

Consultation Draft of the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019 - 2024

Contents

- A 20 Year Vision
- Ministerial Foreword
- AONB Partnership Chairman Foreword
- Map of the AONB
- Summary of Objectives and Policies
- Statement of Significance and Special Qualities

1. Context

- 1.1. Purpose of the AONB Designation
- 1.2. State of the AONB
- 1.3. Strategic and Policy Context
- 1.4. The North Devon UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve
- 1.5. Setting and Boundary Review

2. Place

- 2.1 Landscape and Seascape
- 2.2 Biodiversity and Geodiversity
- 2.3 Historic Environment and Culture

- 2.4 Environmental Quality and Climate Change

3. People and Prosperity

- 3.1. Planning, Development and Infrastructure
- 3.2. Farming and Land Management
- 3.3. Sustainable Rural and Visitor Economy
- 3.4. Access, Health and Wellbeing

4. Communications and Management

- 4.1. Community Action, Learning and Understanding
- 4.2. Management and Monitoring

5. Appendices

- 5.1 Glossary
- 5.2 References
- 5.3 Abbreviations

A 20 Year Vision

“The North Devon Coast AONB will remain as one of England’s finest landscapes and seascapes, protected, inspiring and valued by all. Its natural and cultural heritage will sustain those who live in, work in or visit the area. It will be valued by residents and visitors alike who will have increased understanding of what makes the area unique and will be addressing the challenges of keeping it special to secure its long-term future.”

Ministerial Foreword

AONB Partnership Chairman Foreword

Map of the AONB

Summary of Objectives and Policies

Landscape and Seascape	Environmental Quality and Climate Change	Sustainable Rural and Visitor Economy
To conserve and enhance the natural beauty and special landscapes of the AONB	To promote the sustainable management of natural resources and climate change impacts	To promote sustainable development within the AONB that is consistent with the designation
<p>A1 Ensure that the landscape character, natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB are enhanced and fully respected in all decisions affecting the Area</p> <p>A2 Preserve the dark skies, peace and tranquillity of the AONB</p> <p>A3 Ensure developments both onshore and offshore, take account of open views, wilderness and maritime connections</p> <p>A4 Recommend that no development should be permitted inside or outside the AONB that would harm the natural beauty, character or special qualities of the AONB</p> <p>A5 Ensure developments comply with the North Devon Landscape and Seascape Character Assessments</p>	<p>D1 Increase understanding and mitigation of climate change impacts on coastal landscapes and communities, to be sensitive to the need to enhance the special qualities of the AONB</p> <p>D2 Contribute to marine planning and protection to conserve seascape quality, coastal species and habitats</p> <p>D3 Improve inland, coastal and bathing water quality through catchment management, local flood management and litter management</p>	<p>G1 Take account of the value of the natural environment in economic development decisions using the Natural Capital and Ecosystem services approach</p> <p>G2 Support partners to develop sustainable tourism opportunities that promote the special qualities of the AONB, without damaging protected sites and species</p>
Biodiversity and Geodiversity	Planning, Development and Infrastructure	Access, Health and Wellbeing
To conserve and enhance the wildlife, ecological health and geodiversity of the AONB, in terrestrial, aquatic and marine habitats	To ensure the planning process and infrastructure development protects and enhances the designated AONB and its special qualities	To ensure sustainable access to the AONB for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of local people and visitors, consistent with the designation
<p>B1 Support and promote approaches to conserve and enhance habitats and species, increase wildlife richness and ensure the health of the wider landscape</p> <p>B2 Identify and address actual and potential impacts on biodiversity from invasive species, disease and climate change</p> <p>B3 Encourage actions to enhance, maintain and promote the geodiversity of the AONB through appropriate site management and public awareness</p>	<p>I1 Provide planning advice and policy guidance to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and special qualities of the designated AONB</p> <p>I2 Promote and maintain the local distinctiveness and historic character of the built environment</p> <p>I3 Support affordable housing proposals to meet local housing needs, that take full account of the AONB designation</p> <p>I4 Conserve and enhance the coast and marine environment in relation to onshore and offshore developments</p> <p>I5 Support appropriate infrastructure, signage and transport networks in the AONB, for the benefit of local and visiting communities</p>	<p>H1 Work with partners and landowners to develop improved access to and interpretation of the natural environment</p> <p>H2 Support new opportunities and reduce barriers to improve the health and wellbeing of local people and visitors</p>
Historic Environment and Culture	Farming and Land Management	Community Action, Learning and Understanding
To conserve, enhance and understand the historic and cultural features of the AONB	To promote farming, food production and land management practices that conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONB	To support more people to learn about, understand and take action to conserve the AONB
<p>E1 Support actions to conserve and enhance the historic and cultural features of the AONB, and their setting</p> <p>E2 Develop approaches to increase understanding of local heritage and culture</p>	<p>F1 Support partners to deliver sustainable and exemplar land management, forestry and farming practices in keeping with the AONB designation</p> <p>F2 Work with landowners and managers to maintain landscape features such as hedge-banks and woodlands</p> <p>F3 Support approaches to enhance the Natural Capital within the AONB including carbon storage, clean water, timber, renewable energy and food, consistent with the designation</p>	<p>J1 Raise awareness and understanding of the AONB, its special qualities, natural and cultural heritage</p> <p>J2 Develop opportunities for people to volunteer and gain appropriate skills and knowledge to deliver AONB policies</p> <p>J3 Support the provision of community facilities and services to improve the quality of life and sustainability of rural and coastal communities</p> <p>J4 Support communities and businesses to reduce carbon emissions from the designated AONB so long as they are complementary to the special qualities of the AONB</p>

Statement of Significance and Special Qualities

The North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated in 1959 and confirmed by the Secretary of State in 1960¹. It was the first of the five Devon AONBs to be designated. It covers 171 square kilometres (66 square miles) of mainly coastal landscape including special places such as Combe Martin, Lee Bay, Woolacombe, Croyde, Saunton, Braunton Burrows, Northam Burrows Country Park, Westward Ho!'s Pebble Ridge and the Hartland Peninsula. The extensive, mobile, dune system at Braunton Burrows has an immense diversity of wildlife and lies at the heart of the AONB. In 2002 Braunton Burrows earned the international status of a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve with the AONB being an important part of its core and buffer zone.

Statement of Significance

The North Devon coast has a wide diversity of scenery including some of the of the finest cliff scenery in the country, the primary reason for its designation. Tall rugged cliffs and wave-cut platforms contrast with wide, sandy bays and sand dunes. In the north, steeply dipping rocks form hogsback cliffs at varied heights in a natural continuation of Exmoor's coastline. To the south, facing the full force of the Atlantic, sheer crags and razor-like reefs present the coast at its most rugged and beautiful. The AONB reaches inland to the Hartland plateau, scored by deep valleys, which reach the coast as steep hanging gaps in the cliffs, often with spectacular waterfalls.

In contrast, the broad sweep of Bideford and Barnstaple Bay is a mixture of low cliffs, long sandy beaches and the dunes at Braunton Burrows. Inland a pastoral landscape of hedged fields complements the steep-sided wooded combes and valleys where villages shelter from the Atlantic winds. Whilst skirting larger settlements such as Ilfracombe and Westward Ho!, the AONB boundary takes in bustling seaside resorts such as Woolacombe and Croyde and picturesque fishing villages such as Clovelly and Bucks Mills along this spectacular coast.

Distinctive Coastal Scenery

Walking along the South West Coast Path across the open, windswept clifftops, and gazing westward across the seemingly infinite expanse of ocean, there is a sense of timelessness and of raw nature devoid of human influence. The feeling is sharpened when Atlantic storm waves crash against the twisted strata of exposed rocky cliffs, sending thunderous sprays of surf into the air. Dropping down into a coastal combe from the cliffs or farmland, a strong sense of refuge and shelter prevails, made more striking by the presence of enclosing woodland in the combes.

Where stretches of coastline are distant from the coast road, a sense of tranquillity and remoteness is strong. In Braunton Burrows, the vast sand-dune system, infinite sky and an expansive sandy beach are bordered by tranquil grazing marshes. Likewise, the Hartland Coast possesses a sense of wilderness, but this is a fragile quality, which can dissolve with the sight of a wind turbine or mast on a skyline, or a car parked in an open combe. Coastal landforms provide classic examples of erosion and deposition, as well as rare and characteristic landscape features.

A Landscape and Seascape of high visual quality

Panoramic views from elevated areas across rolling countryside are an important feature of the AONB. Within the combes, framed sea views are characteristic, and coastal vistas across to Lundy are wide and empty. Further north the view is framed by intimate distant views of the Welsh coast. Inland, the countryside, much of it undesignated, forms an important backdrop to the coast and is a defining element to the visual quality of the AONB providing a variety of open views. The coast path provides long views along the coast across the estuary and inland to the undeveloped skyline and downland.

