

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date and Time - **Monday 22 April 2024 – 6:30pm**

Venue - **Council Chamber, Town Hall, Bexhill-on-Sea**

Councillors appointed to the Committee:

P.N. Osborne (Chair), Mrs V. Cook (Vice-Chair), J. Barnes (MBE),
Mrs M.L. Barnes, S. Burton, C.A. Clark, B.J. Coupar, C.A. Creaser, M.C. Legg,
C.R. Maynard and S.B. McGurk + 1 vacancy.

Substitute Members: F.H. Chowdhury, N. Gordon, P.J. Gray, C. Pearce, J. Stanger

AGENDA

1. MINUTES

To authorise the Chair to sign the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 March 2024 as a correct record of proceedings.

2. APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES

The Chair to ask if any Member present is substituting for another Member and, if so, to declare his/her name as substitute Member and the name of the absent Member.

3. ADDITIONAL AGENDA ITEMS

To consider such other items as the Chair decides are urgent and due notice of which has been given to the Head of Paid Service by 12 Noon on the day of the meeting.

4. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

To receive any disclosures by Members of disclosable pecuniary interests / other registerable interests / non-registerable interests in matters on the agenda and the nature of any interest and details of any dispensations obtained. Members are reminded of the need to repeat their declaration immediately prior to the commencement of the item in question.

5. CALL-IN AND URGENCY PROCEDURES (Pages 3 - 8)

6. DRAFT ANNUAL REPORT TO COUNCIL (Pages 9 - 20)

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For all enquiries – please contact louise.hollingsworth@rother.gov.uk (Tel: 01424 787815)

Rother District Council putting residents at the heart of everything we do.

7. **HIGH WEALD AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2024-2029** (Pages 21 - 116)
8. **WORK PROGRAMME** (Pages 117 - 118)

Lorna Ford
Chief Executive

Agenda Despatch Date: 12 April 2024

Rother District Council

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	22 April 2024
Title:	Call-In and Urgency Procedures
Report of:	Chief Executive
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of Report:	To inform Members of the use of the call-in and urgency procedures during the period 1 March 2023 to 28 February 2024.
Officer	
Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED : That the report be noted.

Introduction

1. In accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Rule 17 (b) of the Constitution, the operation of the provisions relating to call-in and call-in and urgency shall be monitored annually and a report submitted to Council, via the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) and Audit and Standards Committee should there be any proposals for review / change in operating procedures.
2. Attached at Appendix A are extracts from the Constitution of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules 16 (Call-in) and 17 (Call-in and Urgency). This report covers the meetings of the Executive (Cabinet) from 1 March 2023 up until 28 February 2024. In total there have been eight Cabinet meetings held during this period.
3. No Executive decisions have been called-in during the period to which this report relates, and two decisions within the approved budget and policy framework, have been deemed and resolved as urgent decisions.

Call-In

4. As Members may be aware, the call-in procedure is the mechanism by which the OSC can review or challenge decisions made by the Executive, but which are not yet implemented. Executive decisions are usually published within three days of the meeting and those decisions that are subject to the call-in procedure are contained within Part II of the Minutes. The Executive Minutes are published electronically via the website and email notification is sent to all Councillors.
5. Executive decisions come into force and may then be implemented following the expiry of five working days following publication of the Minutes, unless the OSC objects to a decision and calls it in.
6. Any two non-Executive Members, one of whom must have been physically present at the Executive meeting, or the Chair of the OSC can request that a matter be called in. The call-in request must state the reasons for the call-in.

Once a decision is called in, its implementation is held in abeyance until the call-in procedure has been exhausted.

7. Following a call-in request, the OSC is required to meet within five working days in accordance with the procedure. The date and time of the call-in meeting is set by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair of the OSC and key service officers. Previously, call-ins have been considered by both the calling of additional meetings and the scheduled meetings coinciding within the prescribed timescales.

Call-In and Urgency

8. The call-in procedure does not apply to recommendations to Council nor Executive decisions that have been agreed as urgent by the Chair of Council. Urgent decisions that are taken outside of the approved budget and policy framework are also excluded from the call-in arrangements.
9. In agreeing any decision as urgent, the Chair of Council must be satisfied that any delay in the implementation of that decision would seriously prejudice the Council's or the public's interest. The potential time delay between an Executive decision being made, called-in, meeting the requirements of the call-in procedure and finally being implemented could be significant, and, in a worst case scenario, could be as long as six weeks.
10. During the period covered in this report, there have been two Executive decisions within the approved budget and policy framework, which have been designated and resolved as urgent and therefore outside of the call-in arrangements. These were in relation to the UKSPF support for Rye Fisheries, to allow the Council to reassure the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities by 3 May 2023 that it was the intention of the Council to deliver the Rye Fisheries scheme in line with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment plan, and in relation to the Rother District Council Public Conveniences Cleaning Contract 2024, to allow the Council to commence the tender process without delay and meet the tight timescales. The table below gives details of the numbers previously designated as urgent in the last three municipal years:

Period	Number of Decisions
March 2021 – February 2022	2
March 2022 – February 2023	0
March 2023 – February 2024	2

11. When preparing reports for the Executive, consideration is given by officers to whether the decision needs to be taken as a matter of urgency having regard to the possible delays that could occur in the implementation of that decision, if it were subject to the call-in procedure. In advance of the Executive Agenda publication, officers endeavour to identify any decision which needs to be taken as urgent, to seek the Chair of Council's permission for this, and to include rationale for the decision being treated as urgent within the report itself.
12. All decisions that are deemed as urgent, and therefore outside the call-in procedure, are reported to full Council at the next available meeting.

Conclusions

13. The call-in procedure continues to operate well, therefore it is not considered necessary to amend the current procedure. Non-Executive Members should continue to have trust and confidence in the call-in process.
14. There have been two occasions during the period to which this report relates, where it has been necessary to use the urgency provision.
15. It is not considered necessary to amend the call-in provisions and the OSC are recommended to note the report. Should Members wish to amend the procedure this would require a recommendation to Council, via the Audit and Standards Committee, as a change to the Council's Constitution and operating procedures.

Risk Management

16. Failure to monitor the operation of the provisions relating to call-in and urgency is in breach of the Constitution and could leave the Council open to criticism.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	No	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

Chief Executive:	Lorna Ford
Report Contact Officer:	Lisa Cooper, Democratic Services Manager
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Appendices:	Appendix A – Call-in Procedures
Relevant previous Minutes:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Reference Documents:	N/A

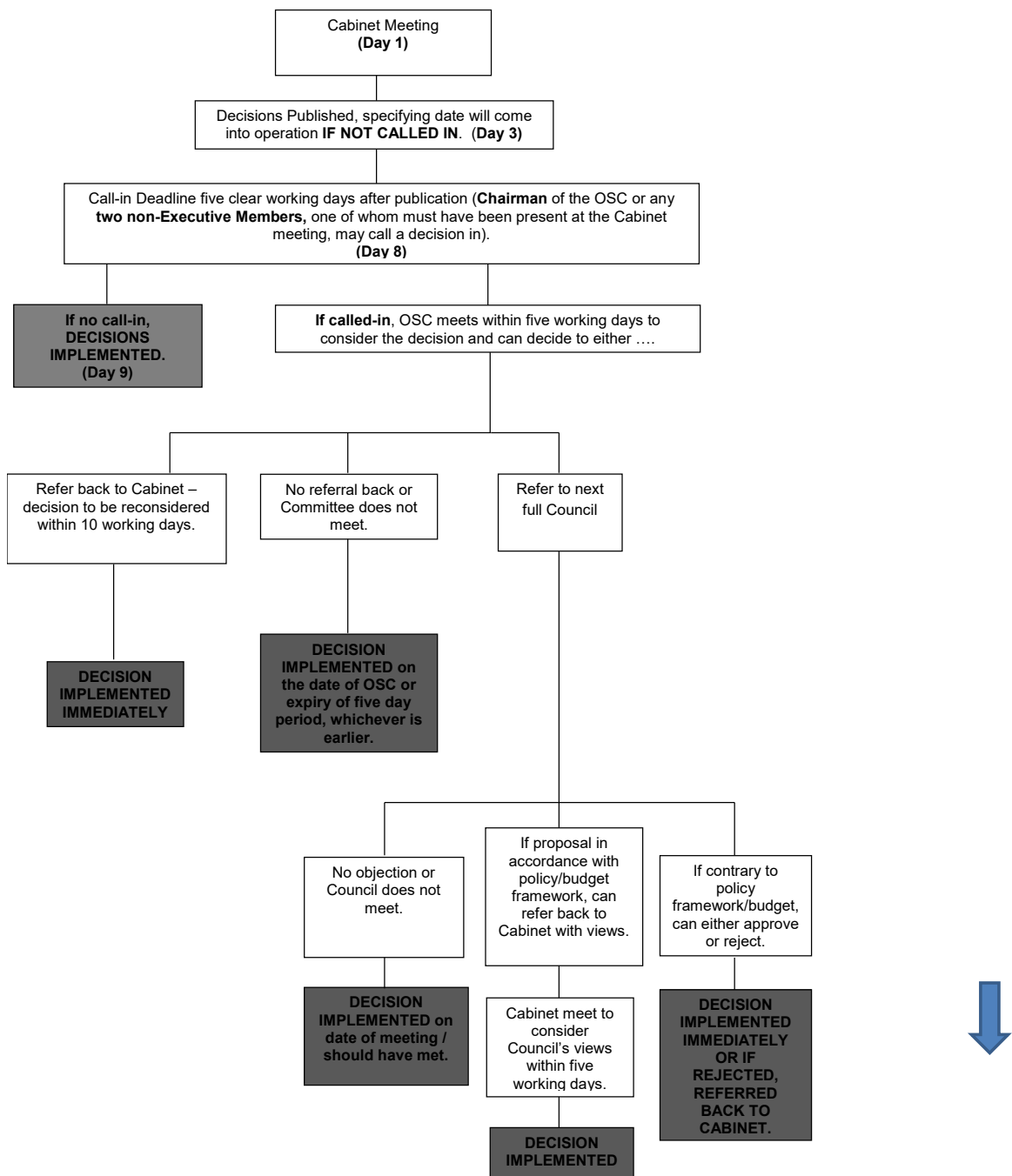
16. Call-In

A flow-chart setting out the following process can be found at the end of this section.

- (a) When a decision is made by the Cabinet or a key decision is made by an officer with delegated authority from the Cabinet, or an area committee or under joint arrangements, the decision shall be published, including where possible by electronic means, and shall be available at the main offices of the Council normally within two working days of being made. The person responsible for publishing the decision will send all Members of the Council copies of the records of all such decisions within the same timescale.
- (b) That record of the decisions will bear the date on which it is published and will specify that the decision will come into force, and may then be implemented, on the expiry of five working days after the publication of the decision, unless the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or any two non-Executive Members objects to it and calls it in.
- (c) During that period, the Head of Paid Service shall call-in a decision for scrutiny by the Committee if so requested by the Chair or any two non-Executive Members, one of whom must have been present at the Cabinet meeting and shall then notify the decision-taker of the call-in. The request for the call-in must state the reasons for the call-in. The Head of Paid Service shall call a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on such date as they may determine, where possible after consultation with the Chair of the Committee, and in any case within five working days of the decision to call-in.
- (d) If, having considered the decision, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is still concerned about it, then it may refer it back to the decision making person or body for reconsideration, setting out in writing the nature of its concerns or refer the matter to Council. If referred to the decision maker they shall then reconsider within a further 10 working days, amending the decision or not, before adopting a final decision.
- (e) If following an objection to the decision, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee does not meet in the period set out above, or does meet but does not refer the matter back to the decision making person or body, the decision shall take effect on the date of the Overview and Scrutiny meeting, or the expiry of that further five working day period, whichever is the earlier.
- (f) No further action is necessary if the matter has been referred to Council and the Council has not objected; and the decision will be effective in accordance with the provision below. However, if the Council does object, it has no locus to make decisions in respect of an Executive decision unless it is contrary to the policy framework, or contrary to or not wholly consistent with the budget. Unless that is the case, the Council will refer any decision to which it objects back to the decision making person or body, together with the Council's views on the decision. That decision making body or person shall choose whether to amend the decision or not before reaching a final decision and implementing it. Where the decision was taken by the Cabinet as a whole, a meeting will be convened to reconsider within five working days of the Council request. Where the decision was made by an individual, the individual will reconsider within five working days of the Council request.

- (g) If the Council does not meet, or if it does but does not refer the decision back to the decision making body or person, the decision will become effective on the date of the Council meeting or expiry of the period in which the Council meeting should have been held, whichever is the earlier.
- (h) Any decision referred back by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or by Council for reconsideration by Cabinet or the decision-taker(s) shall not be subject to further call-in, whether or not it is altered or adjusted to accommodate some or all of the concerns of the original call-in request.

Call-in Flow Chart



17. Call-In and Urgency

- (a) The call-in procedure set out above shall not apply where the decision being taken by the Cabinet is urgent. A decision will be urgent if any delay likely to

be caused by the call-in process would seriously prejudice the Council's or the public's interests. The record of the decision and notice by which it is made public shall state whether in the opinion of the decision making person or body, the decision is an urgent one, and therefore not subject to call-in. The Chair of the Council must agree both that the decision proposed is reasonable in all the circumstances and to it being treated as a matter of urgency. In the absence of the Chair, the Vice-Chair's consent shall be required. In the absence of both, the Head of Paid Service or their nominee's consent shall be required. Decisions taken as a matter of urgency must be reported to the next available meeting of the Council, together with the reasons for urgency.

- (b) The operation of the provisions relating to call-in and urgency shall be monitored annually, and a report submitted, via the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to Council with proposals for review if necessary.

Rother District Council

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	22 April 2024
Title:	Draft Annual Report to Council
Report of:	Chair, Councillor Paul Osborne
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of Report:	To inform Members of the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee from April 2023 to March 2024.
Officer	
Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED : That the contents of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Draft Annual Report to Council be considered and recommended as appropriate to Council.

Introduction

1. The Local Government Act 2000 states that where councils operate an executive style administration, there must be at least one committee that has the power to review or scrutinise decisions or actions which affect the authority's area or its residents. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) acts as a critical friend to the Cabinet (Executive) and other local service providers, helping to monitor performance and develop policies. The OSC also has the power to hold the Cabinet to account by "calling in" decisions before or after they have been taken.
2. The OSC cannot make decisions or policies themselves, but they have the power of influence. They make recommendations informed by partner and public opinions, performance information, examples of best practice and professional advice.
3. In accordance with Article 6, paragraph 6.3. (d) of Rother District Council's (RDC) Constitution, the OSC must report annually to Council on their workings and make recommendations for future work programmes and amend working methods, if appropriate.
4. In compiling this report, consideration has been given to the terms of reference contained within Article 6 of the Constitution and how the OSC has fulfilled its role under these terms.
5. This report covers the period from April 2023 through to the end of March 2024; the report has been prepared before the last scheduled meeting of the OSC for the 2023/24 municipal year has been held.

Scrutiny Improvement Review

6. During the last administration, the Council commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to carry out a review and evaluation of the Council's scrutiny function, as one of the recommendations that came out of the last review of the Council's Constitution.
7. The CfGS commenced the review in July 2022, which involved evidence gathering in person and online through conversations with Members and officers. They met with elected Members and officers, including the Council Leader and Cabinet Members, the Scrutiny Chair, Members of the Scrutiny Committee, and the Council's Senior Leadership Team (SLT).
8. As part of the feedback stage, a facilitated workshop was held with Members and officers in January 2023 to reflect on the review and to discuss options for improvement. Given that the make-up of the OSC had changed significantly since the elections in May 2023, it was suggested at the first meeting of the civic year that the OSC meet informally to consider in detail the outcome and recommendations of the Scrutiny Improvement Review and agree future working arrangements in light of the review's findings. Members of the Committee were happy to agree to an informal meeting to take place once the Committee had met a few times, in order for new Members to gain more of an understanding of the scrutiny process at Rother District Council.
9. The OSC met informally in January 2024 and worked through the original recommendations made by the CfGS with officer comments, which had been updated with further officer comments. After considering all 16 recommendations in turn, a total of seven actions were agreed to help improve the scrutiny function, including separate and then joint officer / Member training which had been scheduled to take place later in the year.

Scrutiny at Rother

10. Currently, RDC has 38 elected Members who represent the 21 wards within the boundaries of Rother. With 10 Members currently appointed to Cabinet, this enables 28 Members to have the opportunity to be involved in Scrutiny.
11. During the period of this report, 71% of non-Cabinet Members have been involved in Scrutiny either through membership of the Council's Scrutiny Committee or in the Task and Finish Group(s).

Structure of Scrutiny Committees

12. During the period of this report, three Task and Finish Groups have been in operation. In addition to Scrutiny meetings, the Council can have up to four active Task and Finish Groups in place at any one time, provided that the same service officers are not being involved in more than one active group at any one time.
13. There are 12 Members appointed on the OSC and they meet formally eight times a year. The OSC is politically balanced in that its make-up reflects that of the Council as a whole and its Chair and Vice-Chair are elected annually from amongst its membership save that the Chair must be appointed from one of the opposition groups serving on the Committee. As there is currently only

one opposition group, this means that a Conservative Member of the OSC must be appointed as the Chair of the Committee.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

14. The following Members were appointed by full Council to the OSC in May 2023:

P.N. Osborne (Chair), Mrs V. Cook (Vice-Chair), J. Barnes, Mrs M.L. Barnes, S. Burton, C.A. Clark, B.J. Coupar, C.A. Creaser, T.M. Killeen (MBE), M.C. Legg, C.R. Maynard and S.B. McGurk.
15. The following substitute Members were appointed to the OSC: F.H. Chowdhury (Labour), P.J. Gray (Green), N. Gordon (Conservative), C. Pearce (Liberal Democrat) and J. Stanger (Association of Independents).
16. The Committee has met nine times in person between April 2023 and the end of March 2024. This includes an additional meeting held in February 2024 to consider the draft Local Plan Consultation. The Committee also met informally over MS Teams in January 2024 to consider the recommendations of the scrutiny improvement review.
17. Attendance at meetings by Members appointed to the Committee has been good, with an average of 93% of the substantive Members attending the meetings during the period of this report. The Substitute Scheme has been used on four occasions over three meetings.
18. The average number of reports on the agenda for each meeting was four and the average length of a meeting was 1 hour and 43 minutes. A total of 125 members of the public were in attendance either in the Council Chamber or via the live broadcast at the nine formal committee meetings held during the period of this report. Dependent on the business to be considered, the relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holders continues to be invited to attend meetings.

Between April 2023 and the end of March 2024, the OSC received reports on a number of issues including:

- Climate Strategy 2023
 - Council Tax Reduction Scheme
 - Discharge of Homelessness Duty to a Suitable Private Rented Property Policy
 - Grounds Maintenance Contract – Specification
 - Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2028/29
 - New Housing Allocations Policy
 - People Strategy and Workforce Plan
 - Rail Ticket Office Consultation
 - Report of the Climate Change Steering Group
 - Rother District Council Owned / Leased Accommodation Policies
 - Rother Draft Local Plan Regulation 18 Document
19. Standing items reviewed by the Committee included:
 - Annual Work Programme
 - Annual Report of the Rother Community Safety Partnership

- Call-in and Urgency Procedures
- Draft Annual Report to Council
- Draft Revenue Budget
- Key Performance Targets
- Quarterly Progress Reports on the Annual Performance Plan
- Revenue Budget and Capital Monitoring Programme

Informal Annual Work Programming Meeting

20. The meeting for the 2024/25 municipal year will take place during May (date to be confirmed), in order to highlight Council priorities for the year. All current non-executive Members will be invited to this meeting whether or not they will be appointed to the new OSC. The Work Programme items identified during this informal meeting will be considered alongside the Annual Work Programme report that will be received by the new OSC at its first meeting on 3 June 2024.

Crime and Disorder Committee

21. The Scrutiny Committee is designated as the Council's 'Crime and Disorder Committee' under section 19 of the Police and Justice Act 2006. This is not a separate working or steering group; it simply means that on an annual basis, as part of their regular Scrutiny business, the OSC reviews the work of the Safer Rother Partnership as the Council's designated Crime and Disorder Committee.
22. The opportunities and challenges for 2023/24 included: Anti-social behaviour and youth crime; drug related harm (including drug supply (both local and county lines) and the impact on the local community); and rural crime. Work on domestic abuse, business crime, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and road safety was also included as a focus for work, but not as specifically identified priorities.

Scrutiny Reviews

April 2023

23. **Report of the Climate Change Steering Group (CCSG):** Members received the report of the CCSG, which summarised their work to address the Climate Emergency since their last public meeting in March 2022. The CCSG had met on 10 occasions overseeing the development and implementation of projects, which included Council Emissions Baselineing; Tree Planting in Bexhill; Urban Forest 1066; Bexhill Tree Planting Strategy; and Couch to Carbon Zero. Various presentations had also been received and the Group were given regular updates on all projects.

September 2023

24. **Rail Ticket Consultation:** Members received the report of the Chief Executive which gave an update on the proposed changes to ticket office services at train stations within the Rother district. Rail operators were seeking views on proposals to improve and modernise the experience for passengers, by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens and onto station concourses and platforms, which rail operators hoped would provide

support to passengers where they most needed it and help to those who could not or did not want to use contactless or digital tickets.

25. Southern Rail had already carried out a public consultation in July 2023; Southeastern Rail had completed the first phase of public consultation, with a further consultation planned for later in the year. The Council would continue to monitor and feedback updates on the ticket office consultations. Depending on the timing of the next phase of consultation, the Managing Director of Southeastern Railway would be invited to attend the next meeting of the OSC or a Member's Briefing.

Scrutiny of Services

26. The OSC also scrutinised the performance of services and the resources they use on a quarterly basis. In conjunction, the OSC considered the wider, strategic implications for the district and the lives of residents that are represented by individual indicators and targets. The Council's performance was scrutinised against 26 selected Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), broken down into eight service areas:

- **Corporate Core:** (Percentage of Freedom of Information Requests answered in 20 working days)
- **Customer Services:** (Percentage of enquiries that are resolved on the first contact with customer services; Average call waiting time for the contact centre; and Total number of customer contacts to the Council (channel shift towards digital (Telephone calls answered by customer services))
- **Environmental Health:** (% of scheduled food inspections that were carried out; and % of service requests completed in the required timescale).
- **Estates:** (Income from all assets).
- **Housing:** (Number of households either prevented from homelessness or relieved from homelessness; Average cost of placing household in temporary accommodation; and Average weeks a household was in temporary accommodation before placement).
- **Neighbourhood Services:** (Missed bins per 100,000 collections; Missed bins per 100,000 collections; Percentage of public land found with unacceptable levels of detritus when surveyed; Fly tips recorded each month, cleared from public land; and Fly tip fines issued).
- **Planning Development Management:** Percentage of major development applications determined in 13 weeks or agreed extension; Percentage of minor development applications determined in 8 weeks or agreed extension; Major development planning appeals allowed by the Planning Inspector; Minor development planning appeals allowed by the Planning Inspector; and Total number of PS1 and PS2 planning applications (live cases)).
- **Revenues and Benefits:** (Average calendar days to process a new housing benefit claim; and Average calendar days to process a change to an existing housing benefit claim), (Percentage of council tax owed for the year that has been collected; and Percentage of business rates owed for the year that have been collected)

Recommendations to Cabinet

27. During the period of the report, a total of 12 recommendations were made to Cabinet, the majority of which were supported. Details of all recommendations made to Cabinet by the OSC can be seen at Appendix 1.

Call-In

28. The OSC has not found it necessary to call-in any decisions of the Cabinet for further scrutiny during the last year. The annual report on the Call-In and Urgency Procedures can be seen elsewhere on the Agenda for this meeting.

Task and Finish Groups

29. Members have previously requested that this Annual Report to Council incorporates a cumulative examination of the results of working groups, when they have concluded their work, to establish if their recommendations and outcomes have delivered their set objectives.
30. During the period of this report, the Digital and Customer Services Strategy Task and Finish Group (DCSS T&FG), the Housing Development Strategy Task and Finish Group (HDS T&FG) and the Local Enforcement Plan Task and Finish Group (LEP T&FG) were established. The initial report of the DCSS T&FG is elsewhere on the agenda, the HDS T&FG is scheduled to report back to the OSC in 2025 and the LEP T&FG have not met yet.
31. The DCSS T&FG was established in October 2023 and has been tasked with developing a Digital and Customer Services Strategy and action plan that mandates the aims and objectives of the Council's digital and customer service aspirations over the next four years, along with Key Performance Indicators to measure the success of its outcomes. The DSCC have met four times between December 2023 and March 2024.
32. The HDS T&FG was established in September 2023 to gather evidence from a range of stakeholders and make recommendations that will inform the shape and direction of a Housing Strategy. The HDS T&FG have met once since January 2024.

Overview and Scrutiny Chair's Statement

33. From the contents of this report, it is evident that this has been another busy and productive year for the OSC. Following the elections in May 2023, there has been a change to the make-up of the OSC and the new Members appointed to the Committee who are new to scrutiny have engaged in the process and made valuable contributions. As Chair, I am pleased with the progress that has been made in terms of improved scrutiny processes and comprehensive contributions from outside representatives. I would like to thank the Members of the Committee for their attendance and their input to the many debates that have taken place. I look forward to continuously improving scrutiny by engaging in training and development opportunities in the coming year and other initiatives as a result of the scrutiny improvement review.

34. The Task and Finish Groups that we have established continue to do a lot of good work with regard to the individual tasks that they have been set. I would particularly like to thank the Members of these Task and Finish Groups, as well as outside representatives and officers for their time and input.
35. I would like to thank Councillor Mrs Vikki Cook, my Vice-Chair and Democratic Services, in particular Louise Hollingsworth, for their continued support throughout the year.

Risk Management

36. Failure to produce this report would be in breach of Article 6, paragraph 6.3. (d) of the Constitution.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	No	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

Chief Executive:	Lorna Ford
Report Contact Officer:	Louise Hollingsworth
e-mail address:	louise.hollingsworth@rother.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – References to Cabinet
Relevant previous Minutes:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Reference Documents:	N/A

REFERENCES TO CABINET

From April 2023 until end March 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) referred the following reports to Cabinet:

5 JUNE 2023

1. **NEW HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY:** Members received the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration, which provided details of the new draft Housing Allocations Policy (HAP). The Policy provided a transparent framework for the effective and equitable allocation of social housing in the Rother District, having regard to the statutory guidance as set out in s.196 of the Housing Act 1996 and the Localism Act 2011. The Council was obliged to consult local residents and other stakeholders on the proposed changes within the new draft HAP so these could be revised, refined and adjusted to best meet the needs of the community. Members of the OSC were happy to recommend to Cabinet that the draft Consultation Plan, draft Consultation Questionnaire and the draft Housing Allocations Policy be approved for consultation, as submitted.

Cabinet was supportive of the OSC's recommendation.

10 JULY 2023

2. **REVENUE BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING DRAFT OUTTURN 2022/23:** Members received and considered the report of the Interim Deputy Chief Executive which updated Members on the Council's finances as at the end of March 2023 and included a brief update on the Collection Fund performance, as well as information on income write offs for the last financial year, as required by the updated Constitution. Members raised concerns about the £7.5m underspend on Temporary Accommodation (TA) purchases, and recommended that Cabinet consider giving more priority to the purchase of TA.

