

Shropshire Local Access Forum

30 April 2009

10.00 am

Item

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Paper

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Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
Access, Recreation & Tourism Working Group
Note of meeting 17th March 2009



Present:

Karen Wilson	Shropshire County Council (Access Development Officer)
Tim King	South Shropshire District Council (Tourism Development Officer)
Ian Kemsley	South Shropshire Tourism Association (SSTA)
Sue Lee	Long Mynd & District Bridleways Association
Bob Welch	Church Stretton Town Council
Phil Holden	Shropshire Hills AONB Team (AONB Partnership Manager)
Clare Fildes	Shropshire Hills AONB Team (Development Officer)
Stephanie Hayes	Shropshire Hills AONB Team (Promotions Officer)
Stewart Minton-Beddoes	Country Land & Business Association
David Shelley	Ramblers Association
Jonathan Felton	Natural England

Apologies:

Anna Morris	Shropshire County Council (Cycling Officer, Highways)
Emma Smith	Shropshire County Council (Tourism Research Unit)
Deb Hughes	Shropshire County Council (Countryside Access Manager)
Zoe Griffin	Shropshire County Council (Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre)
Caroline Oakes	Telford and Wrekin Council
Jim Stabler	Shropshire County Council (Shropshire Way Project Officer)

1. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes were agreed. Karen said that discussions were still going on with Highways about the Access Team taking on some responsibility for management of certain UCRs with recreational value, but finances were uncertain.

2. Brief recap on Terms of Reference

Phil reminded members that the Working Group, which was established in 2006, aimed to co-ordinate partners' work around the AONB Management Plan, and act as a valuable forum to update on related projects in the Shropshire Hills. Phil highlighted the need to maintain the link with the Local Access Forum, and that a greater effort will be made to pass on minutes promptly for inclusion in LAF papers (next meeting 30th April 2009). Phil said that different formats of meetings had been valuable with other groups, and asked members if a site visit would be welcome for the next meeting in September. Clare suggested Church Stretton as a location as there are a number of

sustainable tourism initiatives to look at. This was agreed and will be organised in due course.

3. Update on new Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2009-14

The formal public consultation ended 31st Dec 2008 and Phil reported 27 written responses. Many comments were favourable, but minor changes have been made, including refinement of some policies. Natural England have made their formal observations which were also favourable. The Plan is going for formal approval to the Implementation Executive for Shropshire Council on 19 March and to Telford and Wrekin Council shortly after.

4. Diversity Action Plan – AONB related actions

Natural England raised this as an issue to bear in mind in implementation of the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan. Phil highlighted that the new LEADER project will be a big opportunity for the AONB Partnership to do more work on this, but asked for members' thoughts on any other current projects which tackle diversity or particular unmet needs.

Bob Welch mentioned the recent exhibition in the Mayfair Centre, Church Stretton, which had highlighted the lack of accommodation in the area for disabled people. The town centre development plans for Church Stretton includes improving access for disabled people such as widening the pavements, but difficulties with accommodation remain.

Karen explained that the Access Team is working on updating the 'easy access to the countryside' booklet, and Steph mentioned that a specific search box is being added to the Shropshire walking website (www.shropshirewalking.co.uk) which will allow people to search for route which are wheelchair friendly, etc.

Tim highlighted that all our websites are English language only. Stewart mentioned earlier involvement with the Dog Rose Trust e.g. in helping to create tactile interpretation panels, etc., who may be a good contact for possible LEADER projects.

Karen reminded the group that Shropshire Outdoors is a current project that works with adults with learning difficulties, and Jonathan highlighted that children are a target group for Natural England. There are also a number of current project proposals to increase working with young people – 'Youths in Nature' and 'Youthful Landscapes'.

5. Sustainable Development Fund projects linked to access and tourism [Mgt Plan Action 0.1]

Phil said that there will be £53,000 for 2009-10. A lot of project proposals have been submitted of which a short list has been drawn up for the Panel totalling £83,000. David asked about feedback from previous projects and Phil said after reporting is complete some projects continue to have links with members of the AONB team or Partnership, but not all. There was some discussion around the proposal for a feasibility study for a Red Kite feeding station somewhere in the Shropshire Hills. There were some issues, including around the possible impact of traffic, depending on the scale and location.

Action: Steph to email list of approved SDF projects to group when agreed.

