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STATE OF THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB - published separately – possibly as a CD insert

KEY ASSETS OF THE AONB

Landscape

Geology and soils

Biodiversity

Historic Environment

Environmental Quality

Quality of Life – Tranquillity, Opportunities for enjoyment and understanding

KEY INFLUENCES ON THE AONB

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Other Economic Activity – Employment, Transport, Development, Tourism

Social Characteristics – Population, Services, Community, Leisure & Recreation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2009-14

This is the second statutory Management Plan for the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a legal designation covering 23% of Shropshire with **the principal purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty**. The Plan has been prepared by the **Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership** on behalf of the five local authorities with whom this legal duty rests. Formal approval of the Plan is by the local authorities, with endorsement by the AONB Partnership and formal observations by Natural England.

The Shropshire Hills AONB is nationally important, and its key **special qualities are the diversity and contrast of its landscape, its hills, farmland, woods and rivers, the important geology, wildlife and heritage they hold, plus scenic quality and views, tranquillity, culture and opportunities for enjoyment**.

The character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape are relatively stable, and continue to be of high importance. However, **the overall condition and trends of the special features and qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB are mixed**. Improvements in some areas linked to a significant scale of conservation activity are accompanied by declines in other aspects. Land management practices remain a crucial determining factor, alongside wider economic and social factors.

The Management Plan's Vision is that:

The natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills landscape is conserved, enhanced and helped to adapt by sympathetic land management, by co-ordinated action and by sustainable communities, and is valued for its richness of wildlife and heritage, and its contribution to prosperity and wellbeing.

The AONB designation is not about preventing change, but **managing change in a positive way** and securing maximum benefit for the area. The Management Plan defines the following strategic priorities to guide action for the coming five years, relating to the Vision above but also reflecting the high priority for action on climate change:

Valuing, conserving and enhancing what we have

Conserving habitats, heritage and quality; appropriate and high quality development

Keeping the Shropshire Hills countryside thriving

Land management, especially farming; sustainable communities

Shifting to low carbon

Taking the right action to mitigate climate change

Adapting for the future, working alongside nature

Landscape scale conservation; functioning ecosystems; social and economic adaptation

Helping people to connect with the AONB

Awareness; enjoyment and wellbeing; community involvement

Policies are defined on a variety of topics (collected in the Appendix), seeking to provide direction and guide activity in relation to the AONB. Public bodies are legally required to *'have regard to the purposes of AONBs in carrying out their functions'* (Section 85, Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000). Some of the policies are intended to complement and support formal planning policies in existing Plans, and in the proposed Local Development Framework for Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

Partnership is key to delivery of the Management Plan, and the actions of many people, especially farmers, landowners and the local community, support the AONB. **The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership** through the Management Plan aims to provide co-ordination, advice and assistance, and believes that the achievement of the primary environmental aims of the AONB will be best achieved by close integration with social and economic interests. The prioritised Actions which are set out to deliver the Objectives of the Plan over the next five years are mostly, but not exclusively, focused on organisations which are part of the AONB Partnership. The Partnership currently has 36 members, along with a small staff team who play a co-ordinating and facilitating role and also implement some of the Actions directly. Progress will be monitored through reporting at the regular meetings of the AONB Partnership, and the Management Plan Actions will be updated and progress reported on annually. Further information is available at www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk.

Chair of the AONB Partnership

In this, the first formal review of the statutory Management Plan for our AONB area, we build on the experience of the first Plan period to set the agenda for the next five years. It is fitting that the review has taken place during the 50th anniversary year of the designation of the Shropshire Hills AONB. The first Management Plan, published in July 2004, quite rightly concentrated on the steady accumulation and analysis of data and establishment of priorities for the future rather than prescription of policies in areas of concern. In parallel with this work, the AONB Partnership was able to intervene directly on several fronts through the Blue Remembered Hills project focusing particularly on trees, Wildlife Sites, orchards and community involvement through the 'Down to Earth' approach.

The synthesis of substantially improved data and the experience of practical projects on the ground informs our revised Plan. Successive reviews of particular topic areas have produced Position Statements which have been debated by the Partnership and these are now refined in the draft Plan as Policies or AONB Partnership Positions. Our experience of rural community engagement has given the Partnership the confidence to set ambitious goals in the social and economic spheres which underpin the landscape, and to undertake the role of a LEADER Action Group to finance practical community development during the Plan period.

The priorities of the Plan also recognise that the framework of government policies, planning administration and rural delivery has changed dramatically since 2004. Natural England has replaced three former agencies, and Advantage West Midlands now has responsibility for funding streams closer to our sphere of work. Environmental Stewardship is replacing Environmentally Sensitive Area funding for farm conservation. Regional Economic and Spatial Strategies have created a new pool of stakeholders with both responsibilities and interests in what we aim to do. Above all, carbon reduction, a term hardly used in 2004, has become an urgent necessity in all areas influenced by government spending, warranting its inclusion as one of the five main priorities of this Plan.

These changes, and the current transition to a unitary authority for Shropshire, mean that we have to depend, in part, on a new set of partners to implement the Policies and Actions identified in the Plan. We are acutely aware that implementation depends mainly on the activities of people other than those directly involved in the AONB Partnership or Team. The project work which the Team undertakes directly can do no more than provide models of good practice for others to follow. We therefore look mainly to those with statutory, commercial or voluntary responsibility within the AONB to get behind the Plan and make it happen.

One of the Key Issues identified in the previous Plan was "*the low level of public awareness of the Shropshire Hill AONB and its special qualities*". We have made enormous strides in the last five years on this front. A combination of, for example, the Blue Remembered Hills project; support for community efforts through the Sustainable Development Fund; improved branding in collaboration with the Discovery Centre and others; high quality events, publications and website and active engagement of a wide range of organisations and individuals through Partnership membership - all these have helped to create a much wider sense of the AONB 'belonging' to the people of the area. This has the invaluable consequence that the more distant agencies of change such as our Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands), our two unitary authorities (Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin) or Natural England can count on widespread popular support for actions which advance the Plan.

Despite the use of the term "we" throughout this short Foreword I am of course aware that the statutory responsibility for preparing this Plan rests with the local authorities within whose boundaries the area lies (currently five and soon to be only two). It is their Plan and "we" - the AONB Partnership - have only an advisory role. It is a measure of the enlightened support we receive from the local authorities that we can nevertheless retain a sense of ownership of the Plan. As Chair of the Partnership I commend it to the reader with both pride in what we and our partners have achieved over the last Plan period, and optimism regarding what we aspire to achieve over the next five years.

Peter Norman, Chair and individual member of the AONB Partnership, October 2008

Local authority member representatives on the AONB Partnership

The Shropshire Hills AONB occupies about a quarter of Shropshire and a small but very significant part of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin. The local authorities have the statutory lead responsibility for the AONB, but cannot secure its future by acting alone. Landowners, local communities and other organisations all have important roles to play, and we value their work and the involvement of some of their representatives in the AONB Partnership. The Partnership continues to strengthen, and provides a valuable advisory and championing role for the AONB, both through its members and groups, and through its staff team. This Management Plan is a significant step forward in clarifying and communicating ideas about the future of the Shropshire Hills. The effective combination of the local authorities and the wider involvement and capacity of the Partnership will remain important under the new structure, in which local authorities covering the AONB will be the two unitary Councils of Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

Cllr James Gibson
Shropshire County
Council

Cllr Lee Chapman
South Shropshire
District Council

Cllr Tim Barker
Shrewsbury &
Atcham Borough
Council

Cllr William Parr
Bridgnorth District
Council

Cllr Dennis Allen
Telford & Wrekin
Council

October 2008

Introduction

The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a legal designation with the principal purpose '*to conserve and enhance natural beauty*'¹. Designated in 1958, the AONB covers 804km² (23% of Shropshire). A legal duty to fulfil the AONB's purposes rests with the local authorities, who act jointly in a formal structure called the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership. Other members include conservation bodies, landowner and community representatives, interests such as recreation and tourism, and individual members. The main mechanism for protecting AONBs is through the planning system. The 40 AONBs in England and Wales have equal landscape value and protection to National Parks, but planning decisions remain with the local authorities. Public bodies are legally required to '*have regard to the purposes of AONBs in carrying out their functions*' (Section 85, Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000²). In recognition that the landscape needs active management as well as protection, AONBs also receive funding for conservation. This includes specific funding for AONB Partnerships, as well as targeting by other schemes such as farm conservation grants.

One of a 'family' of AONBs linked by a National Association, the Shropshire Hills is the tenth largest AONB in England and Wales and makes up 54% of protected landscape (AONBs and National Park) in the West Midlands region.

Figure 1 Map of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (with regional and national insets)

Purposes of AONBs

"The primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.

In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities.

Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.

Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses." (Countryside Agency, 2001³)

'Natural beauty' in relation to AONBs is not strictly defined, but includes references to the area's "*flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features*" (National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, as amended¹). Natural beauty is closely linked with modern understanding of landscape value. Although legal arguments about natural beauty continue in relation to designation of new areas as National Park or AONB, for the purposes of conserving and managing the area, the term can be taken to include cultural and historic aspects as well as more strictly 'natural' ones. The Environment Act 1995⁴ states in relation to National Parks that "*landscape encompasses everything - 'natural' and human - that makes an area distinctive: geology, climate, soil, plants, animals, communities, archaeology, buildings, the people who live in it, past and present, and the perceptions of those who visit it.*"

'Protected landscapes'

AONBs make up 15% of the land area of England and Wales (9% of the West Midlands), and along with National Parks they represent our finest landscapes. They are recognised internationally by the IUCN as Category V protected areas, which are settled areas in which cultural influences are important alongside natural ones. Especially in the larger of these areas, land ownership primarily for conservation is only an option for a minority of the area. The Shropshire Hills typifies this, being a living, working area in which farming and active land management by private owners is key to retaining the special qualities of the landscape. About 19,000 people live within the AONB, and many more live close by. Most of the work of conserving the landscape is carried out by landowners in the area, and a wide variety of organisations. **The approach to management of the AONB therefore has a strong ethos of working with local people, valuing their contribution and involving people through events and community projects, and representation in decisions.** The effective combination of indigenous knowledge and skills with professional, technical knowledge is a powerful one. Protected landscapes are also well placed to deliver a **sustainable development approach**, in which alongside the environment, attention is given to the economic activities which sustain the landscape and to maintaining vibrant communities.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership plays three main roles:

- To develop policy and strategy for the area especially through the AONB Management Plan, and to influence the policies and strategies of others.
- To take and co-ordinate action to conserve and enhance natural beauty, to promote enjoyment, understanding and wellbeing, and to further sustainable development.
- To support the involvement of the community in the management of the AONB.

The Partnership is formally a 'Joint Advisory Committee' to the five local authorities, but the local authority members co-opt many others according to Terms of Reference ⁵, and the Partnership currently has 36 members representing a wide range of interests, as shown in the Appendix. While the local authorities are lead partners, this broad structure does mean that **the AONB Partnership has a valuable 'voice' somewhat independent of the local authorities themselves**. The Partnership has a number of sub-groups to aid delivery, as shown in Figure 2 (Diagram of AONB Partnership structure), and these involve further partners. Detailed arrangements for AONBs vary, but **the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership does not own or manage any land directly**. Core funding is received from Natural England (currently at 75%) and from the local authorities, with funding also from other sources for project work. A small staff team works on behalf of the AONB Partnership to help fulfil the roles above. The aim is to balance involvement at both grassroots and strategic levels, and the national importance of the area with local priorities. The broad remit covering landscape, biodiversity and heritage as well as influences such as economic activity, recreation and tourism means that **supporting and advisory roles are important for the AONB Team as well as direct delivery**.

The Partnership structure of the AONB is a particular strength and enables communication and understanding between many different interested parties, with the effect of reducing or avoiding potential conflict. For further information on governance and activity of the AONB Partnership, including Annual Reviews, please see www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan

The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 S89(2) ² states *"the relevant local authority in respect of an area of outstanding natural beauty shall... prepare and publish a plan which formulates their policy for the management of the area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it."* There is also a requirement to 'act jointly', and the five local authorities for the Shropshire Hills AONB formally agreed that the AONB Partnership lead the preparation of the Management Plan on their behalf. This has included involvement of a range of local authority members and officers. On completion however, the formal approval of the Management Plan is by the local authorities themselves.

The first statutory Management Plan for the Shropshire Hills AONB ⁶ was produced in 2004, replacing the earlier Advisory Plan ⁷. The Actions section of the Management Plan has been updated annually, both with progress and through addition of new actions. A full review of the Management Plan is required every five years, and this new Plan is the first such review. Most of the issues in the 2004 Plan are still relevant, and this Plan aims to build on and develop the approach of the previous one. Some issues are more prominent now - in particular the need to address climate change mitigation and adaptation. The 2004 Plan also did not explicitly state policies, and between 2005 and 2008 the AONB Partnership developed a number of Position Statements on various topics. These have been incorporated and in some cases refined into formal local authority Policies as part of the development of this new Plan. Other, more aspirational statements, which the local authorities are unable to endorse as formal Policies, are also included in this Plan as AONB Partnership Positions.

Importantly, the Management Plan is not just a Plan for the AONB Partnership. **It is a Plan for the area, and seeks to set out what needs to happen for the purposes of AONB designation to be fulfilled.** It is therefore of relevance to anyone whose activity or decisions affect the Shropshire Hills in relation to AONB purposes. It does however have a particular role to guide the activity of partners within the AONB Partnership and of the Partnership's staff team, and in seeking to influence relevant public spending in the area.

Review of the Management Plan

The review resulting in this new Management Plan follows national guidance⁸. It has been influenced by policy directions from above and by community consultations and experience at a local level (Figure 3 Main sources for updating and reviewing the Management Plan). Progress with implementing the previous Management Plan and evaluation of it has been reported to the AONB Partnership over recent years in papers available at www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk. The current condition of the AONB and influences on it are described in detail in the 'Key Assets' section of the Plan, which also includes key points from sources of community views and opinions.

There is a legal requirement to undertake Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Management Plan. The broad sustainability focus of recent work of the AONB Partnership has been particularly valued by members, so the decision was made to go beyond the legal minimum for Strategic Environmental Assessment and undertake a fuller Sustainability Appraisal. At the formal public consultation stage, the draft Plan was therefore accompanied by a draft **Sustainability Appraisal** report⁹. This examined the Policies and Positions of the draft Management Plan against a range of sustainability criteria, highlighting any potential conflicts and possible alternative approaches to minimise these. An earlier Scoping Report for the Sustainability Appraisal⁹ included a review of a wide range of relevant policies and strategies, from international to local, drawing out implications for the Management Plan. A further screening process of 'Appropriate Assessment' has been carried out in relation to sites coming under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations 1994. This identified the need for care in promotion and management of access on the Stiperstones SAC (Special Area of Conservation), but no other significant issues, and no changes were required to the Plan.

Consultation

Consultation has been integral to the preparation of the Management Plan. This has included through the broad and inclusive membership of the AONB Partnership and its sub-groups, and through consideration of consultations carried out for other purposes including the six 'Down to Earth' projects carried out around the AONB from 2003-7, Parish Plans and Community Strategies and other initiatives. A period of public consultation was held from October to December 2008, including six public meetings attended by a total of over 100 people. 27 written responses were made.

Approval and endorsement

Following public consultation, the Plan will be considered for formal observations by Natural England (as the statutory overseeing body for AONBs), and endorsed by the AONB Partnership. Formal approval is by each local authority. **Other organisations are invited to strengthen the Plan by formally endorsing it**, and a list of those doing so will be made publicly available.

Local authorities

As this Plan is being approved, local authorities in Shropshire are being reorganised into a single unitary authority. This brings the number of local authorities covering the AONB down from five to two unitary authorities, with Shropshire Council covering 99.4% of the AONB and Telford & Wrekin Council 0.6%. In some protected landscapes, a very small coverage of a local authority may not be represented in governance arrangements. However this 0.6% is the Wrekin, Shropshire's iconic hill, and cannot be overlooked. During 2007 a local management structure for this area, the Wrekin Forest Partnership, was developed with staffing support from the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The continued links of this group with the AONB Partnership (essentially a 'devolved' AONB type of structure), and the involvement of Telford & Wrekin Council in the AONB Partnership itself, are seen as very important. Notwithstanding this, the extent of the Shropshire Hills AONB within a single unitary authority area is unique among protected landscapes in England, and offers significant opportunities. The AONB Partnership will need to liaise with many Council departments, but most of these will be under one organisation, and it should also be easier to align the AONB Management Plan with the planning system.

