



Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

State of the AONB Report 2017



South West England
(Natural England)



Introduction

The Blackdown Hills are special and form a tranquil, beautiful, and relatively isolated landscape on the Devon and Somerset border. Steep ridges, high plateau, valleys and springs create a charming mosaic of countryside dotted with farms, villages and ancient features.

This special place is home to wildlife and people, with valuable habitats existing alongside living, working communities. Unique geology creates an exceptional environment where rare plant, insect, bird and mammal species can flourish.

The Blackdown Hills have been protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) since 1991 and form part of the AONB family (34 in England). The Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership brings together over 80 organisations to protect this precious landscape.

Each AONB is required to have a statutory five-year Management Plan (produced on behalf of the Local Authorities) and this State of the Blackdown Hills AONB report provides an important summary of progress against indicators in the current Management Plan (2014-2019).

Critically, the outputs of this report will be used to help determine the 'health' of the protected landscape and trends over time, that will help shape and inform the policies, objectives and indicators needed for the 2019-2024 Management Plan, in order to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of this treasured landscape.



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Management Plan - summary of indicators and headline performance

Landscape Character		
1	Area and percentage of AONB in agri-environment schemes	10,004 ha, 27%
2	Change in percentage of AONB recorded as 'most tranquil'	44.98% recorded as tranquillity is high or very high
3	Fixed-point photographic monitoring of key views	Data not available
Cultural Heritage		
4	Change in area of land under agri-environment schemes for the management and protection of historic features	Increase of 5.7%
5	Change in percentage of heritage assets at risk	3 Scheduled Monuments currently at high risk
6	Change in number of heritage records for the AONB available on the on-line Historic Environment Record (HERs)	Increase from 4961 to 8144
Biodiversity and Geodiversity		
7	Percentage of SSSIs in 'favourable condition'	19.09% favourable 76% unfavourable recovering
8	Area and percentage of AONB in agri-environment schemes	See indicator 1
9	Percentage of woodland in active management	44.16%
10	Status of rivers	0% in good or high status in 2017
11	Education and interpretation initiatives	Available via projects including Blackdown Hills Natural Futures
Natural Resources		
12	Change in ecological status of waterbodies and riparian habitats	See indicator 10
Farming, Forestry & Land Management		
13	Percentage of land managed under all agri-environment schemes	See indicator 1
14	Percentage change in farm number and size	3% increase in number of farms, 14.5% decrease in number of largest farms
Access and Enjoyment		
15	% of AONB that is publicly accessible	3%
16	Number of people participating in local health walk scheme	1113 attendees at Walking for Health group walks in 2017
Planning and Development		
17	Number of affordable homes built annually	Data not available
18	Change in % of settlements with neighbourhood plan, parish plan or village design statement	4 parishes with adopted neighbourhood plans
19	Change in % of AONB recorded as 'most tranquil'	See indicator 2

Transport and Highways		
20	Traffic counts at locations in/near AONB	8 locations, all but one saw increases in traffic
21	% of settlements served by daily bus service	Data not available
Rural Economy and Tourism		
22	Total annual values of agri-environment agreements	£870,686
23	Percentage of area that has access to faster broadband	Data not available
Community and Culture		
24	Number of parishes with neighbourhood plan, up-to-date parish plans or equivalent	4 parishes with adopted neighbourhood plans
25	Percentage of key settlements with core services. Core services include: post office, village store, community hall, primary school, pub, regular bus service.	Data not available
Communication, Education and Awareness		
26	Numbers of people engaged with social networks and attending events	Available via AONB stats
27	Numbers of people participating in voluntary activities in the countryside	This isn't readily available for the whole AONB, although data has been collated for projects including Blackdown Hills Natural Futures
28	Evaluation of shifting opinions and attitudes among targeted audiences	Available via projects including Blackdown Hills Natural Futures
Partnership and Management		
29	Blackdown Hills AONB Annual Review produced and publicly available	Yes
30	Amount of funding brought in by the AONB team	Approximately £160K in 2017/18
31	Percentage attendance by members at Partnership Management Group meetings	62%

Landscape Character

1. *Indicator: Area (ha) and percentage of AONB in agri-environment schemes*

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Area of land (ha)	15,159	14,388	14,327	12,898	10,004
Percentage of Blackdown Hills AONB	41%	39%	39%	35%	27%
<i>East Devon AONB</i>	50%	-	-	-	40%
<i>Quantock Hills AONB</i>	49%	-	-	-	42%
<i>All AONBs (England)</i>	55%	-	-	-	45%

