

CABINET

14 JANUARY 2014

KENT DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Jane Chitty, Strategic Development and Economic Growth
Report from:	Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture
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Summary

This report seeks authority to adopt a revised management plan for the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This fulfils the legal duty on the Council under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000.

The management plan restates policies for the conservation and enhancement of this protected landscape, and supports the social and economic wellbeing of its communities. The policies in the plan are not land use planning policies, but rather are for the wider management of the AONB.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 The decision to adopt the AONB management plan is within the Council's policy and budget framework. The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is recognised as a statutory designation for a protected landscape in the Medway Local Plan 2003. The National Planning Policy Framework 2012 gives AONBs the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.
- 1.2 The Kent Downs AONB management plan is consistent with the aims of the Medway Sustainable Community Strategy 2010, in particular in promoting a high quality environment and achieving recognition as a destination for heritage and tourism. Its promotion of countryside access and non-car based travel has indirect links to health and transport policies.
- 1.3 The AONB management plan does not place any additional financial obligations on the Council. Therefore, this is a matter for Cabinet.

2. Background

- 2.1 AONBs are designated by Government for the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. A secondary purpose is to support the social and economic wellbeing of their communities and the needs of farming and forestry. Medway has a proportion of the Kent Downs AONB within its jurisdiction. This is located to the south of Medway around Halling and Cuxton, Nashenden and south of the M2 near Parkwood. A map of the designated area is shown in Appendix 1. It is a statutory responsibility for Local Authorities to act jointly to prepare, adopt and subsequently review Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plans. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 also requires that the management plan formulates the policies for the local authorities for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it.
- 2.2 The AONB Management Plan has the potential to improve the quality of life for Medway residents living and working in and around the Kent Downs, through the conservation and enhancement of its landscape and supporting the social and economic wellbeing of communities.

Review process

- 2.3 The Kent Downs AONB Unit produced the management plan on behalf of its member local authorities. The current AONB management plan expires in 2014, and the Unit has carried out a review to ensure that a new plan can be in place from April 2014, in line with the statutory requirements.
- 2.4 A second revision of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2009-2014 has been prepared. It is a review of the plan which has already been adopted by all relevant Local Authorities. The revision strongly reflects the original plan (2004) and its first revision (2009), but has been subject to further engagement and consultation. There has been a rigorous assessment of the plan and its policies have been reduced in number, reviewed and clarified. The plan presented for adoption is the result of extensive participation and consultation which included Medway Council. It has been redrafted and takes account of the comments made by this Council. The plan has been approved for adoption by the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) on 21 November 2013. Medway Council is a member of the JAC.
- 2.5 The plan is going forward for adoption to all local authorities with administrative areas in the Kent Downs AONB, with a mutually agreed adoption date of 14 March 2014. This comes after all Councils' considerations and will avoid the need to re-present any minor changes made during that process.

- 2.6 This is not a consultation document; there has been detailed consultation already. Any changes requested through the adoption process should be minor in nature and not materially affect the plan.

Content of management plan

- 2.7 The plan restates a vision for the Kent Downs and sets out policies that will add value to existing plans and policies. The policies address the main purposes of the designation. Consideration is given to: landscape,

biodiversity, farming, woodland and trees, historic and cultural heritage, geology and natural resources, heritage coasts, vibrant communities, sustainable development, and access, enjoyment and understanding of the AONB. The main amendments to the plan arising from the second review were:

- The plan has been shortened, its structure simplified and repetition removed.
- A clearer focus has been brought to the special qualities of, and threats to, the AONB
- The number of policies has been reduced, and care has been taken to ensure that there is a clear distinction between the wording of policies and actions.
- The plan has been checked for its consistency with the National Planning Policy Framework
- A revised sustainable development section of the plan has been introduced to reflect the NPPF and consider cross cutting issues in one place
- A new section on Heritage Coasts has been added.

2.8 A copy of the revised management plan is attached at Appendix 2.

3. Options

3.1 The Kent Downs AONB management plan, (Second Revision), is presented to members for approval to adopt. The council has a statutory duty to produce and review a management plan for the AONB.

3.2 The council could consider producing a management plan independently of the Kent Downs AONB unit, but this would have additional resource demands and potentially lose the effectiveness of a coordinated policy approach across the designated area.

4. Advice and analysis

4.1 It is considered that the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan (Second Revision) has been prepared appropriately and fulfils the requirements of the statutory obligations placed on the council under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. Natural England has confirmed that the revised plan conforms with relevant guidance, the statutory requirements and represents good practice.

4.2 The adoption of the revised management plan by April 2014 will remove risks to the council in failing to meet its statutory duties.

4.3 A Diversity Impact Assessment screening (attached at Appendix 3) has been carried out on the management plan. It was found that the plan does not favour any particular social groups and that there are no differential impacts on local communities. The management plan is focused on landscape issues and recognises diversity in promoting access for people of all ages and backgrounds in the AONB area. The Kent Downs AONB Unit also carried out an Equalities Impact Assessment as part of the plan preparation process.

4.4 The AONB management plan is based on the principles of sustainable development and promotes actions to conserve and enhance the natural resources of the AONB. The management plan has been subject to a Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment. The Kent

Downs AONB unit has also carried out an Appropriate Assessment, required to ensure that the objectives and the policies of the plan do not have a significant negative effect on sites of European importance for their wildlife.

- 4.5 The policies in the plan are not, nor are they intended to be, planning policies and it is clearly recognised that it is for Local Planning Authorities to balance the impact of any development proposal on the AONB against all of the other material planning considerations. The plan states that it does not formulate land use planning policies and confirms that it is only a component of the decision making process in planning applications. However the policies, in conjunction with relevant policies at local level, can be a material consideration.
- 4.6 It is worth noting that Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are already afforded the highest status of protection to conserve landscape and scenic beauty through the National Planning Policy Framework, 2012.

5. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Lack of adoption of revised AONB management plan	Medway Council would not meet the legal duties placed on it by the CROW Act, 2000.	Work with Kent Downs AONB Unit to ensure the plan is acceptable to the Council.	E3

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The Kent Downs AONB unit carried out a detailed engagement process in reviewing the management plan. This involved contributions from 550 individuals and organisations. This review included an eight week formal consultation period during summer/autumn 2013. The unit received 61 responses on the consultation draft. The draft management plan was considered by Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 14 August 2013, and the Council submitted comments to the consultation in September 2013. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the aims and objectives of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan.
- 6.2 As a result of consultation carried out on the draft management plan, there were no fundamental changes to the plan, but there were revisions to the layout and clarifications on content.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 The plan does not place any additional financial requirements upon the council. It is noted that there may be opportunities to attract additional investment to the area, based on the AONB designation.

8. Legal implications

- 8.1 The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan (Second Revision, 2014-19) is intended to meet the council's statutory duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) to prepare and revise a management plan for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The plan does not contain land use planning policies.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 That the Cabinet agrees the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan (Second Revision) for formal adoption on 14 March 2014.
- 9.2 That Cabinet authorises the Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development & Economic Growth, to consider and accept changes made by other local authorities during the adoption process in the unlikely event these are requested.

10. Suggested reasons for decision(s)

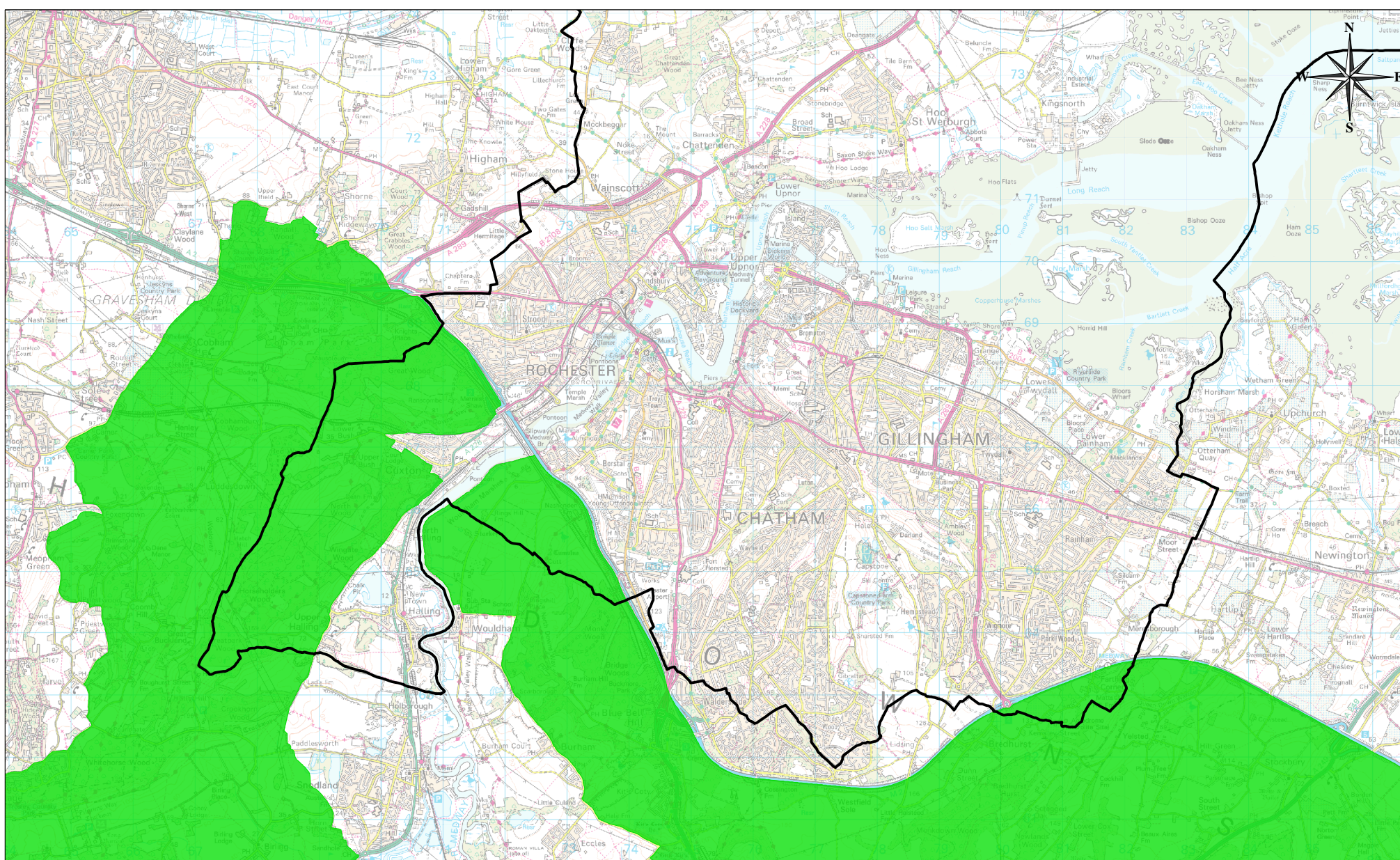
- 10.1 To fulfil the statutory requirements on the authority to produce and revise a management plan for the AONB.

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Background papers

None



Kent Downs AONB designation in Medway



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1. The Kent Downs AONB

Overview

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.

1.1 A vision for the Kent Downs AONB in 2034

In the first AONB Management Plan we agreed a 20 year vision; this 2004 vision remains fundamentally unchanged:

In 2034... 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, are valued, secured and strengthened.

The Kent Downs has become a landscape where change supports the AONB's distinctive features. Robust responses to development pressures and climate change have enhanced landscape character. The Kent Downs landscape is recognised and valued, 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 and internationally recognised and valued landscape.

1.2 Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB

1.2.1 The special characteristics and qualities

The rich landscape of the Kent Downs AONB is made up of diverse special characteristics and qualities which together distinguish it as a landscape of national and international importance and which are consistently identified and valued by the public, individuals, institutions, organisations and experts alike. The special characteristics and qualities of Kent Downs natural beauty have been identified as:

Dramatic landform and views

The Kent Downs dramatic and diverse topography is based on the underlying geology. These features comprise: impressive south-facing steep slopes (scarps) of chalk and greensand; scalloped and hidden dry valleys - these features are especially valued where they have a downland character; expansive open plateaux; broad, steep-sided river valleys, and the dramatic, iconic 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.

Biodiversity-rich habitats

Rich mosaics of habitats, plant and animal communities of national and local importance are sustained, although they may be 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 has helped create the natural beauty of the Kent Downs. The pastoral scenery is a particularly valued part of the landscape. Farming covers around 64% 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 and agri-environment schemes. 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, shooting and increasingly renewable energies are replacing and augmenting traditional farming practices.

Woodland and trees

Broadleaf and mixed woodland cover 23% of the Kent Downs and frame the upper slopes of the scarp and dry valleys and plateau tops. Some 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 since 1600), supporting nationally important woodland plant and animal species. Large areas of sweet chestnut coppice are present throughout. Woodland management is critical to secure this resource and efforts to secure new markets for woodland products are beginning to effect a resurgence in management. Tree disease and deer are now probably the greatest threats to this vital resource.

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. In the original designation the villages, churches and castles are particularly noted. 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 villages and 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.

Geology and natural resources

The imposing landform and special characteristics of the Kent Downs is underpinned by its geology. This is also the basis for the considerable natural capital and natural resources which benefit society. These include the soils which support an important farming sector and the water resources which support rivers teeming with wildlife and offering enchanting landscapes. Hidden below the chalk is a significant aquifer providing 75% of Kent's drinking water. Much of the AONB provides surprisingly tranquil and remote countryside – offering dark night skies and peace. These are much valued perceptual qualities of the AONB.

1.2.2 Quality of life characteristics and qualities

Vibrant communities

The Kent Downs is a living, working landscape shaped and managed by people. Currently there is a population estimated as 93,000 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.

Development pressures

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 – AONBs, Heritage Coasts or National Parks, has faced severe development pressure. New 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 a threat; 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 retained its character and community based projects have shown the real benefit of sustainable development approaches.

Access, enjoyment and understanding

The Kent Downs is an easily accessible and charming 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.

1.3 The public perception of the Kent Downs

In the preparation of the 2004 Management Plan and its subsequent reviews, comments and engagement have been sought from many participants including local authorities, stakeholders, local residents and visitors to the AONB. A key issue was to confirm which of the special characteristics and qualities AONB are most valued and what are the most important related issues and priorities.

The main consultation method used for the 2004 plan was a written questionnaire in the Kent Downs newspaper, The Orchid. Respondents could also complete an online questionnaire. For the Management Plan Reviews (2008 and 2013) 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 was

promoted on their and the Kent Downs AONB websites gaining much wider coverage. The questionnaire was also sent to all Orchid subscribers and parish councils. The 2002/3 consultation included mainly individuals and groups based in the Kent Downs. For the recent review in 2013, more than half of the respondents were from outside the AONB but the features valued and priorities for action are remarkably consistent.

Each time people have been asked to select the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB most important to them, they have confirmed that the special characteristics and qualities that formed the basis of the original AONB designation are still those most valued by people today.

2. The management of the Kent Downs AONB

Our vision

In 2034... the Kent Downs AONB is recognised and valued. It is a landscape cherished and held in the highest esteem by those who visit, live and work there and by those who influence its future. 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 collaboratively engaged in the partnership and management planning. The partnership is open to all opinions about the conservation and management of the AONB and is adaptive to short and long-term change such as climate change.

2.1 The Kent Downs in context

2.1.1 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Areas of Outstanding National Beauty are part of a global family of protected areas recognised and classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). 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 the 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, p. 5).

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, revised and partially replaced the AONB provisions of the 1949 Act, including a requirement that a management plan be prepared for each AONB. In the case of the Kent Downs AONB (and others covered by more than one local authority), the management plan must be prepared by the local authorities acting jointly. It must also be reviewed every five years.

