



**KENT DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY**

**MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**FIRST REVISION 2009 – 2014**

**FINAL TEXT APPROVED FOR ADOPTION**

**OCTOBER 2008**

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## **FOREWORD**

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is exactly what it says it is: a precious landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them.

AONBs represent only 18% of the land area of England and Wales. In this small proportion of the country it is the landscape that should come first.

### **The Kent Downs are home to some of the most enchanting landscapes of southern Britain.**

In 2004 the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty partnership worked closely together to prepare and produce the first management plan for this special place.

The management plan provided energy, direction and commitment and in the time since it was published much has been achieved to conserve and enhance the Kent Downs. At the same time the pressures on this landscape have been greater than we anticipated. What is clear now is that this pressure will continue to grow and we need to redouble our efforts to secure this fine landscape into the future.

With the help and support of many hundreds of individuals and organisations we have reviewed the original Kent Downs AONB Management Plan. This first revision builds fundamentally on the original plan adopted in April 2004.

The ultimate goal of the Management Plan remains to ensure that the natural beauty, special character of the landscape and vitality of the communities within the Kent Downs AONB are recognised, maintained and strengthened well into the future. To achieve this we need your help.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Reynolds', written over a horizontal line.

Chris Reynolds  
Chairman, Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee

## STRUCTURE

This is the first revision of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan.

In response to consultation the structure of the plan has changed from the original in an attempt to make it more logical and easier to navigate.

This plan is set out in the following sections:

**1 Setting the scene.** An introduction to the AONB, the need for management planning and a statement of the special components of natural beauty of the AONB and the main issues and threats relating to them.

**2 The 20 Year Vision for the AONB.** An aspirational and inspirational portrayal of the Kent Downs AONB in 2029. Developed from the understanding of the special characteristics and threats. The Management Plan then sets out how the vision can become reality.

**3 The Management of the AONB.** A description of the main management arrangements for stakeholders and partners and provides a description of the formulation of AONB Policies.

**4 Components of Natural Beauty.** A separate description for each component of the vision the plan sets out; the special characteristics, the main issues and threats identified through consultation and intelligence gathering, the aims and policies are defined.

Landform and landscape character  
Biodiversity  
Farmed landscape  
Woodland and trees  
Historic and cultural heritage  
Geology and natural resources  
Vibrant communities  
Sustainable development and travel  
Access, enjoyment and understanding

**5 Finally the plan considers implementation, monitoring and review.** To be reported in AONB annual reviews publicising achievements and rolling forward actions. Indicators will establish if our policies are achieving the aims and visions.

**6 Action Plan.** A separate Action Plan has been prepared in partnership with the local authorities and other key stakeholders involved in the development of the plan. The Action Plan sets out what will be done, by whom and when. To achieve policies and to be reactive to change the Action Plan will be reviewed annually.

## **1 Setting the scene**

### **1.1 The background to the vision for the AONB**

There is no doubt that the landscape of the Kent Downs is special. There is drama and intimacy; there is diversity and contrast within the AONB; there are ancient places as well as the bright white of a new cliff fall. This is a distinctive, national landscape of outstanding quality and value.

The Kent Downs AONB is a nationally important landscape and one of the most enchanting parts of southern England. The AONB was designated in July 1968 under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. It covers 878sq.km (326 sq.miles) stretching from the Surrey/Greater London border to the Strait of Dover. Aside from a small area within the London Borough of Bromley, the AONB lies wholly within the county of Kent and covers some 23% of the total land area of the county. It rises to an altitude of 250m above sea level at its highest point at Toy's Hill south of Sevenoaks, and is crossed in three places by the river valleys of the Darent, the Medway and the Stour, all flowing northwards.

The Kent Downs are the eastern half of the North Downs ridge of chalk stretching from Farnham in Surrey to the English Channel. The western half of the chalk ridge lies within the Surrey Hills AONB, which adjoins the Kent Downs. The same ridge of chalk reappears on the French side of the Channel, where it is designated le Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d'Opale. In Kent, the North Downs, along with part of the Greensand Ridge and Romney Marsh, form the Kent Downs AONB.

The Kent Downs is the eighth largest AONB in England and Wales, and administratively is one of the more complex falling within twelve local authorities and lying partly or wholly within 137 parish council boundaries.

#### **1.1.1 AONB designation**

Areas of Outstanding National Beauty are part of a family of protected areas recognised and classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) throughout the world. AONBs, National Parks and Heritage Coasts in England and Wales fall into Category V – Protected Landscapes. These are areas that have been moulded by centuries of human activity, where there is a diversity of land use with a "sense of place". Equivalent areas in other countries include the French Parcs Naturels Régionaux. The Kent Downs AONB has a strong partnership with le Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d'Opale. The IUCN definition of Protected Landscape aims to maintain the harmonious balance between people, landscapes and nature for now and for future generations.

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 legislated for the designation of AONBs and National Parks. Their purpose was to be similar – to conserve and enhance natural beauty. The Countryside Commission further defined the purpose of AONB designation in a statement of 1991.

## **Purpose of AONB designation...**

"...is primarily to conserve and enhance natural beauty".

"In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment".

"Recreation is not an objective of designation but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses."

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement (Countryside Commission, CCP 356, 1991), page 5

In the time span of this reviewed management plan, Natural England, the successor to the Countryside Agency, will develop a policy position for the English Protected Landscapes.

AONBs and National Parks are recognised in England to be on a par legally because of their nationally important landscapes. In June 2000 the Government confirmed that AONBs are equivalent to National Parks in terms of their landscape quality, scenic beauty and planning status. Subsequently, paragraph 4.8 of Planning Policy Guidance 7: The Countryside – Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development was amended to reflect this status.

The thirty-six AONBs in England amount to over 15% of the total land area. They vary greatly in landscape character and size ranging from the smallest – Isles of Scilly (16sq. km) to the largest – the Cotswolds (2,038 sq. km). In Kent, the High Weald and Kent Downs AONB cover 33% of the county's land area. In the south east England region AONBs cover over 33% of the total land area.

### **1.1.2 Definition of Natural Beauty and Landscape**

The term 'natural beauty' remains at the heart of the purpose of AONB designation. The 1949 Act provides a definition of natural beauty as such:

"References in this Act to the preservation or conservation of the natural beauty of an area shall be construed as including references to the preservation or, as the case may be, the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features."

National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, section 114.

The term 'natural beauty' was always intended to embrace more than just the visual or scenic elements of the landscape. However, over the course of the last fifty years, this definition has been updated and broadened to include historic and cultural heritage. Recent government guidance specifically on AONBs provides a useful non-technical definition:

"Natural beauty is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries."<sup>1</sup>

At the core of the secondary purpose of AONB designation is the understanding that the landscape is not just scenery, but it is the result of the historic and ongoing interaction between people and place. Social and economic activity that contributes to the landscape and natural beauty is fundamental to shaping the future of the AONB.

The important link between people and place is emphasised in the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe) where landscape is defined as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”. The convention, ratified by the UK in 2006, also recognises that “the landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere; in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas”.

<sup>1</sup> Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB partnership members (Countryside Agency, CA24, November 2001) page 6.

### **1.1.3 The need for management planning**

In recognition of the national importance of AONB landscapes the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 required relevant local authorities to prepare, publish and subsequently review a plan which formulates their policies for the management of the area and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. The management plan is essentially about conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, the statutory purpose of the designation. The first Kent Downs AONB management plan was published and adopted in April 2004, this is the first review.

The relationship between this management plan and the planning system is set out in section 3.1.3

### **1.1.4 The Kent Downs**

The Kent Downs were confirmed in 1968 as an AONB. The overall remarks of the designation committee are summarised that:

“The scarp slope and dry valleys of the Kent Downs are the main target for designation, particularly where they retain a downland character, that woodlands are highly valued throughout the designated area and particularly on the scarp slope and dry valley sides, and that other qualities of note are views from the escarpment, pastoral scenery, parklands, villages, churches and castles.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **Landscape character**

Landscape character is described as the pattern that arises from particular combinations of the different landscape components and can provide a sense of place to our surroundings.<sup>3</sup> This revised management plan considers both the important components of the natural beauty of the Kent Downs and its landscape character. The components of the landscape of the Kent Downs are described below and landscape character areas are described in chapter 4.1 Landform and Landscape Character.

## **The public perception of the Kent Downs**

In the preparation of the 2004 Management Plan and this first review, views and engagement have been sought from many participants, including local authorities, stakeholders, local residents and visitors to the AONB. A key issue was to reconfirm which components of the AONB were most valued and the issues and priorities most important relating to them.

The main consultation method used for the 2004 plan was through a written questionnaire within the Kent Downs newspaper, *The Orchid*, in autumn/ winter 2002/3. Respondents could also fill in an online questionnaire. For the Management Plan Review (2008) consultation was widened following the preparation of a Statement of Community and Stakeholder Involvement (SCI). Consultation included a questionnaire in Kent on Sunday and Saturday Observer free newspapers and promoted on their web site and internet TV, gaining county wide coverage. The questionnaire was also available on the Kent Downs website and an A4 printed version with background information was sent to the *Orchid* subscribers database and parish councils. The 2002/3 consultation included mainly individuals and groups living in or based in the Kent Downs. For the review, 52% of respondents were from outside the AONB, but the features valued and priorities for action are remarkably similar.

Each time people were asked to select the components of natural beauty most important to them, they confirmed that the fundamental and special characteristics that formed the basis of the original AONB designation are still those most valued by people today.

<sup>2</sup> Woolmore, R. 2002. Kent Downs AONB. Designation History series.

<sup>3</sup> Landscape character assessment guidance for England and Scotland Countryside Agency/ SNH 2002.

### **Table 1**

Kent Downs AONB 'Have your say' survey and participation responses (2003 and 2008) (participants asked to select the three most important components or features)

### **Table 2**

Kent Downs AONB 'Have your say' survey and participation responses (2003 and 2008) (participants asked to select the three most important priorities for action or actions to improve use)

## **1.2 Special components of the Kent Downs AONB**

### **1.2.1 The components of natural beauty**

#### **Dramatic landform and views**

The Kent Downs' dramatic and diverse topography is based on the underlying geology. These features comprise: impressive south-facing scarps of chalk and greensand; scalloped and hidden dry valleys; expansive open plateaux; broad, steep-sided river valleys, and dramatic white cliffs and foreshore. Breathtaking, long-distance panoramas are offered across open countryside, estuaries, towns and the sea from the scarp, cliffs and plateaux; the dip slope dry valleys and river valleys provide more intimate and enclosed vistas. Overlying this landform are diverse

natural and man-made features creating distinctiveness at a local level. Key landscape features in some areas have been lost or eroded through lack of support mechanisms, through intensive land management, development or neglect. Illegal or antisocial activities, such as fly tipping, have led to further erosion of landscape beauty in certain places.

### **Biodiversity-rich habitats**

Rich mosaics of habitats, plant and animal communities of national and local importance are sustained, although many are isolated or fragmented in a modern agricultural landscape. These include: semi-natural chalk grassland and chalk scrub; ancient semi-natural woodland; traditional orchards, including cobnut platts; chalk cliffs, foreshore and sea platform; chalk rivers and wet pasture; ponds and spring lines; heath and acid grassland; woodland pasture and ancient trees and networks of linear features of species-rich hedgerows, flower-rich field margins and road verges. Sensitive management and conservation of all these features as well as the creation of functional ecological networks is essential to the survival of the AONB's important biodiversity heritage and landscape quality.

### **Farmed landscape**

A long-established tradition of mixed farming (of arable, livestock and horticulture) has helped create the natural beauty of the Kent Downs. Farming covers over 74% of the AONB. Expansive arable fields are generally on the lower slopes, valley bottoms and plateau tops. Disconnected 'ribbons' of permanent grassland (shaves) are found along the steep scarp, valley sides, and on less-productive land, grazed by sheep, cattle and increasingly by horses. Locally concentrated areas of orchards, cobnut platts (nut orchards), hop gardens and other horticultural production are also present, their regular striate form can enhance the rise and fall of the land. At a national level, uncertainty hangs over the future policy and funding regimes for agricultural production, agri-environment schemes, and the decisions of farmers generally. At a local level, more farms are being managed together in large contracts where rotations can be at whole farm rather than field level. Elsewhere farm owners with non-agricultural incomes are becoming more common. Provision for leisure including equine activities and shooting are replacing traditional farming practices.

### **Woodland and trees**

Broadleaf and mixed woodland, covering over 20% of the Kent Downs frame the upper slopes and plateau tops. A number of large woodland blocks are present, but many woodlands are small, fragmented and in disparate land ownership and management. Over half of the woodland sites are ancient (continuously wooded for at least 400 years), supporting nationally important woodland plant and animal species. Large areas of sweet chestnut coppice are present throughout, although active coppicing has declined considerably and timber production is very localised. Markets for local woodland products are currently at a low ebb.

### **A rich legacy of historic and cultural heritage**

Millennia of human activity have created an outstanding cultural inheritance and strong 'time depth' to the Kent Downs. There are the remains of Neolithic megalithic monuments, Bronze Age barrows, Iron Age hill-forts, Roman villas and towns, medieval villages focused on their churches, post-medieval stately homes with their parks and gardens and historic defence structures from Norman times to the twentieth century.

Fields of varying shapes and sizes and ancient wood-banks and hedges, set within networks of droeways and sunken lanes have produced a rich historic mosaic, which is the rural landscape of today. Architectural distinctiveness is ever present in the scattered farmsteads and oasthouses, barns and other agricultural buildings, churches and country houses. The diverse range of local materials used, which includes flint, chalk ragstone, timber and tile, contributes to the character and texture of the countryside.

The AONB landscape has been an inspiration to artists, scientists and leaders, from Shakespeare to Samuel Palmer and Darwin to Churchill.

The biggest threats to the AONB's historic and cultural heritage are from a general lack of awareness and understanding of the importance of these many sites and features. Other issues include the lack of sensitive management, and loss or erosion of features, character and settings through development.

### **Tranquillity and remoteness**

The imposing landform of the Kent Downs has confined the main transport links to its edges and the river valleys throughout history. This has largely remained true through to modern days, and much of the AONB provides surprisingly tranquil and remote countryside – offering dark night skies and peace away from road traffic. These much valued perceptual qualities are particularly vulnerable to the further spread of inappropriate development and continual pressure on the AONB's transport networks.

## **1.2.2 Quality of Life Components**

### **Vibrant local communities**

The Kent Downs is a living, working landscape shaped and managed by people. Currently there is a population of 66,000 and, while changing in nature, many of the Kent Downs communities are strong and vibrant, assertively seeking to conserve and enhance the place that they are fortunate to live in. At the same time it is increasingly difficult for those involved in the practical management and enhancement of the landscape to afford to live locally.

### **Sustainable development and travel**

The position of the Kent Downs, close to London, mainland Europe, major urban centres and growth areas means that the Kent Downs AONB, perhaps more than any other of Britain's protected landscapes – AONB, Heritage Coast or National Park, has faced severe pressure from development. The development of transportation infrastructure including strategic trans European highways, communications and housing, as well as the pressures of intensive agriculture and forestry, increased recreational use and illegal activities such as fly tipping and off road driving can detract from this important landscape. This is both an opportunity and threat and an important role of the management plan is to seek a positive exchange of goods and services between the Kent Downs and the surrounding urban areas. Despite the intense pressure experienced in the Kent Downs, it is still true that the AONB has largely withstood the onslaught and small but important community based projects have shown the real benefit of sustainable development approaches.

### **Access, enjoyment and understanding**

The Kent Downs is an easily accessible and enchanting landscape; over 1 million people live within a kilometre of the AONB boundary. There is considerable demand for access and recreation in the Kent Downs and providing this in a way which supports the special characteristics of the AONB is an important but challenging task. The AONB provides a public rights of way network four times as dense as the national average and there is a high relative density of bridleways and byways. Active user groups help to promote the sustainable management and use of the AONB for quiet countryside recreation.

Access to the Kent Downs AONB particularly through walking, cycling and riding can provide benefits to health and well being as well as supporting the local community.

Improving the understanding of the AONB is a critical task, without this the landscape will not be recognised, valued or enjoyed and its future conservation and enhancement may not be assured.

Since the designation of the Kent Downs AONB was first confirmed, an enormous amount of change has occurred. All aspects of environmental, social and economic circumstances have been transformed and the resulting changes have brought new practices and pressures on the landscape.

In the period since the first AONB Management Plan was published the pressures experienced have become more intense. Each chapter describes the issues and threats identified and, while in most cases those identified for the first plan remain, there have been more added to the list or the pressures are felt more intensely.

### **Countryside Quality Counts analysis**

The Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) project provides an indicative assessment of how the countryside is changing, working at a national scale. It is intended to help to understand where change is occurring and whether change matters to people in terms of the way it affects the things about landscape that people value. This information, when considered with the other locally derived evidence, has been used to inform the priorities and policies of the Management Plan review.

Despite the pressure of development, the character of the farmed and wooded landscape has probably been maintained, although it is likely that opportunities to further strengthen character remain.

## **2 A Vision for the Kent Downs AONB in 2029**

### **2.1 The Kent Downs in 2029**

In the first AONB Management Plan we set an agreed 20 year vision. The 2004 vision remains fundamentally unchanged but has been reviewed to reflect the changes we have seen since it was set.

The Vision for 2029 describes the Kent Downs AONB that we wish to be passed on to future generations. It takes a positive but realistic approach, by facing up to changes that are inevitable: pressure from development and traffic, land use and lifestyle changes, as well as technological advances and trends at a national or international level such as climate change. The Vision includes things that people would wish to remain much as they are now, as well as enhancements that should be made. It provides a future view of the AONB for all people involved in decision-making and actions that affect the landscape and life of the Kent Downs.

#### **2.1.1 The overall vision for 2029**

The qualities and distinctive features of the Kent Downs AONB, the dramatic south-facing scarp, secluded dry valleys, network of tiny lanes, isolated farmsteads, churches and oasts, orchards, dramatic cliffs, the ancient woodlands and delicate chalk grassland along with the ancient, remote and tranquil qualities, remain valued, secure and strengthened.

The Kent Downs has become a landscape where change supports the distinctive features of the AONB and responses to pressure for development and climate change have enhanced landscape character. The Kent Downs landscape is enjoyed and cherished and its future conservation and enhancement is a certainty.

Positive partnerships, local people and land managers act together to conserve, enhance and promote a nationally recognised and valued landscape.

#### **The management of the Kent Downs AONB**

In 2029... the Kent Downs AONB is recognised and valued. It is a landscape that is cherished and held in the highest esteem as a national and local asset by those who have influence in its future and those who live, work and visit it. Residents and visitors know where the AONB is and they understand and support the purpose of its designation. The Kent Downs AONB partnership is acknowledged and supported as the main advocate and champion for the AONB; organisations delivering positive action on the ground are strongly engaged in the partnership and management planning and operate in a coordinated way through the management plan. The partnership is open to all opinions about the conservation and management of the AONB and is adaptive to the consequences of short and long-term changes such as climate change.

#### **Landform and landscape character**

In 2029... the rich diversity of landscape character and qualities distinctive to the Kent Downs are protected, enhanced and managed to the highest standards in a coordinated and continual programme. The essential components of natural beauty, including the underlying geology, landform and views, as well as its special characteristics, are recognised and strengthened and landscape character is at the heart of decisions on land use, responses to climate change and development.

### **Biodiversity-rich habitats**

In 2029... the rich tapestry of distinctive wildlife habitats are in favourable, resilient condition and individual species flourish. A matrix of wildlife habitats span the AONB with functional connectivity as well as interconnecting field margins and ponds, hedgerows, headlands, road verges and ditches across the farmed and wooded landscape. These allow both rare and common and widespread animals and plants to expand, prosper and support resilience to the impacts of climate change. The extent and quality of chalk grassland in favourable management has significantly increased, forming corridors along the escarpment and the main dry valleys, grazed by a range of livestock. Policy and funding regimes recognise and support the distinctive and special characteristics of the AONB landscape.

### **Farmed landscape**

In 2029... the Kent Downs AONB is a place where agriculture is appreciated for its pivotal role in the conservation of natural beauty and landscape character. Sustainable farming is the predominant land-use of the AONB and the heritage of mixed farming (of arable, livestock and horticulture) is retained. There is a greater understanding of the role of farming and more opportunities to visit and understand farming systems. Despite the volatility of agricultural markets and production a broad range of crops are produced that are suited to the increasing extremes of climate, local conditions and market forces. Pasture is well managed by grazing and orchards and hop gardens retain a vital role in the landscape. The high quality products of the Kent Downs are available locally and high environmental quality is a market advantage.

### **Woodland and trees**

In 2029... the network of ancient and new woodland is conserved and enhanced for its landscape, wildlife and historic value and its extent is intact. Sustainably managed woodlands supply buoyant local markets for timber, coppice products and wood fuel, and woodlands, managed in an integrated way also provide well-used and well-managed places for leisure, country pursuits and recreation.

### **Historic and cultural heritage**

In 2029... the rich heritage of historic buildings, settlements and sites that characterise the Kent Downs' historic and cultural fabric are maintained in favourable condition and are enhanced to reflect their local character. The environmental performance of historic buildings is enhanced in a way that is sensitive to their character. They are understood and cherished by local people and visitors alike for their intrinsic value and for their important contribution to quality of life and rural economy. Vibrant and exciting cultural interpretation and celebration of the Kent Downs is strongly supported.

### **Natural resources, tranquillity and remoteness**

In 2029... great care is taken by farmers, landowners and managers to conserve and manage the natural resources of the environment particularly soil, ground and river water. Many communities, both inside and outside the AONB have reduced their ecological footprint and have energy fuelled by products from the Kent Downs, particularly wood fuels and other renewal energy sources appropriate to the landscape. Important areas of tranquillity have been identified, protected and expanded and provide 'oases of calm' away from increased traffic volumes. Worked out quarry sites have been restored to enhance local landscape character.

### **Vibrant communities**

In 2029... local people are involved and are central to the important processes that care for the Kent Downs, and have a clear sense of ownership and belonging within the AONB. They have a strong and influential say in development within their communities through pro-active consultation and engagement processes and are involved through their work and voluntary activity in the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs. People choose to buy goods and services locally because of their quality, value and benefit to the environment and local economy.

### **Sustainable development and travel**

In 2029... new development within the AONB and restoration and conversion work to existing buildings, reinforce and enhance the character and distinctiveness of the settlements and landscape of their settings. High quality, carbon neutral modern design fits neatly and complements the traditions of the past.

As the surrounding urban areas have expanded considerably, innovative management techniques successfully address the increasing pressure on the AONB as a place for outdoor recreation and leisure, as a rural place in which to live and from which to commute. There is now greater awareness, celebration and involvement in the Kent Downs by people from the surrounding towns and a positive and sustainable exchange of goods and services between the town and countryside.

