

North Devon Coast  
Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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State of the AONB  
Report 2014-2018

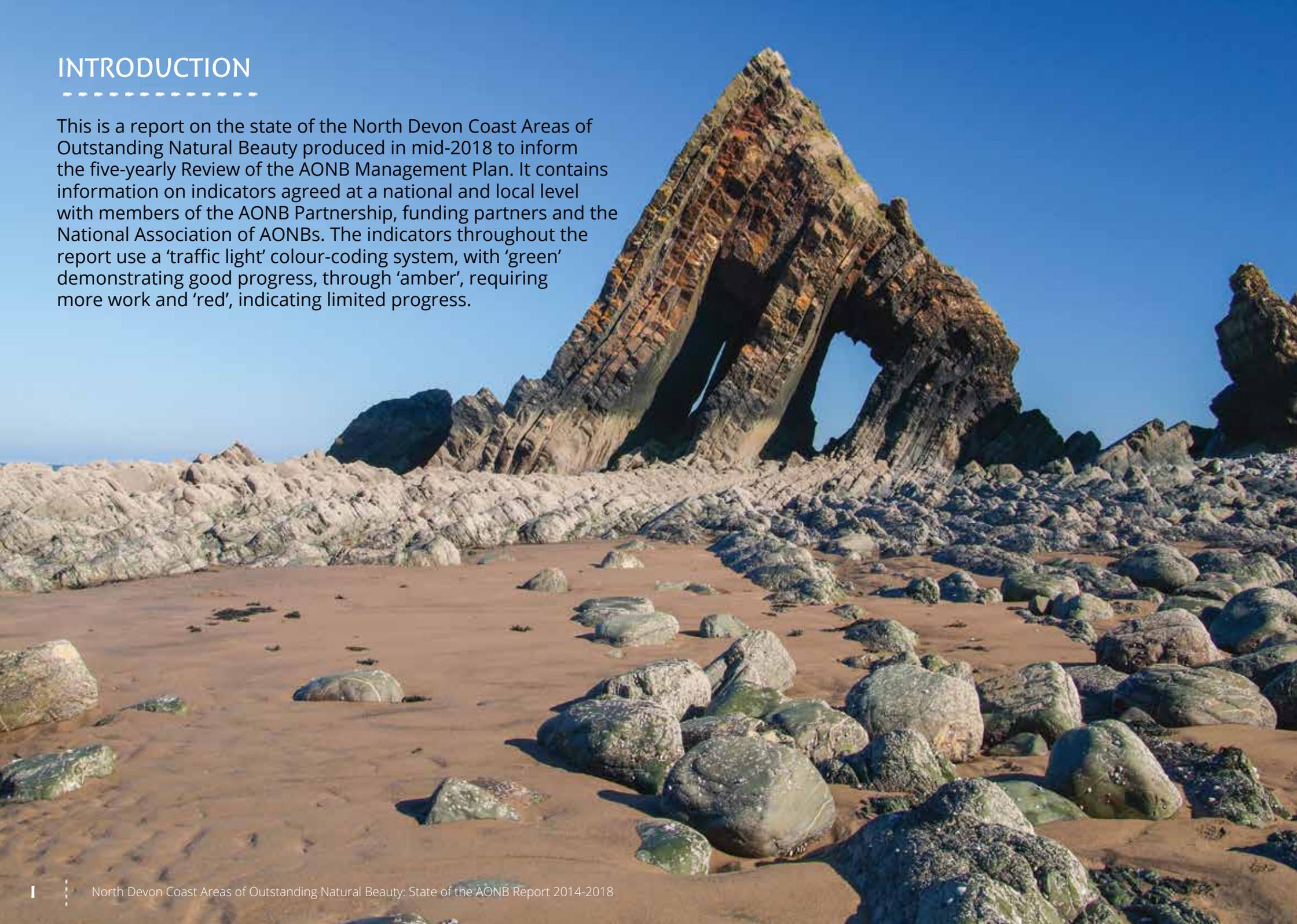


NORTH DEVON  
COAST  
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# INTRODUCTION

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This is a report on the state of the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty produced in mid-2018 to inform the five-yearly Review of the AONB Management Plan. It contains information on indicators agreed at a national and local level with members of the AONB Partnership, funding partners and the National Association of AONBs. The indicators throughout the report use a 'traffic light' colour-coding system, with 'green' demonstrating good progress, through 'amber', requiring more work and 'red', indicating limited progress.



