

Area West Committee – 19<sup>th</sup> February 2014

## **7. Natural Futures (Executive Decision)**

*Strategic Director:* Rina Singh (Place and Performance)  
*Assistant Director:* Helen Rutter & Kim Close (Communities)  
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### **Purpose of the Report**

For Members to consider an application for funding towards the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Natural Futures project.

### **Public Interest**

Natural Futures is a three year nature education project that uses a wide range of activities and events to teach people about nature and wildlife of the Blackdown Hills.

### **Recommendation**

Members approve a grant of £5,000 towards this innovative well thought out project. Natural Futures will engage with a large number of people, providing a wide range of fun and interesting activities that will raise awareness of the wildlife on the Blackdown Hills.

### **Background**

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 within the AONB, conservation groups and community organisations. Councillor Ros Roderigo represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Zoë Harris represents SSDC on the Officers Support Group.

Natural Futures is a 3 year project that has been developed by the Blackdown Hills AONB through consultation with a wide number of individuals and organisations including residents, land owners, local experts, and conservation groups. Consultation activities included public surveys and face to face discussions as well as a community consultation event.

Consultation identified the main themes of the project which are:

- The need to find out more about the natural heritage of the Blackdown Hills
- The need for better communication and increased understanding of the value of the area's natural heritage
- The need to help local communities build skills and confidence to set up their own projects and contribute more to the conservation of their natural heritage locally

### **Natural Futures**

Taking the themes identified through the consultation the project has been developed with three strands Discover it! Share it! and Do it!

Discover it!

This strand focuses on learning and finding out about the natural heritage of the Blackdown Hills. There are two main elements to this theme:

- Firstly the project will create 9 six month traineeships for recent ecology graduates. The graduates will receive over 200 days of training in species and habitat identification.
- Secondly, two thirds of the training days offered to the graduates will also be open to the public. Altogether over 400 training day places will be made available to local volunteers across the duration of the project. These training sessions will involve the collection of data on the habitats and species found on at least 120 sites throughout the Blackdown Hills including nature reserves and wildlife sites.

In addition to gathering data on the rich fauna and flora the area has to offer, the project will also collect oral histories from farmers on the Blackdown Hills. This will help uncover the traditional farming practices that have supported nature in the Blackdown Hills and record memories before they are lost.

Share it!

The information and data identified through the Discover it! element of the project will be widely communicated through the Share it! activities. This will include the production of a variety of information resources such as:

- on line map based photo, film and story gallery
- interactive landscape interpretation app
- project updates on-line and via bulletins
- workshops and talks

Do it!

This is all about putting the learning into practice and people coming together to create and deliver community nature projects and events. There will be a wide range of activities and events so there will be something that will appeal to everyone with an interest in nature on the Blackdown Hills. The type of activities the project expects to deliver includes:

- 9 winter identification workshops
- 30 community nature talks / wildlife site discovery days
- 3 high profile show case events
- 3 'Bio blitz events aimed at families
- Creation of 15 community nature projects

The bio blitz concept is often used to mobilise a large group of people and experts to build a comprehensive species list for a site. 'Bio blitz' events will take place at accessible sites and invite families to come along and help identify all the different flowers, bugs and beasts they can find. The bio blitz style events run as part of the Natural Futures project will have more of a family fun focus, providing children and adults the chance to discover a range of exciting wildlife and get to know a site near them. The project's trainees will plan an event each year and will be on-hand to show children what to look out for and how to have a go at working out what things are, as well as sharing some fun facts along the way.

**Pilot stage of the Natural futures Project**

It is anticipated that subject to securing all the funds, the project will commence in November 2014. Leading up to that date a number of activities and events are already being delivered in 5 local communities, which are pilot areas for the project. As the wider project is heavily geared towards community support and participation, with people

sharing their experiences as they learn from the project, work has commenced during this development phase to engage local people and help them to develop their ideas for a community nature project in their parish. The feedback obtained from the people that take part in these activities will be used to further refine the project. One of the parishes involved in the pilot stage of the project is Buckland St Mary.