A Significant Wildlife Resource

The rarest AONB habitat is rush pasture, or Culm Grassland, small fragments of which are found on the wet inland moors of the Hartland area such as Bursdon and Brownsham Moors. Elsewhere, there are mosaics of maritime grassland, heathland and scrub, estuarine salt marsh, along with sea cliffs and rocky shores especially around Morte Point and Hartland Quay. There are internationally important sand dunes and hundreds of miles of hedgerows with isolated trees and Devon hedge-banks providing extensive havens throughout the inland area. Western oak woodland is found along the Clovelly coast and within the combes, whilst excellent air quality, constantly freshened by Atlantic westerlies, is a particular asset supporting a proliferation and variety of lichens, all contributing to the local landscape character.

A Varied Geology

Much of the coastline is covered by SSSI for its geological importance. Coastal landforms provide classic examples of coastal erosion and deposition as well as rare and unique landscape features. These include the pebble ridge at Northam Burrows, the mobile sand dune system at Braunton Burrows, Blackchurch Rock at Brownsham, the Tuts Hole anticline at Abbotsham and the dramatic waterfalls cascading on to rocky shores from truncated combes. The variety of coastal landforms from wave-cut platforms to wide sandy beaches offers an immense resource for marine wildlife that inhabit the foreshore.

A Remarkable Heritage

The legacy of a long history of human habitation in the area is woven into the landscape, with some threads tracing back to pre-historic times. The most extensive historic landscape features are the enclosed fields defined by ancient hedge-banks, from the narrow, enclosed strip fields of Combe Martin to the 19th century regular enclosures of the downland above Ilfracombe, their patterns reflecting centuries of agricultural change. This is made more appealing by historic farmsteads, hamlets and villages and the winding lanes which connect them.

Inland the ridgelines are marked by ancient burial mounds, whilst along the coast, promontory sites such as the ancient earthworks at Hillsborough and Embury Beacon, have been home to strategic defences from the Iron Age to the 20th Century wars. Devon's seagoing heritage is represented by historic quays and fishing villages like Clovelly, with lime kilns in almost every inlet and wrecks of ships and planes on both land and sea.

Special Qualities (Text with 16 Photos)

1. Diversity of scenery contained within a small area, including some of the finest cliff scenery in the country (as mentioned at designation)
2. Panoramic seascape, with seaward views to Lundy within the Atlantic Ocean, across the Bristol Channel to Wales and along the coastline. These views are of a landscape and seascape devoid of human influence.
3. Narrow framed views of the sea from coastal mouths of steep-sided combes.
4. Panoramic views across a rolling landscape of pastoral farmland, wooded combes and valleys towards the sea from elevated inland areas.
5. Wild coastal scenery. In the north, hogsback cliffs of varying heights; in the south high, rugged cliffs, dramatic rock formations, exposed headlands, wavecut platforms and rocky coves.
6. A vast sand dune system at Braunton Burrows of exposed wild character, with high nature-conservation interest of international importance, and the pebble ridge at Westward Ho!
7. Long, broad sandy beaches backed by extensive dune systems
8. A strong sense of tranquillity and remoteness where the coast road is located away from the coastline
9. Rare and fragile quality of wilderness in Braunton Burrows and on the Hartland coast
10. Historic landscape pattern of hedge-banks, farmsteads, hamlets, villages and lanes
11. Historic coastal quays and fishing villages, coastal promontory sites for strategic defences and lighthouses.
12. Deep combes and cliffs cloaked in ancient woodland along the Bideford Bay coast
13. Small pockets of remnant lowland coastal heathlands around Morte Point and Hartland Quay
14. Tourist-orientated settlements in sheltered seaside locations
15. Steep sided valleys that dissect the high downland and coastal plateau which are secluded, secretive and tranquil
16. Dark night skies, particularly in the southern part of the Hartland Peninsula

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Purpose of AONB designation

The North Devon Coast AONB was designated under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. It is part of a family of protected landscapes of 34 AONBs in England including two conservation boards, plus ten National Parks. The primary purpose of AONB designation is:

“To conserve and enhance natural beauty”

In pursuing the primary purpose, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and rural industries as well as the economic and social needs of local communities. Regard should be paid to social and economic development that conserves and enhances the environment. Whilst recreation is not an objective of the designation, the demand for recreation should be met insofar as it is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty¹.

1.1.1 Duty of Regard

Several different guidance documents and legislative changes have amended or clarified the terms, duties and understanding of elements of the 1949 Act. The **Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000** subsumes and strengthens the 1949 Act:

- Section 85 places a duty on all public bodies *‘to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty’* of AONBs when coming to any decisions or carrying out activities relating to or affecting the designated area.
- Sections 89 and 90 place a statutory duty on local authorities with an AONB in their area **to prepare a Management Plan** *‘which formulates their policy for the management of their area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’*, and thereafter to review adopted and published Plans at intervals of not more than five years.
- Section 92 clarifies that **the conservation of natural beauty includes** the conservation of *‘flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features.’*

1.1.2 The AONB Management Plan

This is a place-based plan derived through local consensus, that is for the area as a whole not just for the AONB team or Partnership members. It seeks to define the approach to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB through the application of local solutions to local challenges, that respect the national and international importance of the AONB. This plan is the fourth to be produced by the AONB team, at the request of the local authorities covering the AONB - North Devon Council, Torridge District Council and Devon County Council. The five-year plan has the following purposes:

AONB Management Plan Purposes

- To provide a statutory plan that sets out the policies and objectives for the designated AONB
- To identify the special qualities of the area that contribute to its natural beauty, to inform and influence the determination of planning applications and appeals as the Plan is a 'material consideration' in the planning system
- To inform public bodies how they can demonstrate compliance with their statutory duty to "have regard to" the AONB designation
- To inform and engage local people, visitors and organisations with the AONB's purpose 'to conserve and enhance' through their actions to deliver the Management Plan objectives
- To guide the work of the AONB Partnership and other local actors and organisations

1.2 State of the AONB

Insert State of the AONB Infographic and reference to full report².

1.3 Strategic and Policy Context

The following policies, documents and strategies have been considered during the production of this plan: -

International

At an international level, the AONB is classified as a Category V landscape by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature⁷ recognising it as a 'cultural landscape' managed mainly for landscape and seascape protection and for recreation. Additional status is given to the area from the North Devon UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve international designation covering the whole of the AONB and the catchments of the Taw and Torridge rivers.

At a European level, this plan is under development during the negotiations for the UK to leave the European Union in 2019. The consequent political and policy decisions in progress during this period will have an impact on the AONB through new agricultural, environmental and economic policies. As an example, at the time of writing the Agriculture Bill 2017-19 is progressing through the various parliamentary stages with proposals on direct payments during an agricultural transition period and other matters. These may be some of the most significant forces for change for the AONB and will be considered through the Annual Business Plans but are only mentioned here once rather than in each of the thematic areas below.

National

A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (DEFRA, 2018)

Natural England's Conservation 21 Strategy (2018)

Natural England Framework Document (2017)

Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009

Biodiversity 2020 (DEFRA, 2011)

The National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2018)

Water Framework Directive (EU, 2000)

Government Forestry Policy Statement (DEFRA, 2013)

Local

North Devon and Torridge Local Plan (2018)

Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018–2022 (2018)

Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership – Strategic Economic Plan (2014) and Productivity Strategy (2018)

Devon Minerals Plan 2011–2031 (2017)

North Devon Biosphere Strategy for Sustainable Development 2014-2024

North Devon and Somerset Shoreline Management Plan

Northern Devon Economic Strategy 2014–2020 (2014)

1.4 The North Devon UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve

Biosphere Reserves are designated by UNESCO to be sites of excellence for demonstrating sustainable development on a bio-regional scale. The reserves have 3 functions:

- Conservation of ecosystems, habitats, species and genetic diversity
- Development that is environmentally, economically and socially equitable
- Knowledge management to promote learning and understanding to be an example for the local and international community.

Biosphere Reserves are structured with 3 zones: **MAP inserted here**

- **Core area: Braunton Burrows** - a highly protected ecosystem of bioregional significance

- **Buffer Zone: the AONB and Taw Torridge Estuary** - an area where land/sea management is sympathetic to the conservation of the objectives of the core area
- **Transition area: the catchment areas of the Taw and Torridge rivers and the adjacent marine area including Lundy Island, taking in the whole of the North Devon and Torridge districts, and parts of Mid and West Devon districts and of Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks** - denoted by the extent of the ecosystems where sustainability will be a key aim of the community

The interests of the Biosphere Reserve and the AONB have much in common ranging from biodiversity to cultural traditions. With a strong focus on catchment based and landscape scale approaches, the Biosphere Reserve seeks adaptation to climate change through the optimisation of natural capital and the range of ecosystems services from the area. Both bodies are required to produce a Management Plan and these two documents work in tandem. The Biosphere Reserve Partnership Strategy is delivered through seven working groups on Catchment Partnerships & Agriculture, Marine, Woodland, Green Economy & Energy, Nature Improvement, Community & Communications and Research & Evidence. This provides a broad conservation, research and development framework for the AONB and its setting (See www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/).

