



**Blackdown
Hills
National
Landscape**

**Appropriate Assessment Screening of the Blackdown Hills
National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30
(Pre-adoption final draft version January - April 2025)**

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Contents

1 Introduction.....	3
2 European Sites Potentially Affected	7
3 Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030	11
4 Fuller Considerations	26
5 Other plans and programmes	30
6 Conclusion.....	31
7 References	32
Appendix 1.....	33
Qualifying Features, Conservation Objectives and Vulnerabilities of European Sites Within or Close to Blackdown Hills National Landscape	33

Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Nutrient Neutrality Catchment Areas in relation to Blackdown Hills National Landscape.....	8
Figure 2 European Sites within and close to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.....	9
Table 1 Principal requirements to maintain site integrity.....	10
Table 2 Broad impacts and examples of possible contributing activities.....	12
Table 3 System for interpretation of likely effects of objectives and policies.....	14
Table 4 Assessment of effects of Objectives on European Sites	15
Table 5 Assessment of effects of Policies on European Sites.....	17
Table 6 Objectives and Policies to be taken forward for fuller consideration.....	26

1 Introduction

This report presents the results of the screening and assessment stages of the Appropriate Assessment (AA) process for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30. This entails a review of the proposed Plan (the consultation draft and any further relevant amendments were considered) to identify any 'Likely Significant Effects' (LSEs) on the conservation objectives of European sites. If, following screening, LSEs are anticipated, subsequent stages of AA would consider these in more detail and determine whether alternative measures could be adopted. If there are no viable alternatives, a Plan can only be implemented if there are 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest'.

1.1 The Structure of this Report

This chapter (Chapter 1) explains the requirement for AA for the National Landscape Management Plan, summarises the AA process and explains the purpose of screening in more detail.

Chapter 2 identifies the European Sites which could be affected.

Chapter 3 summarises the plan to be assessed: the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30. It presents the results from screening of objectives and policies and identifies possible effects on European Sites. Screening matrices are provided as Tables 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 sets out a more detailed assessment of some objectives and policies.

Chapter 5 explains why in this case potential "In Combination Effects" are not analysed.

Chapter 6 draws a conclusion for the screening process.

Appendix 1 provides details of the European sites included in the assessment.

1.2 The European Habitats Directive

The [Habitats Regulations](#) [The Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2017 (as amended)] transpose the requirements of the European Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) that aims to protect habitats and species of European nature conservation importance. The Directive establishes a network of internationally important sites designated for their ecological status. These are referred to as *Natura 2000 sites* or *European Sites* and comprise *Special Areas of Conservation* (SACs) and *Special Protection Areas* (SPAs). The UK Government also requires that *Ramsar* sites (that support internationally important wetland habitats and are listed under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance [Ramsar Convention]) are included within the HRA process (and as required by the Regulations).

A competent authority must carry out an assessment under the Habitats Regulations, known as a *Habitats Regulations Assessment* (HRA), to test if a 'plan or project' could significantly harm the designated features of a European site (also known as 'habitat sites').

All plans and projects (including planning applications) which are not directly connected with, or necessary for, the conservation management of a habitat site, require consideration of whether the plan or project is likely to have significant effects on that site. This

consideration should take into account the potential effects both of the plan/project itself and in combination with other plans or projects. The process of HRA is based on the precautionary principle and where the potential for likely significant effects cannot be excluded, a competent authority must make an appropriate assessment of the implications of the plan or project for that site, in view of the site's conservation objectives. The competent authority may agree to the plan or project only after having ruled out adverse effects on the integrity of the habitats site.

In 2018, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) issued a judgment (*People over Wind & Sweetman v Coillte Teoranta* Case C-323/17), which ruled that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive must be interpreted as meaning that mitigation measures (referred to in the judgment as measures which are intended to avoid or reduce effects) should be assessed within the framework of an appropriate assessment (AA), and that it is not permissible to take account of measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the plan or project on a European site at the initial screening stage.

1.3 The Appropriate Assessment (AA) Process

The purpose of AA is to ensure that significant effects on European sites are avoided. The assessment is carried out solely in respect of the 'conservation objectives' for which a European site has been designated and its integrity in relation to its ability to support those objectives. There are four stages:

- *Stage One: Screening*
 - To identify the likely impacts on a European site of a project or plan, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans, and consider whether these impacts are likely to be significant;
- *Stage Two: Appropriate Assessment (where there are likely to be significant impacts)*
 - To consider the impact on the integrity of the European site of the project or plan, either alone or 'in combination' with other projects or plans, with respect to the structure, function and conservation objectives of the site. Additionally, where there are adverse impacts, to assess the potential mitigation of those impacts;
- *Stage Three: Assessment of alternative solutions*
 - To examine alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the project or plan that avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the European site;
- *Stage Four: Assessment where no alternative solutions exist (where adverse impacts remain)*
 - To assess compensatory measures where, in the light of an assessment of imperative reasons of overriding public interest, it is deemed that the project or plan should proceed.

Each stage determines whether a further stage in the process is required. If, for example, the conclusions at the end of Stage One are that there will be no significant impacts on the European site, there is no requirement to proceed further.

1.4 The Appropriate Assessment of the National Landscape Management Plan

Natural England considers that National Landscape Management Plans are plans which could have significant effects (both positive and negative) on European sites. Thus, they should be assessed before formal adoption.

When undertaking HRA on a plan, it is important to ensure that the assessment is carried out at an appropriate scale and level of detail. The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan is reviewed at 5-yearly intervals and provides a strategic framework for partnership working comprising a long-term Vision for a vibrant and sustainable landscape and responding to climate change and nature recovery. It includes aspirational Guiding Principles and Objectives with targets and policies for guiding management of the National Landscape within the context of conserving and enhancing natural beauty. Such a management plan does not include allocations for development nor locationally specific plans or projects, which are more likely to have potential significant effects on the protected European sites.