### Project Costs

The total cost of the project is £406,088. These costs include:

Item / activity	Cost
New staff: Manager (0.6FTE) and Officer (0.8 FTE)	£130,500
Training for staff	£ 2,450
Training for volunteers	£ 11,100
Travel for staff	£ 4,671
Travel & expenses for volunteers	£ 22,938
Equipment & materials including printed & digital resources	£ 20,135
Venue hire & catering	£ 9,500
External contractor costs including community engagement, data management, artistic & oral history work	£ 29,783
Recruitment	£ 2,364
Publicity & promotion	£ 1,500
Independent evaluation	£ 3,000
Office & project management costs associated with the project	£ 20,444
Contingency (10% of all project costs) and inflation	£ 29,989
Non-cash contributions and volunteer time	£117,714
<b>Total</b>	<b>£406,088</b>

### Funds

The table below provides details of the funding package for this project.

Funding Source	Amount	Status
Own funds (AONB)	£59,600	Confirmed
Heritage Lottery Fund	£213,700	2 <sup>nd</sup> round application to be submitted May 2014
In kind including volunteer time	£117,714	£117,714
Charitable trusts and local businesses	£15,074	£3250 secured to date- work on-going to secure a further £11,824.
<b>Total</b>	<b>£406,088</b>	

The costs show this is a large project requiring mainly revenue funding for a period of 3 years. The Blackdown Hills AONB hopes to obtain the majority of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The team has already been in discussions with the Heritage Lottery Fund and has successfully passed through to the second stage of the application process.

A significant amount of the project will be funded through in-kind contributions. This comprises of volunteer time, including the hours worked by the trainee ecologists. In addition it involves contributions of time and resources from the AONB and partner

organisations. For example, Devon County Council will provide computers and associated equipment for project staff and data management costs.

To help secure the £213,700 required from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Blackdown Hills AONB needs to find the remaining £15,074 in match funding before they submit their bid. The AONB have already secured £3250 so this leaves a shortfall of £11,824. A contribution of £5000 from SSDC will help significantly in making up the shortfall and helping to draw down further funds.

**Assessment of Grant Application**

The Neighbourhood Development Officer has assessed this application and it can be seen from the table below that it exceeds the minimum score of 22 needed for a project to be considered.

Category	Score	Maximum
Target Groups	5	7
Project	4	5
Capacity of Organisation	13	15
Financial need	7	7
Innovation	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>37</b>

**Corporate Priority implications**

This project meets three of the themes of the SSDC Corporate Plan; it addresses the themes in the following ways:

Jobs

- The project will create 2 part-time jobs within the AONB area for the duration of the project.
- The nature identification programme created by the project will provide opportunities for recent graduates to gain vital work experience, helping them move out of unemployment and into their chosen profession.
- The training programme is open to local people, regardless of their educational background, this provides further opportunities for skills development that could lead to employment.
- Helping to conserve and enhance the special Blackdown Hills landscape will continue to provide an attractive setting in which to live and work, for new or relocating businesses.

Environment

- The project will help to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area by increasing understanding of its habitats and species, enabling conservation efforts to be targeted most effectively.
- Environmental benefits will be delivered through enhancement of biodiversity on sites throughout the Blackdown Hills following advice from the project staff.

- Blackdown Hills Natural Futures will also raise awareness of the area's natural assets and inspire public engagement in its conservation, which is vital if the areas natural beauty is to be conserved in the long term.
- Through the community nature projects, local people will be directly involved in creating attractive wildlife rich areas on their doorstep.

#### Health & Communities.

- Through the support to develop community nature projects, the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures will help communities work together, increasing their collective skill set to deliver benefits for their local area.
- The outdoor activities offered by the project, such as the training programme, will deliver health benefits for participants by boosting physical activity as well as providing stress relief through engagement with the natural environment.
- Many of the projects activities also provide opportunities for social interaction, such as on the community nature projects and events, helping to support mental well-being.

#### **Financial Implications**

The project can be funded from the community grants budget.

#### **Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications**

Data collected from the habitat and species surveys will be used by conservation groups in their observations on how species adapt to climate change.

#### **Equality and Diversity Implications**

The wide range of activities offered by the project will ensure that people will be able to engage with Natural Futures in some ways regardless of any disability. Where it is impossible to meet the needs of all potential disabled participants, for example on a training day at a privately owned wildlife site with challenging terrain, the project team will ensure potential disabled participants are able to engage in other ways, for example by sharing in the learning of the team through receiving regular updates, watching films online and attending talks and other events.

**Background papers:** *AW committee October 2013 - Blackdown Hills AONB*

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