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

Four common aims unite AONBs partnerships and management plans:

- Conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the UK's AONBs ensuring they meet the challenges of the future.
- Support the economic and social well-being of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty.
- Promote public understanding and enjoyment of AONB landscapes and encourage people to conserve and enhance them.
- Value, sustain and promote the benefits that AONBs provide for society including clean air and water, food and carbon storage.

2.1.2 The Kent Downs AONB

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; 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 around 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 Lympne Escarpment form the Kent Downs AONB.

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

When the Kent Downs were confirmed as an AONB, the overall remarks of the designation committee were summarised as:

"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."

2.1.3 Definition of natural beauty and landscape

The term 'natural beauty' remains at the heart of the purpose of AONB designation. Part IV of the 2000 Act provides the following definition of natural beauty:

"Any reference in this Part to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area includes a
Draft Kent Downs AONB Management Plan Text Version December 2013

reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features". Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, section 92.

The term 'natural beauty' was always intended to embrace more than just the visual or scenic elements of the landscape and the definition has been updated and broadened to include historic and cultural heritage. Government agency 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."

(Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB partnership members – Countryside Agency, CA24, November 2001)

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 on-going 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".

2.2 Management planning for AONBs

In recognition of the national and international importance of AONB landscapes the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 required relevant Local Authorities to jointly prepare, publish and subsequently review a Management Plan. It is required that the Plan formulates their policies for the management of the AONB 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.

2.2.1 The role of this management plan revision

The first statutory Kent Downs AONB Management Plan was adopted in April 2004. This is the second review. In their formal observations the Countryside Agency and subsequently Natural England recognised the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan and its first review as representing 'exemplary practice'.

This revised Management Plan is based on the original plan and its first review. It justifies and details policies and actions for 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, thus fulfilling their statutory obligations.

2.2.2 The status and role of management plan policies

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

The scope of the CRoW act was wide for AONB Management Plans requiring policies both for the management of the AONB and for the Local Authorities to carry out their many functions. 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 saying '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 or mitigate negative impacts on Kent Downs. In this plan policies have been divided into control and intent policies, both are critical to ensure the conservation and enhancement of the AONB.

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 is developed in partnership with the Joint Advisory Committee and other partners once the Management Plan has been confirmed and adopted.

The Management Plan does not formulate land use planning policies and but is a component of the decision making process in planning applications. The status of the Management Plan combined with the thorough process of plan making and review means that the AONB Management Plan and its policies are a material consideration in planning matters and should be afforded weight in decisions. The emerging draft National Planning Practice Guidance confirms this, and supports the evidence and principles established in the Management Plan being taken into account in local planning authorities' Local Plans and in neighbourhood plans.

AONB Management Plan policies will be reflected and in part implemented through policies in each Local Plan and in development management decisions. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that local planning authorities should set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development affecting landscape will be judged, reflecting the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is commensurate with their status. The principles and priorities set out in this management plan will assist the preparation of criteria-based policies for the Kent Downs AONB.

2.2.3 Who is the plan for?

First and foremost, the Management Plan and its policies belong to the AONB Local Authorities – this is the policy and action framework which will influence and help 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, land managers, individuals, countryside management organisations, and 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 advise and influence activities, decisions and the perception people have of the Kent Downs.

A Duty of Regard

The strengthened status of AONBs through the CRoW Act has brought commitments from a wide range of organisations – including those who are not directly involved in the AONB partnership. Section 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.

The Kent Downs AONB partnership has prepared a series of guidance documents, which form part of the Management Plan and inform and provide practical ways for organisations and individuals to implement their Duty of Regard.

In support of the Duty several Public Bodies and Statutory undertakers have either signed Joint Accords or have developed practical projects to deliver the conservation and enhancement of Natural Beauty on the ground. Notable amongst these are the Forestry Commission, Natural England, UK Power Networks and English Heritage.

2.2.4 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, plays a pivotal role in realising the strategic vision for the Kent Downs AONB and overseeing 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. JAC membership includes the twelve local authorities who have joint responsibility 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 (ACRK).

An Executive of JAC representatives and some outside advisors steer the work of the Kent Downs AONB Unit. At a much larger scale, a Kent Downs Forum is held at an annual 'Countryside Day' for a wider audience, to discuss current issues and to inform the agenda for the forthcoming year.

The AONB Unit is employed by Kent 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.

The objective of the JAC is to ensure that the AONB Unit is effective, efficient and authoritative, recognised and valued by partners and policy makers as a professional body delivering significant added value and enabling action on the ground. To achieve this the Unit:

- Builds knowledge in order to inform and realise the ambitions of the Management Plan.
- Provides great value to partners, providing helpful advocacy, advice and support and leading activity where appropriate.
- Carries out a timely, inclusive and authoritative review of AONB Management Plan on behalf of Local Authorities.
- Leads on the delivery of the AONB Management Plan and generates partnerships and collaboration in support.
- Builds capacity, motivation and professionalism and retains expertise and high quality staff.
- Actively seeks finance and other resources to support the delivery of the Management Plan.

In doing this the Unit retains the highest standards of business management.

Together the JAC, its Executive and the Unit form the Kent Downs AONB Partnership.

The AONB Partnership's role in planning decisions

Planning issues have a fundamental impact on the statutory purposes of AONB designation.

Until CRoW Act 2000 enactment, the statutory land use planning system was the main legal mechanism by which AONBs were protected, conserved and enhanced. The relationship between AONB management plan policies and land use planning policies is set out in 2.2.2 above.

The Kent Downs AONB partnership has agreed to take on a limited land use planning role, in summary this is to:

- Provide design guidance in partnership with AONB Local Authorities.
- Comment on forward/strategic planning issues e.g. Local Plans.
- Involvement in development control only in exceptional circumstances, e.g. in terms of scale and precedence.
- Provide planning advice/comments on development control at the request of a Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory member and /or Local Authority Planning Officers.

This Management Plan is required by the legislation to formulate the Local Authority policies for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. The planning function of Local Authorities is a critical way to conserve and enhance the Kent Downs.

Delivering in partnership and developing wider collaboration

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 Kent Downs AONB partnership is recognised nationally as one of the most effective at securing activity and resources in support of the Management Plan and its policies; this revision recognises that even greater benefit could be generated through even larger scale collaborative partnerships working across sectors and at a landscape scale.

2.3 The management of the Kent Downs AONB - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The vision, policies and actions of the AONB Management Plan are supported, promoted and delivered through strong collaborative partnerships, individual actions, strategy and policy and development management decisions.
2. The AONB partnership provides leadership and direction for the future of the AONB but is open to the views of all people, and is adaptive and flexible to change.

2.4 The management of the Kent Downs AONB - policies

MPP1 The Kent Downs AONB partnership and Management Plan will be 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, policies and actions in Local Plans, development management decisions, planning enforcement cases and in carrying out other relevant functions.

MPP3 The development of strong working partnerships and landscape scale collaborations to implement the vision, policies and actions of the AONB Management Plan will be pursued.

MPP4 Public bodies and statutory undertakers have a statutory Duty of Regard for the

purposes of the AONB: this will be pursued.

- MPP5 Collaborative working partnerships and initiatives with other Protected Landscapes will be supported.
- MPP6 The involvement of relevant interest groups, especially local communities, in decisions about the Kent Downs AONB future will be supported at a strategic level through the Management Plan and AONB Forum and at a local level through local consultations and project development.
- MPP7 The preparation and review of the Management Plan, advocacy of its policies and work in partnership to deliver the actions described will be pursued through the AONB Unit.
- MPP8 The promotion of the importance, qualities and sensitivity of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

3 Sustainable Development

Our vision

In 2034 ... the principles of sustainable development are at the heart of the management of the Kent Downs. Change reinforces and enhances the characteristics, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs, its communities and economy. While the surrounding urban areas have expanded considerably, innovative management techniques and policy approaches successfully address the pressure and opportunities presented to the AONB and its partnership.

The impacts of climate change are being felt but the mitigation and adaptive responses taken are intelligence led, effective and carefully chosen to enhance the characteristics, qualities and distinctiveness of the landscape rather than detracting from them.

Overview

Achieving sustainable development is an overarching principle for much national and international policy. The UN General Assembly defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The principles of sustainable development underpin the UK Sustainable Development Strategy and are reiterated in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). AONB management plans are an important way to help achieve sustainable development in the context of a Protected Landscape.

Sustainable development has economic, social and environmental dimensions. In the context of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, sustainability should be judged primarily against the objective of AONB designation set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This is "for the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area".

Applying this to the local circumstances of the Kent Downs, particular attention should be given to the special characteristics and qualities of the area and the reasons for designation.

These in turn help to apply the National Planning Policy Framework, which advises setting criteria based policies in Local Plans, against which proposals for any development on or affecting the AONB can be judged. The protection afforded should be commensurate with the national status of the area and give appropriate weight to the AONB's importance and the contribution it makes to wider ecological networks.

To assist this process, this management plan identifies key issues, threats, opportunities and aims, together with policies which respond to them. Strategic issues are identified in this section: over-arching 'guiding themes' arising from the purposes of designation and the need to respond to climate change, and 'recurrent themes' which arise frequently across the topics in this plan. These themes will be considered first when implementing the NPPF's criteria-based approach, before turning to specific policy areas later in the management plan. In the absence of local criteria-based policies, the intention is that this management plan's policies will provide a helpful basis for planning decisions (though the policies of the plan are more widely cast than the town and country planning system alone).

3.1 Guiding themes

Some of the sustainability issues to be addressed in the Kent Downs AONB are of a high-level,

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over-arching nature which should inform actions and decisions in the area generally. These are 'Natural beauty' (outlined in section 1.2.1), 'Local character' and 'Climate change'.

- **Local character**

Local characteristics and qualities are the triumph of the distinctive and the diverse over the uniform. Each section in this management plan explains what that means in the Kent Downs. Many aspects of local characteristics and qualities are specific to the designated area, such as the landform and landscape of the scarp and dip slope, the woodland and biodiversity which thrive on the steep scarp slopes, and access routes and farming practices which respond to them all. Many more local characteristics are distinctive to individual places or small localities, from building materials to traditional events, fruit trees to dew ponds. These provide enormous variety around different parts of the AONB, in addition to the sense of place which comes from being within the designated area. These qualities, features and experiences should not be seen in isolation but as vital components of an approach to AONB management which reveres what is locally special.

- **Climate change in the Kent Downs**

Climate change will affect the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The UK Climate Impact Programme (UKCIP 09) identifies likely impacts of a series of emission scenarios and the UK Climate Risk Assessment assesses these for a number of key landscape characteristics and qualities. Headline changes include hotter, drier summers and warmer wetter winters with greater rainfall intensity. A key issue, which generally creates more change, is the impact of greater uncertainty and extremes such as drought and flood, which are predicted to become more frequent.

The Kent Downs is vulnerable to changes in the natural environment being generally a dry and free-draining landscape, and located in one of the driest parts of the country where predicted climate change will be most strongly felt.

A 2009 pilot study carried out by Natural England for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB showed a likely 2080 climate similar to Lisbon today; if anything the impacts in the Kent Downs are predicted to be more severe. A changing climate will affect all characteristics and qualities of natural beauty in the Kent Downs and mitigation and adaptation responses can be chosen which support landscape qualities, the Cranborne Chase study provides some appropriate responses appropriate to the Kent Downs.

3.2 Recurrent themes

Some topics arise so frequently when seeking to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs that they should be understood for their strategic importance to the management of the AONB. These cross-cutting topics are usually one of a number relevant to any action or decision affecting the AONB. They are assembled here to highlight their overall importance, and should be viewed as matters to address first whenever this management plan is relevant, before turning to specific topics in each of the following sections. This does not mean that each one will necessarily be significant to every action or decision, but that their possible applicability should always be considered. On this basis, these recurrent themes are not referred to again in the policies in later sections. For instance, this means that, with the AONB setting as a recurrent theme, reference to development 'in the AONB' will also apply as appropriate 'in its setting' too.

- **Tranquillity and remoteness**

The perception of being away from the noise, sights and smells of modern life is a much valued feature of many parts of the AONB 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 reduced by 73%. As Kent's population increase, this resource will become more

important and increasingly under threat. National tranquillity mapping carried out by the CPRE has confirmed that the Kent Downs offers important areas of relative tranquillity.

A 2003 CPRE survey documents the loss of dark night skies over the last 20 years through badly designed and sited night lighting. An accepted and often valued part of country living has always been dark, star-filled skies. These qualities are increasingly difficult to enjoy in the AONB.

The importance of tranquillity has been noted in the National Planning Policy Framework which requires (paragraph 123) that planning policies and decisions should aim to 'identify and protect areas of tranquillity which have remained relatively undisturbed by noise and are prized for their recreational and amenity value for this reason'.

- **Setting**

The setting of the Kent Downs AONB is broadly speaking the land outside the designated area which is visible from the AONB and from which the AONB can be seen, but may be wider when affected by intrusive features beyond that. It is not formally defined or indicated on a map. The setting of the AONB landscape should be distinguished from the setting of listed buildings and other heritage assets (on which there is legislation and also policy in the National Planning Policy Framework and elsewhere).

Proposals which would affect the setting of the AONB are not subject to the same level of constraint as those which would affect the AONB itself. The weight to be afforded to setting issues will depend on the significance of the impact. Matters such as the size of proposals, their distance, incompatibility with their surroundings, movement, reflectivity and colour are likely to affect impact. Where the qualities of the AONB which were instrumental in reasons for its designation are affected, then the impacts should be given considerable weight in decisions. This particularly applies to views to and from the scarp of the North Downs.

The importance of the Kent Downs AONB setting has been recognised in the AONB Management Plan 2009-2014. This included policies to protect the AONB from inappropriate developments in its setting unless they could be satisfactorily mitigated. The Management Plan was adopted by all planning authorities with land in the AONB. National policy issued by Defra also explains that:

"it may sometimes be the case that the activities of certain authorities operating outside the boundaries of these areas [nationally protected landscapes] may have an impact within them. In such cases, relevant authorities will also be expected to have regard to the purposes of these areas." Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, Defra, March 2005.

Before it was abolished, the South East Regional Spatial Strategy had an AONB settings policy. The National Planning Policy Framework (2012) has no AONB settings policy. Nonetheless, partner Local Planning Authorities have been proposing, and the Secretary of State through his Inspectors accepting, that such policies remain appropriate in Local Plans. Likewise, the Secretary of State has been supporting Local Authority decisions to refuse damaging proposals in the setting of the AONB. In particular, following an inquiry, he refused a road-rail freight interchange in 2010 in the immediate setting of the Kent Downs scarp at Bearsted (the 'Kent International Gateway'), with a key reason being substantial harm to the AONB setting.

- **Design and materials**

The special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs include the quality of the built heritage and settlement patterns. To conserve and enhance the natural and scenic beauty of the Kent Downs, the scale and design of new development, re-development and restoration is critical. The NPPF focuses on the importance of design, stating that 'permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for

improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions’.

To support the statutory Duty of Regard towards the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty placed on public bodies and statutory undertakers the Kent Downs AONB Partnership has produced a series of design guidance documents:

- The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Design Handbook
- The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Rural Streets and Lanes: A Design Handbook
- The Kent Downs AONB Farmsteads Design Guidance
- Managing Land for Horses – a guide to good practice in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- A Buildings and Settlement Design Guide is planned.

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 predominance of local materials helps to establish the distinctive character of the built environment. 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. High quality modern design can draw from the past. New development should use available, sustainably sourced traditional as well as appropriate new materials and a design approach which fits neatly with and complements the valued traditions, forms and patterns of the past, while securing environmental efficiency and affordability.

