

## **Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)**

*Strategic Director:* Rina Singh, Place and Performance  
*Assistant Director:* Helen Rutter, Communities  
*Service Manager:* Andrew Gillespie, Area Development Manager (West)  
*Lead Officer:* Zoë Harris, Neighbourhood Development Officer (Communities)  
*Contact Details:* zoe.harris@southsomerset.gov.uk or 01460 260423

### **Purpose of the Report**

To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership.

### **Public Interest**

This report provides an annual update on the activities and projects carried out by the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) partnership.

### **Recommendation**

That members note the report and continue to support the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership.

### **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

The primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area; this includes the distinctive landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage. An AONB also encourages social and economic well-being of its local communities; promotes sustainable development and has regard to the needs of recreation. There are six South Somerset parishes within or partly within the AONB. They are Buckland St Mary, Broadway, Combe St Nicholas, Tatworth & Forton, Wambrook and Whitestaunton. However, as 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 wide activities and projects in 2014/15 period**

#### **AONB Management Plan**

The work of the Blackdown Hills is guided by a 5 year management plan, which SSDC, along with the other local authority partners that sit on the AONB Partnership, has a statutory duty to be involved in the preparation and implementation of. A new 5 year AONB Management Plan has just come into force covering the period 2014 to 2019.

The Plan does not set out to deal with all of the issues facing the Blackdown Hills - it focuses on objectives and policies relevant to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, and the management actions needed to conserve this special place for future generations. The new Management Plan places greater emphasis on heritage, bio-diversity and eco-systems services. The plan also covers issues relating to tourism, farming, landscape and planning. A Delivery Plan accompanies the Management Plan, and this identifies actions and targets that flow from the objectives and policies contained in the Management Plan.

## **Natural Futures**

This is an exciting project with 3 strands to its delivery: Discover it, Share it, Do it.

Discover it! – This strand will offer nine six-month traineeships to recent ecology graduates that need work experience. In addition two-thirds of the natural heritage identification training days the graduates will be involved in will also be open to the public, totalling at least 432 training day places for local people across the lifespan of the project. This will provide a fantastic opportunity for local people to find out more about wildlife-rich sites close to them and develop their skills to identify the flora and fauna, such as bees, butterflies, birds and mammals, found in the Blackdown Hills. To capture knowledge from those who know the Blackdown Hills countryside best, a contractor will be engaged to interview and film local people and other experts talking about the area. This will generate film clips for both the project's website and smartphone app. As part of this work the contractor will also help primary school children to take part in the interviewing and filming process in their local area. This will provide children with the opportunity to learn about their local natural heritage and landscape, and to gain experience in interviewing and filming.

Share It! – The knowledge gained from the Discover it activities will be shared with a wider audience through new pages on the AONB website, a new smartphone app called 'Naturally Blackdown Hills' and via 30 local events. In addition there will be a 'nature discovery' tent that will tour at least three existing large, high-profile events in the final year of the project, showcasing the area's fantastic natural heritage and the benefits brought about by the project. Local artists will help schoolchildren to produce nature-related materials especially for the tent. The touring tents will also provide community nature projects with the opportunity to come together to share and celebrate their achievements.

Do it! - Support will be provided to communities throughout the Blackdown Hills to develop and deliver their own 'community nature projects'. These projects will focus on habitat creation and management on areas of publicly accessible land, such as village greens, playing fields, school grounds and churchyards, as well as on raising local awareness of the value of natural heritage. The project will help to inspire local communities to take action and provide the support they need to make their project happen. This will include advice on project ideas, sources of funding, how to set up their group and how to raise awareness of their project. Where groups need specialist advice, local experts or volunteers from successful community nature projects will provide 'natural expertise' visits, to ensure Blackdowns communities have the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver enjoyable and successful projects.

SSDC Area West Committee agreed to contribute £5000 towards this innovative project in February 2014. The AONB recently secured £246,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to deliver this project and have recently recruited 2 members of staff, allowing the 3 year project to commence in January 2015.