6. Shropshire Hills LEADER [Action 0.2]

Clare reminded the group that Pete Banford had been appointed as LEADER Co-ordinator. The Local Development Strategy and Business Plan was submitted to Advantage West Midlands at the end of January, and formal confirmation was awaited before being able to start accepting formal grant applications, which Clare hoped would be in May.

The overall theme for LEADER is 'wellbeing' and building on sense of place, linking to local landscape, and based on the following five principles:

Connect... Ensure everyone has access to services, facilities, learning and the countryside.

Be active... Encourage people to get out and about in the Shropshire Hills.

Take notice... Develop a deeper understanding of where people live and help them celebrate!

Keep learning... Encourage creativity, learning, and the development of new skills.

Give - Get more people involved with their local area and the communities in which they live.

David asked for an example project and Clare mentioned a 'spiritual landscapes project' proposed by the South Shropshire Housing Association. She envisaged a number of larger projects would go forward this year, rather than lots of little ones, so that in the first year the project administration would not be too complicated.

Clare confirmed that LEADER could link in with the 'transition town' ideas and reiterated that the connections with the landscape will be underpinning all projects.

Project funding is around £200,000 per year for the next five years and project ideas are welcome – all the details and forms are on the AONB website.

7. Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme [Action 5]

Clare reminded the group that this scheme was set up to support and celebrate local businesses who want to sign up to a public pledge and promote what they are doing to be sustainable. To date 49 businesses have signed up to the scheme, details of which can be found on the website www.shropshirehills-buylocal.co.uk. A directory will also be out soon promoting these businesses.

There is a strong emphasis on networking and exchanging ideas. Members also have to participate in events, and seven of these have been held. A number of member 'champions' have been recruited to promote the scheme to other businesses. Phil emphasised the simplicity and low cost approach on which the scheme was based, and said that Clare's work had opened new ground in involving the business community with work of the AONB.

8. Church Stretton Sustainable Tourism Strategy Implementation [Action 77]

Church Stretton was awarded funds from South Shropshire District Council, some of which are being used to develop a marketing plan, building on the sustainable tourism work done by Alison Caffyn. A merchandising plan is in place to promote activities in the town and surrounding area. These are joint projects between the Church Stretton Area Tourism Group and the Chamber of Trade, and Bob said this is helping to build links between these groups. Ian also stressed the difficulty in interesting some businesses in tourism markets.

A business database has been created and is helping to link up businesses with the town's events, including launch on 9th April of the 'Church Stretton – where to eat, shop and stay' booklet, and the Chamber of Trade are holding a summer festival on 20 June, in place of the Food Festival. On 17-18 October, Church Stretton is hosting the annual 'Walkers are Welcome' conference, and the town is hoping to link up better with Acton Scott and the Victorian Farm promotion.

Spending of £30,000 from the Better Welcome programme is under way, including historic plaques around the town, benches, new road signs, etc. The Area Tourism Group is taking the lead on moving the Church Stretton Sustainable Tourism Strategy forward.

9. 'Offa's Dyke Country' project [Action 79]

A contract has been let to 'Resources for Change' (Welshpool based consultancy) to complete a Regeneration Strategy for the area by end June 2009. Advantage West Midlands, Natural England and the Welsh Assembly Government are funding this and the AONB Partnership is managing the project on behalf of a wider group. The strategy will investigate the potential to use Offa's Dyke as a thread to link regeneration along the England- Wales border, and will look at the opportunities and issues surrounding this idea. A survey will be sent around to all members of the AONB Partnership Working Groups, and Clare highlighted this opportunity to input thoughts and comments on the proposal.

Offa's Dyke Interpretation Plan - This project has been let by the SCC Access Team and is being undertaken by Nigel McDonald – it focuses on sense of place and how people connect to Offa's Dyke.

10. Shropshire Hills Shuttles and other public transport news [Action 88]

Steph reported that the AONB Partnership has taken on the management of the Shropshire Hills Shuttles. The 16-seater mini-buses operate every weekend and Bank Holiday Monday through the summer season and provide a valuable service linking the key market towns in the Shropshire Hills to the surrounding countryside. The 2009 starts on 4th April and a number of 'familiarisation' trips have been organised for tourism businesses, including Visitor Information Centre staff to travel on the buses and get more of an insight into how they operate. The Shuttles Steering Group was also successful in receiving extra funding to produce a range of promotional material to target the 'quiet times' on the buses to encourage more people to use them, and highlight the various access points for connecting with the Shuttles in order to alleviate the issue of overcrowding at peak times and in particular at Church Stretton and Carding Mill Valley.