# I. LANDSCAPE AND SEASCAPE

## Fixed-Post Photography

An annual record of perceptual and actual change in the landscape is provided by 360° photographs taken from 13 sites across the AONB (expanded from the original 10 sites in 2007 to cover new areas of development impact on the AONB and to fill gaps in coverage). This method is consistent, but not always detailed enough for some sites. However, overall it demonstrates that the designation is basically holding its own in terms of landscape and habitat maintenance. Often the changes that this method reveals are quite subtle, but cumulatively they can add up to a significant landscape impact that may otherwise be missed. Aerial photography records held by Devon County Council are used to explore specific site changes from 1947, 2000 and other years up to 2018.

## Tranquillity

The Council to Protect Rural England research on tranquillity from 2006 used in the previous Plan has not been re-done on a comparable basis, so although much of the AONB had a high tranquillity rating at that time, it is not possible to assess change since 2006. The measure of tranquillity used a range of visual and aural qualities as follows: seeing a natural landscape, hearing birdsong, hearing peace and quiet, seeing natural-looking woodland, seeing the stars at night, seeing streams, seeing the sea and hearing natural sounds (*Saving Tranquil Places, CPRE 2006*). The Devon Landscape Policy Group are researching a new tranquillity measurement for use in the future.

## Light Pollution and Dark Skies

Many parts of the AONB have beautiful, star-filled, dark skies due to the remoteness of areas like the Hartland Peninsula. A new measure available over several years (1993-2015) is light pollution, which links to some of the previously highlighted tranquillity factors. In 2015, North Devon Coast AONB was ranked 19th out of 36 AONBs in England. Torridge is the 5th darkest and North Devon the 19th darkest out of 326 districts in England (including unitary, London and metropolitan boroughs).

The CPRE map shows that over 90% of the AONB qualifies as the 'Darkest' areas, with just under 10% in the 'Brighter' areas and none in the three 'Brightest' categories. Light comes from large settlements within the AONB such as Combe Martin, Woolacombe, Croyde and Hartland and 'Brighter' areas in the setting of the AONB from Westward Ho!, Ilfracombe and Braunton (*Night Blight - Mapping England's Light Pollution and Dark Skies, CPRE 2016*).



Sites of fixed-post photography in the AONB

### INDICATOR

Light Pollution Levels – 90% in the 'Darkest' categories.

### INDICATOR

Area of Landscape enhanced – 335 hectares from power line removal.

## 2. BIODIVERSITY AND GEODIVERSITY

### Sites of Special Scientific Interest

There are 14 designated SSSI within or partly within the AONB, of these 10 are biological SSSI, 6 of which are designated for their geological features and a further four are designated solely for their geological features.

TABLE 1. Comparison of SSSI common standards monitoring in March 2018 and March 2013

SSSI Condition	2018		2013	
	hectares	%	hectares	%
Favourable	1,238	42	1,238	42
Unfavourable Recovering	1,536	52	1,354	46
Unfavourable No Change	147	5	221	7
Unfavourable Declining	27	1	136	5
Total	2,948		2,947	
% in favourable or recovering condition		94.1%		87.9%

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### County Wildlife Sites

There are 54 county wildlife sites within the AONB, of which 44% are in green or amber condition, 2% in red and 54% not yet surveyed (DBRC, 2016).

### UK BAP Priority Habitats

Seven BAP Priority Habitats are found within the AONB. They are: Western Oak Woodland; Parkland; Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture (Culm); Sea Cliffs and Slopes; Estuarine; Sand Dunes and Shingle Banks; Rocky Shore.

### UK BAP Priority Species

BAP Priority Species found in the AONB include Dormouse, Greater Horseshoe bat, Otter, Devon Whitebeam, Rock Sea Lavender, Sea Stock, Round-headed Club Rush, Water Germander, Petalwort, several lichen communities, including Golden Hair Lichen, and some rare marine species, including Pink Sea-fan.

