

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

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Purpose of the Report

- To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership.
- Seek agreement to continue SSDC contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2020/21.

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) Agree to continue SSDC contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2020/21 subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2020/21

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 Chard and Ilminster 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 & Taunton Council and Somerset County Council) has statutory duties in relation to the Blackdown Hills. This has included recent input and adoption of the five year Management Plan 2019-2024.

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 2019/20. 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. 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 2019/20
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory Blackdown Hills 2019-24 AONB Management Plan produced by the AONB staff unit (through the AONB Partnership) – delivery of the 5 year plan • On-going Nature & Wellbeing work – funded by Public Health Somerset - to bring out groups (e.g. WATCH groups) to local farms and work with existing local support groups • Support the Blackdown Hills Farming & Woodland Group Farm Facilitation Funding – now with 70 farmer members. Regular events and demonstrations on topics including wood fuel / woodland management, orchards • Target the Woods for Water project (led by the AONB) at areas of the Axe catchment in the SSDC area - to improve water quality & biodiversity • The AONB Volunteer Co-Ordinator has recruited volunteers from across the area

Achievements from 2019/20

- and engaged them in activities including biological surveying and practical tasks
- Three events Guides per year promoting events organised by the AONB and partners
- A Visitor Guide for the AONB will include sites in the SSDC part of the AONB, including local walks
- There will be interactive sessions undertaken with all the primary schools in the AONB and in parishes that are part of the AONB

Forward Plans for 2020/21

- Stage 1 approval has been secured from the National Lottery Communities Fund for 'Somerset's Nature Connections' nature & wellbeing project, in partnership with the other two Somerset AONB's (Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills) and Somerset Wildlife Trust. The bid is to better connect people in towns (including Chard) to green spaces in their local areas and the adjacent AONB
- A new heritage project is being developed to celebrate sense of place and discover local areas of historic interest that people can engage with. Opportunity for local archaeological digs and 'finds' days

Benefit of continued engagement

- Proven partnership delivering AONB Management Plan and Duty of Regard for SDDC under Sec 85 & 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW Act) 2000
- Excellent multiplier of SDDC's £6,000 – **approximately 1:34**
- Provides specialist planning advice to SDDC Planning Officers
- Helps deliver SDDC'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 SDDC

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. The agreed financial contribution of £6,000 per annum has been funded through existing budgets in 2019/20. Approval in principle to continue funding in 2020/21 is recommended but this is subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2020/21.

Council Plan Implications

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB contributes to:

Environment

To keep South Somerset clean, green, attractive and sustainable we will:

- Maintain and improve the provision and quality of open spaces and parks
- Be a leading council in developing and adopting a Green Agenda to promote sustainable environment, economy and communities
- Support long-term flood resilience

- Promote a high-quality built environment

Housing

To enable housing and communities to meet the existing and future needs of residents and employers we will work to:

- Enable sufficient housing in appropriate places to meet community needs
- Ensure development which is sustainable, where people want to live and communities can thrive

Healthy, Self-reliant Communities

To enable healthy communities which are cohesive, sustainable and enjoy a high quality of life we will:

- Work with partners to reduce the impact of social isolation and create a feeling of community
- Work with partners to support people in improving their own physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Enable quality cultural, leisure and sport activities

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 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
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