



The Sandstone Ridge ECOnet Partnership

Mid Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
Progress Report

April 2005 – March 2009



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Sandstone Ridge EONet Partnership Project overview

The Sandstone Ridge EONet Partnership (SREP) Board has been working over the last 4 years with the common aim of creating an interconnected network of woodlands, heathlands, peatlands and meadows along the mid Cheshire Sandstone Ridge for the benefit of people and wildlife. The area was chosen for action as a result of ecological analysis which identified it as a priority for enhancement. The area has a particularly striking landscape character, a long history of human habitation and it is used extensively for informal recreation.

Since 2005 the SREP Board has supported over 162 local projects through an annual grant aid programme. The main focus of enhancing wildlife at a landscape scale has also helped to restore historic features, improve access for local people and visitors, raise the appreciation of the area, encourage traditional rural skills and encourage active participation in the local environment.

Over £635,000 has been provided in grant aid over the four years. This has attracted over £1.8million in investment from other sources including the Heritage Lottery Fund, Cheshire Rural Enterprise, private funds and time.

Further information of this work is summarised within this report, providing information on what has been delivered and examples of the benefits gained.





Chair's Report

March 2009 marked the delivery of the fourth year of the Sandstone Ridge EONet Partnership. With the support of the partner organisations, local communities, farmers and landowners a huge amount has been delivered. After initial work with limited funds from Cheshire County Council's Environmental Planning Service, Vale Royal Borough Council and the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, Cheshire County Council committed £200k per annum over a four year period. This bold decision has proved to be a wise one as seen by what has been delivered in the area, the level of local interest and the amount of public and private investment secured.

The progress made during these four years will be continued with a range of programmes and projects through the 'Habitats and Hillforts of Cheshire's Sandstone Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme' supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (2008-11).

Congratulations and thank you to all those who have been involved.

Councillor Steve Wilkinson, Chair of the Sandstone Ridge EONet Partnership



Delivering the SREP Project

The work of the SREP Project was overseen by a SREP Board comprising of representatives from the following partner organisations:

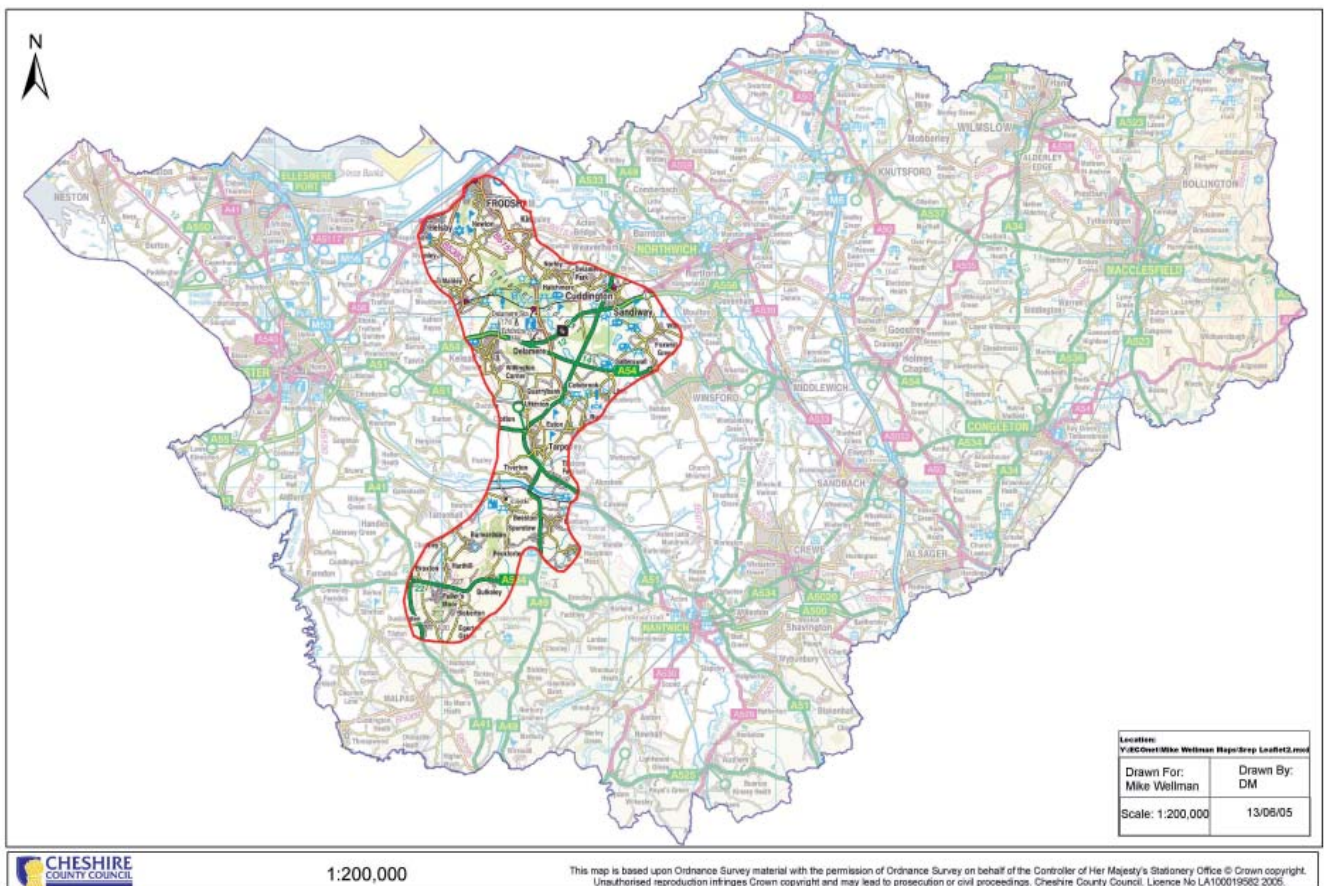
Cheshire Community Action
National Farmers Union
Country and Landowners Business Association
Tarmac plc
Natural England
Cheshire County Council Education Service
Vale Royal Borough Council
Bolesworth Estate
National Trust
Cheshire County Council

