

SHROPSHIRE HILLS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY  
**MANAGEMENT PLAN 2014 – 2019**  
TEXT VERSION AS APPROVED MARCH 2014



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2014 – 2019

This is the third statutory Management Plan for the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a legal designation covering 23% of Shropshire with **the principal purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty**. The Plan has been prepared by the **Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership** on behalf of the constituent local authorities Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. Following public consultation in 2013, a revised draft was sent for formal observations by Natural England. The final Plan was then endorsed by the AONB Partnership and formally approved by the two Councils in early 2014.

The Shropshire Hills AONB is nationally important landscape. Its **special qualities include 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 continue to be of high importance, but are under **increasing pressure**, and the **condition of a number of the special qualities of the AONB is declining**. Improvements resulting from conservation activity, e.g. on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and through agri-environment schemes, are accompanied by **wider declines in biodiversity**, especially bird, plant and invertebrate populations. **Land management** practices remain a crucial determining factor, while economic forces are **increasing development pressure and reducing resources for positive management**, leading to more deterioration of features by neglect.

### Vision

**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 geology, 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 themes** to guide action for 2014 to 2019 in pursuit of the Plan's vision and the nationally defined objectives for the AONB family:

#### **Conserving and enhancing our outstanding landscape and its nature**

*Wildlife, heritage, tranquillity, appropriate development*

#### **Helping our local communities thrive in a more sustainable way**

*Farming and land management, prosperity and wellbeing, low carbon*

#### **Promoting personal enjoyment, understanding and participation**

*For local people and visitors, sense of place and belonging, doing and taking part*

#### **Maintaining and enriching the natural services on which we all depend**

*Ecosystem services (air, water, food, climate, etc.) and wider benefits to society*

### Delivery Priorities

In pursuit of these strategic themes six delivery priorities have been established for the Plan period:

**Joining up the conservation effort**

**Valuing the AONB in planning and decisions**

**Encouraging a sustainable land management economy**

**Supporting enjoyment and a visitor economy in harmony with the AONB**

**Raising awareness and participation, especially among young people**

**Local working with communities**

Policies are defined on a variety of topics, 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). The Policies are intended to complement and support formal planning policies in existing Plans, and in the Local Development Frameworks for Shropshire and for Telford & Wrekin as well as guiding other aspects of local decision-making.

**Partnership** and the actions of many people supporting the AONB - especially farmers, landowners and local communities – are key to delivery of the Management Plan. Through the Management Plan, the **Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership** aims to provide co-ordination, advice and assistance. It believes that the primary environmental aims of the AONB will be best achieved by close integration with social and economic interests. The Actions set out to deliver the priorities of the Plan over the next five years are mostly (but not exclusively) focused on organisations that are part of the AONB Partnership. The Partnership currently has 40 members, along with a staff team which plays a co-ordinating and facilitating role and implements some of the Actions directly. Progress will be monitored through reporting at the meetings of the AONB Partnership, and the Management Plan Actions will be updated and progress reported widely on a regular basis. Further information is available at [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk).

## Forewords

### Minister at Defra

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are some of our finest landscapes. They are cherished by residents and visitors alike and allow millions of people from all walks of life to understand and connect with nature.

I am pleased to see that this management plan demonstrates how AONB Partnerships can continue to protect these precious environments despite the significant challenges they face. With a changing climate, the increasing demands of a growing population and in difficult economic times, I believe AONBs represent just the sort of community driven, collaborative approach needed to ensure our natural environment is maintained for generations to come.

AONB Partnerships have been the architects of a landscape-scale approach to land management. This approach is a key feature of the Government's Natural Environment White Paper and emphasises the need to manage ecosystems in an integrated fashion, linking goals on wildlife, water, soil and landscape, and working at a scale that respects natural systems.

This management plan also makes the important connection between people and nature. I am pleased to hear that local communities have been central to the development of the plan, and will be at the heart of its delivery. From volunteers on nature conservation projects, to businesses working to promote sustainable tourism, it's great to hear of the enthusiasm and commitment of the local people who hold their AONBs so dear.

AONBs are, and will continue to be, landscapes of change. Management plans such as this are vital in ensuring these changes are for the better. I would like to thank all those who were involved in bringing this plan together and I wish you every success in bringing it to fruition.

Lord de Mauley

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

## Chair of the AONB Partnership

Everyone involved with conserving and enhancing the truly outstanding natural beauty of our Shropshire Hills can be justly proud of their achievements over the past 10 years in particular. Tremendous progress has been on so many fronts by individuals, groups and communities working together to a common purpose.

We enter the third of our statutory five year Management Plan periods with a greater and wider scale of AONB Partnership delivery than ever before, the legacy of a highly successful LEADER programme, active Friends and Sustainable Business Schemes, and our newly-earned European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, to name but a few recent highlights.

The strength of commitment and understanding we share with the many public, private and voluntary sector partners with and through whom all our work is done has never been more important. Serious uncertainties over national and local Government funding and acute time and financial pressures from every side make sustaining joined-up community efforts especially challenging.

That's why developing and freshening our approach, objectives and priorities in line with evolving national and local priorities and needs in this new five year Management Plan is so essential.

All those familiar with the 2009-2014 Plan will recognise the clear continuity of purpose and activity in our latest plan of action which sets out to inform and guide the contributions of all who work for the good of the AONB through to 2019.

The new Plan continues to see effective conservation and enhancement as inextricably linked to social and economic vitality. Focussing more closely on landscape scale delivery of ecological networks and natural environment benefits, it views the Shropshire Hills in the wider rural, wildlife, historical and ecosystem contexts that are vital to its wellbeing and that of the surrounding countryside. At the same time, it sets out to stimulate and nurture increasing levels of local community working focused on especially important and cherished parts of the AONB's landscape.

I must stress that is your Plan for your Area. Statutory responsibility for preparing it rests with Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. With their continued support and involvement, we very much look forward to working with you to turn its aspirations into reality over the coming five years and beyond.

George Chancellor, Chair and individual member of the AONB Partnership

## 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 their representatives in the AONB Partnership. The Partnership provides a valuable co-ordinating role for the AONB, and this Management Plan is crucial in clarifying and communicating ideas about the future of the Shropshire Hills. The Partnership's staff team continues to provide exceptionally good value, recently bringing additional funding in to Shropshire at a ratio of over 20:1 against the local authority core funding.

Cllr Tim Barker  
Shropshire  
Council

Cllr Cecilia Motley  
Shropshire  
Council

Cllr Heather Kidd  
Shropshire  
Council

Cllr David Turner  
Shropshire  
Council

Cllr Chris Turley  
Telford & Wrekin  
Council

## Introduction

The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a legal designation with the principal purpose *'to conserve and enhance natural beauty'*<sup>1</sup>. Designated in 1958, the AONB covers 804km<sup>2</sup> (23% of Shropshire). Since local government reorganisation in Shropshire in 2009, 99.4% of the AONB falls into Shropshire Council's area and 0.6% remains in the area of Telford & Wrekin Council.

A legal duty to fulfil the AONB's purposes rests with these two local authorities, who act jointly in a formal structure called the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership. Other members of the Partnership include conservation bodies, landowner and community representatives, interests such as recreation and tourism, and individual members.

The main mechanism for protecting AONBs directly is through the planning system. The 38 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 2000<sup>2</sup>). 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.

Figure 1 Map of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

### Purposes of AONBs

The primary purpose of AONB designation as set out in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949, as amended<sup>1</sup>) is ***"to conserve and enhance natural beauty"***.

Countryside Agency guidance of 2001<sup>3</sup> sets out the following non-statutory secondary purposes:

*"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."*

'Natural beauty' in relation to AONBs is not strictly defined, but some further clarification is provided in the legislation. Reference to conservation of natural beauty includes conservation of its *'flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features'* (s.92(2) of the CROW Act). Land is not prevented from being treated as of natural beauty by the fact that it is used for agriculture, or woodlands, or as a park, or that its physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention in the landscape (s.99 NERC Act<sup>4</sup>).

Natural beauty is closely linked with modern understanding of landscape value. It is accepted to include cultural and historic aspects of landscape as well as more strictly 'natural' ones. In relation to National Parks the Environment Act 1995<sup>5</sup> states 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."*

### AONBs - a National Designation

AONBs were strengthened especially by the CROW Act of 2000 and subsequent improvements in practice. After significant increases in funding under the Countryside Agency, there have been steady reductions under Natural England and since 2011 when overall AONB sponsorship moved directly to

Defra. Natural England remains the government's statutory adviser on AONBs and has set out its recommended directions in a position statement of April 2010 <sup>6</sup>.

**The National Association for AONBs** <sup>7</sup> is an incorporated controlled company limited by guarantee formed in December 1998. Its membership includes managing bodies for most AONBs, as well as some of the local authorities with statutory responsibility for AONBs, and voluntary bodies and individuals. The NAAONB has established itself as the voice of the AONB partnerships in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, representing those involved in the planning and management of 8,000 square miles of the UK's finest landscapes.

The Association's priorities are to influence national decision making, to develop clear and consistent messages about AONBs, to share and disseminate good practice, and to establish opportunities for collaborative working. It delivers these through activities focused on parliamentary liaison, communications, government policy development, technical support to members, governance and administration, and funding and resources.

Through the National Association for AONBs, the AONB family has adopted the following high level objectives nationally:

- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the UK's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, ensuring they can meet the challenges of the future.
- To support the economic and social well-being of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty.
- To promote public understanding and enjoyment of the nature and culture of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and encourage people to take action for their conservation.
- To value, sustain, and promote the benefits that the UK's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty provide for society, including clean air and water, food, carbon storage and other services vital to the nation's health and well-being.

#### Protected Landscapes

AONBs make up 15% of the land area of England and Wales, and along with National Parks, represent our finest landscapes. They are recognised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Category V Protected Areas <sup>8</sup>, defined as areas *'where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value; and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values'*. A primacy to conservation of 'nature' is important in this classification and is borne out in this Management Plan. The Shropshire Hills is typical of a Category V Area, in which land ownership primarily for conservation is only an option for a minority of the area, and active land management by private owners is key to retaining the special qualities of the landscape. AONBs as protected landscapes also are an important form of delivery of the UK's commitments under the European Landscape Convention <sup>9</sup>.

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 and a wide variety of organisations. **The approach to managing the AONB therefore has a strong ethos of working with local people, valuing their contribution, 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. Collaboration between AONBs and National Parks remains a priority for Defra.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership has defined its three main roles as:

- **To develop policy and strategy for the AONB 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 has the formal status of a 'Joint Advisory Committee' to the two local authorities, but the local authority members co-opt many others according to Terms of Reference <sup>10</sup>. The Partnership currently has 36 members representing a wide range of interests. While the local authorities are lead partners, this broad structure means **the AONB Partnership has a valuable 'voice' independent of the local authorities**. The Partnership has a number of sub-groups to aid delivery, and these involve further partners.

Detailed arrangements for AONBs vary, but **the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership does not own or manage any land directly**. A core of funding is received from Defra and from the local authorities, with project funding also secured from many other sources. A small staff team works on behalf of the AONB Partnership to help fulfil its roles. 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**.

Fig 2 Structure of the AONB Partnership

The Partnership structure of the AONB is a particular strength and enables communication and understanding between many different interested parties, reducing or avoiding potential conflict. For further information on governance and activity of the AONB Partnership, including its annual reviews and current membership, please see [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk). Since the last Management Plan, there has been an increase in the number of local area groups within the Partnership structure. Where resources allow, this is seen as a direction to develop further.

#### The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan

The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 S89(2) <sup>2</sup> states that *"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 two local authorities for the Shropshire Hills AONB formally agreed that the AONB Partnership would lead the preparation of the Management Plan on their behalf with the involvement of a range of local authority members and officers. On completion the formal approval of the Management Plan is by the local authorities themselves.

The first statutory Management Plan for the Shropshire Hills AONB <sup>11</sup> was produced in 2004, and the second in 2009 <sup>12</sup>. The Actions section of the previous Management Plan has been updated periodically, both with progress and through the addition of new actions. A full review of the Management Plan is required every five years, and this new Plan is the second such review. Most of the issues in the 2009 Plan are still relevant, and this Plan aims to build on and develop the previous approach, updating and making changes where necessary, and setting out current priorities and actions. The Policies in the last Plan have been reviewed and, where necessary, updated or refined.

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 of relevance to anyone whose activity or decisions affect the Shropshire Hills in relation to AONB purposes. It does, however, have the particular role of guiding the activity of partners within the AONB Partnership and its 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 has followed national guidance <sup>13</sup>. It has been influenced by policy directions from above and by community consultations and experience at a local level. Progress with implementing the previous Management Plan and evaluation of it has been reported to the AONB Partnership in papers available at [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk). The current condition of the AONB and influences on it are described in detail in an updated 'State of the AONB' section.

There is a legal requirement to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Management Plan. The broad sustainability focus of the work of the AONB Partnership is valued by members, so the decision has again been 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 is therefore accompanied by a draft **Sustainability Appraisal** report. This examines 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. The earlier Scoping Report for the Sustainability Appraisal <sup>14</sup> 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 promoting and managing access on the Stiperstones (a European Special Area of Conservation or SAC), but no other significant issues.

#### Consultation, Approval and Endorsement

Consultation is integral to all stages of the Management Plan review. This has extended through the broad and inclusive membership of the AONB Partnership and its sub-groups, and involved consideration of consultations carried out for other purposes. The period of public consultation on the draft Plan was from July to August 2013.

Following public consultation, amendments were made to the Plan. Formal observations were then sought from Natural England (as statutory consultee), followed by endorsement by the AONB Partnership, before formal approval by Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council.



## 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 the special qualities set out here are those defined and refined through the development of successive Management Plans.

Different people have their own opinions on what is special about the Shropshire Hills, and no definition can claim to be absolute. Each aspect identified could occupy many pages of description, and the purpose of this brief outline is to help determine how best to manage these qualities within the remit of the AONB. This necessarily involves dealing with aspects which are subjective, hard to define and often difficult adequately to put into 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 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’ chapter in the ‘State of the AONB’ 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. This is reflected in both ecology and patterns of human activity. The AONB contains within a quarter of Shropshire more than half of the Landscape Types defined in Shropshire’s Landscape Character Assessment<sup>15</sup>. The key **components of the Shropshire Hills landscape** are the hills, farmed countryside, 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. They contain commons, heath, moorland and rough grasslands, and are home to a variety of upland birds including curlew, red grouse and merlin.

### Farmed Countryside

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. There is some small scale arable cultivation - mostly for feed crops - with larger scale cropping in the valleys extending outside the AONB.

### Woodlands

The area has higher than the national average cover of ancient and semi-natural woodland. Upland oakwoods are found mostly on steeper slopes and are important for birds, bryophytes and lichens, while mixed ash-elm-oak woods such as on the limestone of Wenlock Edge have a rich ground flora. There are also larger predominantly conifer plantations, many small farm woodlands, scattered valuable areas of wet woodland, parkland, wood pasture, and 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 like the dipper, white-clawed crayfish and otter. The critically endangered 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 expanses with some flood meadows, and the broad dales such as Corve Dale and Ape Dale which divide up the area. The AONB makes up the majority of the headwaters of the Teme catchment, and a short stretch of the River Severn within the AONB divides the Wrekin from Wenlock Edge. There are no large water bodies but many ponds, marshes and flushes.

Other special qualities **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 the Permian, and the influence of different rock types and structures 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 AONB 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 well-recognised 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, including red grouse and dormice. The area holds some national rarities and is very significant in a regional and county context for upland species such as merlin, snipe, curlew, whinchat, dipper, emperor moth, small pearl-bordered fritillary and grayling butterflies. It is also significant for species of western oakwoods such as pied flycatcher, wood warbler redstart and tree pipit, and something of a stronghold for formerly more common or widespread species like skylark, 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 local materials available, and there is a rich variety of churches and churchyards. 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 extend across and beyond the AONB which abounds in both wide open spaces and intimate corners. 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 other valuable ecological functions including food and fibre growing, and water run-off control.

### **Tranquillity**

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

### **Culture and Opportunities for Enjoyment**

The Shropshire Hills span a wide spectrum of cultural settings, from the urban 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 market 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 with walks and outdoor activities respecting the area’s qualities. The AONB 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 2014-19 remains the same as in the previous Plan:

**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 geology, wildlife and heritage, and**
- **its contribution to prosperity and wellbeing.**

The Management Plan translates this long term vision into strategic themes and delivery 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 3 illustrates this Vision:

## Summary of Condition of the AONB and Key Issues

The 'State of the AONB' section of the Management Plan, updated from the previous Plan, is published electronically in a separate volume. It describes in more detail the current status, trends and causes of change in relation to key assets of the AONB. The State of the AONB volume contains the main descriptive and analytical sections, as an integral part of the statutory Management Plan, and should be referred to for further background on the content of this main volume.

### Summary of condition and trends

The character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape continue to be of high importance, but are under **increasing pressure**, and the **condition of a number of the special qualities of the AONB is declining**. Improvements resulting from conservation activity, e.g. on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and through agri-environment schemes, are accompanied by **wider declines in biodiversity**, especially bird, plant and invertebrate populations. **Land management** practices remain a crucial determining factor, while economic forces are **increasing development pressure** and **reducing resources for positive management**, leading to more deterioration of features by neglect.

- The area's very high level of geological diversity underpins all other aspects of landscape. Key **geological sites are in good condition**, but there is potential to raise awareness of geology further and to incorporate it into other areas of work.
- Protection of the most important features of the AONB is generally good. However the ecological integrity of the area has suffered significantly in the past, **high quality habitats are very fragmented, and direct loss of biodiversity continues**. In common with national trends, many bird species continue to decline, from a variety of causes, known and unknown. Some key upland and farmland **bird species** such as lapwing, curlew, snipe and common sandpiper have declined to

**critically low levels** but a few species, notably red kite, are increasing.

- Many of the special features and qualities of the AONB are only maintained by **sympathetic land management**. This dependence makes some features (e.g. rivers, 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, and the **future of the sheep and beef sectors** is especially important. Upland farmers face particular challenges, and support for delivery of a range of public benefits will continue to be necessary. New farm enterprises such as poultry and non-farming enterprises such as renewable energy can have a large impact, and better guidance is needed.
- Levels of participation in farm conservation (**agri-environment**) **schemes** are still high, but as Environmentally Sensitive Area agreements finish, and the Higher Level Stewardship scheme has closed, many farms are reducing conservation activity. The forthcoming shift from Environmental Stewardship to the New Environmental Land Management Scheme is likely to reduce resources further. The potential benefits of some Higher Level Stewardship agreements are limited by the choice of options which may not meet the area's important strategic issues. Levels of maintenance of traditional **field boundaries** (mostly hedges) are high, but may be affected by reductions in funding.
- A wide variety of **conservation projects** are achieving significant progress within the AONB:
  - The main **heathlands** are improving in condition, and arrangements for management of a number of **commons** are improving.
  - The rising demand for woodfuel, and provision of advice have resulted in improvement in management of many **woodlands**. Many woods however remain under-managed, especially those with the most difficulties in terms of lack of resources and practical access.
  - **Rivers and river catchments** have become a significant focus for activity, but **face significant challenges**, including water quality and flow regimes, nutrient and sediment input and riparian habitat quality.
- Good land management and increasing awareness is helping to conserve 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.
- Business activity within the AONB itself is strongly focused on **land management** and associated industries, plus tourism and services. The **environmental resources** of the AONB are increasingly recognised as important to businesses in the surrounding market towns, but appear to be undervalued in some areas of decision making.
- **Development pressure** is relatively low in a national context, though this is **increasing**, with considerable local concerns and occasionally contention regarding proposed developments for housing, industry and large scale agricultural buildings in particular. There is a continuous need also to ensure that tourism and renewable energy are integrated sensitively within the high quality landscape.
- **Levels of transport are probably increasing slightly**. This is the major source of intrusive noise, resulting in a **gradual erosion of tranquillity**. Air quality however remains good.
- The **economic downturn** is putting pressure on a range of rural businesses and communities. Tightening margins may threaten the adoption of more environmentally friendly practices. **Rising costs of energy and fuel** are also influencing business choices.
- The population 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 long-standing and incomers, nevertheless, **value the relative remoteness of the area**.
- **Tourism** activity and promotion is now better co-ordinated and giving greater recognition to the AONB and the identity of the Shropshire Hills. Levels of **investment in countryside access** such as rights of way are declining however, and maintaining standards in the light of local authority cuts is a real concern, despite increases in voluntary activity.
- **Community support** for conservation is high, and **awareness of and involvement with the AONB continues to increase**. However, there remains much scope and need to raise awareness of the value of the environment to people (ecosystem services), and of the actions needed to meet environmental goals.

