



Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) (Executive Decision)

Director: Kirsty Larkins, Director of Service Delivery
Locality Manager: Tim Cook, Locality Manager
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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership and to seek agreement to continue SSDC's contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2021/22.

Public Interest

This report provides an annual update on the activities and projects carried out by the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- 1) Comment upon and note the report:
- 2) recommend that the Chief Executive agrees to continue SSDC's contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2021/22.

Background

The Blackdown Hills is an unspoilt landscape on the Somerset and Devon border, rich in wildlife, beauty and heritage. The Blackdown Hills were designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1991 after the Countryside Commission's landscape assessment judged the Blackdown Hills landscape 'to be outstanding due to the subtle combination of four characteristics':

- An isolated, unspoilt rural area
- Diversity of landscape patterns and pictures
- A unique geology
- A landscape with architectural appeal

An AONB also encourages the social and economic wellbeing of its local communities; promotes sustainable development and has regard to the needs of recreation.

There are six South Somerset parishes wholly or partly within the AONB. They are; Buckland St Mary, Broadway, Combe St Nicholas, Tatworth & Forton, Wambrook and Whitestaunton. However, as the towns of Ilminster, Chard and many other villages are so close to the Blackdown Hills, plenty of residents in South Somerset enjoy spending time in the AONB and benefit from the work of the partnership.

AONB Management and Funding

The AONB is managed by a partnership which is made up of six local authority core funding partners, other public bodies, the 41 parish councils within the Blackdown Hills, community organisations and voluntary groups.

South Somerset District Council, along with the five other local authorities that sit within the AONB (Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, Mid Devon District Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and Somerset County Council) has statutory duties in relation to the Blackdown Hills.

In addition, it is a statutory responsibility of the six Local Authority partners to contribute 25% of the core funding to cover the running costs of the small staff team, with the other 75% coming from The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Defra fixes this funding ratio and the level of core funding is agreed through a 'Memorandum of Agreement'. It should be noted, that if any Local Authority partner reduces their funding contribution this will result in a reduction in the amount of money from Defra.

The table below shows what each local authority partner has contributed this financial year.

Funding Partner	£ Amount contributed
Devon County Council	9,274
Somerset County Council	5,122
East Devon District Council	9,323
Mid Devon District Council	8,500
South Somerset District Council	6,000
Somerset West and Taunton Council	10,000
Total from Local Authorities	48,219
Defra	165,465
Total funding	213,684

Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2020/21. This figure represents good value for money when taking into account the quality of the projects and activities delivered through the partnership and the wide range of benefits residents in and around the AONB gain from enjoying the Blackdown Hills.

Councillor Martin Wale represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group and he will provide a verbal update on their work. Adrian Moore represents SSDC at the Officers Support Group.

AONB activities project work and associated programmes

The AONB has a small staff team who carry out a range of work across the area:

Achievements from 2020/21

- The flagship nature and wellbeing partnership project, Somerset Nature Connections, has started with the team (Project Manager and 3 Project Officers) in place. The project is a partnership between Somerset Wildlife Trust, Blackdown Hills, Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills AONBs. The project aims to tackle some of the barriers that prevent people experiencing the health and wellbeing benefits of Somerset's spectacular natural environment, including AONBs. Somerset Nature Connections will support local communities and individuals most vulnerable to mental health issues to access these natural spaces. Chard will be one of focus areas for the project and Chard Watch are one of the delivery partners. We are very grateful to SSDC for their pivotal match funding contribution that enables this £500K project to go ahead.
- Volunteering – Despite restrictions, we managed to run a small volunteer group surveying for crayfish in one of the river Culm tributaries last summer. In the autumn we worked with Devon County Council historic environment team to run practical volunteer events at Scheduled Monument sites, and Forestry England on introduction to countryside management sessions. Over the winter our Volunteer Co-ordinator organised a series of online talks and training for volunteers.
- Saving Devon's Treescapes – development phase - aims to provide hope and action in the face of the alarming changes that are already affecting our precious treescapes. The project will support local communities across Devon (including the Neroche area - one of five priority landscapes that includes part of Buckland St Mary, Broadway and Ashill) to plant and nurture thousands of replacement trees. These won't be ash trees, but they will be of other native species including oak, field maple, rowan, crab apple, hawthorn, birch, and hazel. The project will enable people to care for and celebrate our treasured treescapes, supporting local action for wildlife and climate change. There are many ways for people to get involved from planting trees to recording butterflies. The partnership project is led by Devon Wildlife Trust and the AONB is a funding and contributing partner.
- As part of the AONBs Colchester Declaration [Colchester Declaration \(Colchester Declaration :: National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty \(landscapesforlife.org.uk\)\)](#), a Nature Recovery Plan is being



**Achievements from
2020/21**

produced that will set out the priorities for nature recovery and building climate resilience. The work includes a focus on the Axe catchment, a national Colchester Declaration pilot and where a new partnership initiative, Triple Axe (Farming, Nature & People) is being developed, that directly supports actions to reduce phosphates as well as restore other catchment functions (that includes 12 South Somerset parishes – those in the AONB and those south of the A30 between Chard and Crewkerne).