### Marine Protected Areas

Two Marine Conservation Zones were designated along approximately two-thirds of the AONB coast in 2017, and a further three are proposed offshore in the Tranche 3 round. These complement the 2013 designation of Lundy Marine Conservation Zone off the North Devon coast, the first English Marine Nature Reserve established in 1986.

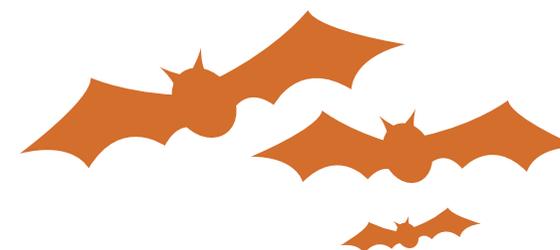
### Local Nature Reserves

There is one Local Nature Reserve at Hillsborough near Ilfracombe with a Scheduled Iron Age hillfort, which is owned and managed by North Devon Council.



#### INDICATOR

Percentage of SSSI in favourable condition – 42%. There has been a steady improvement in the overall condition of SSSI over the last five years. Ongoing challenges remain due to a number of factors. Whilst there has been little change in the Northam Burrows and Taw Torridge Estuary SSSI, the areas that are unfavourable and declining include parts of Braunton Burrows and the Saunton to Baggy Point Coast due to scrub, invasive species and coastal management challenges.



#### INDICATOR

Area of habitat/land enhanced – no data currently available.

## Coastal Creatures Project, 2016-2018

Coastal Creatures operated for 27 months focusing on the marine and coastal natural heritage of the AONB. It provided 247 different activities to engage over 11,000 participants with the habitats and wildlife on local beaches. These included rockpool rambles, mud dipping, learning on the beach for schools and colleges, beach cleans, BioBlitz species hunts, species and technical training and stands at

local festivals. It also carried out a thorough habitat suitability survey and audited marine and coastal species collections in local museums.

The project provided new biodiversity data through citizen science opportunities focussed on the intertidal zone on four beaches: Westward Ho!, Croyde, Lee Bay and Combe Martin. A total of 441 different species were

identified by some 37 volunteers who carried out seasonal, intertidal surveys over 2 years. Four Bioblitz events added more species records, from 240 species identified in 8 hours at Combe Martin to 732 species over 24 hours at Lee Bay. All data is available on the National Biodiversity Network.

The project was generously supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Tesco

Bags of Help, Torridge District Council, North Devon Council, Fullabrook CIC, Coastwise and the AONB. Thank you to project partners Coastwise North Devon, Combe Martin Primary School, Northam Burrows Country Park and the National Trust whose expertise and enthusiasm made it such a success.

[www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk/our-work/projects/coastal-creatures](http://www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk/our-work/projects/coastal-creatures)

## 3. HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

The AONB contains 24 scheduled monuments and over 400 listed buildings with just one registered park and garden at Saunton Court (see Table 4). Locally important heritage assets have been enhanced by local owners and community groups with financial support from Historic England, environmental stewardship payments and the AONB's Sustainable Development Fund grants. These include: Bucks Mills Hillfort; Damage Barton standing stone; Holy Well and Butterwell near Clovelly Dykes; St Clare's Well at Philham; Bucks Mills winch wall restoration; Clovelly Dykes Hillfort Southern Extension surveys; Hartland's 8 Wooden Signposts restored; and St Mary's Church, Mortehoe, clock restoration.

TABLE 2. Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments in the AONB

	Listed Buildings				Scheduled Monuments	Scheduled Monuments at Risk (2017)	Registered Parks and Gardens	
	Grade I	Grade II*	Grade II	Total			Grade II	Total
2018	6	22	385	413	24	3 (12%)	1	1
2013	6	22	378	406	21	4 (19%)	1	1

(HISTORIC ENGLAND STATUTORY FIGURES (31 March 2018) for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty)

**INDICATOR**  
Scheduled Ancient Monuments at Risk – 3 in 2018, 1 fewer than in 2013.

**INDICATOR**  
Heritage Assets enhanced with AONB Support – 15 since 2014.

Between 2011 and 2013 1,100 new monuments were recorded by English Heritage's National Mapping Programme work on the North Devon Coast AONB using aerial photographs and lidar assessment and mapping (English Heritage Project 6083, 2014). A proportion of these new monuments are being assessed and recorded through the North Devon Coastal Heritage Project operating from 2018 to 2020.