Cross-border working

Although wholly in England, the Shropshire Hills AONB lies along the Welsh border. The AONB Partnership has endorsed the West Midlands – Central Wales Memorandum of Understanding¹⁰ on cross-border working, and will continue to develop practical and strategic cross-border working where appropriate.

The future of protected landscapes

AONBs have undergone significant change in recent years, especially strengthening resulting from the CROW Act of 2000. After significant increases in funding under the Countryside Agency, reductions have recently been made due to financial pressures on Natural England. This new agency is also still developing its own policy and vision for protected landscapes¹¹. The disparity in funding between AONBs and National Parks remains stark, and the National Association for AONBs¹² seeks convergence with National Parks as a long term aim. An updating of the statutory basis of AONBs reflecting the breadth of values which they offer society, including recreation and ecosystem services, is also widely regarded as necessary in the longer term¹³.

Statement of significance and special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB

The ‘special qualities’ of the Shropshire Hills AONB are those aspects for which it is considered important, and on which the priorities for its management are based. There is no statement accompanying the original designation of the AONB, and these special qualities have been defined and refined through the development of this and the previous AONB Management Plan.

Different people have their own opinions on what is special about the Shropshire Hills, and no definition can claim to be absolute. Each aspect below could occupy many pages of description, and the purpose of this brief outline of the special qualities is to help determine how best to manage them within the remit of the AONB. This involves dealing with some aspects which are subjective, hard to define and ultimately not well represented by words. Such qualities are nevertheless greatly valued by people and may be threatened, making it important to consider them in a structured way. The qualities identified below relate to each other and overlap to some extent. The interaction between natural and cultural factors creates a significance which is not recognised by looking at attributes in isolation. More detailed information on particular aspects is available in the ‘Key Assets’ section of the Plan.

Diversity and contrast

With a variety of geology unequalled in any area of comparable size in Britain, the Shropshire Hills have no single dominant feature or landform. The area’s landscape character is one of variety and of transition – between the lowland plains of the English Midlands and the uplands of Wales, and between north and south of Britain, and this is reflected in both ecology and patterns of human activity.

The key **elements in the Shropshire Hills landscape** are the hills, farmed landscape, woodlands, rivers and river valleys.

Hills

The rocky Stiperstones, the dissected plateau of the Long Mynd, the craggy volcanic Stretton Hills and Wrekin, the harsh quarried landscape of the Clee Hills, the long wooded scarp of Wenlock Edge, and the rolling enclosed hills of the Clun Forest all have their own distinctive character. The hills define the identity of the area, and are the backbone of our landscape. Here are found commons, heath, moorland and rough grasslands, home to upland birds including Curlew, Red Grouse and Merlin.

Farmed landscape

The patchwork of fields, mostly pasture bounded by hedges, results from generations of farming. Hedgerow and field trees, including many veteran trees, give the landscape a maturity. Remnants of valuable grassland and hay meadow habitats survive. Some small scale arable cultivation mostly for feed crops is found, with larger scale cropping in the valleys which extend down outside the AONB.

Woodlands

The area has higher than the national average cover of ancient and semi-natural woodland, and this is found especially on steeper slopes. Some hills are dominated by woodland cover, such as the Wrekin, Helmeth above Church Stretton and Wenlock Edge, which has continuous woodland for nearly twenty miles. There are many small woodlands, along with larger predominantly conifer plantations many of which are being diversified, parkland and wood pasture, and many small, often remnant, orchards.

Rivers and river valleys

The Rivers Clun, Teme and Onny, along with many smaller rivers and streams, are relatively clean and natural in form, and of high quality. Many are lined with Alder, and home to important species such as Dipper, White-clawed Crayfish and Otter. Freshwater Pearl Mussel is found in the River Clun just outside the AONB. Valleys vary from the steep-sided batches and dingles of the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, to larger valleys with some flood meadows, and the broad dales such as Corve Dale and Ape Dale which divide up the area. A short stretch of the River Severn within the AONB divides the Wrekin from Wenlock Edge. There are no large water bodies but many small ponds, marshes and flushes.

The other special qualities defined below are **characteristics which are found in different ways across the whole area**, including geology, wildlife, heritage, environmental and scenic quality, tranquillity, culture and opportunities for enjoyment.

Geology

The Shropshire Hills have the greatest geological variety of any comparable sized area in the UK, or indeed the world. Bedrock dates from the Precambrian almost continuously through to just before the Permian, and the influence of different rock types and structure on the landscape are clearly visible. There is a widespread mantle of more recent Quaternary deposits, and along with landforms on the lower ground these reflect the complex geological history of the last 'Ice Age'. The area is important in the history of geological science – Murchison's study of the Silurian (including the Wenlock limestone) and its fossils being notable. The Ercall has a good example of the sudden transition from metamorphosed and barren rocks to sediments containing the earliest known hard-shelled fossils in the Cambrian period.

Wildlife

The valuable habitats of the AONB, especially heathland, grassland, woodland and rivers are linked to a long history of relatively sympathetic land management. Due to their transitional position, the Shropshire Hills have an unusual mix of species associated with both upland and lowland, e.g. Red Grouse and Dormice. The area holds some national rarities and is very significant in a regional and county context for upland plant and animal species such as Merlin, Snipe, Curlew, Whinchat, Dipper, Emperor moth, Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary and Grayling butterfly. It is also something of a stronghold for species which were formerly more common or widespread, such as Skylark, Tree Pipit, Black Poplar and Great Crested Newt.

Heritage

Many ancient features survive in a landscape which has seen much less change than many parts of the country. Defences such as Offa's Dyke, Iron Age hillforts such as at Caer Caradoc and Bury Ditches, and medieval castles and fortified houses such as Clun and Stokesay tell of centuries of turbulent Marches history. The Shropshire Hills has the greatest concentration of medieval castle earthworks anywhere in Britain. Much of the field and settlement pattern is very ancient, with tiny lanes, villages and scattered hamlets and farms. There are also estates, parkland, planted settlements and abandoned medieval villages, along with areas of later, more regular Parliamentary enclosure. Stone and timber-framed buildings in a variety of styles reflect the diversity of materials available. Parts of the area have seen periods of thriving industry, from charcoal burning to lead mining and stone quarrying, often accompanied by haphazard 'squatter' settlement.

Scenic and environmental quality

Panoramic views can be had across and beyond the AONB, and both wide open spaces and intimate corners are found. There are contrasts from relatively wild hills and valleys to softer, settled landscapes, as well as between varying seasonal colours of heather, grass, bracken and broadleaved trees. Clean air and water are accompanied by valuable ecological functions including growing of food and fibre, and regulation of water run-off.

Tranquillity

Off the beaten track and remote in the context of the West Midlands, the Shropshire Hills are a haven of tranquillity – peace and quiet, dark skies and unspoilt views. Relatively low levels of noise and inappropriate development combine with modest visitor numbers to create an unspoilt quality that is greatly valued throughout the area.

Culture and opportunities for enjoyment

The Shropshire Hills span a wide spectrum of cultural setting from the fringes of Telford and Ironbridge through the rural hinterlands of market towns such as Ludlow, Craven Arms and Much Wenlock, to some of the sparsest areas of population in England along the Welsh border. Church Stretton, the only town within the AONB, has a unique location in the heart of the hills and a strong Edwardian character. The Shropshire Hills have been a cultural inspiration for writers such as A E Housman, Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville. Opportunities for enjoyment and wellbeing are open to both locals and visitors through walks and outdoor activities which respect the area's qualities. The area has some of the best rights of way networks in Shropshire, most of its open access land, and a wide variety of sites, features and promoted routes.

Vision Statement

The Vision for the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan is that :

The natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills landscape is conserved, enhanced and helped to adapt

- by sympathetic land management,
- by co-ordinated action and
- by sustainable communities,

and is valued for

- its richness of wildlife and heritage, and
- its contribution to prosperity and wellbeing.

The Management Plan translates this long term Vision into Strategic Priorities for the coming five years. These are complemented by specific Objectives for the period of the Plan, against which the Actions are referenced.

Figure 4 illustrates this Vision (annotations on landscape image)

Development meets local needs but remains in keeping with the special landscape

Wildlife is conserved, enjoyed and helped to adapt to climate change

Heritage is cared for and well understood

People are happy, healthy and prosperous and connected to the landscape and their communities

Farming continues to provide food and increasingly safeguards the environment and supplies local markets

Energy is used wisely and carbon emissions are rapidly lowered

Transport is becoming more sustainable, with less pollution and noise, and saner lifestyles

Natural resources are valued and carefully managed

Summary of condition of the AONB

Below is a brief summary of the 'State of the AONB' section of the Management Plan, which is published electronically in a separate volume for economy of design and print. That section describes in more detail the current status, trends and causes of change in relation to key assets of the AONB and to the main influences on it, along with identifying recent successes and issues for the AONB Management Plan. It provides the main description and analysis part of the Plan, and readers are recommended to refer to this separate volume, which is an integral part of the statutory Management Plan, for further background. Exclusion of some aspect within the limited space in this volume should not be interpreted as omission from the Plan overall.

In a national context, the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape are **relatively stable**, and continue to be of high importance. However, the **overall condition and trends** of the special features and qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB **are mixed**. **Improvements** in some areas linked to a significant scale of conservation activity are accompanied by **declines** in other aspects. **Land management** practices remain a crucial determining factor, alongside **wider economic and social factors**.

- The area's very high level of geological diversity underpins all other aspects of landscape. The best **geological sites are generally in good condition** and awareness of geology is increasing.
- Protection of the most important features of the AONB is now generally good. The ecological integrity of the area in particular has suffered significantly, especially in the last 60 years. **High quality habitats are very fragmented and many species have declined**. Baseline data and monitoring of biodiversity and heritage features is patchy but evidence suggests that **direct loss has slowed but continues**.
- Many of the special features and qualities of the AONB are only maintained by **sympathetic land management**. This dependence makes some features (e.g. unimproved grasslands) very sensitive to adverse land management practices.
- **Structural change in agriculture** will continue to have a significant impact on the special qualities of the AONB. The **future of the livestock sector**, especially beef cattle and sheep, is important to the AONB.
- Current levels of participation in farm conservation (**agri-environment**) **schemes** are very high, mainly due to the Environmentally Sensitive Areas. The shift to the Environmental Stewardship scheme offers opportunities to continue this, especially if good levels of targeted uptake of the Higher Level Scheme are achieved.
- A variety of **conservation initiatives** are having a significant impact within the AONB.
- There have been some significant improvements in the condition and extent of **heathlands**.
- Many **woodlands are under-managed**, often owing to poor economic viability, and practical difficulties including access and shortage of skills. The rising demand for woodfuel should help to address this.
- **Many river habitats are in poor condition**, due to the lapsing of traditional coppicing of riverside trees, extensive Alder *Phytophthora* disease and effects of stock access such as siltation. Recent work through projects and agri-environment schemes has gone some way to addressing this, but much remains to be done.
- Key upland and farmland **bird species are declining**. Lapwing, Curlew and Snipe have declined to critically low levels; Ring Ouzel and Teal no longer breed in the area.
- Levels of maintenance of traditional **field boundaries** (mostly hedges) are high, especially linked to the Environmentally Sensitive Areas.

- Good land management and increasing awareness is conserving many **historic features**. Maintenance of traditional buildings requires considerable ongoing funding. A number of historic settlements are using Design Statements to help retain their character.
- **Air quality is good. Water quality is mostly good** but diffuse pollution and pockets of poor water quality are still found.
- Business activity within the AONB itself is strongly focused on **land management** and associated industries, plus tourism and services. The **landscape** of the AONB also acts as a hinterland for the nearby market towns, with its **resources benefiting many businesses** in the surrounding area.
- **Levels of traffic, especially by road and air, are increasing**. This is the major source of intrusive noise, resulting in a **gradual erosion of tranquillity**.
- The area's relatively remote location coupled with sparse population and strong protective policies continue to mean that **development pressure is generally low**. There is however an urgent need to accommodate affordable housing, sustainable tourism and renewable energy within the high quality landscape.
- The population is stable but has a generally **high age profile** but with **widely varying levels of income**. Access to services is often poor, and many initiatives are operating to address this. Many residents, both longstanding and incomers, nevertheless **value the relative remoteness of the area**.
- **Community support** for conservation is high, and **awareness of the AONB is increasing**.
- The quality of **access to the countryside has improved significantly** in recent years including through the condition of rights of way, open access and promotion.
- **Climate change will intensify pressures on the landscape**, through direct effects on wildlife and habitats, and also through indirect social and economic effects, e.g. pressure of land use.

Headline indicators related to special qualities of the AONB

Headline indicators are key statistical measures which can help to summarise the condition of the AONB. Those shown below are based on national guidance for condition monitoring of AONBs, and influenced by local priorities. They are linked to the special qualities of the AONB, but are dependent on what data is available, and are not intended to be comprehensive. It is proposed to report annually on these indicators as part of monitoring of the condition of the AONB.

Special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB		Headline Indicator	Condition trend	National level for comparison (where available)
Overall	Diversity and contrast (landscape character)	Character is classed as being 'maintained' (i.e. stable) in the two Joint Character Areas in which the AONB falls ^a	stable	51% of England's landscape is 'maintaining' character (10% is enhancing).
Elements of the landscape	Hills	70.5% of registered farmed land (46,625ha) is managed under some form of agri-environment scheme ^a	improving	13% (2007)
	Farmed landscape			
	Woodlands	50% of overall woodland (6,800ha) is managed under a Forestry Commission Woodland Grant Scheme agreement ^b	stable	Not available in this form but estimated c30%
	Rivers and river valleys	0% of river SSSIs are in favourable or recovering condition ^a (one site only – River Teme)	stable	National level higher
Characteristics of the landscape (found in different ways across the whole area)	Geology	99.6% of geological SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition ^a	stable	National level probably lower
	Wildlife	58.2% of biological SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition ^a	improving	National level probably higher
		31% of Wildlife Sites are in good condition ^c	unknown	Unknown
		Key farmland and upland bird species are declining ^d	declining	Declining
	Heritage	52% of Scheduled Ancient Monuments (86) are classified as 'At High or Medium Risk' ^e	declining	Not available
		2% of Listed Buildings (3) are classified as 'At Risk' ^e	stable	3.2% (2007) Listed buildings and structural SAMs
	Environmental and scenic quality	60.3% of all SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition ^a	improving	80.1% (71% in West Midlands) <i>Defra PSA target to reach 95% by 2010</i>
32% of river length is classified as of 'good' water quality ^f		improving	72% good for biological quality, 69% for chemical (2006)	
Tranquillity	70% of the AONB is classified as 'tranquil' ^g	declining	National figure not available but AONB level certainly higher	
Culture and enjoyment	86.8% of rights of way are classified as 'easy to use' ^h	improving	All of Shropshire 78%	

a Data supplied by Natural England, JCA data as at 2007, agri-environment and SSSI data as at Feb 2008.

b Data supplied by Forestry Commission, as at 2007

c Based on data gathered in the Blue Remembered Hills project 2003-7. In future information will be available from monitoring for the local authority performance indicator NI197.

d Based on data from Shropshire Ornithological Society, Long Mynd Breeding Bird Project, Upper Onny Wildlife Group and Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group, up to 2008

e Data supplied by English Heritage, as at 2007

f Data supplied by Environment Agency, as at 2007

g Data supplied by CPRE, 2005 ¹⁴. Green areas in map taken as 'tranquil'

h Data supplied by Shropshire County Council, for 2007-8 survey

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR 2009 TO 2014

This section is informed by the analysis of current status, trends and issues arising, in the 'State of the AONB' section of the Plan (published electronically). The text here focuses on rationale for Objectives and Policies, and readers are recommended to see the 'State of the AONB' section for a fuller background.