- Trends in society are tending to **reduce engagement by young people with the countryside and the outdoors** for leisure. The insecurity of countryside jobs is also an issue for retention of young people in the Shropshire Hills, and may lead in future to skills shortages in areas crucial to maintaining the landscape.
- The **Low Carbon agenda has fallen in public and political prominence** in the last few years. Progress has been made in some areas of lowering emissions, but the difficulties and conflicts associated with significant changes have become more apparent.
- **Climate change will continue to intensify pressures on the landscape**, through indirect social and economic effects like pressure of land use as well as through direct effects on wildlife and habitats.

The following **key issues** facing the Shropshire Hills have been identified as the most significant in the Plan period:

### **Development and the Economy**

Schemes which may generate economic benefits in the short term have to be balanced with the longer term sustainability of the area. Housing appropriate to local need, tourism and business development are required to allow rural communities to survive, but these need to be of a scale, design and quality which complements the special qualities of the AONB. The economic downturn means there is a progressive decrease in public sector resources available for all kinds of work in support of the AONB.

### **Maintaining Wildlife Habitats and Heritage Features**

Many bird species are still declining, and habitats such as rivers and high quality grassland are still at risk. Some features are neglected, others damaged through a lack of understanding of their importance. Good quality advice and funding is needed for both established and new landowners, together with improved ways of passing on skills.

### **The Future of Farming**

Livestock farming in particular is vital to maintaining the character of the Shropshire Hills, and farmers need support to adapt to changing subsidy regimes and to use and nurture environmental quality as a valuable asset. Developing local supply chains and an emphasis on environmental quality will be crucial.

### **Climate Change**

Ecological networks need to be strengthened to improve their resilience, and mitigation measures put in place for wildlife and habitats which are unable to adapt. Farming, infrastructure and communities will also need to adapt to changes in the climate, the economic and political consequences of which are very uncertain. The area needs to play its part in shifting to a low carbon economy and way of life, conserving energy and developing appropriate small-scale renewables.

### **Transport**

High levels of travel on roads and in the air uses scarce resources and erodes tranquillity. Further incentives are needed to influence patterns of employment and leisure, and offer viable alternatives, including reduced travel and use of public transport.

### **Awareness and Involvement**

Local people and visitors have a great love of the Shropshire Hills and a willingness to understand more and contribute to the area's wellbeing. Volunteering, community activity, business engagement and events need to continue to be fostered, and renewed efforts made to connect young people with the countryside and outdoors.

### **Connecting and Joining up**

Greater integration of efforts and activities at all levels is crucial. Within the AONB, this includes working locally in the different areas of the Shropshire Hills, and linking the environment with the local community and economy. On a wider scale, it also means connecting the AONB better with the area around it, working with the nearby towns, along river catchments and where appropriate across administrative boundaries.

## 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.

Special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB		Headline Indicator and status for 2009-14 Plan	Trend since 2009-14 Plan *	Current status (at 2014 or most recent data available)
Overall	Diversity and contrast (landscape character)	Character is classed as being 'maintained' in the two National Character Areas in which the AONB falls <sup>a</sup>	→	No new data from Countryside Quality Counts project.
Elements of the landscape	Hills	70.5% of farmed land (46,625ha) is managed under some form of agri-environment scheme <sup>a</sup>	↘	62.2% in 2012 <sup>a</sup> . Reduction mainly due to end of ESA agreements
	Farmed landscape			
	Woodlands	50% of overall woodland (6,800ha) is managed under a Forestry Commission Woodland Grant Scheme agreement <sup>b</sup>	↘	31.8% in 2013 <sup>b</sup>
	Rivers and river valleys	0% of river SSSIs are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup> (one site – River Teme including River Clun SAC)	→	Considerable activity but no sections are yet in recovering condition <sup>a</sup>
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 <sup>a</sup>	↘?	New data not yet obtained
	Wildlife	58.2% of biological SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup> Key farmland and upland bird species are declining <sup>c</sup>	↗	Continued improvement <sup>a</sup>
			↘	Declines continuing <sup>c</sup>
	Heritage	52% of Scheduled Ancient Monuments (86) are classified as 'At High or Medium Risk' <sup>d</sup> 2% of Listed Buildings (3) are classified as 'At Risk' <sup>d</sup>	↘*	54% (100) at Medium or High Risk <sup>e</sup>
			↘*	2.5% at high risk <sup>e</sup>
	Environmental and scenic quality	60.3% of all SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup> 32% of river length is 'good' water quality <sup>f</sup>	↗	97% in 2012 <sup>a</sup>
			↗?	New data not yet obtained
Tranquillity	70% of the AONB is classified as 'tranquil' <sup>g</sup>	↘?	No new data	
Culture and enjoyment	86.8% of rights of way are classified as 'easy to use'	↘?	New data not yet obtained	

\* Downward arrow indicates a negative trend for condition of the AONB

a Data supplied by Natural England

b Data supplied by Forestry Commission

c Based on data from Shropshire Ornithological Society, Upper Onny Wildlife Group, Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group and Kemp Valley Community Wildlife Group

d [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/SUKB\\_2012\\_tcm9-328339.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/SUKB_2012_tcm9-328339.pdf)

e Data supplied by English Heritage

f Data supplied by Environment Agency

g Data supplied by CPRE, 2005. Definition of 'tranquil' based on green colour

## Key Delivery Highlights of the 2009-14 Management Plan period

- Expansion of the Shropshire Hills **Rivers Project**, working with land managers to improve habitat and water quality and especially seeking to improve the condition of the River Clun SAC (freshwater pearl mussel site) and River Teme SSSI.
- Completion of **Sustainable Tourism Strategy** for the Shropshire Hills, achievement of the **European Charter** for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas and co-ordination through the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership.
- The Shropshire Hills AONB **Woodlands Project** supported management of ancient semi-natural woodland and Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) on over 100 sites.
- Renewal of the AONB **Planning Protocol** with Shropshire Council, outlining the basis and procedures for AONB Partnership involvement in planning policy, guidance and casework.
- Delivery from 2009-13 of the £1.25 million Shropshire Hills **LEADER programme** to a Local Development Strategy linking people's wellbeing with the landscape.
- The **Sustainable Development Fund** has supported 97 projects over eight years since it started, with grants totalling £231,730, attracting a considerable amount of match funding.
- Continuation of the **Shropshire Hills Shuttles**, including the provision of some new services.
- Improved communication and promotion of the AONB through good quality publications, website, press releases, social media, events, talks and other materials.
- Co-ordination of **events** and their promotion in the Shropshire Hills, with new opportunities for **guided walks**.
- Achievement of **Long Mynd Higher Level Stewardship agreement** with commoners, following the ending of the earlier ESA agreement.
- Developing and securing funding for a new £2.2 m **Landscape Partnership Scheme** for the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country, starting delivery in 2013.
- Upgrading the standard of the **Shropshire Way**, and development of linked short walks, including linear walks accessible by public transport.
- Close involvement with the strengthening **National Association for AONBs**.
- The **'Walking With Offa'** project has worked with two other AONBs and a National Park to co-ordinate promotion of the Welsh border area, with pub walks, business support and events.
- Publication of the Shropshire Hills AONB **Design Guidance for Agricultural Buildings**.
- The Shropshire Hills **Farming Project** provided one-to-one support for over 200 upland livestock farmers resulting in higher than average uptake of Environmental Stewardship schemes, and also involved many people in educational and community activities.
- The AONB Partnership has increased its work with **schools**, and introduced the John Muir Award.
- A cluster of towns around the Shropshire Hills have gained **'Walkers Are Welcome'** status, linked to the development and promotion of a range of walks and information.
- **Completion of Historic Farmstead Characterisation Project** by Shropshire Council in 2010 in partnership with English Heritage, as part of a regional project mapping and characterising historic farmsteads, out-farms, field barns and smallholdings across the region.
- Conservation of churchyards continues to be championed and supported by **Caring for God's Acre**, a local organisation which started as a Shropshire Hills AONB project, and recently launched a national programme.
- Extension of the **Church Stretton Conservation Area**, including Cardingmill Valley.

For further information see <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/news-publications/annual-review/>

## Geographical Context

### The AONB Boundary

Questions are inevitably raised at intervals about the AONB boundary, and suggestions or queries about amending it, either to exclude or include particular areas. The Shropshire Hills AONB boundary has not been changed since it was drawn up in 1957 prior to the designation. The conclusion from a study of the AONB boundary commissioned in 2006<sup>65</sup> was that the boundary was fit for purpose. While there are legal mechanisms to make boundary changes, and some examples of this across the AONB family, it is an involved and time consuming process. Any move to amend the boundary would inevitably result in a clamour of proposals for changes to include or exclude certain parcels of land. The AONB Partnership and the local authorities have established a clear policy against changing the boundary.

Suggestions are occasionally raised regarding designation of adjacent or nearby land in Powys or Herefordshire as AONB. Resources within the statutory agencies are increasingly limited to pursue this, and the AONB Partnership regards these as matters for the authorities and communities in the areas affected, and has agreed not to become actively involved in such proposals. A high priority has been given to strengthening the 'Shropshire Hills' identity to gain support for the AONB. If any adjacent land outside Shropshire were ever designated, the AONB Partnership would favour a model of collaboration and links rather than losing the identity of the Shropshire Hills AONB in a single larger cross-boundary AONB.

### The AONB Boundary - Policy

**In the foreseeable future, the benefits of formally amending the AONB boundary would not be justified against the considerable costs and resources this would entail. The AONB Partnership and local authorities will work, and encourage partners and others to work, in ways which strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills AONB 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 boundary to secure the maximum benefit for the Shropshire Hills.**

(see [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/news-publications/position-statements/](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/news-publications/position-statements/) for full statement approved Feb 2008).

### The Changing Context

The most obvious wider area in which the AONB sits is that of Shropshire. The AONB lay wholly within the old county of Shropshire, but extends into the area of Telford & Wrekin Council, which became a separate unitary authority in 1998. For many administrative purposes this context is meaningful and relevant. However, issues around the geographical context are changing in a number of ways affecting approaches to the AONB's management. These changes are opening up new directions in which the context of the AONB needs to be considered and in which new partnerships may be forged.

Since the move to unitary local government in Shropshire in 2009 and the disappearance of the district councils, Shropshire Council use for some purposes a looser division of the county, in which the AONB falls mostly into the 'south' (though not covering all of this area), and also into the 'central' area nearer to Shrewsbury. For planning policy, infrastructure planning and increasingly other aspects of service delivery, the Council uses 'Place Plan' areas centred on market towns<sup>66</sup>. Those for Bishop's Castle, Church Stretton, Cleobury Mortimer, Craven Arms, Ludlow, Minsterley & Pontesbury and Much Wenlock cross into the AONB, but all include substantial areas outside it (see Figure 4 below). The relationship between these towns and their hinterlands is important in the Place Plans, but these also need to differentiate the part of the hinterland of each town which is within the AONB.

Figure 4 Map of Place Plan areas

Since the last Management Plan, the abolition of the government regions now means much less



emphasis on the West Midlands as a contextual setting for the AONB. The creation of the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership<sup>67</sup> comprising Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire creates a new geographical area however, which is likely to become increasingly important as a vehicle for government funding.

Although wholly in England, the Shropshire Hills AONB lies along the Welsh border. The AONB Partnership has in recent years increasingly become involved cross-border working with Wales, and will continue to develop practical and strategic cross-border working where appropriate.

The increasing national and regional prominence given to an integrated catchment approach to water management<sup>68</sup>, makes more prominent the importance of the Shropshire Hills as containing most of the headwaters of the River Teme catchment (see Figure 4 below). This is a functional ecological unit rather than an administrative area, which links the AONB to the east into Worcestershire, a direction which does not emerge very strongly in other aspects of the area's management.

Figure 5 Map of the Teme Catchment (pink shading) and the Shropshire Hills AONB (red boundary)

## A 'Zone of Influence' for the AONB

The 2009-2014 Management Plan included a map of the wider Shropshire Hills area defined for the 2007-13 LEADER rural development programme. This has the AONB at its core but takes into account the National Character Areas for landscape and also includes the surrounding market towns, parishes spanning the boundary, and those communities which have social characteristics and affinities more related to the Shropshire Hills landscape than the surrounding lowlands. The area is mostly defined on parish boundaries, as these have a real functional value, although around the Wrekin only parts of some parishes are included on the basis of characteristics and affinity. Delivery of the LEADER programme over the last five years has proved the meaningfulness of this area. It is still 'the Shropshire Hills', in a slightly broader way than the AONB itself, and as a unit and an identity serves to support AONB-focused working. It is proving especially valuable in its inclusivity and for encouraging links - social or economic as well as landscape and ecological - with and between the surrounding communities, especially the market towns.

In 2012 this same 'wider Shropshire Hills' area was adopted by the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership to co-ordinate tourism activity and marketing. This decision recognised that for these purposes it would not be a hard boundary, and that links beyond it and overlaps - for example with Ironbridge, Shrewsbury, North Herefordshire and mid Wales - are all important.

**The Management Plan adopts more generally this wider Shropshire Hills area as a 'zone of influence' for the AONB.** This is not any formal designation, and does not change the consideration of developments outside the AONB through planning (the impact on the AONB of developments outside the boundary may already be taken into account where these are large or close by). Nor does it change the statutory status of or primary focus of the Management Plan on the AONB itself. It does not mean either that the AONB Partnership will start to deliver all of its functions in an area beyond the AONB. However, it does provide a useful, though not rigid, area in which the AONB and its high quality landscape has significant economic and social influence. A wide variety of partners agree that developing these linkages is beneficial both to the AONB and to the surrounding area. The zone may also be valuable in aligning the future delivery of wider functions such as tourism, future rounds of LEADER and other rural development activity.

Figure 6 Map of 'zone of influence' of the AONB

## STRATEGIC THEMES AND DELIVERY PRIORITIES

This section is informed by the analysis of current status, trends and issues arising set out in the separate 'State of the AONB' section of the Plan. Four strategic themes have been agreed to guide action over the life of the Management Plan to 2019. The first of these relates to the primary statutory purpose of AONBs and is the over-riding priority.

### Strategic Themes 2014-2019

#### **Conserving and enhancing our outstanding landscape and its nature**

Wildlife, heritage, tranquillity, appropriate development

#### **Helping our local communities thrive in a more sustainable way**

Farming and land management, prosperity and wellbeing, low carbon

#### **Promoting personal enjoyment, understanding and participation**

For local people and visitors, sense of place and belonging, doing and taking part

#### **Maintaining and enriching the natural services on which we all depend**

Ecosystem services (air, water, food, climate, etc) and wider benefits to society

These themes are deliberately cross-cutting to support an integrated approach to implementation of the Management Plan.

In pursuit of these strategic themes six delivery priorities have been established for the Plan period.

### Delivery Priorities 2014-2019

#### **Joining up the conservation effort**

#### **Valuing the AONB in planning and decisions**

#### **Encouraging a sustainable land management economy**

#### **Supporting enjoyment and a visitor economy in harmony with the AONB**

#### **Raising awareness and participation, especially among young people**

#### **Local working with communities**

Long Mynd – Stiperstones

Clun Forest and Valley

Clee Hills

Stretton Valley, Wenlock Edge and Dales

Wrekin Forest

Under each priority policies are defined, **policies are defined where there is a particular need for clarity of position and to influence others.** These are mostly the same as in the previous Management Plan, but have been reorganised and updated, with a few additions. Since the Management Plan is formally approved by the local authorities, **these are policies of Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council, not merely those of the AONB Partnership.** 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.

Key delivery mechanisms are set out, emphasising the important role of a wide range of partners. Defining actions is a compromise on the level of detail appropriate. 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 as a strategic plan, the actions defined have to be reasonably broad. Reflecting a need for greater focus and the reduced public sector funding now available, the actions proposed are fewer in number than the previous Plan.

## Key Delivery Mechanisms crossing all Strategic Themes

### **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 Shropshire Council provides valuable links and back-up. The Partnership's 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.

### **Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)**

The Sustainable Development Fund run by the AONB Partnership since 2005-6 has offered grants to organisations, businesses and individuals for projects with environmental, social and economic benefits related to the AONB. 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. All AONBs and National Parks established SDF with public funding, which in most cases has been reduced. In the Shropshire Hills AONB, government funding has now been lost completely from SDF, but new charitable sources of income have been secured.

### **Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and LEADER**

The RDPE is partly European funding, and has been an important source of funding for activities related to the Management Plan, delivering valuable projects in areas including food and drink, tourism and environmental technology. The next round of RDPE is due to start in 2015, and is linked with proposals for a 'Common Strategic Framework' connecting with the delivery of other EU structural supports such as the European Social Fund. It will be important to align these as closely as possible to secure the maximum benefit for the AONB. LEADER is one strand of the RDPE, which was delivered by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership from 2009-13. As preparations for the next round of LEADER and other EU funds are being made at the time of writing, the Management Plan's over-riding priority is to optimise benefits to the Shropshire Hills of future rounds of these funds.

### **Stiperstones & Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme**

This is a five year £2.1 million scheme operating from 2013-18 in the north-western part of the AONB, and an adjacent small part of Wales. Initiated by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and hosted by Shropshire Council, the scheme focuses on the mining landscape of this area, and will undertake works on heritage sites, offer support and guidance to landowners, and provide many opportunities for involvement and learning by members of the local community. The scheme has a dedicated staff team of six, as an outposted arm of the AONB Partnership team. <http://www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk/>

## Joining up the Conservation Effort

In line with the primary statutory purpose of AONBs, conservation is the highest priority for the Management Plan. This priority of 'joining up' the effort recognises the importance of co-ordinating activity between conservation organisations and with landowners, of improving ecological networks across the landscape, of connecting the conservation of biodiversity, heritage, scenic and environmental quality, and of the need to join up conservation with the economy and with people.

