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INTRODUCTION

Ditchet Hill

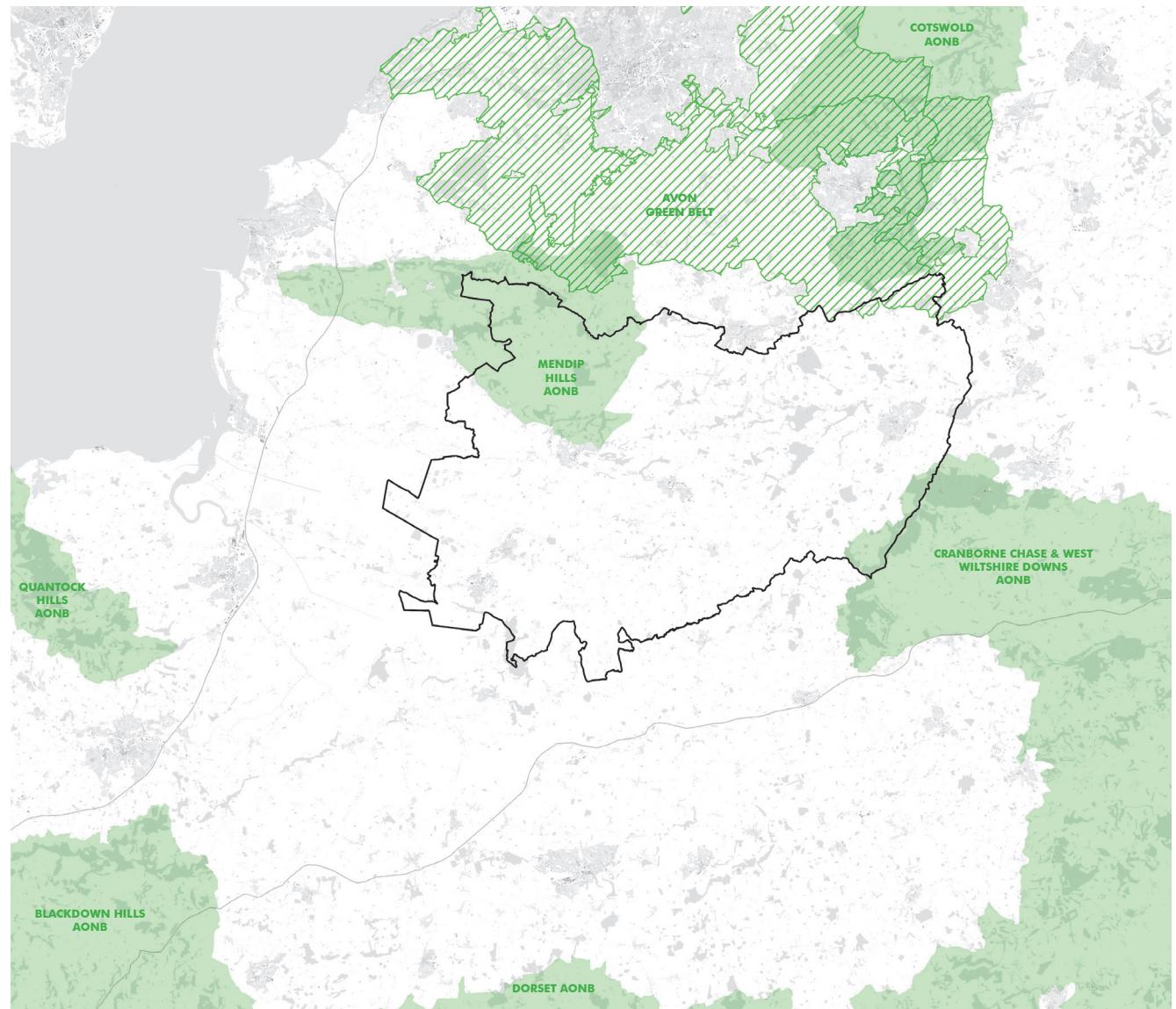
Landscape = People + Place + Nature

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Mendip District is essentially a rural district with four discrete towns and the small historic city of Wells (the smallest city in England and only the third largest settlement in the district). The city nestles into the landscape; this and the pattern of other settlements across the area have been shaped by the environment since the earliest eras of human occupation. The evidence of how early the area was settled is embedded in the landscape of the hills and levels illustrating a remarkable and very long history. This early history included exploitation of the mineral reserves found close to the surface in the hills. Later extraction of hard rock aggregates, coal and peat scaled up to modern demands and created local industries as major employers within the area. The abandonment of various workings to nature has left unique habitats in their place. By contrast forestry and farming practices have quietly created a framework of managed landscapes that reflect generations of work. Where this has been constant practice for long periods of time natural flora and fauna have become well established as cohabitants and even dependants on such practices.