Source Defra/Natural England (Framework for Monitoring Environmental Outcomes in Protected Landscapes)

Interpretation:

The majority (96%) of the decrease in the area of land in schemes in the period has been due to the expiry of 5 year entry level stewardship schemes from 204 to 111 agreements (with no equivalent Countryside Stewardship option)

Desired state: As much land as possible is in higher tier/ level agri-environment schemes as this should result in sustainable land management that conserves and enhances the natural beauty

2. *Indicator: Change in percentage of AONB recorded as 'most tranquil'.*

This measure is based on analysis of the 2006 Council for Protection for Rural England (CPRE) Tranquillity Mapping by Natural England and attempts to quantify the distribution of relative tranquillity within each protected landscape.

The results for the Blackdown AONB are as follows;

Relative tranquillity	% area
Very high	5.5
High	39.48
Moderate	43.82
Low	11.06
Very low	0.14

Source Natural England/Council for Protection of Rural England

(National Tranquillity Mapping Data 2006 developed for the Campaign to Protect Rural England and Natural England by the University of Northumbria)

Interpretation:

Under the CPRE methodology, each 500m x 500m of England was given a tranquillity score, based on 44 different factors which add or detract from people's feelings of tranquillity. Positive factors included seeing a 'natural' landscape, hearing birdsong and seeing the stars at night; and detracting factors included hearing constant traffic noise, seeing lots of people and urban development.

This measure was only provided in 2013, using the 2006 base data, and no national tranquillity mapping has been repeated since.

Desired state: As much of the AONB as possible is very high or high tranquillity status

3. **Indicator:** Fixed-point photographic monitoring of key views (one viewpoint per landscape character area)

Viewpoints were identified as part of the *What Makes a View?* project in 2013 in order to be able to record and monitor landscape-scale change. However, photographic recording was not started until summer 2017 and so there is no data available for this indicator.

Source AONB

Cultural Heritage

4. **Indicator:** Change in area of land under agri-environment schemes for the management and protection of historic features

	2013	2017
Number of agreements	31	25
Area (ha)	182	192.4

Source Defra/Natural England (Framework for Monitoring Environmental Outcomes in Protected Landscapes)

Interpretation:

Although there are fewer Environmental Stewardship agreements specifically for the management and protection of archaeological features, over the period the area of land under management has increased by 5.7%.

Desired state: All archaeological features are suitably protected or managed

5. **Indicator:** Change in percentage of heritage assets at risk

The Heritage at Risk Programme (HAR) was launched in 2008, as a way of understanding the overall state of England's historic sites. In particular, the programme identifies those sites that are most at risk of being lost as a result of neglect, decay or inappropriate development.

The 2017 figures for assets at risk are as follows;

Listed buildings (% of total)				Scheduled Monuments (% of total)
Grade I	Grade II*	Grade II	Total	
0	6.4	0.1	6.5	16

Source Historic England 2017

Interpretation:

Within the Blackdown Hills AONB Historic England records 765 listed buildings (13 grade I, 47 grade II* and 705 grade II) and 25 scheduled monuments.

Of these, three of the Scheduled Monuments are currently classified as at high risk of being lost. These are Dunkeswell Abbey, Membury Castle and Stockland Great Castle.

Desired state: No Scheduled Heritage Assets are at risk

6. **Indicator:** Change in number of heritage records for the AONB available on the on-line Historic Environment Record (HER)

	2013	2018	change
Number of records	4961	8144	+ 3183 (64%)

Source Devon County Council/South West Heritage Trust

The county-based Historic Environment Records (HER) contain extensive records of:

- Archaeological monuments (e.g. prehistoric flint finds, hillforts and field systems, Roman roads, medieval fortifications, significant placenames, sites of palaeoenvironmental importance, Second World War defensive sites, etc.)
- Historic buildings
- Archaeological events (excavations, archaeological assessments, geophysical surveys, etc.)

as well as:

- Historic maps
- Aerial photographs
- Archaeological reports
- Historic landscape information
- Unpublished notes and other records

Interpretation:

The huge increase in the number of records is largely a result of an archaeological aerial investigation carried out between 2016 and 2018 that was centred on the AONB. The survey area covered 564 square kilometres in Devon and Somerset, focused around the AONB, which has seen little systematic archaeological survey and where the archaeological resource was relatively poorly understood. The project consulted over seven thousand hard copy aerial photographs loaned from the Historic England Archive, as well as modern digital datasets of vertical aerial photographs. However it was the remote sensing technique known as lidar that proved to be exceptionally useful during this project, enabling features obscured by tree cover and those that survived only as slight earthwork remains to be mapped and recorded.