Residents and visitors to the AONB actively choose to travel using effective, good value high quality public transport networks, as well as by walking and cycling because it is safe and enjoyable to do so.

Development adjacent to the AONB minimises its impact on views in and out of the AONB and its setting. Opportunities have been taken to reduce and remove the impact of unsightly development and infrastructure on the beauty and tranquil qualities of the landscape. The net result of development has been to enhance the special and distinctive characteristics of the Kent Downs.

### **Access, enjoyment and understanding**

In 2029... the Kent Downs AONB is a place where there is opportunity and access for all people and they feel welcome to participate in quiet recreation for relaxation, enjoyment, understanding, and for cultural and artistic expression which does not detract from the natural beauty.

Improved management ensures that the Public Rights of Way and much of the highway network is safe, quiet and convenient for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Maintenance of the Public Rights of Way and highway network will be sympathetic to biodiversity and landscape character.

The landscapes of the Kent Downs are places of increasing tranquillity because the importance of this vital element of natural beauty is recognised and decisions and actions have improved rather than detracted from this valuable resource. The Kent Downs AONB is recognised, valued and celebrated by residents, and by those who do not live there but may visit or those who can simply delight in the fact that it is there.

**Climate change**

In 2029... the impacts of Climate Change are being felt but the mitigation and adaptive responses taken to this major challenge are intelligent, effective, measure up to the challenge and are carefully chosen to enhance the qualities and distinctiveness of the landscape rather than detracting from it. The functions and services that the Kent Downs landscape provides to people, the recreational opportunities, solace, food and fuel remain intact and important to a larger population.

## **3 The Management of the Kent Downs AONB**

### **3.1 The management of the Kent Downs AONB**

#### **3.1.1 The role of the Kent Downs AONB Partnership**

Within an area as large and varied as the Kent Downs, there are many hundreds of stakeholders who have a role in managing the landscape, supporting local business and communities and enabling quiet recreation. The Joint Advisory Committee, above all others, has a pivotal role to play to help realise the strategic vision for the Kent Downs AONB, and to oversee the Management Plan.

The Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) for the Kent Downs AONB was established in July 1997 and is at the heart of the partnership. The membership of the JAC is made up of the twelve local authorities who have the responsibility jointly to prepare and review the Management Plan namely: Ashford, Bromley, Canterbury, Dover, Gravesham, Kent, Maidstone, Medway, Sevenoaks, Shepway, Swale and Tonbridge & Malling; as well as Natural England. Additional advisory members are the Environment Agency, Country Land and Business Association (CLA), the National Farmers Union (NFU), Kent Association of Parish Councils (KAPC) and Action with Communities in Rural Kent.

An Executive of representatives from the JAC, with some outside advisors, advises the work of the Kent Downs AONB Unit. At a much larger scale, a Kent Downs Forum is held once a year at a 'Countryside Day' for a wide audience, to discuss current issues and themes and inform the agenda for the forthcoming year.

The AONB Unit is employed by the County Council and works on behalf of the JAC to carry out the preparation and review of the Management Plan, to advocate its policies and work in partnership to deliver a range of actions described in the Action Plan.

In 1997, the Kent Downs AONB had one officer, a minimal budget and no projects in place except for local authority countryside management. Increased political support and funding have enabled the AONB Unit to expand its staffing and capacity. There are now (2008) 5 'core staff' and 11 project staff co-ordinating a number of AONB initiatives. Inevitably, as capacity has expanded, so have the ambitions and expectations of our partners.

Much that has been achieved since the publication of the first Kent Downs Management Plan has been through the many delivery partners who work on the ground in the AONB. The vital role of the Countryside Projects and Partnerships, the Country Parks teams and Public Rights of Way Officers, the charitable sector of wildlife groups, the Kent Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust, Farmers Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), The National Trust, Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation and, of course, the many private farmers and land owners carrying out positive action. All work hard to secure both their individual aims but in support of the aims and policies of this Management Plan. Without the consistent support and energy of these groups, and the strategic support given to them by host authorities and funding partners, then much significant achievement of the first plan would simply not have happened.

Funding has been provided for core and project work from a variety of sources, particularly from Natural England, the Local Authorities, European Regional Development Fund (Interreg), Heritage Lottery Fund and the Rail Link Countryside Initiative. These have taken forward a number of activities under the core functions, and deliver a wide range of project programmes.

### **3.1.2 The role of this Management Plan revision**

The first statutory Management Plan was adopted in April 2004 and runs until April 2009. In their formal observations the Countryside Agency recognised the first Kent Downs AONB Management Plan as representing 'exemplary practice'.

This revised Management Plan is based fundamentally on the original plan. It justifies and details the policies and actions for guiding the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs AONB. It has been prepared by the Kent Downs AONB Unit and Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) for, and on behalf of, the twelve local authorities that have land within the Kent Downs. It therefore fulfils the statutory requirements under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 that all local authorities with AONBs in their area are required, jointly, to produce and revise an AONB Management Plan.

### **3.1.3 The status and role of Management Plan policies**

In relation to the town and country planning system it is clear that this plan **formulates local authority policies for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it** (as required by the CRoW Act). The Management Plan does not formulate land use planning policies. The AONB management plan policies are therefore only a component of the decision making process in planning applications. The Management Plan takes forward relevant policies of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan, the South East Plan and furthers the aims of Governments Planning Policy 7.

In relation to supplementary guidance, Government's Planning Policy Statement 12 states that:

Supplementary guidance to assist the delivery of development may be prepared by a government agency, Regional Planning Body or a County Council or other body (e.g. AONB committee) where this would provide economies in production and the avoidance of duplication e.g. where the information in it would apply to areas greater than single districts. Such guidance would not be a supplementary planning document. However, if the same disciplines of consultation and sustainability appraisal (where necessary) are applied, such information might, subject to the circumstances of a particular case, be afforded a weight commensurate with that of SPDs in decision making.

The preparation of the review of this management plan was subject to extensive public engagement and consultation as defined by an agreed Statement of Community and Stakeholder Involvement (SCI). It was also subject to a Strategic Environmental Appraisal (SEA), Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) under the Habitat Regulations.

## The Role of Policies

**The overarching aim of the policies of this Management Plan is to achieve the purpose of the AONB designation.**

The Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans (CA 221 September 2006) describes a policy as the means by which to achieve the objective 'this is how we will get things done'. Primarily policies are there as plans of action which help define what will be encouraged, promoted, supported and pursued; policies are also needed to help stop negative impacts on Kent Downs.

The policies of the AONB Management Plan will be reflected and in part implemented through policies in each Local Development Framework and in development control decisions.

An action is what the AONB partnership wants to do and should be grounded in policy e.g. investment in on the ground delivery, guidance, engagement in a process or research etc. An action plan has been developed in partnership with the Joint Advisory Committee and other important partners in the management of the AONB.

In this review the policy wording and structure of the plan has been reconsidered. This is because the review process identified a need to be clearer about what the aims and objectives of the policy are and what the policy wording actually means. Policies have been divided into intent and control policies, both of which being critical to ensure the conservation and enhancement of the AONB.

## Intent policies

### Policy wording      Intervention proposed

**Pursue**                      The AONB Local Authorities, wider partnership and Unit will actively seek to ensure that the policy intention is achieved through leading a series of their own interventions, developing policies, actions and development control decisions. This will include seeking resources and support from other agencies

**Support**                    The AONB Local Authorities, wider partnership and Unit will provide support through policy and development control decisions, influence others, seek resources and occasionally intervene to seek to achieve the policy intention

**Encourage**                The AONB Local Authorities, wider partnership and Unit will endorse the actions of others, develop policies and development control decisions and occasionally seek resources and influence to achieve the policy intention

**Maintain**                 Little or no intervention expected from Local Authorities, Partnership or Unit but policies and actions required to prevent negative change will be expected.

**Monitor**                  To seek to understand change in condition of issue

## **Control policies**

### **Policy wording      Intervention proposed**

**Oppose**      The AONB Unit and partnership will engage in the active opposition (for instance to development proposals) through responses to development control consultations or attending public inquiries.

**Resist**      The AONB Unit and partnership will provide evidence and support to seek to overcome risks to the qualities and special characteristics of the AONB.

**Will and shall**      A strong intention for the AONB Unit, partnership and others to achieve the aim/s and objective/s stated in the policy

**Expect/ed**      AONB Unit, partnership and others will be required to comply with the level of quality and action inferred by the policy and no support or encouragement would be given by the partnership to actions challenging the spirit of the policy.

### **3.1.4 Who is the plan for?**

First and foremost, the Management Plan and its policies are for the local authorities of the AONB – this is the policy and action framework which will influence and determine decision-making, advice and resource allocation for all their relevant functions in, and affecting, the AONB.

Second, this Management Plan is for all the government agencies, statutory undertakers, utilities and public bodies which have a 'duty of regard' for the purposes of the AONB designation in their functions and operations. All public bodies and relevant authorities have to demonstrate that they have taken into account the purposes of the AONB designation in all their functions within the area. This Management Plan will inform, guide and influence that process.

Finally, and importantly, this is a plan for everyone who cares for and manages the AONB, for those who live, work or play in the Kent Downs. The impact and difference that can be made by farmers and land managers, individuals, countryside management organisations, community and voluntary organisations, when viewed as a whole is critical to the future of the Kent Downs. We intend that this Management Plan is practical and relevant, and that it will help to advise and influence the activities within, the decisions taken and the perception people have of the Kent Downs.

### **3.1.5 What will the Management Plan achieve?**

An integrated approach and direction for the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the AONB as a whole, as well as the specific needs of different areas and different interest groups that use it.

Clarity about the current state of the Kent Downs AONB and a clear vision of how we would like it to be in future.

Raised awareness of the complex and changing nature of issues affecting the AONB. Linkage of policies and action, and a common commitment to deliver them, between the broad range of statutory, advisory, business and voluntary partners and individuals.

A shared approach to ensure efficient use of financial and staff resources, time and effort to deliver high-quality, cost effective, appropriate, practical and realistic actions.

A process for monitoring and evaluating progress and achievements, as well as a parallel monitoring programme to assess the condition of the Kent Downs AONB.

### **3.1.6 How has this Management Plan Revision been prepared?**

Preparation of the original Management Plan followed Management Plan Guidance and supplementary guidance from the Countryside Agency (CA23, November 2001), and consisted of seven stages: public participation and drafting, public consultation, amendments, agreement, adoption, publication and implementation.

The revision of the plan has had an even more rigorous process which follows the Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans (CA 221, 2006) and has included:

- Announcement of intention to review – a formal requirement of the review process.
- Statement of Community and Stakeholder involvement – establishing how individuals and organisations wish to be involved in the review process.
- Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Scoping study.
- Review of the existing plan – a consultation on the content and priorities of the existing Management Plan.
- Landscape Character Assessment review – a field review of the AONB Landscape Character Areas to help set spatial priorities and to understand areas of opportunity and threat.
- Report and agreement to proceed, following the early consultation agreement from the JAC that it is expedient to review the plan.
- Public and stakeholder engagement in the issues and options – updating the priorities established for the original plan.
- Expert opinion debates – a series of debates with specialist audience to consider the existing plan and to look at where the changes in priority have occurred, reconfirm the special characteristics of the Kent Downs, consider the issues and threats, the aims and the policies which should be included in the revised plan and to consider alternatives and justify, with evidence, their conclusions.
- Updating the evidence base of the original plan – considering new information, policies and strategies as well as the trends. Reviewing the monitoring indicators set in the original Management Plan.
- Draft review – A draft reviewed management plan was prepared and consulted on widely – consultation was actively promoted. Consultation responses were logged and the Management Plan amended to reflect the comments made.

- Final Draft – a final draft plan was circulated only to the JAC partners for final comments and to ensure that previous comments have been properly taken into account.
- Adoption – following the advice of the JAC this plan has been adopted by the Kent Downs Local Authorities as formulating their policies for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it.

### **3.1.7 Commitment and support from other relevant authorities**

The strengthened status of AONBs through the provisions of the CRoW Act has brought commitments from a wide range of organisations – including those who are not directly involved in the AONB partnership. Sec 85, Part IV of the CRoW Act requires all public bodies and relevant authorities to demonstrate that they have taken account of the purposes of the AONB in their decision making. This new duty has already been met positively by a number of organisations.

Leading the way is the Forestry Commission, with the signing of a National Joint Accord in July 2001 with the National Association of AONBs. The Forestry Commission has recognised the important role that woodland plays in defining the natural beauty of many of England's AONBs.

In the South East, a Statement of Intent was agreed in November 2002 between the Countryside Agency, Defra, Government Office for the South East (GoSE), South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) and the ten 'nationally protected landscapes' wholly within the South East Region.

In December 2004 English Heritage agreed an accord with the National Association of AONBs which recognised the key role AONBs can have in the sustainable management of the historic environment.

The South East England Protected Landscapes Partnership is also working to demonstrate the growing importance of the regional agenda and profile of AONBs. AONBs cover 33% of the South East Region, and are therefore important in the delivery of environmental, economic and social strategies. This partnership is also striving to develop further partnerships to deliver the primary and secondary purposes of AONB designation.

The National Association of AONBs (NAAONB) was established in 1998 and represents all the AONBs in England and Wales. It provides a national forum for all elected members, officers and AONB staff involved in AONBs to exchange information, knowledge and best practice. It also provides a collective national voice, campaigning and lobbying on behalf of AONBs, working with its equivalent, the Association of National Parks.

At an international level, the Europarc Federation is the umbrella organisation of Europe's protected areas. It champions the remit and work of nationally protected landscapes – AONBs, National Parks, regional parks, nature parks and biosphere reserves in 37 countries, with the common aim of protecting Europe's unique variety of wildlife, habitats and landscapes.

It is clear that positive, responsive and effective partnerships are the key to the successful delivery of the Management Plan and to the assured future for the Kent Downs AONB as a nationally important and valued landscape.

### **3.1.8 Maintaining productive partnerships**

Principles for a successful AONB partnership:

- Set high standards and establish and promote good practice in all areas of work.
- Ensure efficient and cost effective use of staff and financial resources.
- Avoid duplicated effort.
- Share experiences and knowledge.
- Promote consistent messages to all stakeholders, including landowners and funding bodies.
- Establish a networking culture to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas.
- Promote and co-ordinate action to address strategic issues.
- Develop a suitably strong and diverse identity promoted by all parties.
- Help to develop initiatives that are led by other partners.

### **3.1.9 Management of the AONB – aims**

A landscape in which:

1 The vision, policies and actions of the AONB Management Plan are delivered through strong and coordinated partnerships and individual actions as well as development policy and development control decisions.

2 The AONB partnership provides leadership and direction for the future of the AONB but is open and receptive to the views of all people, and is adaptive and flexible to changing circumstances and events.

### **3.1.10 Management of the AONB – policies**

MPP1 The Kent Downs AONB partnership and Management Plan will be the first point of reference and supported as the primary means to develop, co-ordinate and promote policies and new opportunities for the management, conservation and enhancement of the AONB.

MPP2 Individual local authorities will give high priority to the AONB Management Plan vision and policies in Local Development Framework policies, Area Action Plans, development control decisions and planning enforcement cases.

MPP3 The development of strong working partnerships to implement the vision policies and actions of the AONB management plan with those organisations with a statutory duty of regard for AONB purposes, particularly public bodies and statutory undertakers will be pursued.

MPP4 The assertion of the Kent Downs AONB vision, policies and aims in all national, regional and local policy and practice documents, and with statutory undertakers where relevant and applicable will be pursued.

MPP5 Collaborative working partnerships and initiatives with partnerships for neighbouring Protected Landscapes particularly the Surrey Hills, High Weald and Sussex Downs AONBs, and le Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d'Opale, and with the family of AONBs and protected landscape generally through the South East Protected Landscapes Forum, National Association of AONBs and the Europarc Federation will be pursued.

MPP6 The involvement of relevant interest groups, especially local communities, in decisions on the future of the Kent Downs AONB, at a strategic level through the Management Plan and AONB Forum, and at a local level through local consultations and project development will be pursued.

MPP7 The effective use of existing resources and seeking additional resources to support partnerships and projects that conserve and enhance the character of the AONB in accordance with the Management Plan will be pursued.

MPP8 The promotion of the importance, qualities and sensitivity of the Kent Downs AONB and highlighting of issues affecting it will be pursued.

MPP9 Cooperative working with organisations active in the Kent Downs AONB to develop and/or promote projects and work programmes to support the AONB Management Plan vision, policies and actions will be pursued.

#### **4 Components of Natural Beauty**

- **Landform and landscape character**
- **Biodiversity**
- **Farmed landscape**
- **Woodland and trees**
- **Historic and cultural heritage**
- **Geology and natural resources**
  
- **Quality of life components**
- **Vibrant communities**
- **Sustainable development and travel**
- **Access, enjoyment and understanding**

## **4.1 Landform and landscape character**

### **Overview**

The landform and landscape characteristics that directly relate to the natural beauty of the Kent Downs landscape were identified when the Kent Downs AONB was designated in 1968. This was reconfirmed in the 1995 AONB Landscape Assessment and again in the views of the public and stakeholders, expressed through the public participation and consultation process for the original AONB Management Plan and this review.

#### **4.1.1 Landform of the Kent Downs**

The landform of the AONB underlies the Natural Beauty of the area. It is complex and varied, but is characterised by six basic components:

##### **The Chalk Ridge**

The long arc of the North Downs chalk ridge is the most dominant element of the AONB, consisting of the steep, south-facing scarp slope rising above the Gault clay vale below, the open expansive plateau tops and gentle dip slopes traversed by many hidden, dry valleys. Spectacular views are offered along the chalk escarpment across the low Weald, the river valleys and the towns below. Perhaps more surprising and intriguing are the views from the highest and most open parts of the plateau and dip-slopes looking towards London and the Thames and Swale estuaries.

##### **The White Cliffs Heritage Coasts**

The ridge of chalk ends at the English Channel forming the Dover White Cliffs, at their highest point reaching 150 metres above sea level. The scale of the Kent Downs landscape is at its greatest here. The high vertical cliffs and the white chalk contrast starkly with the foreshore and constantly changing sea below, providing an awe-inspiring panorama. The expansiveness and drama is increased further by the bustle of the ferries and shipping seen from many parts of the White Cliffs and enticing glimpses of the French coast on the horizon.

##### **The Greensand Ridge and Lympne escarpment**

The undulating Greensand Ridge rises to one of the highest points in southeast England at 250 metres at Toy's Hill. The views from along the length of the Greensand Ridge are some of the best in southern England, and on a clear day, the High Weald and the South Downs beyond can be seen.

In the east Kent Downs, the Lympne escarpment of calcareous sandstone and Ragstone provides a spur of higher ground affording dramatic views across the near-level Romney Marsh and Hythe Bay.

##### **The river valleys**

Further diversity is provided at the points where the three main rivers, the Darent, Medway and the Great Ouse cut through the chalk. Each river flows in a northerly direction and they form broad, steep-sided valleys with open vistas along the river corridors. The River Medway does not lie in the AONB itself, although parts of its tidal flood plain are within the boundary.

##### **Scalloped and hidden dry valleys**

Dry valleys are a beautiful and intimate feature of much of the Kent Downs landscape and they are often criss-crossed by a maze of tiny, sunken one track lanes. The valleys often have a narrow strip of rough grassland, scrub or woodland along their steepest slopes, locally known as shaves, which are important for wildlife. The larger dry valleys such as Elham and Alkham have the sporadic winterbournes such as the Nailbourne in Elham, flowing occasionally during the very wettest winters.

### **Expansive open plateaux**

North of the chalk scarp the plateaux offer huge open landscapes with a simple structure and sometimes surprising and dramatic views to the Thames Valley. Often dominated by stiff clay with flint soils overlying the solid chalk, the soils were historically difficult to cultivate and were used extensively for sheep grazing. Much of the ancient woodland remains framing the plateaux and enclosing the dry valleys.

### **Landcover**

The Kent Land Cover Change survey (2002) provides information on the extent and change in land cover categories in the AONB from 1961 to 1999. Table 3 shows that there has been a degree of change in land cover type during this 30 year period at an AONB scale in percentage terms.

### **4.1.2 The Kent Downs Landscape Character Areas**

The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment prepared by the Countryside Commission (1995 CCP 479) defined key landscape components and how they combine to give a sense of place, special character and quality to the AONB. The human dimension in the development of landscapes is inextricably linked with the landscape character which is valued today. The assessment identified 13 distinctive Landscape Character Areas in the AONB. Many of the Character areas have been divided into local character areas which look in more detail at the specific characteristics of localities and identify some of the pressures facing them. Summary descriptions of the Landscape Character areas with summary condition assessments of the local character areas are included in this section of the plan.

The 2004 Landscape Assessment of Kent<sup>1</sup> and local level landscape character assessments for Sevenoaks, Maidstone, Medway and areas of Canterbury drew on the Countryside Commission work and provide more detail on landscape characteristics, the condition of local landscape areas and their robustness and capacity to withstand or absorb change. Importantly this work also makes recommendations on how to conserve and restore landscape character. Further local landscape character assessments for each local authority district covered by the Kent Downs are expected to be produced over the period covered by this Management Plan.

During the review of the Management Plan the Kent Downs AONB Unit visited the landscape character areas to carry out a field review and consider the relevance of the existing management plan policies for each landscape character area. This analysis considered both opportunities and the threats in each area. This work has influenced the spatial prioritisation and summary actions proposed and is available through the AONB Unit.

National policy guidance in Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS 7)<sup>2</sup> promotes the use of a landscape character approach and an important change in this revised AONB Management Plan is to place more emphasis on landscape character and spatial priority setting on the basis of landscape character area condition and sensitivity analysis.

The Guidance for the Review of AONB management plans (CA221 2006) suggests a stronger spatial dimension in the review.

In the section below each Landscape Character Area in the Kent Downs AONB is described. For each local character area a summary of its condition and sensitivity is described – this is taken from the Landscape Assessment of Kent. In addition summary and example actions are proposed.

Landscape condition is strongly influenced by the impact of external factors. The assessment of condition evaluates the pattern of the landscape and the presence of incongruous features on the unity of the landscape. It also evaluates how well the landscape functions as a habitat for wildlife and the condition of cultural or 'man-made' elements such as enclosure, built elements and roads. Urban fringe areas are often under pressure which often means that these areas are described as being in a poor condition whilst other more remote areas may still have the same basic features but be in a better condition. It is therefore practical to assume that

condition may vary throughout a character area so that any conclusions should be regarded as a summary of the overall situation.

Visual Unity is the result of an analysis of the Pattern of Elements, for example the pattern of vegetation, enclosure, settlement, and the relationship of these to the landform etc., weighed against the number of Detracting Features in the landscape.

Functional Integrity is an assessment of how the landscape functions and considers both the influence of man (Cultural Integrity) and nature (Ecological Integrity).

Condition is defined by an analysis of Visual Unity and Functional Integrity and is classified as, poor, moderate, and good.

