# BLACKDOWN HILLS National Landscape

# Minutes of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership Management Group held on Thursday, 7th March 2024 at Riverside, Hemyock

# Present:

David Northcote-Wright Somerset Wildlife Trust

Gordon Field Blackdown Hills Artist & Makers

Cllr Graham Long Blackdown Hills Parish Network

Cllr John Berry Devon County Council

Jonathan Doyle Somerset Council

Martin Turner Blackdown Hills Hedge Association

Cllr Martin Wale Somerset Council

Cllr Natasha Bradshaw Mid Devon District Council

Paul Spearing Co-opted Member

Peter Chamberlain (Acting Chair) Devon County Council

Tommy Muncie National Trust

Blackdown Hills AONB staff team: Tim Youngs **(TY),** Lisa Turner **(LT)**, Gavin Saunders **(GS)** Lucy Jefferson **(LJ)** Hannah Metson **(HM)**

**Apologies:** Cllr Bob Nelson (Blackdown Hills Parish Network), Bruce Payne (Special Appointee), Carolyn Dare (Blackdown Hills Transition Group), Clare Newill (Natural England), Daniel Lazar (Co-opted Member), Janette Ward (Campaign to Protect Rural England), Robert Derryman (National Farmers Union), Cllr Sarah Wakefield (Somerset Council), Cllr Yehudi Levine (East Devon District Council), Alex Swan (Environment Agency): Emily Martin (National Farmers Union); Sarah Jennings (Devon County Council); Cllr Mike Canham (Blackdown Hills Parish Network)

**Members of the public:** One

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| **ITEM 1 Welcome and Introductions** | **By whom** |
| **1.1:** The Chair presented a fitting tribute to John Greenshields who passed away in December and acknowledged the support and assistance he had provided to the work of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. TY discussed the proposal to create a John Greenshields Memorial Award and he would update the group following a meeting with Jo Greenshields. **1.2:** Welcome, introductions and apologies were made, including welcoming a member of the public **1.3:** Declarations of interest: none**1.4:** The Chair reminded members to complete an updated Register of Interest form (regardless of whether they have one for their own organisation), a copy will be circulated with the minutes.**1.5:** Following the loss of John Greenshields as Deputy Chair, the group were asked to consider the role and suggest a nomination for a replacement who would be willing to take the position. Nominations / suggestions to be forwarded to HM and TY in the first instance. | **TY****HM/ALL****ALL** |
| **ITEM 2 Partnership Management Group Election Update** |  |
| **2.1** A total of eight nominations had been received (details of nominees sent out in advance of the meeting) and therefore further elections were not required. It was agreed that the eight nominees would be accepted to represent the partners for the next four years. A welcome letter and register of interest form would be sent to all new nominees that were representing the partners for the first time and training offered where required. An invite to attend their first meeting in June will also be sent. | **HM** |
| **ITEM 3 National Landscape Partnership Meeting** |  |
| 3.1 Questions from the public – None Received3.2 The minutes of the meeting held 30th November 2023 and any matters arising - The minutes were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a true record. |  |
| **ITEM 4. Workshops** |  |
| **4.1 Presentation on Connecting the Culm- by Lucy Jefferson (Culm Catchment Officer for The Devon Resilience Innovation Project)**Lucy provided a presentation on the Connecting the Culm project which is working with nature and local communities, to help make the River Culm and its catchment better for wildlife and people, and more resilient to flood and drought. The presentation included videos demonstrating run off from fields that had been previously planted with maize as well as videos showing how improvements had been made by the installation of nature-based solutions such as leaky dams, flow spreaders and restoration of wetland habitats including mires.**4.2 Presentation on the Management Plan** **review​ - Workshop: progress report and discussion on key points by Lisa Turner (Planning Officer Blackdown Hills National Landscape)**Lisa provided an update on the Management Plan in particular providing a progress report and discussion on the key points raised following the recent workshops with partners and community members. Specific focus was given to the ‘vision’ and inviting members to identify if they were comfortable with working towards the planned vision, was it ambitious enough, was there anything that was missing etc. This was followed by a summary on the four ‘principles’ of ‘climate, nature, people and place’. Documents had been circulated with the agenda in advance of the meeting.**Action** Members have been asked to provide feedback on the principles to identify if they:1. Provide an adequate framework for policies and high level actions?
2. Reflect the vision?
3. Focus on the right things?

