



Blackdown Hills
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Annual review 2017 – 2018

Contents

Forward – Paul Diviani, Chair, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership	2
New AONB manager	3
Planning.....	3
New website for Blackdown Hills AONB	4
State of the Blackdown Hills AONB report	4
The Blackdown Hills AONB and East Devon River Catchments Archaeological Survey (National Mapping Programme)	4
Blackdown Hills Natural Futures	5
Culm Community Crayfish project	7
Blackdown Hills Farming and Woodland Group	7
Woods for Water	8
Culm Enhancement Project	8
Sustainable Development Fund	9
Nature and Wellbeing	10
Naturally Healthy Month	10
Volunteering	11
Events.....	12
Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership Management Group 2017/2018	13
Financial information 2017/2018	14
Sustainable Development Fund grants 2017/2018	14

Forward – Paul Diviani, Chair, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership

“It was ‘all change’ in August 2017 as Linda Bennett retired and Tim Youngs joined us as the new Manager of Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Tim had to hit the ground running as there were many projects coming to fruition and being developed, alongside the start of the AONB Management Plan review process and business planning.



In November 2017, Blackdown Hills Natural Futures project, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, came to an end after three years of fantastic engagement with community groups, young people, schools and individuals, helping to inspire and engage them about the wildlife on their doorstep. The project has also created a step change in our understanding of the biological importance of the Blackdown Hills AONB. Many exciting finds were made including a rare black dormouse and a species of plant previously unrecorded in the area. Such data is invaluable in justifying to funders the importance of the work of the AONB Partnership.

Hot on the heels of the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures project, another Partnership project, the Culm Community Crayfish project, started with the aim of securing a future for the endangered, indigenous white-clawed crayfish. This project is working with specialists and volunteers to assess the current status of the species and very much captures the imagination of the local community.

Our £1.6 million Making it Local LEADER programme across the Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONBs has been critical in supporting the rural economy and maintains pole position as the top performing LEADER programme in the country.

The Government’s 25-Year Environment Plan (YEP) was published in early 2018 and offers much in terms of linking to AONB objectives. We are supportive of the principle of a review of protected landscapes, in so far as it pledges to look at what might be done better and what changes could assist Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Developing new projects, as referred to previously, offers a great opportunity to strengthen the Blackdown Hills AONB’s role in delivering the 25 YEP, through providing clean drinking water, reducing downstream flooding and securing the important ‘natural capital’ of the area, whether that be historic field boundaries, wetland mires or ancient woodlands. As our Nature & Wellbeing work expands, we are truly making the link between a protected landscape, rich in heritage, and public health benefits. Finally, we have engaged new audiences via more than 50 events, including those during Naturally Healthy Month and Outstanding Week.”

New AONB manager

In August 2017, **Tim Youngs** took up his post as the manager of Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), following Linda Bennett's retirement. Tim has more than 20 years' experience working in the environmental sector and joined the AONB from Somerset Wildlife Trust where he was Director of Land Management.



Planning

We made substantive responses to 62 **planning** applications and considered 43 others. The number of applications in the AONB in 2017 totalled 440 – up on the previous year but in line with long-term figures. Blackdown Hills AONB was consulted in 22% of cases.

In addition, we submitted comments and responses to:

- South Somerset Local Plan issues and options consultation.
- Greater Exeter Strategic Plan issues consultation.
- Housing White Paper consultation and Further Consultation on Rural Planning Review Call for Evidence (in relation to agricultural permitted development thresholds).

In November, we held a joint training workshop with Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills for local authority planning and landscape officers on issues around agricultural buildings.

In 2017-18 Chardstock, Dunkeswell and Yarcombe joined Stockland in having their neighbourhood plans adopted, bringing the total number to four.



New website for Blackdown Hills AONB

This year, we redeveloped our [website](#), creating a hub for people to discover what makes the Blackdown Hills AONB so special, to inspire them to explore what the area has to offer and help them find out what contribution they can make to its future.

Significant improvements were made in relation to mobile compatibility, accessibility, search engine optimisation, and user experience. Members of the local community were involved in the planning process and continue to contribute to the website's content.

State of the Blackdown Hills AONB report

We published our first [State of the Blackdown Hills AONB](#) report, with a view to assessing of the 'health' of the Blackdown Hills protected landscape, thereby helping to inform and assess progress on the AONB's management plan. It is intended that this will be an annual publication allowing us to fine-tune our methodology for measurement and to track trends over time.



