Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030

Pre-Consultation draft version for local authorities

October 2024

Contents

How to use and navigate this Management Plan

This version of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030 is a text only document for the purpose of informing local authority partners prior to public consultation. Ultimately the Management Plan will be published on the Blackdown Hills National Landscape website and available to download in pdf format (or alternative format on request). Maps, images and full design will be included.

The management plan has the following structure:

Introduction [sets the context, explains the purpose and role of the management plan, describes some of the main policy linkages]

Special qualities [describes why the place is special/reasons for designation and what do we need to conserve and enhance?]

Vision to 2050 [where do we need to get to/ direction of travel]

There are then **four themes - Place, People, Nature, Climate,** and the contents of each is organised in the same way under the following headings:
Objective(s) [what we want to achieve for the area]
Guiding Principles [high level statements of intent and ambition, needed to realise the vision and meet/ exceed national targets and deliver what's needed for the place]
Target and Outcomes Framework targets [lists national milestones and identifies what this Management Plan aims to achieve by 2030 towards these milestones (apportionment)]
Current status [headline findings from the 2023 State of the Blackdown Hills report, and where are we currently in relation to the targets and indicators (data provided by Defra) in bullet point/summary format]
Priority actions [concise list of bullet pointed actions, that together collate to form the 5-year Strategic Delivery Plan]
Policies [guides management by setting out what needs to be done and how to achieve the objective(s)]
Evidence [Describes the significance of topics to the Blackdown Hills and the local context, with key issues, opportunities and challenges]

Delivery and monitoring [including a **Strategic Delivery Plan** which will outline the strategic priorities and high-level actions over the 5-year period required to deliver this plan's ambitions, based on the identified priority actions.]

The **Appendices** then set out more detailed information and data relating to;

- **Special Qualities** [a comprehensive description, summary table, overview of associated natural capital and ecosystem services]
- **Planning** [general principles for development proposals and major development]
- **TOF indicators and data**
  Additional appendices: climate change, landscape character, habitats and species TBC

Introduction

Purpose and role of the Management Plan

Context

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are nationally important protected landscapes, known as National Landscapes since 2023. The 46 National Landscapes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cover just under 20% of the UK. Their distinctive character and natural beauty make them some of the most special and cherished places in which to live and to visit.

Together with National Parks, National Landscapes represent our most outstanding landscapes; unique and irreplaceable national assets, each with such distinctive character and natural beauty that they are recognised internationally as a Category V Protected Landscape by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 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 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.

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

What is the Management Plan for?

The Management Plan blends national and local priorities and seeks to address them in a way that is right for the Blackdown Hills – the landscape, environment, and communities – to make sure the very special character of the area is conserved and enhanced for future generations.

The statutory Management Plan is the single most important policy document for the National Landscape. It sets out the ambition, strategy, and guidance for the conservation and enhancement of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape for the next five years. It is a revised and updated version of the previous Management Plan 2019-2024.

Its purpose is to:

• Highlight the special qualities and significance of the National Landscape

• Present a vision for the future of the National Landscape and set the direction of travel
• Set out objectives and policies to secure the vision
• Define the pace and scale of action required to achieve our vision
• State the condition of the National Landscape and establish measures of success and targets upon which progress can be measured and evaluated

Working together with others to achieve success underscores all National Landscape Partnership work. As the principal strategic guidance for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, the plan, therefore, provides the basis to:
• Inform and influence decisions
• Stimulate and prioritise action
• Promote collaboration
• Help co-ordinate and prioritise resources

Who is the Management Plan for?

It has been prepared by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership on behalf of the relevant local authorities, but it is a plan for the geographic area of the National Landscape (and beyond), not an organisation and provides a framework to help guide all activities affecting the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.

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 relevant authority organisations that are required to jointly prepare, adopt and review the Management Plan, and who carry out key functions, such as planning, that affect the National Landscape. The Management Plan, in its entirety, establishes the management policy of the responsible authorities.
- National Landscape Partnership organisations – these organisations will have a key role in delivering and championing the Management Plan
- Relevant authorities – all public bodies and statutory undertakers (including local authorities, government and governmental organisations, parish councils, utilities) have a duty to further the purpose of the National Landscape; this Management Plan will guide them in fulfilling their statutory duties
- Landowners, land managers and developers – those who own and manage land in the National Landscape have a vital role to play; the plan aims to guide, support and attract resources for sensitive management of the National Landscape
- Local communities and businesses and visitors – all who live and work or visit the Blackdown Hills can play an active role in caring for the National Landscape; the plan identifies some of the priorities for action and ways to become involved

- Others such as funding bodies, third-sector and voluntary groups and organisations, who may refer to the plan or use it to gain a greater understanding of the issues affecting the area.

This plan is ultimately about partnership working to make the vision a reality.

Guiding principles for partnership and management

Principle 1: The management plan will be used to direct strategic leadership in the delivery of meaningful benefits to the landscape, communities and economy of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, while relevant authorities will seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty in the conduct of their functions and decision making.

Principle 2: Collaboration, co-ordination and partnership is to be encouraged amongst the wide range of national, regional and local agencies and organisations to secure appropriate funding and support for the care and enhancement of the Blackdown Hills.

Principle 3: The National Landscape Partnership is the central vehicle to promote the roles and activities of all those involved in conserving and enhancing the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, and to showcase innovation and best practice.

Principle 4: We will monitor and report on the state of the National Landscape utilising tools such as the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework and local measures so that management interventions can be kept under review.

Policy landscape

Although generally now known as National Landscapes, ‘Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty’ (AONB) remains the legal term for the designation and so is the terminology used in this section.

Legislation

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:

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* placed 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* placed a statutory duty on local authorities to prepare and review a Management Plan for each AONB in their administrative area.

The **2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act** (LURA) places a stronger requirement on partners such as local authorities and public bodies (known as relevant authorities) to conserve and enhance Protected Landscapes. It amends the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, placing a revised duty on relevant authorities:
'In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in any [Protected Landscape] in England, a relevant authority must *seek to further* the specified purposes'. This replaces the existing duty to "have regard to" the specified purposes.
It also grants powers to the Secretary of State to make regulations to:

- direct a relevant authority in the discharging of the duty,
- require a protected landscape management plan to contribute to meeting any national environmental target set under the Environment Act 2021;
- set out how a management plan must further the purposes of the designation;
- require and set out how a relevant authority must contribute to the preparation, implementation and review of a management plan.

Defra and Natural England policy

Under the umbrella of the UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (2018) the work and priorities of the National Landscape, as set out in the Management Plan, are required to contribute to Defra's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23). This sets the UK goals for enhancing the natural environment, including the target to protect 30% of our land and sea for nature through the Nature Recovery Network by 2030 (the so-called '30 by 30' commitment which arises from the UK's commitments at the COP15 Biodiversity summit), and the target to restore or create more than

500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2042. It also seeks to halt the decline in species abundance by the end of 2030 increasing it above 2022 levels by 2042. The ambition is to achieve high quality, accessible, natural spaces with increased biodiversity close to where people live and work, with a focus around the equal distribution of environmental benefits and resources to all.

Specifically, a *Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework* Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) *s*ets 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 Protected Landscape targets are non-statutory and create a shared ambition for all 44 of England's Protected Landscapes. The targets are for the Protected Landscapes as places (the geographic area covered by the designation). Action will be coordinated by Protected Landscape bodies through their statutory management plan, and it will be the responsibility of all stakeholders, partners and land managers in the area to support their delivery.

Most of these changes follow recommendations made within the Landscapes Review 2019, an independent review of Designated Landscapes (National Parks and AONBs) in England commissioned by the Government and led by Julian Glover. 'The Review aims not to diminish the character or independence of our designated landscapes, or to impose new burdens on them and the people who live and work in the areas they cover. Instead, its purpose is to ask what might be done better, what changes could assist them, and whether definitions and systems which, in many cases date back to their original creation, are still sufficient.'

The Review was published in 2019 and produced twenty-seven proposals including;

- AONBs strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, renamed as National Landscapes
- The state of nature and natural capital in our national landscapes should be regularly and robustly assessed, informing the priorities for action, and
- Strengthened Management Plans should set clear priorities and actions for nature recovery including, but not limited to, wilder areas and the response to climate change (notably tree planting and peatland restoration). Their implementation must be backed up by stronger status in law.

Other key policy influences

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

The Management Plan review needs to take account of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies for Devon and Somerset which are currently under development. These are being prepared as part of a statutory duty on responsible authorities (the two county councils in our case), enshrined in the Environment Act 2021 to work with stakeholders across the public, private and voluntary sectors to agree priorities for

nature's recovery, map the most valuable existing areas for nature, and establish shared proposals for action to be taken to recover nature.

Climate action planning

The Management Plan will be influenced by the Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy Somerset's Climate Emergency Strategy and the equivalent Devon Carbon Plan Devon Carbon Plan – Devon Climate Emergency, plus Climate Adaptation Strategy
for Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Adaptation Strategy – Devon Climate Emergency.

Local Plans

Planning policy and decisions to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and character of the National Landscape are the responsibility of local authorities. This does not mean that there should be no development but that any development should complement the character of the landscape, be sustainable and be of an appropriate scale and nature.

Any development proposal must be in accordance with the relevant local authority's Development Plan, including core strategies, local plans, neighbourhood plans and any supplementary planning documents adopted by the authority. This includes adopted local plans in the former Somerset districts of Somerset West and Taunton and South Somerset, East Devon District Council and Mid Devon District Council.

Agri-environment funding

A major vehicle for the delivery of actions advocated in the Management Plan, with respect to land management, is the suite of payment schemes which are either already available, or under development by Defra to replace the agri-environment schemes which used to be part of the UK's farm support under the CAP. Broadly falling under the heading of Environmental Land Management, the key ones of relevance for the Blackdown Hills are the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Countryside Stewardship, Farming in Protected Landscapes (operated by the National Landscape locally) and Landscape Recovery.

Special qualities

The Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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 designated 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 National Landscape.

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.

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

It is an area notable for its unspoilt rural character, which remains relatively undisturbed by modern development and so ancient landscape features, special habitats, historical and archaeological remains have survived intact. In the winding lanes, the hidden valleys and traditional villages there is a sense of stepping back in time; of release from the stresses of everyday living; of the links between nature and humanity. The countryside remains largely unchanged and there is an identifiable and characteristic vernacular, pastoral landscape.

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

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. There are long views over field-patterned landscapes. Ancient, species-rich hedgerows delineate the fields and define the character of the landscape, enclosing narrow twisting lanes. The open plateau is dissected by steep valleys, the

slopes supporting a patchwork of ancient woodland. The history of medieval and parliamentary enclosures has resulted in a contrasting landscape of small fields in the valleys and larger fields with straight hedges on the plateau. There are patches of heath and common, bog and mire and there are fine avenues of beech along the ridge. At a more detailed level there is a variety of visual and ecological interest; heathland birdlife, ground flora of woodland and mire, and colourful wildflowers on hedgebanks.

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 such buildings and where the vernacular character is particularly well preserved. Predominant materials are chert and cob with thatch, over time often replaced by corrugated iron, or clay-tiled roofs. The appeal lies in the way in which the buildings fit so naturally into their surroundings.

Further information about the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills is included in the appendix. [link to be inserted]

Vision

Our vision is that in 2050, as a result of collaboration and positive change, the Blackdown Hills will be a rich and vibrant landscape where:

Thriving, diverse communities, with a strong sense of place and wellbeing, are sustained by a connection to the land and a rich local culture. Living and working sustainably in and around the area, they underpin the prospering local economy and can access the services they need.

Sense of place is maintained and strengthened, characterised by small villages and hamlets set within a distinctive panorama of wide plateaux bisected by deep valleys, containing an intimate patchwork of fields, woodlands and extensive hedges, all shaped by the unique geology.

Farming and land uses work successfully within the natural tolerances of the land to create a resilient place, providing food, fuel, timber, clean water and other wider benefits needed by society, nurturing the area's rich resources for future generations.

Wildlife and habitats are in good condition, diverse and abundant, species moving freely through a connected and healthy landscape.

Our collective heritage is conserved and celebrated, keeping alive traditional skills.

Everyone seeking inspiration and enjoyment of its landscape and natural benefits is welcomed and can readily access and experience this special place.

Delivering the vision

Over the next 25 years, the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is facing a number of drivers of change which have the capacity to impact significantly on its core character, and which need to be addressed in this plan period, not least the interconnected threats of the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis. Collectively we can mitigate these and other threats if concerted and urgent action is taken now. The challenge will be to capitalise on the Blackdown Hills' ability to restore nature, grow healthy food and reduce carbon emissions while supporting vibrant and diverse rural communities – and fundamentally, the evolving landscape and special character of the Blackdown Hills is at the heart of all we do and the decisions we make.

Place

It is the diverse landscapes, the distinctive villages, the historic and natural environment, that give the Blackdown Hills its special sense of place. This section of the management plan focuses on sustainable and resilient land use and land management that is central to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area. It covers landscape, natural resources and natural capital, farming, forestry and land management, historic environment and geology, planning, development and infrastructure.

Objectives

To restore, conserve and enhance the natural capital stock of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape and maximise the flow of ecosystem goods and services it provides.

To support sustainable farming, forestry and land management practices that conserve and enhance the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape and deliver a range of ecosystem services

To strengthen the Blackdown Hills special sense of place, with a diversity of landscape patterns and pictures, unique geology and buildings of architectural appeal, through sound custodianship

Guiding principles

Principle 1: The distinctive character and special qualities of the Blackdown Hills need to be recognised, understood and valued if natural beauty is to be conserved, enhanced and restored.

Principle 2: Our historic environment and 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 Blackdown Hills.

Principle 3: We need to ensure that any development and infrastructure affecting the National Landscape is of the highest quality; sensitive to landscape setting and historic character, conserving and enhancing wildlife and other special qualities.