The following key priorities have been agreed to guide action over the life of the Management Plan:

Valuing, conserving and enhancing what we have

Conserving habitats, heritage and quality; appropriate and high quality development

Keeping the Shropshire Hills countryside thriving

Land management, especially farming; sustainable communities

Shifting to low carbon

Taking the right action to mitigate climate change

Adapting for the future, working alongside nature

Landscape scale conservation; functioning ecosystems; social and economic adaptation

Helping people to connect with the AONB

Awareness; enjoyment and wellbeing; community involvement

These priorities are deliberately cross-cutting, to support an integrated approach to implementation of the Management Plan. Topics such as biodiversity or recreation occur under more than one priority, and the subheadings under a particular priority should not therefore be read in isolation.

Under each priority a series of Objectives and Policies have been defined. **Objectives** seek to define what it is that the Management Plan seeks to achieve over the coming five years, and **provide the framework for Actions**, which are mostly the responsibility of partners within the AONB structure. The Objectives seek to address the issues and negative trends identified in previous sections. Unless otherwise stated, they refer to the five year period of the Plan (i.e. to 2014). Not all aspects are measurable, and in some cases the potential influence of the Management Plan over issues and trends is relatively small. The Plan covers a large area with a wide remit, and in order to cover this without too many Objectives, these are necessarily reasonably broad. The Actions defined later in the Plan are more specific and measurable.

Policies are defined where there is a particular need for clarity of position and to influence others. It should be emphasised that as the Plan is formally approved by the local authorities, **these are local authority Policies**. Some however relate to topics on which the local authorities do not have decision-making powers, and in these cases they are put forward to guide the decisions of others and responses to consultations.

Some statements which the local authorities are not able to endorse as formal Policies are included as **AONB Partnership Positions**. These tend to be more aspirational statements which it is hoped will influence future thinking and policy development for the area. Policies, Objectives and AONB Partnership Positions are collated in the Appendices.

Key delivery mechanisms for the AONB, emphasising the important role of a wide range of partners, are highlighted in boxes through this section.

Relationship of Management Plan Policies to planning policies

Inevitably, many of the issues covered by Policies in the Management Plan relate to planning matters. As the Management Plan and its Policies are approved by the local authorities (the local planning authorities), it is important that the relationship between the Management Plan and the planning policy framework is made completely clear. A statutory AONB Management Plan is regarded as a '*material consideration*' in planning matters, with LDF planning policies clearly taking precedence. However, the recent Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 12⁸² indicates that an AONB Management Plan "*might, subject to the circumstances of a particular case, be afforded a weight commensurate with that of SPDs in decision making*".

The Management Plan does not define Policies which duplicate existing planning policies at national, regional or local level, but only where additional guidance is needed. A summary of current planning policy relevant to the AONB has been prepared as part of the Management Plan review process, and will be kept up to date at www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk. Management Plan Policies related to planning are intended to align with existing and proposed planning policies (and are cross referenced to these), whilst adding detail or clarification in relation to the AONB. Many planning policies will apply to the whole of a local authority's area, and can therefore be complemented by the Management Plan more specifically '*formulating their policy for the management of the AONB*', as required by the CROW Act. In the unlikely event that there is a conflict between the Management Plan and relevant planning policies, the actual planning policy will carry greater weight. The timing of this Management Plan provides a good opportunity for co-ordination and alignment with the preparation of the new Local Development Framework for Shropshire led by the unitary Shropshire Council⁸³. In the very small part of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin in the AONB there is little planning casework, but what there is can be highly significant, and the relationship of the Management Plan to Telford & Wrekin's Local Development Framework is also important.

Valuing, conserving and enhancing what we have

This priority relates to the primary purpose of AONBs '*to conserve and enhance natural beauty*'. Conservation is not a static thing, but since many of the existing features and qualities are irreplaceable, the highest priority must be given to retaining and managing those which already exist.

The areas considered under this priority are:

- Understanding the Shropshire Hills landscape and the influences on it
- Protecting the AONB – general
- Planning - protective aspects, including design and quality (development, highways) (planning is also considered under other priorities)
- Biodiversity
- Geology
- Agri-environment
- Woodlands
- Water quality and river habitats
- Heritage
- Tranquillity
- Managing recreation

(N.B. For further background on these topics please refer to the separate 'State of the AONB' section).

A practical application of some of the key conservation principles of land management for the AONB is shown in Figure 16 'Conservation Guidelines'.

Understanding the Shropshire Hills landscape and the influences on it

OBJECTIVE To co-ordinate among partner organisations the holding, improvement and application of relevant data about the special qualities of the AONB and influences on it.

An important step to valuing what we have is knowing what we have. A great deal of information exists on the Shropshire Hills and aspects of their value. The challenge is to marshal this information appropriately to influence decision making. The development of Natural England and the relocation of the AONB Partnership's hosting with the Environment section of the new unitary Shropshire Council both offer good opportunities for this. Shropshire Wildlife Trust has an important role in relation to biodiversity data, and the County Council is leading the development of the Shropshire Ecological Data Network.

The range and quality of data and information on the natural and historic environment should be expanded through further targeted survey and research. This information can shed light on the past and on natural processes with applications for the future, and there is much which is not yet known about. Sharing of data, including with the general public, should be supported except where this may compromise conservation objectives.

The AONB boundary was defined in 1957, and its rather tortuous shape has attracted comment and sometimes criticism. An independent study carried out in 2006⁸⁴ largely endorsed the boundary, highlighting a limited number of places where minor changes could be considered, and the fact that considerable areas adjoining in Wales are of AONB quality. The AONB Partnership has considered the issue of boundary review and its work in relation to the current boundary, and agreed in February 2008 the following:

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 1

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership does not believe that the benefits of formally amending the boundary are justified against the considerable costs and resources this would entail. The Partnership will work, and encourage its partners and others also to work, in ways which will strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills as an area of exceptional landscape value. The Partnership will focus its work strongly on the designated AONB area, but will work in a flexible and pragmatic way in relation to the AONB boundary, to secure the maximum benefit for the Shropshire Hills. (see www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk for full statement).

Protecting the AONB – general

OBJECTIVE To provide information and guidance to land managers on practices which support the special qualities of the AONB.

OBJECTIVE To set and influence policy and strategy which supports AONB purposes and Management Plan priorities.

OBJECTIVE To ameliorate where possible eyesores in the landscape and existing inappropriate development.

A range of organisations have regulatory powers relevant to the AONB's remit. Actions and decisions are also taken by many people outside any form of regulation, but nevertheless affecting the AONB. Section 85 of the CROW Act 2000 imposes a duty on all public bodies to "*have regard to the purposes of AONB designation*" in carrying out their functions². Sometimes the AONB is wrongly equated simply with visual amenity, and the breadth of its qualities and purposes overlooked. Some changes may affect only a small part of the AONB, but consideration needs to be given to cumulative impacts.

POLICY 1 Organisations which regulate designated sites and features, environmental quality and amenity should make full use of available measures to ensure the highest standards appropriate to a nationally protected landscape are achieved in the AONB. A supportive and awareness-raising approach should be used with landowners where possible, but mechanisms for legal enforcement should also be used where necessary in more serious cases. Known 'blackspots' and problems should be addressed and tackled, but consideration given to the secondary purposes of AONBs to have regard for the needs of rural industries and local communities, and to promote sustainable development.

POLICY 2 Consideration of the purposes of designation in all decisions affecting the AONB should reflect sustainability and the full range of special qualities defined in the Management Plan as well as landscape character and visual amenity.

The methodology outlined in 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment'⁸⁵ should be used for Environmental Statements and may also be useful in relation to smaller scale developments.

Though all of the AONB is influenced by human factors, its sense of 'wildness' is greatly valued and is very important in the context of the area's location in the West Midlands region. Larger structures such as telecommunications masts and wind turbines are regulated by the planning system. However smaller structures such as signage and waymarking, memorials, interpretation panels and plaques may also be intrusive and detract from wildness.

POLICY 3 Even with small structures not requiring planning permission, care should be taken to avoid loss of wildness. On many hills and in more secluded valleys, especially where there are few man-made objects, this will mean a preference for no structures at all. In cases where structures are essential, their location and design may need to be modified to reduce the impact on wildness.

Planning - protective aspects, including design and quality (development, highways)

(Planning also comes under other priorities for future and enabling aspects)

OBJECTIVE To seek the best protection for the AONB and support for Management Plan priorities from planning decisions.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Planning

Planning is the principal means by which the AONB is protected. Existing national, regional and local planning policies provide strong protection for the AONB from inappropriate development. Planning decisions affecting the AONB are made by the local authorities, with the exception of appeals and certain major developments. The AONB Partnership seeks to concentrate on adding value to policy and guidance, and only comments on a small number of more significant applications.

National policy relating to AONBs includes PPS1⁸⁶ - para 17 and PPS7 - para 21. Current local policies on the Shropshire Hills AONB are South Shropshire Local Plan⁸⁷ - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan⁸⁸ - policy LNC9 and Bridgnorth District Local Plan⁸⁹ - policy B4, Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy⁹⁰ - Policy CS 12). Policies defined below are only those felt necessary to complement existing planning policy, avoiding duplication.

POLICY 4 Farm diversification enterprises need to be in harmony with environment and protecting this resource, which also provides an important economic asset for the future. The potential impacts of business-related traffic to and from the property will be an important consideration, including cumulative effects.

[This policy links in particular with South Shropshire District Local Plan policy ED3.]

POLICY 5 Small scale quarrying to supply local materials for restoring traditional buildings and structures is likely to be supported, subject to careful consideration of environmental factors, including the conservation value of former quarries where these may be reopened.

POLICY 6 Opportunities created by technological advance should be sought to remove or reduce the prominence of hilltop telecommunications structures.

POLICY 7 New overhead cables should be avoided where possible, with emphasis given to undergrounding or off-grid options.

POLICY 8 Design of new agricultural buildings including location, structure and materials should be of a high standard appropriate to the AONB. Efforts should be made to improve existing buildings where these are of a poor standard.

POLICY 9 Exceptionally where a significant adverse impact associated with development cannot be avoided, appropriate mitigation measures including habitat creation or community benefits, should be sought.

N.B. Policies relating to renewable energy development are set out under the 'Shifting to Low Carbon' priority.

Development for **tourism and recreation** must be very sensitive to avoid damaging the special qualities of the area. For built development, the location, scale and design of development are key considerations, along with less direct impacts such as transport, and impacts on tranquillity and light pollution. Existing policies encourage the re-use of existing traditional buildings wherever possible (PPS 7⁹¹ - paras 17 & 36, South Shropshire District Local Plan - policy SDS4, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy EM4, Bridgnorth District Local Plan - policy RD2).

Planning policy is to focus tourism development in settlements in order to reduce the need to travel. This is supported, but in the Shropshire Hills there is also a need to enable tourism to benefit the most rural areas, especially through farm diversification, encouraging other means to reduce car travel (e.g. accommodation providers operating public transport pick-ups and price incentives, and focusing on local attractions).

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 2 An approach of smaller, low-key tourism developments designed in sympathy with local character will blend better into the area and spread economic benefits more widely than larger facilities. Tourism businesses will be supported to take a sustainable approach and encourage their visitors to do likewise.

POLICY 10 The siting, design and specification of new developments for tourism and recreation should be to high standards of environmental sensitivity and sustainability. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Single developments of more than around ten accommodation units are less likely to be supported in small settlements and open countryside.
- Large parks of static caravans, cabins or chalets are likely to be intrusive. Smaller sites with good landscaping are preferable, and facilities for touring caravans and camping generally have a low impact as there are fewer permanent structures.
- Built facilities for recreation should only be allowed where their location and the activities they support are compatible with the special qualities of the AONB.

This policy links with current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan – policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy – Policy CS 12.

Conservation Area designation is a valuable tool for protecting the character of settlements, and there is scope to use this approach further. The buildings within Cardingmill Valley at Church Stretton, their character and their fit with the landscape, are a particular case where this seems justified.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 3 In recognition of its unique character, prominence to visitors and the juxtaposition of residential properties with the highest quality landscape, the AONB Partnership advocates the designation of Cardingmill Valley as a Conservation Area.

Design Statements drawn up with community involvement are of particular value for settlements including Conservation Areas. The production of Design Statements should be supported, and adopted statements should be given due weight in planning decisions.

Low-impact forms of development (e.g. buildings using traditional, locally sourced and low embodied energy materials) have potential to fit well with the AONB's purposes. This is especially so where they are associated with sustainable lifestyles including low energy and resource use, small-scale land management using sustainable approaches to food or wood production and with community or educational uses. Guidance and regulation will remain important to ensure compatibility with landscape, local community and other considerations. There is a case however that such development may be suitable in locations where higher impact forms of development would not be allowed. Progress is desirable to enable the planning system to assess such developments more broadly in relation to sustainable development and meeting the need for affordable housing.

Transport is a major impact on tranquillity and other aspects of natural beauty. The value of these assets needs to be borne in mind against expected economic benefits from upgrading transport links. The AONB Partnership should be consulted on more significant road improvement schemes.

POLICY 11 Road improvement schemes within and outside the AONB should not increase noise pollution or emissions from traffic. Approaches such as speed management schemes may, for example, be more appropriate than road widening. Potential impacts within the AONB of proposed road improvement schemes beyond the boundary should be considered.

POLICY 12 Road management and improvement schemes in the AONB should minimise landscape impact and avoid urbanisation of rural roads, e.g. through sensitive and appropriate design and use of materials, and avoiding unnecessary signage clutter.

POLICY 13 The provision of any new public car parking should be in scale with the setting and capacity of roads used to reach the location. Larger car parks should generally be situated nearer to settlements or larger roads. Where informal roadside parking is improved to alleviate traffic problems on smaller roads, care should be taken to avoid adding to traffic levels. Design should be appropriate to a rural setting, e.g. stone surfacing, use of timber for edging and signs.

(See also Transport section under 'Shifting to Low Carbon' priority).

Biodiversity

OBJECTIVE To conserve and enhance existing high quality habitats, preventing loss and improving condition, and conserve and enhance populations of priority species.

'Securing Biodiversity', Natural England's new framework for delivering priority species and habitats in England ²⁹, puts greater emphasis on habitat conservation and on a 'large areas' approach, and will significantly shift priorities in the Biodiversity Action Plan process. The focus on conservation in the 'wider countryside' as well as protected sites will require greater integration of biodiversity with other concerns, including heritage conservation, farming, etc. Wildlife is an important aspect of public interest in the landscape, and direct involvement in conservation by local people is significant, with a variety of groups. With a number of public and voluntary sector bodies active, and some from the private sector, the co-ordination role played by the Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership is very valuable.

(See also Biodiversity content on enhancement and climate change adaptation under the 'Adapting for the Future, Working Alongside Nature' priority, and on community involvement under the 'Helping People to Connect with the AONB' priority).

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Sites of Special Scientific Interest

SSSIs are national designations covering the sites most important for biodiversity (and geological conservation). Most are in private ownership, but owners and occupiers must request formal consent from Natural England to carry out specified operations which may damage features of interest. Natural England will also often work pro-actively to agree and pursue management objectives on SSSIs, and undertakes regular monitoring of their condition.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Conservation ownership

Ownership of land by conservation bodies covers a small minority of land within the AONB compared to land in private ownership. It nevertheless has an important role to play in protecting some of the most important conservation sites, many of which would not be economically viable for farming or other commercial activity. Such sites are also often valuable for public access, interpretation and education. The National Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Natural England are important owners in the area. Forestry Commission objectives include conservation along with timber production and other aims. Small areas are owned by local authorities and other national and local organisations.

The significant lag within the AONB of **SSSI condition** behind both the national average and target for favourable or improving condition is of great concern. The reasons behind this are not clear, but may in part relate to the increased attention which can be given to SSSIs in parts of the country where they are more scarce. Close work between Natural England and partners is necessary to address this. It appears impossible that the national target of 95% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in 'favourable or recovering condition' by 2010 will be reached. The condition of upland sites is below average, and as

they tend to be large this has a big effect on the indicator, which is calculated by area. The Long Mynd and Catherton Common are priority sites. The Rivers Teme and Clun SSSIs are both in unfavourable condition, and there is a huge task to put right the issues in the catchment which cause this. The AONB Partnership's Team has established specialist knowledge and experience in project work on rivers, and this justifies a continued high priority.