This HRA screening is being undertaken in accordance with good practice; the available guidance on process; and using the following principles:

- Use existing information
- Systematic and as simple as possible whilst retaining a robust process
- Proportionate assessment – the management plan is a strategic management plan for conserving and enhancing natural beauty

This report documents the AA process to provide the information required for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership to determine whether further stages of Appropriate Assessment are required for the National Landscape Management Plan. The assessment process was undertaken on the [Consultation Draft of the Management Plan](#) as amended, and will be subject to confirmation by Natural England (as the statutory nature conservation body).

1.5 Approach

Stage 1: Screening

The purpose of screening (this stage) is to identify whether any European site might be exposed to Likely Significant Effects (LSEs) and therefore to determine whether further stages of AA would be required.

This screening assessment comprises three steps:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| One | Describing the Management Plan and possible impacts |
| Two | Identifying the <i>potential</i> effects on the European sites |
| Three | Assessing the <i>significance</i> of any effects on the European sites |

The actual 'screening' evaluation is being completed as a two stage process:

Preliminary considerations (Step 2 above) considers the vulnerabilities of each site, and what potential impacts may be damaging to the site, this then 'screens out' policies that clearly have no possible negative impacts.

For some policies the decision of No Likely Significant Effect will be obvious, and these can be screened out immediately. At the other extreme, some policies may very clearly have a Likely Significant Effect. These policies will need to be taken forward for 'appropriate assessment' or removed from the Management Plan.

In other cases the judgement about a Likely Significant Effect will be less clear cut. It is in these cases that it is necessary to consider further the nature of the potential effect. This is the purpose of the fuller considerations (Step 3 above) assesses the potential impacts of each policy on the specific conservation objectives of the site, the significance of such an impact and the degree of risk of it occurring.

it is important to consider the possibility of impacts for any European site which might be affected, whatever its location, given the activities included in the plan and their range of influence. This may extend some distance from the area within the immediate influence of a plan.

Sites which could possibly be affected were identified and information obtained about designated interest features and associated conservation objectives, largely using information contained on the JNCC and Natural England websites. These were reviewed against the Management Plan objectives and policies that might affect interest features or the ability to achieve favourable condition.

2 European Sites Potentially Affected

Initial screening centred on the Appropriate Assessment Screening of the previous National Landscape Management Plan, together with checks on the JNCC online record of European sites for any additions or amendments that may have been made since 2019. Two European sites were immediately identified that might possibly be affected by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan and should be subject to Appropriate Assessment Screening.

These are:

- Quants SAC
- River Axe SAC (outside of the National Landscape but within 50 metres of the boundary at its nearest point)

The following European sites are within 15km of the National Landscape but have not previously been included in HRA screening because of their distance from the National Landscape boundary and the absence of any impact pathway that might indicate that activity within the National Landscape could have an effect on the site. The distances at the nearest points are also shown.

- Beer Quarry and Caves SAC (9.0km)
- Holme Moor and Clean Moor SAC (7.8km)
- Sidmouth to West Bay SAC (8.9km)
- Lyme Bay and Torbay SAC (8.6km)
- East Devon Heaths SPA (11.6km)
- East Devon Pebblebed Heaths SAC (11.6km)
- Somerset Levels and Moors SPA (6.8km)
- Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site (6.8km)
- Hestercombe House SAC (8.1km)

However, since the preparation of previous management plans, in August 2020 Natural England issued an Advice Note to the former Somerset Councils regarding the implications of the Court of Justice of the European Union CJEU case known as the “Dutch N” in relation to high levels of phosphate and planning applications that may affect the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar and Special Protected Area (SPA) European Sites.

The ruling has resulted in greater scrutiny of plans or projects that are likely to, either directly or indirectly, increase nutrient loads to these internationally important sites where a reason for their unfavourable condition is an excess of a specific pollutant.

In March 2022, Natural England issued similar advice to East Devon District Council (and some of the Somerset Councils) about phosphates in the River Axe.

The catchments of both the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar and River Axe SAC include areas within the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, see Figure 1.

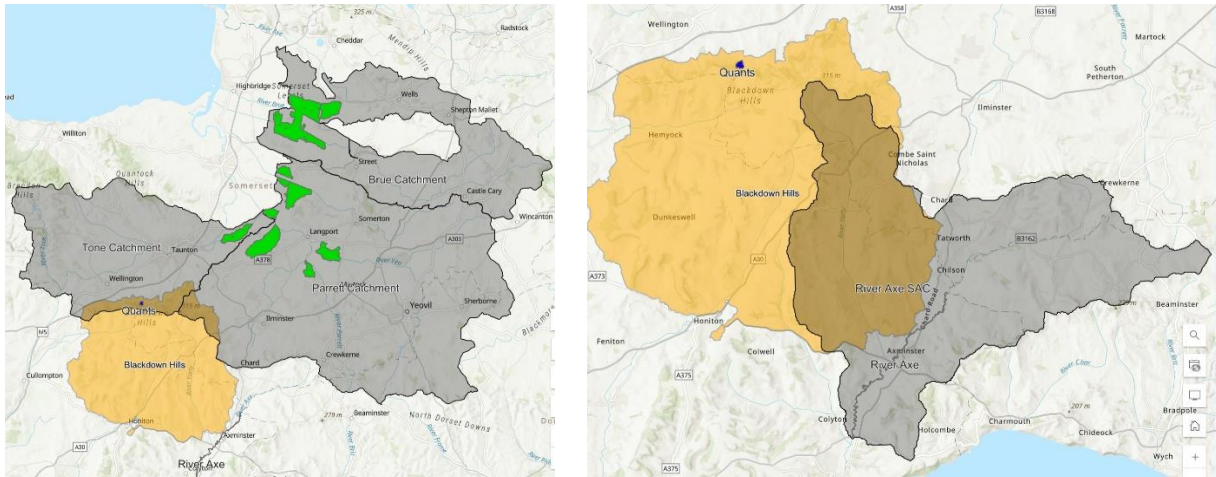


Figure 1 Nutrient Neutrality Catchment Areas in relation to Blackdown Hills National Landscape

