

Area West Committee – 16<sup>th</sup> October 2013

## 8. Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

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### 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. Every 5 years the AONB Partnership is required to update the Management Plan. Consultation for the new Plan starts on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 2013 for 8 weeks.

### Recommendation

That members note the report and continue to support the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership.

### 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'.

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, conservation groups and community organisations.

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 implementation of the statutory Management Plan.

In addition the six Local Authority partners 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 Understanding which covers a 3 year period. Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2011- 2014. This figure represents good value for money when taking into account the quality of 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 Ros Roderigo represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Zoe Harris represents SSDC on the Officers Support Group.

## **AONB Management Plan**

SSDC, along with the other local authority partners that sit on the AONB Partnership, has a statutory duty to be involved in the preparation and implementation of the AONB Management Plan. The current Management Plan runs to 2014, so work is well under way to produce the next Management Plan which will cover the period 2015-2020.

The Plan does not set out to deal with all of the issues facing the Blackdown Hills - it focuses on objectives and policies relevant to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, and the management actions needed to conserve this special place for future generations.

The new Management Plan will place greater emphasis on heritage, bio-diversity and eco-systems services. The plan also covers issues relating to tourism, farming, landscape and planning. A Delivery Plan accompanies the Management Plan, and this identifies actions and targets that flow from the objectives and policies contained in the Management Plan.

The Plan will be available for 8 weeks from Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October on the Blackdown Hills AONB website. Organisations and individuals will be particularly asked to comment on the key action priorities which form the Delivery Plan

## **AONB wide activities and projects in 2013/14**

Over the past year the AONB team have been involved in a number of activities and projects, including:

### 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. Work was carried out with communities to identify key views and what makes them special. This element of the project included working with schools and local artists to inspire local communities to value their local landscapes. A consultant was commissioned to work with the communities and collate the results from the various activities along with desk study research. The result has been the creation of 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. The final report will soon be available on the AONB and CORDIALE websites. The report has also been entered for a Landscape Institute award under the Heritage & Conservation category. The AONB team is now looking at how best to disseminate the information and toolkit to local authority partners.

As a follow up to this project the public are being asked to take a photo of their favourite view and enter it into the 'What makes a View landscape competition'. Winners can have either a meal for two at the Merry Herriers pub or a family day out with Wildlife Experience.

### Dunkeswell War Stories

Dunkeswell airfield was used as a base for air crews protecting supply ships from attack by German submarines during the Second World war. The Blackdown Hills high, flat land close to the Atlantic and the English Channel meant it had a unique strategic importance. The Blackdown Hills AONB obtained Heritage Lottery Funds to produce a fascinating project that explores the role the airfield played in the Second World War told through the eyes of those who were there.

Working with local schools the project team interviewed veterans and residents about their experiences, which have been uploaded to the internet on a dedicated website. Also on the website is a video and education resources for use by schools. Information including photos and audio recordings are also available at two kiosks with touch pads which have been installed at the Aviator Café in Dunkeswell and the Honiton Museum.

The project was launched at the Aviator café in April 2013 where a film version of the stories was shown. The film includes interviews with American veterans and evacuees along with animation, archive film, photographs and music. The launch event was so popular that when numbers reached 170 they had to turn people away and a second showing of the film was arranged. A DVD of the film shown at the launch has been produced for sale and is selling well. There is still much interest in this project; further showings of the film to will be held as part of the AONB's autumn / winter events programme. The AONB team is now working with the two local primary schools, who helped develop the schools' worksheets, on how best to promote these to other Devon, Somerset and Dorset schools.

For more information visit the website at <http://dunkeswellwarstories.com>

### AONB Countryside Events Programme

This hugely successful programme of events continues. A range of activities are delivered by a number of AONB partners across the Blackdown Hills. As can be seen from the list below the programme is devised to appeal to a wide variety of people:

- Buggy walks for families with toddlers at Staple Hill
- Managing woodlands for wood fuel and wildlife
- Fungus & nature walk
- Night walk and owls
- Carols at Wellington Monument
- Explore the stars
- Hedgerow Christmas decorations

These and many more are advertised through the website, on Facebook and Twitter and via a brochure which is printed twice a year.