- **Pressure of growth and infrastructure**

The Kent Downs AONB, probably more than any other protected landscape, is under pressure from growth, demographic change, development and infrastructure. The management plan policy framework needs to support the principles of sustainable development and reflect these challenges so that decisions (both within and outside the Kent Downs) have regard to the AONB and the benefits it offers. Significant urban areas adjoin the AONB boundary, or lie within close proximity, and most of these areas will expand in the coming twenty years.

Against this backdrop of large-scale development, there is continual pressure for small-scale development and change creating a cumulative impact on the special character and qualities of the AONB.

The Kent Downs landscape has been influenced by infrastructure development for many years. The AONB is bound by two major road routes, the M20 and M2/A2. In recent years the impact of traffic and transport infrastructure has become a significant detractor to the quality of the landscape; international traffic flows are predicted to increase. The rail network could be used to much greater extent to access the AONB, however the treatment of railway land can be out of character with AONB landscapes. Several main flight paths from London to mainland Europe pass over the Kent Downs, and the western part of the landscape is passed by aircraft descending to London Gatwick. The impact of overflying airplanes on landscape tranquillity can be significant.

Energy, water supply and fast communications are critical to the functioning of society, but their supply infrastructure can detract from landscape characteristics and qualities. In recognition of this UK Power Networks and the National Grid have joined forces with Protected Landscapes to underground power lines where there is strong environmental and public benefit, economic justification it is technically possible without detracting from statutory duties.

The generation of renewable energy is an increasing priority and several technologies can have a detracting impact on the special qualities and characteristics of the Kent Downs. The Joint

Advisory Committee has supported a renewables position statement for the Kent Downs, which considers each significant renewable energy technology, judges its effectiveness at reducing greenhouse gasses and impact on the landscape.

Fast telecommunication is necessary to support social and economic activity and where it reduces the need to travel it can have significant environmental advantage. Enabling high speed rural broadband is an important priority for Kent and the Kent Downs AONB Partnership, delivery of these services should be met in a way that does not detract from landscape character and quality.

- **Mitigation**

The National Planning Policy Framework sets out a 'mitigation hierarchy' in the following terms: "Local planning authorities should seek opportunities to achieve each of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and net gains across all three. Significant adverse impacts on any of these dimensions should be avoided and, wherever possible, alternative options which reduce or eliminate such impacts should be pursued. Where adverse impacts are unavoidable, measures to mitigate the impact should be considered. Where adequate mitigation measures are not possible, compensatory measures may be appropriate" (paragraph 152).

This management plan follows the priorities set out in the NPPF by focusing on the avoidance of damage to the characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB. However, mitigation is also important. Reducing the impacts of unavoidable change from infrastructure and growth and a growing population close to the AONB, changing land management, the needs of the AONB population and access and enjoyment, for instance, is an on-going challenge. Likewise, infrastructure and growth in the setting of the AONB can challenge the qualities of the AONB itself. Mitigation will also be needed where schemes which have benefits for the AONB also themselves have adverse effects, for example where:

- affordable housing to sustain local AONB communities is needed but must be constructed in ways which minimise impacts on their surroundings;
- infrastructure to reintroduce woodland management (with benefits including biodiversity, wood products, renewable energy, and employment) may also need road access, harm local amenities or erode tranquillity; and
- improved recreational access to enjoy the qualities of the AONB could erode those very qualities.

In addition, the AONB must play its part in appropriately mitigating the impacts of climate change, which demands responses by all sectors of local life. This should be achieved in a way which supports rather than harms the character and qualities of the AONB.

3.3 Sustainable development – main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. To conserve and enhance the natural and scenic beauty of the Kent Downs, the design of new development, re-development and restoration is critical.
- b. Cumulative loss of landscape features, tranquillity and character due to incremental development, climate change (and adaptation and mitigation responses), intensive agricultural and forestry practices, pressure from traffic and significant levels of urban growth and development.
- c. The potential for climate change mitigation and adaptation responses to detract from landscape character and the opportunity to adopt those which support it.

- d. The need to support project-based sustainable development initiatives and exemplars in the AONB and to increase the scale, integration and impact of activity and funding.
- e. Despite a significant loss and continuing pressure, the Kent Downs still provides important relatively tranquil areas; the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places a requirement on Local Planning Authorities to identify and protect tranquil areas.
- f. Fewer places have dark night skies.
- g. The setting of the Kent Downs is recognised as important in the original designation of the Kent Downs and in the enjoyment of the landscape today.
- h. The choice of design and materials in restoration, new development and landscape management are recognised as critical when seeking to conserve and enhance the landscape of the Kent Downs AONB.
- i. General development pressures, including major transport and infrastructure proposals; knock-on pressure from the Greater London area and growth areas, and the opportunity to provide positive outcomes from growth as well as effective mitigation strategies.
- j. Estimated day visitor numbers are high and probably increasing. Pressure on the characteristics and qualities of the AONB as well as particular countryside routes, sites and areas can be very high but unevenly distributed.
- k. Urban and growth areas in close proximity to the AONB will generate new opportunities for enjoyment, health and well-being but also pressure for travel and access.

3.4 Sustainable development – aims

A landscape in which:

1. AONB conservation and enhancement and sustainable development principles are the starting point of development and infrastructure plans, local policies and proposals.
2. The character and distinctiveness of villages, farmsteads and individual buildings are conserved and enhanced by combining the best traditions of the past with the best technologies of the present to create environmentally sustainable and locally enhancing development.
3. 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 ecosystem services.
4. All development achieves landscape enhancement; conservation and mitigation is delivered in every case.
5. A comparatively tranquil environment is protected, conserved and enhanced.
6. The setting and views in and out of the AONB are conserved and enhanced.
7. New developments respect and reinforce the traditions of the past, whilst integrating sustainable technologies and sensitive new design.
8. The impact of infrastructure on the qualities of the AONB is significantly reduced.

3.5 Sustainable development – policies

- SD1 The need to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB is recognised as the primary purpose of the designation and given the highest level of protection within statutory and other appropriate planning and development strategies and development control decisions.
- SD2 The local character, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs AONB will be conserved and enhanced in the design, scale, setting and materials of new development, redevelopment and infrastructure and will be pursued through the application of appropriate design guidance and position statements which form components of the AONB Management Plan.
- SD3 New development or changes to land use will be opposed where they disregard or run counter to the primary purpose of the Kent Downs AONB.
- SD4 A strategic, evidence led approach to both the adaptation to and mitigation of the impacts of climate change on the natural beauty and historic character of the Kent Downs, and its human consequences, will be pursued.
- SD5 Local renewable and sustainable energy initiatives will be pursued 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 opposed where they do not conform with the Kent Downs AONB Renewable Energy Position Statement.
- SD6 Activities to increase understanding of the importance and extent of tranquillity, remoteness and 'dark night skies' within the Kent Downs and the factors that affect them, will be supported and pursued.
- SD7 To retain and improve tranquillity, including the experience of dark skies at night, careful design and the use of new technologies should be used. New developments and highways infrastructure which negatively impact on the local tranquillity of the Kent Downs AONB will be opposed unless they can be satisfactorily mitigated.
- SD8 Proposals which negatively impact on the distinctive landform, landscape character, special characteristics and qualities, the setting and views to and from the AONB will be opposed unless they can be satisfactorily mitigated.
- SD9 The particular historic and locally distinctive character of rural settlements and buildings of the Kent Downs AONB will be maintained and strengthened. The use of locally-derived materials for restoration and conversion work will be encouraged. New developments will be expected to apply appropriate design guidance and to be complementary to local character in form, setting, scale, contribution to settlement pattern and choice of materials. This will apply to all development, including road design (pursued through the adoption and implementation of the AONB Rural Streets and Lanes Design Handbook), affordable housing, development on farm holdings (pursued through the farmstead design guidance), and rights of way signage.
- SD10 Positive measures to mitigate the negative impact of infrastructure and growth on the natural beauty and amenity of the AONB will be supported.
- SD11 Where it is decided that development will take place that will have a negative impact on the landscape character, characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB or its setting, mitigation measures appropriate to the national importance of the Kent Downs landscape will be identified, pursued, implemented and maintained. The removal or mitigation of identified landscape detractors will be pursued.
- SD 12 Transport and infrastructure schemes are expected to avoid the Kent Downs AONB as

far as practicable. Essential developments will be expected to fit unobtrusively into the landscape, respect landscape character, be mitigated by sympathetic landscape and design measures and provide environmental compensation by benefits to natural beauty elsewhere in the AONB.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

4. Landform and landscape character

Our vision

In 2034... the rich diversity of landscape character and qualities distinctive to the Kent Downs are protected, enhanced and managed to the highest standards in a co-ordinated and continual programme. The special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB are recognised, valued and strengthened and landscape character informs land management, responses to climate change and development decisions.

Overview

The fundamental and special characteristics that distinguish 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 Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment and again in the views expressed in the public and stakeholder consultation for the original AONB Management Plan and its subsequent reviews.

4.1 Landform and landscape character - special characteristics

The AONB landform underlies the area's natural beauty; it is complex and varied, but characterised by six key elements:

- **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 Vale of Holmesdale, Low Weald, the river valleys and the towns below making the setting important to the enjoyment and purposes of the AONB. 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 Medway, Thames and Swale estuaries.

- **The White Cliffs Heritage Coasts**

The chalk ridge ends at the English Channel forming the Dover White Cliffs, one of the most evocative and best known British landmarks. 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 with the bustle of ferries and shipping; overall the coast provides an awe-inspiring panorama. The expansiveness and drama is increased further by 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 Stour 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, greatly valued 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 for instance 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.

4.2 The Kent Downs landscape character areas

Landscape character

Landscape character is described as the pattern that arises from particular combinations of different landscape components such as landform, land cover and settlement and can provide a helpful description and sense of place to our surroundings. A Landscape Character approach, supported by historic landscape character assessment, can assist in informing landscape management decisions and its use is supported by the draft National Planning Policy Guidance.

The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment prepared by the Countryside Commission (1995 CCP 479) identified 13 Landscape Character Areas in the AONB. Many of these have been divided into local character areas which detail specific local characteristics and identify some of the pressures facing them. Drawing from these descriptions, the 2004 Landscape Assessment of Kent described Landscape Character Area condition and sensitivity assessments. At a local level landscape character assessments have been prepared as part of the Local Plan Process for several Kent Downs Local Authorities.

Landscape Character Assessment is a helpful tool to inform the management of the Kent Downs AONB landscape. However the Kent Landscape Group (a group of landscape practitioners and managers established through the Kent Forum's Kent Environment Strategy) has identified that the County and Local Landscape Assessments do not necessarily align and that there is a need for a review of the 2004 Landscape Assessment for Kent.

During the Management Plan review the Kent Downs AONB Unit carried out a 'field review' of several landscape character areas and considered the relevance of the existing management plan policies at a landscape character area level. This approach considers both opportunities and threats in each area. This work is on-going and will be available on the Kent Downs AONB website. Landscape Character Assessment has formed an important basis for the Landscape and Streets and Lanes Design Guides which form part of this plan.

National Character Areas

Natural England has a programme to describe National Character Areas (NCAs) which divide England into 159 distinct natural areas. Each is defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural and economic activity. Their boundaries follow natural lines in the landscape rather than administrative boundaries, making them a good decision making framework for the natural environment. The National Character Areas Profiles which cover the Kent Downs AONB include the North Downs (119), Wealden Greensand (120) and Romney Marshes (123).

Landscape condition

Landscape condition is strongly influenced by external factors which can contribute or detract from landscape character. The assessment of condition evaluates the landscape pattern and the presence of incongruous features (detractors). It also evaluates how well the landscape functions as a habitat for wildlife and the condition of cultural or 'man-made' elements such as enclosures, built elements and roads. Urban fringe areas are often under pressure and are therefore often described as being in poor condition whilst other more remote areas may still have the same basic features but be described as in a better condition. It is therefore practical to assume that condition may vary throughout a character area and any conclusions should be regarded as a summary of the overall situation.

4.3 Landform and landscape character - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Loss of and damage to the quality of views in and out of the AONB through development and occasionally obstructing tree growth and vegetation.
- b. Degradation of the setting and urban fringe impacts in certain Kent Downs landscape character areas through development, infrastructure, urbanisation and recreational pressure.
- c. The erosion of natural beauty and special character through illegal activities particularly fly tipping, abandoned cars and illegal off-road vehicles.
- d. The importance of the setting of the Kent Downs has been emphasised in policy development management decisions which provides an opportunity to work with Local Planning Authorities to develop planning policy protection for the setting of the Kent Downs and to ensure that the setting is taken into account when Local Planning Authorities determine planning applications.
- e. The opportunity to promote landscape character conservation and enhancement specifically focusing on addressing and seeking to remove or mitigate identified detractors from it.
- f. General lack of awareness of the importance and value of the Kent Downs landscape, its characteristic features and the social and economic benefits it brings.
- g. Landscape character approach not used sufficiently or appropriately in land-use, land management and development management decisions and landscape character assessments are not always consistent or up to date.

4.4 Landform and landscape character - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The diversity of landscape character across the Kent Downs is properly described and understood, 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 AONB management decisions 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 integrated into all land uses in the Kent Downs and its setting.
4. There is better understanding of which landscape features local people and visitors value and all people are encouraged to play a part in retaining and enhancing these features.

4.5 Landform and landscape character - policies

- LLC1 The protection, conservation and enhancement of special characteristics and qualities, natural beauty and landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be supported and pursued.
- LLC2 The promotion, management, restoration and appropriate creation 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 special characteristics and qualities, natural beauty and the landscape character of the AONB.
- LLC4 The detection, prevention, and prosecution of illegal and overtly damaging activities such as fly tipping, dumping of abandoned cars and non-permitted off-road vehicular use will be pursued.
- LLC5 The revision, development and use of coordinated landscape character assessments for the Kent Downs AONB will be supported and pursued.
- LLC6 The improved awareness and appreciation of all the special qualities 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 of the AONB with the greatest threats or opportunities will be supported and pursued.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

5 Biodiversity

Our vision

In 2034... the distinctive wildlife habitats of the Kent Downs are enjoyed and celebrated and are in favourable, resilient condition with individual characteristic species flourishing. There has been a net gain in biodiversity and habitats across the Kent Downs with a particular and significant increase in the extent and quality of chalk grassland in favourable management. Policy and funding regimes recognise and support the importance of biodiversity in the Kent Downs.

5.1 Overview

The unique landscapes of the Kent Downs created and contain a rich and distinctive biodiversity which contributes greatly to the natural beauty of this exceptional place, adding much of the detail which makes the Kent Downs special.

The natural 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. The 'wildwood' has been cleared and managed over the last 6,000 years. 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.

Since the last AONB management plan review the context for biodiversity conservation and enhancement has changed substantively, partly due to the failure at a national and international level to meet the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss. At the same time the potential impacts and risks of climate change are now better researched and understood, although significant uncertainty remains.

• The Natural Environment White Paper

The White Paper shifts the emphasis from piecemeal conservation action towards a more integrated, large scale approach. It contains a commitment to move to a net biodiversity gain, by supporting healthy, well-functioning ecosystems and coherent ecological networks; this strongly aligns with the Kent Downs vision.

The White Paper stresses that natural capital, such as protected areas, should be properly valued. It highlights findings from The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity study and the UK National Ecosystem Assessment that the natural environment is significant beyond its intrinsic value and that protected natural areas can yield returns much higher than the cost of protection.

• Biodiversity 2020 – The England Biodiversity Strategy

Biodiversity 2020 builds on the White Paper and directs biodiversity policy for the next decade. The mission is: "To halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people."

Biodiversity 2020 identifies a series of priority outcomes for habitats, ecosystems, species and engaging people. In Kent these support the previous activity of the Kent Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership which developed priorities for intervention and a series of defined 'Biodiversity

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Opportunity Areas (BOAs)'.