Principle 4: All those whose actions affect the landscape work together to allow nature and natural processes to thrive, as a foundation of a productive, healthy rural economy.

Principle 5: Soil health is restored and nurtured; rivers and streams flow clean and other ecosystem services are provided to society as a result of sustainable land management.

Targets

These are the Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes Framework targets that we will contribute to:

Target 5

- Ensuring at least 65% to 80% of land managers adopt nature friendly farming on at least 10% to 15**% of their land by 2030**

Target 8 *(to be apportioned)*

- Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).
- If the target was pro rata'd based on this Protected Landscapes' area (i.e. 3% of the Protected Landscape area itself, not the area of existing woodland) without any local factors this would be **1,108.76 ha**. This would be equivalent to **39.60 ha** per year between 2022 and 2050. The total amount of woodland within the BHNL in 2050 would then be 9,302.93 ha.

Target 10

- Decrease the number of nationally designated heritage assets at risk in Protected Landscapes

Current status

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
Natural resources and natural capital	
Air quality	Particulate matter (PM2-5) levels low in the area but with a hotspot around Hemyock. Sulphur dioxide (SO_2) levels are low in the area but with hotspots at Hemyock, Dunkeswell and near to Axminster.
Change in weather patterns	9-millimetre increase in annual rainfall and a rise of 0.3°C in annual temperature over the last 30 years.
Soil organic carbon stock	5% increase in carbon accumulating in the soils and vegetation between 2017 and 2021.
Surface water flood risk	Low risk
Additional data from Defra: Water Framework Directive (WFD) River waterbodies (rivers, canals and surface water transfers) within Protected Landscapes	• **Length of waterbodies within each status (km):** 122 km moderate status (19 waterbody catchments), 24km poor status (9 waterbody catchments), 0.8km bad status (2 waterbody catchments)

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
	• **WFD groundwater waterbodies-** 4 in high status, 3 in good status
Landscape	
Light pollution	Satellite images suggest that there is very little light pollution in the National Landscape. A noticeable increase of light spillage from Chard and Taunton conurbation. Increasing spillage from some communities within the area, noticeably Dunkeswell, Hemyock and around Yarcombe.
Noise pollution	National noise mapping suggests that the extent of traffic noise from major roads is limited in the National Landscape. Most recent data is for 2017.
Historic environment	
Number and condition of heritage assets	There are 770 Listed Buildings and 26 Scheduled Monuments. Of these, 8 assets are at risk; this is a minor improvement since 2019.
Conservation Areas	There are ten Conservation Areas within the National Landscape. None are deemed as at risk.
Farming and Land Management	
Agricultural land-use	78% of the National Landscape is under agriculture (2021).
Change in farm number and size	During the last ten years the number of holdings has remained at around 625 42% are less than 20 hectares in size and 44% are between 20-100 hectares in size. 48% are recorded as lowland livestock grazing.
Livestock numbers	Poultry (1,006,928 animals), a 7% increase since 2016. Sheep (22,573 breeding ewes), a 6% decline since 2016. Cattle (17,965 animals), with a 5% decline since 2016.
Employment	9.8% of the resident population employed in farming.
Land in agri-environment schemes	The area has decreased from 11,793 ha in 2017 (27% of the National Landscape) to 8,246 ha in 2021 (22.8% of the National Landscape)

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
Total annual values of agri-environment agreements	£2,113,434 (2021); up from £1,017,856 (2017)
Planning and Development	
Number and change in Neighbourhood Plans	8 made Neighbourhood Plans (all in East Devon)
Number of new dwellings	Approval given for one affordable housing scheme since 2017

Priorities for action

- Target 5 will be mainly met through the three components of ELM. The current uptake of agri-environment schemes (AES) is relatively low at 18% of the National Landscape (6,800 hectares)- see stat 12 in annex. Therefore, a priority is to increase the update of appropriate AES options, aiming for 75%+ of Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), to underpin Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery additional take-up. This will require significant promotion and close working with the land management community, via trusted local advisers.

- There is a round 2 Landscape Recovery scheme in the National Landscape - Luppitt- and the potential for another (Upper Axe- round 1) to be extended in the future. Adding value and supporting these schemes is a priority, along with rolling out successful Landscape Recovery type management to other areas in the Blackdown Hills.

- Target 8- (apportioned)- tree canopy current and woodland cover (combined) is currently 14.7% of the National Landscape i.e. 5379 hectares. Increasing combined cover by 3% of total land area (**1108.76** hectares) by 2050 will require significant new tree planting, restoration of currently undermanaged woodlands (to promote regeneration) and restoring/ re-creating trees outside woods habitats. Five- or ten-year milestone targets (towards the 2050 target) will be agreed via TOF apportionment workshops with the other protected landscapes. Significant ELM investment will need to be made and woodland advisory support provided for willing landowners (including relevant authorities), applying the 'Right Place Right Tree' principles. The Somerset and Devon Tree Strategies will also help guide and support.

- Step up the action required in order to work with land managers and partners to tackle Water Framework Directive (WFD) failures, linked to drinking water/ resource (including drought), surface quality and downstream coastal waters.

- Continue to promote, deliver and advocate for 'mainstreaming' natural based solutions as a mechanism to provide resilience to property and infrastructure,

both within the National Landscape, but also importantly downstream, where there are major critical infrastructure 'receptors' that are at risk from flooding and where building resilience is only possible through upstream interventions. Such nature based solution interventions rely on land managers to collaborate at scale and the Landscape Partnership play a key role here, to help support, incentivise and deliver.

- Continue to support the farming and land management community through agricultural transition, via farm facilitation support programmes and responding to the needs of an ever changing agricultural policy backdrop and the need to/ incentive to provide ecosystem services for society, including green finance. The National Landscape Partnership play a key convening, supporting and deliver role here.

Policies

Landscape, natural resources and natural capital

PL1 Approach the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape according to landscape-led principles, based on landscape character, underpinned by a sound understanding of the area's rich stock of natural and cultural capital assets and its value to society in terms of the flow of goods and services.

PL2 The special qualities, distinctive character and key features of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape will be conserved and enhanced, and opportunities will be sought to strengthen or restore landscape character where landscape features are in poor condition, missing or fragmented.

PL3 Promote a catchment-scale, multiple-benefit, collaborative-based approach to soil conservation and restoration, water quality improvements, reducing flood risk, and improving resilience, based on the Otter, Axe, Culm and Parrett/Tone catchments.

PL4 Approaches to flood risk management and erosion control which work with natural processes, conserve the natural environment and improve biodiversity will be advocated and supported.

Farming, Forestry and Land Management

PL5 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 National Landscape.

PL6 Promote, encourage and support widespread take-up of Environmental Land Management schemes that help conserve and enhance natural beauty and deliver a

range of environmental outcomes through sustainable farming and forestry practices.

PL7 Encourage the production and marketing of local food and other agricultural products where these are compatible with the National Landscape and purpose of designation

PL8 Encourage sensitive management of field boundaries and hedgerow trees, woodlands and orchards, protect ancient woodland and veteran trees, and restore the original broadleaved character of plantations on ancient woodland sites

PL9 Encourage woodland creation and expansion that considers both the ecological value and landscape character of a site and surroundings and opportunities for maximising ecosystem services including natural flood management

PL10 Monitor, manage and mitigate damaging diseases such as ash dieback that have potential to impact negatively on landscape and biodiversity

PL11 Wider community engagement with the farming and land management sector will be encouraged to enable a deeper understanding and appreciation of the important role played by land managers in maintaining the National Landscape's special qualities.

Historic environment and geology

PL12 Conserve and enhance the historic built environment and rural heritage assets, support training in traditional heritage skills, and promote the use of Historic Environment Record (HER), historic landscape characterisation and other tools to inform projects, policymaking and management activities.

PL13 Monitor the extent and condition of historic sites, features and landscapes across the Blackdown Hills and seek to address sites and features in poor and declining condition.

PL14 Promote awareness and understanding of the geology and geomorphology of the Blackdown Hills and secure effective management of important features and sites.

Planning, development and infrastructure

PL15 All relevant strategic, local and neighbourhood plan documents and planning decision-making will;

- seek to further the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape;
- utilise the Management Plan and consider other Blackdown Hills statements and guidance, and
- ensure that conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty is given great weight.

PL16 All necessary development affecting the Blackdown Hills National Landscape will conserve and enhance natural beauty and special qualities by:

- Respecting landscape character, settlement patterns and local character of the built environment,
- Being sensitively sited and of appropriate scale,
- Reinforcing local distinctiveness, and
- Seeking to protect and enhance natural features and biodiversity

PL17 Promote and protect tranquillity and dark skies by minimising intrusive noise and development and light pollution that may undermine the intrinsic character of the National Landscape.

PL18 The character of skylines and open views into, within and out of the National Landscape will be protected and enhanced.

PL19 The deeply rural character of much of the land adjoining the National Landscape boundary forms an essential setting for the Blackdown Hills and care will be taken to maintain its quality and character.

PL20 Community-led planning tools, such as neighbourhood plans, and initiatives such as Community Land Trusts will be supported as the principal means of identifying need and securing local community assets such as affordable housing. Any development should conserve and enhance natural beauty.

PL21 Road and transport schemes (including design, maintenance, signage, landscaping and safety measures) affecting the National Landscape will be undertaken in a manner that is sensitive and appropriate to landscape character and special qualities, seeking to further the purpose of designation. The landscape, biodiversity and cultural features of the area's road network such as hedge banks, flower-rich verges, and locally distinctive historic highway furniture, will be protected, conserved and enhanced.

Evidence

Natural Capital and ecosystem goods and services

Restoring a good quality and condition of the natural and cultural capital stock (including 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 (further details are included in the Special Qualities appendix [link]). For example, 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 tackling pollution and improving water quality for drinking water through initiatives such as South West Water and partners' Upstream Thinking. There are a considerable number of properties in the Blackdown Hills that are not connected to mains water, and therefore rely on water from springs, boreholes and wells. These can be particularly

sensitive to rainfall and drought, over abstraction by other users, water quality and contamination risks, which all require consideration.

The Blackdown Hills forms part of the headwaters of the rivers Culm, Yarty (running to the River Axe), Otter and Tone. People well outside the National Landscape are therefore affected by how land is managed for flood risk and water quality. The rivers that originate in the National Landscape flow downstream through larger towns and villages outside of the National Landscape which are more prone to flooding. As such, land management in the upper river valleys can play a key role in helping to reduce flood risk 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 can align, leading to overtopping and flooding of settlements, the M5 motorway and the main railway line. Connecting the Culm is a long term, multi-agency approach to tackling some of the issues in the river corridor and focusing on nature-based solutions to address them. Natural flood management works with natural processes to 'slow the flow' of flood waters. This helps to reduce the maximum water height of a flood (the 'flood peak') and/or delay the arrival of the flood peak downstream, increasing the time available to prepare for floods. Managing the natural resources of the Blackdown Hills (including mires that act as natural sponges and woodland planting in appropriate locations), sustainable drainage systems, and ecological river restoration projects are important components of natural flood management.

It is widely accepted that some development and land management practices in water catchments are increasing nutrient loadings, storm water runoff rates, siltation and pollution incidents that are impacting downstream. The knock-on consequences can have much wider implications, as exemplified by the requirement for new development not to cause increased nutrient pollution to certain protected sites (locally the river Axe SAC and Somerset levels and Moors Ramsar site), which has caused significant delays to development proposals in the last few years. Diffuse pollution and nutrient enrichment are factors affecting water quality in the National Landscape. Indeed, 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 such as the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme operate across all the catchments.

Parts of the eastern and western fringes of the National Landscape 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. Northern parts of the National Landscape are within a Drinking Water Safeguard Zone (Surface Water), where actions may be required to avoid deterioration in quality of drinking water supplies.

Landscape

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.

Our landscapes have evolved over time, and they will continue to evolve – change is a constant, but outcomes vary. The management of change is essential to ensure that we achieve sustainable outcomes – social, environmental and economic. Decision makers need to understand the baseline and the implications of their decisions for that baseline. The process of Landscape Character Assessment has an important role to play in managing and guiding change.

Landscape character describes the qualities and features that make a place distinctive. It can represent an area larger than the National Landscape or focus on a very specific location. The Blackdown Hills National Landscape displays a variety of landscape character within a relatively small, distinct area. These local variations in character within the National Landscape are articulated through the Devon-wide Landscape Character Assessment (LCA), which describes the variations in character between different areas and types of landscape in the county and covers the entire National Landscape . There are Devon Character Areas, named to an area sharing a unique and distinct identity recognisable on a county scale and Landscape Character Types (LCTs), each sharing similar characteristics. Hidden characteristics and past land uses are identified in county-based Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC).

These assessments are used in planning and land management to understand and describe the landscape and manage pressures for change and are central to a landscape-led approach in planning and design. Under this approach plans, policies and proposals are strongly informed by understanding the essential character of the site and its landscape context and creates development which is locally distinctive, responds to local character and fits well into its environment; it needs to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area and create sustainable and successful places for people.

Further information about the assessments that cover the National Landscape , descriptive information about the character areas and character types relevant to the Blackdown Hills and links to associated documents can be found in the annexe [link to be added].

One of the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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 National Landscape 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 Hembury Hillfort.

The setting of a National Landscape 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 National Landscape 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, associated with the visual experience and aesthetic appreciation. Views are particularly important to the Blackdown Hills. 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 National Landscape may be lost or degraded.

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 and 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.

Dark, expansive 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 National Landscape in England, with very low levels of night-time brightness; 95% of the area is in the two very darkest categories as evidenced by 2016 research by CPRE.

The Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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 National Landscape's unique historic character. Designated heritage assets include 770 Listed Buildings (13 Grade I, 47 Grade II* and 710 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, and there is also one Listed Building at risk. Understanding and addressing the reasons for these assets being at risk is key to meeting the relevant target in the Targets and Outcomes Framework.

The geology of the Blackdown Hills 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.