*N.B. Background descriptions and facts and figures about these topics are set out in the separate 'State of the AONB' section of the Plan.*

The whole concept of AONBs involves conservation at a **landscape scale**. Nature and biodiversity have a prominent place in this, but the holistic approach of looking also at geology, heritage and scenic values is important. The last Management Plan outlined a rationale for this in the light of climate change adaptation, recognising the valuable ecosystem services provided by our countryside. These approaches have since been given greater weight by the Natural Environment White Paper<sup>69</sup> and the Lawton report 'Making Space for Nature'<sup>70</sup>.

The UK government has a legal commitment to reverse the declines in biodiversity.

The new Biodiversity Strategy for England: Biodiversity 2020<sup>71</sup> proposes action in four themes:

- 1. A **more integrated large-scale approach to conservation on land & sea** (includes sites and species action)*
- 2. **Putting people at the heart of biodiversity policy** (includes engagement, value of nature and innovative funding)*
- 3. **Reducing environmental pressures** (includes issues such non-native species, air pollution)*
- 4. **Improving our knowledge** (includes evidence activities, and making more accessible)*

The Strategy also defines four outcomes, towards which activity in the AONB by a range of partners will play an important role:

### **Outcome 1: Priority Habitats (including SSSI)**

*1A. Better wildlife habitats with 90% of priority habitats in favourable or recovering condition and at least 50% of SSSIs in favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in favourable or recovering condition.*

*1B. More, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife, with no net loss of priority habitat and an increase in the overall extent of priority habitats by at least 200,000 ha*

*1C. By 2020, at least 17% of land and inland water, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, conserved through effective, integrated and joined up approaches to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services including through management of our existing systems of protected areas and the establishment of nature improvement areas*

*1D. Restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems as a contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation*

### **Outcome 3: Species** (Outcome 2 relates to the marine environment and is omitted here)

*By 2020, we will see an overall improvement in the status of our wildlife and will have prevented further human-induced extinctions of known threatened species*

### **Outcome 4 : People**

*By 2020, significantly more people will be engaged in biodiversity issues, aware of its value and taking positive action*

The sections below seek to link activity in the AONB to these outcomes where possible, as well as integrating with broader considerations. The need is recognised to develop further actions on biodiversity within the lifespan of this Plan.

## Ecological and Habitat Networks

The Shropshire Hills AONB contains a high concentration of the county's priority habitats, and the strength of habitat networks is relatively high. Shropshire Council has mapped ecological networks in the county using the Lawton report principles (Figure 6). High quality habitats are defined as 'core areas' around which there are buffer zones in which expansion or improvement of complementary habitats may be important. To support the physical connectivity of networks, the mapping identifies corridors and stepping stones that help enable animals and plant species to move and adapt. It defines the surrounding matrix of land as 'sustainable use areas' where environmentally friendly practices will still support the overall quality of the ecological network.

Figure 7 Map of Environmental Networks in the Shropshire Hills AONB

### Outcome 1A Condition of existing habitats

One principle the new strategic approaches to biodiversity do not change is the top priority accorded to maintaining in good condition the best quality habitats and sites. Conservation ownership is an important mechanism in this, but private land is also important and availability of funding can be a limitation in either case. Based on Natural England's most recent inventory data, there is 147km<sup>2</sup> of priority habitats in the Shropshire Hills AONB, making up 18.4% of the area of the AONB.

Upland heathlands and grasslands tend to be some of the largest areas of high quality habitat, but by their very nature they often do not and cannot link directly to each other. Small grasslands such as those designated as Wildlife Sites without the protection afforded to SSSIs are especially vulnerable. These would profit from a national change to lower the size threshold of coverage of Environmental Impact Assessment regulations on semi-natural grasslands.

Though slow to change and less vulnerable than many habitats, woodlands and their associated wildlife are important in the AONB and there is great potential both to improve their management and to expand the network of tree cover through new woodland creation.

Hedgerows are a vital element in the patchwork quilt landscape of much of the Shropshire Hills, and good quality hedges can also be excellent ecological corridors. A recent case just outside the AONB has shown that the Hedgerow Regulations are not always strong enough to protect hedges and not broad enough to recognise the value of different hedge types. This has prompted a national petition to strengthen the Regulations. Individual trees are also of great value in the landscape, often as part of hedgerows and adding greatly to their value, though many are unprotected.

### Outcome 1B Creation of new habitat

Areas of good habitat may be enlarged or their connectivity improved by working with neighbours to extend existing areas such as nature reserves. Targeted land acquisition by conservation bodies has some role to play here, but seeking to expand and recreate good quality habitats right across the landscape will for the most part require work on private land. A high priority must therefore be given to working with landowners and local communities to improve understanding and foster support. Agri-environment schemes will continue to be the most important means of delivering this at the scale of the AONB, but especially considering current funding cuts, will be more limited in future and are insufficient alone to maintain the networks required. Projects and initiatives working at a local area scale securing additional funding from a range of sources are needed to supplement and add value to the mainstream national schemes.

Natural England have calculated the potential for priority habitat types where sufficient data exists, to create additional or restore existing priority habitat, within each of the 159 National Character Areas (NCAs) towards outcome 1B.

Indicative breakdown of the potential for creation and restoration of priority habitat in National Character Areas (NCA) covering the Shropshire Hills AONB <sup>72</sup>

National Character Area	Shropshire Hills	Clun and North West Herefordshire Hills
NCA No.	65	98
Size index	4	2
Index of fragmentation	3	4
Native woodland	No breakdown	No breakdown
Lowland wood pastures and parkland		105
Traditional orchards	110	55
Hedgerows (assumes 2m-wide hedge)		10
Ponds (assumes mean pond size of 0.05ha)		15
Arable field margins		300
Lowland dry acid grassland	140	140
Lowland meadows	150	25
Lowland calcareous grassland	40	
Purple moor grass and rush pastures		45
Upland heathland	70	
Upland flushes, fens and swamps	80	40
Lowland fens		65
<b>TOTAL (hectares)</b>	<b>590</b>	<b>800</b>

	High contribution to national habitat total
	Medium contribution to national habitat total
	Low contribution to national habitat total

About 60% of the Shropshire Hills NCA is within the AONB, and about half of the Clun and NW Herefordshire NCA (see map below)

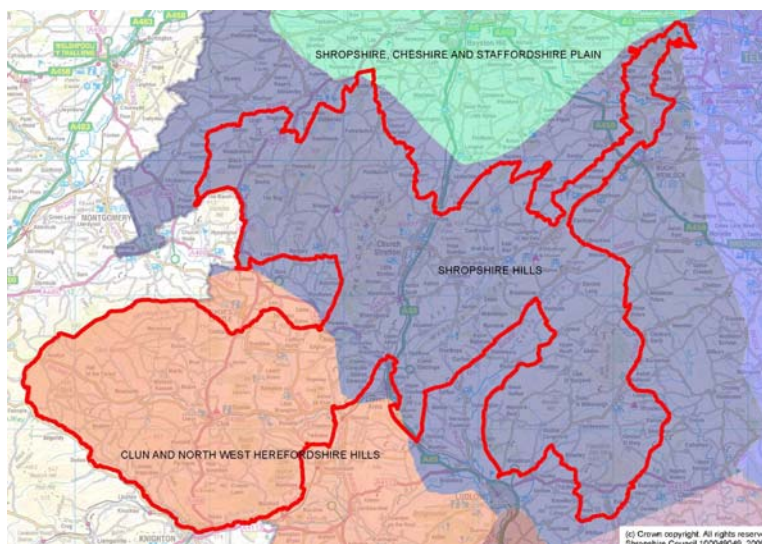


Figure 8 National Character Areas and the AONB

## Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Areas for Action

The Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership has identified a number of 'Priority Areas for Action'<sup>73</sup> to implement landscape scale conservation, and the AONB is well represented.

Figure 9 Map of Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Areas for Action within the AONB

The Long Mynd – Stiperstones area has the strongest and largest habitat networks of any part of the AONB, and there is plenty of scope to continue recent work seeking to strengthen these, both through the Stiperstones & Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme<sup>74</sup> and other mechanisms.

The Clun catchment is another large Priority Area for Action, in which the interaction between the land and water environments is a key consideration. Work throughout the catchment on a variety of habitats will benefit the rivers, and these can act as a useful spur and focus for conservation activity<sup>75</sup>.

The Cleve Hills are the third significant area of upland habitat in the AONB. As yet there is no structure or project pushing forward action specifically on the PAA, although the Cleve Hill Partnership<sup>76</sup> is bringing together partners in the south of the area and seeking to develop a project in which there will be a biodiversity element alongside the main heritage focus.

Wenlock Edge is one of the longest continuous woodlands in England, and links to the woods of the Wrekin and the Severn valley. It is also highly valuable for geology and for limestone grassland. There is an opportunity to build on recent work by conservation bodies and private landowners to enhance this important corridor.

The other PAA is the Stretton Hills, a cluster of some small but iconic hills with some important areas of habitat network associated. This area too as yet has no structure or project associated with it.

The resources currently available through existing mechanisms such as agri-environment schemes are not adequate to meet the aspirations of these BAP Priority Areas, which will be necessary to halt declines in our wildlife. Co-ordinated local working between conservation bodies and land managers, and additional resources for action on the ground have been shown to be effective but need wider application.

Following a national competitive process to establish and fund a small number of '**Nature Improvement Areas**' (NIAs), Defra have set out a process whereby other areas can declare themselves NIAs (without the funding), where certain criteria are met<sup>77</sup>. The potential benefits of pursuing this to focus attention and raise the profile should be examined, especially for areas such as the Clun Catchment, and Stiperstones and Corndon where structures are already in place.

### **Priority species** (relates to Biodiversity 2020 outcome 3)

The Shropshire Hills AONB holds a concentration of priority species (such as those identified by the Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan), and some of these are listed in the separate 'State of the AONB' volume. There is an increasing move in conservation practice to managing species through better habitat management across large areas.

Habitat loss and degradation is usually the main cause of species decline, though in some cases invasive alien species play a significant role. Predators are often blamed for declines in valued species. However healthy populations of most prey species have evolved to withstand natural levels of predation, and it is generally only when populations have declined to critical levels through loss or deterioration of habitat that predation makes a really significant difference, or where the populations of 'generalist' predators are not limited by the availability of specific prey species. Certain direct impacts of humans can also be very harmful e.g. shooting of very low populations of grouse.

## Ecosystem Services <sup>78</sup>

These human benefits from the environment can be divided into a four 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. There is a wide range of benefits from the land, its rocks and soil, and from good quality habitats and ecological networks - including landscape, wildlife, carbon storage and water regulation. Functions such as clean air, water and food production sustain life and are vital for health, and effective catchment management to maintain water quality and help prevent flooding in major settlements has huge economic benefits.

### **Key Messages from the National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) <sup>79</sup>**

The UK is the first country to have undertaken a complete assessment of the benefits which nature provides, how they have changed, the prospects for the future and their value to society. Some of the key messages of the NEA are set out below:

- The natural world, its biodiversity and its constituent ecosystems are critically important to our wellbeing and economic prosperity, but are consistently undervalued in conventional economic analyses and decision-making.
- Ecosystems and ecosystem services, and the ways people benefit from them, have changed markedly in the past 60 years, driven by changes in society.
- The UK's ecosystems are currently delivering some services well, but others are still in long-term decline. 30% of the services we get from UK's ecosystems are in decline.
- Population growth and climate change are likely to increase pressures on ecosystem services in future.
- Actions taken and decisions made now will have consequences far into the future for ecosystems, ecosystem services and human wellbeing. It is important that these are understood, so that we can make the best possible choices for present and future generations.
- We need to move towards a more integrated, rather than conventional sectoral approach to ecosystem management.

Although there is much more to learn about how valuable different aspects of biodiversity are to the delivery of ecosystem services, the NEA concludes that we have both the evidence of the benefits of managing our ecosystems more sustainably, and enough information, to start doing so.

Some mechanisms exist to pay land managers for landscape, conservation and access benefits (e.g. agri-environment and woodland grants) but market mechanisms for resource protection benefits are less well developed. This is an area which needs more development nationally to generate economic incentives to maintain environmental value. In some cases the agricultural improvement of marginal land for a modest increase in food production may generate more income but result in environmental damage with much greater economic costs. Often such costs (or the financial benefits of avoiding them) are not direct enough to influence land management decisions, and this is what schemes of payment for ecosystem services aim to do. The New Environmental Land Management Scheme <sup>80</sup> will make greater funds available for resource protection measures.



## Rivers and Catchment Management

Driven especially by the EU Water Framework Directive there is nationally an increasing emphasis on catchment management <sup>81</sup>, with initiatives like the Catchment Restoration Fund and Catchment Demonstration pilots, as well as the Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative. River SSSIs are in substantially poorer condition than other categories of SSSI and are the most challenging in terms of making improvements.

Most of the AONB forms the headwaters of the River Teme catchment, and working with this functional ecological unit through the Teme Catchment Pilot has brought collaboration with partners and areas not found in other ways, including well east of the AONB into Worcestershire. The AONB Partnership has recently been able to increase the level and breadth of its activity in the Clun Catchment through additional funding. A site of European importance for the freshwater pearl mussel makes this a high priority, providing a valuable impetus for improvements to water quality, riparian habitat quality, reduction in sedimentation and, where possible, measures to stabilise river flow rates by holding water further up in the catchment for longer. Catchments are a very useful unit in which to work at joining up the conservation effort.

The speed of run-off in a river catchment is affected by factors such as geology and surface deposits, vegetation height, soil compaction, 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 and therefore reducing peak flood levels <sup>82</sup>.

## Climate Change Adaptation

There will be significant change to the landscape in the long term from climate change, and the evidence is clear that this is already happening. While not all changes are predictable, the aim of adaptation actions should be to retain ecological value, with a focus on **resilience and robustness**. 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. A range of altitudes and habitats makes the Shropshire Hills arguably more suited for wildlife adapt than some landscapes. Some key impacts identified in the Natural England's recent Climate Change Impact Assessment and Response Strategy for the Shropshire Hills Character Area <sup>83</sup>are:

- Changes in species composition (of particular concern being species significant for the functioning of ecosystems - e.g. alder and willow helping to bind riverbanks)
- Phenological effects (such as the timing of life cycles, upsetting synchrony with food sources)
- Reduced water resources from a decrease in summer rain
- Increased flooding frequency and magnitude from an increase in winter rain – with the knock-on higher risk of soil erosion and impacts on water quality
- Species moving upwards or towards north-facing slopes (although the area has some characteristics of robustness, including topographic variation and many land cover types).
- A likely increase in fire risk.

The study noted, however, that indirect effects of climate change, especially through changes in farming, are likely to have the most significant impact on the Shropshire Hills. *"Climate change may have a greater impact on natural assets through changes in agriculture than through direct biophysical impacts. Changes to the types and varieties of crops, sowing dates, irrigation, pests, diseases and soil erosion are all likely."*

Climate change adaptation is a major part of the rationale of strengthening ecological networks, both by maintaining existing habitats and by extending networks through restoration and creation. These depend however on changes in land use, and relatively little progress has yet been made. Other aspects of response identified in the study included a shift in conservation paradigms in terms of species not considered native, changing attitudes towards alien and invasive species, and planting a wider range of tree species to compensate for loss of native species. These factors are becoming more prominent. The emergence of plant diseases such as *Phytophthora* and *Chalara fraxinea* are having effects on landscape and ecology which are not altogether predictable, both through direct effects of mortality, and through human responses such as use of alternative tree species for planting.

## Geology

The Shropshire Hills is very important for its geology. This is expressed across the whole landscape, but there is also a series of designated sites representing features of particular significance. The best are protected as geological SSSIs, as well as a network of Local Geological Sites which lack the same statutory protection. Such sites will sometimes need active management to maintain their value, specifically 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.

## Heritage

In line with the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>84</sup> and the good practice promoted by English Heritage<sup>85</sup>, this Plan adopts a broad definition of the historic environment, covering a wide range of heritage assets including area, buildings, features and landscapes with statutory protection, together with those parts of the historic environment which are locally valued and important, and also the historic character of landscape and townscape. Historic and natural aspects of the environment are closely inter-related. Many particular elements of the landscape have historic importance, such as hedgerows, veteran trees, parkland and ancient woodland. In addition to this, the character of the landscape more generally, such as the small fields around squatter settlements and different enclosure patterns, has important cultural influences.

Fundamental to conserving heritage assets effectively is understanding their **significance**. This is defined in the National Planning Policy Framework as *“The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset’s physical presence, but also from its setting.”* Setting is defined as *“The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.”* To illustrate this, scheduled monuments in the area are often carefully placed in the landscape in relation to their original function, such as Offa’s Dyke, a boundary feature placed for visibility and prominence.

Assets are often at risk from neglect as much as from direct damage, and considerable work is needed on routine management, maintenance and repair. Climate change resilience for the historic building stock is increasingly an issue, as extremes of weather including heavy rain and drought can all take their toll. Retaining traditional building and craft skills is important, and a number of specialist companies are suffering from the economic downturn and restrictions in public sector spending.

Heritage assets and their conservation contribute to economic and social objectives, and heritage-led regeneration can provide opportunities for sustainable tourism, recreation activities and enhancing wellbeing. They help to give the landscape its character and communities their identity and sense of place.

## Data and Monitoring

A key element in understanding and valuing the Shropshire Hills landscape and the influences on it 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. Natural England and Shropshire Council both have important roles in this, but are suffering from reduced capacity alongside increased demand for environmental information. Shropshire Wildlife Trust also has an important role in relation to biodiversity data, and Shropshire Council supports the Shropshire Ecological Data Network with some additional support from Natural England and the Environment Agency.

Where funding allows the range and quality of data and information on the natural and historic environment need to 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.

## Involving People

Wildlife is an important aspect of public interest in the landscape, and direct involvement in conservation by local people is significant. The growth of a range of Community Wildlife Groups<sup>86</sup> supported by AONB funding has substantially increased opportunities for involvement. Heritage is also an area which interests and motivates many people.

The relatively new structure of the Local Nature Partnership<sup>87</sup> will be important in connecting up conservation strategically at a Shropshire level, and also connecting it to other sectors such as health and business.

## Joining up the Conservation Effort - Key Delivery Mechanisms

### 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 work pro-actively to agree and pursue management objectives on SSSIs, and undertakes regular monitoring of their condition.

### Conservation Ownership

Ownership of land by conservation bodies covers a small minority of land within the AONB compared to land in private ownership. Nevertheless, it 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.

### Heritage Designations

National designations for heritage include Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Registered Parks and Gardens. Responsibility for these designations lies with local authorities and with English Heritage, and formal consent are required for certain works.

### Agri-Environment Schemes

These are the principal means by which private landowners are supported to carry out conservation work, including biodiversity, landscape, heritage and resource protection. 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, have been the main farming schemes over recent years, run by Natural England. In addition the Environmentally Sensitive Areas had high uptake in the AONB and at the time of writing there is a significant period of transition as many agreements are coming to an end. Within the new Rural Development programme starting in 2015 the current schemes will be replaced with the New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMS). Funding levels are therefore uncertain over the Plan period, and likely to be increasingly tight. One positive proposal for developing landscape scale working under NELMS is the ability to have collaborative agreements between neighbouring landowners. 'Greening' measures under CAP reform include crop diversification, retention of permanent pasture and ecological focus areas as a requirement of basic subsidy payments, in a similar way to cross-compliance.