1.5 Setting and Boundary Review

1.5.1 Setting

The North Devon coast's designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty cover a long and narrow sliver of largely coastal land based on the catchments of the coastal streams of Hartland and North Devon. This reflects the reasons for designation – coastal cliffs, coastal scenery and sand dune systems. In consequence the designation does not cover key areas in its setting which have a significant landscape, environmental and economic impact on the AONB because of the narrowness of the area. These include: the majority of the Taw Torridge Estuary SSSI and the wider catchments of the Taw and Torridge rivers which specifically affect water quality, biodiversity, tranquillity and visual impact; the surrounding marine environment including the Atlantic Ocean, the Bristol Channel and Lundy Island which impact on the seascape, visual impact, recreational impact and biodiversity; and the settlements of Ilfracombe and Westward Ho! with effects on tranquillity, visual impact and recreation.

Developments and management activities outside of the designated area in its setting, be it on land or at sea, can have a profound effect across the entire AONB, and extreme care must be taken when making management decisions within these special areas. This is recognised in Section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000 which states that activities and developments outside the boundaries of AONBs that have an impact within the designated area, are also covered by the '*duty of regard*'.

This is particularly relevant to Lundy Island which lies outside of the designated AONB but is defined as Heritage Coast and forms an important backdrop to the AONB. Some of the AONB's special qualities include seaward views to Lundy and with the potential development of offshore wind farms in the approaches to the Bristol Channel, the seaward setting of the AONB is vulnerable.

Several recent legislative and evidence gathering activities have helped to address some of these issues. Firstly, the completion of the North Devon and Exmoor Seascape Assessment in 2016 provides evidence to make informed decisions in relation to onshore and offshore planning, management and policy activities by local partners, agencies, developers and planners over the coming years. It will also contribute to development of the new Marine Management Plan for South West England. Secondly, the designation in 2016 of two Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ) along two thirds of the AONB coastline covering Hartland Point to Tintagel and Bideford to Foreland Point from Mean High Water out to 1 nautical Mile, to add to the one around Lundy Island, with three more offshore sites in the third Tranche under consideration. The MCZ designation helps to strengthen existing legislation and management activities along the coast and in the setting of the AONB.

1.5.2 Reviewing the AONB Boundary

There has been a longstanding ambition locally to extend the AONB boundary to include two significant landscape areas – Lundy Island and Braunton Great Field and Marshes. These are iconic places in North Devon and are worthy of consideration as highlighted in the evidence provided to the AONB Landscape Assessment in 1999. Firstly, they are significant in landscape and natural beauty terms through their definition as Heritage Coast. Secondly, including the full Heritage Coast designation area as part of the AONB would clarify protection of the inter-tidal zone, as this would cover the marine area of up to two nautical miles from the mean low water mark. Thirdly, this would provide additional protection for the coastal setting of the AONB, whose value has been clearly demonstrated in the Seascape Character Assessment. Finally, both sites are vulnerable to significant threats including: development pressures within the Bristol Channel affecting Lundy Island; changes in farming methods, viability and pressures of globalisation affecting traditional farming and land management; and the impacts of climate change resulting in coastal re-alignment at Braunton. The Review of National Parks and AONBs carried out under the 25 Year Environment Plan is due to report in 2019 and is considering the boundary review process (www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan).

2. PLACE

2.1 Landscape and Seascape

The exceptional landscape and seascape of the North Devon coast is the main reason why it was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1960 and defined as Heritage Coast in 1990 for Hartland and 1992 for North Devon. To assist in the management of this valuable landscape several Landscape Character Assessments have been undertaken at different levels and scales which can be viewed as maps on the DCC Environment Viewer landscape section at <https://new.devon.gov.uk/environment/environmental-maps>. These Assessments provide an objective appraisal of what special features and qualities make the landscape valuable and worthy of conservation. This is important to help understand the potential impact of onshore and offshore development and to inform planning decisions. These Assessments look at the pressures and forces for change acting on the landscape and others provide a strategy of how to protect, manage and plan the area to keep it special.

2.1.1 National Character Areas

At a national level, the whole of England has been divided into 159 unique National Character Areas (NCA). These National Character Areas are defined by a combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, cultural and economic activity. Their boundaries follow natural lines in the landscape, rather than administrative boundaries, making them a good decision-making framework for the natural environment. The North Devon AONB is split between two National Character Areas: Exmoor (145), which covers the AONB to the north of the Taw & Torridge Estuary and The Culm (149) which covers Bideford Bay and the Hartland coast. (Insert Map)

2.1.2 Devon Landscape Character Areas

In 2011, Devon County Council, in partnership with other Devon local authorities, AONBs and Dartmoor National Park produced a new and unique set of 68 Landscape Character Areas for Devon¹³ to provide a more local and relevant landscape description. It provides a valuable evidence base for local planning by articulating what people believe is distinctive and special about each landscape. In addition, it describes the key “forces for change” affecting those landscapes and provides management guidelines. The unique features of the seven Landscape Character Areas found in the AONB provide a great “sense of place”.

Landscape Character Areas in the AONB - Photo for each one and description

North Devon High Coast	North Devon Coastal Downs	North Devon Downs	Taw and Torridge Estuary
Bideford Bay Coast	Hartland Peninsula	High Torridge Culm Plateau	Lundy Island in the Setting

2.1.3 Landscape Character Types

In 2010, a comprehensive assessment was undertaken on behalf of Torridge and North Devon District Councils³ which uses the definition of Landscape Character Type as its base. Landscape Character Types are generic, and they describe key landscape types within the area, such as cliffs, estuaries and river valleys. This document was adopted by the respective Local Authorities and assists with both spatial planning through the Local Plan and development control decisions. They have also been used to help develop district council strategies for the deployment of renewable energy schemes within the North Devon and Torridge areas⁴.

Landscape Character Types

- 1B Coastal Open Plateau (Hartland Peninsula)
- 1F Farmed Lowland Moorland and Culm Grassland (High Torridge Culm)
- 2C Steep Open Slopes (North Devon Coastal Downs and High Coast)
- 2D Moorland Edge Slopes (North Devon High Coast)
- 3H Secluded Valleys (Hartland Peninsula)
- 4A Estuaries (Taw-Torridge Estuary)
- 4B Marine Levels and Coastal Plains (Taw-Torridge Estuary)
- 4C Coastal Slopes and Combes with settlement (North Devon High Coast)
- 4D Coastal Slopes and Combes (Bideford Bay and Hartland Peninsula)
- 4E Extensive Intertidal Sands (Taw-Torridge Estuary and Coastal Downs)
- 4F Dunes (Taw Torridge Estuary and Coastal Downs)
- 4H Cliffs (AONB coast)
- 5B Coastal Undulating Farmland (Bideford Bay Coast)
- 5C Downland (North Devon High Coast and Coastal Downs)

2.1.4 Landscape Description Units

In 2010 the AONB Partnership commissioned a further fine-grained study to produce Landscape Description Units⁵. This work defined some 43 unique Landscape Description Units, which are frequently referred to as the “building blocks” of the other Landscape Character Assessments. This is an important baseline document when assessing and describing the landscapes, geology, land use and built environment of the AONB.