1.2 The district local plan notes that Mendip district is 'defined by its landscapes'.

1.3 This study has been prepared by Macgregor Smith Landscape Consultants. The work was commissioned by Mendip District Council as part of a series of technical studies as evidence for updates to the Local Development plan. The work replaces earlier assessments undertaken in 1996 / 97 and is based on more recent best practice guidance for landscape character assessment.



Context Map-Environmental Designation

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In setting the brief for the commission the Council identified a series of issues to be considered and reasons for the required update. These included:

- Changes to the landscape over the previous 20 or so years, including the growth in the towns and employment sites in the countryside.
- Reference to the National Character Area profiles (published by Natural England – 2014) [2.1]
- Reference to valued landscapes, as set out at paragraph 170 of the NPPF [2.2] and a concern that the while the Local Plan focuses on the protection of the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the districts Special Landscape Features (SLF), the quality of other landscape areas are at risk of being under-valued in the plan and decision making process.
- Providing evidence for the assessment of broad locations and 'opportunity areas' for longer term housing and employment development.
- The assessment would provide the characteristics and landscape sensitivity or quality information to help assess extensions to the market towns or villages, infrastructure and new roads.
- The study would also feed into formal sustainability appraisals for the Local Plan and other strategies such as a Green Infrastructure Plan and a review of the local plan landscape policy.
- The study would assist planning consideration of developments by providing a comprehensive baseline landscape assessment.

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- The Council may in due course develop more specific skills and landscape assessment tools for the consideration of specific types of development.

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A full copy of the working brief for the project is provided in Appendix 1. While the study has been commissioned by the District primarily as a planning tool it is expected the work may be used more widely both within and outside the council. MDC along with all the other Somerset Districts and the County Council have recognised and declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency [2.3]. From this it is recognised the landscape is under threat and may well change both as a result and as a response to the challenges faced. As set out within this study there are areas and aspects of the landscape that would be sensitive to these changes and others that offer opportunities for a strategic planned response.

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Many parts of the Ecological Emergency are being driven by Climate Change effects. One issue for the district (and indeed the wider county) that is exacerbated by climate is the impact of Ash Die Back disease which is well established in the MDC area. This study will provide a record of the landscape in its current state and includes discussion on the topic as a high priority issue.

The study has been undertaken at a time of potentially very significant change. The Country has now left the European Union but has as yet to set its future relationship with Europe. The two main aspects where change could have far reaching implications for landscape are environmental protection and the agriculture sector. The position on these topics has not become clearer during the period of this study. The onset of the Covid-19 has recently required the unprecedented lock down of society and 'non-

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essential' businesses. The social and economic shocks of this event are predicted to be profound for the country as a whole. For the rural farming communities, the economic impacts may be less evident than for those in more urban settings, but at the same time may be combined with the impacts of Brexit, Climate Change and Ash Die Back. Continued economic pressure on agriculture has both social and environmental implications.

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The availability of recreational green space where people can exercise, and respect social distancing has been an issue in many more urban areas. In the countryside the issue has been around visitors making unnecessary journeys and honey pot locations. The issues of health and well being are clearly interconnected with access and enjoyment of the countryside; in the recovery from the current crisis the value of the District's landscape may be in helping people find connections to restorative natural green spaces. The benefits of a strategic approach to a comprehensive Green Infrastructure plan could help define the existing and potential opportunities to enhance the value of these areas.

The final stage of the study process has been to undertake a public consultation. This was done between October 2020 and March 2021. The report was published via a website with consultation questions set out for different organisations and the public to respond to. Comments were received providing further detail and views on most sections of the report which have been reviewed and where appropriate amendments made. As part of the consultation local people were invited to comment on 8 Special Characteristics of the District area (as set out within Section 7 of the study) and to identify their favourite Walks, Views and Hidden Gems of

the district. The full detail of all the responses is set out within a Consultation Report provided alongside the main study.

1.10 The final study along with various additional graphics and data is again published via a dedicated website.

1.11 The study area overlaps with the District's two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), namely the Mendip Hills AONB, and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB which have landscape character assessments. In the case of the Mendip Hills AONB, this pre-dates the main district assessment from 1997 (the AONB area appears to have been done the year before and the text reused for the Mendip Council area). Both AONB areas have subsequently been covered by the National Landscape Character Mapping and have both produced AONB Management Plans which include statements of the Special Qualities of the respective areas. While this study includes the MDC portions of the AONB's for most up to date guidance on issues within those areas the two respective Area Units should be referred to. The overlap is necessary to help appreciate how the wider landscapes of the district relate.

1.12 As noted, the Mendip area is long associated with various mineral workings. These are subject to planning control by the County Council as separate function from the District Council's planning remit. This study includes areas that are affected by existing workings and may help inform future strategy. There are issues identified within this study that would be of relevance to the minerals sector (including Ash Die Back and involvement in Green Infrastructure).



Colliers Way Cycle Path near Great Elm