



**Blackdown Hills**

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

# **MANAGEMENT PLAN 2019 – 2024**

## **ADOPTION DRAFT**

**March 2019**





## Vision for the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

*In 2029:*

The Blackdown Hills remains an ancient landscape of small villages and farms, deep valleys and high hedges shaped by its unique geology.

Its sense of tranquil timelessness and lack of change provides reassurance in a polluted, overcrowded world and gives a sense of well-being to residents and visitors alike.

Its wildlife is thriving and heritage conserved due to sympathetic management that is keeping alive traditional skills. They are enjoyed and understood by local people and visitors alike.

Vibrant, diverse communities, with a strong sense of identity, live and work sustainably, supporting the local economy and conserving and enhancing the area's rich resources for future generations.

This Vision was first set in 2009, providing a long-term goal for management of the Blackdown Hills AONB.

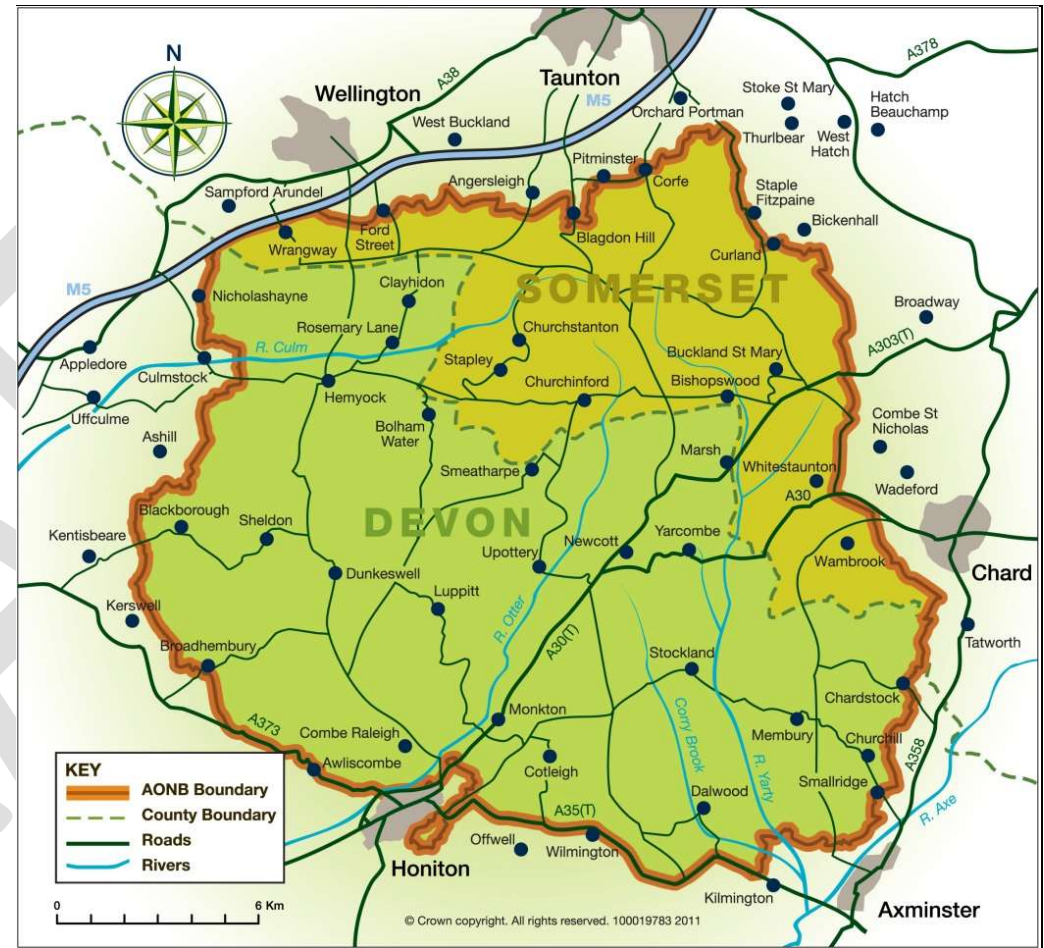
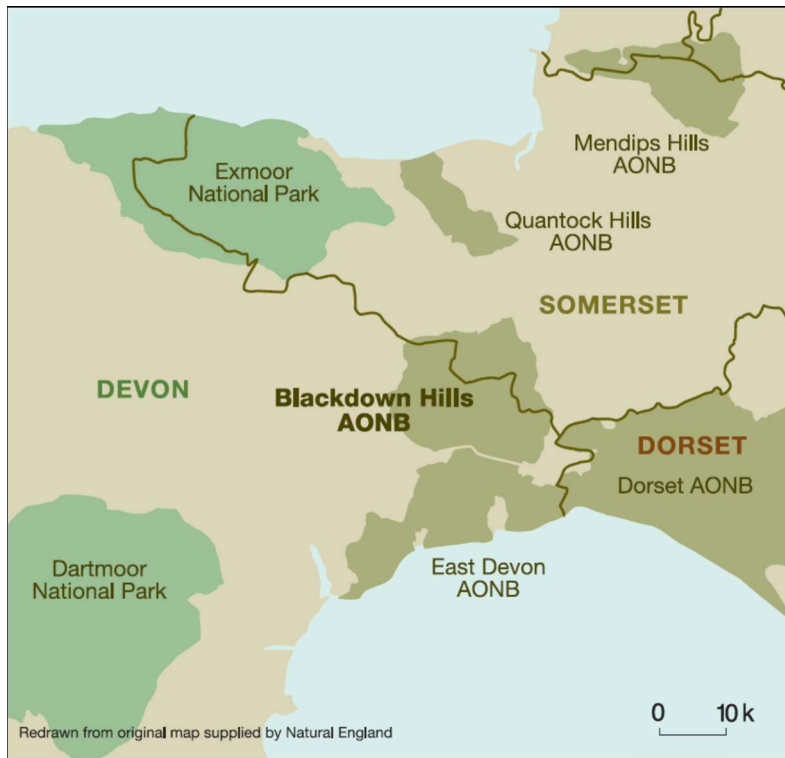
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## CHAPTER 1

### LOCATION OF THE BLACKDOWN HILLS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covers 370 square kilometres (143 square miles) of unspoilt countryside straddling the Somerset and Devon border, and embracing part of four separate district council areas.



## Ministerial Foreword

I am fortunate that England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are part of my Ministerial responsibilities. Whether it be rolling hills, sweeping coastline or a tranquil village, spending time in an AONB can stir the heart and lift the spirit.

This is a pivotal moment for all AONBs. The Government has set its ambition in the 25 Year Environment Plan which states clearly the importance of natural beauty as part of our green future, while AONBs retain the highest status of protection for landscape through national planning policy. Leaving the EU brings with it an opportunity to develop a better system for supporting our farmers and land managers, who play such a vital role as stewards of the landscape. And the Review of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty led by Julian Glover - the first of its kind for generations - will make recommendations to make sure our designated landscapes can flourish in the years ahead.

In my visits to AONBs around the country, I have been struck by the passion of many people - farmers, volunteers, and hard-working staff - for the beautiful places they live and work in. In this spirit I am delighted to welcome publication of this Statutory Management Plan for the Blackdown Hills AONB. It is significant that this plan will be delivered in partnership by those who value the Blackdown Hills AONB. I would like to thank all those involved in the preparation of this document and wish you the best of success in bringing it to fruition.

*Lord Gardiner of Kimble - Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity*

## AONB Chairman's Foreword

The next five years offers considerable opportunity for the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership, as well as many challenges. Recent government policy reflects the value that high quality landscapes have to society and this strengthens our mandate to continue to work through our partnerships to conserve and enhance the nationally important and very special corner of England that is the Blackdown Hills.

We anticipate that the government's Review of Designated Landscapes will reflect the value to society that designated landscapes can deliver and we hope that future rural support mechanisms will enable our cherished landscape to be further enhanced and reward custodians, thereby mitigating against challenges such as climate change whilst optimising public goods and services.

We feel confident that this AONB Management Plan will provide the direction and focus to work collaboratively to make a difference to the Blackdown Hills and act to bring communities together to celebrate, understand and engage with the rich heritage that makes the area so distinctive and cherished.

I am proud to be chair of the AONB Partnership and I look forward to rewarding and inspiring times ahead, through the life of the AONB Management Plan period.

*Cllr Paul Diviani - Chairman, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership*

### **AONB Partnership Commendation:**

This management plan is endorsed by partnership organisations as the guiding framework for maintaining the special character of the Blackdown Hills AONB, while recognising the need for a thriving future for the area and its communities.

## NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are nationally important protected landscapes. The 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cover just under 20% of the UK. The distinctive character and natural beauty of AONBs make them some of the most special and cherished places in which to live and to visit.

In England AONBs are living, working landscapes that contribute some £16bn every year to the national economy. Although home to less than half a million people (under 2% of England's population), over two thirds of England's population live within half an hour's drive of an AONB and around 150 million people visit English AONBs every year, spending in excess of £2bn.

Together with National Parks, AONBs represent our most outstanding landscapes; unique and irreplaceable national assets, each with such distinctive character and natural beauty that they are recognised internationally as part of the global Protected Areas Family to be managed in the interest of everyone – local residents, businesses, visitors, and the wider public - and protected for future generations.



The south west of England has a particularly rich landscape and environmental resource, with 12 AONBs and part of two others and two National Parks covering more than a third of the region. The Blackdown Hills is one of nine AONBs that lie entirely or partially within the counties of Devon and Somerset. In Devon the AONBs and National Parks together cover 38% of the county, while the figure is 24% in Somerset.

To the south, between Honiton and Axminster, the Blackdown Hills AONB shares a boundary with the East Devon AONB, and not far to the east is Dorset AONB. Looking north, there is a strong visual relationship across the Vale of Taunton with the Quantock Hills AONB and Exmoor National Park. A population of around 150,000 live in the towns close to the AONB.

AONBs and National Parks in South West England  
(Redrawn from original map supplied by Natural England)



### The purpose of AONB designation

AONBs are designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

The purposes of the AONB designation were updated and confirmed by the Countryside Commission in 1991 as follows:

- The primary purpose of the designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
- In pursuing the primary purpose, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, other rural industries and the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.
- Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 confirmed the significance of AONBs and created improved arrangements for their management. There are two key sections of the Act for AONBs:

- Section 85 places a statutory duty on all 'relevant authorities' to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty when exercising or performing any function affecting land in AONBs.
- Section 89 places a statutory duty on local authorities to prepare and review a Management Plan for each AONB in their administrative area.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 ABOUT THIS PLAN

#### What is the Plan for?

This statutory Management Plan sets out the policy framework for the conservation and enhancement of the Blackdown Hills AONB for the next five years. It is a revised and updated version of the previous Management Plan 2014-2019. Its purpose is to:

- Highlight the special qualities and significance of the AONB
- Present a vision for the future of the AONB
- Set out objectives and policies to secure the vision
- Identify what needs to be done, and by whom
- State the condition of the AONB and how the effectiveness of its management will be monitored
- Reflect the views and aspirations of a wide range of AONB stakeholders and parties with an interest in it
- Co-ordinate the work of different partner organisations

Working together with others to achieve success underscores all AONB Partnership work. As the principal strategic guidance for the Blackdown Hills AONB, the plan therefore provides the basis to:

- Inform and influence decisions
  - Stimulate and prioritise action
  - Promote collaboration
  - Help prioritise resources
- in respect of the AONB.

The plan is based on robust evidence that is regularly reviewed, to give an up-to-date status of the 'health' of the AONB and to underpin decision making. In 2017, a State of the Blackdown Hills<sup>1</sup>

report was produced to provide base line and trend data to inform the Management Plan review process.

#### Who is the Plan for?

It has been prepared by the AONB Partnership on behalf of local authorities but it is a plan for the AONB, not an organisation and provides a framework to help guide all activities affecting the AONB. All those that have an active interest and role in the management of the Blackdown Hills landscape and in supporting the communities that live and work within it have a role in implementing the Management Plan through individual action as well as partnership working. Its audiences include:

- Local authorities – the organisations that are required to prepare, adopt and review the Management Plan, and who carry out key functions, such as planning, that affect the AONB
- AONB Partnership organisations (see appendix D) – these organisations will have a key role in delivering and championing the Management Plan
- Relevant authorities – all public bodies and statutory undertakers have a duty to have regard to the primary purpose of the AONB; this Management Plan will guide them in fulfilling their statutory duties
- Landowners, land managers and developers – those who own and manage land in the AONB have a vital role to play; the plan aims to guide, support and attract resources for sensitive management of the AONB
- Local communities and businesses – all who live and work in the Blackdown Hills can play an active role in caring for the AONB; the plan identifies some of the priorities for action and ways to become involved

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<sup>1</sup> Available on AONB website



### **How does it relate to other plans, strategies and activities?**

As the statutory policy document for the AONB, this plan can be used to guide, inform and support all other plans and activities developed by public bodies and statutory undertakers that may affect the AONB, in line with their duty to have regard to conserving and enhancing natural beauty. It doesn't override the plans and policies of other organisations, who may also be the lead body in respect of responsibility for decision making and implementation. It can also be used as a guide and information base for other organisations, groups and people in and around the Blackdown Hills.

Some of the key links are:

- Local plans: it provides part of the evidence base for local plans including those for transport, waste and minerals
- Development management: local planning authorities have a statutory duty of regard for the AONB when making planning decisions; this Management Plan can be a material consideration and provide the depth of information to support relevant planning decisions
- Community-led planning: it can help inform neighbourhood and parish plans and similar tools
- Local nature partnerships and catchment partnerships: it provides part of the evidence base for their own plans and offers a basis for working in an integrated way at a landscape scale
- Land management and economic investment: it can guide the targeting and prioritising of environmental stewardship grants and other rural economy programmes

## 2.2 KEY EXTERNAL INFLUENCES FOR THE AONB

### Environmental change

While primarily concerned with climate change, environmental change also encompasses local threats resulting from increased global trade and travel, including new or advancing pests and diseases (e.g. Ash Dieback, *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*). Coping with climate change is likely to be one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century as global warming makes its impact. The latest climate change projections for the south west indicate there are likely to be warmer wetter winters, hotter summers, more extreme weather events (e.g. heat waves, torrential down pours of rain, extreme wind and storm events) and rising sea levels. These changes in climate are likely to create significant impacts which will affect all aspects of the south west's economy, society, infrastructure and the natural environment.

### Political uncertainty

This plan was prepared as negotiations continued to remove the UK from the European Union (EU) and establish a new trading relationship with it. This has significant implications for the UK's rural areas and their management, particularly around:

- national legislation for environmental protection to replace those agreed at EU level
- future investment in agriculture, the environment and rural communities to replace those arising from Common Agricultural Policy and potential changes in policy
- the potential for future cross-Channel co-operation, trade and future marketplace impacts on land-based businesses.

At the time of writing two other processes are in progress:

- Changes in local authority structures and operation

- A review of protected landscapes (the Glover review) will make recommendations to Government in 2019 on the purposes, funding, governance and coverage of England's National Parks and AONBs.