The AONB holds the major proportion of many of the county's priority habitats and species listed in the **Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan**, and action to maintain and increase them by implementing the BAP within the AONB is also a high priority. Small grassland Wildlife Sites without the protection afforded to SSSIs are especially vulnerable. A national change to lower the size threshold of coverage of Environmental Impact Assessment regulations on semi-natural grasslands would be a valuable step. Actions under the Biodiversity Action Plan are recorded in the Biodiversity Action Recording System (BARS). The active use of this system by partner bodies ensures good co-ordination and monitoring of activity.

(A number of Policies in other sections are of relevance to biodiversity, including 1, 2, 14, 15, 17, 25, 27, 32, 33, 38, 39 and 41).

Geology

OBJECTIVE To improve the condition of geological sites and raise awareness of geology and its influences on landscape and human activity.

Geological sites (both SSSIs and RIGS) will sometimes need active management to maintain their value, such as controlling vegetation and tree growth. Sites which are well used for education and study may need active monitoring and liaison to ensure that damage, either deliberate or accidental, does not occur.

Agri-environment and Woodlands

OBJECTIVE To optimise the uptake, targeting and effectiveness of agri-environment and woodland grant schemes.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Agri-environment and Woodland Grant Schemes

These are the principal means to support private landowners to carry out conservation work (including biodiversity, landscape and heritage) and also support resource protection and timber production. Part of the Rural Development Programme for England, they are funded from EU and government money, including 'modulated' subsidies formerly linked to agricultural production. Environmental Stewardship, with Entry and Higher Levels and additional Organic and Upland elements, is now the main farming scheme, run by Natural England. Agreements are normally for five or ten years, and many existing agreements under earlier schemes have some years yet to run. Funding levels are looking promising for the period of the Management Plan, providing great potential for furthering the Management Plan's objectives. The English Woodland Grant Scheme is administered by the Forestry Commission.

POLICY 14 The Shropshire Hills should remain a priority area for agri-environment funding, and farmers should be actively encouraged to utilise the options that best contribute to the AONB Management Plan's aims.

Though slow to change and less vulnerable than many habitats, **woodlands** are important in the AONB and there is great potential to improve their management. Many small woodlands in particular are unmanaged. With careful planning, a gradual increase in the levels of woodland cover in the AONB will bring benefits for landscape, biodiversity and carbon storage.

POLICY 15 Broadleaved woodland comprising native species should be expanded, and especially restored on Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and Plantation on Wood Pasture (PWP).

POLICY 16 Where woodland and forestry felling is taking place, opportunities should be sought to improve design and landscape sensitivity of plantations. Reversion to open habitat should be targeted to locations where landscape benefits and potential for high value habitat (e.g. heathland) are greatest.

POLICY 17 Any new or replacement coniferous planting should follow the highest standards of design guidelines in relation to landscape and amenity, nature and heritage conservation and resource protection.

Individual trees are also of great value in the landscape, though many are unprotected. The AONB Partnership supports the Parish Tree Wardens Scheme, though there is scope for further recruitment and training. Arrangements for consultation with Tree Wardens on relevant planning applications have been agreed in South Shropshire, and should be consolidated with the unitary Shropshire Council.

Water quality and river habitat quality

OBJECTIVE To improve water quality, especially through reducing diffuse pollution, to reach requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive.

River habitat quality is one of the areas where the current condition of some features is poorest, and is therefore a very high priority. The Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative covering the River Teme is continuing, and the AONB Partnership has recently secured funding for the continuation of a Rivers Project.

Heritage

OBJECTIVE To conserve and manage heritage features and attributes, preventing damage and acting to maintain value where necessary.

English Heritage has recently published '*Conservation Principles, Policies & Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment*'⁹². This sets out six principles (see box below), and policies on: routine management and maintenance, repair, restoration, new work and alteration, integrating conservation with other public interests, and enabling development.

English Heritage's Conservation Principles for the Historic Environment

- Principle 1: The historic environment is a shared resource
- Principle 2: Everyone should be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment
- Principle 3: Understanding the significance of places is vital
- Principle 4: Significant places should be managed to sustain their values
- Principle 5: Decisions about change must be reasonable, transparent and consistent
- Principle 6: Documenting and learning from decisions is essential

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Heritage designations

National designations for heritage include Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listed Buildings, and operate similarly to SSSIs with formal consent required for certain works. The current Heritage Protection Review aims to modernise the designation system, and will delegate further responsibility from English Heritage to local authorities³⁴.

Tranquillity

Tranquillity is a vital aspect of the Shropshire Hills, and a fragile quality easily eroded by cumulative impacts.

OBJECTIVE To retain tranquillity, gather more information and raise the profile of this quality.

POLICY 18 Tranquillity should be taken fully into account in both strategic and specific decisions. Proposals having a significant impact on tranquillity in the AONB should be prevented where possible.

POLICY 19 Expansion of airports or alterations to flight path corridors which increase the volume or impacts of air traffic over the AONB should not be allowed.

(Other policies and objectives also make reference to tranquillity).

Managing recreation

OBJECTIVE To promote and support environmentally sound leisure and recreation activities.

Experience shows that conflicts can be avoided between access, conservation and land management by careful planning and management. This will include appropriate promotion, e.g. promoting locations that are robust and can be managed while maintaining a low profile for some sensitive conservation sites; maintaining paths; and encouraging sensitive behaviour and understanding of the conservation value of the area.

The relative remoteness of the area and its tranquillity are valued by both residents and visitors alike, and any conscious efforts to attract walkers should respect this. Conservation value is widely spread around the AONB, but the most heavily visited sites are also some of the most valuable in conservation terms (e.g. the Long Mynd – especially Cardingmill valley). **To help minimise impacts on these sites, the overall strategy should therefore be one of encouraging dispersal of access (planned with care), while ensuring high standards of management at well used sites and the retention of quieter areas.** This strategy fits with a positive message of encouraging people to explore and to see and learn new things.

Walking, cycling and horse riding are inherently low impact forms of access and, with appropriate planning, can be actively promoted without conflict with conservation. Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles can have a significant physical impact on soils, vegetation and paths as well as on tranquillity. The AONB Partnership has considered in detail the issue of recreational use of off-road vehicles and feels strongly that this activity is incompatible with the special qualities of the AONB, in particular through disturbance of tranquillity. The proactive work of the County Council Countryside Access Team in dealing with this issue is supported, including collaboration with the Countryside Recreation Access Group (CRAG). In the past, some routes in the AONB have become quite seriously damaged by vehicle use, and on vulnerable routes with little or no stone surfacing, especially where heritage or conservation designations apply, a preventative approach is strongly preferred to avoid damage occurring. Maintenance of routes, such as drainage and appropriate surfacing can help to reduce damage, and the County Council is currently reviewing arrangements for managing byways and unsurfaced county roads. The Local Access Forum is a valuable mechanism for bringing relevant

parties together to deal with such issues, and links between the Forum and the AONB Partnership will remain important.

POLICY 20 A principle of 'quiet enjoyment' should apply, and activities which are in keeping with this encouraged. Recreation activities which are inherently noisy or intrusive should be discouraged, and where possible prevented, e.g. facilities for such activities not allowed through the planning system.

POLICY 21 Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles should not be encouraged or promoted within the AONB. Voluntary measures and pro-active work with users are recommended to minimise the impact of legal off-road use of motor vehicles on the landscape and on people's quiet enjoyment of the countryside. Where the impact on the AONB is significant however, measures including Traffic Regulation Orders restricting legal use should be used. Illegal motorised activities should as far as possible be prevented, and proactive support given to the Police.

POLICY 22 Events in the AONB such as concerts, festivals, and challenge walks should be planned (e.g. in location, timing and scale) to minimise environmental impact, and regular events should not be allowed or encouraged to grow to a scale where problems arise. Event organisers should seek advice at the planning stages to enable this.

POLICY 23 Infrastructure associated with countryside access should be sensitively designed and appropriate materials should be used, e.g. stone for surfacing of a type appropriate to the location, preference for wooden signposts and gates on rights of way, rural character in the specification and signage of cycle routes.

Keeping the Shropshire Hills countryside thriving

While the AONB Management Plan must concentrate on the primary purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty, in the Shropshire Hills this is so dependent on economic and social activity that to ignore these would be like trying to treat symptoms without looking at causes. The landscape is much more than a pretty backdrop to business and local life – the AONB is a living, working area with specific characteristics and needs which are not typical of the region. Local experience in the AONB shows that conservation when viewed as part of sustainable development, along with social and economic benefits, gains support from a much wider constituency than on its own. This is not to say that the AONB Partnership will not champion the environment where conflicts with economic or social factors arise, but looking closely at the inter-relationships should help avoid such conflicts and also support the development of viable and more compatible alternatives. 'Thriving' in the sense of this priority means a balance between economic, social and environmental factors, where one is not sacrificed at the expense of another – the essence of sustainable development.

The topics considered under this priority are:

- Farming
- Forestry
- Economic development
- Affordable housing and sustainable communities
- Tourism

(N.B. For further background on these topics please refer to the separate 'State of the AONB' section).

Farming

OBJECTIVE To improve integration of environmental practices and farm conservation with business development (such as product differentiation, direct local selling and diversification), especially in the Less Favoured Areas.

OBJECTIVE To maintain food production by environmentally sustainable means, and maintain long term capacity to continue to produce food, e.g. by promoting farm support networks, encouraging succession and retaining and developing skills.

OBJECTIVE To increase the local supply of food, especially meat from grazing animals, through improving supply chains and expanding from niche markets, e.g. into tourism and public sector procurement.

OBJECTIVE To stimulate local demand by raising awareness among consumers of food and other local products, and their connections with the landscape.

After geology and landform, it is human activity, especially through farming, which has had the greatest influence on the landscape of the Shropshire Hills. The continuation of farming, in ways that are sensitive and sympathetic to the landscape, is vital to the conservation of the qualities that are valued in the Shropshire Hills. The continuity of knowledge which goes with family farming is also of great value, and it remains a significant employer.

There is a need to integrate business and environmental advice, in a whole farm approach. The combination of reaching local markets, accessing environmental subsidies and reducing costs, including through environmental measures such as waste and energy, combine to provide a sustainable alternative model to intensification. Grants supporting diversification should take into account the needs of small businesses in rural areas and make connections with environmental schemes. Economic support schemes for food and drink need to be locally based, as some of the regional scale initiatives have been limited by lack of local relevance.

Effort will be needed to retain traditional skills for managing landscape features, e.g. hedge laying, traditional buildings. New commercial skills will also need to be developed, related to farmers getting more involved in the supply chain, e.g. on collaboration, direct selling, adding value, etc. Support should be made available for farmers to work together to plan for the future, and to build alliances with other interests including environmental groups and the wider community.

There is a need for further awareness raising and education focusing of the links between food, farming and the landscape. This includes farm walks and tours, school visits and publicity.

Farming is also considered under the 'Adapting for the Future' priority re food security.

POLICY 24 Farmers and land managers should be supported as the main stewards of natural beauty, and for their vital role in maintaining the Shropshire Hills landscape. Policies and public funding relating to farming and forestry should recognise this and help to support ways of farming which generate these public environmental benefits.

POLICY 25 Environmental Stewardship priorities should support a shift back towards more mixed systems of farming especially in the uplands (e.g. by allowing a proportion of arable cropping and hay meadows). Advisory services should make better links with business approaches such as selling direct into local markets, which are also of benefit to the AONB.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 4 Because the vitality of the local agricultural economy is so integrally linked with the natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills, the AONB Partnership will actively support appropriate and sustainable forms of farming and diversification enterprises where these are compatible with the AONB designation.

Wood and forest products

OBJECTIVE To increase the local supply of wood and wood products, especially woodfuel.

Due in part to the shift towards renewable energy, the demand for forestry and woodland products is increasing. The Rural Development Programme for England provides funding opportunities to benefit the forestry sector, including the woodfuel supply chain in particular. There is great potential to increase local supplies of logs, woodchip, and pellets with associated development of supply chains, and stoves and boilers at the consumer end. It is important however that this is linked to improving the condition of woodlands, or some of the potential environmental benefits will be lost. The old and new Woodland Grant Schemes remain important financial incentives to encourage and influence woodland management, and encourage timber production as well as conservation and recreation benefits.

Use of local timber may remain relatively modest, but recent work with Alder flooring has shown that assumptions about the poor quality of local timber can be overcome, and there are significant niche markets for local materials which can be expanded. Raising awareness and involving people remain important, and wood is always a popular subject. The Green Wood Centre at Ironbridge, including the Small Woods Association and the regional Heartwoods project, is an important partner in this work.

Economic Development - general

As well as having a concentration of high quality scenery, biodiversity and heritage, the Shropshire Hills is a lagging area by many social and economic indices. Economic development is therefore a priority, but must be taken forward in ways which do not undermine the high quality environment of the AONB, which itself is a significant long term economic asset. The right kind of economic activity (e.g. in farming and forestry) can sustain the quality of the landscape, and the quality of the landscape can in turn sustain other economic activities (e.g. tourism). The planning system should help to enable

appropriate sustainable forms of development. Awareness could be raised substantially by encouraging or requiring appraisal of the overall sustainability of development proposals against economic, social and environmental criteria. With guidance and support, many people are willing to improve their proposals.

The **relationship between the AONB and the surrounding area** is very important in relation to economic development. However the distinctive nature of the AONB must be recognised, and appropriate measures may not be the same as, for example, throughout Shropshire generally. To illustrate this, the AONB makes up 23% of Shropshire, but contains only 6.5 % of its population. Policy for the AONB need not therefore be the same as policy for the whole county, as the characteristics are not the same – the AONB represents a ‘distillation’ of both the highest quality environment and least populated parts. Policies appropriate for the whole county may not provide adequate recognition of the special characteristics of the AONB. However, with many market towns and other land lying outside the AONB, there are many opportunities to accommodate developments which would not be suitable within the AONB itself. Indeed the economic (and social) inter-relationship between towns and their rural hinterlands needs to be nurtured and re-discovered. Church Stretton is particularly relevant here, but links between the AONB and the significant number of towns lying just outside it are important too.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 5 The model for the economy of the Shropshire Hills should be of environment-led regeneration, in which a pattern of relatively small-scale dispersed enterprise will be key to maintaining the right balance.

Enterprise, innovation, skills and levels of economic activity (among the population) are major factors in economic development, and the local situation with these factors needs to be taken into account. Opportunities at the lower end of the skills range, including land-based activities, will be important in addition to higher value activities. In innovation and enterprise, there is a need to support existing businesses to develop, as well as encouraging new ones to start. Revenue support available in small packages and addressing the needs of small and micro-businesses is needed. There are considerable opportunities for businesses, especially small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), within an environment-led approach, including the low carbon energy approaches outlined in the next section. Advantage West Midlands have specifically highlighted the importance of these opportunities to the Shropshire Hills area ⁹³.

Access to **training** is also an important factor, and different methods may be needed in rural areas to ensure that opportunities reach the right people. With regard to levels of economic activity, there is a particular need to encourage retention of young people in rural areas. A range of opportunities, including added-value activity in the land-based sector will be appropriate for this.

OBJECTIVE To promote relevant training to maintain and develop skills to support AONB priorities, including land management and traditional crafts, sustainable business and environmental knowledge.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Advantage West Midlands funding programmes

AWM, the Regional Development Agency for the West Midlands, is responsible for the economic and social aspects of the Rural Development Programme for England ⁵², and for the Rural Regeneration Zone ⁵⁷, as well as other public funding linked to priorities of the Regional Economic Strategy, including ‘natural assets’. Relevant priority areas for these significant funding sources include food and drink, tourism and environmental technology.

Housing and sustainable communities

OBJECTIVE To integrate affordable housing of high design and environmental standards in appropriate locations.

Though the issue of affordable housing is not unique to the Shropshire Hills or to AONBs, the issue is fundamentally connected with the AONB. The natural beauty of the area attracts incomers, and protection of the landscape limits supply of new housing; both therefore contribute directly to the affordability problem. It is not desirable that the existence of natural beauty and its protection have negative social consequences. With care and thought it should be possible to address housing need in ways which are also compatible with protecting the special qualities of the AONB. Development and implementation of the Shropshire Housing Strategy⁹⁴ and new Core Strategy⁸³ will help to achieve this.

There is a further link, in that the affordability problem to some extent limits the labour and skills available to manage the landscape. In such cases, provision of affordable housing will help directly to conserve the landscape as well as supporting the social and economic needs of the area. Enabling workers in lower paid jobs in rural areas to stay living near their work should also help to reduce travel, with associated environmental benefits.

