Extracts from Vision:

Land

is nurtured, so it can sustain us

- Farming produces good food sustainably while supporting nature
- Soils are healthy

"Anything I do now will probably be for good for nature, you know, and farming at the same time. You mustn't forget that. It's got to be farming and nature. It's got to be in combination."

Matt Betton, farmer

<u>Subsections in this 'Land' section of the Plan</u>:

Geology

Soil health

Land use

Farming – transition to new government support regime

Agricultural development and diversification

Forestry and woodlands

Sources of practical **guidance**

*Key link to other Plan themes - **Local food and food systems***

Geology

The Shropshire Hills contain a great variety of geological features from across a very wide range of geological eras or time periods. This has given rise to a diversity of landscapes with hills, crags, scarps and valleys, as well as different building styles, generating the varied character that is so distinctive. The geology that underpins the whole landscape is the basis for understanding soils, ecology, etc which overlays it.

Due to the robustness of the basic geological resource, earth science conservation is focussed on conserving particular exposures which are significant to the understanding of certain stages, groups or processes. Key sites are protected as SSSIs and Locally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites (LGS), with the very best listed in the Geological Conservation Review. Some sites are known to be deteriorating through the uncontrolled growth of vegetation including trees and scrub, and through scree accumulation masking vertical faces, such as in former quarries.

Some sites are used for interpretation and education and priority action relates often to the accessibility and visibility of sites but capacity for maintenance and monitoring is very limited. Ideally geology needs to be integrated along with other things.

Soil health

There has been significant activity by farmers through various projects related to soil health and conservation, which should be developed further. Catchment Sensitive Farming has supported this, and other changes in agricultural practice have also had positive impacts. Vulnerability to erosion depends on soil type, slope, aspect and land use, and digital mapping is now a valuable tool.

Loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage often supporting pasture are easily compacted when wet, and are prone to capping and slaking, increasing the risks of erosion, especially on steeper slopes. When wet, these soils are easily poached by livestock and compacted by machinery, and the risks of diffuse pollution and flooding are increased. More freely draining, loamy soils typically in arable cultivation are at risk of erosion on slopes where exposed or compacted. The sources of erosion should be tackled, along with slowing pathways and protecting watercourse receptors.

There is now greater understanding of the importance of the soil microbiome, and soil health is a key principle of regenerative farming which is gaining in popularity.

Land use

Finding a balance of land use is one of the most important challenges for the Shropshire Hills – where farming produces healthy food while sustaining the land and allowing nature recovery and other public benefits. This is not an either/or, it needs integrated solutions.

This is quite a fast moving policy environment, with recent consultation on the National Land Use Framework and the final Framework expected soon. This could usefully set principles for land use decisions in a framework. The Food, Farming & Countryside Commission have undertaken a number of useful county level land use frameworks. An integrated approach breaking down silos is likely to help – land uses which seem wrong for the environment are often driven by single issue decision-making. Land serves multiple uses and purposes, and some land is more suitable for some functions than others.

A greater diversity of land ownership is gradually happening with some sites being bought by Community Land Trusts (especially the Middle Marches CLT). Other new owners sometimes bring different objectives which can offer opportunities and occasionally threats to the special qualities or features of the National Landscape.

Farming – transition to new government support regime

The continuation of farming in ways that are sensitive and sympathetic to the landscape is vital to conserving the qualities that are valued in the National Landscape. However the balance is not currently optimal – habitats are fragmented, much of our biodiversity is in decline, and the water environment is far from ideal. Working with the natural characteristics and processes of the area offers a holistic and sustainable model. We need our farming to be good for people and for nature – providing a supply of good food, respecting and protecting the environment and natural resources, and providing a fair income.

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 located within the National Landscape. Grass-fed livestock is the main activity, with arable and dairying especially in the lower lying fringes of the area. Food production will remain an important objective in the Shropshire Hills, but the many other public benefits from land management also need to influence how this is carried out. The long-term capacity to continue producing food depends on looking after natural capital (such as soils, clean water and pollinators) as well as social capital (e.g. by promoting farm support networks, encouraging succession, and retaining and developing skills).

