

Area West Committee – 19th October 2012

9. Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

Strategic Director: Rina Singh, Place and Performance
Assistant Director: Helen Rutter, Communities
Service Manager: Andrew Gillespie, Area Development Manager (West)
Lead Officer: Zoë Harris, Community Regeneration Officer (West)
Contact Details: zoe.harris@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01460) 260423

Purpose of Report

To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership during the last 12 months.

Public Interest

This report provides an annual update on the activities and projects that are taking place within the Blackdown Hills, particularly in relation to the work that happens within or close to South Somerset. Through the Area West Committee, South Somerset District Council is one of 6 local authorities that provide funding for the AONB partnership.

Recommendations

That members note the report.

Background

The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a distinctive and diverse rural landscape stretching from the M5 in the north to Honiton and Axminster in the South, and from Chard in the east to Culmstock in the west. 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'.

These characteristics that make the Blackdown Hills so special are:

- An isolated, unspoilt rural area
- Diversity of landscape patterns and pictures
- A unique geology
- A landscape with architectural appeal

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.

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 AONB, 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 2009-2014.

In addition the six Local Authority partners contribute 25% of the core funding to cover the running costs of the 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 Understanding which covers a 3 year period. Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6000 per annum in the period 2011- 2014. Like all other public sector organisations the AONB team has experienced cuts in recent years.

Councillor Ros Roderigo represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Zoe Harris represents SSDC on the Officers Support Group.

Projects specific to South Somerset

Hedgerow Event, Wambrook

In November the AONB team is organising a demonstration on hedgerow management for wood fuel, following research carried as part of a major European project involving other AONBs in the South West and French partners. The event will be held at Wambrook and include talks and a demonstration of hedgerow management techniques. The event is aimed at farmers and land managers.

AONB wide activities and projects in 2012/13

Website

The AONB provides a very useful and informative website providing a wide range of information suitable for both residents and visitors to the Blackdown Hills. The website is updated regularly and includes the following information:

- Things to do – an events diary, places to visit, routes for walking, cycling and horse riding including downloadable maps.
- Community – places to eat, community grants, links to parish websites.
- Looking after – advice on planning, climate change, light pollution and landscape guidelines.
- Volunteering – information about volunteer opportunities.
- Explanation of the AONB and how it is managed.

Visit the website at www.blackdownhillsaonb.org.uk

The Blackdown Hills Countryside Volunteers

A wide range of voluntary and community groups carry out activities within the AONB and are often looking for volunteers to help them. Likewise people living in and around the Hills often ask how they can help and get involved in countryside activities.

With money from the Lottery the AONB were able to set up a volunteer hub. Potential volunteers can register online via the AONB website and they will get matched with appropriate volunteer vacancies. In addition conservation groups can advertise volunteer days. A number of charities are involved in the scheme including Somerset Wildlife Trust, Blackdown Hills Walking Group, Butterfly Conservation and the Neroche Conservation Volunteers.

Countryside Events

The AONB team organise a year round calendar of events. These are advertised through the website and via a brochure which is printed twice a year. The events for this coming autumn and winter include a number of activities within South Somerset, such as guided walks and workshops to make hedgerow chairs and Christmas decorations. There are also a wide range of events happening very close to Chard such as campfire cooking in the woods, orienteering, hedge laying courses, green woodworking courses and even an event combining art and dance which includes dancers from the Royal Ballet performing in Stockland.

Blackdown Hills Heritage Day

On Saturday 29th September the team organised a day of activities that focused on the wealth of heritage the AONB has to offer, the event included:

- Displays and talks on farm buildings, Wellington Monument, Dunkeswell's American airbase, mining, Tithe maps and old photographs.
- Guided walk explaining the history of the Castle Neroche Hill Fort
- Iron Age living at Whitestaunton – re-enactment of the life of the Dumnonii tribe in the Blackdown Hills during the Iron Age.
- Medieval pot making
- Tour of the Dunkeswell Abbey ruins with an expert guide
- Hedges & Houses – a guided walk around Stockland explaining how agriculture has shaped the Blackdown Hills.
- Landscape painting in a Camden style – a day of painting at Ringdown Nature Reserve in the style of the Camden artists who painted in the area 100 years ago.

What makes a view?

The AONB's main field trail, as part of the CORDIALE European programme, is a study of views of the Blackdown Hills to, from and within the AONB. This study will work with communities to identify these key views and what makes them special, and also to inspire them to value their local landscapes. It will create a robust planning and management tool to aid decision-making and help retain and enhance the views identified, as well as devise a system for monitoring landscape change.

Design Guide for Houses

Produced by the AONB team, this is a very informative guide suitable for planners, developers and residents wishing to make alterations to their properties. The guide is available on the website and the Area West Planning team have been given a box.

BBC Country File

In March 2012 the BBC filmed a large part of one episode of Country File in the Blackdown Hills. Unfortunately the weather was not great but the programme generated enough interest for hits on the website to increase from an average of 400 a day to 2600 a day in the period just after the programme was broadcast.

AONB Funding Schemes

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

Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)

£27,000 was available to distribute to small community projects in 2012/13, most of this money has now been allocated.

Making it Local (Local Action for Rural Communities)

This RDPE (Rural Development Programme for England) funding programme for rural businesses and communities comes to an end in December 2013. The programme is no longer accepting applications for large grants but is still open for small applications of between £1,000 and £10,000, the deadline for applications is 12th November 2012. In September Making it Local delivered a funding advice session aimed at small businesses in Chard.

Financial Implications

The agreed financial contribution of £6,000 per annum can be funded through existing budgets.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

The environment is Focus 2 of the SSDC Council Plan, by working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB addresses Focus Two of the SSDC Council Plan which is the environment.

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

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

The Design Guide for Houses includes information on energy conservation and alternative forms of energy in relation to residential properties on 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 October 2011*
Area West Committee September 2009 agenda and minutes