### Economy and reduced public finance

Since the last Management Plan was adopted in 2014, the UK economy, as with many western economies, has experienced lengthy periods of recession and slow growth. There has also been a significant reduction in public spending over this period and the voluntary sector is experiencing a fall in income. There is and will continue to be a knock-on effect in terms of delivery of conservation and enhancement; reduced guaranteed income and increased competition for available funds are making delivery more difficult via the 'traditional' means. Increasingly, the 'civil society' is being expected to adopt responsibility for the parts of their local environment that were supported to a greater extent by public bodies.

### Development pressure and changes to planning policy context

There is a need for additional housing and associated infrastructure to accommodate a growing population and a growth in low-occupancy households. This presents challenges to the AONB's landscape in terms of:

- Land-take for building and infrastructure provision with associated potential landscape and visual impacts
- Increased nutrients being introduced to sensitive river catchments
- Increased recreational pressure from a growing population.

While many areas of the AONB are robust and afford ample opportunities for outdoor recreation, some are particularly sensitive to such disturbance. Meanwhile, to address housing supply and delivery recent years have seen an increased emphasis on neighbourhood planning, the revision of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and the emergence of joint local plans to

address major urban extensions and expansion (such as the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan).

## 2.3 KEY CONCEPTS WITHIN THIS PLAN

### **Sustainable development**

This Management Plan is underpinned by, and contributes towards delivery of, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals<sup>2</sup>.

### **Natural capital and the ecosystem approach**

Put simply, natural capital is about nature's assets, while ecosystem services relate to the goods and services derived from those assets. By bringing together three core principles of the ecosystem approach, we can ensure that the threats to the AONB are adapted to or mitigated against and that the benefits we derive from the natural environment (ecosystem services) are safeguarded and enhanced. The principles are:

- The natural systems that operate within the AONB are complex and dynamic, and their healthy functioning should not be taken for granted.
- Those that live, work and visit the AONB benefit from services provided by the natural environment. These services underpin social and economic wellbeing and have a value – both monetary and non-monetary
- Those that benefit from the services provided by the AONB and those who are involved in the management of them should play a central role in making decisions about them. Natural and cultural capital and their relation to natural beauty is more fully discussed in Chapter 3.

Using the Ecosystem Approach and applying the 'bigger, better, more and joined' principles<sup>3</sup> means that the AONB Partnership is helping deliver the aspirations of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, its commitment to the delivery of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity and Biodiversity 2020. The mission for Biodiversity 2020 is "to halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent [and resilient] ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people"

### **Landscape approach**

The landscape approach and an understanding of landscape character guide the AONB Partnership's work. This fits well with the ecosystems approach as both encourage consideration of the links between various elements of the landscape in their management.

The European Landscape Convention (ELC) promotes the protection, planning and management of landscapes and seascapes and reinforces the approach to landscape character assessment. In line with the convention and the principles of sustainable development, this Management Plan uses an understanding of landscape character to help guide local activity and ensure that planning decisions and management practices conserve and enhance the distinct character and quality of the AONB's landscapes.

Using landscape as a guide the ELC applies to all landscapes; it includes open countryside and urban areas, as well as the coastal and marine environment. Landscape character assessment recognises the holistic nature of the landscape, defined as "part of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

<sup>3</sup> Making Space for Nature, Lawton et al, 2010



the land, as perceived by local people or visitors, which evolves through time as a result of being acted upon by natural forces and human beings.” Landscape character goes beyond landscape and scenic beauty - it is about the interaction of people and place over time, encompassing a suite of perceptual and aesthetic qualities and historical, cultural, ecological and economic aspects.

Conservation and enhancement of the character and quality of the AONB landscape lie at the heart of all the chapters in this Management Plan. There are four landscape management strategies that can be used:

- Conserve - for landscapes in good condition with strong character where the emphasis is on protecting the key characteristics of the area
- Enhance - for landscapes where some features have fallen into decline. Management should aim to reintroduce features, improve their management and remove features that detract from the overall character
- Restore - for landscapes where features have been lost or are in a severe state of decline. Management should aim to repair and re-establish characteristic features
- Create - for landscapes where condition is poor and character weak beyond repair. Management should consider creation of a new landscape.

In taking forward these approaches, AONB management tends to focus on large or ‘landscape scale’ initiatives which also tend to be integrated to include many different interests. Smaller, more local projects also have great value in being able to focus on specific issues and secure ongoing community engagement. Here AONB management is about making connections and contributing to a bigger picture.

## CHAPTER 3

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE – WHAT’S SPECIAL ABOUT THE BLACKDOWN HILLS

#### 3.1 Natural Beauty

‘Natural beauty’ is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries (Countryside Agency, 2001). These aspects of natural beauty are key physical components of the landscape. However, landscape is also about tranquillity, sensory experiences, cultural associations and the relationship between people and place. It is therefore important that the cultural, perceptual and aesthetic dimensions of landscape are also recognised as elements of natural beauty. Natural England has developed a list of factors that contribute to natural beauty:

<i>Landscape quality</i> - a measure of the physical state or condition of the landscape
<i>Scenic quality</i> - the extent to which the landscape appeals to the senses (primarily, but not only, the visual senses)
<i>Relative wildness</i> - the degree to which relatively wild character can be perceived in the landscape makes a particular contribution to sense of place
<i>Relative tranquillity</i> - the degree to which relative tranquillity can be perceived in the landscape
<i>Natural heritage features</i> - the influence of natural heritage on the perception of the natural beauty of the area. (Natural heritage includes flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features.)
<i>Cultural heritage</i> - the influence of cultural heritage on the perception of natural beauty of the area and the degree to which

associations with particular people, artists, writers or events in history contribute to such perception
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#### 3.2 Special Qualities

The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has a suite of special qualities that together make it unique and outstanding, underpinning its designation as a nationally important protected landscape. Special qualities may be considered as specific components of ‘natural beauty’, distilling out the key attributes that combine in particular ways to form the natural beauty of the AONB. These are the special qualities individually and in combination that we need to conserve and enhance for the future and they should be considered in all decisions affecting the AONB.

#### 3.3 Overview of the AONB

The Blackdown Hills are a distinctive, diverse rural landscape stretching from the prominent scarp above the M5 in the north to Honiton and Axminster in the south, and from Chard in the east to Culmstock in the west. Ranging from around 50 to 310 metres above sea level, the area is characterised by a sense of relative remoteness and tranquillity, and was designated as an AONB in 1991.

From the dramatic, steep, wooded north-facing scarp, the area dips gently southwards as a flat-topped plateau deeply dissected by valleys. This is the northern part of the East Devon Plateau – one of the finest, most extensive in Britain. The tops are open and windswept; in the valleys villages and hamlets nestle among ancient patterns of small, enclosed fields and a maze of winding lanes lined with high hedgebanks. The steep valleys support a patchwork of woodland and heath, nationally and regionally important habitats

which support a wealth of charismatic and priority species and interesting plant communities.

## **Statement of Significance**

### **3.4 The Special Landscape Character**

Key to the Blackdown Hills designation as an AONB is the subtle combination of four aspects of the landscape (*The Blackdown Hills landscape: A landscape assessment*. Countryside Commission, 1989):

*It is an isolated and unspoilt rural area* and remains relatively undisturbed by modern development and so ancient landscape features, special habitats, historical and archaeological remains have survived intact. There is a sense of stepping back in time in the winding lanes, the hidden valleys and relatively remote villages. The traditional pattern of villages, hamlets, paths and roads remains largely unchanged and there is an identifiable and characteristic vernacular, pastoral landscape.

*There is a diversity of landscape patterns and pictures.* The visual quality of the landscape is high and is derived from the complex patterns and mosaics of landscapes. Although the scenery is immensely varied, particular features are repeated. Ancient, species-rich hedgerows delineate the fields and define the character of the landscape, enclosing narrow twisting lanes. There are long views over field-patterned landscapes. The high plateau is dissected by steep valleys, supporting a patchwork of woodland and heath, and fine avenues of beech along the ridge. The history of medieval and parliamentary enclosures has resulted in an

individual, patchwork landscape of small fields in the valleys and larger fields with straight hedges on the plateau.

*A unique geology.* The composition of the underlying geology of the Blackdown Hills and the adjoining East Devon AONB is unique in Britain and is one of the area's strongest unifying features. It has given rise to the distinct topography of a flat-topped plateau, sharp ridges and spring-lined valleys. The springs have created the characteristic pattern of rough grassland, mire and woodland vegetation on the valley sides. The nature of the Greensand rock has meant that plant communities are particularly diverse. Moreover, the geology has provided a local building material, chert, which is uncommon elsewhere.

*It is a landscape with architectural appeal.* The landscape pattern is punctuated by a wealth of small villages, hamlets and isolated farmsteads of architectural value and distinctive character. Devon and Somerset are recognised nationally for their fine rural architecture, but the Blackdown Hills contain a special concentration of buildings where the vernacular character is particularly well preserved. Predominant materials are chert and cob with thatch, often now replaced by corrugated iron, or clay-tiled roofs. The appeal lies in the way in which the buildings fit so naturally into their surroundings.



### 3.5 The Special Historic Landscape

The Blackdown Hills landscape has great time depth, from prehistoric through to modern:

*Prehistoric to Roman times* There are significant concentrations of early prehistoric evidence in the AONB. Large numbers of Mesolithic flint and chert tools have been found, along with Neolithic causewayed enclosures. Later prehistoric features include Bronze Age round barrow cemeteries and isolated barrows, and large Iron Age hillforts that take great advantage of the local topography. Of the 25 Scheduled Monuments in the area, 10 are Bronze Age barrows or barrow cemeteries and seven are hillforts.

Peat deposits in springline mires provide information back to prehistoric times, and the preserved pollen records show changes from woodland to pastoral and arable farming.

The Roman period is represented by military use of the Iron Age hillfort at Hembury, the later bath-house at Whitestaunton and several 'Romanised' farms.

*Medieval period* Key medieval sites include Castle Neroche, an early Norman earthwork castle built on an earlier Iron Age defended site, and Hemyock Castle, a fortified manor house of the late medieval period. Dunkeswell Abbey, founded in the 13th century, had a significant influence on the landscape through its grange farms and probable involvement in iron production.

The Blackdown Hills' distinctive field patterns and many dispersed farmsteads and hamlets originate from medieval times. Across the area are properties and settlements that were recorded in the Domesday Book. Historic landscape characterisation projects have

identified a high proportion of the landscape as being of medieval origin. Enclosed, former medieval strip fields are well preserved throughout the AONB. Irregular fields and massive hedges in the valleys represent land taken directly into cultivation from woodland in the medieval period.

There is an extraordinary concentration of medieval buildings in the villages, as well as many deserted or shrunken medieval and post-medieval settlements, which reflect the ebb and flow of agriculture on marginal land. Ancient woodland, surviving from the medieval period, is still well represented, particularly on the northern escarpment. The Royal Forest of Neroche was finally enclosed in the 1830s but traces of the old woodbanks still survive.

*Modern* Parliamentary Inclosure of former commons on the plateau tops in the 19th century has created distinctive landscapes of large regular fields with straight roads and beech hedges. Beacon Hill in Upottery was the last area of England to be enclosed some 100 years ago.

The Wellington Monument, a prominent feature on the northern skyline, commemorates the battle of Waterloo. The AONB also contains important evidence from the World War Two – the three airfields at Culmhead (Trickey Warren), Dunkeswell and Upottery (Smeatharpe). As well as the runways, a wide range of structures still survives at all three sites including pillboxes, aircraft dispersal pen and technical and domestic buildings. Some have been designated as Scheduled Monuments or Listed Buildings. Since World War Two, there has been a substantial loss of hedgerows and orchards to meet the needs of modern agricultural; simplifying parts of the landscape and masking their early origins.

These landscapes of the Blackdown Hills have been created by the interplay of people and the land over many centuries:

The **unique geology** of the area has had a strong influence on the industrial archaeology and landscape. Iron production is thought to have started locally in the later Iron Age, it was an important Roman industry and continued into the Middle Ages. Recent finds in Hemyock suggest an intensive iron industry existed in the late 9th and early 10th centuries. The iron ores were found at the junction of the Upper Greensand and the capping clay layer. The cratered landscape of opencast iron workings can still be seen in places on the plateau tops, such as Culm Davy, and heaps of iron slag are widespread.

Mining of a hard seam of stone within the greensand for whetstone production reached its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries. Indications of the mines can still be seen on the western escarpment around Blackborough and Broadhembury. There are claypits associated with medieval and post-medieval pottery production (a vast hoard of medieval pottery pieces found in Hemyock suggests it was an important local industry) and a number of largely 18th and 19th century limekilns particularly around the Bishopswood and Wambrook area.

In terms of **literature and the arts**, over the centuries the Blackdown Hills landscape has inspired writers and artists who have left a legacy of cultural associations. Celia Fiennes, Daniel Defoe and Rev John Swete all travelled through the area providing informative descriptions and historic perceptions of the landscape.

In the early 20th century the Camden Town Group of artists, including Robert Bevan, Charles Ginner and Spencer Gore used the patterned rural landscape as inspiration for their impressionist

paintings that provide records of the past. Today the texture, colour and light of the Blackdown Hills continue to influence artists.

The AONB has a distinctive **local style of architecture**. Local materials such as chert, cob, thatch and clay tiles are used extensively, as well as limestone and Beer stone. The large number of surviving late medieval houses is exceptional. Many are Grade II\* Listed Buildings and contain particularly fine woodwork screens, ceilings and jetties; there are fine examples in Broadhembury.

Historic farmsteads are a key part of the AONB's architectural, agricultural and social heritage, and they too still survive intact and with unchanged associated farm buildings in exceptional numbers. Most farmsteads and hamlets are in sheltered valleys, often terraced into the hills. Villages are often at river crossings and crossroads in the valley floors, generally clustered around the parish church. Small stone houses often directly front or butt gable-end on to the narrow lanes. Topography often influences settlement pattern, such as Membury where the village straggles along the valley and Blackborough, where it follows the escarpment.

In terms of **landscape features**, although designed landscapes are not widespread within the AONB, there are some features that make a significant contribution. The Wellington Monument built between 1817 and 1854 is iconic, defining the north-west escarpment. Much of a Victorian designed landscape including walled garden, lakes and leats, still survives on the Otterhead Estate. Similarly, the large Victorian manors at Upottery and on the Tracey Estate, Awliscombe have gone, but their parkland, formal garden features and ancillary buildings can still be seen.

### **3.6 The Special Natural Environment**

The biodiversity of the Blackdown Hills is one of its greatest assets. The unique geology and landscape patterns of the area have combined with traditional land management, climate and clean air to support a rich diversity of habitats and species. This immense variety, with patches of valuable habitat scattered throughout the landscape, is notable; these include flower-rich meadows, ancient hedgerows, springline mire, wet woodland, heathland, calcareous grassland, ancient woodland, fen and bog. At a micro-scale there is an abundance of lichens, mosses and fungi. Bees, butterflies, birds, bats and many other animals, some nationally scarce, thrive in the Blackdown Hills, feeding and breeding in the habitats the area provides. These habitats and wildlife bring colour, texture, sound and life to the landscape, epitomising the mental picture of the 'English Countryside', which has, in reality, long since disappeared elsewhere.

