

Report for: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 8th July 2025

Subject: Adoption of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan

Cabinet Member: Councillor Steve Keable, Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration

Responsible Officer: Richard Marsh, Director of Place and Economy

Exempt: None

Wards Affected: Upper Culm, Cullompton Outer (part)

Enclosures: Appendix 1 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 (adoption draft)

Appendix 2 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 Part B: Appendices (adoption draft)

Appendix 3 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 Part C: Delivery Plan (adoption draft)

Appendix 4 - Strategic Environmental Assessment screening report

Appendix 5 - Habitats Regulations Assessment screening report

Appendix 6 – Equalities Impact Screening Assessment

Appendix 7 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030 Engagement and Consultation Report

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendation(s)

Mid Devon District Council together with other local authorities has previously authorised the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership to undertake a review of the current Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan on their behalf, as required under Section IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Public consultation on the reviewed management plan took place in January to March 2025, and now adoption of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan by Mid Devon District Council and the other relevant local authorities is required before the management plan is published and is submitted to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

Recommendation(s):

That:

- 1. The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan (Appendices 1, 2 and 3) is adopted.**
- 2. That delegated authority be given to the Director of Place and Economy in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration to approve any editorial changes made to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan.**

Section 2 – Report

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1** Under Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, Mid Devon District Council, together with other local authorities, namely Devon County Council, East Devon District Council and Somerset Council, is required to produce a Management Plan for the designated Blackdown Hills AONB (now known as National Landscape) and review it at intervals of not more than five years (exceptionally, Defra authorised a 12-month-plus extension to the review of the current Plan). Along with the other relevant local authorities, Mid Devon District Council has authorised the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership to perform this duty on its behalf; the review and preparation of the new Management Plan is co-ordinated by the National Landscape team, who are hosted by Devon County Council, and has been previously reported to the Planning Policy Advisory Group on 22nd July 2024 and the Cabinet on 15th October 2024 (Minute 70).
- 1.2** The CRoW Act (and as amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023) and guidance from Natural England provides advice on the scale, nature and content of Management Plans. A Management Plan should serve

to highlight a shared long term vision for the National Landscape and contain ambitions, targets and actions that seek to further the statutory purpose, i.e. to conserve and enhance the designated AONB. The delivery of the Plan will be subject to funding availability from Defra, the local authorities, and other parties.

- 1.3 The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership has taken the opportunity to undertake a more thorough review than in the previous review cycle to ensure that the Management Plan remains fit for purpose and forward looking. The Management Plan is expected to contribute to Government's Environmental Improvement Plan (including protected landscapes targets) and key drivers include addressing the significant issues of the climate emergency and nature recovery, taking account of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Plans and local authority climate action plans.
- 1.4 The review process has been a participatory one, with members of the Partnership Management Group, local authority officers and other stakeholders involved in agreeing the approach and identifying key matters for consideration, in advance of a wider public consultation on the draft management plan (held January to March 2025).
- 1.5 The Management Plan was also screened under both Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment regulations to determine whether policies in the Management Plan could have significant environmental effects, concluding that further detailed assessment was not required in either case.

2.0 About the Plan

Purpose

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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*.
- 2.3 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.

2.4 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 coordinate and prioritise resources.

Content

2.5 The Management Plan includes:

- A longer-term Vision - in summary; thanks to collaboration and positive change, by 2050 the Blackdown Hills will be a vibrant, thriving landscape where diverse communities flourish with a strong sense of place and wellbeing, deeply connected to the land and local culture. Sustainable living and working practices will underpin a prosperous local economy, while the distinctive patchwork of villages, fields, woodlands, and hedges will be maintained and enhanced. Farming and land use will be in balance with nature, building resilience and ensuring the sustainable provision of essential ecosystem services. Wildlife will thrive in a well-connected landscape, and the area's heritage will be celebrated and preserved. The natural beauty and wellbeing benefits of the area will be accessible to all.
- Four main themes;
 - Place:** Focuses on sustainable land use, farming, forestry, planning, and infrastructure to conserve the area's natural capital, landscape character, and historic environment.
 - People:** Aims to nurture thriving communities, support the local economy, improve accessibility, and promote inclusivity and engagement with the landscape.
 - Nature:** Prioritises habitat restoration, connectivity, and species conservation to create resilient ecological networks and contribute to national biodiversity targets.
 - Climate:** Addresses climate change mitigation and adaptation through nature-based solutions, carbon sequestration, and sustainable practices.
- Objectives, guiding principles, policies, targets and priority actions for each theme, and;
- A five year strategic delivery plan

Land use planning

- 2.6 The NPPF makes clear that National Landscapes (and National Parks) have the highest status of protection in the planning process and great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing their landscape and scenic beauty. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 has amended the CRow Act in respect of protected landscapes to require relevant authorities in England to 'seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty' of the National Landscape. The Management Plan is relevant to the land use planning process, in relation to the preparation of local plans, neighbourhood plans and minerals and waste plans and the implementation of their policies, and in the determination of planning applications.