## 4. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

### River and Coastal Water Bodies

There have been improvements in the status of coastal and river water bodies over the last five years, with targets to achieve 'good' or 'high' status for 100% of them by 2027. Of the 40km of River water bodies, the remaining 42% have 'moderate' status with none of 'poor' or 'bad' status. The remaining 25% of Coastal Water Bodies have 'moderate' status and those sites needing improvement include the Taw Estuary, Abbey River and Philham Water. (© Natural England copyright. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2017)

### Flooding

There were nine incidents of flooding in the AONB between 2014 and mid-2018, affecting at least 18 properties. These were in Combe Martin (3), Lee (2) and one in each of Berrynarbor, Hele, Croyde and Woolacombe (Devon County Council 2018). Natural flood management work is proposed at Combe Martin and Hele to reduce potential flooding.

### Marine Litter

The high value of the inter-tidal, estuarine, beach and dune environments for wildlife and people is demonstrated through regular beach cleans activities to enhance and conserve this landscape. Five beaches in the AONB have been cleaned and surveyed regularly by local volunteers following the Marine Conservation Society's annual scheme, working with the AONB team. Eight of the eleven popular public beaches within the AONB have a '2 Minute Beach Clean' board and equipment to encourage litter removal and 2018 has seen a noticeable reduction in litter on beaches as more people reduce and remove litter, following campaigns around the BBC's 'Blue Planet', including reducing single-use plastics.

**INDICATOR**  
Status of Water Bodies:  
'Good' or 'High' for 58%  
of River and 75% of Coastal.



**INDICATOR**  
Area of Land Enhanced:  
5,308 hectares through  
beach cleans 2014-2018.

## 5. PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### Planning and Development

The number of planning applications within the AONB has remained constant over the last few years, averaging 350 per year, with around a fifth in Torridge and four-fifths in North Devon, demonstrating the greater development pressure on the North Devon coast compared with the Torridge coast. The AONB Partnership comments on those applications with a landscape impact, averaging 12% of the applications submitted, and rising. Changes in the National Planning Policy Framework to encourage more pre-application advice required 21 responses from the AONB Partnership to the local authority in 2017, compared with none in previous years. This change, added to requests for environmental assessments for new telecommunications masts, has increased the planning workload on the AONB Partnership.

### Power Lines

Over 5km of power lines were undergrounded in 2017 and 2018 in Morteheo and Croyde.

### Public Transport

Nine public transport routes serve the communities within the AONB, with just four providing hourly daytime services. This is a reduction from thirteen routes and five providing hourly daytime services in 2008, just ten years ago. Five routes only operate on two days a week with only a couple of journeys in each direction. Several routes provide more services in the summer months than they do in the winter, to meet visitor demand.

**INDICATOR**  
Number of planning  
applications commented  
on: 64 in 2017, showing  
a significant increase from 30  
in 2014.

**INDICATOR**  
Percentage of planning  
decisions commented  
on that match the AONB  
Partnership recommendation:  
96% in 2017.

## 6. FARMING AND LAND MANAGEMENT

### Farming

There were 181 commercial holdings (at least 5 hectares) in the AONB in 2016, with 442 people working in agriculture (*June 2016 Survey of Agriculture, Defra 2017*). The landscape has a clear influence on 'farm type', with 61% grazing livestock (of which half are in the 'Less Favoured Areas'), 13% general cropping and 10% dairy, with a handful of farms defined as horticulture, cereals, specialist poultry, specialist pigs or mixed farming. An increase in the number of poultry-, pig- and horticulture-based activities – and possibly agricultural intensification in relation to dairy – may have contributed to the 16% increase in total labour numbers since 2010. These changing numbers reflect an increase in employees and casual labour rather than the number of full-time and part-time farmers which has remained static. Although the latest figures do not cover smallholdings, a comparison with the 2008 Survey of Agriculture showed 349 holdings in the AONB, of which 40% were not considered commercial; it is possible therefore that there are a further 100 smallholdings today, with a range of recreation, tourism, agricultural and 'horsicultural' activities.