The AONB is characterised by its intricate patchwork of semi-natural habitats, scattered throughout the landscape. This includes patches of woodland habitat, although there are larger concentrations of woodland to the north of the AONB. Of particular note are the valuable plant communities that arise along the springlines, where the Greensand meets the clays, supporting wet grassland, heathland, mire (i.e. purple moor-grass and rush pastures) and woodland habitats. Linear features such as hedgerows, rivers and streams help to link habitat patches, forming a network that allows species to move through the landscape. The majority of habitats are under agricultural or forestry management and in private ownership.





Bog flora

### **3.7 Summary of the special qualities and distinctive characteristics of the Blackdown Hills AONB**

From the diverse characteristics, features and qualities outlined previously, the table on the next pages summarises the special qualities that combine to create the particular sense and spirit of place that gives the Blackdown Hills its distinctive identity in relation to natural beauty factors. These special qualities require protection, conservation and enhancement if the AONB is to retain its character and status among England's finest landscapes.

The AONB's Landscape Character Assessment adds further understanding of the contrast and diversity of the AONB landscape and its management requirements.

Natural Beauty	Special qualities (including distinctive characteristics and key features)
<b>Landscape quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A managed landscape sculpted and maintained by the stewardship of generations of those who work the land</li> <li>• Undeveloped skyline of the northern scarp slope is a prominent feature in views from the Vale of Taunton and beyond</li> <li>• Rich mosaic of diverse and interconnected semi-natural habitats; a patchwork of woodland, heathland, meadow and mire linked by hedgerows</li> <li>• Clear, unpolluted streams that meander down the valleys to feed the Yarty, Otter, Culm rivers</li> <li>• Ancient and veteran trees in hedgerows, fields and woodland</li> <li>• A settled landscape with a strong sense of time-depth containing farms and small scattered villages well related to the landscape</li> </ul>
<b>Scenic quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The elevation and long, panoramic views out from the Blackdown Hills create a sense of detachment from surrounding towns and transport corridors</li> <li>• Unspoilt, panoramic views across flat-topped plateau and straight undisturbed ridge tops and over hidden valleys</li> <li>• A well-wooded pastoral landscape with a strong pattern of hedges and hedgerow trees</li> <li>• Pattern of regular, large-scale enclosure fields on the plateau contrasts with the smaller, curving medieval fields on the valley slopes</li> <li>• Majestic avenues of beech trees along northern ridges</li> <li>• Long straight roads across the plateau with verges and low, neat hedges give way to narrow, enclosed, high-hedged winding single-tracked lanes in the valleys</li> <li>• Wellington Monument is a key landscape feature identifying the Blackdown Hills over a very wide area in all directions</li> </ul>
<b>Relative wildness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sense of remoteness enhanced by the exposure of the plateau and more intimate extensive woodland of the upper slopes and hidden valleys</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide open spaces provide exposure to the elements; big sky, windswept places, contrasts of sunlight and shadow</li> </ul>
<b>Relative tranquillity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Areas of high tranquillity spared many of the intrusions of modern life</li> <li>• Places to enjoy natural sounds; the melody of the song thrush and skylark, the call of buzzards</li> <li>• Dark night-time star-filled skies contrasting with the light pollution of the surrounding towns</li> </ul>
<b>Natural heritage features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One of the finest, most extensive Greensand plateau in Britain; a distinctive landform that contrasts with the surrounding lowlands to the east, north and west</li> <li>• The presence of straight, uninterrupted ridges are evident as a visual backdrop over a wide area</li> <li>• Distinctive springline mires located around the upper slopes of the valleys</li> <li>• The varied landscape supports a rich assemblage of wildlife including many species of bats, butterflies and meadow flowers and healthy populations of ferns, lichens, mosses and fungi</li> <li>• Ancient, species-rich hedges with many hedgerow trees and flower-rich banks; colourful displays of primrose and bluebells in spring</li> <li>• A network of ancient semi-natural woodland linked by hedgerows support a thriving dormouse population</li> <li>• Streams and rivers are home to otters, lamprey and the vulnerable white-clawed crayfish</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number and extent of well-preserved buildings in the local vernacular – chert, cob and thatch – are an important element of the landscape</li> <li>• Hillforts are prominent features on the ends of the plateau ridges</li> <li>• Mining remains from the once internationally significant whetstone industry and extensive evidence of iron-working</li> <li>• Three World War Two airfields and their associated buildings are found on the high, flat land of the plateau</li> <li>• A community with a strong sense place closely linked to the land and its management, with a particularly strong tradition of hedge laying</li> <li>• A landscape that has inspired artists from the early 20th century Camden Town Group to the Blackdown Hills Artists and Makers of today</li> </ul>

### 3.8 Natural Capital Stock and Ecosystem Service Flows

#### Why this is relevant to the AONB

Natural capital and the elements of natural beauty have a natural overlap: largely they are ways of categorising the landscape and some of the benefits we derive from it.

Understanding natural capital underlines the AONB commitment to delivering the Government's 'Biodiversity 2020 A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services'. This identifies a series of 'desired outcomes' including that "by 2020, at least 17% of land and inland water, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, [will be] conserved through effective, integrated and joined up approaches to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services including through management of our existing systems of protected areas and the establishment of nature improvement areas."

#### Definitions

Many of the elements which make up the natural beauty of the AONB can be described in terms of natural and cultural capital. Natural capital refers to both the living (e.g. fish stocks, forests) and non-living (e.g. minerals, energy resources) aspects of nature which produce value to people, both directly and indirectly. It is this capital that underpins all other capital in our economy and society, including cultural capital which is the historic environment and cultural landscape (as described in chapter 4). Cultural capital is increasingly being seen as a 'missing element' of a purely 'natural' approach to this way of categorising and defining the environment. Natural and cultural assets are the actual stock: living and non-living parts. From these assets we derive a flow of benefits known

as ecosystem services. Essentially, natural capital is about nature's assets, while ecosystem services relate to the goods and services derived from those assets.

The landscape of the AONB provides a lot to those that live, work and visit here, from the quantifiable benefits of fresh food and clean water to those that are harder to define such as mental health benefits from contact with the natural environment. These benefits can be defined as 'ecosystem services', all critical to maintaining human health and wellbeing. They are categorised into four:

- **Provisioning services:** the products we gain and use from the AONB, such as food, energy and water
- **Regulating services:** the natural functioning of the AONB purifies water, pollinates crops and maintains air quality
- **Cultural services:** non-material benefits derived from interaction with the AONB, such as inspiration, education and spiritual connection
- **Supporting services:** the foundations for all other services – primary production (carbon fixation), the formation of soil, nutrient cycling and water cycling.

A high-quality landscape (of rich natural and cultural heritage) delivers wide economic benefits. Some ecosystem services have related economic markets, some do not. Those that don't can be considered 'public goods.'

#### Public goods

Some ecosystem goods and services that flow from the landscape's natural and cultural assets have a market which rewards the producer. Farming and forestry, although frequently not high return



enterprises, are nonetheless producing goods for a functional marketplace.

However, some goods and services do not have a fully functional marketplace, for example farmers who maintain species rich grasslands are not rewarded by the market for the external value of that work. These are known as 'public goods' as they are non-excludable (i.e. no-one can be stopped from benefiting from that good) and nonrival (one person's enjoyment does not preclude another's). Private markets may develop for some of these goods in the future, but while they do not exist public investment should be made to adequately reward the conservation of natural assets.

Public goods for the AONB can be considered to include:

- conservation of biodiversity
- conservation of built heritage
- maintenance of characteristic landscape features such as hedges and tree clumps (these will vary by landscape character area)
- providing clean air and water by taking uneconomic land management choices to reduce pollution (e.g. stopping fertiliser applications)
- maintaining rights of way
- providing educational access

Some of the key goods and services provided by the Blackdown Hills include:

- AONB farmers and foresters produce food, fibre, timber and wood fuel.

- The AONB lies over an Upper Greensand aquifer providing water for both public and private supplies. The sources of the rivers Culm, Otter and Yarty and some of the river Tone headwaters are in the Blackdown Hills and wetland mires help attenuate flows and trap sediment
- Carbon storage in woodland, lowland heathland and peat deposits, for example in turbaries.
- Hedgerows, rough grassland, wood pasture and woodland help to regulate soil erosion and water flow and support nutrient cycling
- Species rich grasslands are biodiverse and support pollinating insects
- Historic heritage features link and add value to the natural heritage stock as well as having cultural heritage value in their own right
- Recreational opportunities support the health and wellbeing of both residents and visitors
- The characteristic and richly patterned landscape and ancient features provides a strong sense of place and history
- The distinctive landform and coherent landscape are inspirational at a personal, cultural and spiritual level.
- The AONB gives access to clean air, tranquillity and freedom from noise and light pollution.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4.0 Introduction to Management Framework

This part of the Management Plan sets out the objectives and policies for managing the AONB over the next five years to work towards achieving the longer-term vision.

There are three main themes divided into several topics:

**Place** – topics related to the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty:

- Landscape Character
- Historic Environment and Cultural Heritage
- Biodiversity and Geodiversity
- Natural Capital and ecosystem goods and service
- Farming, Forestry and Land Management

**People** – topics related to the secondary purposes of recognising the economic and social needs of the local community, promoting sustainable development and recreation:

- Access and Enjoyment
- Planning and Development
- Transport and Highways
- Rural Economy and Tourism
- Community and Culture

**Partnership and Promotion** – the core functions of AONB management:

- Communication, Education and Awareness
- Partnership and Management

Each *theme* starts with identifying the key issues, opportunities and challenges under Forces for Change. It is not a list of every issue facing the area.

Each *topic* is structured in the same way; the aim is stated and then background information describes the significance to the Blackdown Hills and the local context. An objective and set of policies are then identified.

Explanation of terms used:

Aim – the overall ambition for this topic area

Objective – what we want to achieve

Policy – what needs to be done to achieve the objective

The final section, **Chapter 5**, is *Delivery*, which explains the roles and responsibilities of the AONB Partnership, individual organisations and others in delivering the plan, and further information about monitoring and measuring progress. A *Strategic Delivery Plan* outlines the strategic priorities and associated actions for the next 5 years necessary to deliver the ambitions of this plan. The separate annual AONB Business Plans will translate these into specific roles for partners working in collaboration with the AONB team across key work areas.

The *appendices* set out detailed information in support of the management plan in relation to Planning and Development, the legislative background and lists AONB Partnership organisations. A separate *Annexe* of supporting information is also being prepared to provide a range of technical and statistical information, including Devon landscape character assessment, species, habitats and sites, Census data and other additional data.

# Theme 1: Place

## Forces for Change - key issues, opportunities and challenges:

- A range of opportunities through delivery of Defra's 25-year plan to improve the environment, including:
  - The review of protected landscapes
  - Delivering new Environmental Land Management Schemes
  - Planting new woodlands at appropriate locations
  - Promoting Natural Flood Management
  - Delivery of a Nature Recovery Network (and priority species recovery/ re-introduction)
  - Expanding forestry and woodland product markets (including woodfuel)
  - Delivery of Forest Design Plans and Open Habitats Policy
  - Increased recognition of natural assets and ecosystem services through adoption of a Natural Capital approach
  - Emerging markets for Payments for Ecosystem Services and Nutrient Offsetting
- Potential to use enhanced data and evidence (for example Historic Environment Records) to identify areas for externally funded projects to restore and protect features.
- Increase in catchment-scale approaches to water management including Natural Flood Risk Management schemes offers potential to restore natural ecosystems, improve water quality and reduce risk of flooding downstream but also pressure to change the character of the landscape.
- Climate Change, leading to:
  - Shifts in species ranges
  - Reduced species diversity and abundance
  - Increased pests and diseases
  - Extreme weather events
  - Changing growing conditions, affecting ability to grow certain crops but also offering new opportunities
- Market failure of rural businesses, leading to:
  - Biodiversity, natural assets and ecosystem services being undervalued in decision making
  - Inappropriate or lack of management
  - Poor succession planning and reduced opportunities for new entrants
  - Land abandonment/change to non-farmed use
  - Homogenisation of the landscape
  - Adoption of damaging practices
- Considerations around planting alternative tree species, to compensate for loss through ash dieback and other diseases, or more drought tolerant species in relation to climate change
- Development pressure, including major urban extensions in the setting of the AONB and recreation and traffic pressure, from both residents and visitors.

## 4.1 Landscape Character

*Aim:* The Blackdown Hills remains an unspoilt rural area, with a diversity of landscape patterns and pictures, a unique geology and buildings of architectural appeal, that are all understood and referred to. It is a truly 'living landscape' benefitting from its special landscape and heritage and is appreciated as such

### Background

It is the diverse landscape, the distinctive villages, the historic environment and the tranquil rural setting that gives the Blackdown Hills its special sense of place. The relationship between people and the landscape is enshrined in the European Landscape Convention and recognises that landscapes evolve through time due to natural and human forces. The challenge for the AONB Partnership is to manage change to ensure that the AONB landscape remains special.

One of the special qualities of the AONB is its visual relationship with other landscapes, and in particular the view of the steep escarpment of the Blackdown Hills rising out of the Vale of Taunton. The wooded edge to the plateau provides a relatively wild, uninhabited backdrop to the flatter, low-lying farmed and settled Vale. The juxtaposition of these contrasting characters means that one enhances the other. The Wellington Monument provides a single focus to the scene and enriches the cultural history of this landscape. This scenery can be appreciated from much of the Vale but makes for dramatic views from southern slopes of the Quantock Hills AONB and the eastern fringes of Exmoor National Park. There are expansive and far-reaching views from the Blackdown Hills across much of Devon and Somerset, including views to Dartmoor from Culmstock Beacon and the Jurassic coast from Membury.

The setting of an AONB is the surroundings in which the influence of the area is experienced. If the quality of the setting declines, then the appreciation and enjoyment of the AONB diminishes. Large scale development, the construction of high or expansive structures, or a change generating movement, noise, intrusion from artificial lighting, or other disturbance will affect the setting. Views are one element of setting, being associated with the visual experience and aesthetic appreciation. Views are particularly important to the AONB. This is because of the juxtaposition of high and low ground and the fact that recreational users value them. Without husbandry and management, views within, across, from and to the AONB may be lost or degraded.

Landscape character describes the qualities and features that make a place distinctive. It can represent an area larger than the AONB or focus on a very specific location. The Blackdown Hills AONB displays a variety of landscape character within a relatively small, distinct area. These

local variations in character within the AONB's landscape are articulated through the Devon-wide "Landscape Character Assessment" (LCA)<sup>4</sup>, which covers the entire AONB. Hidden characteristics and past land uses are identified in county-based Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC). These assessments are now extensively used in planning and land management to understand and describe the landscape and manage pressures for change.