Sensitivity is a measure of the ability of a landscape to accept change without causing irreparable damage to the essential fabric and distinctiveness of that landscape. The term change refers to both beneficial changes such as a new woodland as well as change that may be brought about by new land uses.

Sensitivity is defined by an analysis of Sense of Place and Visibility and ranges from low, moderate to high.

The table above shows how condition and sensitivity are compared to propose summary actions.

1 (Babtie for Kent County Council 2004)

2 Planning Policy Statement 7 Communities and Local Government

## Summary Descriptions of Kent Downs Landscape Character Areas

### 4.1.3 Summary Descriptions of Kent Downs Landscape Character Areas

#### 1 Low Weald – Crockham Hill to Shipbourne

The Low Weald is an open pastoral landscape of gentle, undulating farmland, which stretches away south from the dominant wooded scarp of the greensand ridge. The fields are predominantly pasture, surrounded by a strong pattern of trimmed hedges of thick deciduous shaws. Hedgerow trees, especially oak, are particularly characteristic of this area, thriving on the heavy clay soils. Where hedgerow removal has taken place, some of these oaks have been left as isolated trees in the fields. Elsewhere, fences have been widely used to create new paddocks for livestock, in particular for horses.

	<b>Western Low Weald</b>	<b>Eastern Low Weald</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Reinforce	Conserve and Reinforce
<b>Example Actions</b>	Reinforce patterns of hedgerow, woodlands, shaws and water courses Reinforce historic character  Reinforce rural land use Reinforce landscape pattern by long-term management Conserve existing and establish new field and hedgerow oak trees Improve horse pasture management to reinforce landscape character	Conserve broadleaf woodland Conserve heathy woodland Conserve and reinforce estate parkland – including tree cover and boundary features Reinforce mature standards within farmland and along roads  Conserve the rural setting of settlements, and the setting of greens and commons

#### 2 Sevenoaks Ridge – Westerham to Ightham

The greensand ridge around Sevenoaks is characterised by extensive coniferous and deciduous woodlands which conceal a network of narrow lanes, producing an intimate, secretive landscape. A number of heathy commons occur along the top of the southern scarp from where magnificent views extend across the Low Weald. Between the woodlands, small pastures are divided by overgrown hedges or lines of mature trees. The local greensand has been used in a number of sandstone buildings and walls. In the east around Ightham, woodlands give way to orchards surrounded by tall shelterbelt hedges and occasional cobnut platts producing a highly distinctive and attractive landscape. Historic Parks, for instance Knowle in the ownership of the National Trust, are a feature of this area.

	<b>Westerham Greensand</b>	<b>Ightham Greensand</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	High	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Restore	Conserve
<b>Example Actions</b>	Replace conifer plantations with native species Encourage appropriate boundary enhancements and woodland enclosure Conserve highway characteristics  Conserve area and characteristics of the woodland  Restore and manage heaths and acid grassland Seek to integrate new development	Conserve acid grasslands Conserve heathy woodland  Conserve parkland and ancient landmarks Conserve visual isolation of hamlets and settlements  Reinforce the enclosure of roads with dense hedgerow and no verges  Encourage use of vernacular materials  Support retention of characteristic cobnut platts and apple and pear orchards

### **3 Darent Valley – Brasted to Farningham**

The River Darent rises in Westerham and runs between the greensand ridge and the chalk downs in a wide valley enclosed by deciduous scarp-top woodlands above cultivated lower slopes. These valley-side fields still have a strong hedgerow pattern and support many hedgerow trees. The river flows through a corridor of pasture and riverside trees, such as willow, alder and poplar. In the north, the valley sides wind out into intensively farmed arable fields with few remaining hedges. To the south, intensive cultivation takes place on the scarp foot where there has been significant hedgerow loss. Throughout the valley scattered flint and brick buildings reflect the local underlying geology. The Darent Valley is noted for its distribution of a series of Roman villas, many with Iron Age predecessors demonstrating the long use of this area for human habitation and agriculture, being described as 'one of the earliest cradles of English settlement in Kent'.

	<b>West Darent</b>	<b>North Darent</b>	<b>Knockholt</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate	Moderate	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	High	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Create	Conserve and Restore	Conserve
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Conserve the form and features of the historic Parklands and pattern of wet pasture Create wooded links to the base of the scarp from the wooded ridge Conserve the features of the Pilgrim's Way Create wooded links to incorporate the motorway corridor</p> <p>Conserve and create small copses on the clay vale</p> <p>Resist suburbanisation of characteristic landscape</p>	<p>Conserve and restore hedges on lower slopes and valley bottom trees Strengthen pattern of hedgerows and shaws</p> <p>Conserve wood pasture</p> <p>Resists suburbanisation of characteristic landscape Conserve, enhance and seek to connect chalk Downland features Resist and seek to remove non native species</p> <p>Conserve and restore water meadows</p>	<p>Conserve the dense woodland cover Conserve narrow roads and small enclosed pastures</p> <p>Conserve isolation of farming settlements</p> <p>Resist and seek to remove non native species</p> <p>Resist suburbanisation of characteristic landscape</p>

#### **4 West Kent Downs – West Kingsdown to Shorne**

The West Kent Downs lie between the Darent and the Medway. This is an area of ridges and deep dry valleys, where extensive deciduous woodlands surround large arable fields on the plateaux often separated by thick shaws. Between these plateaux, a series of remote, enclosed dry valleys support small pastures on the lower slopes. Woodland is very significant in this landscape, providing an important backdrop for the rolling landform, the network of small lanes and the settlements and valley pastures. The landscape becomes more open to the north. A certain amount of bungalow development and horticulture extends into some areas and there are several village settlements in the woodlands. Although most of these woodlands are now unmanaged, many were once coppiced and this practice is still carried out at Shorne Wood in the north. Despite pockets of suburbanisation, this area provides an important and high quality rural buffer between the Medway towns and the villages south of Gravesend, such as Meopham.

	<b>Luddesdown</b>	<b>Cobham</b>	<b>Kingsdown</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good	Moderate	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	Moderate	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Reinforce	Conserve and Create	Conserve and Restore
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Conserve woodland on ridges</p> <p>Enhance woodland and consider extending woodland shaws into lower slopes</p> <p>Conserve mix of hedgerow species and management of tall hedgerow</p> <p>Seek enhancements in areas of equine management.</p> <p>Conserve, manage and reinforce hedgerow pattern</p> <p>Resist suburbanisation of characteristic landscape</p>	<p>Conserve and restore the parkland features</p> <p>Conserve and manage the parkland trees and woodland cover</p> <p>Restore hedgerow enclosure of agricultural land</p>	<p>Conserve woodland</p> <p>Promote removal of non native trees and shrubs</p> <p>Conserve and enhance the management of linear developments and recreational areas</p> <p>Conserve historic isolated settlement</p> <p>Conserve pastures and irregular field patterns and hedgerows</p>

## 5 Kemsing Vale – Kemsing to Ryarsh

The Kemsing Vale runs along the foot of the Kent Downs, between Sevenoaks and Ryarsh. The steep scarp which rises up to the north is a patchwork of woodland and chalk grassland and offers magnificent views south. Thick hedges along the Pilgrim's Way separate the scarp from the large scarp-foot arable fields. Beyond these fields, the strong pattern of trimmed hedges which characterise the vale, is emphasised by frequent hedgerow trees. Several traditional brick and flint buildings occur in this area.

	<b>Kemsing Vale</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Reinforce
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Conserve existing woodland and shaws</p> <p>Replanting of hedgerow and In-field trees</p> <p>Conserve characteristics of narrow highways with trimmed hedges</p> <p>Conserve isolated nature of Estate Houses.</p> <p>Conserve the historic nature of the settlement pattern</p> <p>Seek to reduce impact of quarrying</p>

## 6 Medway – Birling to Cuxton; Wouldham to Aylesford

The AONB covers only the scarp slopes of the Medway Valley, excluding the industrialised valley bottom. This area is characterised by wooded upper scarps and wide views across the river and south towards the greensand ridge. The typical pattern of large scale rolling arable fields on the scarp foot, surrounded by trimmed

remnant hedges, occurs on both sides of the valley. The 'carvings of industry' from the cement industry are visible throughout the valley and traditional brick and flint buildings are found here, although there are few buildings on the scarp foot itself. The long history of human activity in this area is illustrated by the prehistoric sites, the most important megalithic monuments east of the Berkshire Downs.

A strategic rural buffer between the Kent Thames Gateway and Maidstone growth areas.

	<b>The Eastern Scarp</b>	<b>The Western Scarp</b>	<b>Boxley Vale</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	High	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Create	Conserve and restore	Conserve and restore
<b>Example Actions</b>	Arable - conversion and field margins. Enhance access - access and biodiversity opportunities. Seek enhancements in areas of horse management. Conserve and manage woodlands and shaws Limit impact of industrial development outside AONB	Conserve the large-scale of open arable fields, restore hedges and consider grassland creation  Restore ecological interest to arable areas  Restore some wooded shaws to the arable land  Conserve and restore the characteristics and enclosure of ancient highways Restore hedgerows and shaws, and hedged enclosure to roads	Conserve and strengthen Hedgerows and hedge pattern  Seek enhancements in areas of horse management.  Remove conifers.  Conserve wooded setting of settlements

## **7 Mid Kent Downs – Boxley to Selling**

The Mid Kent Downs stretch between Chatham and the Stour Valley in a series of wide ridges and dry valleys. Within this area, tiny scattered villages are linked by a network of single track lanes. Extensive coppice woodlands, many of which are no longer managed, stretch along the upper slopes of the valleys and there are several large expanses of conifer woodland. The ridge-top plateaux are dominated by large arable fields, many of which are undivided by hedge or fence. Elsewhere, hedges and hedgerow trees are more prominent. Around Chatham, Bicknor and Faversham a considerable number of orchards and shelterbelt hedges impose a strong geometric pattern in the landscape. The farm buildings which survive from hop and fruit growing are a characteristic feature of this area. Portions of the Mid Kent Downs are subject to severe urban fringe pressures.

	<b>Challock</b>	<b>Faversham Fruit Belt</b>	<b>Bicknor</b>	<b>Chatham Outskirts</b>	<b>Nashenden Valley</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good	Moderate	Moderate	Poor	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	Moderate	High	High	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Reinforce.	Conserve and Create	Conserve and Restore.	Restore	Conserve and Restore
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Improve character of main highway corridors.</p> <p>Opportunities for arable reversion in dry valleys.</p> <p>Reinforce shaws and beech stands</p> <p>Reinforce the localised and characteristic design and pattern of settlements.</p>	<p>Keep open where historically relevant.</p> <p>Encourage In-field and hedgerow trees.</p> <p>Seek to stimulate return to cherry, apple/pear trees and hops</p> <p>Resist urban fringe pressure</p>	<p>Reinforce the broadleaf woodland and permanent cover</p> <p>Create broadleaf woodland to ridge tops where these are open</p> <p>Create wooded edges to settlements</p> <p>Reinforce the ancient characteristics of highways of narrow carriageways and hedged boundaries</p> <p>Encourage retention of orchards and hop gardens</p> <p>Promote good practice for equines and boundary treatments</p>	<p>Restore woodland links from the ridge into the large arable areas.</p> <p>Restore hedgerow along selected highways and around settlements.</p> <p>Restore areas of broadleaf woodland. Restore management to areas of dereliction and resist urban fringe pressures</p>	<p>Conserve the historic form of open common land</p> <p>Conserve wooded edges by sensitive management</p> <p>Conserve broadleaf woodland and woodland cover generally</p> <p>Conserve the sparseness of settlement</p> <p>Resist urban fringe pressure</p>

## **8 Hollingbourne Vale – Boxley to Westwell**

The Hollingbourne Vale runs between Boxley and the Stour Valley in a narrow strip including the scarp and the scarp foot. The character varies from the yew-dominated woodlands in the west to grassland and open cultivated fields which extend up the scarp in the east. Large arable scarp-foot fields dominate the fertile flatter landscape of the vale, bordered to the north by thick hedges along the Pilgrim's Way. A series of historic spring line villages, such as Hollingbourne, occur in this area above which extensive views from the scarp are available. The scarp is a very sensitive landscape feature. A significant number of hedgerow trees dot the shallower slopes of the scarp, although many were battered by 1987 storm damage.

	<b>Hollingbourne Vale</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Poor
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate
<b>Summary Actions</b>	Restore and create
<b>Example Actions</b>	Re-enforce existing field patterns and encourage sensitive management of arable and pasture land. Opportunity for strengthening field boundaries. Opportunity for downland creation on scarp. Conserve and manage existing woodlands Conserve and manage existing chalk grassland and encourage restoration of chalk grassland. Conserve setting of spring line settlements

## 9 Stour – Brook to Chartham

The Stour Valley cuts through the AONB between Ashford and Canterbury and retains a strongly rural, highly valued, visual identity. Deciduous scarp-top woodlands occur on both sides of the valley, below which is a strong pattern of mixed farmland. Hedgerow trees are frequent both on the slopes and on the flood plain, which is further broken up by thin lines of deciduous trees between the fields. A series of rough grassland dominated enclosed coombes add an intimacy to the landscape which often offers long views. Mature parkland extends across considerable areas of the lower valley slopes. Alders and willows enhance some sections of the river, but cultivation stretches to the very edge of the riverbanks in other areas, decreasing the visual and ecological quality of the waterside.

	<b>Wye</b>	<b>Hampton</b>	<b>Chilham</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good	Moderate	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Moderate	High	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Reinforce.	Conserve and restore	Conserve and Reinforce
<b>Example Action</b>	Re-establish field patterns.  Return to broadleaf in plantation woodland. Retain existing shaws and hedgerows. Conserve and reinforce riverside trees by pollarding and new planting Conserve and manage chalk grassland	Conserve and manage broadleaf woodland and ancient woodland  Conserve, gap up and manage hedgerows  Conserve the remote setting of historic settlements	Conserve and reinforce small scale woodland plantation and riparian vegetation on the valley floor, create new flood meadow pasture Conserve historic parkland  Reinforce hedgerows and field patterns in the upper valley

## 10 East Kent Downs – Crundale, Bridge, Capel-le-Ferne to Lyminge

The East Kent Downs includes the wide expanse of downland between the Stour Valley and the Folkestone to Dover Heritage Coast. This is a remote and peaceful area of typical downland landform including long ridges and narrow, dry valleys, emphasised by the wooded upper slopes, which divide the open valley bottoms from the arable ridge-top plateaux. Between the Petham and Elham valley systems there are extensive conifer and coppice woodlands and throughout the area thick overgrown hedges often extend down the valley sides. On the steepest valley slopes, there are long, narrow uncultivated banks or 'shaves' where ploughing is impractical. These have left 'islands' of semi-natural grassland or woodland. The church spires of sometimes tiny, remote settlements are often glimpsed on the ridges, connected by a network of winding, single track lanes. Towards the coast the landscape becomes more exposed where scattered military remains still exert strong cultural influences on the landscape.

	<b>Petham</b>	<b>Elham</b>	<b>Alkham</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Good	Good	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	High	High	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve	Conserve	Conserve and Create
<b>Example Action</b>	<p>Conserve settlement patterns, avoiding ridgeline development</p> <p>Conserve and enhance species rich grasslands Conserve and manage hedgerows, shaws and shaves</p> <p>Conserve highway characteristics of narrow cross contour lanes and ridgeline roads</p> <p>Promote forest design plan in important woodland areas.</p>	<p>Conserve broadleaf woodland and parkland</p> <p>Encourage the planting of broadleaf edges to plantation areas and restoration of broadleaves and heathland.</p> <p>Conserve woodland edges which follow natural contours and define fields</p> <p>Conserve and manage chalk grasslands</p> <p>Promote good practice of equine pasture.</p>	<p>Conserve unimproved grasslands and pastures</p> <p>Conserve and create open grazed grassland areas Conserve and manage existing woodlands</p> <p>Conserve and reinstate hedgerows</p> <p>Support enhanced landscape management of Heritage Coasts</p>

## 11 Postling Vale – Brabourne to Newington

The Postling Vale covers the undulating countryside between the dramatic chalk scarp above Folkestone and the Hythe escarpment above Romney Marsh. The species-rich rough grassland on the scarp highlights the strong, sweeping landform of the downland and is fringed by a thick belt of scrub along the scarp foot. Urban Folkestone and the Channel Tunnel Terminal immediately about the AONB boundary where the chalk scarp forms a dramatic backdrop to the town. At the base of the scarp thick hedges draw attention to the ancient Pilgrims Way. Beyond this, arable fields are edged by remnant hedges and several blocks of scattered large woodlands match the bold scale of the surrounding hills. Magnificent views from the scarp overlook this area, extending out to Romney Marsh and the sea. Around the outskirts of Hythe, several small valleys conceal a more intimate landscape of thick hedges, woodland and hedgerow trees.

	<b>Saltwood</b>	<b>Folkestone Outskirts</b>	<b>Stowting</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate	Poor	Good
<b>Sensitivity</b>	High	High	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Restore	Restore and Create	Conserve and Reinforce
<b>Example Action</b>	<p>Conserve and manage woodland cover</p> <p>Restore areas of dense hedgerow and hedgerow pattern in vale</p> <p>Restore characteristics of estate roads, remove exotic species</p> <p>Conserve views of dominant rounded chalk hills</p>	<p>Linking and re-introducing grazing to grassland.</p> <p>Implementation of woodland management. Consider boundary issues and seek to reduce impact of urban edge and highway infrastructure.</p>	<p>Strengthen hedge pattern in vale.</p> <p>Link chalk grassland and seek reversion to chalk grassland of arable on scarp.</p> <p>Enhance viewpoints.</p>

## 12 Lympne – Bonnington to Hythe

The Lympne character area covers the Hythe escarpment and the extreme northern edge of Romney Marsh. The scrub and species-rich rough grassland on the uneven scarp gives these slopes a 'wild', undisturbed character which is highly sensitive and visible from the flat marsh. The very large fields on the Marsh are surrounded by fences or ditches, rather than hedges, although sporadic willows and thorn frequently grow alongside, especially at the scarp foot. Some areas of deciduous woodland occur on the scarp, typically below Aldington and magnificent views extend over the Marsh. The Royal Military Canal is an important historical feature and linear defensive structure which now provides a recreational route and an important component of the drainage of the Romney Marsh.

	<b>Aldington</b>	<b>Hythe Escarpment</b>	<b>Romney Marsh</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	High	High	Moderate
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Restore	Conserve and Restore	Conserve and Create
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Conserve and restore small woodlands.</p> <p>Restore open areas of farmland.</p> <p>Conserve the infrequency and scale of built form.</p> <p>Restore the ecological interest of pastoral land.</p> <p>Avoid introduction of further suburbanisation</p>	<p>Conserve wooded top to the scarp</p> <p>Conserve rough and pastoral grasslands</p> <p>Conserve the canal, wetlands and drainage courses</p> <p>Conserve open views to/from sites and monuments</p> <p>Seek to retain 'wild' nature of escarpment avoiding further intrusion.</p>	<p>Conserve the ecological and historical interest of Royal Military Canal and ditches within the farmland</p> <p>Create a design code for built form and its surroundings</p> <p>Conserve the visual significance of the ditches and maintain water levels</p> <p>Establish arable field margins and re-establish pollards</p>

### 13 South Foreland – Dover to Kingsdown

The South Foreland includes the White Cliffs of the Dover to Kingsdown Heritage Coast and the downland behind, rearing straight up from the English Channel. This is one of the country's most famous and valued landmarks. Beyond the cliffs is an open, exposed landscape dotted by farms and small settlements fringed by trees, a landscape highly vulnerable to any form of development. The large rolling arable fields are surrounded by a thin network of remnant hedges and there are wide views across the gentle valleys and out to sea. Along the cliff tops, important areas of unimproved chalk grassland and scrub contribute to the natural beauty of the area and are of great ecological value.

	<b>South Foreland</b>
<b>Condition</b>	Moderate
<b>Sensitivity</b>	High
<b>Summary Action</b>	Conserve and Restore
<b>Example Actions</b>	<p>Conserve spacious and wild aspect of the landscape</p> <p>Restore hedgerows only where appropriate</p> <p>Encourage species-rich grassland and the reversion of arable land as key priority.</p> <p>Conserve and create pockets of scrubby vegetation to screen intrusions</p> <p>Maintain open views</p>

#### **4.1.4 Main issues and threats identified**

- a Loss of views in and out of the AONB through development, obstructing tree growth and vegetation.
- b Degradation of the setting and urban fringe impacts in certain landscape character areas of the AONB through inappropriate development, urbanisation, recreational pressure and illegal activities.
- c Cumulative loss of landscape features, tranquillity and character due to the impact of climate change (and adaptation and mitigation responses), intensive agricultural and forestry practices, pressure from traffic and significant levels of urban growth and development.
- d Potential deterioration of the special characteristics of the landscape due to inappropriate or lack of management of existing features and habitats.
- e The erosion of natural beauty and special character of many areas within the AONB through illegal activities particularly fly tipping, abandoned cars and illegal off-road vehicles.
- f Uncertainty over the future of agri-environment schemes and subsequent effects on landscape and biodiversity and the essentially farmed nature of the Kent Downs landscape.
- g The increase in leisure activities such as shooting, golf courses, livery premises, horse keeping and fenced horse paddocks and the changes brought to landscape character through poor or inappropriate landscape management.
- h General lack of awareness of the landscape value of the Kent Downs AONB, its characteristic features and the social and economic benefits it brings.
- i Landscape character approach not used sufficiently in land-use, land management and development control decisions.

#### **4.1.5 Landform and Landscape character – aims**

A landscape in which:

- 1 The fundamental diversity in the landscape character across the Kent Downs is maintained and enhanced, and the strong sense of place of individual localities is recognised, reinforced and celebrated;
- 2 A landscape character approach is used to inform decision making in the AONB and areas of opportunity and threat are identified and become the focus for action;
- 3 The highest standards of landscape conservation, restoration and enhancement are encouraged, and are integrated into all land uses, particularly agriculture, forestry, leisure and development;
- 4 There is better understanding of what local people and visitors value in the landscape and all people are encouraged to play a part in retaining and enhancing these features.

#### **4.1.6 Landform and landscape character – Policies**

LLC1 The protection, conservation and enhancement of the components of natural beauty, landscape character and historic landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be supported and pursued.

LLC2 The promotion, retention or restoration of prominent views and viewpoints will be supported.

LLC3 The provision of co-ordinated and high quality landscape conservation guidance and funding advice to all AONB farmers and landowners, including the equestrian sector, woodland owners and field sports, will be pursued, focusing on the components of natural beauty and the character of AONB landscape.

LLC4 The prevention, detection, prosecution and change of behaviour to control illegal and overtly damaging activities such as fly tipping, dumping of abandoned cars and non-permitted off-road vehicular use will be supported.

