

A report on the delivery of a brief for research and recommendations into improving engagement with under-served groups in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Purpose of the report

- To provide an understanding of under-served groups in relation to the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- Make recommendations for engagement with them and improving services and provision by a range of partner organisations.

1. The background to this report
2. About AONBs and the Shropshire Hills AONB
3. The national opportunities and challenges to increase participation and diversity in the outdoors
4. The opportunities and challenges in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin to increase participation and diversity within the Shropshire Hills AONB
5. Recommendation themes, case studies and suggested actions
 - Communicating confidently
 - Maximising the health and well-being potential of the landscape
 - Increasing diversity in participation
 - Improving accessibility
 - Developing creative connections to the AONB's urban areas
 - Strengthening the AONB Partnership's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion
 - Aligning strategy and action with national policy and best practice
6. Appendices with additional information and links to background information that has been used.

The background to this report

An important and influential Landscapes Review, led by Julian Glover OBE was published in 2019. The Review recommended greater emphasis on ensuring National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) – known as designated landscapes - are enjoyed by everyone. The Review says that making this a reality should be proactively planned for by the designated landscape organisations given the known under-representation in ‘the great outdoors’ of a significant number of groups and communities.

This report has been commissioned by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership to better understand why some people are currently less likely to visit the AONB or get involved in the activities and groups connected with the area. The report has identified a number of recommendation themes and suggests actions linked to these that can be taken by individuals, teams, and organisations within the Partnership – as well as the Partnership as a whole.

Thinking about participation, this is seen principally in terms of people using the AONB for enjoyment, including visitors and local people. Participation also extends into more active involvement – such as taking part in organised events and volunteering. Volunteering can be doing things within the AONB, doing things with the AONB Partnership, or being involved in the running of the AONB Partnership.

Positive outcomes can be achieved by the AONB Partnership working through the report's recommendation themes and suggested actions.

These include -.

- Greater understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Greater understanding of the hard and soft barriers experienced by different communities to spending time in nature.
- Confident and inclusive decision making, activity and communications.
- The Shropshire Hills AONB being recognised as a welcoming and proactively inclusive place for everyone.
- A greater range of people involved in existing AONB programmes and projects.
- New outreach activities co-produced with the people who take part in them.
- Improved diversity in the people and communities who engage with and contribute to the review of the AONB Management Plan.
- Greater diversity within the governance structures that inform and decide actions within the AONB Partnership and its individual organisations.
- Greater diversity within the AONB Partnership's workforce.

The recommendation themes and actions are balanced between being realistic and pragmatic and aspirational and ambitious. Some activity can be integrated into current or planned work through redesign and the involvement of new partners.

However, additional resources and capacity will be needed to effectively deliver some of the activity at a pace that will make change feel tangible.

It is clear that public and third sector organisations – including those in the AONB Partnership are under considerable pressure as they recover from the pandemic in an environment of straightened budgets and a cost-of-living crisis.

This will not be a completely new scenario for longer serving officers and trustees, but it will require partnership working, creativity and proactive connections to communities to make the difference we all want to see.

Fundamentally, taking action that means visiting our historical rural villages, getting out into the wild outdoors, and connecting with nature is something that everybody can do in some way is the only option that will enable our beautiful landscapes to be valued and protected in the future.

This report is written in a way that is meant to be easy to read and understand. There are as few acronyms and as little jargon as possible. The layout is simple with clear headings, simple punctuation and short sentences.

The report also provides details of helpful resources such as books, reports, organisations, websites, and social media accounts that focus on promoting diversity and inclusivity in the outdoors.

About AONBs and the Shropshire Hills AONB

The Shropshire Hills AONB is one of 46 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They are supported as a network by the National Association for AONBs and are actively encouraged to work together to achieve shared outcomes.

AONBs protect some of our most important and sensitive habitats and store millions of tonnes of CO₂, which helps in our fight against global warming. The Shropshire Hills AONB contributes to this through its Peatlands Project in the Upper Clun area.

Over 19,000 kilometres of footpaths and bridleways pass through AONBs including National Trails. In the Shropshire Hills AONB you can travel along many rights of way and footpaths including the Jack Mytton Way, the Shropshire Way, Offa's Dyke Path, and the Cross Britain Way.

AONBs are visited by millions of people each year. The challenge is to take action that leads to greater diversity in these visitors and these beautiful places becoming welcoming and inclusive to everyone who would like to go there.

In 2023 the AONBs will be rebranded as National Landscapes and will continue the implementation of the recommendations made in the Landscapes Review. The name change is designed to create a more unified, coherent, and up to date brand, which will support a shift in how what is needed for nature and communities is delivered.

The Shropshire Hills AONB is a landscape nationally designated for its natural beauty, and covers 23% of Shropshire, from the Wrekin to the Clun Forest and from the Stiperstones to the Cleve Hills.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is the advisory body that furthers the purpose of the landscape designation to conserve and enhance its natural beauty. The Partnership is supported by a small staff team who are hosted by Shropshire Council. The team deliver some projects directly and also work through influencing roles, especially in support of the statutory AONB Management Plan. The Partnership has a legal status but few powers and does not own or manage any land itself.

The AONB is a geographically large area and includes some contrasting locations. The Wrekin is a well-known area on the edge of Telford which attracts a wide range of different visitors who enjoy the great views after climbing to the summit. There are many small towns and villages and remote and sparsely populated rural areas on its border with Wales.

About 19,000 people live in the small villages and hamlets within the AONB. Church Stretton with a transport hub for Carding Mill Valley is the main market town, and a number of market towns lie just outside the AONB boundary, which add to the population local to the area.

Shrewsbury and Telford – Shropshire's largest towns also lie close to the AONB. A greater number of people who live there could be visiting and doing things within the AONB than is currently the case.

There are some relatively deprived areas in many of the towns, along with perhaps less visible, but equally real, pockets of deprivation within the rural areas.

A recent survey of visitors to Church Stretton and to Carding Mill Valley showed that they were split by two-thirds as day visitors and one-third as people staying locally. Two thirds of people were return visitors and when asked to score out of 10 how likely they were to visit again the average score was 9.6.

It seems that the overwhelming majority of people who visit Church Stretton and Carding Mill Valley enjoy their visit and want to visit again. This is wonderful feedback, especially as it can be assumed that they will make word of mouth recommendations to others, leading to additional visitors. It is also a challenge if these returning and new visitors continue to focus their visits on Church Stretton and Carding Mill Valley – the 'honeypot' places in the AONB, which already can feel very busy.

Carrying out another visitor survey in 2023 would enable the Partnership to gain an understanding of the current visitor profiles and the patterns of their visits and would inform a review of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

The AONB Partnership actively supports sustainable tourism, which has social as well as environmental benefits. The AONB team manages the Long Mynd and Stiperstones Shuttle Bus service, which runs from May to September and receives very positive feedback from users.

The national opportunities and challenges to increase participation and diversity in the outdoors

Chapter 2 of the Landscapes Review – Landscapes for Everyone - makes specific proposals that would increase participation and diversity in the outdoors, and says;

'A lot more must be done to meet the needs of our many fellow citizens who do not know the countryside or do not always feel welcome in it but should be able to enjoy it. Our landscapes are open and free to all but can seem exclusive.'

Landscapes for Everyone proposals include -

- Proposal 7: A stronger mission to connect all people with our national landscapes, supported and held to account by the new National Landscapes Service
- Proposal 8: A night under the stars in a national landscape for every child
- Proposal 9: New long-term programmes to increase the ethnic diversity of visitors
- Proposal 10: Landscapes that cater for and improve the nation's health and wellbeing
- Proposal 11: Expanding volunteering in our national landscapes
- Proposal 12: Better information and signs to guide visitors
- Proposal 13: A ranger service in all our national landscapes, part of a national family

The Landscapes Review was completed 4 years ago. This was before the global pandemic which altered many people's attitudes to being outdoors, and just before the prominence and influence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the UK. The proposals made in the Review, particularly in relation to Landscapes for Everyone are more important than ever.

The pandemic and BLM brought into sharp focus the physical and mental health inequalities people from ethnic minority backgrounds endure. Post-pandemic, the importance of good mental health and its parity with physical health has greater recognition.

In addition to minority race and ethnicity communities, there are significant numbers of other groups of people who find it hard to have outdoor adventures or to connect with nature. These people are missing out on the many recognised benefits of spending time in the wild outdoors. There is a greater inequality because they are more likely to be experiencing emotional, mental, or physical health challenges, and the benefits of being more active in beautiful places would be significant.

People from communities who have historically experienced barriers that exclude them from spending time in the wild outdoors or connecting with nature are now breaking those barriers down, getting outside and inspiring others to do the same. They are brave pioneers. At best they can experience a lack of understanding of what they need to be comfortable outdoors, at worst they experience racism, prejudice, and a sense the outdoors is not a place for people 'like them'. Members of Muslim Hikers, Black Girls Hike, The Outdoor Lads, and Everybody Outdoors (plus size adventurers) are making themselves visible in some of our iconic landscapes, and not everybody appears to approve.

There are many reasons to be positive about a growing sense of equity and inclusiveness in the outdoors, but it can currently feel one-sided. The pioneers will sometimes feel that they are doing an unequal amount of work to achieve this through their activities and the showcasing of these. It is the responsibility of the national landscapes to proactively welcome different communities in as their interest in the outdoors and a wish to spend time there grows and demonstrate that they can be the best possible hosts and teachers.