### Woodland Grant Schemes

These are the main means of supporting private landowners to carry out woodland management for a

range of objectives including conservation and timber production. The English Woodland Grant Scheme has been administered by the Forestry Commission as part of the Rural Development Programme for England, but is to be included in the New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMS).

### **Wildlife Sites and Local Geological Sites**

Wildlife Sites are designated at a county level by Shropshire Wildlife Trust, covering areas important for biodiversity but not of SSSI status. They are recognised by the planning system, but not afforded the protection of SSSIs. The work of the Wildlife Trust (and earlier projects through the AONB) with private landowners is invaluable in providing advice on managing such sites to maintain their value and interest and to monitor their condition.

Local Geological Sites (formerly known as Regionally Important Geological Sites- RIGS) are a similar system for sites important for geological conservation. There are however next to no resources to support management or monitoring of these sites.

### **Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership and Local Nature Partnership**

Though funding has been reduced, the Biodiversity Partnership remains an important mechanism to co-ordinate biodiversity action and reporting throughout the county. The Local Nature Partnership is a new structure arising from recommendations in the Natural Environment White Paper, aimed at linking the environment sector with other interests such as business and health. In Shropshire at the time of writing, the transition is being made from a shadow Board to the full Board.

### **Community Wildlife Groups**

Community Wildlife Groups currently involve over 300 people in the Shropshire Hills. They are actively monitoring a wide variety of species of conservation concern, habitats and Wildlife Sites, and making recommendations to the other statutory and voluntary organisations involved in the conservation effort. Between them these Groups cover around 600 square kilometres in the AONB and surrounds. The network of Community Wildlife Groups continues to grow.

## Joining up the Conservation Effort – Management Plan Policies

### Habitats and Networks

Existing areas of high quality habitat should be retained, and networks developed of higher quality habitat through targeted improvements on privately owned land, by all available mechanisms.

### Climate Change Adaptation

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

### Regulating Organisations

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 wherever possible, but mechanisms for legal enforcement should be employed where necessary. While known blackspots and problems should be targeted consideration should be given to the secondary AONB purposes of having regard for the needs of rural industries and local communities, and promoting sustainable development.

### Agri-Environment Funding

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.

### Woodlands

Broadleaved woodland comprising native species should be expanded, with restoration prioritised on Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and Plantation on Wood Pasture (PWP).

Where 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 the potential for high value habitats such as heathland are greatest. Any new or replacement planting should follow the highest standards of design guidelines in relation to landscape and amenity, nature and heritage conservation and resource protection.

### Heritage

The conservation and enhancement of the area's historic environment and heritage assets is a high priority and all activities should seek to enhance or better reveal their significance as well as promote their wider understanding and enjoyment.

## Joining up the Conservation Effort - Actions

Action	Status	Lead and key partners	Priority
Deliver the highest possible levels of uptake of the <b>New Environmental Land Management Scheme</b> , and uptake of scheme options meeting strategic conservation needs. Undertake promotion, awareness raising and training to support this.	In progress	NE, AONB, SC, SWT	H
Produce and offer <b>guidance and advice in a variety of forms</b> for land managers, e.g. farmers, smallholders, woodland owners, on practices which support the special qualities of the AONB.	In progress	AONB, NE, SC, CWGs	H
Develop and implement an integrated catchment plan for the <b>Clun catchment</b> , addressing biodiversity, water and other issues, working closely with land managers and the local community.	In progress	AONB, NE, EA, SRT, SWT, LLL, CWGs	H
Investigate possibilities for translocating or encouraging colonisation to new sites of the critically endangered population of <b>freshwater pearl mussel</b> in the River Clun.	In progress	EA, NE, AONB	H
Develop the <b>Teme Partnership</b> to implement the integrated catchment plan arising from the River Teme Catchment Pilot.	In progress	SRT, NE, EA, AONB	M
Develop a <b>Clee Hill Heritage Project</b> and other <b>community heritage</b> projects.	In progress	AONB, SC, NE, CGs	M
Provide support and networking opportunities to <b>commoners</b> undertaking grazing on important upland sites.	In progress	AONB, NT, SWT, NE	M
Develop new initiatives to encourage more <b>woodland creation</b> and planting.	Aspiration	WT, FC, AONB, NT, SWT, NE	M
Support the management of <b>existing woodlands</b> and their wildlife, including restoring Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites.	In progress	HW, FC, NT, SWT, NE	H
Promote principles and practices of land management for <b>carbon sequestration, ecosystem resilience, flood alleviation</b> and other aspects of resource protection.	In progress	EA, LAs, AONB, NE	H
Support the operation of <b>Community Wildlife Groups</b> , to provide valuable survey information and engage local people with wildlife.	In progress	SWT, AONB, NT, SC	M
Manage sites owned by conservation bodies and publicly owned sites to high standards and optimising connections with the wider landscape.	In progress	NE, NT, SWT, FC	H
Advise owners of <b>Wildlife Sites</b> and Site Alerts on their management, focusing on those at risk, e.g. grasslands, and designating new sites.	In progress	SWT, AONB SC, NE	H
Support and develop proposals for conservation or restoration works at <b>key historic sites</b> (e.g. 31 SAMs at High Risk, 3 Listed Buildings at Risk).	In progress	EH, LAs, NE, AONB	M
Implement a programme of <b>undergrounding of electricity cables</b> , prioritised according to landscape impact.	In progress	CN, AONB	M
Co-ordinate among partner organisations the holding, improvement and application of relevant <b>data</b> about the special qualities of the AONB and influences on it.	In progress	AONB, NE, SC, EA, SWT	M
Establish a programme of <b>fixed point photography</b> at key locations as a means of monitoring landscape change.	Aspiration	AONB	L
Develop mechanisms to enhance habitat networks in the <b>Long Mynd - Stiperstones and Stretton Hills</b> areas.	In progress	NT, NE, AONB	H
Develop a project to co-ordinate conservation effort at a landscape scale on <b>Wenlock Edge</b> .	Aspiration	NT, SWA, AONB, LOs	M

# Valuing the AONB in Planning and Decisions

## Management Plan Status in Relation to Planning

The statutory AONB Management Plan is regarded as a '*material consideration*' in planning matters, and aims to complement Local Development Framework policies where additional guidance is needed.

The range of planning policy applicable to the AONB is much reduced from the time of the last Management Plan, with the removal of both national Planning Policy Statements and regional policy. The summary of current relevant planning policy has been updated as part of the Management Plan review process (Appendix 1).

Management Plan Policies related to planning are intended to align with existing and proposed planning policies, while adding detail or clarification in relation to the AONB. Many planning policies which apply to the whole of a local authority's area can 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 of any conflict between the Management Plan and relevant planning policies, the actual planning policy will carry greater weight.

At the time this Plan is being reviewed, Shropshire Council is finalising policies in its Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) DPD, which includes important references to the AONB. Though only a very small part of the Telford & Wrekin Council area is in the AONB the relationship of the Management Plan to the Telford & Wrekin Local Development Framework is also important.

## Higher Level Planning Policy

The **National Planning Policy Framework**<sup>84</sup> mentions AONBs specifically in its cornerstone policy on sustainable development as exceptional areas where restrictions apply. It also includes two specific policies on the weight accorded to AONBs and National Parks and on major development within them (Appendix 1: paras 115 and 116).

The **Shropshire Core Strategy**<sup>88</sup> gives a high profile to the AONB in terms of quality of landscape, geodiversity and biodiversity, as an important asset for tourism, and as a key part of Shropshire's Environmental Network. It recognises the need for development to be of higher quality in the AONB, stating that:

*"proposals which would result in isolated, sporadic, out of scale, badly designed or otherwise unacceptable development, or which may either individually or cumulatively erode the character of the countryside, will not be acceptable. Whilst these considerations will apply generally, there will be areas where development will need to pay particular regard to landscape character, biodiversity or other environmental considerations including in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty."* (Appendix 1 for full relevant extracts).

The **Shropshire Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) Plan**<sup>89</sup> setting out draft Development Management Policies, includes policy on the AONB under Sustainable Design, Managing Development in the Countryside, Infrastructure Provision, Tourism Facilities and Visitor Accommodation, and Natural and Historic Environment (Appendix 1).

Looking ahead, it will be important to include guidance relating to the AONB through the range of Supplementary Planning Documents which Shropshire Council intends to produce. It will also be desirable to give the AONB Management Plan as much strength as possible within the Local Development Framework.

## Telford & Wrekin Local Development Framework

The Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy for 2006 – 2016<sup>90</sup> was adopted in December 2007. There are also saved policies in the 2000 Wrekin Local Plan. For the period beyond 2016, Telford & Wrekin Council is preparing a new Local Plan called 'Shaping Places'<sup>91</sup> to replace the Core Strategy (Appendix 1).

## The Planning Balance

As well as having a concentration of high quality scenery, biodiversity and heritage, the Shropshire Hills falls behind in many social and economic indices. Development to meet economic and social goals is therefore a priority, but must be taken forward in ways which do not undermine the high quality environment of the AONB, which is itself a significant long term economic asset. Sensitive forms of economic activity sustain the quality of the landscape, and the quality of the landscape can in turn sustain other economic activities which depend on it, such as tourism. The planning system should help to enable appropriate sustainable forms of development, balancing economic, social and environmental factors.

However, the distinctive nature of the AONB is rightly recognised in planning policy, since appropriate measures for the AONB may not be the same as throughout Shropshire generally. Making up 23% of Shropshire but containing only 6.5 % of its population, the AONB represents a 'distillation' of both the biggest areas of high quality environment in the county and its least populated parts.

In relation to economic development, the AONB is very interlinked with the surrounding area and especially the market towns close by. The economic and social inter-relationships between towns and their rural hinterlands need to be strengthened, and this is a key theme of Shropshire Council's Place Plans. The geography of many market towns lying just outside the AONB, and all of them having substantial rural hinterland outside the AONB, means that there are often local opportunities to accommodate developments which would not be suitable within the AONB itself.

## Landscape

The importance of the AONB is much greater than visual. Natural beauty includes wildlife, geology, heritage, landscape character, scenic beauty, environmental quality and opportunities for enjoyment. A holistic interpretation of landscape takes into account all these factors in combination rather than separately, and this should inform the way the impact of development proposals are assessed. The methodology outlined in 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment'<sup>92</sup> should be used for Environmental Statements and may also be useful in relation to smaller scale developments. This takes a narrower view of landscape, but still includes landscape character in addition to visual aspects:

*"Landscape impact assessment, in common with any assessment of environmental effects, includes a combination of objective and subjective judgements, and it is therefore important that a structured and consistent approach is used. ... Landscape and visual impacts are separate, although linked procedures. Landscape effects derive from changes in the physical landscape, which may give rise to changes in its character and how this is experienced. Visual effects relate to the changes that arise in the composition of available views as a result of changes to the landscape, to people's responses to the changes, and to the overall effects with respect to visual amenity."*

Some changes may affect only a small part of the AONB, but consideration needs to be given to cumulative impacts. Tranquillity is a vital aspect of the Shropshire Hills, and a fragile quality easily eroded by cumulative impacts. Consideration should also be given to the impact of developments outside the AONB on its setting and in particular the effects on important views into and out of the AONB.

Although all of the AONB is influenced by human factors, the sense of '**wildness**' in the Shropshire Hills is greater than in other parts of the county and in neighbouring counties in England, making it particularly valued. Larger structures such as telecommunications masts and wind turbines are regulated by the planning system. However, smaller structures - including signage, waymarkers, memorials, interpretation panels and plaques - may also be intrusive and detract from wildness.

A range of organisations have other regulatory powers relevant to the AONB's remit. Actions and decisions outside any form of regulation are also taken by many people, but nevertheless affect 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 functions<sup>2</sup>.



## Heritage

Planning will most often need to take account of heritage in relation to particular heritage assets such as buildings or archaeological features. These may be significant for their archaeological, architectural, artistic, historic or other values, even if not individually designated. The National Planning Policy Framework<sup>84</sup> sets out an over-arching principle of avoidance of harm to the significance of heritage assets, including their setting. Where harm cannot be avoided, there is a need to take account of the degree of harm to their significance, and implement mitigation measures to reduce this harm. It is important to remember that not all heritage assets are recorded and the potential archaeological interest in particular of sites should be assessed. Cumulative impacts may arise from development, either in different places, over time or simultaneously. Development can sometimes bring benefits through enhancement of the significance of a heritage asset or its setting, or through active management of an asset.

Conservation Area designation is a valuable tool for protecting the character of settlements. These should be backed by a conservation area appraisal involving the local community, ideally leading to a Design Statement. The production of Design Statements should be supported, especially but not exclusively for settlements with Conservation Areas, and adopted statements should be given due weight in planning decisions (see Core Strategy CS6: Para 4.83<sup>88</sup>). Local Heritage Lists are also valuable for recording non-designated but locally valued heritage assets.

Historic characterisation of a settlement and its surrounding landscape can form an important contributor to community-based planning initiatives, including neighbourhood planning.

Heritage value across the whole AONB landscape needs also to be recognised by the planning system, taking account of for example traffic generation, setting and trans-boundary issues. Protecting, enhancing and managing the character and appearance of landscapes has a strong heritage element, along with maintaining and strengthening local distinctiveness and sense of place. Other important considerations include achieving high quality and sustainable design for buildings, spaces and the public realm sensitive to the locality; optimising the use of previously developed land, buildings and existing infrastructure; and supporting the sustainable use of historic farmsteads.

The distinctiveness of many towns, villages and farmsteads often arises from the use in historic buildings of particular local stone. Repairs, alteration and new development in such locations should reflect and enhance this character where possible. To achieve this, there is a need for micro quarries to release suitable stone (see Core Strategy CS6: Para 4.83 and CS20 (2nd to last bullet) and Para 7.31)<sup>88</sup>.

## Housing and Sustainable Communities

The issue of affordable housing is not unique to the Shropshire Hills or to protected landscapes, but is fundamentally connected with the AONB. The natural beauty of the area attracts incomers while policies to protect the landscape limit the supply of new housing, both combining to contribute 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 compatible with protecting the special qualities of the AONB.

The Shropshire Core Strategy<sup>88</sup> allocates most housing development to defined market towns, in approximate proportion to their size. However it is accepted that development of an appropriate type and scale should also be encouraged elsewhere, including within the AONB, in order to maintain vitality and support the development of sustainable rural communities. Shropshire Council is implementing this 'Rural Rebalance' approach with a high level of local determination, by allowing settlements to put themselves forwards as 'Hubs' for new development or 'Clusters' of smaller settlements serving a similar function collectively. The map below shows those defined through the Core Strategy, in relation to the market towns and Place Plan areas.

Figure 10 Map showing Hubs and Clusters:

Bucknell, Clun, Lydbury North, Clee Hill and Onibury are now defined as Community Hubs, and with Community Clusters comprising:

- Aston on Clun, Hopesay, Broome, Beambridge, Long Meadow End, Rowton, Round Oak and Horderley
- Priest Weston, Rorrington (with Stockton, Brompton, Marton, Middleton)
- Clunbury (with Clungunford)
- Hope, Bentlawnt, Shelve and Leigh
- Snailbeach, Stiperstones, Pennerley
- Wentnor and Norbury

Church Stretton is the only market town with a requirement to take new development which is within the AONB. It is also the only town in Shropshire within a nationally protected landscape, and the scale and design of development here therefore needs to be highly sensitive to the location. The fact that no communities have come forward as Hubs or Clusters within Church Stretton's hinterland places greater pressure on the town itself to accommodate housing, while there are real physical as well as environmental constraints on the availability of sites in the town. There will however be some development in settlements not defined as Hubs or Clusters through the single plot exception sites policy .

## Transport

Transport has a major impact on tranquillity and other aspects of natural beauty. Sensitive upgrading of transport infrastructure will continue to be necessary and may be able to reduce environmental impacts. The economic value of any upgrading of transport infrastructure needs to be balanced against its expected benefits.

Ever-increasing mobility as the main means to meet people's needs is not sustainable. While it makes sense to locate many new developments near existing settlements and transport interchanges, appropriate and sustainable development of dispersed settlements that helps to enable local employment for the local population should also be actively supported. Strengthening local communities and targeted measures to improve accessibility of services and employment are also important in helping to make rural communities more sustainable. Rural areas are likely to remain dependent on cars and road freight transport, but improved efficiencies along with optimising provision and use of public transport will help to maintain the qualities of the AONB.

Farm diversification enterprises should be sensitive to the impact of increasing business-related traffic to and from the property. Those likely to generate more traffic, such as farm shops or visitor 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 with large retailers on an environmental, social and economic level. The increasing size of farm and goods vehicles can have negative impacts on road verges, heritage features and other users especially on very small roads, and in some cases restrictions may be justified. Highways and road drains are significant artificial pathways for sediment and pollutants, and impacts on freshwater habitats should be considered.

## Tourism and Recreation

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, tranquillity and light pollution. Policies encourage the re-use of existing traditional buildings wherever possible.

Planning policy focuses tourism development in settlements in order to reduce the need to travel. While this is supported, in the Shropshire Hills tourism also needs to benefit the most rural areas, especially through farm diversification. This should be accompanied by encouragement for other ways of reducing car travel – for instance, accommodation providers operating public transport pick-ups and price incentives focused on local attractions).

## Mineral extraction and restoration

Mineral extraction is a unique form of temporary, but long term development which can only take place in the location where the mineral is actually found, which is sometimes in areas of landscape sensitivity. Restoration proposals should take this into account by requiring former mineral sites within the AONB to be restored in a way which recognises the environmental characteristics and potential of the site alongside any economic or social benefits that restoration may deliver. Mineral site restoration may provide valuable opportunities to encourage greater biodiversity through the retention of rock faces, scree and bare ground, and through the creation of valuable habitats such as heathland or unimproved grassland. The National Planning Policy Framework highlights that as with other forms of major development, there should be a preference for new mineral extraction sites outside AONBs.

## Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions for the AONB are significantly above the national average<sup>93</sup>, with high levels of transport, lack of mains gas and larger old properties being key factors. The government's target of 80% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 1990 levels by 2050<sup>94</sup> 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 CO<sub>2</sub> emission targets without significant impacts on its special qualities. Energy conservation is the best way to achieve reductions in emissions without harm to the landscape and should be given the highest priority. Demand reduction and improving energy efficiency in all sectors will minimise costs and improve productivity as well as benefiting the environment. Advisory services helping to achieve this continue to need support.

The local production of renewable energy should be increased, but in ways compatible with the AONB. Reductions in energy use and CO<sub>2</sub> 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, including the use of local materials for building.

### Wind Energy

The particular conflict between landscape protection and the potential for wind power to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is a key issue identified in the Sustainability Appraisal<sup>95</sup> of this and the previous Management Plan. The approaches originally identified to reducing this conflict remain valid, including the need to emphasise energy conservation and demand reduction, to encourage the national focus of wind energy development outside protected landscapes, to work proactively on more compatible forms of renewables in the AONB.