#### Landscape character map

The distinctiveness of the Blackdown Hills includes the area's relative remoteness, timelessness and tranquillity. Its very character relies on retaining a natural feeling without being over managed. Although hard to quantify it is all too easily lost through, for example, increasing standardisation, creeping suburbanisation, changing agricultural practices and loss of distinctive elements of the natural and historic environment. Each individual case may not have a significant impact, but cumulatively they can erode the area's distinctive character.

Natural starry skies are one of the sights which make the Blackdown Hills so special. Night time darkness is a key characteristic of the area's sense of tranquillity and relative remoteness. The Blackdown Hills is the fifth darkest AONB in England, with very low levels of night time brightness; 95% of the AONB is in the two very darkest categories as evidenced by 2016 research by CPRE.

#### CPRE dark skies map

### **Management objective and policies**

<b>Objective LC</b>	<b>Policies</b>
To ensure that the distinctive character and qualities of the Blackdown Hills landscape are understood, conserved, enhanced and restored	LC1 Approach the conservation and enhancement of the AONB based on landscape character underpinned by comprehensive and up-to-date evidence bases that are also made widely available to decision makers and others
	LC2 Understand clearly the social, environmental and economic benefits of landscape and natural beauty and ensure this is reflected in decision making at every level, supported by sound evidence
	LC3 Promote high levels of peace and tranquillity with dark night skies by minimising noise, intrusive development and light pollution
	LC4 Support local distinctiveness

<sup>4</sup> To be detailed in online supporting annexe in final plan

	LC5 The character of skylines and open views into, within and out of the AONB will be protected
	LC6 The deeply rural setting of much of the land adjoining the AONB boundary forms an essential setting for the AONB and care will be taken to maintain its quality and character
	LC7 Opportunities will be sought to strengthen landscape character by improving condition of landscape features in poor condition and reinstating landscape features identified as missing or fragmented



## 4.2 Historic environment and cultural heritage

*Aim:* The AONB's cultural heritage, from its archaeological sites and historic buildings through to the unique arts and crafts produced today, is recognised as an intrinsic part of the landscape and special qualities of the AONB. It is conserved, enhanced and enjoyed and adds value to the local economy. Local communities are actively engaged in celebrating the cultural heritage, keeping the skills and traditions alive and sensitively shaping its future

### Background

The Blackdown Hills AONB retains a strong sense of continuity with the past and the landscape has great time depth, from prehistoric through to modern. Centuries of human activity have created the intricate patterns of woods, heaths and fields, lanes and trackways, and hamlets and villages that contribute greatly to the AONB's unique historic character. Designated heritage assets in the AONB include 768 Listed Buildings (13 Grade I, 47 Grade II\* and 708 Grade II), which is up from 762 in 2013. As a result of positive management, only three Scheduled Monuments from 26 are considered at risk, compared to eight in 2013.

The Blackdown Hills AONB has been a relatively under-studied landscape to date. To help address this between 2016 and 2018 an archaeological aerial investigation, centred on the AONB, was undertaken by a project team of staff from AC archaeology and Devon County Council. It was funded by Historic England and hosted by Devon County Council within the Historic Environment Team in partnership with Somerset Historic Environment Record. The survey area covered 564 square kilometres in Devon and Somerset, focused around the AONB, which has seen little systematic archaeological survey and where the archaeological resource was relatively poorly understood. In addition, the historic environment is under pressure from potential impacts as diverse as initiatives to reduce diffuse water pollution to road improvement schemes.

The project consulted over seven thousand hard copy aerial photographs loaned from the Historic England Archive and held by Devon County Council, as well as modern digital datasets of vertical aerial photographs. However, it was the remote sensing technique known as lidar that proved to be exceptionally useful during this project, enabling features obscured by tree cover and those that survived only as slight earthwork remains to be mapped and recorded. In total, 5052 archaeological or historic sites were identified from the aerial imagery and recorded on the relevant Historic Environment Record (HER); 87% of these had not previously been recorded.

A number of different 'themes' became apparent as the project progressed. These included: extractive pits, changing fieldscapes, cider making, fortification and control and religion and ceremony. Full details are available from <https://new.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/the-devon->

historic-environment-record/blackdown-hills-aim-project/ The individual monument records are all available online via either the Somerset Historic Environment Record<sup>5</sup>, the Devon Environment Viewer<sup>6</sup> and Heritage Gateway<sup>7</sup>.

Surprisingly, by far the most numerous type of monument were extractive pits, which made up over a third of all features recorded. These unprepossessing features make a huge contribution to the distinctive landscape of the AONB. They became wooded, sometimes by deliberate planting of orchard trees, producing the many small tree clumps that dot the hills. These scattered pits were for extraction of clay, marl, gravel, chalk and sand, reflecting the varied geology of the project area. Although difficult to date, the size and definition of the earthwork, type of vegetation cover, comparison with historic maps, field patterns, field names and other evidence can help to infer the date of use. Some pits may originate in the medieval period, whilst others were in use right up to the 20th century. Many of the gravel pits for instance might have been associated with improvements to roads in the 18th and 19th century, whilst chalk pits are often seen in conjunction with lime kilns of similar date, having been used to produce agricultural lime.

The scattered and often small-scale pits form a marked contrast to the much more intensive Roman-medieval iron ore and 18th-20th century whetstone mining industries on the western part of the AONB.

Changing fieldscapes: Relict or removed field boundaries were the second most numerous monument type recorded during the survey, at a fifth of the total. Many have a curvilinear form, enclosing small and irregularly shaped fields, which suggests a medieval origin. A high proportion were seen in areas recorded by Historic Landscape Characterisation as medieval enclosures, presumably having gone out of use during later land reorganisation and field amalgamation.

About 80% of the removed boundaries were recorded as earthworks, some of them very wide shallow ditches suggesting that there may have been substantial drainage banks associated with them in certain areas. Only an eighth were visible just as cropmarks, testament to the generally good survival of earthwork remains within the project area.

Cider making: parallel rows of tree planting banks for cider orchards were still very often visible in the more poorly draining mudstone areas. As well as assisting with drainage, these increased the soil depth and could be augmented with other helpful inclusions, such as sand and road scrapings known as 'waydrift'. Some of these orchards seem to have been long-lived, attributed by Marshall in 1796 to the Devonshire practise of replanting in between failed trees and so helping to avoid disease.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.somersetheritage.org.uk/](http://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/)

<sup>6</sup> <http://map.devon.gov.uk/dccviewer/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>

Fortification and control: Some of the earliest defended sites visible on aerial imagery were the Iron Age hillforts at prominent sites such as Hembury, and the mapping of their ramparts and ditches, as well as some internal features, emphasises just how imposing these sites must have been. Medieval defended sites are relatively rare, but alongside well-known places like the imposing Castle Neroche, examination of recent lidar data seems to confirm that three small motte and bailey castles were sited just to the south of the AONB at Widworthy, Bushy Knap and Buckerell Knap.

Religion and ceremony: Neolithic ceremonial or funerary monuments are rare and it was notable to add a possible long barrow at Broadhembury to the Historic Environment Record, which was first recognised from cropmarks on aerial photographs taken in 1989. More frequently observed were indications of the more familiar circular Bronze Age barrows, particularly on the prominent greensand plateau. Several additional examples were added, not just to known cemeteries such as Robin Hood's Butts but also potential 'new' clusters, eg at Hartridge.

Well-known sites such as Dunkeswell Abbey also benefit from the in-depth study of aerial imagery, and in this instance lidar was again crucial in mapping subtle features within the inner precinct that might relate to provisioning – perhaps a dovecote or stewpond, and other ancillary structures. Parchmarks of the east range, that had been noted since the 19th century, could finally be accurately plotted from aerial photographs taken in 1989. It is possible that the exact site of the monastic grange of Bowerhayes has also now been identified.

### Management objective and policies

Objective CH	Policies
To ensure effective conservation, management and understanding of the Blackdown Hills historic environment, including historic buildings, archaeological sites and heritage landscapes	CH1 Conserve and enhance the historic built environment and rural heritage assets and integrate into other land management initiatives in the AONB
	CH2 Regularly monitor the extent and condition of historic sites, features and landscapes in the AONB and promote the use of Historic Environment Record (HER), historic landscape characterisation and other tools to inform projects, policy-making and management activities
	CH3 Gain a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for heritage being 'at risk' and in declining condition and make direct interventions to bring Scheduled Monuments and unscheduled sites into positive management and improving condition
	CH4 Encourage and support training in traditional heritage skills.
	CH5 Promote the sensitive interpretation of the AONB's historic environment to ensure local communities and visitors gain a good understanding and experience of place

## 4.3 Biodiversity and Geodiversity

*Aim:* The AONB's nationally important wildlife and unique geology are conserved and enhanced and there are thriving populations of important species. All the natural heritage of the AONB is understood and appreciated.

### Background

The biodiversity of the Blackdown Hills is intrinsic to the area's character and aesthetic appeal. The wide variety of species and habitats<sup>8</sup>, reflects the complex landscape patterns, unique geology and traditional management of the area. Its mosaic of priority habitat includes spring line mire, heathland, woodland and species rich grassland, all connected via hedges and banks. The Blackdown Hills is noted for its butterflies (in particular marsh fritillary, small pearl-bordered, duke of burgundy, wood white and brown hairstreak) as well as dormice and its woodland bird assemblage. Its rivers contain water vole, white-clawed crayfish and lampreys.

The Blackdown Hills AONB is a connected landscape and supports coherent and resilient ecological networks, demonstrating the Lawton *Making Space for Nature* principles of bigger, better, more and joined. However, some habitats are fragmented and the condition of priority habitats are fragile and degraded in some areas, so restoration and connectivity of priority habitat is a high priority for both biodiversity and delivery of other ecosystem services. A greater age and species diversity in woodlands and hedgerow trees, for example, will benefit biodiversity and improve resilience.

Some areas of the highest conservation value are nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), covering 639ha of the AONB. Under Biodiversity 2020, the desired outcome nationally is for at least 50% of SSSIs to be in favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in favourable or recovering condition. In the Blackdown Hills 2018 figures show that only 19% (122ha) are deemed to be in favourable condition, with 75% unfavourable recovering (477ha). There are some specific technical reasons for so few sites being favourable (often because parts of sites do not fully meet the 'standard' site/habitat expectations), but the large percentage of sites in a recovering condition is positive. This category has seen a significant increase since 2008 when 40% (254ha) were classed as unfavourable recovering, and over the same period the area considered unfavourable declining has moved from 118ha to none.

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<sup>8</sup> To be detailed in online supporting annexe in final plan

In addition to the sixteen SSSIs, there is one Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) of European importance for nature conservation.<sup>9</sup> This is located at Quants in the north of the Blackdown Hills, selected for its population of marsh fritillary butterflies, that occur on spring line mire habitat mosaics. Maintaining a viable population for this species requires a landscape-scale approach to connect fragmented populations further south in the Bolham Valley. Just beyond the AONB boundary to the south east is the river Axe SAC and the river Yarty, a major tributary, rises and flows through the AONB for the vast majority of its length. The Axe is designated as a watercourse with a chalk influence with presence of water crowfoot species. The priority for the SAC is to reduce diffuse pollution (mainly phosphates and sediment largely from agriculture) to improve water quality.

The geology of the Blackdowns Hills AONB is dominated by one of the finest and most extensive plateaux in Britain – the East Devon Plateau – dissected by the long, deep valleys of the rivers Culm, Otter, Yarty and their tributaries. The AONB has two geological SSSIs covering 3.5ha – Furley Chalk Pit and Reed's Farm Pit.

The AONB might be likened to an irregularly cut layer cake, with near horizontal beds of soft rocks deposited one on top of the other, the youngest at the top. The lower layer, exposed in the river valleys, is marl (red Mercia Mudstone), replaced with Lias in the east. A 30-metre layer of Upper Greensand rests upon this, outcropping as an abrupt rim to the valleys and capping the conspicuous northern scarp slope. The composition of Upper Greensand layer, which underlies much of the East Devon Plateau, is unique in Britain. This is covered by a superficial deposit of Clay-with-Flints-and-Cherts.

At the junction of the greensand and clay iron ores were found and the chert-tempered local clay supported a medieval pottery industry around the Membury/Axminster area and later in Hemyock, while the almost indestructible chert is used extensively for buildings and walls. On the western edge of the AONB the Upper Greensand produced well-preserved fossils, and the area around Kentisbeare and Broadhembury was famed for its whetstone industry in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Soils provide a strong link between the physical environment and the wildlife, land use and cultural landscape. For example the dark-topped, organic and peaty soils found on the plateau gives an indication of the former extent of heathland vegetation, small remnants of which persist at Dunkeswell Turbary and North Hill. The freely draining land on the scarp with its dry, acid grasslands and woods, contrasts sharply with the perennially wet ground on the springlines. This supports wet woodlands, acid Rhôs pastures and other wet grasslands, with mire and bog communities in more restricted sites such as Hense Moor.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-23>

## Management objective and policies

Objective BG	Policies
To ensure effective conservation, enhancement, expansion and connectivity of habitats, forming coherent and resilient ecological networks across the Blackdown Hills and beyond, facilitating movement of priority species across the landscape	BG1 Take a strategic landscape-scale based approach to the creation, restoration and maintenance of habitats within the AONB (focussing on designated and undesignated priority sites) in order to ensure resilience to climate change and other pressures
	BG2 Connect habitats at a landscape scale and ensure permeability for species movement within coherent and resilient ecological networks
	BG3 Priority species (including Section 41, Devon Special Species, Protected Species) will be conserved. Targeted action will be taken to support the recovery of priority species
	BG4 Ensure sites of geological and geomorphological importance are appropriately managed to conserve their special features and reduce impacts of development
	BG5 Opportunities will be sought to maximise the benefits for wildlife and people from the positive management of all types of land including farmland, gardens, parks and community green spaces
	BG6 A strategic approach to the control, or eradication where feasible, of invasive non-native species will be taken where they threaten or damage local habitats and species and where action is practicable
	BG7 Increased recreational pressure will be resisted at locations where unacceptable damage or disturbance to vulnerable habitats or species is likely to arise



## 4.4 Natural Capital and ecosystem goods and services

*Aim:* The air, land, soils and water of the Blackdown Hills are of a high quality, are sustainably managed and support healthy ecosystems. Flood and drought events are mitigated against via nature-based solutions. The impacts of climate change are understood, mitigated against and the low carbon economy is thriving

### Background

The water environment is fundamental to the character of the Blackdown Hills and has wider relevance:

- The plateau landscape dissected by long deep river valleys
- The source of the rivers Culm, Yarty and Otter within a small geographic area
- The steep scarp slope marks the watershed separating streams draining northwards to the Bristol Channel and south to the English Channel

Restoring a good quality and condition of the natural capital stock (land, soils, air and water) is the key to the outstanding environment of the Blackdown Hills, as well as delivering a range of multiple benefits and ecosystem services for society, including residents and visitors – as described in more detail in Chapter 3. Some of the rivers that rise in the Blackdown Hills provide domestic drinking water for both Devon and Somerset. The river Otter flows across the top of a large ground water aquifer and is a priority for improving water quality for drinking water through initiatives such as Upstream Thinking. South West Water and Wessex water are responsible for drinking water and waste water in the area.