The opportunities and challenges in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin to increase participation and diversity within the Shropshire Hills AONB

The 2021 census data for Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin seems to show that the majority of people who live here are alike when it comes to race, ethnicity and sexuality. However, we know from our own experience that we are not all alike and have different interests, gifts, and ways of doing things. People living in Shropshire, the people already spending time in the AONB and those wanting to visit will have a range of needs that the census data will not be able to show.

Relevant highlights of the census data for Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Council areas include –

The population of Shropshire has more people aged over 50 than the average across England and Wales and the median age in Shropshire is 48.

The population of Telford and Wrekin has a similar age profile to the England and Wales average and the median age is 39.

In Shropshire there has been a 5% increase in the number of people aged over 65 since the last census.

In Telford and Wrekin there has been a 3% increase in the number of people aged over 65 since the last census.

In Shropshire 18% of people said that their activities are limited a lot or a little by disability.

In Telford and Wrekin 20% of people said that their activities are limited a lot or a little by disability.

In Shropshire 96.7% of people say they are White.

In Telford and Wrekin 88% say they are White, 5.4% say they are Asian and 2.97% say they are Black.

In Shropshire 90.5% of people say they are heterosexual.

In Telford and Wrekin 90.18% say they are heterosexual.

It is of note that a greater percentage of people preferred to not state their sexuality than say that they are Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Trans-sexual (LGBT).

Across the two areas 90% of people said that they did not provide unpaid care to others, but with a total population of 509,200 people, the 10% who do are a significant community.

The headline census data gives a useful indication of some of Shropshire's diversity and how this has changed since 2011. A significant amount of insight and local knowledge is needed to bring the headlines to life – particularly as the people from minority backgrounds will be living over a large area and may not find it easy to create communities of geography. The AONB Partnership should embrace the aspiration of wanting to make everything it does universally welcoming and accessible to everyone regardless of which community they are part of.

Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Councils both produce Joint Strategic Needs Assessments to describe at a population level what the current and future health and wellbeing needs are of the people who live in the area. Shropshire is also creating more local profiles.

The JSNAs both highlight that the populations they are describing are getting older – there are more elderly people – and that the number of people described as inactive is increasing. Unless people can be supported to age well and to become more active, the pressure on our health and care services will continue to increase.

The AONB Partnership has an existing understanding of the groups of people known or believed to have barriers to using the Shropshire AONB for leisure, activities, or volunteering.

- People who are elderly
- People who are young
- People living with poor mental or physical health
- People living with complex disabilities
- People living with neurodiversity
- People from minority ethnic backgrounds
- People living on low incomes
- People without access to a car or easy access to public transport
- People who are socially isolated
- People experiencing barriers because of their religion
- People experiencing barriers because of their sexuality
- People experiencing barriers because of their gender
- People experiencing barriers because of their body shape

As human beings we are complicated creatures and will often have multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage. This is known as intersectionality and the obstacles it creates are often not understood in conventional ways of thinking. Intersectionality needs to be considered as part of the wider approach to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

One of the challenges facing the AONB Partnership is that it can be difficult for it to know everything that is going on within the AONB. It is likely that the range of people coming to the area to be active and explore is more diverse than is currently known.

It's important for the AONB Partnership to appreciate that it doesn't have to understand every community that wants to be part of the AONB in some way, but to work effectively in partnership with the people who do understand those communities.

Examples of hard and soft barriers that exclude people from the outdoors

Hard barriers -

- living far away from visitable outdoor spaces without transport
- not having the right outdoor clothing or equipment
- having limited finances to invest in transport or kit
- physical barriers such as stiles and paths that are inaccessible to wheelchairs
- not having easily readable and understandable information and signage
- not having accessible safe places to support people living with complex disabilities
- having caring responsibilities

Soft barriers -

- being told that because you have a disability being outdoors is too risky for you
- not knowing what it will be like when you get there
- not knowing what clothing and kit to wear and take
- not knowing what the weather will be like
- not knowing where to park if there isn't an organised car park
- not knowing to leave gates as you find them and to keep to paths
- not knowing to not light fires
- not having a map or knowing how to read one
- anxiety about how and where to go to the toilet
- anxiety about being visible when you don't think you're going to see anyone else who looks like you

- anxiety about being stared at because you're black, because you're plus size or because you're wearing a hijab
- anxiety about your wheelchair not getting through a gate or getting stuck on a path
- anxiety about there being somewhere to pray, wash or change

Again, it isn't the responsibility of the AONB Partnership to provide solutions to all these potential barriers. The Partnership should be aware of them as genuine barriers, understand them, have empathy with the people experiencing them and learn who to work with to identify actions that will reduce or remove them.

Recommendation themes, examples of good practice and suggested actions

The report has explored the strategic drivers for wanting to increase diversity in the outdoors and what is already being done at a national level. It has described Shropshire's profile, identified the groups of people who will find it more difficult to get outdoors and listed some of the barriers they are experiencing.

These insights and intelligence – including feedback from members of the AONB Partnership attached as Appendix 4 – along with examples of practice from elsewhere have informed the recommendation themes and suggested actions detailed below. A summary suggested action plan is attached as Appendix 2.

1 Communicating confidently

The ability to be able to communicate confidently and authentically on subjects that are complex and rooted in people's lived experiences that are different to our own is vital to being able to bring about informed change at an individual, team, organisation, and partnership level.

There are many opportunities and resources for those working in the outdoors to find out more about race, equity, diversity, and inclusion. There are communities of practice for outdoor practitioners who want to share their experiences and learn from others, there are toolkits, suggested reading lists and social media advice from people who are experts in diversity and inclusion.

As individuals and organisations we can use our social media accounts to connect with a vibrant and diverse community of people and groups who are breaking down barriers to getting outside. This is a great source of contemporary information and enables us to build connections. It helps us to feel part of a movement for change and more confident in our own public facing communications that promote our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Exploring, learning, and reflecting at an individual level is vital but the AONB Partnership cannot rely on individual members, or team members to make changes by themselves. It should create a new strategic approach to communication that resonates with our diverse communities and is more effective in engaging with people who currently might not know what an AONB is, let alone know that they might like to visit one in the Shropshire Hills.

Examples of best practice

All The Elements – a community for people committed to seeing more diversity in the outdoors. There are monthly on-line socials for leaders and practitioners - representatives of AONBs and National Parks already attend – and these are a great opportunity to talk to a range of people doing interesting things. There are opportunities to have one-to-one conversations with the founder, spin-off events, a directory and great resources.

<https://www.alltheelements.co>

YHA Outdoor Citizens Community of Practice – the Youth Hostel Association has created this community of practice that individuals and small groups can join and take part in regular facilitated conversations about increasing diversity in the outdoors. Larger organisations are currently not able to join but there is talk of a community of Resource Partners being created, which would be a great opportunity for the Partnership to connect with others in a supportive space.

<https://www.yha.org.uk/outdoor-citizens>

Purposeful Adventure Club - a space for people using the outdoors and adventure for change to get the support they need to get their message heard. This is a great resource for supporting people to be effective communicators and networkers through social media. Social media will be the most effective way of connecting with different communities to let them know about the AONB and why they should visit.

<https://www.frankiedewar.co/purposefuladventureclub>

This is a good time for the Partnership to review and update its current Communication and Engagement Strategy through the lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion. This could be supported by external people with a range of different experiences and voices.

The Partnership can also review its existing public facing literature and communication to identify where language and content can be updated to pro-actively demonstrate the Partnership's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Diversity and accessible language style guides should be used to ensure that language, content and writing style is appropriate and accessible.

Suggested actions

- Encourage everyone involved in the AONB Partnership to get involved in race, equity, diversity, and inclusion conversations to build an understanding of the historical and contemporary issues that impact the participation in land and nature by marginalised communities.
- Create a resource pack of information created by people who have felt marginalised from land use, land access, connections with nature and being active outdoors. These could include links to books, articles, websites, podcasts, communities of practice, webinars, and conferences.
- Create the formal and informal opportunities for people to talk about what they have discovered and the impact it has had on them.
- Identify ways that individual learning and development can be shared to influence the knowledge of teams, organisations, and the Partnership and how they communicate with others.
- Ringfence a small annual budget to invest in a resource library of books, subscriptions and attending events that will give the opportunity for Partnership members to build their race, equity, diversity, and inclusion knowledge and understanding.

- Review the Partnership Communications and Engagement Strategy through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion and update to include these Communicating Confidently actions.
- Seek external support from someone who has expertise in both diversity and the outdoors to review the current use of the AONB's social media channels. This would help connect with groups and individuals working to make the outdoors more inclusive and to create opportunities to welcome people to the AONB. It would also help to connect with people and groups working to make the outdoors more inclusive.
- Review and update the AONB's existing public facing literature and communication to identify where language and content can be updated to proactively demonstrate the Partnership's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Diversity and accessible language style guides should be used to ensure that language, content and writing style is appropriate and accessible.
- Use simpler language in all literature – particularly when information is created for members of the public. Use diversity and accessible language style guides to ensure that language, content and writing style is appropriate and accessible. Records of Partnership meetings are made in the style of Shropshire Council's formal meetings but accompanying reports and presentations should be easy to read and understand.

