

Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan Review: Briefing Paper August 2024

1. Introduction

Management Plans are a vital tool to help protect and enhance our National Landscapes¹.

A Management Plan provides a shared long term vision for the National Landscape and contains ambitions, targets and actions that seek to further the statutory purpose, i.e. to conserve and enhance the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Under the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW)*, it is a statutory requirement for local authorities to produce Management Plans for their National Landscapes and to review these at five yearly intervals. The Review aims to reflect significant changes to legislation, policy and the environmental context to ensure that the Plan remain valid and up to date.

The latest review process is well underway for the Blackdown Hills, and the National Landscape team has been tasked with leading this work on behalf of Devon County Council, Somerset Council, East Devon and Mid Devon District Councils.

2. Drivers for change

The Plan must address the significant issues of the *climate emergency* and *nature recovery*, taking account of, and contributing to, *Local Nature Recovery Strategies* and the hierarchy of *climate strategies* and action plans.

Work and priorities for the National Landscape set out in the Management Plan are required to contribute to Defra's *Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23)*. This sets the goals for enhancing England's natural environment, including the targets to;

- protect 30% of our land and sea for nature through the Nature Recovery Network by 2030 ('30 by 30')
- restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2042; and, halt the decline in species abundance by the end of 2030, increasing it above 2022 levels by 2042.

Specifically, a *Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (TOF)* sets the ambition for how Protected Landscapes are expected to achieve 3 outcomes from EIP23 through a number of targets:

- Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife
- Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change
- Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

The *Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) (2023)* amended and strengthened the CRoW Act in respect of Protected Landscapes, to;

- Require relevant authorities in England to 'seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty' of the National Landscape. This replaces a 'duty of regard' to the purpose in previous legislation.
- Allow the Secretary of State to make provision to require relevant authorities in England 'to contribute to the preparation, implementation or review' of a National Landscape's Management Plan and for the Plan to contribute to meeting specific targets set under the Environment Act 2021.

3. Our response

We have;

- ▶ Reworked the plan into 4 main themes – Place, People, Nature, Climate.
- ▶ Collectively revised the Vision to 2050 and agreed some shared guiding principles (high level statements of intent and ambition; what's needed to realise the vision and meet or exceed national targets and deliver what's needed for the place).

¹ Since 2023, AONBs are known as National Landscapes. The designation remains an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is referred to as such in legislation and policy. References here to National Landscape are synonymous with AONB.

4. Structure and content

	<i>Proposed Sections</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
a.	Purpose and role of plan	<i>Its audiences and uses</i>
b.	Policy landscape	<i>Legislative background – CRoW, LURA, EIP, relevant authorities etc. (see sections 1 and 2 above)</i>
c.	Navigation	<i>i.e. the evidence sits behind, action and priorities are front-loaded; how to quickly find the section you need, explain terminology</i>
d.	Special Qualities (summary)	<i>i.e. why is the place special/ reasons for designation and what do we need to conserve and enhance?</i>
e.	Vision 2050	<i>Sets strategic direction</i>
f.	The Themes: Place People Nature Climate	<i>Strategic priorities framework; topics including - Landscape, heritage, land use & land management, ecosystem services Community, access, inclusion, economy, transport Nature recovery, species, habitat and wildlife site management Greenhouse gases, carbon storage, pathway to net zero, adaptation</i>
	- Objectives - Guiding principles - TOF targets*	<i>What we want to achieve See explanation in section 3 above 2030/2040 TOF milestones and what this Management Plan aims to achieve by 2030 towards these (apportionment) *see section 2 above</i>
	- Current status	<i>Where are we currently in relation to the targets and indicators, data in 'State Of' Report</i>
	- Priority Actions - Policies	<i>Concise list of bullet pointed actions What needs to be done to achieve the objective, along with high level actions</i>
	- Evidence	<i>Key issues, opportunities and challenges under Forces for Change. Describes the significance to the Blackdown Hills and the local context</i>
g.	5-year Delivery Plan	<i>High level actions</i>
h.	Annexes	<i>Further detailed information, such as Special Qualities, TOF data, Climate action plans</i>

5. Review process so far

- Identification of forces for change
- Evaluation of current plan, fitness for purpose and its usage
- Appraisal of other plans and strategies (own and others)
- 'State of the National Landscape' report covering range of topics in current Management Plan
- Public survey (online and at some events)
- Stakeholder workshop (audience included Partnership Management Group, representatives of partnership organisations, local councillors, farming representatives, parish councils)
- Workshop with 'community resilience' activists and presentation at Parish Network meeting
- Information exchanges with the other Devon and Somerset National Landscapes

6. Next Steps

The consultation draft will be finalised and then a 6-week period of public consultation on the Draft Plan for 2025-30 is proposed during October to November. Details of specific promotion and engagement opportunities during that period are still to be determined, but an option could be to hold a workshop session with Councillors for example.

The Draft Plan will be revised as necessary, and a final draft version will undergo formal consultation with the statutory consultee, Natural England.

The Management Plan will then be finalised and recommended by the National Landscape Partnership to partner local authorities for adoption by end of March 2025 as the statutory Management Plan for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

7. Recommendation

To agree to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership undertaking public consultation on the reviewed Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan for 2025-2030.