Below the surface are 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 Blackdown Hills 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. The National Landscape has two geological SSSIs covering 3.5ha – Furley Chalk Pit and Reed's Farm Pit, which are both in unfavourable condition.

The Blackdown Hills National Landscape is significant for its geology and geomorphology with some features unique to the area. The geology influences the landscape, soils and biodiversity and has played a significant role in the area's industry and heritage. It is vital that this geological resource is protected, conserved, enhanced, promoted and better understood. Exploration and research into the geology of the National Landscape should be continued to improve understanding of the landscape, and of the geological resource and its importance to inform the conservation and management of geological sites.

Farming and land use

Farmers and land managers are the main stewards of the landscape, and their actions which help maintain natural beauty and the special qualities of the National Landscape should be supported. The farmed area reflects centuries of land management practices and traditions which remain at the heart of our rural communities, producing high quality food, maintaining and shaping the landscape. Farming has a key role to play in protecting the environment by keeping air and rivers clean, improving soils and providing wildlife habitats.

The agricultural sector is in a period of major change especially funding and market uncertainties while arrangements for post Brexit environmental land management system is still developing. Broadly, existing government direct payments to farmers are being phased out and a new system will recognise and value broader societal benefits with payments being based on the provision of public goods.

Key challenges and changes in agriculture have implications for conserving and enhancing natural beauty. 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 more suburban appearance. On the other hand, new land managers can bring new opportunities, resources 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. New crops for energy generation (such as anaerobic digestion) are also a driver for change, while use for recreation or tourism activities is sought on other land.

Soils are one of the most valuable natural resources we have. Healthy soil supports a range of environmental, economic and societal benefits. These include food production, climate change mitigation and increased biodiversity. Poor soil management or inappropriate land use can cause soil degradation, which reduces the ability of soil to perform these vital functions. Soil health also underpins the unique character and distinct form of the area's landscape and biodiversity.

Regenerative agriculture is a suite of practices that put soil health front and centre, allowing farming to be more in tune with nature. As a result, it is seen as a more climate resilient approach to farming whilst also supporting nature recovery. Regenerative agriculture starts with building healthy soil by focusing on rebuilding organic matter and the natural living biodiversity in the soil. This improves the ground's ability to:

- draw down carbon from the air and store it underground,
- hold and clean water,
- help wildlife above and below the ground,
- produce nutrient-dense food year after year.

Regenerative agriculture also delivers on climate change via minimally disturbing soils, which improves soil carbon storage and sequestration, and aids nature recovery from the ground up.

Trees and woodland

There are many reasons why new tree planting is important, at a local and global level, not least in society's response to climate change, both in terms of increasing offsetting of carbon, and to mitigate the impact of climate change. For example, new planting in strategic locations can reduce the risks of flooding, while planting a diverse range of species can create resilient ecosystems that can cope with changing weather patterns such as prolonged periods of dry weather.

However, careful principles of woodland creation and design objectives are required to maximise the potential benefits and ensure that the woodlands have a strong chance of developing and thriving into the long term. Furthermore, any new planting also has the potential to bring a range of benefits locally and that opportunity should be understood. For example, consideration needs to be given to the suitability of the land to support different woodland types; the surrounding habitats that the new

planting could connect with; and the opportunities to work with the local landscape and cultural heritage to deliver multiple benefits, whether nature recovery or public access. As a principle, all new woodland creation and planting schemes should consider the scheme's impact on landscape, biodiversity and heritage from the outset, utilising landscape character assessment and Devon's Right Place Right Tree Guidance.

Both ancient woodlands and veteran trees represent a historic part of the landscape and past land use given they have been undisturbed by development and human activity. Furthermore, they are known to host a diverse array of plants, fungi, birds and insects due to their undisturbed soil and decaying wood, providing optimum growth conditions. They are also a significant carbon store as they have been sequestering atmospheric carbon for centuries. Their support for conservation and climate change mitigation, as well as their status as iconic monuments of our landscape, means ancient woods and veteran trees are widely valued as an irreplaceable resource. 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.

Tree diseases pose an increasing and significant pressure on the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills, for example ash dieback especially where ash is a dominant tree in and outside woods and/or hedgerow component.

Effective woodland management is essential for growing timber of high value, but it also supports delivery of ecosystem services. Thinning out trees increases their capacity to sequester carbon and enhances their habitat quality as more light is let through. This form of low-intensity management is particularly supportive of good-quality and young-medium age trees which are most efficient at sequestering carbon. Well-managed woodlands also lead to thriving habitats that support wider ecosystems.

On one hand, more productive forestry, including conifer crops where appropriate to the landscape, has a role to play in sustaining economically viable landholdings that can continue to provide a wide range of ecosystem services. Alternatively, community woodland management 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.

Hedges are an integral landscape feature to the Blackdown Hills, of historical importance, defining the farmed landscape, and supporting wildlife, while also helping to control soil erosion and reduce flooding. The well-established Blackdown Hills Hedge Association continues to promote the traditional hedge-laying management of hedgerows through training courses, competitions and other events.

A spotlight on planning and land use

Villages, hamlets, farmsteads, 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 National Landscape and around it, is of key importance in maintaining the landscape and scenic beauty of the area.

Planning decision-making is the responsibility of the local 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 to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty in all their actions affecting a National Landscape.

The NPPF provides specific planning guidance for plan-makers and decision-takers in relation to National Landscapes (albeit that references in it are to Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty/AONB). The latest version was published in December 2023, and confirms that National Landscapes [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 should be limited, while development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas. Also, 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.

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 are addressed with references to protecting tranquil areas and intrinsically dark landscapes - special qualities of the Blackdown Hills. 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 National Landscape, 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 National Landscape. The availability of a range of affordable housing (as defined in the NPPF), 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 183. 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. However, in the context of the relevant NPPF paragraphs, the potential for harm to the National Landscape 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, the quantum of development, duration, permanence or reversibility of effects. Harm to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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. There is further information on the consideration of ‘major development’ in the appendix[to be linked].

Role of the management plan
The management plan aims to promote consistency and co-operation between local planning authorities, both in setting policy and dealing with planning applications within the National Landscape, to conserve and enhance natural beauty across the area. National Landscape management plans can be a material consideration in planning decisions.

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 Blackdown Hills Design guide for houses and Good lighting guide. It is expected that further design/planning guidance will be prepared during the life of this plan.

Considering natural beauty in planning proposals

It is important that impacts on the Blackdown Hills National Landscape are properly recognised and accounted for in decision making. In an area like the Blackdown Hills where timelessness and escape from the modern world are 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/homeowners 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 National Landscape ’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 National Landscape 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 area 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.

The layout, form and density of all new developments need to reflect the historic rural grain of the National Landscape . 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 National Landscape , 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 the sense of place.

Development proposals in or affecting the Blackdown Hills should avoid sensitive locations that will impact on the special qualities of the National Landscape – 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.

A major challenge in more rural areas of the Blackdown Hills, 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, which are increasingly taller and larger, at odds with an inherently small-scale landscape, 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.

Roads and traffic

Inevitably most people in rural areas need a vehicle to access employment, services and other opportunities. Nevertheless, reduction of unnecessary car use will

contribute to reducing carbon emissions, quality of life and conservation of the area's natural beauty. In terms of supporting that shift, the availability of electric vehicle charging points is expanding but is still very limited.

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. The design and management of the rural road network should reinforce the local character and distinctiveness of the national Landscape. The distinctive character of minor roads contributes to the character of the wider landscape and they are an important means for people to experience the area. Insensitive, overengineered changes to these roads can have a detrimental impact. The increasing use of larger heavy goods vehicles is having damaging impacts.

Road improvement schemes within and outside the National Landscape should not increase noise pollution or emissions from traffic. Approaches such as speed management schemes may, for example, be more appropriate than road widening. Potential impacts within the National Landscape of proposed road improvement schemes beyond the boundary should be considered. Road management and improvement schemes should minimise landscape impact and avoid urbanisation of rural roads – for instance through sensitive and appropriate design and use of materials, and avoiding unnecessary signage clutter, road markings and coloured road surfaces. Wildflower-rich verges should be managed appropriately and traditional features such as fingerposts and milestones should be retained.

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 Blackdown Hills. 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 National Landscape and adversely 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 to further National Landscape purposes in carrying out their functions.

Meanwhile, national rail services can be accessed at Honiton and Axminster, as well as Taunton and Tiverton Parkway. There are proposals for a new station at Wellington too.

People

The Blackdown Hills is a living and working landscape, and we want it to stay that way. Shaped by the stewardship and innovation of generations, with collaboration and community spirit at heart, this is what needs to be harnessed to ensure resilience for the future. We also know that the special landscape and environment has much to offer residents and visitors alike. Positive action will help to ensure everyone can enjoy the benefits of living in and visiting the Blackdown Hills National Landscape and contribute to the area's conservation and enhancement.

Objectives

To nurture flourishing communities, where the population is both cohesive and diverse, where there is easy access to a range of services and facilities, and where the commitment of local people helps to conserve and enhance the environment, heritage and landscape of the Blackdown Hills.

To foster a thriving and diverse Blackdown Hills economy that provides jobs for local people, makes wise use of local resources and benefits local communities, while conserving and enhancing the outstanding landscape and distinctive character of the countryside and villages.

To ensure that opportunities to explore and enjoy the Blackdown Hills countryside and its special qualities are available to all and that everyone feels welcome.

To commit to eliminate discrimination, provide equal opportunities, and challenge prejudice and promote foster good relationships between diverse groups in and around the Blackdown Hills.

Guiding principles

Principle 1: Our landscape is a shared resource, providing opportunities for learning and contact with nature, opportunities to experience calmness and tranquillity, a place to inspire and comfort, and to provide the time and space to benefit health and wellbeing.

Principle 2: We must respond to the needs of people living and working within the Blackdown Hills, in nearby towns, and nationally.

Principle 3: Local communities play an integral role in the evolution of the Blackdown Hills – The landscape has been shaped by many generations of people working with the land and nature to develop industries, heritage and culture, and it will continue to change and develop into the future.

Principle 4: Everyone should feel supported and welcome to access, cherish and enjoy the natural environment and the heritage of the Blackdown Hills.

Principle 5: We should support a thriving rural economy that plays a positive role in conserving and enhancing natural beauty and sustains local communities and the farming economy alongside nature recovery.

Principle 6: This is a place where local communities are actively engaged in celebrating the area's cultural heritage, helping to keep skills and traditions alive and sensitively shaping its future.

Targets

These are the Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes Framework targets that we will contribute to:

Target 9
Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using metrics based on those in the Defra Access for All programme.

Current status:

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
Access and recreation	
% of area that is publicly accessible	2% of the area
Local economy and communities	
Population	14,130
% of population of working age (20-74 years old)	68% (down from 71% in 2011)
Employment status	56% employed (down 11% from 2011) 2% seeking work (down 1% from 2011) 42% not seeking works (up 12% from 2011)
Employment profile by industry	Transport & Communication the same 2011-2021 Decline in industry since 2011: -7% in land-based employment -1% in distribution, hotel & restaurants Increase in industry since 2011: +6% in manufacturing & construction +3% in professional & public sector
Employment profile by occupation	2011 to 2021: +5% in managerial & professional occupations -5% in skilled trade, administrative and caring occupations All other occupational sectors remain the same
General health of the resident population (%)	83% have good or very good health (no change since 2011) 4% have bad or very bad health (no change since 2011)

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
Disability status of resident population (%)	17% disabled under Equality Act 8% with long-term physical or mental health conditions 75% with no long-term physical or mental health conditions

Priorities for action

1. Target 9 Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all will be measured by Defra based on a number of indicators, using metrics from the FiPL programme and Access for All programme. This will only provide part of the picture because some of it relies on data from funded projects rather than a broad picture.
Priorities will be to;

- Capitalise on opportunities to secure physical works to improve accessibility, such as accessible trails, parking and facilities.
- Ensure that projects have opportunities for volunteering and engagement with schools built in.
- For the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership to take positive action to increase diversity within the management group and the voices reflected in decision making.

2. Collecting data so that we have a clear definition and better understanding of equity, diversity and inclusion issues relevant to the Blackdown Hills. Further work needs to be undertaken to deepen our knowledge of the population within the Hills and in the surrounding area and be able to respond accordingly. This includes building relationships among local community organisations and agencies to collaborate on inclusion.

Policies

A landscape for all

Pe1 Seek to inspire and foster connection with the Blackdown Hills through provision of a range of opportunities for active engagement with the countryside, wildlife and heritage of the Blackdown Hills that are available and accessible to all, working to ensure that everyone feels welcome to explore and enjoy the area.

Access and recreation

Pe2 Take a coordinated, strategic 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 National Landscape, improves access and connectivity with surrounding areas, avoids impact on sensitive sites and minimises conflict between different interests.

Pe3 Opportunities to use the natural environment resource of the Blackdown Hills to benefit the health and well-being of residents and visitors will be sought and promoted, particularly where this will enhance landscape, biodiversity, heritage and access.

Local economy and communities

Pe4 Local communities will be supported to identify, plan, and provide for their own needs, in undertaking activities to encourage sustainable lifestyles, reinforce and celebrate local cultural traditions, and engagement in cultural and natural heritage initiatives. Support initiatives that help to provide, retain or enhance community facilities and services where they are compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty

Pe5 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 Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Pe6 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 conserve or enhance the special qualities of the National Landscape and contribute to employment and prosperity.

Pe7 Tourism and recreation provision will be supported where it contributes to the local economy without harm or detriment to the Blackdown Hills landscape, historic environment, biodiversity or tranquillity, and respecting special qualities.