There is a clear role for AONB partnerships to deliver appropriate parts of the strategy. In particular Natural England's designation strategy challenges National Parks and AONBs to realise their potential to make a significant contribution to ecological networks and ecosystem service delivery through their management planning process (in support of outcome 1 below). Key measurable outcomes relevant to this section of the plan include:

Outcome 1: Sites, habitats & ecosystems in summary:

Work carried out by Natural England in support of Outcome 1 identifies potential targets for new habitat creation in the North Downs National Character Area (broadly similar geography to the Kent Downs) which proposes; 110 Ha of new traditional orchard, 25km of new hedgerow; 25 new ponds; 1180 Ha field margin; 30Ha new heathland; 400ha new chalk grassland.

Outcome 2: covers the marine environment

Outcome 3: Species

Species - overall improvement and no human induced extinction

Outcome 4: People – this is discussed in the access, enjoyment and understanding section of the plan.

A Local Nature Partnership for Kent

The Natural Environment White Paper created the opportunity to develop Local Nature Partnerships to further objectives for the Natural Environment. The Kent Local Nature Partnership has chosen to be an advocate for existing natural environment strategies such as the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan.

Underpinning this work, The Lawton Report 'Making Space for Nature' draws from a wide range of evidence to review England's wildlife and ecological network. The report reiterates that the natural world is fundamental to our wellbeing, health and economy and that action priorities at a landscape scale should be:

- 1st Manage existing sites better
- 2nd Make existing sites larger
- 3rd Create new sites
- 4th Enhance connectivity
- 5th Create new corridors

While much emphasis is now being placed on larger, landscape scale approaches to enhancing biodiversity, the contribution of many small-scale individual enhancements can help support this more overarching approach, indeed it is a critical component.

5.2 Biodiversity - 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 its proximity to the continent. In Britain, there are several species largely or wholly confined to the Kent Downs. 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 good numbers; for example the dormouse, the edible or Roman snail, the adder and rare arable field wild flowers along with several butterflies associated with downland. Many of these are recognised in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act as species of principle importance in England. Semi-natural habitats of particular importance in the Kent Downs are also recognised in the UK list of priority habitats targeted in Biodiversity 2020.

• 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 found in England. Although this habitat is one of the most valued features of the Kent Downs (the most important feature for 71% of respondents to an AONB questionnaire), the remaining extent of unimproved chalk grassland is less than 2% of the AONB land area (about 1500 ha or 80% of the Kent and 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.

- **Ancient woodland and chalk cliffs, foreshore and seabed platform**

These are significant special qualities and characteristics of the Kent Downs AONB which are covered in detail in separate sections of the plan.

- **Chalk streams**

Chalk streams, river corridors, flood plains and spring lines, together with ponds, dew ponds and small wetland areas are the principle wetland types in the Kent Downs. Chalk streams and ponds are frequently seasonal in nature and often host characteristic species.

- **Acid grassland and heaths**

Acid grassland and heaths on the greensand and clay plateau typically survive 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 and road verges**

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

- **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 and farmland birds.

- **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 which are special features in their own right.

- **Traditional 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 orchards of apples, pears, plums and, in the Downs, cherries with large, widely spaced trees; traditional Kentish Cobnut platts are important and distinctive, particularly in the western portion of the AONB.

Designated nature conservation sites

The most important nature conservation sites in the Kent Downs are legally protected and managed primarily for their biodiversity value. There are 38 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the Kent Downs AONB covering some 4420 Ha, of these the following sites are of international importance and are protected under the European Union's Habitats Directive as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC):

- Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment
- Wye and Crundale Downs, National Nature Reserve
- Queendown Warren, Local Nature Reserve
- Lydden and Temple Ewell, National Nature Reserve (on the AONB boundary)
- Park Gate 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.

Management of these important sites rests largely with government and public bodies, and specialist conservation organisations. 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.

Of recognised county level importance the Local Wildlife Site network is also critical in conservation of the landscape and wildlife; the importance of these sites is recognised in the Natural Environment White Paper and Lawton review. In total Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) cover some 16% of the AONB.

Despite the extent of recognised and recorded nature conservation sites in the AONB some are losing species and condition, elsewhere habitat loss and change, alien species, pests and disease are detracting from the biodiversity of the Kent Downs. Most plant and animal species depend on suitable long-term management of appropriate habitats in the wider countryside.

5.3 Biodiversity - main issues, opportunities and threats

- Habitat fragmentation, damage and loss, the opportunity to manage, extend and connect existing priority protected sites and habitats as well as create new habitat as a critical step to conserve and enhance biodiversity and generating high quality Green Infrastructure in which the Kent Downs could play a focal role.
- Lack of grazing livestock or poor returns from managing remaining areas of semi-natural grassland, and other habitats important in the Kent Downs particularly small, inaccessible or unprotected sites.
- General lack of awareness and understanding of the biodiversity resource and value of the Kent Downs and how it contributes to landscape condition, the quality of life, health and wellbeing as well as the county economy with an associated lack of funding and support for management.
- Need to provide accessible and well-managed nature conservation sites in close proximity to urban areas to provide contact with nature particularly through the designation of Local Nature Reserves.
- Need to respond to the failure to meet Biodiversity 2010 targets and the opportunity for the Kent Downs AONB to make a significant local contribution to meet Biodiversity 2020 targets.
- Need to find sustainable economic futures for key habitat products in the AONB to ensure their continued management.
- Kent Downs landscape is sensitive to gradual changes in climate and to more abrupt changes caused by extreme weather events; both are predicted. The UK Climate Change Risk Assessment identifies key risks to Kent Downs biodiversity. At the same time the ability of each habitat to sequester carbon has been identified and could be an opportunity to link habitat creation to climate change mitigation.
- The opportunity to develop significant collaborative partnerships to secure the biodiversity objectives of the plan.

5.4 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 in a way that allows characteristic species to flourish.
2. A network of well-managed, connected sites of biodiversity importance covers the Kent Downs, providing habitats for locally typical and rare species and communities and the essential building block to achieve functional ecological networks to assist with climate change adaptation.
3. More common and widespread wildlife species and populations of the wider farmed and wooded landscape flourish due to careful and sensitive management.
4. Comprehensive and easily accessible data informs and influences land management and development decisions and monitors changes to biodiversity.
5. 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.
6. Collaborative management at a landscape scale secures significant enhancement to the characteristic habitats and species of the Kent Downs as a local response to the national and international challenges to biodiversity.

5.5 Biodiversity - policies

- BD1 The maintenance and enhancement of existing designated sites and priority habitats, their extension and connection, will be pursued through sensitive management, fragmentation reduction and restoration. Creation of new habitats and habitat corridors will be pursued, informed by landscape character, through collaboration to establish functional ecological networks and high quality green infrastructure.
- BD2 Local, regional and national biodiversity targets and spatial priorities for habitats and species distinctive to the Kent Downs will be supported; a Kent Downs AONB response to Biodiversity 2020 targets will be pursued.
- BD3 Targeting of advice, grants and planning agreements to reduce fragmentation and enhance the distinctive biodiversity of the Kent Downs will be pursued.
- BD4 The collection, promotion and sharing of information on land cover, designated wildlife sites, habitats and species to assist in effective biodiversity and landscape character management and monitoring will be encouraged.
- BD5 The protection, conservation and extension of Kent Downs priority and distinctive habitats and species will be supported through the Local Plan process, development management decisions and the promotion of the Biodiversity Duty of Regard (NERC Act 2006).
- BD6 Proposals which generate markets for the products of sensitively managed UK Priority Habitats characteristic to the Kent Downs AONB will be supported.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

6. Farmed landscape

Our vision

In 2034... 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 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 as well as the landscape. Pasture is well managed by grazing and orchards, platts 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.

6.1 Overview

The Kent Downs AONB is principally a farmed landscape, with around 64% of its land classed as agricultural. Centuries of changing farming practices have shaped the landscape to create an important part of the natural beauty which 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. The farmed landscape is much valued for the access afforded along public rights of way, permissive paths and open access land.

Table 5 indicates that the Kent Downs AONB continues to be a landscape of mixed agricultural use. There has been a reduction in overall farmland area as well as a rationalisation of farming practice.

6.2 Farmed landscape - 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 the 45 years since designation, although the methods of arable farming have changed considerably within this period.

Since WWII early government policy and incentives encouraged increased food production. Modern 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 intensive 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 and climatic fluctuations

affecting both produce value and production costs. These pressures require farmers to make increasingly market led decisions and to use up to date methods to retain competitive advantage and resilience. 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 an increase in the changing nature of farm holdings in the Kent Downs. There is a move to larger 'contract' farming and cooperative farming ventures, especially on the most productive land in order to achieve economies of scale often leading to crop rotations on a whole farm rather than field scale.

When medium sized farms are absorbed into larger holdings, farmhouses and buildings can be 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 and relationship between buildings in farmsteads and immediate landscape around farm buildings is becoming more 'suburbanised'. The separation of farm holdings and farm cottages and the increasing price of housing effectively prices the agricultural labour force out of the rural housing market.

Historic farm buildings are an important cultural part of the landscape and are the category of historic building most at risk; farmstead guidance prepared in partnership with English Heritage and Kent County Council seeks to secure this important special characteristic in the Kent Downs

The farm subsidy environment is critical to the management of the Kent Downs landscape with agri-environment and cross compliance schemes potentially making an important contribution to landscape conservation.

Grazing pasture

Sheep and beef cattle play an important part in the AONB land-based economy. There has been a significant decline in livestock farming (particularly sheep which have nearly halved in number since 1990), which is important to retain the special character of the AONB. This decline has been experienced in other AONBs; the High Weald AONB has researched opportunities to redress the change (Restocking the High Weald report) – many of the proposals are applicable to the Kent Downs.

The effects of BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease and the arrival of Bluetongue in 2007 (although the UK was declared free in 2008), as well as other factors such as 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 previously grazed, falling out of use only to be ploughed up for crops, planted with trees, converted to leisure use or scrubbed over through abandonment.

Horses are an increasingly common grazing animal in the AONB. The continued growth in equine activities play an important role in the future of the AONB land-based economy and can provide a market for local farm produce for feed and bedding for instance. 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 quality 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 Kent Downs landscape character – good practice guidance has been published for the management of land for horses in the Kent Downs AONB.

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 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 more productive and labour-efficient, safer, smaller fruit trees grown in closely spaced 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 valued historic landscape. Research by Natural England found orchards are important for biodiversity, carbon storage and the local economy.

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 an increasing number of vineyards have been planted adding a new hue to the AONB scenery. A further locally distinct landscape feature is the production of cobnuts in the southeast corner of the Greensand Ridge, centred around 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 (70% nationally). There has however been a recent upturn in orchard planting including walnuts and fruits such as apricots, as well as vineyards, 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. Polytunnels can be important detractors to landscape character. The horticultural sector is a small but important component of the AONB landscape and significant to the rural economy.

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. Until 2013 such schemes have achieved significant enhancements to the landscapes of the Kent Downs.

39,699ha (45%) of the AONB (this equates to 74% of the utilisable agricultural area) is managed under agri-environment schemes, 262 agreements are in place. This includes 5,538ha of managed grassland with 487ha with public access payments. 734ha of unimproved chalk grassland and 250ha of semi improved chalk grassland.

New collaborative approaches to farming and the landscape

Research (Relu research note 38, Sept 2012) and pilots in the South Downs and Nature Improvement Areas, such as the Marlborough Downs, show the greater potential for landscape and biodiversity gain from wide collaborative management across farm holdings (clusters) rather than at a single farm holding level. This approach can address the issues of managing ecosystem services and seeking payment for them. Given future natural resource management issues and the importance of the farmed landscape to the natural beauty of the Kent Downs, a wide collaborative approach to farming and landscape could form an innovative future approach to landscape management in the Kent Downs.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones and catchment sensitive farming

Currently about half of the AONB is covered by a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ). 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. A Catchment Sensitive Farming programme operates in the Kentish Stour and Medway Catchment within the AONB. Catchment sensitive farming offers free, practical advice and

training to farmers and land managers on how to reduce diffuse water pollution from agriculture.

Farm Diversification Activity

Farms have been diversifying their businesses for many years; this provides a way to increase returns for the enterprise, stabilise incomes and utilise farm resources effectively. Farm diversification can be carried out in a way which supports the wide objectives, of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan. Equally diversification, for instance to some renewable energy technologies or intrusive leisure activities can run counter to the characteristics and qualities which are valued. The Kent Downs Farm Diversification Tool Kit provides an integrated approach to farm diversification, balancing business, planning and environmental issues when considering diversification proposals

6.3 Farmed landscape - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Need to balance a viable, resilient and competitive farming industry with the need for sensitive environmental management in a landscape of national importance.
- b. Decline in farmland area and grazing livestock industries and loss of skilled graziers.
- c. Greater volatility in agricultural commodity prices (both scale and speed) leading to uncertainty about the future direction of agriculture in the Kent Downs.
- d. 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 ending of long run Stewardship schemes.
- e. In the short term the ploughing of permanent grassland as a response to uncertainty about the future subsidy environment.
- f. Changes in landholdings and land management practice. Loss or amalgamation of medium-sized mixed farms and growth of large units with 'share' or 'contract' farming, and establishment of 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.
- g. 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.
- h. Given the relatively high proportion of grade 2 and 3 land there is a need to encourage investment in landscape character management.
- i. Farm diversification and development activities such as increased equine facilities, permitted rights afforded to farm building conversions, 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 traditional farm buildings) can have important detracting impacts as well as benefits to the characteristics, qualities, and rural economy of the Kent Downs.
- j. Increasing use of polytunnels to provide high quality, low 'food mile' soft and stone fruit and other high value produce.
- k. The need to manage adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate change, promote low carbon farming, sensitive water storage, new livestock housing or bio energy crops,

to create a positive impact on the farmed landscape.

- l. The opportunity to develop a wide collaborative approach to farmland management in the Kent Downs.
- m. Lack of public awareness of the links between farming and land-based activities, environmental issues, landscape conservation and management and the opportunity to develop local markets for products which conserve and enhance the landscape.
- n. Farm buildings are the category of historic building identified as being most at risk and the historic character of farmsteads is being lost

6.4 Farmed landscape – aims

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

1. Public subsidies support farmers who meet the objectives of the AONB. The conservation of landscape character and diversity, the restoration and enhancement of wildlife habitats, 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 mixed farming landscape is promoted in a modern collaborative context and at a landscape scale; 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 and development activities conserve and strengthen landscape character and local distinctiveness, and 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 residents and AONB visitors of the importance and fundamental role played by farming, and the connection between landscape conservation, environmentally responsible farming and high quality food are appreciated by all people.

6.5 Farmed landscape - policies

- FL1 The AONB will retain the principally farmed character for which it is valued.
- FL2 The targeting of public agricultural subsidy to make a positive, landscape scale contribution to conserving and enhancing the special characteristics, qualities and landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.
- FL3 Farming practices that improve AONB landscape character, or mitigate damaging impacts, will be supported.
- FL4 The use of integrated whole farm planning, as set out in the Kent Downs Farm Diversification Toolkit, which includes a business plan, landscape, heritage, biodiversity and habitat assessments and shows how the farm business will support the wider rural economy and AONB objectives will be pursued.
- FL5 Farm diversification activities will be supported if they help achieve the aims of the

AONB Management Plan and resisted or opposed where they run counter to the purposes of the designation.