Cabinet noted the OSC's recommendation.

11 SEPTEMBER 2023

3. **ROTHER DISTRICT COUNCIL OWNED / LEASED ACCOMMODATION POLICIES:** Members received and considered the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration that outlined the proposed Rother District Council (RDC) owned / leased accommodation policies for implementation. As a Registered Provider, the Council had to ensure it had a suite of policies in relation to its accommodation, tenants and staff/contractors, in order to comply with Housing Ombudsman, Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 and duties as a landlord.

Members were happy to recommend to Cabinet, for onward recommendation to full Council, that the policies be approved for adoption. Cabinet were supportive of the OSC's recommendation.

4. **DISCHARGE OF HOMELESSNESS DUTY TO A SUITABLE PRIVATE RENTED PROPERTY POLICY:** Members received the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration which gave details of the proposed Discharge of Homelessness Duty to a Suitable Private Rented Property Policy. The policy outlined the criteria for how offers of private sector accommodation were made when discharging the Council's homelessness duties under the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. To have a formal policy in place would enable the Council to transparently make an offer of a private sector tenancy inside or outside of the Rother District Council area to all households where a suitable property had been identified and leave it less open to formal appeal from customers.

Members were happy to recommend to Cabinet, for onward recommendation to full Council, that the policy be approved for adoption and that the Head of Housing and Regeneration be granted delegated authority to make any further changes to the policy that may be required in the future. Cabinet was supportive of the Committee's recommendations

5. **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024/25 TO 2028/29:** Members considered the report of the Interim Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151) on the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2028/29, which would be considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 6 November 2023. The updated Medium Term Financial Strategy, identified savings and efficiencies, draft capital budget, fees and charges proposals, a risk assessment for the next year's budget and a sensitivity and scenario analysis were appended to the report.

Members made three recommendations to Cabinet, two of which were not supported and one was already being considered as part of the Council's Fit for the Future work.

6. **COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME:** Members received the report of the Revenue and Benefits Manager which outlined a proposed consultation with both the public and the Major Precepting Authorities in respect of proposed changes to the Council's Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme with effect from 1 April 2024. The proposed changes in the scheme for 2024/25 were to increase the working age maximum to 100% and to remove the £5 per week minimum payment; the discounts available based on current income thresholds were outlined in the report for Members' information.

Members requested that Cabinet consider the Council consult with the public and Major Precepting Authorities on proposed changes to the Scheme and Cabinet was supportive of the OSC's recommendation.

7. **PERFORMANCE REPORT: FIRST AND SECOND QUARTERS 2023/24:** Members considered the report of the Corporate Programme and Improvement Manager on the Performance Report of the First and Second Quarters 2023/24. Members were given the opportunity to scrutinise progress towards corporate operations and service delivery and make any necessary recommendations to Cabinet for future service delivery. Members were

provided with a summary of the Council's performance against the selected 26 Key Performance Indicators (KPI) broken down into eight service areas; performance was compared to the previous quarter result and to the same quarter the previous year. Members were asked to consider a change to the target for processing all types of planning applications to 80%, which Members were happy to recommend to Cabinet.

Cabinet was supportive of the OSC's recommendation.

8. **CLIMATE STRATEGY:** Members considered the report of the Environment Strategy Officer, which summarised the work of the Climate Strategy refresh and provided the resulting draft Climate Strategy (CS) to be considered for onward approval and adoption. In 2022/23, in partnership with stakeholders and the local community, a review of the Council's strategy to reduce emissions and create a cleaner, greener, more equitable district was completed, alongside a review of the Environment Strategy 2020. The resulting CS detailed how the Council would use its powers and influence to make the district carbon neutral and reduce its operational emissions to Net Zero by 2030.

The aim of the CS was to enable, encourage and accelerate the reduction of GHG emissions across the district to net zero by 2030. The CS outlined its five objectives with five action areas (Buildings and Energy Efficiency, Transport, Resource Consumption and Waste, Biodiversity and Land Use and Energy Generation), which detailed the challenges and the Council's approach. A three-year Climate Action Plan had been produced to direct delivery of the CS.

Members recommended that Cabinet be requested to consider that the draft Climate Strategy be recommended to Council for approval and adoption, which Cabinet were supportive of.

22 JANUARY 2024

9. **DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET 2024/25 PROPOSALS:** The OSC considered the draft Revenue Budget which outlined the likely financial position and key issues that Members needed to consider as part of the budget setting process. The Committee had been requested to consider the draft budget and make recommendations to Cabinet, to be considered at its meeting on 5 February 2024.

Cabinet noted the OSC's comments and agreed to recommend to Council an increase in Council Tax at Band D by £5.94 (2.99%) and set at £204.54 (subject to any changes to special expenses yet to be confirmed).

10. **KEY PERFORMANCE TARGETS 2024/25:** The OSC considered the report of the Corporate Programme, Risk and Improvement Manager, which gave details of the current Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and their target levels of performance for the financial year 2023/24. A new KPI for Progress of the Climate Strategy had been added to the set for 2024/25, minor changes made to the Planning Development and Revenues and Benefits KPIs and a reduction in the number of KPIs for Customer Services were proposed.

Members recommended and agreed that Planning Development KPIs P3 and P4 be combined and agreed to recommend all the suggested KPIs for consideration by Cabinet. Members requested they be listed in alphabetical order for ease of reference.

Cabinet was supportive of the KPIs and their performance targets recommended by the OSC for 2024/25 and it was acknowledged that the KPIs selected would adequately reflect a review of the Council's performance.

11. **ALLOCATIONS POLICY:** The OSC considered the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration, which presented the findings of the eight-week public consultation on the draft Housing Allocations Policy 2024 (HAP) and the proposed final version of the Policy. Members were happy to recommend the Policy to Cabinet and full Council for approval and adoption, with delegated authority granted to the Head of Housing and Regeneration to formally adopt it make any further minor amendments, in consultation with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing, following the conclusion of the implementation period.

Cabinet was supportive of the OSC's recommendations.

19 FEBRUARY 2024

12. **LOCAL PLAN CONSULTATION DRAFT (REG 18):** The OSC considered the report of the Planning Policy Manager, together with the Rother Draft Local Plan Regulation 18 document and the Rother Local Development Scheme, ahead of their formal consideration by Cabinet on 4 March 2024.

After some discussion, Members were happy to recommend the Rother Draft Local Plan Regulation 18 document to Cabinet for approval and formal consultation and for the revised Rother Local Development Scheme to be approved and published alongside the Local Plan. Cabinet noted the OSC's comments, were supportive of their recommendations and also agreed that delegated authority be granted to the Director – Place and Climate Change, in consultation with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Planning to make any minor modifications to the draft LP prior to the consultation.

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Rother District Council

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	22 April 2024
Title:	High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029
Report of:	Jeff Pyrah, Planning Policy Manager
Ward(s):	All, except Bexhill Wards
Purpose of Report:	To introduce the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029
Officer	
Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED : That the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-2024, reproduced at Appendix A, be recommended to Cabinet and full Council for approval and formal adoption.

Introduction

1. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities with land in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to prepare and publish an up-to-date plan which 'formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it' (S89 (2)). Where AONBs cross administrative boundaries, local authorities are required to act jointly to prepare the plan (S89 (11)(b)). In the High Weald, this requirement is delivered through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), acting on behalf of the 15 local authorities with land in the High Weald AONB.
2. The current AONB Management Plan was adopted by Cabinet on 11 February 2019. Each management plan covers a five-year period. This Plan will be the first edition of a new 20-year strategy, with a five-year implementation plan.
3. This new strategy takes account of current issues such as the biodiversity crisis, climate change, fairer access to nature, and development pressure. This means that the range of character components has broadened, and other aspects of the Plan have changed, including the inclusion of cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action and an investment strategy 2024-2029.
4. The Planning Policy Manager has represented the local authority throughout the drafting process, as part of the officer steering group. He has collated responses from officers across departments and fed this into the process. He attended a full day workshop to provide informal feedback and provided written comments on behalf of Rother District Council during the formal public consultation on the draft Management Plan, which took place at the end of 2023. The overall objective for the Planning Policy Manager was to ensure

that the plan aligns with the Council's adopted development plan and the intended direction of the new Local Plan 2020-2040.

5. The preparation of the Management Plan has been overseen by the High Weald AONB's Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), which our Planning Committee Chair sits on. The JAC agreed the timetable for the plan in March 2022; agreed the content structure in November 2022; and recommended consultation on the draft Management Plan in March 2023.
6. On 27 March 2024, the JAC agreed the final Management Plan 2024-2029 and its supporting papers and recommended that individual local authorities formally adopt the Plan by the end of June 2024.

Analysis

7. The Management Plan incorporates introductions, facts and figures and a Statement of Significance before explaining the Core Character Components that underpin the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB.
8. It sets out five cross-cutting themes:
 - Restoring Soil Health and Regenerative Land Management
 - Nature Recovery and Biodiversity
 - The Climate Crisis: Achieving Net Zero
 - People and Access
 - Planning and Development in the High Weald AONB
9. The Plan is supported by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA); Habitats Regulations Assessment; Equality Impact Assessment; and a Consultation Statement.
10. Note that the plan is not a development plan document, but it will be a material consideration in relation to the determination of planning applications.

Conclusion

11. The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 has completed all of the statutory stages of a review and has been subject to public engagement and scrutiny. It has been agreed by the AONB's Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) as the final Management Plan 2024-2029. The JAC recommends that individual local authorities formally adopt the Plan by the end of June 2024. The Plan and its supporting documents will then be submitted to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Financial Implications

12. There are no financial implications for the proposals within this report.

Legal Implications

13. Failure to adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan would mean that the Council would be in breach of the requirements of the CROW Act 2000 to review the Management Plan within five years.

Human Resources Implications

14. There are no Human Resource implications for the proposals within this report.

Environmental Implications

15. The adoption of the Management Plan will help to ensure the restoration and reinvigoration of the High Weald AONB as a cultural landscape for future generations to enjoy and for nature to thrive, while supporting the journey towards net zero (taken from the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee's message within the Management Plan).

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	Yes
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

Chief Executive:	Lorna Ford
Report Contact Officer:	Jeff Pyrah
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Appendices:	A AONB Management Plan 2024-2029

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High Weald
National
Landscape

The High Weald National Landscape an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



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AONB Management Plan

A 20-year strategy for the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald's natural beauty

THIS EDITION: 2024-2029

A statutory plan adopted by 15 local authority partners setting out their policies for the management of the area and providing an agreed public policy vision for the High Weald 2024-2044

The High Weald

AONB Management Plan

2024-2029

Published by the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, on behalf of:

- East Sussex County Council
- Kent County Council
- Surrey County Council
- West Sussex County Council
- Ashford Borough Council
- Crawley Borough Council
- Hastings Borough Council
- Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
- Horsham District Council
- Mid Sussex District Council
- Rother District Council
- Sevenoaks District Council
- Tandridge District Council
- Wealden District Council



From November 22nd 2023, all AONBs are to be known as National Landscapes. The High Weald National Landscape remains designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is referred to as such in policy, legislation and guidance. For this reason, this document is still titled and referred to as the High Weald AONB Management Plan. Its statutory purpose remains unchanged.

This edition published 2024

- Fourth edition published 2019
- Third edition published 2014
- Second edition published 2009
- First edition published 2004

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Foreword

The High Weald is a remarkably beautiful and precious landscape. It has for centuries inspired artists and writers and been a joyous place for its residents and visitors. Its protection should be of importance to all, and threats to its character should be of concern to all.

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Future generations will view us very poorly if we fail to hand it on to them in good shape. Designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1983, the High Weald now enjoys the greater accolade of 'National Landscape' respecting its great significance beyond its own borders.

The High Weald is part of a family of landscapes which are so special, they have been recognised in law as being of national importance.

In today's rapidly changing world, our landscapes are facing unprecedented challenges. Climate change, habitat loss, and growing pressures from human development threaten the very essence of what makes our National Landscapes so special. As such, it is imperative that we take proactive measures to safeguard our natural heritage for future generations to enjoy.

In line with current policy priorities in landscape and natural beauty, this Management Plan sets out a clear vision for the future of the National Landscape. At its core, this vision aims to strike a balance between conserving the area's natural beauty and wildlife, while also supporting thriving communities and facilitating responsible and sustainable access for visitors and residents alike.

This Management Plan acknowledges the importance of partnership working in achieving our conservation goals. By collaborating, we can leverage our collective expertise and resources to implement effective strategies for protecting and enhancing the National Landscape.

We urgently need to recognise that natural beauty is not to be taken for granted and is an essential and life enhancing foundation for a healthy and sustainable future. Indeed, it is reckless to take it for granted; natural beauty and the landscapes that cradle it deserve to be cherished, protected and celebrated.

I am grateful to all those who have contributed to this excellent management plan. Your dedication and passion for the High Weald are truly commendable and I look forward to seeing the Plan's positive impact for years to come. While I encourage you to read the Plan, I equally encourage you to take every opportunity to get out and enjoy the special beauty of the High Weald.

Philip Hygate FRSA Chair of the National Landscapes Association



The High Weald is an outstandingly beautiful landscape cherished by people and celebrated for its scenery, tranquillity and wildlife. Its ridges and valleys are clothed with an intricate mosaic of small fields interspersed with farmsteads and surrounded by hedges and abundant woods, all arranged around a network of historic routeways. One of the best surviving medieval landscapes in north-west Europe, the High Weald has remained a unique and recognisable area for at least the last 700 years. Covering 1461 sq. km and close to London, this extensive area offers millions of people the opportunity to experience the beauty of nature within working countryside. It was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983, and is now known as the High Weald National Landscape.

‘A landscape not yet bulldozed for speed’

As I walked Out One Midsummer Morning, Laurie Lee, 1969

High Weald National Landscape Partnership

The High Weald Partnership is constituted as a Joint Advisory Committee involving the 15 local authorities that cover the National Landscape (AONB) and representatives of local communities and other stakeholders. Its role is to champion the National Landscape, prepare a joint management plan and coordinate delivery of the Plan's objectives. The Partnership was set up in 1989 as an advisory body. It does not own or manage land in the National Landscape.

Our commitment

- We will work together to recover nature and achieve a landscape-led net zero future for the High Weald through facilitating regenerative land management, encouraging pollution reduction and coordinating ambitious net-zero related planning policies.
- We will work together to protect the distinctive cultural character of the High Weald landscape and its human capital, supporting rural skills and a local economy for food and sustainable materials.
- We will work together to ensure fair access to the landscape as a natural health service, promote ecological literacy in schools and facilitate connections to nature in communities so everyone can enjoy the High Weald's natural beauty.
- We will use the Plan to inform plan-making and assess policies, proposals, and planning applications to fulfil our duty under Section 85 of the CRoW, Act 2000 to ensure they further the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.
- We will use the Plan to guide support for environmental land management and rural development to ensure they conserve and enhance the AONB.
- We will pursue best practice in governance of the Partnership in relation to equity, diversity and inclusion, seeking to engage and empower local communities in decision-making and giving a voice to young people and future generations.

Message from the Chairman

The High Weald Partnership has a vision to foster the restoration and reinvigoration of this beautiful cultural landscape for future generations to enjoy and for nature to thrive whilst supporting our journey towards net zero.

As part of our vision, sustainable activities, farming and community-scale land management will secure long-term economic and social benefits, creating more rural jobs and supporting vibrant community life. An unpolluted and biodiverse landscape will ensure food security, clean air and water, and healthy soil for our children and grandchildren.

Settlements designed around safe and accessible low carbon travel will provide opportunities for everyone to enjoy the health and happiness that the High Weald's natural beauty offers, with well planned housing, tailored to local needs and designed as a high quality response to the character of the area.

This Plan sets out a route map to achieve our vision. A successful outcome relies on all our actions, large and small, and our collaboration as a community.

I would like to thank all those that contributed to this Plan, particularly the staff and colleagues who have worked so diligently to produce it, and I commend it to our partners. We, in the High Weald Partnership will continue to lead and champion the protection of natural beauty so that the legacy bequeathed to us from past generations is passed on restored and renewed for the future.



Councillor Pete Bradbury

Chairman, High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

High Weald Partnership 20-year vision

The High Weald Partnership seeks to ensure that actions taken today leave the High Weald National Landscape as a beautiful and functioning biodiverse landscape for future generations, whether they work, live, or spend their leisure time here.

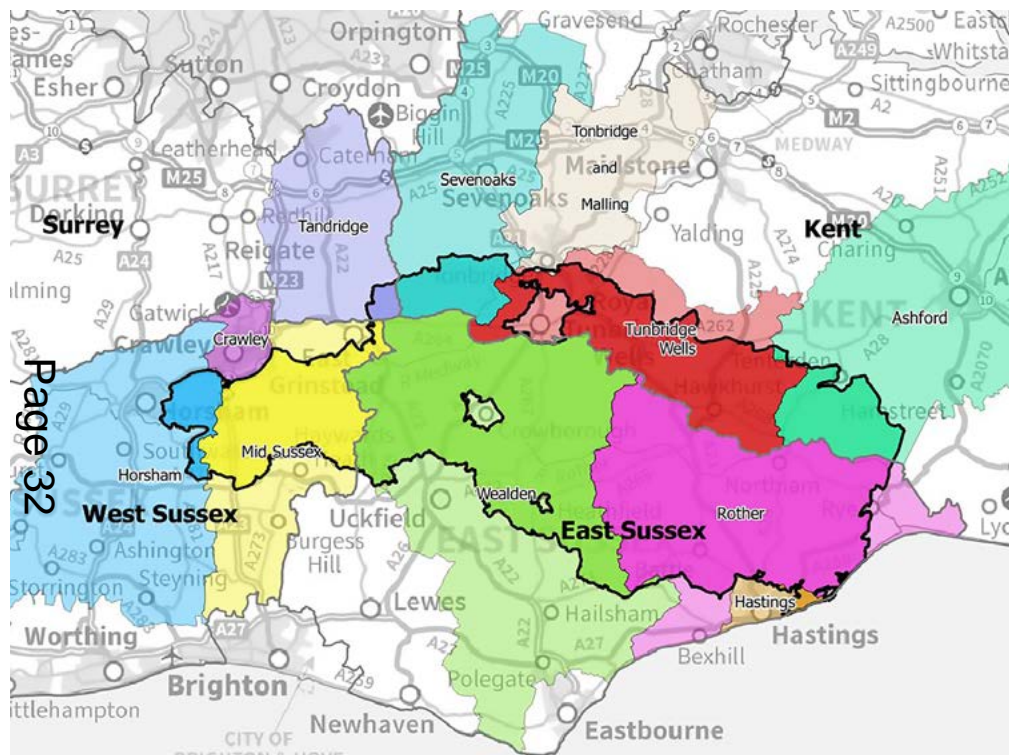
This will require transformational change at a cultural level, with a strengthened appreciation of National Landscape status amongst policymakers supported by increased investment and resources, and wider engagement and understanding. The High Weald Partnership seeks to respond proactively, ambitiously and urgently to 'drivers of change', including working towards the national goal of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, reversing the biodiversity crisis, and reducing development pressure so that the High Weald:

- Page 31
- Retains its distinctive historic character and beauty as a small-scale anciently enclosed working landscape, with a mosaic of landscape features and habitats including woodland, shaws, native hedgerows, gill streams, traditional meadows, lowland heath and built heritage, and has halted the incremental erosion of natural beauty.
 - Has restored its rich biodiversity and abundance of characteristic species, and reinstated healthy water, air and soil systems improving habitat connectivity, condition and ecological resilience.
 - Is maintained as a thriving working landscape with mixed farming and livestock producing nutrient-dense food through sustainable land management practices, such as regenerative agriculture supplemented by leaving land to nature and agro-forestry, with activities and appropriate infrastructure supported and nurtured where they deliver public benefits.
 - Celebrates its woodland history and has revitalised its woodland economy producing highly valued timber products sustained by sensitive small-scale woodland management.
 - Sustains a diverse range of people and more young people working in farming, forestry and rural land management, supported by appropriate workspace, skills training and business investment.
 - Retains its innate sense of rurality, tranquillity and perception of remoteness, allowing people to experience the sounds of nature and changing seasons.
 - Has protected its historic landscape features and heritage assets, allowing people to experience the sense of history everywhere and the visibility of the medieval landscape.
 - Has maintained and enhanced the quality of its dark skies and the ability to see the stars.
 - Exhibits appropriate high quality and landscape-led new housing, including affordable housing, and workspace to support thriving rural communities, and which does not compromise the High Weald's character, aided by a consistent approach to planning across the National Landscape.
 - Facilitates active participation by people, their communities and businesses, in conserving the area and managing change.
 - Has adopted a net-zero future, relying on nature-based solutions to aid climate cooling and adapt to flooding and extreme weather events, with landscape-led green and renewable technologies, and non-fossil fuel transport underpinning a strong rural economy and thriving communities.
 - Provides a warm welcome and high-quality experience for residents and visitors, and is a more accessible landscape, with modal shifts in transport and more opportunities for walking and cycling, allowing people to engage with nature and enjoy the 'natural health service' benefits offered by the landscape.
 - Provides inspiration and enjoyment for people, businesses and communities, and is valued and understood by them and championed by the High Weald Partnership.
- To help achieve this, the Management Plan sets out a 20-year strategy for the High Weald National Landscape, supported by a five-year implementation strategy 2024-2029 with recommended actions to guide the activities of the partnership, partners, stakeholders and communities, along with investment priorities under a number of cross-cutting themes.

Members of the High Weald National Landscape Partnership: Ashford Borough Council, Country Land and Business Association, Crawley Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, Forestry Commission, Hastings Borough Council, Horsham District Council, Kent County Council, Mid Sussex District Council, the National Farmers Union, Natural England, Rother District Council, Sevenoaks District Council, Surrey County Council, Tandridge District Council, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Wealden District Council, West Sussex County Council.

About the High Weald

High Weald AONB counties, districts and boroughs



Fifteen local authorities have adopted the Plan as their policy for the AONB.

AONB boundaries were drawn so as to include land of outstanding scientific value to ensure:

‘The preservation of large tracts of country too large for strict preservation as National Nature Reserves, but yet of great value either physiographically or geologically or as containing complex communities of plant and animal life’.

The Report of the National Parks Committee 1947

Local Authority	% of the HW AONB within each local authority	% of each local authority that is within the HW AONB	
County Councils	East Sussex	60.19	50.99
	Kent	25.41	10.21
	West Sussex	13.68	9.87
	Surrey	0.7	0.61
Districts & Boroughs	Wealden	30.53	53.36
	Rother	29.29	82.6
	Tunbridge Wells	15.61	68.88
	Mid Sussex	11.19	48.96
	Ashford	5.69	14.34
	Sevenoaks	4.05	16.0
	Horsham	2.46	6.77
	Tandridge	0.7	4.11
	Hastings	0.37	17.63
	Tonbridge & Malling	0.07	0.39
	Crawley	0.03	1.05



High Weald National Landscape

High Weald in facts and figures

2,570 km of public footpaths, bridleways and byways

Ashdown Forest the largest public open space in South East England

Over 13,000 man-made ponds

>700,000 people within 5km

68 Village Conservation Areas

100 parishes

57 Medieval Parish Churches

124,000 residents

174,000 hectares in environmental land management schemes

Dissected by 4,613 of small streams

1,562 farm holdings average size 36ha, half the national average size

3,500 historic farmsteads

>12,500km of ancient hedgerows

40% of fields managed with low chemical inputs

639 recorded historic iron working sites

671 inland sandstone outcrops

272 sq km of ancient woodland highest coverage in any protected landscape

15% designated as wildlife sites

Covering 4 Counties Across 11 Districts

4th largest AONB

>1,800 sites of internationally important gill woodland

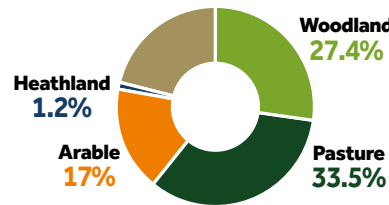
5 reservoirs

29 Historic parks & gardens open to the public



9.5 Million tonnes of carbon sequestered in trees
18.6 Million tonnes of carbon stored in soils

Land use



71 Parishes with intrinsically rural Dark Skies

41km of heritage railways

5,296 listed buildings



About our Plan

What is a National Landscape or AONB?

'National Landscape' is the informal term adopted in 2023 to describe an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) is the legal term for the designation. An AONB is an area of countryside designated by the government to protect its landscape character and the wildlife, natural systems and cultural associations on which it depends in order that people, now and in the future, can enjoy its natural beauty. AONBs (National Landscapes) are protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act), which sets out the legal purpose of AONB designation as being to "conserve and enhance natural beauty".¹

There are 34 National Landscapes in England, a further four wholly in Wales and eight in Northern Ireland. The 46 National Landscapes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cover approximately 18% of the land surface.

Together with National Parks, National Landscapes represent our finest landscapes; unique and irreplaceable national assets, each with such distinctive character, biodiversity and natural beauty that they are recognised internationally as part of the global family of protected areas to be managed in the interest of everyone. The distinctive character and outstanding natural beauty of National Landscapes make them some of the most special and loved places in the UK.

National Landscapes are living, working landscapes that contribute some £16bn every year to the national economy. Land in National Landscapes is mostly owned and managed privately with limited ownership by third sector or public bodies. The commitment of all these communities is critical to the designation's success.

1 & 2. [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

What is the purpose of the Plan?

AONB Management Plans are policy documents for the whole of the protected landscape. They are evidence based, locally owned and democratically accountable strategies for looking after these beautiful places in the interests of both people and natural systems. They are formulated to coordinate ambition, policy, investment and action to achieve the legal purpose of 'conserving and enhancing natural beauty' for the benefit of current and future generations, and to set out how people's enjoyment of the area's special qualities can be fostered. The Management Plan is the principal vehicle for ensuring that the statutory purposes of the protected landscape are met.

Who prepares the Plan and what is its status?

AONB Management Plans are statutory documents. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities with land in an AONB (National Landscape) to prepare and publish an up-to-date plan which

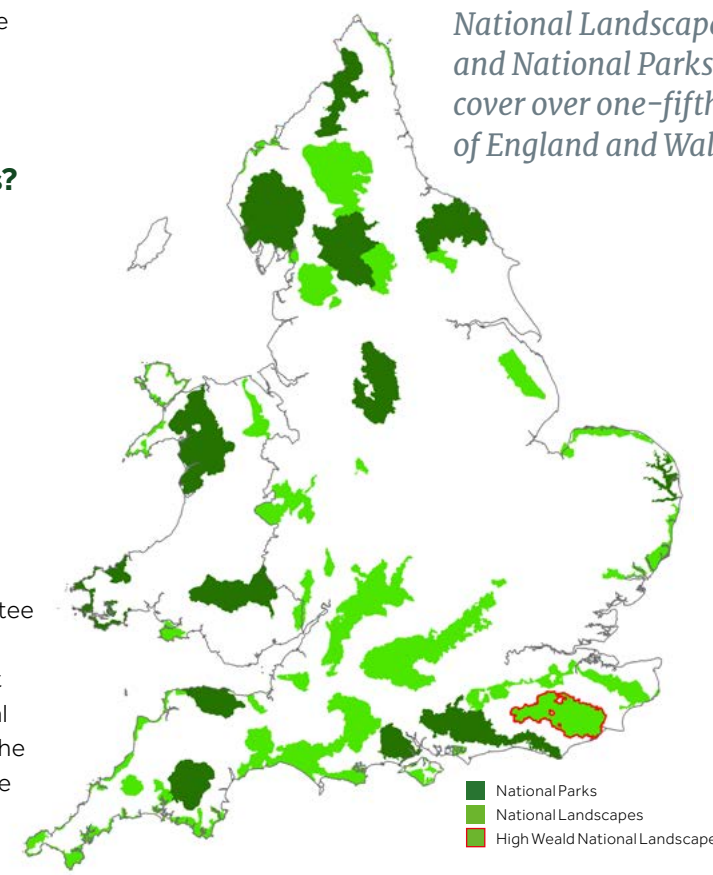
'formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it'.²

Where National Landscapes cross administrative boundaries, local authorities are required to act jointly to prepare the plan. In the High Weald, this requirement is delivered through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), a partnership which includes 15 local authorities covering the area together with community, environment and land-based sector representatives. Following a formal consultation process, the High Weald JAC recommends the Plan to individual local authorities who then each adopt the Plan as their policy for the management of the National Landscape. The Plan is reviewed every five years.