Pe8 Support efforts to secure and improve fast and reliable broadband and mobile phone coverage without adversely affecting special qualities

Transport

Pe9 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

Pe10 Promote the development of high quality, integrated and sustainable transport services and initiatives in and around the Blackdown Hills where they can be achieved without compromising the conservation of natural beauty and local character

Evidence

A landscape for all

The Landscapes (Glover) Review published in 2019 included proposals to increase the inclusivity and diversity of all the work of AONBs (and National Parks), from governance through to engagement and delivery. It noted that they want our nation's most cherished landscapes to fulfil their original mission for people, providing

unrivalled opportunities for enjoyment, spiritual refreshment and in turn supporting the nation's health and wellbeing. Proposals included a stronger mission to connect all people with our national landscapes; new long term programmes to increase the ethnic diversity of visitors; and landscapes that cater for and improve the nation's health and wellbeing.

We are deeply connected to the natural world, and it is now well understood that exposure to nature and natural environments, especially those of good quality, provides many benefits to physical and mental health to all - at every age, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. Meanwhile, a deeper understanding of biodiversity and the natural world affects our connection to it and how we interact with it. Understanding how the rural environment is managed increases environmental awareness and supports appreciation of countryside.

People's opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills relies on fair access – for example, to experience the tranquillity of woodlands, to be able to afford to live, farm or work land, or to use the extensive network of public rights of way. However, for a variety of reasons not everyone has equitable access to the natural environment. Barriers are varied and often multi-faceted and may include disabilities which prevent access or limit interpretation and enjoyment, lack of transport, supporting facilities and infrastructure, societal ones such as lack of information, experience or confidence to explore the countryside, and financial barriers.

Being in a position of privilege, because of age, gender, ability, or access, can make it hard to see how it for those who are not, partly because of the structures and systems that privilege gives us access to.

Improving equity, inclusivity and diversity of access for people to enjoy the natural and historic environment of the Blackdown Hills is a key driver for this plan and we need to find innovative local solutions and collaborative partnerships to facilitate and support more people, especially those who would benefit most, to explore and enjoy the area.

One of the key issues identified locally is a limited understanding of who lives in the Blackdown Hills and the surrounding towns. Without this understanding, it isn't possible to understand who the National Landscape is serving and who is under-served. Further work needs to be undertaken to deepen our knowledge of the population within the Hills and in the surrounding area, and be able to respond accordingly.

Below the headline figures for the area from the current Census, research relating to earlier socio-economic data offers a more nuanced population insight that forms a useful baseline and starts to highlight some key issues:

- Generally, there is high proportion of over 65s in the area. The parishes with the highest proportion of people over 65 were Chardstock, Combe St Nicholas, Membury, Dalwood, Kilmington, Combe Raleigh and Shute (35% to 40%). The parishes with the highest proportion of young people were

Monkton, Sheldon, Uffculme, Hemyock, Kentisbeare and Clayhidon (20% to 22%).

- Disability and health. Three Lower layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) show over 10% of the population having their day-to-day activities limited a lot by disability or ill health. The percentage of people reporting they have bad or very bad health ranges from 2.6% to 6.1% across the Blackdown Hills. Rates of provision of unpaid care range from 9% to 15%
- Ethnicity. The numbers of people within the National Landscape whose ethnicity is other than White British is low (0 to 2.4% in the Devon parishes). There are small populations in the market towns in Devon particularly of people who are Asian/Asian British and of mixed ethnic origin. In Somerset there are areas of Taunton and Wellington with higher-than-average numbers of White Gypsy/Irish Travellers; and Asian people. Areas of Taunton and Chard have higher than average numbers of people of 'white: other' residents.
- Deprivation. Official figures show there is limited deprivation within the Blackdown Hills, with 4 LSOAs in the 5th Decile and the remainder higher (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, measure of relative deprivation, 1 is most deprived, 10 is least deprived). There is, however, high deprivation for access to services and the living environment. Average figures can hide individual households living in poverty. In the surrounding towns, there are areas of deprivation within Chard, Wellington and Taunton, and to a lesser extend in Tiverton and Honiton. Fuel poverty and lack of access to services and poor broadband coverage are all identified as issues across the area.
- Income and Food insecurity. Wages are low in the area, and housing prices high. Mid Devon is in the top 10 nationally (7th) of local authorities with the highest share of children with very low food security (above 20%). The former Somerset West and Taunton also has high food insecurity levels.

Recreation and access

Opportunities and promotion aimed at both visitors and the local community should encourage people to experience the Blackdown Hills more fully in more sustainable and less potentially damaging or disruptive ways. 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 this is a working environment with most of the land in agriculture and in private ownership. However, 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 and outdoor activities. Walking, cycling and horse riding are popular, but people also come to the area for activities as diverse as sky-diving, gliding, motorsports and bushcraft. There is scope to engage with some of these sectors to reach a broader audience and to engender a greater awareness and appreciation of the significance of the area.

The public rights of way (PRoW) network in the National Landscape is extensive (436 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 National Landscape Partnership has a history of producing some circular walks and rides guides, including on-road cycle routes, however there is further scope for collaboration to develop safer routes for walkers, horse riders and cyclists, 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. This would have numerous benefits; it 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 National Landscape for visitors whether or not they are car-owners. One way of delivering this could be green infrastructure provision which 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, and so responsible access is priority as part of comprehensive site management. Other sites with public access include National Trust land such as Dumpdon Hill and at Wellington Monument and several Wildlife Trust reserves.

Devon County Council and Somerset Council are responsible for the PRoW network across the National Landscape, supported by actions by parish councils and volunteers. Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) for their networks set out objectives and priorities that aim to 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 also has committed and active Countryside/Local Access Forums that bring together representatives of many fields of interest including users such as horse riders, landowners, tourism, health, and education which are pertinent to improving access to the countryside.

Traffic and transport

Traffic speed and volume are a real concern for many communities. Routes across the Blackdown Hills are frequently used as short cuts by through traffic, affecting both tranquillity and the environment as well as raising highway safety concerns. Although necessary, lorries and other large vehicles travelling to and from farms and small businesses along narrow lanes cause noise, a risk to other users and damage to the roads, verges and characteristic hedgebanks. Highways 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, the 60mph national speed limits outside villages and public transport.

The availability of public transport is limited in the Blackdown Hills and has seen reductions in services over recent years, which can leave those without access to a car at a serious disadvantage. Where there are bus services they can be very infrequent and do not operate at weekends or evenings, but nevertheless, certain routes that cross the area and connect with surrounding towns do have great potential to offer opportunities for tourism and recreation. Rail services can be accessed at the nearby towns of Taunton, Tiverton, Honiton and Axminster.

Local economy and communities

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

The area is typically characterised by very high numbers of small and micro enterprises and of self-employment, with 95% of registered businesses having 0-9 employees. Many of those who have established small businesses were attracted to the area by the high quality of life provided by the Blackdown Hills environment. There is however still a strong agricultural sector; accounting for around 40% of businesses.

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 the many small businesses within the area.

A key aim is to nurture a diverse and resilient local economy that is not over reliant on one specific 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. It is important that rural areas such as the Blackdown Hills are not overlooked compared to businesses in local towns, and that support is accessible. As part of economic development support on offer from local authorities, Heart of the South West Growth Hub offers free business advice and support services for established businesses and those looking to start-up, linking to business support programmes and organisations.

Tourism in the Blackdown Hills is largely characterised by high-quality accommodation and quiet countryside pursuits. 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 – in other words, focusing on local products and services that do not compromise the landscape and environment. This can bring

benefits by encouraging visitors to explore the local 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. There is also scope to explore the opportunities for a more direct economic relationship between tourism spending and resources to manage the landscape that people come to enjoy.

The landscape has in the past been an inspiration to artists and writers, and the present day Blackdown Hills artists and makers keep this tradition alive, contributing to the local economy and communities, strengthening the cultural associations with the landscape and providing creative opportunities to engage with new and varied audiences.

Rapidly evolving communications technology can attract and enable new economic opportunities and ways of working that have a minimal environmental impact, enable rural businesses to link up for promotion and co-operation, offer new ways of accessing health, services and education, and provide a lifeline for those who are not able to access shops for whatever reason. Over the last 10 years the government has regularly stressed the importance of rolling out superfast and then full-fibre broadband, backing this with a number of dedicated funding schemes. However, throughout the Blackdown Hills plenty of residents and businesses still receive very slow speeds. Ensuring the wide availability of high-speed broadband and mobile connectivity is a central part of the government's National Infrastructure Strategy and levelling up agenda. The government has a target that gigabit broadband and 'standalone' 5G will be available nationwide by 2030. Therefore, it is important to ensure that businesses and communities across the Blackdown Hills can readily access fast and reliable digital connectivity. However, broadband and mobile infrastructure needs to be sensitively sited and located to avoid harm to the area's natural beauty.

Communities within the Blackdown Hills have a strong sense of identify and readily describe themselves as living in the Blackdown Hills rather than acknowledging administrative boundaries. Although sparsely populated with small settlements, most are active communities with a spirit of self-sufficiency and host many social and interest groups and events, centred around parish halls, churches, schools and pubs. Over the years many villages having produced parish plans and village design statements to inform planning and other decisions, and several parishes in the East Devon part of the Blackdown Hills now have adopted neighbourhood plans to influence decisions. Many communities have also produced village guides, walks leaflets and organised heritage and environmental projects.

There is a particularly strong collaborative spirit among like-minded people in the area. The Blackdown Hills Hedge Association, Blackdown Hills Artists and Makers, and Blackdown Hills Transition are well established networks covering a range of interests. Parish councils in the National Landscape form a collective voice through the Blackdown Hills Parish Network, which seeks to identify, address and promote

issues of common concern and seek cohesion among the local authorities and other bodies responsible for the area.

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. Meanwhile, for younger residents, secondary schools are located in surrounding towns, or larger villages in the case of Uffculme, around the periphery, resulting in protracted journeys to and from school, and then a need to travel or leave the area for further/higher education. Loss of young people from communities is a major issue across rural areas and, without employment opportunities and affordable housing, this trend will only continue.

Nature

The biodiversity of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is intrinsic to the area's character and aesthetic appeal and is diverse, as a result of the area's varied geology and landforms. Its mosaic of priority habitat includes springline mire, heathland, woodland and species-rich grassland, all connected via hedges and banks supports a wide variety of habitats and species.

It supports coherent and resilient ecological networks which exemplify the Lawton Making Space for Nature principles of 'better, bigger, 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 the delivery of other ecosystem services. Older and more diverse woodlands and hedgerow trees, for example, will benefit biodiversity and improve resilience.

Objectives

To ensure the effective conservation, enhancement, expansion and connectivity of habitats to form coherent and resilient ecological networks across the Blackdown Hills and beyond, facilitating the movement of species of conservation concern across the landscape.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles we adopt locally reflect the principles that National Landscapes across the country are adopting, while also recognising requirements specific to the Blackdown Hills.

1) People need nature, wherever they are and whatever their ability or knowledge.
2) Soil and water are the foundations of a healthy natural environment.
3) We must use our targets as driver to advocate for and seek sufficient resources.
4) When meeting our targets, we must not miss the point. (For example, it would be possible to deliver *30 by 30* with isolated sites that will not allow species to spread.)
5) The natural landscape of the Blackdown Hills should be seen as a functioning whole.
6) We will use the Lawton *Making Space for Nature* principles [3] of 'better, bigger more and joined' to create networks that are fit for purpose for nature to thrive in and adapt to climate change.
    a) What happens in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is contributing to something much bigger. The Blackdown Hills is not an island – it links to the surrounding countryside.
    b) More wildlife habitat in the Blackdown Hills will deliver many wider benefits.

7) Beyond Lawton, the mantra of 'right tree, right place' should be extended to 'right habitat/species, right place', allowing nature to flow. This should ensure that scarce and irreplaceable habitats are protected and that the development of one habitat does not damage the network of another.
8) Some of the habitats and species in the Blackdown Hills are more threatened than others. We will therefore prioritise habitats and species of conservation concern, guided by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan.
9) We will contribute to delivering the Devon Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Somerset Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
10) We will embrace and promote the latest conservation practice where appropriate.

[1] https://stateofnature.org.uk/
[2] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65807a5e23b70a000d234b5d/Delivering_30by30_on_land_in_England.pdf
[3] https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130402170324/http:/archive.defra.gov.uk/ environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf
[4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65807a5e23b70a000d234b5d/Delivering_30by30_on_land_in_England.pdf
[5] https://national-landscapes.org.uk/news/crunching-the-numbers-on-30by30
[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protected-landscapes-targets-and-outcomes-framework/protected-landscapes-targets-and-outcomes-framework
[7] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/55/enacted
[8] Target 1 (Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline).
Target 7 (Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050).
Target 8 (Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).
[9] https://national-landscapes.org.uk/news/new-targets-and-outcome-framework-for-nature-published
[10] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategies/local-nature-recovery-strategies

Targets

These are the Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes Framework targets that we will contribute to:

Target 1:

Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline). Farmers will also be supported to create or restore 30,000 miles of

hedgerows a year by 2037, eventually returning England's hedgerows to 10% above their 1984 peak of 360,000 miles.
- The apportioned target for Blackdown Hills National Landscape is to restore or create more than 2,919.10 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats by 2042, equivalent to 145.96 hectares per year between 2022 and 2042.
- During the lifetime of this Management Plan (2025-30), this equates to 730 hectares.
- 1.7% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This means that there is significant potential to deliver outside of these nature conservation designated sites, against target 1.
- Note that in the PLTOF datasets, the new categories of 'Grass moorland', 'Fragmented Heath' and 'Good quality semi-improved grassland' (GQSIG) are not actually considered to be priority habitats (by Defra/ Natural England). So, action on grass moorland, fragmented heath and GQSIG that is sufficient to deliver a wildlife-rich habitat outcome (ie to create or restore one of the habitats listed in TIN19, Table 2), and is outside a protected site (SSSI), would count towards Target 1 (not target 4).

Target 2
- Bring 80% of Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs) within Protected Landscapes into favourable condition by 2042.

Target 3
- 60% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes assessed as having 'actions on track' to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028.

Target 4
- Continuing favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (from a 2022 baseline) and increasing to include all newly restored or created habitat through agri-environment schemes by 2042.