Management Plan policy remains opposed to large scale turbines, as well as any wind turbine development in the sensitive landscapes found only within the AONB. These include the county's 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.

Windfarms outside the AONB, including in Powys and Herefordshire, could affect the AONB. However, guided by the rationale of the Sustainability Appraisal process, it is recognised 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 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This means that the AONB Partnership may not object to windfarms simply because they are visible from the AONB. At the same time, large scale developments close to the AONB that could have a significant effect on it may not be acceptable (see policy below).

### Other forms of renewable energy

Solar photovoltaic generation, woodchip and biomass may all make valuable contributions to renewable energy and lowering carbon emissions. Large industrial scale application of these could however significantly affect the special qualities of the landscape, and within the AONB they should only be developed at smaller scales which avoid unnecessary impacts.

### **Low-Impact Forms of Development**

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<sup>96</sup>. 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.

### **Climate Change Adaptation**

The planning system is a valuable way of driving forward climate change adaptation measures, 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 (as in the Shropshire Core Strategy Spatial Vision).

## **Valuing the AONB in Planning and Decisions – Key Delivery Mechanisms**

### **The land-use planning system**

Planning is the principal means by which the AONB is protected. Existing national and local planning policies provide strong protection for the AONB from inappropriate development. All decisions must take account of these policies. 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.

## Valuing the AONB in Planning and Decisions – Management Plan Policies

### Protection of the AONB

In line with national and local authority planning policies, the AONB has the highest standards of protection for landscape and natural beauty and the purposes of designation should be given great weight in planning decisions, also taking into account the statutory AONB Management Plan.

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

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.

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.

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

In line with Shropshire Council policy MD8 on infrastructure, opportunities created by technological advances should be sought to remove or reduce the prominence of hilltop telecommunications structures, while still improving services. New overhead cables should be avoided where possible, with emphasis given to undergrounding or off-grid options.

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.

*[This policy links with current Shropshire Council Core Strategy policies CS5 Countryside and Green Belt, CS17 Environmental Networks].*

## Housing and Design of Development

The design of all housing (market priced and affordable) should demonstrate sensitivity to the special qualities of the AONB.

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. Such cases need to include a rigorous assessment of identified local housing need and consideration of the capacity of the landscape to accommodate development without undermining the purposes of designation. Development should not contribute to the loss of irreplaceable habitats or established ancient trees.

All development should integrate well into the historic pattern and character of the surrounding built environment and landscape. Building style should reflect local tradition, and designs should be of a high standard in keeping with the nationally designated landscape. In line with Core Strategy policy CS6, particular regard should be paid to village

and town design statements and Conservation Area Appraisals. Inappropriate design, layout and materials should be avoided. Innovative sustainable schemes are to be encouraged where they take account of the surrounding vernacular and the use of local materials.

Where possible, locally-occurring building materials should be used. Roofing materials should be in keeping with those used in nearby buildings, with no bright coloured tiles or reflective surfaces. The use of photovoltaic tiles matching existing and surrounding roof colours should be encouraged. External lighting on new developments should be kept to a minimum and use down-lighting to reduce light pollution.

*[This policy links with current Shropshire Council Core Strategy policy CS6 Sustainable Design & Development Principles and Policy CS20].*

#### **Buildings of heritage interest**

Existing traditional buildings of heritage interest should be repaired and reused in preference to being replaced by new building, and conservation advice should be sought.

All proposals relating to the reuse and redevelopment of traditional rural buildings should be informed by an assessment of the farmstead as a whole, including its landscape setting, character, significance and sensitivity to and potential for change. Traditional rural buildings of heritage interest should be retained in appropriate agricultural use, where possible. All proposals for new uses (employment, live-work, residential) will need to be carefully assessed in order to achieve the conservation and enhancement of the heritage asset and secure its sustainable use. Where it can be demonstrated that new buildings will sustain and enhance the significance of a farmstead, an element of new build might offer the most appropriate option.

#### **Carbon emissions and Renewable Energy**

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 carbon emissions should be optimised. Integration of energy efficiency and renewable energy should be encouraged in all development – new or refurbishment - of any scale, having regard where necessary to the significance of heritage assets.

Major developments of wind and solar energy, and woodfuel or biomass processing should be refused within the AONB, unless it can be demonstrated the proposals are in the public interest and the tests of exceptional circumstances in AONBs as set out in NPPF para 116 can be fully satisfied.

Small scale domestic renewable installations (such as solar panels) are encouraged and AONB designation should not be used to constrain or refuse proposals for this type of development. The design and installation of such installations 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.

Community low carbon initiatives in keeping with the AONB's purposes should be supported and renewable energy proposals assessed on a range of sustainability criteria.

Existing resources in the area, such as woodfuel and agricultural by-products, may contribute usefully to biomass energy as well as sustainable land management, but processing facilities should be of a scale and location appropriate to the AONB. Establishment of energy crops should avoid harm to biodiversity, water quality and availability, and where larger and longer-lived than normal agricultural crops, should take account of visual amenity (for example, following forestry design guidelines regarding scale and shape of compartments

including in relation to landform, structural diversity and edge treatments).

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.

Proposals for wind turbines and associated infrastructure within the AONB should take account of factors including landscape character, visual amenity and recreation, biodiversity, heritage assets and their setting, 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.

Decisions on proposals for wind turbines and associated infrastructure 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.

Land within 5km of the AONB boundary is unsuitable for large scale windfarm development, and should be excluded from any Search Areas. (As used by TAN 8, the definition of 'large' is developments of 25MW and over).

#### Highways & Road Management

Road improvement schemes within and outside the AONB should not increase noise pollution or emissions from traffic. Approaches like 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.

Road management and improvement schemes in the AONB should minimise landscape impact and avoid urbanisation of rural roads – for instance through sensitive and appropriate design and use of materials, and avoiding unnecessary signage clutter. They should also take into account potential impact on freshwater habitats, using rural SuDS principles where possible.

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 for example stone surfacing, timber for edging and signs,

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 have detrimental effects on the AONB may be avoided by use of other measures.

## Valuing the AONB in Planning and Decisions - Actions

Action	Status	Lead and key partners	Priority
Work co-operatively on production of <b>Supplementary Planning Documents</b> including landscape, biodiversity, trees & woodland.	Aspiration	SC, AONB	H
Develop a <b>planning guidelines</b> document for the AONB, taking into account local distinctiveness of particular areas.	Aspiration	AONB, SC	M
Integrate <b>ecological networks and green infrastructure</b> approaches into planning policy and guidance in relation to the AONB.	In progress	LAs, AONB	M
Raise <b>awareness of the AONB with Planning Officers and Planning Committee members.</b>	In progress	AONB, LAs	H
Provide greater planning <b>protection to the Wrekin</b> part of the AONB and its setting, on the fringes of Telford.	Aspiration	TWC, AONB	H
Support the development of <b>Village and Parish Design Statements.</b>	In progress	AONB, LAs, PCs	M
Increase coverage of <b>Parish Plans</b> , and include landscape and sustainability issues.	In progress	PPSGs, CCS, PCs, AONB	M
Develop planning guidance on the sustainable use of <b>farmsteads</b> based on the Farmsteads Mapping project.	Aspiration	SC, EH	M
Develop guidance on how <b>renewable energy</b> can be developed in the area with minimum impact on the AONB's special qualities.	In progress	LAs, AONB	M
Establish an <b>AONB Design Award</b> to recognise high quality sustainable development.	Aspiration	AONB, LAs	L
Report annually on the number and type of <b>planning applications</b> in the AONB, and on the numbers granted, and refused or modified on grounds of the AONB.	Aspiration	LAs, AONB	L



## Encouraging a Sustainable Land Management Economy

The landscape of the Shropshire Hills underpins the area's economy and shapes it, nowhere more directly than in the important land management sector, consisting of farming, forestry and woodlands, and a range of ancillary industries.

### Farming

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 AONB. Working with the natural characteristics and processes of the area will also be important in the long term future of farming itself. Upland farming is crucial in maintaining some of our most sensitive landscapes, and is important economically and socially in areas where the options are generally much fewer. Continued structural change, such as the growth in large and small holdings along with a reduction in the number of medium-sized farms, can have real implications for conservation.

Farming and land management remains key to the economy of the Shropshire Hills, employing more than a quarter of its residents, and providing a higher proportion of the jobs actually within the AONB. Food production is the core business of farms and will continue to be important in the AONB, with upland livestock breeding and production the mainstay, and greater variety and intensity with arable and dairying in the lower lying fringes of the area. Farmers also deliver other public benefits including managing the landscape, and in the uplands a high proportion of income comes from subsidies including agri-environment schemes<sup>97</sup>.

In the AONB there is a need to maintain food production by environmentally sustainable means, and preserve long-term capacity to continue producing food by promoting farm support networks, encouraging succession, and retaining and developing skills. In support of this, it will be beneficial to increase the local supply of food, such as meat from grazing animals, especially where this is certified as sustainably produced. This may be achieved through improving supply chains and expanding from niche markets, into tourism and public sector procurement, for instance. It is also desirable to stimulate local demand by raising awareness among consumers of food and other local products, and their connections with the landscape.

If approached in the right way, the high quality of the environment of the AONB provides an asset which can benefit the land management economy of the area rather than being a constraint. Integration of environmental practices, wildlife and farm conservation with business development will be valuable. The combination of reaching local markets, differentiating products with high environmental credentials, accessing environmental grants and reducing costs - including through environmental measures such as waste and energy reduction - provides a sustainable means of developing agricultural businesses. New techniques and technologies (including the basics of IT and on-line working) can also increase production while reducing environmental impacts. Not all means of developing and growing farm businesses are compatible with the AONB however, and proposals which damage environmental features of value are likely to generate conflict.

Organic farming is well established in the AONB, and though a small proportion overall, contributes significantly to biodiversity, water quality and lowering emissions. There is potential for higher levels of organic farming to deliver well against Management Plan priorities, and to integrate with initiatives such as catchment management and local supply chains. The concept of 'High Nature Value' farmland, and farming practices (focused especially on low intensity operations in the uplands) has some currency at a European level<sup>98</sup>, and should be supported in the AONB.

Over the last three years the most common topics discussed in the one-to-one support meetings provided to upland farmers through the AONB Partnership's Farming Project<sup>99</sup> have included:

- Environmental Stewardship – particularly in relation to the end of ESA agreements
- Catchment Sensitive Farming Capital Grants

- Rural Development Programme for England Funding under Farming and Forestry Improvement Scheme (FFIS)
- Woodland management
- Other land management advice
- Tourism/diversification
- Care Farming/work with schools
- Cross Compliance

Recent years have seen an increase in development of **large scale poultry units**, which many people feel have had a detrimental effect on the AONB. In addition to visual and landscape aspects, issues of aerial nitrogen pollution also need to be taken into account, which can have a harmful effect on sensitive upland habitats, along with spreading of highly soluble nitrogen rich waste which contributes to eutrophication of soil and watercourses.

### Changes in Farm Support

Changes in farm support schemes are affecting farmers in the Shropshire Hills, with implications for conservation. The Clun and Shropshire Hills Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) schemes are coming to an end after around 20 years and very high levels of take-up. They offered incentives to encourage farmers to adopt agricultural practices to safeguard and enhance landscape, wildlife or historic value. In the Clun area alone, over 100 ESA agreements ended in spring 2013. Many of these farmers have been in an ESA scheme for a long time and greatly rely on the annual payments they receive. This loss of income is compounded by loss of the Hill Farm Allowance and the Uplands Transitional Payment which also ends on the termination of the ESA agreement. Since not all are able or choose to go into new schemes, there is likely to be a reduction in both conservation activity and income. The latter may increase pressure on farmers to intensify, with knock-on environmental impacts. The arrangements and targeting of the New Environmental Land Management Scheme within the next Rural Development Programme, and the transitional arrangements leading to the new programme will be very important.

The decision to replace the current Less Favoured Areas classification with a new scheme of Areas of Natural Constraint (ANCs) <sup>100</sup> will result in exclusion of parts of the Shropshire Hills. This may leave some farmers ineligible for support - including Uplands Entry Level Stewardship - with likely environmental consequences. Partners will need to work together to minimise the impact of this.

Grants supporting **diversification** should take into account the needs of small businesses in rural areas and make connections with environmental schemes and landscape conservation. Economic support schemes for food and drink need to be locally relevant.

### Wood and Forest Products

Due in part to the shift towards renewable energy, the demand for forestry and woodland products is increasing. The Rural Development Programme for England has provided funding opportunities to benefit the forestry sector - the woodfuel supply chain, in particular. There is considerable 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 English Woodland Grant Scheme has been a valuable financial incentive to encourage and influence woodland management, encouraging timber production as well as conservation and recreation benefits. Its replacement under the New Environmental Land Management Scheme will be important.

Use of local wood as timber may remain relatively modest, but successful use of alder for flooring has shown that perceptions about the poor quality of local timber can be overcome, and significant niche markets for local materials 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, is an important partner in this work.

## The Wider Rural Economy

The landscape is much more than a scenic backdrop to business and local life. The AONB is a living, working area with specific characteristics and needs distinct from the rest of Shropshire by virtue of its upland character and sparse population.

Enterprise, innovation and skills are major factors in economic development, and the local situation with these factors needs to be taken into account. Opportunities at the lower income end of the skills range, including land-based activities, will be important in addition to higher value activities. Effort will be needed to retain traditional skills for managing landscape features such as hedge laying, dry stone walling and timber-framed building.

As well as handing on old skills, new commercial skills will also need to be developed if farmers are to get more involved in the supply chain. 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. Relevant training should be promoted to maintain and develop skills that support AONB priorities, including land management and traditional crafts, sustainable business and environmental knowledge.

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. 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.

## Greenhouse Gases and Land Management

There is real potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from land management and increase carbon sequestration through soils and trees, in particular. The opportunities for these, as well as the implications of non-fossil fuel greenhouse gas emissions related to farming - like methane production from livestock - 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 relatively uncommon in the Shropshire Hills. In mineral soils, the amount of organic matter is significant, and it appears that carbon storage under organic farming systems is greater. Methane emissions – especially from cows can be significant, and methane is approximately 20 times more powerful a greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. 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. The current increase in ploughing of land held as long-term pasture under The ESAs will have implications for emissions. Nitrous oxide has around 310 times the greenhouse effect of CO<sub>2</sub>, 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 CO<sub>2</sub>.

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 or timber is 'locked up' - for example, in buildings - 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.

## Encouraging a Sustainable Land Management Economy – Key Delivery Mechanisms

### Farmers Markets

Farmers Markets are a proven way for local producers to shorten supply chains and add value to their goods. The AONB Partnership has supported collaborative promotion and working between Farmers Markets in the Shropshire Hills since 2006, and the market co-ordinators are now using the [www.shropshirehills-buylocal.co.uk/markets](http://www.shropshirehills-buylocal.co.uk/markets) website directly.

## Encouraging a Sustainable Land Management Economy - Policies

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.

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.

**Agricultural development.** Farm enterprises need to be in harmony with the environment and not degrade this resource, which also provides an important economic asset for the future. The impact of business-related traffic to and from the property will be an important consideration, including cumulative effects.

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

Farm advisory services on environmental issues should make better links with business approaches such as selling direct into local markets, which are also of benefit to the AONB.

## Encouraging a Sustainable Land Management Economy - Actions

Action	Status	Lead and key partners	Priority
Provide <b>guidance</b> to help identify opportunities to land managers for economic return utilising the environmental assets of the area sustainably.	Aspiration	AONB, NE, NFU, SA, LEAF	H
<b>Promote local food</b> by a variety of means including press, leaflets, exhibitions and events such as food fairs, farm walks, schools activities.	In progress	LAs, RH, PGs, AONB	H
Develop the Shropshire Hills <b>Farmers Markets</b> , and collaboration with promotion.	In progress	FMs, AONB	M
Develop the <b>Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme</b> .	In progress	AONB	H
Develop a successor to the Shropshire Hills Farming Project, providing <b>support to upland farmers</b> , including the delivery of environmental benefits.	Aspiration	AONB	H
Promote the uptake and supply chain development of <b>woodfuel</b> linked where possible to improved management of woodlands.	In progress	GWC, FC, AWM, AONB	M
Promote and develop <b>training opportunities</b> which support conservation land management.	In progress	WNSC, HAUC, RH, NE, LSC	M

## Supporting Enjoyment and a Visitor Economy in Harmony with the AONB

Enjoyment of the landscape is one of the most obvious and direct public benefits of the AONB. It takes many forms and includes both local people and visitors, covering both tourism and recreation.

### Tourism

Reorganisation of local government and tourism structures since the last Management Plan has enabled both the Shropshire Hills area and sustainable tourism approaches to become considerably more prominent. Since 2010, the AONB has formed the core of the area of the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership (DDP), one of three current destination partnerships in Shropshire that aim to improve co-ordination of tourism activity by bringing together business, public sector and community representatives.

The DDP's area has also taken in the nearby towns of Bishop's Castle, Cleobury Mortimer, Craven Arms, Ludlow, Minsterley, Much Wenlock and Pontesbury. The DDP area is 45% of Shropshire and accounts for nearly half of the county's revenue from tourism activity. In September 2011, the DDP adopted a Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Action Plan<sup>101</sup>, commissioned by Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and Shropshire Council, and the subject of extensive local consultations. The guiding principles of this strategy are:

- Building an integrated destination, linking the towns and the hills
- Ensuring effective partnership working between stakeholders at all levels
- Growing tourism spending year round and throughout the area
- Bringing out opportunities to enjoy the area's special qualities and distinctiveness
- Being ambitious about the sustainable aspects of tourism
- Providing a quality experience for all visitors

The strategy sets its main objectives as:

- **Raising awareness**
- **Delivering the experience in our three main areas – the hills, the towns and local food**
- **Orientating and informing visitors**
- **Promoting sustainable access and management**
- **Supporting local enterprise**

In 2012 the Shropshire Hills was awarded the Europarc Federation's 'European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas'<sup>102</sup>. After a detailed assessment of work by a wide variety of partners, the Charter award recognises the foundation of the area's tourism in the quality of its countryside and towns, and the need to develop tourism in ways which do not undermine these qualities.

The fact that the Charter Sustainable Tourism Strategy is the Strategy for tourism in this area is of huge importance in terms of mainstreaming the AONB and sustainable tourism within the industry. **The AONB Management Plan endorses the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and its implementation, and supports the continued development of activity linked to the European Charter.** The AONB Partnership has a particular role in taking forward the Sustainable Tourism Strategy Objective 'Delivering the Hills Experience'.

The rise in prominence of the Shropshire Hills is also reflected in consumer awareness and preference. In 2012, market research by Arkenford<sup>103</sup> showed that the Shropshire Hills were level with Shrewsbury and Hereford as top draws for visitors for the Marches area. There is further scope to reflect this better in the profile given to the Hills in promotion at a county level.

Wildlife and heritage are very important elements in the visitor appeal, and fostering wildlife and heritage based sustainable tourism can enhance sense of place and benefit conservation too.