2 Maximising the health and well-being potential of the landscape

The population of Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin is becoming older – there are more elderly people living here. Everyone wants to age well and be healthy, active, and independent for as long as possible.

The number of people in the area described as inactive is increasing and we know that being sedentary is a serious health issue – our bodies and minds like being active and being outside – the benefits are enormous.

There is now greater understanding and recognition that medicine and clinical therapies alone cannot keep us well. Many people have known this for a long time. Our current health and care systems are not designed to treat and cure all the challenges modern life has created for our emotional, mental, and physical health and they do not have the capacity to do so.

Spending time in the natural environment can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity, and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

Examples of best practice

Bench to bench walks are being developed all over the country, including in Telford and Wrekin. It is a very simple and successful idea that works well in town centres or in parks but could be adapted to small wilder areas, with benches evolving into walls, stones, and tree stumps. A circular walking route that takes in as many benches (or other sitting down options) as possible is designed. The benches need to be quite close to each other to cater for all mobility needs. A map of the route is created showing as much detail as possible. In some projects some of benches are chatting benches, in other places GPs share the map with patients rehabilitating after surgery and use it as a tool to advise on distances to walk – building up the number of benches to conquer as time goes on.

<https://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk/resources/case-studies/cs063-act-cs-kirkby-stephen-bench-walks-2.pdf>

Wild Teams within Shropshire Council started originally as an opportunity for people being supported by Shropshire Council's south-east Community Mental Health Team to go outside and get involved in conservation volunteering. They would spend a day on Brown Clee cutting back trees, clearing vegetation and generally supporting the health of the landscape. Wild Teams are still running across Shropshire, albeit with fewer resources, and the different teams now include people referred from social prescribing, people who have self-referred and people living with learning disabilities. Many of the people taking part will be living with some kind of mental health illness or challenge. The teams are either doing in-season conservation work, or other outdoor activities. Wild Teams relies on organisations that own or manage land to work with them to provide volunteering opportunities. Their experience of working with organisations within the AONB Partnership is inconsistent – a consistent collaborative approach would be of enormous value.

Norfolk and Waveney MIND run a Nature Connect project that runs regular activities to help people living in urban areas develop a deeper contact with nature. There are various elements within the project including workshops and groups. Groups have guided tours of Wild Ken Hill, a farm in West Norfolk that has become familiar as a host for BBC Springwatch. Wild Ken Hill describes itself as a project to restore nature, fight climate change, grow healthy food and engage people with the natural environment.

A visit to Wild Ken Hill would feel very special, but there is well documented evidence that proves there is a positive impact on our mental health when we feel connected to nature in a range of ways including looking after window boxes, nature themed art and writing and even watching wildlife documentaries.

The Mental Health Foundation report, Nature – How Connecting with Nature Benefits our Mental Health, and the Nature Connectedness research of the University of Derby give greater insight.

Access to nature and green spaces is not equal and people living in poorer areas and people from minority ethnic communities often have less access to green space. This compounds health inequalities.

Social prescribing and 'green' social prescribing are now mainstream offers from our GPs and primary care. People are able to have a conversation with a Healthy Lives Adviser, which covers all areas of their health, wellbeing, interests, and the activities they like. People are then linked up with a community based group or activity that they think they will enjoy.

The evidence consistently shows that when someone is connected into their community successfully, they feel better and have fewer medical appointments.

In Shropshire mainstream social prescribing has always had a strong 'green' provision as it has a good choice of green space resources. Walking groups, growing projects and conservation volunteering are all popular activities.

One of the challenges for sustaining social prescribing is that it does not provide funding for activities. It has to rely on them having alternative forms of support and being able to take referrals.

The Partnership and the AONB are well placed to deliver and host activities linked to social prescribing and this links to the strategic proposal for designated landscapes to contribute to our health and wellbeing. However, funding and resourcing new activity will inevitably be a challenge.

The Partnership should explore the ways it can create an 'offer' to social prescribing practitioners that they can give to the people they are working with. This would be a way of supporting them to come to the AONB, spend time outdoors and connect with nature.

This offer could include creating small-scale accessible and attractive places for people to sit and enjoy being outside, detailing how to reach these places and creating easy-to-access resources that help people to connect with nature by identifying plants and bird calls so that know what they're looking at and listening to and why it's important to that place.

Projects or activities do not always need to have lots of additional funding – existing resources can be used creatively or reimaged as the bench to bench walks idea demonstrates.

Suggested actions

- Connect with the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin social prescribing programmes to understand their work and gain insight into what the people they are supporting are looking for.
- Use the insight from practitioners to start to design resources that will create opportunities for people to connect with nature – co-produce these with the people who are likely to use them. These could include accessible short walks with seated areas and information about the nature people will experience.
- Look for opportunities to strengthen connections and partner with local health and well-being services and programmes being clear what the AONB 'offer' can be.
- As a Partnership strengthen and develop connections with Shropshire Council's Wild Teams both to provide a consistent approach to volunteering opportunities and activities within the AONB.

3 Increasing diversity in participation in the AONB and AONB Partnership

To contribute to the creation of this report, Lovelyland described the level of detail it has to work at to support families to do good things outdoors.

Lovelyland is a community organisation based in Shrewsbury that does lots of work with members of the community – including families on low incomes – to be creative, grow plants and food, and connect with the outdoors. Most people would not be doing these things on their own.

Many people who do not have the experience of travelling to and enjoying being in the wild outdoors will have very low confidence levels in being able to do so. The challenges of supporting them do this and the detailed effort required cannot be underestimated.

Lovelyland often organises activities outside Shrewsbury – sometimes at Attingham Park and sometimes in Carding Mill Valley – that people travel to independently. People wanting to attend often experience the barriers described earlier in the report. They are anxious about going to an unknown place, they would like facilities like toilets, a changing space and a café and have a lot of questions about exactly where it is, what there is to do, what the environment will be like, what they should bring and what they should wear.

Lovelyland works one to one with families to reassure these anxieties, to provide information such as a video of travelling to the site with verbal directions, and to support on the day to get everyone there.

It cannot be underestimated how much support some people will need to become familiar with areas and activities and to build their confidence. This reinforces the argument for long-term programmes and funding that provide consistency and longevity. Short-term activities have a habit of coming to an end just as the people attending are getting use to them.

All the recommendation themes in this report are designed to contribute towards increasing diversity in participation in the AONB and the AONB Partnership. The recommendation theme specifically around increasing diversity in participation suggests a number of practical and proactive actions that the Partnership can take.

Committing to action and taking steps to make things actually happen is vital. We should not fall into the trap of not doing anything to increase diversity because we are worried it's not perfect or we will get it wrong in some way or we will offend someone.

We get things wrong all the time, the most important thing is that we are honest when we make unintentional mistakes or missteps, we learn from them, and we try not to repeat them. It is also important that we start small to learn and don't over promise and under deliver.

People from marginalised communities will sometimes have experience of being disappointed by the reality of something promised not matching what was described to them. This can actually increase the feeling of disengagement. They can also be delighted when something seemingly small but done really well turns out much better than they expected.

The act of designing and delivering activities and programmes that aim to increase diversity in participation has to involve the people we want to take part. We are not experts in other people's lives and making assumptions about what particular people want and how and when they want it usually results in failure.

We should stop thinking we are doing things 'for' people and instead think we are doing things 'with' people. The planning and design phases should be seen as an integral part of the activity and involve others in co-production right from the start.

This will require more resources, more time, and knowing who to ask to help, but the outcomes will be better, and the time spent getting to something finally happening can be really enjoyable and rewarding.

This approach will take time to implement, and the Partnership may decide to create a Participation Advisory Group to help. In the meantime there are a number of actions that can be taken forward straight away to promote the AONB as a welcoming place for visiting and volunteering.

The AONB Partnership runs popular Young Rangers and Green Leaders programmes in the AONB for a range of young people. Young Rangers has currently given about 100 young people the opportunity for fun, exploration, learning and adventure. There are area groups doing a range of activities linked to conservation and doing good things outdoors. The achievements of the young people are celebrated and recognised through the John Muir Award and the AQA Unit Award Scheme.

Green Leaders is the conservation, campaigning, and leadership project for 17 -21 year olds in the AONB. They are supported to take action through campaigns and projects, to be an advocate for their local green space or countryside and represent young people's priorities through the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership. As well as meeting other like-minded young people and working in a team to develop communication and leadership skills they can play an active role in supporting the work of the AONB Partnership and gain AQA qualifications.

Young Rangers is running more successfully than Green Leaders and there are a number of reasons for this – many out of the immediate control of the AONB Partnership. The impact of the pandemic on groups being able to meet in person has affected the development of Green Leaders. Young Rangers have been able to get going again post-pandemic – their age and meeting outside reduces any perceived risk of being in groups and the activities mirror other youth clubs and activities. Green Leaders as an older group has been more affected by behaviour change brought about by the pandemic and it seems that some young adults now feel more comfortable by themselves, in very small groups or doing things virtually.

The original design of Green Leaders is being adapted to increase participation and impact. Sessions are being delivered at the local college, there are plans to bring it closer to Young Rangers for practical activities and there are targeted activities taking place in the college setting.