The international obligation that the government has signed up to of 30% of land and sea managed for nature by 2030 is a current major policy driver. National Landscapes (15% of England) include 31% of England's SSSIs, 22% of England's broadleaved woodland and 18% of England's deep peat. Blackdown Hills National Landscape should make a **significant contribution** to 30 by 30[4],[5].

Current status

We know that delivering nature recovery in England with the current resources is failing[1].

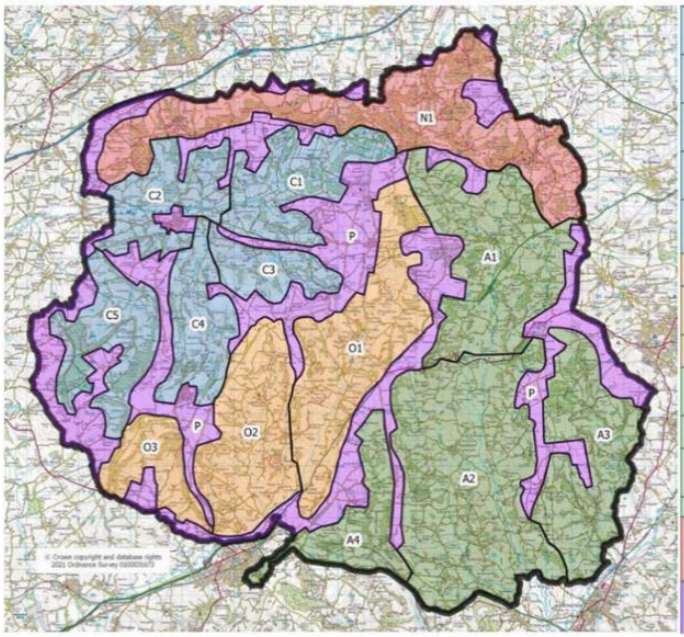
A focus on nature recovery

In 2021, the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership held three workshops with a mix of landowners, conservation organisations, neighbouring National Landscapes, community interest groups and other stakeholders. The aim was to engage partners and inspire and inform positive action to conserve existing wildlife and habitats and reinstate what's been lost.

As a result of these workshops, a collective view was formed about what the priority measures for nature recovery (and delivery of other public goods & services) should be:

- Measures to slow the flow of flood water off the land, through nature-based solutions including tree planting, natural regeneration, leaky dams, additional water storage, hedgerow restoration, and improvement of soil infiltration.
- Measures to conserve soil, enhance soil quality, and prevent the loss of sediment and phosphates to watercourses, by reducing soil compaction, preventing soil erosion, and increasing soil organic carbon.
- Conservation of existing springline mire, wet and dry heath, species-rich grassland, and the prevention of loss of these habitats to scrub invasion, drainage, cultivation, inorganic fertiliser or herbicide application.
- Retention of long-standing permanent pasture, because of its high soil carbon content, undisturbed soil profiles, and botanical, fungal and invertebrate communities.
- Restoration or creation of new wildlife habitats such as ponds and wetlands, mires, species-rich grassland, hedgerows and broadleaved woodland.
- Measures to improve public understanding of farming and the environment in the Blackdown Hills, and community involvement in countryside management.

Following these workshops, a Nature Recovery Delivery Plan was produced. The 14 'Nature Recovery Areas' (NRAs) identified in this report deliberately cover the entire National Landscape. This all-encompassing approach has been taken to create a holistic agenda for nature recovery, recognising the importance of measures which can be taken across the farmed and forested landscape.



C1	Upper Culm	From Culmhead west to Ringdown and south to Biscombe and Stapley, including valley spurs up to the source of the Culm
C2	Culmstock to Hemyock	The Culm valley from Rosemary Lane, through Hemyock and down to Culmstock village, including the Culm Davy and Ashculm spurs
C3	Bolham Water	The Bolham River valley from Southey & Gotleigh Moor SSSI west to Lemons Hill and the junction with the Madford River
C4	Madford River	The Madford River valley from Dunkeswell in the south to the confluence with the Culm in the north
C5	Sheldon & Black-borough	West-facing scarp from Sheldon and Blackborough in the south to Hackpen Hill in the north, including some forested plateau land
O1	Upper Otter	Upper Otter valley from the headwaters at Otterhead south to Upottery
O2	Luppitt	River Love valley from Hense Moor in the north, through Luppitt to Combe Raleigh in the south, including Dumpdon and Hartridge
O3	Awliscombe	River Wolf valley from Wolford and Hembury to Awliscombe village
A1	Upper Yarty	Yarty valley from the headwaters at Yarty Moor and Blackwater, south through Bishopswood and Buckland St Mary to Long Lye by the A303
A2	Lower Yarty	Valleys of Rivers Yarty and Corry from Yarcombe in the north to Dalwood in the south
A3	Wambrook & Membury	East side of Kit Brook valleys from Chard and Cotley in the north to Beckford Bridge and Chardstock in the south
A4	Umborne	Valley of River Umborne from the A30 to the A35
N1	North Scarp	Whole scarp face from Culmstock Beacon in the west to Castle Neroche, and Wych Lodge including the east-facing slopes around Dommett Wood
P1	Plateau lands & periphery	Generally agriculturally-improved land across the flat plateau lands and on parts of the periphery of the AONB

All 14 Nature Recovery Areas include land where priority actions can and should be pursued to enable the recovery of habitats, species and ecosystem functions across the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. 13 are based on river catchment and sub-catchment boundaries, excluding most of the flat plateau lands. These Nature Recovery Areas generally represent ancient countryside on the valley sides and floodplains, with thick hedges and relatively small field sizes.

The 14th Nature Recovery Area covers the remaining high plateau land, together with some of the lower peripheral land around the boundaries of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. These areas are largely agriculturally improved, with larger, late-enclosure field patterns.

The nature recovery actions identified for these Nature Recovery Areas vary in their emphasis, from a focus on conserving and expanding existing habitat for biodiversity, to a consideration of opportunities for regenerative farming practices for soil conservation and hydrological management.

See also:
Blackdown Hills State of Nature report
Blackdown Hills Nature Recovery Plan visualisations

Headlines from the State of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Report 2023

Number of SSSIs:
There are 16 designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, occupying 640 ha (1.73%) of its area.

Percentage of SSSIs in a favourable or unfavourable but recovering condition
94% of the Blackdown Hills' SSSIs are in a 'favourable' or 'unfavourable recovering' condition. This is an improvement from 2017. Then, only 90% of its SSSIs met the target. (However, this masks that only 19% are in 'favourable' condition.)

Area of priority habitats
There are 4,724.43 ha of priority habitats covering 12.8% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

Area of woodland
There are 5,380 ha of woodland covering 14.5% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Area of ancient woodland
There are 867 ha of ancient woodland covering 2.3% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Percentage of woodland in active management
45%

Ecological status of rivers and lakes
0% in good or high status

Locally protected sites
Non-statutory designated sites cover around 8.5% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

Otterhead Lakes Local Nature Reserve covers 0.1% of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

Priorities for action

- As guided by the Lawton hierarchy, **Target 4** is considered the top priority for action, followed by Target 2 & 3 and then Target 1. This is because it's vital to make the existing priority habitat 'better' before considering creating new habitat, although potentially both could be done concurrently, so long as resources are focussed on restoration and not creation.
  1. Target 1:
     - It is **vital** that this habitat creation is focussed on the highest priority areas, as per the Lawton hierarchy. See opportunity/ targeting map in 'evidence' section below.
     - The additional element of target 1 that relates to hedges- 'create or restore 30,000 miles of hedgerows **each** year by 2037.' The Blackdown Hills will have an important role to play here, having a well-connected and dense lattice of hedgerows across the landscape (one of its special qualities). Stat 11 (see annex) states the Blackdown Hills National Landscape as having a hedge length of 4,400 kilometres.

2. Target 2 and 3:
   - Significant work needed in order to move sites from unfavourable recovering to favourable. This will require more condition surveying by Natural England and more incentives through ELM and other schemes, backed up by trusted local advisers.
   - The current status of SSSI condition in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is that only 16.3% is in favourable condition. 94% is in a favourable or unfavourable recovering condition.
   - There is one Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, currently failing to meet its conservation targets (marsh fritillary butterfly).
  3. Work with in a reciprocal way/ incorporate LNRSs (Somerset and Devon). Utilise this Management Plan to ensure appropriate and consistent delivery of the statutory duties arising from the Environment Act (2021) including Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).

- 30x30- the Blackdown Hills National Landscape is one of six national pilots developed by the Protected Landscape Partnership, in conjunction with the National Landscapes Association[1]. The outputs from this work are summarised as:
  - The current 'potential' of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape to achieve 30x30 is 20% of the total area (i.e. restore **all** extant priority habitat)
  - Of this, the current 'actual' (meeting 30x30) is 10% of the total Blackdown Hills National Landscape area (3,700ha), with the majority of this in Somerset
  - Therefore, in order to reach 30x30, 10% more priority habitat needs to be re-created in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape i.e. c3,600ha

[1] Bruce Winney, National Landscapes Association, unpublished

4. Enhancing the data baseline, particularly for areas outside designated sites would be valuable. Refreshing / ground-truthing priority habitat maps in particular would help improve their accuracy and coverage
5. Integrated natural capital benefits from nature recovery include carbon budgets, catchment-scale improvements to fluvial management, well-being benefits from access and recreation, and cultural and heritage enhancements. The conservation of the characteristic complex 'patchwork' landscapes and point-features for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape within Nature Recovery Plans would be of value, particularly for spring-line mires
6. Following a process agreed nationally within the National Landscapes network, a suite of champion species of conservation concern has been identified and discussed with partners and national species champion organisations. We are also working collaboratively with other National Landscapes to take local, regional and national actions for species that are linked to the National Landscape's special qualities (such as springline mires) or that indicate the health of a well-connected landscape:
    - Greater and lesser horseshoe bat; Bechstein's bat
    - Hazel dormouse
    - White clawed crayfish
    - Brown hairstreak butterfly
    - Springline mire mosaic invertebrates including marsh fritillary, small pearl-bordered fritillary, double line moth, narrow bordered bee hawkmoth
    - Beaver
7. Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be identifying priority species where conservation measures are required over and above broad habitat management and restoration. It is anticipated that the champion species (listed above) will concur with the LNRSs, but this needs to be an iterative process and so a review maybe needed part way through the Management Plan cycle, to ensure alignment.

Policies

N1 Use the Lawton principles[3] of 'bigger, better, more and joined' to create networks that are fit for purpose for nature to thrive in and adapt to climate change.

N2 The mantra of 'right tree, right place' should be extended to 'right habitat/species, right place'. This should ensure that scarce and irreplaceable habitats are protected and that the development of one habitat does not damage the network of another.

N3 The long-term high-level Targets and Outcomes Framework[6] targets will need to be embedded in plans and strategies to ensure that they have the highest statutory weight accorded by the strengthened duty in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023[7].

N4 Priority species (including Section 41, Devon Special Species, Protected Species) will be conserved. Targeted action will be taken to support the recovery of champion/priority/indicator priority species.

N5 All public bodies within National Landscapes must have regard to Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). There should be alignment between the National Landscape and LNRS needs, and LNRS opportunities need to be reflected in partnership delivery on the ground.

N6 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.

N7 Increased recreational pressure will be resisted at locations where unacceptable damage or disturbance to vulnerable habitats or species is likely to arise.

Evidence

Some areas of the highest conservation value are nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), covering 639ha of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

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 or 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.

In addition to the 16 SSSIs in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, there is one Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of European importance for nature conservation.[2] This is located at Quants in the north of the Blackdown Hills, selected for its population of marsh fritillary butterflies, that occur on springline 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 Blackdown Hills National Landscape boundary to the south east is the River Axe SAC. The River Yarty, a major tributary of the Axe, rises and flows through the Blackdown Hills for most of its length. The Axe is designated as a

[2] http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-23

watercourse with a chalk influence with the 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.

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 give 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.

Wildlife habitats and species are part of a whole ecosystem, which includes our soils, water cycle, landform, rivers, and our human settlements. To pursue the health of any part of the nature of the Blackdown Hills, we need to understand how the whole ecosystem works, and where its functioning is being compromised. Outside of habitats like woodland, wetland and flower-rich grassland, good agricultural practices and a regenerative approach to soils, pasture and crops have huge implications for wildlife and healthy ecosystem function.

Smaller, more isolated patches of wildlife habitat are more vulnerable than larger, more connected networks. Populations of species like butterflies in isolated habitat patches cannot migrate to new patches. We will not retain our wildlife unless habitat becomes more extensive and connected. Connections could include more hedges, more rough vegetation around and between habitats, extended woodlands, and species-rich grassland or wetland to join up blocks of existing habitat.

Some of the habitats and species in the Blackdown Hills only occur in certain parts of the landscape – for example springline mire, around the springs between greensand and clay layers in the ground; and raft spiders, which only live on mires. Other habitats have a wider tolerance. To look after the diversity and specialness of Blackdown Hills' wild places, we need to ensure our most characteristic and unique features are retained. Also, some of our wildlife, like the dormouse, is relatively common on the Blackdown Hills but rare nationally, so we have a particular responsibility to sustain what we have.

While some aspects of modern farming and forestry, and the economic pressures which drive them, have had a negative impact on wildlife in the last fifty years, the very character of our habitats is a consequence of farming, forestry and nature working in harmony. Without farming, we would not have flower-rich pastures, meadows or heaths. We need to enable the positive effects of sustainable farming to continue to produce a wildlife-rich landscape, while diminishing the negative effects. Existing wildlife habitats, like wetlands, mires, hedges, copses and ponds, help us in many ways; they slow the flow and hold water back during floods, they retain moisture during droughts, they provide shelter for livestock, and they catch sediment before it reaches rivers. New wildlife habitat, if sited thoughtfully, can help us address the wider environmental pressures we face.