The concept established in government policy of focusing most development on larger settlements is clearly correct in general terms, and in the context of this area this will often mean outside the AONB. However, development of an appropriate type and scale should be encouraged in the AONB in order to maintain vitality and support the development of sustainable rural communities. The government's Sustainable Communities policy does not take adequate account of the needs of rural areas by discouraging this trickle down, as recently highlighted by the report of the Rural Affordable Housing Commission⁹⁵, and work by the Commission for Rural Communities⁹⁶. Rural areas are of importance as functioning areas in their own right, and should not be seen merely as a hinterland to urban areas. Smaller settlements must be allowed to be 'sustainable' too, and preventing all development will work against vitality and exacerbate affordability problems. Modest levels of affordable housing development in these smaller settlements will help to support the social and economic needs of some of the most rural communities within the AONB.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 6 Where market priced housing is used to generate finance for affordable housing within the AONB, it is preferable that the market priced housing is outside the AONB.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 7 Where affordable housing is allowed when other forms of development would not be, in order to meet social need, the standards of sensitivity to the AONB should not be compromised, and are expected to be higher than outside the AONB.

[Links with current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan – policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy – Policy CS 12.]

Tourism

OBJECTIVE To develop and support sustainable tourism strongly linked to the landscape of the Shropshire Hills, including policy, facilities and services and approaches to marketing.

A sustainable approach to tourism can be defined as one which seeks to achieve less impact on the environment, more understanding and enjoyment, and more benefit to the local economy and community. The actual numbers of visitors are less important – the benefits described above may be achieved with either greater or fewer numbers. This is not a matter of black and white, that a certain form of tourism is sustainable or not, as there is a continuum of impacts and benefits. Neither is sustainability just about making tourism 'less harmful' to the environment – it can actually be beneficial to conserving the landscape, e.g. where boosting a market for local products. Between 32% and 66% of tourists have been found to either purchase or eat local foods during their visit⁹⁷. The Europarc

'Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas'⁹⁸ provides both accreditation and a framework for working with both the public sector and businesses, and may be helpful for the Shropshire Hills.

Tourism is an important component of the rural economy of the area and its development has strong political support, while the need for sensitivity is generally acknowledged. A focus on quality and maximising value from visitors fits with a sustainable tourism approach, but should encourage social inclusion, e.g. through good quality but low cost facilities such as campsites and hostels. Facilities and services outside the AONB are especially relevant to tourism, and consideration of aspects crossing the boundary is important.

POLICY 26 Countryside attractions and walks should be linked where possible to settlements where services and public transport facilities exist and can be promoted, helping to maximise economic benefits, especially from day visitors.

POLICY 27 Tourism activities which draw on the special qualities of the area without harming them should be especially encouraged. This may include development of access infrastructure (e.g. off-road cycle routes, rights of way), use of public transport, historic and natural sites, interpretation to help aid understanding, enterprises based specifically on the special qualities of the AONB (e.g. wildlife watching, landscape painting, walking festivals) and cultural events.

Shifting to low carbon

Climate change almost certainly represents the biggest long term threat to the AONB and to humankind. Responding to this requires both mitigation and adaptation, and will need all the efforts of co-ordinated public policy and community action. The AONB structures therefore have an important role to play.

“Our actions over the coming few decades could create risks of major disruption to economic and social activity, later in this century and in the next, on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th Century. And it will be difficult or impossible to reverse these changes... The earlier effective action is taken, the less costly it will be... The Review estimates the annual costs of stabilisation at 500-550ppm CO₂e to be around 1% of GDP by 2050 - a level that is significant but manageable.”

Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change, 2006 ⁹⁹

The scale of this challenge cannot be underestimated. Stern’s recommended level of investment in lowering carbon emissions equates to around £4.36 million annually for the Shropshire Hills AONB (or £229 per person pa). CO₂ emissions for the AONB are likely to be higher than those for South Shropshire (9.9 tonnes per capita for 2006 ¹⁰⁰), where a higher representation of market towns include smaller and terraced properties and have lower car ownership. The AONB’s emissions levels are therefore significantly above the regional and national average, with high levels of transport, lack of mains gas and larger old properties being key factors. The government’s target of 80% reduction in CO₂ emissions from 1990 levels by 2050 ¹⁰¹ equates to a cut of around 4,000 tonnes per year for the AONB (equivalent to the per capita annual emissions of over 300 people).

In relation to the AONB it is desirable to find measures to meet these CO₂ emission targets without significant impacts on its special qualities. Energy conservation is the best way to achieve reductions in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions without harm to the landscape and should be given the highest priority. Improving energy efficiency in all sectors will minimise costs and improve productivity as well as benefiting the environment. Advisory services helping to achieve this need further support. Reductions in energy use and CO₂ emissions can be made by technological improvements, but behavioural changes will also be necessary to achieve the reductions required. As well as finding new ways, there may be some lessons from the past, e.g. in the use of local materials for building.

The conflict between landscape protection and the potential for reducing CO₂ emissions through wind generation was a key issue identified in the Sustainability Appraisal ⁹ on the draft Management Plan. This Appraisal highlighted the need to emphasise energy conservation and demand reduction, encourage the focus nationally of wind energy development outside protected landscapes, and for proactive work on more compatible forms of renewables in the AONB, as alternatives to reduce this conflict. These approaches are developed below.

The topics considered under this priority are:

- **Energy**
- **Transport**
- **Greenhouse gases and land management.**

(N.B. For further background on some of these topics please refer to the separate ‘State of the AONB’ section).

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Sustainable Development Fund

The Sustainable Development Fund is run by the AONB Partnership and offers grants to organisations, businesses and individuals for projects with environmental, social and economic benefits related to the AONB. All AONBs and National Parks operate the Fund with money from Defra (for AONBs via Natural England). As well as supporting a range of excellent projects, the Fund has raised the profile and understanding of the AONB. Use of a simple sustainability appraisal with support to applicants has also substantially raised awareness and practical understanding of sustainability issues. The AONB Partnership has chosen to give a high priority to low carbon projects e.g. in energy and transport, but the Fund also covers a wide range of other topics.

Energy

OBJECTIVE To reduce energy use by households, services, farms and businesses, including through energy conservation and efficiency.

The main sectors of energy use in the area are considered briefly below:

Domestic – Domestic energy consumption is likely to be relatively high – the carbon footprint for Bishop’s Castle carried out by the Wasteless Society in 2005 showed levels 40% higher than the national average, mainly due to reliance on electric heating because of being off the main gas grid. High standards are now found in new developments due to Building Regulations and the Code for Sustainable Homes, but the existing housing stock includes many older and larger properties with poor energy efficiency standards. Existing buildings nevertheless have substantial embodied energy and often heritage value, and retaining and upgrading them will usually be the most sustainable option for delivering energy savings. Despite common perceptions, significant work can be done to improve the energy efficiency of older properties.

Business – Industry within the AONB is mostly relatively small scale, and the energy use of many business premises is likely to be similar to the domestic sector. However, distances travelled of both materials and people are often high due to the rural setting. There are likely to be benefits to competitiveness, productivity and profitability especially to small businesses from energy efficiency and other energy reduction measures.

Farming – Energy inputs are considerably lower in livestock farming compared to arable where greater use of fertiliser and grain driers are energy intensive. Use of diesel for transport and machinery is a significant area, and transport and embodied energy is higher in systems where more feed is bought in. Energy use in lower input farming systems (such as organic) are lower, but higher yields can mean that more intensive systems result in lower carbon emissions per unit of output. This may need to be balanced against other environmental factors such as biodiversity and landscape, and externalities which have both carbon and cost implications, such as water quality.

POLICY 28 Lowering carbon emissions from the area is an over-riding priority, and should influence all areas of decision making. Energy conservation should be given the highest priority, and should always accompany renewable energy generation. Low carbon community initiatives are supported. In addition to carbon from energy use, the ability of land management to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should be optimised.

POLICY 29 Integration of energy efficiency and renewable energy will be encouraged in all development – new or refurbishment, and of any scale.

Renewable energy

OBJECTIVE To increase local production of renewable energy in ways compatible with the AONB.

Renewable energy generation has an increasingly important role, but may have impacts on the landscape, including natural, historical and cultural features as well as the amenity value of the area (e.g. in relation to visual intrusion, noise, dust, odour and traffic generation). Some forms of renewable energy are inherently more compatible with a nationally protected landscape than others, e.g. solar, biomass, small scale hydro and ground source installations are likely to be less intrusive than wind generation. Some types of development of renewables have the potential to benefit both conservation and the land-based sectors.

The government's proposed new Renewable Energy Strategy¹⁰² aims to meet 15% of energy supply from renewables by 2020. Combining this aim with landscape, biodiversity and other considerations is a real challenge, and will require considerable further work in the AONB and elsewhere. The Management Plan aims to move forward understanding of how renewable energy can be developed in harmony with the natural beauty of the AONB.

The main technologies are reviewed briefly below in relation to the Shropshire Hills:

Wind – The area has significant theoretical potential for wind, but currently only has a few individual turbines of up to around 18m in height. Though turbines can be of any size, their output does not rise in direct proportion, and the cost-benefit balance is driving a trend towards larger turbines of 100m+ high or 2-3MW each. No proposals for development of large turbines in the AONB have been actively put forward to date, though applications for sites near to the AONB in Powys and Herefordshire have recently been made. Smaller scale turbines tend to be a completely different category of development, motivated by an individual property holder. The effectiveness in terms of cost and energy of the smallest (e.g. building-mounted) turbines is questionable, and this alone is likely to limit their development. Modest turbines can be effective however, where combined with other low energy measures such as demand reduction through building design and ground or air source heat pumps. While turbines do provide opportunities in off-grid locations, the battery back-up required has negative environmental implications, and grid connection is usually preferable if possible.

Unsurprisingly, areas of higher ground where winds are greater also have higher visual sensitivity. Though opinions differ, there is a body of strong feeling against the development of large scale wind turbines in the AONB. CPRE's approach to tranquillity includes consideration of man-made structures, and they have cited impacts on tranquillity as well as landscape and visual aspects in their opposition to wind turbine developments. The overall sustainability benefits of wind energy generation (as with other forms of renewables) are potentially greater where a community approach is taken. Proposals involving community ownership, meeting local needs, awareness raising and involvement in a broad range of energy reduction and generation approaches are likely to win more support than proposals perceived to be led by and benefiting external commercial concerns.

Solar – This sector has limited development so far in the area. However, being off the mains gas grid makes a major difference to economic viability, especially making solar water heating more attractive. Photovoltaic panels for electricity generation are more expensive, but have been used on some properties and for some road signs in remoter locations.

Hydro – This sector is also not developed in the area, but there is potential for relatively small scale schemes using rivers and streams.

Biomass – this is split between :

- Existing biomass resource – i.e. woodfuel. This area has the greatest overlap of benefits with conservation as many woods are under-managed and harvesting appropriate levels of material, e.g. reinstating coppicing cycles can bring biodiversity benefits. High levels of unplanned or uncontrolled harvesting could however be damaging. Wood energy is especially suited to heating rather than electricity generation. Transport will be an issue for larger scale schemes, but the rural nature of the area also makes the use of very local resources cost effective. Use of firewood is already quite high, though the potential exists to increase and improve efficiency e.g. stoves rather than open fires, better use of waste wood/dust for chip, pellets. The range of small scale mobile machinery is improving – log

splitters, etc. and can also improve efficiency. Supply chain development in the woodfuel sector provides opportunities for the development of businesses in the area.

- Specially planted crops – including Willow and Poplar coppice, *Miscanthus*, and wheat and rape for biofuels. Government policy supports development of bioenergy, though there is increasing recognition of the conflict with food production. The application of energy crops will be limited in the Shropshire Hills by the quality of land, and is likely to cause less change to the landscape than elsewhere in the county. Overall sustainability benefits, the intensity of management and impact on wildlife and resources are probably more significant considerations than visual impact. A major influence is the demand and where the crops are used and processed.

Biogas – Anaerobic digesters can take plant material and animal dung, but larger scale installations are more likely in for example larger dairy units which are not so common within the AONB.

Ground/air heat pumps – These are most cost effective at new build, as installation is disruptive and also because they are best suited to lower temperature underfloor heating. Negative impacts are likely to be minimal provided sensitive historic sites are avoided.

Lack of knowledge of the various technologies is a major issue. There is currently a rapid rise in interest and demand and this is a rapidly changing sector. The Shropshire Hills area has a strong interest in renewable energy, and a number of innovators and specialists.

Other energy installations/ developments - Conventional generation includes combined heat and power CHP (e.g. gas fired, which is now available at a smaller, even domestic scale), and energy from waste. The same criteria apply to these as other types of proposal i.e. no major developments within the AONB, appropriate scale and location (especially in proximity to demand or to supply of material), with consideration of visual, biodiversity, historic, amenity impacts including indirect effects e.g. through transport. Supply chains should be kept short where possible. Localisation of energy production will help to improve energy security.

POLICY 30 Renewable energy developments in the AONB should generally be of a small scale appropriate to local use. Larger scale energy developments will be more suitable outside the AONB, e.g. linked to market towns where transport links are better, closer to larger scale demand, etc.

POLICY 31 Small scale domestic renewable installations (e.g. solar panels) are encouraged and AONB designation should not be used as a reason against these. The design and installation of these should take account of visual amenity. Greater sensitivity may be required in Conservation Areas and on Listed Buildings, but even in these circumstances, effort should be made to enable energy benefits to be achieved.

POLICY 32 Biomass energy based on existing resources in the area, such as woodfuel and agricultural by-products, is particularly compatible with the AONB and is strongly supported.

POLICY 33 Establishment of energy crops should avoid harm to biodiversity or water quality and, where larger and longer-lived than normal agricultural crops, should take account of visual amenity (e.g. following forestry design guidelines regarding scale and shape of compartments including in relation to landform, structural diversity and edge treatments).

Development of **wind turbines** affecting the AONB is a controversial topic, and an area in which policy and attitudes are evolving quite rapidly. Wind energy has a role to play in the important priority of lowering carbon emissions, but is much less compatible with landscape than other forms of renewable energy. A recent study of wind energy potential in the West Midlands¹⁰³ excluded all land within AONBs in a first level screening for 'constraints', and showed overall a relatively small prioritised practical potential resource for wind energy development in the region. Planning policies at a national and local level will be more significant in determining any applications than the content of this Plan, and all planning decisions are ultimately made on a case by case basis. The presumption against major development in AONBs in PPS 7 is the key policy in relation to any major proposals. The intention of the paragraphs below is to supplement existing policy, to guide limited development of wind energy compatible with the AONB, and help to avoid unnecessary time and conflict over unsuitable proposals.

POLICY 34 There should be no development of wind turbines (other than in accordance with permitted development rights) within the ‘High Open Moorland’ and ‘High Volcanic Hills and Slopes’ Landscape Types in the AONB.

[This policy links with paragraphs 5.14 to 5.20 of ‘Planning for Renewable Energy, a Companion Guide to PPS 22 and with current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan – policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy – Policy CS 12.]

These landscape types are found in Shropshire only within the AONB and include its most iconic landmark hills - the Long Mynd, the Stiperstones and its outliers, the Clee Hills, Stapeley Hill, the Wrekin, the Stretton Hills and Earl’s Hill.

POLICY 35 Proposals for wind turbines within the AONB should take account of factors including landscape character, visual amenity, biodiversity, heritage, recreation and overall sustainability (including cumulative impacts), and the following guidelines:

- Within 100m of buildings (excluding Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas), one or two wind turbines of up to 12m to blade tip are likely to be acceptable within the AONB.
- Turbines of over 25m to blade tip, or groups of more than two turbines, are not likely to be acceptable within the AONB.
- Wind turbine proposals should be linked to local energy needs and energy conservation measures. Community benefits should relate to energy in preference to amenity or other measures.

[This policy links with current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan – policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy – Policy CS 12.]

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 8 The Partnership supports community low carbon initiatives and will consider wind turbine proposals based on a range of sustainability criteria as well as visual and landscape aspects.

[Links with PPS22 – para 1, RSS – Policy EN1].