The Sustainable Development Fund has also been able to support a feasibility study for developing a Shuttles route along Wenlock Edge linking Craven Arms with Much Wenlock and Ironbridge. Les Lumsdon, of the University of Central Lancashire, is producing the report and has been working with the National Trust on this project. This route would link in with the 2012 Olympic developments taking place in Much Wenlock.

11. The Shropshire Way project [Action 94]

Karen reported that much of the work on the ground is now complete. Circular walks are being devised and a guidebook will be produced in the spring. The Access Team

is seeking funding to upgrade the Shropshire Way in north Shropshire, and the Much Wenlock link to the Wrekin is being incorporated into the museum's Olympic project bid. Steph highlighted the SDF project which has been linking linear walks along the Shropshire Way to the local bus and train services. These walks vary in length and will be available to download from the Shropshire walking website.

12. Events booklet 2009 [Action 101]

The 2009 Shropshire Hills events booklet has been produced, with extra funding from Natural England linked to the European Landscape Convention. The booklet includes information on the area, suggests things to do, highlight some topical news and contains an events listing which runs to December. This remains a joint project between the AONB Partnership, National Trust, Natural England and SCC.

13. Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre [Action 27.7] – incl. walks leaflets reprint

The circular walks leaflets from the Discovery Centre are being re-done. Stewart asked that he be contacted in relation to the Wart Hill Wander that goes across his land.

Action: Zoe to contact Stewart

14. Countryside Access Strategy and Implementation

Implementation of the Strategy is continuing with funding being sort to develop projects. The number of metal gates which have been put up through out the Shropshire Hills was raised, and members of the group felt that wooden gates would be more sympathetic in the AONB. Phil clarified that the AONB Management Plan does stress a preference for wooden gates, and hoped that the Council would be able to reconsider this.

15. Shropshire Hills Seminar & leaflet swap, Tues 24 March

Tim highlighted this event, which is being held at the Ludlow Race Course, 9.30 – 2pm. Phil will give a brief presentation on the future of the Shropshire Hills, and this will be followed by two workshops – sustainable tourism in the Shropshire Hills and sourcing community funding (including explaining LEADER funding in more detail). The annual tourism leaflet swap event is combined with this.

16. Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway

The leaflet describing the route has been produced but there is still one outstanding permissive path issue to be resolved. Promotion of the route has been delayed, but is described in the 2009 Shropshire Hills events booklet, so any route leaflets requested are being sent out with a note highlighting this remaining problem. Steph hopes to resolve it in the next couple of months.

Ian asked whether there was any data on people coming to the area on holiday with horses. Clare highlighted that equine tourism was one of the research papers that the SCC Tourism Research Unit had produced and was available on their website. Karen said it was difficult to monitor numbers and that the A49 was always going to be a barrier for horse riders to ride the breadth of the AONB as there are not many safe crossing points.

17. Pontesbury – Minsterley railway proposed cycle/walking route

Phil mentioned that this proposal was being raised by the Shrewsbury Railway Heritage Society linked to their plans for Abbey Foregate. A copy of a presentation on this had been received, but it was not entirely clear who was involved. The Rea Valley Environment Network were also interested in the idea. Discussion followed about the possibility of developing access along the old Wenlock Edge railway line.

18. Other Funding

- Destination Management Partnership (DMP) allocations 2009-10

Tim highlighted that Advantage West Midlands has a DMP annual budget of 110k to spend in the region, and quite a bit had been spent in the Shropshire Hills so far. He is currently waiting for guidelines on what the funding can be spent on for the next three years and Bob asked that these be sent to him when available.

Action: Tim to email funding guidelines to tourism groups when available.

- Advantage West Midlands 'Natural Assets' funding

Phil said that discussions were still ongoing with AWM and Natural England. It was hoped that some funding would become available to the AONB under this scheme linking economic outputs to environmental assets.

19. AOB and date of next meeting

Karen Wilson was thanked for all her work and involvement with the group and the AONB.

The date of the next meeting will be confirmed nearer the time.