Sometimes, creating a new habitat can destroy a rarer existing habitat, for example by planting woodland on flower-rich pasture on a slope. Furthermore, new habitat will be most valuable for wildlife if it is sited close to existing good quality habitat of a similar kind. And unless the soil type and hydrology is right for a given habitat, it won't thrive. Where we can, we should let nature take the lead in determining what habitat develops where, rather than trying to be too directive. Often the ecologically richest places are in the 'edge zone' between habitats – we help nature to flourish where we allow it to relax and flow.

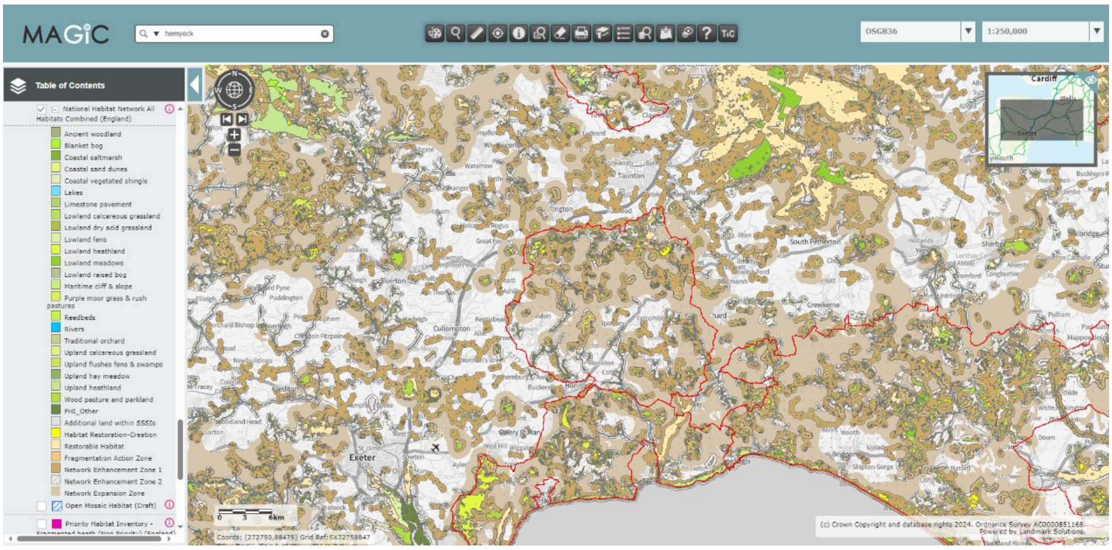
Wildlife in the Blackdown Hills, just like human society, is at risk from the effects of climate breakdown – flood, drought, high winds and high temperatures. Some habitats and species are more vulnerable than others, because of their location, exposure, or relationship to landscape features which are particularly impacted by severe weather events. We need to consider these differences in trying to build greater resilience into the landscape to enable nature to tolerate and adapt to a changing, unstable, extreme climate.

It is essential that we understand and nurture our soils, to allow wildlife to thrive and farming to continue to take a sustainable harvest from our land. And the interaction of water with soil is critical to future climate resilience, so we must manage the journey of water through our landscape more effectively – from infiltration of rain into soils, slowing flow down slopes, holding water in mires and wetlands, maintaining moisture in times of drought, and allowing rivers to function naturally in their floodplains.

Wherever they occur, wildlife habitats and species can and should benefit people. Nature is good for our mental and physical health and wellbeing, helps us work better together, provides enjoyment and tranquillity, provides settings and resources for business, and underpins everything that provides quality to our lives.

Wildlife habitats and the issues they face extend beyond the National Landscape boundary. The wildlife we protect and restore in the Blackdown Hills will contribute towards a national effort to restore a thriving, functioning natural environment across the UK. The UK has an international commitment to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030, and with organisations and land managers working together we can deliver a significant slice of that target.

Map showing National Habitat Network combined- note 'Network Enhancement Zone 1 and 2' that indicate the optimal locations for making the habitat network 'better, bigger', more and joined'.


MAGiC
hemyock
Table of Contents
National Habitat Network All Habitats Combined (England)
Ancient woodland
Blanket bog
Coastal saltmarsh
Coastal sand dunes
Coastal vegetated shingle
Lakes
Limestone pavement
Lowland calcareous grassland
Lowland dry acid grassland
Lowland fens
Lowland heathland
Lowland meadows
Lowland raised bog
Maritime cliff & slope
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Cullompton
Exeter
Cardiff

Climate

- Our planet's climate is changing and warming at an accelerating rate. 2019 saw the UK's hottest ever recorded temperature and the warmest winter temperature. The increased levels of greenhouse gases (GHG) from human activities mean we are trapping more heat and causing our planet to warm at an unprecedented rate. The science is clear; we are in a climate emergency and need to act now to reduce carbon emissions to limit global temperature rise to below 1.5°C.
- 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 downpours 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.

Objectives

To safeguard the carbon stores in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, reduce emissions from land and increase carbon sequestration, in ways which are compatible with nature.

Promote and deliver nature-based solutions to climate change.

To play an active role in addressing the climate emergency by delivering meaningful actions for climate change mitigation and adaptation, ensuring the actions are aligned with existing national, regional and local plans.

Guiding principles

Principle 1: The climate and nature crises are intrinsically linked.

Principle 2: We need to work urgently to mitigate climate change, including storing a much more carbon in our landscape, especially in soils and trees.

Principle 3: We need to ensure that climate change mitigation and the pathway to net zero is appropriate to the character of the Blackdown Hills, is consistent with the purposes of the National Landscape designation and protects the landscape's special qualities.

Principle 4: Fossil fuels must be phased out as an energy source, and energy consumption must be minimised wherever possible.

Principle 5: We need to take measures to help our communities adapt to climate change.

Principle 6: The climate change transition process must be democratic, fair and involve all communities, ensuring that no communities are unduly impacted.

Principle 7: We need to move beyond growth being the only measure of economic progress.

Targets

These are the Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes Framework targets that we will contribute to:

Target 6:
Reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in Protected Landscapes to net zero by 2050, relative to 1990 levels.

Target 7 *(to be apportioned)*:
Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050. (There is no deep peat in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape (as defined by Defra) we will therefore not contribute to the national target. However it is important to note that 'soils with peaty pockets (scattered pockets)' covers an area of 10,017 hectares (27%) of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape (as shown in Defra's statistics – Stat 6)[3].

Current status

Headlines from State of the National Landscape report 2023:	
Greenhouse gases	A 10% reduction in total greenhouse gas emissions across the local authority areas between 2017 and 2021.
Renewable energy	3 operating renewable energy generation sites.
Soil organic carbon stock	5% increase in carbon accumulating in the soils and vegetation between 2017 and 2021.

[3] This is a non-spatial dataset that provides statistics on the area, depth and percentage cover of peatland within National Parks and National Landscapes.

Priorities for action

The top priorities for action are:

1. Nature-based solutions (carbon sequestration, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity).
2. A resilient local economy (local food, circular economy, renewable energy)
3. Education and communication.
4. Buildings retrofit & energy efficiency.
5. Sustainable transport.

Renewable energy is cross-cutting.

Further detail about research and preparation that is already underway to inform these actions is included in the Evidence section below.

Policies

Cross cutting

C1 To reach net-zero, support communities and individuals to collectively make changes to their behaviour, such as energy use, eating habits, travel choices, waste disposal and more, in addition to using technological solutions

C2 Ensure that relevant knowledge and skills are shared so everyone can switch to a net-zero lifestyle

C3 Plan settlements so that services can be accessed using active, shared and public transport, ensuring that the evolution of landscapes due to climate change is carefully managed in order to protect and enhance them

Energy supply

C4 Use less energy to reduce the amount of new energy infrastructure required to meet net zero

C5 Transition to renewables- energy used from renewable energy generated within the area need to rise to near 100% by 2050

C6 Develop carbon capture and storage and increase flexibility of supply

Food, Land and Sea: Nature based solutions

C7 Maximise carbon storage in the environment

C8 Reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions through encouraging sustainable farming practices

C9 Support initiatives which protect the streams that meander down the valleys to feed the Yarty, Otter and Culm rivers (plus tributaries of the river Tone and Parrett)

C10 Develop demand for nutritious and sustainably produced food

Develop a resilient local economy & use of resources

C11 Avoid waste and create a circular economy through redesigning products to reduce their environmental impacts and improve their reusability and recyclability, buying second hand and recycling

C12 Reduce emissions from unavoidable biodegradable waste and wastewater treatment

C13 Use the purchasing power of Devon/ Somerset organisations to benefit the environment and local communities

C14 Support communities and businesses to transition to net-zero

Education and communication

C15 Engage in outreach & awareness raising activities which encourage & enable behavioural change in our communities

Built environment: Buildings retrofit and energy efficiency

C16 Improve energy efficiency for all buildings using low carbon technology in all refurbishment, regeneration and improvement schemes.

C17 Promote reduction of electricity consumption within the National Landscape

C18 Develop and encourage measures which reduce energy usage in existing buildings

C19 New Buildings need to be net zero as soon as possible

Sustainable transport

C20 Reduce the need to travel and support the development of sustainable transport and active travel options, while working to avoid leaving any community isolated

C21 Provide targeted advice, incentives and enforcement in respect of low carbon travel

C22 Encourage the development of a transport infrastructure that supports more low carbon travel options for people living in the National Landscape

Evidence

Climate change is in part driven by human land use, and in turn, a changing climate is exacerbating loss of biodiversity across the Blackdown Hills as elsewhere. However, actions that help reverse biodiversity loss will also contribute to increasing carbon sequestration and help make the landscape more resilient to climate instability. Nature-based solutions have an important role to play in tackling climate change, e.g. by reducing flood risk in the river catchments of the Blackdown Hills, while also improving conditions and habitats for wildlife. Meanwhile regenerative approaches to farmland management improve the resilience of soils and crops to climate extremes. Some habitats in the Blackdown Hills like mires, heaths and woodlands, already have high carbon stocks. Therefore carbon content should be borne in mind when prioritising habitat creation or restoration, and trade-off's between habitats need to take account of carbon implications. Restoring habitats like springline mire and wetland, and creating new woodlands in the right locations across the Blackdown Hills, will increase carbon sequestration as well as helping wildlife. And across the whole Blackdown farmed landscape, modest changes in land management practices could have a large cumulative effect on carbon storage.

There is a role for all those working in the Blackdown Hills to promote and implement lower carbon lifestyles, through organisations' own activities to minimise their carbon footprint, and by promoting local food, choosing venues accessible by public transport, online meetings etc. Moving away from the fossil fuel-based economy is essential for the whole of society, though it is harder in some respects to make that transition in a rural landscape like the Blackdown Hills. We need to do whatever we can to make it easier for businesses and residents here to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels, through renewables, reduced energy use, and more opportunities to share transport, for example. Our collective response to the climate crisis is unlikely to succeed if we expect to simply switch to renewable sources while maintaining current demand. We need to encourage a less profligate approach to energy use, seeking greater efficiency and reducing waste.

There is a massive societal shift required to respond to the climate crisis. That transition must be fair and equitable with the burden shared appropriately by all of us, according to our abilities and means. We must not allow the climate crisis to create new kinds of inequality. Given the need for all parts of our communities to be part of the change, and given that climate change – and the transition to avoid it – affects all of us, the decision-making to enable change must include everyone. We need to recognise as local communities and as a wider society, that our climate emergency is deepened by our continuing focus on economic growth as a measure of societal progress. A shift towards more progressive measures of a sustainable and circular economy, based less on resource depletion and more on regenerative principles, would make the fight against climate change more winnable.

Climate change adaptation

Warmer wetter winters; increased severity of storms; and hotter, drier summers are symptoms of a changing climate. These impacts are already being felt and will increasingly affect the special qualities and ecosystem services of our landscapes.

National Landscapes can play a vital role in adapting to climate change and building resilient landscapes for future generations. Climate adaptation reporting provides an opportunity to identify relevant climate risks, incorporate them into management processes, and encourage early engagement with stakeholders to address climate challenges.

Climate Change *Adaptation* Management Plans:
The government's 2023 Climate Adaptation Strategy under the Third National Adaptation Programme (NAP3) requires all National Parks Authorities (NPAs) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) Partnership and Conservation Boards will have Climate Change Adaptation Management plans produced, embedded in or linked with their management plans by 2028, and in all future plans. See annex xxx for more information[to be added].

National Landscapes Climate *Adaptation* Risk Assessment:
A risk assessment document template has been created by National Landscapes, to provide a common approach for National Landscapes to conduct climate risk assessments. While this approach doesn't directly produce a climate adaptation plan, it **will identify the climate risks in each landscape and provide the information needed to create such a plan by 2028.**

This risk assessment processes seeks to provide a general format to identify risks to key assets and features of National Landscapes, identify policy responses and relevant local stakeholders, and finally set out planned actions for the short, medium and long term. Whilst also providing the flexibility for each individual landscape to carry out the process according to their own need.

To produce a climate adaptation plan, National Landscapes can utilise the risk assessment process following these principles:

- Identifies the key assets and features of the landscape;
- Assesses the vulnerability of these assets and features to the impacts of Climate Change;
- Consider sectoral impacts for principal land uses such as farming and forestry, as well as the natural, built and historic environment;
- Assess the impacts based upon current climate change projections;
- Score these risks and opportunities based on their likelihood, impact and risk over the short, medium and long term;

Headlines/ priority actions (against the three topic headings below) include:

Risks and Mitigation for Natural Environment

- Risks: Reduced and changed biodiversity – loss of trees, loss of pollinators, loss of water, flooding, loss of soil

- Mitigation:
- Resilient habitats help to mitigate extremes (as a result of climate change) and well-connected habitat allow species to move to new climate spaces (e.g. different aspects, slopes, feeding and breeding opportunities, shade/ sun) and avoid local extinctions.
- Impacts of browsing regenerating woodlands and trees may need to involve control of browsing animals such as deer
- Mainstream soil health & regenerative farming & forestry techniques, in order to build resilience of soils, that will in turn help with infiltration of water and storage of carbon

Risks and Mitigation for Farming and forestry:

- Risks: Necessary changes to farming practices. Reduced and changed biodiversity – loss of trees, loss of pollinators, loss of water, flooding, loss of soil, new pests and diseases, reduction in crop yield.