Questions and discussion ensued and the chairman thanked the presenters and encouraged participants to take up the opportunity to get involved by contacting lucy.jefferson@devon.gov.uk (Culm Catchment Officer Devon Resilience Innovation Project) or lisa.turner@devon.gov.uk (Planning Officer Blackdown Hills National Landscape)**Action: Copy of the presentations to be circulated with the meeting minutes.** | **ALL****HM** |
| **ITEM 5 Presentation – Update on the Blackdown Hills Parish Network work plan** |  |
| **Graham Long** provided an update on the Blackdown Hills Parish Network (BHPN) workplan to date:* Work has continued in relation to planning priorities/ planning reform.
* Guidance on electric charging point installation has been shared with interested parishes.
* Following the grant from the Blackdown Hills National Landscape the thermal imaging camera project ‘Hunt the Heat’ has been progressing well with eight community members being trained to use it and four of the parishes have completed a survey. The weather has been warmer than expected this winter and the camera has seen to be more effective when used early in the morning as a consequence.
* Since 2019 £5 billion has been allocated to ‘Project Gigabyte’ , however there has not been any funds allocated to the Blackdown Hills area and the perception has been that Devon and Somerset Councils have not been keen to engage in support of the project despite the BHPN continuing to lobby MPs, government and the two County Councils and the concern remains that the clawback funds of £12 million provided by BT from the project to the County Councils will be used to pay outstanding council debts and not alleviate the technological imbalance between rural and urban towns.
* A request was made to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape to review, update and re-issue the Design Guide which is now over ten years old.
* Issues were raised highlighting two illegal development in Upottery e.g. installation of yurts/railway carriages, however there are insufficient planning officer / lawyers to tackle the rising problem.
* An information / guidance sheet on HGVs and improved signage has been published on-line and support has been sought from the County Council to help tackle the problem of HGVs using inappropriate routes.
* The group is continuing to work on ride sharing and ride hailing initiatives such as an ‘Uber Bus’ scheme where cars can utilise technology to enable this. Discussions are underway with the Rebecca Pow the Under Secretary of State (Minister for Nature) who is looking to progress this type of project.

**Action: Blackdown Hills National Landscape to consider the request for updating the design plan** | **LT** |
| **ITEM 6.1 National Landscape Team** |  |
| **TY** gave a presentation to highlight some key aspects of core and project work set out in the team report (slides to be circulated with minutes); The key issues being: * Staff recruitment/ procuring services​ – three members of staff will be leaving the team and currently recruitment freezes and slow procedures are causing delays.
* Budgets are very squeezed due to a number of factors such as- pay award increases, inflation, flatline income from Defra and local authorities etc.​
* Additional capital funding has been secured, however the revenue​ funding remains static.
* 24/25 is the last year of the current 3 year funding settlement with Defra

**Action: Somerset members to indicate if there’s any more that we/ they can do to keep the Blackdown Hills National Landscape profile high and demonstrate value for money. JD & MW have committed to engage with members, MP’s, colleagues at the Quantocks & Mendips to further the profile of National Landscapes.**A brief summary was given on the following live projects:* **Triple Axe**(Farming, Nature, People) – **GS**
* **Facilitation Fund**– 160 landowners signed up and FWAG have been appointed to facilitate the project -**GS**
* **Nature Recovery Plan / 30x30 / Local Nature Recovery Strategies**​ -
* **Climate Action Plan** – National Landscapes collaboration​
* **Luppitt Landscape Recovery** – A new CIC has been set up with funding / project work to commence in spring 2024 following DEFRA panel approval . Gavin will be taking up the role of Project Manager for the CIC in May. **GS**
* **Landscape Enhancement Initiative**– **LT**
* **Nature and wellbeing** – **LT**
* **Equality, diversity and inclusion**(EDI)​ **GS**
* **FiPL** -£407K available for next year with the project extended to a fourth year. £200K of funding is already in the pipeline.