Hearing the voice of young people in the development of the AONB is a priority for the Partnership. Making this happen in a sustained way will be a challenge in the context and environment of the Shropshire Hills. Successful youth engagement work requires consistent leadership, significant on-going resources, and sustainable funding. Successful projects often have a physical base that young people are invested in. This creates an environment where young people can just be young people, where equipment and resources can be stored, and spin-off activities can take place.

When these things are in place and trust is built then 'real work' can begin. Young people are in a position to contribute towards and influence things like management plans or what is discussed at Partnership meetings. Those things then start to evolve to reflect their ideas and tangible change starts to appear.

This model doesn't just apply to young people – it applies to everyone who doesn't fit into the current way of doing things. The Partnership should appreciate the extent it will have to adapt AONB activity, business, and governance to achieve the following outcomes – lifted from the longer list earlier in the report - and devote time and energy to working out how to do things differently.

- A greater range of people involved in existing AONB programmes and projects.
- New outreach activities co-produced with the people who take part in them.
- Improved diversity in the people and communities who engage with and contribute to the review of the AONB Management Plan.

- Greater diversity within the governance structures that inform and decide actions within the AONB Partnership and its individual organisations.
- Greater diversity within the AONB Partnership workforce.

This is where the difference between equity and equality comes into sharp focus along with a realisation of how much change is needed. The Partnership should be aspirational and ambitious, but also realistic and pragmatic – being open and transparent about the progress it is able to make. The Partnership should work closely with the other designated landscapes who will be thinking about exactly the same challenging issues at this time of strategic change.

Examples of good practice

To celebrate Refugee Week, which had the theme of ‘healing, exploring what it means to heal from trauma and the ways we can support each other’ Croydon Voluntary Action received funding from the Alpkitt Foundation to organise a trip into the South Downs National Park for local asylum seekers. They enjoyed a hike and the positive impact of fresh air and open spaces on the mental and physical health.

Peak District Mosaic have a project called Championing National Parks for Everyone. They recently put out a call for individuals to be part of their trustee team – proactively appealing to those who are passionate about providing opportunities for people from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities to participate in the National Park.

Komoot is a route planning and navigation app. It allows people to plan hiking, running or biking routes on their phone or computer that they can share and use and will also record the routes people complete so that they can be seen and used by others. It is creating a huge collection of routes with lots of information that people can look at to help them decide where to go to and what to do.

Komoot is doing a lot of work with communities that have been historically underserved in the outdoors and the app is becoming popular with them as a route planner and recorder.

The Shropshire Hills AONB has its own collection on Komoot, which showcases the area with photos, information, and maps. It includes the details of some of the most popular walks and is a great advert for the AONB. By interacting with the app and creating new and interesting content the Partnership could engage with a diverse range of visitors and potential visitors to showcase the whole of the area and build on the current collection.

Suggested actions

- The Partnership should hold a dedicated session to discuss this report, consider the impact of the recommendations and suggested actions and make clear decisions about what the next steps should be.
- Start working towards the creation of a ‘Participation Advisory Group’ (could evolve from the conversations with groups about accessibility) made up of representatives of the under-served communities detailed earlier in the report, that can co-produce the actions the Partnership wants to take to increase diversity in participation.
- Understand what the barriers to volunteering could be and what the Partnership is able to do to mitigate these to develop equity in its volunteering opportunities.
- Plan for what comes after Young Rangers and Green Leaders to continue the proactive involvement of young people. Consider long-term funding for consistency and sustainability.

- Build connections with outdoor-interest communities of people outside Shropshire who are less represented in the outdoors, e.g. Black, Muslim, LGBT, disabled, plus-sized and proactively invite them to come and spend time in the Shropshire Hills.
- Proactively connect to celebration weeks or months, e.g. Pride Month, Carers Week, YHA Festival of Walking and promote the AONB's support and what it can offer as part of these celebrations.
- Use Employer Supported Volunteering schemes to give people the opportunity to learn something new in their work time and bring that back to the Partnership. The AONB team could use their Shropshire Council allowance to build relationships with groups or spend time in projects in other AONBs. The Partnership could reach out to companies in or outside Shropshire that are looking for opportunities with an offer for staff to use their ESV days in the AONB doing conservation work, hiking, or biking and builds their knowledge and familiarity.
- Work with Komoot to develop the current Shropshire Hills AONB collection into an AONB organisation collection that is something more interactive and dynamic and creates a walk, hike, bike resource library that potential visitors can be signposted to.
- Create a clear and equitable pathway showing how people can move through visiting to volunteering to greater involvement in the Partnership (think about equity and reciprocity to enable this).
- Carry out a visitor survey in 2023 to gain a post-pandemic understanding of visitor profiles and the pattern of their visits.
- Gather insight and intelligence about who is coming to spend time in the AONB in groups, or with businesses. Ask for high level feedback from existing contacts through surveys.
- Bring together a working group of countryside site providers in the AONB to work together on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

4 Improving accessibility

Some of the organisations within the AONB Partnership will already be taking positive action to improve accessibility by removing barriers that create disadvantage. Their duty under the Equality Act 2010 is to make reasonable adjustments. A reasonable adjustment can be changing the way things are done, changing a physical feature, or providing extra aids or services.

Regardless of duties under the Equality Act all Partnership members will want to see barriers removed wherever possible to improve accessibility within the AONB. Despite having numerous well-loved and wonderful features, the area also has the characteristics of an inaccessible landscape and minimal infrastructure to enable easy and comfortable access for everyone. For some people this will be part of the AONB's attraction, but for others it will make it a no-go area.

Enabling physical and sensory access to the wild outdoors in the AONB landscape is at the heart of improving accessibility, but it has to be much more than that.

There should be future opportunities for an interpretation and reimagining of the iconic Shropshire Hills experience of sitting on a hill in the heather looking at the ponies and listening to skylarks above and curlews in the distance, that can be enjoyed by everyone.

To help understand these issues the Partnership could invite a range of people representing the groups detailed earlier in the report, with lived experience of day to day barriers to accessibility to describe how they would plan and execute a visit to the AONB.

These conversations would be likely to cover –

- The information about the AONB that you can look at before you travel to decide where is going to be suitable to visit.
- Reassurance whether there will be people available if needed to advise and support.
- What the facilities such as toilets and cafes are and where they are.
- How you can travel to the AONB and how accessible transport is.
- Where you can park your car that is flat, spacious and is close to facilities.
- Once you're in the AONB what the design of paths is, and are there obstacles such as walls, fences, streams, hills, steps, and vegetation to be negotiated.
- The information available once you're in the AONB – either landscape interpretation or practical information – the different formats it is available in.
- The availability of mobile phone reception.
- The options for travelling around the area – how to get back to your homeward transport.

Many issues and potential actions would be recorded, which could feel overwhelming to take forward, but there would be a greater understanding in the Partnership and potentially a willingness from the invited people to stay involved as an advisory group or sounding board to continue the conversations.

Proposal 13 in Chapter 2 of the Landscapes Review – Landscapes for Everyone is 'A ranger service in all our national landscapes, part of a national family'. The presence of a friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable person within the AONB would have a positive impact on reducing people's perceived accessibility barriers.

Examples of good practice

Attingham Park, run by the National Trust has worked with West Midlands Autism to create sensory maps and bags of resources to help people living with autism have a more enjoyable visit. The maps are clear about what kind of a place each area within the Park is, enabling people and their families or carers to choose to spend time in the areas that will bring them the most enjoyment.

Lake District National Park has just opened the first section of a brand-new £1.45 million multi-user trail that will go along the western shore of Windermere between Newby Bridge and the YMCA at Lakeside. The accessible West Windermere Way one mile route starts at the Swan Hotel in Newby Bridge and goes to the Lakeside Ferry Terminal. Once fully completed in the summer of 2023, this path will go to the YMCA with the aim of linking to the existing Windermere West Shore Way that goes to Wray Castle. The route consists of locally sourced stone paths and boardwalk sections ensuring it is suitable for some wheelchair users, bikes, horses, and families including little legs and pushchairs. The route will follow the lakeshore in some areas and provide an off-road link to key visitor attractions in the Newby Bridge and Lakeside area meaning people can stay longer in the area and explore the area without their car.

<https://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk/aboutus/media-centre/latest-news/news-releases/new-route-makes-it-easier-to-enjoy-the-scenic-west-shore-of-windermere>

The Long Mynd and Stiperstones Shuttle Bus operates in the Shropshire Hills from May to September/October and is very popular with the people who use it to get them to the starting point of their day out or return them to their homeward transport. It undoubtedly enables people who perhaps are not able to walk as far as they were once able to have a wonderful day out in the hills and explore new places confident that they will be within their capabilities to get home safely.

"I just wanted to say thank you for the wonderful shuttle bus service, which last weekend took us to the Stiperstones one day and the Long Mynd the next. As we don't have a car, we certainly could never have walked on the Stiperstones ridge without the help of the bus, and the top of the Long Mynd would have been quite a stretch! This is an amazing service for tourists and locals, please keep it going."

This report has benefitted from the insight and experience of people who have direct experience of supporting people with complex and severe disabilities and who love the outdoors.

There is a small organisation based in Cumbria called Outdoors is for everyone. They champion the 'rights' of people living with disabilities or neurodiversity to be active in outdoors – kayaking, rock climbing, hiking, biking, or swimming.