- Mitigation:
- Halo thinning and management of browsing around veteran trees will help make them more resilient.

Risks and Mitigation for Built Environment, Community & Economy

- Risks: Increased flooding and pressure on infrastructure, especially medical. Pressure on sewerage and loss of drinking water
- Mitigation:
- Nature based solutions that build resilience for communities and critical infrastructure, as well as provide a range of co-benefits including for biodiversity, carbon and water quality- e.g. by reducing flooding in the built environment, providing ‘natural sponge’ type functions to store and slowly release water in times of drought and ‘natural filter’ to help improve water quality
- Tree and shrub canopies provide shade and significant cooling benefits for communities and much more tree planting to field boundaries as well as single trees in fields gives protection to livestock and wildlife alike.
- Identify possible high-level mitigation actions
- Identify existing policy responses and identify any gaps;
- Identify relevant local stakeholders that can support or lead the action;
- Assess the acceptability of these options, their interdependencies, and potential barriers to delivery;
- Set out planned actions for the short, medium and long term.

See appendix xxx for the risk assessment outputs[to be added].

This links to the Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Adaptation Plan Adaptation Strategy – Devon Climate Emergency. The risks identified in the BHNL climate change adaptation plan ‘nest’ within the Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Adaptation Plan. In other words, the regional information has been tailored and refined down for

the BHNL, to highlight where actions (to build resilience and allow communities to adapt) can be most effective.

Climate change mitigation

- Climate change mitigation involves actions to reduce or prevent greenhouse gas emissions from human activities.
- Mitigation efforts include transitioning to renewable energy sources, enhancing energy efficiency, adopting regenerative agricultural practices and protecting and restoring forests and critical ecosystems that act as carbon sinks.

What is climate change mitigation?

Since the industrial era began, human activities have led to the release of dangerous levels of greenhouse gases, causing global warming and climate change. However, despite unequivocal research about the impact of our activities on the planet's climate and growing awareness of the severe danger climate change poses to our societies, greenhouse gas emissions keep rising. If we can slow down the rise in greenhouse gases, we can slow down the pace of climate change and avoid its worst consequences.

Reducing greenhouse gases can be achieved by:

- Shifting away from fossil fuels: Fossil fuels are the biggest source of greenhouse gases, so transitioning to modern renewable energy sources like solar, wind and geothermal power, and advancing sustainable modes of transportation, is crucial.
- Improving energy efficiency: Using less energy overall – in buildings, industries, public and private spaces, energy generation and transmission, and transportation – helps reduce emissions. This can be achieved by using thermal comfort standards, better insulation and energy efficient appliances, and by improving building design, energy transmission systems and vehicles.
- Changing agricultural practices: Certain farming methods release high amounts of methane and nitrous oxide, which are potent greenhouse gases. Regenerative agricultural practices – including enhancing soil health, reducing livestock-related emissions, direct seeding techniques and using cover crops – support mitigation, improve resilience and decrease the cost burden on farmers.
- The sustainable management and conservation of forests: Forests act as carbon sinks, absorbing carbon dioxide and reducing the overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Measures to reduce deforestation and forest degradation are key for climate mitigation and generate multiple additional benefits such as biodiversity conservation and improved water cycles.
- Restoring and conserving critical ecosystems: In addition to forests, ecosystems such as wetlands, peatlands, and grasslands, as well as coastal

biomes such as mangrove forests, also contribute significantly to carbon sequestration, while supporting biodiversity and enhancing climate resilience.
- Creating a supportive environment: Investments, policies and regulations that encourage emission reductions, such as incentives, carbon pricing and limits on emissions from key sectors are crucial to driving climate change mitigation.

Carrying out a carbon assessment of emissions from an individual landscape will create a carbon footprint for the landscape. This alone will not produce a pathway to Net Zero, but it will allow landscapes to understand the key areas of emissions in their landscapes and begin targeting areas for emissions reduction, whilst quantifying the amount of carbon sequestration required to meet Net Zero.

To produce a comprehensive pathway to net zero, National Landscapes relevant authorities, partnerships and communities/ organisations should follow these steps:

- Using the greenhouse gas emission data from government (and other data sources) to identify key areas of emissions, such as industry, commercial, public sector, domestic, transport, waste management, agriculture, and LULUCF (Land Use, Land-Use Change, and Forestry).
- Assess which areas National Landscapes can impact directly.
- Prioritise areas for immediate impact and plan how to engage stakeholders to reduce emissions or promote land use changes for carbon sequestration.
- Coordinate with existing plans and integrate climate action plans with nature recovery strategies to create a cohesive approach to climate action.
- Address emissions that are outside the jurisdiction of National Landscapes by engaging with local authorities, businesses, or other relevant stakeholders.
- Evaluate the feasibility and interdependencies of different actions and identify potential barriers to implementation.
- Develop planned actions for the short, medium, and long term to meet Net Zero targets.

This work will be drafted and then consulted on later in 2025 and completed in 2026. Outputs will be fed back into the Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Adaptation Plan.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions data

See annex for detailed data [to be added]

Headlines

Greenhouse gas emissions estimate totals have **dropped** for the following sectors between 2005 and 2022 (kt CO2e):

- Industry: 5.2 to 3.0
- Commercial: 7.3 to 2.7
- Public sector: 0.9 to 0.3
- Domestic: 41 to 19.7
- Agriculture: 199.8 to 166.6
- Waste: 11.2 to 3.9
- Grand total: 276.4 down to 204.80

Greenhouse gas emissions estimate totals have **increased** for the following sectors between 2005 and 2022 (kt CO2e):

- Transport: 57.3 to 58.3
- LULUCF: -46.3 to -49.5

Population (k people): 12.7 to 14.20
Per Capita Emissions (tCO_2e)- dropped from 21.70 to 14.40
Emissions per km^2 (kt CO_2e) dropped from 0.7 to 0.6

Carbon stores and stocks

In 2022, the National Association of AONBs (now the National Landscapes Association) commissioned Cranfield University to undertake a Carbon Audit and Metric (land management) assessment.
Zawadzka, J.E., Keay, C., Hannam, J., Burgess, P.J, Corstanje, R. (2022). National Landscapes Carbon Audit & Metric (land management), Bedfordshire: Cranfield University.

The overarching goal of the project was to provide a baseline assessment of organic carbon storage capacity of and fluxes from habitats present within all 34 National Landscapes in England, with emphasis on priority habitats.

The carbon audit focussed on carbon stocks and stores in soils and biomass of priority and non-priority habitats within the National Landscapes was based on two main data sources – the NATMAP Carbon dataset representing soil carbon stocks at the 1:250,000 mapping scale as well as available literature, summarised within the NERR094 report Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat 2021 - NERR094 (naturalengland.org.uk) as well a few additional sources.

It found that soil carbon *stocks*, expressed as tonnes of carbon per hectare, were generally *higher* in priority habitats than non-priority habitats, however, the absolute amounts of carbon *stored* within habitats, expressed as tonnes per habitat area, was higher in non-priority habitats, which can be explained by their large extent.

This assessment highlighted that both priority and non-priority habitats within the National Landscapes are valuable carbon stores with a good potential for carbon sequestration. Therefore, the main recommendation is to **preserve current high levels of carbon storage where they exist as well as increase the level of soil and biomass carbon on non-peaty soils, with a caveat that any land cover conversions should be preceded with thorough impact assessments on biodiversity and other ecosystem services, livelihoods, and net greenhouse gases emissions**

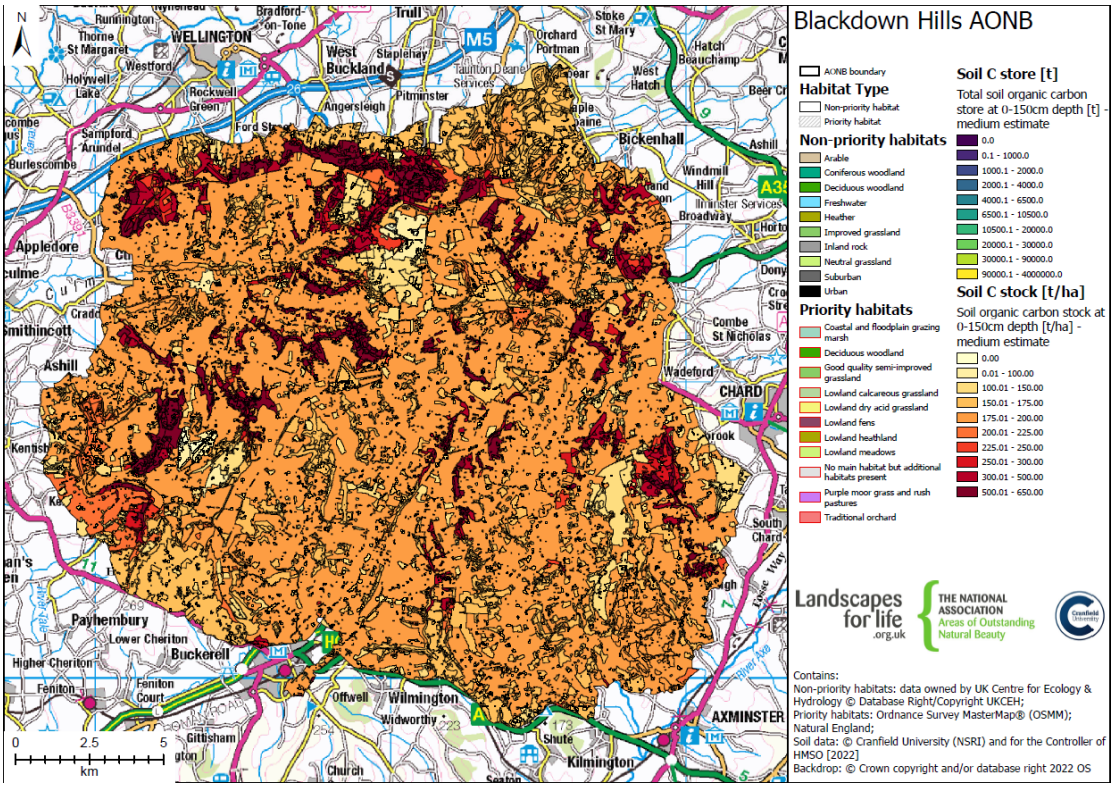
In this study there was had an opportunity to compare soil organic carbon contents represented by the NATMAP Carbon dataset to point observations sampled within three different National Landscapes: Blackdown Hills, Shropshire Hills and High Weald. The samples measured the organic carbon contents within portions of the

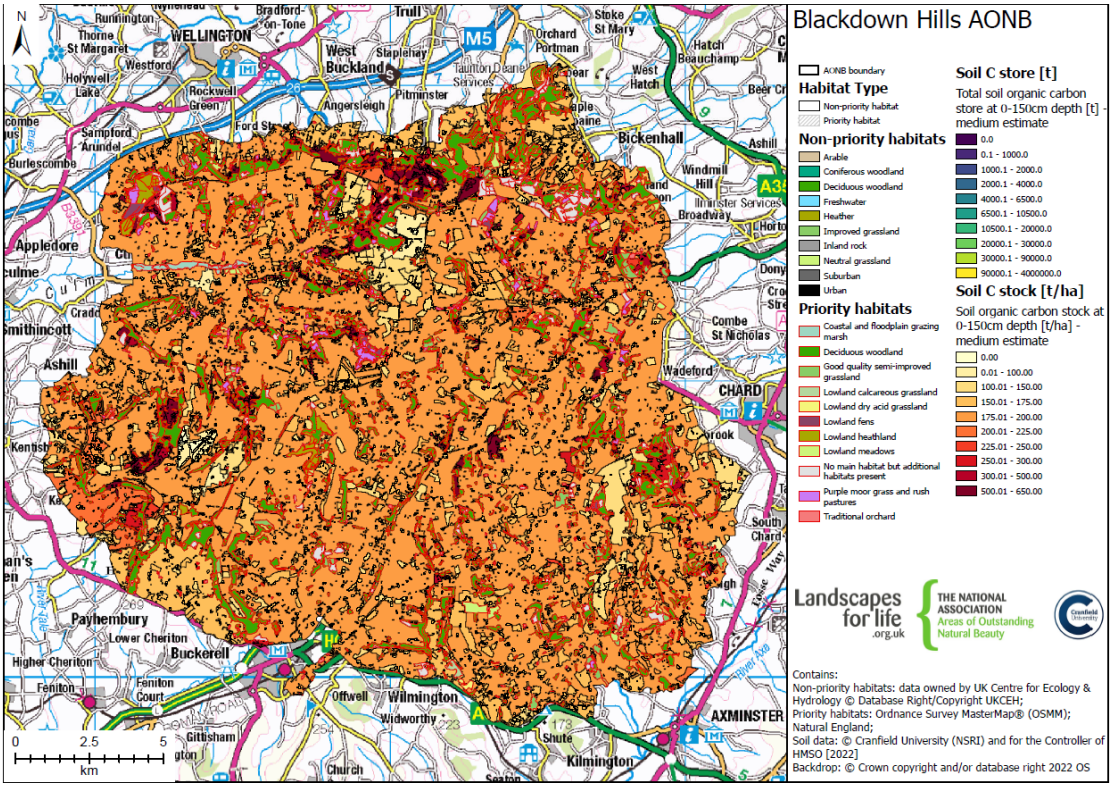
National Landscapes, and therefore it was possible to compare these values to organic carbon contents assigned to each NATMAP Carbon polygons rather than carbon stocks, which require information on soil bulk density and stoniness.