Windfarms outside the AONB, including in Powys and Herefordshire could affect the AONB, though the influence of the designation is considerably less for developments outside the boundary. The Management Plan’s approach on this topic is guided by the rationale of the Sustainability Appraisal process, which recognises that siting wind energy developments outside designated areas is a key means of reducing the conflict between landscape protection and the potential of wind energy to reduce CO2 emissions. In Wales, developments will be guided by the ‘Strategic Search Areas’ defined in TAN 8¹⁰⁴ and refined in local authority policy. There is a strong presumption against large or medium windfarm development outside these Search Areas (and most of the land adjoining the AONB in Wales is not included in Search Areas).

AONB PARTNERHIP POSITION 9 Land within 5km of the AONB boundary is unsuitable for large scale windfarm development, and should be excluded from any Search Areas.

The definition of large in respect of this policy is that used by TAN 8, i.e. developments of 25MW and over.

[Links with PPS22 para 14, current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan – policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy – Policy CS 12.]

POLICY 36 Decisions on proposals for wind turbines outside the AONB should take account of the potential impacts within the AONB, especially the extent of visibility and significance of viewpoints affected, and potential cumulative effects with existing structures.

[This policy links with PPS22 para 14, current local authority planning policies South Shropshire Local Plan - policy E1, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Local Plan - policy LNC9, Bridgnorth District Local Plan - policy B4 and Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy - Policy CS 12.]

Recent changes to **permitted development** allow wind turbines up to 11m in any location and in any number other than in World Heritage Sites or Conservation Areas. The general principle of easing planning restrictions on microgeneration is strongly supported, but there are felt to be one or two loopholes in the changes which could allow developments which would be incompatible with the AONB.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 10 The Partnership supports permitted development rights for appropriate microgeneration, but believes the current moves to extend permitted development rights could allow some wind turbine developments which would have an unacceptable impact on the landscape of the AONB. The Partnership will work with the planning authorities to explore the case for an Article 4 Direction which would remove permitted development rights for multiple micro wind turbines and for those sited away from existing development (e.g. further than 100m from buildings).

Transport

OBJECTIVE To reduce car dependency and optimise provision and use of public transport.

Regional research on rural communities⁷⁰ shows that relying on mobility as the main means to meet people's needs is not sustainable. Strengthening local communities and targeted measures to improve accessibility of services, employment, etc. have important roles in helping to making rural communities more sustainable. Changes need to be made that reduce the need to travel. This includes generally locating new developments near to existing settlements and transport interchanges. Appropriate and sustainable development of dispersed settlements that helps to enable local employment for the local population should be actively supported. Farm diversification enterprises should be sensitive to the impact of increasing business-related traffic to and from the property. Those that are likely to generate more traffic, such as farm shops or visitor-led attractions should be located near existing settlements or close to transport interchanges. Efficiency in the transport of goods should be promoted as a key priority of local distribution networks, particularly those involved in the food chain, to enable local producers and shops to compete on an environmental, social and economic level with large retailers.

Continued commitment is necessary to provide and improve targeted, efficient and appropriate public transport. It is important to ensure that the needs of tourism are integrated into transport planning and promotion. Existing public transport networks such as rail and bus should be utilised to publicise attractions in the AONB, which may encourage existing users to make more use of public transport for leisure visits. Church Stretton is particularly well suited to this approach and its role as a public transport 'hub' should be developed. There may be greater benefit to the local economy from visitors using public transport, e.g. visitors to Cardingmill Valley arriving by train have to walk the short distance from the station through Church Stretton town and are more likely to support local businesses than those arriving by car.

An approach of minimising travel while staying in the Shropshire Hills is also likely to result in a more direct and enhanced experience of the countryside, reduced environmental impacts and more benefit to local businesses. Accommodation providers should be supported to encourage visitors to explore locally. This approach (sometimes known as 'Slow Travel') may be worked into a project for 'Offa's Dyke Country', to encourage visitors to appreciate and protect the unique qualities of this area. The availability of public transport should be a decisive factor when organising and scheduling events

within the AONB. Public transport should always be promoted as the preferred mode for accessing an event, e.g. by offering incentives such as discounts on entry to users of public transport.

The Shropshire Local Transport Plan outlines a range of approaches including managing demand, changing behaviour and promoting transport efficiency, and these are especially relevant in relation to the AONB.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 11 Strategies for transport affecting the AONB should not be solely informed by a 'predict and provide' model of increasing capacity to deal with increased traffic flow. The need for road upgrades and improvements which could increase car travel and have detrimental effects on the AONB may be avoided by use of other measures.

POLICY 37 Promotion of the area for tourism should aim to minimise car travel. Towns and location best served by public transport should receive the main promotion as 'gateways' to the Shropshire Hills, in preference to locations where access is only possible by car.

Greenhouse gases and land management

OBJECTIVE To reduce greenhouse gas emissions from land management and increase carbon sequestration including through soils and trees.

There are non-energy greenhouse gas emissions related specifically to farming e.g. methane from livestock, and also opportunities to sequester carbon in both soils and trees. The implications of these have not been quantified for the Shropshire Hills, but some pointers are emerging. Peat soils are the most significant for storing carbon, but these are very uncommon in the Shropshire Hills. In mineral soils, the amount of organic matter is significant, and it appears that carbon storage under organic systems is greater. Methane emissions from cows especially can be significant, and methane is approximately 20 times more powerful a greenhouse gas than CO₂. Anaerobic digesters can significantly reduce methane emissions, even where energy is not recovered. Unimproved grasslands store more carbon than improved grassland or tilled land, and may result in lower methane emissions from ruminants. Nitrous oxide has around 310 times the greenhouse effect of CO₂, and is released in fertiliser production and use, and through soil disturbance. The combined emissions of nitrous oxide and methane may be more significant for many farms than their CO₂ emissions.

The ability of growing trees to sequester carbon has on occasions been exaggerated and this has been seen as a potential 'easy way out' from carbon reduction through lowering fossil fuel use. The carbon stored in trees is released when they decay or are burnt, resulting in a neutral process over time. However if woodland cover is increased on a long term basis then more carbon is stored. Certainly if more timber is harvested for greater use of woodfuel, then continued planting of new trees is desirable to ensure that carbon storage increases.

In an interview study with 40 farmers in the Shropshire Hills in 2008, 33% said they were already involved in at least one activity managing carbon, and 67% were interested⁵³. 40% were interested in converting to organic.

Adapting for the future, working alongside nature

The qualities for which the AONB is designated will remain important in the future, but climate change will intensify pressure on land for food and energy production, and consequently on wildlife and landscape. The AONB's landscape is perhaps more suited than some to allow wildlife to adapt, due to the range of altitude and habitats. This section focuses on measures to adapt to climate change, both from the perspective of conservation, and in relation to social and economic adaptation in ways compatible with the AONB. Under the Climate Change Act 2008¹⁰¹, local authorities will be required to draw up adaptation strategies and it is hoped that this analysis can contribute. This section draws heavily on Natural England's recent Climate Change Impact Assessment and Response Strategy for the Shropshire Hills Character Area⁸⁰.

The UK Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP), drawing on Defra's Adaptation Policy Framework¹⁰⁵ considers there are two types of adaptation response: **building adaptive capacity** and **delivering adaptation actions**¹⁰⁶. Building adaptive capacity involves creating the information, supportive social structures and governance that is required for delivering adaptation actions which help to reduce vulnerability to climate risks or exploit opportunities.

The topics considered under this priority are:

- **Adaptation for Wildlife and Landscape**
- **Functioning Ecosystems**
- **Social and economic adaptation.**

(N.B. For further background on some of these topics please refer to the separate 'State of the AONB' section).

Adaptation for Wildlife and Landscape

There will be significant change to the landscape in the long term from climate change. The directions of change must be recognised, with the aim of retaining ecological value, albeit perhaps with different species and even habitats. It will be unwise to expend lots of resources conserving particular features or species which do not have a long term future. The focus instead should be on **resilience** and adaptation. It is now widely accepted that conserving wildlife in isolated 'reserves' alone will not be effective, and that conservation at a 'landscape scale' is necessary. There may be multiple benefits from improving habitat networks, e.g. woodland expansion can be beneficial to the landscape, wildlife, carbon, local energy, water quality and management.

OBJECTIVE To restore and create improved habitat networks at a landscape scale by enhancing habitats (including heathland, grassland and woodland) especially buffering and linking existing high quality areas.

Hopkins *et al* (2007¹⁰⁷) identified these guidelines for conserving biodiversity in a changing climate:

1. **Conserve existing biodiversity** - Conserve protected areas and other high quality habitats.
Conserve the range and ecological variability of habitats and species
2. **Reduce sources of harm not linked to climate**
3. **Develop ecologically resilient and varied landscapes** - Conserve and enhance local variation within sites and habitats. Make space for the natural development of rivers and coasts
4. **Establish ecological networks** through habitat protection, restoration and creation
5. **Make sound decisions based on analysis**
Thoroughly analyse causes of change. Respond to changing conservation priorities
6. **Integrate adaptation and mitigation measures** into conservation management, planning and practice

Key adaptation responses identified in the Natural England Shropshire Hills study are:

- An important response is to **maintain the quality of existing habitats**;
- There is a need to **increase the capacity of sites to respond** to climate change;
- **Be aware of future potential catastrophic events** that may occur as a result of climate change such as the emergence of new pests and diseases;
- **Extension of existing habitats and the creation of new areas**;
- **Plant new trees, perhaps of a wider range of species** as possible replacements for species that may succumb to drought, disease and storm damage. Research will be required to establish which species will be most appropriate.
- **Plant and promote young trees** in hedges and boundaries on a continuing timeline, so that there is always a wide range of age classes to replace older/larger trees that may be lost;
- A series of actions to **raise awareness of fire risk** and prevent/control outbreaks. This involves having a fire plan which requires co-operation between the fire service, landowners and other agencies, access to suitable training and equipment;
- Acceptance that the changes to the landscape may mean **access arrangements need to be altered**;
- A major principle of visitor management is dispersal, or **spreading the impact of an increase in visitor numbers** across the area;
- Provide and promote attractive circular walks close to urban areas, thus reducing the numbers of people in the more sensitive parts of the area and **reducing the need to travel for recreation**;
- In addressing impacts on water resources and water quality it will be necessary to **manage catchments in a more holistic manner**;
- Climate change may be the 'tipping point' that prevents the area from recovering from the in-combination effects of all sources of pressure. In addition, the legacy of past sources of pressure on the natural environment may restrict the ability of the area to adapt to climate change. It is thus vitally important that efforts are made to **address other sources of pressure**.
- **Habitat restoration and creation** will be required to address these multiple sources of pressure;
- Use the spatial planning system to **maintain adequate land for the natural environment**;
- A common impact across all habitat types is the likelihood of **species and community compositional changes** and there is a need for policy to reflect this;
- **Identifying research needs** and commissioning appropriate studies can be seen as an early step towards building adaptive capacity that should increase the effectiveness of strategies when implemented.

The West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership have published a regional 'Landscapes for Living' 50 year vision map ¹⁰⁸ which shows areas of high habitat network potential in the AONB. Shropshire County Council have developed opportunity mapping for new woodland creation based on the Landscape Character Assessment ¹⁰⁹. This defines preferred, neutral and sensitive areas for woodland creation. Much of the AONB is classed as sensitive, but this should not be taken to mean that woodland creation is not desirable, simply that it must be done with care, e.g. in relation to landscape impact and potential impact on other habitats or heritage.

Areas of good habitat may be enlarged or their connectivity improved by working with neighbours to existing areas such as nature reserves, and targeted land acquisition by conservation bodies has a role to play. However, seeking to expand and recreate good quality habitats right across the landscape will require work on private land, and a high priority must be given to working with landowners and local communities to explain the reasons and benefits and foster support. **Agri-environment schemes will be the most important means of delivering this at the scale of the AONB.** Recent work by Shropshire County Council on mapping plant species which act as good indicators of habitat quality has potential to aid accurate local targeting of Higher Level Stewardship ¹¹⁰.

In order to prioritise and to help convey the concepts to a wider audience, three **main themes** with four focal areas are proposed on which to prioritise habitat restoration in the AONB, as shown in Figure 18, Priority areas and themes for habitat restoration:

1. Long Mynd – Stiperstones area - upland habitats
2. River Clun & Teme catchments - river habitats
3. Wenlock Edge – Wrekin - woodland habitats
4. Clee Hills – upland habitats

These are based on the quality of existing habitat networks, which have been analysed and mapped by Natural England. They also relate to the West Midlands 'Landscapes for Living' vision. They are not exclusive, either in terms of favoured habitat type within each area, or in relation to other parts of the AONB, but they are intended to provide a focus. The Long Mynd – Stiperstones area has the strongest and largest habitat networks of any part of the AONB, and work has already been carried out in strengthening these. There is plenty of scope to continue this, though the area is not large enough for the more ambitious 're-wilding' approach adopted in some areas. Being relatively low-lying hills, the area is dependent on continued grazing to maintain open habitats by preventing vegetation succession.

The large catchments of the River Clun and those parts of the Teme within the AONB have many habitats, but the rivers themselves are the most important biodiversity features. Work throughout the catchment including on a variety of habitats will benefit the rivers, and these can act as a useful spur and focus for conservation activity. Wenlock Edge is one of the longest continuous woodlands in England, and links to the woods of the Wrekin and the Severn valley. There is an opportunity to build on recent work by conservation bodies and private landowners to enhance this important corridor. Other valuable habitat networks which may be enhanced include the uplands of the upper Clun Forest, the Rivers Onny and Corve, and woodlands in the west of the AONB from the Clun Valley to Linley and Eastridge/Pontesford.

POLICY 38 Pro-active adaptation to climate change, giving a high priority to wildlife and natural processes, is essential to retaining the natural beauty of the AONB and must be given a high priority.

POLICY 39 Existing areas of high quality habitat must be retained, and networks developed of higher quality habitat through targeted improvements on privately owned land.

Functioning ecosystems

OBJECTIVE To improve land management for flood alleviation.

Ecosystem services³⁸ (or human benefits from the environment) can be divided into a number of categories:

- Provisioning (food, energy, raw materials),
- Regulating (air, climate, water),
- Cultural (aesthetic, recreation),
- Supporting (soil, nutrients, primary production)

Though some economic sectors have little direct connection with the land, the environment still provides basic resources for urban and rural populations alike. Functions such as clean air and water are vital for health, and catchment management (affecting flooding in many of the region's major towns), has a huge bearing on economic activity. Ultimately the environment sustains life, and the consequences of climate change will draw into sharper focus the need to remember these basic needs.

Flood alleviation is an important area of adaptation linking natural with social and economic aspects. The speed of run-off in a river catchment is affected by factors such as vegetation height, land drains and woodland cover. Changes beneficial to habitat quality such as reducing grazing and re-wetting grasslands and heath may not prevent flooding, but can have some effect in slowing down the flow of water. The value of the ecosystem services provided by Shropshire Hills needs to be more fully acknowledged, and in particular land management practices which improve water quality and mitigate against flooding should be promoted (other ecosystem services are addressed elsewhere in the Plan).

Social and economic adaptation

Though awareness has risen sharply in recent years, the depth of the implications of climate change are not yet fully accepted by many people. There is an overlap between mitigation and adaptation measures, e.g. localising food and energy production may both lower carbon emissions and provide greater security. The scales of action and thinking for adaptation are at the same time national and international as well as highly local.

The planning system is one way to drive forward some forms of adaptation, such as:

- Avoiding the need for development in flood risk areas and incorporating measures in design and construction to reduce the effects of flooding
- 'Future proofing' of development activity for its susceptibility to climate change
- Improving the resilience and reliability of existing infrastructure to cope with changes in climate and in the light of future demand.
- Linking the provision of homes, jobs and services based on role and function so that cities, towns and villages and groups of places have the potential to become more self-contained and the need to travel is reduced.

Some, however argue that a much deeper level of adaptation is required, a fundamental change in our relationship with the environment. The effects of 'peak oil' may force changes on us much sooner than they may come about through climate change. Global pressure on resources may bring about divisions and conflicts and severely test the moral fabric of society. The burgeoning 'Transition Towns' movement is attracting interest in the area. This stresses **resilience** – in lifestyles, through skills and approaches which fit with a low carbon, unpredictable future; and in communities, through mutual support and the empowerment of working with others towards a sustainable future.

(Objectives 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26 and 28 are relevant to this heading).