The Somerset Levels and Moors are designated as an SPA under the Habitat Regulations 2017 and listed as a Ramsar Site under the Ramsar Convention. The Ramsar Site broadly covers the same area as the Somerset Levels and Moors SPA. While the SPA is designated for its international waterbird communities, the Ramsar Site is designated for its internationally important wetland features including the floristic and invertebrate diversity and species of its ditches, which is shared as a designated feature of the underpinning Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The interest features of the Ramsar Site are considered unfavourable, or at risk, from the effects of eutrophication caused by excessive phosphorous. The vast majority of the ditches within the Ramsar Site and the underpinning SSSIs are also classified as being in unfavourable condition due to excessive phosphorous and the resultant ecological response.

Mirroring conclusions reached by Natural England in relation to development, it is unlikely that the management plan either alone or in-combination, will have a 'likely significant effect' on the internationally important bird communities for which the SPA site is designated and it is screened out of this assessment. However, given that parts of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape are within the Nutrient Neutrality Catchment for the Ramsar site, that site has been included in this assessment.

Figure 2 shows the three European sites included in this HRA.

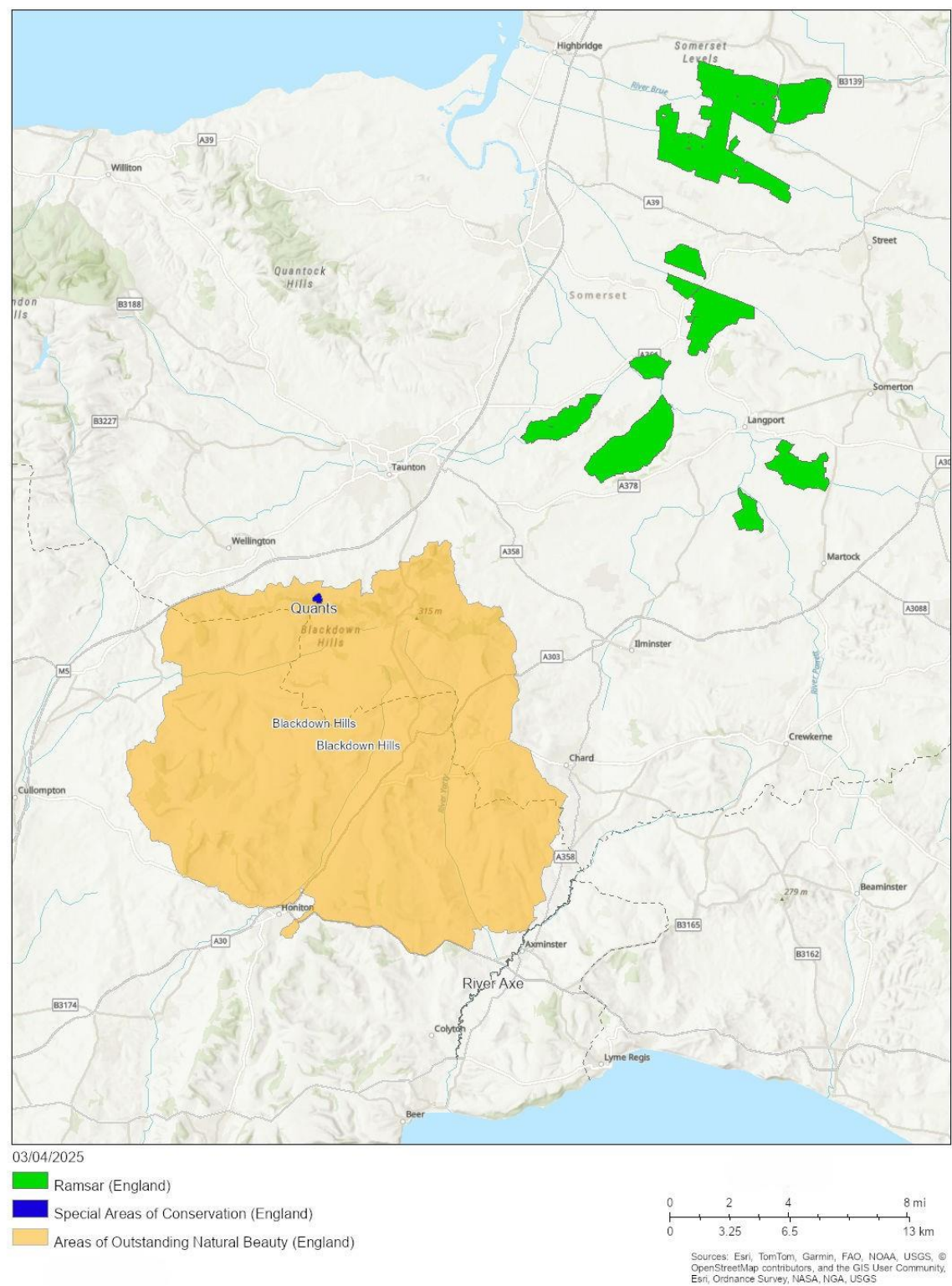


Figure 2 European Sites within and close to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Site descriptions are set out in Appendix 1. This includes the qualifying features, conservation objectives and requirements to maintain the favourable conservation status of the European sites.

Table 1 summarises the conditions necessary to maintain site integrity taking into account the qualifying features and conservation objectives.