2.1.5 Seascape Character Assessment

The North Devon AONB was largely designated because of its stunning seascapes, where the land interacts with the sea. In response to potential offshore developments which could impact on the designated area, in 2015 the North Devon Coast AONB in partnership with other organisations commissioned a Seascape Character Assessment of the North Devon and Exmoor coast⁶. This assessment provides valuable information on how to conserve and enhance the coastline of the area to protect it for future generations to enjoy.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Number and scale of renewable energy projects within, and in the setting of, the designated landscape
- Changes to environmental and agricultural policy may impact on farmers' priorities and hence the landscape, with possible intensification, extensification and/or diversification
- Farm diversification and changes in technology and techniques are changing the landscape
- Increased development and continuing impact of car dependency affects the tranquillity of the AONB
- Climate change is reflected in farming changes, and impacts of disease and pests
- Coastal erosion and sea level rise affecting low lying landscape
- Potential impact of marine plans and management of marine protected areas

Work to date

- ✓ North Devon and Exmoor Seascape Character Assessment completed in 2016 and training workshops held across the area
- ✓ Fixed Post Photography maintained providing comparative landscape assessments for the 'Coastal Change' project with Beaford Archive in 2016/17
- ✓ Contribution to new Local Plan consultations and development work for Defra Landscape Pioneer in North Devon
- ✓ Power line removal at Morteheo and Croyde
- ✓ Responding to 'major developments' including the Atlantic Array Offshore Wind Farm, Route 39 School and Beckland Slurry Lagoon

Landscape and Seascape

Objective

To conserve and enhance the natural beauty and special landscapes of the AONB

Policies

A1 Ensure that the landscape character, natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB are enhanced and fully respected in all decisions affecting the Area

A2 Preserve the dark skies, peace and tranquillity of the AONB

A3 Ensure developments both onshore and offshore, take account of open views, wilderness and maritime connections
A4 Recommend that no development should be permitted inside or outside the AONB that would harm the natural beauty, character or special qualities of the AONB
A5 Ensure developments comply with the North Devon Landscape and Seascape Character Assessments

- **Priority Actions**

Review Landscape Character Assessments with DCC, NDC and TDC

Monitor and respond to landscape change

Promote understanding and use of AONB landscape and seascape character assessments

Deliver Morte Point landscape and habitat enhancements

Work with regional partners to develop a tranquillity measurement

- **Indicators**

Light Pollution levels

Area of Landscape Enhanced (AONB/NAAONB KPI)

2.2 Biodiversity and Geodiversity

The AONB has a plethora of designations to protect and conserve its wildlife and geology.

2.2.1 Biodiversity

The AONBs varied landscapes support a rich wildlife resource the highlight of which are the two internationally designated sites: Braunton Burrows Special Area of Conservation (SAC) includes a spectacular dune system with over 400 plant species whilst the Tintagel-Marsland-Clovelly Coast SAC is home to western oak woodlands, vegetated sea cliffs and coastal heath. Small fragments of rare Culm grassland survive in the Hartland Peninsula, notably in the Bursdon Moor Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). There are 14 SSSI in or partly in the AONB and 54 County Wildlife Sites. Of the areas designated as SSSI, 94% are now in 'favourable' or 'unfavourable recovering' condition, compared to only 78% in 2008 (Natural England data 2018). [MAP of SSSI](#)

Priority habitats found in the AONB include oak woodland, parkland and wood pasture, species-rich hedgerows, farmland, Culm grassland, coastal heathland, sand dunes, estuary and salt marsh, rocky foreshore and seabed⁷. The Devon list of priority species was updated in 2018 and includes a list of 96 Special Species for which the county has a particular responsibility⁸. A number of these Special Species are

found in the AONB including sea stock, round-headed club-rush and the scrambled-egg lichen found in Braunton Burrows, pink sea fan, pearl bordered fritillary and greater horseshoe bats. See <https://www.naturaldevon.org.uk/devons-natural-environment/devons-wildlife/devonspecialspecies/>. Citizen science surveys of marine species in the inter-tidal zone, under the Coastal Creatures project in 2016-2018, identified 441 different species across four beaches with Lee Bay having the richest wildlife resources. All verified records have been uploaded to the National Biodiversity Network website⁹.

The AONB contains several Strategic Nature Areas, areas with higher than average concentrations of existing wildlife habitats. These are largely based on coastal sand dunes, coastal and floodplain grazing marsh and mudflats, see <http://www.dbr.org.uk/strategic-nature-areas-snas/>

In response to the 'Lawton principles' from the 2010 review "Making Space for Nature"¹⁰ and publication in 2011 of both the Natural Environment White Paper and the 'Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services', Devon has made considerable progress in better understanding and taking action on biodiversity issues. This has been facilitated through the Devon Local Nature Partnership (LNP)¹¹ and delivering projects at a more local level working to address four priorities:

- a more integrated large-scale approach to conservation on land and at sea
- putting people at the heart of biodiversity policy
- reducing environmental pressures
- improvement of knowledge

Examples of actions in North Devon include: landscape scale activities and making habitats better connected to provide better ecological networks (through Nature Improvement Areas and Landscape Partnership Schemes); work on valuing the natural environment through the ecosystem services based approach and more recently the Natural Capital approach (www.gov.uk/government/groups/natural-capital-committee) under the Defra Pioneer work on landscape and marine habitats; engaging the public with a wide range of Devon LNP campaigns and awareness raising, for example on invasive species, diseases, pollinators and value of road verges for wildlife.

Strengthening ecological networks is a challenge for the AONB given the development pressures in unprotected areas of its setting, the narrowness of the area and private ownership of most of the land in the AONB. It is therefore critical that habitat improvement and creation become a stronger part of sustainable land management systems in the AONB, whether through support schemes, one-off targeted projects or a changing farming ethos incentivised by payments for public goods. The National Trust's 'nature-friendly farming' approach launched in 2016 in response to the recorded decline of 60% of species¹², is an example of shifting farming methods and priorities to balance food production by making space for nature, whether wildlife, water quality, timber production or hedgerows. This is now being implemented with a number of the Trust's tenants across the AONB. The long-term priority for all partners is to deliver a robust and resilient

AONB and ensure that wildlife-rich sites such as the designated SAC, SSSI, non-designated County Wildlife Sites and other Priority habitats are conserved, and species are in favourable conservation status.

A new opportunity for wildlife under threat from development is the policy of 'net gain for biodiversity' in the North Devon and Torridge Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework 2018 update.

2.2.2 Geodiversity

The term 'geodiversity' encompasses the variety of rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, sediments and soils in an area, together with natural processes, such as erosion and landslips that may still be active. The rocks, fossils and minerals have been formed over millions of years, shaping the landforms of the area and providing much of the spectacular scenery along the coastline.

The underlying geology is a mixture of carboniferous sandstones and shales, Devonian slates, sandstones and volcanics, with an area of transition sandwiched in between. Spectacular zig-zag patterns in the carboniferous rocks can be seen along the Atlantic coast at Hartland Quay. This illustrates how the rocks were crumpled and contorted by the collision of crustal plates and thrust up into mountains. In the northern part of the AONB, the slates and sandstones provide building materials, clearly visible in the village of Mortehoe. A scattering of Limestone intrusions around Ilfracombe and Combe Martin have left their legacy in the remains of industrial heritage such as lime kilns and burners.

Within the North Devon Coast AONB there are 10 designated geological SSSI of which 94% are in a favourable or favourable recovering condition in 2016. Additionally, there are thirteen Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) defined due to their value for education, geological research or aesthetic reasons. Whilst they are non-statutory designations, they are recognised as important "material considerations" when local authorities assess planning applications.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Impact of new developments for housing, infrastructure, business and agriculture
- Changing land management practices and technology in agriculture and forestry in AONB and in its setting
- Climate change benefits and negative consequences
- Management of marine protected areas that cover majority of the AONB coastline
- Net Gain policy opportunities to benefit biodiversity through policies in new Local Plan and National Planning Policy Framework
- Increased numbers and changing recreational and sporting activities bringing people closer to nature
- Community engagement and citizen science opportunities to address resource constraints on knowledge, data, scale and reach
- Invasive species and diseases e.g. ash dieback

- Opportunities for habitat restoration at Braunton Burrows through the Dynamic Dunescapes Project led by Plantlife.

Work to date

- ✓ Devon Wildlife Trust's 5-year Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project – with the AONB team as North Devon lead partner
- ✓ The AONB's 2-year Coastal Creatures community engagement and citizen science project focussed on the wildlife on four beaches and marine litter. This followed on from the Clean Marine project focussed on marine litter and beaches.
- ✓ A survey of potential chough nesting sites commissioned with the RSPB, supported by SDF funds to install nest boxes for seabirds
- ✓ New wildlife monitoring project started in 2017 across all National Trust sites, to support their Nature Friendly Farming work
- ✓ SDF funding provided to the Biosphere - Life on the Verge project to engage communities in managing wildlife on local verges
- ✓ New wildlife trails produced for Woolacombe, Ilfracombe and Northam Burrows through Coastal Creatures project
- ✓ AONB team and partners actively involved in the Devon Local Nature Partnership
- ✓ A Local Geodiversity Action Plan for the North Devon Coast AONB produced in 2017
- ✓ Advice to land owners to manage, connect and improve habitats e.g. work on the Nature Improvement Area and West Country Buzz
- ✓ North Devon Pioneer work on Natural Capital approaches

Biodiversity and Geodiversity

Objective

To conserve and enhance the wildlife, ecological health and geodiversity of the AONB, in terrestrial, aquatic and marine habitats

Policies

- B1 Support and promote approaches to conserve and enhance habitats and species, increase wildlife richness and ensure the health of the wider landscape
- B2 Identify and address actual and potential impacts on biodiversity from invasive species, disease and climate change
- B3 Encourage actions to enhance, maintain and promote the geodiversity of the AONB through appropriate site management and public awareness