The transition for upland farming is a key issue for the Plan, and solutions enabling farm businesses to be environmentally, economically and socially sustainable are supported.

Much of the Shropshire Hills is used for raising grass-fed livestock which is relatively low intensity farming, but some of the land is worked hard and has become ecologically simplified. There are directions within the industry towards regenerative and agroecological farming, and lower input grazing systems where reducing stocking rates can increase profitability. These approaches could be very beneficial to nature recovery.

The benefits to nature from farming can come not just from looking after habitats at the fringes – the fields themselves matter too. This is recognised in High Nature Value (HNV) farming where relatively low-intensity farming systems maintain large areas of semi-natural habitat in high quality countryside. Apart from conserving wildlife, these types of farming provide ecosystem services such as carbon storage, clean water and fire prevention, and much of the rich social fabric and character of landscape. Maintaining the farming system and preventing its abandonment or intensification is therefore the priority. The social and economic realities of farming systems are important to conservation strategies. Across the larger areas outside nature reserves, conservation of semi-natural habitats is more likely to be effective and meaningful if embedded in the cultural and socio-economic activity of the communities which created and now maintain them.

Agricultural development and diversification

Diversification activities involving new development should work with the qualities of the National Landscape rather than against them, and respect the quality of the landscape, which is the basis of many other businesses in the area. If the designation is perceived as a limitation to a certain kind of development, this is an indication that an approach working in harmony with the high quality landscape is not being adopted. Many types of developments of farm enterprises and diversification can be done without harm to the National Landscape, including:

- Adding value to products
- Alternative livestock
- Sustainable tourism including accommodation and sensitively planned events
- Care farming and social forestry
- Crafts and training
- Woodlands and agro-forestry
- Alternative uses of buildings

A simple Sustainability checklist for diversification would include looking at:

- Where possible using previously developed land and re-using existing buildings
- Using locally sourced materials and minimising waste
- High quality and sustainable design and construction methods
- Energy efficiency, renewable energy and recycling
- Minimising the need for travel and transport
- Protecting and enhancing landscape, heritage and biodiversity

Case study – Upper Onny Farmers Group

The Upper Onny Farmers Group was formed in 2018 initially with 9 farmers, now over 20. The group has an aim to common aim to *'share views about the main issues affecting the future of farming and the environment in the upper Onny valley, and to explore ways for improving the environment, the landscape and its wildlife in ways that are integral to profitable farm businesses'*. It has been supported in its development over a number of years by staff from the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Team and the National Trust, the latter providing significant funding for staff time by both organisations, as part of the Stepping Stones project.

Members of the Upper Onny Farmers group on a visit to Cumbria

Case study - Clee View Farmers Group

With 3 years of support from the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund a significant group of over 60 farmers has formed on the Clee Hills, covering over 15,000ha. A wide variety of events have been organised including on herbal leys, soils, carbon accounting, water, and natural capital assessment.

Forestry and woodlands

Woodlands and trees are important features in the Shropshire Hills National Landscape and are recognised as one of the special qualities of the area. The area has higher than the national average of woodland overall (13%) and of ancient and semi-natural woodland. 4.95% of the area is covered by ancient woodlands but approximately two thirds of that area are sites classed as Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).

Commercial forests are owned both by Forestry England and private estates. Policy and grants have for some time encouraged multi-purpose forestry for conservation and recreation benefits as well as timber production, supporting greater diversity with more broadleaved trees and open space.