The Blackdown Hills AONB and East Devon River Catchments Archaeological Survey (National Mapping Programme)

The Blackdown Hills AONB has been a relatively under-studied landscape. The [National Mapping Programme survey](#) was designed to provide good archaeological information to inform land management. This particularly related to potential changes due to initiatives to reduce water pollution from agriculture. These targeted the catchments of the rivers Sid, Otter and Axe. Work also focussed on the A30/A303 road corridor.

Blackdown Hills Natural Futures

December 2017 saw the completion of the **Blackdown Hills Natural Futures** project. The project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, had run for three years, from January 2015.



As with previous years of the project, we took on three voluntary trainees who helped survey our local habitats and wildlife. They also took part in specialist ecology training, to gain skills for employment in the ecology and conservation sector. All the trainees entered employment in the sector after completing their placements.

Through the course of the project, we supported 17 community nature projects across the Blackdown Hills AONB which helped community groups and schools to look after wildlife and care for community spaces. The support we provided including help with grants and funding, wildlife identification and rural skills training, and, in many cases, help to develop management plans for the sites.

Local primary school children took part in environmental education sessions involving pond dipping, moth identification, bird and bat box making, and mini 'bioblitz' events.

To mark the culmination of the project, we engaged Daisy (Devon Arts in Schools Initiative) to work with ten local schools to produce habitat-inspired artworks. Some of these artworks were combined into



striking large-scale art panels for an exhibition and, later, reproduced as postcards.

Blackdown Hills Natural Futures in numbers*

- **3,470** participants engaged through events, talks and activities
- **150** sites surveyed, and thousands of new wildlife records submitted
- **63** events and training workshops delivered
- More than **1,000** children and **50** teaching staff engaged in wildlife education activities through **24** school visits
- **100%** participant enjoyment rate for 2017 events (98% over the three years)
- **93%** of participants said their knowledge and understanding of local wildlife had improved
- **111** hours of support to **17** Community Nature Projects

*Figures for the three years of the project



Events

Throughout the course of the project, we ran events exploring the wildlife of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). These ranged from family activities like river-dipping and bat-box making to more specialist sessions where people could learn how to identify plants, trees, birds and mammals.

- Bats and bat-box making
- Birds of the Blackdown Hills
- Wildlife photography talk
- Dawn chorus walk
- Wildlife discovery day
- Meadow meander
- Family river-dipping
- Introduction to mammal tracking
- Bat detecting
- Fun with fungi
- Lichen identification
- Winter tree identification

Approximately 500 people attended our Wildlife Discovery Day at Forde Abbey in May 2017. These annual Wildlife Discovery Days had grown in popularity each year, bringing together conservation organisations and specialists, and providing an opportunity for members of the public to have a hands-on experience with nature.

Culm Community Crayfish project

In January 2018, we embarked on the **Culm Community Crayfish** project. The River Culm is one of only two sites in Devon where the endangered, white-clawed crayfish remains.



The aim of the project is to gather important information about the native white-clawed crayfish, the non-native signal crayfish, and the diverse wildlife of the River Culm with a view to safeguarding the fragile populations of native white-clawed crayfish in the long term. The project has been raising awareness and recruiting volunteers to undertake citizen science surveys relating to the crayfish populations and other aspects of the river's ecology.

The project received support from East Devon Catchment Partnership, £59,800 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), and contributions from the Environment Agency, Blackdown Hills AONB, local parish councils and Devon County Council.

Blackdown Hills Farming and Woodland Group

Following a successful partnership bid to Natural England, a new training and collaboration network, the **Farming and Woodland Group**, was set up for farmers and other land managers within the Blackdown Hills AONB.



Beginning work in early 2018, this three-year project will bring landowners together to share knowledge, learn from each other's experiences and work collaboratively with a 'landscape scale' approach; all with the long-term objective of improving their practices to look after the natural environment and resources on their holdings.

Funding for the project has been provided through Defra's Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund. The project is being led by Butterfly Conservation with Blackdown Hills AONB as one of the lead partners.

Woods for Water

In December 2017, the **Woods for Water** project was launched, with a view to stimulating woodland planting and management in appropriate locations to combat flooding and improve water quality. The project will provide the resource to engage landowners and support them in creating woodland through a suite of existing incentives.

This 40-month project is a partnership between the Environment Agency, Devon County Council through its Biosphere Reserve Team, Natural England, Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust.