## **Blackdowns Metal Makers**

The aim of this project is to bring the ancient iron working heritage of the Blackdown Hills to life for new audiences. It is building on some smaller projects that have already taken place over the past 2 years which included archaeological field work, experimental archaeology and heritage play sessions for children. The project will work with partners to produce a range of lasting learning materials and interpretative products as well as a focussed period of learning sessions and special events. Blackdowns Metal Makers is being led by The Carousel Project with support from the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership. The project also involves a wide range of partners including local schools, preschools, libraries, museums, Forestry Commission and Oxford University.

### Project outputs

- Archaeological fieldwork and post-examination on a known furnace site at Churchinford
- 2 creative learning sessions at Hemyock Primary and Preschool with all children aged 3 - 6, testing and developing learning materials using art, story and song
- 3 sessions with 1 class at All Saints Primary near Axminster, as part of a 6 week programme developed with the class teacher. Pupils will learn about local iron working industry from Iron Age – Medieval and basic film making and drama skills. The class will produce 4 creative mini-films based on their learning.
- Materials from both school programmes incorporated will be incorporated into a range of online resources for families and schools including film, audio, online book, printable resources and lesson plans
- Dedicated Metal Makers webpages including deeper information for interested adult learners
- Packs for schools in the Blackdown Hills including the new book
- Materials for local museums including books and costumes
- Storytelling tour of libraries and museums around the AONB based on the new book
- Main event at Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life, including range of Blackdowns Metal Makers activities and free admission to the museum
- Family friendly walk leaflet to discover historic landscape relating to iron working

## **Activities and Events**

The team continues to organise and promote a number of events and activities across the AONB area. The largest event this year was held in September in Hemyock. 'The 'Good Life in the Blackdown Hills' was aimed at anyone interested in small holding type activities such as cheese making, hedge-laying, creating wildflower meadows and bee-keeping. There were plenty of stalls, demonstrations and advice as well as lunches and refreshments provided by Smetharpe Woman's Institute. Other activities have included guided walks, a fungi foray at Wambrook and rustic chair making in Buckland St Mary.

## **Making it Local - EU Funding Programme**

Making it Local is a community led grants scheme, delivered by a Local Action group as part of the EU LEADER programme. The staff team of Making it Local are hosted by the Blackdown Hills AONB, and the programme covers an area focused on both the Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONB areas. The last Making it Local funding programme ended in December 2013 and 2014 has been a transition year spent producing a new Local Development Strategy.

During the first half of the year the Development Officers carried out extensive consultation across the whole of the Local Action Group area to establish the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. They also established if any businesses and community groups had potential project ideas that may be eligible for funding in the new programme. Part of the transition work included extending the geographical area Making it Local covers to take in a larger section of South Somerset.

The results of the consultation, along with the secondary data and profiles of the extended area have been used to produce a new Local Development Strategy for Making it Local; this was submitted to Defra on the 5<sup>th</sup> September. At the time of writing the team was waiting to hear if that bid had been successful.

If successful the new programme will provide grants to businesses and organisations within the Making it Local area that can demonstrate they have an economic benefit. The priority sectors for grants are:

- Farming
- Micro-businesses
- Tourism
- Rural services
- Forestry
- Culture & Heritage

The South Somerset towns and parishes that are included in the new Making it Local area are:

- Ashill
- Broadway
- Buckland St Mary
- Chaffcombe
- Chard Town
- Chillington
- Combe St Nicholas
- Cricket St Thomas
- Cudworth
- Donyatt
- Dowlish Wake
- Horton
- Ilminster
- Kingstone
- Knowle St Giles
- Tatworth & Forton
- Wambrook
- Wayford
- West Crewkerne
- Whitelackington
- Whitestaunton
- Winsham

### **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. The agreed financial contribution of £6,000 per annum can be funded through existing budgets.

### **Council Plan Implications**

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB helps address 2 themes of the SSDC Council Plan:

- Focus One: Jobs – With the addition of the ‘Making it Local’ programme the Blackdown Hills AONB helps SSDC meet their corporate aim to Increase economic vitality and prosperity.

- Focus Two: the environment - in particular the AONB helps make South Somerset an attractive place to live, work and visit.

### **Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications**

The Blackdown Hills AONB website is a useful resource for homeowners seeking information on renewable energy.

### **Equality and Diversity Implications**

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

### **Background Papers**

- Area West Committee – Natural Futures February 2014
  - Area West Committee - Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) October 2013
  - Area West Committee - Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) October 2012
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