Sources of practical guidance

Shropshire Hills National Landscape website. Includes: Conservation and Land Management – Water Friendly Farming, Planting and Caring for Trees, Black Poplar management, alder coppicing, conserving curlews, hedgerow birds, lapwings. Good practice guide to geological conservation.
https://www.shropshirehills-nl.org.uk/help-to-look-after/resources/guidance-and-grants#wood

Farm Wildlife is a partnership of 8 leading wildlife organisations, brought together to provide a single source of best-practice management advice for wildlife on farmland.
https://farmwildlife.info/

Practical Guidance for Farmers – Natural Flood Management - CaBA

Upland Farmer Toolkit https://uplandfarmertoolkit.org.uk/

Nature Friendly Farming Network https://www.nffn.org.uk/

Linking Environment & Farming (LEAF) https://leaf.eco/

Farming Advice Service (Defra funded)
https://www.farmingadviceservice.org.uk/

Catchment Sensitive Farming
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/catchment-sensitive-farming-reduce-agricultural-water-pollution

Regenerative Food & Farming CIC
https://regenerativefoodandfarming.co.uk/

Key link to other Plan themes - Local food and food systems

There is a link between changes to the food system and landscape. The Food, Farming & Countryside Commission sees the synergy between farming for healthier diets in people and for a healthier environment, with a more mixed farming system with greater crop diversity and more biodiverse and permanent grasslands, grazed by native ruminants. This could deliver more sustainable/regenerative land use, improving health, tackling climate change etc, all at once. More sustainable and healthier diets would include eating in season, eating lots of plants, less but better quality meat, home growing, less processed foods, and more whole foods. People's behaviour as consumers can help drive these changes but changes are needed in supply chains and the food system also.

The affordability of local food remains a core factor where cost of living issues are systemically embedded within many communities in the National Landscape. Public understanding of the many different accreditations is also an issue. Scalability, supply reliability, diversity of consumer choice and investment in local food chains within the National Landscape are relatively underdeveloped. In the Shropshire Hills a small number of meat producers sell direct, either from the farm, by mail order or through farmers markets. Availability of local abattoirs is a barrier for local meat supply. The Pasture for Life group has been undertaking a project locally with FiPL funding.

In more fertile and sheltered valleys there are some vegetable growers. There are some speciality products such as cheeses, organic milk, ice cream and gin. Beer, cider and juices are a feature of the area with a number of breweries and orchards. Outlets for local food include markets, farm shops and venues such as restaurants, cafes, shops. There are also some events such as the Slow Food Festival at Bridges and the Shropshire Good Food Trail. Some regenerative farms do public events and engagement.

Summary of statutory requirements and duties - Land
(not exhaustive)

(many of the statutory requirements highlighted in other topics also relate to land, especially those in Nature and Water)

Rules for farmers and land managers - what you must do when you keep livestock or manage land.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

Hedgerow regulations

Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) regulations

PLAN POLICIES – LAND

(See the explanation of what the Policies are)

17. Geology and Soils

i) Sites of geological and geodiversity importance should be protected, and actively managed and enhanced where necessary.

ii) Soils should be protected, and soil degradation reversed by minimising erosion and compaction and increasing organic content.

iii) The sustainable management of soils should be a priority, to increase their overall health and to support nature recovery, natural water management, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and long-term productivity of land.

18. Land use

i) An optimum balance of land use should be sought to deliver the best overall benefits to society.

ii) The multi-functional benefits of land should be optimised.

19. Farming

i) Farmers should be supported to continue growing food, in ways which are sympathetic to nature, climate, water, heritage and landscape through profitable enterprises. Farming and land management practices should as far as possible be sympathetic to the purpose of the National Landscape and priorities of the Plan.

ii) The best and most versatile agricultural land should be protected from development.

iii) The Environmental Land Management scheme and other relevant government funding schemes should deliver Management Plan priorities as far as possible.

iv) Opportunities to develop and promote local food supply chains should be supported, and to increase local food resilience, opportunities to expand sustainable horticulture and vegetable production should be supported where possible.