Who is the Plan for and how should it be used?

The Management Plan is relevant to everyone. It guides local authority plan-making and decision-taking, and also has a wider role, setting a 20-year strategy for everyone who lives or works in the High Weald, or visits it, to work towards. The Management Plan defines the Natural Beauty of the High Weald AONB, and sets out the management policy for its conservation and enhancement.

National Landscapes and National Parks cover over one-fifth of England and Wales



The Plan is divided into two parts. The first part describes the core components of natural beauty to be conserved and enhanced, providing long term objectives supported by five-year ambitions and proposed actions to guide the activities of the partnership, partners, and stakeholders during the Plan period. The second part addresses the main drivers of change (or cross-cutting themes) affecting the High Weald in the Plan period, providing principles to underpin activities and a strategy for investment 2024-2029. The ambitions and actions in Part 1, and principles and investment strategy in Part 2, constitute the five-year implementation strategy of this Plan.

Government, statutory undertakers and other public bodies (such as NHS England, Forestry Commission and Natural England) or person holding public office can use the Management Plan to help ensure they are fulfilling their Section 85 duty to 'seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty' of the High Weald AONB³. Additionally, the public can use the Management Plan to highlight to relevant bodies the natural beauty and needs of the AONB, and the actions that should be taken to protect it.

AONB 'setting'

The Management Plan may also be applied to the area's 'setting'. The term 'setting' is used to refer to areas outside the National Landscape where development and other activities may affect land within a National Landscape. Its extent will vary depending upon the issues considered, however, due to the high synergy in character between the National Landscape boundary and the wider High Weald National Character Area (NCA)⁴, land within the NCA should be considered as falling within the setting of the National Landscape. Section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000 requires

public bodies to consider whether any activities outside the AONB may affect land in an AONB. Not all activities will be detrimental; conservation practices and economic activities outside the National Landscape can support the National Landscape's conservation purpose.

How was the Plan prepared?

Management Plan preparation follows a formal process requiring preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment and other appropriate assessments to comply with UK law. Public comment and engagement were sought throughout the Plan preparation, and a formal consultation process undertaken in October 2023.

The following documents have been prepared in support of this Plan:

AONB Management Plan Review (2023)

Strategic Environmental Assessment. High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

AONB Management Plan Review (2023)

Habitats Regulations Assessment. High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

AONB Management Plan Review (2023)

Equality Impact Assessment Screening Report. High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Savanta (2022)

Visitors to the High Weald AONB. High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

The above documents can be found at www.highweald.org

The AONB Management Plan and local authority functions

The Management Plan is relevant to any local authority function that may have an influence upon the natural beauty of the AONB, including:

- Planning and development, including neighbourhood planning
- Scheduled ancient monuments, listed buildings and conservation areas
- Building regulations and energy efficiency
- Waste, environment protection, pesticides and pollution
- Libraries and museums
- Animal health and welfare, biodiversity, flooding and marine areas
- Rights of way and coastal access
- Food and food safety
- Public health, mental health, social care and young people
- Highways, traffic management, public transport and parking
- Education

A full list can be found at Statutory duties placed on local government – data.gov.uk

³ Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (legislation.gov.uk)

⁴ NCA Profile:122 High Weald – NE508 (naturallengland.org.uk)



The High Weald's landscape

The High Weald occupies the ridged and faulted sandstone core of an area known from Saxon times as the Weald. It is an area of ancient countryside and one of the best surviving medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. The mosaic of small mixed farms and woodlands is considered to represent a quintessentially English landscape.

At first glance the High Weald appears to be a densely wooded landscape, but closer examination reveals a detailed agricultural tapestry of fields, small woodlands and farmsteads. Everything in the High Weald landscape is human scale. Wildflower meadows, alive with bees and grasshoppers, are now a rare delight, but the medieval pattern of small fields with sinuous edges surrounded by thick wooded hedges remain. Extensive views punctuated by church spires can be glimpsed along the ridge-top roads. Around almost every corner, a harmonious group of traditional farm buildings comes into view with their distinctive steep, clay tile and hipped roofs.

The High Weald is crossed by one of the most famous routeways in English history, the one that took King Harold's army from victory at Stamford Bridge to defeat at Hastings in 1066. Today, its rich detail is still best explored through the myriad of interconnecting paths and tracks. Here you can walk in the footsteps of our medieval and Anglo-Saxon ancestors, who used this dense network of routeways to move between the wooded Weald and settlements on its fringes where farming was easier. These tracks remain a visible legacy of the value communities placed on the resources of the forest.

Woodland still covers nearly a third of the area in an intricate network of farm woods, wooded shaws, pits and gills, and larger wooded estates. Medieval forests and deer parks were extensive, with significant remnants surviving in Ashdown Forest, Worth Forest, Waterdown (Broadwater) Forest, St Leonard's Forest and Dallington Forests. Most of the woodland is ancient, managed in the past as coppice and swept with magnificent carpets of bluebells and wood anemones in the spring. Of the mature oaks for which the Weald was once famous, few remain. The drier sandy soils favour pine and birch within a patchwork of lowland heath.

More ancient woodland survives in the High Weald than anywhere else in the country owing to the small size of Wealden holdings, the importance of crafts to supplement the income from agriculture on poor soils and the high economic value of timber for ships and buildings, and to fuel the iron, glass and cloth industries. Woods were enclosed and managed as coppice with standards, producing hardwood and construction timber. Large, widely spaced trees in hedgerows and parklands produced the crooked boughs required for shipbuilding. In the 17th and 18th centuries, when hop growing expanded so did the extent of chestnut coppice for hop poles.

Indications of the area's busy industrial past are everywhere, from the large houses built by wealthy ironmasters and clothmakers, to the charcoal hearths, pits and ponds of the iron industry scattered through ancient woodlands.

The small scale and historical patterning of the landscape, with intermingling woodland, wetland and open habitats, and many interconnected linear features supporting semi-natural vegetation makes for a rich and accessible landscape for wildlife. Sandstone exposed as outcrops or along the wooded gills is a nationally rare habitat and supports a rich community of ferns, bryophytes and lichens. The High Weald meets the sea at Hastings cliffs, an area of undeveloped coastline consisting of actively eroding soft cliffs of sands and clays. The numerous gill streams of the High Weald give rise to the headwaters and upper reaches of rivers, with those to the east

important in the past as trade routes for timber, iron and wool out to the coastal ports on Romney Marsh.

The High Weald is well-known nationally for its wealth of historic houses and gardens including Sheffield Park and Ashburnham Place, both of whose landscaped gardens were designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown; the ruined 13th-century Bayham Abbey, with grounds landscaped by Repton; the follies at Brightling created by 18th-century eccentric 'Mad Jack' Fuller; Bodiam Castle, moated and dating from the 14th century, Standen, the Arts & Crafts house designed by Philip Webb; the Jacobean house Batemans, home to Rudyard Kipling; Great Dixter, restored by Lutyens with an internationally-renowned garden created by Christopher Lloyd; and Great Maytham, home to Frances Hodgson Burnett, whose walled garden provided the inspiration for

97% of people find the High Weald's scenery, tranquillity and proximity to nature appealing

High Weald Public Survey, 2018

her classic children's book *The Secret Garden*.

Such accents stand out against the backdrop of a rich tapestry of vernacular architecture composed of materials distinct to the High Weald and which contribute to the unique sense of place, cultural identity and local distinctiveness of both the area as a whole, and its individual settlements.

Wilder elements reminiscent of the former forest survive amid this beautiful small-scale landscape, shaped by man, inspiring many notable people. These include the architect Norman Shaw, painter William Holman Hunt, and William Robinson, who pioneered the creation of the English natural garden, as well as writers Rudyard Kipling and A.A. Milne, who set his much-loved stories about Winnie the Pooh in Ashdown Forest.

The High Weald forms the central core of a geological landform of sedimentary rocks, the Wealden anticline, which underpins the south east. The unique geology of the Weald is shared with only three places in Europe – the northern part of the Isle of Wight, and parts of the Boulonnais and Pays de Bray in France. The Purbeck Beds, which lie along the Battle ridge, form the oldest sediments, having been laid down in shallow lagoons at the end of the Jurassic period (142 million years ago). Iron-rich clays and sandstones followed as the landscape changed to one of flood plains and rivers. The area gradually sank below the sea and around 75 million years ago the great uplift began, followed by compression which folded and faulted the strata. Subsequent weathering has cut through the strata, exposing the layers as sandstone ridges and clay valleys. The amazing variability of soils produced has shaped the Weald's economic and therefore social history.

With rising temperatures at the beginning of the post-glacial period, and the continuing land link to Europe, arboreal species were able to expand with birch, hazel and pine being followed by oak, elm, alder, ash and lime. There is some evidence for small-scale, sporadic and temporary clearance by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. From c6000 BC, when Britain became separated from Europe, people had already begun to change the landscape; this is evidenced by the scatter of flints used for hunting and the use of fire to make clearings to entice prey. Periodic woodland clearance continued with Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age hill forts indicating active communities in Ashdown Forest, but it was the medieval practice of transhumance – the seasonal movement of people and animals between the settlements on the borders of the Weald and its interior – coupled with exploitation of the valuable resources of the forest, that transformed the Weald into the settled landscape we see today.

*Edited and adapted from *The Kent and Sussex Weald*, Peter Brandon, 2003*

Natural Beauty and the legislative purpose of AONBs (National Landscapes)

The legal purpose of AONB designation is to **conserve and enhance natural beauty**⁵ (CRoW 2000). Section 85 of the CRoW Act sets out the general duties of public bodies ('relevant authorities'):

“In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty in England, a relevant authority other than a devolved Welsh authority must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.”⁶

In the first half of the 20th century, cultural landscapes such as the High Weald were considered to be 'natural' countryside reflecting centuries of human interaction with nature which pre-dated industrial farming. Their distinctive patterns of land cover (landscape character) included unique settlement patterns, building forms and material palettes, and they were enriched by features of scientific (wildlife and geology) and geographic interest and cultural associations originating from centuries of non-mechanised land management.

The 1949 Act summed up this combination of character and interest as 'natural beauty'. Access to natural beauty was seen as a right for everyone now and in the future, with the pleasurable aesthetic experience and sense of wellbeing gained from immersion in nature considered a societal good and a necessary precursor of health and happiness for all.⁷

'Natural beauty' has been the basis for the designation of both AONBs and National Parks since the 1949 Act. Natural beauty is a holistic concept, and whilst the term has never been exhaustively defined in legislation, over the years, qualification and amendment to the legislation has made it clear that natural beauty includes considerations such as wildlife, geological features and cultural heritage but is not restricted by them.

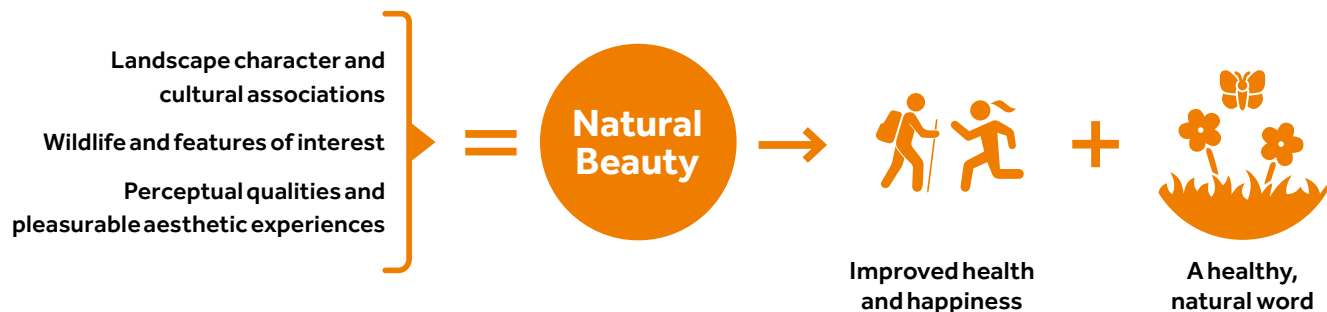
Government guidance relating to AONBs provides a useful non-technical definition:

***'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.*⁸**

This includes scenic quality, tranquillity and cultural heritage (including the built environment), that makes the area unique.

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 clarified that land used for agriculture, woodlands, parkland or with physiographical features is not prevented from being treated as an area of 'natural beauty'.

For the purposes of this Plan, the High Weald's natural beauty is defined by the Statement of Significance overleaf and expanded in the character component sections of this plan.



5. Updated from 'preserve and enhance natural beauty' in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

6. Amended by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023

7. (Dower 1945).

8. Guide for AONB partnership members 2001 CA24, available to view at [National Landscapes - Historical Papers \(national-landscapes.org.uk\)](http://National Landscapes - Historical Papers (national-landscapes.org.uk)).

“What aspects of the High Weald do you value most?”

Public Survey 2022



Scenic beautiful walks

Rolling hills

Its natural light

Tranquillity

Unspoiled views

The greenery

Wooded countryside

The peacefulness

Diverse flora and fauna

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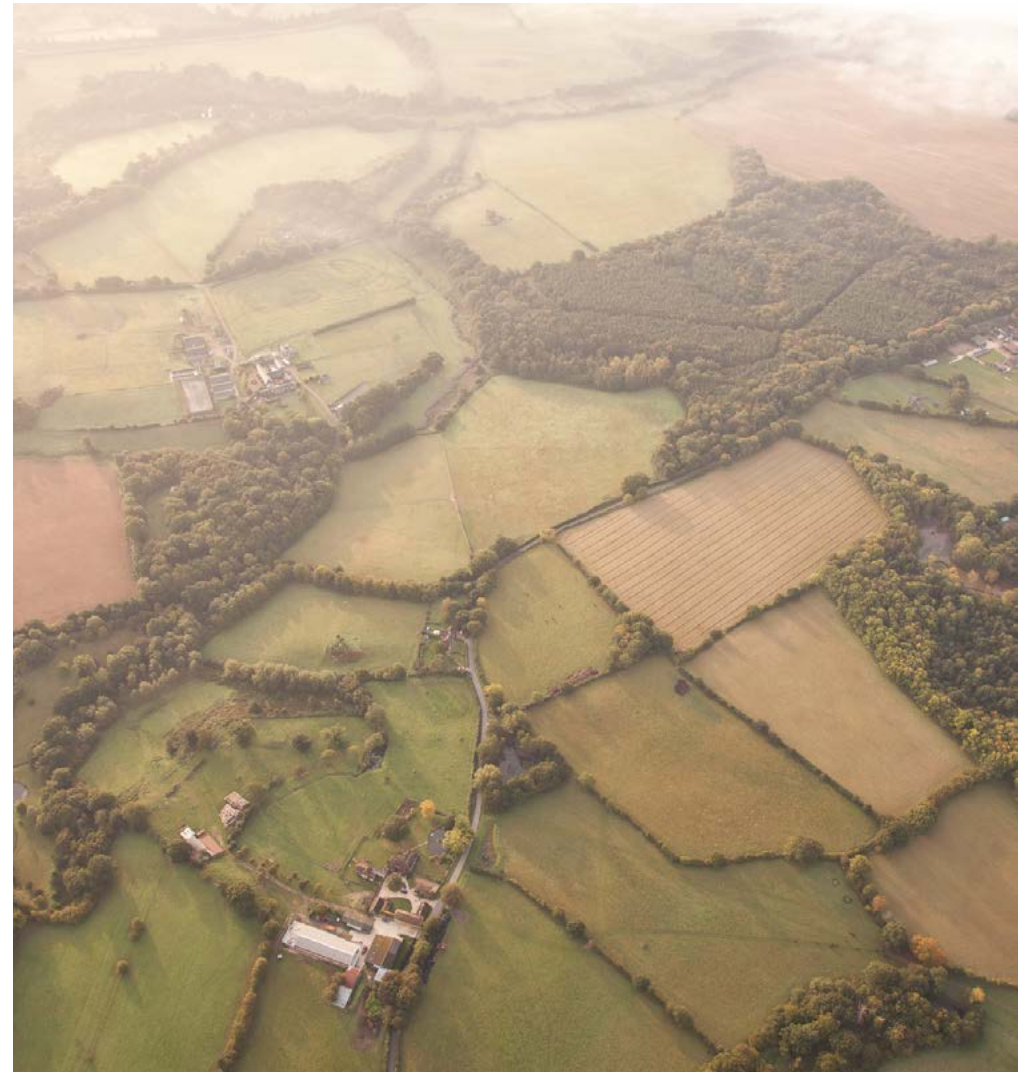
High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – Statement of Significance

The High Weald is one of the best-preserved medieval landscapes in north-west Europe. Despite its large size (1,461 sq.km) and proximity to London, its landscape has remained relatively unchanged since the 14th century, surviving major historical events and accommodating significant social and technological changes.

The natural beauty of the High Weald AONB is derived from the essentially rural and small-scale landscape character, rich in wildlife and cultural features. It has been created by historic and locally distinctive agricultural and forestry practices, with the story of its past visible throughout. The extensive survival of woodland and traditional mixed farming supports an exceptionally well-connected green and blue infrastructure, with a high proportion of natural spaces. Food production and semi-natural habitat are interwoven in a structurally diverse, permeable and complex mosaic supporting a rich diversity of wildlife. A dense network of historic routeways and public rights of way provides access for people to get close to nature and experience its natural beauty. The pattern and landscape setting of dispersed historic settlements enriches its natural beauty, with small, irregular fields and pasture, hedgerows and ancient woodlands interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofscapes of historic buildings. Greenness, a sense of tranquillity and dark skies contribute to the perceptual and scenic qualities people enjoy.

The Plan articulates natural beauty through eight core character components which are rooted in the historic characterisation of the High Weald landscape as a whole, and represent the cultural imprint of generations on the natural inheritance of the area. These components encompass finer-grained key characteristics which include habitats, features of interest and cultural associations, and all combine to create a distinct and recognisable landscape whose natural beauty exceeds the sum of its parts.

Each core component of natural beauty is of equal and stand-alone importance in its own right, (i.e., they cannot be ranked) and any policy or action may be considered harmful to the AONB if it results in the loss of, or material harm to, any of these components of character. *All* of the AONB is important; any areas perceived as ‘degraded’ should be seen as opportunities for enhancement of natural beauty contributing positively to the purpose of designation and objectives of the Management Plan.



Core Character Components of the High Weald's natural beauty comprise

1

Natural systems (geology, soils, water and climate) – a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone with highly variable, relatively undisturbed soils and numerous headwaters (gill streams) functioning under an oceanic climate.

2

Settlement – dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads, hamlets and late-medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.

3

Routeways – a dense network of historic routeways (now roads, tracks and paths).

4

Woodland – an abundance of ancient woodland mostly in small holdings, highly interconnected with hedges and shaws.

5

Fieldsapes and heath – small, irregular and productive fields, bound by hedgerows and woods, and typically used for livestock grazing; with distinctive zones of lowland heaths and inned river valleys (reclaimed marshland).

6

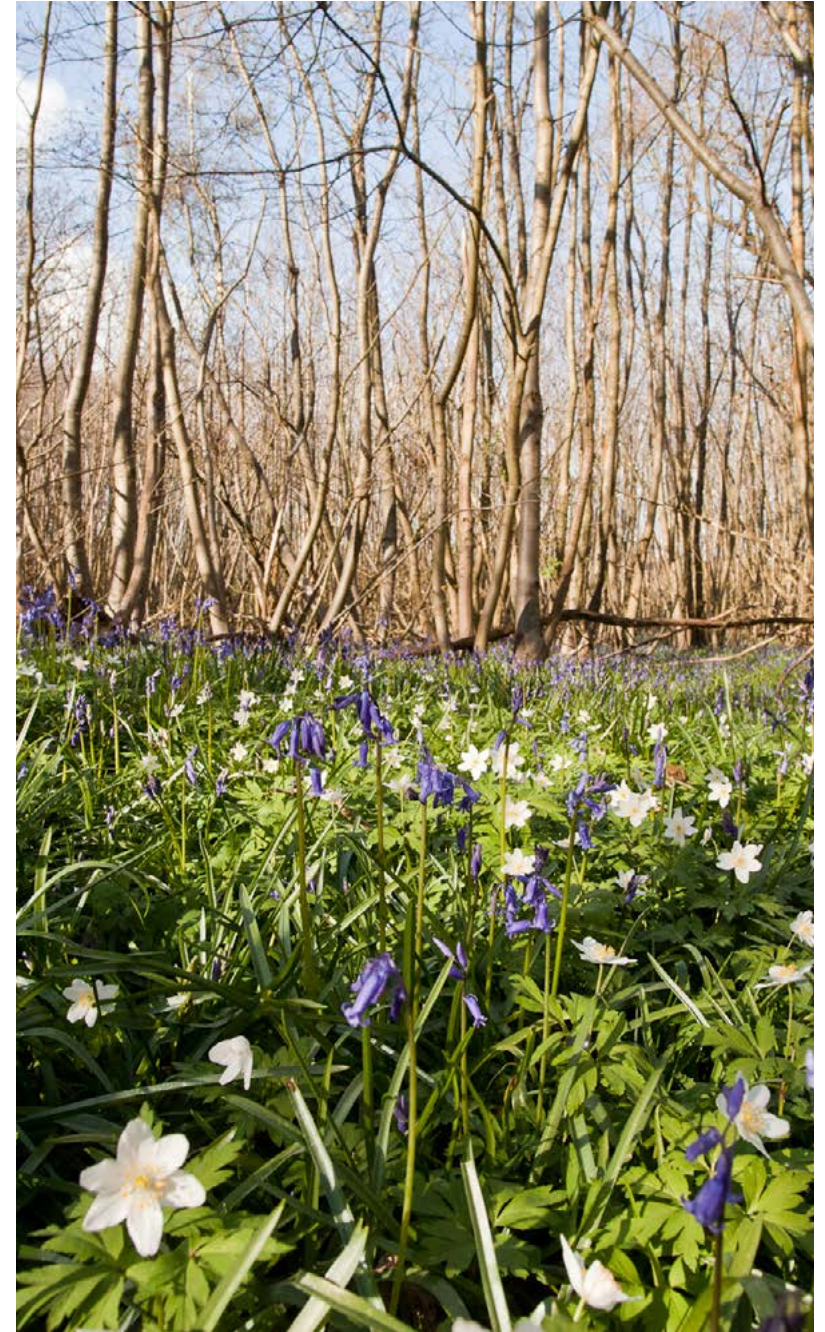
Dark night skies – intrinsically dark at night with our own galaxy (the Milky Way) visible.

7

Aesthetic and perceptual qualities – arising from the interaction of people with the landscape, including the notion of a quintessential English pastoral landscape, intimacy of scale, a sense of history and timelessness; rurality and tranquillity; glimpsed long views; freedom to explore and make connections with the natural world, and a rich legacy of features and ideas left by writers, poets and gardeners inspired by the landscape.

8

Land-based economy and rural living – with roots extending deep into history, and which has visibly and culturally shaped the landscape



Character Components

The following sections of the Plan describe each of the core components that underpin the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB in more detail, including **key characteristics** for conservation and enhancement, and the **top five issues**. It sets out for each component a series of **objectives** along with **actions** recommended to guide the activities of partners and stakeholders.

The Actions are set under three headings:

“The partnership will...”

this means actions for the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC)

“Public bodies should ...”

this means actions for all relevant authorities⁹ including Local Authorities, Parish Councils, Highways Authorities, Statutory undertakers (such as telecoms, water and energy companies etc), and government departments and ALBs (arm’s length bodies) – such as Defra, Natural England, Historic England, Highways England, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission.

“Others can assist conservation and enhancement of natural systems by...”

this means actions for landowners, farmers, community groups and other organisations including environmental NGOs.

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Cross-cutting themes

Over the next 20 years, the High Weald AONB is facing a number of drivers of change which have the capacity to impact significantly on its core character, and which need to be addressed in this plan period.

Addressing the interconnected threats of the climate emergency, biodiversity, and soil health are priorities for everyone over the next five years, as we can mitigate many of these threats if real-world action is taken now. The challenge will be to capitalise on the High Weald AONB’s ability to restore nature, grow healthy food and reduce carbon emissions while supporting vibrant and diverse rural communities.

The **drivers of change** set out in Part 2 of the Plan are cross-cutting issues which can affect each of the core character components and their objectives. That section of the Plan sets out our strategic principles and priorities for focusing resources and targeting investment on cross-cutting programmes that address these themes.



⁹. As defined in Section 85 of the CRoW Act

Cross-cutting themes: Drivers of change 2024-2029



Loss of soil and degradation of soil health

Soil is an essential resource. Soil loss and degradation affect the AONB's ability to produce healthy food, but soil also provides a huge array of other benefits from carbon sequestration and nutrient cycling to restoring the water cycle and flood mitigation. Degraded soil biology affects the health and biodiversity of above and below ground ecosystems that depend upon it, with soil erosion causing sediment loss which undermines the health of our river systems.



People and Access

Inequitable access to the countryside means missing out on the range of health and wellbeing benefits associated with being able to spend time in nature and unequal access to the experience of living and working in the countryside. It concerns everyone today, as well as future generations. Disengagement with the natural world because of a lack of fair access impedes societies' ability to robustly tackle issues affecting the natural world.



Biodiversity crisis

While the High Weald retains rich assemblages of species (particularly associated with its patchwork historic countryside), habitat loss, pollution, pesticide use and inappropriate/lack of management of habitats have cumulatively harmed species diversity and abundance across key habitats such as ancient woodland and permanent grassland. The loss of plant and animal species affects the High Weald's ability to be a functioning and resilient landscape.



Planning & Development

The scale of housebuilding in the High Weald AONB is currently at an unprecedented level; the High Weald is experiencing the highest level of housing growth of any AONB in England.^{10,11} Pressure from ever increasing numbers of new developments is eroding the historic settlement pattern of the High Weald and the rural landscape with its intrinsic sense of naturalness. Meeting the climate, biodiversity and inequality challenges of the next 20 years will require transformational change in the way that development is planned for and delivered in the High Weald AONB. Being nationally designated for their outstanding natural beauty, AONB landscapes should be exemplars of sustainable planning and design.