### Website

The AONB has 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](http://www.blackdownhillsaonb.org.uk)

### **Blackdown Hills Nature Futures project**

This is a new project currently being developed by the AONB team. Blackdown Hills Natural Futures (BHNF) will deliver a better future for the natural heritage of the Blackdowns by equipping people with the skills they need to help look after it. The project will follow a '*Discover it! - Share it! - Do it!*' approach; an innovative and exciting process involving training, research and communication that inspires community participation and conservation action. Blackdown Hills Natural Futures will start in autumn 2014 and run for three years.

Key to the project will be the creation and delivery of a BHNF training programme, which will help to increase understanding of the nature of the Blackdown Hills AONB. Nine six-month (three days per week) traineeships will be offered to recent ecology graduates (three per year), delivering over 200 days of training on identification of species and habitats. Two-thirds of these natural heritage identification training days will also be open to the public, totalling over 400 training day places for local volunteers across the lifespan of the project. The programme will collect vital data on the habitats and species found on at least 120 sites throughout the Blackdown Hills, including nature reserves, county wildlife sites, unconfirmed wildlife sites and other sites of wildlife interest.

The project will also collect oral histories from Blackdowns farmers. This will help to uncover the traditional farming practices that have supported nature in the Blackdown Hills and record memories before they are lost. These recordings will then be incorporated into a variety of resources and events to ensure their experience is passed on.

The project's discoveries will be widely communicated to create a window into the little-known Blackdown Hills landscape. These '*Share it!*' activities will include production of a

variety of resources such as an online map-based photo, film and story gallery; an interactive landscape interpretation app; a 'Do it! Kit' to help local people to learn about and support natural heritage; a project webpage and regular online project updates. This will be complemented by locally-targeted events including winter identification workshops, community nature talks, wildlife site discovery days and annual 'bioblitz's. To bring the nature of the Blackdown Hills to new audiences, a high-profile, engaging event that showcases the area's fantastic natural heritage will also be planned and delivered. Local artists will help to inspire school children to produce materials and get involved with the event, ensuring the awareness-raising benefits are maximised.

Benefitting from the increased understanding and appreciation of natural heritage brought about by the project, 'Do it!' activities will encourage and support communities to do something for their local nature. This will focus on habitat creation and management on areas of publicly-accessible land such as village greens, playing fields, school grounds and churchyards. As well as being inspired by the findings of the BHNF team and project events, community groups will be given the opportunity to go on 'natural exchange visits'. These visits will offer Blackdown Hills communities the chance to learn from other successful projects, inspiring them to take action for nature in their own area. Five parishes will lead the way in year 1, showing how they can work together with the help of the project's staff and resources. This will help inspire other parishes into action, with a target to engage with a further fifteen parishes by the end of the project. Community achievements will be added to the project's online map-based gallery, helping local people to learn from each other and find out how they can get involved in their local area.

The AONB team has recently received confirmation from Heritage Lottery Fund that the first-round application has been approved and they can go through to the second stage, they have now started the development phase of the project and are seeking some match funding.

### **AONB Funding Schemes**

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

- *Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)* - This is a small pot of money available to distribute to small community projects. Most of this has been allocated this year.
- *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 Making it Local team have recently been awarded transition funding by Defra to develop an application for the next grant programme.

### **Financial Implications**

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

### **Implications for Corporate Priorities**

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB addresses Focus Two of the SSDC Council Plan which is the environment. In particular the AONB helps make South Somerset an attractive place to live, work and visit. 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 Blackdown Hills AONB website is a useful resource for homeowners seeking information on renewable energy.

**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 2012*  
                                  *Area West Committee October 2011*  
                                  *Area West Committee September 2009 agenda and minutes*

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