## Recreation and Access

### Walking

Walking is by far the most popular countryside recreation activity in the Shropshire Hills, appealing to a very broad spectrum of people from short casual rambles to serious challenge walks. Walking is a great way to appreciate the landscape and is in almost all circumstances a very environmentally benign pastime. There has been a marked increase in the last few years in activity to raise the profile of walking in the Shropshire Hills, including a number of towns joining the Walkers Are Welcome towns network<sup>104</sup>, the Walking with Offa project<sup>105</sup> involving promoted pub walks, and the expansion of walking-based tourism businesses in the area.

**Cycling** continues to grow in popularity, with the opportunities in the area for road and mountain biking becoming much better known in recent years, and an expansion in commercial activity in mountain biking in the AONB.

**Horse riding** has probably seen a decline as some businesses formerly offering equestrian activities to the public have closed, but remains a popular activity, especially for local people with their own horses.

**Other recreational activities** for which the AONB is much valued include fell running and air sports such as gliding, hang gliding and paragliding. Activities like climbing and canoeing are at a very low level due to the limitations of the particular resources offered by the landscape.

## Managing the Conservation Impacts

Experience shows that real or potential conflicts between access, conservation and land management can usually be avoided by careful planning and management. This will include appropriate promotion for locations that are robust and can be managed while maintaining a low profile for some sensitive conservation sites. Maintaining a good standard of paths in suitable locations is a simple and positive way of managing pressures, though some of the most popular locations do not have adequate mechanisms or resources, e.g. the Wrekin, Caer Caradoc. In some places there will also be a need for raising awareness and understanding of conservation issues, sensitive features and appropriate behaviour (e.g. controlling dogs on moorland where ground nesting birds are found). Greater levels of use bring greater pressures and require more management resources.

The quality of mountain biking available both in forests (especially Hopton and Eastridge) as well as open hill single track (especially on the Long Mynd) means this activity is likely to continue increasing. Good relationships between land managers and the mountain biking community help to avoid problems and will continue to be important. However, ongoing efforts will be needed to promote awareness among riders, and increasing resources are likely to be needed for trail maintenance and repairs.

There is also an increase in fell-running activity, and there have been localised pressures on sensitive wetland areas of the Long Mynd. The National Trust is working with users to raise awareness of these issues and so minimise them. The routing of regular challenge and race events is a significant factor, although awareness and good practice for individuals in their own training or recreational activity will also be valuable.

The relative remoteness of the area and its tranquillity are valued by both residents and visitors alike, and any conscious efforts to attract visitors should respect this. Conservation value is widely spread around the AONB, but the most heavily visited sites – like the Long Mynd and Cardingmill valley – are also some of the most valuable in conservation terms. To help minimise impacts on these sites, **the overall strategy should continue to 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.

Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles can have a significant physical impact on soils, vegetation and paths as well as on tranquillity. This is especially likely where it is carried out irresponsibly in illegal circumstances. Shropshire Council's Outdoor Recreation Team has worked proactively with user groups and problems on many routes in the area have been addressed through improved drainage and maintenance of surfaces, raised awareness and in a few cases legal control through Traffic Regulation Orders. While supporting these approaches, the recreational use of off-road vehicles is generally considered incompatible with the special qualities of the AONB.

## **Access Infrastructure**

Pressure on local authority budgets is likely to result in deterioration of the condition of rights of way. While many sources of external funding will not contribute to statutory functions, innovative methods like visitor giving and use of volunteer groups are likely to become more important. There is also potential for some significant capital projects to create new access infrastructure, especially using parts of former railway line track-beds as good standard multi-user routes suitable for off-road cycling, wheelchairs and pushchairs as well as walking. Routes with particular potential which need further feasibility investigations include Wenlock Edge, Ludlow to Cleehill and Shrewsbury to Pontesbury and Minsterley.

## **Transport**

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 rail and bus networks 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. For instance, 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. 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 - by offering incentives such as discounts on entry to users of public transport, for example. The loss of the Shropshire Link service will make this more difficult in more remote areas.

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.



## **Supporting Enjoyment and a Visitor Economy in Harmony with the AONB – Key Delivery Mechanisms**

### **Local authority outdoor recreation and visitor facilities**

A wide variety of services and facilities provided by the Councils are vital means of supporting enjoyment of the Shropshire Hills. These currently include the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre at Craven Arms, the work of Shropshire Council's 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. Funding cuts and restructuring by Shropshire Council will change the delivery of some of these services in future, including some commissioning to other bodies, but in some cases reductions in service are likely.

### **Shropshire Hills & Ludlow Destination Development Partnership**

The DDP acts as the required forum for the European Charter process and the AONB Partnership has taken a close supporting role in the functioning of the DDP. The complementary elements of countryside, towns and local food make the collaboration between the AONB and the towns which surround it very important. Shropshire Council and the AONB Partnership support the running of the DDP, but this is non-statutory work and resources are under increasing pressure.

## **Supporting Enjoyment and a Visitor Economy in Harmony with the AONB – Management Plan Policies**

### **Tourism and recreation development and infrastructure**

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 10 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, as are facilities for touring caravans and camping which generally have a low impact by virtue of 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.

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.

Infrastructure associated with countryside access should be sensitively designed and appropriate materials should be used, including stone for surfacing of a type appropriate to the location, wooden signposts and gates on rights of way, and cycle route signage of a rural character.

*[This policy links with current Shropshire Council policies CS16 Tourism, Culture & Leisure and MD11 Tourism facilities and visitor accommodation].*

### Recreational Activities

Environmentally sound leisure and recreation activities in keeping with the AONB - including low resource-use, minimum damage to the landscape, and following 'quiet enjoyment' principles - should be encouraged and promoted. Recreation activities which are inherently noisy or intrusive should be discouraged, and where possible prevented.

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 employed. Illegal motorised activities should as far as possible be prevented, and pro-active support given to the police to do so.

Events such as concerts, festivals, and challenge walks in the AONB should be planned (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 (a Green Events Guide is available on the AONB Partnership website).

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

### Tourism promotion

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.

Promotion of the area for tourism should aim to minimise car travel. Towns and locations 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.

Opportunities should be should be taken to strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills for its 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.

Opportunities and promotion aimed at both visitors and the local community should encourage people to experience the AONB's countryside more fully in more sustainable and less potentially damaging or disruptive ways.

## Supporting Enjoyment and a Visitor Economy in Harmony with the AONB - Actions

Action	Status	Lead and key partners	Priority
Support the <b>Destination Development Partnership</b> and implementation of the <b>Sustainable Tourism Strategy</b> , working with partners in the AONB and continuing to strengthen links with the market towns surrounding it.	In progress	AONB, SC, partners	H
Raise awareness of the European <b>Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas</b> , and participate in the Charter Network to exchange ideas and good practice.	In progress	AONB, SC, partners	M
Improve the countryside content and profile of the Shropshire Hills in <b>tourism promotion</b> , use the Shropshire Hills & Ludlow identity and branding, and outline sustainable ways of enjoying the AONB.	In progress	SHT, ST, LAs, AONB	H
Provide and promote opportunities to experience the <b>distinctive landscapes and heritage of different parts of the Hills</b> . This includes improving the experience at the Wrekin, and promoting areas with more potential such as the Clee Hills and Wenlock Edge. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 2.2)</i>	Aspiration	AONB, SC, NT, FC	M
Develop membership and networking activities of the <b>Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme</b> in relation to tourism and local food businesses.	In progress	AONB	H
Conduct a <b>visitor survey</b> to provide up to date information on which to base management and marketing decisions.	In progress	AONB, SC, partners	M
Support and promote <b>walking</b> opportunities, including a volunteer-led programme of guided walks, the Walkers are Welcome towns network, and promotion through Walking with Offa co-ordinated with other areas along the Welsh-English border. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 2.3)</i>	In progress	AONB, SC, partners	H
Develop a programme of promotion of <b>cycling</b> opportunities in the Shropshire Hills, linking outside the area as appropriate. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 2.4)</i>	Aspiration	AONB, SC	H
Further develop and promote the potential of the area for <b>horse riding and other outdoor activities</b> . <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Actions 2.5 &amp; 2.6)</i>	In progress	SC, site managers	H
Continue the operation of the <b>Shropshire Hills Shuttles</b> , and ensure that public transport retains a high profile in promotion and events. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 6.4)</i>	In progress	AONB, SC, partners	H
Establish a <b>visitor giving scheme</b> . Consider a priority to urgent path repairs not achievable by any other means. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 6.7)</i>	Aspiration	AONB	M
Provide <b>training related to sustainable tourism</b> and the AONB for front-line staff and volunteers e.g. at Visitor Information Centres and walks leaders.	In progress	LAs, AONB, SHT	M
Improve and upgrade <b>site-based and other interpretation facilities</b> , making appropriate reference and links to the AONB and its special qualities.	Ongoing role	SC, FC, NT, SWT, AONB	M
Work with <b>activity users and user groups</b> to raise awareness of the sensitivity of sites or features within the area and how to avoid damage while having greater enjoyment through better understanding of the landscape. <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 6.1)</i>	In progress	NT, AONB, SC, partners	H
Improve opportunities to experience and understand the area's <b>wildlife and geology</b> . <i>(Sustainable Tourism Strategy Action 2.7)</i>	In progress	SWT, NT, MT, AONB	H
Demonstrate the <b>value of a high quality landscape</b> to economic returns in the visitor economy.	In progress	NT, AONB, SC, partners	H
Progress feasibility studies and if appropriate implementation of high standard <b>multi-user routes</b> along Wenlock Edge and other routes, such as Bishop's Castle – Craven Arms.	Aspiration	NT, AONB, SC	H

## Raising Awareness and Participation - Especially among Young People

Many people's connection with the landscape of the Shropshire Hills is strong, but awareness of the AONB designation and activity to manage the area is generally not so good. Progress has definitely been made in recent years in raising the profile of the AONB and understanding of it. The challenge for the coming five years is to extend this awareness and understanding, and to help people to value the AONB for the benefits provided by its landscape.

Enjoyment of the AONB should be for all sections of society. Young people are however a particular priority in this Plan, as there are many factors contributing to a downward trend in their contact with nature and the outdoors. In addition to lost opportunities for enjoyment, development and wellbeing, this has been described as a 'time bomb' in terms of possible future attitudes to the natural environment and conservation.

### Awareness

Improving understanding of the special qualities of the AONB is a key part of increasing support for conservation. At the same time, 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. Improving and broadening access to, and understanding of, local heritage and historic sites can therefore be a valuable springboard to a wider understanding of the landscape. There is also a need to continue opportunities to experience and learn about wildlife and geology, and much scope to raise awareness of both environmental issues and food and farming. Focusing on specific topics is worthwhile as the detailed knowledge of specialists and amateur enthusiasts can capture interest.

Awareness of the work of the AONB Partnership and its member organisations is also important. People who have had direct contact with the AONB Partnership and its work are generally much more positive and supportive 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 needs to 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 and its surroundings, needs to be better acknowledged and promoted.

### Sense of Place and Community

The hills and landscape of the AONB are central to most people's attachment to the area. A clear identity for the area has not however historically been strong, perhaps due to its diversity and the variety of local authority areas. Local residents' attachment tends to be focussed on their particular locality, or to Shropshire in general. Increased local working may help to translate this into support and action.

Along with raising awareness of the AONB itself, the Partnership has been promoting more consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity. This will help 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 conservation of the AONB. The 'Shropshire Hills' identity has grown in prominence in recent years, but this does need continual reinforcement.

Communities are strengthened and their capacity and cohesion built by broadening participation in community activity. Community involvement and participation can be both motivated by and contribute to a sense of place. People's involvement through local projects such as those funded by the Sustainable Development Fund<sup>106</sup> and LEADER<sup>107</sup> has demonstrated this. The Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB<sup>108</sup> enables people to support and connect with the AONB, and has potential to develop a much larger membership.

## Health and Wellbeing

The high quality environment of the AONB has considerable value and potential for personal health and 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 health benefits from exercise and a sense of connection with landscape. Indeed, people's enjoyment of the area through recreation is strongly linked to support for its 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 improving both information and physical access can help, 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 by improving path surfaces and 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.

## Young People

In recent years the AONB Partnership has developed a valuable programme of work with schools. Building on a number of Sustainable Development Fund projects by primary schools to develop outdoor learning areas, school assemblies about the AONB have been given, and the Farming Project has provided farm visits and school-based activities. The nationally recognised John Muir Award has been introduced to Shropshire through a number of groups encouraging young people to discover and explore a wild place, undertake some conservation activity, and share their experiences.

For older children there have been activities through the Youthful Landscapes LEADER project (including digital media work related to landscape) and the Tickwood LEADER project offering opportunities for young people with learning difficulties. Family activities are run by a range of providers including Natural England at the Stiperstones and Shropshire Wildlife Trust, with increasing involvement by the AONB Partnership. The National Trust's education facility at Cardingmill Valley involves 33,000 children annually. The Shropshire Outdoor Learning Organisation (SOLO) provides a forum for exchange of good practice and co-ordination.

It is, however, a fact that many children are spending much less time outdoors and having less contact with the countryside. This is especially due to the rise in electronic entertainment, safety concerns and lack of independence for transport. Apart from missing out on valuable physical exercise, general wellbeing and social opportunities, there is a growing lack of connection with nature, which is likely to have significant effects on future patterns of behaviour and attitudes to the environment. Young people may also be unaware of or uninterested in career opportunities in countryside sectors, with implications for future skills and capacity levels.

Valuable as the current programmes are, there is a need to find ways and funding to do more for young people across all areas, from schools work, to family-oriented and outdoor activities. Nature is usually a very successful focus for engaging young children, while physically challenging activities or those involving technology may provide a good way in with older children.

The Shropshire Hills are a popular destination for Duke of Edinburgh's Award groups including from Shrewsbury, Wellington and more distant from the area. There is potential to raise awareness through greater contact with groups and leaders, as well as through other outdoor activity centres and providers in the area. There is also considerable potential to encourage understanding and knowledge of the Shropshire Hills through further work with schools and with further and higher education establishments.

The Europarc Federation for protected areas, to which the AONB belongs, has a network of Junior Rangers groups. Establishment of such a group for the Shropshire Hills would not only provide a new activity and group focused on the AONB, but would also take advantage of the wider network, which offers young people the opportunities of links and exchanges with other areas around Europe.

## Volunteering, Learning, Skills & Training

Volunteering provides a direct way for people to participate more closely with the Shropshire Hills, as well as bringing real personal rewards and benefits. There is a need to increase active involvement with the AONB's countryside through volunteering, and opportunities to support the area directly.

The Shropshire Hills offer considerable learning opportunities for people of all ages, together with employment prospects through land management, through added value business based on local products, and through heritage and environmental activities.

In addition to promoting understanding and involvement, making the most of these and other opportunities will help retain valuable countryside management skills at serious risk of loss. A new mixed heritage skills apprenticeship will be piloted through the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme.

## Partnerships and Networks

Making the AONB more relevant to more people will involve continuing to forge new and stronger links. Through continuity of staff and activities, the AONB Partnership has built up very strong networks. Total membership of the various steering and co-ordination groups led by the AONB Partnership currently involves over 300 people. Adding the membership of Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB, the Sustainable Business Scheme and recipients of grants and advice increases this figure several times. There is a continuing need to manage communications with these and wider audiences effectively. Websites, email and social media have transformed communications and reached new people, but do not substitute for face-to-face relationships or other traditional methods such as effective printed materials. As part of this effort the AONB Partnership needs to be strengthened as an inclusive structure with sound governance and strong partnership relations and communication.

In the wider geographical context, the AONB Partnership has useful links beyond Shropshire in various directions, and through different networks, including AONBs, LEADER, Landscape Partnership Schemes, and tourism initiatives. These are valuable for the exchange of ideas and good practice, practical collaboration projects, wider promotion or joint advocacy work. However the resources applied to these must be proportionate and not detract from local delivery.

## Local Authority Links

Many different local authority departments are important stakeholders in the AONB and can contribute to its purposes. This makes links across many parts of Shropshire Council very important. Local authorities have a statutory duty to take AONB purposes into account <sup>2</sup>, as well as a statutory duty on biodiversity <sup>109</sup>.

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*". Against this background, the following links between different local authority functions and the AONB are especially important:

Local authority function	Interaction with AONB purposes
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 on biodiversity, landscape, trees and sustainability
Heritage	Responsibility for heritage designations.
Outdoor Recreation	Manage and promote responsible access, manage council countryside sites
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 of landscape. Environmental Education, Forest Schools, etc.
Youth services	Encourage wider participation and enjoyment of the countryside
Museums & Arts	Raise awareness of and interpret the AONB. Training and skills.
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
Waste	Encourage sustainable behaviour and resource use
Maintenance	Manage council land to appropriate standards
Public protection	Enforce Environmental Health and pollution standards, maintain standards in food and animal health
Legal & Democratic services	Support for legal requirements of the designation, minuting and circulation of papers for AONB Partnership meetings, administer aspects of Common Land

## Raising Awareness and Participation, Especially among Young People – Key Delivery Mechanisms

### 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 Management Plan's vision. Community or Parish Plans are one important mechanism, but other more informal means are valuable too. Arrangements for community working under Shropshire Council include the Local Joint Committees and Community Action officers.

### Local Authority Facilities

Various Council facilities support awareness and understanding of the Shropshire Hills. These include Museums at Ludlow and Much Wenlock, Acton Scott Historic Working Farm and the Bog Centre. Spending cuts are resulting in increasing moves towards different models of delivery for these functions, including involvement of other bodies, such as at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre at Craven Arms.

### Forest Schools

Forest Schools have become a very important delivery vehicle for environmental education, with support from both the public sector (LEA and schools themselves) and various voluntary sector bodies.

## Raising Awareness and Participation, Especially among Young People - Actions

Action	Status	Lead and key partners	Priority
Develop membership of the ' <b>Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB</b> ' group and fund-raising capacity through a charitable structure.	In progress	AONB	H
Continue to provide a visitor information and focal point at the <b>Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre</b> while developing a more self-sustaining model of operation.	Ongoing role	GCL, SC, AONB	H
Support <b>community groups and projects</b> and co-ordinate funding and services available.	Ongoing role	CCS, CVS, AONB, LAs	H
Provide and improve <b>outdoor education for schools</b> and support for in-school activities, with good co-ordination between providers and schools. Develop links between schools and local sites in order to foster sense of place and reduce travel.	Ongoing role	NT, SWT, LAs	H
Understand development needs in <b>training and skills</b> related to conserving the AONB's special qualities and make proposals for addressing these.	Aspiration	AONB, LSC, LAs, WNSC, HAUC	M
Develop links with <b>outdoor activity providers</b> , e.g. providing talks and information on special qualities of the AONB and good environmental practice.	Aspiration	AONB	M
Develop delivery of the <b>John Muir Award scheme</b> within the Shropshire Hills, through both schools and for informal groups.	In progress	AONB, SWT, NT	H
Develop a <b>Youth Rangers</b> programme to engage involve young people in new ways, and optimise opportunities from linking with the Europarc Federation network.	Aspiration	AONB	H
Develop a follow on project to continue ' <b>Youthful Landscapes</b> ' activity.	Aspiration	The Hive, NT, AONB	M
Create more opportunities for <b>experimental archaeology</b> and practical demonstrations.	Aspiration	SC	M
Develop links with <b>Higher &amp; Further Education</b> establishments	In progress	AONB, WNSC, HAUC	M
Increase use of the Shropshire Hills for <b>geological and heritage education</b> including residential courses, through market research, improvement of facilities and key sites, and promotional activity.	In progress	SGS, SWT, NT, SC, AONB, EH	M
Expand the capacity and uptake of <b>Health Walking</b> schemes in and around the AONB.	In progress	SC, PCT	M
Develop sense of place and awareness of the AONB through enhanced <b>signage</b> on key routes into the AONB and where appropriate on town and village signs.	In progress	AONB	L



## Local Working with Communities

As well as being some of the principal beneficiaries of improvements in the AONB, the communities in and around the Shropshire Hills are key to conserving the special qualities of the AONB in the long term. Working with local communities has been a strong focus of the AONB Partnership's work for many years, but some new area initiatives and projects are opening up local working in new ways. In line with political priorities at a national and local level, local working is a key delivery priority for this Management Plan period.

