

Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership.

Public Interest

This report provides an annual update on the activities and projects carried out by the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) partnership.

Recommendations

Members are asked to

- 1) Comment upon and note the report.
- 2) Agree to continue SSDC contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2019/20 subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2019/20.

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':

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

An AONB also encourages the social and economic wellbeing of its local communities; promotes sustainable development and has regard to the needs of recreation.

There are six South Somerset parishes wholly or partly within the AONB. They are Buckland St Mary, Broadway, Combe St Nicholas, Tatworth & Forton, Wambrook and Whitestaunton. However, as Ilminster, Chard and many other villages are so close to the Blackdown Hills, plenty of residents in South Somerset enjoy spending time in the AONB and benefit from the work of the partnership.

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 Blackdown Hills, 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 2014-19. The 2019-2024 AONB Management Plan review process is well underway and the six week public consultation on the Consultation Draft of the revised plan finished at the end of November. The final draft will then be prepared taking account of comments received and sent to Natural England, the statutory consultee, for final comment. The Management Plan will then be adopted by each local authority through agreed Committee/delegated decision procedures.

In addition, it is a statutory responsibility of the six Local Authority partners to 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 Agreement. It should be noted, that if any Local Authority partner reduces their funding contribution this will result in a reduction in the amount of money from Defra.

The table below shows what each local authority partner has contributed this financial year.

Funding Partner	Amount contributed
Devon County Council	9,274
Somerset County Council	5,122
East Devon District Council	9,323
Mid Devon District Council	8,500
South Somerset District Council	6,000
Taunton Deane Borough Council	10,000
Total from Local Authorities	48,219
Defra	165,465
Total funding	213,684

Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2018-19. This figure represents good value for money when taking into account the quality of the 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 Martin Wale represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Tim Cook and Nicky Doble represent SSDC on the Officers Support Group. From January 2019 Tim Cook and Adrian Moore will represent SSDC at the Officers Support Group.

AONB activities project work and associated programmes

The AONB has a small staff team who carry out a range of work across the area, during 2018 that work has included:

Nature and Wellbeing Project

This is a joint project with the Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills AONBs and is funded by Public Health Somerset. The aim of the project is get people who would not normally venture into an AONB, into the countryside doing some form of gentle physical activity.

The current fixed term Nature & Wellbeing Manager position (Kristen Lambert/ Danielle Wrench) shared across Somerset AONBs finishes at the end of 18/19.

Kristen Lambert has built partnerships with a number of groups in Chard including the Watch project, Chard Memory Café/Alzheimer's Society, Chard Children's Centre, Ferne Animal Sanctuary and the Alzheimers Society to develop a volunteering project which has benefitted both groups.

A group of people from WATCH, with various health and wellbeing needs, now make regular visits to Folly Farm in the Blackdown Hills AONB – a farm which is managed primarily for nature conservation.

Led by farmer Jonathan Farey, the group has been:

- Learning about work on the farm and about its plants, trees and wildlife
- Helping with tasks including scrub clearance, burning, and ditch clearance
- Getting involved in various art projects, for example working with clay and cameras
- Helping to spot and record wildlife

Staff and volunteers have noted how relaxed and happy people have been on their visits.

Also, as part of the Nature and Wellbeing project, members of Chard Memory Café have been paying regular visits to Ferne Animal Sanctuary where they have been taking part in seasonal art sessions led by a local volunteer. The idea is to inspire conversations and memories as many of the members grew up in Blackdown Hills AONB and enjoy sharing stories as they create their artwork. Each season a new display of their artwork is exhibited at Ferne Animal Sanctuary.

Ferne Animal Sanctuary also plans to provide opportunities for the group to volunteer in the garden next summer.

Manor Court Primary School, Chard, has been involving children and their families in wildlife-based activities, including:

- A trip to Ferne Animal Sanctuary involving a trail which took families around the site looking for and identifying birds.
- A volunteer day to improve the school's nature area and pond
- Staff training on how best to use the school's wildlife space

Public Health Somerset have just provided confirmation of continuation of the current AONB Nature & Wellbeing project into 19/20, with an expectation that this will also deliver work on next year's Naturally Healthy Month and develop resources to help promote the outdoor opportunities that exist throughout Somerset to promote emotional health and wellbeing.

Discussions are well underway with Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) regarding the bringing together the nature and wellbeing work of the Somerset AONBs and SWT into one combined project that would be submitted to Big Lottery as a £300-£400K, 3 year project, that would

employ a Project Manager and up to 3 Project Officers (all employed by SWT). The members of staff would work across the AONBs and spend some of their time in each office.

For the Blackdown Hills AONB, they are keen to create a fuzzy county boundary that would enable Hemyock to be included, as the GP practice based is especially keen on social/ green prescribing.

Facilitation Fund (Blackdown Hills Farming & Woodland Group)

This 3 year project is proceeding well, led by Butterfly Conservation with support from the AONB. The AONB are a partner on the Steering group. Since the start in April 2018, several events have been organised at Folly Farm, Dommatt for the 58 farmer members that have been well received. Links to the natural flood management, the undermanaged woods to woodfuel project and the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative as facilitation farmers have been directly targeted, to encourage collaboration and for them to reap the benefits of being in a facilitation group.

Community Nature Projects with local communities

Buckland St. Mary primary school is constructing a brand new environmental educational garden. A small pond and wildlife area at the school had fallen into disrepair and was inaccessible.

The aim is to create a great location in which to learn, but also a tranquil place to relax and enjoy nature. This new educational resource will allow the children to gain hands on experiences and close interactions with plants, trees, birds, amphibians and insects. There will also be the opportunity for children to learn about growing vegetables and sustainable water use by collecting rain water from the school buildings. In the wildlife garden, the school plans to host forest-school activities and guided nature walks. It is hoped that the wildlife garden will not only benefit the school children, but also the wider community of Buckland St Mary. Importantly, it will also provide a valuable new habitat for wildlife.

The head teacher at Buckland St Mary has witnessed a wonderful sense of community enthusiasm developing, many hours of voluntary time has already been invested as well as donation of equipment. It is hoped that, as the project continues, it will bring together the local community and connect people from all walks of life by creating one communal space; there is a sense of this being achieved already.

Pipeline Project

Trees Outside Woods

The project aims to mitigate for the impact of ash dieback through planting landmark trees, hedges, hedgerow trees, managing wood pasture and engaging local communities. Woodland Trust are leading on an application to HLF and one of the landscape priority areas is the Neroche part of the Blackdown Hills (Taunton Deane, South Somerset - Ashill, Mid Devon). The AONB have been heavily involved to date. If successful, the development phase would start in Spring 2019, although no finances will run through the AONB's books (so the project is light touch).

Planning

It is quiet on applications in South Somerset in the AONB.

Financial Implications

Like the other local authorities that make up the partnership, SSDC continues to contribute an annual grant towards the running costs of the AONB. The agreed financial contribution of £6,000 per annum has been funded through existing budgets in 2018/19. Approval in principle to continued funding in 2019/20 is recommended but this is subject to the Council's budget setting process and available budgets for 2019/20.

Council Plan Implications

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB helps address Focus 2 of the SSDC Council Plan:

- The environment - the work of the AONB helps make South Somerset an attractive place to live, work and visit.

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

The Blackdown Hills AONB website is a useful resource for homeowners seeking information on renewable energy and light pollution.

Equality and Diversity Implications

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

Background Papers

- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2017
 - Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2016
 - Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2015
 - Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2014
 - Area West Committee – Natural Futures February 2014
 - Area West Committee - Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) October 2013
 - Area West Committee - Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) October 2012
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