Outdoors is for everyone is the kind of organisation the Partnership would want to work with when thinking about improving physical access to the landscape to tap into their knowledge and lived experiences. Here are some of their thoughts -

Routes that are flat and straight will have good visibility and even if they are used by vehicles they will be accessible. Routes on disused railway lines are potentially good but if they are described as accessible, they need to be regularly checked to ensure that they remain so.

When describing the grade, condition, and quality of paths try to use consistent language and include as much detail as possible, including about the presence of tree roots that are difficult for visually impaired people to see and negotiate.

People who are living with severe autism will be better able to enjoy being outdoors if they are somewhere quiet, safe, and little used by other people. Families and carers would appreciate knowing about these places in ways that are appropriate and sensitively communicated.

Create accessible 'micro-spaces' that have some shelter, seats, a view, and some information to invite people to sit, look and just enjoy being in the landscape. That is all that some people want and need. Find ways to promote these with the people who will benefit most from them.

These are some of the thoughts of a learning disability and autism champion who also knows a lot about the outdoors –

Having days out in nature or spending a significant amount of time outdoors is extremely challenging for people living with complex or severe disabilities and their families. This is an example of health inequalities where the people who could feel the most benefit from nature connection and being in a different landscape are the least likely to be able to do so.

A significant barrier for some people is that they need well changing facilities and somewhere clean, quiet, and safe and have food and drink. The availability of these disability hubs or changing places can make huge difference to people's day to day lives.

Countryside site providers within the AONB should use information and signage to proactively welcome people with disabilities. This could include having the information about where to go, what to do and what facilities there are, available in easy read versions. Local organisations like Taking Part, Parents And Carers Council (PACC) or Parents Opening Doors (PODS) should be able to help with the development of this.

The availability of electric off-road wheelchairs and adapted electric off-road bikes would make accessible paths even more accessible. The Partnership could make connections with organisations that already have these, and work together to design suitable routes. Attingham Park is developing something similar and there is potential to develop on-road and off-road routes that are promoted together.

The Portway on the Long Mynd was one of the first places that Darren Edwards the disabled adventurer from Shropshire went to after the life changing accident that left him using a wheelchair to get around. He knew that it was somewhere wild where he could move independently even in his basic wheelchair. Fast forward a few years and Darren has just completed a marathon distance on every continent and ascended Snowdon on his adapted recumbent bike.

Suggested actions

- The Partnership should hold a session with a range of people representing the under-served groups detailed earlier in the report, who have lived experience of day to day barriers to accessibility to gain greater understanding of how they would plan and execute a visit to the AONB.
- Commit in principle to the creation of an 'engagement ranger' role within the AONB Team, show support for this development within the NAAONB, and move to a state of readiness should the proposal become a reality.
- Identify potential sites for creating accessible simple 'micro-spaces' that enable people to be outside somewhere lovely and connect with nature
- Make connections with the organisations that represent young people with disabilities or neurodiversity and their families to better understand what they would like to be doing in the AONB and what their barriers are.
- Identify organisations that have adapted wheelchairs and bikes – Cycling 4 All Shropshire in an example - and partner with them to firstly create accessible routes within the AONB and secondly support people to come and use them.
- Look to other designated landscapes to see if they have solutions to increasing the amount of mobile or temporary toilets and refreshment facilities and think how these could be implemented in Shropshire.
- Work up these insights and intelligence into a development plan to increase accessibility and to inform options for the use of Access for All funding for 2024/25.
- Be ambitious for longer term change and start to plan and explore potential funding sources for large scale capital projects that will increase accessibility. Examples are creating a significant amount of accessible route designed to be supportive of reduced mobility, physical and learning disabilities and neurodiversity, and the development of changing places in locations that complement the places within the AONB where it is practical for people with disabilities to visit.

5 Developing creative connections to the AONB's urban areas

There are a number of ways the Partnership could reach out to the people living Shropshire's many market towns and larger towns to build an awareness of the AONB – some of these are within other recommendations. This recommendation focuses on the development of creative projects that connect urban areas with the AONB designed to be interesting and attractive to people who are currently less likely to be connected to nature and their local wild landscapes.

Suggested actions

- Create a vision for these activities including the problem we're trying to solve, why it's important to solve it, what the Partnership can offer and what it is looking for in partners.
- Seek out the organisations and groups that the Partnership could work with to develop 'creative nature connections' activities or programmes and seek funding for these.
- Make connections with the built environment by working in partnership on initiatives such as Window Wanderers - www.windowwanderland.co.uk

- Continue to support and participate in the national development of arts projects within AONBs aimed at broadening engagement and participation.
- Make opportunities for people to explore their connection to the AONB through writing and art competitions. Work in partnership to proactively encourage a wider range of people – including young people - to get involved.
- Continue to support and participate in the national development of arts projects within AONBs aimed at broadening engagement and participation
- Work with Shropshire Council's Culture, Leisure, and Tourism (CLT) colleagues to explore projects, connections, knowledge, and mutually beneficial opportunities for working together.

Example of good practice

identity on tyne provides a supportive and encouraging space for writers and artists of colour in the North East of England. It worked in partnership with Northumberland National Park, Harehope Quarry Project, Durham Wildlife Trust, and Northumberland Wildlife Trust to offer the opportunity for four writers of colour to be in residence in the North East countryside.

Over a period of 20 days, each writer engaged with specific natural heritage sites as well as the visitors, staff, and volunteers, exploring the area's industrial and social heritage, and how people's actions and events have helped shape the landscape. They collected stories, information, and experiences.

With additional individual writing time, each writer produced a piece of written work that was shared at a public event at their given site as well as a regional cultural gathering with Black British Nature writers.

The aims of the project were -

- to provide professional opportunities for emerging and established writers of colour in the region to develop their expertise as well as raise their profile
- to promote the development of a relationship with regional natural heritage by people of colour
- to remove some of the barriers which prevent people of colour from venturing into the British countryside
- to develop a language and share our stories of experiences with nature
- to promote the protection and stewardship of the land amongst diverse groups of people

<https://blacknatureinresidence.wordpress.com/blog-feed/>

6 Strengthening the AONB Partnership's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion

In an evolving society it can be a challenge for individual equity, diversity and inclusion knowledge and practice to keep up to date.

Example of good practice

Sustain is an alliance of organisations and communities working together for a better system of food, farming and fishing systems and cultivating the movement for change. Over the last few years Sustain has made concerted efforts to improve diversity and eliminate anti-racism within the organisation, the alliance, and the networks it is working with.

It has a web page that describes the issues it is tackling and shares what it is doing to improve diversity and food justice.

Actions include training for organisation leaders, an audit of their policies, setting up an internal diversity team, creating a diversity style guide, creating a spheres of influence model to implement change and publishing quarterly report on their diversity progress.

Many of the organisations within the Partnership will already have their own equity, diversity and inclusion resources. For example, the AONB Team is hosted by Shropshire Council that has internal and public facing policies and statements.

The National Trust is very clear about what it is doing to address equity and increase diversity and inclusion and has it's Everyone Welcome strategy that includes actions for all parts of the organisation.

Members of individual organisations should be familiar their own resources and also be interested in what else has been created by other Partnership members.

There is the opportunity for the Partnership to build on these – particularly with the style and content of public facing resources to demonstrate its collective commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Sharing what is currently available as good practice within the Partnership will assist with filling any gaps in resources, avoid starting from scratch with new resources and creating consistency.

Community Resource (CR) provides infrastructure support to voluntary and community groups in Shropshire. Smaller groups who are Partnership members, or who are working within the AONB are able to ask for support with their diversity and inclusion policies and induction and training resources for trustees, staff, and volunteers.

It is recognised that the organisational teams within the Partnership are time, resource, and capacity pressured. Whilst additional capacity won't be easily created to positively respond to the need to build inclusion in the AONB, failures in communication or the ceasing of activity that is building inclusion will have the effect of reducing diversity and increase the marginalisation of people who are unable to get involved by themselves.

There is a risk in this resource-pressured times that some people are only able get involved in the AONB because the person representing them knows someone within a partner team

and can make things happen through existing relationships. New people or new groups wouldn't have this advantage and could struggle to make the necessary connections and build positive partnerships.

Suggested actions

- Create capacity in the Partnership's organisations and teams to facilitate requests from under-served people for support with visiting or volunteering.
- Create a cross-organisational equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) group within the Partnership.
- Use the ED&I Group to share and learn from examples of good practice, internal policies and governance, resources, public facing ED&I statements.
- Use the learning from the group to update individual organisation resources, where this is practical, and create the resources that are needed by the Partnership.
- Ensure that consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion is built into project planning

7 Aligning strategy and action with national policy and best practice

The National Association of AONBs (NAAONB) published a prospectus in October 2022 called National Landscape – The Designation for the 21st Century and Beyond. The prospectus is a proactive and energetic follow on document to the NAAONB's response to both the Landscapes Review itself and the government's response to the Landscapes Review.

The introduction to the prospectus says -

'The Landscapes Review recommended that AONBs be: 'Strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources; and renamed National Landscapes.' The Government response provides the compass directing change that will deliver for nature, climate, economy, and a greater diversity of people. This prospectus sets out a vision of what this will feel like and the roadmap to get there, including a renewal of the AONB mission, new powers to create sustainable communities driven by the democratically derived management plan, representative and expert governance, and investment in delivery.'