Although some issues are common throughout, as an especially diverse area there are significant differences between the needs of different parts of the Shropshire Hills. It is important to recognise these differences so that attention can be focused on local priorities alongside the main areas of activity.

Figure 11 Map of areas within the AONB

### Local Priorities for 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 large conservation sites in the region are also popular walking destinations, and lie among 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.**

The area has the biggest concentration of upland and of semi-natural habitat within the AONB, 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. The Long Mynd and Stiperstones themselves are among the most popular walking destinations in Shropshire, and the area also has a good bridleway network, is crossed by the Shropshire Way and served by the Shropshire Hills Shuttles bus service.

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. 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 focal points such as Bridges and Wentnor. 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 small-holding, 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, dormouse, curlew, lapwing and barn owl. Small hay meadows survive, with woods on steeper slopes, and high quality rivers like 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 Mitchell's Fold stone circle, 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.

## **Key Issues**

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 achieved sympathetically. Many farms cross the border with Wales, thus adding an extra level of complexity for getting involved with Environmental Stewardship.

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.

Much of this area is included within the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme<sup>74</sup>. This five year Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) programme led by the AONB Partnership runs from 2013 to 2018 and focuses on the mining and borderlands heritage of the area. The scheme area extends into Wales to cover Corndon and Roundton Hills (Figure 9) and has already proved a valuable way of engaging with partners and communities on the Welsh side of the border.

Figure 12 Map of Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme

## **Priorities**

- Implementation of the Landscape Partnership Scheme over the full period of the Management Plan will deliver many aspects of the Plan's aims and provide a lasting legacy of engagement with the local communities regarding conservation and the landscape.

Earlier activity towards an area project had focused more on the Long Mynd to Stiperstones area with more of a biodiversity focus. The size restrictions in the HLF programme and need for a strong cohesive theme have resulted in the shift to the west, though a small part of the Long Mynd is included in the Scheme. If possible, it will be desirable to develop initiatives to pursue conservation and community activity in those parts of the Long Mynd area not covered by the Scheme. The development of a Nature Improvement Area covering the Stiperstones and Long Mynd will be considered as part of the Landscape Partnership Scheme.

- Agri-environment schemes are vitally important as a means of delivering conservation activity on the ground, and the current period of transition from the ESA is crucial. Continued active engagement with farmers and with the wider community, and advice and exchange of practical ideas have an important role to play.
- For visitors, the connection to the AONB and links into it from the north – from Pontesbury and Minsterley, in particular - should be developed. Both these settlements should benefit economically from development of more services for visitors. The profile of the AONB in Shrewsbury should be raised and its proximity to this part of the AONB is an advantage. The possibility of developing a cycle/multi-user route out of Shrewsbury in this direction would be of benefit to the AONB.
- 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, although there is now a farmers' market in the Rea Valley. The pubs and limited visitor facilities in the area provide an important means of developing this.

## Clun Forest and Valley

**This very rural area is more dependent on farming than any other part of the AONB. Strong networks have recently been 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 River Clun catchment increasingly provides a focal point for conservation activity, and heritage and tranquillity are also key aspects for enjoyment.**

The Clun area is the most deeply rural part of the AONB, and is amongst the most sparsely populated parts of England. Bounded to the west by the Welsh border, the area comprises the catchments of the River Clun and part of that of the 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 and cultivated fields right up to the hilltops, except where remnant and restored heathland remain, such as Rhos Fiddle and Mason's Bank. Woodlands, predominantly coniferous, 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.

Just outside the AONB the River Clun holds a European level protected site for a population of the rare freshwater pearl mussel which is in serious decline. The river and its tributaries are largely tree-lined, but alder disease, stock access to riverbanks and factors affecting water quality, such as nutrients and siltation, are contributing to poor condition of the river for the pearl mussel and other wildlife.

Offa's Dyke runs north-south across the area, in some of its best preserved and dramatic sections. It connects the Shropshire Hills with other areas along the border. 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 just outside the AONB to the north and south, with Craven Arms to the east.

The pattern of landholding is more of medium-sized family farms, with fewer large estates and small-holding than elsewhere. Livestock dominate, but as the soil is relatively good, potatoes and other crops are cultivated even high up. Tourism and recreation are generally at a much lower level than elsewhere in the AONB, although Clun, Bury Ditches and Offa's Dyke Path National Trail are popular with visitors, and new promoted walks are helping to develop the area's potential for sustainable tourism.

### Key Issues

Changes in farming will probably have the greatest influence on this area's future. A high age profile, rising costs and the difficulty of making livestock products pay in a competitive 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 the current transition from this to probably lower levels of activity under Environmental Stewardship will be significant for both the landscape and farm incomes.

The AONB Partnership has given close support over a number of years to the Land, Life & Livelihoods group 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 more effectively than for many years, and has resulted in practical steps such as training events for farmers. The Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group is also well-established in monitoring important species, and encouraging land-owners and managers to maintain and improve habitats for them.

Through the last Management Plan period, the AONB Partnership has developed the activity of its Rivers Project in the Clun Catchment strongly. With additional funding linked to Water Framework Directive targets, practical riparian habitat management and community involvement has been stepped-up, and the focus has broadened to include water quality issues, siltation, and an integrated catchment approach. The Clun Catchment Partnership<sup>75</sup> has been formed to improve co-ordination and raise the profile of the issues with organisations, landowning and community representatives.

Precautionary measures to prevent increased nutrient input are currently affecting planning applications in the area.

The impact of planned wind energy development relatively close over the border in Wales will have most impact on this part of the AONB.

### **Priorities**

- The condition of the rivers (the River Clun SAC and the River Teme SSSI) 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 heath and wetland habitats and any increase in woodland cover. Continued co-ordinated partnership working and significant funding for the Clun catchment will be necessary to address the significant issues here.
- 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 - often at a small scale. Continued development of farmer and community networks and working together will be crucial. The Shopshire Hills Farming Project demonstrated that extra support in the area can result in more Environmental Stewardship agreements being taken up.
- 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. The new Castle Connect shuttle bus service is encouraging visitors to Clun without using their car.

### **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 important challenges for the future.**

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 of sandstone with red soils and mostly enclosed pastoral land. Villages are often small and scattered, and there are some medieval deserted settlements. Cleehill to the south of Titterstone Clee, is the largest village, and bears a strong influence of past and present mining and quarrying. The high point of the A4117 on Clee Hill Common provides remarkable views south to the Malvern Hills, Herefordshire and beyond. The old squatter settlements associated with former 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. Catherton Common is owned by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

In the west the area extends to the perimeter of Ludlow and along the edge of the Corve Dale, where larger traditional country estates are found. To the east lie very rural villages like Ditton Priors and Burwarton, but there are increasingly good 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.

## Key Issues

The issues of change in farming, especially in the livestock sector, are found here as elsewhere. The Cleve 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 a valuable resource in the area, and retaining their landscape value is important as they are affected by fluctuating timber prices and policy drivers such as woodfuel.

There is pressure for development, including large poultry units, tourism and affordable housing, and concern about appropriateness in the way this is carried out.

In recent years the AONB Partnership has supported the operation of a Cleve Hill Partnership<sup>76</sup> for the area around Titterstone Cleve, bringing together conservation bodies with landowner and community representatives. A Cleve Hill Community Wildlife Group has also been established. Cleve Hill common has recently come into an Uplands Entry Level Stewardship agreement.

## Priorities

- A Cleve Hill Heritage project is currently being developed by the AONB Partnership and other partners. This will focus on conserving particular heritage features, along with community involvement, volunteering, skills, events, interpretation, etc. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century quarrying remains and hydro scheme are not protected and the project hopes to work with English Heritage to schedule these.
- Improving habitat networks, especially around the main hills is important. Agri-environment schemes and co-operative working with landowners and commoners will be important means of achieving this.
- Developing tourism sustainably will mean a small scale of developments in remoter locations, connecting to walking, cycling and horse riding opportunities. It should involve making the best of industrial archaeology and geological interest through improved interpretation. Patterns of anti-social use of some of the less attractive former mining and quarrying sites may require concerted efforts 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 main town. Key themes for future effort are limiting the impact of development, and developing tourism sustainably, using the good transport links and scope for outdoor activities.**

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 and least tranquil part of the AONB. Church Stretton, the main 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 tree cover .

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. There are significant former quarry sites on the back of Wenlock Edge, along with areas of

species-rich calcareous grassland. The Corve Dale lies mostly outside the AONB but is of conservation value through its many heritage features, the River Corve itself, veteran trees including black poplar, and in views between Wenlock Edge and the Cleve Hills.

## **Key Issues**

Development pressures are the highest here of any part of the AONB. Church Stretton has taken its share of new housing and employment development over the years, and the allocation of future sites continues to be contentious. The town links itself strongly with the Shropshire Hills and the AONB, and is seeking to make the most of its location and potential for outdoor activities in the development of tourism in a sustainable way.

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

Growth in road traffic on the A49 is a concern, and is affected by development well outside the area, including Shrewsbury and Hereford, and north and south Wales. This corridor does however offer opportunities for sustainable tourism linked to the railway line and good bus services, for capturing passing trade through farm shops and other facilities, and for reducing travel and impacts elsewhere in the AONB by the local siting of particular developments.

The future use of former quarry sites on Wenlock Edge has recently been contentious, with conservation groups and a substantial part of the local community opposing industrial uses. Current developments may have limited the potential of this part of Wenlock Edge to develop into a really significant visitor destination and contributor to sustainable tourism in the area as a whole, but there remains a need to maximise conservation and access opportunities around the new uses.

Much Wenlock rose in prominence for visitors during 2012 due to its Olympic connections, and this profile and much of the investment – in the museum and in walks from the town - will have a lasting benefit in supporting heritage-based tourism. Much Wenlock has also been a pilot area for a Neighbourhood Plan which this has been a useful way for the town to consider its relationship to the AONB and other surrounding countryside.

## **Priorities**

- 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 one of Shropshire's Core Strategy market towns within a nationally protected landscape. The physical capacity for further development may be more limited, and it is important that the sensitivities of Church Stretton's location within the AONB are fully taken into account in decisions.
- 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 in the area. This part of the AONB is a key link for visitors from Shrewsbury, Telford and more populated areas to the north and east. The development of a better located Visitor Information Centre in Church Stretton would be a real benefit.
- The accessibility of the town enables it to provide services for the benefit of other parts of the AONB – for instance in the distribution of local food. Developing further the links between Church Stretton and the AONB should allow the town to play a greater role in raising people's awareness of the AONB and its value, and to develop increasingly as the natural centre or hub of the AONB.

**This area has particular features and needs that are 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. In fact the need here to protect the environment, and to manage people's enjoyment of it are probably as great as ever. Established partnership approaches to co-ordinating management of the Wrekin area also need continued support in order to protect the area's qualities and fulfil its role.**

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 pressures nearby and high levels of recreational and community use.

The woods on the Wrekin and the Ercall are of high quality (SSSI), and important for their geology. The area is rich in industrial archaeology, and has strong connections to the nearby Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site. The town of Wellington has very strong cultural links with the Wrekin. The AONB boundary is drawn tight around the wooded hills of the Wrekin and the Ercall, and so the quality of the surrounding area is very important as a setting for the AONB. The 'Wrekin Forest' area includes the AONB and surrounding area. The Wrekin is very important, both locally and for those visiting the area, in particular use of the main path up the north side of the hill, which is valued by a wide cross-section of people for the exercise it affords.

### **Key Issues**

An active opencast coal and fireclay mine immediately adjacent to and within the AONB will complete operations within the Plan period and, in accordance with the existing plan, will be restored to a pasture and woodland. However, it is acknowledged that areas such as this may come under increasing pressure from housing in the future. With the continued expansion of housing in the Lawley area of Telford, new populations are being brought into closer proximity to the Wrekin.

The high level of use of the Wrekin creates pressure, and for many years there has not been a robust framework or the resources to manage this, resulting in harm to the quality of the landscape and visitors' experience.

Since 2007 the Wrekin Forest Partnership<sup>110</sup> formally linked to the AONB structure has helped to provide a forum for the discussion of issues and co-ordination, and the Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Management Plan has provided direction. Practical activity and community engagement by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, in part supported by LEADER in the Shropshire Hills, has also made a real difference on the ground and raised the profile of the value of the area. The Wrekin Forest Volunteers are now well-established and there is regular involvement by volunteers from Ricoh, a major multinational company with premises in Telford.

Management of the main visitor access point at Forest Glen has improved in recent years under the ownership of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. However, visitor management at the Wrekin would benefit from a more co-ordinated approach, and adequate resources given its importance and scale of use. A recent private initiative to create a new car park has received planning permission but still requires funding to be implemented. A sustainable transport and access study commissioned by the AONB Partnership offered some alternative approaches. There is scope to improve parking provision and visitor facilities at or in proximity to the Wrekin, strengthening the leisure offer the area provides. These however would need to be planned with sensitivity to the location and to visitor management issues, and have a viable business model. Continued co-ordination of activity to manage the Wrekin Forest will depend on the willingness of partners to take into account the views of all those with an interest in the area.

### **Priorities**

- Telford & Wrekin Council propose through their emerging Shaping Places Local Plan to explore mechanisms for the protection, promotion and management of the Wrekin Forest area. This will deliver the AONB's purposes and is strongly supported. Through consultation processes for the AONB Management Plan and the Shaping Places Plan, people's views on planning policy proposals are welcomed. Objectives for the Wrekin Forest area could be:
  - to ensure an approach is applied to development in the important countryside between the urban edge of Telford and the Wrekin itself, which responds to the distinctive character of the area.
  - to provide a mechanism for managing the high environmental quality of the Wrekin Forest area and its continued use by visitors.
  - to strengthen its leisure offer, encouraging enjoyment of the Wrekin Forest countryside compatible with its value, to promote understanding of its qualities and improve opportunities for participation through activities such as conservation volunteering. This has numerous benefits, including improvements to people's health and wellbeing.
  
- Recognition of the national importance of the AONB designation remains important and should be given a higher profile in the Wrekin area. Management of the Wrekin Forest area should link both ways to the wider Shropshire Hills AONB, to Telford's green infrastructure, and to the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site.
  
- 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. Planning gain from new development nearby should be considered to help manage the increased pressure it will come under, and opportunities should be explored for using this to establish a dedicated countryside management officer for the Wrekin Forest.
  
- Priority areas for conservation action will continue to include the woods, other habitats and wildlife, and cultural heritage. Strengthening connections with local people, careful improvements to access, and community involvement through events, education and volunteering also remain key themes.

### **The Wrekin Forest - Management Plan Policy**

**The management of the wider Wrekin Forest area is crucial to the integrity of the Wrekin itself within the AONB and should be integrated within planning policy. 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 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.**



# APPENDIX 1

## Extracts of relevant Planning Policy

Following extensive changes to planning policy and guidance since the last AONB Management Plan, the following are the key relevant policies:

### National Planning Policy Framework <sup>84</sup>:

Para 14 on the 'golden thread' of sustainable development, highlights AONBs through footnote 9 as an exception to a presumption in favour of development, as one of a few types of special area where **"specific policies in this Framework indicate development should be restricted."**

Para 113 describes designations for wildlife, geodiversity and landscape, and sets out that protection should be *"commensurate with their status and gives appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution that they make to wider ecological networks."*

Paras 115 and 116 focus specifically on protected landscapes (National Parks and AONBs):

**115. Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. The conservation of wildlife and cultural heritage are important considerations in all these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads.**

**116. Planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest. Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:**

- *the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;*
- *the cost of, and scope for, developing elsewhere outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*
- *any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated*

Para 144 mentions AONBs in relation to mineral development

**144. When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should:**

- *give great weight to the benefits of the mineral extraction, including to the economy;*
- *as far as is practical, provide for the maintenance of landbanks of non-energy minerals from outside National Parks, the Broads, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and World Heritage sites, Scheduled Monuments and Conservation Areas;*

[bold emphasis added to the most significant phrases in extracts above]

### Shropshire Core Strategy <sup>88</sup>

#### Spatial Vision: (extract)

*"The character, quality and diversity of Shropshire's natural and historic environment, the County's greatest asset, will have been protected, restored and enhanced. The quality of the landscape, geodiversity and core areas of biodiversity such as the Shropshire Hills AONB, Meres and Mosses, and Severn Valley corridor will have been maintained and managed. Both designated and non-designated historic buildings, sites and landscapes will be recognised for their importance to Shropshire's character, communities, economy and sense of place. Shropshire's biodiversity network will connect with similar networks across its borders, maximising potential for wildlife to adapt to climate change. Green infrastructure and areas of recognised environmental quality within towns and villages, with links to the surrounding countryside, will provide enhanced opportunities for recreation, with associated benefits for health and well-being of residents, flood management and improved biodiversity."*

*“In the open countryside, new development will be strictly controlled in accordance with national planning policies protecting the countryside and Green Belt from inappropriate development.”*

Explanation to Policy CS5 Countryside and Green Belt, para 4.72 (extract) *“whilst this policy seeks to facilitate a wide range of beneficial rural development, the operation of this policy, in conjunction with Policy CS6 and more detailed policies in the SAMDev DPD, recognises the need to consider the scale and design of proposals, where development is most appropriately sited, environmental and other impacts. There will be a significant emphasis on achieving quality and sustainability of design, particularly locally appropriate design and use of materials. Thus, proposals which would result in isolated, sporadic, out of scale, badly designed or otherwise unacceptable development, or which may either individually or cumulatively erode the character of the countryside, will not be acceptable. **Whilst these considerations will apply generally, there will be areas where development will need to pay particular regard to landscape character, biodiversity or other environmental considerations including in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.**”* (emphasis added)

CS6: Sustainable Design and Development Principles sets out principles which are highly relevant to the AONB.