Priority Actions

Work with partners to develop Nature Recovery Networks to provide bigger, better, more and joined up habitats building on Strategic Nature Areas within the AONB

Support development work on new colonisations and species re-introductions, appropriate to the AONB

Development and implementation of the Net Gain for Biodiversity policy to ensure that development minimises impacts on wildlife within the AONB and contributes to net gains

Support agri-environment schemes / support for farmers which will benefit wildlife and farmers in the AONB
Promote community engagement opportunities that benefit wildlife and people – building on the legacy of Coastal Creatures and Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project work
Work to reduce the impact of invasive species and diseases on wildlife in the AONB
Identify the Special Species in the AONB and how partners can work together to enhance their populations
Play an active role in the Devon Local Nature Partnership
Implement the Local Geodiversity Action Plan

Indicators

Percentage of SSSI in favourable condition (NE)
Area of Habitat/Land enhanced (AONB/NAAONB KPI)

2.3 Historic Environment and Culture

The long social and cultural history of North Devon is reflected in the landscape, shaped by centuries of farming practices as seen in the strip field systems, hedge banks with facings of slate and stone or remnants of orchards and soft fruit production. Human habitation of the area stretches back to pre-historic times with ancient burial mounds, coastal hillforts, historic farmsteads, remote fishing villages and ancient landscape features. The maritime and agricultural heritage are reflected in local culture and traditions often linked to the seasons or particular historic events. The remoteness of this landscape at the periphery of South West England and its protection through landscape designations, has ensured that many historic features are still visible today whether from the iron age or from the Cold War in the 1950's. There are 25 scheduled monuments in the AONB, 413 listed buildings and one registered Park and Garden.

The National Mapping Programme¹³ carried out analysis of historic hard copy photos (e.g. from the 1940's), lidar and archaeological aerial surveys of the North Devon AONB in 2013 and identified 1100 new monuments. These included a possible southern extension of the iconic Iron Age hillfort of Clovelly Dykes, the effect of military action on the landscape such as explosions at Northam Burrows and fish weirs and hulks from the eighteenth century onwards. Full details are available on the Devon Historic Environment Record <https://new.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/the-devon-historic-environment-record/> or the Heritage Gateway record of historic sites and buildings - <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>. Historic Landscape Characterisation is a method for understanding and mapping the landscape that we see today with reference to its historical development, using digital maps. The AONB has been analysed at four levels and data is available on the Devon Environment viewer.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Development increasingly impacting on the traditional character of settlements through: infill, increased density, sometimes inappropriate building style and design, loss of non-protected architectural styles and developments in the setting of conservation areas.
- Reduction in funding, knowledge and skills for appropriate management of archaeological sites and traditional landscape features (e.g. field boundaries)
- Lack of management and scrub encroachment for many historic features
- Challenge to engage people with local heritage including: new people moving into the area; local schoolchildren not accessing heritage due to constraints on curriculum and funding; the younger or next generation to carry on with traditions, customs and skills
- Coastal erosion affecting sites on cliffs and in coastal margins
- Potential in the 'Place-Making' and 'Health and Wellbeing' agendas to re-engage the public with their heritage

Work to date

- ✓ Five new Monuments scheduled in the AONB – Saunton Lynchetts, two wrecks at Westward Ho!, Northam Burrows Radar station and extension to Hillsborough SAM
- ✓ Three SAMs received conservation work – St Clare's Well at Philham, Holywell and Butterwell at Clovelly Dykes and a standing stone at Damage Barton
- ✓ Scrub clearance at Windbury hillfort and Bucks Mills enclosure by National Trust with Historic England support
- ✓ Clovelly Dykes hillfort – survey and small excavation of unscheduled southern section in AONB setting
- ✓ North Devon Coastal Heritage project developed, and partnership funding obtained in 2018 for 2 years
- ✓ SDF grants to restore historic wooden signposts at Hartland and restoration of Morteheo church clock

Historic Environment and Culture

Objective

To conserve, enhance and understand the historic and cultural features of the AONB

Policies

E1 Support actions to conserve and enhance the historic and cultural features of the AONB, and their setting

E2 Develop approaches to increase understanding of local heritage and culture

- **Priority Actions**

Delivery of North Devon Coastal Heritage project with local partners including training volunteers to survey and monitor heritage assets, 75th anniversary of D-Day commemorations, and community archaeology projects in the Hartland Peninsula

Monitoring, maintenance and interpretation of Scheduled Monuments

Seeking protection for undesignated by locally important heritage

Repair of East Titchberry Malthouse

- **Indicators**

Number of Scheduled Ancient Monuments at risk (NAAONB/Defra KPI)

Heritage Assets enhanced with AONB support (local)

2.4 Environmental Quality and Climate Change

Climate change is one of the most significant pressures on the environment of South West England this is reflected in hotter and drier summers, warmer and wetter winters with more extreme weather and increased flood risk compounded by sea-level rise. The ability of the AONB Partnership to contribute to the mitigation of the effects of climate change is minimal in global terms. However, the Partnership can, and should, support local adaptation and mitigation initiatives which will have a positive impact.

The high-quality environment within the AONB is reflected in the clean air, low levels of light pollution, clean bathing waters and tranquillity that then attract significant visitors to the area. This environmental quality provides a healthy environment for people living in and visiting the AONB. Whilst bathing waters and water bodies have seen quality improvements over the last few years, there has been a reduction in tranquillity in some areas with new developments and new leisure activities. The more remote areas have continued to experience high levels of tranquillity and environmental quality although intensive farming has begun to affect some quality measures even in the more remote areas such as the Hartland Peninsula. [Insert Light Pollution Map¹⁴](#)

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Public understanding of climate change impacts and policy responses and their concern at perceived lack of action
- Climate change impacts on water quality, quantity and flows
- Climate change impacts on soils, productivity and crop types
- Risk from pests, diseases (such as ash dieback, Phytophthora, bovine Tb etc.) and non-native invasive species
- Renewables developing more at farm scale than commercial scale
- Natural flood management schemes with landscape impacts
- Marine litter increasing on the coast

- New regulations (e.g. Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulation 2018)
- The North Devon Biosphere Reserve Action Plan includes priorities on soils, water quality and flood risks

Work to date

- ✓ North Devon Catchment Partnership working with external funds and contractors to address issues related to water quality, flood attenuation, soil quality and coastal realignment
- ✓ Public communication on climate change through ‘Character of our Coast’ talks and displays
- ✓ Natural flood management works in Combe Martin and Braunton areas
- ✓ Advisory visits and small grants from Environment Agency to reduce diffuse pollution going into the Taw Torridge estuary
- ✓ Water quality monitoring in Hartland streams
- ✓ Regular beach cleans along the whole coast and Plastic Free North Devon campaigns¹⁵

Environmental Quality and Climate Change

Objective

To promote the sustainable management of natural resources and climate change impacts

Policies

D1 Increase understanding and mitigation of climate change impacts on coastal landscapes and communities, to be sensitive to the need to enhance the special qualities of the AONB

D2 Contribute to marine planning and protection to conserve seascape quality, coastal species and habitats

D3 Improve inland, coastal and bathing water quality through catchment management, local flood management and litter management

• **Priority Actions**

Monitoring and removal of non-native invasive species

Support for actions through the North Devon Catchment Partnership and use of Water Environment Grants

Beach cleans and litter picks in rural and village locations

• **Indicators**

Water Bodies Status – river and coastal (local)

Area of Land Enhanced (beach cleans - local)

3. PEOPLE AND PROSPERITY

3.1 Planning, Development and Infrastructure

3.1.1 Planning Policies and the AONB

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) legislation from 2012, revised in July 2018, provides specific guidance for plan makers and decision takers in relation to AONBs. Paragraph 172 states:

“Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads⁵⁴. The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited. Planning permission should be refused for major development⁵⁵ other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest. Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- a) the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;*
- b) the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*
- c) any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated.”*

It should also be recognised that the ‘*presumption in favour of sustainable development*’ does not necessarily apply within AONBs as confirmed by Paragraph 11, footnote 6 of the NPPF, due to the other restrictions placed on AONBs elsewhere within the Framework.

The North Devon and Torridge Local Plan¹⁶ contains specific policies related to the designated AONB and confirms the AONB Management Plan is a ‘material consideration’ in the planning process:

Policy ST14: Enhancing Environmental Assets

The quality of northern Devon’s natural environment will be protected and enhanced by ensuring that development contributes to: conserving the setting and special character and qualities of the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty whilst fostering the social and economic well-being of the area;

Policy DM08: Landscape and Seascape

- (2) Great weight will be given to conserving the landscape and scenic beauty of designated landscapes and their settings. Proposals affecting the North Devon Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or Exmoor National Park or their settings should have regard to their statutory purposes including to ensure that their landscape character and natural beauty are conserved and enhanced. Development should be appropriately located to address the sensitivity and capacity of these designated areas and will not be permitted where it would conflict with the achievement of their statutory purposes.
- (3) Proposals within or affecting the setting of the AONB should be informed by, and assist in the delivery of, the North Devon Coast AONB Management Plan. Major development within the AONB will be refused subject to the tests of exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest as set out in national policy.