Taking a catchment approach is vital as land management in the Blackdown Hills AONB affects areas downstream. A prime example of this is the effect that the river Culm has on the peak flows running through Exeter city, as the timing of the river Culm and river Exe peak flows align, leading to overtopping and flooding. Drought and low flows are also increasing due to our changing climate. Flood and drought are being exacerbated by climate change and implementing nature-based solutions by managing the natural resources of the Blackdown Hills (including mires that act as natural sponges and woodland planting in appropriate locations) that deliver multiple benefits by reducing and attenuating peak flows, maintaining low flows and trapping sediment is therefore vital.

Much of the wildlife interest of the AONB depends on water quality, the capacity of aquifers and on the rivers and their tributaries that rise in the Hills. Pollution and over-abstraction can have serious consequences. Surface water run-off can lead to soil erosion and flooding.

The Water Framework Directive<sup>10</sup> seeks to ensure clean water across Europe, looking at water management at a river-basin scale in order to achieve a good environmental status across all water bodies by 2027. In England the implementation is through a catchment-based approach, on the basis that many of the problems facing the water environment are best understood and tackled at a catchment scale. In the East Devon Catchment (the rivers Exe, Otter, Sid and Axe and their tributaries) no water bodies are currently at high or good status and are classified as either moderate or poor. There is also new legislation that affects farmers including the Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulations 2018<sup>11</sup>

Pollution from rural areas is a significant factor in causing poor water quality in every catchment in the south west river basin district: phosphorus in rivers and sediment from agriculture are particular issues in the East Devon Catchment. Initiatives that offer practical solutions and targeted support to control pollution such as the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme<sup>12</sup> operate across the catchments which aim to control diffuse water pollution.

Parts of the eastern and western fringes of the AONB are within Nitrate Vulnerable Zones, where there are controls on some farming activities, particularly relating to manure and fertilisers, in order to tackle nitrate loss from agriculture.

The 2008 Climate Change Act committed the UK to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 18% from 2008 levels by 2020 and 80% by 2050. In 2012, the AONB Partnership commissioned a research project to assess greenhouse gas emissions in the Blackdown Hills to provide a baseline assessment of which sectors are causing the most serious emissions and how patterns of emissions are likely to change over the coming years.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/info/intro\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/info/intro_en.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-rules-for-water-in-england>

<sup>12</sup> [www.naturalengland.org.uk/csf](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/csf)

## Management Objective and policies

Objective NC	Policies
To conserve and enhance the natural capital stock of the AONB and maximise the flow of ecosystem goods and services they provide	NC1 Promote a catchment, multiple-benefit, collaborative based approach to soil conservation, water quality and flood alleviation improvements utilising the Otter, Axe, Culm and Parrett/Tone catchments
	NC2 Improve land management in respect of the control of surface water run-off, to mitigate against flooding during more extreme weather events. Where appropriate within the landscape, seek to reinstate or improve the management of woodland, wetland and hedges to slow and store run-off
	NC3 Support studies, research and improve understanding of the AONB's rich stock of natural capital and ensure that its value to society (in terms of flow of goods and services) is recognised and understood by decision-makers and others
	NC4 Encourage local communities, businesses and visitors to respect the environment and minimise their carbon footprint

## 4.5 Farming, Forestry and Land Management

*Aim:* The 'Living Landscape' and Nature Recovery Network of the Blackdown Hills AONB is conserved and enhanced by sustainable and high nature value farming, forestry and land management enterprises. They are key providers of food, fuel and other public service benefits such as carbon storage

### Background

Farming is fundamental to the character of the Blackdown Hills, as today's landscape is testimony to the stewardship of generations of farmers and landowners. There is a tradition of small-scale family farms based on mixed livestock husbandry (beef and sheep) with associated forage crops such as grass silage.

In 2016<sup>13</sup>, there were 629 farm holdings in the AONB, predominantly grazing livestock (lowland) but also significant numbers of dairy farms plus a smaller number of cereal, pig, poultry and horticultural units. Some of the poultry units are very large. The majority of farms are less than 50 hectares in size. Such marginal<sup>14</sup> farming (due to topography, climate, distance from markets) and small farm size makes the agricultural and rural economy vulnerable to changes in land use policy.

Changes in land ownership and farming practices are influencing the landscape. Agriculture has faced considerable challenges in recent years such as disease (e.g. bovine TB), changes in support and reduced profitability. The number of small family farms are declining and there is an on-going trend towards the amalgamation of farm units and the separation of farmhouse from the land. Thus, farming is being concentrated on fewer, larger, sometimes dispersed units, while many farms are becoming essentially residential, for keeping horses or as small holdings. This risks not only reducing the opportunity for younger people to enter farming but also can lead to the countryside taking on a suburban appearance. However, new land managers can bring new opportunities and ideas that conserve and enhance the natural beauty. Contract labour is used more, often using larger vehicles and machinery and travelling between properties, which can have a wider landscape impact as these vehicles can easily damage the verges and banks of narrow Blackdown Hills lanes and lead to pressure to widen field gateways. The pattern of land management may also change as farmers seek new, profitable activities and markets. To boost profitability especially for dairy farms, there is a shift towards robotic milking, large livestock sheds and zero grazing (animals kept indoors all year). Forage crops that provide high protein/ high volume (such as maize) can be favoured that can result in more compacted soils, risk of runoff from bare soils on slopes and removal of permanent grassland. There is however now a greater awareness of the connection between land management and flood alleviation

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<sup>13</sup> 2016 Defra Agricultural Census data

<sup>14</sup> as opposed to upland

with soil health, crop selection and measures such as hedge reinstatement recognised ways of addressing the issue (see also section 4.4 and policy NC2). New crops for energy generation (such as anaerobic digestion) are also a driver for change, including maize while other land is used for recreation or tourism activities.

The Blackdown Hills Rough Grazing Association and the Farming and Woodland Group (facilitation fund) bring together farmers and landowners to work collaboratively to manage the important heritage features of the Blackdown Hills whilst maintaining farm viability, building farm resilience and supporting farm diversification. High nature value farming is encouraged through agri-environment schemes and the signs are that this will continue or even be strengthened through future support mechanisms.

Sustainable woodland management provides economic benefits and a range of ecosystem services including for wildlife and recreation, woodfuel and the storage of carbon. Many of the characteristic ancient broadleaved woods, which support priority species, were previously managed as coppice but are now undermanaged or have been planted with conifers. There is still such scope elsewhere to enhance the landscape and wildlife through restoration of Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and this will also provide increased opportunities for recreation, while still producing timber, wood fuel and other woodland products. Tree diseases pose an increasing and significant pressure on the natural beauty of the AONB, for example ash dieback especially where ash is a dominant tree in and outside woods and/or hedgerow component.

More productive forestry, including conifer crops where appropriate to the AONB landscape, has a role to play in sustaining economically viable landholdings that can continue to provide a wide range of ecosystem services.

The Blackdown Hills Woodland Association and Axe Woods have done much to encourage the cooperative management of smaller woodlands and there is considerable scope for continuing this work, including potential for reconnecting the supply chain, in local markets in particular. Community woodland schemes, such as Neroche Woodlanders, are encouraging new ways of working woods, as well as bringing a wide range of other benefits from wood fuel to health and wellbeing.

In a similar way the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association has promoted the traditional management of hedgerows through training courses, hedge-laying competitions and other events.

Orchards were a significant element of the Blackdown Hills landscape and are important for biodiversity especially where old trees survive. But most are no longer managed surviving only as a few old trees or have disappeared completely. With the increase in interest in local produce, apples, apple juice and cider are all being produced in the AONB. Furthermore, changing ownership of farms has caused a renewal of interest in restoring or replanting orchards on traditional sites with local varieties of fruit trees.

## Management Objective and policies

Objective FLM	Policies
To support sustainable farming and forestry practices that conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONB and deliver a range of ecosystem services	FLM1 A profitable, sustainable and environmentally beneficial farming and land management sector providing a range of public goods and services will be fostered as one of the principal means of maintaining the special qualities and distinctive landscape of the AONB
	FLM2 Encourage a high take-up of agri-environment schemes especially high quality environmental land management that help conserve and enhance the natural beauty through sustainable farming and forestry practices
	FLM3 Support will be sought for clusters of land managers who sustain land of exceptional landscape and nature conservation interest, in recognition of the value these systems provide to society
	FLM4 Encourage the production and marketing of local food and other agricultural products where these are compatible with the AONB designation.
	FLM5 Support and promote initiatives that encourage sensitive environmental management of field boundaries and hedgerow trees, woodlands, particularly those that conserve ancient woodland and veteran trees, orchards and restore the original broadleaved character of plantations on ancient woodland sites.
	FLM6 Give careful consideration to the landscape and visual impact of new woodland planting schemes
	FLM7 Control, mitigate and monitor damaging diseases such as ash dieback
	FLM8 Influence rural farm and rural business support mechanisms and act as a testbed for and monitor the impacts of agricultural policy reform on rural character
	FLM9 Wider community engagement with the farming and land management sector will enable a deeper understanding of the important role played by land managers in maintaining the AONB's special qualities



# Theme 2: People

## Forces for Change - key issues, opportunities and challenges:

- Opportunities related to delivery of Defra's 25-year plan to improve the environment, including:
  - Recognition of value of natural environment for health and wellbeing
  - Cross sector working between health and environment
  - Nature based social prescribing
- Joined up promotion of existing public transport linking to walks, services and facilities
- Green infrastructure creating physical links with surrounding towns via footpaths or multi-user routes, opening up new recreation and tourism opportunities and potential links with nearby long distance recreational routes
- Managing recreational access to avoid damage to wet ground and steep areas
- Advances in communications technology offers greater potential to support business, education and provision of services
- Added value from local products, brand association and quality niche markets
- Impacts of local authority budget cuts, including rights of way, public and community transport, roads
- Urban expansion and housing development including major development proposals and plans for strategic allocations for urban extensions in the AONB setting, and managing associated noise, traffic and lighting
- High house prices, affordability and limited choice
- Increasing scale of agricultural development
- Decisions relating to the strategic road network (Road Investment Strategy), in particular A303/A30
- Increases in traffic volume and vehicle size
- Impacts of features such as pylons, masts, turbines and other alternative energy

## 4.6 Access and Enjoyment

*Aim:* Residents and visitors are able to appreciate and enjoy the tranquillity and other special qualities of the AONB, gaining inspiration and a sense of wellbeing through a range of quiet leisure activities. The public rights of way network is maintained and managed to meet the needs of all users.

### Background

Access to the countryside and engagement with a high quality natural environment make an important contribution to physical and mental health and wellbeing. The Somerset AONBs Nature and Wellbeing project has been supporting mental wellbeing and physical activity, working with specific groups and individuals who may benefit from such engagement. The aim has been to tackle some of the barriers that prevent people from experiencing the health and wellbeing benefits that the AONBs can offer.

Within the AONB there is a balance to be struck in providing for recreational activities in a way that is consistent with conserving natural beauty and without damaging the environment and tranquillity people come to enjoy, while also recognising that it is a working environment with much of the land in agriculture and in private ownership. Near several market towns and within easy of larger centres such as Exeter and Taunton, the Blackdown Hills offer a range of opportunities for recreation. Walking, cycling and horse riding are popular, but many people come to the area for activities as diverse as sky-diving, gliding, motor sports and bushcraft.

The public rights of way (PRoW) network in the AONB is extensive (429 km) but fragmented, with limited off-road routes for horse riders and cyclists. The local road network provides other opportunities but the twisting, narrow lanes raise safety concerns for walkers, cyclists and horse riders and the terrain can be challenging for casual cyclists. The AONB Partnership has published some circular walks and rides guides, including on-road cycle routes. There is further scope to develop safer routes for horse riders and cyclists within the AONB, multi-user routes and all-ability access, for example short routes around villages, and to signpost suitable routes between surrounding settlements and the Blackdown Hills. Green infrastructure provision offers an opportunity to create physical links with surrounding towns via footpaths or multi-user routes, opening up new recreation and tourism opportunities. There is also potential to improve linkages with nearby long distance recreational routes such as the Stop Line Way.

Opportunities for access to 'open countryside' on foot is relatively limited in the area, although the Public Forest Estate adds to the extent of open access land, which totals 641 ha. The majority of the open access sites are registered commons, in some cases also SSSIs or local wildlife sites. Other sites with public access include National Trust land and Wildlife Trust reserves.

The county councils have Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) for their networks that reflect the modern patterns of demand and land use. They identify how the PRow network will be managed to meet the needs of all users. Each county has committed and active Local Access Forums that bring all interested parties together to improve opportunities and promote responsible access to the countryside for recreation and enjoyment.

### Management Objective and policies

Objective AE	Policies
To ensure that opportunities to explore and enjoy the Blackdown Hills countryside and special qualities are compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty.	AE1 Take a co-ordinated, strategic and planned approach to the management of public rights of way and publicly accessible land to achieve an accessible, well-connected network that conserves and enhances the special qualities of the AONB, avoids impact on sensitive sites and minimises conflict between different interests.
	AE2 Opportunities will be sought to extend and improve the rights of way network, including improving connections with surrounding settlements where this is compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty.
	AE3 Opportunities to use the Blackdown Hills AONB to benefit the health and well-being of residents and visitors will be sought and promoted, seeking a range of sensitive and sustainable access opportunities for users of all abilities to enjoy the special qualities of the AONB.

## 4.7 Planning and development

*Aim:* All planning policies, strategies and decisions recognise and give great weight to the purposes of AONB designation as a nationally valued landscape, all development is in harmony with the landscape and in keeping with the strong local architectural style of the Blackdown Hills. New buildings are designed and built to the highest sustainable standards and affordable housing is available where needed.

### Background

Villages, hamlets, individual buildings and their settings form a vital element of the character of the Blackdown Hills. The planning and design of development, both within the AONB and around it, is of key importance in maintaining the landscape and scenic beauty of the area. Decision-making is the responsibility of the local planning authorities within the context of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and local development plans, including Neighbourhood Plans. All local authorities also have a duty of regard to AONB purposes of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

#### National Planning Policy Framework and planning considerations

The NPPF provides specific planning guidance for plan-makers and decision-takers in relation to AONBs. A revised NPPF was published in July 2018 and includes redrafting of paragraphs 115 and 116 (the main references to AONBs) as the revised paragraph 172. The revision confirms that AONBs [and National Parks] have the highest level of protection in the planning process and that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing their landscape and scenic beauty. It adds that the scale and extent of development in AONBs should be limited, alongside retaining the policy that permission for major development should be refused in these areas other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that it is in the public interest. Time and practice will reveal how this redrafting of controls on development in AONBs will address the growing pressure for development in protected areas like the Blackdown Hills.