Table 1 – Principal requirements to maintain site integrity

European Sites	Summary of Requirement
Quants	Maintenance of specialist intensive habitat management for the marsh fritillary butterfly, restore population connectivity.
River Axe	Protection of the water course from raised nutrient levels, most likely deriving from surrounding land uses and land management.
Somerset Levels and Moors	Protection of the site from raised nutrient levels, deriving from surrounding land uses and land management.

3 Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030

Section 82 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 establishes the primary purpose of AONB (now known as National Landscapes) designation as the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty. Section 85 of the CROW Act, as amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, places a duty on all public bodies to ‘seek to further’ the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty. Under Section 89, the relevant local authorities must prepare and publish a Management Plan for each AONB; and keep it under review. The Management Plan is a statutory document, which provides a policy framework to focus partnership action and priorities for the AONB designation. It also guides and informs all other plans and activities that may affect the AONB so that they can contribute to the continued conservation and enhancement of the area.

The reviewed Management Plan continues on from the previous Management Plans with updating and refinement, and a particular focus on nature recovery and addressing the climate emergency.

A 25 Year Vision for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape has evolved from previous visions statements, which sets the ambition for the plan (draft version):

Our vision is that in 2050, as a result of collaboration and positive change, the Blackdown Hills will be a rich and vibrant landscape, resilient to the effects of climate change, 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, energy, 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.

In order to implement and deliver the vision, a set of objectives, guiding principles, targets and policies are set out in the Management Plan under the themes of Place, People, Nature, and Climate, and are summarised below.

Key Themes

1. Place

- **Objectives:** Restore natural capital, support sustainable farming, and enhance landscape character.
 - **Targets:** Increase nature-friendly farming and tree cover.
 - **Policies:** Soil conservation, flood management, and sustainable development.
2. **People**
- **Objectives:** Flourishing communities, diverse economy, and accessible countryside.
 - **Targets:** Improve accessibility and engagement.
 - **Policies:** Support local markets, sustainable tourism, and transport.
3. **Nature**
- **Objectives:** Enhance and connect habitats for resilient ecosystems.
 - **Targets:** Restore wildlife-rich habitats and improve SSSI conditions.
 - **Policies:** Prioritise habitat restoration and species conservation.
4. **Climate**
- **Objectives:** Reduce emissions, increase carbon sequestration, and promote nature-based solutions.
 - **Targets:** Achieve net zero emissions by 2050.
 - **Policies:** Support appropriate renewable energy, sustainable farming, and energy efficiency.

3.1 Screening of policies to identify Likely Significant Effects

Draft management plan **objectives** and **policies** were assessed to identify any likely significant effects on one or more European sites. These are assessed because these are the core aspects of the management framework that set out what we want to achieve and what needs to be done by way of management to achieve the objectives.

During this assessment, reference was made to the European sites' vulnerabilities, requirements to maintain favourable condition, and activities considered to be damaging or likely to lead to deterioration of the site. If a policy set the framework for any of these activities to occur then a potential effect was recorded. Broad categories of impacts and potentially damaging activities are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 1 Broad impacts and examples of possible contributing activities

Category of Impact	Examples of activity (on and off site) which may cause this impact
Physical loss	<p>Land claim for development - fragmentation and isolation of habitats and populations</p> <p>Changes in channel morphology – canalising, weirs, dams or erosion from alterations to natural processes</p> <p>Construction of artificial features, e.g. wind turbines, electricity transmission structures etc.</p> <p>Changes in land management e.g. cultivation, ploughing, felling, afforestation, deforestation etc</p>

Physical damage/deterioration	Recreation - trampling, erosion, direct disturbance of species Changes in land management – grazing, cutting, burning regimes etc leading to changes in species and community composition Mineral extraction Selective removal of species e.g. scrub removal Changes in hydrological regime – changes in water abstraction for domestic, agricultural or industrial use Changes channel morphology
Non-physical disturbance	Recreation – visual presence leading to disturbance of species (e.g. boat activity, walking etc.) Noise – disturbance of species Lighting – disturbance to diurnal rhythms
Toxic contamination	Changes in land management – application of pesticides, fertilizers etc. Increases in emissions to water, land or air e.g. from transport, domestic, commercial or industrial sources
Non-toxic contamination	Changes in land management - addition of manure, slurry etc. nutrient enrichment and sediment from run-off Waste Water Treatment Works outfalls – nutrient enrichment
Biological disturbance	Changes in management regime, or cessation of management – grazing, cutting, burning Non-native species introduction or translocation Selective removal of species e.g. exploitation from recreational fishing Stocking with non-native and native species e.g. fish farming, recreational fishing, deer farming Introducing barriers to movement or dispersal e.g. weirs, dams, areas of poor water quality (can create a barrier to migration preventing River and Sea lampreys from reaching their spawning grounds), woodland belts, development (roads, buildings etc)

Source: Compiled from Site Vulnerabilities, Favourable Condition Tables, and Operations Likely to Damage from Component SSSI information for the relevant Habitats sites.

Policies and objectives were screened using the 9-point scoring system as outlined in Table 3 overleaf (adapted from David Tyldesley & Associates advice for Natural England 2006, and used in previous assessments).

For each objective and policy in turn, a score was assigned to each European site according to interpretation of the likely effects as set out in the 'Reasoning' column. The assessment takes account of the conservation objectives of each European site and the conditions required to maintain site integrity.