Climate Emergency

This global issue threatens almost every aspect of the planet and our lives from economics to biodiversity, human health and wellbeing, to infrastructure and food production. The High Weald is already seeing changes in economic land use, more harmful tree diseases and increased flooding. The UK has committed to a legally binding net zero target by 2050 with interim targets to achieve a 68% reduction in UK carbon emissions by 2030 on 1990 levels (Climate Change Conference COP26).

10. [An-independent-review-of-housing-in-Englands-AONBs-2012-17.pdf\(cpre.org.uk\)](#)

11. [Beauty-still-betrayed.pdf\(cpre.org.uk\)](#)



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CHARACTER COMPONENT

Natural Systems (Geology, Soils, Water and Climate)

The High Weald AONB is characterised by a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone creating soils which are highly variable over short distances. The ridges tend east-west, and from them spring numerous gill streams that form the headwaters of rivers. Wide river valleys dominate the eastern part of the AONB. The landform and water systems are subject to, and influence, a local variant of the British sub oceanic climate.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Impressive coastal cliffs of interbedded sandstones and clays (Hastings Cliffs to Pett Beach SSSI and Hastings Cliffs Special Area of Conservation); natural, dynamic, evolving and rich in Lower Cretaceous fossils.
- A principal ridge (Forest Ridge) running east – west from Horsham to Cranbrook with an attached ridge (Battle Ridge) extending to the sea at Fairlight.
- A pattern of faults and folds that distinguishes the High Weald from the rest of the south and east of England, with a high concentration of springs associated with fault lines.
- Numerous small streams descending the main ridges in narrow steep-sided valleys (gills), historically often dammed to power industry with many 'pond bays' and 'hammer ponds' surviving.
- Distinctive outcrops of sandstone in the form of crags (popular with climbers) and inland sea cliffs, gill stream bed and banks, old quarries, and along road edges associated with the survival of rare cryptogam communities (ferns, lichens, liverworts and mosses).
- A high density of pits, quarries and ponds resulting from a long history of stone quarrying, surface mining and marl extraction.
- Locally-distinctive geological materials – sandstone, clay bricks and tiles, and Horsham stone – contributing to high-quality vernacular architecture.
- Carbon-rich soils, often undisturbed, that are distinguished by their variability over short distances – characterised as slowly permeable, seasonally wet, slightly acidic clayey soils, with pockets of sandy acidic soils.
- Heavily channelised and intensively managed river valleys in the eastern High Weald (Rother, Brede and Tillingham) originating in the medieval period, with natural floodplain wetlands rare.
- A high density of ponds, five times higher than the national average, with a wide range of pond types supporting significant species such as great crested newts and emerald dragonflies.
- An oceanic climate featuring cool temperatures relative to the latitude, a narrow annual temperature range with few extremes, and rain throughout the year.

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

● 7.6km of eroding sea cliffs designated an SSSI in recognition of the considerable biological, palaeontological and geological interest. ● A unique Lower Cretaceous mammal fauna at Fairlight, one of a handful of localities in the world to have yielded early Cretaceous mammal remains. ● 671 inland sandstone outcrops. ● >315sq km of undisturbed soils. ● 18.6 million tonnes of carbon stored in High Weald soils (to 150cm depth). ● Crowborough Beacon, the highest point at 242m above sea level. ● Headwaters of seven river catchments – Medway (Beult, Eden and Teise), Rother (Brede and Tillingham), Thames (Mole), Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere. ● 253km of main river channel supporting nationally rare species such as otter and water vole; and coarse and salmonid fisheries. ● A European hotspot for gills. ● 4,613km of water courses in total, including tributaries and streams. ● 13,401 ponds (9/sq. km compared with a national average of 1.8/sq. km) with an estimated 1600 supporting great crested newts. ● 769 springs. ● Five reservoirs including Bewl Water, the largest body of inland water in the South East. ● 20 sq. km of wetlands including reedbeds, lowland fens, coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, purple moor grass and rush pastures. Home to a rich array of birds, including reed warbler and marsh harrier.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Climate crisis – the impact of rising temperatures and extreme weather events such as flooding, drought, inundation, tidal surges and storms.

2

Pressure on sensitive geological features from invasive species and recreation.

3

Soil health, the need to improve soil conservation and prevent detrimental soil erosion.

4

Pollution (and diffuse pollution) affecting biodiversity – including from public and private sewage treatment facilities; artificial fertilisers, pesticide and fine sediment run-off into ponds, streams and rivers.

5

Invasive species in rivers, water bodies, wetlands and bankside vegetation.

OBJECTIVE G1

To restore the natural function of rivers, water courses and water bodies.

Rationale

To improve water quality, water resource and structural habitats associated with water; to enhance the role of rivers, water courses and water bodies in supporting and increasing biodiversity, cooling the environment, protecting people and communities from flooding, and promoting enjoyment of wetlands.

OBJECTIVE G2

To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops.

Rationale

To conserve landform and topography on which the High Weald’s character depends, and maintain nationally important geological exposures, allowing for erosion where appropriate, conserving the fern, moss and liverwort communities they support, and protecting their value as significant sites of prehistoric archaeology in the AONB.

OBJECTIVE G3

To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty.

Rationale

To ensure that transformative mitigation and adaption policies are tailored to the High Weald’s defining landscape character.

OBJECTIVE G4

To restore soil health across the High Weald.

Rationale

To increase carbon sequestration and storage potential of soils, as well as water holding capacity to reduce flooding following high rainfall. Improve the soil ecosystem which supports above-ground and below-ground biodiversity and habitats across the High Weald. Healthy soil has higher nutrients for plants, which reduces the need for artificial fertilizer use in the long-term.

Ambitions for 2029

Harnessing the regenerative power of natural systems and restoring their health will need to be the focus of land-use policy to prevent climate and ecological collapse. Monitoring of pollutants and operations damaging to water, air and soil will need to be improved, enforcement strengthened, and government support targeted at best practice. Climate mitigation and adaptation policies at a local level will need to be guided by the Management Plan in order that solutions are tailored to protect natural beauty.

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Further information on maintaining the natural systems of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Produce a climate cooling and net-zero plan for their own operations utilising near-term science-based targets, with the intention of achieving net zero for its own operations by spring 2029.
- b. Work with partners to develop a climate cooling and net-zero vision for the High Weald landscape, taking into account the particular character components of the natural beauty of the High Weald, to inform and guide partner decision-making (refer to Cross-cutting theme: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail).
- c. Promote regenerative land management (including maintaining woodland cover) focusing on soil health.

Public bodies should ...

- d. Ensure developments seek to avoid substantive alterations to landform.
- e. Ensure new developments and land use changes protect undisturbed soils, minimise use of permanent impermeable surfaces, and ensure best practice is complied with to protect soils during construction from compaction, pollution and erosion.
- f. Design for new development to maintain and improve natural geomorphological processes (i.e. natural bank erosion) and natural flood capacity.
- g. Ensure water is retained / slowed e.g., by sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), being aware of possible impacts on vulnerable heritage assets, and supporting grey water recycling schemes.
- h. Seek solutions (such as clear-span bridges) for crossing water courses that minimise adverse impacts on river and stream habitats; avoiding new culverts and remove existing culverts where possible.
- i. Work with landowners and other organisations to agree an invasive species control plan for water systems and geological sites.

- j. Resist the use of carbon credit offsetting where the technologies exist to reduce carbon emissions on-site.
- k. Promote ambitious climate cooling scenarios that lead to the earliest reductions in emissions and urban temperatures (refer to Cross-cutting theme: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail).
- l. Support the recovery of High Weald watercourses, including headwaters, by restoring natural processes in order to benefit a range of aquatic and riparian habitats and associated wildlife.
- m. Support fossil fuel-free and public transport initiatives, encouraging walking, cycling and other travel alternatives where possible.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of natural systems by...

- n. Leaving buffer zones of minimum 5m (10m on slopes) along streams, rivers and ponds.
- o. Encouraging rivers, streams and ponds to develop naturally, with targeted support for vulnerable species such as water vole and rare habitats such as floodplain woodland.
- p. Allowing natural processes and adopt approaches that allow nature to express its capacity to sequester carbon e.g., natural regeneration.
- q. Producing protection plans for ferns, mosses and liverworts at vulnerable sandrock sites.
- r. Adopting soil regeneration approaches to the management of farmland, public spaces and gardens, to prioritise soil health, including minimal soil disturbance practices e.g., no ploughing.
- s. Avoiding run-off of sediment, inorganic fertilizers, pesticides and pollutants into streams, rivers and ponds.
- t. Pursuing appropriate management of ditches and ponds for wildlife and farming.
- u. Allowing targeted riparian woodland creation in appropriate locations primarily through natural regeneration.



CHARACTER COMPONENT

Settlement

The High Weald AONB is characterised by dispersed historic settlements of farmsteads, hamlets, and late medieval villages and market towns founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries. The landscape setting of these settlements underpins the distinct and picturesque small-scale landscape character, with rolling pastures and small ancient woodlands of the countryside interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofscapes of historic buildings.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- High density of historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields, with a long continuity of settlement in the same place; their position strongly influenced by topography and routeways.
- Villages and towns mostly of medieval origin located at historic focal points or along ridge top roads, typically centred around open areas used for meeting places and trade, with markets' charters granted in the 13th and 14th centuries.
- Hamlets occurring around the junction of routeways or small commons (which became greens or forstals), or as clusters of cottages serving a particular industry.
- No significant nucleation prior to the 13th century (apart from Battle).
- Large-scale settlement extensions after AONB designation in 1983 are uncharacteristic.
- Pockets of small wayside cottages (peasant settlement enclosing roadside commons or later worker cottages) interspaced with fields.
- Distinctive settlement types and pattern in the eastern High Weald relating to history of the Rother Estuary and river trade.
- Separation between settlements formed by fields associated with individual historic farmsteads, and historic field systems abutting and containing historic settlement.
- Frequent interconnected green spaces within villages linking to the countryside and offering glimpse views to countryside beyond.
- Verdant character of settlements, with substantial soft landscaping; grass verges, lush hedgerows edging front curtilages, and full tree canopies breaking up the built form.
- Frequent – den and – fold place names echoing the area's history of pasturing cattle and pigs.
- Farmsteads typically arranged around routeways, with loose courtyard plan-types common and dispersed plan-types particularly characteristic. Tend to be relatively modest, typically comprising a farmhouse and a barn, often aisled to at least one side with small-scale ancillary structures, mostly for cattle, which face into their own, generally small, yards.
- High numbers of pre-1750 timber-framed farm buildings with typologies representing locally-distinctive historic agricultural practices, including oast houses and other structures associated with the hop industry (hop-pickers' huts); where a complete range exists, these are rare and particularly significant.
- High concentrations of historic buildings in all settlement types, many listed, whose form and appearance reflects historic and socio-cultural functions (such as the prevalence of craft industries), with locally distinctive typologies, including medieval Wealden Hall Houses (found either as rural farmhouses, or incorporated into the fabric of villages and towns, and often much disguised through later alterations), and features such as catslide roofs.
- Villages and hamlets typically unlit contributing to intrinsically dark skies landscapes.
- A limited palette of local materials intrinsically linked to geology and landscape character, reinforcing local distinctiveness: clay as tiles and brick, timber as weatherboard and framing, and some localised instances of stone.

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

- 17 market towns and villages with populations >2,000, the largest being Battle with a population >6,000.
- 11% households classified as isolated farms (compared with an average of 8% across all protected landscapes).
- 98.3% households in areas classified as rural.
- >3,500 historic farmsteads.
- 5,274 listed buildings.
- 57 medieval parish churches.
- 50 registered parks and gardens on Historic England register.
- 64 village conservation areas.
- 91 scheduled ancient monuments.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Increase in greenfield development pressure for housing, threatening the character of the AONB.

2

Generic layout and design of new housing developments failing to reinforce AONB character.

3

Erosion of AONB character through the cumulative effects of suburbanisation, including the residential fragmentation of farmsteads; the extension of residential curtilage boundaries, additional annexes and outbuildings, inappropriate boundary treatments, hard surfacing and kerbing, and large intrusive replacement buildings.

4

Declining housing affordability, including lack of social housing and key worker housing suitable for land-based workers.

5

Infill development eroding the greenness and open space of villages, threatening the character of settlement and reducing green connectivity and opportunities for community enjoyment.

OBJECTIVE S1

To protect the historic pattern and character of settlements.

Rationale

To protect the distinctive character and landscape settings of towns, villages, hamlets and farmsteads, remove despoiling influences, and maintain the hinterlands and other relationships (including separation and green infrastructure) between settlements that contribute to local identity.

OBJECTIVE S3

To conserve the distinct built heritage of the High Weald.

Rationale

To protect and preserve the character and setting of heritage assets (designated and non-designated); historic traditional buildings and built features distinct to the High Weald area, including the historic public realm (e.g., traditional signs, railings, milestones and paving treatments).

OBJECTIVE S2

To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald and ensure new development reflects the character of the High Weald in its siting, scale, layout and design.

Rationale

To enhance the beauty and quality of buildings in the High Weald, and ensure new development reflects intrinsic High Weald character and place-making, embedded with a true sense of place, along with re-establishing the use of local materials and rich colour palette as a means of protecting the environment and adding to local distinctiveness.

‘[development should be] fully sympathetic to, and in scale with, the land use and local building style’.

Lord Strang, Chairman of the National Parks Commission, speaking about designated landscapes in 1959.

‘Places and buildings... tend to be enriching elements in the sum of scenic beauty’.

Report on National Parks 1945

Ambitions for 2029

Conserving the dispersed historic settlement pattern, which arose before the advent of the private car, will require positive planning and innovative sustainable transport strategies. New housing development will be small-scale and in keeping with the character of the area. Its location and design will be based on meeting local needs (including affordability and housing mix) through high quality and landscape-led place-making and design principles that reflect intrinsic High Weald character, embedded with a true sense of place, without stifling innovation and creativity in the use of local materials and net zero technologies. The energy performance of existing housing stock will be upgraded, whilst still preserving the special character and local distinctiveness of the historic built environment and heritage assets.

Further information on maintaining the settlement pattern of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Develop technical appendices to support the High Weald Housing Design Guide, on topics such as sustainable and net zero design, soft landscaping, and the public realm.
- b. Develop and deliver training and capacity-building programmes for LPAs and other partners regarding the Housing Design Guide, to improve design scrutiny in planning decision-making.
- c. Seek to support LPAs in developing landscape-led planning policies that contribute to net zero regarding settlement in the AONB, including location of development and sustainable transport strategies (refer to Cross-cutting theme: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail).
- d. Support neighbourhood planning groups to utilise the AONB Management Plan, data and guidance.
- e. Promote the desirability of the reduction of housing pressure and pressure for greenfield development in the AONB.

Public bodies should ...

- f. Promote use of the High Weald Housing Design Guide and historic landscape characterisation to guide settlement planning and to help avoid generic approaches to layout and design of new development.
- g. Ensure there is reference to the AONB Management Plan and to the AONB Housing Design Guide in local plans, neighbourhood plans and other public documents, and ensure its use as material consideration in planning decisions; planning policy, site allocations and development management.
- h. Pursue landscape-led positive planning approaches to settlement planning and housing delivery in the AONB, seeking to prioritise the delivery of new housing primarily through small-scale development consistent with AONB character, recognising the potential for harm through the cumulative effects of separate developments on the designated landscape.
- i. Seek to deliver a mix of housing sizes and types that respond to local needs, including the specific requirements of land-based workers and affordable housing.

- j. Identify and protect areas of separation between settlements and green/blue infrastructure connections across settlements, for both landscape setting and ecological values.
- k. Seek to minimise erosion of AONB character through suburbanisation in rural areas, including landscape-intrusive replacement dwellings, extensions to residential curtilages, annexes, and smaller interventions such as new accesses and solid fences, which have a cumulative effect.
- l. Ensure the design and maintenance of highways and the public realm, including street furniture, has regard to local distinctive character and avoids suburbanisation or generic approaches.
- m. Protect and preserve the character and setting of historic traditional buildings and features distinct to the High Weald area, including medieval hall houses, catslide roofs, oast houses and other traditional agricultural buildings, structures such as cattle sheds and hoppers' huts, and the compositional qualities of farmsteads.
- n. Pursue a listed building review to tackle the under-listing of historic farm buildings, along with seeking to increase local listing.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of High Weald settlement by ...

- o. Using the High Weald Housing Design Guide in the earliest stages of the process of developing proposals to inform High Weald specific, landscape-led approaches to layout.
- p. Adopting a local and renewable materials first procurement policy, and supporting activities which celebrate and promote local products and services.
- q. Making space for wildlife to thrive around buildings, gardens and urban spaces and the public realm, and encouraging planting for nature with native species of local provenance and pollinator-friendly plants.
- r. Avoiding operations which sterilise soil or cover it with impermeable materials or plastic grass.



CHARACTER COMPONENT

Routeways

The High Weald AONB is characterised by historic routeways (now roads, tracks, bridleways and paths), the oldest being in the form of ridge-top roads and a dense system of radiating droveways. These are often narrow, deeply sunken and edged with trees, hedges, wildflower-rich verges and boundary banks. These locally distinctive lanes and rights of way often display quietness and rurality in their visual and perceptual character, and they are valuable green infrastructure, creating high public accessibility within the AONB and good connections between settlements.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- A dense, radiating network with a variety of origins including:
 - Droveways, used for moving livestock, radiating out to pre-historic sites on the edge of the Weald.
 - Ridgeways on high ground and often running east-west, closely associated with pre-historic sites and medieval trading settlements.
 - Roman roads cutting across these patterns and strongly associated with iron-working sites.
- Typically present by the 14th century, with many extending back into pre-history and pre-dating settlements.
- Sunken routeways ('holloways') found on sloping land as a result of long use and erosion combined with water run-off.
- 'Braiding' common resulting from people, animals and vehicles finding alternative routes through impassable areas.
- Earth banks, lynchets and ditches typically indicating the former width of the routeway or to separate users from farmland or woodland.
- Wide grass verges common, indicating the historic width of routeways and their function as linear common grazing.
- Species-rich verges as well-preserved relics of their woodland or grassland habitat.
- Small-scale variations in habitat associated with a complex mixture of substrates, aspects and moisture levels supporting a rich biodiversity, especially invertebrates.
- Frequent sandstone exposures, adding diverse assemblages of specialist plants and animals.
- Linear nature facilitating foraging and dispersal and contributing significantly to the ecological interconnectedness of the High Weald.
- Veteran trees and ancient roadside coppice (often showing evidence of laying) frequent, providing niches for lichens and deadwood-dependent beetles.
- Many lost, stopped or diverted routeways evidenced by holloways, earth banks and depressions in the ground.
- Associated heritage public realm features – pre-1964 fingerposts, 'black and white' road signs, roadside milestones.
- Archaeology and cultural associations in the eastern High Weald from trade and the practice of exporting heavy goods (e.g., timber and iron) by floating them at high tide on waterways navigable until the late 13th century.

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

- 2,570km of public rights of way. ● More than 75% of public rights of way are historic (i.e., present on Ordnance Survey maps from at least 1860). ● 1,873km roads.
- More than 80% of roads are historic (i.e., in existence since at least 1800). ● The High Weald is crossed by one the most famous routeways in English history – the one that took King Harold's army from victory at Stamford Bridge to defeat at Hastings in 1066. ● Two main Roman roads (London-Lewes and London-Hassocks/Brighton). ● Droveways dating to the Anglo-Saxon period and earlier for moving livestock (pigs and cattle). ● More than 4,400km of highly interconnected green infrastructure bounded by flower-rich verges, hedges and woods.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Extinguishments of public rights of way (PRoWs) and diversions away from the historic route.

2

Loss of historic roadside character through development and erosion from motor vehicles and wide agricultural machinery, particularly in wet conditions

3

Damage to paths, tracks and Byways Open to All Traffic from the erection of fences; erosion from off-road vehicles, inappropriate surfacing and planting, fly-tipping, and ploughing up of lost routeways.

4

Insensitive management of veteran trees/roadside coppice and poorly planned verge cutting regimes and ditch clearance, resulting in the smothering of woodland flora on shady banks with wood chip, and of wildflowers on relic grassland verges with grass cuttings/spoil.

5

Insensitive highway engineering including passing bays, deep visibility splays to entrances, and urbanising features such as roundabouts, signage and lighting.

OBJECTIVE R1

To maintain the historic pattern, morphology and features of routeways.

Rationale

To maintain and restore a routeway network that has a symbiotic relationship with settlement location, hinterlands and identity, and is a rare UK survival of an essentially medieval landscape; to protect the individual archaeological features of historic routeways such as sunken lanes; and to avoid harming character of routeways with urbanising features.

OBJECTIVE R2

To protect and enhance the ecological function of routeways.

Rationale

To protect, and improve the condition of, the complex mix of small-scale habitats along routeways, including verges, for wildlife and nature recovery, and maintain routeway boundaries as part of a highly interconnected habitat mosaic.



Ambitions for 2029

Routeways walked for hundreds of years will need protection from unnecessary diversions, alterations, or suburbanisation, while the historic and ecological importance of associated routeway features such as verges, hedges, ditch and bank systems, and roadside coppice, to connect and restore nature will need to be recognised, protected and appropriately managed. A re-prioritised hierarchy of routes, with functional routes for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport, and other active travel, connecting homes, schools, services and businesses may be needed to meet the net zero challenge, along with improved public access to the countryside for leisure.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Provide training for highway management engineers and contractors to ensure all roadside verges are managed sensitively for landscape character, including biodiversity and archaeology.
- b. Provide guidance to PRow teams in local highway authorities for considering historic routeways in the High Weald in diversion/ extinguishment applications.

Public bodies should ...

- c. Identify historic routeways in highway improvement plans (including Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs)) and consider management tailored to enhance their historic character, including early intervention to protect banks.
- d. Ensure there is reference to the AONB Management Plan in Local Transport Plans (LTPs), and ensure its use to inform highways works and to support funding bids
- e. Avoid diversion of historic routeways and have regard in decision-making and in the planning process, to the historic alignment of roads, tracks and paths, .
- f. Assess, and where appropriate recognise, historic routeways as non-designated heritage assets in the planning process.
- g. Resist new access points that would damage the character of sunken routeways.
- h. Discourage lane widening, the introduction of lay-bys, or casual parking that erodes or dilutes the pattern of routeways.
- i. Identify ecologically rich historic routeways in biodiversity and green infrastructure planning.

- j. Prioritise the specialist management of ecologically rich road verges in highway management, including following best practice advice¹²; implementing appropriate cutting regimes, avoiding smothering with chip piles or grass cuttings and ditch dredging, and refraining from planting non-native species.
- k. Support the identification, retention and restoration of traditional fingerposts, railings, boundary stones and turnpike features (e.g., milestone and toll houses), adding to the relevant Historic Environment Record where appropriate.
- l. Adopt careful approaches to any upgrading proposals to historic routeways as part of access enhancement, and seek to take enforcement action against unauthorised works, to ensure proposals do not adversely affect the natural beauty of the High Weald (refer to Cross-cutting theme: People & Access Principles for detail).

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of High Weald routeways by

- m. Avoiding fencing and other activity such as the use of machinery which damages routeway archaeology (including ditches and banks) or that alters its historic alignment.
- n. Encouraging the identification and protection of ecologically rich roadside verges and alerting the relevant Highways Authority to their presence or damage.

¹² [Managing-grassland-road-verges-2020.pdf\(plantlife.org.uk\)](https://www.plantlife.org.uk/management-grassland-road-verges-2020.pdf)

Further information on maintaining the historic routeways of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.

CHARACTER COMPONENT

Woodland

The High Weald AONB is characterised by the great extent of woodland including ancient woods, gills and shaws, the product of traditional long-term management. The nationally important assemblage of ancient woodland in the High Weald has immense wildlife, landscape and historical value, while the wider cumulative visual character of trees and hedgerows dividing small irregular fields is fundamental to the verdant nature and appearance of the landscape.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of many small woods, larger forests and numerous linear gill woodlands, shaws, wooded routeways and outgrown hedges, and isolated trees.
- High proportion of woodland is categorised as ancient woodland (46%), typically broadleaved coppice with a rich ground flora, with many more woodlands equivalent in conservation interest. A further fifth of woodland is protected 'plantations on ancient woodlands' (PAWS), much of which is under restoration.
- Many irregularly shaped small woodlands interlinked with shaws, isolated trees, thick hedges and wooded sunken lanes, forming an intimate part of the farmed landscape.
- A number of very large woods lying mostly along the high sandy ridges, such as Dallington and Bedgebury; and remnants of the area's medieval hunting forests, including at Worth Forest and Ashdown Forest.
- Visible evidence of historic use and exploitation (including coppice stools, stubs, pollards, boundary bank and ditch systems, routes and tracks; remains of Roman and medieval iron-working such as slag heaps and ponds, and large earthworks relating to the harnessing of waterpower to fuel furnaces, forges and mills).
- High density of gill woodlands (deeply incised ravines with particularly humid and relatively stable microclimates) – the oldest and least disturbed woodland in the south east supporting a community of plants, vascular and non-vascular, not found together anywhere else in Europe, and important for rare plant species such as small-leaved lime, hay-scented buckler fern, Tunbridge filmy-fern, and rare invertebrates including beetles and molluscs.
- Frequent patches of wet woodland associated with surface water in the form of steep sided streams, springs, wet flushes and water-filled extraction pits, important for regionally distinctive species such as smooth-stalked sedge.
- Large numbers of isolated trees (often remnants from lost woodlands or hedges), such as in-field trees that provide additional connectivity to the wider landscape, as well as shelter and food source to a wide range of species.
- A stronghold for characteristic species such as dormice, and remnant populations of rare species such as pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly.
- Open woodland mosaics of wooded heath, which support both heath plants such as heathers and trees, and act as a transitional habitat.
- Considerable variability in woodland types and tree forms over short distances reflecting the variety of soils, micro-climates and drainage conditions (Principle National Vegetation Classification communities are W10 and W8 with some W15 and W16 on sandier ridges).
- Wood-pasture and parkland, mostly originating from once extensive historic deer parks; an archaeological and cultural feature, open habitats or open heath supporting veteran/ancient trees and their associated wildlife.
- Nationally significant resource of epiphytic (plants that grow on other plants rather than the soil) and dead-wood dependent species supported by a wealth of veteran trees.
- A traditionally strong commercial woodland industry focused on coppice and locally grown hardwoods.
- A culture of small-scale management by people using hand tools to produce a wide variety of products mostly for local use.
- Trees used for boundary markers (including outgrown old laid hedges, stubs and pollards), many of which are accessible on public rights of way.

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

● 28% woodland cover (nearly 3x English average). ● 83% broadleaved woodland, the majority as coppice. ● Highest coverage of ancient woodland in any protected landscape (3/4 all woodland or 19% land cover) covering 273sq km of undisturbed woodland soil. ● >2,800 parcels of ancient woodland under 2ha. ● Nationally significant: 8% of England's ancient woodland resource. ● <22% ancient woodland classified as Plantations on Ancient Woodlands (PAWS). ● 191sq km gill woodland in > 1,800 sites supporting internationally rare cryptogams. ● 56sq km UK BAP priority habitat: wood pasture and parkland. ● More than 7.5m tonnes of carbon stored in woodlands and their soils with an additional > 0.75m tonnes sequestered every year. ● 3sq km traditional orchards containing 34 apple varieties.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Predicted increase in tree diseases such as ash dieback and spruce bark beetle, partly through imported stock or soil, and continued damage from invasive species including rhododendron, grey squirrel and deer damage from over-population of deer across the High Weald.