LLC5 The development and use of landscape character assessments for the Kent Downs AONB will be supported to guide the maintenance of local distinctiveness in Local Development Frameworks and landscape management or enhancement schemes.

LLC6 The improved awareness and appreciation of all the special qualities and components of natural beauty of the AONB landscape and its conservation to people who influence the future of, live, work in or visit the AONB will be pursued.

LLC7 The development of strategic landscape action plans for Landscape Character Areas or Local Character Areas of the AONB which are most at threat or where greatest opportunity lie will be supported and pursued.

LLC8 Proposals which negatively impact on the distinctive landform, landscape character and identified special components of natural beauty, the setting and views to and from the AONB will be opposed and resisted.

## **4.2 Biodiversity**

### **Overview**

The rich biodiversity of the Kent Downs contributes greatly to the natural beauty of this exceptional landscape adding much of the detail which makes the Kent Downs special and distinct.

The natural post-glacial vegetation of the Kent Downs is believed to have been broadleaved woodland. This would have been varied in structure and composition, with open glades and patches of grassland and heath created by fallen trees and grazing animals, and chalk grassland refugia found on the exposed cliff tops. Wet woodland would have covered the river valleys. The 'wildwood' has been cleared and managed over the last 6000 years as human use and settlement of the area has extended and contracted. The woodland clearance gave way to grasslands, scrub and arable. Hence farming and cultivation have been a significant influence on the biodiversity of the AONB.

### **4.2.1 A Duty of Regard for Biodiversity**

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act came into force in October 2006 and introduced a duty that requires public authorities to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in all their activities. With such a wide remit public authorities, by implementing this duty, can make a significant contribution towards the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss. The implementation of the Biodiversity Duty will be achieved by biodiversity enhancement and through reducing adverse impacts on biodiversity.

### **4.2.2 Special characteristics**

The wildlife of the Kent Downs is particularly rich and distinctive. It is also varied, reflecting changes in the local climate, geology, soils and topography and the proximity to the continent. There are several species which are largely or wholly confined to the Kent Downs in Britain. This is true of several beautiful rarities, such as the lady, monkey and late spider orchids, black veined and straw belle moths as well as rare arable field wild flowers. Other rare and threatened species occur in particularly good numbers here, dormouse, the edible or Roman snail, the adder and rare arable field wildflowers along with several of the butterflies associated with downland are good examples.

The mix of species found in a Kent Downs woodland, hedgerow, road verge or downland is distinct and different from other parts of the country adding quality to the character of the Kent Downs landscape.

Semi-natural habitats of particular importance in the Kent Downs are also recognised in the UK and locally the Kent and Medway and London and Bromley Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) they are:

#### **Unimproved chalk downland**

Unimproved chalk downland is for many the essence of natural beauty in the Kent Downs landscape with its flower-rich, scented springy turf and profusion of insect life. Orchids and butterflies of chalk downland are symbolic of this habitat and the AONB supports populations of some of the country's rarest chalk species. Chalk grassland is an internationally important habitat, with over half the world's resource being found in England with up to 32,000ha remaining nationally. Although this habitat is one of the most valued features of the Kent Downs (most important

feature for 72% of respondents to an AONB questionnaire), the remaining extent of unimproved chalk grassland amounts to less than 2% of the land area of the AONB (about 1500 ha or 6% of the UK resource). For many rare species in the Kent Downs it is the warm, sunny south facing chalk slopes which are important. Kent habitat survey 2003.

### **Ancient woodland**

Ancient woodland (continuous woodland cover for at least 400 years), is an irreplaceable habitat, and the Kent Downs supports over 3% of the ancient woodland resource of England and Wales. (Forestry Commission ancient woodland inventory 2003)

This is the second highest concentration of ancient woodland of all AONBs (the High Weald AONB having the highest). Beech-yew communities on chalk and limestone are recognised as internationally important through the European Habitats Directive, and the Kent Downs has important areas (in total about 140ha) of this habitat.

### **Chalk cliffs, foreshore and seabed platform**

Chalk cliffs, foreshore and seabed platform of the two Heritage Coasts are a dramatic and wild element of the Kent Downs, home to a distinctive wildlife influenced by the sea and exposure. Globally coastal chalk is a scarce resource, the UK holds 57% of Europe's resource, Kent holds 35% of the UK resource. The chalk cliffs from Dover to St Margaret's are home to the largest breeding colony of kittiwakes in Southern England. The chalk cliffs support rare plants such as hoary and sea stock, rock sea-lavender, sea heath and wild cabbage.

### **Chalk streams**

Chalk streams, river corridors, flood plains and spring lines, together with ponds, dew ponds and small areas of wetlands. Chalk streams and ponds are frequently seasonal in their nature and often hold characteristic species.

### **Acid grassland and heaths**

Acid grassland and heaths on the greensand and clay plateau, typically surviving in parkland, common land and Chart Woods. Acid grassland can occur on clay caps near downland adding an interesting diversity to the landscape.

### **Species-rich hedgerows**

Species-rich hedgerows, headlands, ditches and road verges and the sunken lanes of the Downs are a special feature. Often the road verges and hedges are rich in plant and animal diversity.

### **Farmland habitats**

Farmland habitats and species adapted to traditional mixed farming practices; in particular the Kent Downs supports a nationally important site for arable weed communities – supporting some of the UK's most threatened native plant species (such as ground pine, pheasants eye, corn cockle and rough mallow) and farmland birds (such as skylark, corn bunting and yellowhammer) the conservation of which supports Governments PSA target 3, which is to: "Care for our natural heritage, make the countryside attractive and enjoyable for all, preserve biological diversity (in part) by reversing the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020, as measured annually against underlying trends."

### **Old orchards**

The Kent Downs landscape is strongly associated with fruit growing, with orchards making a significant contribution to local distinctiveness. The terms 'traditional' or 'old' orchard, usually refer to those orchards of apples, pears, plums and in the

Downs particularly cherries with large more widely spaced trees; traditional Kentish Cobnut platts are important particularly in the western portion of the AONB.

### **Wood pasture and parkland**

There is a strong legacy of parkland and wood pasture in the AONB where there are often large, open-grown or veteran trees – special features in their own right.

The Kent Biodiversity Action Plans (BAP) have supporting habitat and species action plans that are relevant and important to the Kent Downs. The UK BAP priorities were revised in 2007 and there is a requirement to suggest spatial priorities for habitat and species action.

The UK BAP species list has recently been lengthened; of the list of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in England (which are UKBAP Priority species) the AONB supports, among others, skylark, corn bunting, nightjar, linnet, grey partridge, bullfinch, turtle dove, brown hare, dormouse, pipistrelle, silver-spotted skipper, wart-biter, white-clawed crayfish, early gentian and juniper.

### **4.2.3 Designated nature conservation sites**

The most important nature conservation sites in the Kent Downs are legally protected and managed primarily for their biodiversity value. The following Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are all of international importance and have been given special protection under the European Union's Habitats Directive, as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC):

Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment.

Wye and Crundale Downs.

Queendown Warren.

Lydden and Temple Ewell (on the AONB boundary).

Parkgate Down.

Dover to Kingsdown Cliffs (The only SAC for the maritime chalk cliff features in the country).

North Downs woodlands. The scarp slopes of the Medway valley are designated for internationally important beech-yew woodland communities.

Wye and Crundale Downs, and Lydden and Temple Ewell are also designated National Nature Reserves (NNR), while Queendown Warren, Boxley Warren and Folkestone Warren are designated Local Nature Reserves (LNR).

Management of these important sites rests largely with government and public bodies, and specialist conservation organisations, particularly Natural England, Kent Wildlife Trust, the National Trust and Kent County Council. However a number of key sites are in private ownership, such as parts of the Folkestone and Etchinghill escarpment owned by Eurotunnel, and the Medway Valley escarpment by Lafarge or Trenport Holdings.

The network of internationally protected chalk grassland sites is fragmented and dispersed – with greatest concentration in the east Kent Downs beyond the Great Stour Valley. However, there are also a considerable number of other chalk grassland SSSIs and non-statutory Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) across the AONB. Work by Natural England, the Kent Wildlife Trust and other members of the Kent BAP Partnership provides advice and support to site owners and managers to manage these vital sites in favourable condition. In total the SACs, SSSIs and LWSs cover some 16% of the AONB.

The condition of SSSIs in the Kent Downs AONB has been assessed in recent years and the Natural England target is that 95% of SSSIs are in favourable condition by 2010. The condition of the LWSs is being assessed as part of the work to fulfil the Kent Local Area Agreement improvement target for biodiversity.

Despite the extent of recognised and recorded nature conservation sites in the AONB some are losing species and condition and most plant and animal species depend upon suitable long-term management of appropriate habitats in the wider countryside. At the same time it is recognised that the first priority when considering the impact of climate change on biodiversity is to conserve and enhance existing protected sites in order to give species and habitats strongholds of resilience. The next stage is to add buffering areas and functional connectivity of habitats set within a more permeable, wildlife friendly landscape. Conserving Biodiversity in a Changing Climate: Guidance on Building Capacity to Adapt. Defra 2007  
[www.ukbap.org.uk/Library/BRIG/CBCCGuidance.pdf](http://www.ukbap.org.uk/Library/BRIG/CBCCGuidance.pdf)

In Kent both the work of the Branch Project ([www.branchproject.org](http://www.branchproject.org)), the Habitat Opportunity Mapping and the Wildlife Trusts 'Living Landscapes' programme give a firm basis from which the AONB partnership can help build a response to the major potential impacts on biodiversity in the future.

#### **4.2.4 Main issues and threats identified**

A Fragmentation and loss of habitats due to intensive agriculture, agricultural and land ownership changes, horticulture, forestry, country pursuits, infrastructure, poor and inappropriate management and general development.

b Need to manage, extend and connect the existing priority protected sites and habitats as a critical first step for conserving and enhancing existing biodiversity and responding to the challenges of climate change for which the Kent Downs could play a focal role.

c Lack of grazing livestock or poor returns from managing remaining areas of semi-natural grassland, particularly small, inaccessible or unprotected sites.

d Finding a way to support the growing use and enjoyment of the AONB for access, recreation and countryside leisure pursuits whilst conserving and managing the wildlife and habitats that make the AONB so attractive.

e General lack of awareness and understanding about the biodiversity value of the Kent Downs and the value it contributes to quality of life, health and wellbeing as well as the county economy with an associated lack of funding available for management.

f Need to provide accessible and well-managed nature conservation sites in close proximity to urban areas to provide a contact with nature particularly through the designation of Local Nature Reserves.

g The need to address the impacts of climate change, particularly to achieve functional connectivity for all habitats and species in the Kent Downs and beyond to the areas surrounding.

h The need to find sustainable economic futures for the products of key habitats in the AONB to ensure their continued management.

#### **4.2.5 Biodiversity – aims**

A landscape in which:

1 The rich diversity of natural features, wild animals, plants and habitats are recognised, conserved and positively managed so that the extent and condition of key habitats is enhanced and the population of key species is secured and expanded.

2 A network of well-managed designated and non-designated nature conservation sites covers the Kent Downs, providing semi-natural habitats for locally typical and rare species and communities and the essential building block to achieve functional ecological networks and to assist with the adaptation to climate change.

3 More common and widespread wildlife species and populations of the wider farmed and wooded landscape flourish because of careful and sensitive management.

4 Comprehensive and easily accessible data informs and influences land management and development decisions and monitors changes to biodiversity.

5 Local people and visitors alike enjoy and appreciate the Kent Downs as a landscape of rich wildlife heritage, fostered by imaginative and well-planned information and interpretative media.

6 Recreation and countryside pursuits support the conservation of the rich biodiversity of the AONB.

7 The natural heritage and wildlife is recognised for its inherent value for contributing to quality of life and the economic value of the Kent Downs.

8 Spatial priorities are agreed for biodiversity management in the Kent Downs.

#### **4.2.6 Biodiversity – policies**

BD1 The maintenance and enhancement of existing designated sites, and their extension through the reduction in fragmentation and the restoration and creation of landscape and habitat clusters and corridors will be supported and pursued to establish functional ecological networks, help achieve the government’s target for SSSIs in favourable condition, and to meet the Local Area Agreement for the management of Local Wildlife Sites.

BD2 Local, regional and national biodiversity action plan targets and spatial priorities for key habitats and species distinctive to the Kent Downs will be supported notably:

- a) The sustainable management and extension of the area of chalk grassland, particularly through conservation grazing, grazing schemes and targeting the restoration and the creation of new areas of chalk grassland.
- b) Increasing the managed area of ancient, semi-natural and coppiced woodland including restoration of Plantation on Ancient Woodlands Sites (PAWS).
- c) The conservation of riparian and in-stream habitats and species associated with chalk streams, rivers, springs and ponds.
- d) New efforts to conserve and restore farmland and woodland bird populations and distinctive arable wild plant species.
- e) The management of existing old orchards and creation of new traditional orchards and platts.
- f) The conservation and enhancement of chalk cliffs and foreshore.

BD3 The conservation and enhancement of other characteristic and important habitats and species including neutral and acid grassland; heathland and wooded heath; parkland; wood pasture and veteran trees; ancient or species rich hedgerows; cereal margins; headlands and road verges will be supported.

BD4 Targeting of advice, grants and planning agreements to reduce fragmentation and enhance the distinctive biodiversity of the Kent Downs will be supported.

BD5 The collection and sharing of information on land cover, designated wildlife sites and species to assist in effective biodiversity and landscape character management and monitoring will be encouraged.

BD6 The conservation and extension of Kent Downs priority habitats will be encouraged and supported through the Local Development Framework process and the promotion of the Biodiversity Duty of Regard.

BD7 Proposals which generate markets for the products of sensitively managed habitats will be supported where they do not conflict with other AONB policy aims.

BD8 Proposals to increase recreational use will be supported where they protect and where possible enhance the biodiversity and landscape qualities of the AONB and do not conflict with Local Authority policies.

BD9 Coastal defence policies, allowing, where possible, a naturally functioning coastline to maintain the chalk cliffs, foreshores and platforms will be supported.

BD10 The conservation and extension of distinctive common and widespread species and habitats will be supported.

## **4.3 Farmed landscape**

### **Overview**

The Kent Downs AONB is principally a farmed landscape, with 74% of its land classed as agricultural. Centuries of changing farming practices have shaped the landscape to create an important part of the natural beauty for which it is celebrated today.

Historically, the Kent Downs has supported mixed farming practices where arable crop production has co-existed with livestock grazing and horticulture. The complex seasonal colours and textures of cultivated land contrast with the constancy of permanent grassland. The close-cropped texture of grass and arable accentuate the undulation of the land. The patchwork of land-use created by mixed farming is also vital for many plant and animal species associated with farmland.

Table 5 indicates that the Kent Downs AONB continues to be a landscape of mixed agricultural use. While there has been relatively little change in overall agricultural land cover in the last forty years, there has been a rationalisation of farming practice.

### **4.3.1 Special characteristics**

#### **Arable**

The Kent Downs AONB has an unusually high proportion of grade 2 and grade 3 agricultural land for a protected landscape. Arable agriculture has always been an important part of the character of this valued landscape. The area of arable land has fluctuated slightly over forty years, although the methods of arable farming have changed considerably within this period. Post World War II, and since Britain joined the European Common Market in 1972, Government policy and incentives have encouraged increased food production. Modern arable farming responded by adopting new crops, technologies and practices, which have seen a marked increase in crop production and efficiency of scale. In some cases, the cost has been the loss of landscape quality, biodiversity and historic features that have been part of the mixed farming landscape for centuries, elsewhere farmers have chosen to conserve and enhance the landscape at the same time as increasing productivity. Where there has been removal of hedgerows and field margins, deep ploughing of grassland and drainage of wetlands, as well as the use of pesticides and inorganic fertilisers the result is sometimes sterile farmscapes with little wildlife or reduced landscape interest.

More recently the agricultural economy has been subject both to the removal of production based subsidy and to increasing volatility driven by global markets affecting both the value of produce and the costs of production. These pressures require farmers to make increasingly market led decisions and to use up to date methods to retain competitive advantage. At the same time public opinion and Government policy has strengthened in favour of environmentally sensitive farming that produces high-quality food, with less cost on the public purse. Climate change adds a further powerful influence with agriculture having an important role both in adapting to the changes already in train and mitigating further impacts.

Table 6 shows a tendency for an increase in both large and small holdings in the Kent Downs, at the loss of the more traditional medium sized farms. Additionally there is a move to larger 'contract' farmers or co-operative farming ventures,

especially on the most productive land in order to achieve economies of scale for food production leading to rotations on a whole farm rather than field scale.

When medium sized farms are not absorbed into larger holdings, farmhouses and buildings are sold off with small holdings or to 'amenity' farmers and landowners who are not reliant on agriculture as a main income. This trend can bring with it landscape change and a loss of community and other intangibles such as 'attachment to place'. The setting, relationship between buildings in farmsteads and immediate landscape around farm buildings is becoming more 'suburbanised' with amenity hedging and fencing, driveways and garages being constructed. The separation of farmhouses and cottages and the price of remaining farm-housing stock effectively prices the agricultural labour force out of the rural housing market.

Currently Single Farm Payment cross compliance requirements and the roll out of 'Entry Level' and 'Higher Level' Environmental Stewardship are examples of measures aimed at retaining and enhancing some of the environmental and historical qualities of the farmed landscape.

### **Grazing pasture**

Sheep and beef cattle continue to play an important part in the AONB land-based economy. Table 7 (page 64) indicates stock types and herd numbers in the Kent Downs AONB. There has been a **significant decline** in livestock farming, particularly numbers of sheep, which is crucial to retain the special character of the AONB.

The effects of BSE, the 2001 and 2007 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreaks and the arrival of Bluetongue in 2007, as well as other factors such as cheap imports and the lack of adequate infrastructure such as local abattoirs and markets have put increasing pressure on the livestock industry. The loss of grazing livestock and skilled graziers due to the poor economics of grazing, has led to areas of grassland that were grazed agriculturally over 20 years ago falling out of use, being ploughed up for crops, planted with trees, converted to leisure use or scrubbed over through abandonment.

Horses are becoming an increasingly common grazing animal in the AONB. The continued growth in horse riding and equine activities is playing an increasingly important role in the future of the land-based economy of the AONB. If managed in a sustainable and sympathetic manner, horse grazing can make a positive contribution to the management of grassland in the Kent Downs, helping to maintain the important pastoral component of the AONB's natural beauty. However examples of good practice can be difficult to find and the impacts of growth in the equine industry have tended to harm the landscape character of the Kent Downs.

### **Orchards and horticulture**

Historically, orchards and horticulture have played an important part in the special character of the AONB landscape, the regular striate form enhancing the rise and fall of the land. Teynham (just north of the AONB) became the site of the first 'mother' nursery for the commercial fruit orchards in England in the days of Henry VIII, and there is still a concentration of top and stone fruit (tree fruit) and hop growing along the northern fringes of the Mid Kent Downs, including the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale. In the Kent Downs it is the traditional cherry orchards which are particularly distinctive.

Traditional orchards of large trees with understorey grazing are difficult and uneconomic to manage and are being grubbed or replaced by labour-efficient, safer, smaller fruit trees grown in closely spaced, parallel rows. Their greater uniformity and more intensive management have reduced the associated wildlife and landscape value of these orchards. They do, however provide a modern and important link to a historic landscape component. Other horticultural activities add variety and interest to the AONB landscape. For example, lavender as a crop for essential oils has replaced a number of hop gardens, and a number of vineyards have been planted adding a new hue into the AONB scenery. Another locally distinct landscape feature is the production of cobnuts in the southeast corner of the Greensand Ridge, centred on Platt and Plaxtol (a cobnut orchard being called a platt).

The area of orchards and hop gardens in the AONB has decreased by nearly 50% since 1961. There has however been a recent upturn in orchard planting including walnuts and fruits such as apricots as well as wine growing which could increase significantly if the predicted climate changes take place. Additionally the use of polytunnels has increased slightly, while currently covering a small area of the AONB the use of polytunnels is anticipated to increase (together with the associated transport and storage infrastructure), in order to meet quality standards and a longer season as required by customers. The horticultural sector is a small but important component of the landscape and the rural economy of the AONB.

Uncertainty in the future of farming policy and support mechanisms

All agricultural sectors are likely to be subject to considerable changes over the lifetime of this Management Plan, adding an element of unpredictability to the future of the farmed landscape.

The full implications of new agricultural support based on area rather than production linked payments and the modulation of agricultural funding away from production to support the environment and diversification have yet to be seen. A further review or 'health check' of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will be completed in 2008, full CAP reform is expected in 2013. Equally the withdrawal of set-aside could have impacts for landscape and wildlife.

The Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) is now managed at a regional level by SEEDA and will deliver the priorities set in the South East Implementation Plan (for the RDPE), itself influenced by a series of regional responses to strategic work including the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food as well as the Rural Delivery Review (the Haskins Review). A South East Rural Board will take forward, oversee and review these strategies.

### **Agri-environment Schemes**

Since its inception in 1991, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) and subsequently the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) has brought positive changes to the landscape, wildlife and historic features of the AONB. The ESS operates at two levels:

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) aims to encourage a large number of farmers across a wide area of farmland to deliver simple yet effective environmental management. This requires a basic level of environmental management for which there is a payment of £30 per hectare, per year across the whole farm.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) aims to deliver significant environmental benefits in high priority situations and will be targeted at very specific areas. HLS requires more complex environmental management with input from Natural England officers.

Up to 2008, the following have been achieved under CSS targeting in the AONB:

2042ha (3.16%) of AONB agricultural land is managed under CSS agreements, with 120 agreements in place (excluding arable field margins and rotational arable options).

A total 1350ha of managed grassland with 390ha with public access payments. 600ha of unimproved chalk grassland and 250ha of semi improved chalk grassland in agreement.

In 2008 the targeting statements for the Higher Level Scheme of Environmental Stewardship underwent a revision. During this process Natural England have further refined target areas in order to focus resources in those geographic areas where environmental outcomes are likely to be greatest. Two areas have been identified in the Kent Downs AONB:

- The East Kent Downs target area encompasses the east Kent Downs; South Foreland; Stour and eastern part of the Hollingbourne landscape character areas.
- The North Downs target area encompasses: Medway; Kemsing Vale; Sevenoaks Ridge; Darent Valley and parts of the West Kent Downs landscape character areas.

#### **Nitrate vulnerable zones and catchment sensitive farming**

A consultation on the extension of Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZ) will report during the preparation of the Management Plan Review. Currently about half of the AONB is covered by an NVZ and the proposed extension would increase this by a small amount. The NVZ programme aims to reduce nitrate pollution in water through regulation of how and when nitrogen is applied to land, the management and storage of manure and the use of cover crops. The expansion of the area covered could have relatively minor implications on cropping patterns in the AONB.

A Catchment Sensitive Farming programme operates in the Kentish Stour Catchment within the AONB. The programme offers advice to farmers and landowners on best practice methods to reduce diffuse pollution within the catchment. The programme has been confirmed to continue during the period of operation of this plan and there is an opportunity to influence guidance to include landscape character enhancement.

