

## **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.

### **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 2017/18, subject to confirmation of Area West budgets in February 2017.

### **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.

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	5,676
East Devon District Council	9,323
Mid Devon District Council	10,000
South Somerset District Council	6,000
Taunton Deane Borough Council	10,000
<b>Total from Local Authorities</b>	<b>50,273</b>
Defra	159,917
<b>Total funding</b>	<b>2101,90</b>

Through the Area West budget, SSSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2016-17. 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 SSSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Zoe Harris represents SSSDC 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 2016 that work has included:

#### 25th Anniversary celebrations

2016 marks 25 years since the designation of the Blackdown Hills AONB and a wide and diverse programme of walks and activities was held over the year. The celebrations started on 23<sup>rd</sup> April with a heritage day at RAF Culmhead, this event included talks and a guided walk. In June a birthday celebration was held at the Candlelight Inn in Bishopswood, aimed at families the event included river dipping, live music and a tea party. The anniversary celebrations formally come to a close on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> December at Wellington Monument for 'Carols Under the Stars' The Monument will be floodlit, the path illuminated with flaming torches, members of the Blackdown Community Choir will lead the Christmas singing, with Smeatharpe Women's Institute selling their delicious mince pies and mulled wine.

Events that have taken place in or close to South Somerset include:

- Family pond dipping at Ferne Animal Sanctuary in May
- Hedges, Herbs and History, a guided walk with a local botanist around Yarcombe

- Butterfly identification and survey training at Neroche Village Hall in June
- Garden birds and nest box making in Wambrook October 2016
- Fungi identification walk in Wambrook in November.
- Lichen Identification walk at Buckland Wood in October

The events have been well attended engaging new audiences and they have helped raise the profile of the AONB by attracting good media coverage. Publicity includes:

- Feature in both Devon Life and Somerset Life magazines
- Major feature in the Western Morning News by Martin Hesp
- Major article in The Landsman magazine
- Regular mentions in other local press
- Local radio interviews

### Natural Futures

This 3 year project is nearing the end of its second 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. 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 have recently completed their 6 month placements and one has already secured a job with Devon Local Nature Partnership. The trainees visited and surveyed over 40 sites and discovered a number of rare species including the UK's first black dormouse.

The Natural Futures Officers have also held educational sessions with 11 schools, involving over 730 children. In South Somerset both Neroche and Buckland St Mary Schools have been involved.

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.

#### **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 and has experienced a big increase in users this year, visit <http://www.blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org/front>

Work is in progress to provide a smartphone app and 4 newsletters a year are also produced to keep people updated.

#### **Do it**

To date 17 community nature projects have been supported across the AONB. In South Somerset that includes Combe St Nicholas, Tatworth, Buckland St Mary and Ashill. In July an event was held to bring the volunteers from all the projects together so they could learn from each other. That event was very successful and well attended and included expert speakers, site visits and sharing experiences.

Practical workshops are also being offered to help upskill volunteers. A scything course for volunteers took place in July and a hedge laying course is taking place this autumn.

### 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.

### Planning

The Planning Officer has contributed comments to Devon County Council on their provisional plans regarding improvement works along the A30 section through the AONB. A series of information sheets aimed at both households and organisations to help them minimise light pollution from their home or premises has been produced and is available on the AONB website. The Planning Officer has commented on 10 applications within the South Somerset area.

## **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 2016/17. Approval in principle to continued funding in 2017/18 is recommended but this is subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2017/18

## **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 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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