



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

Strategic Director: *Kirsty Larkins, Director of Service Delivery*
Service Manager: *Tim Cook, Locality Manager*
Lead Officer: *Adrian Moore, Locality Officer*
Contact Details: *adrian.moore@southsomerset.gov.uk or 01935 462409*

Purpose of the Report

- To update members on the work of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership
- Seek agreement to continue SSDC contribution to the core funding of the AONB Partnership of £6,000 in 2022/23

Public Interest

This report provides an annual update on the activities and projects carried out by the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership.

Recommendations

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 2022/23

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 (AONB) 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 the towns of 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.

Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6,000 per annum in the period 2021/22. 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.

Report Detail

AONB activities, project work and associated programmes

The AONB has a small staff team who carry out a range of work across the area:

AONB Work in 2021/22

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)

A quick assessment of the figures for what FiPL funded within South Somerset District last year:

- 542 metres of watercourse fencing to prevent stock access and improve water quality
- 223 metres of hedgelaying
- 50 trees planted
- 1.1 hectares of springline mire restored
- Apple pressing kit and other farm educational kit for farm visits
- 1 pond created
- Farm Transformation Plans

Other work includes:

- Much of the rest of the Triple Axe (Farming, Nature & People) work is within South Somerset
- There are 16 farm facilitation members within South Somerset
- One of the Environmental Land Management (E.L.M) test and trial focus zones (with associated farmer ambassador work) was within South Somerset

Nature Recovery Area Delivery Plan

This plan was produced with stakeholders, via three workshops and some underpinning work with the other Somerset AONBs, including the production of a State of Nature report, visualisations (what does a nature rich and resilient Blackdown Hills landscapes look like going into the future?), strategic alignment and monitoring.

Climate Action Plan

This plan is co-created with the Blackdown Hills Parish Network and Local Authorities. The aim is to create a plan that links parish level ambitions to national/ county and district plans, with the AONB Management Plan in the middle. Essentially it itemises where the delivery of the AONB Management Plan is already helping to deliver county/



district targets, as well as what needs to be in the revised AONB Management Plan in order that the climate/ carbon targets in county/ district plans can be met.

Somerset Nature Connections

Weekly Sessions:

Since summer 2021, the Project Officer for the Blackdown Hills has been delivering weekly Nature and Wellbeing self-care sessions on the Blackdown Hills. Sessions originally took place at Park Farm, Near Wellington but most recently have been based at Newhaven Coppice (Whitestaunton). Referrals come from Mental Health support services, other front line support workers and health professionals and self-referrals.

Between June 2021 and March 2022 the AONB have run weekly sessions (6-week blocks with 1/2 week gaps in between blocks). There have been 6-8 people in the group at any one time. This has enabled support for people to deeper their connection with nature for wellbeing. The AONB team adapt sessions to meet the support needs of those attending each block. Sessions are based on the 5 pathways to nature connectedness:

- ❖ Contact
- ❖ Emotion
- ❖ Compassion
- ❖ Beauty
- ❖ Meaning

Through different activities and engagement opportunities participants are supported to explore their connection with nature. Activities include;

- Creating artwork using natural pigments or artwork inspired by nature and wildlife
- Making bird feeders/boxes/bug hotels – things that show nature we care and offer opportunities for nature to thrive
- Opportunities to connect with landscape through poetry/the written word
- Other creative nature based crafts, such as willow weaving, using clay to make pots/cups etc.
- Practical conservation tasks such as coppicing, clearance etc.
- Wildlife monitoring

Sessions began with a check-in, grounding practice (mindfulness/supporting people to be present) and end with an opportunity to reflect on achievements.

The AONB Project Officer has delivered 34 sessions and worked with 18 referred participants and has supported 5 peer supporters/volunteers. This has included supporting them to take up training opportunities such as First Aid, Mental Health First Aid and Peer Support Training. These weekly sessions will continue to take place until

Summer/Autumn 2023 and will continue to be promoted to Mental Health Partners across South Somerset.

Work with The Watch Project – Chard

The AONB work closely with The Watch Project in Chard. This includes receiving direct referrals and linking up with them for volunteer training. The Somerset Nature Connections Project Manager also volunteers as a Director to support the project from a Nature and Wellbeing perspective.