3.1.2 Maintaining the Undeveloped Coast and Heritage Coast - additional protection for the coast is within the NPPF and Local Plan:

The NPPF Paragraph 173 states “Within areas defined as Heritage Coast (and that do not already fall within one of the designated areas mentioned in paragraph 172), planning policies and decisions should be consistent with the special character of the area and the importance of its conservation. Major development within a Heritage Coast is unlikely to be appropriate unless it is compatible with its special character.” This is relevant to the Setting of the AONB, particularly Lundy Island and Braunton Great Field and Marshes.

The Local Plan has specific policies on the Coast that are designed to ensure that it is conserved and enhanced:

Policy ST09: Coast & Estuary states:

The integrity of the coast and estuary as an important wildlife corridor will be protected and enhanced. The importance of the undeveloped coastal, estuarine and marine environments, including the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, will be recognised through supporting designations, plans and policies. The undeveloped character of the Heritage Coasts will be protected.

Policy DM08: further includes:

- (4) Development within the Heritage Coast should maintain the character and distinctive landscape qualities of the area.

3.1.3 Sustainable Development and Infrastructure - the AONB designation is not about preventing development within the area, rather it is about encouraging sustainable development, which does not harm the purposes of AONB designation. Developments that reflect local design and heritage, that use locally distinctive building stone and/or meet clearly evidenced local needs are more likely to be supported. Increasing house prices and competition for properties due to demand for holiday homes or second homes presents difficulties for local people accessing the housing market either for long term rentals or to purchase their own home. This local need for housing has prompted inclusion of a new policy to support affordable housing development within the AONB where they will meet evidenced, local housing need and are appropriate to the AONB designation. An additional sustainable development pressure is for essential infrastructure to meet transport, utilities, communications and information requirements to ensure the area is a living and working landscape.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- New North Devon and Torrridge Local Plan in place
- Ongoing potential for onshore, inshore and offshore renewable energy developments
- On-going pressure for development inside the AONB and in its setting
- Increasing house prices and lack of affordability for local people, lack of affordable housing
- Development impacts leading to loss of tranquillity and increased light pollution
- The change in size and design of existing buildings is having a negative effect on the landscapes of the AONB
- Current unavailability of many of Devon's traditional building stones
- Impact of new communications technology to support mobile phone and internet access improvements
- Changes in highway management and maintenance
- Community led initiatives to maintain signage and local distinctiveness
- Landscape improvements achieved through undergrounding of overhead power lines

Work to date

- ✓ North Devon and Exmoor Seascape Assessment completed
- ✓ Planning protocol signed with the three local planning authorities
- ✓ AONB planning panel providing advice on planning application responses
- ✓ In 96% of planning applications commented on, the decision matches the recommendation of the AONB
- ✓ Provided advice to Neighbourhood Plans in North Devon
- ✓ Worked with Western Power, National Trust and other landowners to underground power lines in the AONB
- ✓ Provided small grants to support locally distinctive village signage in Hartland and Berryarbor from the AONB's Sustainable Development Fund
- ✓ Contributed to consultations on SW Marine Plan and member of the North Devon Marine Pioneer stakeholder group

Planning, Development and Infrastructure

Objective

To ensure the planning process and infrastructure development protects and enhances the designated AONB and its special qualities

Policies

- I1 Provide planning advice and policy guidance to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and special qualities of the designated AONB
- I2 Promote and maintain the local distinctiveness and historic character of the built environment
- I3 Support affordable housing proposals to meet local housing needs, that take full account of the AONB designation

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">14 Conserve and enhance the coast and marine environment in relation to onshore and offshore developments15 Support appropriate infrastructure, signage and transport networks in the AONB, for the benefit of local and visiting communities |
|--|

- **Priority Actions**

Develop Design Guides for Saunton and other areas in the AONB

Research affordable housing needs within the AONB

Training of local authority officers, planning advisors and agents on landscape issues within the AONB

- **Indicators**

Number of Planning Applications commented on (local)

Percentage of Decisions on Planning Applications commented on, that match the AONB Partnership recommendation (local)

3.2 Farming and Land Management

The North Devon Coast AONB is a farmed landscape reflecting centuries of land management traditions and change. More recent changes have been heavily influenced by the European Common Agricultural Policy and its different strands of support to improve productivity, maintain a stable and affordable supply of food and good stewardship of the land (for wildlife, heritage and ecosystem services). Farming is not just about food, it is also about the supply and management of natural resources and a viable rural economy and community.

Over 80% of the AONB is agricultural, three quarters of which is managed by owner occupiers. Significant landowners within the AONB include the National Trust, Stucley Estate (Hartland), Christie Estate (Braunton) and Clovelly Estate. With over 180 commercial holdings and an estimated 100 smallholdings, the majority are engaged in livestock farming including 10% in dairying with only a handful specialising in poultry, pigs, forestry or horticulture. However, slight changes in crops and livestock can be seen with a doubling of land under horticulture, a 30% increase in poultry, a slight decline in beef cattle but static dairy and sheep numbers over the last five years¹⁷. These 'trends' may not continue given the changing context for agricultural and environmental policy in 2018/19.

Several organisations give advice to farmers and landowners, usually linked to environmental stewardship schemes or specific landscape or biodiversity projects. This includes Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and charities such as Devon Wildlife Trust and the National Trust amongst others often working in partnership.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Changes to agricultural and environmental policies, with a stronger focus on public goods and environmental services
- Farmers are an ageing population, although growing pool of younger people in farming with more technical knowledge and skills
- Increases in “lifestyle” farming with high land values and consequent impacts on landscape, woodland and biodiversity
- Trends in farming vary across sectors with larger, intensive or extensive livestock farms and more land under poultry and horticulture in small units
- Changes to soil structure through compaction due to farming practices causing surface water flooding problems, soil erosion and diffuse pollution
- Limited forestry grants and low level of woodland management in the smaller, fragmented and less accessible sites
- Local food products and outlets valued by visitors and residents
- Visitor expectations of landscape, access and land management e.g. reduction in grazing livestock, access for dogs
- Increasing scale of agricultural buildings and development pressures/opportunities for older building stock

Work to date

- ✓ Engagement with farmers to understand impacts of leaving the European Union
- ✓ Facilitation Fund in the Braunton area to support Greater Horseshoe Bats and environmental improvements coordinated by Devon Wildlife Trust
- ✓ Conservation grazing by cattle on Woolacombe dunes and Baggy Point using invisible fencing

Farming and Land Management

Objective

To promote farming, food production and land management practices that conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONB

Policies

F1 Support partners to deliver sustainable and exemplar land management, forestry and farming practices in keeping with the AONB designation

F2 Work with landowners and managers to maintain landscape features such as hedge-banks and woodlands

F3 Support approaches to enhance the Natural Capital within the AONB including carbon storage, clean water, timber, renewable energy and food, consistent with the designation

• Priority Actions

Support environmental land management trials and work of Defra Landscape Pioneer to support 25 Year Environment Plan
Develop a design guide for farm building conversions

Provide interpretation about farming and land management for visitors
Facilitate advice services for farmers/land managers to support nature conservation, pollution management and business viability

- **Indicators**

Percentage of Land in Agri-environment Schemes (NE)

Percentage of Woodland in Management (FC)

3.3 Sustainable Rural and Visitor Economy

The AONB is a living and working landscape requiring a balance between economic activity, societal expectations and environmental conservation. The economy of this coastal strip is more dependent on agriculture and tourism than other parts of the region, due its natural beauty and the significant boost from water-sports linked activities on the coast and estuary. This economic activity closely reflects the landscape and seascape, the coastal climate and soil types as well as agricultural and economic policies.

Tourism is a vital part of the local economy with visitors drawn here by the stunning beaches, dramatic coastlines, the South West Coast Path and the tranquillity of the Hartland Peninsula. Surfing alone is worth more than £52m per annum to the North Devon economy and supports 1500 jobs¹⁸. The North Devon Marketing Bureau has been revived as a private-sector led group to market the area and in partnership with the local authorities has produced a 'Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018 – 2022' following visitor surveys in 2017. This acknowledges the very high quality and natural beauty of the landscape and its attraction for most day and staying visitors. An action plan is being developed to support and maintain a sustainable tourism sector in Northern Devon.