Table 3 System for interpretation of likely effects of objectives and policies

Effect		Reasoning
None	0	The policy relates to activities which are not likely to have an effect on the Natura 2000 site by virtue of their specificity, scale, or distance from the site.
No likely (negative) effect	1	The policy is specifically intended to conserve and enhance biodiversity, and measures under this policy will not be likely to lead to negative effects on the Natura 2000 site.
	2	The policy is intended to conserve and enhance the natural, geological, built or historic environment and measures under this policy will not be likely to lead to negative effects on the Natura 2000 site.
	3	The policy is not likely to lead to activities which are likely to have a negative effect on the Natura 2000 site.
	4	The policy addresses activities which have the potential to affect the Natura 2000 site, but the policy itself is worded so as not to encourage activities or allow projects which would be likely to cause negative effects on the Natura 2000 site.
Potential for a negative effect	5	The policy addresses activities which have the potential to affect the Natura 2000 site, the effects of which may or may not be significant. But the policy itself could be reworded if necessary, so as not to support or encourage activities which would be likely to cause significant effects on the Natura 2000 site.
Potential for a negative effect / effects uncertain	6	The policy encourages activities which have the potential to affect the Natura 2000 site, but the likelihood and risk of significance of effects depends on the location, scale or design (& etc.) of individual schemes or projects. It is therefore more appropriate to screen individual schemes or projects as these come forward.
	7	The policy encourages activities in an area which have the potential to affect the Natura 2000 site, either directly or indirectly. Activities under this policy must be subject to assessment to establish, in the light of the site's conservation objectives, whether it can be objectively concluded that there would not be significant effects on the Natura 2000 site.
Likely Significant Effect	8	This policy makes provision for activities likely to have significant effects on the Natura 2000 site. Activities under this policy must be subject to appropriate assessment to establish, in the light of the site's conservation objectives, whether it can be objectively concluded that the activities would not have significant effects on the Natura 2000 site.

The screening results are shown in Table 4 and 5 below. Scores are colour coded according to the scheme in Table 3.

Table 4 Assessment of effects of Objectives on European Sites

Theme	Objective	Site		
		Quants SAC	River Axe SAC	Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar
Place	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.	2	2	2
	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	2	2	2
	To strengthen the Blackdown Hills special sense of place, with a diversity of landscape patterns and pictures, unique geology, archaeology and buildings of architectural appeal, through sound custodianship	2	2	2
People	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	3	3	3

Theme	Objective	Site		
	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.	3	3	3
	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.	5	3	3
	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.	0	0	0
Nature	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.	1	1	1
Climate	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.	2	2	2

Theme	Objective	Site		
	To promote and deliver nature-based solutions to climate change.	3	3	3
	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.	4	4	4

Table 5 Assessment of effects of Policies on European Sites

Theme	Policy	Site		
		Quants SAC	River Axe SAC	Somerset Levels & Moors SPA/ Ramsar
Place	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.	2	2	2
	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.	2	2	2

Theme	Policy	Site		
	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.	3	4	4
	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.	1	1	1
	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.	2	2	2
	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.	2	2	2
	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.	2	2	2
	PL8 Encourage sensitive management of field boundaries and hedgerow trees, woodlands, orchards and ponds, protect ancient woodland and veteran trees, and restore the original broadleaved	1	1	1

Theme	Policy	Site		
	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.	2	2	2
	PL10 Monitor, manage and mitigate damaging diseases such as ash dieback that have potential to impact negatively on landscape and biodiversity.	3	3	3
	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.	3	3	3
	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.	2	2	2
	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.	2	2	2
	PL14 Promote awareness and understanding of the geology and geomorphology of the Blackdown Hills and secure effective	2	2	2

Theme	Policy	Site		
	management of important features and sites.			
	<p>PL15 All relevant strategic, local and neighbourhood plan documents and planning decision-making will:</p> <p>Seek to further the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.</p> <p>Utilise the Management Plan and consider other Blackdown Hills statements and guidance.</p> <p>Ensure that conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty is given great weight.</p>	3	3	3
	<p>PL16 All necessary development affecting the Blackdown Hills National Landscape will conserve and enhance natural beauty and special qualities by:</p> <p>Respecting landscape character, settlement patterns and local character of the built environment</p> <p>Being sensitively sited and of appropriate scale.</p> <p>Reinforcing local distinctiveness.</p> <p>Seeking to protect and enhance natural features and biodiversity.</p>	4	4	4
	<p>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.</p>	2	2	2
	<p>PL18 The character of skylines and open views into, within and out of the National Landscape will be protected and enhanced.</p>	2	2	2
	<p>PL19 The deeply rural character of much of the land adjoining the National Landscape boundary forms</p>	2	2	2

Theme	Policy	Site		
	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.	4	4	4
	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.	2	2	2
People	PE1 Seek to inspire and foster connection with the Blackdown Hills through provision of a range of opportunities for volunteering and 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.	5	5	3
	PE2 Take a coordinated, strategic approach to the management of public rights of way and publicly accessible land to achieve an	4	4	3

Theme	Policy	Site		
	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 and historic 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.	5	5	3
	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	2	2	2
	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	4	4	4
	PE6 Economic capacity, employment and skills in the area will be supported through training opportunities, community enterprise, business networking and cooperation especially where these	4	4	4

Theme	Policy	Site		
	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.	4	4	4
	PE8 Support efforts to secure and improve fast and reliable broadband and mobile phone coverage without adversely affecting special qualities	4	4	0
	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	2	2	2
	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	2	2	2
Nature	N1 Use the Lawton <i>making space for nature</i> principles of 'better, bigger, more and joined' to create networks that are fit for purpose for nature to thrive in and adapt to climate change.	1	1	1
	N2 The mantra of 'right tree, right place' should be extended to 'right habitat/species, right place'. This should ensure that scarce and	1	1	1

Theme	Policy	Site		
	irreplaceable habitats are protected and that the development of one habitat does not damage the network of another.			
	N3 Species of conservation concern will be conserved. Targeted action will be taken to support the recovery of champion/priority/indicator species.	1	1	1
	N4 All public bodies within the Blackdown Hills National Landscape 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.	1	1	1
	N5 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.	1	1	1
	N6 Increased recreational pressure will be resisted at locations where unacceptable damage or disturbance to vulnerable habitats or species is likely to arise.	1	1	1
Climate	C1 To transition to net zero, support communities, businesses 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.	3	3	3
	C2 Use less energy to reduce the amount of new energy infrastructure required to meet net zero.	3	3	3
	C3 Transition to renewables; energy used within the area needs to rise to	4	4	4