3.0 Public Consultation

- 3.1 A draft Management Plan was subject to an 8 week public consultation from 21 January to 19 March 2025. The consultation was promoted on the Blackdown Hills website and e-newsletter, and directly to partnership organisations, parish councils, surrounding town councils and all councillors (district and county) covering the Blackdown Hills geographic area. 25 representations were received, with six of those from parish councils and six from local residents. Respondents were generally supportive of the Plan's vision, and made helpful comments or sought the inclusion of additional information rather than raise significant concerns. The Engagement and Consultation report (see **Appendix 7** to this report) describes how the draft plan has subsequently been amended in response.
- 3.2 Following public consultation the draft Management Plan has been revised, and the final version of the Management Plan is required to undergo formal consultation with the statutory consultee, Natural England, before local authority adoption. The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership has received confirmation from Natural England that the management plan meets the statutory requirement and has broadly followed the guidance for preparing a strategy for the management of the National Landscape and it represents good practice. Natural England has commented on the level of detail in the plan and has recommended that some sections could be shortened or moved to the appendix / annex. The Partnership has taken these comments into consideration and has agreed that a supporting summary document can be prepared to explain the content and purpose of the management plan.

4.0 Groups Consulted

- 4.1 The Management Plan was reported to the Planning, Environment and Sustainability PDG at its meeting on 10th June 2025, which has endorsed the recommendations in this report.

5.0 Next steps

- 5.1 The Management Plan has been adopted by East Devon District Council and it is expected it will be adopted by Devon County Council in July and also by Somerset Council. Following these decisions, and subject to the recommendation in this report, the Management Plan will be fully designed and will be published on the Blackdown Hills National Landscape website with illustrated webpages and then will be formally submitted to Defra.
- 5.2 Implementation and delivery of the Management Plan will be monitored by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership, which in time will help to inform the next 5-year review. The Partnership will also undertake promotional work and engage with local communities and partner organisations to improve awareness and understanding of the National Landscape and the Management Plan's purposes and objectives.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications from the public consultation and the adoption of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan. The Council makes a grant funding contribution each year to the host authority, Devon County Council, to support the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership.

Legal Implications

The production of a management plan for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, and keeping it under review is required under Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000.

Risk Assessment

No operational or strategic risks associated with the matters covered in this report have been identified.

Impact on Climate Change

The review of the Management Plan is underpinned by a strong commitment to act in response to the climate emergency, with one of the four key themes being Climate, and one of the fundamental aims of the plan being to help facilitate and deliver meaningful actions for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Government's climate National Adaptation Programme (NAP3) requires all protected landscapes (National Parks and National Landscapes) to have Climate Change Adaptation Management Plans produced, embedded in or linked with their Management Plans by 2028, and in all future plans. The Management Plan is also

expected to address national targets to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions to net zero and restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat (carbon storage) in Protected Landscapes.

Equality Impact Assessment

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. The review of the Management Plan embraces this proposal and is based on some guiding principles including that the valued Blackdown Hills landscape and environment provides an asset to benefit people's wellbeing and therefore everyone should feel welcome and be able to access and enjoy the National Landscape. Further guiding principles recognise that local communities play an integral role in the evolution of the Blackdown Hills landscape, and the need to respond to the needs of people living and working within the area and in nearby towns. An equalities impact assessment of the Management Plan has been undertaken by Devon County Council and this is included in **Appendix 6** to this report.

Relationship to Corporate Plan

The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan can help the following aims of the Council's Corporate Plan 2024 - 2028:

- **Planning, Environment & Sustainability:** The Management Plan includes a vision that sets a strategic direction for nature recovery, species, habitat and wildlife management, and also to reduce greenhouse gases, for carbon storage and a pathway to net zero and adaptation. The management plan includes a Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (TOF) to achieve a number of targets, including: Goal 1 Thriving plants and wildlife; Goal 7 Mitigating and adapting to climate change and Goal 10 Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment.
- **Economy & Assets:** The Management Plan's vision sets a strategic direction for economy and transport.
- **Community, People and Equalities:** The Management Plan's vision sets a strategic direction for community, access, and inclusion.

Section 3 – Statutory Officer sign-off/mandatory checks

Statutory Officer: Andrew Jarrett

Agreed by or on behalf of the Section 151 Officer

Date: 25 June 2025

Statutory Officer: Maria de Leburne

Agreed on behalf of the Monitoring Officer

Date: 25 June 2025

Chief Officer: Stephen Walford

Agreed by or on behalf of the Chief Executive/Corporate Director

Date: 25 June 2025

Performance and risk: Steve Carr

Agreed on behalf of the Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager

Date: 19 June 2025

Cabinet member notified: (yes/no)

Report: Exclusion of the press and public from this item of business on the published agenda on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information. (Yes/No)

Appendix: Exclusion of the press and public from this item of business on the published agenda on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information. (Yes/No)

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

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Background Papers :

Appendix 1 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30
(adoption draft)

Appendix 2 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 Part
B: Appendices (adoption draft)

Appendix 3 - Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 Part
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Engagement and Consultation Report

Links:

Cabinet meeting 15th October 2024

[Agenda for Cabinet on Tuesday, 15th October, 2024, 5.15 pm - MIDDEVON.GOV.UK](#)

Planning, Environment and Sustainability PDG meeting on 10th June 2025

[Agenda for Planning, Environment & Sustainability Policy Development Group on Tuesday, 10th June, 2025, 5.30 pm - MIDDEVON.GOV.UK](#)