#### **4.3.2 Main issues and threats identified**

a Need to balance a viable and competitive farming industry with the need for sensitive environmental management in a landscape of national importance.

b Greater volatility in agricultural commodity prices (both scale and speed) driven by increasing exposure to global markets, the impacts of climatic changes, shortages, the need for food and energy security and falling Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies, leading to uncertainty about the future direction of agriculture in the Kent Downs.

c Uncertainty and limited funding for agri-environment schemes and the incentives they offer, particularly in the face of rising farm gate prices. Along with the possible ending of long run Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) schemes with no certainty of inclusion in Higher Level Stewardship (HLS).

d Set aside has, in some circumstances, created areas of biodiversity or landscape interest. It is important to secure these, where appropriate, through the use of agri-environment schemes.

e Changes in landholdings and land management practice. Loss or amalgamation of medium-sized mixed farms – polarisation to very large/block units with 'share' or 'contract' farming, and very small farming units/residential or leisure owners, where farming is not the main source of income and experience and continuity of land management are not guaranteed.

f Rationalisation of the farming system and loss of landscape diversity and distinctiveness and selling off of farmhouse and buildings/cottages from the farmland estate; separating land and accommodation changing the character and landscape setting of former farmhouses; estate cottages and farm buildings.

g Given the relatively high proportion of grade 2 and 3 land there is a need to manage the potential opportunity for economic revival in the arable sector to encourage investment in landscape character management.

h Decline in grazing livestock industries, and loss of skilled graziers, replacement with poorly managed leisure plots or abandonment.

i Farm diversification activities such as increased livery and equine facilities, shooting and field sports, alternative crops (e.g. lavender, biomass energy crops, vineyards) and non-agricultural enterprises (e.g. self-catering cottages and new uses for more recent rather than traditional farm buildings) can have potentially important impacts as well as benefits for the landscape character, biodiversity and rural economy of the Kent Downs.

j Increasing use of polytunnels to provide high quality, low 'food mile' soft and stone fruit. Polytunnels are potentially harmful to the landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB.

k The need to manage adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate change, for instance water storage, new housing for livestock or bio energy crops, to create a positive impact on the farmed landscape.

l Lack of public awareness of the links between farming and land-based activities, environmental issues, landscape conservation and management.

### **4.3.3 Farmed landscape – aims**

#### **The Kent Downs remains principally a farmed landscape with a strong and viable farming industry where:**

1 Regionally targeted public subsidies support farmers who meet environmental, as well as economic and social objectives of the AONB. The conservation of landscape character and diversity, the restoration and enhancement of habitats for wildlife, the conservation of historic and cultural features, responses to climate change and the welcoming of people to enjoy the landscape, are all integrated and complementary activities to contemporary, competitive mainstream farming.

2 The landscape heritage of mixed farming is promoted in a modern context, the benefits of agri-environment and former set aside schemes are retained and good

land management practice is encouraged to all agricultural businesses and farm owners.

3 Farm diversification activities conserve and strengthen landscape character and local distinctiveness, as well as provide benefits to the farm and local economy and rural communities.

4 Locally produced, high-quality and sustainably produced food is bought by people and businesses from local shops, farmers markets and in regional supermarkets with environmental quality being a market advantage.

5 There is heightened awareness and understanding by local residents and visitors to the AONB of the importance and fundamental role played by farming, and where the connections between landscape conservation, environmentally responsible farming and high quality food are appreciated by all people.

#### **4.3.4 Farmed landscape – policies**

FL1 The AONB will retain the principally farmed character for which it is valued.

FL2 The targeting of public subsidy for agriculture to make a positive contribution to conserving and enhancing the components of natural beauty and landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.

FL3 Farming practices that contribute to improving the landscape character of the AONB, or mitigate damaging impacts will be supported.

FL4 The use of integrated whole farm planning which includes a business plan, landscape, heritage, biodiversity and habitat assessments and shows how the farm business will support the wider rural economy and the objectives of the AONB will be pursued.

FL5 Farm diversification activities and land-based businesses will be supported if they help to achieve the aims of the AONB Management Plan.

FL6 The production, supply and marketing of AONB local produce derived from environmentally sensitive management will be encouraged and supported particularly where it supports landscape character.

FL7 Conversion from agricultural to leisure use and the creation of non agricultural structures will only be supported where there is not a cumulative loss to the principally farmed landscape of the AONB and published best practice or design guidance is adopted and conditioned.

FL8 Best practice guidance for the use and landscaping of polytunnels will be pursued. Permanent polytunnels should be resisted where they will have a detrimental impact upon landscape character. Proposals for polytunnels should be justified by and integrated whole farm approach \*.

\*The Integrated whole farm approach as defined in the Kent Downs Rural Advisory Service (KDRAS) Toolkit.

FL9 Where farming practices challenge the components of natural beauty and landscape character of the AONB they should be resisted where these are subject to control.

FL10 Activities will be supported that increase wider public understanding of farming and the benefits that the farmed landscape bring for high quality food production, recreation and leisure, health and well being, nature conservation, archaeology, landscape and a buoyant rural economy.

## 4.4 Woodland and trees

### Overview

The Kent Downs is one of Britain's most wooded AONBs. Woodland covers over 20% of the AONB (17,579ha) and is the second largest land-use, after farming.

Woodlands are a vital component of the natural beauty of the Kent Downs, providing a green mantle to the upper slopes of the escarpments and valleys. They emphasise the undulating nature of the dip slopes and scarp, and frame the agricultural lower slopes and settlements.

### 4.4.1 Special characteristics

Almost 70% (12,197 ha) of the Kent Downs woodland resource is ancient woodland (continuously present since at least 1600 AD). The Kent Downs supports the second highest concentration of ancient woodland in an English AONB at 10.5% (the High Weald AONB supporting the highest at 21%). The Kent Downs' ancient woodland is nationally important representing 3.4% of the total resource of England and Wales 7. It is thought that this figure is an underestimate as the information base does not include woodlands below 2ha.

Ancient woodland is irreplaceable and is greatly valued for its landscape and biodiversity importance. Some ancient woodland may represent our only link with the original post glacial 'wildwood' and is more likely to contain vulnerable animal and plant species than any other habitat. Ancient woodlands can also include physical evidence of former landscape management practices. The rich ground flora of ancient woodlands – of bluebells, wood anemones, ramsons and yellow archangel – and the bird song of warblers, nightingale and nightjar are part of the natural beauty of the AONB ancient woods. Much of the valued woodland wildlife – the invertebrates, lichens and fungi, are associated with old trees, deadwood or open ground and are restricted to ancient woods and wood pasture. The ancient woodlands of the Kent Downs also preserve the evidence of thousands of years of human activity in earthworks, monuments and place names.

The highest woodland concentrations in the AONB are found on the Greensand Ridge between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge; along the chalk escarpment in West Kent; in large blocks in the mid Kent Downs; above the Stour Valley and in areas of the East Kent Downs plateaux. However, much of the AONB's woodland is made up of small, fragmented sites in disparate ownership, a situation exacerbated by the rapid increase of wood lotting (breaking up woods into multiple small ownerships). A recent study into woodlotting in Kent has found negative impacts in some cases. More often there is no woodland management and the ability to manage woodlands as a whole can be compromised. There is, however, often a motivation from the new owners to improve and understand the wildlife and heritage of the wood and this should be harnessed.

The diversity of woodland types broadly follows the different soil types within the AONB, including clay (with ash, hornbeam and oak); chalk (with ash, beech and yew) and free draining sands (with oak, birch and beech). Beech yew woodland is particularly distinctive in the Kent Downs and is of European significance. Significant blocks of conifer plantation date back to the early 1900s; planting continued into the 1990s and is now largely being phased out and the conifers are beginning to be harvested.

A significant feature of woodland throughout the AONB is a predominance of coppiced sweet chestnut planted into much of the ancient woodland over the last two

centuries. Historically, sweet chestnut coppice was used for pit props in the East Kent coalfields and for hop poles. Latterly, as these industries collapsed, chestnut coppice went for hardwood pulp at the nearby paper mills at Sittingbourne and the Medway valley. These industries no longer use hardwood pulp and the closest paper mills are now in North Wales or Northern France. Chestnut is still coppiced for paling fencing and post and rail stock fencing in places.

The continuation of coppicing is vital for landscape and biodiversity conservation. Much of the AONB's woodland landscape was once characterised by blocks (cants) of coppice stools cut on regular cycles. Most animal and plants species of ancient woodlands require coppice management which cyclically opens up the woodland floor to light. Coppice creates mosaics and edges of high canopy with taller and shorter coppice stands, providing a diversity of ecosystems within the woodland habitat. Where deer populations are high establishing coppicing is difficult because the regrowth can be browsed off. It has been noted that the deer populations in Kent woodlands is growing. It is important that the deer population of Kent Downs AONB woodlands be retained at a level where the reestablishment of coppicing is not prejudiced.

In Kent, Sussex and Surrey there remains a coppice industry which, although small and threatened, could provide the resource required to return the coppice woodland of the Kent Downs to rotational management and continue a management tradition with its origins in the Neolithic period.

It should be noted that Kent was one of the few areas of England which has shown a reduction in woodland cover between the inventories in 1980 and 1995

Climate change puts a special focus on the woodlands of the Kent Downs. It is believed that the Kent Downs will be a refuge for lowland woodland types as climatic conditions change. Additionally sweet chestnut, being a species of Southern Europe, is likely to be well adapted to the predicted conditions and coppicing is thought to be a way to make the woodland ecosystem more resilient to the predicted changes. At the same time wood chips from coppice woodland could provide a significant resource of low carbon energy for heating and potentially power, especially and in a significant way in the new developments of the growth areas but also for individual households. A feasibility study carried out for developments in Ashford demonstrated a strong economic case, ample supply and capacity to provide for seven development projects, saving 5,500 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually, although none have yet adopted wood fuel. (Ashford biomass study 2005)

In 1998, the Forestry Commission published the English Forestry Strategy which describes Government policies, priorities and programmes for forestry. At the same time the UK Forestry Standards were published which set out the criteria and standards for the sustainable management of all forests.

In 2001, this was followed up with the signing of the Joint National Accord with the National Association of AONBs demonstrating their commitment to deliver their strategy within protected landscapes. Seeing the Wood for the Trees, the South East Regional Forestry Framework, sets out a vision and plan for the South East and identifies the need to make more of its woodlands, as they can have a fundamental impact on sustainable development in the region. The strategy emphasises the many social, environmental and economic benefits of woodlands including the potential for many uses such as recreation; providing sustainable construction materials; as a source of renewable energy; a wildlife habitat and to offset carbon dioxide emissions. These ambitions strongly support the aims for the woodlands in the Kent Downs.

#### **4.4.2 Main issues and threats identified**

a Need to establish significant new markets to re-generate management in coppice woodland to support the landscape character, wildlife and the local economy.

b Need to build a robust and appropriately trained work force with the capacity to take advantage of new markets as they arise.

c Replanting on ancient woodland sites – if carried out, needs to use appropriate species of local provenance if available. In many situations, natural regeneration should be encouraged. (it should be noted that the use of appropriate non native stock is being considered as a response to the impacts of climate change but this is not conclusive and there is a need to be open to new policy on this matter)

d The implications of climate change (for instance drought and new tree pests and diseases, as well as the low carbon fuel offered by coppicing) put a special focus on the woodlands of the Kent Downs in both adaptation and mitigation responses.

e The owners of many woodlands, particularly small woodlands often cannot be traced. The motivation for woodland ownership and management is varied and more needs to be done to sustain good woodland management.

f The need to make the most of the potential positive and manage the negative aspects of wood lotting.

g The emphasis on multi-purpose use for woodlands brings with it new challenges for woodland owners and managers where recreation, biodiversity and landscape management are unlikely to bring commercial returns.

h Need to establish new high value markets for woodland products – for example for construction materials.

i Intensive agriculture, infrastructure and building developments have led to the loss of woodland and transitional habitats around woods.

j Pheasant and other game bird shooting is an important income source for many landowners with woodland, although many shoots are intensively managed, causing loss to biodiversity and landscape value. There is a need to promote positive advice to encourage good practice management of shoots that integrates sound landscape, heritage and biodiversity management.

k Need to limit potential harm to biodiversity and the regeneration of woodlands from the long term impact of the growth of the deer population on Kent Downs woodlands and to propose and implement long term management solutions.

l Need to restore ancient woodland sites planted with conifers to a semi-natural woodland in a managed way.

m Need to consider and monitor the potential re-emergence of commercial conifer plantation in the AONB following market improvements.

n Need to support the use of the UK forestry standard and certification for woodland products in a way which does not limit the opportunity for the expansion of sustainable woodland management.

o Need for the restoration and management of open space in woodlands, particularly woodland rides and glades.

p Insufficient understanding of the value, condition and location of 'veteran' trees (exceptionally old), specimen trees and standing /lying deadwood in woodlands and parkland – for landscape, biodiversity, cultural and historic reasons.

q Need to review the extent of ancient woodlands and their archaeological and wildlife value and to resurvey the resource using the methodology established in the Wealden survey.

#### **4.4.3 Woodland and trees – aims**

A landscape in which:

1 The irreplaceable ancient woodland component of natural beauty, cultural heritage and landscape character is conserved, restored and managed.

2 The sustainable management of woodlands provides recreation, construction materials, a source of renewable energy, a wildlife habitat, and acts to offset carbon dioxide emissions.

3 Woodlands form functional ecological networks alongside other key habitats of the AONB in order to encourage resilience to the impacts of climate change.

4 Woodland ecology and archaeology is well understood, conserved, enhanced and recognised for its value.

5 There is promotion of public understanding and the sensitive use of woodlands for recreation and leisure.

6 The production of high quality timber and valuable underwood is stimulated through significant new local markets.

#### **4.4.4 Woodland and trees – policies**

WT1 The existing extent of woodland, transitional habitats around woodland and particularly ancient woodland will be protected and threats to the extent of woodland cover opposed.

WT2 Support will be given to ensure that schemes for promoting woodland management and planting make a positive contribution to conserving and enhancing the landscape character and components of natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB.

WT3 The managed conversion of plantations to semi-natural ancient woodland will be supported especially where locally distinct woodland types and tree species and local provenance tree stock or natural regeneration is used\*.

WT4 The promotion of training, accreditation and wider understanding of woodland management to woodland owners and workers, local people and visitors will be encouraged and supported.

WT5 The sustainable multipurpose management of woodland, where conforming to other AONB policies and best practice, will be encouraged, particularly for the

adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, increased access, country pursuits and recreation, and for biodiversity, landscape and archaeological conservation.

WT6 The restoration and management of open habitats and spaces, such as rides and glades, in woodland and wood pasture for landscape, biodiversity and archaeology conservation purposes will be supported.

WT7 The planting of new woodlands and fine specimen trees will be encouraged where it is in keeping with landscape character, resilient to climate change, locally distinct woodland types and tree species are used and where local provenance tree stock or natural regeneration is used\*.

WT8 The identification, protection and management of fine specimen and 'veteran' trees will be encouraged.

WT9 Activities and developments causing damage to woodlands, such as illegal and harmful recreation, an expanding deer population, poorly managed use for game rearing and development associated with wood lotting, will be resisted and/or opposed.

WT10 In response to pressures on woodlands and the positive motivations of many new woodland owners co-ordinated actions and the development of guidance and support which integrates sound landscape, heritage and biodiversity management will be pursued.

WT11 New markets for sustainably produced, appropriately certified woodland products, particularly wood fuels and construction materials will be pursued.

WT12 Research to understand the ownership patterns and motivations of woodland owners will be encouraged.

WT13 The identification and review of ancient woodlands using up to date methodology will be supported.

\* Policies WT3 and WT7 may be amended to reflect the possibility that non native tree stock could be better placed to be resilient to climate change impacts.

## 4.5 Historic and cultural heritage

### Overview

Virtually every facet of the Kent Downs has been shaped by thousands of years of human activity – in the fields and woods, tracks and lanes and villages and hamlets, an indelible memory of past times have been left to us. While the landform and geology underlies its beauty, the Kent Downs AONB is very much a human landscape.

### 4.5.1 Special characteristics

There is a strong 'time depth' to the Kent Downs landscape which adds to its distinctive, ancient feel. Glimpses of prehistory can be caught at various places across the AONB. Numerous Palaeolithic flints have been discovered in the AONB taking human activity back to the lower Palaeolithic period. Artefacts found on the higher land of the Kent Downs indicate the, probably occasional, presence of Mesolithic man. Notable traces of Neolithic culture are present in the lower Medway Valley in the form of megalithic burial monuments and standing stones which include the Kit's Coty, Little Kit's Coty and the Coldrum Stones. There are also long barrows, particularly in the Medway and Stour Valleys. Bronze Age round barrows are dotted across the landscape and the Iron Age saw massive hill-forts like that at Oldbury Hill near Ightham as well as widespread farmsteads and rural settlements.

Kent was probably the scene of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD43 and almost 400 years of Roman occupation have left their mark. The Roman road network, stretching in straight lines across the landscape is still represented by, for example, Stone Street which connected Canterbury with the port at Lympne and sections of Watling Street linking Dover, Canterbury, Rochester and London. Other remains include the lighthouse, or pharos, at Dover and the villa at Lullingstone. The increasing sophistication and landscape impact of agriculture is recorded in the lynchets found throughout the Kent Downs. There is evidence that the Roman and Iron Age field patterns and settlement patterns have strongly influenced the landscape we see today.

Estate centres like Wye and Charing were established in the Anglo-Saxon period. From this time on the carving out of fields from woodland, known as assarting, and unenclosed wood pasture commons appeared in the Kent Downs landscape. Churches were also erected which formed the beginnings of the parochial structure that has continued to the present day. Drove ways, connecting estate centres with summer pastures in the Weald have left their mark in the particularly distinctive north-east to south-west orientation of the road network across much of the Downs which provides a 'grain' to the landscape.

The Norman invasion saw the coming of the castle, varying in scale from that at Dover, the 'key' to England, to smaller structures of local lords, such as the ring-work and bailey at Thurnham. Villages grew into towns and churches were rebuilt in stone. Ecclesiastical interest in the countryside is witnessed by monastic houses and the palaces of the Archbishop of Canterbury at Otford and Charing, both of which are located on the 'Pilgrims Way' or old road, itself an ancient route linking England to the continent. Local man John Kempe established the medieval college at Wye, in 1447 when he was Archbishop of York.

The commons or 'minnises' of the high clay caps of the Kent Downs are believed to have been established by the Saxon or early medieval period and form distinctive open areas or rough grass bracken and gorse. Many have now been enclosed but

open minnises most notably Ewell Minnis near Dover and Stelling Minnis remain as important remnants of once more widespread landscape features.

The character of the Kent Downs landscape was well established by the Tudor period. There were many nucleated villages clustered around flint and brick churches and greens, as well as linear settlements along river valleys and routeways and spring line settlements at the base of the escarpment. The predominance of local materials help to establish the distinctive character of the built environment. Land was cultivated and grazed throughout the AONB and the many isolated farmsteads bear testimony to this agricultural history. It is believed that complex patterns of enclosure, particularly in the more fertile areas have been created in part by the influence of the Kentish custom of 'Gavelkind' inheritance where property was divided equally rather than being allotted to the oldest heir, producing a multiplicity of holdings.

The selling off of church lands following the Reformation led to the growth of country estates with their parks and gardens which cover an important part of the AONB. Designed landscapes in the Kent Downs include Godmersham and Chilham in the Stour Valley, Doddington and Belmont Parks in the mid Kent Downs and Bourne Park and Higham Park on the River Nailbourne.

Along the White Cliffs Heritage Coast, facing as it did potential attack from mainland Europe, there is a rich heritage of defence structures, including Dover Castle and the Western Heights, 19th-century Martello towers and the concrete and brick remains of anti-invasion structures of the two World Wars.

Aside from these grand and dominant historic sites and structures, it is the multitude of smaller cultural and historic features that help to characterise the landscape of the AONB. These are the traces of ordinary people who have worked the land for centuries and have shaped its special character. Networks of ancient hedgerows which still provide enclosure for livestock; wood and field banks which marked boundaries between different manors or estates, picked out with pollarded or 'stubbed' ancient trees; field patterns and lynchets revealing ploughing patterns from centuries ago; hollow ways and sunken lanes carved into the land by millennia of passing feet and hooves; and dene holes (deep excavations into the chalk) and borrow pits where rock and minerals were excavated.

The Kent Downs has a rich tradition of half-timbered and weather-boarded buildings. There is also a legacy of locally distinctive architecture in locally derived building materials such as ragstone, flint and chalk. Soft red bricks and peg-tiles lend colour and here and there long-straw thatching can be seen. The conservation and enhancement of these diverse buildings requires local sources of building materials, as well as skilled craftsmen who understand and respect the building traditions of the past and the architectural vernacular.

The important role that the landscapes of AONBs have in the conservation and sustainable management of the historic environment is recognised in a Joint Statement made between English Heritage and the National Association of AONBs.

### **Historic Landscape Characterisation**

Historic Landscape Characterisation describes landscape character based on historical attributes surviving in the present landscape. Kent was one of the first counties to prepare a historic landscape character map on a county wide basis. The mapping is intended to provide broad scale and overall assessment of historic character.

The Kent Downs AONB is made up mainly of a 'field pattern' historic landscape type, covering approximately 63% of the area. Whilst this historic landscape type is further defined into subcategories, there is no predominant field type. Woodland landscape types also feature heavily with some large tracts being present in the east of the AONB. Also notable are the presence of a large number of areas of parkland, indicating the importance of the managed estates within the landscape.

### **Artistic, cultural and scientific importance**

The Kent Downs have been very influential on many people, places and events of great artistic and cultural importance. These include the ancient Pilgrims Way from Winchester to Canterbury, paintings by Samuel Palmer in the Darent Valley and the writing and paintings of Winston Churchill at home in Chartwell. The Dover and Folkestone white cliffs and coastline have left an indelible mark on British culture and psyche, particularly through Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, Turner's paintings, Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* and Vera Lynne's famous wartime song.

Jane Austen frequently visited her brother at Godmersham Park, and Charles Dickens had many connections with the Downs, including the village of Cobham which featured in the *Pickwick Papers*. Bishopsbourne was sometime home to novelist Joseph Conrad, as was the village of Kingston to world renowned sculptor Henry Moore between 1935 and 1940.

Charles Darwin's family home, Down House, and surrounding countryside in the western Kent Downs, is a proposed World Heritage Site. It is recognised for its international significance as Darwin's home-base from which he developed his scientific theories and the writing of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The North Downs was the landscape laboratory for Darwin's theory on evolution by natural selection.