Theme	Policy	Site		
	near 100% renewable by 2050. The transition to low carbon and renewable energy should be undertaken in a way that seeks to further the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, and is compatible with its special qualities, landscape character and heritage value.			
	C4 Reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions through encouraging sustainable farming practices and maximise carbon storage in the environment by encouraging interventions such as tree planting and peaty soil restoration.	2	2	2
	C5 Develop demand for sustainably produced food.	3	3	3
	C6 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.	3	3	3
	C7 Reduce emissions from unavoidable biodegradable waste and wastewater treatment.	4	4	4
	C8 Develop and encourage measures which reduce energy usage in existing buildings and improve energy efficiency for all buildings using low carbon technology in all refurbishment, regeneration and improvement schemes. As part of the transition, new buildings need to be net zero as soon as possible.	3	3	3
	C9 Reduce the need to travel and support the development of sustainable low carbon transport and active travel options, while	3	3	3

Theme	Policy	Site		
	working to avoid leaving any community isolated.			

4 Fuller Considerations

The majority of the draft objectives and policies were assessed as not requiring more in-depth consideration as they are either beneficial or are not likely to lead to negative effects on the European sites.

For some policies (see Table 6) the potential for them to lead to activities that could have significant impacts on sites could not be obviously ruled out (applying the precautionary principle). These policies were therefore taken forward for fuller consideration of whether these effects are likely to be *significant*.

Table 6 Objectives and Policies to be taken forward for fuller consideration

Objective/Policy	Reason	European Sites
Objective: 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.	5	Quants SAC, River Axe SAC
Policy PE1 Seek to inspire and foster connection with the Blackdown Hills through provision of a range of opportunities for volunteering and 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.	5	Quants SAC, River Axe SAC
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.	5	Quants SAC, River Axe SAC

Assessing 'significance'

In terms of European sites a 'significant' effect is one that is not inconsequential and which is likely to undermine the achievement of the site's conservation objectives.

Examples of the types of effects, which are considered likely to be significant, include:

- 1 Causing change to the coherence of the site or to the designation series (e.g. presenting a barrier between isolated fragments, or reducing the ability of the site to act as a source of new colonisers);
- 2 Causing reduction in the area of habitat or of the site;
- 3 Causing direct or indirect change to the physical quality of the environment (including the hydrology) or habitat within the site;
- 4 Causing ongoing disturbance to species or habitats for which the site is notified;
- 5 Altering community structure (species composition);
- 6 Causing direct or indirect damage to the size, characteristics or reproductive ability of populations on the site;
- 7 Altering the vulnerability of populations etc. to other impacts;
- 8 Causing a reduction in the resilience of the feature against external change (for example its ability to respond to extremes of environmental conditions);
- 9 Affecting restoration of a feature where this is a conservation objective;
- 10 Interfering with key relationships that define the structure of the site;
- 11 Interfering with key relationships that define the function of the site.

It must be acknowledged that this list is not exhaustive, it is only indicative.

Judgements on the 'significance' of impacts was based upon the likely effect on qualifying features of each particular site as well as the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of those impacts. The risk of these impacts occurring was also considered.

Considerations and Recommendations

These considerations evaluate the risk or likelihood of the identified potential effects being *significant*.

Where effects were identified as potentially likely to be significant, policy changes were suggested to reduce or obviate the risk of any of these effects occurring, and prevent the need to progress to appropriate assessment. Consideration was also given to the availability of other mechanisms that in combination with the plan, would obviate or reduce the risk or likelihood of the effect being significant.

The tables below record the further considerations of individual objectives and policies listed in Table 6. Fuller consideration of policies and the type and significance of impacts was informed by professional judgement and the baseline data review. The final row of each table states the 'significance conclusion' for the policy, based on the recommendations here being incorporated into the final Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan.

Objective	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.
<u>River Axe SAC</u>	

Potential for indirect impacts from erosion if access and recreational activities are encouraged and are not sensitive. Increased erosion within the catchment could lead to increased sediment volumes in run-off, leading to elevated levels of suspended solids. This can clog the respiratory structures of the bullhead and lamprey fish species for which the site is of European importance. In addition, siltation of riverine sediments, caused by increased particulates, could prevent the successful establishment of *Ranunculus* plants, and interfere with egg and fry survival in lampreys and bullhead, and is considered a major threat. Whilst the impacts from a single access opportunity are thought unlikely to be significant, there may be cumulative impacts across the tributaries which could lead to a significant effect unless improvements / opportunities and use are sensitive.

Quants SAC

The Quants SAC is part of a site actively managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust. Any potential for increased disturbance, physical damage from erosion as a result of changes to access would be carefully managed and monitored by Somerset Wildlife Trust as an integral part of the site's Management Plan and therefore significant effects from this objective are unlikely.

Recommendations:

*Reword the Objective 'To ensure that **appropriate** opportunities to explore and enjoy the Blackdown Hills countryside and its special qualities **that are compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty** are available to all and that everyone feels welcome.'*

Conclusion:

With only 'sensitive' access being encouraged within the National Landscape, significant effects from the implementation of this objective are unlikely to occur.

No Likely Significant Effects – If recommendations are implemented.