Programme Themes

The Partnership Board has worked with local communities, farmers, landowners, NGOs and government agencies to support practical improvements along the Ridge under 4 Programme Themes:

- Sustaining the natural heritage
- Improving access and awareness
- Supporting education and rural skills
- Promoting the built and cultural heritage

These were backed up by a further 3 cross-cutting themes: harmonising actions of rural agencies, securing private and public investment and providing opportunities for all.





Sustaining the natural heritage

The conservation, enhancement and creation of habitats has been the main focus of SREP with a view to creating an ecological network for Cheshire. In doing so it has helped to deliver towards numerous Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets for both habitats and species.

Key outputs include:

- Created or restored over 90ha of biodiversity action plan target habitats
- Agreement to create a further 28ha heath/acid grassland through quarry restoration
- Restored/planted over 20 km of hedgerow – equivalent of the distance between Helsby and Bickerton
- Work supported on 5 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, 10 Sites of Biological Importance and 1 Local Nature Reserve
- Over 65 landowners engaged in activities to enhance the wildlife on their land
- Farmers and landowners have also been encouraged to enter into Natural England's Environmental Stewardship schemes. Over 40 ha of unimproved and semi-improved grassland is being restored/managed for wildlife through ten year Higher Level Scheme agreements.

The project has assisted in the conservation of over 12 BAP species, including:

- Barn owl
- Farmland birds
- Adder
- Brown Hare
- Bats

Improving access and awareness

The Sandstone Ridge is one of the most popular areas in the county for walking and other outdoor activities. SREP has supported the provision of new and enhanced access routes throughout the area.

Key outputs include:

- 1.9 km of new or improved linear access
- Over 6ha of new/improved area access
- 2 'easy access' routes installed at Bickerton and Helsby Hill (National Trust properties)
- 6 interpretation panels provided
- New guidebook for the Sandstone Trail supported
- Assisted in the creation of the Cuddington link in the Delamere Horse Riding Loop

Many of the natural heritage projects were on/adjacent to the long distance Sandstone Trail. It is difficult to quantify increases in the number of visitors to the area due to the absence of any systematic recording, but improvements to sites and features of interest such as the Sandstone Trail, Mountain Pleasant Gardens at Kelsall and Delamere Forest will only encourage visitors



Supporting education and rural skills

In order to raise understanding and benefit local people SREP has supported projects that provided opportunities for education and training.