Woods for water is focussing on three areas: North Devon, the Camel Estuary, and East Devon taking in part of the Blackdown Hills AONB. It is being led by North Devon Biosphere with Blackdown Hills AONB coordinating locally.

Culm Enhancement Project

Through the East Devon Catchment Partnership, Blackdown Hills AONB secured £20,000 to provide nature-based solutions across the upper catchment of the River Culm to address water quality issues identified in the Water Framework Directive.

The **Culm Enhancement Project** funded four pilot projects with interventions designed to make a notable difference to water quality, flood alleviation and biodiversity – for example, watercourse stock-fencing, stoned cattle-crossing points and drinking points, and natural flood management features such as ‘leaky dams’ and small areas of willow and alder planting.

The aim is to build support and provide evidence for a larger Culm catchment project that will work with communities and landowners to adapt to climate change and provide a more holistic approach in line with Defra’s 25-Year Environment Plan.



Sustainable Development Fund

Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) is aimed at supporting projects that bring social, environmental and economic benefits to the area and demonstrate innovation and good practice, with a maximum grant of £2,000 per project.

In 2017-18, we awarded a total of £9, 573 to seven projects, leveraging £21,714 in match funding (cash and in-kind).

Willtown Turbary restoration

Clearing the land to provide a better habitat for wildlife and improve local community access.

Upottery Primary School – outdoor learning shelter (pictured right)

Enabling the children to have a direct link between their learning and the natural environment.



Hemyock Primary School – pond access improvements

With better access to the pond, the children can more easily learn about the natural world.

Yarcombe apple days – apple crusher and press

Apple pressing equipment to be shared with adjoining parishes to support this rural tradition and make the most of the local harvest.

Wellington Monument's bicentenary

A community event in October 2017 to mark the 200-year anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of this iconic national monument.

Otterford fingerposts

Parts and equipment to restore some of the fifteen historic fingerpost signs within the parish. South West Heritage Trust and Somerset Highways have been encouraging parishes to help with the restoration and maintenance of these heritage features which are an important element of the AONB's cultural landscape.

Newhaven Coppice improving access

Creating better access to this site which is used by heritage and volunteer groups.

Nature and Wellbeing

We continued to work on the **Nature and Wellbeing** Project, continuing to help members of the local community to make the most of Somerset's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) by participating in activities that improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

The project is a collaboration between Public Health Somerset, Blackdown Hills AONB, Mendip Hills AONB and Quantock Hills AONB. Together we are working to cultivate lasting connections, bringing together people and groups to sustain the aims of the project long into the future – from professionals working in health and nature through to volunteers and community groups. Initiatives include:

Wild Days Project

Working with the Forestry Commission and Zing Somerset to support a group from Halcon and Priorswood Estate, we provided families with opportunities to be active, get outside and to visit places they may not otherwise have the chance to explore.

Chard WATCH

A group of people, with various health and wellbeing needs, made regular visits to Folly Farm, a farm in the Blackdown Hills AONB which is managed primarily for nature conservation.

Chard Memory Café

Chard Memory Café paying regular visits to Ferne Animal Sanctuary to take part in seasonal art sessions led by a local volunteer. The idea is to inspire conversations and memories through nature-based art.

Otterhead lakes conservation sessions

Involving people normally less able to access physical outdoor tasks. The volunteers come from various services in Chard and Taunton Deane, including Green Days Day Care.

Foot of the Blackdown Hills walking group

This walking group was set up with the help of Alzheimer's Society and Better in Taunton. Group members enjoy conversations about their childhood memories of nature and spend time sharing stories and experiences.

Naturally Healthy Month

Our Nature and Wellbeing project officer led Somerset's first Naturally Healthy Month programme in May 2017, which ran concurrently with Devon's established Naturally Health Month. Seven Blackdown-Hills-based events were included in the programme, attracting around 800 participants.

Volunteering

This year, we have been working to identify opportunities and training for volunteers, generate interest in volunteering in the Blackdown Hills AONB, and cultivate lasting links between local groups looking for volunteer support and people looking for volunteering opportunities.

In April 2017, we welcomed Sammy Fraser to the new post of volunteer coordinator working across Somerset's three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a day a week with Blackdown Hills AONB.