Outputs (for the Blackdown Hills):

1. Total soil carbon stored (0-150cm depth of soil, medium value) :
    - 7,740,695 tons/ carbon- based on NATMAP data
    - Of this, the amount stored in *non-priority* habitats is 6,257,900 tons/ carbon and the amount stored in *priority* habitats is 1,482,795 tons/ carbon
2. Based on literature, biomass carbon (stored above ground in vegetation) = 851,731 tons/ carbon (medium estimate for t/ C)
3. Based on literature, carbon flux = 571.10 **loss** of CO2e [CO2e gains (-)/losses (+) per habitat area]
4. Based on literature, an alternative carbon flux metric= 164.90 **loss** of carbon [C gains (-)/losses (+) per habitat area]

The maps below illustrate potential 'win-win' land management scenarios, where there are high densities of carbon stocks (dark brown colour on map 1) and also priority habitats (green/ pink colours on top of the dark brown colours).





Soil Organic Carbon in the Blackdown Hills AONB: Towards a Framework for Guiding Land Management Decision Making Report of a study undertaken in winter 2022-2023 in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty[4]

This was a follow-on piece of work, building on the Cranfield carbon audit & metric study.

Headlines:

- Different soil types vary greatly in their carbon stores, and their potential to hold more carbon.
- Soil carbon storage can be increased both through productive, in-field practices, and habitat creation or management.
- Managing productive soils to store more carbon also improves soil health.
- Managing wildlife habitats and creating new habitat also increases soil carbon storage.
- Each soil type can be managed to maximise its ability to store carbon, and the opportunities for doing so vary between soil types.
- **Vegetation with high nature conservation value generally has the highest level of soil organic carbon (SOC), with wet woodland, mire, and wet heath having the highest of all.**

[4] Fred Constantine Smith with support from Gavin Saunders, Richard Smith and Tim Harrod, May 2023

- **The peaty and organic 'Blackdown' and 'Hense' soil types store the most carbon per hectare.**
- **Medium brown soils with a large area in the landscape, such as the 'Whimple' and 'Batcombe' soil types, can play a significant role in carbon sequestration via good soil management practices.**
- **A focus on soil carbon can offer a triple-win, for carbon sequestration, soil health, and biodiversity**

- **Humic soils (e.g. Hense) – found on the** springline
  These naturally wet soils have high carbon levels when carrying semi-natural vegetation. Where they have been drained and agriculturally improved, rewetting them and restoring semi-natural vegetation could yield significant carbon gains

- **Brown Earths (e.g. the** Batcombe**) – found on the plateau**
  These have a lower capacity for holding carbon (compared with wetter soils), but their extent means that the raising their soil carbon by just a small amount would have a significant impact on total carbon stocks in the landscape

Delivery and monitoring

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 for, 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 Countryside and Rights of Way Act Section 85 duty to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. 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 role of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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.

There are two main strands to this monitoring:

National Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework
This defines the contribution that Protected Landscapes (as areas) should make to national targets and certain Environmental Improvement Plan outcomes. The Framework contains 10 targets. Each target is accompanied by an indicator which will measure progress towards it and its related outcome. Natural England will evaluate progress towards the targets and outcomes in the Framework.

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

The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership will additionally look to develop a programme to identify appropriate, effective and proportionate mechanisms to measure or judge progress towards local priorities that may not be covered elsewhere or require local knowledge and research (could be related to diversity and

inclusion and engagement, or specific wildlife species, or hedgerows, for example), and will seek to work with wider partners to secure a long-term programme of monitoring along with appropriate resources.

Strategic Delivery Plan

This will be informed by consultation and will be added at a later stage. Focusing on outcomes and the strategic level, it will outline strategic high level actions and associated delivery mechanisms for the next 5 years, needed to deliver the ambitions of this plan.

Appendices of further and detailed information and data

(under development)

Appendix A: Special qualities

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT THE BLACKDOWN HILLS: OUR SPECIAL QUALITIES

'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:

Landscape quality – a measure of the physical state or condition of the landscape

Scenic quality – the extent to which the landscape appeals to the senses (primarily, but not only, the visual senses)

Relative wildness – the degree to which relatively wild character can be perceived in the landscape makes a particular contribution to the sense of place

Relative tranquillity – the degree to which relative tranquillity can be perceived in the landscape

Natural heritage features – the influence of natural heritage on the perception of the natural beauty of the area. (Natural heritage includes flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features)

Cultural heritage – the influence of cultural heritage on the perception of the natural beauty of the area and the degree to which associations with particular people, artists, writers or events in history contribute to such perception

Special Qualities

The designated 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 area. 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 National Landscape.

Special Landscape Character

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

It is an area notable for its **unspoilt rural character**, which remains relatively undisturbed by modern development and so ancient landscape features, special habitats, historical and archaeological remains have survived intact. In the winding lanes, the hidden valleys and traditional villages there is a sense of stepping back in time; of release from the stresses of everyday living; of the links between nature and humanity. The countryside remains largely unchanged and there is an identifiable and characteristic vernacular, pastoral landscape.

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

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. There are long views over field-patterned landscapes. Ancient, species-rich hedgerows delineate the fields and define the character of the landscape, enclosing narrow twisting lanes. The open plateau is dissected by steep valleys, the slopes supporting a patchwork of ancient woodland. The history of medieval and parliamentary enclosures has resulted in a contrasting landscape of small fields in the valleys and larger fields with straight hedges on the plateau. There are patches of heath and common, bog and mire and there are fine avenues of beech along the ridge. At a more detailed level there is a variety of visual and ecological interest; heathland birdlife, ground flora of woodland and mire, and colourful wildflowers on hedge banks.

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 such buildings and where the vernacular character is particularly well preserved. Predominant materials are chert and cob with thatch, over time often replaced by corrugated iron, or clay-tiled roofs. The appeal lies in the way in which the buildings fit so naturally into their surroundings.

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 Blackdown Hills. Large numbers of Mesolithic flint and chert tools have been found, as well as 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 spring-line 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 area. 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 wood-banks still survive.

Modern

Parliamentary Inclosure of heath and commons on the plateau tops in the 19th century has created distinctive landscapes of large regular fields with straight roads and beech hedges. The area contains some of the latest enclosures in Devon: Stockland Hill was not enclosed from heath until 1864, and Beacon Hill, Upottery, not until 1874.

The Wellington Monument, a prominent feature on the northern skyline, commemorates the battle of Waterloo. The National Landscape also contains important evidence from the second world war – the three airfields at Culmhead (Trickey Warren), Dunkeswell and Upottery (Smeatharpe). As well as the runways, a wide range of structures still survive at all three sites including pillboxes, aircraft dispersal pen and technical and domestic buildings. Some have been designated as Scheduled Monuments or Listed Buildings. There has been a substantial loss of

hedgerows and orchards to meet the needs of modern agricultural since the second world war; simplifying parts of the landscape and masking their early origins.

The 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 during the late 17th and the 18th century, providing informative descriptions and historical 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, colours and light of the Blackdown Hills continue to influence contemporary artists and makers.

The Blackdown Hills 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 National Landscape'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 area, 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.

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.

The National Landscape 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 in the north.

This immense variety, with patches of valuable habitat scattered throughout the landscape, is notable; these include flower-rich meadows, ancient hedgerows, spring-line 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.

Of particular note are the valuable plant communities that arise along the spring-lines, 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.

Summary of the special qualities and distinctive characteristics of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape

From the diverse characteristics, features and qualities outlined on the previous pages, the following table summarises the special qualities that in combination create the particular sense and spirit of place that gives the Blackdown Hills its distinctive identity, in relation to natural beauty factors. All of these special qualities require protection, conservation and enhancement if the area is to retain its character and status among England’s finest landscapes.

Reference can also be made to the Blackdown HIlls Landscape Character Assessment [link] for further understanding of the contrast and diversity of the designated landscape and its management requirements.

Natural Beauty component: Landscape quality
A managed landscape sculpted and maintained by the stewardship of generations of those who work the land Undeveloped skyline of the northern scarp slope is a prominent feature in views from the Vale of Taunton and beyond Rich mosaic of diverse and interconnected semi-natural habitats; a patchwork of woodland, heathland, meadow and mire linked by hedgerows Clear, unpolluted streams that meander down the valleys to feed the Yarty, Otter, Culm rivers Ancient and veteran trees in hedgerows, fields and woodland A settled landscape with a strong sense of time-depth containing farmsteads and small scattered villages well related to the landscape
Natural Beauty component: Scenic quality
The elevation and long, panoramic views out from the Blackdown Hills create a sense of detachment from surrounding towns and transport corridors Unspoilt, panoramic views across flat-topped plateau and straight undisturbed ridge tops and over hidden valleys A well-wooded pastoral landscape with a strong pattern of hedgebanks and hedgerow trees Pattern of regular, larger-scale enclosure fields on the plateau contrasts with the smaller, curving medieval fields on the valley slopes Majestic avenues of beech trees along northern ridges 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 Wellington Monument is a key landscape feature identifying the Blackdown Hills over a very wide area in all directions
Natural Beauty component: Relative wildness
A sense of remoteness enhanced by the exposure of the plateau and more intimate extensive woodland of the upper slopes and hidden valleys Wide open spaces provide exposure to the elements; big sky, windswept places, contrasts of sunlight and shadow
Natural Beauty component: Relative tranquillity
Areas of high tranquillity spared many of the intrusions of modern life, and places that offer a sense of detachment from surrounding towns and infrastructure Places to enjoy natural sounds; the melody of the song thrush and skylark, the call of buzzards Dark night-time star-filled skies contrasting with the light pollution of the surrounding towns
Natural Beauty component: Natural heritage features
One of the finest, most extensive plateaus in Britain; a distinctive landform that contrasts with the surrounding lowlands to the east, north and west The underlying Upper Greensand geology is unique in Britain The presence of straight, uninterrupted ridges are evident as a visual backdrop over a wide area Distinctive spring-line mires located at uniform height around the upper slopes of the valleys

The varied landscape supports a rich assemblage of wildlife including many species of bats, butterflies and moths and meadow flowers and healthy populations of ferns, lichens, mosses and fungi Ancient, species-rich hedges with many hedgerow trees and flower-rich banks; colourful displays of primrose and bluebells in spring A network of ancient semi-natural woodland linked by hedgerows support a thriving dormouse population Streams and rivers are home to otters, beavers, lamprey and the vulnerable white-clawed crayfish
Natural Beauty component: Cultural heritage
The number and extent of well-preserved 17th Century and earlier buildings, and of complete traditional farmsteads in the local vernacular style – chert, cob and thatch – are an important element of the landscape Ancient hillforts are prominent features on the ends of the plateau ridges Mining remains from the once internationally significant whetstone industry and extensive evidence of iron-working Three World War Two airfields and remains of their associated buildings are found on the high, flat land of the plateau A community with a strong sense of place closely linked to the land and its management, with a particularly strong tradition of hedge laying A landscape that has inspired artists from the early 20th century Camden Town Group to the Blackdown Hills Artists and Makers of today

Natural Capital Stock and Ecosystem Services in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape

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

Many of the elements which make up the natural beauty of the National Landscape 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. 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 Blackdown Hills 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 types of services:

Provisioning services: the products we gain and use from the National Landscape, such as food, energy and water
Regulating services: the natural functioning of the National Landscape purifies water, pollinates crops and maintains air quality
Cultural services: non-material benefits derived from interaction with the National Landscape, 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 are developing for some of these goods, but while they do not exist public investment should be made to adequately reward the conservation of natural assets.

Public goods from the National Landscape could 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 ecosystem goods and services provided by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape include:

- Farmers and foresters produce food, fibre, timber and wood fuel
- The 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, addressing flooding downstream, and support nutrient cycling
- Species-rich grasslands are biodiverse and support pollinating insects
- Historic features link, and add value, to the natural heritage stock and have cultural heritage value in their own right
- Recreational and access opportunities support the health and wellbeing of both residents and visitors
- The characteristic and richly patterned landscape and ancient features provide a strong sense of place and history
- The distinctive landform and coherent landscape are inspirational at a personal, cultural and spiritual level
- The area gives access to clean air, tranquillity and freedom from noise and light pollution

Appendix B: Planning

General Principles for Development Proposals

All applicants of development proposals in the Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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 National Landscape and what actions you are taking both to conserve and to enhance the landscape, scenic beauty and other factors of natural beauty;

Think Enhancement - positively set out to 'enhance' the natural beauty of the National Landscape 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 National Landscape. 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 National Landscape;

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 National Landscape 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 National Landscape 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 National Landscape. 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).

Major Development

Note that all paragraph and footnote references relate to the December 2023 version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
Footnote 64 of the NPPF clarifies that:
'For the purposes of paragraph 183 [relating to protected landscapes], 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 National Landscape. 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 National Landscape 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 area. As outlined elsewhere, 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 National Landscape those aspects of natural beauty which make the area distinctive and which are particularly valuable – the 'special qualities' - are described in detail elsewhere in the appendices.

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 National Landscape's 'special qualities'. As well as potential impacts within the Blackdown Hills, consideration should also be given to impacts on these criteria within the setting of the National Landscape, particularly in the context of visual impact (i.e. views into and out) and impacts on tranquillity.

As outlined in paragraph 183 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 National Landscape Partnership would expect any such development proposal to 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 Blackdown Hills. 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 on 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 National Landscape 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 National Landscape, and clearly identify and justify 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. An important principle to address is even if there are deemed to be exceptional circumstances generally, such as the need for housing in a particular local authority area, this does not necessarily equate to exceptional circumstances for a particular development at a specific location because there may be alternative sites that could result in less harm to the National Landscape. 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 National Landscape 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 National Landscape 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 National Landscape taken 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 National Landscape,
- be compatible with the objectives and policies of the Management Plan,
- be compatible with special qualities and local landscape character, and
- be capable of realisation through robust planning conditions or obligation.