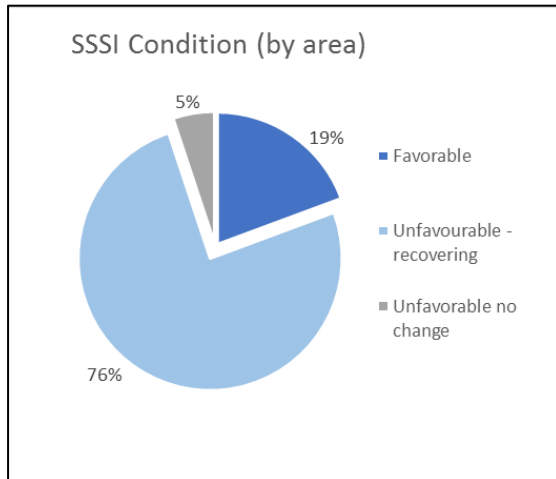
In total, 5052 archaeological or historic sites were identified from the aerial imagery and recorded on the relevant Historic Environment Record (HER); 87% of these had not previously been recorded.

Desired state: The more HER records we have the better - therefore we know more about heritage of the area and we can then protect/ take action to conserve via projects

Biodiversity and Geodiversity

7. **Indicator:** Percentage of SSSIs in 'favourable condition'

SSSI represent best examples of the very best wildlife and geological sites and support key species and habitats. Most SSSI are in private ownership and their management is shared responsibility with Natural England.



Results for the Blackdown Hills SSSIs in favourable condition

Biological 19.09% Geological 0%
Source: Natural England

Interpretation:

Of the 13 biological SSSI in the AONB, 9 have at least one compartment which is considered to be in favourable condition. There is only one SSSI which contains an area considered unfavourable – no change. This represents 32% of that particular SSSI and 5% of the biological SSSI area in the AONB.

Some of the reasons why only 19% of the SSSI’s are in favourable condition (when the target is 50% favourable condition by 2020) is that:

- 76% are unfavourable recovering and therefore on their way to becoming favourable
- woodland SSSI’s are in a ‘recovering’ condition (not yet favourable) as they lack sufficient deadwood
- some grassland mosaics currently lack key indicator species (for example wood white butterfly) and grassland/ scrub components do not concur with Natural England’s Integrated Site Assessments.

In addition there are three Geological SSSI. Two are considered unfavourable - no change and represent 39% in area. The third site representing 61% of the area of geological SSSI in the AONB was considered unfavourable – recovering.

These percentages have remained constant over the five-year period.

Desired state: Under the Government’s strategy for wildlife, Biodiversity 2020 Natural England has a target to ensure 50% of SSSI are in favourable and 100% are either in favourable or in favourable recovering by 2019.

8. Indicator: Area and percentage of AONB in agri-environment schemes

See indicator 1

9. Indicator: Percentage of woodland in management

44%

Source Forestry Commission copyright 2017

This shows a 5% increase since 2013.

Interpretation:

It is estimated that woodland covers 5355 Ha of the AONB which represents 14.5% of its area, with around ¾ of this being classified as broadleaved woodlands. Within this, 44% is actively managed; Forestry Commission (FC) defines this as woodlands where there has been recent activity related to FC-operated grant schemes and initiatives or felling licences or is managed by FC.

Desired state: The amount of woodland in management exceeds the national percentage (58% in England, 2017)

10. *Indicator: Status of rivers*

Source Environment Agency

Under the European Water Framework Directive, the ecological status of rivers is classified as one of the following;

- High
- Good
- Moderate
- Poor
- Bad

There is a target within that for all rivers to reach at least a good or high standard.

5 main rivers rise in the Blackdown Hills:

- Tone
- Parrett
- Culm
- Otter
- Yarty (Axe)

The first two are in the Somerset Catchment Partnership area; the latter three are in the East Devon Catchment Partnership area.