- FL6 The production, supply and marketing of AONB 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.
- FL8 Proposals for polytunnels will be assessed for their impact on the AONB landscape, including by reference to their siting and mitigation. Proposals for polytunnels should be justified by an integrated whole farm plan. Best practice guidance for the use and landscaping of polytunnels will be pursued.
- FL9 Where farming practices run counter to the special characteristics and qualities of natural beauty and landscape character of the AONB they will be resisted where these are subject to control.
- FL10 A collaborative, 'cluster farm' approach to achieving the farmed landscape objectives of the AONB will be pursued.
- FL11 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, well-being, nature conservation, the historic environment, landscape and a buoyant rural economy.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

7. Woodland and trees

Our vision

In 2034... the Kent Downs network of woodland and trees is greater in extent and is conserved and enhanced for its landscape, wildlife and historic value. Diverse and sustainably managed woodlands and trees are resilient to climate change and provide inherent mitigation to that change. The woodlands supply buoyant local markets for timber, coppice products and wood fuel, and high quality multi-functional management provides well-used places for leisure and recreation which are rich in characteristic wildlife.

Overview

The Kent Downs AONB is one of Britain's most wooded landscapes. Woodland covers around 23% of the AONB and is the second largest land-use after farming.

Woodlands and trees are a vital part of the Kent Downs' natural beauty, 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. Individual, fine and ancient field trees are an important, characteristic and sometimes dramatic element of the landscape.

7.1 Woodland and trees - special characteristics

Almost 70% (12,129 ha) of the Kent Downs woodland resource is ancient woodland (continuously present since at least 1600). The Kent Downs' ancient woodland is nationally important representing (3.3%) of the total resource of England and Wales (Natural England, Ancient Woodland (England) Inventory 07/03/2013).

Ancient woodland is irreplaceable and is valued for its cultural, landscape and biodiversity importance and the products it supplies. 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 – 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. Much of the valued woodland wildlife, 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 Kent Downs has a significant area of plantation on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) (3,606ha or 30% of the ancient woodland resource); areas of ancient woodland where non-native species have been planted, generally in the 20th century. The careful, gradual restoration of PAWS sites is a national priority for woodland management, and the draft National Planning Practice Guidance proposes that local planning authorities should pay more attention to development threats to it.

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 comprises small, fragmented sites in disparate ownership, a situation exacerbated by the increase of wood lotting (breaking up woods into multiple small ownerships). Wood lotting research in Kent has found some negative impacts. More often woodland management is absent and the ability to manage woodlands as a whole can be compromised. However, new owners are often motivated to improve and understand woodland wildlife and heritage.

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). Lowland beech yew woodland is particularly distinctive in the Kent Downs and is of European importance.

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.

Ash is a particularly prominent tree in the Kent Downs AONB. Both in the woodlands and hedgerows ash forms a prominent and important part of the landscape. Kent Downs woodlands were one of the first areas in Britain to experience widespread infection from Ash Dieback (*Chalara fraxinea*) and the landscape implications are thought to be serious with the expected death and weakening of the ash population – the Kent Downs has been identified as an Important Ash Area by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). Ash Dieback is only one of many tree diseases and pests which are expected to affect the Kent Downs landscape.

A significant feature 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 fencing and hop poles. Latterly, as these industries declined, chestnut coppice went for hardwood pulp at the nearby paper mills in 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 high value fencing and more recently for the supply of wood chip for heat. Like ash, sweet chestnut is facing several diseases which may seriously affect its productivity and viability in the Kent Downs.

The continuation of coppicing is important 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. Many ancient woodland animal and plant species require coppice management which cyclically opens up the woodland floor to light. Coppice creates edges and mosaics of high canopy with taller and shorter coppice stands, providing a diversity of ecosystems within the woodland habitat. Establishing coppicing is difficult where deer populations are high because re-growth can be browsed off. It has been noted that deer populations in Kent woodlands are growing (The Deer Initiative); it is important to maintain deer numbers at a level that does not prejudice the re-establishment of coppicing.

In Kent, Sussex and Surrey there remains a coppice industry which, although small and threatened, is showing signs of resurgence and could provide a basis from which to return the coppice woodland of the Kent Downs to rotational management and thus continue a management tradition with origins in the Neolithic period.

The Kent Downs landform and landscape character makes its woodlands particularly suitable for shooting, particularly pheasant shooting which is thought to be one of the most important economic drivers for woodland management.

Climate change puts a special focus on the woodlands of the Kent Downs. The Forestry Commission has identified a series of key impacts which include declining tree health and limited mortality, changes to ground flora, loss of drought sensitive species particularly on shallow soils, damage from extreme events and the likelihood that forests and woodland are likely to be increasingly seen as a cool shady refuge for healthy exercise, whilst public access to forests may be interrupted by closures due to storm damage, and roads and paths being washed away.

The Woodland Trust report 'Adapt or Die' suggests that beech will no longer be viable in the Kent Downs by as soon as 2050 if the high carbon emissions scenario is followed. Forestry Commission research indicates 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 these changes. However the relatively single species nature of many chestnut woodlands makes them potentially less resilient to the predicted impacts of climate change and disease. At the same time wood chips from coppice woodland could provide a significant resource of low carbon energy for heating and power. The Kent Downs AONB Wood Fuel Pathfinder Project has identified the most appropriate routes to secure sustainable woodland management to supply wood chip for heat.

The woodlands of the Kent Downs AONB are much valued, for their landscape, wildlife and the recreation and access opportunities they afford; the public reaction to the proposed review of the Forestry Commission Estate showed more widely the general importance attached to woodland. The Kent Downs AONB contains large areas of Forestry Commission land (1,560ha) and public usage is high. There are several examples of community owned and managed woodlands in the Kent Downs and this enthusiasm is an important opportunity for the future sustainable management of the woodlands and trees of the AONB.

The strategic background

This Plan acknowledges and supports the English Forestry Strategy, the UK Forestry Standard which sets out criteria and standards for the sustainable management of all forests, and the Joint National Accord between the Forestry Commission and the National Association of AONBs which demonstrates the Forestry Commissions' commitment to deliver their strategy within protected landscapes. Forest Design Plans, produced by the Forestry Commission, set out management proposals for the next thirty years for the woodlands they look after. They aim to fulfil a number of objectives:

- Provide descriptions of the woods as they are now
- Show the process the Forestry Commission goes through when deciding what is best for the woods in the long term
- Show how the woods should develop over the 30 years
- Show tree felling and re-establishment in detail for 10 years and in outline for the succeeding 20 years.

The West Wood and Clowes Wood Forest Design Plans have been approved by the Forestry Commission.

In July 2012 the Independent Panel on Forestry published a vision, aspirations and recommendations for the future of forestry. Much of these were accepted in the Government's response which particularly noted the need to protect trees, woods and forests, improve valuable woodland assets, expand the woodland resource and realise more value from our woodlands. These ambitions support the aims for woodlands and trees in the Kent Downs AONB.

7.2 Woodland and trees - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Need to establish new and retain existing markets to regenerate sustainable woodland management to support 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. Restocking on woodland sites, woodland creation and tree planting – need to use a diverse range of appropriate species of local provenance if available. In many situations, natural regeneration should be encouraged and current best practice should be adhered to. (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 put a special focus on Kent Downs woodlands for both adaptation and mitigation responses; the resilience of woodlands and trees is a key consideration. The Renewable Heat Incentive provides an important financial stimulus for woodland management which is expected to gain momentum in the plan period.
- e. The diversity of type and motivation of wood owners and the rapidly changing woodland context means there is a need for consistent intervention and advice to sustain good woodland management.
- f. The emphasis on multi-purpose woodland use brings challenges for owners and managers where recreation, biodiversity and landscape management are unlikely to bring commercial returns.
- g. Intensive agriculture, infrastructure and building developments have led to the loss of woodland and transitional habitats around woods.
- h. Pheasant and other game bird shooting can cause a loss of biodiversity and landscape value but can also generate sustainable woodland management.
- i. Need to take a strategic approach and propose long term management solutions to minimise biodiversity loss, to promote woodland regeneration and to limit the long term impact of disease and deer population growth in Kent Downs woodlands.
- j. Need to consider and monitor the potential re-emergence of commercial conifer plantations in the AONB following market improvements.
- k. Need to support the use of the UK Forestry Standard and certification for woodland products in a way which does not limit opportunities to expand sustainable woodland management.
- l. Need for the restoration and management of open space in woodlands, particularly woodland rides and glades.
- m. Insufficient understanding of the value, condition and location of 'veteran' trees, specimen trees and standing /lying deadwood in woodlands and parkland – for landscape, biodiversity, cultural and historic reasons.
- n. The need to harness the popular value of woodlands to improve understanding, engage new management arrangements and wider community and individual involvement.
- o. The opportunity to act strategically and collaboratively to master plan woodland management and where appropriate creation in the Kent Downs to meet the multiple objectives of the AONB Management Plan.
- p. The historic features contained in woodlands can often be overlooked, there is a need to ensure that they are conserved and protected during woodland management operations.
- q. The need to continue to promote and secure the restoration of PAWS sites through guidance and management support.

7.3 Woodland and trees - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The irreplaceable fine tree and ancient woodland characteristics and qualities, cultural heritage and landscape character is conserved, restored and managed.
2. The sustainable management of woodlands provides recreation and education, timber, a source of renewable energy, a wildlife habitat and mitigates the impacts of climate change.
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, engagement 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.
7. A collaborative management approach to the woodlands of the Kent Downs seeks to achieve the objectives of the plan.

7.4 Woodland and trees - policies

- WT1 Threats to the existing extent of woodland and transitional habitats around woodland will be resisted. Extension of both habitat types will be supported where appropriate to landscape character. The loss of ancient woodland will be opposed.
- WT2 A strategic approach will be pursued to secure sustainable multipurpose woodland and tree management and planting that conserves and enhances the special qualities and character of the landscape and the resilience of woodlands and trees.
- WT3 The managed, gradual conversion of plantations on semi-natural ancient woodland to deciduous woodland will be supported where locally distinct woodland types and tree species and local provenance tree stock or natural regeneration are used. New non-native plantations will be resisted.
- WT4 Training, accreditation and wider understanding of woodland management to woodland owners and workers, local people and visitors will be encouraged and supported.
- WT5 The restoration and management of woodland open habitats and spaces, such as rides, glades, and wood pasture, for landscape, biodiversity and archaeology conservation purposes will be supported.
- WT6 The identification, protection, management and planned replacement and reintroduction of fine specimen and 'veteran' trees will be pursued.
- WT7 Activities and developments causing damage to woodlands, such as disease, illegal and harmful recreation, an expanding deer population, poorly managed use for game rearing and development associated with wood lotting, will be addressed by appropriate means. Inappropriate developments subject to planning control will be opposed, other available regulatory mechanisms supported, and positive, strategic management interventions pursued.

- WT8 In response to pressures on woodlands and the positive motivations of many new woodland owners, co-ordinated actions and the development and promotion of guidance and support which integrates sound landscape, heritage and biodiversity management will be pursued.
- WT9 New markets for sustainably produced, appropriately certified woodland products, particularly wood fuels and construction materials, will be pursued and marketing initiatives supported.
- WT10 Research to understand the ownership patterns and motivations of woodland owners will be encouraged to support a master planning approach to the conservation and enhancement of the woodlands and trees of the Kent Downs.
- WT11 The identification and review of ancient woodlands using up to date methodology will be supported.

* Policy WT3 may be amended only on the basis of sound evidence to reflect the possibility that non-native tree stock of native species could be more resilient to climate change impacts.

8 Historic and cultural heritage

Our vision

In 2034... the rich heritage of historic landscape, 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 and significance. 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.

8.1 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 has been left to us. While the landform and geology underlies its beauty, the Kent Downs AONB is very much a human landscape.

8.2 Historic and cultural heritage - 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 structures which include Kit's Coty, Little Kit's Coty and the Coldrum Stones. There are also earthen long barrows, particularly in the Medway and Stour Valleys. Bronze Age round barrows are dotted across the landscape and the Iron Age saw the development of 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. Indeed throughout history Kent has been a communications corridor with mainland Europe and this role has left an indelible print on the landscape expressed in routeways and castles.

The increasing sophistication and landscape impact of agriculture is recorded in the lynchets found throughout the Kent Downs. There is evidence that Roman and Iron Age field 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 commons or 'minnises' of the high clay caps of the Kent Downs are believed to have been established by the Anglo-Saxon or early medieval period and form distinctive open areas of rough grass, bracken, or sometimes heather and gorse. Many have now been enclosed but open minnises most notably Ewell Minnis near Dover and Stelling Minnis remain as important remnants of previously more widespread landscape features.

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 for example 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 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. 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, the multitude of smaller cultural and historic features also help 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, now often byways, 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.

There is still much to discover, for example, the Kent Downs continually reveals archaeological surprises, often of national importance.

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

'Every place, like every person, has its distinctive character, in large measure determined by its inherited features such as streets, hedges, archaeological sites, buildings or place names. Understanding this character is one of the starting points for deciding a place's future, the first step in working out how places can be made better in the future' (English Heritage).

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 influential to 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. 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. In urban centres just outside the Kent Downs the arts are at the heart of regeneration efforts; the Arts Council England's Strategy 'Achieving Great Art for Everyone' recognises the role for the arts as a 'focus of urban and rural regeneration, bringing renewed vitality to neighbourhoods, cities and regions across England' and seeks to balance focus for the arts between urban and rural areas.

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.

8.3 Historic and cultural heritage - main issues, opportunities and threats identified

- a. The need to increase understanding, engagement, awareness of, and inspiration from, the historic, artistic, built and cultural heritage; and to encourage greater opportunities for the historic heritage to inform contemporary decisions, landscape management, regeneration and place making.
- b. The need to conserve and protect the historic environment, both above and below ground. Issues include the effect of deep ploughing, the introduction of (deep rooting)

energy crops and arable conversion on sites containing buried archaeological remains, heritage crime, and development affecting or in the setting of historic buildings.

- c. Recognition and reinforcement of special historic landscape character and the local distinctiveness of settlements, farmsteads, ancient routeways, buildings and design in the Kent Downs landscape through the statutory planning process as well as in, detailed historic characterisation, Neighbourhood Plans, Village Design Statements and Conservation Area Appraisals.
- d. Dearth of skills and local sustainably sourced materials for historic building conservation.
- e. The recognition that this plan period will witness both the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War and the passing of many of the generation involved in the Second World War, both of which have a particular resonance for the Kent Downs AONB.
- f. The opportunity to work collaboratively with the Arts Council, Heritage Lottery Fund and cultural regeneration programmes in Kent to secure new artistic and cultural activity to celebrate the landscape of the Kent Downs and support rural and urban regeneration.

8.4 Historic and cultural heritage - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The principal special characteristics and qualities of the historic character of the Kent Downs landscape, the sites and features, field and settlement patterns, villages, hedgerows, routeways, woodlands and parklands are recognised, valued, conserved and enhanced.
2. The economic and 'quality of life' benefit of living and working in an historically-rich, artistically and culturally inspiring environment is recognised and actively supported.
3. New developments respect and reinforce the traditions of the past, whilst integrating sustainable technologies and sensitive new design.
4. The landscape context and setting of all historic buildings, features and settlements is protected, conserved and enhanced.
5. Restoration and conversion of the built heritage reflect local character and will meet high environmental standards, using sustainably sourced, locally derived materials and skilled workers.
6. Communities are engaged and involved in the historic environment of the Kent Downs through methods such as conservation area management planning, village design, neighbourhood planning, place making and interpretation.
7. Vibrant and contemporary artistic and cultural celebration of the Kent Downs supports the conservation, enjoyment, understanding and enhancement of the landscape.

8.5 Historic and cultural heritage - policies

HCH1 The protection, conservation and enhancement of the historic character and features of the Kent Downs landscape will be pursued and heritage-led economic activity encouraged.

HCH2 A wider understanding of the cultural, scientific and artistic importance of the Kent Downs landscape and its historic character will be supported in part to inform the

interpretation and management of the AONB.