However, North Devon is a remote rural area with poor transport networks, a high proportion of micro businesses and limited markets due to its distance from urban areas and its peripheral location in the UK. In consequence, Torrington has some of the lowest wage levels in the country reflecting an economy largely based on tourism and agriculture¹⁹. The Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership covering Devon and Somerset, developed its Strategic Economic Plan in 2014 and produced a Productivity Strategy in 2018 with the aim of doubling the size of the economy over the next 20 years²⁰. These economic ambitions need to accommodate the importance and value of protected landscapes, hence the work of the Devon Local Nature Partnership to produce a Natural Environment context to inform the strategy, and the role of the government's work on valuing Natural Capital and ecosystem services through the Natural Capital Committee.

The protection of the designated landscape requires a sustainable development approach to new and existing economic activities to avoid damage to its natural beauty. There is potential for growth within the environmental economy, including wood fuel, local food and drink products, sustainable construction, heritage businesses, energy efficiency and sustainable tourism. Sensitive location of communications infrastructure can facilitate remote working, reduce commuting and support high-tech businesses in remote rural areas to retain jobs and wealth within the AONB.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Diversity of tourism activities needs guidance and education to ensure protection of area, promote opportunities and avoid negative impacts
- Increased recreation and visitor numbers in some areas having negative impacts on heritage assets, wildlife and footpath maintenance
- Social media opportunities to better promote local food products, events and outlets
- New investments from the Coastal Communities programme, for the A361 Link Road and on the English Coast Path
- Trend towards specialist and 'experience' holidays rather than traditional seaside stay
- Impact of minimum wage on rural and coastal businesses
- High level of repeat visitors offers seasonal and event opportunities
- Digital challenges in relation to local connectivity and availability of skills in businesses to benefit from new technology and communications

Work to Date

- ✓ Revised AONB website with improved event listings and beach clean calendar
- ✓ Encouraged awareness, understanding and action on marine litter across the AONB (including 2-minute beach clean boards and equipment on most public beaches)
- ✓ Delivered rockpool rambles and beach cleans for the public, with various partners, on most public beaches in the AONB through the Coastal Creatures project
- ✓ Group winner of South West Tourism Alliance Outstanding Contribution to Tourism award (2018) with other SW protected landscapes
- ✓ Northern Devon Tourism Strategy produced in 2018
- ✓ Rockham beach access re-opened in 2017 and new public toilets and showers provided at Baggy Point by NT

Sustainable Rural and Visitor Economy

Objective

To promote sustainable development within the AONB that is consistent with the designation

Policies

- G1 Take account of the value of the natural environment in economic development decisions using the Natural Capital and Ecosystem services approach
- G2 Support partners to develop sustainable tourism opportunities that promote the special qualities of the AONB, without damaging protected sites and species

- **Priority Actions**

North Devon Coastal Heritage project to improve interpretation of and engagement with heritage by residents and visitors

Review of interpretation information and boards to update/replace as appropriate

Improve visitor facilities, for example NT refurbished toilets, showers and catering kiosk at Marine Drive in Woolacombe, new Northam Burrows Visitor Centre

Work with partners on Northern Devon tourism action plan

Work with Devon Local Nature Partnership, Biosphere Partnership and Defra Pioneer projects on valuing the environment

- **Indicator**

Number of Beaches in AONB meeting the 'Higher' Standard for Bathing Water Quality (local)

3.4 Access, Health and Wellbeing

Whilst the primary purpose of the AONB is to conserve and enhance natural beauty, an important activity of many members of the AONB Partnership is to engage people and organisations with the landscape at every level. This is vitally important to ensure people understand why the area is designated and to ensure future generations look after its natural beauty. Engagement happens in many different ways including on a visual, physical and emotional level.

Physical access has been a high priority for much of the coast and countryside management activities through provision of public rights of way, open access land and opportunities for sport and recreation. The AONB has 334km of Public Rights of Way in the AONB, including the 128km South West Coast Path. This National Trail is now part of the England Coast Path which provides considerable economic value to the AONB. It is the most popular part of this national trail in the UK, but this has led to direct and indirect impacts on the local environment arising from transport, visitor and tourism business pressures.

The 935 hectares of 'Open Access' land, as defined under the CRoW Act, covers just over 5% of the total area within the AONB²¹, much of it along the coast path and including the wide sandy beaches found along the coast from Westward Ho! through Saunton, Croyde and smaller beaches along to Combe Martin. North Devon is known for its water sports particularly surfing, however other water sports such as kayaking, coasteering, paddle boarding and wild swimming have become increasingly popular taking people closer to nature and reaching previously inaccessible or less visited sites. All of these have the potential to impact negatively on the AONB if not sensitively managed.

Although there has been a range of works and projects over the years to improve access for people with varying physical abilities or mobility issues, the more recent trend is to take a broader health and wellbeing approach. This has increased attention on the potential of protected landscapes to contribute to the health and wellbeing of resident and visiting populations²². Evidence of the value of being in or

just looking at natural environments, particularly green and blue environments, for both physical and mental health is growing²³. In response, AONB Partnership members have begun to broaden out and customise their activities to meet the needs of very different groups within the population. This can range from targeting activities towards children in local schools who have never been to the beach, to offering artistic activities linked to the natural environment to encourage older isolated people into the countryside, or organising non-competitive physical activities and celebrations, and using special interests to stimulate exploration and activities in the countryside (history, art, music, literature, film).

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Public funding constraints affect communications, interpretation, visitor facilities and maintenance of green infrastructure
- Reduction in vegetation, water and erosion management on public rights of way and coast path
- Housing and business developments are affecting longstanding footpaths, changing their character and potential for users
- Reduction in public transport services and increased charges due to reduced subsidies, but community transport schemes available in some areas and increasing infrastructure for electric cars with charging points in the AONB
- Coast less affordable for visits due to rises in parking, accommodation and transport costs
- A surprising proportion of local children and young people have not visited the coast or a beach
- England Coast Path may create more open access land along the coast, improved paths and provide additional marketing
- Increasing recognition of the potential and cost savings from 'naturally healthy activities' for the physical and mental wellbeing of the whole population, reflected in recent policy and activity in the health and environment sectors
- Health and wellbeing could be addressed by improving the accessibility of beaches, paths and countryside for all
- Obesity and levels of inactivity are major issues for both adults and children in Northern Devon

Work to Date

- ✓ SW Coast Path Association has improved the path at Woolacombe and Watermouth
- ✓ AONB updated walks leaflets, produced two heritage trails at Combe Martin and Ilfracombe, plus three wildlife walks
- ✓ Coastal Creatures project developed improved engagement with schools and community groups through beach activities
- ✓ Biosphere Reserve team produced a coastal code and a good practice guide for marine wildlife activities
- ✓ Tramper for public hire and new tramper route provided at Woolacombe by NT with Woolacombe TIC
- ✓ Research commissioned with communities on 'naturally healthy activities' in the AONB producing a report and action plan
- ✓ AONB Health and Wellbeing working group set up and nominated a representative of this theme on to the AONB Partnership
- ✓ Devon Local Nature Partnership's 'Naturally Healthy May' with walks and promotion supported in North Devon
- ✓ SDF grants supported community health and wellbeing projects at Welcombe and Westward Ho! and new interpretation materials for Braunton Burrows and four beaches

Access, Health and Wellbeing

Objective

To ensure sustainable access to the AONB for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of local people and visitors, consistent with the designation

Policies

H1 Work with partners and landowners to develop improved access to and interpretation of the natural environment

H2 Support new opportunities and reduce barriers to improve the health and wellbeing of local people and visitors

- **Priority Actions**

Deliver the North Devon Coastal Heritage project providing volunteering and activity opportunities

Establishing a weekly 5km Parkrun at Woolacombe run by volunteers with National Trust support

Addressing health and wellbeing issues working with Devon LNP, Biosphere Reserve, local health organisations and charities

Improving information on access and activities on AONB and partner websites

Develop new access and engagement activities using the arts and special interests to reach new audiences

- **Indicators**

Percentage of Area accessible to the public (local)

Number of Health and Wellbeing initiatives in the AONB (local)

4. COMMUNICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 Community Action, Learning and Understanding

The resident community of North Devon and Torridge is very diverse ranging from very affluent areas to some of the most deprived rural communities in Devon. This diversity is also visible in the visitor population reflecting historical tourism flows, a wide range of visitor accommodation types and changing activity trends among visitors and service providers. North Devon's coast provides both high end and budget opportunities for those wishing to enjoy the AONB. This presents a challenge to the AONB Partnership to provide appropriate messages and use a range of communication methods to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Partnership working and community engagement projects (such as Coastal Creatures, Clean Marine, Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat project²⁴ and North Devon Coastal Heritage) are used to provide a flexible range of opportunities for community action and understanding. In addition, the AONB's Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) has provided small grants to support different approaches to community engagement using art, music, theatre, creative industries and science targeted at children, adults and communities who may be excluded from the AONB.