It describes the AONB Network's offer to the nation - 'beautiful world class landscapes delivering on the global challenges of the 21st century: leading the fight against climate change; feeding the nation while restoring nature; ensuring clean, plentiful drinking water; safeguarding against drought and flooding; growing a sustainable, resilient economy to protect rural communities from economic shocks; and delivering health, wellbeing, and employment opportunities to all people.

The prospectus also describes the future vision for AONBs –

- AONBs relaunched as National Landscapes, providing a 'moment' to demonstrate Government's commitment to recovering nature, tackling climate change, and expanding access to improve health and wellbeing.
- National Landscapes are recognised nationally and internationally as setting the standard for designated landscapes.
- The values underpinning National Landscapes: inclusion, expertise, collaboration, innovation, and accountability drive all the actions of the network of National Landscapes.
- The modern look and feel presents a unified offer which unlocks green finance from organisations who have a clear understanding of the scale of National Landscapes and what they do and stand for.

- Younger people and previously underrepresented groups are engaged with and aware of these places and they are a destination of choice. This feeling of belonging has resulted in wider representation on teams and Boards.
- More consistent visual identity and a higher profile means National Landscapes have a familiar feel, people know what to expect from a visit and plan trips around visiting National Landscapes across the country.

The Landscapes Review, the Government's response to the review and the NAAONB prospectus are clear that the National Landscapes must become more diverse if they are to survive and thrive. To achieve greater diversity they will need to plan to be inclusive and equitable.

Suggested actions

- The AONB Partnership plans and strategies to increase participation and diversity reflect the proposals from the Landscapes Review 2019.
- The AONB Partnership remains an active member of NAAONB to ensure that the learning and best practice in equity, diversity and inclusion is accessed and understood.
- Encourage participation in any local NAAONB briefings that take place to share their rebranding plans and that ask for people's input into what happens next.

Additional information and links to background information that has been used in the report

Appendices

Appendix 1: Logic model broadly linking suggested actions to outcomes

Appendix 2: Summary of recommendation themes and suggested actions

Appendix 3: List of people and organisations who contributed to this report

Appendix 4: Feedback from AONB Partnership meeting 23 April 2023

Appendix 5: Suggested resources for learning more about equity, diversity, and inclusion

Appendix 6: Directory of local resources

Links to information held online

Census 2021 data

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps>

Shropshire Council Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/public-health/joint-strategic-needs-assessment-jsna/>

Telford and Wrekin Council Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

https://www.telford.gov.uk/info/20121/telford_and_wrekin_insight

Landscapes for life The National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

<https://landscapesforlife.org.uk>

Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>

Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs: government response

Improving engagement in the Shropshire Hills AONB Curious Birds April 2023

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/landscapes-review-national-parks-and-aonbs-government-response/landscapes-review-national-parks-and-aonbs-government-response>

Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs: NAAONB response
Official Papers: National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
(landscapesforlife.org.uk)

National Academy of Social Prescribing
<https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/green-social-prescribing-project/>

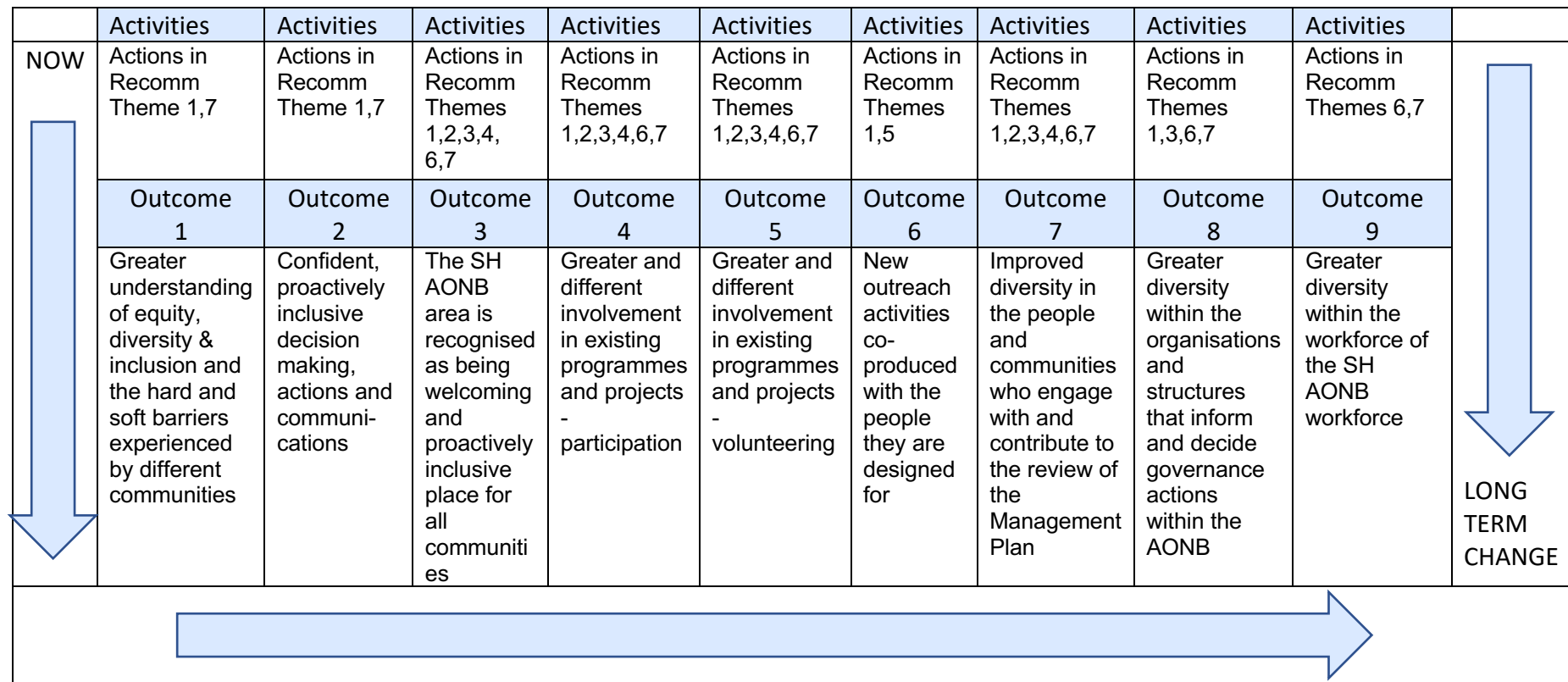
The Green Social Prescribing Programme to tackle and prevent mental ill health –
Programme update after the first year of implementation

Mental Health Foundation
Nature – How connecting with nature benefits our mental health
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf>

University of Derby – Nature Connectedness Research Group
<https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/>

Komoot
<https://www.komoot.com/discover>

Appendix 1: Logic model broadly linking suggested actions to outcomes



Appendix 2: Summary of recommendations and suggested actions

Action Number	Recommendation theme	Suggested actions
1a	Communicating confidently	Encourage everyone involved in the AONB Partnership to get involved in race, equity, diversity, and inclusion conversations to build an understanding of the historical and contemporary issues that impact the participation in land and nature by marginalised communities.
1b		Create a resource pack of information created by people who have felt marginalised from land use, land access, connections with nature and being active outdoors. These could include links to books, articles, websites, podcasts, communities of practice, webinars, and conferences.
1c		Create the formal and informal opportunities for people to talk about what they have discovered and the impact it has had on them.
1d		Identify ways that individual learning and development can be shared to influence the knowledge of teams, organisations, and the Partnership and how they communicate with others.
1e		Ringfence a small annual budget to invest in a resource library of books, subscriptions and attending events that will give the opportunity for Partnership members to build their race, equity, diversity, and inclusion knowledge and understanding.
1f		Review the Partnership Communications and Engagement Strategy through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion and update to include these Communicating Confidently actions.
1g		Seek external support from someone expert in both diversity and the outdoors to review the current use of the AONB's social media channels. This is to maximise opportunities to connect with groups and individuals working to make the outdoors more inclusive and to create opportunities to welcome people to the AONB. It is also to connect with people and groups working to make the outdoors more inclusive
1h		Review and update the AONB's existing public facing literature and communication to identify where language and content can be updated to pro-actively demonstrate the Partnership's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Diversity and accessible language style guides should be used to ensure that language, content and writing style is appropriate and accessible.

1i		Use simpler language in all literature – particularly when information is created for members of the public. Use diversity and accessible language style guides to ensure that language, content and writing style is appropriate and accessible. Records of Partnership meetings are made in the style of Shropshire Council’s formal meetings but accompanying reports and presentations should be easy to read and understand.
2a	Maximising the health and well-being potential of the landscape	Connect with the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin social prescribing programmes to understand their work and gain insight into what the people they are supporting are looking for.
2b		Use the insight from practitioners to start to design resources that will create opportunities for people to connect with nature – co-produce these with the people who are likely to use them. These could include accessible short walks with seated areas and information about the nature people will experience.
2c		Look for opportunities to strengthen connections and partner with local health and well-being services and programmes being clear what the AONB ‘offer’ can be.
2d		As a Partnership strengthen and develop connections with Shropshire Council’s Wild Teams both to provide a consistent approach to volunteering opportunities and activities within the AONB.
3a	Increasing diversity in participation in the AONB and AONB Partnership	The Partnership should hold a dedicated session to discuss this report, consider the impact of the recommendations and suggested actions and make clear decisions about what the next steps should be.
3b		Start working towards the creation of a ‘Participation Advisory Group’ (could evolve from the conversations with groups about accessibility) made up of representatives of the under-served communities detailed earlier in the report, that can co-produce the actions the Partnership wants to take to increase diversity in participation.
3c		Consider what reciprocity for volunteering time and energy could look like and whether it’s a route the Partnership would like to explore to develop equity in its volunteering opportunities.
3d		Plan for what comes after Young Rangers and Green Leaders to continue the proactive involvement of young people. Consider long-term funding for consistency and sustainability.
3e		Build connections with outdoor-interest communities of people outside Shropshire who are less represented in the outdoors, e.g. Black, Muslim, LGBT, disabled, plus-sized and proactively invite them to come and spend time in the Shropshire Hills.