2

Procurement practices and lack of investment restricting market growth for higher value locally sourced wood products.

3

Lack of management where needed, particularly cessation of traditional coppicing affecting ground flora, and fauna species such as fritillaries.

4

Impact of increasing mechanisation and machinery size on soils, the variation and structural complexity of woodlands, and archaeology.

5

Impact of development close to ancient woodland resulting in increased noise and disturbance, and pressure to fell trees and hedgerows as part of development, (including post-development) with a cumulative impact on ecology and reduction in tree cover.

OBJECTIVE W1

To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.

Rationale

To ensure irreplaceable habitats and biodiversity loss are repaired for the benefit of nature and future generations. To maintain a key component of the cultural landscape, and to preserve the high levels of carbon storage in woodland soils and biomass.

OBJECTIVE W3

To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands.

Rationale

To protect the historic environment of the AONB woodlands.

OBJECTIVE W2

To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.

Rationale

To increase the viability of the woodland habitat for wildlife, by identifying and extending the area of appropriately managed woodland (including restoring plantations on ancient woodland) to link and enhance isolated habitats and species populations, providing greater connectivity between woodlands and other important wildlife areas, and helping to facilitate species' response to climate change.

OBJECTIVE W4

To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets.

Rationale

To achieve the most effective management that will deliver the other objectives for woodland, to contribute to sustainable domestic timber production, and to support a working countryside.

Ambitions for 2029

With the beauty and biodiversity of woodlands in the High Weald already under threat from a combination of pests and diseases, disturbance, a warming climate and invasive species, protection will need to focus on fostering healthy and resilient woodlands and buffering through natural regeneration to allow nature to thrive. Tackling invasive species and deer will be a priority. Non-intervention approaches will become more common unless traditional coppice regimes are being maintained or woodlands are being managed for high-quality timber. In these cases, management will be predominantly small-scale with industrialised mechanical harvesting avoided to protect archaeology and soils. Local timber and underwood will once again be essential materials for buildings, fencing and other uses.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Support landscape scale initiatives and nature recovery projects to reverse the decline in key woodland species and protect and enhance vulnerable habitats such as gill woodlands and wet woodland.
- b. Seek to ensure agri-environmental schemes and similar grant schemes are tailored to the specific needs of the High Weald woodland.

Public bodies should ...

- c. Resist development that risks the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or veteran trees, including ASNW and PAWS, through direct and indirect impacts as set out in the Natural England and Forestry Commission 'standing advice' **Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions**
- d. Ensure appropriate buffer zones to woodland, (minimum 15m zones, when justified by survey, otherwise 25m) to protect from the detrimental direct and indirect impacts of nearby developments, including activity and light spill.
- e. Recognise the ecological and landscape value of non-designated woodland and trees, and ensure design of new housing development retains existing woodlands, shaws and other trees in and adjacent to schemes, for ecological and landscape character benefits.
- f. Require woodland archaeology assessments for woodland which would be affected by development, and provide data to county Historic Environment Records, ensuring this is used in the planning process.
- g. Protect ancient woodland soil and ground flora from inappropriate management practices such as heavy machinery damage and chipping-to-mulch, and to consider such practices as part of assessments of felling licence applications and in highways management / statutory undertakers' protocols.
- h. Enhance and restore shaws and gill woodlands.

- i. Support appropriate commercial woodland management, in particular tailored support for a vibrant timber economy in the High Weald woodland landscape.
- j. Promote the use of small dimension roundwood timber in construction and use of untreated local timber for traditional purposes such as fencing, public realm seating, signs and weatherboard.
- k. Adopt UK tree and plant health biosecurity policies and support local provenance tree nurseries.
- l. Tailor environmental land management support to control invasive species, including landscape-scale deer management; grey squirrel eradication; and removal of rhododendron and other damaging invasive plants from ancient woodland, particularly gill woodland.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of woodlands by:

- m. Controlling invasive species such as rhododendron, grey squirrels and deer.
- n. Avoiding activities, such as fencing or use of heavy machinery, which damage archaeological features (e.g., ditch and bank systems, holloways and saw pits).
- o. Maintaining stock-proof fences and hedgerows around ancient woodland to avoid livestock damage.
- p. Avoiding use of large-scale machinery and instead using traditional techniques such as hand cutting, horses or small-scale machinery for woodland management to avoid damage to High Weald woodland.
- q. Allowing natural regeneration in and around woodland where appropriate.
- r. Keeping woodlands, including buffer zones, free of litter, garden waste and ornamental plants.
- s. Demonstrate responsible woodland access; avoiding disturbance to breeding birds or trampling damage to ground flora.

Further information on maintaining woodland in the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.

CHARACTER COMPONENT

Fieldscape and Heath

The High Weald AONB is characterised by an intricate and scenic mosaic of small, irregularly shaped and productive fields often bounded by hedgerows, shaws and small woodlands and in-field trees, and typically used for livestock grazing and small-scale horticulture; within which can be found distinctive zones of lowland heath and inned / reclaimed river valleys. Predominantly undisturbed and highly productive Grade 3 good agricultural grazing land, reflecting the typical and historic agricultural practices of the area, and as such is intrinsically valuable to the landscape character.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- A generally irregular field pattern with individual fields relatively small (less than three hectares).
- Fieldscape characterised by historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields resulting from medieval farming in severalty i.e., land held by individuals rather than in common.
- Strong influence exerted by topography with many field systems aligned to or 'hanging' from (at right angles to) linear features such as watercourses or ridge-top roads.
- Predominantly pastoral mixed farming with an absence of industrial scale livestock farming, and undisturbed soils contributing to carbon sequestration.
- Fields, mostly permanent pasture, used for grazing livestock with some small-scale horticulture and cropping.
- Medieval fieldscape character dominant, with a high proportion of field systems created by assarting (woodland clearance) with sinuous mixed woody boundaries and shaws, and thick hedges common.
- Boundary ditch and bank features typical, along woodland edges or topped with hedges and veteran trees.
- A rich, extensive network of ancient mixed species hedgerows of high ecological and landscape character value.
- Wide, verdant historic hedgerows traditionally managed by laying.
- Unmanaged fields quickly succeed back towards woodland because of abundant tree seeds from the pattern of small woodlands bounding many fields.
- Nationally important fragments of species-rich grassland (such as NVC MG5), supporting an incredibly rich variety of plants, animals, and grassland fungi.
- High proportion of fragmented species-rich grassland scattered within a landscape containing a high proportion of good quality semi-improved grasslands.
- Traditional orchards and hop gardens scattered across the landscape forming part of the visual fieldscape and also providing dead and decaying wood for invertebrates, and a mosaic of other habitats.
- A frequency of deer parks and later 18th-century estates.
- Ashdown Forest (an extensive area of common land and one of the largest continuous blocks of lowland heath, semi-natural woodland and valley bog in the south east) supporting internationally important populations of nightjar and Dartford warbler.
- Distinctive areas of wooded heath and lowland heath scattered along the sandy ridges supporting a complex mosaic of plant communities, rare species such as marsh clubmoss, and more than half of UK's dragonfly species.
- Fragmented grass and ericaceous heath is found particularly on old forest ride systems and along woodland ridges and old hedge banks throughout the High Weald.

'The existence of a flourishing and progressive agriculture is fundamental to...the preservation and enhancement of the characteristic landscape.'

Report of the National Parks Committee, Sir Arthur Hobhouse, 1947



CLICK FOR MAPS

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

● >1,500 farm holdings (2nd highest number of holdings in an AONB) with >750 livestock holdings. ● 17,000 RPA registered parcels of land <1.5ha. ● Average farm size is less than half the national average. ● 70% of fields remain unaffected by reorganisation in the late 20th century. ● >12,500km of hedgerows and field boundaries providing homes for pollinating insects and a source of wild food. ● 220sq km land owned by conservation organisations or designated under international or UK law to protect wildlife, including 64sq km internationally important sites and 51 SSSI's covering 55sq km. ● <3% land cover known wildflower meadows with estimated <40% fields semi-improved grassland with potential for enhancement. ● Nearly 50% of AONB supported by government-funded schemes to encourage environmentally sensitive land management. ● 85% of land is Grade 3 and 4 under the Agricultural Land Classification. ● <5% agricultural holders under 35 years old. ● Steep decline in livestock numbers, with sheep and cattle numbers down by one-third since 2000.

TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Fragmentation of farm holdings due to an increase in non-farming land ownership and loss of farm infrastructure e.g., barns at a holding level

2

Declining agricultural workforce and consequential reduction in sustainable food production

3

Page 62

Increasing costs of maintaining grazing infrastructure (including reducing supporting agricultural infrastructure such as livestock markets and abattoirs) and costs of managing significant levels of associated habitats such as hedgerows.

4

Loss of green fields to development and infrastructure, or conversion to other land uses such as woodland.

5

Loss of high value grasslands (unimproved and semi-improved) and hedgerows through land use change, inappropriate management and lack of management, leading to fragmentation of habitats, affecting biodiversity and species resilience.

OBJECTIVE FH1

To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management.

Rationale

To contribute to sustainable domestic food and non-food agricultural production, to support a working countryside, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to reduce the dependency of the UK on non-sustainably managed agricultural land and the need for long-distance transport that produces air pollutants, causing harm to health and the environment.

OBJECTIVE FH3

To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

Rationale

To improve the condition, landscape permeability and connectivity of fields and heaths and their associated and interrelated habitats (such as hedges, trees, woodlands, ditches, ponds and water systems) for wildlife.

OBJECTIVE FH2

To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands.

Rationale

To maintain fields and field boundaries that form a part of the habitat mosaic of the High Weald; and to maintain this key component of what is a rare UK survival of an essentially medieval landscape.

OBJECTIVE FH4

To protect individual archaeological features as well as historic assets and pattern of fields and heath.

Rationale

To protect the historic environment of the AONB that includes the pattern of fields, and individual archaeological features.

Ambitions for 2029

The management of fieldscapes will need to change substantially over the next five years, with regenerative approaches to food production and nature recovery becoming the norm. The comprehensive decline in biodiversity will not be reversed by focusing on nature reserves only. Fieldscapes will need to be restored so wildlife can thrive there. The small-scale nature of the High Weald's fields are ideally suited for productive farming using regenerative agricultural practices. The smaller, permanent grass fields suiting holistic planned livestock grazing with the grass and surrounding trees and hedges providing nutrient-rich forage for cows, sheep and other livestock. These will need to be interspersed with wilder areas providing reservoirs for pollinators and other wildlife. New and innovative approaches, such as agroforestry, will need to be trialled with layered production of nuts, soft and top fruit becoming more common, taking advantage of the High Weald's ability to grow trees and grass well. Small-scale vegetable production using regenerative agriculture practices to supply local markets will need to increase, drawing on the High Weald's mixed farming history. Chemical input from pesticides and artificial fertilizers will need to be drastically cut. There may be a small increase in tree cover and scrub, but most of the fieldscape and heathy areas will remain as open habitats.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Seek to ensure agri-environment schemes and other farming support schemes are tailored to the specific needs of the High Weald landscape.
- b. Prepare best practice guidance for sustainable land management of the High Weald.
- c. Facilitate landscape scale initiatives aimed at reversing biodiversity loss associated with field and heath management.
- d. Continue to provide a High Weald specific land management advisory service (specialising in regenerative approaches) to landowners and managers, including providing support to farmers entering agri-environment schemes.
- e. Support and facilitate scientific research in collaboration with academic institutions to further knowledge and understanding of the semi-improved grassland spectrum, and support dissemination of best practice management to advisors and site managers.
- f. Provide specialist advice to support the management of boundary features including hedgerows, coppice and veteran trees.

Public bodies should...

- g. Require development to protect and enhance existing field patterns, including hedges, ditches or other boundary features, and where possible to restore them when lost, and in particular avoid harm to medieval field systems in planning and decision-making, especially where there is a high degree of intactness or relationship with other notable landscape and heritage features.
- h. Develop and deliver tailored support for pasture-fed livestock farming utilising regenerative grazing and soil conservation management techniques.

- i. Recognise in decision-making the food productivity value and quality of grade 3a and 3b soils as being of greater importance to the High Weald's pastoral agriculture economy and landscape character than simply the ALC grade.
- j. Promote and enforce the Hedgerow Regulations 1997, in recognition of the importance of hedgerows in the High Weald.
- k. Foster small-scale horticulture (soft and top fruit, nuts and vegetables) and associated necessary infrastructure.
- l. Support development of an audit of unimproved and semi-improved meadows.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of fieldscape and heath by...

- m. Developing veteran tree replacement plans for hedges and shaws.
- n. Utilising local provenance wildflower seeds and plant plugs to create or enhance grassland.
- o. Restoring, protecting and managing hedgerows as part of a diverse hedgerow mosaic, reinstating lost hedgerows, and ensuring hedges are cut only between September and March to avoid damage to wildlife
- p. Avoiding new woodland planting on medieval fieldscapes and heath, and on species-rich grassland, to protect grassland and heathland biodiversity.
- q. Protecting local and heritage breeds and crop varieties to preserve genetic diversity.
- r. Proactively encourage management and monitoring of local wildlife sites and review the designation of new sites.
- s. Sensitively managing and restoring lowland heathland as a key habitat.

Further information on maintaining the fieldscapes of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.

CHARACTER COMPONENT

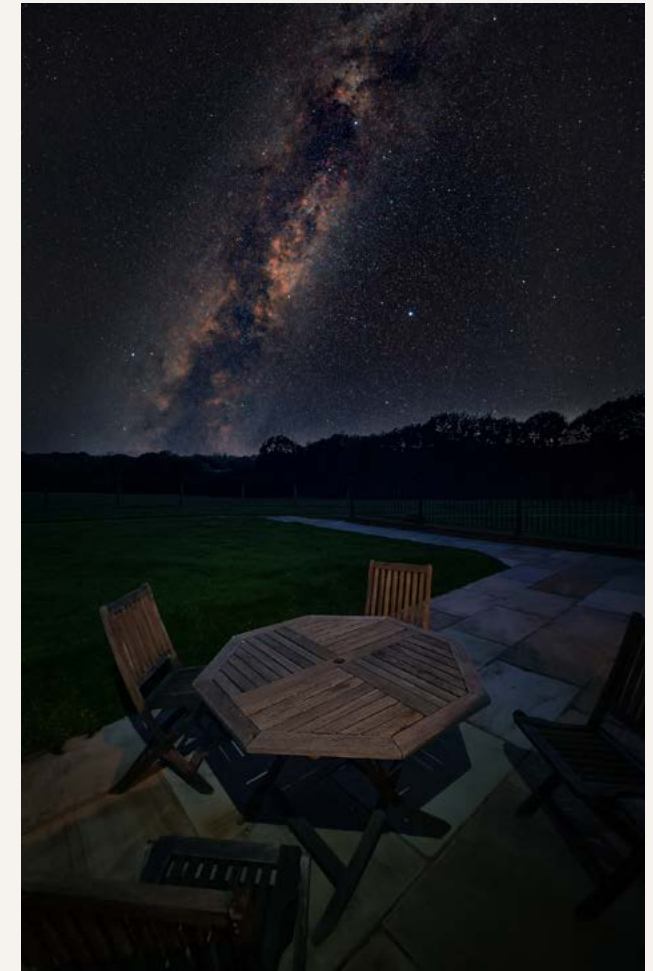
Dark Skies

The High Weald AONB is characterised by having some of the darkest skies in the south-east of England. This gives the AONB a sense of remoteness and peacefulness and connects the natural environment to the cultural and historic landscape.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Intrinsically dark landscapes with a sense of naturalness.
- Some of the intrinsically darkest skies in Southern England, with the least skyglow.
- Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, is observable, as well as the planetary bodies.
- Key constellations such as Orion, Ursa Major and Cassiopeia are visible to the naked eye.
- Deep sky objects are visible to the naked eye, such as the Andromeda Galaxy and Orion Nebula.
- Many rural villages with few street lamps or no street lighting.
- Numerous unlit roads, including A-roads, throughout the High Weald.
- A range of nocturnal species which are dependent on dark skies for feeding, including Natterer's bat, serotine bat, brown long-eared bat, common pipistrelle, noctule bat, Bechstein's bat, dormice, hedgehog, the heart and marsh mallow moths, and glow-worms.



CLICK FOR MAPS

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

● 41 of the 99 parishes within the AONB have wholly dark or intrinsically dark skies. ● A further 15 having 95% coverage of intrinsically dark skies. ● 20 parishes in the AONB have collected light meter readings. ● 15 of the 17 UK bat species are found in the High Weald, all of which are protected.

TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Lack of minimum standards for external lighting that can be enforced. Standards are needed to set out basic principles of dark skies lighting and signpost to guidance and advice where needed.

2

Increased light pollution in rural areas from a variety of buildings and structures including new developments (street lighting and domestic light spill); housing designed with extensive glazing, such as wrap-around or floor-to-ceiling windows; external security lighting; rural out-buildings; public buildings and spaces such as railway stations; camping and glamping sites, and domestic lighting used to light-up homes and gardens at night.

3

Sky glow from adjacent built-up areas (including areas adjacent to the AONB), which reduces views of celestial bodies such as the Milky Way and Orion, leading to a loss of public connection and enjoyment of night skies.

4

Impacts on local wildlife, with light pollution disrupting circadian rhythms, migration, feeding and breeding across all animal groups including invertebrates, mammals, birds and amphibians.

5

Lack of education on the importance of dark skies to human health and wellbeing, as well as their significance to the natural environment.

OBJECTIVE DS1

To preserve the dark skies of the High Weald AONB by minimising light pollution, obtrusive external lighting and internal light spill from domestic, commercial and public premises in both existing and new developments within the High Weald, and from highways lighting.

Rationale

To protect and maintain the existing dark skies within the High Weald for the benefit of all, including future generations, for our health, wellbeing and enjoyment, to increase our understanding and sense of place in the universe; and for the benefit of wildlife and to reduce energy consumption.

OBJECTIVE DS2

To protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.

Rationale

Light pollution affects a wide range of nocturnal species and those out during the day, from feeding to finding a mate and the ability to safely migrate. Light pollution is an additional stress to habitat loss for already declining populations of many species across the High Weald.

‘Artificial light at night has revolutionized the way we live and work outdoors, but it has come at a price. When used thoughtlessly, lighting disrupts wildlife, damages human health, wastes money and energy, contributing to climate change, and it blocks our view of the starry sky’.

International Dark-Sky Association

Ambitions for 2029

Protection of the night-time environment of the High Weald, for nature, and to ensure astronomical dark sky objects such as the Milky Way remain visible to the naked eye, will require the level of artificial light at night to stay at its present low level, with everyone (individuals, communities, businesses including developers and public bodies such as Highways Authorities) committed to environmentally responsible approaches to outdoor lighting, and adopting new technologies.

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ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Promote dark skies awareness and education, including walks and talks aimed at a diverse range of people and organisations, across different geographical areas of the High Weald, and the promotion of International Dark Skies Week.

Public bodies should ...

- b. Include 'Dark Skies' policies in Local Plans and support their inclusion in neighbourhood plans, which seek to maintain dark skies in rural areas and reduce dark skies light pollution in urban areas in the AONB, and ensure the use of such policies in the decision-making process.
- c. Follow the Institute of Lighting Professionals (ILP) guidance on reducing obtrusive lighting, and other relevant guidance to aid protecting dark skies, including ensuring that lighting designers use exterior light control environmental zone E1 to inform any proposed lighting in, or affecting the setting of, the AONB.
- d. Protect wildlife-rich habitats such as ancient semi-natural woodland from external lighting, and where lighting is needed, require minimised and ecologically informed lighting schemes regarding location, direction, lux levels, colour temperature and light fitting design.
- e. Seek to reduce light pollution by ensuring that flood-lit facilities such as sports pitches and car parks are turned off when not in use, through agreements and planning conditions.
- f. Work with organisers of light festivals to reduce impacts, including avoiding light and illumination shows in or near to wildlife sensitive areas.

- g. Avoid new street lighting where possible and ensure any street lighting required for junctions on adopted roads is kept to the minimum necessary and adheres to best practice in terms of location, illuminance and equipment design and light temperature, to avoid unnecessary skyglow and light spill.
- h. Resist large areas of glazing in new building designs, especially wrap-around glazing and floor-to-ceiling windows, to minimise light spill, especially in rural areas with intrinsically dark skies.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of dark skies by ...

- i. Following best practice for external lighting on domestic premises including gardens and garages, to minimise light pollution.
- j. Ensuring new external lighting is installed at the lowest height possible to achieve lighting levels, and is angled downwards (including roof lighting), and using dark sky friendly fixtures.
- k. By using sensors to switch off lighting when not needed, to reduce light pollution and save energy.
- l. Collecting local light meter readings and using satellite data to inform policies at a parish level and highlight light pollution hot spots.

Further information on maintaining the dark skies of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.



CHARACTER COMPONENT

Aesthetic and Perceptual Qualities

Aesthetic and perceptual qualities are sense based, and are experienced as a result of people's interaction with natural beauty and their immersion in it, within the High Weald's landscape.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS¹³**History-related qualities such as ...**

- a. a sense of history and timelessness arising from an ancient countryside with a human-scale agricultural tapestry; veteran and ancient trees; medieval forests, heaths and commons; churches, historic buildings
- b. tangible legacies from the iron and wood industries (such as hammer ponds and place names) and major historic events such as the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Qualities associated with emotion and imagination such as ...

- c. a sense of intimacy, enclosure and remoteness owing to the heavily treed landscape.
- d. a sense of wonder, renewal and connection with the natural world arising from the proximity of wildlife and opportunities for immersion in nature.
- e. a sense of freedom arising from access to a dense network of public rights of way and quiet roads suitable for walking, cycling and horse riding, and opportunities to discover many accessible green spaces (including sandrock areas and rivers, reservoirs and coast) and unexpected features such as the 'mini-landscapes' of gill streams.
- f. a deep sense of rurality unusual in South East England.

Character and gestalt qualities such as ...

- g. the homely, pastoral feel to the whole landscape arising from its human-scale pattern and productivity.
- h. colour palette of greens (vegetation) and browns (clay, timber and iron) representing the materials from which the landscape is constructed.
- i. a rich and varied biodiversity.
- j. a recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats.

Sensory qualities such as ...

- k. unexpected panoramic and long views, often uninterrupted, extending out along the valleys beyond the High Weald with natural skylines and forested ridges occasionally punctuated by church spires, and often framed by field gates and wooded holloways.
- l. quietude and tranquillity, with large areas of natural rural soundscape and perceived distance from urban noise.
- m. natural soundscapes including the ability to enjoy varied birdsong.
- n. exposure to seasonal sensations such as wind and warmth, and diurnal fluctuations in light and dark.
- o. Vivid seasonal changes including the whites and blues of ancient woodland ground flora in the spring and the oranges and browns of autumnal trees and woodlands.

Symbolic and inspiration qualities such as ...

- p. the idea of the High Weald as a 'quintessential English pastoral landscape'
- q. the association of dark autumnal nights and local tradition of High Weald village bonfire societies.
- r. the legacy of physical features and ideas left by writers, artists, poets, gardeners and craftspeople inspired by the landscape such as Kipling's house at Batemans, Christopher Lloyd's house and garden at Great Dixter, the Cranbrook Colony of artists, and A.A. Milne.
- s. traditions illustrating the close relationship between nature and place including skills and crafts, agricultural shows, traditional breeds, and locally produced food and drink.
- t. distinctive public realm features such as fingerposts and milestones.

13. Quality categories based on Brady 2003

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

● >120,000 residents in the AONB and >700,000 people living within 5km of the National Landscape boundary. ● 2,126km footpaths, 383km bridleway, 61km byway (density 1.8km per sq.km). ● 83% population within 5km of a ≤100ha natural greenspace site. ● 4 disused railway lines – Cuckoo Trail, Forest Way, Worth Way and The Hop Pickers Line. ● 87.3km of mainline railway and 41km of heritage railway line. ● 30 manor houses, castles and gardens open to the public, including Battle Abbey (the most visited English Heritage site after Stonehenge). ● 2km of climbable sandrock.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Declining knowledge, connection and involvement with the countryside and its role in producing food and materials.

2

Increasing visitor numbers leading to urbanising infrastructure around villages and popular sites, and lack of awareness of the countryside code by new users, creating tension between different user groups.

3

Difficult accessibility for many, particularly those from urban areas, with declining or expensive public transport services and lack of travel routes for pedestrians, cyclists and riders, declining rights of way maintenance, and lack of signage.

4

Erosion of rurality and tranquillity through 'urbanising' development including new housing, camping/ glamping accommodation and activity, telecoms equipment, traffic and noise (including aircraft), including cumulative impacts.

5

Degradation of nature, including biodiversity decline, erosion of habitats and damage to natural systems reducing people's rich experience of nature.

OBJECTIVE PQ1

To increase opportunities for learning about and celebrating the High Weald's character and aesthetic qualities, and to promote and facilitate contributions by communities and individuals to the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald.

Rationale

To help develop emotional connection to the landscape, encouraging and enabling people to care for the High Weald and support its conservation.

OBJECTIVE PQ2

To protect the unspoilt rural landscape with its intrinsic sense of naturalness, valued views, and the extent of green space which foster experiences of rurality and tranquillity.

Rationale

To prevent the loss of contained green space, glimpsed and long views, and tree-canopied skylines, especially regarding developments that fringe existing settlements in the High Weald, which would impinge on people's perception of greenness and rurality.

OBJECTIVE PQ3

To foster and promote equitable access and informal enjoyment of the High Weald landscape and the integrated management of its resources for the enjoyment of natural beauty by all.

Rationale

To meet the demand for informal recreation from residents and those living close to the AONB, whilst ensuring infrastructure, services and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment for this and future generations.

N.B. For clarity, the pursuance of the above objectives or actions set out in this section should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB.

Ambitions for 2029

Policy and actions will need to protect the physical features that experiencing natural beauty relies on, as well as enabling fair access to it. Conserving and enhancing the High Weald will increase its contribution to a 'Natural Health Service' for people now and in the future, drawing on the area's aesthetic qualities to foster enjoyment and wellbeing, and encourage access for everyone to so that everyone feels welcome and included, while ensuring that nature and beauty are not harmed. Improved and fair access will not just relate to opportunities for recreation but to everything that a naturally functioning healthy countryside can provide including clean air, clean water, healthy food, and the opportunity to learn new skills and interact with nature.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Convene relevant stakeholders to develop best practice and collaborative approaches to managing High Weald greenspaces, including an access strategy that sets out areas for strategic investment to meet increasing population needs and increase access for all users in the High Weald AONB
- b. Coordinate and deliver the primary school education programme to encourage children to enjoy and understand the landscape, including its history and wildlife.
- c. Promote health walks, celebratory landscape-inspired outdoor events, self-guided trails and other outdoor activities encouraging the wider community into the landscape (refer to Cross-cutting theme: People & Access Principles for detail).
- d. Develop and manage the High Weald website and produce information and interpretation promoting the High Weald and its special qualities.

Public bodies should...

- e. Include information about the High Weald AONB on websites and help to promote the purpose and objectives of the AONB Management Plan and the High Weald Charter for Residents and Visitors, encouraging care for the countryside and community engagement.
- f. Recognise and seek to address the potential harm to landscape character, including tranquillity and wildlife, from intensified recreational and tourism related activity (refer to Cross-cutting theme: People & Access Principles for detail).
- g. Ensure that planning decisions (site allocations and development management decisions) consider the impact of development on the intrinsic rural character of the landscape and seek to avoid intrusive development.

