

## **Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)**

*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 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.

### **Recommendation**

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

### **Background**

The Blackdown Hills AONB was set up in 1991 to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area, including its distinctive landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage. 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.

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. Through the Area West budget, SSDC has agreed to contribute £6000 per

annum in the period 2016-17. Like all other public sector organisations the AONB team has experienced cuts in recent years.

Councillor Martin Wale represents SSDC on the Partnership Management Group. Zoe Harris represents SSDC on the Officers Support Group.

### **AONB wide activities**

The AONB has a small staff team who carry out a range of work across the area, during 2015 that work has included:

#### Farming and the Environment

In June the team, in partnership with FWAG South West (Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group) and Natural England, organised a practical workshop for all farmers across the AONB to explain the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme. More than 40 farmers attended including some from South Somerset District.

#### AONB Gateway signage

For the past couple of years the AONB has been working with the relevant highways authority to install boundary signage at suitable locations around AONB's perimeter. This year a sign has been placed west of Chard on the A30.

#### Planning responses

Lisa Turner, the AONB Planning Officer has commented and given landscape advice on 14 planning applications within South Somerset.

#### 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Next year the AONB will be celebrating 25 years since its designation. To celebrate the team is already planning a Walking Festival which will involve 25 walks at various locations across the area. Some of those walks will start in nearby towns and will go into the Blackdown Hills; Chard will be included in the programme.

#### A30/A303 improvements

The AONB manager Linda Bennett has been working closely with Devon Council County (DCC) regarding improvements to the A30/A303 with two meetings with the recent and now current transport ministers John Hayes and Andrew Jones.

In August Andrew Jones visited the AONB to see the route for himself and a meeting was held in Monkton where councillors, members of the local community and officers were able to express their views and concerns regarding the proposed road improvements.

DCC is now leading the work on the improvements centred around Monkton and eastwards to the Devonshire Inn (junction of A30 and A303). Environmental contracts, covering ecology, landscape, historic environment, geo-diversity and flood risk, have been let and will inform the design process.

#### Sustainable Development Fund

This is a small pot of grant money which is used to support local community projects. This year within South Somerset a grant was awarded to the Ancient Technology Festival at Newhaven Coppice, Whitestaunton. This was a full day of experimental archaeology and ancient crafts including flint knapping, charcoal burning and green woodworking, which was free to anyone who wished to attend.

## **AONB project work and associated programmes**

Over the years the AONB has hosted various time limited projects that benefit the people and communities within and around the AONB area. Below is information on current work taking place.

### Natural Futures

This 3 year project began in January 2015 when the 2 officers employed to run the programme started in post. Natural Futures has 3 strands to its delivery: Discover it, Share it, Do it.

**Discover it!** – This strand is all about education and training and provides practical work experience to recent ecology graduates through a six-month traineeship. During this first year 3 trainee ecologists have completed their placements and have received comprehensive training and survey experience. One of those trainees has secured permanent employment as an Assistant Ecologist as a direct result of their placement on the project. The trainee ecologists have surveyed 47 wildlife sites, including 8 in South Somerset, and issued the subsequent reports to the relevant landowners. Some of those training sessions were open to the public and were attended by 24 people.

The Discover it strand also includes filming and work with local schools. The Natural Futures team are currently working with one primary school to make a film about the AONB's natural environment. So far they have made 20 short film clips about wildlife and heritage, which includes interviews with local experts. Four locations in South Somerset were used for the filming; Whitestaunton, Yarty Moor, Street Ash and Bickham Wood. Additional work with schools is planned for next 2 years and that will include South Somerset schools.

**Share it!** – Takes the information gained from the Discover it strand and disseminates it to a wider audience. The project now has its own website [www.blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org](http://www.blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org). This website brings together all the photos, film clips, stories, discoveries, advice and achievements into one place.

In addition there have been 15 wildlife focused events, walks and talks open to the public, plus a Wildlife Discovery day held at Otterhead Lakes which attracted 125 people including South Somerset residents.

**Do it!** – is all about people within the Blackdowns developing their own 'Community Nature Projects'. As well as on raising local awareness of the value of natural heritage, these projects focus on the creation and management of habitats on areas of publicly accessible land, such as village greens, playing fields, school grounds and churchyards. . To date 10 projects are being supported across the Blackdown Hills and this includes 2 in South Somerset:

- 1. Underway Meade, Combe St Nicholas:** this 4 acre area was already designated a Local Wildlife Site in 1999 because of its flower rich grass land with associated pond and stream. The area is surrounded by hedgerows and includes woodland and meadows. The site had become overgrown and was not being managed in a beneficial way for wildlife. The Natural Futures team is working with local volunteers to improve the site as an amenity for both wildlife and the community. The volunteers are actively involved in grassland restoration, woodland and hedgerow management, they are also improving public access and have been running community activities and wildlife skills training.

- 2. Tatworth** – Working with a team of volunteers to restore a village pond and manage the surrounding hedgerow. The project also includes community activities and skills training.

#### Natural Beauty Natural Wellbeing

This is a joint project between the 3 Somerset AONBs (The Blackdowns, Quantocks and Mendip Hills). The project makes use of Somerset's quality landscape to improve the health and wellbeing of residents. Interviews have recently been held to recruit a part time officer to run this 3 year programme, which will commence in January 2016. The Officer will develop and co-ordinate healthy activities with target communities, in the Blackdown Hills they will work with people from Chard, as well as Taunton and Wellington.

#### AONB Parish Network

This network was set up a few years ago when a number of parishes within the AONB decided to work together to develop a community plan for the area. The Parish Network provides a forum for representatives from the parish councils to work together on common issues such as transport and planning. Buckland St Mary Parish Council has recently joined the network. More information can be found at [www.blackdownsonline.org.uk](http://www.blackdownsonline.org.uk)

#### Making it Local - EU LEADER Funding Programme

The staff team for the last Making it Local programme were based in the AONB offices, although arrangements have changed for the new programme, the AONB continues to have strong links with Making it Local. The new programme has very recently opened for applications for economic based projects in Chard, Ilminster and the surrounding parishes. Visit the website [www.makingitlocal.org](http://www.makingitlocal.org) for further information about the programme and a map of the eligible area.

### **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 can be funded through existing budgets.

### **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.

### **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 – 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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