- HCH3 The preparation and use of best practice guidance for adapting the historic and cultural environment to climate change will be supported.
- HCH4 Opportunities to develop contemporary artistic, historic, cultural and scientific interpretation and celebration of the landscape and people of the Kent Downs will be pursued.
- HCH5 The application of high standards of design sympathetic to cultural heritage within the AONB, identified in guidance including the AONB Landscape Design Handbook, Kent Downs Farmstead Guidance and any relevant Village Design Statements and Neighbourhood Plans, will be pursued.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

9. The Heritage Coasts

Our vision

In 2034... the special place that the White Cliffs of Dover have in the hearts and minds of millions of people is justified by the reality experienced on the ground. A new focus and collaborative effort has transformed the management of the coasts which is now more integrated and effective, meeting the needs of the landscape and natural environment and communities, while supporting the sustainable regeneration of the coastal towns.

9.1 Overview

The magnificent chalk cliffs between Folkestone and Kingsdown form one of Britain's most evocative and best known landmarks. For many they are the first sight of Britain while views to France hold a special appeal; the Dover Strait is one of the world's most important, recognised and busiest seascapes.

Behind the rearing cliffs is a landscape of windswept coastal chalk downs, with areas of salt-wind sculpted scrub, open downland, and arable farming punctuated by the remnants of thousands of years of exchange and conflict. The Heritage Coasts are one of the few places in south east England which offer a feeling of wilderness. The ever changing chalk cliffs, foreshore and seabed platform are home to 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 geology and landform of the coast is internationally important with the cliffs being home to many rare birds, plants and invertebrates.

This extraordinary natural and cultural resource can strongly assist the regeneration of Dover and Folkestone, and has been identified as the basis to secure World Heritage Site status for the Dover Strait. Equally this part of the AONB is particularly sensitive and is facing continual challenge, from the impacts of climate change, discordant coastal development, general development and recreation pressure.

- The Heritage Coasts

England's 32 Heritage Coasts have been identified for the conservation and enhancement of their natural beauty, their terrestrial and marine flora and fauna, and heritage features. They also have objectives to:

- facilitate and enhance the public's enjoyment
- maintain and improve the quality of inshore waters and beaches.

In delivering these objectives account must be taken of the needs of land management activities and local communities.

Natural England's Designation Strategy promotes AONB management plans incorporating policies for the management of Heritage Coasts at a strategic level.

The White Cliffs Countryside Partnership (WCCP) has a Heritage Coast management function as part of its purpose and in this plan's period of operation a Landscape Partnership "Up on the Downs", funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and local partners will operate; both can be important vehicles for managing the Coast.

9.2 The Heritage Coasts - special characteristics

The Heritage Coasts either side of Dover, include the shoreline, cliffs and adjacent downland. The White Cliffs form part of our national identity; forming a soaring landscape with a seascape of vast horizons of sea and sky extending westwards to the subtle crumbling Greensand and Clay cliffs of Folkestone.

The Heritage Coast's wildlife is internationally important, the clifftops consisting of nationally important chalk grassland and scrub, the cliff-faces supporting important breeding sea bird colonies including Fulmars, Rock Pipits, Lesser-black backed Gulls and the only Kent population of Kittiwakes. Seabirds wheeling high in the sky connect the sea, and sky.

The cliffs and grassland contain rare plants such as Hoary and Sea Stock, Rock Sea-Lavender, Sea Heath and Wild Cabbage. Most of the area is notified as SSSI, not just for the rich communities of birds, wildflowers but also seaweeds and particularly for the invertebrates. Proposed Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) have been identified off the Heritage Coasts. MCZs will protect areas of nationally rare, threatened or especially representative habitats and species. The Heritage Coasts are a vital landing point for migrating birds and insects and are home to many rare species. The proximity to mainland Europe places the Heritage Coasts in a key position as species migrate in response to climate change.

The predicted impacts of climate change, including sea level rise and the greater frequency and intensity of storms, is expected to have a significant effect on the Heritage Coast, making adaptation strategies, particularly, an important priority for the future management of the coast.

Defence and invasion is one of the themes of the Heritage Coast and forms an important reference in the cultural landscape. Features include the magnificent Dover Castle described as 'the key to England', Napoleonic Martello towers, the 'listening ears' built between the wars and superseded by radar installations some of which are now listed. World War II frontline fortifications, defences and anti-tank devices along the whole coast are exemplified again at Dover Castle. Following evacuation from Dunkirk the cliffs formed a welcoming sight for many thousands of troops.

Communication and cultural exchange are important themes. In 1899 the first international wireless transmission was sent from Wimereux, France to South Foreland lighthouse. Cross channel trade and cultural exchange continues apace – the Strait of Dover being one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. The close proximity of Dover Harbour and views of the Strait's central shipping channel means ferries and large cargo vessels are frequent features.

Arising both from conflict and seagoing transport there is an extraordinary and outstanding collection of wrecks comprising both air and water craft, including the Dover Boat, the oldest sea-going boat in the world. Another example is the protected wreck of the Langdon Bay (English Heritage), located on the edge of Dover Harbour. It is thought to be the remains of a Middle Bronze Age vessel carrying a scrap metal cargo from France to Britain, indicating early cross-channel trade.

Navigation marks are often conspicuous in the landscape for example the National Trust-managed South Foreland lighthouse, which stands 21 metres high on the headland, and a white windmill (near to the lighthouse).

The geological exposures of the cliffs form an internationally important stratigraphic reference site for extensive and near-continuous exposures of Lower, Middle and Upper Chalk, historically important for their contribution to the sciences of geology and coastal geomorphology and are all designated as SSSI. The Chalk cliffs and to the west Gault Clay are rich in fossils. On the seashore at Copt Point the exposed Greensand forms a series of rock pools with important seaweed colonies. The Greensand was also the home of an active quern

stone (corn grinding) industry dating to the first century BC.

The Heritage Coasts are a popular area for recreation; the cliff tops are crossed by the Saxon Shore Way Long Distance Path and North Downs Way National Trail. The route of the new National Coastal Path will soon be defined along this section of coast and there are several areas of open access land and visitor attractions such as the Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel le Ferne. Several areas offer panoramic views across to France and views of the bustling Ferry port and shipping lanes. Access to the base of the cliffs can be dangerous but where available provides a real feeling of wildness. Both the Folkestone Warren and Samphire Hoe offer access below the cliffs in a more managed setting.

Where there is an absence of settlement or transport infrastructure there is a strong relative sense of tranquillity, with exposure to the elements being a key feature.

Much of the Dover-Kingsdown Heritage Coast is managed by the National Trust; this provides a strong framework for the landscape's conservation and enhancement. Ownership of the Dover-Folkestone Heritage Coast is more complex and, while the White Cliffs Countryside Partnership actively manages key sites at Samphire Hoe and Folkestone Warren, overall there is a less cohesive overarching approach or focus.

Seascape assessment of the Strait of Dover

The description of seascape character, like landscape character describes what is distinctive, special and characteristic in an area of sea (and land in coastal areas). Seascape character assessment is a tool and spatial framework to help integrate management decisions. In a pilot seascape assessment carried out in 2012 the Dover Strait was described as 'a cohesive seascape unified by geology, socio-economic functions, biodiversity, history and culture, and indivisibility'. A full assessment of the Strait of Dover is expected to be prepared during the plan period; the pilot assessment is available from the Kent Downs AONB website.

Marine Management Planning

The Marine Management Organisation describes marine planning as 'a new approach to the management of our seas'. The aim is to ensure a sustainable future for our coastal and offshore waters through managing and balancing the many activities, resources and assets in our marine environment.

Marine planning is following a similar approach to terrestrial planning – setting the direction for decision making at a local level to lead to efficient and sustainable use of our marine resources.' The Marine Management Organisation is responsible for Marine Plan Making and will complete a Marine Plan for a section of the Dover Folkestone Heritage Coast area during the plan period.

9.3 The Heritage Coasts - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Cultivation and coastal erosion have reduced the botanically-rich chalk grassland on the cliff tops to a narrow strip, making management difficult and placing the habitat at risk.
- b. High visitor pressure, particularly at the Dover to Kingsdown Heritage Coast and Folkestone Warren threatens to degrade important habitats and reduce the valued sense of tranquillity.
- c. Arable agriculture can sit uncomfortably with the natural beauty and wild scenery of the cliff tops, a significant opportunity remains further to expand the valued semi natural coastal grassland.
- d. Discordant development, for instance caravan parks, visitor resources, and unsympathetic screening attempts.
- e. The enthusiasm for the area brings an opportunity to act collaboratively to address the

lack of coordinated management where this exists outside areas of 'protective ownership'.

- f. Major development pressures and previous developments now falling into disrepair or are prone to marine erosion.
- g. The need to increase understanding of the dynamic nature of the coast, accelerating coastal processes and the potential impacts of climate change.
- h. Widespread inappropriate, antisocial and illegal activities, such as off-roading vehicles, extensive wild camping, fly-tipping and vandalism in parts of the Heritage Coasts.
- i. The safety and interpretation of remaining military and historic structures, particularly from the Second World War.
- j. The very high quality, iconic natural environment can be an important component of a package to regenerate the coastal towns of Dover and Folkestone, but the Heritage Coasts are in themselves extremely sensitive to development and visitor pressure.
- k. Marine litter and air pollution are significant detractors from the qualities of the Heritage Coast.
- l. The opportunity identified and supported by Kent County Council and the Pas-de-Calais Department to achieve World Heritage Site status for the Strait of Dover.
- m. Proposed Marine Conservation Zones (yet to be designated), while primarily protecting wildlife could also be managed to have a positive impact on fisheries, thereby avoiding unnecessary disruption to livelihoods.
- n. The Heritage Coasts are much loved, iconic national landscapes with partnerships in place to support their management.

9.4 The Heritage Coasts - aims

A landscape in which:

1. A wide collaborative approach achieves management of, respect and international recognition for the Heritage Coasts which reflects the extremely high national esteem in which they are held.
2. The extreme importance and sensitivity of the Heritage Coasts are recognised publicly, through appropriate international status and in policy and development management decisions.
3. The importance and value placed on these iconic landscapes delivers resources and partnerships to ensure their management supporting the regeneration of the nearby coastal towns.

9.5 The Heritage Coasts - policies

- HC1 Coastal defence policies, allowing, where practicable, a naturally functioning coastline will be supported.
- HC2 The opportunity to support economic regeneration through the sustainable and integrated management of the Heritage Coast in accordance with its defined purpose will be supported.
- HC3 Threats to the qualities and character of the Heritage Coast will be resisted and

managed.

- HC4 A collaborative approach, such as that employed by the WCCP and the Up on the Downs Landscape Partnership, will be pursued to secure the objectives for Heritage Coast management and address the specific threats and opportunities identified.
- HC5 Achieving World Heritage Site status or other appropriate international recognition for the Strait of Dover will be pursued.
- HC6 The conservation and enhancement of the special characteristics of the Heritage Coasts and Strait of Dover will be pursued through influencing the Marine Plan making process – and the development of new Heritage Coast Management Plans.
- HC7 The New National Coastal Trail will be managed in partnership to meet National Trail standards. The conservation and enhancement of the landscape of the corridor of the National Coastal Trail in the Heritage Coasts will be pursued.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

10 Geology and natural resources

Our vision

In 2034... great care is taken to conserve and manage the natural resources of the environment particularly soil, ground and river water. New and innovative ways to reduce resource use have been adopted which support landscape character and the economy. Important areas of tranquillity have been identified, protected and expanded and provide 'oases of calm'. The need to conserve and enhance natural beauty means mineral resource winning occurs away from the AONB, except in exceptional circumstances, and worked out quarry sites have been restored to enhance local landscape character.

10.1 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 environment. Kent Downs natural resources provide vital ecosystem services to the population of Kent and beyond. With significant changes predicted in the natural environment along with substantial new demands placed on our natural resources, positive action and management is an important priority for the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs.

10.2 Geology and natural resources - special characteristics

• Geology

The Kent Downs are valued as a place of spectacular views, changing scenery and landscape diversity. 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 they support.

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 the exposures are of international significance. Where they are not statutorily designated, some sites have been selected as Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) which are sometimes referred to as Local Geological Sites.

Some 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 geology of the Kent Downs means that mineral winning has been a long run activity, particularly on the northern edge of the Greensand.

• Soil

Soil is an irreplaceable and often overlooked natural resource. It is a key determinant of the AONB's natural vegetation and is fundamental to all land uses. In semi-natural habitats, an undisturbed soil structure is a vital ecosystem component. On cultivated land, careful soil management is a primary principle of good farming but overall soil quality has been declining at a UK level. Soil erosion can occur on ploughed steeper slopes of the AONB, the soil eventually being washed into adjacent watercourses – adding to the flooding risk.

Pollution or contamination of soil can occur through pesticide and other chemical misuse, which

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can accumulate over time, and can leach into surface and groundwater supplies. Soil husbandry is increasingly understood to be important for carbon management. The UK Climate Risk Assessment has identified that drier summers leading to increased soil moisture deficits may result in the increased release of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane. Heavy rainfall, especially following a dry period, may increase soil erosion.

• **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 (e.g. Postling, Hollingbourne and Underriver). These springs flow into the main river catchments, flowing out of and sometimes through the AONB.

Within the Chalk and Greensand domes, clean percolated water forms the groundwater aquifer, which provides 75% of Kent's drinking water. Water availability is one of the biggest issues facing the UK water sector with pressures on availability already evident, especially in southern and eastern England. The quality and quantity of the ground water aquifer and the surface river water is determined in no small part by landscape management and other activities. The quantity of groundwater and surface water is becoming a more critical issue as Kent is set to accommodate significant population growth 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 effect on Kent's potable water supply, but also may impact on the AONB's physical and ecological character over time.

Water supply is at the forefront of issues being addressed by water companies through Water Resource Management Planning. There is an emerging potential coherence of interests between the needs of sustainable landscape management and water resource management.

The Government is promoting locally focussed decision making and action at the heart of the debate about the future direction of improvements to the water environment. The Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) aims to generate more effective stakeholder engagement in order to tackle environmental problems at a more local scale. It is thought that this will particularly help tackle pollution from diffuse sources, by their diffuse nature, local. The collaborative ways of working to consider the needs of the water environment and acting to enhance it in a truly collaborative way fit comfortably with the AONB management approach.

• **The Water Framework Directive and Catchment Abstraction Management Strategies**

The Water Framework Directive's (WFD) main objectives are to protect and enhance the water environment and ensure sustainable water resource use for economic and social development.

The scope of the framework is wide, covering lakes, streams, rivers, groundwater, groundwater dependent ecosystems, estuaries and coastal waters out to one mile from the low-water mark. The Environment Agency is the lead authority for implementing the WFD. Whilst the Agency will focus on the appropriate application of regulations and using an evidence-based approach to ensure the most cost-effective actions are taken; improving the health of our natural water environment will require collaborative working across many sectors and making use of local knowledge.

Catchment Abstraction Management Strategies (CAMS) set out how catchment water resource management can contribute to WFD implementation.

• **The provision of ecosystem services**

The UK government has recognised that 'people benefit from processes or structures within ecosystems that give rise to a range of goods and services called 'ecosystem services''. This is essentially a description of how natural resources and the ecosystems they create and support

provide for the needs of society. The services described range from the relatively simple, such as crop pollination to the highly complex, such as soil fertility maintenance, waste sinks or climate regulation. Ultimately all human life depends on ecosystem services for fundamental necessities such as clean air, clean water and food production. Services have been grouped into four categories:

- Supporting services, such as nutrient cycling, oxygen production and soil formation. These underpin the provision of the other 'service' categories.
- Provisioning services, such as food, fibre, fuel and water.
- Regulating services, such as climate regulation, water purification and flood protection.
- Cultural services, such as education, recreation, and aesthetic value.

Kent Downs ecosystem services are identified in detail in Natural England's National Character Assessment for the North Downs and Wealden Greensand and are therefore not repeated here.