- h. Use the High Weald Housing Design Guide for best practice on incorporating green-ness into new developments, by including grass verges, trees and shrubs, and greenspaces, to ensure a strong sense of place and help minimise noise intrusion.
- i. Ensure that installations of infrastructure and equipment for telecoms and utilities services are located and designed so as to avoid introducing urbanising features (such as security fencing, lighting etc) into the rural landscape.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of aesthetic and perceptual qualities by...

- j. Promoting, sustaining and expanding volunteer heritage and conservation groups.
- k. Sharing best practice in visitor management, and producing visitor management plans for sensitive sites and areas.
- l. Promoting the rich cultural, artistic and historical associations with the landscape, and highlighting local distinctiveness in the visitor 'offer', including those associated with farming and forestry.
- m. Maintaining rights of way, particularly promoted routes, and enable responsible and fair access for all to the landscape.
- n. Seeking to retain and enhance panoramic long-distance public viewpoints to enable people to connect with the High Weald and its natural beauty.
- o. Choosing native hedges, shrubs and trees for boundaries for domestic curtilages.
- p. Supporting conservation measures that protect a wide variety of bird species.

Further information on maintaining the aesthetic and perceptual qualities of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.



CHARACTER COMPONENT

Land-based Economy and Rural Living

The High Weald AONB is characterised by a broad-based economy but with a significant land-based sector and related community life focused on mixed farming (particularly family farms and smaller holdings), woodland management and rural crafts.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Land-based workers at a proportion higher than the rural average.
- Strong historic relationship with London and other employment areas on social character and commuting patterns.
- Tendency for greater self-sufficiency in smaller communities to the east of the area, away from major population centres.
- Retention of woodland workers and their families who have a multi-generational relationship with, and whose livelihoods rely on, the area's coppice woodlands.
- A landscape that suits traditional management owing to its small-scale nature and hedged bank and ditch boundaries.
- Strong rural community life based around small towns and villages supported by a network of valued and accessible local services and amenities, such as village halls, shops and post offices, clubs and societies, and infrastructure including bus services.
- Predominantly pastoral mixed farming with an absence of industrial scale farming.
- Other traditional mixed and well-integrated land-uses including orchards, hops, vineyards and soft fruit, and land-based crafts and processing.



Lord Strang, Chairman of the National Parks Commission in 1959 called on the government to

‘Secure modern standards of living in the countryside with improved rural housing and new small rural industries to provide employment’ but observed that these must be ‘fully sympathetic to, and in scale with, the landscape and local style of building’.

Natural and cultural capital – fact and figures

- Agriculture, forestry and fishing account for 13% of businesses (employing 8% of the workforce) compared with 3% in the south east (employing 1% of the workforce).
- 38% of employment is in micro businesses compared with 17% in the south east.
- 29% of the working age population are retired compared with 21% in the south east.
- Rural incomes are slightly lower than those in the south east but average house prices are 42% higher.
- Self-sufficient in cereals, fruit and lamb but an under-supply of potatoes, beef, fresh vegetables and salads.



TOP 5 ISSUES

1

Low wages and lack of affordable housing and well-designed workspace affecting recruitment and retention of workers and constraining ability of land-based businesses to thrive.

2

Holdings which are typically small (by national standards) struggling to remain economic in the current market under traditional livestock management regimes and uncertainty over future agri-environmental schemes; compounded by reducing agricultural infrastructure, such as livestock markets and abattoirs, while high cost of land and decline in affordable farm tenancies are a barrier to new entrants to agriculture.

3

Changing land use away from traditional agricultural enterprises, which cumulatively threatens long-term food production.

4

Loss of traditional skills owing to ageing workforce and contracting farm and woodland economies, and lack of economic value in land-based products constraining innovation.

5

Closures and cuts to rural services and amenities, including bus services, Post Offices, village shops, pubs and banks.

OBJECTIVE LBE1

To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty.

Rationale

To sustain an economically viable land management sector, with a particular emphasis on sustainable and small-scale farming and forestry.

OBJECTIVE LBE2

To reconnect settlements and residents with the surrounding countryside, and maintain and improve rural amenities and services that support communities within the context of the rural settlement pattern.

Rationale

To foster community life, and enhance the synergy of the local economy, society and environment, and the relationship with the surrounding countryside and wild species that defines sustainable rural settlement.

OBJECTIVE LBE3

To improve agricultural and forestry infrastructure (including the provision of appropriate affordable housing and workspaces for land-based workers), along with skills development for rural communities and related sectors that contribute positively to conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

Rationale

To foster land-based economic activities – including heritage conservation, sustainable tourism and outdoor education – that support conservation of the AONB. To provide opportunities for economic activity that supports appropriate land management objectives and AONB designation.

N.B. For clarity, the pursuance of the above objectives or actions set out in this section should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB.

Ambitions for 2029

A renaissance in land-based activity and rural living will be needed to meet the net-zero challenge. Support should be focused on reconnecting people with the land and driving innovation in carbon-neutral agricultural and timber infrastructure, small-scale food production, and forestry and rural skills development. Investment in land-based education, skills, and businesses will need to be significantly enhanced to ensure sufficient land management capacity is created alongside the resilient and flexible skills required to adapt to a warming, more unpredictable climate. Innovative mechanisms to deliver affordable housing for local people, including land-based workers, will need to be explored, such as developing local criteria for key workers, exploring local thresholds for First Homes, and supporting local community land trust ambitions (whilst still having regard to the other Management Plan objective, particularly those relating to Settlement). Increased working from home will continue to stimulate community activities, rural services, and demand for access to countryside resources creating opportunities for new relationships with nature.

ACTIONS

The Partnership will ...

- a. Work collaboratively with local authorities to ensure rural business strategies and investments meet the requirements of the AONB management plan.
- b. Work collaboratively with partners to support and promote apprenticeships and training in rural skills.
- c. Promote the need for national policy and support to be tailored to maintain viable farming and forestry in the High Weald.

Public bodies should ...

- d. Plan for appropriate development to ensure continuing vitality of local communities and viability of community services, including seeking to deliver a mix of housing sizes that responds to local needs and key worker housing, including for land-based workers.
- e. Engage positively with mechanisms capable of delivering affordable housing and housing tailored to the specific needs of land-based workers for rural housing needs.
- f. Seek to retain and support rural services and amenities including bus services, village shops, pubs and Post Offices, and support investment in rural services such as improved rural broadband and digital connectivity across rural areas and community transport initiatives.
- g. Ensure that proposals for farm diversification projects, (including camping /glamping sites), conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald, and would support, and not adversely impact on, the agricultural viability of a holding in terms of retention of sufficient productive land and compatible uses.

- h. Support maintenance and development of agricultural infrastructure and food processing facilities e.g., abattoirs and livestock markets.
- i. Promote, use, and resist removal of, agricultural occupancy conditions and seek to retain capacity for land management within farmsteads.
- j. Ensure support for farming and associated rural development is tailored to the particular needs of the High Weald.
- k. Support organisations offering career introductions to the land-based sector, and explore opportunities to work collaboratively with others to offer viable longer-term tenancies to young farmers and new entrants.
- l. Collate and maintain AONB level data on farming and forestry.

Others can assist conservation and enhancement of the land-based economy by...

- m. Supporting and investing in improved working conditions and manufacturing technology for land-based businesses.
- n. Retaining affordable farm tenancies and seeking creating new affordable tenancies, jobs and accommodation for new entrants to land-based businesses.
- o. Facilitating and encouraging collaborative farming, food processing, and marketing enterprises.
- p. Supporting initiatives that develop skills in land management and rural crafts, and promoting and celebrating local crafts.
- q. Establishing buy-local procurement policies and choosing locally produced food, fencing and furniture.

Further information on supporting the land-based economy in the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at www.highweald.org.

Cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action, and investment strategy 2024-2029

Achieving the Management Plan’s objectives and its 2029 targets will require urgent and ambitious action by all to address the main drivers of change and cross-cutting themes.

This section of the Plan sets out our strategic aims for focusing resources and targeting investment on cross-cutting programmes that address these main drivers and can deliver multiple benefits across the High Weald’s character components.

To change course on climate and nature recovery, and to improve equality, inclusivity and diversity of access for people to enjoy nature, participate in the countryside and sustain a decent living, there will need to be action and investment at multiple levels, and new collaborative partnerships within the AONB and connecting to adjacent areas. There is a need to address ‘Shifting Baseline Syndrome’ through education and understanding; recognising that the human-led biodiversity crisis has shifted people’s perception of what good environmental condition looks like. Local creative solutions will need to be found to

reconcile competing national priorities at a High Weald level, while conserving its distinctive character, but key threats are national and long term, requiring action at a national level.

Despite current threats, there are many actions and policy solutions that will help the High Weald AONB landscape remain culturally and environmentally important for future generations. To do so, this Management Plan recommends that actions by all stakeholders should adopt the following hierarchy:

1. **Avoid** harm to wildlife, climate and natural systems.
2. **Restore** and regenerate nature and natural systems.
3. **Transform** our relationship with nature at multiple levels, such that nature and beauty are protected for their non-instrumental value as well as the joy they bring and services they provide to people.¹⁴



14. (Based on the mitigation hierarchy used by Environmental Impact Assessment and the action framework proposed by the Global Commons Alliance)

The key drivers are interconnected; the climate crisis is in part driving the biodiversity crisis. But loss of biodiversity is exacerbating climate change. Extreme weather events, such as flooding and increased surface water run-off, erode soil, soil erosion releases carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere, and so it goes on. However, this means that a solution or mitigation

for one of the drivers is often part of the solution or mitigation for another priority, especially regarding more nature-focused solutions which result in win-win outcomes. A good example of this is the reinstatement of lost hedgerows, which confers multiple benefits:

EXAMPLE

Multi-benefits of hedgerow restoration; hedge-laying, replanting lost hedgerows and gapping-up

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- **Provides habitats** – shelter and food resource for multiple wild species above and below ground, including for pollinators
- **Protects freshwater ecosystems** – slows soil run-off and pollution
- **Improves connectivity between habitats** – provides corridors for species to move along between patches of habitat
- **Reduces the need for pesticide use** – by providing a habitat for common pest predators
- **Protects soils from erosion** – reduces runoff, improves soil health
- **Provides protection for crops** – provides shelter from wind
- **Improves structure and drainage of soils** – improves soil health and increases soil biota



- **Increases carbon storage and sequestration** – in both the soil and plant biomass
- **Cuts down wind speeds** – protects crops and other habitats, reduces wind throw of trees
- **Provides natural flood prevention** – soil can hold more water and reduces runoff
- **Helps regulate water supply to crops** – better water storage capacity of the soil
- **Enhances and maintains a key characteristic of the High Weald’s cultural landscape** – hedges are an integral landscape feature to the High Weald
- **Absorbs noise and pollution** – increases tranquillity
- **Provides shelter and winter feed for livestock** – supports farmers to keep livestock outside all year round and reduces costs
- **Makes available ‘wild’ food for foraging** – provides access for people to experience the rural environment

Delivery & Investment Strategy

The following sections of the Plan set out our principles and priorities for focusing resources and targeting investment on each of the cross-cutting themes.

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Effective delivery of the Management Plan is dependent upon:

Statutory regulation and enforcement of national minimum standards for air, soil and water quality, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Adequate resourcing for the public bodies, including the High Weald Partnership, responsible for coordinating and implementing necessary actions.

Alignment of rural support and environmental land management schemes with the character of the High Weald and aims of this Management Plan.

Alignment of planning policy, including local development plans, neighbourhood plans, and development management decision-making, with the character of the High Weald and aims of this Management Plan.

Alignment of strategies and investment plans of other Section 85 relevant authorities (for example Local Transport Plans, Climate Change Action Plans, Economic Growth strategies, Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans) with the character of the High Weald and aims of this Management Plan.

Appropriate regulatory protection for landscape character and biodiversity.

Suitable data and forecasting to aid monitoring and review.

The primary means through which the Plan’s cross-cutting investment priorities for soil health, biodiversity and nature recovery, achieving net zero, and improving access, will be delivered is through the range of targeted national investment programmes, agri-environmental schemes, local grant programmes, along with strategic and project-based funding allocations through partner agencies, which should be informed by the specific investment priorities under each cross-cutting theme.

Further details and up-to-date information on current grant schemes can be found on the High Weald AONB website at [Grants – High Weald](#).



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Restoring Soil Health and Regenerative Land Management

Soil health underpins the unique character and distinct form of the High Weald's landscape and biodiversity. Soils are one of the most valuable natural resources we have and are critical to life on Earth. Recognising the importance of soil and its linchpin role in planetary health means prioritising soils and soil health across the High Weald AONB.

Healthy soil, like any other ecosystem, is complex with abundant biodiversity. Soil biodiversity is made up of thousands of species such as springtails, nematodes, fungi and bacteria, many of which are microscopic. These species account for between a quarter and a third of all species on Earth. A teaspoon of healthy soil is estimated to contain billions of organisms from thousands of different species.

Protecting and enhancing soil health provides better food security through increased self-sufficiency. Healthy soil provides a medium in which to grow our food, and underpins many ecosystem services that sustain life, including healthy water systems. The loss or degradation of healthy soils has a knock-on effect to these services and is a major problem because soil creation is an extremely slow process, taking anywhere between 100 to 1,000 years for one inch of soil to form.

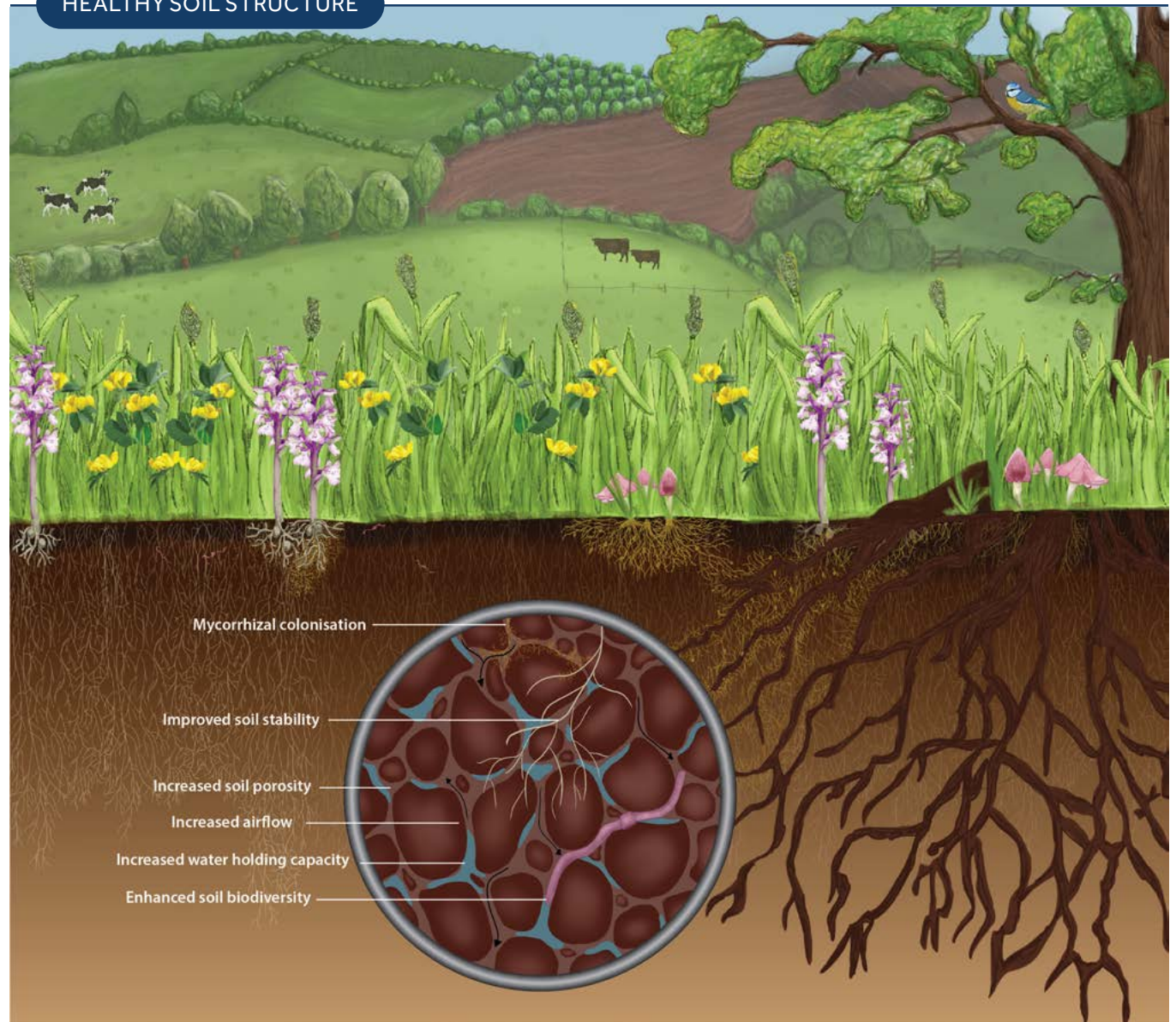
Damage to soils from compaction, erosion and use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides degrades soil structure, affects its ability to absorb and hold water, depletes soil biodiversity, reduces plant growth capacity, and affects nutrient flow to below ground food webs. This leads to a reduction in soil functioning which compromises its ability to store carbon and imbalances soil nutrient content,

Soil and soil health underpins all the character components of natural beauty in the High Weald. Protecting and restoring soils helps restore natural systems, enhances the ecological function of fields, and improves food production and the economic returns from farming and horticulture.

“The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. Without proper care for it, we can have no life.”

Wendell Berry (writer and farmer)

HEALTHY SOIL STRUCTURE



SOIL HEALTH: PRINCIPLES & INVESTMENT PRIORITIES 2029

The priority for delivering soil health in the High Weald AONB over the next five years is through the continued investment in the promotion and guidance of soil monitoring and regenerative agricultural practices for soil health and restoration. This will help conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald landscape by helping to deliver objectives of the Management Plan character components.

The High Weald AONB Partnership recommends that the following practices and actions are pursued in the High Weald in relation to soil health:

Regenerative agriculture and horticulture practices

Many of the techniques associated with regenerative agricultural practices will lead to pastures becoming more resilient to the climate crisis and reduce their vulnerability to droughts; mitigate for flooding by increasing water infiltration in the soil; reducing sediment run-off, and increase carbon storage because of healthier root and fungal networks. Helpful practices include:

Practising no- or min-till farming – reducing or stopping mechanical disturbance by ploughing and discing helps to rebuild the soil ecosystem.

Reducing or eliminating the reliance on chemical pesticides and artificial fertilizers, to improve soil health

Adopting rotational grazing practices – short duration high-density grazing techniques, which improve pasture and grazing productivity, increase water retention and the drawdown of carbon from the air and its storage in the soil, and enhance the soil ecosystem.

Increasing agroforestry and multi-layered growing – incorporating trees and hedges into the farm enterprise, growing trees for their fruit or nuts, planting crops between rows of trees, or grazing livestock amongst rows of trees.

Utilising cover cropping – growing a non-commercial crop for the benefit of the soil, both to prevent soil erosion, and to improve the soil health for future crops.

Adopting companion / intercropping – growing two complementary crops together to utilize space and ensure soil coverage.

These techniques can be underpinned by assessing and monitoring soil health; collecting baseline data which can be used to adjust management approaches.



SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative agriculture is a suite of practices that put soil health front and centre, allowing farming to be more in tune with nature. As a result, it is seen as a more climate resilient approach to farming whilst also supporting nature recovery.

Regenerative agriculture starts with building healthy soil by focusing on rebuilding organic matter and the natural living biodiversity in the soil. This improves the ground's ability to:

- draw down carbon from the air and store it underground,
- hold and clean water,
- help wildlife above and below the ground,
- produce nutrient-dense food year after year.

Regenerative agriculture also delivers on climate change via minimally disturbing soils, which improves soil carbon storage and sequestration, and aids nature recovery from the ground up. The High Weald landscape of small, irregularly shaped fields is ideally suited to regenerative agriculture, and a growing number of farms across the High Weald are incorporating regenerative practices, particularly with livestock grazing.



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Nature Recovery and Biodiversity

Biodiversity is a fundamental component of natural beauty and enriches the distinctive landscape patterns of the High Weald AONB. Biodiversity drives opportunities for people to access and engage with the natural world and fosters understanding of the importance of the High Weald AONB. In 2020, the UK Government committed to the UN target of protecting 30% of the UK's land for nature by 2030. Recovering nature in the High Weald AONB means giving nature more space, providing quality, well-managed habitats and ensuring connectivity between those habitats; in other words, providing bigger, better, more and joined-up places for nature.

The High Weald AONB contains many different habitats and landscape features that collectively support a wide diversity of species. Habitats range from broadleaf woodland to wildflower meadows, open heath and sandstone outcrops to ponds, rivers and coastal cliffs. The importance of the region's biodiversity stems not only from the rarity and variety of species, but also from the ancientness, interconnectedness and assortment of the habitats that support them, and the quality and tranquillity of these habitats. The essentially medieval origin of the High Weald landscape, with its patchwork of small-scale and linear features created through long-standing human-environment interactions, significantly enhances the region's ecological connectivity and its resilience. In the High Weald, the biodiversity value of its landscape is greater than the sum of its parts.

All areas and habitats in the High Weald are suitable for supporting nature recovery, and nature recovery is fundamental to conserving all the character components of natural beauty, from ancient woodlands which support a wide range of plants, and animals including birds, bats and invertebrates, to the numerous undisturbed pastures that support wildflower species and waxcap communities. This plan supports the protection and recovery of all characteristic species, from the small invertebrates to reintroductions of charismatic fauna.

Statutory requirements relevant to Nature Recovery

The Environment Act (2021) has brought with it responsibilities for local authorities in the fight to halt biodiversity loss, and it is important that this Management Plan is utilised to ensure appropriate and consistent delivery of the statutory duties arising from the Environment Act (2021):

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGIES (LNRS)¹³

- LNRS are prepared by 'responsible authorities'; in the High Weald National Landscape these are East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council, Kent County Council and Surrey County Council.
- LNRS underpin the national Nature Recovery Network (NRN) by establishing spatial mapping and planning tools to identify existing and potential habitat for wildlife and agreeing local priorities for enhancing biodiversity.
- LNRS identify investment opportunities for nature locally, rather than being the delivery mechanism for nature recovery.
- All public bodies must have regard for any relevant LNRS.

The LNRS regulations require responsible authorities to engage with supporting authorities, as well as other local partners (such as National Landscape partnerships), to develop their strategy so that it can build on existing or planned nature recovery and environmental work and align with relevant strategies.

BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN (BNG)

BNG is legal mandate for a minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity associated with new developments. Developers must demonstrate this net gain in biodiversity for new developments from early 2024 onwards. The gains should be achieved on site. Where this is not possible, off-site gains can be considered and agreed with the LPA.

Importantly, the provision of BNG does not override the 'mitigation hierarchy' set out in paragraph 186 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The National Planning Policy Guidance makes it clear that "*Biodiversity net gain complements and works with the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy set out in NPPF paragraph 175a [now 186a]. It does not override the protection for designated sites, protected or priority species and irreplaceable or priority habitats set out in the NPPF. Local planning authorities need to ensure that habitat improvement will be a genuine additional benefit and go further than measures already required to implement a compensation strategy.*" (Paragraph: 024 Reference ID: 8-024-20190721).

Within the High Weald AONB, it is important that BNG proposals are informed by a robust understanding of the habitat typologies and systems of the High Weald, evidenced by accurate baseline survey information regarding habitat condition and protected species, in order that they are designed to provide a genuine positive contribution to local biodiversity and habitats. Proposed enhanced or new habitats should function as a meaningful part of the wider connected High Weald habitat mosaic, with reference to the components of natural beauty set out in the Management Plan, and should support the Nature Recovery principles set out in the Management Plan. Importantly, the pursuance of 'biodiversity units' within the metric should not inadvertently harm existing on-site or site-adjacent habitats through their loss or reduction in their connectivity to wider habitat networks, nor should the pursuance of BNG result in works that would cause wider harms to the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB.

13. Local nature recovery strategy statutory guidance (publishing.service.gov.uk)

High Weald habitat and 30x30

In 2022, the UK Government joined the international commitment to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030, known as 30x30. The target requires areas to be effectively conserved and managed while integrated into the wider landscape and respecting the rights of local communities.¹⁴

Protected areas such as the High Weald AONB, and their dedicated Partnerships, are at the forefront of national work to conserve, protect and restore nature-rich habitats across our landscapes. The High Weald already has complex and interconnected nature-rich habitat with many areas in sympathetic low input management. Through protecting these areas and their inter-connectivity, along with improving the quality of habitats through investment via agri-environmental schemes, wilding and adoption of regenerative land management, the High Weald could further contribute to 30x30 objectives, creating a wildlife-rich heart at the centre of the south-east.

The approach in the High Weald should:

- Identify, protect and prevent damage to wildlife-rich core sites (including semi-natural habitats such as ancient woodland) from pollution, pesticides, poor management, over-exploitation, invasive species, disturbance, and habitat destruction and development, and manage appropriately to enhance biodiversity
- Buffer and link core sites, and manage nature, to support a connected and resilient ecological network
- Restore wildlife richness to its pre-industrialised farming baseline across the wider landscape by, for example, fostering management of land for multiple objectives, investing in approaches that maximise nature recovery alongside food production, allowing natural processes to flourish, and creating structural diversity.

14. An extraordinary challenge: Restoring 30 per cent of our land and sea by 2030 (parliament.uk)

The High Weald Partnership will therefore look to promote land management and habitat restoration schemes delivering healthy soils and quality habitats that will benefit species of flora and fauna characteristic of the High Weald. For example:

the characteristic structural woodland and hedgerow flora of the High Weald, such as oak, chestnut, beech, hazel, hornbeam and hawthorn, along with wood anemone, bluebell, wood melick, coralroot bittercress and black bryony, and lichens and fungi such as chicken-of-the woods, supporting fauna including the dormouse, greater spotted woodpecker, marsh tit, flycatcher; white admiral, brown hairstreak and silver washed fritillary butterflies, and a number of bat species, including Bechstein's bat, Natterer's bat and noctule bat.

fields, including grassland flora such as Dyer's greenweed, green-winged orchid and waxcap fungi, supporting fauna such as the barn owl, fieldfare, yellow meadow ant, and a number of grasshopper species; and arable field species such as the brown hare and skylark.

lowland heath, with its carefully balanced mosaic of different vegetation including heather, acid grassland, bare ground, gorse and scrub, and supporting flora such as marsh gentian and marsh clubmoss, supporting fauna such the common lizard, adder, nightjar, linnet and Dartford warbler.

routeways and road verges with their characteristic flora such as primrose, cuckoo flower, common spotted orchid, oxeye daisy, birds foot trefoil; supporting fauna such as the orange tip butterfly and glow worms.

river and wetland-based habitats, including wet grasslands, ditches, ponds, floodplains and gill woodlands, supporting a range of bryophytes (mosses and liverworts, including handsome woollywort) along with other flora such as frogbit, scaly male fern, marsh violet, ragged robin, and fox sedge and tufted sedge, supporting fauna including snipe, woodcock, lapwing wild brown trout, bullhead, brook lamprey, great crested newt, and insect species including caddis flies and beautiful demoiselle, along with foraging opportunities for a number of bat species such as Daubenton's.

historic buildings and gardens, farmsteads and churchyards, supporting birds such as the house martin, swallow, swift, and lesser spotted woodpecker, along with a number of bat species (including common pipistrelle, serotine and brown long-eared) and the hedgehog, slow worm and red mason bee.