There is strong contemporary interpretation and artistic celebration of the Kent Downs AONB. In Kings Wood Stour Valley Arts are a long standing company which has commissioned artists to make sculptures within the forest and also other kinds of artworks. Artists who are particularly responsive to the history and character of this working forest are invited to spend long periods here. As a consequence of their close and sympathetic involvement with the forest, they use natural materials found in the immediate area, and engage with seasonal and growing cycles. Work in Kings wood includes commissioning sculpture, photography performance and film, guided walks and creative workshops for school and community groups, placements and training. Along the National Cycle Route 2 a series of commissions for Sustrans and local partners forms the Chalk and Channel Way, from sculpture to poetry artists have been inspired by the dramatic coastline between Folkestone and Dover.

The Kent Downs landscape continues to be influential and inspirational to contemporary artists and cultural life, and this quality needs to be celebrated, linked to regeneration activities and promoted more widely.

A detailed report of the history, culture and traditions of the Kent Downs AONB was prepared to inform the Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership Scheme (Kent Downs AONB March 2004).

### **4.5.2 Main issues and threats identified**

a Lack of general understanding of historic influences on the components of the landscape of the Kent Downs.

b The need to increase people's understanding, engagement, awareness of, and inspiration from, the historic, artistic, built and cultural heritage, to encourage greater opportunities for the historic heritage to inform contemporary decisions and place making.

c The need to develop the use of a holistic approach to the historic environment, referring to the Historic Environment Record, to inform research projects, development decisions and landscape management.

d The need to conserve and protect the historic environment, both above and below ground. Issues include the effect of deep ploughing, the introduction of new (deep rooting) energy crops and arable conversion on sites containing buried archaeological remains and development affecting or in proximity to historic buildings. Protection and conservation may take place in the development control system or through schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship.

e There is a need to establish where the conservation of buried archaeological remains and biodiversity (particularly management and restoration of chalk downland) can be managed in parallel to secure wider heritage conservation objectives.

f Recognition and reinforcement of special character and the local distinctiveness of settlements, farmsteads, buildings and design in the Kent Downs landscape through the statutory planning process as well as in Village Design Statements and Conservation Area Appraisals.

g Dearth of skills and local sustainably sourced materials for historic building conservation and new developments.

h Responses to climate change provides both risks (for instance planting of deep rooted new crops on sites of buried archaeology) and opportunities (sensitive adaptation of historic buildings) for the historic environment.

#### **4.5.3 Historic and Cultural Heritage – aims**

A landscape in which:

1 The principal components of the historic character of the Kent Downs landscape, the field patterns, hedgerows, droveways, woodlands and parklands are recognised, conserved and enhanced.

2 The rich legacy of sites and features are conserved, positively managed, understood and cherished by people who live, work in and visit the AONB.

3 The economic and 'quality of life' benefit of living and working in an historically-rich, artistically and culturally inspiring environment is recognised and supported.

4 New developments respect and reinforce the traditions of the past, whilst integrating sustainable technologies and sensitive new design.

5 The distinctive and historic pattern of settlement is protected and maintained for its own sake and for the greater benefit it brings to landscape quality, natural beauty and the quality of life of those who live and work in the AONB.

6 The landscape context and setting of all historic buildings, features and settlements is respected, conserved and enhanced.

7 Restoration, conversion and new build reflect local character in form, scale and texture and will meet high environmental standards, using sustainably sourced, locally derived materials and skilled workers.

8 Responses to climate change will support and strengthen the historic character of the Kent Downs

9 Communities are engaged and involved in the historic environment of the Kent Downs through methods such as conservation area management planning, village design, place making and interpretation.

10 The cultural influences of the past contribute to vibrant and contemporary artistic interpretations and celebrations of the landscape of the Kent Downs.

#### **4.5.4 Historic and Cultural Heritage – policies**

HCH1 The conservation and enhancement of the historic character of the Kent Downs landscape will be supported and pursued.

HCH2 The protection, restoration and enhancement and ongoing management of sites and features of historic interest will be supported.

HCH3 A wider understanding of how the Kent Downs landscape has evolved and its historic character will be encouraged.

HCH4 A wider understanding of cultural, scientific and artistic inspiration from the Kent Downs landscape will be supported in part to inform the interpretation and management of the AONB.

HCH5 Activities which respond to the economic potential of the historic and cultural environment, for instance rural tourism, and the reuse of buildings will be encouraged where they also support the conservation and enhancement of the landscape character and components of natural beauty of the Kent Downs and resisted where they conflict with them.

HCH6 The particular historic and locally distinctive character of rural settlements and buildings of the Kent Downs AONB will be identified, maintained and strengthened. New developments will be encouraged to use appropriate design guidance and:

- demonstrate high quality in design which respects local character and distinctiveness of the AONB,
- are complementary in form, setting, scale and use of materials.

HCH7 The provision and use of locally-derived materials for construction, restoration and conversion work will be encouraged where the source of material meets the requirements of development control policies, is in conformity with AONB Management Plan policies, and helps to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB.

HCH8 Activities to secure the conservation of areas of historic or archaeological interest will be supported especially where they also support permanent chalk downland and/or other biodiversity rich habitats.

HCH9 The preparation of best practice guidance for adapting the historic and cultural environment to climate change will be supported; adaptation and mitigation schemes will be supported where they are also sensitive to the historic landscape character and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs.

HCH10 Opportunities to develop contemporary artistic, cultural and scientific interpretation and celebration of the landscape of the Kent Downs will be supported and pursued.

## **4.6 Geology and Natural Resources**

### **Overview**

The natural and cultural features that create the Kent Downs' sense of place and special character have in large part been governed by the physical nature of the environment. With significant changes predicted in the natural environment a special focus on positive action is an important priority for the future conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs.

### **4.6.1 Special characteristics**

#### **Geology**

The Kent Downs are valued most as a place of spectacular views, changing scenery and diversity of landscape. The underlying geology is quite literally the foundation of this natural beauty.

The AONB encompasses a complex band of geological layers, each following the broad east-west sweep of Kent. The folded and undulating chalk, greensand, Gault Clay and ragstone, with intricate overlying layers of clay with flint, sand, river gravels and alluvium determine the nature of the land and soil, and the plants and animals that are supported.

The AONB contains a number of nationally and regionally important geological or physiographical features, eight of which have been designated as geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) – including the full extent of the chalk cliffs of the Heritage Coasts. Where they are not statutorily designated, some sites have been selected as Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS).

Many of these are exposures created during mineral workings or cuttings for transport infrastructure, which have been left uncovered and reveal strata of important rocks, minerals and fossils.

The importance, management and awareness of geological sites and features tend to be overlooked or misunderstood because of the lack of information and interpretation. These features and sites are an important part of the natural beauty of the Kent Downs.

The geology of the Kent Downs means that mineral winning has been a long run activity, particularly on the northern edge of the Greensand. Spent mineral workings are at risk from new development proposals but should be carefully operated and sensitively restored.

#### **Soil**

Soil is an irreplaceable and often overlooked natural resource, which forms naturally over hundreds of years. It is a key determinant of the natural vegetation of the AONB and is fundamental to all land uses. In semi-natural habitats, an undisturbed soil structure is a vital component of the ecosystem. On cultivated land, the careful management of soil is a necessary primary principle of good farming. Soil erosion can occur on ploughed steeper slopes of the AONB, the soil eventually being washed through into adjacent watercourses – adding to the risk of flooding. Pollution or contamination of soil can occur through the misuse of pesticides and other chemicals, which can accumulate over time, and can leach into surface and groundwater supplies. Soil husbandry is an essential element of environmentally

sustainable farming and land management and is increasingly being understood as being important in the management of carbon.

## **Water**

The Kent Downs AONB is a comparatively dry landscape – rain water permeates easily through the porous chalk and greensand bedrock with generally few areas of standing water – except where clay-lined dew ponds are present. Where the permeable chalk and greensand layers meet impermeable Gault clay, water seeps out in spring lines – the lower scarp slopes are characterised by historic settlements that have developed around these water sources (Postling, Hollingbourne and Underriver to name three). These springs flow into the main river catchments, flowing out and sometimes through the AONB. Within the chalk and greensand domes, clean percolated water forms the groundwater aquifer, which provides 75% of drinking water in Kent. This is clearly an important resource and should not be underestimated. The quality of the ground water aquifer and the surface river water is determined in no small part by land and landscape management and other activities. The quantity of groundwater and surface water is becoming a more critical issue as Kent is set to accommodate over 137,000 (figure taken from South East Plan Companion Report 2008) more households in the next twenty years. Abstraction already occurs throughout the AONB and has been linked to low summer river flows particularly of the Rivers Darent and Little Stour. This situation will be exacerbated by the predicted effects of climate change. Not only will these factors have a profound affect on potable water supply in Kent, but also may impact on the physical and ecological character in the AONB over time.

## **Climate**

The physical environment is constantly changing, and man-made changes are occurring now, faster than recorded for many generations. The impact of climate change is leading to warmer, drier summers and milder, wetter winters. Similarly, short-lived but more extreme weather events are occurring more frequently. It is anticipated that extreme weather events, such as summer drought, are most likely to trigger the most significant changes in land management and landscape. Sea levels are also rising which will have localised effects on the Heritage Coast and on the reaches of the tidal Medway. Sea cliff erosion will occur at an accelerated rate, and brackish water already reaches the flood meadows in the Medway valley, affecting the quality of grazing pastures and influencing local flora and fauna.

The likely headline impacts of climate change for the South East Protected Landscapes have been studied at a regional level; it was found that climate change will have a major effect on some important aspects that make up Protected Landscapes (ADAS headline indicators of climate change 2006). It will affect the existing biodiversity (both terrestrial and freshwater), the potential and use of land for agriculture, the morphology of the coastline and the cultural features within the landscape. In the Kent Downs key impacts were likely in the rivers and streams, along the coast, as well as for biodiversity and agriculture. In the short term landscape impacts are most likely from mitigation responses; in the longer term it is the climatic changes themselves which are likely to have important impacts on natural beauty.

The Kent Downs AONB is vulnerable to changes in the physical and natural environment being a dry and free-draining landscape, located in the driest part of the country where climate changes will be most strongly felt. A drop in summer rainfall levels and increase in temperature will affect many of the wild animal and

plant species. Beech trees and bluebells, to name two, suffer from heat stress in hot dry summers, and are predicted to contract their ranges northwards. Similarly, other species will become established from the European mainland. At the same time modelling carried out by the Branch project (Alterra 2007) shows that, for instance the Kent Downs has a key role in providing a network for chalk grassland species and work by the Forestry Commission (Forestry commission 2007) shows that woodlands may be less effected in Kent Downs than surrounding areas making the landscape potentially an important refuge for lowland woodland communities.

It is clear that policies and action have to be adopted at all levels in response to climate change and that AONBs must contribute positively. The preparation of an adopted renewables position statement for the AONB is an important step in showing how a protected landscape can contribute to government's mitigation efforts target of reducing carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2050. At the same time a methodology has been developed to consider adaptation responses for the protected landscapes using the 'UK Climate Impact Programme (UKCIP) climate risk and adaptation wizard'.

The benefits of climate change need to be harnessed to best effect for the benefit of the AONB, such as promoting new sources of renewable energy from our woodlands, wind and sun; and the increased opportunity for tourism by providing lengthened holiday periods in this dry, warm and attractive part of the country.

The UKCIP will publish UK 21st Century Climate Scenarios late in 2008 (UKCIP08). These are expected to provide more confidence and detail than the scenarios on which current modelling is developed (UKCIP02).

### **Tranquillity and remoteness**

The perception of being away from the noise, sight and smells of modern life is a much valued feature of many parts of the AONB as a place where people can refresh body and soul. In the south east of England tranquillity is an increasingly rare resource, Research by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) has shown that since the 1960s England has lost over 20% of its tranquil areas to urban sprawl, traffic and light pollution. The average size of our tranquil areas has been reduced by 73%. As Kent becomes increasingly populated, this resource will become more important and increasingly under threat. Recent national tranquillity mapping carried out by the CPRE has confirmed that the Kent Downs offers important areas of relative tranquillity in Kent.

A CPRE survey (2003) has focused on the loss of dark night skies over the last 20 years by badly designed and sited night lighting. An accepted part of country living has always been the pitch dark at night, and star-filled skies. These qualities are increasingly difficult to enjoy in the AONB. A questionnaire carried out through the Orchid Newspaper showed that Tranquillity was a vital and much valued feature of many parts of the AONB with 49% of respondents rating it as the feature most valued to them.

### **Ecological foot printing**

Ecological foot printing compares individual human consumption of natural resources with the Earth's ability to regenerate them. The first analysis of the Ecological Footprint has taken place at a regional level in 2004 and was reported in 'Taking Stock: An Ecological Footprint of the South East region'. Taking Stock identified the South East as the region with the highest Ecological Footprint within the UK. This

was followed by 'Stabilising the Ecological Footprint in the South East Plan: A report to SEERA' published in 2005 which sets out how the South East can move towards stabilising and eventually reducing the Ecological Footprint of the regions residents. The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) contains a headline target to reduce the rate of increase in the Ecological Footprint (currently rising at 1.1% per year), stabilise the Footprint and then generate a reduction by 2016.

In 2008 Kent County Council is seeking to analyse the Ecological Footprint of Kent. At an AONB level taking a community based approach to achieving the Ecological Footprint Targets set in the RES is an appropriate approach for the management of natural resources. At a community level, the Kent Downs could be an appropriate place to pilot such an approach.

#### **4.6.2 Main issues and threats identified**

##### **Geology**

a Loss of geological exposures and sites through lack of management of scrub and trees; top soiling and grass seeding; development, landfill and dumping.

b Lack of information and awareness about the underlying geological importance and land form of the AONB.

c Mineral workings can have a serious impact on landscape quality and are highly sensitive, the loss of a single hedge can expose the scar of a quarry over a long distance and they are also susceptible to development proposals.

##### **Soils**

d Soil erosion, especially on the steeper slopes and under 'open' arable crops, such as maize and potentially some biomass crops.

e Maintaining and improving agricultural soil quality and understanding the relationship between soil management and climate change mitigation.

##### **Water – Groundwater and rivers**

f Pollution of rivers and springs from point sources, including public and private sewerage systems, agriculture and fish farms.

g Diffuse pollution from agricultural sources leading to nutrient enrichment, reduced water and elevated levels of silt and pesticides.

h Abstraction and low river flows, particularly in the Darent and Great Stour catchments – the compound effect of water abstraction for public water supply, and unpredictable river flow through reduced groundwater aquifer levels and changes in rainfall patterns.

i Predicted increase and volume in flooding events. Rivers flooding in the Kent Downs affects localised areas.

j Need to understand the relationship between landscape management and aquifer recharge.

##### **Climate**

j Rising sea levels and the accelerated erosion of the Heritage Coasts and areas adjacent to the tidal Medway.

k Continuing general lack of appreciation of the likely trends and speed in global warming and methods of addressing these.

l The need to adopt renewable energy technologies which are effective at reducing green house gasses and which support the special qualities of the AONB.

m Potential for bio fuel planting in locations that are unsympathetic to landscape character.

- n Change in land uses e.g. new crops, and management practices.
- o Vulnerability of species and fragmented habitats at the south-eastern edge of their range, and establishment of other species both detrimental and benign.
- p Potential increase in summer water demand and reduction in supply.

#### **Minimising noise and light pollution – for tranquillity and remoteness**

- q Since the 1960s, the average size of tranquil areas (away from traffic and urban noise) has been reduced by 73% but the Kent Downs still provides important relatively tranquil areas.
- r Fewer places have dark night skies because of the increasingly ubiquitous lighting columns and floodlighting.

#### **Ecological footprint**

- s High ecological footprint for communities in the Kent Downs and the opportunity to pilot innovative community level approaches to this.

### **4.6.3 Geology and natural resources – aims**

A landscape in which:

- 1 A safe, clean and comparatively tranquil environment is protected, conserved and enhanced, where residents and visitors alike will benefit through increased well being and quality of life;
- 2 The important geological sites and exposures of the Kent Downs are recognised conserved and enhanced;
- 3 The natural resources of soil, water and air will be conserved and enhanced;
- 4 Local sources of pollution indigenous to the AONB, including noise, light, soil and water, are minimised, reduced or controlled;
- 5 A positive, proactive and urgent approach is taken to the implications of climate change and intelligent and effective mitigation and adaptation responses are chosen which support landscape character and natural resources;
- 6 Priority is given to the production of effective sustainable energy from traditional land uses (such as woodland produce), and renewable energy initiatives that serve the needs of local communities and meet the purposes of the AONB designation.
- 7 The ecological footprint on AONB communities is stabilised and reduced to meet or exceed the South East Economic Strategy targets.

### **4.6.4 Geology and natural resources – policies**

GNR1 Advice to farmers and land managers which seeks integrated environmental land management in the Kent Downs will be encouraged – to retain and enhance soil quality, to prevent soil erosion, to reduce surface and groundwater pollution and overuse, improve aquifer recharge, mitigate climate change and to assist with local flood prevention and control.

GNR2 Threats to the conservation of the natural resources of soil, water and air will be resisted.

GNR3 Activities designed to protect, conserve and enhance the important geological exposures of the Kent Downs will be encouraged.

GNR4 The careful management and sensitive restoration of existing minerals and waste sites within, visible from or adjoining the Kent Downs will be pursued and resisted if they do not conform with AONB policies and conserve and enhance landscape character.

GNR5 Activities to increase the understanding of the importance and extent of tranquillity, remoteness and 'dark night skies' within the Kent Downs and the factors that impact on them, with special reference to intrusive developments, noise and light pollution, and methods to abate damaging impact will be supported and pursued.

GNR6 New developments and highways infrastructure will seek to achieve a net improvement in tranquillity and dark skies through careful design and the use of new technologies.

GNR7 Local renewable and sustainable energy initiatives will be pursued and supported where they help to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and landscape character of the AONB and bring environmental, social and economic benefits to local people. Proposals will be expected to conform with the approved Kent Downs AONB Renewable Energy Position Statement and not conflict with other policy aims.

GNR8 Community based initiatives to reduce ecological foot print and conserve and enhance natural beauty will be pursued.

GNR9 The causes and effects of climate change on the Kent Downs AONB will be taken into account in landscape management decisions.

GNR10 Additional water abstraction particularly in the Darent and Great Stour river catchments will be resisted unless it can be demonstrated that there will not be any harmful impacts upon the character of the Kent Downs.

## **4.7 Quality of life components**

### **4.7.1 Secondary purposes of AONB designation**

**The landscape comes first.** The primary purpose of AONB designation is to 'conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape', and this purpose is the primary focus of the Management Plan.

The secondary purposes of AONB designation are to take account of the needs of land-based and rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. In addition, recreation demand should be met in a way that is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.

The following three chapters set out how the secondary purposes of AONB designation will be addressed by the Management Plan. A principal consideration in preparing these sections is the way in which they relate back to the primary purpose of designation. The challenge for this Management Plan is to find ways in which social and economic well-being and public understanding and enjoyment, can be complementary to, and can further support the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

## **4.8 Vibrant communities**

### **Overview**

The Kent Downs AONB is a living and working landscape. One aim of this Management Plan must be to find ways of achieving a sustainable and prosperous local economy that conserves and enhances this nationally important area.

An AONB management plan is not the primary means for tackling social and economic needs. That is the role of a range of other organisations, funding streams, and strategic policy documents. Sustainable Community Strategies prepared through Local Strategic Partnerships, regional and sub-regional policy documents (e.g. the South East Plan, South East Regional Economic Strategy, Kent Rural Delivery Framework, Medway Rural Action Plan etc.) and national programmes such as the new Rural Development Programme for England 2007-12 are designed to form a context for socio-economic activity. Other key players in this large and complex area include Action With Communities in Rural Kent, South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), Business Link, the County Council's Rural Regeneration team and the Kent Rural Board and the Parish Councils. Many of these organisations are public bodies and therefore, under the CRoW Act have a statutory duty of regard towards the purposes of the AONB when developing their strategic and funding plans.

Without the right social and economic conditions it will be difficult to conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONB. This plan focuses on those areas that have a significant and direct impact on the primary purpose of AONB designation.

### **4.8.1 Special characteristics**

#### **The people and rural economy of the AONB**

The population of the Kent Downs AONB in 2001 is estimated to be just over 66,000 or 4.2% of Kent's population (of 1,570,000).

The 2001 National Census survey provides the most up to date information about the residents of the AONB. This, and other data was examined by Terra Consulting to provide a social and economic profile of the Kent Downs AONB.

The AONB population is generally older, with fewer ethnic minority groups than the rest of the county. The population has more people in white-collar and professional work than for the county as a whole, with higher owner-occupancy and car ownership/household than for Kent as a whole. A higher percentage of people are self-employed, probably resulting in more home-working and indicative of an increasing knowledge-based economy within the AONB. The ease of access to main urban areas, particularly Greater London, and the attractiveness of the villages and countryside places great demand on most parts of the AONB as a place to live and work and from which to commute. House prices are high and the percentage increase has been higher than the regional average. Second homes are felt to be a threat to the communities of the AONB; second home ownership in the Kent Downs is 263 homes (Socio-economic profiles for PLAs in South East England, Terra Consult 2005).

The lack of affordable or rented housing within or adjacent to the AONB exacerbates the situation particularly for young people and families, and people on lower incomes (including public sector workers and those employed in the land-based industries). This situation creates 'hidden households' where young adults continue to live with parents rather than establishing themselves independently.

On the whole incomes are higher than the regional average and are around the average for people living in a protected landscape.

Not surprisingly, the percentage of people employed in land-based economic activities is double that for the county as a whole, although this figure is a small part of the overall AONB workforce (3.8%). AONB residents from other industry sectors are in similar proportion to the county as a whole; hotels and restaurants are important employers in the Kent Downs AONB. The Kent Rural Delivery Framework evidence base has described the rural communities of Kent as active and entrepreneurial; they are a considerable asset which can be harnessed to secure the future of the AONB.

Against this background of apparent higher standard of living, 3% of the work force is unemployed. Rural poverty and exclusion is regarded as a hidden but real issue in a number of communities particularly for isolated elderly people, people with disabilities, migrant workers and some young families. While lower than the regional average the Index of Multiple Deprivation is higher than for other South East Protected Landscapes. Added to this, there are at least five wards on or immediately adjacent to the AONB boundary with very high social and economic needs.

The importance of traditional land-based economic activities to the AONB's rural income is small and declining. However, a number of other employment sectors and industries (such as transportation, distribution, tourism and retail) depend on the land-based activities and landscape to some extent. The diversification of the employment base in a way which supports the landscape character and special characteristics of the AONB needs to be encouraged and developed.

The impact of a high speed rail link to London in 2009 is anticipated to only have a minor effect on the social and economic conditions in Ashford and it is assumed that this will be true for the AONB too; however it could be expected to exacerbate the trends seen so far and provide a real opportunity to promote sustainable rural

tourism based on high speed train travel. (The Impact of High Speed Trains on Socio-Economic Activity: The Case of Ashford (Kent), Transportation Research Group, University of Southampton.)