Key outputs include:

- Environmental projects at 4 local primary schools (Eaton, Kelsall, Delamere and Bickerton) and encouraging pupils to be actively involved in hedge planting schemes on neighbouring farms.
- Enhanced educational access facilities - Support given for specially adapted trailers at Depmore Farm, Kingsley (70 educational access visits in 2008) and Meadowbank Farm, Broxton to take school groups and others around the farm.
- Creation of education rooms in former barns at Castleside Farm, Beesto and Meadowbank Farm.
- Provided opportunities for training in rural skills – BTCV volunteers have undertaken tasks such as hedgelaying and step building. Volunteers with the National Trust have also assisted in many of the projects on Trust land and in doing so have learnt new countryside skills.

Many of the projects supported under other programme themes have used the skills of local contractors to undertake dry stone walling, hedge laying and the use of lime mortar in masonry works.



Promoting the built and cultural heritage

The Sandstone Ridge has a rich and diverse past covering over 2500 years. Wherever possible ecological enhancements have been linked to the maintenance and enhancement of local historic sites and features.

Key outputs include:

- Over 800 metres of drystone walling using local sandstone
- Studies commissioned – Elephant & Castle, Peckforton
- Restoration of a C19th Dovecote associated with Peckforton Castle
- Re-siting of field gateway to protect Maidens Cross (scheduled ancient monument)
- Realignment of livestock fencing at Helsby Hillfort (scheduled ancient monument) together with improved access.
- 6 Iron Age fort reconstruction drawings
- Restoration of a parkland lake and 2 mill ponds
- Conversion of a derelict smithy building to a bunk barn



Cross cutting themes

Harmonising actions of rural agencies

The delivery of many grant funded projects relied on the support and cooperation of other organisations eg National Farmers Union, Natural England, BASC, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Mersey Forest, and FWAG.

Securing private and public investment

The financial commitment of Cheshire County Council was used to complement and attract additional funding, either from private contributions or other public sources.

Investment levered in:

- Rural Enterprise £66,381
- Heritage Lottery Fund £44,600 for the development phase (2007/8) plus £1.3million for the implementation of the 'Habitats and Hillforts of Cheshire's Sandstone Ridge'.
- Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund £ 40,000 (led by Cheshire FWAG)
- Grant applicants' contributions (own funds/time/labour) £355,000
- In total over £1.8 million of private/public investment has been secured (excludes agri-environment scheme funding). An additional £97,000 of volunteer work has been undertaken on the three National Trust properties during the period.



Opportunities for all

The engagement with local community groups, parish councils and environmental charities has been important throughout the project period. 33 projects proposed by local community groups, parish councils, environmental organisations were supported through SREP enabling local people to become involved, enjoy their local countryside and enhance its wildlife.

Over 40 events were attended/organised during the four years and 50 articles/papers written to promote the work of the project. This has ranged from presentations at national and international conferences through to local heritage open days and guided walks.

The project also had its own dedicated website www.cheshire.gov.uk/srep where information was provided and regular news via SREP e-news posted.

Case study

Crown Farm Quarry Open Day 13/14th October 2006 – Tarmac plc opened the quarry to visitors the opportunity to see the quarry and learn about its products, restoration and work with SREP. The event was very successful attended by over 300 people.

The Future

The work completed by SREP to date has made a noticeable difference to the life, both human and wildlife, along the Ridge. Despite the progress that has been made there is still a need to reverse the decline in biodiversity and address the fragmentation of our wildlife habitats. The need to engage people with their local countryside for both social, economic and health benefits are equally pressing. These issues coupled with the uncertainties of climate change make SREP just as relevant now as it was in 2005.

The partners are keen to continue with the partnership and value the benefits of working together. Local community projects are still coming forward, building on previous efforts or as a result of the wider promotion of the partnership's work.

There are also new opportunities to explore, such as the Northern Marches Leader Programme and the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (£3.8 million available nationally each year). This will complement the delivery of the 3 year 'Habitats and Hillforts of Cheshire's Sandstone Ridge' scheme, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The latter will focus on the immediate areas around the six Iron Age Hillforts.

The success to date shows what can be achieved in a relatively short time and with the goodwill and enthusiasm of those involved.

For more information you can contact the SREP Project at:

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