

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

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### **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.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to:

- 1) Comment upon and note the report;
- 2) Agree in principle to continue SSDC contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6000 in 2018/19, subject to confirmation of Area West budgets in February 2018.

### **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 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 with 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, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Somerset County Council) has statutory duties in relation to the Hills. These

duties include being involved in the preparation and review of the five-year Management Plan, with the current plan covering the period 2014-19. The 2019-2024 AONB Management Plan review process is now underway. All local authorities have requested that the AONB lead on review of the management plan, although AONB are still awaiting written confirmation from Somerset County Council. We will then formally write to Natural England.

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 Defra. This funding ratio is fixed by Defra 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.

<b>Funding Partner</b>	<b>Amount contributed</b>
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
Taunton Deane Borough Council	10,000
<b>Total from Local Authorities</b>	<b>48,219</b>
Defra	165,465
<b>Total funding</b>	<b>213,684</b>

Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2017-18. 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 (see attached report). Tim Cook and Nicky Doble represent SSDC on 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, during 2017 that work has included:

#### Natural Futures

This 3 year project is nearing the end of its third year and is proving to be very popular and has successfully encouraged many more people to engage with activities and events within the AONB. The project has 3 strands:

#### **Discover it**

This is all about education and training. BBNF Officer left the project in September. Cost savings from redundancy and salary used to contract DBRC and SERC to continue and extend training programme until the end of October. Each year 3 conservation graduates are given the opportunity to take part in a 6 month fieldwork placement, which provides them with the essential work experience they need to progress their careers. This year's ecology graduates currently applying for jobs and have had some success with being selected for interviews (but no job offers yet). All are also involved in additional volunteering or work experience in ecology

sector. The trainees and BHNF Officer surveyed 30+ sites in to date including 2 sites suitable for LWS designation in Somerset and 4 sites at Devon CWS quality. Permission obtained to survey over 50 sites and training schedule extended to survey as many as possible.

The Natural Futures Officers have also held educational sessions with all 10 schools. In South Somerset Neroche and Buckland St Mary Schools have been involved. The new half-day format worked extremely well (to fit with new art project) and excellent feedback has been received from children and teaching staff. Planning to continue the school sessions in 2018 is now underway. Annual cost of £3800 identified and 50% of this funding is already secured.

In addition, a number of short films have been made of local experts covering various subjects including Hillforts, farming wild flower meadows, woodland management, the Romans and reptiles. These films are all available to view on the Natural Futures website. Additional/final training programme filming took place in September.

### ***Share it***

The Natural Futures website is the main conduit for sharing information and brings together all the photos, film clips, stories, discoveries, advice and achievements into one place. The website is being continually updated <http://www.blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org/front> with ongoing project progress/ newsletters. There is good social media coverage via AONB accounts. Archiving of the website is being planned for the end of the project and the site will remain live as information resource.

The smartphone app project has been abandoned due to technological challenges and issues with sub-contractor used by Plymouth University. The full original budget of £5k remains (no charge/costs incurred from Plymouth University due to non-delivery).

14 community events and activities to develop natural heritage skills and understanding were planned for 2017 and advertised and 11 have run so far. The majority of events have been fully booked with a waiting list. More than 45 events have been delivered through the project attended by over 1600 people.

### ***Do it***

To date over 20 CNPs have now been actively supported through projects covering habitat improvements and creation at a wide range of sites. Of these 13 are still active' and in various stages of development. In South Somerset that includes habitat management of a meadow, woodland, and a pond (including new record of water vole!). in Combe St Nicholas, pond restoration in Tatworth, the creation of a wildlife garden at Buckland St Mary School and habitat creation and improvement in the recreation field and around the village hall in Ashill.

Dormouse monitoring volunteers continue to be supported to ensure sustainability. 5 volunteers have now obtained NE licences.

Additional budget allocated for consultants to provide extra support and to run workshops for groups.

### ***Nature and Wellbeing Project***

This is a joint project with the Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills AONBs and is funded by Public Health Somerset. The aim of the project is get people who would not normally venture into an AONB, into the countryside doing some form of gentle physical activity.

Kristen Lambert, the officer leading the programme has built partnerships with a number of groups in Chard including the Watch project, Chard Memory Café/Alzheimer's Society and Chard Children's

Centre. Kristen is currently working with Ferne Animal Sanctuary and the Alzheimers Society to develop a volunteering project, which will benefit both groups.

Since November 2016 she has worked an additional day to coordinate Somerset's Naturally Healthy Month (May) 2017 and join with Active Devon to spread this activity month across the two counties. The cost of this extra day was also covered by Public Health Somerset until the end of July 2017.

The Project Steering Group agreed to continue to jointly fund this extra day until March 2018. During this period Kristen will research funding opportunities that may enable the continuation of a specific element, yet to be decided, of the current nature and wellbeing project, e.g. obesity in primary school aged children, Alzheimers, mental health in young people, adults with learning difficulties.

The cost of this additional day over the 8-month period is £4,800. Which divided equally among the AONB partners is £1,600 each. Discussions with Public Health are on-going regarding their ongoing involvement beyond the current funding they are providing.

### Planning

It is quiet on applications in South Somerset in the AONB.

Permission was given for a new dwelling at Buckland St Mary several years ago for a new dwelling to replace an uninhabitable home on site. This has not been implemented although people continued to live on the site. This application is essentially a revision of the original permission.

The Partnership are working with the Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills AONB to run a workshop with planning officers on issues around agricultural buildings, including progressing design guidance. It will be in Taunton on the 24th November 2017. check details on email

## **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 has been funded through existing budgets in 2017/18. Approval in principle to continued funding in 2018/19 is recommended but this is subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2018/19.

## **Council Plan Implications**

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

- The environment - the work of 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 and light pollution.

## **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 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 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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