Community action in support of the AONB is directly demonstrated in the ten 'community representative' places on the AONB Partnership, the public survey and consultation activities held by members and the opportunities presented by the Sustainable Development Fund small grants. Action, enjoyment and understanding of the AONB encompasses every element of its natural beauty as well as the opportunities linked to sport, recreation, learning, volunteering and employment.

Forces for Change - Issues, Opportunities and Threats

- Changing local population characteristics – ageing and fewer young adults; larger retired community including range of incomes, education, fitness and volunteering commitment
- Changes in media and communications methods and formats, but traditional boards and leaflets still required
- School and College engagement needs to be based on curriculum requirements due to time and funding constraints
- Confusion among the public and organisations about the multiple agencies and groups operating in the natural environment
- Challenge of 'AONB' brand as long-winded and difficult to communicate to the public, 'North Devon Coast' name is more comprehensible and potential brand for local communities and businesses
- Improvements to connectivity for internet and telecommunications opening up new digital communication opportunities
- Challenge of optimising community volunteer potential due to lack of management capacity in local organisations
- Media generated campaigns and content stimulating interest and action from the public (e.g. BBC's 'Blue Planet' programmes, reducing single-use plastic, marine litter/beach cleaning, iconic species)

- Challenge of communicating responsibility and respect for environment alongside positive action, access and enjoyment
- Limited funding and capacity to maintain and renew existing community facilities such as halls, parks, sports and play areas

Work to Date

- ✓ Updated website for the AONB, reinstated bi-annual public Forum
- ✓ Coastal Creatures community engagement project provided education, training, volunteer capacity and work placements
- ✓ Beach cleans supported through delivery, SDF grants, equipment and raising awareness of marine litter through Clean Marine and Coastal Creatures projects
- ✓ Community, visitor and business engagement through Plastic Free North Devon Community Group and wider agency Consortium to support behaviour change and understanding of impact of plastics on people, wildlife, the environment and the sea
- ✓ New interpretation materials including walks leaflets and downloads, Spotter Guide and three Wildlife trails
- ✓ Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project activities engaging communities and schools around Braunton and Combe Martin
- ✓ Attended community, public and partner events with AONB stand to promote understanding
- ✓ Provided SDF small grants every year totalling £25,000 to support community projects

Community Action, Learning and Understanding

Objective

To support more people to learn about, understand and take action to conserve the AONB

Policies

J1 Raise awareness and understanding of the AONB, its special qualities, natural and cultural heritage

J2 Develop opportunities for people to volunteer and gain appropriate skills and knowledge to deliver AONB policies

J3 Support the provision of community facilities and services to improve the quality of life and sustainability of rural and coastal communities

J4 Support communities and businesses to reduce carbon emissions from the designated AONB so long as they are complementary to the special qualities of the AONB

- **Priority Actions**

Provide Beach Clean calendar on AONB website and ongoing support for community beach cleans

Promote the AONB and the work of the Partnership and its member organisations

Provide information, interpretation and educational materials on the AONB for a wide range of interests

Develop an education strategy for the AONB Partnership

Work with Plastic Free North Devon on community and business engagement, understanding and behaviour change

Publicise and celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the 1949 Act and the 60th Anniversary of the North Devon AONB designation

- **Indicators**

Number of People Participating in AONB activities (AONB/NAAONB KPI)

Value of Work and Projects secured by the AONB team (local)

4.2 Management and Monitoring

4.2.1 Managing the North Devon AONB

The governance arrangements for the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were established under the guidance of the former Countryside Agency and subsequently Natural England²⁵. Since 2011, Defra has provided direct funding to the host authority to support delivery of the Management Plan and running of the Partnership and staff team. This funding covers 75% of the running costs, the remaining 25% coming from the local authorities within the AONB. Governance arrangements are specified in a Memorandum of Agreement between the three Local Authorities.

The North Devon Coast AONB Partnership is a voluntary, non-executive body which meets three times a year to develop policy, champion the AONB, provide advice and guide work within the area. The AONB Partnership is comprised of representatives from:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coastwise North Devon• Council to Protect Rural England• Country, Land and Business Association• Devon Wildlife Trust• Environment Agency• Exmoor National Park Authority• Forestry Commission• Historic England• National Farmers Union• National Trust• Natural England	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• North Devon Archaeological Society• North Devon Marketing Bureau• North Devon UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Partnership• North Devon+• Tarka Country Trust• Taw Torridge Estuary Forum• Devon County Council• North Devon Council• Torridge District Council• Up to 10 Community representatives
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The Executive Group comprising the Chairman, Vice Chairman, AONB Manager, representatives of the funding partners and Natural England meets four times a year to oversee day-to-day management issues and monitor delivery of the business plan. Devon County Council is the host authority employing the team and providing office services in Barnstaple.

The AONB Team is core funded by Defra and the three local authorities providing a Manager, Projects Officer and part time Communications and Support Officer (2.6 FTE roles). The Team provides: administrative support and reporting to the governance structures; planning and development advice to the local planning authorities; promotion and awareness raising of the AONB designation and offer; administration of the Sustainable Development Fund small grant scheme; project development and external funding bids; partnership working and engagement at the local, regional and national level including participation in the National Association of AONBs, the South West Protected Landscapes Forum, the Devon Landscape Policy Group and the Devon AONBs group.

Delivery of the AONB Management Plan

The Management Plan has formerly included a five-year Delivery Plan specifying indicative actions and proposed partners to achieve the policy objectives. Due to the very changeable context in 2018 in relation to environmental and agricultural policies during the preparation of this Plan, a different approach has been adopted. This Plan includes priority actions for the plan period, with a more detailed delivery plan being produced within each AONB annual business plan. This will include short and longer-term actions indicating the key partners and the lead partner involved in their delivery.

The National Association of AONBs

The North Devon Coast AONB is a member of the National Association of AONBs (NAAONB), which is a registered charity²⁶. Its purpose is to support and develop a network of ambitious AONB partnerships with a strong collective voice. Four objectives have been agreed that are common to all 46 AONBs across the UK. The NAAONB provides learning, support and collaboration across the 'AONB Family' through an online intranet, joint marketing activities, national meetings and an annual conference. The coordinated 'Outstanding Week' in September every year raises the profile of AONBs through experiential activities and joint marketing.

4.2.2 Monitoring the North Devon Coast AONB

Monitoring of the North Devon Coast AONB is led by the AONB team with input from Partnership members and other statutory agencies. This is dependent on the availability of datasets provided by third parties and funding to commission specific data collection where this is not routinely available. Performance and Progress indicators are shown in the Table below but may be refined to reflect changing issues, activity or data availability. Some indicators have been provided from national datasets by Natural England (NE), the Environment Agency (EA) and Forestry Commission (FC) as shown below. Some indicators are reported collectively with other AONBs through the National

Association to Defra as Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), others are reported locally as indicated in the table. Monitoring information will be communicated in three different ways: -

- 'State of the AONB' report produced every five years to inform the review of the Management Plan
- Monitoring section included in annual Business Plans
- Public reporting through a bi-annual public forum or review document, plus regular E-news and social media

Table of Performance and Progress Indicators

Landscape and Seascape	Environmental Quality and Climate Change	Sustainable Rural and Visitor Economy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light Pollution levels (local) • Area of Landscape enhanced (AONB/NAAONB KPI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of Water Bodies - river and coastal (EA) • Area of land enhanced (beach cleans - local) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of beaches meeting the 'Higher' Standard for Bathing Water Quality (local)
Biodiversity and Geodiversity	Planning, Development and Infrastructure	Access, Health and Wellbeing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of SSSI in favourable condition (NE) • Area of Habitat/Land enhanced (AONB/NAAONB KPI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of planning applications commented on (local) • Percentage of decisions on planning applications commented on, that match the AONB Partnership recommendation (local) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of Area accessible to the public (NE) • Number of Health and Wellbeing Initiatives in the AONB (local)
Historic Environment and Culture	Farming and Land Management	Community Action, Learning and Understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Scheduled Ancient Monuments at Risk (NAAONB/HE KPI) • Heritage Assets enhanced with AONB Support (local) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of Land in Agri-environment Schemes (NE) • Percentage of Woodland in Management (FC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of people participating in AONB activities (AONB/NAAONB KPI) • Value of work and projects secured by the AONB team (local)

The Annual Business Plan produced early in each calendar year provides an implementation, monitoring and reporting function. Firstly, it will include an annual delivery programme for the Management Plan, secondly it will provide monitoring of some performance and progress indicators as they become available and thirdly it will provide a report to the public and partners. Annual Business Plans are available on the AONB website.

5. APPENDICES – to be completed

5.1 Glossary

5.2 Abbreviations

5.3 References

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