N.B. many species of fauna rely on a combination of these habitats for different purposes, e.g. nesting, foraging, roosting, and so the interconnected nature of these habitats is important.

Further information can be found in the High Weald AONB Biodiversity Statement 2014: [High Weald Biodiversity Report](#) Detailed advice regarding the management / restoration of each of these habitat types can be found at www.highweald.org

RECOVERING NATURE: PRINCIPLES AND INVESTMENT PRIORITIES 2029

Delivering nature recovery within the High Weald over the next five years is through investment in programmes and actions which enhance habitats, increase biodiversity, and build a more resilient and connected network for wildlife across the area. These actions feed into Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and are the nature recovery priorities for agri-environment schemes in the High Weald AONB, both of which help to deliver global ambitions to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (known as 30x30). These also deliver the largest gains towards nature, stack benefits for climate change and soil health, and conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald landscape by helping to deliver objectives for character components.

The High Weald Partnership recommends that the following priorities are pursued in relation to nature recovery:

Restoration of species rich grasslands – identification, audit and appropriate management of our most threatened habitat in the High Weald (often undervalued, under recognised and over or under managed) with buffering and improved connectivity achieved by protecting semi-natural grassland and enhancing modified grassland.

Recovery of the abundance of characteristic High Weald species and habitats – focusing on understanding the specific habitat needs of the range of species and adapting management accordingly.

Deer management – active strategies to reduce deer numbers to prevent over-population of deer having a significant impact on the flora of High Weald woodlands and other habitats.

Hedge restoration and reinstatement – hedge-laying, gapping-up and replanting lost hedgerows, including intermittent hedgerow trees, to provide habitat for a variety of species, and provide connectivity between parcels of woodland and species rich grasslands.

Creation and management of scrub and wilder boundaries – allowing for outgrown hedges, scrub and tall grasses which provide structural diversity between different habitats, and support wildlife by providing additional shelter, feeding and breeding sites, as well as being valuable habitats with their own ecosystem and dependant species.

Restoration of a pesticide and pollution free environment – avoidance of air, soil and water pollution (especially water pollution from septic tanks and sewage treatment plants) and significant reduction in the use of chemical pesticides and artificial fertilisers to allow freshwater ecosystems and insect populations in the High Weald's rivers and tributaries and ponds to recover.



SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Wilding

Wilding allows restoration of naturally functioning ecosystems at nature's pace. It does not always equate to abandonment and can be far more nuanced. Expert guidance may be needed, and species introduction should be carried out with careful planning and in collaboration with landowners and neighbours. Projects in the High Weald AONB should consider:

- Small-scale wilding projects which help buffer other core habitats, provide connectivity across the landscape, but do not adversely impact on land which is needed for agriculture or is being managed to enhance other vulnerable habitats such as species-rich grassland.
- Agricultural wilding projects using livestock, preferably traditional breeds such as Sussex cattle.
- Working with adjacent landowners to explore the reintroductions of lost species and expansion of diminished species (such as beavers, pine martens and white-letter hairstreak).
- Wilding which complements the existing medieval landscape character.



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

The Climate Crisis: Achieving Net Zero

The High Weald AONBs distinctive Atlantic climate is found nowhere else in the south east of England. These cool and wet conditions which are found predominantly in gill woodlands are a distinctive part of the natural beauty of the High Weald, however climate change threatens these Atlantic microclimates.

A dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is required to prevent the world reaching an unassailable tipping point. To ensure the UK reaches its target of net-zero GHG emissions by 2050, the UK carbon budget target is an emissions reduction of 68% (compared to 1990 levels) by 2030, which includes shipping and aviation emissions, as a stepping stone towards the 2050 goal.

Tackling the climate crisis in the High Weald AONB requires a net-zero emissions, rather than a carbon neutral, strategy. Referring to emissions seeks to tackle all greenhouse gas emissions, not just carbon dioxide. Net-zero strategies actively work to reduce emissions by setting targets, rather than off-setting or compensating current emissions.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES' DECLARATION OF A CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Since 2019, local authorities nationally have been declaring climate emergencies and producing action plans to tackle the emergency. Most of the fifteen local authority partners to the High Weald AONB have produced plans and set net-zero carbon targets.

CARBON SEQUESTRATION IN THE HIGH WEALD

The High Weald AONB already stores large amounts of carbon in its soils owing to the undisturbed nature of many grasslands (fields) and ancient semi-natural woodlands, making a sizeable contribution to climate mitigation:

- Up to 26.8 million tons of carbon (0-150cm depth) is stored in High Weald soils.
- Woodland covers 28% of the High Weald AONB, well above the national average, and as such the amount of carbon dioxide sequestered across this landscape is substantial, averaging 149,910 tons of carbon a year.

Predicted changes in the climate for the south east of England suggest hotter, drier summers, and warmer wetter winters. Extreme weather events will also become more frequent, of longer duration and greater intensity. These changes pose a threat to the character of the High Weald landscape, impacting both its cultural and natural heritage.

For example, increases in damaging storm events are likely to exacerbate erosion of the coastal cliffs at Hastings, and cause further tree loss, escalating flooding of properties and infrastructure. The changes to our climate will alter the delicate biodiversity found in the High Weald's woodlands, grasslands and heathlands, as some species struggle to adapt and survive whilst others move in, with the potential for increased pests and tree diseases in woodlands. Some habitats found across the High Weald AONB are particularly sensitive to the climate crisis, such as rivers and gill streams, and other wetter habitats. Woodland and grassland will also be affected by hotter, drier summers and wetter winters.

The climate crisis will affect all the character components of natural beauty in the High Weald in different ways, but the AONB can support climate change mitigation; trees and soils are crucial to carbon sequestration. As a nationally protected landscape, the AONB's priority for climate change mitigation is nature-based solutions which simultaneously work to mitigate aspects of the climate crisis, cool the local environment and restore naturally functioning systems; while changes in agricultural practices, such as regenerative farming practices, can improve carbon sequestration and lead to greater water-holding capacities in soils.

CLIMATE CRISIS: PRINCIPLES AND INVESTMENT PRIORITIES 2029

Whilst the High Weald AONB stores and sequesters large amounts of carbon dioxide, this is not a replacement for continued work towards net-zero emissions targets.

The priority for addressing the climate crisis in the High Weald AONB over the next five years is building a resilient landscape for future generations through investment in nature-based solutions, modal shifts in transport, and landscape-led renewable energy solutions.

The High Weald AONB Partnership recommends that the following practices and actions are pursued in the High Weald in relation to the climate crisis:

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Development of nature-based solutions

i.e., those solutions which provide mitigation to the climate crisis through rebuilding the natural functioning of ecosystems. For example, floodwater attenuation (e.g., ‘slow-the-flow’ projects), natural cooling systems, and increasing carbon storage in soils and woody plants.

Developing renewable energy appropriate to the landscape

Renewable energy systems in the High Weald can be best accommodated into this small-scale landscape through smaller scale and domestic projects, and small-scale shared community installations, for example prioritising solar panels on roofs of existing development, (particularly on the larger roofscapes of modern commercial and agricultural buildings, and avoiding external roof slopes of historic and listed buildings), in gardens and on brownfield land (depending on visibility in the landscape), rather than solar fields.

Promoting modal shifts in transport

Including shifts away from car-centric thinking in planning and development, supporting continued investment in existing public transport options and development of other community transport initiatives, coupled with reductions in speed limits to support walking and cycling options.

Achieving net zero in housing design

Including following the principles of whole life carbon assessment, considering not just energy efficiency measures in the in-use operation of buildings, but also embodied energy (including use of existing building stock and sustainable use of materials such as sustainably sourced timber in new buildings), water recycling, and site-wide design strategies such as sustainable drainage systems, layouts that minimise natural resource requirements, and soft landscaping to support climate resilience.



SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Tree Cover

Increasing tree cover is a nature-based solution to help mitigate the climate crisis through helping to store more carbon dioxide. The High Weald already has the highest cover of woodland in England. However, increases in tree cover can be accommodated in the High Weald through increased scrub habitat (managed), thickened hedgerows, in-field trees, wood pasture (ideally by natural regeneration) and the planting of fruit or nut trees. The importance of the High Weald’s small-scale medieval fieldscape means large woodland creation schemes are usually unsuitable. Instead:

- Hedges can accommodate trees either directly planted or left to mature through natural regeneration.
- Agroforestry – introducing trees to the farmed landscape within fields. These trees can also provide shelter for livestock.
- Instead of new planting, land can be left to naturally return to woodland through natural regeneration.
- Urban tree planting within towns and villages throughout the High Weald.
- Reinstating traditional woodland management, such as coppicing, where it has been lost is often more important than planting new woodlands.

Right tree, right place, right reason.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

People and Access

The High Weald AONB provides respite from the highly developed south east of England, spread over four counties, with over 700,000 people living within 5km of the High Weald AONB, as well as being accessible to those in London, Brighton and other cities in the south east. The AONB contains a high amount of publicly accessible countryside, along with a range of landscape-based leisure destinations popular with both residents and visitors alike.



There is a wealth of countryside with public access across the High Weald which includes 2,570 km of Public Rights of Way, Country Parks at Hastings and Buchan, long distance trails such as the Cuckoo Trail and the Forest Way, Forestry Commission woodlands, and both council and eNGO-run reserves such as Crane Valley, Brede High Woods, Broadwater Warren and St Leonard’s Forest. Popular leisure destinations include Ashdown Forest, the largest area of open access land in the south east; Bewl Water, the largest area of inland water in the south east; Harrison’s Rocks, a 1.5km sandstone climbing crag, and Bedgebury Forest, with its 22km of cycle tracks, along with a number of parks, gardens and estates throughout the AONB. Meanwhile, the heritage railways that operate within the High Weald provide a further means of viewing and enjoying the countryside.

We are intimately connected to the natural world, and it is now readily accepted that exposure to nature and natural environments, especially those of good quality, confers many benefits to human health at every age, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. Meanwhile, a deeper understanding of biodiversity and the natural world affects our connection to it and how we interact with it. Understanding how the rural environment is managed increases environmental awareness and supports appreciation of countryside.

People’s opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the High Weald relies on fair access – for example, to experience the tranquillity of woodlands, to be able to afford to farm or work land within the High Weald, or to use the extensive network of public rights of way. However, for a variety of reasons not everyone has equitable access to the natural environment. Barriers may include disabilities which prevent access or limit interpretation and enjoyment, lack of supporting facilities and infrastructure, including transport, and financial barriers. Improving equity, inclusivity and diversity of access for people to enjoy nature in the countryside, and to farm and sustain a decent living there, requires transformational policies at a national level, along with innovative local solutions and collaborative partnerships that empower communities.

Increased access, however, also brings additional pressures on the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB and its character components, particularly around popular visitor destinations. Pressures include disturbance of habitats, increased activity, traffic and pollution, and additional infrastructure such as car-parking facilities, hard-surfacing, lighting and signage. Innovative and landscape-led solutions, including sustainable transport plans and carefully tailored visitor management, will be required to balance the positive benefits of improved access with the duty of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.

Maintaining and improving access to the High Weald in a landscape-led manner sensitive to local character, and with responsible behaviours, will help support objectives relating to historic routeways, public enjoyment objectives to experience rurality and tranquillity, including dark skies, and the reconnection of settlements to the surrounding countryside. The public network of historic routeways can also play a valuable role in meeting the net-zero challenge in association with sustainable transport options.

COUNTRYSIDE CODE

The new Countryside Code, relaunched in 2021^{15,16}, seeks to help people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy the health and wellbeing benefits that nature offers, while affording nature the respect it deserves. It aims to help everyone enjoy the countryside in a safe way, encouraging people to act responsibly when visiting the outdoors, by respecting those who manage the land, and by looking after our natural environments and the livelihoods of those who work there.



15. [The Countryside Code: advice for countryside visitors – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/95424/countryside-code-2021.pdf)

16. [The Countryside Code: advice for land managers – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/95424/countryside-code-2021.pdf)

PEOPLE & ACCESS PRINCIPLES AND INVESTMENT PRIORITIES 2029

The priorities for delivering People and Access within the High Weald AONB over the next five years are set out below.

Investment is required to enable the High Weald to offer fair access to the widest range of people. Although the High Weald AONB has a rich network of public rights of way and nature reserves, not all people are able to reach these, or use them. The following priorities and actions will help people to access the High Weald and secure a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits, whilst conserving and enhancing its natural beauty. Pursuance of any of these priorities or actions should not involve harm to any of the character components set out in Part 1 of this Plan, nor cause harm to the biodiversity of the area.

Promotion and maintenance of the High Weald’s extensive public rights of way network – including:

- mitigating damage from the effects of climate change
- encouraging their use for active travel for recreation, short journeys connecting to towns and villages, wellbeing, and appreciation of the historic and cultural landscape
- designating quiet lanes
- keeping bridleways and footpaths clear, ensuring paths, gates, bridges and benches are in working condition, and signposts and other signage are maintained, and
- promoting responsible public access, supporting promotion of adherence to the countryside code.

Improving transport into and around the High Weald – developing innovative solutions to active and shared transport solutions for those who live and work in and close to the AONB.

Management and landscape-sensitive improvement of green space infrastructure – to support a range of access needs and recreation opportunities, whilst ensuring infrastructure and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing the High Weald’s natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment – including

- the development of holistic, landscape-led visitor management strategies for larger tourism destinations, and
- catering for a range of needs including ethnically diverse and socially deprived groups, and those with mobility or visual impairments, including the provision of disabled parking spaces, wheelchair/mobility scooter friendly paths and routes, rest points such as benches, and interpretation boards, waymarked trails or routes.

The quantum, siting and design of onsite infrastructure and furniture must be carefully planned to be consistent with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the High Weald.

Development of training programmes – in traditional land management practices and skills, and supporting community-led growing initiatives.

Promotion of celebratory landscape-inspired outdoor events and cultural activities – including developing public engagement programmes to address barriers, and promoting the enjoyment of dark skies, and walking festivals, that benefit health and wellbeing, and increase understanding of the natural world.



SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Woodlands and people

Woodlands contribute to a sense of place and provide a link to our past which make them culturally and spiritually important, as well as offering healthy environments to get immersed in.

The High Weald AONB has the highest cover of woodland in England at 28%, which is well above the average of 10% for the rest of the country.

Woodlands often hold a special place in people’s hearts and can be awe inspiring places to visit. Research shows that woodlands are also especially good for our wellbeing. Because of their physical structure they are able to screen out noise and other intrusions from the modern world, absorb large numbers of people without feeling crowded, and offer a wide range of activities (Forestry Commission, 2005). The mental health benefits of woodlands are estimated to be worth around £141 million in England alone. This is thought to arise from more natural sounds such as bird song, being physically active and lower air pollution levels (see e.g., Saraev et al., 2020).



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Planning and Development in the High Weald AONB

Meeting the climate, biodiversity and inequality challenges of the next 20 years will require transformational change in the way that development is planned for and delivered in the High Weald AONB. Being nationally designated for their outstanding natural beauty, AONB landscapes should be exemplars of sustainable planning and design. As the AONB continues to evolve to meet the needs of current and future generations, this must happen in a way that respects its landscape character, natural resources and cultural heritage.



Local Plan Policies and the AONB

Responsibility for planning in AONBs lies with the relevant local authority. The AONB Management Plan does not form part of the statutory development plan, but local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning bodies should take the AONB Management Plan into account when preparing local and neighbourhood plans. AONB Management Plans are also material considerations for making decisions on planning applications within AONBs and their setting.

The 11 districts and boroughs with land in the High Weald AONB each have local plans and strategies that contain policies specific to the AONB, as do many of the parishes that have a 'Made' Neighbourhood Plan. The waste, mineral and highway strategies prepared by the four county councils with land in the AONB may also have AONB specific policies.

As part of their shared ambition to coordinate policies across the AONB, High Weald partners commit to providing a representative with sufficient experience and seniority from each local authority to the Officers' Steering Group (OSG) which meets regularly during the year to build policy consensus and develop joint working initiatives.

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AONB Setting

It is not only development within the boundary of the High Weald AONB that needs to be informed by consideration of the Management Plan; national planning policy and guidance make clear that land within the setting of AONBs often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, and here poorly located or designed development can do harm. This is especially the case where long views from or to the designated landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary. Development within the settings of these areas will therefore need sensitive handling that takes these potential impacts into account.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and AONBs

National planning policy is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2023¹⁷. The NPPF applies as a whole to AONBs as it does to non-designated areas and sets out that planning policies and decisions should [inter alia] recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside¹⁸. However, two paragraphs refer specifically to AONBs: paragraphs 182 and 183.

The NPPF and the accompanying Planning Practice Guidance form important material considerations with regard to development management and confirm that:

- **The scale and extent of development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) should be limited¹⁹**
- **The presumption in favour of sustainable development does not automatically apply within the High Weald AONB (where the application of policies in the Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed, OR where any adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the Framework taken as a whole)²⁰**
- **There is a presumption that planning permission should be refused for major development in AONBs other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest²¹**
- **Policies for protecting AONBs may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for housing and other development in full (where the application of policies in the Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area)²²**
- **AONBs are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs arising from adjoining, non-designated, areas.²³**

17. References to NPPF paragraphs refer to the December 2023 version of the NPPF

18. NPPF 2023 para 180

19. NPPF 2023 para 182

20. NPPF 2023 para 11 (d) and its footnote 7

21. NPPF 2023 para 183

22. NPPF 2023 para 11 (b) (i)

23. NPPG Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721

Development in the High Weald AONB

Paragraph 182 of the NPPF states:

‘Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads. The scale and extent of development within all these designated areas should be limited, while development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas.’

PLANNING PRINCIPLE

1

In order to demonstrate that planning applications are consistent with national policy, and in particular reflect the great weight to be given to the protection of the AONB in the NPPF para 182, and to ensure planning decisions take full account of the importance of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, the High Weald Partnership recommends that proposals be accompanied by suitable assessment reports which:

- specifically set out how proposals have been informed early in the process by the Management Plan and, where relevant, the High Weald Housing Design Guide;
- set out how any adverse impacts on the character and conservation purpose of the AONB, and on the specific components of character as set out in this Plan, including cumulative impacts, have been avoided or minimised in the proposals. LVIA reports, assessments of impact on scenic beauty, and Design & Access Statements are all useful tools in this regard;
- are used to clearly inform planning decision-makers in considering the scale, extent, location and design of development, in accordance with para 182;

and that production of local plans, site allocation proposals and Neighbourhood Plans should be informed by similar assessments.

Major Development in the High Weald AONB

Paragraph 183 of the NPPF states:

‘When considering applications for development within National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest. Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- a. the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;*
- b. the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*
- c. any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreation opportunities and the extent to which they can be moderated.’*

Major development as referred to in paragraph 183 of the NPPF is not defined, but Footnote 64 of the NPPF explains:

‘For the purposes of paragraphs 182 and 183, whether a proposal is ‘major development’ is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined.’

PLANNING PRINCIPLE

2

Noting that whether development is major or not in the context of the AONB (under para 183 of the NPPF) is a matter of planning judgement for the decision maker, the High Weald Partnership recommends that, in forming that judgement, specific consideration be given to the following:

- The potential of the proposal to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty for which the AONB is designated and defined, as set out in this Management Plan, for example, where the nature, scale and setting of the proposal could significantly harm any of the character components.
- The potential for such adverse impact from cumulative development

and that on a precautionary basis, such consideration is also applied to the plan-making stage and any proposed allocations for development in the AONB.

N.B. It is important to remember that even where development is not considered to be ‘major’ under para 183, the provisions of para 182 still apply.

New Housing Development in the High Weald AONB

The built character of the High Weald, in terms of settlement form and structure, siting in the landscape, the relationships of buildings to streets, and building form and massing, is highly important to the natural and scenic beauty of the High Weald.

The High Weald Partnership recommends that new development should be 'landscape-led' and consistent with the objectives set out in this Plan and expanded on in the **High Weald Housing Design Guide**²⁴. The Guide sets out the urban design expectations for all new housing developments within the High Weald AONB, with the objective of achieving higher quality and landscape-led design that reflects intrinsic High Weald character, that steers away from generic or suburban layout and design approaches, and that is instead embedded with a true sense of place, without stifling innovation and creativity.

Landscape-led design means using landscape as a framework to understand the site and formulate a design response. The term landscape used here includes landscape history, physical character and perceived qualities, and socio-economic and ecological functioning – all of which contribute to understanding a place. A design response includes issues such as site capacity, layout, form, scale and detailing as well as any landscaping and ecology plans which combine to make a place beautiful and distinctive and integrate it into the surrounding AONB.

As well as providing a brief explanation of the High Weald AONB and its settlement character, the Design Guide format is intended to help structure the design process, with ten Design Themes ranging from **Responding to Site & Landscape Context**, **Layout & Structuring the Site**, and **The Right Built Form**, to more detailed matters such as **Parking Strategies**, **Building Appearance**, and **Reinforcing Local Planting Character**. Each Design Theme contains detailed analysis and advice, illustrated with photographs and diagrams, and a summary checklist, with a particular emphasis on tailoring design approaches to support the overall character and identity of the High Weald. As such, it aligns with the advice in the NPPF (para 133) and in the National Design Guide advocating locally-based design guides and regarding their scope and purpose.



24. Design Guide and Colour Study – High Weald

PLANNING PRINCIPLE 3

The High Weald Partnership recommends that:

- the High Weald Housing Design Guide is used by developers and designers to create schemes which contribute positively to the character and natural beauty of the High Weald AONB, and by Neighbourhood Plan groups to help inform Neighbourhood Plans, and by LPAs to inform planning policies, site allocations and development management decision-making.
- local plan policies for new housing development in the High Weald should aim towards net-zero standards.
- new development should contribute positively to nature recovery, ensuring that the functioning of existing on-site and site-adjacent features and natural processes are protected and enhanced; whilst noting that 10% BNG is a statutory requirement for all relevant development, and achieving gains in biodiversity does not necessarily mean a development meets the wider requirements of planning policy in AONBs.
- local plan policies consider alternative mechanisms to improve delivery and affordability while minimising land take, to help deliver housing within the AONB in a manner that complies with the NPPF, and which can help conserve the character and beauty of the High Weald AONB. For instance, encouraging the subdivision of larger homes into smaller ones and the efficient utilisation of the existing building stock and brownfield sites, along with ensuring that energy-efficient new development makes the most efficient use of land, whilst still having appropriate regard to retaining and incorporating landscape features.

Historic Built Environment in the High Weald AONB

The historic environment is fundamental to the distinctive character, sense of place and natural beauty of AONBs²⁵. The rich built heritage greatly informs the character of the High Weald AONB; historic hamlets and farmsteads are an intrinsic part of the distinct and picturesque landscape, with the rolling pastureland and small ancient woodlands of the countryside interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofs of historic buildings. Along with the domestic building stock of farmhouses and cottages, building typologies reflect locally distinct historic agricultural practices, for example the distinctive brick roundels of the hop industry's oast-houses, fine timber-framed barns and modest brick cowsheds, dairies and outbuildings.

National planning policy places great importance on the conservation of these Heritage Assets (Chapter 16 of the NPPF) which can be classified as:

- **'designated'** – i.e., those benefiting from statutory designation, such as Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas, and
- **'non-designated'** – other historic features and structures which contribute positively to the physical, historic and socio-cultural character of the area, and which warrant retention and interpretation, and which can be identified in 'Local Lists' (prepared by LPAs or via Neighbourhood Plans), or during the decision-making process.

PLANNING PRINCIPLE

4

The High Weald Partnership recommends that, with reference to the contribution that Heritage Assets and their settings make to the cultural value, character and natural beauty of the National Landscape, appropriate regard is given to their conservation in the planning process, including in planning policy and site allocations process, neighbourhood planning and in decision-making.



Energy Efficiency and Historic Buildings

To help meet net zero ambitions, the energy efficiency of historic buildings is an important consideration; Historic England recognises the urgent need for climate action and believe that England's existing buildings have an essential role to play in fighting climate change. Sustainability in building is not just associated with operational energy consumption, but also the embodied energy used in the construction of buildings, and to meet carbon neutral targets we must recycle, reuse and responsibly adapt our existing historic buildings. Continuing to upgrade, repair and maintain historic buildings makes good social, economic and environmental sense, and will help conserve and enhance the AONB, contributing to the Management Plan objectives and Climate Change priorities.

It is important to recognise that retrofitting measures which may be suitable for modern (post-war) housing stock can be damaging to older buildings, either through causing unacceptable damage to the character and appearance of historic buildings, or through causing damaging technical conflicts with traditional construction.

Historic England's extensive research in the complex area of understanding and improving the energy performance of historic buildings has led to their overarching guidance: **Energy Efficiency and Historic Buildings: How to Improve Energy Efficiency | Historic England**. This sets out their holistic 'whole building approach' which can help in meeting the combined objectives of increasing energy efficiency and sustaining significance in heritage assets while avoiding unintended consequences, and is supported by a more detailed suite of guidance on practical measures.

PLANNING PRINCIPLE

5

The High Weald Partnership recommends that energy efficiency planning policies and decision-making affecting the historic built environment should follow best practice advice from Historic England, in order that energy conservation measures are balanced with conserving the historic environment that contributes to the natural beauty of the AONB.

25. Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty | Historic England

Public Realm in the High Weald AONB

The historic public realm across the High Weald plays an important role in defining the special character of the AONB. Historic features such as locally distinctive paving, railings, milestones and historic fingerpost signs, along with red telephone kiosks and letterboxes, contribute positively to the character of the rural public realm. The materials, finishes and elements used within the public realm often make a significant contribution to an area's sense of place, and the retention, sensitive repair, and, where appropriate, reinstatement of such features is important in maintaining the AONB's character.

Rural areas can also suffer suburbanisation through inappropriate creation of footways with raised kerbs, the loss of verges, the introduction of excessive road signage, or of signage and railings in inappropriate modern and generic styles and materials, and the introduction of street lighting. Meanwhile, wildflower verges are part of the High Weald's natural beauty and often a refuge for wildlife that has disappeared elsewhere, and the appropriate management of both woodland verges and grassland verges is important for ecology.

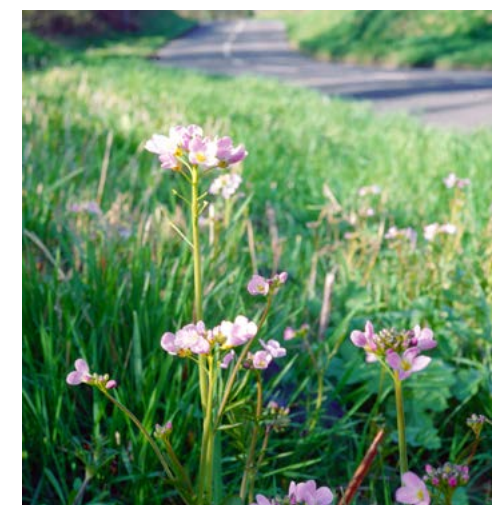
The public realm is also important to the quality of everyday life throughout the AONB, from the accessibility and convenience of bus stops, benches and litter bins, to the community activities and events enabled by quality public spaces.

