

Introduction

The idea of developing a Community Plan for the Blackdown Hills parishes evolved following the formation of the Blackdown Hills Parishes Network.

A group of interested parishes met first in May 2009, following earlier discussions related to the possible creation of a Devon Unitary Authority. While this did not materialise, the participating Devon parishes of the Blackdown Hills were keen, with their Somerset counterparts, to continue meeting in order to develop a cohesive voice for this group of rural parishes, and decided that the group would be known as the Blackdown Hills Parishes Network.

The Network agreed that a community-led plan for the Blackdown Hills would be an appropriate step toward achieving this outcome. The purpose of the plan would not be to repeat or distil county or district plans and policies or individual parish plans, but to focus on those things that are particular to the Blackdown Hills and important to local communities, where working collectively would be beneficial. The planning process and the final plan would be collaborative and inclusive and focus on realistic, achievable outcomes that complement the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) management plan.

In summary the community-led plan:

- **Provides a social and economic profile of the area**
- **Identifies what people value about the area and why it is distinctive**
- **Sets out the priority issues facing local people**
- **Sets out locally agreed actions and projects to address these issues**

This document addresses the first three of these points, and makes recommendations for the achievement of the fourth point.

The local authorities that provide services to the communities across the Blackdown Hills are all committed to supporting local decision-making and giving people more say and more influence about the future of their area. Devon County Council in particular has supported the development and preparation of the Blackdown Hills Community Plan. During the period that the Blackdown Hills Parishes Network was developing, Devon County Council has been supporting a small number of community forums and initiatives with the Devon Association of Parish Councils (DAPC), and the Community Council of Devon (CCD), characterised by the involvement of local people coming together to decide what they need and how to achieve the desired outcomes.

The Blackdown Hills Community Plan project has enjoyed wider recognition through this network, as one of the projects showcased by DAPC as part of its Empowering Communities initiative. In addition, Devon County Council commissioned the Young Foundation to evaluate three of the area based initiatives, including the Blackdown Hills, with a view to looking for effective ways of working that can be expanded to further develop and enhance community engagement. Their findings are published in a report entitled "Learning Locally" report. This is available at <http://policydevon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Learning-locally-v1.pdf>

Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Blackdown Hills are a distinctive, diverse rural landscape stretching from the M5 in the north to Honiton and Axminster in the south and from Chard in the east to Culmstock in the west. Lying between 150 and 310 metres above sea level, the area is characterised by a sense of relative remoteness and tranquillity, and was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1991. From the dramatic, steep wooded north-facing scarp the area dips gently southwards as a flat-topped plateau, deeply dissected by valleys. On the tops are open, windswept spaces; in the valleys villages and hamlets nestle among ancient patterns of small, enclosed fields and a maze of winding lanes lined with high hedgerows.

The Blackdown Hills are a special place both for those born here and for those that now live and work here. It is a true living landscape with a strong sense of identity where traditional land management and rural skills flourish. Sparsely populated with widely distributed communities, it is quite unlike the nearby market towns. There are different needs and aspirations from those more urban areas. This plan, for the parishes of the Blackdown Hills, identifies these differences, and articulates how community-led actions and decision-making at a local level can play a part in meeting the wishes and ambitions of the Blackdown Hills community.

The balance between the environment, the ecology and the economic and social well being of the Blackdown Hills relies on active management and community involvement. Work undertaken following designation as an AONB soon indicated that measures to protect the landscape and natural environment would only be successful if related to economic and social goals. Equally, the natural beauty of the AONB contributes substantially to the economic and social well being of the local communities.

It is intended that the community plan will complement the AONB management plan:

- **The AONB management plan takes account of communities' economic and social needs, the needs of agriculture and other rural industries in relation to the main point of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area.**
- **The value of this plan is that it is based on issues identified directly by parishes, groups, and communities across the area.**

Together they present a compelling picture of the interaction between environmental, economic and social wellbeing, and a framework for targeted action. Recognising this, the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership has supported and facilitated the community plan's development and provided administrative support to the Parishes Network.

