

Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan Review

Report of the Head of Planning, Transportation and Environment

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Committee:

- (a) notes the process and timetable for undertaking the AONB Management Plan Review;**
- (b) endorses the principles set out in this report for the 2014-19 Management Plan for the Blackdown Hills AONB;**
- (c) delegates to officers the final agreement of any outstanding detailed issues for the Consultation Drafts;**
- (d) notes that the final version of the new Management Plans will be adopted through the Cabinet Member decision process in Spring 2014.**

1. Summary

This report outlines the process of the Review of the Management Plan for the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and seeks the Committee's approval of the approach. Any views of the Committee will be addressed before production of the Plan.

2. Background

Devon has five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) within its boundaries. Three, East Devon, North Devon and South Devon, are wholly within the county, while two, Blackdown Hills and Tamar Valley, straddle the county boundary with Somerset and Cornwall respectively.

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, it is a statutory requirement for local authorities to produce Management Plans for their AONBs. It has been agreed that this will be led by the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership on behalf of the relevant local authorities. Previous Plans were agreed and adopted for all five AONBs in 2004 and 2009 and it has now become necessary to undertake a further five year review of these Plans which need to be sent to the Secretary of State by March 2014. The Review is necessary to make sure that the Plans remain relevant to key partners in the light of changing circumstances and resources, new knowledge, and lessons learnt from implementation of previous Plans. The task of the Review is to identify amendments that are necessary to ensure the Plans remain a working document that reliably, and realistically, informs the management process itself and other processes such as the preparation of local plans at the same time taking into account on-going reduced resources for implementation.

3. Content of the Plans

The County Council has set out in writing its expectations and requirements for the reviewed Plans reflecting national guidance. Defra considers that previous Guidance documents on AONB Management Plans are still fit for purpose but, together with Natural England and the National Association for AONBs, has produced a paper outlining the collective steer to

AONB Partnerships in taking forward the next round of Management Plans. The County Council supports the principles outlined in this paper in issuing its own guidance.

The County Council is promoting a 'light touch' approach building on the common format, structure and timetable agreed between the AONBs. However, the Reviews need to reflect changes in the statutory and legislative background as well as new ways of partnership working such as through the Devon Local Nature Partnership, the Devon Landscape Officers Group and Green Infrastructure Partnerships. The Reviews also need to consider their approach to current issues such as "setting", pressures from renewable energy proposals, the requirements to meet Biodiversity 20/20 and ecosystem targets and the public health and well-being agenda.

In consideration of Governance issues, and in the light of likely on going funding reductions, the Review should take into account the actions within the Devon AONBs Adaptation Plan and how these may be further developed, particularly in joint work both with other AONBs but also other Partnerships such as National Parks, World Heritage Sites and Biosphere, where relevant. One example of this is the work on the production of Highways Guidance for Protected Landscapes undertaken in 2011.

The County Council will judge the content of the Plan against the criteria in its guidance when it is formally consulted on the draft Plan and before adoption of the final reviewed Plan.

4. The Process and Timetable in Devon

The County Council has encouraged the five AONBs Partnerships in Devon to develop a consistent approach to the development of their plans and to work to a similar timetable. To this end the Partnerships have agreed a broadly similar format and structure to their Plans and adopted the same timetable.

The Consultation Drafts of the Plans are currently being prepared and the local authorities are being requested to endorse the structure and outline content of the Draft Plan for consultation. It would be normal practice for this Committee to formally agree a full draft for public consultation but due to the timetabling of meetings this is not possible. However, the Consultation Drafts will be approved by the AONB Partnerships on which DCC Members are represented prior to consultation during late summer and early autumn.

At that point the County Council will be able to submit formal comments. Account will be taken of the feedback and comments and an amended draft Final Plan will be produced for each of the AONB Partnerships by December 2013. Local authorities will be asked to adopt these Final Plans during January and February 2014. It is proposed that these will be signed off on behalf of the County Council by the Cabinet Member for the Community and Environmental Services through the delegated decision process.

5. Blackdown Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-2019 Preparation

The consultation draft of the revised Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2014–2019 will follow the guidance issued by Defra, Natural England and the National Association for AONBs to ensure a consistent approach nationally. It will include the required Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitats Regulations Assessment, Sustainability Appraisal and Equality Impacts Assessment.

The formal review process began last July when the AONB's Partnership Management Group endorsed the principles and process. It was agreed that the review should be conducted with as light a touch as possible, nonetheless it was recognised that certain

sections would require more revision in light of new national agendas and changing context. These include:

- The Natural Environment White paper, *The Natural Choice*, 2012
- National Planning Policy Framework, 2012 and other new planning legislation
- Common Agricultural Policy reform, due to be completed in 2013
- Revised National Character Area profile currently being carried out by Natural England, and Devon County Council's new work on Landscape Character Areas
- Biodiversity, with greater emphasis on ecosystem goods and services and landscape-scale approach
- A303 corridor improvement programme
- Renewable energy targets and the need to ensure that landscape is conserved but community needs are met
- Climate change and mitigation
- Public sector funding cuts

To identify any further issues, the community has been consulted through:

- Two on-line questionnaires – one for the general public and the another specifically for farmers
- Two public workshops – 'wildlife and land management' and 'the rural economy'
- A joint event with FWAG, again targeting farmers
- Discussions with the AONB's topic working groups and relevant public sector officers (biodiversity, heritage, rights of way officers, planners)

The team will be working closely with its local planning authorities to ensure that the Management Plan is compatible with new and emerging Local Plans. Some flexibility will be needed as the various Plans are at different stages.

Making it Local, the joint Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONBs' Rural Development Programme England (RDPE), comes to an end this year and, with East Devon AONB, the AONB Partnerships will again be seeking funding from this source to help deliver the social and economic outcomes of the Management Plan. Defra has indicated that it wishes to see wider rural coverage from the new programme, and officers are therefore investigating the possibility of extending the coverage of the Local Advisory Group (LAG) to include the Mid Devon area lying between the Blackdowns and the southern fringes of Exmoor.

6. Financial Considerations

The Management Plan Review is being undertaken as part of the AONB services' core functions, for which Defra contribute 75% of the funding; the remaining 25% is provided between all the local authorities on the Partner and these contributions are set out formally in a four year Memorandum of Agreement from 2011/12 to 2014/15. Costs of undertaking the Reviews are being met from these existing core budgets.

7. Sustainability, Carbon Impact, Equality and Public Health Considerations

It is a requirement that AONB Management Plans are subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitat Regulations Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment. These are being drafted and will be subject to Consultation alongside the Management Plans. This should ensure that sustainability, environmental, equality and public health issues have been fully taken into account.

8. Legal Considerations

Under the CROW Act, the County Council and the relevant District Council(s) have a statutory duty for ensuring that AONB Management Plans are periodically reviewed. The current Review process meets that responsibility.

9. Risk Management Considerations

Risks associated with the Management Plan can be categorised as reputational, relating to not undertaking full public consultation; legal, relating to not having statutory plans in place to ensure effective management of the AONB; and financial, related to lack of strategic context for making funding bids to deliver activity.

10. Options/Alternatives

The County Council could have resolved to undertake the Management Plan Reviews itself or in conjunction with the relevant District Council(s). This would have ignored the existing governance structure and expertise of the AONB Partnerships.

11. Reasons for Recommendation/Conclusion

The Review procedure will allow the County Council to fulfil its statutory obligation and also to ensure that the Management Plan Reviews are subject to appropriate consultation.

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Local Government Act 1972 - List of Background Papers

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Background Paper	Date	File Ref
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