### **Initiatives to support rural development, regeneration and communities**

A rapidly changing plethora of initiatives, projects and grant funding are available and carried out by many organisations. These include:

- Rural Development Programme for England 2007-12
- Kent Downs & Marshes LEADER Programme
- West Kent LEADER Programme
- SEEDA Rural Access to Services Programme
- Kent Rural Towns Programme – applicable in Wye, Chilham, Lenham etc.
- East Kent Community Fund
- East Kent Parish Plans Fund

### **Community and Parish Planning**

A programme of support for parishes wishing to undertake a parish plan (i.e. a community strategy at individual parish level) has been in place since 2001. In the first instance, support, including officer time and grants, was financed through the Countryside Agency. From 2005 this support was financed by Defra and, in 2006-08, delivered through the Defra Rural Social & Community Programme. Central government funding for this activity ceased in April 2008 but is to be replaced with private trust funding in East Kent (including the AONB between Charing / Challock / Molash and St Margaret's at Cliffe.) Within Kent a structure to incorporate actions from Parish Plans into Sustainable Community Strategies was agreed by the Kent Partnership, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, Kent Association of Local Councils and Kent Downs AONB in 2007.

Demand to prepare Village Design Statements is still high within the AONB and research carried out for the Kent Downs AONB<sup>1</sup> has shown that Village Design Statements are an effective, although not infallible tool at influencing planning and development control decisions at a village level, they also serve to bring communities together around the issue of good design.

Community responses to climate change are being piloted in Elham and St Margaret's at Cliffe in the Kent Low Carbon Communities project. The lessons from these projects will be useful to develop and widen community and parish planning initiatives so that they include ecological footprint measures and enhanced sustainability.

### **Sustainable rural leisure and tourism**

Expressed simply, sustainable tourism can be said to be: tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities.

Making Tourism More Sustainable – A Guide for Policy Makers (p2), UNEP World Tourism Organization, 2005

There is an increasing recognition that the development of a sustainable leisure and tourism industry is essential to the economic well being of rural areas. The Foot and Mouth disease crisis in 2001 and the subsequent spotlight on rural tourism as a key

component of the rural economy have added further to this view. This is reflected in The Countryside Agency/English Tourism Council joint strategy 2001 – 2005, and more recently in the South East Regional Economic Strategy (RES) which identifies a priority to 'Invest in and promote the area's cultural, heritage and landscape assets, and develop the visitor economy linked to the conservation of a high quality environment'. SEEDA RES

Work undertaken by Kent Downs AONB Sustainable Tourism Project has established that there are over 650 rural tourism and leisure businesses operating within or immediately adjacent to the Kent Downs AONB. In addition there are many more businesses in the urban areas around the AONB that promote and use the Downs as part of their attraction to visitors.

A visitor survey conducted by the AONB Unit in 2005 confirmed that the main motivations for visiting the Kent Downs are its beauty and tranquillity, whilst the main activity undertaken is walking. Its main strengths were identified as its walking and cycling opportunities and its proximity to other popular attractions in Kent. In spite of its strengths, the development of some carefully selected new products and services were identified that could potentially enhance the appeal of the Kent Downs, in particular improved public transport linking railway stations, attractions and accommodation, and improving the food product.

A small-scale survey of AONB accommodation businesses in 2002 showed average room occupancy rates of 55 – 60%. This reflects Kent Tourism's own research which shows average room occupancy of 57% for the whole county, higher than the national average of 46%.

Not surprisingly the Kent Downs receives a greater ratio of overseas visitors than other AONBs in the south east.

There is an important opportunity to encourage more visitors to stay in the AONB area to fill empty beds and generate more income for the local economy provided this is done in a carefully managed way.

Sustainable tourism is not a discrete or special form of tourism. Rather, all forms of tourism should strive to be more sustainable.

Making tourism more sustainable is not just about controlling and managing the negative impacts of the industry. Tourism is in a very special position to benefit local communities, economically and socially, and to raise awareness and support for conservation of the environment. Within the tourism sector, economic development and environmental protection should not be seen as opposing forces—they should be pursued hand in hand as aspirations that can and should be mutually reinforcing. Policies and actions must aim to strengthen the benefits and reduce the costs of tourism.

Making Tourism More Sustainable – A Guide for Policy Makers (p2), UNEP World Tourism Organization, 2005

### **Principles of Sustainable Tourism in the Kent Downs AONB**

- Conserve rural landscape and character – the primary motivating force behind visits to the countryside
- Maximise benefits to the local economy whilst minimising environmental impact

Identify, promote and support the local distinctiveness of the AONB area  
 Raise public awareness about the wildlife, culture and history of the AONB  
 Ensure the local tourism industry is at an appropriate scale and in harmony with the local community and environment  
 Support the improvement and development of the local public transport offering  
 Support AONB tourism businesses in developing sustainable business practice

#### **4.8.2 Main issues and threats identified**

##### **Social exclusion and deprivation**

- a A number of areas and wards around and within the AONB are recognised to have high levels of social deprivation.
- b Within a number of rural communities, rural poverty and social exclusion is 'hidden' but is believed to be an issue such as for some elderly people, ethnic minority groups, migrant workers, people with disabilities and families on low incomes.

##### **Retaining and improving access to, and provision of, local services and facilities**

- c Decline and loss of commercial services in some parishes including post offices, village shops, public houses and garages.
- d Community facilities, such as schools, libraries and doctors surgeries, are unevenly available and accessible.
- e Access to health and social care is an issue in some parishes, especially for the elderly.
- f Village school closure threats.
- g Rapidly changing and lack of consistency in support structures for community development in rural areas.

##### **The availability of affordable housing, to rent or buy**

- h Housing prices, until recently have continued to rise, in some parts, well above and faster than the national average.
- i Considerable demand for affordable housing in many parishes in the AONB.
- j Creation of 'hidden' households
- k Establishment of second homes is perceived to be a threat to the vibrancy and life of communities.
- l Impact of high speed link is uncertain.

##### **Maintaining and diversifying the employment base**

- m Decline in farming and forestry employment, although both industries are still important economically in terms of maintaining the character of the Kent Downs.
- n Skills gap for some local employers, such as locally based skilled forestry contractors and business marketing.

##### **Sense of community and belonging**

- o The need to attach people to place where an increasing proportion of the population are not directly involved in the management of landscape.
- p The fundamental need to improve community recognition and value of the special characteristics of the AONB to secure its future conservation and enhancement

##### **Sustainable leisure and tourism**

- q There is an important opportunity to increase the numbers and income from day and staying visitors in a sustainable way that brings benefit back to local people and supports the AONB landscape.
- r A number of areas within the AONB suffer either from over capacity or over use, leading to a detrimental impact on both the landscape and host communities.

#### **4.8.3 Vibrant communities – aims**

A landscape in which:

- 1 Thriving rural communities understand, recognise and value the special qualities of the AONB and play an active role in its conservation and enhancement while reducing their ecological foot print;
- 2 A strong and sustainable rural economy supports the special characteristics of the AONB and is supported by residents and visitors, who value and use local produce and services;
- 3 There is well designed, sustainable and affordable housing, particularly for key workers employed in the land-based economy and conservation of the AONB’s landscape and its social and economic vitality;
- 4 Accessible local services and facilities are available and are well-used throughout the AONB;
- 5 The high quality environment and landscape of the AONB is seen as an asset to local businesses, which in turn contribute to the conservation of the landscape through the use of local sustainable goods and labour;
- 6 The area is recognised by both local communities and visitors as a ‘green’ or ‘sustainable tourism’ destination through achieving Europarc Sustainable Tourism Charter status.

#### **4.8.4 Vibrant communities – policies**

VC1 Community initiatives that improve the recognition and value of the AONB, encourage and maintain the vitality and diversity of rural community life and which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty while reducing ecological footprint will be pursued.

VC2 Positive and sustainable links between the AONB (landscape, communities and partnership) and people who live nearby, particularly people from excluded groups and from neighbouring deprived areas will be pursued, where they are developed and maintained in accordance with AONB policies.

VC3 Initiatives which are in line with existing policies of the local planning authority that increase and improve the supply of housing for i. those with proven local needs, and ii. affordable housing for key workers whose activities directly contribute to the purposes of the AONB designation will be supported where it is demonstrated that the proposals are: of high quality design, limited quantity and scale and which respects local landscape and built character; complementary to the particular area in form, setting, scale and use of materials, use sustainably sourced local materials and are built to the best current environmental standards.

VC4 The retention and development of local services, facilities and employment opportunities in order to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB or reduce the need to travel by car and maintain viable rural communities will be supported where they do not conflict with AONB policies.

VC5 Encouragement will be given to businesses and services which contribute to the vibrancy of communities, conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB and contribute to people's understanding and enjoyment of the AONB designation.

VC6 Provision of skills training and assistance with business development will be encouraged where these activities contribute to the viability of communities and meet the purposes of the AONB.

VC7 The development of sustainable visitor and tourism facilities will be pursued where they lead to a contribution to the local economy, meet the purposes and policies of the AONB and enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the AONB.

VC8 Tourism and leisure businesses in the AONB will be encouraged to sign up to the Principles of Sustainable Tourism and to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through achieving nationally recognised green accreditation.

## **4.9 Sustainable development and travel**

### **Overview**

Planning issues have a fundamental impact on the statutory purposes of AONB designation. Indeed, until the enactment of the CROW Act 2000, the statutory land use planning system was the main legal mechanism by which AONBs have been protected, conserved and enhanced. However, data from the Kent Land Cover Change survey (2002), which is the latest information available, indicated that in the nine year period from 1990 to 1999 developed land in the AONB rose from 5426ha (6.2% of the AONB) in 1990 to 7274ha (8.3% of the AONB) in 1999, a 34% increase in developed land or 1848ha. This scale of development, derived largely from agricultural land, is mainly due to the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and the M2/A2 widening. Other development areas, significant at a more local level, include Hawkinge in Shepway District.

The Kent Downs AONB, probably more than any other protected landscape is under pressure from growth, development and major infrastructure. The policy framework provided by the management plan needs to reflect these local circumstances so that planning decisions (both within and outside the Kent Downs) have regard to the AONB. This includes securing mitigation measures to take advantage of the opportunities generated by this growth and to prevent a harmful impact on the AONB.

Since the adoption of the original AONB Management Plan the South East England Regional Assembly, SEERA, has prepared and consulted upon a Regional Spatial Strategy which is anticipated to be adopted in the winter of 2008. Once adopted it will supersede the County Structure Plan. At the same time the Local Authorities are preparing Local Development Frameworks to replace the Local Plans. Each Local Development Framework provides an important opportunity to secure the future conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs AONB and to reinforce the policies of the Management Plan locally. The Local Development Framework also offers the opportunity to develop Area Action Plans which could respond to the spatial priorities of this plan and deliver community benefits.

### **4.9.1 Special characteristics**

#### **Development pressure**

There is no doubt that the Kent Downs AONB is under severe development pressure from housing and transportation infrastructure in particular. Significant urban areas immediately adjoin the AONB boundary, or lie within very close proximity, and most of these areas will expand in the coming twenty years. Foremost are Ashford, the Thames Gateway growth areas (including Gravesham, Swale and Medway), Maidstone, which became a 'growth point' in 2006, and Dover, where growth point status was confirmed in 2008. For Dover growth is seen as a mechanism to overcome social and economic disadvantage. Over 15% of the AONB boundary coincides with the boundary for the Greater London Metropolitan Green Belt.

In the period since the first AONB Management Plan was adopted there have been five major development proposals within or immediately adjacent to the AONB although none have yet emerged as formal applications. Government guidance, in Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7), is clear that major development should not occur in AONBs except in exceptional circumstances and when national need and a lack of suitable alternative sites is demonstrated; site ownership in the AONB does not amount to a lack of alternative site.

As the nearby urban areas expand, the challenge for the Kent Downs AONB will be to retain its special character and landscape quality but also to function as a key component of the 'green infrastructure' of Kent. There will be increased traffic pressure along and through the AONB, increased visitor use of the AONB, and indeed increased demand for housing in AONB villages. The approaches to and the views from the AONB are also set to deteriorate unless efforts are made to protect them. At the same time growth provides opportunities for the sustainable management of the AONB landscape, for instance in the supply of wood fuel, high quality building materials, food and sustainable low impact visiting and recreation opportunities.

Against this backdrop of large-scale development, there is continual pressure for small-scale development and change. Incremental change can result in cumulative impacts which are seemingly insignificant individually but over time can bring about a considerable change in character from developments such as telecommunication masts, infrastructure for utilities and services, small scale changes to the housing stock and small developments, change of use away from agriculture, leisure development, farm and business developments.

It is the stated intention of the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) that this Management Plan becomes a Supplementary Planning Document and therefore material in development control decisions.

#### **The AONB Partnership's role in planning decisions.**

The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty partnership has agreed to take on a limited land use planning role.

In summary this is to:

- Provide design guidance in partnership with the Local Authorities represented in the AONB.
- Comment on forward/strategic planning issues-for instance local plans/Local Development Frameworks.
- Involvement in development control (planning applications) only in exceptional circumstances. For example in terms of scale and precedence.
- Provide informal planning advice/comments on development control (planning applications) at the request of a Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory member and /or Local Authority Planning Officers.

#### **Community and parish planning**

The Kent Downs AONB partnership has sought to support planning engagement at a local level, in part as a response to the extent of development pressure. Across the AONB, 23 village or parish design statements have been adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, or are nearing completion, giving local people a positive role to influence building design at a local level. 74% of respondents in the Management Plan Review questionnaire suggested that traffic, development and visitor pressure were key issues for the future management of the AONB.

#### **The importance of sensitive design**

"There should be no space for mediocre architecture. It is too important for that." CABE 2006. The design of buildings and places in a nationally important landscape is critical to its future conservation and enhancement. This is as true for the aesthetics as it is for environmental performance. The AONB Landscape Design Handbook

provides practical advice to conserve and enhance locally distinctive landscape features, and a buildings design handbook is planned.

### **Traffic and transport**

The growth in road traffic over recent years and further rapid increase anticipated in the next few years, will bring pressure to both rural roads and the strategic transport links with mainland Europe. Traffic growth is bringing continuing pressure for road construction and improvement in and around the Kent Downs. Figures from the Kent Travel Report 2006 (KCC) indicate an average 3.0% increase in traffic on selected rural roads in the AONB during 2005 and 2006, Dover Harbour Board predicts a rise from 1.9m units a year in 2004 to 2.2-2.5m units in 2014 (there was a 530% increase in freight traffic between 1974 and 2004). Where main routes are heavily used this can result in increasing use of unsuitable minor roads as so called 'rat runs' adding to the congestion, noise and disturbance in otherwise quiet rural areas.

The Kent Downs has suffered major impact on the natural beauty of the landscape from new road developments and improvement schemes. Further damage should be avoided and resisted, particularly where routes do not respect the natural lie of the land or which affect important landscape, wildlife or historic features. All road construction, improvements and routine maintenance should be carried out with extreme sensitivity to the special character of the landscape and where permitted should have detailed mitigation strategies.

The cumulative effect of small scale development or change, be it in buildings or roads, needs to avoid unnecessary 'urbanisation' and reduce the amount of roadside clutter – of redundant and unnecessary boundary treatments, signs, bollards, kerbs, lights and fences.

The greater reliance on the car is partly because people perceive roads to be dangerous to walk or cycle and have withdrawn, as demonstrated by car dominated 'school runs'. In order to bring about a shift in modal use from private car to public transport, bike or foot, there needs to be a better provision of frequent, reliable and affordable public transport in remote rural areas and an emphasis on car sharing and changing driving behaviour and streetscape and highways design to make routes safer for all users.

Both the Local Transport Plan for Kent (2006-2011), and the Medway Local Transport Plan (2006-2011) have similar aims to provide good accessibility, to improve safety and to improve the environment and health by reducing congestion and pollution, widening the choice of transport available and by developing public transport, walking and cycling. These aims support those of the AONB for sustainable approaches to travel although the targets and performance indicators of the plans are less closely aligned.

The Kent Downs AONB Highways Design Handbook (awaiting adoption) takes a contextual approach for the Kent Downs AONB highways and streetscapes, seeking to remove the visual clutter and confusion and support locally distinctive qualities of the landscape. A key result of this approach should be that a modal shift away from cars is achieved through an approach where space is shared between different road users.

### **Rail network**

The Kent Downs are fortunate to have a number of railway lines crossing or running alongside the AONB boundary. This rail network could be used to much greater extent to access the AONB.

The opportunity for sustainable development

The introduction of a Sustainable Development fund in the AONB in 2005 gave a chance to demonstrate how a sustainable approach can both support landscape quality and benefit communities, businesses and individuals in the Kent Downs.

Over 3 years many successful smaller scale projects have been delivered which demonstrates how a positive approach can deliver multiple benefits. Examples of funded projects include:

The installation of a reed bed filter at the Pines Calyx, to treat the grey and black water.

Through Creative Environmental Networks, a project to provide support and guidance to communities within the Kent Downs AONB to facilitate the development of alternative, sustainable fuel sources.

A wood chip fuelled boiler system has been installed to the environmental education centre at Bore Place; a project to enable Commonwork to reduce their need for fossil energy fuels and attempt to become a Zero (Fossil) Energy Site.

On a smaller scale Elmsted Parish Council have carried out vital clearance and coppicing work at Shrubs Wood Barrow. One of only four surviving long barrows in Kent.

#### **Under grounding of overhead cables**

The Kent Downs AONB Unit has been working in partnership with EDF Energy to remove overhead cabling where it intrudes visually onto the landscape. Ofgem (the electricity regulator) has allocated an allowance from EDF Energy customer payments towards the cost of under grounding overhead cabling in National Parks and AONBs. £10.6 million has been allocated. Since the scheme started in 2006 there are now 6 schemes in the Kent Downs.

#### **4.9.2 Main issues and threats identified**

a General development pressures, from major transport and infrastructure development proposals; small incremental change, as well as a knock-on pressure from the Greater London area and expansion of Maidstone, Dover and the Ashford and Thames Gateway growth areas, and the need to provide positive relationship as well as effective mitigation strategies.

b The need to establish and secure the Kent Downs as a vital component in the green infrastructure provision for Kent.

c Identity, scale, design and setting of rural settlements and buildings is under threat from development generally, generating the need for good practice design guidance design principles.

d Inappropriate conversion of old farm buildings and change from agriculture to recreational management.

e The impact of telecommunication towers, pylons, cabling and other unsightly structures on the landscape.

f The impact of increasing numbers of livery and equine facilities, with land management out of keeping with the character of the AONB including, overgrazing, excessive subdivision of fields and inappropriate fencing, flood lit and poorly sited stabling and arenas and field shelters, poor waste management.

- g Anticipated pressure for wind turbines and wind farms particularly suited to the AONB's high ground.
- h A greater need to influence route, volume and speed of traffic, and parking provision.
- i Mitigation for the impact of roads and railways, particularly noise, air pollution, light and physical intrusion.
- j A need to address provision of rural public transport – particularly in the evenings and Sundays.
- k A need to promote good design principles focusing through the adoption of the AONB Highways Design Handbook, to overcome urbanisation and visual intrusion, including 'over-engineering' of the rural road network, and maintaining traditional road features, such as cast signs.
- l Promote the availability and use of non-car based countryside transport and recreation and seek integrated public transport initiatives.
- m The need for greater local involvement in planning decision-making, place making and greater consultation on planning and significant road maintenance matters.
- n The need to provide support for sustainable development initiatives in the AONB and to increase the scale and impact of funding.
- o The need to ensure that the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty, the primary purpose of the AONB designation, is at the heart of development and transport proposals and to resist proposals which challenge this basic tenet.

#### **4.9.3 Sustainable development and travel – aims**

A landscape where:

- 1 The conservation and enhancement of the AONB is at the heart of and is the starting point of development and transport plans, policies and proposals and the landscape of the Kent Downs AONB provide vital services and green infrastructure for Kent and the south east.
- 2 The setting and views in and out of the AONB are conserved and enhanced.
- 3 The character and distinctiveness of villages, farmsteads and individual buildings are conserved and enhanced using the best traditions of the past incorporated with the best technologies of the present, to create environmentally sustainable and locally enhancing development.
- 4 Local building materials – flints, bricks, Kentish peg tiles, timber and weather boarding are available and are used for constructing new buildings.
- 5 Eyesores are removed, development impact is minimised and appropriate enhancement and landscape conservation and mitigation is delivered by every development.

6 Frequent, affordable, high quality, accessible and innovative public transport is well-used by local residents, businesses and visitors.

7 The impact of road traffic on the lives of local people is minimised and traffic speeds are reduced.

8 Unsuitable traffic is steered away from country lanes.

9 Children and adults walk, cycle or take public transport for recreation or to get to school or work.

10 Residents, businesses and visitors are encouraged to walk, cycle and use public transport services. Support for car reduction initiatives such as car free/car share/car discount schemes is offered by tourism providers.

#### **4.9.4 Sustainable development and travel – policies**

SDT1 The need to conserve and enhance the characteristic components of natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB is recognised as the primary purpose of the designation and given the highest level of protection within the Regional Spatial Strategy, Local Development Frameworks, Area Action Plans, Supplementary Planning Guidance, Local Transport Plans and development control decisions.

SDT2 The local character and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs AONB and high environmental sustainability will be reflected and required in the design, scale, setting and materials of new development and will be pursued through landscape and buildings design guidance.

SDT3 New development or changes to the use of land will be resisted where it disregards or challenges the primary purpose of the Kent Downs AONB or weakens its fundamental components of natural beauty and landscape character.

SDT4 The greater involvement of local people and communities in influencing and informing development planning will be supported, particularly through the development and use of Parish Design Statements and other community planning initiatives.

SDT5 Proposals that have a negative impact upon the setting and views to and from the AONB will be resisted unless they can be satisfactorily mitigated.

SDT 6 Measures to reduce the long-term negative impact of major transportation infrastructure and transport growth on the natural beauty, amenity and tranquillity of the AONB will be encouraged where they do not conflict with AONB policies.

SDT7 A strategic approach to the use of road signage, furniture, design and maintenance that conserves and enhances the local character and distinctiveness of the AONB, and promotes better route management will be pursued through the adoption and implementation of the AONB Highways Design Handbook.

SDT8 A reduction in the need to travel by car will be supported through new and improved measures to provide integrated and attractive and affordable transport economic opportunity in the Kent Downs.

SDT9 Sustainable and effective solutions to identified problems of rural traffic density, speed and type of traffic particularly in rural settlements or where there is a conflict with landscape quality, walkers, cyclists and horse riders will be supported.

SDT10 Highway improvement schemes will be expected to conserve and enhance landscape character and use new technologies to achieve a net reduction in impact on the components of natural beauty of the AONB.

