

Environmental description of target area cohesion:

This extremely rural and coherent project area sits between the largely inaccessible chalk uplands of Salisbury Plain to the north, the cornbrash ridges of eastern Somerset to the west, and Thomas Hardy's Egdon heathlands to the south and east. The intimate rolling clay vales of Wardour and Blackmore are embraced by the extensive chalk downlands of south Wiltshire, Cranborne Chase, and north Dorset. Chalk escarpments provide internal edges, dramatic long distance features, and enhance the feelings of grandeur and enclosure.

The archaeology and history of the bid area offers not only a wealth of nationally important historical and archaeological features but a landscape which has been relatively untouched by modern development. Part of the area forms the ancient Cranborne Chase, an area that from the medieval times onwards was subject to Chase Hunting Law. The special character of these areas and the long durée of many of the features in the landscape such as the survival of large tracks of ancient woodland and ancient track ways, are all directly related to the former importance of these hunting areas.

The historic importance of the area can further be demonstrated by the over thirty documented medieval deer parks many of these were transformed into 17th century landscape parks. The rich architectural heritage of the area also boasts over 4,000 listed buildings and 56 Grade I listed buildings. The many small villages tend to use locally distinctive building materials leading to great diversity in style between areas, depending on the availability of local building materials such as greensand or Chilmark stone. All of the market towns in the area date back to the Saxon era.

Fragments of these ancient landscapes remain in an unparalleled aggregation of semi-natural habitats. This is recognised in the extent, density and high level of nature conservation designations:

- 70% of the bid area is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (1,088.40 km²).
- 5.36 km² is designated as a Special Area for Conservation (SAC), the highest European nature conservation designation.
- 40 km² is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a good proportion of which is also National Nature Reserve; the so-called "jewels in the crown" of British natural areas.
- The area of SAC and SSSI together make up nearly 3% of the bid area.
- In addition, there are numerous County Wildlife Sites (also called Sites of Nature Conservation Interest) amounting to a further almost 10% of the bid area.

The area boasts large expanses of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland; a habitat rich in endemic species. They were once united by small farm woodlands and hedgerows full of elm and oak. While this is no longer the case, the opportunities exist to end their isolation and unite the wooded landscape once again, safeguarding the populations of wildlife that depend upon them. Lack of management of woodlands is an important issue which we hope to address through this Local Development Strategy.

Lowland calcareous grasslands, nearly a fifth of the total UK resource of this threatened habitat, form chains across the landscape. This area holds arguably the most sustainable remnant chalk grasslands in the UK, being adjacent to Salisbury Plain; the largest chalk grassland complex in Western Europe. The opportunities for

chalk grassland restoration that exist in this area are unique. If chalk grassland conservation is to be undertaken at a landscape scale then it must start here.

The Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has been identified by Natural England as being extremely important for arable biodiversity, holding nationally important populations and assemblages of farmland birds and arable plants in the south west. It will be taking part in the South West Farmland Bird Project 2008 -2011. Local Action funding could add value to this project.

River valleys intersect the landscape. The Leader approach could allow the adoption of catchment-scale solutions to resolve complex issues of over abstraction for drinking water and diffuse pollution from agriculture.

The communities and businesses of the bid area are peculiarly dependent upon the high quality of the ecosystem services provided by the natural environment which surrounds them and of which they are a part. Therefore, the sustainable development of this area is tied inextricably to the maintenance of biodiversity in the region.