In 2017, 0% were categorised as being in either *good* or *high* status. However, this is not atypical of the river quality status in England and the classifications are stringent, with a 'one out, all out' level of attainment set. When the data is interrogated, it is encouraging that some 'reasons for failure' are improving and through targeted action, it is possible to address these failures. The Environment Agency have set a long timescale for addressing issues largely due to agricultural diffuse pollution, which explains the target of achieving *good* status on many of the watercourses in the area by 2027.

This is an area which needs further analysis to understand the reasons for this apparent poor water quality, to determine if this is a concern.

Desired state: The status of rivers moves from poor/ moderate to high/ good (and there is no deterioration)

11. **Indicator:** Education and interpretation initiatives

Wildlife and environmental education and interpretation is largely undertaken via projects in the AONB due to the need to secure funding to deliver this work. This results in peaks and troughs of activity.

Between 2014 and 2017, the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures (BHNF) project (managed by the Blackdown Hills AONB) undertook education and interpretation initiatives across the AONB.
Source AONB

Interpretation:

Headline outputs from the BHNF project include over 1000 school children engaged in wildlife education through 24 school visits. 20 Community Nature Project developed with local communities and interpretation installed.

Desired state: The AONB have an ambition to have continued and active engagement with all the schools in or immediately adjacent to the AONB

Natural Resources

12. **Indicator:** Change in ecological status of waterbodies and riparian habitats

See indicator 10

Farming, Forestry & Land Management

13. **Indicator:** Percentage of land managed under all agri-environment schemes

See indicator 1

14. **Indicator:** Percentage change in farm number and size

3.5% increase in number of farms

14.5% decrease in number of largest farms

5% decrease in total land area

	2013	2016
Number of farms	608	629
<5 ha	75	75
5-20 ha	165	172
20-50 ha	144	169
50-100 ha	130	131
>100 ha	94	82
Total area	31,430 ha	29,773 ha

Source Defra (June Agricultural Survey)

Interpretation:

There has been a small trend over the three years towards a higher number of smaller farms. The numbers in each sector have remained broadly similar except for cereals/crops where the number of holdings has increased from 84 to 121.

Geographical breakdowns, that provide figures for AONB areas, are only available in years that correspond to EU Farm Structure Survey, hence the only figures available are for 2013 and 2016. Changes in sampling and methodology mean that identification of trends and direct comparisons are difficult.

Access and Enjoyment

15. Indicator: % of AONB that is publicly accessible

3% of the AONB

Source: Natural England (Framework for Monitoring Environmental Outcomes in Protected Landscapes)

Interpretation:

3% of the AONB is considered to be accessible to the public (1011ha). This includes Open Access land, Wildlife Trust Reserves, National Trust accessible land, Local Nature Reserves, Forestry Commission woodlands, Woods for People and Woodland Trust land. There are also public rights of way totalling 429 kilometres (2008).

This data was provided in 2013 only, using nationally available statistics.

Desired state: Many opportunities exist for people to easily access the natural environment across the AONB

16. Indicator: Number of people participating in local health walk scheme

1113 attendees were recorded as taking part in the organised group walks during 2017

Source local provider

Interpretation:

Westbank Health Walks run a Mid Devon Walk and Talk programme in the Blackdown Hills with walks on a weekly basis starting from Hemyock and Dunkeswell, ranging from short easy walks to longer, more challenging ones. The figure of 1113 is the sum of numbers attending each walk, and not the number of individuals participating in the programme.

Planning and Development

17. Indicator: Number of affordable homes built annually

No data available for this indicator

Source local planning authorities

This data is not readily and easily available; local authority figures are not cut to the AONB boundary and this has not been pursued by the AONB team.

18. Indicator: *Change in % of settlements with neighbourhood plan, parish plan or village design statement*

Four parishes have completed neighbourhood plans
Source local planning authorities and AONB

Interpretation:

Parishes in the AONB have a long history of preparing parish plans and similar community planning documents. The formal planning status of a neighbourhood plan was a natural progression for some communities, and by the end of 2017 the parishes of Stockland, Chardstock, Yarcombe and Dunkeswell had adopted plans in place. Information about the preparation and updating of other community plans has not been systematically recorded.

Desired state: Good coverage of neighbourhood plans, driven by local communities, which contribute to conserving and enhancing the AONB

19. Indicator: *Change in % of AONB recorded as 'most tranquil'*

See indicator 2

Transport and Highways

20. Indicator: *Traffic counts at locations in/near AONB*

There are 8 traffic count monitoring points on main roads within the AONB, which are reported on by the Department for Transport. All but one of these saw increased traffic numbers between 2014 and 2016.

