

Joint Area Committee – West – 16th September 2009

7. 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 Partnership, which manages the AONB, since the last report to the former Area West Committee in June 2008.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the report.

Background

South Somerset District Council along with five other local authorities (Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, Mid Devon District Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Somerset County Council) and Natural England have signed a Memorandum of Agreement and are the key funders of the Blackdown Hills Partnership. The Agreement was agreed in 2002 when the Partnership was formed. The funding contribution made by SSDC has been extended to 2011 when the current Memorandum of Agreement will be up for renewal. Cllr. Ros Roderigo represents SSDC on the Blackdown Hills Partnership Management Group.

Blackdown Hills AONB Management Plan 2009 – 2014

Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act to produce a plan, which sets out an agenda for managing the AONB. In the last report to Area West the Community Regeneration Officer informed members that a review of the management plan was then taking place. The review of the 2004 - 2009 management plan is now complete and a new management plan has been produced to cover the next five years.

Activities and Events

The Blackdown Hills Partnership organises a programme of countryside activities and events, which take place within the AONB. During the period 2008/2009 there were over 90 free or low cost events, which ran all year round for the first time. A Blackdown Hills Countryside Events booklet is now produced twice yearly and distributed through tourist information centres, details of the events are also available on the Blackdown Hills AONB website (www.blackdown-hills.net).

Recent events that took place in South Somerset included:

- Stargazing evening at Buckland St Mary
- Combe St Nicholas Walk
- Eastern edge of the Blackdowns walk
- Hedge crafts day at Buckland St Mary

The Autumn / Winter Guide to countryside events taking place in the Blackdown Hills includes the following events taking place in South Somerset:

- Woodland Awareness Day at Chaffcombe
- Mushroom Foray at Wambrook
- Hedgecraft Day
- Making Natural Christmas Decorations at Buckland St Mary
- Build a Nestbox at Combe St Nicholas

In addition to the events programme the Partnership produces a range of leaflets giving details of walking and cycling routes across the Blackdown Hills. In September 2008 a new series of five circular horse riding routes was launched and these routes are available to download from the website, as well as being available in booklet form.

Staple Hill Easy Access Viewpoint Trail

In March 2009 an easy access trail of 1km in length opened up. The trail starts at Staple Hill is 1km in length and allows people of all abilities the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and beautiful views. The trail has been designed and built to national all ability access standards, so is easy for everybody to use including people with limited mobility.

Making it Local

'Making it Local' is a 5 year grant scheme in the Blackdown Hills and East Devon area. It runs from summer 2009 until the end of 2013. The grant scheme is part of the Local Action for Rural Communities (LARC) money, which in turn is part of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) a fund, which comes through from the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA).

The area covered by the Making it Local grant scheme is the Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONB areas and the surrounding market towns including Chard. In addition to Chard the following South Somerset parishes are eligible to apply for an award:

Buckland St Mary	Horton
Broadway	Knowle St Giles
Chaffcombe	Tatworth & Forton
Combe St Nicholas	Wambrook
Donyatt	Whitestaunton

Funding is available for different kinds of businesses and organisations, including private businesses and sole traders, social enterprises, Parish and Town Councils, voluntary groups, local community groups, charities and constituted groups.

There are three main areas in which people can apply for funding:

- Raise Business Performance and local employment. For projects that support micro and small businesses, to make them more ambitious and productive, to create more sustainable jobs and to make the most of markets for local products.
- Communities and Connections. For projects that help communities and businesses to be more resilient and sustainable by developing strong local communities, essential community services and community held assets.
- Making the most of local resources. For projects which strengthen the local economy through sensitive and sustainable use of landscape and natural resources that work with local culture and built heritage.

Organisations with big projects can apply for a large grant of between £10,000 to £100,000, for schemes that last up to three years and will have a significant impact on the area. Alternatively for smaller projects organisations can apply for up to £10,000 for projects that will last one year or less. Grants will fund 30-70% of the costs, depending upon the kind of organisation and project. Funding can be for revenue and capital.

Financial Implications

Like the other local authority members, SSSC makes an annual contribution of £12,240 towards the core costs of running the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership. This is recognised as a corporate responsibility and provision is built into Area West budgets for the period of the agreement.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB addresses the corporate aim to

Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change

- 2.0 Outcome: An enhanced natural environment measured by: Improved health of the natural environment.
- 2.1 Support the exploration of options for biodiversity, conservation and enhancement on land managed by South Somerset Together partners by 2012 and deliver biodiversity projects each year to 2026.

With the addition of the 'Making it Local' grant the Blackdown Hills AONB helps SSSC meet their corporate aim to 'Increase economic vitality and prosperity'.

In particular

- 1.11 Outcome: A vibrant and sustainable Yeovil, Market Towns and Rural Economy measured by: Increased local sustainability.

Background Papers: *Report to former Area West Committee - 18th June 2008*
Blackdown Hills AONB Management Plan 2009-2014
Blackdown Hills AONB Annual Review 2008-09
