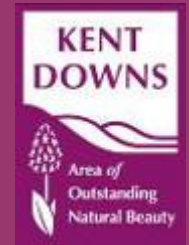


Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014 - 2019



Second revision April 2014



Ministerial Foreword



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are some of our finest landscapes. They are cherished by residents and visitors alike and allow millions of people from all walks of life to understand and connect with nature.

I am pleased to see that this Management Plan demonstrates how AONB Partnerships can continue to protect these precious environments despite the significant challenges they face. With a changing climate, the increasing demands of a growing population and in difficult economic times, I believe AONBs represent just the sort of community driven, collaborative approach needed to ensure our natural environment is maintained for generations to come.

AONB Partnerships have been the architects of a landscape-scale approach to land management. This approach is a key feature of the Government's Natural Environment White Paper and emphasises the need to manage ecosystems in an integrated fashion, linking goals on wildlife, water, soil and landscape, and working at a scale that respects natural systems.

This Management Plan also makes the important connection between people and nature. I am pleased to hear that local communities have been central to the development of the plan, and will be at the heart of its delivery. From volunteers on nature conservation projects, to businesses working to promote sustainable tourism, it's great to hear of the enthusiasm and commitment of the local people who hold their AONBs so dear.

AONBs are, and will continue to be, landscapes of change. Management Plans such as this are vital in ensuring these changes are for the better. I would like to thank all those who were involved in bringing this plan together and I wish you every success in bringing it to fruition.

Lord de Mauley
Minister for Natural Environment
and Science



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Foreword

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

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

The Kent Downs is home to some of the most enchanting landscapes of southern Britain. Put simply, the purpose of this Management Plan is to set out the strategy to conserve and enhance them.

The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership has worked closely to prepare and produce this revision of the Management Plan for this special place. We are grateful to the many people who have been involved in developing this Plan.

The Management Plan provides energy, direction and commitment for the future of the landscape and through the previous versions of the Plan, much has been achieved. Indeed the Kent Downs AONB Partnership is recognised nationally as one of the most effective at securing resources to support the management of this fine landscape.

At the same time the pressures on this particular landscape have grown once again. Our response to this greater pressure and to the difficult financial environment is not to retreat to seeking merely to protect the Kent Downs; instead, this Plan is more ambitious for the landscape and seeks wider, stronger and more collaborative partnerships to meet its positive objectives.

The ultimate goal of the Management Plan remains to ensure that the natural beauty of the landscape and vitality of the communities of the Kent Downs AONB are recognised, valued and strengthened well into the future. We seek to do this in a way which enhances health and well-being and supports much needed sustainable growth and development.



Chris Reynolds
Chairman, Kent Downs AONB
Joint Advisory Committee



Nick Johannsen
Director, Kent Downs AONB Unit



1. The Kent Downs AONB

Our vision

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.

1.1 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.



A traditional orchard



Wild flower meadow



Yellowhammer



Postling Downs

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 the 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 plats; 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 plateaux tops. Disconnected 'ribbons' of permanent grassland (shaves) are found along the steep scarp,



Langdon Hole



Shepherds Hill, Sheldwich



Straw bale



Darent Valley



Man orchid

valley sides, and on less-productive land, grazed by sheep, cattle and increasingly by horses. Locally concentrated areas of orchards, cobnut plats (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 plateaux 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 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 droveways 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.



Fog over Holly Hill Wood



The Kent Downs landscape

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.



Walking in the Kent Downs



Horse riders in the Kent Downs



Cycling through the Kent Downs



Recording sounds from the landscape

◆ Access, enjoyment and understanding

The Kent Downs is an easily accessible and charming landscape; over one 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 (PRoW) 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 of the 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 the 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.

Table 1 - Kent Downs AONB 'Have Your Say' survey and participation responses (2003, 2008 and 2013) (participants were asked to select the three most important components or features)

Most important components of natural beauty in the Kent Downs AONB	2003	2008	2013	Most valued features of the Kent Downs AONB	2003	2008	2013
Chalk downland	59%	74%	71%	Scenery and views	86%	83%	79%
Woodland	52%	43%	41%	Wildlife	49%	48%	39%
Landform and geology	45%	41%	34%	Peace and quiet	46%	49%	39%
Ancient lanes and paths	33%	47%	40%	Outdoor recreation	33%	10%	12%
Orchards/cobnut plats	21%	17%	14%	Villages and village life	32%	32%	29%
River valleys	20%	21%	19%	Historic buildings	24%	17%	14%
Hedgerows	20%	19%	18%	Dark skies	n/a	6%	7%
Historic settlements	17%	25%	24%	Amenities	10%	8%	7%
Mixed farmland	14%	17%	12%	Available local produce	7%	8%	5%
Dry valleys	7%	7%	8%	Visitor attractions	n/a	n/a	7%
Historic parkland	6%	9%	7%	Public rights of way network	n/a	41%	45%
				Locally distinct highways	n/a	1%	3%