

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET 11th July 2019

PROTECTING THE WREKIN FOREST: THE APPROVAL OF THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2019-24 AND THE AONB PARTNERSHIPS TERMS OF REFERENCE.

REPORT OF ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: BUSINESS, DEVELOPMENT & EMPLOYMENT

LEAD CABINET MEMBER – CLLR H RHODES

PART A) – SUMMARY REPORT

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

- 1.1 The Council has committed to protect, enhance and extend the network of green spaces within Telford and Wrekin which characterise the Town and provide accessible spaces for local communities to enjoy and support the Council's health and wellbeing agenda. The Borough's Green Network extends to over 2500 hectares and under its recent Green Guarantee and Local Nature Reserve initiatives the Council has identified, retained and protected over 1000 hectares of important green spaces valued by the local community.
- 1.2 The Wrekin Forest forms significant links between Telford's urban green network to the north and the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site to the east and is an integral part of Telford's green infrastructure and 'Forest City' heritage. The Wrekin and Ercall hills are regional landmarks and the Council provides protection to this 'strategic landscape' which also includes flanking woodlands and villages including Little Wenlock and New Works, through planning policy.
- 1.3 It is estimated that up to 120,000 people visit the Wrekin every a year. This massive popularity reflecting its attraction for those leading healthy lifestyles, providing the facilities and the environment for all ages to enjoy. The work of Discover Telford and the 'smart packaging' of the area's tourism offer focusses on the Wrekin forming part of a wider package of visitor experiences including guided walks, trails and 'multi-centre' experiences such as wider heritage and nature itineraries linked with the Ironbridge Gorge, the local woodlands managed by the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust and the Local Nature Reserves and Public Parks in the urban heart of the borough. The approach aims to increase visitor dwell time, return and benefits to all.
- 1.4 A small part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) falls within The Wrekin Forest Strategic Landscape and this report seeks Cabinet approval for the 2019-2024 AONB Management Plan (Appendix 1) and the revised Terms of Reference for the AONB Partnership (Appendix 2).
- 1.5 Local Authorities with an AONB in their boundary have a statutory requirement to produce a Management Plan. The Management Plan sets out the priorities for conserving and enhancing the AONB for the next five years. As the AONB extends outside the borough's boundary and impacts on a wide range of stakeholders the AONB Partnership was established as a joint advisory committee to both Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. The Council is represented on the Partnership at Officer and Member level. The Partnership has led the update of the Management Plan which has been subject to consultation with the public and a wide range of partner organisations. The amendments to the Partnership's terms of reference reflect the need to ensure an effective management structure while maintaining links with wider stakeholders.
- 1.6 The Vision for the AONB set out in the Management Plan is that :-

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

- 1.7 The revised Management Plan recognises the unique qualities of the element of the AONB that sits within the Borough and the key management policy maintains the protection of the area through planning policy and promotes the ongoing support of local partnerships including the Wrekin Forest Partnership established in 2007.
- 1.8 Collaboration and partnership working will continue to be key to the success of the management and evolution of the AONB in the borough.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Approve the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-24,
2.2 Approve the revised Terms of Reference for the AONB Partnership.

3 SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Co-operative Council priorities?	
	Yes	The objectives of the AONB management plan are compatible with the priorities of the Council, in particular the objectives to raise awareness and participation, improving the health and wellbeing of our communities, addressing health inequalities and local working with communities. The management plan also supports sustainable tourism and the associated inward investment that this can bring.
	Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?	
	Yes	The management plan supports equality of access to the AONB by all members of the community
TARGET COMPLETION/ DELIVERY DATE	The management plan covers the period of 2019 – 2024	
FINANCIAL/ VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes	<p>Responsibility for funding the management of the Shropshire Hills AONB is split 75% DEFRA and 25% Local Authority. The Local Authority contribution is split proportionately between Shropshire Council and Telford and Wrekin Council. Telford and Wrekin Council currently contributes £2,694 p.a. this will rise to £3,000 p.a. in 20/21 and will be funded from Development Management budgets.</p> <p>The Management Plan sets out aspirations for projects and delivery activities and does not make any binding financial commitments above the contributions referred to above.</p> <p>The AONB Partnership also actively seeks external funding and third party grant funding opportunities to support management actions at The Wrekin. AEM 11/06/19</p>
LEGAL ISSUES	Yes	Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Council has a duty to prepare and publish a plan setting out its policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out its functions in relation to it. The Council has a duty under the Act to review the management plan before the end of 5 years after the publication and, after that, at