3f		Proactively connect to celebration weeks or months, e.g. Pride Month, Carers Week, YHA Festival of Walking and promote the AONB's support and what it can offer as part of these celebrations.
3g		Use Employer Supported Volunteering schemes to give people the opportunity to learn something new in their work time and bring that back to the Partnership. The AONB team could use their Shropshire Council allowance to build relationships with groups or spend time in projects in other AONBs. The Partnership could reach out to companies in or outside Shropshire that are looking for opportunities with an offer for staff to use their ESV days in the AONB doing conservation work, hiking, or biking and builds their knowledge and familiarity.
3h		Work with Komoot to develop the current Shropshire Hills AONB collection into an AONB organisation collection that is something more interactive and dynamic and creates a walk, hike, bike resource library that potential visitors can be signposted to.
3i		Create a clear and equitable pathway showing how people can move through visiting to volunteering to greater involvement in the Partnership (think about equity and reciprocity to enable this).
3j		Carry out a visitor survey in 2023 to gain a post-pandemic understanding of visitor profiles and the pattern of their visits.
3k		Gather insight and intelligence about who is coming to spend time in the AONB in groups, or with businesses. Ask for high level feedback from existing contacts through surveys.
3l		Hold a dedicated session to discuss this report, consider the impact of the recommendations and suggested actions and make clear decisions about what the next steps should be.
3m		Bring together a working group of countryside site providers in the AONB to work together on equity, diversity, and inclusion.
4a	Improving accessibility	The Partnership should hold a session with a range of people representing the under-served groups detailed earlier the report, who have lived experience of day to day barriers to accessibility to gain greater understanding of how they would plan and execute a visit to the AONB.
4b		Commit in principle to the creation of 'engagement ranger' roles within the AONB Team, show support for this development within the NAAONB, and move to a state of readiness should the proposal become a reality.
4c		Identify potential sites for creating accessible simple 'micro-spaces' that enable people to be outside somewhere lovely and connect with nature.

4d		Make connections with the organisations that represent young people with disabilities or neurodiversity and their families to better understand what they would like to be doing in the AONB and what their barriers are.
4e		Identify organisations that have adapted wheelchairs and bikes – Cycling 4 All Shropshire in an example - and partner with them to firstly create accessible routes within the AONB and secondly support people to come and use them.
4f		Look to other designated landscapes to see if they have solutions to increasing the amount of mobile or temporary toilets and refreshment facilities and think how these could be implemented in Shropshire.
4g		Work up these insights and intelligence into a development plan to increase accessibility and to inform options for the use of Access for All funding for 2024/25.
4h		Be ambitious for longer term change and start to plan and explore potential funding sources for large scale capital projects that will increase accessibility. Examples are creating a significant amount of accessible route designed to be supportive of reduced mobility, physical and learning disabilities and neurodiversity, and the development of changing places in locations that complement the places within the AONB where it is practical for people with disabilities to visit.
5a	Developing creative connections to the AONB's urban areas	Create a vision for these activities along with what's the problem we're trying to solve, why it's important to solve it, what the Partnership can offer and what it is looking for in partners.
5b		Seek out the organisations and groups that the Partnership could work with to develop 'creative nature connections' activities or programmes and seek funding for these.
5c		Make connections with the built environment by working in partnership on initiatives such as Window Wanderers - www.windowwanderland.co.uk
5d		Make opportunities for people to explore their connection to the AONB through writing and art competitions. Work in partnership to proactively encourage a wide range of people outside the AONB – including young people - to get involved.
5e		Continue to support and participate in the national development of arts projects within AONBs aimed at broadening engagement and participation
5f		Work with Shropshire Council's Culture, Leisure and Tourism (CLT) colleagues to explore projects, connections, knowledge and mutually beneficial opportunities for working together.

6a	Strengthening the AONB Partnership's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion	Create capacity in the Partnership's organisations and teams to facilitate requests from under-served people for support with visiting or volunteering.
6b		Create a cross-organisational equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) group within the Partnership.
6c		Use the ED&I Group to share and learn from examples of good practice, internal policies and governance, resources, public facing ED&I statements.
6d		Use the learning from the group to update individual organisation resources, where this is practical, and create the resources that are needed by the Partnership.
6e		Ensure that consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion is built into project planning
7a	Aligning strategy and action with national policy and best practice	The AONB Partnership plans and strategies to increase participation and diversity reflect the proposals from the Landscapes Review 2019.
7b		The AONB Partnership remains an active member of NAAONB to ensure that the learning and best practice in equity, diversity and inclusion is accessed and understood.
7c		Encourage participation in any local NAAONB briefings that take place to share their rebranding plans and that ask for people's input into what happens next.

Appendix 3: Feedback from AONB Partnership meeting 23 April 2023

Activity	How can this be promoted with people from different backgrounds?	Hard barriers	Soft barriers	Potential solutions
Visiting and walking in the AONB. Thinking about a family with a disabled child with complex needs	Missing: Changing Place (more than a disabled toilet). Places to eat: children who need to be fed through a tube Language: reasonable adjustments	Lack of disability hubs, no changing places for adults, nowhere to feed a disabled child	Language, no easy read options, no proactive welcome for disabled families	Provision of 2 disability hubs within the AONB Off road wheelchairs Electric adapted bikes Information in easy read – where to go and facilities available Information for the public about hidden disabilities
Wildlife watching and foraging in the hills	Providing guided groups to help them know where to go, what to look for, what is safe to do. Advertising such activities to wide audiences – trying to show it's open to all.	Knowledge of where to go and what to look for. Accessibility – nature reserves May not have public transport directly to them Equipment e.g. binoculars	Confidence in feeling they are safe to go to remote places looking for wildlife. Foraging – worry about natural food items being safe/ culturally acceptable to try.	Promotion of the joy wildlife watching can bring – linking it what they see in the media and that wildlife (and foraging) is out there and open to all. Maximise social media to different audiences and younger people.
Walking	Pictorial examples showing people from varied backgrounds enjoying the landscape.	Hills, parking, public transport, poor signage, very poor wheelchair access.	Not seeing anyone like yourself, no groups from your home to join	Better pictorial posters showing numerous groups enjoying hills. Volunteers advertise to take groups out. Guided walks.
Conservation work in Rectory Woods	Promotion using local radio, poster in places of worship	Language, working with people of different ages	Being judged, how to share own ideas, daytime group meet ups	Understanding of the group leader to be open to other people's thoughts and ideas and ways that things can be done.

Bio-blitz or more targeted wildlife survey	Mechanisms – on-line or 'hard copy' advertising Message – it's fun – meet people, learn stuff, outdoors, it's useful, contribute to knowledge and conservation efforts.	Equipment, technical knowledge, resources to travel, access to sites	Perception of exclusive, unwelcoming 'club', fear of failure ' what if I don't find anything'	Provide basic equipment, e.g. quadrats Provide onsite training – light touch Have a specialist on hand to help with identification
Cycling	Cycle clubs, ability to hire (borrow) appropriate equipment	Fitness, lack of equipment, safety concerns, getting lost		Electric cycles with charging points, cycle hire and deposit sites, routes that are graded by distance, incline, height etc for different levels of fitness and mobility – and in different languages
Walking	Child friendly routes, reinstate walking for health, buddy systems, training for carers for people with learning disabilities, building confidence, taster sessions, social element and coffee afterwards	Stiles – replace with gates, lack of public transport to walk start points		Larger wheelchair accessible paths and routes. Use boardwalks more on peat/boggy land. Improved signage Long/short circular routes with picnic tables and benches at strategic intervals.
Walking groups	Taster sessions, group sessions, schools, social media, presentations	Stiles, path conditions, confidence of landscape	Kit, access to start of walk, costs	Gates not stiles, accessible routes, start walks from the train station
Off road biking, mountain biking	Such informal activity happens when peers do and enjoy and promote it. Key in folk who are women, plus sized, non-white, disabled enthusing their peers. Promotion from outside into such communities rarely effective.	Price of bikes and equipment, how to get to the hills, knowing where on internet, social media and on the ground to ride, informal bike path network	Going to the loo in the wild – very daunting, fear of looking wrongly equipped, not knowing the road, not having mechanical skills	Introductory activities at/from places might actually visit (Discovery Centre, Carding Mill) which are easy and cheap to do on a one-off basis without the gear or knowledge, and hope this inspires 1 or 2 who then generate interest in their peers.