Over the last five years, land use has changed little, with 76% owned and 24% rented, primarily focussed on livestock farming. Of the nearly 12,000 hectares in commercial farming, 67% is permanent grass, with a further 14% temporary grass, 12% crops/fallow, 3.6% woodland and 1% rough grazing. Slight changes in crops and livestock can be seen with a doubling of land under horticulture (from 12 to 26 hectares), a 30% increase in poultry, a slight decline in beef cattle but static dairy and sheep numbers over the last five years.

TABLE 3. Change in Area in Agri-environment Schemes in North Devon AONB

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>Agreement Counts</b>	119	122	125	103	75	51
<b>ESS Area (ha)</b>	8,709	8,673	9,287	6,699	5,589	3,888
<b>Percentage of AONB under ESS</b>	51%		54%			23%
<b>Sum of ESS costs</b>	£548,120	£631,177	£672,983	£429,389	£476,251	£331,250

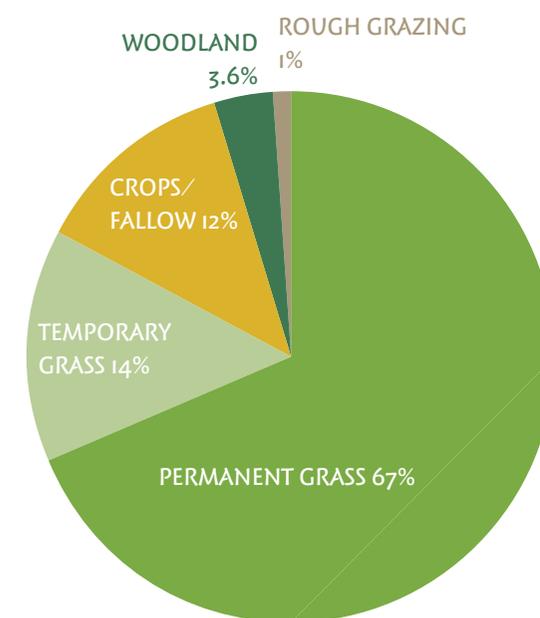
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The Agri-environment indicator previously used to reflect positive environmental management may need reviewing with the changes to the European CAP in the last few years and changes to agricultural and environmental policy. Nearly £3.1m has come into the area over the past six years but is reducing dramatically as agreements end and new agreements are more limited and tightly targeted. 2015 was the peak year for number and value of agreements.

### Woodland

Some 11% of the AONB is covered by woodland, an area of 1,919 hectares of which nearly 90% is broadleaved woodlands and a third is classified as ancient woodlands. The reduction in area under active management reflects challenging times in terms of tree diseases (e.g. Phytophthora and Ash dieback) and changes to the grant schemes as much as changes in woodland management. However, much of the woodland is not commercial and is located in small pockets or on steep slopes so is less profitable to manage or less likely to meet scheme criteria.

**INDICATOR**  
Percentage of Land in Agri-environment Schemes – 23% in 2018 compared with over 50% in 2013.



Land use in commercial farms, 2016

**INDICATOR**  
Percentage of Woodland in Management – 21% in 2016 compared with 34% in 2013.

## 7. SUSTAINABLE RURAL AND VISITOR ECONOMY

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Due to the linear nature of the AONB and the crossing of administrative boundaries, economic data for the AONB area alone is not available from standard datasets. Tourism is worth around half a billion pounds to the North Devon and Torridge economies, with a significant proportion of this income related to the world-class natural environment on the coast and countryside. Over 11,000 jobs are supported by tourism directly and indirectly to service over six million visitors to the area (*Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018-2022*). Tourism plays a significant role in supporting and sustaining many rural services and

facilities in the peripheral and remote communities within the AONB.

An online visitor survey carried out by the North Devon Marketing Bureau in 2017 showed that the top five reasons for visiting the area were: beaches and coastline, coastal towns and villages, countryside and scenery, peace and tranquillity, and walking opportunities. All of these reflect the high-quality environment in the area protected by a wide range of designations, support for public access and organisations working across the area to provide a high-quality experience for visitors. Of the 1,535 respondents, 87% would

definitely or probably visit again and 86% would recommend the area to family and friends. The area has a high level of repeat visitors among families and couples, and this is supported by this study, with 63% having visited the area at least five times before.