		<p>intervals of not more than 5 years. The Council needs to consider the amended Management Plan and determine whether it is appropriate.</p> <p>The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is a joint advisory committee established to advise both Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. The Partnership's Terms of Reference will govern the operation of the Partnership to facilitate the implementation of the Management Plan. The Terms of Reference have been updated/revised and are being presented to both Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council for approval so that the Partnership is appropriately authorised.</p> <p>More generally, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in the area of outstanding natural beauty, the Act requires that the Council must have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty. (IR 13.06.19)</p>
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES		Production of the management plan is a condition of DEFRA's core funding for the AONB Partnership. There are a number of opportunities identified in the plan to enhance the AONB including the Wrekin Forest, maximising benefits to the natural environment, local residents and those visiting the area.
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	Yes	The AONB is located within the Wrockwardine Ward. However, the approval of the Management Plan and Terms of Reference will deliver borough wide benefits.

PART B) – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

4 AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

- 4.1 This is the fourth statutory Management Plan for the AONB since the requirement to produce a plan was enacted by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The AONB is a statutory designation to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area and has been in place since 1958. The Management Plan sets out the priorities for conserving and enhancing the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty for the next five years.
- 4.2 The Management Plan has been produced jointly with Shropshire Council through the AONB Partnership – a Joint Advisory Committee. The Plan has been developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders and was made available for public consultation from November 2018 to January 2019. Formal approval is required by the two local authorities, Telford and Wrekin Council and Shropshire Council.
- 4.3 The Vision of the Management Plan is:
- “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.”***
- 4.4 Across the whole AONB the Management Plan recognises that the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape are of high importance but under increasing pressure. The condition of some of the special qualities of the AONB is declining. Conservation activity through many schemes and projects is not enough to prevent some losses in wildlife. There are also challenges across the wider AONB in relation to water quality and catchment management targets. Economic forces are also increasing development pressures.
- 4.5 The Plan sets out the Land Use Plan policies established by the respective local authorities, and proposes actions for a wider range of partners. These fall under three main aims:
- Land management supporting natural beauty and landscape
 - Planning for a sustainable economy and communities

- People enjoying and caring about the landscape

5 THE AONB IN TELFORD AND WREKIN

5.1 The Wrekin and surrounding area is identified as a priority area within the Management Plan. The area is recognised as having distinct features and needs that are different to the rest of the AONB. The plan acknowledges that the area within the Borough of Telford & Wrekin brings different users, audiences and partners. The plan recognises the well-established partnership approaches to co-ordinating management of the Wrekin area and the need for the continued support of this approach. The Plan identifies the 'Key Issues' for the area, lists a number of 'Priorities' and presents the Wrekin Forest Policy.

Key Issues and Priorities

- 5.2 Recreation, leisure and access remain the biggest challenges for the AONB within the borough. Finding ways to manage patterns of access and ensure the landscape remains resilient to increasing impacts will be required in order to ensure effective and sustainable visitor management.
- 5.8 Estimates suggest that up to 120,000 people visit the Wrekin every a year. Collaboration and partnership working will continue to be key to the success of the management and evolution of the AONB in the borough. The massive popularity of The Wrekin for audiences at the peak periods of 8am and 6pm during the week illustrates that, for those of working age, it is a magnet for healthy lifestyles, providing the facilities and the environment that fulfils their physical and mental needs. However, there is opportunity to diversify these audiences especially during peak weekend times, encouraging users to visit other areas of the AONB and the wealth of other Local Nature Reserves, parks and open spaces the borough has to offer. There are opportunities for the AONB partnership to work actively in the borough to increase awareness and knowledge.
- 5.9 Opportunities exist to better celebrate the outstanding natural importance of the Wrekin as an AONB. There is opportunity to create a stronger narrative and celebration of why The Wrekin and its heritage is globally important. Any initiatives would bring with them major benefits of civic pride and a stronger sense of community both within the borough and between other AONB locations.
- 5.10 Tourism is a major driver of the local economy and as Telford becomes more popular for domestic and international tourism there is greater opportunity to take a sustainable approach to both tourism and transport/access.
- 5.11 The 'smart packaging' of the area's tourism offer would see the Wrekin forming part of a wider package of visitor experiences including guided walks, trails and 'multi-centre' experiences such as wider heritage and nature itineraries linked with the Ironbridge Gorge, the local woodlands managed by the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust and the Local Nature Reserves and Public Parks in the urban heart of the borough. The approach would result in increased visitor dwell time, return and benefits to all.
- 5.12 Sustainable transport is a major opportunity for the future and while it is universally appreciated that The Wrekin must be celebrated, access to the area by car is impacting negatively on both landscape value and visitor experience. Early work has already been done on sustainable transport but it is now taking this forward that will strengthen landscape resilience and provide opportunities for growth.