The NPPF also references the importance of high standards of design and materials that reflect the identity of the local built and natural environment. The avoidance and reduction of noise and light pollution is addressed with references to protecting tranquil areas and intrinsically dark landscapes - special qualities of the AONB. Sustainable construction methods offer the potential to reduce the wider environmental impacts; this includes advocating sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), a natural approach to managing drainage in and around development. In the AONB, where possible, new developments should incorporate sustainable technology, renewable energy sources, and energy and water efficiency as standard; the use of locally sourced materials should be encouraged. However, this needs to be balanced with retaining a locally distinctive built environment with a strong local vernacular. There may also be implications related to sourcing local materials, for example extracting building stone.

As evidenced in neighbourhood plans and similar, meeting local housing needs should be the priority for new housing developments in the AONB. The availability of a range of affordable housing (see NPPF Annexe 2: Glossary), and other more affordable options, is a high priority for many local communities due to the limited choice of accommodation available and lack of affordability. Some have established Community Land Trusts to address provision. Whether on an exceptions site or part of a larger site, such development should pay full regard to conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

#### Major development

The NPPF does not define the meaning of the phrase 'major development' in respect of protected landscapes and there is no single threshold or factor that determines whether a proposal is major development for the purposes of paragraph 172. Assessing whether a proposed development is a major development is a matter of judgment for the local planning authority, based on an assessment of all the circumstances. What is clear from the case law and Planning Inspectorate decisions (made with reference to paragraphs 115 and 116 of the 2012 NPPF) is that the determination as to whether a development is major development or not, is to be considered in the policy context of those relevant paragraphs - the intent of which is to conserve landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs. As such, the potential for harm to the AONB should be foremost to the determination of whether development is major or not. This requires consideration of a range of site and development specific factors that include (but are not limited to) location, setting, quantum of development, duration, permanence or reversibility of effects. Harm to the Blackdown Hills AONB is any impact which causes loss, damage or detriment to its natural beauty, its special qualities or its distinctive characteristics or to the perception of natural beauty. **Appendix B** provides further information on the consideration of 'major development'.

#### Role of the management plan

The Management Plan provides supporting evidence and complementary policy guidance for local plans and can be referenced to inform development proposals and decisions. The Management Plan is supplemented by topic-specific guidance, such as the AONB's *Design guide for houses*, *What makes a view?* and *Good lighting guide*. It is expected that further design/planning guidance will be prepared during the life of this plan. The plan aims to promote consistency and co-operation between local planning authorities, both in setting policy and dealing with planning applications within the AONB, to conserve and enhance natural beauty across the area. AONB Management Plans can be a material consideration in planning decisions. Complementing the plan is the Devon landscape character assessment which provides key landscape evidence and guidance to inform policy and decision making.

#### Considering natural beauty

It is important that impacts on the AONB designation are properly recognised and accounted for in decision making. In an AONB like the Blackdown Hills where timelessness and escape from the modern world is written into the core qualities underpinning the designation, some degree of harm will inevitably occur as a result of development and needs to be explicitly recognised and assessed. The Management Plan and supporting documents should help planning authorities, developers and land/home owners understand the landscape's capacity for change and

assess impact. Mitigation is a response to harm, a way of ameliorating but not eliminating impact, and should not be a justification for allowing inappropriate development. A clear understanding of the AONB's special qualities and distinctive characteristics will help to develop proposals which avoid or minimise harm.

The special qualities and defining characteristics of the Blackdown Hills AONB predominantly relate to the distinctive nature of the farmed landscape; the mosaic of land use types and hedges, and the isolated, dispersed type of development much of it driven by the topography of the area, which in turn is a product of the unique geology. Much of the appeal of the AONB stems from the relatively low level of 'modern' development. Essentially what we are considering in the Blackdown Hills are large tracts of an intact historic/cultural farmed landscape. The challenge therefore is to seek a sustainable approach to development that respects this inherent character and landscape assets whilst also fostering the social and economic wellbeing of local communities.

#### Informing sustainable development

The layout, form and density of all new developments needs to reflect the historic rural grain of the AONB. It is important that all new development, especially housing development, is of a scale and layout that conserves and enhances the distinctive pattern of built form found across the Blackdown Hills, specifically a low density, dispersed pattern of development.

Location and context are important; development should respect the importance of the setting of the AONB, of individual settlements, hamlets and historic farmsteads, maintaining the existing pattern of fields and lanes, the integrity of the hedgerows as well as open agricultural vistas, and enhance sense of place.

Development proposals in or affecting the AONB should avoid sensitive locations that will impact on the special qualities of the AONB – notably views – including prominent locations on the northern scarp slope, on skylines and hilltops, the open plateaux and ridgelines, and undeveloped valley slopes. Attention should be given to noise and activity arising from developments together with lighting to avoid having an adverse impact on the area's tranquillity and dark skies.

The sense of place is easily lost: suburbanisation and the cumulative effect of 'permitted development' break down local distinctiveness; replacing small-scale, locally distinct features with ones of a standard design erodes local character – for example the choice and style of gate, fence, wall or hedge around a house, or pavements, kerbs and driveways in new development.

In more rural areas of the AONB, agricultural buildings and development are significant issues and can be detrimental to natural beauty if not handled sensitively. As some agricultural practices continue to intensify and with an increasing awareness of animal welfare, the demand for modern large-scale agricultural buildings is continuing. To comply with environmental regulations comes large-scale slurry storage facilities

often in isolated and elevated locations with associated landscape and visual impacts, and the enclosure of open yards, often infilling the gaps between existing structures resulting in the visual massing of buildings.

**Appendix A** supports this section by providing a checklist for development proposals to help demonstrate how the proposal responds positively to the AONB designation.

### Management Objective and policies

Objective PD	Policies
To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills by ensuring that all development affecting the AONB is of the highest quality, sensitive to landscape setting and conserves its wildlife, historic character and other special qualities.	PD1 All relevant local and neighbourhood plan documents and planning decision-making will have regard to the AONB purpose, the management plan and other AONB statements and guidance, and ensure that conserving and enhancing the special qualities of the AONB is given great weight.
	PD2 All necessary development affecting the AONB will conserve and enhance natural beauty and special qualities by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respecting landscape character, settlement patterns and local character of the built environment,</li> <li>• Being sensitively sited and of appropriate scale,</li> <li>• Reinforcing local distinctiveness, and</li> <li>• Seeking to protect and enhance natural features and biodiversity</li> </ul>
	PD3 Support measures to improve energy efficiency and resource use and support appropriate small scale renewable energy schemes that do not detract from historic character or visual amenity, and do not conflict with the special qualities of the AONB or the conservation of natural beauty.
	PD4 Support the provision of affordable housing to meet identified local needs in locations with access to employment and local services, ensuring that developments are appropriately scaled and sited to respect landscape and settlement character, and avoiding impacts on nature conservation and historic interests.

## 4.8 Transport and highways

*Aim:* Sustainable transport options are available in the area and used as an alternative to the private car, benefitting the tranquillity and natural environment of the AONB as well as local communities and visitors. The road network is maintained and in keeping with the unspoilt rural landscape of the AONB.

### Background

Inevitably most people in rural areas need a car to access employment, services and other opportunities. 94% of households in the Blackdown Hills have at least one car (Census 2011). Nevertheless, reduction of unnecessary car use will contribute to both quality of life and conservation of the area's natural beauty. Much of the road network is made up of rural roads and lanes, not built or maintained for the volume, traffic size and use which they now must sustain. Devon County Council and Somerset County Council, as the highway authority, are responsible for the repair and maintenance of most roads in the AONB. Budget cuts will continue to affect their ability to effectively manage and maintain the rural road network and support bus services.

Highways England looks after the M5 and A35 trunk road, both which partly bound the Blackdown Hills, and the A303/A30 which passes through the middle of the AONB. Other major roads on the periphery are the A373 and A358, which are not part of the national strategic network, and are looked after by the respective county council.

Alterations or improvements to any of the above routes could have an impact on the special qualities and setting of the AONB, and affect local communities. Full consideration of the environmental and landscape impacts would be required as part of the feasibility and scheme development. Highway authorities and Highways England have a duty of regard to AONB purposes in carrying out their functions. Other strategic decisions regarding road and rail resilience in the South West could in the longer term also have implications for traffic and transport in the AONB, for example, improvements and upgrades to rail lines could shift passenger and freight traffic off the major roads.

Traffic speed and volume are a real concern in many communities. Routes across the AONB are frequently used as short cuts by through traffic, affecting both tranquillity and the environment. Although necessary, lorries and other large vehicles travelling to and from farms and small businesses along narrow lanes cause noise, risk to other users and damage to the roads, verges and hedgebanks. Traffic and transport is a focus topic for the Blackdown Hills Parish Network, who have been trying to secure cross-boundary co-operation on managing HGV traffic and work with the highways authorities to identify and tackle the issues.



The availability of public transport is limited in the AONB, and has seen reductions in services in recent times, which can leave those without access to a car at a serious disadvantage. Where there are bus services, they can be expensive, infrequent and do not operate at off-peak times. Nevertheless, certain routes that cross the area could provide better opportunities for tourism and recreation. In some places voluntary community transport schemes provide a valuable service, and could be used more. Rail services can be accessed at the nearby towns of Taunton, Tiverton, Honiton and Axminster. As noted in Section 4.6 there would be benefits to developing safer routes for non-motorised road users (including pedestrians and cyclists) within the AONB, and to 'signpost' suitable routes between surrounding settlements and the Blackdown Hills. This would help move towards creating places less dominated by motor vehicles and more welcoming for people - environmental benefits include cleaner air less greenhouse gas emissions and reduced congestion, social benefits include better physical and mental health and more equitable access to the AONB for visitors whether or not they are car-owners.

Both county councils have an approach of reducing unnecessary road signage where possible, which will have a positive impact on the landscape. However, loss of traditional roadside features, like fingerposts and milestones, and urbanising changes to the road corridor and streetscape of villages, are detrimental to the AONB's local character and distinctiveness.

### Management Objective and policies

Objective TH	Policies
To ensure that the impact on the landscape, environment and enjoyment of the AONB is considered in the planning, provision and management of transport networks and services.	TH1 Road and transport schemes (including design, maintenance, signage, landscaping and safety measures) affecting the AONB will be undertaken in a manner that is sensitive and appropriate to landscape character, having regard to the purpose of AONB designation and conserving and enhancing the area's special qualities. The landscape and cultural features of the AONB's road network (including hedge banks, flower-rich verges, and locally distinctive historic highway furniture) will be protected and conserved
	TH2 Traffic management measures will be supported which reduce the impact of large and heavy vehicles on the most minor roads and help to provide a safer environment for walking, cycling and horse riding, where this is compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty.
	TH3 Promote the development of high quality, integrated and sustainable transport services and initiatives in and around the AONB where they can be achieved without compromising the conservation of natural beauty and local character.

## 4.9 Rural economy and tourism

*Aim:* A thriving and diverse Blackdown Hills economy provides jobs for local people, makes wise use of local resources and benefits local communities while conserving and enhancing the outstanding landscape.

### Background

The high quality landscape has an integral part to play in sustaining economic growth, generating income, local jobs and products<sup>15</sup>. The key is for these aspirations to be consistent with the area's unique qualities.

The area is typically characterised by high numbers of small and micro enterprises and a high level of self-employment. Many of those who have established small businesses were attracted to the area by the high quality of life provided by the AONB environment. There is however still a strong agricultural sector; in 2011 accounting for 40% of businesses. Since 2014, £4.4 million has been brought into the AONB through agri-environment payments.

There is a common desire to develop a diverse and resilient local economy that is not over reliant on one particular sector, particularly one that could be heavily affected by external factors, such as agriculture and tourism for example. One of the implications of this, therefore, is a need to identify and support the training and development of new skills required to meet the needs of local employers and take advantage of new economic opportunities. The Blackdown Hills are not a self-contained economic area being heavily influenced by the surrounding market towns and larger settlements of Exeter and Taunton. These towns are inextricably linked with their rural hinterlands, both culturally and economically, providing opportunities and potential markets that can benefit small businesses within the area.

There is considerable local experience of the collaborative LEADER approach to rural development, with successful programmes operating in the AONB since 2002 seeking to strengthen the connections between the business sector, local services and markets, local employment opportunities and landscape management.

The Blackdown Hills Business Association (BHBA) aims to promote the interests of all businesses in the Blackdown Hills area. It is a not-for-profit membership-based organisation which was set up in the early 1980s to bring together small businesses for mutual support and promotion. This principle remains the core of the BHBA's activities today.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example [www.heartofswlep.co.uk](http://www.heartofswlep.co.uk) and [www.naturaldevon.org.uk](http://www.naturaldevon.org.uk)

Tourism in the AONB is largely characterised by high quality accommodation and quiet countryside pursuits and it is well established that there is a balance to be struck between realising the economic benefits of tourism and conserving the environmental wealth that is the attraction to visitors. The desire is to encourage and develop a tourism offer that is linked to local products and services that do not compromise the landscape and environment. This would bring benefits by encouraging visitors to explore the area; increasing their understanding and enjoyment, lengthening their stay and increasing the income for local businesses from both day and staying visitors. There is potential to improve the links between attractions, events and places, and to establish links with other more recognised tourist areas, for example the East Devon coast.

Rapidly evolving technology around modern communications enables new economic opportunities and ways of working that have a minimal environmental impact, as well as enabling rural businesses to link up for promotion and co-operation. The Government wants to see nationwide full fibre broadband coverage by 2033, and to be a world leader in 5G, with the majority of the population covered by a 5G signal by 2027<sup>16</sup>. Therefore it is important to ensure that the Blackdown Hills are well placed to take advantage of this technological revolution and not disadvantaged by poor communications infrastructure, in particular the availability and roll out of high speed (super- and ultra-fast) broadband. That said, broadband and mobile phone infrastructure needs to be sensitively sited and located within the AONB.

### Management Objective and policies

Objective RET	Policies
To sustain a local economy that makes wise use of the resources of the AONB and conserves and enhances the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills	RET1 Support the principle of local markets and sustainable local products where it adds value to the local economy without compromising the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the special qualities of the AONB.
	RET2 Economic capacity, employment and skills in the area will be supported through training opportunities, community enterprise, business networking and cooperation especially where these assist businesses to contribute to AONB purposes
	RET3 Tourism and recreation provision will contribute to the local economy without harming the Blackdown Hills landscape, historic environment, biodiversity or tranquillity, and respecting the special qualities of the AONB.
	RET4 Support efforts to secure and improve superfast broadband and mobile phone coverage in the AONB without adversely affecting special qualities.

<sup>16</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-telecoms-infrastructure-review](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-telecoms-infrastructure-review)

## 4.10 Community and culture

*Aim:* The Blackdown Hills is home to flourishing communities, with a cohesive and diverse population who can access a range of services and facilities. The commitment of local people helps to conserve and enhance the environment and landscape of the AONB, maintaining the distinctive character of villages and countryside.