Walking on published and promoted routes	Illustrations/photos of people with different backgrounds on leaflets/web/ etc. Launch event with invites to specific groups, or just guided version of walk. Feature on social media, blog type experiences with photos	Poor stiles and waymarking. Distance, terrain. Kit.	Unfamiliarity will lengthen the time of the published route. Lack of confidence. Safety fears	Work with a 3P group/ council to replace stiles with gates and upgrade waymarking – check annually. Have people test the route and details and directions, have an on-line version. Include short cut option for poor weather or if people are struggling. Clear info on timing/ distance/ terrain. Produce an audio version of the directions.
Walking in the hills	Find out whether they want to go. How mobile they are, do they need help? What are they interested in.	Money, transport	Knowledge, otherness	Raise awareness, maybe through schools/ allotment group/ urban parks Worry about unknown. How do you light the flame so that people are enthused?
Conservation volunteering	Promote widely, emphasise the benefits to the participation	Equipment, getting to sites	Don't have the knowledge to do what is required. Will I be able to do the physical aspects of the work?	Emphasis that training will be given and equipment provided. Emphasise that participants can do as much/little as they can manage. Emphasise that there are opportunities for all to participate.
Walking in the hills	Leaflets, social media, on-line sites, contact with schools, youth organisations, ethnic minority communities	Transport, parking, appropriate clothing, finances, disabilities, toilets, steepness of terrain, map reading	Fear of mixing with other people from different backgrounds and abilities. Shyness Confidence around or lack of racial awareness Mental as well as physical disabilities	Different for different people. Gates instead of stiles. More information about specific walks.

Community Wildlife Group bird surveys	People will need advice	Not part of the local community No bird identification skills		
Walking	Map and identify stakeholders groups – actively reach users, develop networks to promote activity across all communities Benefits to health, social, mobility and companionship.	Transport to locations Parking Principle of least restrictive access	Will I be accepted? How do I do that? Will there be other people like me? Will there be someone to help?	Active promotion of activities in all communities, understand environment, Increase and improve engagement across all communities
Cycling	Better promotion of 'entry level' opportunities, visible diversity in imagery used (must be genuine)	Having a bike and equipment, transporting the bike here, hard terrain, weather	Knowledge – where to go Confidence – go alone/ in group Image – high cost and physical challenge	Bike hire and e-bikes (eases physical constraints, but adds cost) Safe off-road cycling routes and quiet lanes Peer network of support, e.g. cycle repair café. Guided/supported rides – volunteers?
Volunteering on footpath maintenance	Outreach to colleges and schools in towns	Transport	Lack of knowledge of countryside 'codes'	Explain the countryside 'code' (for want of a better phase!) in schools.
Gliding	Make videos, social media, showing diverse people enjoying it. Actively contact people, invite them – a few pioneers – to try it. Film and report.	Can't get in, can't find where it is, signage, inaccessible distance, frightening.	No-one like me there. Only macho blokes do it.	Better signage, 'stories' out there, organise special trips, free outings
Walking in the hills	Local champions, exemplars, links into groups representing different backgrounds	Stiles, especially those with the extra livestock bar	Lack of experience and feeling scared! Navigation	Fewer livestock stiles, reduction of distance between marker posts – where next?

Mountain biking	Guided MTB tours, event days, e.g. assisted/adapted bike events, promote routes/ places to target groups/ communities through MTB organisations/brands	Transport to MTB trails, money for kit/ equipment, knowing where to go - info, knowing what's there – info, physical disability to overcome	Feeling out of place, lack of confidence to try something new, looking different – if you are a person of colour or a woman! Fear of getting lost, feeling unfit, physically not up to it.	Women's MTB groups, Black MTB groups, guided tours, more information and mapping for trails and info on what to expect when you get there. Adapted off-road bikes.
Walking and sightseeing	For people with mobility issues if there was a looped walk or specialist equipment available this could be promoted.	Physical ability to move around, quality and width of paths and tracks, availability and cost of off-road wheelchairs or mobility scooters	Confidence, people looking at you, especially if you are struggling with mobility	There are hardly any wheelchair accessible tracks or routes for people with mobility issues (this can also discourage families with pushchairs), consider investment in and expansion of hard surfaced paths (in suitable locations). Tarn Hows in Cumbria have a scheme where off road mobility scooters can be hired (and a circular accessible route) for a few hours. NT operate Tarn Hows and also have similar schemes on other sites. Seeing the view, appreciating the hills means being up high – possible on The Burway but not elsewhere.
Walking	Talks to community groups, resources for community groups, You Tube videos involving different types of people, walks designed for specific groups and promoted to them	Hills, lack of transport, poorly marked routes	Lack of toilets, lack of rural understanding, fear of livestock and the unknown	Composting toilets (as in New Zealand), special walking routes promoted to different individuals, subsidised transport, routes defined by ease of access, simple information on dealing with livestock

Summary of the Partnership feedback themes

Suggested examples of activities

Walking, cycling, conservation volunteering, gliding, wildlife identification projects, foraging, and simply visiting the AONB for the day.

Hard barriers

Lack of infrastructure – toilets, changing places, cafes.

Accessibility challenges – making public transport work, hills, stiles, challenging terrain, parking challenges, availability of kit and equipment, having the financial means to do things.

Knowledge, skills and confidence – lack of skills to take part in activities, lack of fitness, lack of knowledge of the area, lack of more general 'countryside codes' knowledge, fearful of livestock.

Soft barriers

Language or reading challenges, safety concerns, being judged, having the confidence to contribute and know you'll be listened to, activities taking place during the day, fear of failure, not wanting to be visible, going to the loo – when there isn't one, having a feeling of otherness, a fear of not being able to do the activity, concerns around racial or cultural awareness, will there be someone to help me, feeling scared, feeling out of place especially if you're doing something where you're the minority.

Potential solutions

Infrastructure - creation of changing hubs, provision of composting toilets.

Communication - proactive communication through social media to show the positive reality of activities, increase and improve engagement across all communities, easy read information, proactively emphasise that everyone is welcome, simple information on dealing with livestock.

Accessibility – larger wheelchair accessible routes, consider investing in hard surfaced paths in suitable locations, routes that have benches/ picnic tables at regular intervals, electric adapted bike hire, provision of equipment and training, really full and accessible information about routes, check/test routes regularly,

Knowledge, skills, and confidence - taster/introductory sessions, volunteer guided walks, training and awareness raising for volunteers, proactively emphasise that training will be given, and equipment provided, peer support networks, bespoke walking routes promoted to different groups.

This very useful feedback from Partnership members should be woven into the final action plan that results from this report.

Appendix 4: List of people and organisations whose knowledge and experience contributed to the report.

Adventure Queens

Alison Hulme, National Trust Attingham Park

All The Elements community members

Claire Andrews, Lovelyland

Clare Millington, Outdoors is for everyone

Gina McCabe, Outdoor Citizens

Helen Fairweather, Resources for Change

Janet Cobb

Jo Fells, National Trust Attingham Park

Joe Penfold, Shropshire Hills AONB Team

Joy Howells, Shropshire Hills AONB Team

Phil Holden, Shropshire Hills AONB Team

Rebecca Sherriff, Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Sharon Smith, Energize Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership members

Shropshire Hills AONB Team members

Shropshire and Telford United Women's Association

Simon Brown, Wild Teams, Shropshire Council

Tom Blackwell, National Trust Carding Mill Valley

With thanks to all for being so positive and sharing time, knowledge, and ideas so willingly.

Appendix 5: Resources for learning more about equity, diversity and inclusion including social media feeds that focus on diversity in the outdoors

Youth Hostel Association Outdoor Citizens

<https://www.yha.org.uk/outdoor-citizens>

All the Elements

<https://www.alltheelements.co>

Sustain

<https://www.sustainweb.org/news/dec21-diversity-and-anti-racism-progress-report/>

Sustain's diversity style guide

<https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/dec21-diversity-style-guide/>

Sustain's progress report on diversity and anti-racism

<https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/dec21-progress-on-diversity-and-anti-racism/>

Land in Our Names

<https://landinournames.community/who-we-are>

Kitsquad – assisting people living on low incomes to get into the outdoors

<https://kitsquad.co.uk>

Groups and individuals who promote diversity and inclusion in the outdoors and showcase this through social media, websites, podcasts

Outdoors is for everyone - Instagram
Everybody Outdoors - Instagram
Muslim Hikers - Instagram
Black Trail Runners - Instagram
Black Girls Hike - Instagram
Steppers UK - Instagram
Peaks of Colour - Instagram
The Outdoor Lads - website
Navigation with Harriet - Instagram
Adventure Queens UK - Instagram
The Wanderlust Women - Instagram
Youth Hostel Association - Instagram
On the Outside - Instagram and podcast
Our Shared Outdoors – Instagram
Darren Edwards – Disabled Adventurer – Instagram
The Running Granny - Instagram

Appendix 6: Directory of the local groups and communities mentioned in the report or local versions of a national example used for illustration

Community Resource
<https://www.community-resource.org.uk>

Lovelyland
<https://www.lovelyland.co.uk>

Parent and Carer Council (PACC)
<http://www.paccshropshire.org.uk>

Parents Opening Doors PODS
<https://www.podstelford.org>

Shropshire Churches Together
<https://shropshirechurches.wordpress.com>

Shropshire Islamic Foundation
<https://www.telfordcentralmosque.com>

Shropshire Mental Health Support
<https://www.shropshiremhs.com>

Taking Part
<https://www.takingpart.co.uk>

Wild Teams
simon.brown@shropshire.gov.uk