SDT11 Measures to guide developments and activities including those exempt from planning control will be pursued in order to reduce their impact upon the character of the Kent Downs.

SDT 12 Where it is decided that development will take place mitigation measures appropriate to the national importance of the Kent Downs landscape will be identified, pursued, implemented and maintained.

## **4.10 Access, enjoyment and understanding**

### **Overview**

The Kent Downs AONB offers some of south east England's most enchanting and, in parts, accessible countryside. The AONB has a resident population of over 66,000 people, however a further 1 million live within 1 kilometre of the boundary. Beyond this, up to eight million people live within an hour, including populations in northeast France (via the Channel Tunnel).

The area is crossed or adjacent to four motorways, 15 trunk and 'A' roads, and hundreds of smaller roads. It is served by five railway lines with 27 railway stations in or adjacent to the AONB and numerous bus routes and services. The Port of Dover, the UK's busiest ferry terminal, as well as the Channel Tunnel terminal are both immediately adjacent to the AONB. Ashford and Ebbsfleet International stations are in easy reach. The AONB has a Public Rights of Way network which is four times the density of the national average and, although the network is limited, the Kent Downs accommodates 40% of Kent's bridleways and 50% of Kent's Byways on 23% of the land area of the county. The network is managed by Kent County Council as the Highway Authority.

While there is often concern about the impact of recreation, carefully managed access to attractive countryside, particularly walking, cycling and horse riding can bring physical and mental health benefits, enable people to enjoy and appreciate a great landscape and provide support to the local economy.

### **4.10.1 Countryside Access in the Kent Downs**

Under the provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act (2000), a Countryside Access Forum for Kent has been established. The role of the Forum is to advise on the improvement of public access to land within Kent for the purpose of open-air recreation and enjoyment. The Kent Countryside Access Forum also responds to Government consultations, contributes to the Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan and steers and monitors access and recreation policy in Kent.

### **The Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan**

Under the CRoW Act, Kent County Council was charged with a duty to develop a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). Known as the Countryside Access Improvement Plan (CAIP), Kent's ROWIP was adopted as county policy in February 2008.

The plan heralds an important change in the way public rights of way and access will be managed in Kent enabling a more pro-active and targeted approach. The Kent plan strongly supports and makes special reference to many policy objectives set out in the first AONB Management Plan.

The CAIP is the principal document for the Rights of Way network and countryside access in Kent and its close relationship with this Management Plan is essential for enhancing recreational access and green space within the AONB. Priorities, policies and actions of this plan will support and add value to the priorities and actions of the CAIP and where appropriate seek a special focus for action within the AONB.

### **4.10.2 Special characteristics**

#### **Open access land**

Under the CRoW Act, Kent was one of the first areas to be mapped for **open access land**. 0.6% of the land area of Kent has been mapped and the majority of this is chalk downland, along with registered common land and parkland within the AONB. 46% of the open access land in Kent is within the Kent Downs AONB. Open access land is managed by Kent County Council as the Access Authority. Additionally the Forestry Commission had dedicated its land for open access. In many cases new access land was already available through time limited access agreements. However, where large tracts of land have been mapped, for instance around Dover, there are significant new access opportunities.

### **Coastal access**

In 2007 the government consulted on proposals to create continuous coastal access for walkers within a 'landscape corridor that offers enjoyment, understanding of the natural heritage and a high quality experience; and that is managed sustainably'. While the Heritage Coasts of the AONB currently offer continuous and dramatic access on foot, the AONB Executive considered the enhanced management of the landscape corridor and access for all, where appropriate, were critical components of the government's objectives.

The implementation of coastal access is expected to be achieved through a Marine Bill which is likely to be enacted during the life of the revised plan.

### **Visitors to the Kent Downs**

Unfortunately no reliable visitor information is available for the AONB as a whole. Estimated visitor numbers to the AONB vary considerably, however a figure of approximately 20 million day visits a year is considered a best estimate. Research conducted in 2003 offers a conservative estimate ranging from 10 - > 20 million day visits a year to the Kent Downs<sup>1</sup>, whilst Kent Tourism research, based on 2003 figures, estimates just over 44 million visits a year to the county as a whole<sup>2</sup>. It must be remembered that local residents also use the Downs extensively for leisure purposes.

### **Walking**

The density of Rights of Way in the Kent Downs is four times higher than the national average. This is an invaluable asset to the Kent Downs and enables virtually all parts of the AONB to be accessible and in places can provide strong links between the Downs and local towns and villages. The Ramblers Association has identified that there is uneven distribution in the use of footpaths in the AONB with much greater pressure faced in the west, and many remaining areas still little used apart from near 'honey pot' attractions.

Of national importance is the North Downs Way National Trail which starts at Farnham in Surrey and follows the North Downs through Surrey and Kent to Dover with a loop via Canterbury. Of the 153 mile (246km) trail 70 miles (112km) lies within the AONB. Research conducted by the North Downs Way National Trail Team shows an estimated 250,000 visitors use the trail each year between May and October.<sup>3</sup> National Trails are promoted as long distance trails, although user surveys show that the majority of use on the North Downs Way tends to be for shorter walks. With this in mind, several circular walks taking in the more scenic parts of the trail have been developed and promoted by the North Downs Way. The opportunity to upgrade appropriate sections of the North Downs Way to include cyclist and horse

riders is being considered and is supported. Two Regional routes, the Saxon Shore Way and Greensand Way also pass through the Kent Downs, and there are a number of county recreational routes.

## **Cycling**

Cycling is an environmentally sustainable means of transport and is generally a quiet activity with a low impact on the countryside. Opportunities for off-road cycling in the AONB have been developed by Sustrans, the cycling charity. Sections of two National Cycle Routes pass through the AONB, namely Route 1 from Dover to Aberdeen and Route 2 from Dover to Portsmouth. Regional Routes 16 and 17 also pass through the Downs from Dover to Canterbury taking in the North Downs Way and Elham Valley respectively. There are also a number of locally promoted cycle routes across parts of the AONB. Dedicated cycling routes to the AONB are proposed to be an effective and low impact way to link the Kent Downs with the nearby urban and growth areas.

## **Horse riding**

40% of the bridleways in Kent are in the AONB, making the Kent Downs one of the most significant areas for horse riding in Kent. It is estimated that there are 100,000 riders in Kent, 50,000 ride regularly, the number of horses is thought to be between 30 and 40,000 (source Land Use Consultants/KCC). 12% of respondents to the AONB questionnaire (KD AONB 2002) listed horse riding as an activity they undertook in the AONB. Evidence from the British Horse Society in Kent and the Public Rights of Way teams (from maintenance spend) indicate that the increasing use of bridleways is creating damage to the routes fabric.

The keeping of horses and horse riding generally is increasing, and the equine industry is recognised as making an important contribution to Kent's rural economy (estimated at £100m pa in 2002). While well managed horse pasture can contribute positively to landscape character, the impact of horse keeping on the landscape can be of concern, principally through the excessive subdivision of fields, built development, waste management, overgrazing and night lighting adversely affecting dark night skies. This has been recognised by local authorities and farmers as both an issue to address and opportunity to develop. Horse riding, like cycling and walking is increasingly difficult and dangerous on the rural roads because of the volume and speed of traffic and the bridleway network in Kent is limited; the increase in damage to the fabric indicates too limited a network.

Other opportunities for informal countryside recreation activities are generally provided on the many open access sites, picnic sites and facilities across the AONB. These include 12 Country Parks and Picnic sites, 44 Village Greens (44.9 ha) and 48 areas of Registered Common Land (442.7 ha). Access for informal recreation is also available at a number of National Trust properties concentrated on the Greensand Ridge south of Sevenoaks, parts of the White Cliffs Heritage Coast, Forestry Commission-owned woodland and sites owned and managed by Kent Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust.

## **Formal countryside recreation**

Field sports, in particular pheasant/game bird shooting and hunting take place throughout. The Kent Downs landscape lends itself to pheasant shooting and hunting with extensive areas of woodland and tree cover running along the slopes of the dry valleys and arable and mixed farm use in the valley bottoms. It is estimated that game bird shooting generates at least £10 million per annum<sup>11</sup> into the local

economy and is thought currently to be the most economically important use for Kent Downs woodlands. However, conflicts arise because of overstocking with pheasants; the woodland management carried out for game birds; the impact of the stocked bird populations on wild plant and animal communities and the landscape impact of game bird cover crops. Through a collaborative project with the Game Conservancy Trust, best practice guidance has been prepared for pheasant shooting in the Kent Downs.

Fishing is also popular although the Kent Downs AONB offers only limited scope for coarse and freshwater fishing, such as along the river and gravel pits of the Great Stour valley. Sea fishing is also popular off parts of the Heritage Coast, such as Samphire Hoe, where national competitions are held, and St Margaret's Bay.

Country motor sports are growing in popularity and are of special relevance in the AONB given that the Kent Downs (23% of Kent's land area) accommodates 53% of the Byways. The use of byways and unmetalled roads by 4x4 vehicles and motorbikes, although legal, can lead to conflicts in particular areas with other users because of disturbance, safety issues and damage to the surface of Rights of Way. There is also an increasing threat from illegal use of footpaths and bridleways by motorised vehicles. These and other recreational activities can negatively affect the tranquillity of the AONB which is a much valued component of natural beauty.

### **Access for people with restricted mobility and socially excluded groups**

The greater recognition of the needs of socially excluded groups, and legislation including the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005, are leading to enhanced efforts to meet the needs of all, including people with disabilities, people on low incomes and people without access to private transport. For people with mobility restrictions there are a growing number of promoted routes and sites and user groups are taking active and welcome steps to support wider access for all.

There are a number of sites which are fully or partially accessible in the AONB, at places as far apart as Lullingstone, Shorne Country Park and Samphire Hoe. Explore Kent, a County Council based website, provides detailed information on the public rights of way network including terrain, slope and barriers involved in Rights of Way as well as 'easy access' information.

### **Education and children**

In the twenty year lifetime of the vision for this Management Plan today's children will become the decision makers. If we are to secure a future for this precious landscape, and enjoy it today, we should be active in encouraging understanding and education especially with young people. The close proximity of substantial urban areas to the Kent Downs AONB gives a special opportunity to promote exciting and engaging activities for schools and families. Exciting projects such as the 'Sounds of the Downs' have taken an innovative approach to engaging young people.

There are many opportunities to link education activities to the national curriculum but also to strengthen the understanding, enjoyment and celebration of the AONB landscape.

### **Information and Interpretation**

At the heart of well-managed and enjoyable countryside recreation is high quality information that helps visitors plan their use of the Kent Downs, and increase the understanding and satisfaction of their experience. There are numerous forms of information currently available including:

The Kent Downs AONB newspaper, The Orchid, which is distributed widely across the AONB and its surrounding areas, contains a broad range of articles specifically about many aspects of the AONB landscape, heritage and communities. Included is a seasonal programme of events and activities from a broad range of organisations. The AONB web-site, linked to those of many different partners and organisations, including Explore Kent and the North Downs Way, with current programmes of events and activities available.

Programmes of farmer-led walks, themed guided walks, cycle rides, talks and conservation activities aimed at different age groups provided by countryside management partnerships, local authorities and other organisations. Numerous leaflets and booklets with details of recreational walking, cycling and horse riding routes and village centre maps of Rights of Way network, developed by Kent County Council.

A wealth of site based information in the form of interpretation boards, leaflets and maps.

A number of visitor centres with static displays and interactive interpretation, which provide important or potential welcome points to the wider AONB including: Shorne, Trosley, Brockhill and Lullingstone Country Parks provided by local authorities, Eurotunnel's Samphire Hoe centre, Kent Wildlife Trust's centres at Tyland Barn and Bough Beech reservoir, the National Trust's visitor centre at Langdon Cliffs, Dover, as well as extremely popular visitor centres at Chartwell and Ightham Mote. Local information such as 'Walks in Lenham' and 'Walks around Belmont' and Perry Wood provided by parish councils, local businesses or community groups, in many cases part funded by the AONB Unit.

No specific AONB visitor centres exist, although many of the existing centres do provide information about the Kent Downs.

Added to this is an extensive system of countryside management partnerships covering the whole AONB, site-based with volunteer wardens employed by the local authorities and conservation charities. Although much of their work remains uncoordinated across the AONB, a pilot project operating in the Mid Kent Downs has demonstrated how coordination can bring wider benefits to visitors, local groups, communities and businesses. The opportunity remains to develop co-ordination and links between all these services based on the successful Mid Kent Downs sustainable rural tourism pilot.

1 Page 27 – Kent Downs AONB South East Sustainable Tourism Project – Appraisal of Sustainable Visits Projects Stage 1 & 2 Report – Transport for Leisure Ltd – July 2003)

2 Page 1 – The Economic Impact of Tourism on Kent in 2003 County and District Results – Prepared by Tourism South East Research Unit – June 2005)

#### **4.10.3 Main issues and threats identified**

a Estimated day visitor numbers are high and probably increasing although precise figures are uncertain. Pressure on the components of natural beauty of the AONB as well as particular countryside routes, sites and areas can be very high but this is unevenly distributed.

b Urban and growth areas in very close proximity to the AONB will generate new pressure for access and ways to manage this, without damaging the qualities of the AONB need to be found.

c The Countryside Access Improvement Plan provides opportunities to focus on the AONB, given the special pressures for access and the national importance of the landscape.

d There is a need to identify how CRoW Act open access sites can bring wider benefits and links to education and information provision.

e Differences in requirements and uses between rightful PRoW users (horse riders, cyclists, motorbikes, 4x4s and walkers), can result in conflicts.

f Conflicts between rightful PRoW users and illegal users, fly tipping, dumping and path obstruction.

g The growth in the popularity of horse riding and off road cycling which is focused particularly on the AONB, putting pressure on the bridleway network. Need to seek opportunities to enhance, extend, connect and improve fragmented bridleway links and to secure management which does not harm the natural beauty of the AONB.

h Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005 prompt the need to be proactively aware when managing access and extend different forms of accessible provision.

i Need to support other excluded groups and non users to ensure that sustainable access to the landscapes of the Kent Downs AONB is available to all.

j Need to ensure that the PROW network is well signposted, waymarked and maintained to enable access and enjoyment across the AONB using materials and equipment appropriate in design and sustainably sourced.

k Making more of the rural road network for quiet countryside recreation by managing traffic pressures to provide quiet lane links to benefit horse riders, walkers, cyclists and local people.

l Need to increase and enhance people's understanding of the AONB, its landscape and countryside practices and to provide information in a number of formats appropriate to their setting to increase accessibility.

m Need to make the most of the opportunities for coastal access through the Marine Bill, and in particular support the enhanced management of the coastal corridor.

n Need to promote exciting and engaging education and interpretation schemes for children and young people.

#### **4.10.4 Access, enjoyment and understanding – aims**

A landscape that provides:

1 Sustainable opportunities and facilities to enable everyone to enjoy and understand the AONB countryside;

- 2 A legally defined, well maintained and promoted rights of way network that provides safe, well designed and satisfying routes for walkers, cyclists and horse riders where conflicts between rightful uses are minimised;
- 3 New routes and connections between public rights of way and a highway network which is increasingly available and safe for walkers, cyclists and horse riders;
- 4 Access where Illegal or damaging recreational activities are controlled;
- 5 Special places, events, media and appropriate support available throughout the year for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn about their environment, enjoy the AONB landscape, know they are there and celebrate its diversity and richness;
- 6 Innovative and stimulating opportunities for all people to be involved artistically and culturally and to exercise and improve their health and well being, in tranquil and inspiring surroundings.

#### **4.10.5 Access, enjoyment and understanding – policies**

AEU1 Co-ordinated information, and interpretation for recreation, access, education and understanding across the AONB which is accurate, well presented and appropriate to its setting, readily available in a variety of formats and fosters a greater understanding, knowledge and respect for the AONB will be pursued.

AEU2 Diversions and stopping up of PRowS will be resisted unless it can be demonstrated that they will not have a detrimental impact on the opportunities for access and quiet enjoyment of the landscape and historic character of the AONB.

AEU3 Investment to secure sustainable, high quality, low impact and easy access routes from the towns and growth areas to the AONB will be pursued.

AEU4 The sustainable and enhanced management and promotion of open access sites will be encouraged where it conforms with AONB policies.

AEU5 Mechanisms will be supported to resolve conflicts between rightful users of Public Rights of Way including the appropriate promotion of higher rights. Where there are irreconcilable conflicts from legal but damaging activities the use for non damaging quiet recreation will be supported above other legal activities.

AEU6 Robust mechanisms to resist and overcome illegal use and poor maintenance which harm the opportunity to explore and enjoy the AONB will be pursued where design is in accordance with the Landscape Design Handbook.

AEU7 Improvements to the Rights of Way Network to provide and improve countryside access, including waymarking, signposting and maintenance, which conforms with AONB policies and design guidance, will be supported through the Countryside Access Improvement Plan.

AEU8 Opportunities for high quality, low impact enjoyment, education, celebration and understanding of the AONB for all people will be supported.

AEU9 The establishment and management of new public rights of way, particularly for walkers, horse riders and cyclists, together with a safer and better connecting

network will be supported, where they conform to policies to conserve and enhance the AONB.

AEU10 High standards of landscape and recreational management, accessible visitor facilities and access opportunities, and increased opportunities for learning through a programme of training, events, guided walks and gateway routes and sites will be supported.

AEU11 Provision of initiatives in schools and youth groups, especially those located in the Kent Downs AONB, which encourage interest in and learning about the AONB will be supported.

AEU12 Support will be given to the management and implementation of the North Downs Way National Trail initiatives where they conform to policies to conserve and enhance the AONB.

## **5 Implementation, monitoring and review**

### **5.1 Implementation**

The vision, aims and policies of this management plan need to be translated into action. Actions to protect, conserve and enhance the Kent Downs AONB have been agreed and described in an action plan.

The Action Plan defines what is required to achieve the vision, aims and policies of the plan. Actions have a timescale, target and lead partner. An important finding from the implementation of the original plan is that the actions have not been shared; rather they have been assumed to be the sole responsibility of the AONB Unit – this was not the intention. It is therefore important that partners and stakeholders have been closely involved in the development of the action plan.

In addition the JAC is calling on all partners and stakeholders, particularly those with a duty of regard for the AONB, to incorporate the vision, aims and policies of the management plan into their work programmes.

Delivery of the Action Plan and key achievements of the AONB Unit will be published in an annual review.

### **5.2 Resourcing the management plan**

The management plan is ambitious and its achievement requires a variety of resources including new funding and the time and commitment of partners and stakeholders. The Kent Downs AONB Unit has a limited amount of financial and staff resources at its disposal, with which it will enable, facilitate, support and co-ordinate action. Its role will have increasingly to be to influence the action of others, particularly its partner organisations, to encourage the allocation of resources and time to achieve the aims of the plan.

In 2006 the Countryside Agency and local authorities signed a 6-year Memorandum of Agreement for the core funding of the AONB Unit. Included in this are activity costs to meet AONB core functions and a number of these will help to deliver ambitions of the management plan. In addition, the Kent Downs AONB Unit bids for project funding to Natural England annually, with the specific aim of matching this money with funding from partners, to carry out and achieve agreed policies and actions. Natural England project funding resources have however declined and part of the core work of the AONB Unit will be to seek to secure project funding elsewhere.

Where more substantial amounts of investment are required for projects and implementation, a number of external funding options have been harnessed. Substantial resources have been secured for the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs; including the £1m Interreg (EU funding), living landscapes project and a £2.5m Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) landscape partnership for the Medway Gap. The time required to develop, deliver and manage these projects is considerable and is an important part of the role of the AONB Unit. Many other potential sources of external funding are available, and every suitable option will be explored over the course of the five years to deliver the Management Plan.

There are a range of other resources, including staff time, commitment, expertise, advice and equipment which will play a valuable role in achieving the aims of the Management Plan. However, probably the most important resource is commitment. A

huge amount can be achieved by co-operation between various specialist staff and individuals across the AONB, who pool resources and work together to achieve the visions and policies of the Management Plan.

### **5.3 Monitoring condition**

It is an ambition that the partnership monitors the condition of the AONB. This plays an important role in identifying key issues and trends. The condition monitoring process also aims to contribute to an understanding of whether the policies and actions are achieving the aims and vision of the management plan. A set of proposed headline monitoring indicators were set when the first AONB plan was adopted and these have been reviewed as part of the review process. The Countryside Agency and now Natural England have been working to establish an agreed national set of indicators for the AONBs. The Kent Downs AONB has therefore not pursued condition indicators beyond those proposed at adoption of the plan but has used other relevant sources of information, recorded in the environment report, to inform the issues and threats identified, the aims and policies. The agreed set of national indicators will be reported in each annual review.

## Abbreviations

AIF	Area Investment Framework
AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
BHS	British Horse Society
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
BTCV	British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CAIP	Countryside Access Improvement Plan
CLA	Country Landowner and Business Association
CLG	Communities and Local Government (Department of)
CMS	Countryside Management Services
CoAg	Countryside Agency
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
CRoW Act	Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000
CSS	Countryside Stewardship Scheme
DC	District Council (also includes Borough Councils)
Defra	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
EA	Environment Agency
EH	English Heritage
ELS	Entry Level Stewardship
ESS	Environmental Stewardship Scheme
ER	Environment Report
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund (Interreg)
ET	Eurotunnel
EU	European Union
FC	Forestry Commission
GIS	Geographical Information System
GOSE	Government Office for the South East
Ha	hectare
HA	Highways Agency
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
HLS	Higher Level Stewardship
ICT	Information and communication technology
JAC	Joint Advisory Committee
KDAONB	Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
KAPC	Kent Association of Parish Councils
KCC	Kent County Council
KDU	Kent Downs Unit
KFWAG	Kent Farming, Wildlife Advisory Group
Km	kilometre
KRCC	Kent Rural Community Councils
KTA	Kent Tourism Alliance
KWT	Kent Wildlife Trust
LA	Local Authority
LAF	Local Access Forum
LBB	London Borough of Bromley
LNR	Local Nature Reserve
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
LTP	Local Transport Plan
LWS	Local Wildlife Site
M	Million
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NAAONB	National Association of AONBs

NatRECS National Route Evaluation and Classification System  
NDW North Downs Way  
NE Natural England  
NFU National Farmers Union  
NNR National Nature Reserve  
NT National Trust  
PCs Parish Councils  
PROW Public Rights of Way  
RDF Rural Delivery Framework  
RDPE Rural Development Programme for England  
RIG Regionally Important Geological/Geomorphological Site  
RLCI Rail Link Countryside Initiative  
ROWIP Rights of Way Improvement Plan  
RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
SAC Special Area for Conservation  
SAM Scheduled Ancient Monument  
SEEDA South East England Development Agency  
SEERA South East England Regional Assembly  
SPD Supplementary Planning Document  
SSSI Site of Special Scientific Interest  
TSE Tourism South East  
WHS World Heritage Site.  
WT Woodland Trust