- Agri-environment advocacy – we have undertaken a questionnaire across the Blackdown Hills, East Devon AONB and the whole of the Axe catchment-focussing on agricultural transition.
- A series of eight 'Explore and Create' educational videos [Explore and create - Blackdown Hills AONB](#) were produced.
- An AONB Visitor Guide was produced but now needs to be revamped in light of COVID-19.
- AONB Challenge Fund projects (one off (SDF) Sustainable Development Fund) – Dommett Wood Dormice and Combe St Nicholas Underway Mead plus Ferne Animal Sanctuary water vole SDF project.

**Forward Plans for
2021/22**

- Somerset Nature Connections runs until 2023
- Saving Devon's Treescapes will hopefully enter a full 4-year Delivery Phase
- Events and promotion (assuming COVID-19 restrictions) – an online/downloadable activity treasure/ trail with 30 things to see and do in the AONB (including in the SSDC area) - as part of our 30 year celebrations; promoting self-led walking visits; keeping the website updated along with active social media
- Some volunteering can restart including some biological surveys and introduction to countryside management.
- Agricultural transition and support- as part of the government's agricultural transition plan, there will be an emphasis on farming in protected landscapes and there will be funding available to help support farming businesses through the transition away from Basic Payment Scheme. Accessing Countryside Stewardship grant aid will be encouraged and supported, as a gateway to Environmental Land Management (ELMs) for farmers and landowners.

**Forward Plans for
2021/22**

- Further educational 'Explore & Create' videos will be produced, this time focussing more on heritage in the AONB, including in the SSDC area
- An AONB Visitor Guide (that includes food & drink venues) will be revamped in light of COVID-19

Benefit of continued engagement

- Proven partnership delivering AONB Management Plan and Duty of Regard for SSDC under Sec 85 & 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW Act) 2000
- Excellent multiplier of SSDC's £6,000 – approximately 1:34
- Provides specialist planning advice to SSDC Planning Officers
- Helps deliver SSDC's Council Plan and Strategies
- Continuation of partnership working with key public and private sector partners
- Ability to access additional funding for local projects
- Strong cross-sector and community engagement and support
- Key partnership targeting rural economy, farming and forestry
- Policy development benefits e.g. Landscape Character Assessment
- Ambassador for SSDC

Financial Implications

Like the other local authorities that make up the partnership, SSDC continues to contribute an annual grant towards the running costs of the AONB and has already agreed to adopt the AONB five-year Management Plan 2019-2024. The agreed financial contribution of £6,000 per annum has been funded through existing budgets in 2020/21.

If this £6,000 award is agreed, funding will be paid from the existing Area West 21/22 budget.

Council Plan Implications

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB contributes to:

Focus 1: High quality cost effective services

- Transform customer services through technology
- Provide access to services to suit our customers' needs
- Actively manage assets and resources to ensure the best financial or community return
- Seek business opportunities for the council
- Work with partners to achieve economies, resilience and influence



South Somerset District Council

Focus 2: Economy To promote a strong and growing economy with thriving urban, rural and

land based businesses and improving productivity we will:

- Work with businesses and use our assets
- Advise and support initiatives that ensure worker skills meet the employer's needs
- Lobby for and support infrastructure improvements to enable growth
- Capitalise on our high quality culture, leisure and tourism opportunities to bring people into the district

Focus 3: Environment

To keep South Somerset clean, green and attractive we will work in partnership to:

- Promote recycling and minimise waste
- Promote the use of 'green' technology
- Maintain and promote access to our Country Parks and open spaces to promote good mental and physical health
- Keep streets and neighbourhoods clean and attractive
- Continue to support long term flood resilience
- Promote a high quality built environment in line with Local Plan policies
- Support communities to develop and implement local, parish and neighbourhood plans

Focus 4: Homes

To enable the provision of housing that meets the future and existing needs of residents and employers we will work with partners to:

- Minimise homelessness and rough sleeping
- Work with the private rented sector to improve the standard and availability of rented accommodation
- Tackle fuel poverty
- Work to minimise the impact of personal or household debt
- Enable people to live independently for as long as they are able

Focus 5: Health and Communities

To build healthy, self-reliant, active communities we will:

- Support communities so that they can identify their needs and develop local solutions
- Target support to areas of need
- Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities
- Work with partners to tackle health issues such as diabetes and hypertension and mental health
- Work with our partners to keep our communities safe

Area West Chapter Implications

- Continue to support the Blackdown Hills AONB



Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

- The Blackdown Hills AONB website is a useful resource for homeowners seeking information on renewable energy and light pollution

SSDC Environment Strategy

- We will work to achieve a significant reduction in emissions and improve carbon-offset rates across the geography of South Somerset, through direct action, by supporting the communities of South Somerset to meet their ambitions and through the way we do things; ensuring that working towards carbon neutrality is a thread which runs through all of our decision-making

Equality and Diversity Implications

- The Blackdown Hills AONB works to ensure that people with limited mobility can enjoy the countryside easily by promoting easy access trails

Background Papers

- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB January 2020
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB April 2019
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2018
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2017
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2016
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2015
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2014
- Area West Committee – Natural Futures February 2014
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB October 2013
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB October 2012