10.3 Geology and natural resources - main issues, opportunities and threats

• Geology

- a. Lack of awareness about the importance of AONB geology and landform.
- b. There are important mineral resources in the Kent Downs and its setting. Mineral workings can have a serious impact on landscape quality. Restoration plans may be affected by the deficit of inert materials which were once more easily obtainable.
- c. The importance of geological sites and features tends to be overlooked due to lack of information, interpretation, poor management, development, landfill and dumping.

• Soils

- d. Soil erosion, especially on the steeper slopes and under 'open' arable crops, such as maize and potentially some biomass crops; climate change enhances this risk.
- e. Maintaining and improving agricultural soil quality and promoting the relationship between good soil management and climate change mitigation.

• Water

- 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. The expected increase in water demand for public use and irrigation in already over abstracted catchments presents major challenges for water resource management and potentially the installation of significant new water infrastructure in the landscape.
- i. Predicted increase and volume of flooding events. Rivers flooding in the Kent Downs affects localised areas.
- j. Need to understand the relationship between landscape management and aquifer recharge.
- k. The water companies' Water Resources Management Plans process provides an opportunity for collaborative working to secure a more resilient water supply at the same time as landscape management which supports landscape character.

- l. The opportunity to collaborate with the Catchment Based Approach to secure the conservation and enhancement of landscape character as well as delivery of Water Framework Directive (WFD) objectives – and also ensuring that AONB policies and projects support the WFD.
- m. The significant benefits of Kent Downs ecosystem services are insufficiently recognised and valued and the opportunities to secure payment for them is not yet developed.
- n. The need to establish and secure the Kent Downs as a vital component of Kent’s green infrastructure provision.

10.4 Geology and natural resources - aims

A landscape in which:

1. A safe, clean environment is protected, conserved and enhanced, where residents and visitors alike benefit from essential ecosystem services and increased well-being and quality of life.
2. 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, enhanced and managed in a way which enhances landscape character.
4. Local sources of pollution indigenous to the AONB are minimised, reduced or controlled.
5. The Kent Downs AONB landscape provides vital services and green infrastructure for Kent and the south east.

10.5 Geology and natural resources - policies

GNR1 Activities designed to protect, conserve and enhance the important geological exposures of the Kent Downs will be encouraged.

GNR2 Careful management and sensitive restoration of existing minerals and waste sites affecting the Kent Downs will be pursued.

GNR3 Allocations and permission for new mineral extraction are likely to be major development proposals and within the AONB will be opposed, except in the exceptional circumstances identified in paragraph 116 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Where permitted in accordance with the provisions of the NPPF, exceptional site management, working and restoration conditions which support landscape character will be expected, conditioned and enforced.

GNR4 Advice to farmers and land managers which seeks integrated environmental land and natural resource management in the Kent Downs will be encouraged.

GNR5 Threats to the conservation of the natural resources of soil, water and air will be opposed.

GNR6 A strategic collaborative Catchment Based Approach will be taken to the management of the water environment in the Kent Downs AONB to secure a more resilient water supply, achieve good ecological status in the water bodies and the conservation and enhancement of the landscape.

GNR7 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 special character and qualities of the Kent Downs. Support for Water Resource Management Planning which seeks to secure the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.

GNR8 A collaborative approach will be pursued to secure the provision of appropriate ecosystems services and green infrastructure, which supports the special character and qualities of the Kent Downs, for the benefit of the community and economy.

Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs

Quality of life

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 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. The demand for recreation 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 sections set out how the secondary purposes of AONB designation will be addressed by the Management Plan. A principal consideration is how secondary purposes relate 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.

11. Vibrant communities

Our vision

In 2034... local people are central to the conservation of the Kent Downs; they have a clear sense of pride and belonging within the AONB. People from neighbouring urban communities feel welcome to enjoy the AONB and recognise and value the need for its conservation and enhancement. Kent Downs communities have a strong influence over development and change through pro-active consultation and engagement. Communities' work and voluntary activity marries social and economic well-being with landscape conservation and enhancement. Individuals and organisations choose to buy goods and services that benefit the Kent Downs landscape and local economy.

11.1 Overview

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

While an AONB Management Plan is not the primary means for tackling social and economic needs, without the right social and economic conditions, it is difficult to conserve and enhance the valued landscape.

11.2 Vibrant communities - special characteristics

The population of the Kent Downs AONB in 2011 is estimated to be approx 93,300 or around 5.5% of Kent's population, including Medway (approximately 1,730,000). The 2011 National Census provides the most up to date information about AONB residents.

The AONB population is generally older, with fewer ethnic minority groups than the rest of the county. The population has more white-collar and professional workers than the county as a whole, with higher owner-occupancy and car ownership per household. 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

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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.

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

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%). However 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 describes Kent's rural communities 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 living standards, 3% of the work force is unemployed compared to 4% for Kent. 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 five wards on or immediately adjacent to the AONB boundary with 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 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 community heritage knowledge which resides with older generations of residents is a valuable resource for the celebration of the landscape and community vibrancy.

Some of the challenges for communities of the Kent Downs are to maintain balance and diversity given limited housing availability and high house prices, an aging population and sometimes difficult access to services. The provision of affordable local needs housing which is of sensitive design and location is a high priority identified by Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) through their community engagement.

Evidence from the Kent Downs partnership and other Protected Landscapes shows that to be 'thriving and vibrant' communities need good access to services, social and community links, places to meet and interact, places for recreation and work, links beyond the immediate community, access to jobs, good digital connectivity and community activities and engagement. Rural deprivation issues also require close attention and support. In the context of a protected landscape these community needs should be met in ways which support the character, qualities and characteristics of the landscape. Indeed landscape and environmental conservation and design can be a good focus for community development.

• **Community and parish planning**

There has been long running support for community and parish planning in the Kent Downs AONB. Community engagement in understanding the built and cultural heritage can be important to community identity and activity.

There are a variety of community planning approaches including Village Design Statements, Parish Plans; neighbourhood planning (given weight under the Localism Act), and Conservation Plans.

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

- **Community services and enterprises**

There has been long run concern about the decline in community and village services such as village shops, post offices, churches and pubs. Consequently the loss of such assets can trigger the creation of community run enterprises which in themselves are a community development catalyst and can be a vehicle to support a sustainable local economy which supports landscape character.

- **Volunteering**

Already there is a strong voluntary ethic in the Kent Downs; Parish Councils, conservation volunteers, tree and river wardens, footpath volunteers, walks leaders, religious groups, village and community enterprises all rely on voluntary efforts and often this supports landscape conservation and the enhancement of communities.

- **Our neighbours**

The Kent Downs AONB is in a unique position of being so close to major urban and growth areas and London. There are over 1 million people living within one kilometre of the Kent Downs AONB boundary, many are areas of high social and economic need. The AONB offers a place for recreation, health and well-being to these communities, but the relationship needs to be carefully developed so that all benefit and landscape qualities are not compromised.

- **Sustainable rural leisure and tourism**

Sustainable rural leisure and tourism has been identified as a key way to supporting the socio-economic well-being of rural areas. Providing jobs and supporting community services, sustainable rural tourism of itself can be a catalyst for community development.

Sustainable tourism can be defined as "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, UNEP World Tourism Organization, 2005.

An AONB Unit visitor survey confirmed that the main motivations for visiting the Kent Downs are its beauty and tranquillity, whilst the main activity 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 enhance the appeal of the Kent Downs, in particular improved public transport linking railway stations, attractions and accommodation, and improving the food product.

Making tourism and recreation more sustainable is not just about controlling and managing the negative impacts. Tourism and recreation are in a special position to benefit local communities economically and socially, and to raise awareness and support for environmental conservation.

In recognising the importance of sustainable rural tourism, the Kent Downs AONB Unit has taken the lead on the Our Land Project, a national tourism project for Protected Landscapes. Our Land aims to provide a commercial advantage to businesses which recognise, celebrate, conserve and enhance the AONB.

11.3 Vibrant communities - main issues, opportunities and threats

Social exclusion, deprivation and access to services

a. A number of areas and wards around and within the AONB have high levels of social

deprivation. Rural poverty and social exclusion can be 'hidden' and is an issue for some elderly people, ethnic minority groups, migrant workers, people with disabilities and those on low incomes.

- b. Retaining and improving access to, and provision of, local services and facilities including super-fast broadband, post offices, village shops, public houses and garages.
- c. Community facilities, such as schools, libraries, social care and doctors surgeries, are unevenly available and accessible.
- d. Rapidly changing and lack of consistency in support structures for community development in rural areas.

The availability of affordable housing

- e. Housing prices have continued to rise, in some parts, well above and faster than the national average.
- f. Considerable demand for affordable housing in many parishes in the AONB.

Maintaining and diversifying the employment base

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

Sense of community and belonging

- i. The need to attach people to place and landscape heritage where an increasing proportion of the population are not directly involved in landscape management.
- j. The need to improve community recognition and value of the special characteristics of the AONB to secure its future conservation and enhancement.
- k. The need for support to achieve greater local capacity and involvement in decisions affecting the AONB.

Sustainable leisure and tourism

- l. There is an important opportunity to sustainably increase the numbers and income from visitors to benefit local people, local services and support the AONB landscape.
- m. Some areas within the AONB suffer either from over capacity or over use, leading to a detrimental impact on both the landscape and host communities.

11.4 Vibrant communities - aims

A landscape in which:

1. Thriving, vibrant communities understand, recognise and value the special qualities of the AONB and play an active role in its conservation and enhancement while reducing their environmental impact.
2. A strong and sustainable rural economy supports the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB and is supported by residents and visitors, who value and use sustainable local produce and services.
3. There is well designed, sustainable and affordable housing, particularly for workers

employed in the land-based economy and conservation of the AONB's landscape, social and economic vitality.

4. Accessible, affordable 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 premier sustainable tourism destination.
7. The environmental impact of AONB communities is stabilised and reduced.

11.5 Vibrant communities - policies

- VC1 Community and business initiatives that improve the recognition, engagement in and conservation of the AONB and encourage community life will be pursued.
- VC2 Positive and sustainable links between the AONB (landscape, communities and partnership) and nearby communities, particularly from excluded groups and from neighbouring deprived areas will be pursued.
- VC3 Initiatives which are in line with existing policies of the Local Planning Authority that increase and improve the supply of affordable housing for (i) those with proven local needs, and (ii) 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 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.
- VC5 Skills training and business development assistance will be encouraged where they contribute to the viability of communities and meet the purposes of the AONB.
- VC6 The development of sustainable visitor and tourism facilities will be pursued where they enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the AONB without detracting from the special characteristics and qualities.
- VC7 Tourism and leisure businesses in the AONB will be encouraged to adopt the principles of sustainable tourism and to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through achieving nationally recognised green accreditation and/or becoming part of the Our Land project.
- VC8 Local communities will be encouraged to prepare and promote Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and Neighbourhood Plans as appropriate to assist in the conservation and enhancement of local distinctiveness as settlements evolve. These documents should address development requiring planning permission, automatically permitted development, and change outside the scope of the planning system.

12. Access, enjoyment and understanding

Our vision

In 2034... the Kent Downs AONB is a place of natural beauty with opportunity and access for all people; they feel welcome to participate in quiet recreation for health, relaxation, enjoyment and for cultural and artistic expression.

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 and public transport is an attractive option to reach and enjoy the landscape. Maintenance of the Public Rights of Way and highway network is sympathetic to biodiversity and landscape character.

The Kent Downs AONB is recognised, valued and celebrated by residents, visitors and by those who simply delight in the fact that it is there.

12.1 Overview

The Kent Downs AONB offers some of south east England's most captivating and accessible countryside. The AONB has a resident population of over 93,000 people, however a further one million live within one kilometre of the boundary. Beyond this, up to eight million people live within an hour, including populations in northeast France.

The AONB has a Public Rights of Way network which is four times the density of the national average. The Kent Downs accommodates 40% of Kent's bridleways and 50% of Kent's byways on 23% of the county land area.

The AONB is crossed by or adjacent to four motorways, many trunk and 'A' roads, and hundreds of smaller roads. It is served by five railway lines with 27 railway stations 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.

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 a great landscape, reconnect with nature and provide support to the local economy.

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• **Managing access in the Kent Downs**

Under 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 (KCAF) 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 Forum has provided formal advice to the Joint Advisory Committee during the preparation of this revised management plan – this includes a focus on the access benefits of woodland and farmland, the impact of horses in the AONB, dogs in the AONB, country motor sports in the AONB and the importance of improving off road access in the AONB. An overriding issue is the importance of maintenance of Public Rights of Way – good maintenance is seen as a basic requirement which overcomes many other perceived problems.

• **The Kent and Medway Countryside Access Improvement Plans**

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, Highway Authorities have a duty to develop a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). Known in Kent as the Countryside Access Improvement Plan (CAIP) and in Medway as the Medway Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Kent's ROWIP was adopted as county policy in February 2008. Its revision will be completed during 2013. Medway's ROWIP was adopted in 2011.

These plans must assess the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public for exercise and leisure. It must also assess the accessibility of Public Rights of Way to blind or partially-sighted people and others with mobility problems. The AONB Management Plan supports and adds value to the CAIP and where appropriate seeks a special focus for action within the AONB.

• **Open access land**

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act around 0.6% of Kent and Medway has been mapped for open access and the majority of this is chalk downland, along with registered common land and parkland within the AONB. 46% of 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 access land was already available through time limited agreements. However where large tracts of land have been mapped, for instance around Dover, there are significant access opportunities.

• **Coastal access**

The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 places a duty on Natural England to improve access to the English coast through the creation of a continuous long-distance walking route, the 'England Coast Path', effectively a new National Trail around England's open coast. The new path will provide a Coastal Access Margin on the seaward side of the new path, similar to open access land, potentially providing significantly more access than the path itself.

12.2 Access, enjoyment and understanding - special characteristics

• **Visitors to the Kent Downs**

Limited visitor information is available for the AONB as a whole. Estimated AONB visitor numbers vary considerably, however 20 million day visits a year is considered a best estimate. Research conducted in 2003 offers a 'conservative estimate' of 10 - > 20 million day visits a year, whilst Kent Tourism research, based on 2003 figures, estimates just over 44 million visits a year to the county as a whole.

• **Road users**

The rural road network of the Kent Downs is often of ancient origin and an important part of the special character and qualities of the landscape. While the general growth in Kent road

traffic has recently abated the Kent Travel Report 2011 (KCC) shows traffic growth continues on main roads in the Kent Downs. The roads of the Kent Downs provide well used north south links through the county and are also used as an important way to access the landscape. Greater reliance on the car is partly thought to be because people perceive roads to be dangerous to walk or cycle. The KCC road safety (2012) campaign states that rural roads account for 2/3 of road fatalities, which are focused on roads to and from urban areas. Consultation responses to the management plan have consistently raised the issue of the impact of heavy lorries on the small roads of the Kent Downs.

• **Walking**

The density of Public Rights of Way in the Kent Downs is four times higher than the national average. This is an invaluable asset and enables access to and enjoyment of virtually all parts of the AONB and can provide good links between the Downs and local towns and villages. The use of footpaths in the AONB is unevenly distributed with much greater usage in the west and around 'honey pot' attractions.

The Kent Countryside Access Forum cites that between 50% and 90% of walks in the countryside are accompanied by dogs. There are many benefits to walking with dogs, including and particularly for health and wellbeing. The KCAF has noted also the potential negative impacts such as chasing stock, damaging crops, lack of control. The KCAF is leading on promoting sensible access with dogs to the countryside.

