

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) Overview – Mendip Hills

Lead Officer: Jonathan Doyle, Strategic Manager, ECI Commissioning

Author: Jim Hardcastle, AONB Manager, Mendip Hills AONB

Contact Details: jim.hardcastle@somerset.gov.uk

Cabinet Member:

Division and Local Member: Cllr Pauline Ham

1. Summary

- 1.1.** The county of Somerset has a vast range of special landscapes including a number of Protected Landscapes. These include two thirds of Exmoor National Park, the Quantock Hills AONB and parts of the Mendip Hills and Blackdown Hills AONB. There are also small areas of Dorset and Cranborne Chase & West Wiltshire Downs AONBs to the east of the county. The Protected Landscapes deliver or enable delivery across diverse workstreams including climate change adaptation / mitigation, nature recovery, engagement and economic development all influenced by the character of the landscape. The Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills Services are hosted by Somerset County Council.
- 1.2.** The purpose of the report and presentation is to:
 - Introduce / update the Committee on the purposes and duties of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
 - Update the Committee on outcomes of the Landscape Review (2019) and implications for AONB Partnerships, Services and local authority partners
 - Showcase delivery by the Mendip Hills AONB

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1.** Members are asked to consider and note the update.

3. Background

- 3.1.** Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – AONBs – are a landscape designation created by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. They are areas of countryside in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that has been designated for conservation due to their significant landscape value. AONBs have the same level of protection to inappropriate development as national parks but unlike national parks do not have their own planning powers, with the duty being discharged through the constituent local planning authorities.
- 3.2.** The Purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance the landscape, with landscape including the scenic landscape, flora & fauna, geology, historic and cultural importance. Currently there are two secondary aims, to meet the need for quiet enjoyment of the countryside and to have regard for the interests of

the local communities living and working within AONBs.

- 3.3.** In 2000 the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) increased regulation and protection of AONBs. Under the Act there is now a requirement for all local authorities with an AONB within their area to produce a management plan and to review the plan at a period not exceeding five years. The Act also placed a requirement that local authorities and other statutory undertakers make sure that all decisions have regard for the purpose of AONBs, including potential effects within and outside of AONB boundaries.
- 3.4.** The Gower and Quantock Hills were the first AONBs designated in 1956, with the Mendip Hills being designated on 1st December 1972. There are now 46 AONBs in Britain, 33 in England, 4 in Wales, 8 in Northern Ireland and 1 which straddles the English / Welsh border. AONBs vary greatly in size, type and landuse. The smallest is the Isles of Scilly at 16km² (6.2 sq mi) and the largest is the Cotswolds at 2,038km² (787 sq mi). Together AONBs cover around 15% of England's land area.
- 3.5.** In 2019 the Landscape Review was published [Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs](#) . Commissioned by Government in 2018 the review aimed to assess the value and role of National Parks and AONBs in the 70th anniversary year of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The report concluded that while protected landscapes are delivering much which is good, it falls short of what can be achieved and what society requires. The review recognised that the network of AONBs has different purposes from National Parks, vastly less money but in many cases greater pressures and yet cover areas that are more visited, more biodiverse and are just as beautiful. The review contained 27 proposals ranging from greater funding for AONBs, revised governance, strengthening purposes and powers, increasing the accessibility to all parts of society and connections with nature and wellbeing.
- 3.6.** In January 2022 the Government responded to the Landscapes Review. The response highlighted the will of Government to unlock the potential of AONBs by
- Renaming AONBs as National Landscapes
 - Creation of a national Landscape, Parks & Trails Partnership – to ensure existing partners (National Parks England, National Association for AONBs, National Trails and National Parks Partnership) work together more effectively.
 - Reviewed or new purposes, specifically in relation to nature recovery and supporting access with specific reference to health & wellbeing.
 - Provision of sustainable funding
 - Robust governance
 - Strengthen the role of AONBs in planning

It is likely that renaming of AONBs and launch of the Landscape, Parks & Trails Partnership will happen during 2023 though it is at a very early stage with uncertainty over the timescale for the other proposals.

3.7. The Mendip Hills AONB covers 198km² (77 sq mi), of note the area contains;

- 5 local authority areas; Somerset County Council (Mendip District 87.67km² 44.3% and Sedgemoor District 34.03km² 17.2%), North Somerset Council 39.35km² 19.9% and Bath & North East Somerset Council 36.95km² 18.6%.
- 26% of land is designated as a statutory nature conservation site with 29 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Nearly half (48%) of the AONB's SSSIs consist of calcareous grassland, 28% are open water, 11% are earth heritage sites, 6% are broadleaved woodland and the remaining 6% are neutral or acid grassland. There is a national target for 95% of SSSI's by area to be favourable or unfavourable recovering condition, 97% of the Mendip Hills SSSIs are in these categories.
- 14.5% is woodland with 2.5% of that recognised as Ancient Woodland.
- The Mendip Hills is important for a number of priority and threatened species – with significant breeding populations of Greater Horseshoe Bat, adder, skylark and many invertebrates. It is the 'assemblage' of good habitats that is noteworthy.
- Over 1770Ha 8.9% of Open Access land with 447.5km (278miles) of Public Rights of Way.
- The AONB contains 173 Scheduled Monuments, 206 listed buildings, 1 Scheduled Parks and Garden. This list includes the largest Scheduled Monument in the South West, a WWII decoy city, Europe's first formal cemetery and evidence of humans dating back 500,000 years.
- The unique geology of limestone over sandstone means there are no rivers rising on the limestone hills, the karst landscape draining water down through the rocks, creating the internationally important cave system, which then emerges at the spring line at the base of the hills. These springs feed the headwaters of the rivers Sheppey, Axe and Cheddar Yeo which in turn feed into the Blagdon Lake Reservoir (Congresbury Yeo), Chew Valley Lake Reservoir (River Chew) and the Cheddar Reservoir (Cheddar Yeo) providing drinking water to around 2 million people.
- The area contains the international destination of Cheddar Gorge but is predominantly used as a visitor destination by people with a 30 minute radius. The Mendip Hills are culturally significant for outdoor and underground adventure.

Mendip Hills AONB Service budget;
Defra Core Funding £184,662
Somerset CC £34,700

Mendip DC	£8,017
North Somerset UA	£3,500
Sedgemoor DC	£8,001
B&NES UA	£5,000
TOTAL	£243,880

Project Expenditure (External sources)

Connecting on Mendip (National Grid)	£20,000
Defra Access for All	£65,200
Defra Farming in Protected Landscapes	£210,000
Tree planting (various sources)	£35,840
Species Recovery Programme (Natural England)	£9,250
Countryside Stewardship	£6,025
Mendip Hills Fund (visitor giving)	£16,000
TOTAL	£362,315

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** The Mendip Hills AONB is managed through a Partnership. The report and presentation will provide information on management of the AONB and significant issues.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** N/a

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author