The Wrekin Forest Policy

- 5.9 The Management Plan sets out its key management policy for the Wrekin Forest which focuses upon the protection of the area through planning policy and the ongoing support of local partnerships.

- The need to protect the AONB is recognised in Local Plan policy NE7. This policy places the highest level of protection upon the Shropshire Hills AONB and protects the 'strategic landscape' of the wider 'Wrekin Forest' area.
- The Wrekin Forest Partnership was established in 2007. The partnerships 'Wrekin Forest Plan' is now coming to the end of its second phase (2015-2020). Moving forward the Council will explore ways to work with partners to deliver practical project based actions that celebrate the outstanding natural importance of the Wrekin as an AONB and its links to the urban green network and the world heritage site.

Engagement in Development & Monitoring Delivery

- 5.10 In the Plan preparation, three workshops were held with the AONB Partnership, and Management Plan topics were also discussed at working groups such as the Wrekin Forest Partnership and the Shropshire Hills Destination Partnership. Themes that emerged included ongoing support for the protection of the landscape and biodiversity; the key role of the land use planning system in protecting the AONB and the need to encourage greater recognition of the AONB as an asset recognising the protection also poses economic challenges.
- 5.11 A public on-line survey was carried out during April and May 2018. With over 200 responses, the survey revealed a high degree of support for the primary purpose to 'conserve and enhance' the AONB. The most valued characteristics of the Shropshire Hills were dramatic views and wide panoramas, opportunities to walk and explore, wildlife and relatively natural areas, peace and quiet and a chance to unwind. Top concerns included the loss/neglect of habitats and wildlife, inappropriate new development, losing the Shropshire Hills' distinctive character and the quality of water and condition of rivers.
- 5.12 The Sustainability Appraisal of the Management Plan conducted in parallel with the Plan review meets the legal requirements for Strategic Environmental Assessment.
- 5.13 The statutory timescale for completion of the review of the Plan is by 31st March 2019. Defra have been sent the completed Plan as endorsed by the AONB Partnership subject to the final approval by the two Councils. They have congratulated the Partnership on the work on the new Plan. Natural England have also given support to the draft Plan and made 'formal observations'.
- 5.14 The Management Plan Actions will be monitored and reviewed by the AONB Partnership and progress reported publicly. The condition of the AONB landscape will be monitored through a set of headline indicators, and a new set of performance indicators for activity of the AONB Partnership team are currently being developed nationally.
- 5.15 The Plan will help deliver many of the priorities of Defra's 25 Environment Plan - clean air and water, thriving plants and wildlife, reduced risk from flooding and drought, using natural resources more sustainably and efficiently, enhanced beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment.
- 5.16 Preparation of the Management Plan by the large and inclusive AONB Partnership group is the established national methodology, and national guidance has been followed. The team members leading the work have been responsible for previous Management Plan reviews.

6. AONB PARTNERSHIP TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 6.1 The process of updating the AONB Partnership Terms of Reference was led by the Partnership's Chair and its sub-group the Management Board (now Strategy & Performance Committee). Several consultations were held with the Legal teams of both Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council, and drafts were seen and endorsed by the Partnership. The attached Partnership Terms of Reference document includes the proposed membership and appends the Partnership's procedural arrangements and the Terms of Reference for the Strategy & Performance Committee.
- 6.2 The changes being proposed are mainly minor amendments to wording. The more substantive changes include:

- The maximum number of seats on the Partnership is proposed to be reduced from 45 to 36. Reductions would be made by means of currently vacant seats and through the membership review due in the autumn of 2019. An inclusive group is valuable, but this has to be balanced with manageability, and the current size is believed to be the largest of any AONB Joint Advisory Committee in the country.
- The Management Board has been re-named the Strategy & Performance Committee and now has separate Terms of Reference. As a sub-committee of the Partnership, its Terms of Reference are approved by the Partnership itself.

