

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	11 February 2019
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-2024

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**Recommendation:** It be **RESOLVED** that the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-2024 be formally adopted.

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**Head of Service: Tim Hickling**

**Lead Cabinet Member: Councillor Gillian Johnson**

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## Introduction

1. Section 89 of the Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act) places a statutory responsibility on relevant local authorities to produce and regularly review an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan which *'formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it'*. They are also obliged to review this Plan every five years. Whilst the Plan is not a planning policy document as such, it will be a material consideration in relation to planning policy and the determination of planning applications.
2. In the case of the High Weald AONB, the preparation and review of the Management Plan is undertaken by the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), acting on behalf of the 15 local authorities with land in the High Weald AONB.
3. The current AONB Management Plan was adopted in January 2014 (RDC Minute CB13/72 refers).
4. The review process started in March 2017, with a series of technical workshops held in summer 2017. Drafting of the revised Plan text started in December 2017. Public consultation was carried out during June and July 2018. At their meeting on the 28 November 2018, the JAC approved the revised Plan and supporting documents, and recommended its adoption by the constituent local authorities. This updated Management Plan covering the period 2019-2024 has been circulated separately to Members.
5. Councillor Kentfield is the District Council's representative on the JAC, as well as being its current Vice-Chairman.

## Commentary

6. In March 2017 the Joint Advisory Committee agreed to restrict the 2019-2024 version to a minor review. Nonetheless, the review has needed to take account of the potential impact of Brexit on agri-environmental policy and the

significant increase in development pressure on the AONB since the last review. While the character components and management policy objectives, (the most important aspects of the Management Plan) remain broadly appropriate, other aspects of the Plan have needed a more substantive re-consideration.

7. The new Plan retains the same basic structure, being around AONB purpose, character and key components of natural beauty. The Statement of Significance has been expanded to set out that the natural beauty of the High Weald also includes 'Land-based economy and related rural life' and 'Other qualities' (expanded as perceptual qualities, features, and cultural associations that enrich the 5 character components). These two subjects form two new chapters in the Management Plan, following guidance from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs that AONB Management Units needed to include focus on living working landscapes and communities and promoting public understanding and enjoyment.
8. A necessary area of updating has been the identification of the top 5 issues for each of the Character Components, and whilst many of the Objectives remain essentially the same, the setting of new 5 year 'Proposed Actions' for a range of public bodies and for other stakeholders (as opposed to the previous 'targets'). These Proposed Actions are well aligned with the purposes of designation and are supported in principle. Officers have expressed concern at the deliverability of all Proposed Actions relevant to local authorities, especially against tightening public sector funding. However, the Plan makes clear that these Proposed Actions indicate the ambitions of partners, to help guide resources and effort to where they are most needed.
9. A useful addition has been the inclusion of Key Characteristics (and supporting evidence) for each component of character.
10. In relation to planning, the new Proposed Actions relating to 'settlement' are particularly relevant. They reference the emerging High Weald Design Guide (for new housing developments) which is welcomed. This updated chapter will help officers to ensure that due regard is consistently given in planning decisions to conserving and enhancing the AONB across the area.

## **Conclusion**

11. It is considered that the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024 is a supportable and appropriate framework for the High Weald AONB, and may be adopted. The Plan has completed all of the statutory stages of a review and has been subject to significant public and expert engagement and scrutiny. As the Plan does not represent a significant policy shift, it is a matter that can properly be determined by Cabinet.

Dr Anthony Leonard  
Executive Director

## **Risk Assessment Statement**

Failure to adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan by 31 March 2019 would mean that the Council will be in breach of the requirements of the CROW Act 2000 to review the Management Plan within 5 years.