CS16: Tourism, Culture and Leisure (extract)

*To deliver high quality, sustainable tourism, and cultural and leisure development, which enhances the vital role that these sectors play for the local economy, benefits local communities and visitors, and is sensitive to Shropshire’s intrinsic natural and built environment qualities, emphasis will be placed on:*

- *Supporting new and extended tourism development, and cultural and leisure facilities, that are appropriate to their location, and enhance and protect the existing offer within Shropshire.*
- *Promoting connections between visitors and Shropshire’s natural, cultural and historic environment, including through active recreation, access to heritage trails and parkland, and an enhanced value of local food, drink and crafts.*
- *Supporting development that promotes opportunities for accessing, understanding and engaging with Shropshire’s landscape, cultural and historic assets including the Shropshire Hills AONB, rights-of-way network, canals, rivers and meres & mosses. Development must also meet the requirements of Policy CS17.*
- *Supporting schemes aimed at diversifying the rural economy for tourism, cultural and leisure uses that are appropriate in terms of their location, scale and nature, which retain and enhance existing natural features where possible, and do not harm Shropshire’s tranquil nature.*

CS17: Environmental Networks

*Development will identify, protect, enhance, expand and connect Shropshire’s environmental assets, to create a multifunctional network of natural and historic resources. This will be achieved by ensuring that all development:*

- *Protects and enhances the diversity, high quality and local character of Shropshire’s natural, built and historic environment, and does not adversely affect the visual, ecological, heritage or recreational values and functions of these assets, their immediate surroundings or their connecting corridors. Further guidance will be provided in SPDs concerning the natural and built environment;*
- *Contributes to local distinctiveness, having regard to the quality of Shropshire’s environment, including landscape, biodiversity and heritage assets, such as the Shropshire Hills AONB, the Meres and Mosses and the World Heritage Sites at Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and Canal and Ironbridge Gorge*
- *Does not have a significant adverse impact on Shropshire’s environmental assets and does not create barriers or sever links between dependant sites;*
- *Secures financial contributions, in accordance with Policy CS8, towards the creation of new, and improvement to existing, environmental sites and corridors, the removal of barriers between sites, and provision for long term management and maintenance. Sites and corridors are identified in the LDF evidence base and will be regularly monitored and updated.*

Explanation: (extracts)

*7.4 Environmental networks consist of environmental assets and their connections which can provide multifunctional benefits. This includes providing opportunities for informal recreation for local communities and tourists; improving health and community wellbeing, sense of place and identity,*

*social cohesion, increasing biodiversity value and maintaining air quality. Such networks can also help us to mitigate against and adapt to the effects of climate change, providing natural methods to manage flood risk and routes for the dispersal and migration of species.*

*7.5 Shropshire has a wealth of environmental assets which make it locally distinct. The local geology is diverse, with a wide range of mineral resources and rocks representing most of the major divisions of geological time. The area includes large, more natural areas such as the Shropshire Hills AONB, and the Meres and Mosses in North Shropshire, as well as areas of open space throughout the range of urban settlements from larger towns such as Shrewsbury and Oswestry to local centres and rural villages.*

...  
*7.7 All new development should take account of the features which generate local distinctiveness, both within Shropshire and its surrounds. Evidence from the Landscape Character Assessment, Historic Landscape Characterisation and Urban Characterisation Assessment should be used to ensure proposals contribute towards retaining and enhancing these assets and thereby making a positive contribution to the environment. For development affecting the Shropshire Hills AONB, particular regard should be paid to the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan.*

## **Shropshire Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) Plan, Pre-Submission Draft (Final Plan) Shropshire Council 17/3/2014<sup>89</sup>**

### Introduction (extract)

Added value comes particularly at the local level, the draft policies fully support the development and importance of Community Led Plans and **recognise the significance of the AONB Management Plan.** (emphasis added)

### Policy context (extract)

2.5 The Shropshire Hills AONB covers 23% of the county's land area. This national designation has a principal purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty and secondary purposes of meeting the need for quiet enjoyment of the countryside and having regard for the interests of those who live and work there. To achieve these aims, AONBs rely on planning controls and practical countryside management. The statutory Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan contains a number of policies adopted by Shropshire Council and has therefore been a key document influencing the preparation of the SAMDev policies. **Whilst stressing the importance of the countryside as a whole, the SAMDev policies emphasise the importance of the AONB and the need to conserve and enhance its character and distinctiveness and have regard where appropriate to the requirements of the AONB Management Plan.** (emphasis added)

### Policy MD2 Sustainable Design, Explanation (extract)

***For development affecting the Shropshire Hills AONB, particular regard should be paid to the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan and supplementary guidance.*** (emphasis added)

### Policy MD7 – General Management of Development in the Countryside

(explanation, para 4.66) The changing needs and effects of agricultural and other related enterprises in the countryside are a particular local issue, in particular the impacts of large scale agricultural buildings. General sustainable design criteria and development management considerations are as relevant to this type of development as other proposals in the countryside and the Plan seeks to balance the needs of the countryside as a working environment with its role as a place to live and enjoy. The policy defines the primary considerations that will be taken into account in considering agricultural development proposals which require planning consent. Additional criteria set out in other relevant policy such as MD2 Sustainable Design and MD12 Natural Environment which, for example, highlights **special requirements in the Shropshire Hills AONB, which would also need to be taken into account in considering applications.** It should be noted that where appropriate, planning conditions will be attached to a permission to control the quality of the development and to ensure the scheme incorporates appropriate agreed mitigation measures such as coloured external cladding, landscaping and waste management; (emphasis added)

### MD8 - Infrastructure Provision (extract)

New Strategic Infrastructure

3. Applications for new strategic energy, transport, water management and telecommunications infrastructure will be supported in order to help deliver national priorities and locally identified requirements, where its contribution to agreed objectives outweighs the potential for adverse impacts. **Particular consideration will be given to the potential for adverse impacts on:**

i. Residential and other sensitive neighbouring land uses;

**ii. Visual amenity;**

**iii. Landscape character and sensitivity, including impacts on sensitive skylines;**

**iv. Recognised natural and heritage assets and their setting, including the Shropshire Hills AONB (Policy MD12);**

v. The visitor and tourism economy including long distance footpaths, cycle tracks and bridleways (Policy MD11);

vi. Noise, air quality, dust, odour and vibration;

vii. Water quality and resources;

viii. Impacts from traffic and transport during the construction and operation of the infrastructure development;

ix. Cumulative impacts.

4.74 For wind energy proposals, the policy identifies a number of specific considerations which give rise to local concern and upon which specific reassurance will be sought. Applicants for such proposals should provide sufficient information to allow a qualitative assessment of the potential impacts against relevant national, local or good practice standards including:

i. British Horse Society standards (2010) for the buffer distance between wind turbines and bridleways;

ii. ETSU R 97 standards for noise assessment;

**iii. The policies of the AONB Management Plan.** (emphasis added)

#### MD11 - Tourism facilities and visitor accommodation

1. Tourism, leisure and recreation development proposals that require a countryside location will be permitted where the proposal complements the character and qualities of the site's immediate surroundings, and meets the requirements in Policies CS5, CS16, MD7, MD12, MD13 and relevant local and national guidance;

2. All proposals should to be well screened and sited to mitigate the impact on the visual quality of the area through the use of natural on-site features, site layout and design, and landscaping and planting schemes where appropriate. **Proposals within and adjoining the Shropshire Hills AONB should pay particular regard to landscape impact and mitigation.** (emphasis added)

Explanations (extract)

4.108 In areas of recognised scenic and environmental value proposals must pay particular regard to the qualities of the area and the reasons for designation in line with Policies CS6 and CS17, MD12, MD13 and the NPPF. **Within and adjoining the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty applicants should also have regard to guidance in the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan. Sustainable tourism development plays a vital role in supporting the local economy but must be sensitive to the inherent qualities that the AONB is designated for;** (emphasis added)

#### MD12: The Natural Environment

In accordance with Policies CS6, CS17 and through applying the guidance in the Natural Environment SPD, the conservation, enhancement and restoration of Shropshire's natural assets will be achieved by:

1. Ensuring that the social or economic benefits of development can be demonstrated to clearly outweigh the harm to natural assets where proposals are likely to have an unavoidable significant adverse effect, directly, indirectly or cumulatively, on any of the following:

**i. the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB;**

ii. locally designated biodiversity and geological sites;

iii. priority species;

iv. priority habitats

v. important woodlands, trees and hedges;

vi. ecological networks

vii. geological assets;

viii. visual amenity;

ix. landscape character and local distinctiveness.

(emphasis added)

In these circumstances a hierarchy of mitigation then compensation measures will be sought.

2. Encouraging development which appropriately conserves, enhances, connects, restores or recreates natural assets, particularly where this improves the extent or value of those assets which are recognised as being in poor condition.

3. **Supporting proposals which contribute positively to the special characteristics and local distinctiveness of an area, particularly in the Shropshire Hills AONB, Nature Improvement Areas, Priority Areas for Action or areas and sites where development affects biodiversity or geodiversity interests at a landscape scale, including across administrative boundaries.** (emphasis added)

Explanation (in full)

4.113 Policy MD12 sets out in detail the level of protection offered to Shropshire's natural assets. Natural assets include: biodiversity and geological features; trees, woodlands and hedges in both rural and urban settings; the ways in which the above combine and connect to create locally distinctive and valued landscapes, **including the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** and the contribution all of the above make to visual amenity;

4.114 Such assets provide ecosystem services including; flood relief; soil retention; climate change mitigation and adaptation; carbon sequestration; interception of airborne pollutants; water filtration; amenity value; health and well-being benefits and opportunities for tourism and recreational activities. These services are essential to a thriving economy;

4.115 Internationally and nationally important sites of wildlife conservation and geological interest as well as legally protected habitats and species will be afforded the highest level of protection in line with the relevant legislation and policy. **Great weight will also be given to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills AONB, having regard to the AONB Management Plan.** Development proposals affecting or involving the following will be assessed in accordance with the relevant legislation and national policy; European and nationally designated wildlife sites (Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Ramsar and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and all candidate designations; **Major developments in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty**; Ancient woodland, other irreplaceable habitats and aged or veteran trees; Pollution – including noise, water, air and light pollution Further details are given in the Natural Environment SPD; (emphasis added)

4.116 The principle behind MD12 follows the hierarchy of:

- i. avoid loss or damage;
- ii. where the public benefits of the development clearly outweigh the value of any assets affected, provide adequate mitigation measures for any full or partial harm or loss;
- iii. as a last resort, where neither avoidance nor mitigation is reasonably possible, provide adequate compensation measures.

4.117 Development proposals must firstly assess whether they are likely to affect a natural asset, using current accepted guidance and best practice (see the Natural Environment SPD). Effects can be direct, indirect or cumulative. Where an effect is identified, further work should be carried out to define whether this is an adverse or benign effect and if adverse, whether it is likely to be significant. If a significant adverse effect is identified, then any social or economic benefits of the proposal must be clearly stated to enable a proper assessment of all aspects of the development;

4.118 Where loss or damage to an asset is likely then all reasonable alternative methods of delivering the proposal should be considered. If no solution can be found, through use of an alternative site or redesign to avoid harm for example, and the demonstrated social or economic benefits of the proposed development clearly outweigh the harm to that asset, then mitigation and compensation measures will be sought through planning conditions, planning agreements or offsetting measures as appropriate. Biodiversity offsetting may be an alternative method of providing compensation and the Natural Environment SPD sets out appropriate measures for a variety of circumstances;

4.119 Proposals should demonstrate that on-site mitigation or compensation measures are not feasible, before off-site measures will be considered. Off-site compensation measures, including tree and/or hedge planting, will be considered within the same settlement or associated group of settlements (as defined within the LDF Implementation Plan and Place Plans) in which the development is located. All

on- and off-site compensation, mitigation or offsetting measures should be accompanied by a management plan detailing management and implementation provisions and indicating how these will be resourced, both financially and practically over an agreed timescale;

4.120 If neither on- nor off- site mitigation or compensation is possible, applicants will be encouraged, where appropriate, to make a contribution via a section 106 agreement to funds to support the conservation and enhancement of natural assets (including the planting of trees, woodland and hedgerow) more widely in Shropshire in accordance with the Natural Environment SPD;

#### Natural Assets

**4.121 The special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB are set out in the AONB Management Plan. This is a statutory document, required under section 89(2) of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 to contain Shropshire Council's and Telford & Wrekin Council's policy for the management of the AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it. The Management Plan should be regarded as a material consideration in planning decisions;** (emphasis added)

4.122 A list of locally designated biodiversity and geological sites can be found in the Natural Environment SPD. These include Local Wildlife Sites, Local Geological Sites, Local Nature Reserves and Local Green Spaces where the latter are notified at least in part, for their wildlife value;

4.123 UK Priority species and habitats (NERC Act 2006, section 41 list) are nationally important. A link to the list is provided in the Natural Environment SPD, together with additional habitats and species of local importance;

4.124 Trees, woodlands and hedges are integral and significant features in Shropshire's landscapes and townscapes and their conservation and proper management is an essential factor in maintaining local distinctiveness. Important trees, woods and hedges include those with legal protection as well as other trees, groups of trees, woodlands and hedgerows that are of demonstrable significance in terms of their amenity, cultural, biodiversity, landscape, heritage, financial or ecosystem service values, or which make a significant contribution to the character of a building, a settlement or the setting thereof. Further information about determining the importance and value of trees, woodland and hedgerows can be found in the Natural Environment SPD;

4.125 Ecological networks are vital for the movement, foraging, migration and dispersal of wildlife species through urban and rural landscapes. In the past, plants and animals have generally been protected on discrete sites which then tended to form islands of biodiversity embedded in otherwise inhospitable surroundings. In order to halt the loss of biodiversity, ecological features need to be buffered and joined to form a functioning network. Such networks also help to provide ecosystem services such as pollination and improve resilience to climate change. In many cases they will be integral components of the environmental networks covered by policy CS17 and should be maintained, enhanced and created. Examples of ecological networks are provided in the Natural Environment SPD;

4.126 Geological assets include quarries as well as naturally occurring rock exposures, and geomorphological landforms such as drumlins and kettle holes. These features may be designated as geological SSSIs or as Local Geological Sites (LGS) – formerly regionally important geological sites (RIGS). Geological assets also include other valued cultural evidence of geology such as use of local building stone, mining structures and educational resources such as museum collections. Additional information is provided in the Natural Environment SPD;

4.127 Visual amenity is a measure of the visual quality of a site or area as experienced by residents, workers or visitors. It is the collective impact of the visual components, as perceived by people, which make a site or an area pleasant to be in. It is thus greatly influenced by value judgements. Visual amenity is strongly related to landscape character but the two are not the same. Planning proposals should appraise their impact on visual amenity and landscape character separately and clearly distinguish between the two;

4.128 The Shropshire Landscape Character Assessment and Historic Landscape Characterisation provide information on the locally distinctive features which combine to produce the characteristic

landscapes of Shropshire. **The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan provides information on the valued characteristics which comprise the landscape of the designated area;** (emphasis added)

Deriving benefits from development

4.129 Development has a positive role to play in not only conserving natural assets but in enhancing, restoring, re-creating and connecting them. Reference should be made to the Place Plans for appropriate opportunities and other information on positive measures is set out in the Natural Environment SPD. **The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan also sets out actions which would enhance the natural beauty and contribute to the greater enjoyment and understanding of the protected landscape;** (emphasis added)

4.130 The connections between natural and heritage assets – the environmental network - are identified and protected by policy CS17 and shown within the Natural Environment SPD.

**Opportunities to deliver landscape wide improvements to these networks exist particularly in Nature Improvement Areas, Priority Areas for Biodiversity Action and the Shropshire Hills AONB.**

Increasing the connectivity of assets both within and between such areas provides benefits for the natural and historic environment. Partnership working will be encouraged where appropriate, to achieve this objective, in accordance with policies CS8, CS9 and CS17 and MD13; (emphasis added)

4.131 Landscape scale initiatives such as Nature Improvement Areas and Priority Areas for Biodiversity Action have partnerships (e.g. Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Local Nature Partnership and the Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership) co-ordinating actions for their conservation and enhancement. Where relevant, development proposals should consider how they can increase the size and quality of priority habitats and reduce fragmentation, to deliver net gains in accordance with CS17.

#### MD13: The Historic Environment

In accordance with Policies CS6 and CS17 and through applying the guidance in the Historic Environment SPD, Shropshire's heritage assets will be conserved, sympathetically enhanced and restored by:

1. Ensuring that proposals which are likely to either directly or indirectly affect the significance of a heritage asset, including its setting, are accompanied by a Heritage Assessment.
2. Ensuring that the social or economic benefits of a development can be demonstrated to clearly outweigh any adverse effects on the significance of a heritage asset, or its setting, taking into account the degree of harm, the importance of the asset and any potential beneficial use of the asset. Where such proposals are permitted, measures to offset and record the loss of significance to the heritage asset and to advance understanding in a manner proportionate to the asset's importance and the level of impact, will be required.
3. Encouraging development which delivers positive benefits to heritage assets, as identified within the Place Plans. Support will be given in particular, to proposals which appropriately conserve, manage or enhance the significance of a heritage asset including its setting, especially where these improve the condition of those assets which are recognised as being at risk or in poor condition.

Explanation

4.132 Whilst this policy is closely related to sustainable design (CS6 and MD2) and the conservation of Shropshire's natural environment (CS17 and MD12) it sets out specific guidance on the protection of Shropshire's historic environment, including the requirements that need to be met for those development proposals which are likely to have either a direct or indirect impact on the significance, including the setting, of a heritage asset;

4.133 **Heritage assets are buildings, monuments, sites, places, areas or landscapes which have a degree of significance and heritage interest that merit consideration as part of the planning process. The term includes all designated assets, namely Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas, World Heritage Sites, Registered Parks and Gardens, Registered Battlefields, Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and nationally protected landscapes such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty;** (emphasis added)

**Telford and Wrekin Core Strategy: Adopted December 2007** <sup>90</sup>

**POLICY CS 7: Rural Area**

Development within the rural area will be limited to that necessary to meet the needs of the area. It will be focussed on the settlements of High Ercall, Tibberton and Waters Upton. New housing development will be expected to deliver affordable housing to the level of 40% of all such development. Outside of these settlements development will be limited and within the open countryside will be strictly controlled.

#### **POLICY CS 12: Natural Environment**

The natural environment of the Borough will be protected and enhanced. **The natural environment of The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** and that of the Borough's Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Areas of Special Landscape Character, Local Nature Reserves, Wildlife Sites and Ancient Woodland sites **will be protected from development that has the potential to adversely impact on its sustainability.** Biodiversity, including habitats, and geodiversity will be protected from development. Where appropriate, development that delivers enhancement will be consistent with local biodiversity targets and objectives.

#### **POLICY CS 13: Environmental Resources**

The environmental resources of the Borough will be used with prudence within environmental limits. The production of energy from renewable sources will be supported where this is consistent with the statements within this policy, others contained within the Development Plan and national guidance. Development that reduces the risks of contaminated land to the environment and human health will be supported. That which has detrimental impacts on the environment, including the quality of land, air or water, will be resisted if satisfactory mitigation cannot be achieved. Development will avoid increasing the risk of flooding. Where appropriate and consistent with the policies of the Development Plan and local strategies, development will integrate measures for sustainable water management. Further guidance on reducing the Borough's carbon burden will be provided by supplementary documents.



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## Abbreviations

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

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
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
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions pour Development Economique Rural
NCA	National Character Area
PAWS	Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site
PWP	Plantation on Wood Pasture
RDPE	Rural Development Programme for England
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SAM	Scheduled Ancient Monument
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
TPO	Tree Preservation Order

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The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is hosted by Shropshire Council,  
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**Working together to conserve and sustain the landscape**