### Background

Residents within the AONB identify strongly with the area and readily describe themselves as living in the Blackdown Hills rather than acknowledging administrative boundaries. There is a strong sense of the timelessness and traditions, expressed through community activities and events, arts, crafts and trades. Although sparsely populated (about 36 per square kilometre) with small settlements – the two largest are Dunkeswell and Hemyock, each with a population of some 2,000 – most are active communities with many social and interest groups and events, centred around parish halls, community centres, churches, schools and pubs.

The landscape of the AONB has in the past been an inspiration to artists and writers, and the present day Blackdown Hills artisans keep this tradition alive, strengthening the cultural associations with the landscape.

There is a particularly strong collaborative spirit among like-minded people in the area. The Blackdown Hills Business Association and Blackdown Hills Hedge Association are long established networks, but also more recent groups include a diversity of interests such as the Blackdown Hills Artists and Makers, Blackdown Hills Transition and Blackdown and East Devon Woodland Association.

Parish councils in the AONB form a collective voice through the Blackdown Hills Parish Network. The parish network produced a community plan in 2011<sup>17</sup> that pulled together social and economic information about the area and identified shared priority issues among local communities. The focus of the network is on finding ways to collectively address some of these issues.

There is a long community planning history, with many villages having produced parish plans and village design statements to inform planning and other decisions, and some now have adopted neighbourhood plans to influence decisions. Many communities have also produced village guides, walks leaflets and organised heritage and environmental projects.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://blackdownsonline.org.uk/parish-network/>

Access to services and facilities such as health, libraries, education, childcare and shopping varies considerably but is generally limited, as might be expected in a rural area. While village shops and post offices are invaluable community assets, maintaining their long-term viability remains a real issue whether commercially- or community-run. In common with the rest of Devon and Somerset the population age profile is older than the national average; the combination of an ageing population, sparse numbers and limited local facilities brings challenges to ensuring ongoing wellbeing. There is no getting away from the fact that improved digital connectivity will continue to revolutionise quality of life, from how we work and how children learn, to how we spend our leisure time, shop, and engage with health and public services. It is therefore important to ensure that communities in the Blackdown Hills are not disadvantaged by poor broadband speeds and mobile coverage (see also Section 4.9 and policy RET4).

### Management Objective and policies

Objective CC	Policies
To foster vibrant, healthy and resilient communities who enjoy a high quality of life and feel connected to the AONB and its special qualities	CC1 Local communities will be supported to identify, plan, and provide for their own needs, in undertaking community activities to encourage sustainable lifestyles, reinforce local cultural traditions, and in celebrating their achievements and strengths.
	CC2 Community-led planning tools (neighbourhood plans, parish plans, village design statements and others) that contribute to conserving and enhancing the AONB will be supported.
	CC3 Support and promote initiatives that help to provide, retain or enhance community facilities and services where compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty.
	CC4 Support local community engagement in cultural and natural heritage initiatives within the AONB.

# Theme 3: Partnership and Promotion

## Forces for Change - key issues, opportunities and challenges:

- Opportunities through delivery of Defra's 25-year plan to improve the environment, including:
  - Getting children close to nature
  - Encouraging volunteering
- AONB Partnership's strong track record in managing collaborative projects and community engagement
- Engagement with education providers (all ages)
- Harnessing and developing volunteer support and community involvement
- Social media and new digital technology
- Political and policy change and uncertainty, e.g. post-Brexit and outcome of Glover review of protected landscapes
- Local government transformation and budget cuts
- Financial pressures; reduced resources and capacity to deliver
- Increasingly competitive nature of external grant programmes
- Lack of current data specific to the AONB and regular monitoring

## 4.11 Communication, education and awareness

*Aim:* The significance of the AONB designation is well understood and widely appreciated. Local people, visitors and decision-makers are actively involved in caring for the countryside and heritage of the Blackdown Hills and there are diverse opportunities for enjoyment and learning.

### Background

The continued protection and enhancement of the Blackdown Hills' landscape, biodiversity and historic assets can only be achieved by successful communication of their value, with the ultimate aim to influence behaviour and ensure that the significance of the Blackdown Hills AONB is widely understood and valued among a variety of audiences. This may involve:

- Equipping audiences with high quality, targeted information and interpretation resources
- Enabling outdoor learning and enjoyment to suit many different ages, interests and needs
- Creating opportunities for people to contribute knowledge, time and labour

One of the specific roles of the AONB Partnership is to communicate the purpose of designation, and to promote awareness of the AONB and its special qualities. The main tools available to the AONB Partnership in carrying out this work are:

- Outdoor events and activities
- Volunteering opportunities
- Curriculum-related activities with local schools
- Social networking and media presence
- Online and print information
- On-site interpretation, both static and live

Communicating AONB key messages consistently and in varied media helps to establish the AONB vision in the minds of the local community, surrounding populations and regular visitors. It is important to appeal to the range of audiences who are familiar with the area as well as informing and empowering less familiar audiences.

As well as being the central public point of communication about the Blackdown Hills, the AONB team facilitates communication between the member organisations of the Partnership.

## Management Objective and policies

Objective CEA	Policies
To promote a greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the Blackdown Hills AONB and wider recognition of the designation and its purpose.	CEA1 Through promotion and education make more people aware of what makes the Blackdown Hills special, inspiring them to help care for the area and contribute to its conservation and enhancement.
	CEA2 Develop and support a range of opportunities for active engagement with the countryside, wildlife and heritage of the Blackdown Hills AONB, promoting the benefits that the natural environment provides to us.



## 4.12 Partnership and management

*Aim:* All AONB Partnership organisations work together to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills while also enabling, supporting and sustaining local communities and businesses.

### Background

The AONB Partnership is made up of organisations and interest groups that work together towards achieving the AONB vision through delivering the aims, objectives and policies of the Management Plan. Policy direction and implementation of the Management Plan is guided by the Partnership Management Group. This is comprised of appointed representatives from the local authorities and a number of representatives elected from the statutory and non-statutory organisations, local groups and parish councils within the AONB.

The AONB Partnership is supported by a core staff team of two full-time and two part-time posts. The AONB manager is supported by an Officer Support Group, consisting of officers from the local authority funding partners and the AONB chairman, who advise on technical issues such as resources and staff. To co-ordinate action and help to deliver projects that conserve and enhance the AONB it is enormously valuable that the Partnership can call on topic-specific working groups or forums drawn from the local community, interest groups, businesses, and the statutory and non-statutory agencies.

In recognition that the Blackdown Hills AONB is a nationally important landscape the majority of AONB funding comes from Defra. Core funding, which maintains the staff team and services of the Partnership, is matched by the six local authority partners in the proportion 75% Defra: 25% local authorities. Other Defra funding is allocated to projects; it is used by the team to draw down match from a variety of sources to co-ordinate and deliver projects and other initiatives. It also provides a grant pot, the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF), to which organisations and individuals can apply to deliver sustainable initiatives throughout the AONB.

Many organisations and agencies such as Natural England, the Forestry Commission, DEFRA and the National Trust contribute to delivering the Management Plan, through policies affecting land management, heritage protection and public access and the need for partnership funding and support. Local authorities at county, district and parish level continue to have a major role, including active involvement in the management, financial and officer support for the AONB Service, co-ordination of policies and plans across the AONB, and involvement in projects implementing the plan.

Protected landscapes in the south west, including the two national parks, meet regularly to work collaboratively and learn from best practice. Joint working between the AONBs in Devon, particularly with the adjoining East Devon AONB, is supported and encouraged. Also, recent

years have seen successful collaboration with the Quantock and Mendip Hills AONBs in Somerset on nature and wellbeing, volunteer co-ordination and planning.

The National Association for AONBs (NAAONB) is a charity that provides a strong collective voice for the UK's 46 AONBs. Its objectives are to

- promote the conservation and enhancement of AONBs,
- advance the education, understanding and appreciation by the public of AONBs, and
- promote the efficiency and effectiveness of those promoting or representing AONBs, other protected areas and those areas for which designation might be pursued.

It does this by taking a collaborative and partnership-based approach to working at a national level to achieve shared goals. It provides a focus for exchanging information, promoting best practice and raising awareness of AONB issues with national decision-makers.

The Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership also works with a range of other partnerships, such as the Devon and Somerset Local Nature Partnerships, East Devon Catchment Partnership and Devon Landscape Policy Group, to streamline overlapping activities and explore areas where joint working would be beneficial.

### Management Objective and policies

Objective PM	Policies
To ensure that the special qualities of the AONB are better understood, valued, conserved and enhanced through an effective AONB Partnership	PM1 Encourage co-ordination and partnership amongst the wide range of national, regional and local agencies and organisations to secure funding for the care and enhancement of the AONB
	PM2 Promote and highlight good practice within the AONB and the role and activities of the AONB Partnership
	PM3 Monitor the state of the landscape to identify where erosion and enhancement of the quality of the AONB is taking place and develop feedback mechanisms for corrective management

## CHAPTER 5: Delivery

*Aim: A landscape conserved and enhanced into the future, rich in natural/ historic/ cultural capital, understood and cared for by the community and providing services that people value*

### 5.1 Implementation

Collaboration and working together with others to achieve success underscores all AONB Partnership work.

All those that have an active interest and role in the management of the Blackdown Hills landscape and in supporting the communities that live and work within it have a role in implementing the Management Plan through individual action as well as partnership working. This includes parish councils, landowners and managers, voluntary organisations and interest groups, local authorities, statutory agencies, advisory bodies and government departments – whether individually or as part of other partnerships. The need and importance of partnership working and community engagement has never been greater. New and innovative working relationships will be needed to deliver the priorities of the Management Plan and draw down new sources of funding that may become available.

By helping to implement this plan, government, local authorities, public bodies and other ‘relevant authorities’ will be contributing to their ‘Section 85’ duty to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills AONB (see appendix C). It is therefore important that the strategies, plans and action plans of key local, regional and national authorities, agencies and organisations take account of and reflect the vision, objectives and policies of this plan.

A key function of this plan is to encourage co-ordinated action in the Blackdown Hills and ensure an integrated policy context. Sitting as it does across four districts and two counties, activities in the Blackdown Hills are often delivered by several different organisations – or different parts of the same organisation – based on administrative boundaries. This can lead to local issues being marginalised, different approaches being taken in neighbouring areas, and divergence of policy, for instance.

As such, one of the most important roles of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership, supported by other AONB-wide groups such as the Parish Network and Business Association, is to co-ordinate information and facilitate action across administrative boundaries to ensure that organisations collectively can meet the needs of the environment, landscape and communities of the Blackdown Hills. This will support local authorities and other public bodies in their ‘duty to co-operate’, and help to develop integrated, effective collaboration at a landscape-scale through, for example, the Local Nature Partnerships and Catchment Partnerships.

The AONB Partnership, both directly through the work co-ordinated by the AONB staff team and through its member organisations, will seek to achieve the vision for the AONB in the following ways:

- educating, communicating, advising and informing
- improving understanding of the AONB and the value of the designation
- providing leadership and co-ordination of the work of others locally
- using this plan to influence and inform decision making
- encouraging others to put the wellbeing of the AONB at the core of their strategies, plans and actions
- working jointly with the National Association for AONBs
- undertaking project work
- securing new grants and funding
- developing partnerships and co-operative programmes
- commissioning research and survey programmes to aid evidence-based decision making

Partner organisations may also:

- allocate grants and funding streams
- lobby for change at local, regional, national and international level
- exercise statutory and regulatory functions, such as local authority planning and development management, or Environment Agency pollution control

## **5.2 Monitoring and evaluation**

We can only achieve the AONB purpose of conserving and enhancing the Blackdown Hills' natural beauty and promote understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities if we understand what makes the area special, the issues and challenges facing those special qualities, and the opportunities for celebrating, conserving and enhancing them, and telling their stories.

We also need to ensure that decisions are made based on the best available evidence so that we can make the most of the funding and resources available. It is therefore important to ensure that there are adequate mechanisms in place for monitoring, research and reporting.

A role of the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership is to monitor and evaluate the actions that happen as a result of the implementation of this plan to demonstrate where management actions are making a difference on the ground - but without the monitoring process being overly burdensome.

**Qualitative monitoring** of action is relatively straightforward; partners regularly report to the AONB Partnership Management Group. This is the opportunity to highlight the work they are doing throughout the year. In addition, the AONB Partnership Annual Review is the mechanism for reporting on implementing the Management Plan and the AONB website highlights a range of project work.

Over the last plan period Natural England oversaw a national **framework for monitoring environmental outcomes in protected landscapes** which provided a consistent annual data set to help guide future management and this provided a body of supporting evidence for this plan. At the time of writing it is likely that Natural England will not be able to continue to collate and provide the data for all English AONBs and National Parks in the same way, and an alternative mechanism for securing relevant data will need to be explored.

The AONB family are working with Defra to produce a set of high-level **key performance indicators** (KPIs) that can be used to measure performance and outcomes. These have not yet been finalised, but the headlines are as follows:

1. Hectares of land enhanced for natural beauty through the work of AONB Teams
2. Number of heritage assets where the Condition or setting has been improved by the work of AONB Teams
3. Number of people engaged through the work of AONB Teams
4. Number of partnerships (e.g. steering groups, research projects) where the AONB Team promotes the delivery of the Management Plan
5. Number of Strategies or development schemes appraised by AONB Teams for compliance with the AONB Management Plan
6. Total value of work delivered directly or secured by the work of AONB Teams

A series of further indicators are also being developed that will sit under each of these headlines to add depth and may be more locally tailored.

### 5.3 Strategic Delivery Plan

The table on the following pages outlines strategic actions and associated delivery mechanisms for the next 5 years, necessary to deliver the ambitions of this plan. Focusing on outcomes and the strategic level rather than specific and detailed actions reflects uncertainty (spending review, Glover review, impact of Brexit, etc), but the approach is also intended to highlight opportunities to all relevant organisations, groups and others on ways they can contribute to managing the Blackdown Hills AONB. The annual AONB Partnership Business Plan will specify the expected roles for partners in more detail in relation to workstreams and specific projects.

There is a flow across the table, rather than a direct read across; in terms of the connections the table can be interpreted as follows:

*Objectives* – what we want to achieve within a specific topic area

*Outcomes* – what we want things to be like in the AONB as a result of implementing the management plan

*High Level Actions* – the core strategic actions required to be able to achieve the outcomes

*Partnership Delivery* – what organisations can do to contribute to delivery of the strategic actions.

Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership 5-year Strategic Delivery Plan (2019-2024)					
Place	Objectives	Outcomes (being sought as a result of delivering the objectives)	High Level Actions which need to be developed and supported	Partnership Delivery	Monitoring ( Key Performance Indicators or KPI's)
	<p>LC To ensure that the distinctive character and qualities of the Blackdown Hills landscape are understood, conserved, enhanced and restored</p> <p>CH To ensure effective conservation and management of the Blackdown Hills historic environment, including historic buildings, archaeological sites and heritage landscapes</p> <p>BG To ensure the conservation, enhancement, expansion and connectivity of habitats, forming coherent and resilient ecological networks across the Blackdown Hills and beyond, facilitating movement of priority species across the landscape</p> <p>NC To conserve and enhance the natural capital assets of the AONB and maximise the ecosystem goods and services they provide</p>	<p>There is a resilient landscape, richer in wildlife</p> <p>Natural and cultural heritage assets are in a good condition</p> <p>Our natural and cultural heritage assets are valued for their own sake and all that they provide for us</p> <p>Communities are at a reduced risk of flooding and water quality is improved through co-created catchment solutions</p> <p>Farming and land management are economically viable while conserving and enhancing natural beauty</p>	<p>Build a robust evidence base</p> <p>Restore coherent and resilient ecological networks (i.e. wildlife corridors)</p> <p>Promote and co-create catchment-based approaches including nature based solutions</p> <p>Develop landscape scale projects (respecting landscape character), especially those promoting greater collaboration across sectors</p> <p>Quantify natural capital assets and enable the value to society to be measured</p>	<p>Fully understand the state of the AONB (including genetic diversity) and geodiversity resource</p> <p>Recording, consolidating and conserving built/ other cultural heritage features and increasing knowledge and understanding of the natural and historic environment</p> <p>Reverse the decline in biodiversity, focussing on priority habitats and species</p> <p>Take a catchment based &amp; climate change adaptation approach to restore catchment function and natural processes, including restoration of features such as wetland mires via nature based solutions</p> <p>Develop and manage projects and initiatives to engage local communities in the management of their historic and natural environment</p> <p>Influence rural support mechanisms to ensure that they conserve and enhance and then promote them</p>	<p>1. Hectares of land enhanced for natural beauty through the work of AONB Teams</p> <p>2. Number of heritage assets where the Condition or setting has been improved by the work of AONB Teams</p> <p>3. Total value of work delivered directly or secured by the work of AONB Teams</p> <p>4. Number of Strategies or development schemes appraised by AONB Teams for compliance with the AONB Management Plan</p> <p>5. Number of people engaged through</p>

	FLM To support sustainable farming and forestry practices that conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONB and deliver a range of ecosystem services			Continue to build collaborations with farmers and landowners and help build resilient, sustainable businesses	the work of AONB Teams
People	<p>AE To ensure that opportunities to explore and enjoy the Blackdown Hills countryside and special qualities are compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty.</p> <p>PD To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills by ensuring that all development affecting the AONB is of the highest quality, sensitive to landscape setting and conserves its wildlife, historic character and other special qualities.</p> <p>TH To ensure that the impact on the landscape, environment and enjoyment of the AONB is considered in the planning, provision and management of transport networks and services.</p> <p>RET To sustain a local economy that makes wise use of the resources of the AONB and conserves and enhances the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills</p>	<p>High quality development has strengthened the character of the area bringing economic, social and environmental benefits</p> <p>Quiet enjoyment respects special qualities and contributes to quality of life</p> <p>Resilient communities have a strong sense of place and people share their environment and heritage with others</p>	<p>Planning policies that support the purpose of designation</p> <p>Promote a strategic approach to management of rights of way and access sites</p> <p>Initiatives that support health and well being</p> <p>Sustainable local transport initiatives</p> <p>Availability of local, sustainable economic opportunities</p> <p>Local communities have access to appropriate local facilities, services and amenities</p>	<p>Build a robust evidence base</p> <p>Continue to inform and influence the policy framework through additional planning guidance and tools to conserve and enhance landscape and natural beauty</p> <p>Projects which focus on using the natural and cultural environment to bolster people's health and wellbeing</p> <p>Influence rural economy support mechanisms to support local produce and natural capital</p> <p>Develop and support local supply chains and networks</p> <p>Responsive and well used community and public transport that links people, recreation and facilities</p> <p>Sensitive roll out of high quality broadband provision</p>	6. Number of partnerships (steering groups, research initiatives, etc) where the AONB Team promotes the delivery of the AONB Management Plan

	CC To foster vibrant, healthy and resilient communities who enjoy a high quality of life and feel connected to the AONB and its special qualities				
Partnership and Promotion	<p>CEA To promote a greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the Blackdown Hills AONB and wider recognition of the designation and its purpose.</p> <p>PM To ensure that the special qualities of the AONB are better understood, valued, conserved and enhanced through an effective AONB Partnership</p>	<p>The special qualities of the AONB are widely appreciated, understood, conserved and enhanced</p> <p>Decisions are made based on a robust evidence base and change can be quantified</p>	<p>Identify and encourage opportunities for joint working and partnership delivery</p> <p>Ensure that people have a wider range of opportunities to explore, enjoy and learn about the Blackdown Hills</p>	<p>Collaborative communications campaigns</p> <p>Support countryside and heritage volunteering opportunities that contribute to the positive management of the AONB</p> <p>Promote, support and provide events and activities that offer outdoor experiences and learning that connect people with landscape, wildlife and heritage</p> <p>Encourage the appropriate use of the AONB for a wide range of education, study and research initiatives that will contribute to its conservation and enhancement and improve awareness of the potential impact of change on the landscape</p> <p>Produce a regularly updated State of the AONB report</p> <p>Review the AONB Management Plan every 5 years and ensure that the Delivery Plan element is reviewed annually</p>	



## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: General Guidance for Development Proposals

**All applicants of development proposals in the Blackdown Hills AONB should consider the following and where possible demonstrate, through the planning application process how the development has responded positively to the AONB designation:**

**Think Special Qualities** - explain how the development will impact on the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills AONB and what actions you are taking both to conserve and to enhance landscape, scenic beauty and other factors of natural beauty;

**Think Enhancement** - positively set out to 'enhance' the natural beauty of the AONB with your development proposal – be proud of your contribution to this special place;

**Think Location** - avoid development that creates incongruous features in prominent and highly visible locations that detract from the long views and open character of the Greensand plateau and views from or to the ridge lines, undeveloped valley sides and scarps of the AONB. Fit development into the landscape not on top of it;

**Think scale and massing** - again this will help reduce harmful impact on the prevailing character of the AONB;

**Think vernacular** - consider how the development relates to the vernacular style of local building materials and styles;

**Think biodiversity** – explain how the development impacts on the biodiversity assets of the AONB and how you will avoid, mitigate, or as a last resort compensate for any residual impacts;

**Think dark skies** - consider the need for and impact of artificial lighting. Dark skies are recognised as important elements of tranquillity and contribute to the sense of wildness and remoteness as well as being culturally important;

**Think geology, soil, air and water** - explain how the development impacts on these natural capital assets of the AONB and how you will avoid, mitigate, or as a last resort compensate for any residual impacts;

**Think cumulative effects** – identify, describe and evaluate whether there are cumulative effects on the different natural beauty criteria which although alone may appear to be insignificant when considered together have a greater impact on the AONB. Identify and describe whether there are cumulative impacts from your development in combination with development already in place, or that which is reasonably foreseeable (such as allocated sites and sites with planning permission).

*Acknowledgement D Dixon/South Devon AONB Unit*

## Appendix B: Major Development

Footnote 55 of the NPPF clarifies that:

- *'For the purposes of paragraphs 172 [relating to protected landscapes, including AONBs] and 173 [relating to Heritage Coasts], whether a development is 'major development' is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined'.*

As such, it is not possible or appropriate to apply a blanket definition for what should be treated as major development in the Blackdown Hills AONB. Nevertheless, there are some key factors that help to define if a development is major, as outlined below.

The purpose for which the Blackdown Hills AONB has been designated is to conserve and enhance its natural beauty. Therefore, the judgement as to whether or not a development is major development depends, to a large degree, on whether or not the development could have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty of the AONB. As outlined in Chapter 3, natural beauty incorporates a number of criteria, including landscape quality, scenic quality, tranquillity, natural heritage and cultural heritage. Within the context of the Blackdown Hills AONB, those aspects of the AONB's natural beauty which make the area distinctive and which are particularly valuable – the AONB's 'special qualities' - are also described in Chapter 3.

On this basis, a development should be considered 'major' if, by reason of its nature, scale, location and/or setting, it could have a significant adverse impact on any of the above criteria, including the AONB's 'special qualities'. As well as potential impacts within the AONB, consideration should also be given to impacts on these criteria within the setting of the AONB, particularly in the context of visual impact (i.e. views into and out of the AONB) and impacts on tranquillity.

As outlined in paragraph 172 of the NPPF, to help inform whether there are exceptional circumstances, and whether it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest, applications for such development should include an assessment of:

*a. 'the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy';*

The AONB Partnership would expect any such development proposal be accompanied by a statement of need in the context of national and local considerations and, ideally, in the context of needs arising from within the AONB. The impacts of permitting or refusing the development should be clearly identified in respect of the local economy, ideally including that of the local communities affected. Such a statement should be based upon objective assessment and clear evidence.

*b. 'the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way';*

The AONB Partnership would encourage any such development proposal to be accompanied by a report setting out a sequential approach to site selection. This should evidence the extent to which alternative sites have been assessed before the selection of sites within the AONB, and clearly identify why sites outside of the designated area could not be developed. The report should also identify and evidence why the need for the development could not be met in some other way. The report should include relevant evidence regarding the cost of developing outside the AONB. The AONB Partnership is mindful of the judicial review decision in relation to development in Cornwall AONB<sup>18</sup> which confirmed that even if there are exceptional circumstances generally, such as the need for housing, this does not necessarily equate to exceptional circumstances for a particular development because there may be alternative sites that could result in less harm to the AONB. These can be outside the local planning authority's area. Thus the proper consideration of alternatives, (with a view to ascertaining if alternative(s) which would result in less harm to the AONB exist), is an essential component of exercising the assessments correctly.

*c. 'any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated'.*

The AONB Partnership would expect any such development proposal to be accompanied by a report identifying any detrimental effects upon the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities. Such a report should relate directly to the natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB as a whole as well as those specific to the development site.

Any mitigation identified to moderate these impacts should be:

- clearly detailed, in line with the duty to conserve and enhance the AONB,
- be compatible with the objectives and policies of the AONB Management Plan,
- be compatible with special qualities and local landscape character, and
- be capable of realisation through robust planning conditions or obligation.

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<sup>18</sup> R (Mevagissey Parish Council) v Cornwall County Council [2013] EWHC 3684 (Admin)

## Appendix C: Legal Framework for AONBs

AONBs exist within a legal framework which has been progressively strengthened since the first AONBs came into existence after the Second World War.

The **1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act** first established the AONB designation, provided AONBs with protection under planning law against inappropriate development and gave local authorities permissive powers to take action for '*preserving and enhancing natural beauty*' in them.

The **Countryside Act 1968** placed a responsibility on local authorities, the statutory conservation bodies, and civil servants, in exercising their functions under the 1949 Act (as amended by subsequent legislation) to '*have due regard to the needs of agriculture and forestry and to the economic and social interests of rural areas.*' Within AONBs, this means a responsibility to acknowledge and, where appropriate, to promote farming, forestry and the rural economic and social context wherever this can be done without compromising the primary purpose of conserving natural beauty.

The **Environment Act 1995** introduced the phrase 'conserve and enhance' in place of 'protect and enhance' in relation to duties of local authorities, the Environment Agency and other bodies. No statutory duties were placed on local authorities actively to manage AONBs in any particular way.

The **Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000** (CRoW) subsumes and strengthens the AONB provisions of the 1949 Act. It confirms the purpose and significance of AONBs, clarifies the procedure for their designation, and created a firm legislative basis for their designation, protection and management. In particular;

**Section 82** reaffirms the primary purpose of AONBs: to conserve and enhance natural beauty.

**Section 83** establishes the procedure for designating or revising the boundaries of an AONB, including Natural England's duty to consult with local authorities and to facilitate public engagement.

**Section 84** confirms the powers of a local authorities to take '*all such action as appears to them expedient*' to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of an AONB, and sets consultation and advice on development planning and on public access on the same basis as National Parks in the 1949 Act.

**Section 85** places a statutory duty on all 'relevant authorities' to '*have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty*' of AONBs when coming to any decisions or carrying out activities relating to or affecting land within these areas. 'Relevant authorities' include all public bodies (including county, borough, district, parish and community councils, joint planning boards and other statutory committees); statutory undertakers (such as energy and water utilities, licensed telecommunications companies, nationalised companies such as Network

Rail and other bodies established under statute responsible for railways, roads and canals); government ministers and civil servants. Activities and developments outside the boundaries of AONBs that have an impact within the designated area are also covered by the 'duty of regard'.

**Sections 86 to 88** allow for the establishment in an AONB of a Conservation Board to which the AONB functions of the local authority (including development planning) can be transferred. Conservation Boards have the additional but secondary function of seeking to increase public understanding and enjoyment of the AONB's special qualities. They also have an obligation to '*seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities*' in co-operation with local authorities and other public bodies.

**Sections 89 and 90** create a statutory duty on all AONB partnerships (local authorities and Conservation Boards) to prepare a Management Plan '*which formulates their policy for the management of their area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it*', and thereafter to review adopted and published Plans at intervals of not more than five years. Where an AONB involves more than one local authority they are required to do this '*acting jointly*'.

**Section 92** makes clear that the conservation of natural beauty includes the conservation of '*flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features*.'

The **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006** (NERC):

**Section 99** formally clarifies in law that the fact that an area consists of or includes land used for agriculture or woodlands, or as a park, or '*any other area whose flora, fauna or physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention in the landscape*' does not prevent it from being treated, for legal purposes '*as being an area of natural beauty (or of outstanding natural beauty)*.'

**Schedule 7** asserts that an AONB joint committee of two or more local authorities, or a conservation board, can constitute a 'designated body' for the performance of functions allocated to Defra.

## Appendix D: Organisations represented on the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership

Blackdown Hills Business Association	Forestry Commission
Blackdown Hills Hedge Association	Forest Enterprise
Blackdown Hills Trust	FWAG South West
Blackdown & East Devon Woodland Association	Historic England
Blackdown Hills Artist & Makers	Mid Devon District Council
Blackdown Hills Parish Network	National Farmers Union
Blackdown Hills Rough Grazing Association	National Trust
Blackdown Support Group	Natural England
British Horse Society	Neroche Woodlanders
Butterfly Conservation	Otterhead Estate Trust
Campaign to Protect Rural England	Parish councils (falling entirely or partially within the AONB)
Community Council for Somerset	Ramblers Association
Council for Voluntary Service (Mid Devon)	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Country Land and Business Association	Somerset County Council
Devon Communities Together	Somerset Environmental Records Centre
Devon Biodiversity Records Centre	Somerset Rural Youth Project
Devon County Council	Somerset Wildlife Trust
Devon Wildlife Trust	Somerset Women's Institute
Devon Women's Institute	Somerset Young Farmers Club
Devon Youth Association	South Somerset District Council
Devon Young Farmers Club	South West Heritage Trust
East Devon Council for Voluntary Service	Taunton Deane Borough Council
East Devon District Council	Transition Group (Blackdown Hills)
Environment Agency	Wessex Water
Ferne Animal Sanctuary	