

Area West Committee – 19th October 2011

## 9. 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 since the last report to Area West Committee in September 2009.

### Public Interest

Part of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty lies within South Somerset, and as such South Somerset District Council contributes an annual grant towards the running costs of the AONB team. This report provides an update of the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB team.

### Recommendations

That members note the report.

### Background

The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covers 370 sq km of unspoilt countryside straddling the Somerset and Devon border and was designated in 1991. An AONB is a landscape that is considered to be of such importance that it is worthy of protection for the nation. AONBs are of equal status to National Parks in terms of scenic beauty and landscape protection and are designated through the same legislation – the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 strengthened the 1949 Act and placed specific statutory duties on local authorities; these include:

- to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB
- to prepare, publish and review a Management Plan for their AONBs at intervals of not more than five years.

The primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area; this includes the distinctive landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage. An AONB also encourages social and economic well-being of its local communities; promotes sustainable development and has regard to the needs of recreation. There are six South Somerset parishes within or partly within the AONB. They are Buckland St Mary, Broadway, Combe St Nicholas, Tatworth & Forton, Wambrook and Whitestaunton.

The AONB is managed by a partnership of the six local authority core funding partners, other public bodies, the AONB's 41 parish councils, community organisations and voluntary groups. The Management Group meet quarterly and Cllr Ros Roderigo represents SSDC at these meetings.

## AONB Core Funding

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) contributes 25% of the core funding for the AONB, the other 75% comes from DEFRA. This funding ratio is fixed by DEFRA.

Blackdown Hills AONB budget in 2010/11	£248,606
SSDC contribution in 2010/11	£6,000

Therefore for every £1 contributed by South Somerset DC, a further £40 is secured directly by the AONB from DEFRA and the other five local authority partners.

The level of core funding is agreed through a Memorandum of Understanding intended to cover a three year period. Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2011- 2014.

## AONB Management Plan 2009 – 2014

The current plan has five key purposes:

- To highlight the special qualities and issues of the area and the value of its different features.
- To present an integrated vision for the future of the AONB as a whole in the light of local, regional and national priorities.
- To set out agreed policies and objectives with specific targets, which will help secure that vision
- To identify what needs to be done by whom and when in order to achieve these outcomes in a delivery plan
- To state how the condition of the AONB and the effectiveness of its management will be monitored.

The plan is split into three key themes:

- Landscape – this includes work relating to the character of the landscape, natural habitats, geology, renewable energy and climate change.
- Sustainability – includes work that relates to farming, forestry and land management, also planning, development, transport and highways. In addition this theme covers leisure and tourism, the rural economy and community and culture.
- Communication and Management – relates to the way the Partnership works with others and promotes its activities.

## Activities and projects specific to South Somerset in 2011/12

- *Planning consultations* – Commented on South Somerset's draft Core Strategy. Consulted on eight planning applications since January (24 applications within AONB).
- *Somerset Batscapes* – key Somerset habitats mapped for eight species of bats, and a Big Bat Survey carried out in June; transects carried out in Whitestaunton and Wambrook.
- *Harvesting Voices* – development of a website that will not only hold the 100 plus interviews collected during phase one but also those from other local collections including Chard Museum.
- *Wambrook Summer Fair* – AONB attended.

- *Blackdown Hills information points* – provided and serviced at Chard Tourist Information Centre, The Eagle Tavern and Ferne Animal Sanctuary.
- *Neroche/Phoenix link* – a horse-riding trail linking the Neroche Herepath with Phoenix Route 1 at Wambrook.
- *Walks leaflet* – new walks leaflet highlighting one walk from five key areas, Chard being one. All other walks, including the six Chard walks can be downloaded from the website: <http://www.blackdownhillsaonb.org.uk/walking-routes.htm>

### **AONB-wide activities and projects benefiting South Somerset area in 2011/12**

- *Blackdown Hills Community Plan* – launched in September, co-ordinated by a consultant funded through the AONB working with all 39 parishes. <http://www.Blackdownhillsaonb.org.uk/Parishes.html>
- *Countryside Design Guide* – residential design guide, which encourages sustainable development and reinforces local distinctiveness, due for completion December 2011.
- *Working Landscapes Programme* – 3-year partnership project encouraging management of both marginal land and small woods through co-operative working (£119k over 3 years)
- *Swift and waxcap surveys* – general public participation surveys across the AONB.
- *Force for Nature* – AONB a partner in an application to Heritage Lottery Fund for a 2-year project to develop volunteering across the AONB (£51k).
- *Countryside events programme* – this is organised twice yearly with a spring / summer programme and an autumn / winter programme. The current autumn / winter programme includes eight specific events in the South Somerset area.

### **AONB Funding Schemes**

The AONB runs two grant schemes for the local community and businesses.

#### *Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)*

This has £40,000 to distribute in 2011/12. There is still money available for this financial year and the maximum grant a group could apply for is £5,000.

#### *Making it Local*

The grant scheme is part of the Local Action for Rural Communities (LARC), which in turn is part of the Rural Development Programme England. This grant fund covers the Blackdowns Hill and East Devon AONB areas, along with surrounding market towns including Chard. The grant programme had £2.4 million to allocate over four years to 2013.

To date £1.3 million has been allocated through this fund and 17 projects in, or benefiting South Somerset, have received £712,000 for projects totalling £1.256 million.

DEFRA conducted a review of all LARC funding this summer and subsequently made cuts to all the funds, with Making it Local receiving a cut of 30%. This will not affect approved projects that have been allocated funds, however there is now no money left to distribute to other projects.

### **Financial Implications**

The agreed financial contribution can be funded through existing budgets.

## **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.
- 2.2 Improve local biodiversity by active management of local sites

With the addition of the 'Making it Local' grant the Blackdown Hills AONB helps SSDC 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

## **Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

Through the report 'Renewable Energy in the Blackdown Hills' the AONB has provided information on the constraints and opportunities for renewable energy within the Blackdown Hills.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

The Blackdown Hills AONB works to ensure that people with limited mobility can enjoy the countryside easily via easy access trails.

**Background Papers:** *Area West Committee September 2009 agenda and minutes*