**Action – Group encouraged to promote the FiPL project and that funding is available for land / land use not just farming related purposes.** | **JD/MW****ALL** |
| **ITEM 6.2 Financial summary to end of February 2023** |  |
| The financial report was previously circulated and a summary provided by TY and HM, stating that we were on track to deliver a balanced budget, however due to increasing financial pressures next years budget would be even tighter and funding pots such as the Sustainable Development Fund would not be able to offer any grants to community projects in 2024/2025.**MW** raised a question regarding whether Parish Councils should be approached for funding and it was pointed out that currently parish councils are also under pressure with only 50% of them currently contributing to the BHPN. **Action - TY has agreed to raise the question of approaching parishes for a contribution at the next Officers Support Group** | **TY** |
| **ITEM 7.1 Briefings from partners** |  |
| **JW** were unable to attend the meeting, but kindly submitted an update which will be circulated with the minutes.**PS** is working with Adam Powel on the Climate Action Plan**GL** see item 5.1 above**GF** the successful View from the Hills exhibition has helped to promote the Blackdown Hills Artist & Makers group and encourage new members and they continue to develop and grow as a group.**MT** the weather has resulted in a challenging season for the hedge layers, but despite the weather 70 people were trained this year in the art of hedge laying. The 26th Annual “Skills of the Hills” Event held on Saturday 2nd March 2024 at Bolham Water proved to be very successful with three trainees winning in the novice classes. The annual Cotley Hedgelaying Competition is being held on March 16 2024**JD**: explained the bleak financial position that Somerset Council was facing. Work is underway to address the shortfall and making savings where possible to achieve a balanced budget with the aim of achieving savings of £35 million this financial year and £105 million next year. Job losses will be significant with cuts of around 1200 (approximately 20% of the current workforce). JD will continue to support the work of the Blackdown Hills National Landscape and to ensure funding is protected. Any updates following consultation in April will be circulated to the group.**MW** reiterated the update from **JD** and how difficult councils were finding budgeting with rising costs of living. He will continue to promote the importance BH Partnership and also share the requirements of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA) across the council.**DNW** kindly provided feedback from local landowners regarding the FiPL work and officers. The feedback had been very positive and complimentary, and they appreciate the support and advice given and that the process was less bureaucratic than other DEFRA schemes.**TM** also experienced positive feedback working with the Quantocks FiPL team and will be looking to see if there is funding to support a project at Quarts Moor which has habitats of special interest / ecology that would benefit from a funded project. It was also suggested that if an opportunity arose to pass the feed back to Rebecca Pow about the success of the FiPL project it should be taken.**JB** raised a question regarding the number of farmers in the Blackdown Hills area and how effective the communication is for them and how effective it is at keeping them supportive of the work we do. It was felt that the current communication channels are well established, but any opportunity to develop these channels would be taken. |  |
| **ITEM 7. 2 Thanks to Peter Chamberlain** |  |
| Thanks were given to Peter Chamberlain for stepping in to chair todays meeting, but also to thank him for his longstanding support for Blackdown Hills National Landscape Team and Partnership. Peter is stepping down from his position of Environment Manager at Devon County Council and the group wished him well for the future. |  |
| **ITEM 8 Any other Business** |  |
| None |  |
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| Next meeting will be held on **Thursday 27th June 2024** from **9.30am – 12pm,** venue to be confirmed.  |  |

**Signed as a true record:**

**Chairman………………………………… Date………………….**