Policy PE1	Seek to inspire and foster connection with the Blackdown Hills through provision of a range of opportunities for volunteering and 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.
<p>This policy is primarily concerned with <i>promoting</i> the Blackdown Hills countryside as a place for volunteering and active engagement for all. Some areas of the countryside and aspects of wildlife and heritage are more appropriate than others, and this policy should take this into account.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <p><i>Reword the policy: 'Seek to inspire and foster connection with the Blackdown Hills through provision of a range of sensitive and sustainable opportunities for volunteering and 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.'</i></p>	

<p>Delivery implementation should consider the impacts on sensitive sites, particularly European sites, from the activities that are promoted.</p> <p>Conclusion:</p> <p>With the recommendations implemented this policy and its delivery actions (if in line with the policy) are unlikely to have significant impacts on the European sites.</p>
<p>No Likely Significant Effects – If recommendations are implemented.</p>

<p>Policy PE3</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>This policy is primarily concerned with <i>promoting</i> the health and wellbeing benefits offered by the natural environment of the Blackdown Hills. Although the policy refers to the possibility of enhancing landscape, biodiversity, heritage and access, it is silent on <u>conserving</u> natural beauty. Some areas of the countryside, such as designated sites, are less appropriate than others, and this policy should take this into account.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <p><i>Reword the policy: ‘Opportunities to use the natural environment resource of the Blackdown Hills to benefit the health and well-being of residents and visitors which are compatible with conserving and enhancing natural beauty will be sought and promoted, particularly where this will enhance landscape, biodiversity, heritage and access.’</i></p> <p>Delivery implementation should consider the impacts on sensitive sites, particularly European sites, from the activities that are promoted.</p> <p>Conclusion:</p> <p>With the recommendations implemented this policy and its delivery actions (if in line with the policy) are unlikely to have significant impacts on the European sites.</p>	
<p>No Likely Significant Effects – If recommendations are implemented.</p>	

Summary of conclusions on the likelihood of significant effects

The screening process confirms that the large majority of objectives and policies as currently worded, are considered to have No Likely Significant Effects on the identified European sites.

Three were identified in the Preliminary Screening for which the *potential* for negative effects could not be obviously ruled out (applying the precautionary principle) within the framework of their current wording. These two policies and one objective all related to access and enjoyment.

During fuller considerations, recommendations were made for rewording **all** of these policies to obviate the need for progressing them to appropriate assessment. With the recommendations implemented, there are unlikely to be any significant effects from these policies.

There are no significant changes to the plan's objectives and policies, or the overall intent, arising from the consultation period. Policy PE3 above has been amended by the inclusion of 'historic environment' as well as 'natural environment', however this is not considered to affect any earlier conclusions.

Overall Significant Effect Conclusion

The National Landscape Management Plan should be considered in its entirety and necessarily within the context of the statutory purpose of AONB designation, '*to conserve and enhance natural beauty*.' As such, the purpose of all policies, and Delivery Plan actions under those policies, is to actively and positively contribute to conserving and enhancing the area's natural beauty. Included within the definition of 'conserving and enhancing natural beauty' is the conservation of '*flora, fauna and physiographical features*' and as such encompasses the reasons for designation of European protected sites, that is to conserve flora and fauna.

The statutory purpose *to conserve and enhance natural beauty*, inherently necessitates the delivery of actions in such a way as not to compromise or prejudice the achievement of the conservation objectives of European protected sites.

When policies are interpreted within the overall framework of the Management Plan and the intention of the policies (to expand on the statutory purpose), this provides sufficient safeguards and there is a negligible risk that any adverse effects would be permitted to occur.

It is therefore concluded that the *Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030* when taken in its entirety, should have **No Likely Significant Effects** on the identified European sites, provided **all** the recommendations here are acted upon and relevant legislative provisions are adhered to in the delivery.

5 Other plans and programmes

As part of the HRA screening process, it is also necessary to consider whether the proposed plan might have any significant adverse effects 'In combination' with other plans. 'In combination' refers to the cumulative effect of influences acting on sites from other relevant plans and projects in the context of prevailing environmental conditions. The purpose of the National Landscape Management Plan is to set out the policy of the relevant local authorities towards the National Landscape. Policies are purposefully protective towards the environment in line with conserving and enhancing natural beauty and will have varying degrees of influence on the way in which local authorities, and others, carry out their duties and functions in general and under other plans.

However, given that screening of the plan itself concludes that the plan will not have significant effects on one or more European sites then it is not deemed necessary to undertake an in-combination analysis. This is based on Natural England's advice and guidance on previous rounds of Management Plans (*It is Natural England's view that if the Management plan does not have a significant environmental effect then it is not necessary to carry out an in combination assessment and that '...if no LSE [Likely Significant Effects] then no in combination effects are possible'*).

6 Conclusion

This Habitat Regulations Assessment Screening has considered the objectives and policies in the draft *Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030* for their potential effects on the two SAC European sites inside or very close to the National Landscape and the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site.

Provided the recommendations set out in this report are acted upon it can be concluded that the *Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030* when taken in its entirety, should have **No Likely Significant Effects** on the identified European sites. Therefore it is not necessary to proceed to full Appropriate Assessment.

The HRA screening considered the strategic nature of the Plan and it is noted that the need for further HRA may need to be considered again as specific projects or delivery plan action are developed.

7 References

[Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site - GOV.UK](#)

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Appendix 1

Qualifying Features, Conservation Objectives and Vulnerabilities of European Sites Within or Close to Blackdown Hills National Landscape

Quants SAC

Area: 20.29 Ha

Annex II species that are a primary reason for selection of this site

1065 Marsh fritillary butterfly *Euphydryas (Eurodryas, Hypodryas) aurinia* This damp and sheltered site supports a medium-sized but strong **marsh fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia*** population in a neutral grassland/fen mosaic. It is strategically placed close to other smaller sub-populations, with which it forms a metapopulation, and may exchange individuals with the large population at Southey Moor (outside the SAC series).

[The Site Improvement Plan highlights that despite suitable habitat conditions Marsh fritillary butterfly is not currently present on site. The nearest known population is adjacent to Southey & Gotleigh SSSI which is 6km away]

Conservation Objectives

With regard to the natural habitats and/or species for which the site has been designated ("the Qualifying Features" listed below);

Avoid the deterioration of the qualifying natural habitats and the habitats of qualifying species, and the significant disturbance of those qualifying species, ensuring the integrity of the site is maintained and the site makes a full contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status of each of the qualifying features.