Sweet Surprise

Recently the AONB have linked up with Sweet Surprise, a day care provider supporting adults with Learning Disabilities based in Ilminster. The AONB's work with the group is to support those attending to find connections with local nature and wildlife through hands on experiences. The AONB have linked the group up with a local landowner/business keen to share their land and wildflower meadow with others and get others involved.

AONB plans for 22/23

- Core work will involve advising on/ commenting on planning applications, co-ordinating events (those hosted by the AONB and supporting those of others), community empowerment including via small Sustainable Development Grants, active website with many opportunities to become engaged
- The AONB Management Plan review is proposed to start in early 2023, ready for the revised plan to run from 2025-2030, although this is being agreed with Defra and Natural England in principle
- Somerset Nature Connections, Farming in Protected Landscapes, nature recovery and climate resilience are priorities, alongside people engagement and conserving/ enhancing heritage

Benefit of continued engagement

- Proven partnership delivering AONB Management Plan and Duty of Regard for SDDC under Sec 85 & 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW Act) 2000
- Excellent multiplier of SDDC's £6,000 – approximately 1:34
- Provides specialist planning advice to SDDC Planning Officers
- Helps deliver SDDC's Council Plan and Strategies
- Continuation of partnership working with key public and private sector partners
- Ability to access additional funding for local projects
- Strong cross-sector and community engagement and support
- Key partnership targeting rural economy, farming and forestry
- Policy development benefits e.g. Landscape Character Assessment
- Ambassador for SDDC

Financial Implications

Like the other local authorities that make up the partnership, SDDC continues to contribute an annual grant towards the running costs of the AONB and has already agreed to adopt the AONB five-year Management Plan 2019-2024. The agreed

financial contribution of £6,000 per annum has been funded through existing budgets in 2021/22.

If this £6,000 award is agreed, funding will be paid from the existing Area West 2022/23 budget.

Council Plan Implications

Working in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB contributes to:

Focus 1: High quality cost effective services

- Transform customer services through technology
- Provide access to services to suit our customers' needs
- Actively manage assets and resources to ensure the best financial or community return
- Seek business opportunities for the council
- Work with partners to achieve economies, resilience and influence

Focus 2: Economy To promote a strong and growing economy with thriving urban, rural and land based businesses and improving productivity we will:

- Work with businesses and use our assets
- Advise and support initiatives that ensure worker skills meet the employer's needs
- Lobby for and support infrastructure improvements to enable growth
- Capitalise on our high quality culture, leisure and tourism opportunities to bring people into the district

Focus 3: Environment

To keep South Somerset clean, green and attractive we will work in partnership to:

- Promote recycling and minimise waste
- Promote the use of 'green' technology
- Maintain and promote access to our Country Parks and open spaces to promote good mental and physical health
- Keep streets and neighbourhoods clean and attractive
- Continue to support long term flood resilience
- Promote a high quality built environment in line with Local Plan policies
- Support communities to develop and implement local, parish and neighbourhood plans

Focus 4: Homes

To enable the provision of housing that meets the future and existing needs of residents and employers we will work with partners to:

- Minimise homelessness and rough sleeping
- Work with the private rented sector to improve the standard and availability of rented accommodation
- Tackle fuel poverty



South Somerset District Council

- Work to minimise the impact of personal or household debt
- Enable people to live independently for as long as they are able

Focus 5: Health and Communities

To build healthy, self-reliant, active communities we will:

- Support communities so that they can identify their needs and develop local solutions
- Target support to areas of need
- Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities
- Work with partners to tackle health issues such as diabetes and hypertension and mental health
- Work with our partners to keep our communities safe

Area West Chapter Implications

- Continue to support the Blackdown Hills AONB

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

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

SSDC Environment Strategy

- Work to achieve a significant reduction in emissions and improve carbon-offset rates across the geography of South Somerset, through direct action, by supporting the communities of South Somerset to meet their ambitions and through the way we do things; ensuring that working towards carbon neutrality is a thread which runs through all of our decision-making

Equality and Diversity Implications

<i>An Equality Impact Relevance Check Form has been completed in respect of the Proposal?</i>	Yes
<i>The Impact Relevance Check indicated that a full EIA was required?</i>	No
<i>An EIA was not required. Please see the attach Impact Relevance Check Form as an Appendix to this report.</i>	
Additional Comments	
<i>The Blackdown Hills AONB aims to provide for all</i>	



Background Papers

- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB May 2021
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB January 2020
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB April 2019
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB December 2018
- 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 AONB October 2013
- Area West Committee – Blackdown Hills AONB October 2012