

## NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL DECISION



**DECISION OF:** COUNCILLOR ANNEMIEKE WAITE. CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

**ADVICE FROM:** THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT, ASSETS AND TRANSPORT SERVICES

**DECISION NO:** 25/26 EAT 384

**SUBJECT:** Adoption of the Mendip Hills National Landscape (ex AONB\*) Management Plan 2025-2030

**KEY DECISION:** NO

**REASON:** No expenditure or savings over £500K and no significant impacts for communities.

### **BACKGROUND:**

\* Since 22nd November 2023, all AONBs have been known as “National Landscapes”, However, relevant legislation continues to refer to “Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty” (AONB) and their statutory purpose remain unchanged. The terms National Landscape and AONB are therefore used interchangeably in this document.

The Mendip Hills National Landscape is a significant local landscape which has national recognition, safeguarded by statutory designation. The National Landscape is a key resource for both residents and visitors, providing important wellbeing, health, environmental and economic benefits.

The Mendip Hills National Landscape falls within the three local authority administrative boundaries of Somerset Council, North Somerset Council and Bath and North-East Somerset Council. Elected Members from each Local Authority sit on the National Landscape Partnership alongside representatives of other stakeholders. This Partnership oversees the delivery of the Management Plan.

The Management Plan has been consulted on, amended and is now being presented for approval prior to sending a copy to the Secretary of State.

### Current position

The Mendip Hills National Landscape Partnership agreed that the Management Plan review was to be conducted with as light a touch as possible and that the review process was manageable and economical in terms of resources required.

The National Landscape Partnership approved the Draft Final Management Plan 2025-2030 at their meeting on 20th November 2025 following 24 months of consultation. The management plan has also been endorsed by Natural England, a necessary step under the CRow Act 2000. An Annual Delivery Plan agreed by the partners will accompany the Management Plan and this will include monitoring information.

As the ‘competent authority’ under the Habitats Regulations 2010 the Mendip Hills National Landscape Partnership was required to assess the Management Plan to determine whether policies in the plan would affect Natura 2000 sites. The screening report concluded that the

Plan is unlikely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites assessed. Therefore, a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment was not required. In order to ensure compliance with the European Directive 2001/42/EC relating to Strategic Environmental Assessment a screening report was produced. This report concluded that that there are no likely significant effects associated with any part of the plan. The Management Plan has also been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment as required by the Equality Act 2010.

### The Management Plan

The plan is broken down into four themes covering Place, Nature, Climate and People. Following early consultation with key stakeholders it was accepted that the revised Plan needed to recognise new agendas and a changed context, including:

- Defra 25 Year Environment Plan
- New planning legislation and National Planning Policy Framework
- 30x30
- Protected Landscapes Targets & Outcomes Framework
- Local nature recovery strategies
- Increased development and population levels
- Increased access pressure

The review has resulted in a slight restructuring of themes, some rewording of current objectives and a few new objectives to take forward. These include a greater emphasis on access, nature recovery and wellbeing. As a result of national policy directly related to protected landscapes, the major changes have been made to the context to show the importance of the Mendip Hills in providing benefits to society (ecosystem services) and the relationship between them.

Delivery of the Management Plan is by the whole Partnership, together with others who have an interest in the area. The Plan cannot be implemented solely by the National Landscape Team. It depends on the support of many stakeholders, including farmers, landowners, parish councils, trusts, volunteers, public agencies and Government organisations.

### **DECISION:**

To approve the Mendip Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030 as the basis for safeguarding and managing the unique beauty and distinctive character of the area and to be taken into account in the preparation of the Council's Local Development documents and in the determination of planning applications.

### **REASONS:**

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, local authorities are required to produce and adopt management plans for NLs within their boundaries. The Act also requires local authorities to review Management Plans every five years.

The purpose of the management plans is to provide a framework for coordinated management of these outstanding natural and built assets.