Subject to natural change, to maintain or restore:

- The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species;
- The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species;
- The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species rely;
- The populations of qualifying species;
- The distribution of qualifying species within the site.

Qualifying Features

S1065. *Euphydryas (Eurodryas, Hypodryas) aurinia*; marsh fritillary butterfly

Vulnerability¹

The marsh fritillary population here was restricted to a comparatively small area (c. 2 ha) and is kept high by a considerable level of management directed at producing 'ideal' habitat in this area. If the highly interventionist nature of management is disrupted or discontinued the population may drop.

¹ Please note: vulnerability accounts are extracts from original Standard Data Forms submitted by JNCC to the European Commission on designation of the European Sites in the period 1995 to 2001; some references are no longer current.

River Axe SAC

Area: 25.78Ha

Annex I habitats that are a primary reason for selection of this site

3260 Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitriche-Batrachion* vegetation

The Axe is a south-western example of sub-type 2. Only the lower reaches of the main river have been designated, where the mixed catchment geology of sandstones and limestones gives rise to calcareous waters where *R. penicillatus* ssp. *pseudofluitans* dominates, giving way to *R. fluitans* further downstream. Short-leaved water-starwort *Callitriche truncata* is an unusual addition to the *Ranunculus* community and gives additional interest.

Annex II species present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for site selection

1095 Sea lamprey *Petromyzon marinus* 1096 Brook lamprey *Lampetra planeri* 1163 Bullhead *Cottus gobio*

Conservation Objectives

With regard to the natural habitats and/or species for which the site has been designated ("the Qualifying Features" listed below);

Avoid the deterioration of the qualifying natural habitats and the habitats of qualifying species, and the significant disturbance of those qualifying species, ensuring the integrity of the site is maintained and the site makes a full contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status of each of the qualifying features.

Subject to natural change, to maintain or restore:

- The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species;
- The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species;
- The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species rely;
- The populations of qualifying species;
- The distribution of qualifying species within the site.

Qualifying Features

H3260. Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitriche-Batrachion* vegetation; Rivers with floating vegetation often dominated by watercrowfoot

S1095. *Petromyzon marinus*; sea lamprey

S1096. *Lampetra planeri*; brook lamprey

S1163. *Cottus gobio*; bullhead

Vulnerability

The main threat on this site is the potential nitrification from surrounding land-use. A programme of surveys has been undertaken investigating the sources of potential

problems. On completion, management advice will be provided to the perpetrators to minimise impacts.

Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site

Area: 6,395 ha

The Ramsar site is designated for its internationally important wetland features including floristic and invertebrate diversity and consists of a series of Sites of Special Scientific Interest within the largest area of lowland wet grassland and associated wetland habitat remaining in Britain. It consists of areas in the flood plains of the Rivers Axe, Brue, Parrett, Tone and their tributaries. The site attracts internationally important numbers of wildfowl in winter and is one of the most important sites in southern Britain for breeding. The network of rhynes and ditches support an outstanding assemblage of aquatic invertebrates, particularly beetles.

Qualifying Features of the European Site

Ramsar criteria 2 - A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities.

Supports 17 species of Red Data Book invertebrates. The vascular plants *Wolffia arrhiza*, *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae* and *Peucedanum palustre* are considered vulnerable by the GB Red Book.

Ramsar criteria 5 - A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds.

Species with peak counts in winter: 97,155 waterfowl (5 year peak mean 1998/99-2002/2003)

Ramsar criteria 6 - A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird.

Qualifying Species/populations (as identified at designation) -

Species with peak counts in winter:

Tundra swan , *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*

Eurasian teal, *Anas crecca*

Northern lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*

Species/populations identified subsequent to designation for possible future consideration under criterion 6 -

Species with peak counts in winter:

Eurasian wigeon, *Anas penelope*,

Mute swan, *Cygnus olor*,

Northern pintail, *Anas acuta*,

Northern shoveler, *Anas clypeata*,

European Site Conservation Objectives

Site specific conservation objectives for Ramsar sites have not been published. However, the following generic Conservation Objectives for all Ramsar sites have previously been signed off by Natural England:

With regard to the Ramsar Site and the wetland habitats, individual species and/or groups of species for which the site has been listed (its 'Qualifying Features'), and subject to natural change;

Ensure that the integrity of the [Ramsar] site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the wise use of wetlands across the UK, by maintaining or restoring:

- The extent and distribution of qualifying habitats and habitats of qualifying species
- The structure and function of qualifying habitats and habitats of qualifying species
- The supporting processes on which qualifying habitats and habitats of qualifying species rely
- The populations of each qualifying species, and,
- The distribution of each qualifying species within the site'.

Vulnerability of the European Site

The vast majority of the ditches within the Ramsar Site and the underpinning SSSI's are classified as being in unfavourable condition, or at risk, from the effects of eutrophication caused by excessive phosphorous.

Aquatic invertebrate assemblage

The designated invertebrate assemblage is sensitive to changes in water quality. Water beetles and large mouthed valve snails associated with the Ramsar are particularly dependent on the maintenance of water quality. The interest features of the Ramsar are in unfavourable condition, or at risk, due to the effects of eutrophication caused by excessive phosphates.

Migratory/wintering birds

The availability of an abundant food supply is critically important for adult fitness and survival and the overall sustainability of the population. As a result, inappropriate management and direct or indirect impacts which could affect the distribution, abundance and availability of prey and hence adversely affect species' populations.

The nature, scale, timing and duration of some human activities can result in the disturbance of birds at a level that may substantially affect their behaviour, and consequently affect the long-term viability of the population. This includes increased recreational pressure.