7. PREVIOUS MINUTES

20th February 2014. Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2014-2019

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-2019

20th February 2014. Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2014-2019

The Wrekin Forest Plan 2015-2020

Report prepared by Mark Latham Ecology and Green Infrastructure Specialist, Phil Holden Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Manager and Sarah Bird Destination Tourism Development Officer.

APPENDIX 1: AONB MANAMGMENT PLAN

<http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/a-special-place/management-plan/>

APPENDIX 2: REVISED TERMS OF REFERENCE

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

Terms of Reference

(Amended 4th March 2019)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is the body responsible for coordinating the management of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 1.2 The Partnership has the formal status of a 'Joint Advisory Committee' under Section 102(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 to the two local authorities of Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council ("the Councils").
- 1.3 The purposes of the national AONB designation are as follows:
- The primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. *Natural beauty goes well beyond scenic and aesthetic value. The natural beauty of an AONB is to do with the relationship between people and place. It encompasses everything – 'natural and human' – that makes an area distinctive. It includes the area's geology and landform, its climate and soils, its wildlife and ecology. It includes the rich history of human settlement and land use over the centuries, its archaeology and buildings, its cultural associations, and the people who live in it, past and present.*
[AONB Management Plan Specimen text, NAAONB 2018]
 - In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves, conserve and enhance the environment.
 - Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.
(Countryside Agency, 2001)
- 1.4 Local authorities have a legal obligation under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 to prepare and review a Management Plan for the AONB, and to 'act jointly' in doing this. The AONB Partnership is the body formed principally to fulfil this requirement and includes a substantially wider membership in order to engage a range of relevant interests and expertise in the management of the area.

2. Roles and Responsibilities of the AONB Partnership

- 2.1 The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership plays three main roles regarding the AONB:
- To promote the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty, character and landscape of the Shropshire Hills AONB as a local, regional and national asset.

- To promote compatible social, environmental, economic development and the wellbeing of constituent communities.
 - In pursuit of these ends, to prepare, monitor and review the statutory Management Plan for the AONB and to coordinate its implementation.
- 2.2 In order to perform the above roles and responsibilities the Partnership will lead the review of the statutory Management Plan for the AONB every five years. This Plan will be formally approved by each individual local authority and will, as required in the CRoW Act 2000, 'formulate their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it'.
- 2.3 In addition, the Partnership will co-ordinate and facilitate the implementation of the Management Plan, and will monitor progress in achieving its objectives, policies and actions.
- 2.4 The Partnership will champion the interests of and vision for, the Shropshire Hills AONB, as contained in the statutory Management Plan, and promote a coherent and strong identity for the area.
- 2.5 The Partnership will add value to the role of local authorities as planning authorities for the AONB, especially by contributing to the development of planning policy and guidance, and by providing comments on significant development proposals and planning applications. Detailed roles and procedures for the AONB Partnership's involvement in planning are set out in a formal Planning Protocol with the local authorities.
- 2.6 The Partnership will seek to secure resources required for effective management of the AONB, including external funds to assist in delivering management activities and projects.
- 2.7 The Partnership will ensure that public bodies fulfil their duty under S85 of the CRoW Act to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB in the exercise and performance of their functions.
- 2.8 The Partnership will monitor the condition of the AONB and progress with Management Plan implementation and will publish an annual review of progress and make recommendations to local authorities as appropriate.
- 2.9 The Partnership will periodically review its governance arrangements to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

3. Membership

- 3.1 Membership of the Partnership will consist of a maximum of 36 people comprising the following:
- Four elected Members appointed by Shropshire Council (representatives should be relevant portfolio holders or local division members);
 - One elected member appointed by Telford and Wrekin Council (the representative to be an elected member appointed by the Council);
 - Up to 6 elected members of parish or town councils within or partly within the AONB;
 - Up to 4 representatives of other statutory bodies;
 - Up to 15 representatives appointed by non-statutory or voluntary organisations;

- Up to 6 individual members.