Helping people to connect with the AONB

This priority encompasses raising awareness about the AONB and its special qualities, making more of the benefits of living in and visiting the area, and establishing closer links between the AONB designation and the key issues facing Shropshire. Many people's connection with the landscape of the Shropshire Hills is strong, but understanding of the designation is generally poor, the cumbersome name being something of an obstacle. Progress has been made in raising the profile of the AONB, and many people have now heard of it. Challenges for the coming five years are to raise understanding of what the designation means, and to help the AONB and its landscape to generate more benefits to a wider range of people.

The topics considered under this priority are:

- Awareness
- Sense of place and community
- Wellbeing
- Learning, skills and training
- Partnerships and networks.

(N.B. For further background on some of these topics please refer to the separate 'State of the AONB' section).

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Community action

A huge range of community groups undertake action which supports the AONB, and a variety of public and voluntary sector organisations provide support. People empowered to improve their own local environment are a core part of the Vision of the Management Plan. Community or Parish Plans are one important mechanism, but other more informal means are valuable too. Strengthened arrangements for community working under the new unitary Shropshire Council, including Local Area Committees and revised structures for Local Strategic Partnerships will help communities to do more for themselves and link more closely to decision-making bodies.

Awareness

OBJECTIVE To raise public awareness of the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills and of the AONB and its management.

Improving understanding of the special qualities of the AONB is a key part of increasing support for conservation, and most people's enjoyment will be enhanced by greater knowledge. Many people seem to have more confidence with heritage than in relation to wildlife or geology. There is also scope and demand to raise awareness of environmental issues and of food and farming. Focusing on specific topics is worthwhile as the detailed knowledge of specialists and amateur enthusiasts can capture interest.

A further aspect of awareness is about the work of the AONB Partnership and its partners. It is apparent that people who have had direct contact with work of the AONB Partnership are generally much more positive and supportive about it than those who have not. Improving contact and knowledge is therefore an important means of increasing support.

Awareness raising needs to target decision makers as well as the public. The AONB can become a stronger part of Shropshire's identity. The designation is commonly perceived to be just about visual amenity, and the contribution of the AONB's high quality environment to the economy and wellbeing of the area itself, and of the county and region, needs to be better acknowledged and promoted.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: Local authority work in support of enjoyment and understanding

A wide variety of services and facilities provided by the Councils are vital means of supporting enjoyment and understanding of the Shropshire Hills. These include the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre at Craven Arms, Museums at Ludlow and Much Wenlock, the work of the County Council Countryside Access Team on rights of way and other access, and work in support of health walking and volunteering, including the Parish Paths Partnership Groups. The Local Access Forum provides an inclusive means to look at access and recreation issues, including in relation to the AONB.

Sense of place and community

OBJECTIVE To strengthen communities and build their capacity and cohesion by broadening participation in community activity.

OBJECTIVE To develop sense of place and community pride around the Shropshire Hills, and strengthen the 'Shropshire Hills' identity, especially in visitor and tourism promotion material.

The hills and landscape of the AONB are central to most people's attachment to the area. The identity of the area however has not been strong, perhaps due to its diversity and the variety of local authority areas. Local residents' attachment tends to be quite focussed to their particular locality, or to Shropshire in general. Along with raising awareness of the AONB itself, the Partnership has been promoting more consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity. This is helping to strengthen the area's sense of place, to support sustainable tourism by associating this with environmental quality and sensitivity, and ultimately to lead to more support for the area's conservation. The approach has gained support from both communities and business sector, and now forms the basis of branding through the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme.

Community involvement and participation can be both motivated by and contribute to a sense of place. People's involvement through the Blue Remembered Hills project has shown the untapped potential. The AONB has some valuable champions in the community and will benefit from more.

POLICY 40 Opportunities should be should be taken to strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills as an area of exceptional landscape value. Consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity should be given greater prominence in tourism and other forms of promotion, along with the special qualities of the AONB and opportunities for visitors to adopt a sustainable approach.

Wellbeing

OBJECTIVE To maximise health and wellbeing benefits from access to the countryside.

OBJECTIVE To broaden participation in the countryside from a wider cross-section of society, targeting under-represented groups such as the young, elderly and less able.

OBJECTIVE To increase active involvement with the AONB's countryside (e.g. through volunteering) and opportunities to support the AONB directly.

The high quality environment of the AONB has considerable value and potential for personal wellbeing, and for counteracting stress and mental illness, which are also significant economic factors. It is proven that contact with nature and high quality countryside has significant benefits in this regard. Outdoor recreation also brings benefits of physical health from exercise, and sense of connection with the area. Indeed people's enjoyment of the area through recreation is strongly linked to support for conservation.

While these benefits are enjoyed by many people, others are excluded, and broadening accessibility and participation is a priority. Research and experience shows that this involves improving both information and physical access, but that pro-active 'outreach' work may be necessary to influence under-represented groups including the young, the elderly, disabled and minority ethnic groups. The range of opportunities for the less mobile can be broadened for example by improving path surfaces or removing barriers e.g. replacing stiles with gates. Events and sites with facilities have a particularly important role in broadening participation, and planning and training for these should take account of social inclusion and guidance on best practice.

POLICY 41 Opportunities and promotion aimed at both visitors and the local community should encourage people to experience the AONB's countryside more fully in ways which are not damaging (e.g. through walks and activities away from cars and roads, through appreciating wildlife and heritage).

Learning, skills & training

OBJECTIVE To encourage understanding and knowledge of Shropshire Hills, especially through schools and further and higher education.

The Shropshire Hills offer considerable learning opportunities for people of all ages, and also employment prospects through land management, added value business through local products, and through heritage and environmental activities. These areas require continued attention and investment, and there is great potential to increase local uptake for the benefit of the community and the AONB.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: LEADER in the Shropshire Hills

From 2009-13, the AONB Partnership will deliver the LEADER element of the Rural Development Programme in the Shropshire Hills. LEADER in the West Midlands is focussed on social and community objectives, but this represents a significant opportunity to show how the high quality landscape of the AONB can deliver a broad range of benefits to people. The Shropshire Hills LEADER area is larger than the AONB, and includes the main market towns lying just outside it (see Figure 19 Map of the Shropshire Hills LEADER area). LEADER in the Shropshire Hills will hopefully make available around £250,000 per year with the theme of *"improving the wellbeing of people in and around the Shropshire Hills by building on a sense of place and attachment to the landscape"*.¹¹¹

Over the period of this Plan, integration between LEADER and other AONB Partnership activity will be a high priority.

Partnerships and networks

OBJECTIVE To build the AONB Partnership as an inclusive structure with sound governance and strong partnership relations and communication.

OBJECTIVE To monitor and report on progress with the Management Plan and condition of the AONB.

Key delivery mechanism for the AONB: The AONB Partnership

The AONB Partnership is an important focal point for environmental activity in the Shropshire Hills and provides a mechanism for co-ordination in support of the AONB. Its broad membership and multi-disciplinary approach helps ensure understanding and support from diverse interests including conservation, farming and land management, recreation, tourism, business and the local community. The hosting of the Partnership with a local authority provides valuable links and back-up. A range of sub-groups for both topics and specific areas act as forums for more detailed work in support of the Management Plan, and the staff team provide a resource for enabling, supporting, advising and advocating, as well as undertaking work directly.

Making the AONB more relevant to more people will involve forging new and stronger links. The Local Strategic Partnerships have already been mentioned as important, and the Southern Shropshire Partnership will be the highest priority for the AONB due to the level of geographical overlap.

The AONB Partnership will also seek to develop its impact at a regional level, through LEADER and other work with Advantage West Midlands, and through the West Midlands Protected Landscapes Forum with other AONBs and the Peak District National Park.

The national network of AONBs is also strong through the National Association for AONBs. The network provides considerable benefits of sharing experience and good practice, and the Association also provides a collective voice and influence at a national level. Forging bilateral links with areas with particular similarities is useful, and the Forest of Bowland and the Blackdown Hills are two of the most relevant AONBs.

International links are not the highest priority, but also provide some opportunities. The Europarc Federation of protected areas runs a Sustainable Tourism Charter and a Young Rangers scheme, both of which may be appropriate for the Shropshire Hills at some stage. The European nature of LEADER, local food networks and the international importance of Shropshire's geology offer further opportunities for links.

Many different local authority departments are important stakeholders for the AONB and can contribute to its purposes, and links across many parts of the new unitary Shropshire Council will be important. The CROW Act requires the Management Plan to set out the policies of the local authorities "for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it", and the links between different local authority functions and the AONB are examined in the table below.

Local authority function	Possible interaction with AONB purposes
Legal & Democratic services	Support for legal requirements of the designation, administer aspects of Common Land
Communication	Support appropriate promotion of the AONB
Community working	Support promotion of social and economic development compatible with the AONB, strengthen communities
Education	Encourage understanding
Youth services	Encourage wider participation and enjoyment of the countryside
Arts & Heritage	Raise awareness of and interpret the AONB through Museums, websites and events, and especially through the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre. Training and skills.
Leisure & Outdoor Recreation	Manage and promote appropriate public access, manage council countryside sites
Social care	Encourage wider participation and enjoyment of the countryside
Highways	Support sustainable transport policy, manage roads to sympathetic designs and standards
Transport	Provide public transport, promote cycling and sustainable transport
Maintenance	Manage council land to appropriate standards
Public protection	Enforce Environmental Health and pollution standards, maintain standards in food and animal health
Waste	Encourage sustainable behaviour and resource use
Planning	Protect the AONB against inappropriate development, encourage sustainable and compatible forms of development
Economic Development	Promote sustainable forms of development, including in tourism, farming and environmental technology
Environment	Specialist support e.g. on biodiversity, landscape, data, policy, management of trees and historic buildings, encouraging sustainable practices throughout Council departments

Local Priorities for Areas within the AONB

As previously described, the Shropshire Hills is an especially diverse area, and though some issues are common throughout, there are also significant differences. This section aims briefly to draw out the locally distinct aspects of particular areas of the AONB, and highlight particular issues which may not be adequately addressed in the overall sections above. The areas used for this section are shown in Figure 20, Map of areas within the AONB.

Long Mynd – Stiperstones (including Stapeley Hill and Hope Valley)

This is a 'core' part of the Shropshire Hills in terms of landscape, identity and biodiversity. Some of the most important conservation sites in the region are also popular walking destinations, and lie alongside hill farms undergoing significant change and sparse remote communities. Finding ways to integrate farming with conservation, and of enabling local people to benefit from sustainable patterns of use by visitors, are key to the future of the area.

Description

This area has the biggest concentration within the AONB of upland and of semi-natural habitat, including the largest areas of heathland. This is not a wilderness however, but the mix of relative wildness with habitation and productive land use which epitomises the Shropshire Hills.

Much of the high ground is designated for nature conservation, and land ownership by conservation bodies (including Natural England, National Trust and Shropshire Wildlife Trust) is more extensive here than anywhere else in the AONB, and still increasing. However the mosaic of habitats on farmland is of great value, and grazing by commoners and neighbouring farmers remains important to maintaining heathlands on the hilltops. A high priority needs to be given to retaining and building the inter-relationship between conservation sites and farmed land.

The Onny Valley between the Long Mynd and Stiperstones has a strong farming character, with sparse villages, and some visitor facilities. There is a gradual transition down the valleys from upland to more intensive lowland farms with more arable land. To the west of the Stiperstones there is more smallholding, and links become stronger across the border with Wales.

The area is important for species such as Harebell and Mountain Pansy, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Holly Blue butterflies, Otter and Dormice, Curlew, Lapwing and Barn Owl. Small hay meadows survive, with woods on steeper slopes and high quality rivers such as the East and West Onny. The area has an interesting geology, being crossed by the Pontesford–Linley Fault, and with minerals formerly exploited including lead and barytes. Historic features include hillforts and prehistoric settlements, classic Parliamentary enclosure field patterns on Prolley Moor and mining relics around the Stiperstones. Other significant landscape features include Linley Beeches and Bromlow Callow. Community involvement in wildlife and heritage is strong through groups such as the Upper Onny Wildlife Group and those involved with mining sites such as Snailbeach and the Bog. The Long Mynd and Stiperstones themselves are among the most popular walking destinations in Shropshire, and the area also has a good bridleway network and is crossed by the Shropshire Way long distance footpath, currently being redeveloped. The Shropshire Hills Shuttles are a long established tourist bus service.

Forces for change

The area has long views and is quiet, making it very sensitive to inappropriate development, either visually or through intrusive activities. Retaining farming and encouraging its activity to be in keeping with the environment is key to conserving the area's character. The transition of farm conservation funding from the Shropshire Hills Environmentally Sensitive Area to the Environmental Stewardship Scheme will be significant. Sheep and cattle are the main enterprises, and the ESA has tended to preserve pastoral land-use. A return to more mixed farming could have some environmental benefits if done sympathetically.

Diversification is likely to continue, and the area has high potential for wildlife, landscape, and heritage based approaches. Increasing visitor numbers could create problems, and a sustainable, low-impact

approach is necessary, minimising traffic and noise. Encouraging visitors to stay longer, experience more and spend more is preferable to simply chasing greater footfall.

Priorities in relation to the AONB

- Ongoing active engagement with farmers and with the wider community is necessary to achieve the AONB's aims. A continuing process of dialogue is needed to increase understanding of the perspectives and priorities of different interests.
- Agri-environment schemes are crucial, and the current time is an important period of transition. Advice and exchange of practical ideas have an important role to play, and contact networks in the Long Mynd – Stiperstones area need building on to enable this.
- Local food activity has significant potential to act as a bridge between farming, conservation and visitors. This is not currently as strong here as in some areas of the Shropshire Hills, perhaps due to the lack of a nearby Farmers Market. Support to develop local food activity in ways appropriate to the area is needed.

Clun Forest and Valley

This very rural part of the AONB is more dependent on farming than any other area. Strong networks have been recently established, and building on these will be important for managing change in farming to provide the best outcomes for both the landscape and the community. The rivers provide a focal point for conservation activity, and heritage and tranquillity are also key aspects for enjoyment.

Description

The Clun area is the most deeply rural part of the AONB, and is amongst the most sparsely populated parts of the West Midlands region. Bounded to the west by the Welsh border, the area comprises the catchments of the River Clun and part of River Teme, extending from the uplands of the Clun Forest to the lower Clun Valley. Shales and siltstones give rise to a rolling topography, with enclosed fields right up to the hilltops except where remnants of heathland remain such as at Rhos Fiddle. Woodlands, predominantly of conifers, are of substantial size in the lower Clun valley, while smaller ones higher up are valued for shelter. Broadleaved woodlands are less common and tend to be small.

Offa's Dyke runs north-south across the area, in some of its best preserved and dramatic sections. Other archaeological earthworks include Bury Ditches hillfort, and the Upper & Lower Shortditches near the Kerry Ridgeway. The large village of Clun is a natural centre for the area, and its prominent ruined castle shows that this has long been the case. The market towns of Bishop's Castle and Knighton lie outside the AONB to the north and south, and Craven Arms to the east.

The pattern of landholding is more of medium sized family farms, with fewer large estates and smallholding than elsewhere. Livestock dominate, but as the soil is relatively good there is cultivation even high up e.g. for potatoes. Tourism and recreation are generally at a much lower level than elsewhere in the AONB, although Clun, Bury Ditches and Offa's Dyke path are popular with visitors.

Forces for change

Changes in farming are probably the greatest influence. The trends of high age profile, rising costs and difficulty of making livestock products compete in a global market are felt as keenly here as anywhere, sometimes compounded by the relative isolation of the area. Uptake of agreements in the Clun Environmentally Sensitive Area was very high, and again the transition to Environmental Stewardship will be significant for the landscape.

The AONB Partnership has given close support over a number of years to a group called 'Land, Life & Livelihoods', which aims to bring farmers and the rest of the community together and help to secure a sustainable future for the upper Clun Forest part of the area. This has resulted in the community coming together around these issues in more effectively than for many years, and has resulted in some practical steps such as training events for farmers. The Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group has also

been formed to monitor important species, and encourage farmers to maintain and improve habitats for them.

Initiatives and measures for the whole West Midlands region sometimes do not appear applicable to this very rural end of the spectrum, and there is a need to take the particular needs of this area better into account. Links with Wales are strong, and the political priority of integrated working across the border is relevant here. The impact of wind energy development in Wales will have most impact on this part of the AONB.

