

Conclusions

A Community Plan for the Blackdown Hills will not happen without effective management. Throughout the development of the plan, there has been active and supportive engagement from the Blackdown Hills Parish Network, the AONB office and Devon County Council working through a steering group comprising members of these organisations. A similar group should be appointed to oversee future activities which will require a Chair and members elected or appointed from the community to liaise with the appropriate local authorities to ensure that advice, guidance and training are sought when appropriate. It is recommended that the management group that has overseen the development of this plan is offered the opportunity to undertake the short term recommendations set out below, and then to establish an effective means of appointing additional personnel to oversee medium and longer term goals:

1. To ensure momentum, a certain degree of funding will be necessary and it is essential that the Steering Group sets itself an early task to determine the level of support required and potential sources.
2. It has been evident throughout the process that the aims of the AONB management plan are entirely complementary to the development of community aspirations. This has been successful for a number of other AONBs and National Parks in the country (eg Quantocks AONB, Lake District National Park). It is therefore appropriate to consider any opportunity for the community to work in tandem with the AONB office. Topic based groups might usefully ensure that there is good connectivity between the core interests of the AONB Partnership and local communities.
3. The greatest difficulty during the Plan development has been the ability – or otherwise – to communicate with a significant proportion of the population, either through Parish Councils, consultation meetings, poster campaigns or local publications and websites. Other communication difficulties also exist between and with county organisations and local authorities, which in an area like the Blackdown Hills can create considerable hold-ups and practical obstacles. This is perceived to be particularly noticeable where the issues are related to services contracted out by those local authorities, for example waste collection, highways matters and public transport. A short term recommendation is that the Steering group commissions a survey of current information dissemination mechanisms, their current uptake and reach and to identify the portions of the community least well served. This will inform an investigation into opportunities for improving the links wherever possible. It is suggested that a ‘Blackdowns Online’ website would be a relatively easy first stage to develop an identity for the Community initiative, to link existing Blackdowns sites of all descriptions. Efforts need also to be made to raise awareness through other media. In time the remit of this communications group might be extended to investigate opportunities to enable access to high speed broadband for all, better

mobile signals etc. There are many examples of community led actions to draw on in other parts of the country and it is useful to note the current high speed broadband access project already underway throughout Somerset and Devon.

4. Early engagement with groups and individuals from the community willing to work on the following areas:

Planning : It is clear that there are some problems with planning matters among the various Parish Councils. With the recent publication of more detail surrounding the Localism Bill, it is important that the bodies nearest planning matters in the communities themselves (the Parish Councils) are engaged and willing to learn about the devolved responsibilities that will be available. The opportunity therefore exists to work together, share best practice and engage with planning authorities. It is recommended that the Steering Group makes it possible for interested Parish Councils to work within a Planning Group to gather evidence of planning decision issues to enable effective engagement for future decisions where appropriate.

In the longer term, the community would be well served by the Planning group ensuring that all Parish Councillors with planning responsibilities have access to relevant information by setting up specific training sessions, held in local venues.

Public transport opportunities group: it became clear during the course of developing this plan that a number of community led public transport schemes are in operation in a number of small areas. In addition, it is clear that members of the community are not necessarily aware of these schemes, nor of the opportunities that exist to extend and improve what already exists. This requires an initiative to better disseminate information about what is already available, to survey the uptake of community led schemes and assess opportunities to widen these schemes or to emulate in different areas/catchments of the Blackdown Hills.

Winter roads planning group: a small number of parishes has already worked on winter road gritting for their network of roads that is untreated by the local authority. These are frequently the essential lifelines for many residents. The Steering group should ensure that a best practice group is set up in advance of next winter to undertake a survey in the parishes of self help opportunities to enable gritting and salting of important, yet untreated roads in the Blackdowns. This would build on a report prepared for Devon County Council's Environment, Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee in 2010, which contains a comprehensive assessment of the state of road network throughout the County and makes recommendations for community actions to maintain the network.

The two preceding initiatives (public transport and winter roads planning groups) could lead to the development of a wider group to keep abreast of Devon County Council's work with its highways contractor, South West Highways (SWH). A new arrangement is in place intended to create

flexibility of working practices across the SWH remit to enable more effective information sharing for maintenance. It will be important to pursue this approach for Somerset too, and importantly, enable cross county liaison. In the longer term it is foreseen that this will lead to achieving reduced speed limits and less HGV traffic, allowing safer recreational access in key locations.

5. The steering group will be responsible for maintaining an overview and directional focus as the immediately important issues are dealt with. In particular, it will be important for the Steering group to maintain a watching brief on the impact of new initiatives that come forward, locally or Government led, that may affect the community in topic areas that were not perceived to be of high importance during the development of this Plan. Therefore provision for review is essential. While there were few current concerns from the responding Blackdown Hills community about health and social care, education provision, sustainability and environment for example, regular review must open up opportunities to address these in the future.

The long term aim is for a functional, joined up community that speaks for itself with knowledge and the trust of corresponding local authorities

In summing up the process of preparing the plan overall, the following considerations need to be taken into account. It is clear that in the allotted time and with the available resources it was not possible to engage directly with every parish council. Nor was it feasible to ensure that every household within the Blackdown Hills area had an awareness of the initiative and opportunity to contribute.

- **Nineteen of twenty published Parish Plans were consulted in hard copy or from web versions.**
- **All Parish Councils/Parish Meeting Chairpersons were apprised of progress throughout and sixteen of the 39 parishes with a full or partial footprint in the AONB responded to the request for prioritised issues in their individual parishes.**
- **All local parish/church magazines and newsletters were sent three separate items for publication to raise awareness during the eight month consultation.**
- **The two consultation meetings, one in each county, were attended by 21 individuals who were not either AONB employees or representatives of organisations with responsibility for community initiatives (eg Community Council for Devon)**
- **During the course of the project there were numerous conversations with individuals living in the area that may not have responded directly, commented or attended any part of the consultation process. At no point in that informal awareness raising process was there any indication that a Community Plan was inappropriate. It is that tacit agreement together with the principle underlying the initiative of the Blackdown Hills Parish Network, to develop a cohesive voice for this group of rural parishes, which underlies the endorsement of the various recommendations made here.**