All of the above will have full voting rights.

APPROVAL OF TERMS OF REFERENCE

Signed

Date

Position

on behalf of SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL

Signed

Date

Position

on behalf of TELFORD AND WREKIN COUNCIL

Appendix 1 to Terms of Reference - Procedures of the Partnership

1. All parties recognise that the Partnership is likely to be most effective if its recommendations can be reached by consensus rather than by confrontation but, if it is necessary to regulate any debate, then the Chair shall have the power to order that the Council Procedure Rules set out in Part 4 of the Constitution of Shropshire Council shall apply. Consensus will be taken as the majority of the members present and the Chair will have the casting vote where needed.
2. The Partnership may establish sub-committees and may delegate any of its powers and functions to sub-committees. Only Partnership members and officers of the Councils may be appointed to be members of sub-committees but officer members will not have any power to vote. Only the Partnership can appoint members of any sub-committee.
3. The Partnership may participate in other groups as it deems appropriate.

Frequency of Meetings

4. The Partnership will normally meet three times per year. A site-based meeting or tour will normally be held annually. The Chair of the Partnership may call additional meetings or cancel pre-arranged meetings if it is felt that there is either urgent business which needs to be discussed or there is insufficient business to justify a meeting being held.

Chair and Vice Chairs

5. The Partnership will elect its own Chair on a biennial basis, or as necessary. The Chair will be a non-local authority member. The Chair will not serve for more than three consecutive terms (i.e. six years maximum). Both Vice Chair posts will be elected biennially by the Partnership, or as necessary. One Vice Chair post will be an elected member of Shropshire Council and the other Vice Chair post will be open to any Partnership member. Nominations will be invited in advance of the meeting at which the elections take place.
6. In the event of the Chair or Vice Chairs not being present at a meeting of the Partnership, a chair for the meeting will be elected by the Partnership members present.
7. The expectations of Chair and Vice Chair roles are set out in Role Descriptions and Person Specifications, which will be reviewed as necessary by the Partnership.

Local Authority Officers

8. Local authority officers attending Partnership meetings do not have the right to vote on issues being decided by the Partnership.

Declaration of interests

9. Members of the Partnership and any of its sub-groups shall declare an interest in a meeting where a matter to be discussed may affect:
 - their own wellbeing or financial position, or
 - the wellbeing or financial position of a family member or close associate, or
 - the financial position of an employer/business of the member, their family member or close associate, or
 - the financial position of a charitable body, association or other group with which they are closely associatedand shall leave the meeting room whilst that matter is being debated and voted upon.
10. Councillor Members of the Partnership shall, when acting as a member of the Partnership, comply with the code of conduct of their local authority.

11. Non-Councillor Members of the Partnership shall, when acting as a member of the Partnership, comply with the code of conduct of Shropshire Council.

Membership, Applications & Nominations

12. The Partnership will operate an application process for the individual member seats and Parish/Town Council seats, and where necessary for non-statutory or voluntary organisations. The process will be transparent and non-discriminatory.
13. Appointment of applicants to seats will be made by the full Partnership, based on the following criteria:
Individual and Parish/Town Council members
 - Resident in the AONB or a nearby town or in the surrounding countryside;
 - Proven commitment to AONB purposes and relevant areas of interest;
 - Ability to make a valuable contribution to the Partnership.Non-statutory and voluntary bodies
 - Support for AONB purposes and a clear synergy with the remit of the AONB;
 - A significant material or operational interest within the AONB;
 - Representative with ability to make a valuable contribution to the Partnership.
14. Statutory and non-statutory bodies on the Partnership will appoint a named representative to attend as their member, and may identify a named 'deputy' who will also receive papers and may attend meetings in place of the representative without prior arrangement. A representative other than the named member or deputy may attend a meeting in their place by agreement with the Chair.
15. The Partnership will undertake a biennial review of its membership.
16. In the event of conduct or alleged conduct of a member which is not consistent with the Partnership's Terms of Reference, every effort will be made to resolve the issue by informal negotiation. The Partnership may however resolve to withdraw membership, or, in the case of an organisation member, resolve to ask the organisation to provide a different representative.

Appendix 2 to Terms of Reference

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
structure (February 2019)