Bathing water quality is an important issue for the significant tourism economy and local residents, but standards have become more stringent since 2015 with Combe Martin in the AONB only meeting the 'Minimum' standard in 2016. Only Westward Ho! beach still holds a Blue Flag Award (held for 15 years) since

the scheme was changed to include 33 different criteria including water quality, and is now better suited to resort beaches rather than smaller beaches.



### INDICATOR

Number of beaches meeting the 'Higher' Standard for Bathing Water Quality – 9/12 bathing beaches in North Devon and Torridge, 2016.

## 8. ACCESS, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### Access

Access to the coast and countryside within the designated AONB is optimised where appropriate by landowners and organisations working together. This includes public rights of way, 'open access land', national trails, access to sites through environmental stewardship agreements and public or community-owned land such as parks, allotments, playing fields and nature reserves. Whilst formal accessible 'greenspace' is fairly limited within the AONB as these areas tend to be more urban based, the high density of public rights of way and 'open access land' on beaches, commons and alongside the South West Coast Path/England Coast Path do provide a wide range of opportunities and access, although not all is fully accessible for those with limited mobility. Key statistics for 2016 are:

- 206.8 km of public rights of way
- 127.8 km of the SW Coast Path National Trail (also part of the England Coast Path)
- 935 hectares of 'open access land' – which may increase with the proposals linked to the England Coast Path
- 'Ease of use' status of public rights of way across Devon managed by Devon County Council have improved from an average of 94% in 2014 to 96.8% in 2018.

### Health and Wellbeing

There is increased recognition nationally and within the AONB Partnership of the importance of the natural environment to the physical and mental health of the population. The high levels of deprivation and disadvantage experienced by some communities within and adjacent to the North Devon Coast AONB demonstrate that living in coastal and rural areas does not necessarily result in good health. The Ilfracombe area (including Combe Martin, Hele and Lee) is among the third most deprived areas of England recorded through the Index of Multiple Deprivation, scoring particularly poorly on health and indoor environment indicators, as well as low on income, employment and education indicators (*Ranked 10,904 out of 32,844 SLOAs in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015, Devon County Council 2018*). The most dramatic indicator is that life expectancy in some parts of the Ilfracombe area is 15 years lower than the highest scoring parts of Devon. Physical access and activities could help to address some of the health and lifestyle challenges faced by communities within and adjacent to the AONB, and this is therefore an increasing area of focus for the AONB Partnership.

**INDICATOR**  
Percentage of Area accessible to the public – 5.5%.



**INDICATOR**  
Number of Health and Wellbeing initiatives in the AONB – 2 (Naturally Healthy Activities Community Consultation Report and SDF-funded Amble and Art project).

## 9. COMMUNITY ACTION, LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING

During 2017/18 almost 6,000 people took part in AONB activities, including the Coastal Creatures Project and the Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project. Some 2,522 volunteer days were contributed to the Coastal Creatures project over 27 months.

The value of work and projects secured by the AONB team amounted to £136,921 over the period 2014-2017 for three partnership projects (Clean Marine, Coastal Creatures and North Devon Aquaculture Centre Study).

Interpretation: new materials created in 2017-2018 included three virtual wildlife trails and one spotter guide under the Coastal Creatures Project; three new walks booklets and one AONB annual report; and one information leaflet for Braunton Burrows.

People engaged through social media and online: Twitter 4,929, Facebook 5,077 and website views 3,528 (July 2018).

**INDICATOR**  
People participating in AONB activities – 5,972 people in 2017/18.

**INDICATOR**  
Value of work and projects secured by AONB team – £136,921 2014-2017.



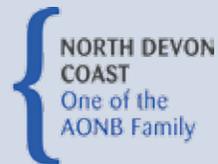
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Design & sub-editing by Naomi Cudmore ([www.lighthousecommunications.co.uk](http://www.lighthousecommunications.co.uk))  
Photographs of Lee Bay, Blackchurch Rock, Broadchurch Sands and Cotton Grass on Bursdon Moor  
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