### **OPTIONS CONSIDERED:**

Failure to approve and have a Management Plan in place for the Mendip Hills National Landscape will leave the Council in breach of its statutory duty under the CROW Act 2000 and the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023. Failure to adopt/endorse the plan will

undermine the Councils ability to fulfil its duties to further the purpose of conservation and enhancement of the National Landscapes when carrying out its operations and statutory duties.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

Delivery of the Management Plan is by the whole Partnership, together with others who have an interest in the area. The Plan cannot be implemented solely by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Unit. It depends on the financial support of many stakeholders, including farmers, landowners, parish councils, trusts, volunteers, public agencies and Government organisations.

The Council make an annual contribution to the Mendip Hills National Landscape Partnership, through a Memorandum of Understanding between the local authority partners and Natural England. The Council's contribution for 2025-2026 amounted to £3,500 and this amount is approved in the budget for 2026-2027. Approval of this Management Plans will not incur any additional expenditure.

The added value of National Landscape partnerships was the subject of an independent study by Land Use Consultants. The report findings concluded that these Partnerships provided a cost-effective approach to managing National Landscapes and indicated that: "The work being undertaken by AONB Partnerships is of growing relevance to national and local policy objectives. Concepts such as sustainable development, the ecosystems approach and the environment as an economic driver and determinant of health and wellbeing, all of which are core tenets of the AONB purpose, now have widespread acceptance in national and local policy".

### **LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, local authorities are required to produce and adopt management plans for National Landscapes within their boundaries. The Act also requires local authorities to review Management Plans every five years. The purpose of the management plans is to provide a framework for coordinated management of these outstanding natural and built assets.

The provisions of Section 85 of the CROW Act also require local authorities to have regard to the conservation and enhancement of AONBs when carrying out their operations and statutory duties within the AONB. To demonstrate compliance with this duty, the AONB Management Plans should be taken into consideration, where appropriate, when determining planning applications and in drafting Local Development Documents to ensure a consistent approach to policy development and to help protect the AONBs.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 brought amendment of section 85 (A1) into statute on 26 December 2023, whereby; Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 is amended as follows (emphasis added):

*A1) In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty in England, a relevant authority other than a devolved Welsh authority must **seek to further** the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.*

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) gives 'great weight' to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, and states that 'planning permission should be

refused for major developments in [AONBs] except in exceptional circumstances...'. This means that the management plans can have significant weight in planning and other decision-making that affects the AONB.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment Screening Reports were commissioned and subject to their own consultation with the statutory bodies of Natural England, the Environment Agency and Historic England as appropriate. Having done so, it was concluded that there are no likely significant (negative) environmental effects resulting from the new MP, including on any European sites.

### **CONSULTATION**

Consultation on the MHNL Management Plan has been undertaken with all statutory stakeholders, the MHNL Partnership Committee, other organisations and the wider public. A Statement of Consultation has been included in the management plan.

### **PROCUREMENT**

N/A

### **RISK MANAGEMENT**

Adopting the management plan will ensure the Council is not in breach of its statutory duty under the CROW Act 2000. Adopting the plan will enable the Council to fulfil its duties to have regard to the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.

### **EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

The Management Plan has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment as required by the Equality Act 2010, which concluded that no negative outcomes are likely to impact on any protected groups.

### **CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

The provisions of Section 85 of the CROW Act also require local authorities to have regard to the conservation and enhancement of National Landscapes when carrying out their operations and statutory duties within the MHNL. To demonstrate compliance with this duty, the MHNL Management Plan should be taken into consideration, where appropriate, when determining planning applications and in drafting Local Development Documents to ensure a consistent approach to policy development and to help protect the NL.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, s15 para.189.) gives 'great weight' to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in NLs, and states that 'planning permission should be refused for major developments in [National Landscapes] except in exceptional circumstances...' This means that the management plans can have significant weight in planning and other decision-making that affects the NL.

### **APPENDICES**

The full text of the Plan is available on the Mendip Hills AONB website <http://www.mendiphillsaonb.org.uk/caring-about-the-aonb/management-plan/>

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

The Mendip Hills National Landscape Management Plan 2025-2030

SIGNATORIES:

DECISION MAKER(S):

Signed: ..... Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment

Date: .....

WITH ADVICE FROM:

Signed: ..... Director of Environment, Assets and Transport Services

Date: .....