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 trail, 70 miles lie within the AONB. Research by the North Downs Way National Trail Team shows an estimated 250,000 visitors use the trail each year between May and October. National Trails are promoted as long distance routes, although user surveys show that the majority of use on the North Downs Way tends to be for shorter walks. The opportunity to upgrade appropriate sections of the North Downs Way to include cyclists 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 increasingly popular and can be a sustainable means of transport and recreation and is generally a quiet activity with low impact on the countryside. Opportunities for off-road cycling in the AONB have been developed by Sustrans. Sections of two National Cycle Routes and two regional routes pass through the AONB and the Pilgrims Cycle Trail, from Rochester to Canterbury, provides an arterial route through the Kent Downs. There are also a number of locally promoted on and off road cycle routes. Dedicated cycling routes are proposed as an effective and low impact link between the Kent Downs and nearby urban and growth areas.

• **Horse riding and driving**

Although the network is limited, 40% of Kent's bridleways are in the AONB, making the Kent Downs a significant area for horse riding. The latest information estimates 100,000 riders in Kent, 50,000 regular riders, and horse numbers between 30 and 40,000 (Land Use Consultants/KCC). Evidence from the British Horse Society (BHS) and the Public Rights of Way teams (from maintenance spend) indicates that the increasing use of bridleways is damaging the route fabric. The BHS in Kent estimates a population of 90 horses per kilometre of bridleway, creating significant pressure on the network. Horse riding, driving and equine events provide important opportunities for access, exercise, health and wellbeing and can provide access opportunities for those with disabilities.

Horse riding, like cycling and walking is increasingly difficult and dangerous on rural roads because of the volume and speed of traffic and the bridleway network in Kent is limited.

Other opportunities for informal countryside recreation 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 (44.9ha) and 48 areas of Registered Common Land

(442.7ha). 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 the Woodland Trust.

• **Organised events**

The last decade has seen strong growth in organised events for a range of outdoor activities including cycling sportives on-road and trail (cross-country), running, duathlons, triathlons, sponsored walks, orienteering and geocaching. Events are led by a range of organisations including charitable bodies, sports clubs, and increasingly local events companies specialising in running and cycling events, such as Nice Work based in East Sussex which operate several events in and around Kent. Local running clubs are also active in this area, such as Istead and Ifield Harriers (North Downs Run) and Centurion Running (North Downs 50 and 100).

• **Field sports**

The Kent Downs landscape lends itself to pheasant shooting and hunting with extensive areas of woodland and tree cover and arable and mixed farm use. It is estimated that game bird shooting generates at least £10 million per annum for the local economy and is one of the most economically important uses for Kent Downs woodlands. However, conflicts arise because of overstocking with pheasants; woodland management 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. A collaborative project with the Game Conservancy Trust has produced best practice guidance for game bird management in the Kent Downs.

Fishing is also popular although the Kent Downs offers 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 St Margaret's Bay and Samphire Hoe where national competitions are held.

• **Country motor sports**

Country motor sports are growing in popularity and are of special relevance in the AONB as the Kent Downs (23% of Kent's land area) accommodates 53% of the byways. Activities include events on public roads such as car tours, treasure hunts and road rallies along with greenlaning and trail riding on byways. While responsible users promote good practice and respect for others, the use of byways and unmetalled roads by 4x4 vehicles and motorbikes, although legal, can lead to conflicts with other users because of disturbance, safety issues and damage to the Rights of Way surface. There remains illegal use of footpaths and bridleways by motorised vehicles, and the use of byways to access the wider landscape. 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**

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, on low incomes or without access to private transport.

Research from the Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan has shown that 18% of people with a disability never visit the natural environment, compared with 8% of the non-disabled population. Research found that disabled people visited the countryside to enjoy views, the landscape and to relax and they perceived the countryside as inherently rewarding and beneficial to the same degree as the wider population, especially for the psychological benefits. In addition, accessing the natural environment gave people with disabilities a sense of continuity between their disabled and non-disabled selves, and a sense of achievement.

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.

• **Health and well-being**

There is compelling evidence for the health and well-being benefits of contact with nature and access to the countryside. With a rapidly increasing urban population in Kent and London there is a special focus on the role of the Kent Downs landscape in providing these significant multiple benefits.

• **Education and children**

Over the next 20 years, today's children will become tomorrow's decision makers. If we are to secure a future for this precious landscape, we should actively encourage understanding and education for young people. The close proximity of substantial urban areas to the Kent Downs AONB offers a special opportunity to promote exciting and engaging activities for schools and families. The disconnection between children and the natural environment has been described as 'Nature Deficit Disorder' and its consequences and the opportunities to address it have been documented in a National Trust report.

There are many opportunities to reconnect children with nature, link education activities to the national curriculum and to strengthen the understanding, enjoyment and celebration of the AONB landscape.

• **Information and interpretation**

At the heart of enjoyable countryside recreation is high quality information that helps visitors plan their use of the Kent Downs, and increases the understanding and satisfaction of their experience. Information is currently available in a variety of forms but tends not to be coordinated.

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

There is also an extensive system of countryside management partnerships covering the AONB; they are site-based with volunteer wardens employed by local authorities and conservation charities. Much of their work remains uncoordinated across the AONB.

12.3 Access, enjoyment and understanding - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Estimated day visitor numbers are high and probably increasing. Pressure on the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB as well as particular countryside routes, sites and areas can be very high but unevenly distributed.
- b. Urban and growth areas in close proximity to the AONB will generate new opportunities for enjoyment, health and well-being but also pressure for travel and access.
- c. The Countryside Access Improvement Plan provides opportunities to focus on the AONB, given the special access pressures and the landscapes national importance.
- 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, those with dogs) can result in conflicts.
- f. Conflicts between rightful PRoW users and illegal users, fly-tipping, dumping and path obstruction.
- g. The increasing popularity of horse riding and off road cycling which is focused particularly on the AONB, putting pressure on the rights of way network. The need to enhance, extend, connect and improve fragmented bridleway links and secure higher rights on PRoW without harming the characteristics and qualities of the AONB.

- h. Special needs groups who experience barriers to enjoying the landscape require special attention and support.
- i. Need to ensure that the PRoW network is well signposted, way-marked and maintained using materials and equipment appropriate in design and sustainably sourced.
- j. Improving the rural road network for its landscape quality and to promote quiet countryside recreation by managing traffic pressures to provide quiet and safe access.
- k. Need to increase and enhance people's understanding of and access to the AONB, its landscape and countryside practices and to provide coordinated information in a number of formats appropriate to their setting.
- l. Need to maximise coastal access opportunities through the newly defined Coast Path National Trail and support the enhanced management of the coastal corridor.
- m. Need to promote exciting and engaging education and interpretation schemes for children and young people.
- n. The opportunity to promote the availability and use of safe non-car based countryside transport and recreation opportunities and seek integrated public transport initiatives.

12.4 Access, enjoyment and understanding - aims

A landscape that provides:

1. Sustainable opportunities and facilities to enable everyone to safely enjoy and understand the AONB countryside without detracting from it.
2. A legally defined, well maintained, connected 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 actively 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.

12.5 Access, enjoyment and understanding - policies

- AEU1 Co-ordinated information and interpretation for recreation, access, education, and health and well-being 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 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 opportunities for access and quiet enjoyment of the AONB landscape and historic character.
- AEU3 Investment to secure sustainable, high quality, low impact and easy access, multiuser

routes from towns and growth areas to the AONB will be pursued.

- AEU4 The sustainable and enhanced management and promotion of open access sites will be pursued.
- AEU5 Mechanisms will be supported to resolve conflicts between rightful users of Public Rights of Way. Where there are irreconcilable conflicts from legal but damaging activities, quiet recreation will be supported above other 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, health and well-being opportunities, including way-marking, signposting and maintenance, new routes and establishment of higher rights which conforms with AONB policies and design guidance, will be supported.
- AEU8 High standards of landscape and recreational management, accessible visitor facilities, access opportunities and increased opportunities for learning and health enhancement through a coordinated programme of training, events, guided walks and gateway routes and sites will be supported.
- AEU9 Initiatives for children, schools and youth groups which encourage interest in and learning about the AONB and reconnection with nature will be pursued.
- AEU10 Support will be given to the North Downs Way and England Coast Path National Trails as the main promoted route in the Kent Downs.
- AEU11 A reduction in the need to travel by car will be supported through new and improved measures to provide integrated, attractive and affordable public transport in the Kent Downs. New business, community and other initiatives in support of the vision, aims and policies of the Management Plan will seek to relate to existing public transport links.
- AEU12 Sustainable solutions to problems of rural traffic will be supported, particularly in rural settlements or where there is a conflict with landscape quality or walkers, cyclists and horse riders.
- AEU13 A strategic approach to the use of road signage, furniture, design and maintenance that conserves and enhances the local character and distinctiveness and encourages non-motorised access will be pursued through the adoption and implementation of the AONB Rural Streets and Lanes Design Handbook.
- AEU 14 Proposals which detract from the amenity and enjoyment of users of the Public Rights of Way network will be resisted.

13. Implementation, monitoring and review

13.1 Implementation

The vision, aims and policies of this management plan need to be translated into action. This revision is, if anything, more ambitious than previous plans, seeking wider positive impacts and greater collaboration to achieve the purposes of the AONB. Actions to protect, conserve and enhance the Kent Downs AONB will be agreed once the Management Plan has been adopted by the Local Authorities following public consultation.

The Action Plan shall define what is required to achieve the vision, aims and policies of the plan. Actions shall have a timescale, targets and lead partner. Our ambition shall be to develop greater ownership of the actions by all of those with an interest or responsibility for the AONB. It shall therefore be important that partners and stakeholders are closely involved in the development of the action plan.

In addition the Joint Advisory Committee (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.

13.2 The Kent Downs AONB Design and Land Management Guidance

The Kent Downs AONB partnership has developed a series of design guides. The purpose of these is to provide practical, readily accessible design guidance to assist in the implementation of the management plan and contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the special characteristic and qualities of the AONB and the distinctiveness of individual Character areas.

The guidance draws from Landscape Character descriptions across the AONB.

The use of the Kent Downs AONB Design Guidance is supported in overarching policies of the management plan and several Local Authorities have adopted the guidance as supplementary planning guidance.

- The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Design Handbook
- The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Rural Streets and Lanes: A Design Handbook
- The Kent Downs Farmsteads Design Guide
- Managing Land for Horses – a guide to good practice in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Kent Downs AONB Land Management Pack (a web based resource).
- Kent Downs AONB Farm Diversification Tool Kit (a web based resource).
- A Buildings and Settlement Design Guide is planned.

13.3 Resourcing and monitoring the management plan

This Management Plan is necessarily 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 coordinate action as well as leading where necessary. We shall need to seek that others, particularly partner organisations, allocate resources to achieve the aims of the plan.

Part of the work of the Unit and Partnership shall be to position the Kent Downs AONB so that national and international resources are available to achieve the objectives of the 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 cooperation and collaboration between various specialist staff and individuals across the AONB, who pool resources and collaborate to achieve the visions and policies of the Management Plan.

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 re-examined as part of the review process. The Countryside Agency and now Natural England has been working to establish an agreed national set of indicators for the Protected Landscapes. Allied to this the Kent Downs AONB has begun to establish a monitoring programme which will inform the delivery of this plan and future reviews.

Diversity Impact Assessment: Screening Form

Directorate Regeneration, Community & Culture	Name of Function or Policy or Major Service Change Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan		
Officer responsible for assessment Catherine Smith, Development Policy & Engagement Manager Housing & Regeneration	Date of assessment 23 December 2013	New or existing? Review of existing plan.	
Defining what is being assessed			
1. Briefly describe the purpose and objectives	<p>The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) management plan sets out policy for the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape.</p> <p>The council has a statutory duty to prepare, review and adopt a management plan for the AONB (set out in the Countryside & Rights of Way Act, 2000).</p> <p>The plan has been prepared by the Kent Downs AONB management unit on behalf of partner local authorities. It is being presented to Cabinet for adoption.</p>		
2. Who is intended to benefit, and in what way?	<p>The primary purpose of the management plan is to conserve and enhance the landscape of the AONB. It also recognises the needs of land-based and rural industries and the economic and social needs of local communities.</p> <p>The plan does not favour any particular social groups, and makes explicit reference to the need to ensure that all people have opportunities to enjoy the AONB, and promotes wider access. There is no evidence of differential impact arising from the management plan.</p> <p>Wide consultation has been carried out on the AONB management plan, including representatives of access groups and minority ethnic organisations, to understand any issues that may be experienced by different community groups.</p>		
3. What outcomes are wanted?	The conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the AONB landscape.		

4. What factors/forces could contribute/detract from the outcomes?	<p>Contribute</p> <p>Resources available Good quality development and initiatives.</p>	<p>Detract</p> <p>Limited resources Poor quality development and activities.</p>
5. Who are the main stakeholders?	The Kent Downs AONB management unit, and partner organisations, including Medway Council; residents of the AONB; people who work in the AONB, including farmers; and visitors to the AONB.	
6. Who implements this and who is responsible?	The Kent Downs AONB management unit will monitor the implementation of the plan. The plan will be delivered by partner activities. Medway Council will adopt management plan policies to meet its statutory duties for the conservation and enhancement of the AONB.	

Assessing impact		
7. Are there concerns that there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to <i>racial groups</i>?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside and recognises the need to take action to understand how perceptions and engagement opportunities differ.
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
8. Are there concerns that there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to <i>disability</i>?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside and recognises the need to consider disability impacts in experiencing differences and barriers in people's capacity to understand and engage in the AONB, and appropriate mitigation .
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
9. Are there concerns that there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to <i>gender</i>?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside.
	NO	

What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
10. Are there concerns there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to <i>sexual orientation</i> ?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside.
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
11. Are there concerns there <u>could</u> be a have a differential impact due to <i>religion or belief</i> ?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside.
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
12. Are there concerns there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to people's <i>age</i> ?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside and recognises that different age groups are likely to have different abilities to engage, understand and benefit from the AONB, and this is reflected in policies.
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
13. Are there concerns that there <u>could</u> be a differential impact due to <i>being trans-gendered or transsexual</i> ?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. The plan promotes access for all to the countryside.
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
14. Are there any <i>other</i> groups that would find it difficult to access/make use of the function (e.g. people with caring responsibilities or dependants, those with an offending past, or people living in rural areas)?	YES	If yes, which group(s)?
	NO	
What evidence exists for	There are opportunities to engage and involve	

this?	different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	
15. Are there concerns there could be a have a differential impact due to <i>multiple discriminations</i> (e.g. disability <u>and</u> age)?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i>
	NO	
What evidence exists for this?	There are opportunities to engage and involve different groups in the management, celebration and enjoyment of the Kent Downs, and these are identified in the policies and actions of the management plan.	



Conclusions & recommendation

16. Could the differential impacts identified in questions 7-15 amount to there being the potential for adverse impact?	YES	<i>Brief statement of main issue</i> The AONB Management Plan is focused on landscape issues. Promotion of access and engagement recognise the needs of different groups.
	NO	
17. Can the adverse impact be justified on the grounds of promoting equality of opportunity for one group? Or another reason?	YES	Please explain N/A
	NO	
Recommendation to proceed to a full impact assessment?		
NO	This function/ policy/ service change complies with the requirements of the legislation and there is evidence to show this is the case.	

Action plan to make Minor modifications

Outcome	Actions (with date of completion)	Officer responsible
Access and engagement activities in the AONB are open to a wide range of communities.	Monitoring of activities carried out in AONB upon adoption of plan (2014-19)	AONB management unit.

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Planning ahead: Reminders for the next review		
Date of next review	2019	
Areas to check at next review (e.g. new census information, new legislation due)	Monitoring of participation in and design of AONB activities.	
Is there <i>another</i> group (e.g. new communities) that is relevant and ought to be considered next time?	No	
Signed (completing officer/service manager) 	Date	23 December 2013
Signed (service manager/Assistant Director) 	Date	23 December 2013