Source Department for Transport

Interpretation:

The locations of the traffic count sites are:

A373 near Broadhembury

A35 near Shute

A30 Monkton

A30 near Newcott

A303 Marsh

A303 near Buckland St Mary

A30 Yarcombe

A30 near Wambrook

Average annual daily traffic flows for 2016 vary from 2,200 at Yarcombe, 3,400 on the A373 (a small decrease from 2014) to 12,400 on the A35 and 15,900 at Monkton.

21. Indicator: *% of settlements served by daily bus service*

No data available for this indicator

This locally derived data has not been developed or recorded and no accurate data is available.

It was noted that in 2014 there were 10 bus routes in the AONB (at least one return journey per week).

Rural Economy and Tourism

22. *Indicator: Total annual values of agri-environment agreements*

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total (£)	1,002,569	992,579	1,027,291	942,079	870,686

Source Defra/Natural England (Framework for Monitoring Environmental Outcomes in Protected Landscapes)

Interpretation:

These figures relate to all agri-environment schemes, mostly Environmental Stewardship, but also some ESA agreements in 2013 and 2014.

23. *Indicator: Percentage of area that has access to faster broadband*

No accurate available data

Interpretation:

Connecting Devon and Somerset have an ambition to provide superfast broadband speed (over 24 mbps) to all premises by 2020, and although progress is being made generally, there is no accurate or reliable picture of speeds or coverage in the Blackdown Hills.

Community and Culture

24. *Indicator: Number of parishes with neighbourhood plans, up-to-date parish plans or equivalent*

See indicator 18

25. *Indicator: Percentage of key settlements with core services.*

No data available for this indicator

This locally derived data has not been developed or recorded and no accurate data is available.

Communication, Education and Awareness

26. *Indicator: Numbers of people engaged with social media networks and attending events*

Source AONB

Events

Approx. 1,650 people attending events in 2017.

This figure is based on the number of people who booked on AONB/BHNF events (assuming the number of no shows cancels out the extras who turned up without bookings) plus an estimate of 400 people at the Carols.

Facebook

1400+ page likes on Facebook, which has grown from 500 in 2014.

Twitter

Since August 2009: 2636 followers, tweets 3205, 401 likes – likes per tweet 0.13, likes per follower: 0.15.

Klout Score

Klout is a website and mobile app that uses social media analytics to rate its users according to online social influence via the "Klout Score", which is a numerical value between 1 and 100.

Blackdown Hills AONB's Klout score is currently 48

Comparison: Quantock Hills 49, East Devon 47, Shropshire Hills 46.

Newsletter

2,758 subscribers to our email newsletter

Website news pages

2017: page views of news pages = 3389

Desired state: as many two-way social media 'hits' as possible that are a proxy for people's celebration, awareness and engagement in the AONB

27. Indicator: Numbers of people participating in voluntary activities in the countryside

Data not currently available

Source AONB

Interpretation:

Although no robust data is currently available across the AONB, a new volunteer effort metric is being developed for the AONB Partnership to allow comparison against a baseline in future years. Data has been collected for projects including the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures Project, through which there were 400+ volunteer days contributed through the dormouse monitoring programme alone.

28. Indicator: Evaluation of shifting opinions and attitudes amongst targeted audiences

Data not currently available

Source AONB

Interpretation:

No systematic survey has been undertaken to date although the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures Project recorded a positive change in opinion and attitudes amongst target audiences; a) 93% of participants [in events and training] knowledge and understanding of local wildlife improved and b) 71% of participants [in events and training] were given confidence to start identifying and recording wildlife.

Partnership and Management

29. *Indicator: Blackdown Hills AONB Annual Review produced and publicly available*

An AONB Annual Review is produced each year and is publicly available via a spread in *View from the Blackdowns*, AONB website and email.

30. *Indicator: Amount of funding brought in by the AONB team*

Approximately £160K in 17/18

Source AONB

Interpretation: This amount consists of external funding secured through the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures Project, Wood 4 Water, part of the Culm Community Crayfish Project and the Culm Enhancement Project.

31. *Indicator: Percentage attendance by members at Blackdown AONB Partnership Management Group meetings*

62% attendance in 2017

Source AONB

Interpretation:

There are usually three meetings a year which bring together representatives from Local Authorities, key NGOs, local organisations and the community.