Priorities in relation to the AONB

- The condition of the rivers (the River Teme SSSI and the River Clun SAC) is an over-riding priority, and links with many other aspects as it is dependent on activity throughout the catchments. The quality of water and habitats is affected by land management practices near to the rivers themselves, but will also benefit from restoration of upland habitats and an increase in woodland cover.
- The future of farming brings big challenges and issues which are not easily tackled. The continuation of both livestock and appropriate cropping are both important for the landscape. Initiatives to reach local markets will need to be appropriate to the area, i.e. sometimes at a small scale. There is a rising interest in organic farming as an option. Continued develop of farmer and community networks and working together will be crucial.
- Tourism development will need to be very sensitive to avoid spoiling the area's character. Approaches which make the most of tranquillity and opportunities to slow down and appreciate the natural, historic and cultural features of the area will be the most appropriate.

Clee Hills

This large part of the AONB contains very contrasting areas, but is characterised by the influences of the minerals industry, of traditional farming and of larger settlements beyond. Maintaining and enhancing quality in the landscape and making the most of the area's undervalued features of interest are challenges for the future.

Description

The south-eastern part of the AONB is dominated by the main hills of Brown Clee (Shropshire's highest point) and Titterstone Clee. Heath and common land on the tops of these are accompanied by disused and active quarries, as well as prominent telecommunications and radar structures. The mark of industry is strong here, and the beauty of a harsher kind than elsewhere in the AONB.

The hills are surrounded by a high plateau area of sandstone with red soils and mostly enclosed pastoral land. Villages are often small and scattered, and there are some medieval deserted settlements. Cleehill is the largest village, at the south of Titterstone Clee, and bears a strong influence of past mining and present quarrying. The high point of the A4118 on Cleehill Common provides remarkable views south to the Malvern Hills and Herefordshire. The old squatter settlements associated with the mining result in a surviving pattern of small land holdings, including non-agricultural uses. Small hay meadows and high quality grasslands survive in amongst these.

In the west the area reaches the edge of Ludlow and along the edge of the Corve Dale, where larger traditional country estates are found. Towards the East lie very rural villages such as Ditton Priors and Burwarton, but there are links with the market towns of Bridgnorth and Cleobury Mortimer and also commuting to the West Midlands conurbation. There are substantial woodlands on the eastern flanks of Brown Clee near Burwarton.

Forces for change

The issues of change in farming, especially in the livestock sector, are found here as elsewhere. The Clee Hills are a large part of the Shropshire Hills Environmentally Sensitive Area, where uptake has been

high. The proximity of Ludlow and the opportunities to develop local food linked to this is a factor in the south of the area.

Woodlands are also an important resource in the area, and retaining their landscape and affected by fluctuating timber prices and policy drivers such as woodfuel.

There is pressure for development, especially tourism and affordable housing, and concern about appropriateness in the way this is carried out. This area will be affected by the administrative changes of local government reorganisation as it was partly in Bridgnorth District and partly in South Shropshire.

Priorities in relation to the AONB

- Improving the condition of heathland and grassland habitats is a high priority, and often involves co-operative working with commoners. Catherston Common has recently been purchased by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Expanding and linking habitats, especially around the main hills is also important.
- Support for farmers, especially in the uplands where options are fewer, will be important. The AONB Partnership's links with farming and community networks are not as strong here as elsewhere in the AONB, and this balance needs to be redressed.
- Developing tourism sustainably will mean a small scale of developments in remoter locations, connecting to walking, cycling and horse riding opportunities, and making the best of industrial archaeology and geological interest through improved interpretation. There are patterns of antisocial use on some of the less attractive former mining and quarrying sites which may require concerted efforts of management to influence.

Stretton Valley, Wenlock Edge and Dales

This area can justifiably claim to be the heart of the Shropshire Hills, with the Stretton valley containing a major transport corridor and the AONB's only town. Key areas for future effort are limiting the impact of development, linking the AONB more closely with Church Stretton, and developing tourism sustainably, using the good transport links and scope for outdoor activities.

Description

This is the most settled part of the AONB and includes the largest lowland area, with more intensive and arable farming. The A49 corridor makes this the most accessible part of the AONB, but also the least tranquil. Church Stretton, the only town in the AONB, has a superb setting among the hills, with the Long Mynd, Caer Caradoc and the Lawley providing some of the most iconic images of the Shropshire Hills. The historic character of the town is enhanced by considerable cover of trees.

Tourism is most strongly developed in this part of the AONB. Cardingmill Valley is the major visitor honeypot site in the AONB, predominantly used by day visitors. It is very well managed by the National Trust, who also own substantial parts of Wenlock Edge. This famous wooded limestone escarpment is a major landmark running from near Much Wenlock to Craven Arms, and separates Apedale from the Corve Dale. Both active and former quarries are found on the back of Wenlock Edge, along with patches of species-rich calcareous grassland. The Corve Dale lies mostly outside the AONB but has considerable value for heritage, in the River Corve, veteran trees including Black Poplar, and its place in views between Wenlock Edge and the Clee Hills.

Forces for change

Development pressures are the highest here of any part of the AONB. Church Stretton is the second largest town in South Shropshire District, and is therefore expected to take its share of new housing and employment development. Church Stretton is linking itself much more strongly with the Shropshire Hills identity and now visibly sees the AONB and its location within it as a source of pride.

Farming is more diverse due to lower and better quality land, and therefore has more options for the future than the uplands. More intensive methods, alternative crops and large agricultural buildings have the potential to cause harm to the landscape quality of the area.

Growth in road traffic on the A49 is a major concern, and is affected by development well outside the area, from Shrewsbury and Hereford to north and south Wales. There are however opportunities from this location - for sustainable tourism linked to the railway line and good bus services, to capture passing trade through farm shops and other facilities, and to reduce travel and impacts elsewhere in the AONB by siting certain developments close to the A49.

The closure of some quarries on Wenlock Edge creates important opportunities to secure sustainable long term uses, making the most of biodiversity and geological interest, and the potential for appropriate quiet forms of recreation.

Priorities in relation to the AONB

- The need to retain character and limit the negative impacts of change and development is probably more acute here than anywhere else in the AONB. Church Stretton is an important service centre, but is also the only town in Shropshire within a nationally protected landscape. Current policy enables the town to accommodate some forms or scales of development which would not be acceptable elsewhere in the AONB. However, it is important that the sensitivities of Church Stretton's location within the AONB are fully taken into account in decisions on the scale, type and design quality of future development.
- A sustainable tourism approach is vital in this part of the AONB, and also made more possible by the good transport links, attractiveness for walking and landscape interest of the area.
- The different nature of this area, including its accessibility and the town, enables it to provide services for the benefit of other parts of the AONB, e.g. in distribution of local food. Developing the link between Church Stretton and the AONB enables the town to play a greater role in raising people's awareness of the AONB and its value, and to develop further as the natural centre or hub of the AONB.

Wrekin Forest

This area has particular issues and needs different to the rest of the AONB, and extending into the Borough of Telford & Wrekin brings different partners and contacts. The same principles of retaining landscape quality and engaging with local people are nevertheless still relevant. Recent partnership approaches to improving management are gaining momentum and need continued support.

Description

The Wrekin is Shropshire's iconic hill, and being surrounded by lower ground affords excellent views over much of the county and beyond. An outlying hill, the Wrekin area is the least typical part of the Shropshire Hills, lying on the urban fringe of Telford, with consequent development pressure, high levels of recreational and community use and greater problems of abuse. The woods on the Wrekin and the Ercall nearby are nevertheless of high quality (SSSI), and both are important for geology. The area is rich in industrial archaeology, and has strong connections to nearby Ironbridge. The town of Wellington has very strong cultural links with the Wrekin. The AONB boundary is drawn tight around the woodland on the Wrekin and Ercall themselves, but includes farmed countryside and settlements south towards the River Severn.

Forces for Change

Proposals for opencast mining of coal and fireclay immediately adjacent to and within the AONB are still current at the time of writing. Visitor use is very focussed on the main path up the north side of the hill, which is valued by a wide cross section of local people for the exercise it affords. Use by tourists from outside the area is much less common. There are parking and road safety issues at Forest Glen,

the main starting point. Continued expansion of housing in the Lawley area of Telford will bring new populations in close proximity to the Wrekin. With local government reorganisation, the Wrekin area will become the only part of the AONB where working with two local authorities will remain necessary.

The high level of use of the Wrekin creates pressure, and for many years there has not been an adequate framework or resources to manage this, resulting in harm to the quality of the landscape and visitors' experience. On the ground staffing capacity to take practical action and engage with visitors is key to maintaining the quality of a well used countryside site. After being unable to secure purchase of part of the hill which was for sale, the Shropshire Wildlife Trust from 2005 to the present has led the Wrekin Forest Project, with a dedicated Project Officer, which has made significant progress with improving management of the area. The project developed a Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Management Plan¹¹², and this led in 2007 to the formation of a 'Wrekin Forest Partnership' formally linked to the AONB structure. As a result of the priorities established by the Plan and the Partnership structure to over see it, Telford & Wrekin Council have recently committed substantially increased funding towards management of the area, which is greatly welcomed.

Priorities in relation to the AONB

The 'Wrekin Forest' area of the Plan extends beyond the AONB boundary (see Figure 21, Map of the Wrekin Forest). The Vision for the Wrekin Forest outlined in the Conservation Plan is:

- *The aim of the Landscape Conservation Management Plan is to promote the natural, cultural and economic future of the Wrekin Forest.*
- *The Plan will address wider landscape concerns through a series of practical initiatives.*
- *The Plan advocates the establishment of a local partnership to focus individual and group efforts in the conservation of the wildlife, habitats, and wildness of the Wrekin Forest.*
- *The Plan will be underpinned by the concept of sustainability that is to live now 'in ways which do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.*
- *The Plan seeks to offer measurable benefits for the conservation of the natural environment, heritage features, access networks and the Wrekin Forest visitor.*

POLICY 42 The management of the wider Wrekin Forest area is crucial to the integrity of the Wrekin itself within the AONB. The landscape quality of the wider Wrekin Forest area should be protected as far as possible, and the management of the Wrekin integrated with this surrounding area. The Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Management Plan is a locally relevant and detailed framework for the area and is formally endorsed by the AONB Management Plan.

POLICY 43 The Wrekin Forest Partnership provides a vital local forum for this important area, and should be supported and its links to the AONB Partnership maintained. The Wrekin Forest Partnership needs to develop as a long-term structure linked to permanent funding for a dedicated staff resource to take and co-ordinate action on the ground.

- The Wrekin Plan contains prioritised conservation actions relating to the woods, other habitats and wildlife, and cultural heritage. It also outlines action areas for strengthening connections with local people, through careful improvements to access, and community involvement through events, education and volunteering. There is also considerable support for improving facilities for visitors in the Forest Glen area, such as toilets and refreshments. While this is a legitimate need, great care must be taken to ensure that provision of any new visitor facilities provided at the Wrekin does not exacerbate parking, safety or other problems.
- Recognition of the AONB designation remains important, but the Wrekin's own identity has stronger attachment for local people than the 'Shropshire Hills' and should be given greater prominence in this area.

APPENDICES

Objectives and links to strategic priorities

Objectives have been listed above under the priority they most closely relate to. There are however many inter-relationships, and these are shown below.

Objective	Conserve & enhance	Keep thriving	Low carbon	Adapt for future	Help people connect
1. To co-ordinate among partner organisations the holding, improvement and application of relevant data about the special qualities of the AONB and influences on it.	/	/	/	/	/
2. To provide information and guidance to land managers on practices which support the special qualities of the AONB.	/	/	/	/	/
3. To set and influence policy and strategy which supports AONB purposes and Management Plan priorities.	/	/	/	/	/
4. To seek the best protection for the AONB and support for Management Plan priorities from planning decisions .	/	/	/	/	
5. To optimise the uptake, targeting and effectiveness of agri-environment and woodland grant schemes .	/	/	/	/	/
6. To conserve and enhance existing high quality habitats , preventing loss and improving condition, and conserve and enhance populations of priority species.	/			/	
7. To restore and create improved habitat networks at a landscape scale by enhancing habitats (including heathland, grassland and woodland) especially buffering and linking existing high quality areas.	/			/	
8. To improve the condition of geological sites and raise awareness of geology and its influences on landscape and human activity.	/				/
9. To conserve and manage heritage features and attributes, preventing damage and acting to maintain value where necessary.	/			/	/
10. To improve water quality , especially through reducing diffuse pollution, to reach requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive.	/	/		/	
11. To ameliorate where possible eyesores in the landscape and existing inappropriate development.	/				/
12. To retain tranquillity , gather more information and raise the profile of this quality.	/				/
13. To improve integration of environmental practices and farm conservation with business development (such as product differentiation, direct local selling and diversification), especially in the Less Favoured Areas.	/	/		/	/
14. To maintain food production by environmentally sustainable means and maintain long term capacity to continue to produce food, by promoting farm support networks, encouraging succession and retaining and developing skills.	/	/	/	/	/
15. To increase the local supply of food, especially meat from grazing animals, through improving supply chains and expanding from niche markets, e.g. into tourism and public sector procurement.	/	/	/	/	/
16. To increase the local supply of wood and wood products , especially woodfuel.	/	/	/	/	/
17. To stimulate local demand by raising awareness among consumers of food and other local products, and their connections with the landscape.	/	/	/	/	/
18. To develop and support sustainable tourism strongly linked to the landscape of the Shropshire Hills, including policy, facilities and services and approaches to marketing.		/	/	/	/

Objective	Conserve & enhance	Keep thriving	Low carbon	Adapt for future	Help people connect
19. To reduce energy use by households, services, farms and businesses, including through energy conservation and efficiency.			/	/	
20. To increase local production of renewable energy in ways compatible with the AONB.	/	/	/	/	
21. To integrate affordable housing of high design and environmental standards in appropriate locations.	/	/			
22. To promote relevant training to maintain and develop skills to support AONB priorities, including land management and traditional crafts, sustainable business and environmental knowledge.	/	/		/	
23. To improve land management for flood alleviation .	/			/	
24. To reduce greenhouse gas emissions from land management and increase carbon sequestration including through soils and trees.			/		
25. To reduce car dependency and optimise provision and use of public transport .	/		/		
26. To promote and support environmentally sound leisure and recreation activities .	/		/	/	/
27. To raise public awareness of the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills and of the AONB and its management.	/				/
28. To strengthen communities and build their capacity and cohesion by broadening participation in community activity.				/	/
29. To maximise health and wellbeing benefits from access to the countryside.		/			/
30. To broaden participation in the countryside from a wider cross-section of society, targeting under-represented groups such as the young, elderly and less able.		/			/
31. To encourage understanding and knowledge of Shropshire Hills, especially through schools and further and higher education.	/				/
32. To increase active involvement with the AONB's countryside, including through volunteering and opportunities to support the AONB directly.	/	/			/
33. To develop sense of place and community pride around the Shropshire Hills, and strengthen the ' Shropshire Hills ' identity , especially in visitor and tourism promotion material.	/	/			/
34. To build the AONB Partnership as an inclusive structure with sound governance and strong partnership relations and communication.	/	/			/
35. To monitor and report on progress with the Management Plan and condition of the AONB.	/	/	/	/	/

Summary of AONB Management Plan policies

To be added

Summary of AONB Partnership positions

To be added

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Members of the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

To be added

Abbreviations

Acronyms have been avoided wherever possible and most are defined in the text.

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
AWM	Advantage West Midlands
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
BARS	Biodiversity Action Reporting System
BEA	Biodiversity Enhancement Area
BVPI	Best Value Performance Indicator
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
CROW	Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000
Defra	Department for Food & Rural Affairs
ESA	Environmentally Sensitive Area
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
JCA	Joint Character Area
LB	Listed Building
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions pour Development Economique Rural
MW	Megawatts
PAWS	Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site
PPS	Planning Policy Statement
PSA	Public Service Agreement
PWP	Plantation on Wood Pasture
RDPE	Rural Development Programme for England
RIGS	Regionally Important Geological Site
RSS	Regional Spatial Strategy
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SAM	Scheduled Ancient Monument
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
TPO	Tree Preservation Order

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Working together to conserve and sustain the landscape