We worked with external organisations and partners to identify volunteering opportunities and match them with willing volunteers:

- Identifying three volunteers to help at Coldharbour Mill
- Recruiting five volunteer fence-checkers for the Blackdown Hills Trust
- Promoting volunteer opportunities with Neroche Conservation Volunteers and Young Wood
- Teaming up with the Nature and Wellbeing Project to provide volunteering opportunities for people who would otherwise find it difficult to access the AONB in this way. For example, groups such as Greendays, Wild Days and Chard WATCH (see above).
- Recruiting nine Nature and Wellbeing volunteers to support these groups.
- Working closely with partners such as the Forestry Commission to check accessibility in key public sites, run family activities and set up regular practical volunteering opportunities.

In this first year, nearly 1,200 volunteer hours were contributed.



Events

Here are some of the highlights of our events calendar in 2017-18:

A Fragile Beauty

A group of English post-impressionist artists working in the early 20th century, known as the Camden Town Artists, became well known for their paintings of the Blackdown Hills countryside.

The artwork was celebrated in 2017, with an exhibition at the Museum of Somerset, A Fragile Beauty: Art on the Blackdown Hills 1909 to 1925. We worked in partnership with the South West Heritage Trust to put on a series of complementary events:

- **Celebrated but seedy** – a talk on the life of Walter Sickert.
- **Beauty and the Blackdowns** – family fun day at Taunton Museum.
- **Making patterns in the landscape: art workshop** – aimed at people with memory loss or those who could find it difficult to visit the Blackdown Hills.
- **The Blackdown Hills: a landscape of patterns and pictures** – talk and tea.
- **In the footsteps of the Camden Town artists** – a walk exploring the fields, lanes and buildings which feature in the Camden Town Artists' paintings.



A night with the stars

90 people attended our 'Night with the stars' event in Churchinford, celebrating the beauty of Blackdown Hills' night skies, raising awareness of light pollution and how people can combat it through their own actions. Activities included a mobile planetarium experience, interactive space-themed activities, a chance to learn about life on board the International Space station and, of course, some star-gazing.

Carols at the Wellington Monument

In partnership with the National Trust, we once again held our annual carol-singing event at the Wellington Monument, led by Blackdown Community Choir.

Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership Management Group 2017/2018

(as at end of year)

Name:	Representing:
Cllr Paul Diviani (chairman)	East Devon District Council
Cllr John Berry	Devon County Council
Cllr John Thorne	Somerset County Council
Cllr Frank Rosamond	Mid Devon District Council
Cllr Martin Wale	South Somerset District Council
Cllr Dave Durdan	Taunton Deane Borough Council
Rachel Williams	Natural England
Gordon Field	Blackdown Hills Artists & Makers
Heather Stallard	Blackdown Hills Business Association
Martin Turner	Blackdown Hills Hedge Association
John Greenshields	Blackdown & East Devon Woodland Association
Chris Lewis / Penny Mills	Campaign to Protect Rural England, Somerset/Devon
Simon Larkins	National Trust
Mark Pope	National Farmers Union
David Northcote-Wright	Somerset Wildlife Trust
Cllr Graham Long	Upottery Parish Council
Cllr Bob Nelson	Broadhembury Parish Council
Cllr Jocelyn Pritchard	Hemyock Parish Council
Bruce Payne (vice chairman)	
Elaine Hayes	
Specific points of contact (3):	
Hugh Davey	Environment Agency
Kate Tobin	Forestry Commission
Charlotte Russell	Historic England

Financial information 2017/2018

AONB income	£
Income brought forward from 2016/17	36,453
Defra	162,667
Devon County Council	9,274
Somerset County Council	5,392
Mid Devon District Council	8,500
East Devon District Council	9,323
South Somerset District Council	6,000
Taunton Deane Borough Council	10,000
Rental income	1,839
Other income	7,277
Income carried forward to 2018/19*	- 37,509
Total income	219,216

* Monies received for Blackdown Hills AONB ongoing projects

AONB Expenditure	£
Staffing	132,963
Office costs	26,386
Partnership costs	16,780
Heritage Lottery Fund Project Natural Futures	11,313
Partnership projects	22,201
Sustainable Development Fund	9,573
Total expenditure	219,216

Sustainable Development Fund grants 2017/2018

Projects	£
Willtown Turbary restoration	1,000
All-weather outdoor learning shelter	2,000
Pond dwellers and habitat conservers	1,163
Yarcombe apple days	1,140
Celebrating 22 years of the Wellington Monument	2,000
Otterford fingerposts	1,920
Newhaven coppice	350
Total	9,573