20. <u>Agricultural development</u>

i) Agricultural and diversification development regulated through the planning system should be in keeping with the special qualities and other key characteristics of the National Landscape.

ii) New farm buildings should be of high design standards in keeping with the qualities of the landscape and published Agricultural Buildings guidance. The minimum of external artificial lighting should be erected, and where necessary, design lighting to be in accordance with the Bat Conservation Trust - Guidance Note GN08/23 Bats and Artificial Lighting At Night;

iii) Major development for intensive livestock including poultry should only be allowed where the stringent tests of exceptional circumstances in national policy are met. Criteria indicating that applications for intensive livestock developments should be refused include where:

- **the scale of new buildings would exceed the farmstead's existing built footprint;**
- **proximity to other developments would create significant cumulative adverse impacts;**
- **development is proposed in open field locations away from other farm buildings;**
- **significant earth-moving or bunding is proposed, or landscape features landscape features such as hedgerows, watercourses, trees, and ponds are affected;**
- **the topography means that the development will be easily visible from publicly accessible vantage points;**
- **harm to local amenity and landscape character cannot be satisfactorily mitigated;**
- **proximity to residential properties or other businesses (within 400m has potential to generate harmful impacts on amenity, as recognised in the restriction in this zone for agricultural permitted development);**
- **units would be accessed by narrow roads and/or heavy traffic movements would alter the character of rural lanes or damage hedges or verges.**

iv) Development of dwellings for rural workers should be allowed where:

- **the proposal can demonstrate an essential need for permanent accommodation at or near a place of work;**
- **no significant adverse impacts upon the local community, landscape, nature, heritage, natural beauty, and tranquillity can be demonstrated.**

21. <u>Forestry</u>

i) The optimum delivery of nature and public benefits from commercial forestry is encouraged.

Recommendations – Land

(See the explanation of what the Recommendations are)

L 1. Continue the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme and a land management advice function in the National Landscape Team.

L 2. Raise awareness of and champion agro-ecological and regenerative farming methods with a focus on soil health, and facilitate knowledge exchange for new sustainable farming methods.

L 3. Continue to adapt to rapidly evolving government policy for land and farming.

L 4. Support the development of farmer groups and clusters – including new and existing groups, linking and sharing experience.

L 5. Continue to make the case for extensive grazing as a sustainable use of hill land.

L 6. Support the special role of common land to deliver multiple benefits, and the continuation of common grazing and commoners associations.

L 7. Raise awareness of geology as the foundation of our landscape and of how knowledge of rocks helps to understand soil – its pH, hydrology, etc, and what kinds of habitats would naturally develop, to inform land management decisions.

L 8. Support for a 'nature positive' and 'carbon negative' food system, and local food initiatives – e.g. networking producers with outlets, developing short supply chains, marketing which draws on the special qualities of the area and the quality of production.

L 9. Seek to ensure an adequate and co-ordinated provision of farm advisers across all relevant topics, co-ordinated among a variety of providers.

L 10. Support the provision of training and skills relevant to agricultural transition (e.g. habitat creation, carbon footprinting) as well as traditional skills (e.g. hedge laying, drystone walling).

Aspirations - Land

(See the explanation of what the Aspirations are)

L(a) Secure DEFRA Landscape Recovery programme funding for appropriate areas of the Shropshire Hills.

L(b) Explore Maximum Sustainable Output approaches for farming, looking to lower inputs but maintain profitability.

L(c) Explore local application of principles of the new Land Use Framework to influence local land use decisions.

L(d) Apply holistic deer management strategies to enable woodland regeneration and build local venison supply chains.

L(e) Support local provision of Community Supported Agriculture, where customers build a link with a producer through subscription, and often also through events and volunteering.

L(f) Expand markets for woodland products to support sustainable woodland management.

L(g) Support techniques to reduce methane emissions from livestock.

L(h) Manage a priority suite of geological sites to a high standard with access and interpretation.

L(i) Foster a local food culture, promoting local food and drink to visitors and through suppliers, retailers, and hospitality businesses.

L(j) Develop a regular competition for a Shropshire Hills Local Food Hero – to reward and profile as a personal story in order to raise awareness of local food activity.