Meanwhile, considerable new public realm is created in new developments, which offers the opportunity to enhance the landscape character and ecological value of existing retained green infrastructure on-site or adjacent, as well as providing new positive planting to meet BNG requirements. Within new developments, existing site features such as trees, hedgerows, ponds and streams should be retained as part of the public realm to embed a genuine local sense of place in new schemes, while new green spaces and habitats for wildlife should be maximised, with a range of native plantings. Further, green spaces within sites can actively contribute to climate adaptation, and bring with them opportunities to enhance the locality through their management, drawing on local traditional land-management skills (e.g., coppicing) and supporting local industry.

PLANNING PRINCIPLE 6

The High Weald Partnership recommends that:

- Historic public realm features in the AONB are given consideration as Heritage Assets, and should be retained in-situ and repaired appropriately, in order to conserve their contribution to the natural beauty of the AONB.
- Partners responsible for management of roadside verges and works in their vicinity follow best practice advice, including [Managing grassland road verges 2020 \(plantlife.org.uk\)](#).
- Existing trees in villages and towns, including street trees, are retained, managed well, and supplemented where appropriate, to reinforce the verdant character of High Weald settlements and to help with climate adaptation.
- Design choices for new or replacement public realm infrastructure, including paving, signage and lighting, are sensitive to the character of the AONB, use traditional designs and materials, and have regard to the objectives of the Management Plan.
- New public realm soft landscaping schemes are informed by the advice in the High Weald Housing Design Guide regarding creating multi-layered planting strategies of native trees, (including street trees), hedging plants and wildflowers, avoiding ubiquitous, suburbanising planting of ornamental ground-cover shrubs or locally non-native or invasive species.



High Weald Charter for residents and visitors

The following are actions that all residents, visitors and businesses can take to help care for this nationally important landscape.



Buy local products and services from farmers and woodland managers who actively manage their land to benefit the environment

The landscape and wildlife value of the area's woodlands, hedges, meadows, heathlands and field margins are dependent on traditional management. Money invested in products and services that help support this management is money invested in conserving the AONB and its local economy.



Take pride in the High Weald – promote its special features and places to family, friends and visitors

Promoting what you find special about the High Weald is the best way of encouraging commitment and action by others to the area.



Slow down for people, horses and wildlife

Traffic spoils enjoyment of the High Weald for 80 per cent of its residents. Speeding cars kill people, horses, badgers, deer and foxes, and ancient routeways and their rare plants are damaged by inconsiderate driving and parking.



Help prevent the spread of invasive and harmful plant and animal species

Introduced plant, animal and fish species spread rapidly in the High Weald countryside, competing with our native wildlife and leading to its loss.



Have a say

Your views can influence care of the area – use consultation processes operating at parish, district, county and AONB level to steer policy and action that affects the area.



Use less water

Demands for water lead to high levels of water extraction, damaging the wildlife of the AONB's streams, rivers and wet grasslands. Increased demand in future will create pressure for new reservoirs within the AONB.



Avoid using the car where possible and consider using renewable energy in your home

Emissions from petrol and other non-renewable fossil fuels contribute to climate change and lead to degradation of valuable habitats such as sandrock, and gradual loss of wildlife such as bluebells.



Get involved – support local conservation organisations

With your financial and practical support, local conservation organisations can take action to care for the area such as monitoring threatened wildlife, undertaking practical conservation tasks, and lobbying government.



Respect other users – follow the Countryside Code

Through responsible behaviour we can all use and enjoy the countryside without damaging the enjoyment or livelihoods of others.



Manage your land for wildlife and maintain the rural nature of your property

Fields, woodland, paddocks and gardens support valuable and threatened wildlife. Inappropriate materials and features, often associated with urban areas, are leading to the gradual loss of the AONB's valued rural feel.



Reduce, reuse and recycle, and dispose of all litter responsibly

Litter spoils enjoyment of the countryside for the majority of residents. Less rubbish means less pressure for landfill sites and incinerators in the AONB.



Monitoring

National Monitoring

The government is currently developing a new outcomes framework for Protected Landscapes, including AONBs, which will set targets for their contributions to national environment and climate commitments. Targets set by national government²⁶ will form part of a subsequent Monitoring Addendum to this Management Plan.

Local Monitoring – Indicators of Success

Local Monitoring for the duration of the Management Plan will remain specific to the High Weald landscape, associated with the objectives set out in the Plan.

The Partnership will look to develop a programme to identify appropriate, effective and proportionate mechanisms to measure or judge progress towards the indicators of success, and will seek to work with wider partners to secure a long-term programme of monitoring along with appropriate resources.

Natural Systems

- All water bodies with either a 'good' or 'high' ecological and chemical status.
- 100 per cent geological SSSIs in favourable condition.
- Earthworm numbers consistently high across the High Weald.

Settlement

- Increase in percentage of new developments that accord with High Weald AONB Housing Design Guidance.
- High level of planning appeals dismissed where grounds of refusal were adverse impact on AONB, including non-compliance with High Weald Housing Design Guide.
- Physical and perceived separation between settlements maintained.

Routeways

- Greater proportion of new homes delivered through re-development or small developments.
- Increase in retention of historic public realm features in highways management regimes.
- Fewer public rights of way diversions on historic routeways.
- Increase in proportion of designated wildlife verges with tailored management regimes.

Woodland

- No loss of ancient woodland.
- Increase in proportion of woodland managed to remove invasive species.
- Increase in woodland dependent butterflies.
- Length of hedges restored or replanted.
- Increase in Historic Environment Records (HER) for woodlands.
- Increase in scale and numbers of businesses milling local timber.

Fieldsapes and Heath

- Maintenance of land registered for grazing animals.
- Increase in hedges restored and new hedges planted.
- No loss of Medieval field systems.
- No loss of species rich grassland.
- No loss of lowland heath.
- Increase in connectivity of species-rich grassland.

Dark Skies

- Increased number of LPA development plans (including neighbourhood plans) that include specific dark skies policies.
- No loss of dark skies or tranquillity.

Aesthetic & Perceptual Qualities

- Maintaining the number and frequency of schools undertaking outdoor learning activities.
- Number of volunteer days supporting AONB conservation.
- Proportion of rights of way in good condition.
- Increase in High Weald Walking Festival participants.

Land-based Economy and Rural Life

- Improved conditions for land-based businesses to flourish.
- Increased procurement by public bodies of goods and services which support AONB landscape conservation.
- Increase in average rural incomes.
- High retention of agricultural occupancy conditions.
- Maintained numbers of people employed in land-based and craft sectors.
- No loss of strategic agricultural or land-management infrastructure (e.g. abattoirs, livestock markets, sawmills).
- Improved levels of rural public transport.
- No loss of rural amenities (e.g. Post Offices, pubs).

26. Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).



Definition of terms

Aesthetic – Concerned with beauty, or the appreciation of beauty.

Assart – Land enclosed from woodland, often still with numerous trees on boundaries.

Biodiversity – In this context covers species richness and abundance, along with genetic diversity and diversity of traits.

Character – A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements (or components) that makes an area different from other areas.

Conservation – The preservation, protection or restoration of the landscape.

Cryptogam – A plant that reproduces through spores rather than seeds or blooms, such as algae, lichens, mosses and ferns.

Culture – The sum total of people's beliefs, customs, social groupings, knowledge and technology, not inherited through biology.

Dark skies – Where you can see starry skies and our own galaxy, the Milky Way.

Diffuse Pollution – The release of potential pollutants from a range of activities that, individually, may have no effect on the water environment, but, at the scale of a catchment, can have a significant effect.

Field – An area of land, often enclosed, traditionally used for cultivation or the grazing of livestock.

Field system – A group or complex of fields sharing a common character, which appears to form a coherent whole (in the High Weald, this usually results from the influence of topography and land use but also historic features).

Forest – Derives from the Latin nova foresta (literally 'new hunting ground') and originally denoted an area defined by the Normans where deer and other animals were kept for hunting. Forest in this sense does not necessarily refer to a wooded area in the modern meaning of the word but also to heathlands, moorlands, and wetlands.

Geomorphology – Landform origins, and the processes which shape or modify them, such as erosion.

Gestalt qualities – Concepts which refer to the essential nature of a perceptual experience, where the whole is greater than the parts.

Gill – A deep cleft or ravine, usually wooded and forming the course of a stream.

Greenhouse gases – Gases that trap heat in the atmosphere. The gases are water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases.

Green and Blue Infrastructure – All the individual parcels of natural space and features that, when connected, deliver quality of life and environmental benefits for communities and the nature that thrives within them. Green infrastructure usually refers to land; fields, woods and hedgerows, while blue infrastructure includes water bodies.

Heritage Asset – Defined in the NPPF as a building, monument, site, place, area, or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and non-designated assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).

Historic Landscape Characterisation – Method of identification and interpretation of the varying historic character within an area, looking beyond individual heritage assets to an understanding of the whole landscape.

Holloways – Sunken routeways generally in wooded areas.

Human-scale – A pre-industrial farming landscape managed by human labour using traditional tools, created prior to heavily mechanised farming and intensive agricultural practices.

Inned rivers – Reclaimed often marshy land through draining and other engineering techniques of the day.

Key characteristics – Combinations of elements particularly important to character that help make that character distinctive.

Landform – Natural features in the landscape that make up the terrain, such as hills, valleys and plains.

Landscape – An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.

Landscape-led – Shaped and informed by an understanding of the High Weald's landscape as described in this Management Plan. Landscape-led design means using landscape as a framework to both understand the site – its context, character, qualities and functioning – and to formulate a design response in terms of site capacity, layout and design.

Natural and Cultural Capital – in the context of this Plan, natural capital is the natural resources and habitat of the area, including geology, soils, water, vegetation, and wildlife, while cultural capital includes employment, skills, knowledge, experience and enjoyment.

Natural beauty – For the High Weald AONB, natural beauty is defined by the Statement of Significance.

Natural assets – Biological assets, land and water areas with their ecosystems, subsoil assets and air.

Near-term targets – These outline how organisations will reduce their emissions, usually over the next 5-10 years, to galvanise the action required for longer-term targets.

Net zero – Net zero means that any greenhouse gas emissions created are balanced (cancelled out) by taking the same amount out of the atmosphere. In 2019, the UK government became the first major economy to pass a net zero emissions law with a target that will require the UK to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Oceanic Climate – A climate sub-type typical of much of north-west Europe, characterised by cool summers and mild winters, with a narrow annual temperature range and few extremes due to maritime influence.

Public Realm – All external spaces that are publicly accessible, such as streets, lanes and paths, verges, village greens and squares, and the features within them, such as signage, lighting and street furniture.

Regenerative agriculture – A system of farming principles and practices that increases biodiversity above and below the soil's surface, restores soil health, rebuilds soil organic matter, improves watersheds and enhances ecosystem services.

Routeway – Any route between places across either land or water.

Setting – The surroundings in which the AONB is experienced by people.

Shaw – A narrow strip of woodland.

Shifting Baseline Syndrome – The generational loss of historic understanding, knowledge and experience of environmental conditions and the acceptance of more recent ecological conditions, erodes sustainable baselines for nature recovery. In practice this means that environmental targets set today would have been considered poor yesterday, whilst what is considered a poor baseline today may sadly be considered a good target in the future if shifting baseline syndrome persists.

Significance – What is special and valued about the AONB to this and future generations.

Species-rich grassland – A grassland displaying a wide variety of wildflowers and grasses with the exact composition varying according to the dynamic interaction of factors such as management, drainage, history and soils.

Sustainable land management – Farming and other land management activity that conserves the character of the AONB, enhances the diversity and biomass of characteristic wildlife, improves soil quality and the functioning of natural systems; and supports local livelihoods and social structure.

Topography – The arrangement of the physical features of an area, including both natural and artificial.

Undisturbed soils – Soils that haven't been disturbed over the long term by activities such as ploughing/chemical input/construction works.

Wooded pasture – The product of historic land management resulting in a typical vegetation structure of large, open-grown or high forest trees (often pollards) at various densities in a matrix of grazed grassland, heathland or woodland.

Zero carbon – Zero carbon means that no carbon emissions are being produced from a product or service.

The following terms are used in the document:

CRoW Act	Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000
HLC	Historic Landscape Characterisation
JAC/HWJAC	High Weald Joint Advisory Committee
LPA	Local Planning Authority
LVIA	Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment
NLA	National Landscapes Association (Formerly the National Association of AONBs)
NP & AC Act	National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act 1949
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
NPPG	National Planning Policy Guidance
NVC	National Vegetation Classification
PAWs	Plantations on Ancient Woodlands
RIGs	Regionally Important Geological Sites
RPA	Rural Payments Agency
SAC	Special Areas of Conservation
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest

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Disclaimer

Adoption of this management plan by partner authorities does not necessarily imply endorsement of the views and conclusions of documents identified in this Plan as ‘Evidence and further reading’.



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Appendix 1:

AONB designation, policy and legal framework

Purpose of designation

The primary purpose of AONB designation is to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty'²⁷ but the architects of the 1949 Act recognised other underlying principles which were important aspects of the designations' success. These included the need to maintain a 'thriving community life' with particular emphasis on farming and forestry, and the need to promote understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities by people.

These subsidiary purposes – in effect, qualifications of the primary purpose – are those defined in the Countryside Commission statement 1991²⁸, restated in 2006²⁹. The basis for the wording of the subsidiary purposes can be found in the Countryside Act 1968 (section 37):

- 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.

Although AONBs do not currently have the statutory second purpose of National Parks, which is 'to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities [of the area] by the public', the 1949 Act assumed that AONBs would also fulfil this function^{30,31}, and this intent is reflected in the subsequent duty placed on AONB conservation boards by Section 87 of the CRoW Act 2000 which adopts the same language³².

High Weald designation history³³

The report of the first National Park Committee, set up in 1929, mentioned the wooded hill country of the High Weald, essentially Ashdown Forest, as an area requiring measures to protect its bird interest. A subsequent report in 1945, the Dower Report, included the 'Forest Ridges (Horsham to Battle)' in its list of 'Other Amenity Areas not suggested as National Parks'. Dower had recognised that some areas might not be suitable for National Park status because of their size or lack of 'wildness', but they nonetheless required safeguarding for their 'characteristic landscape beauty'. A follow-up report, the Hobhouse Report, in 1947 included the Forest Ridges in a list of 52 Conservation Areas (largely based on Dower's 'Other Amenity Areas...') which, it proposed, should be designated for their high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value. It wasn't until 1969, following coordinated landscape surveys by county and district councils, that the wider High Weald was put forward to the Countryside Commission for consideration as an AONB. Detailed work on the boundaries was then carried out and designation of the High Weald was confirmed in 1983.

From 22nd November 2023, all AONBs are to be known as National Landscapes. The High Weald National Landscape remains designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is referred to as such in policy, legislation and guidance. For this reason, this document is still titled and referred to as the High Weald AONB Management Plan. Its statutory purpose remains unchanged.

27. [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

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29. Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans (Countryside Agency, CA 221, 2006, p.6)

30. [ukpga_19490097_en.pdf \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

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Responsibility for conservation and enhancement of AONBs: the legal framework

AONBs exist within a legal framework which has been progressively strengthened since the first AONBs came into existence after the Second World War.

- **The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act** made provision for the designation of AONBs and National Parks. It provided AONBs with protection, under planning law, against inappropriate development and gave local authorities permissive powers to take action for ‘preserving and enhancing natural beauty’.
- **The Countryside Act 1968 (Section 37)** placed a responsibility on local authorities, statutory conservation bodies, and civil servants, in exercising their functions under the 1949 Act (as amended by subsequent legislation) to ‘have due regard to the needs of agriculture and forestry and to the economic and social interests of rural areas.’ Within AONBs this means a responsibility to acknowledge and, where appropriate, to promote farming, forestry and the rural economic and social context wherever this can be done without compromising the primary purpose of conserving natural beauty.
- **The Environment Act 1995** confirmed replacement of ‘preserve and enhance’ with ‘conserve and enhance’ in relation to the purpose of National Parks and duties of public bodies towards them.
- **The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW)**, amended by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, subsumed and strengthened the AONB provisions of the 1949 Act. It brought the primary purpose in line with that of National Parks, clarified the procedure for their designation, and created a firm legislative basis for their protection and management, giving responsibility for their conservation and enhancement primarily to local authorities. In particular:
 - **Section 82** reaffirms the primary purpose of AONBs: to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
 - **Section 83** establishes the procedure for designating or revising the boundaries of an AONB, including Natural England’s duty to consult with local authorities and to facilitate public engagement.
 - **Section 84** confirms the powers of local authorities to take ‘all such action as appears to them expedient’ to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of an AONB and sets consultation and advice on development planning and on public access on the same basis as National Parks in the 1949 Act.

- **Section 85** places a statutory duty on all relevant authorities ‘...in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect land [in an AONB] must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty...’. ‘Relevant authorities’ include all public bodies (county, borough, district, parish and community councils, joint planning boards and other statutory committees); statutory undertakers (such as energy and water utilities, licensed telecommunications companies, nationalised companies such as Network Rail and other bodies established under statute responsible for railways, roads and canals); government ministers and civil servants. Activities and developments outside the boundaries of AONBs that have an impact within the designated area are also covered by the duty.
- **Sections 86 to 88** allow for the establishment in an AONB of a Conservation Board to which the AONB functions of the local authority (including development planning) can be transferred. Conservation boards have the additional but secondary function of seeking to increase public understanding and enjoyment of the AONB’s special qualities. They also have an obligation to ‘seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of local communities’ in co-operation with local authorities and other public bodies.
- **Sections 89 and 90** create a statutory duty on all AONB partnerships (local authorities and Conservation Boards) to prepare a management plan ‘which formulates their policy for the management of their area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’, and thereafter to review adopted and published Plans at intervals of not more than five years. Where an AONB involves more than one local authority, they are required to do this ‘acting jointly’. Section 90 also sets out that the Secretary of State may by regulations make provision requiring AONB Management Plans to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Environment Act 2021, and setting out how such a plan must contribute to the meeting of such targets, and setting out how AONB Management Plans must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.
- **Section 90A** sets out that the Secretary of State may by regulations make provision requiring relevant authorities to contribute to the preparation, implementation or review of AONB Management Plans, and setting out how such a relevant authority may or must do so.
- **Section 92** makes clear that the conservation of natural beauty includes the conservation of ‘flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features.’

● **The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC):**

- **Section 99** formally clarifies in law that the fact that an area consists of or includes land used for agriculture or woodlands, or as a park, or ‘any other area whose flora, fauna or geographical features are partly the product of human intervention in the landscape’ does not prevent it from being treated, for legal purposes, ‘as being an area of natural beauty (or of outstanding natural beauty).’
- **Schedule 7** asserts that an AONB joint committee of two or more local authorities, or a conservation board, can constitute a ‘designated body’ for the performance of functions allocated to Defra.

The international context

AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are part of the international family of protected areas. As cultural landscapes, produced through the interaction of humans with nature over time, they have a special significance (together with UK National Parks) of being recognised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as ‘Category V – Protected Landscapes’. These offer a unique contribution to the conservation of biological diversity, particularly where conservation objectives need to be met over a large area with a range of ownership patterns and governance. They can act as models of sustainability, promoting traditional systems of management that support key species.

Category V protected landscapes are defined by IUCN as:

‘A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values.’

The Council of Europe Landscape Convention (2000), ratified by the UK government in 2006, provides a definition of landscape as ‘An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.’ This is a rich concept that puts people at the heart of landscape (the commonplace and ‘degraded’ as well as the eminent), each of which has its own distinctive character and meaning to those who inhabit or visit it.

Since the 1949 Act there has been continuous development in the policy and legislative context of AONBs, shaped by a number of key policy documents including:

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A Policy Statement (Countryside Commission & Countryside Council for Wales, CCP356, 1991)

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A Guide for Members of Joint Advisory Committees (Countryside Commission & Countryside Council for Wales, CCP461, 1994)

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Providing for the future (Countryside Commission, CCWP 08, 1998)

Protecting our finest countryside: Advice to Government (Countryside Commission, CCP352, 1998)

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans: A Guide (Countryside Agency, CA23, 2001)

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

Guidance for the Review of AONB Management Plans (Countryside Agency, CA221, 2006)

Guidance for assessing landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England (Natural England, 2011)

Appendix 2:

A brief history of the High Weald

Termed Anderida silva by the Romans, it was referred to as Andredesleah ('leah' suggesting wood pasture) in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and later as Andredesweald (the high forest of Andred) shortened to Weald in Saxon charters (sometimes associated with weald-bera or den-bera – a right to feed swine in the forest). The Weald is one of the longest lasting regional names in Britain.

Prehistory

It is possible that the system of moving livestock into seasonal grazing areas in the Weald from the surrounding downs and vales originated in the Neolithic period, or even earlier. Mesolithic and Palaeolithic flint scatters are concentrated close to springs and on the drier ridgetops. There is significant evidence for communities using and clearing woodland, cultivating land and for the formation of heathland by the Bronze Age.

Iron Age ironworks are concentrated around the northern and eastern fringes of the High Weald, enabling the export of iron via tributaries of the River Thames and the Brede and Rother. The location of routeways close to Iron Age forts and camps suggest a degree of control and supervision over trade in livestock, and also the export of iron and other products out of the Weald.

The Roman period (AD 43-420)

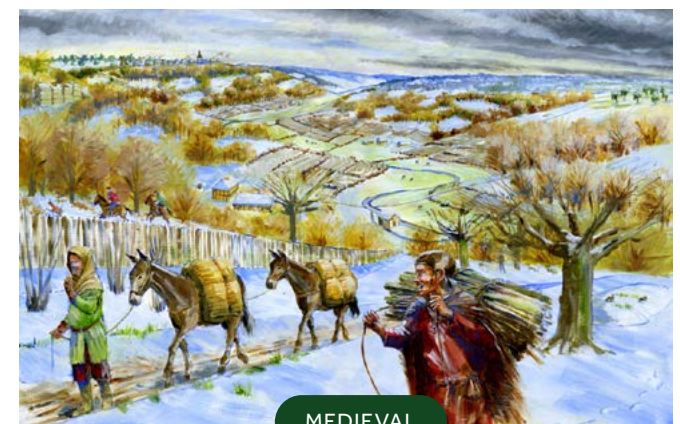
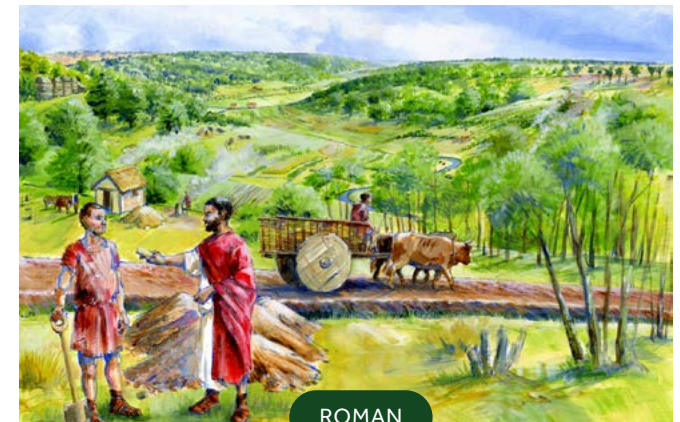
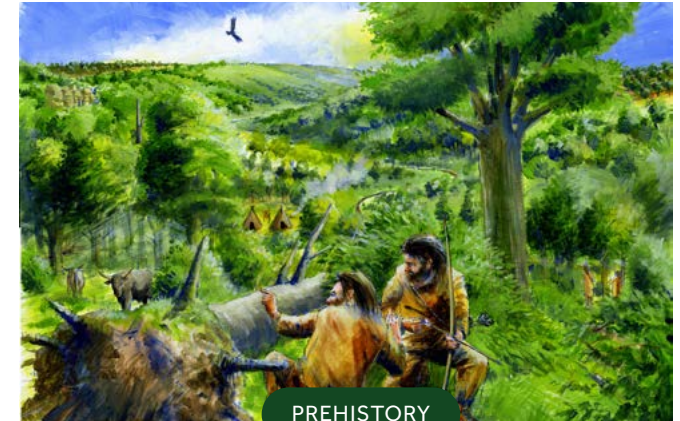
The High Weald was the premier iron producing district in Britannia during the Roman occupation, with up to 2,000 bloomeries scattered across the area and nine industrial scale sites. Iron production, which peaked in the 2nd and first half of the 3rd centuries AD, was located within 3.5km of

known Roman roads and concentrated to the east, where it was managed as an Imperial estate by the Roman Fleet (the Classis Britannica). Here it had good access to the navigable waterways of the Brede and Rother, and to major highways linking to both the London market and the wealthy villas and cornlands of the South Downs.

The Roman roads that intersect the High Weald, and which enabled the movement of military force and the extraction of iron, broadly correspond in their alignment with earlier routeways and in some cases intersect them. Unlike most routeways which avoid boggy ground, Roman roads drove across the landscape and required paved fording points where they crossed rivers and streams. Recorded Roman villas are very rare in the High Weald because the control of the Roman Fleet inhibited the development of private estates.

'Unless a man understands the Weald, he cannot write about the beginnings of England...'

Hilaire Belloc



The Saxon period (420-1066)

Routeways provided the framework for territorial units – called ‘lathes’ in Kent and Surrey, and ‘rapes’ in Sussex – that developed after the Roman period and up to the adoption of counties and then the parish system from the 8th and 9th centuries. These routeways connected parent manors in surrounding arable landscapes to the woodland resources and rich pastures of the Weald, often at distances of 20 or 30 miles apart. These included the temporary swine pastures or ‘dens’ (concentrated in Kent) where pigs and sometimes cattle and sheep were herded to feed on acorns and beech mast in the autumn.

The surveyors for the Domesday Book (1086-7) used pigs as a way of calculating the value and extent of woodland. The right of tenants to graze pigs in wood pasture areas (called ‘pannage’) developed from the 9th century and continued into the 14th and 15th centuries. Other areas along routeways were used as seasonal pastures or stopping-off points, including ‘folds’ and areas which became greens and forstals within farming settlements.

The medieval period (1066-1540)

The practice of temporary grazing from outlying manors had declined by the 11th century, probably owing to the gradual break-up of the large estates by the Saxon kings through granting of lands to secular and ecclesiastical holders. Between the 9th and 12th centuries, seasonal pastures had developed into individual and clustered groups of farmsteads as more land was enclosed for growing crops and pasturing cattle. By the 14th century, the High Weald’s characteristic dispersed settlement pattern was well established, with the land mostly worked from individual family farms set in anciently enclosed fields for managing crops and pasturing animals carved out of woodland and wood pasture.

The numbers of permanent farmsteads increased until the 14th century, requiring an increasingly dense network of routeways to link them and provide access to fields and common land. A number of new farms were created out

of the woodland from the 11th century. By the late 13th century, the Wealden landscape comprised a scattering of gentry properties intermingled with a mass of small peasant holdings, many of which developed – as a result of amalgamation – in the 14th and 15th centuries into larger freehold properties. Yards in farmsteads were used to manage pigs, which continued as an important part of the local farming economy, and cattle, which continued to be driven out of the area on the hoof for finishing. Cattle became an increasingly important export between the 14th and 18th centuries, and most locally produced corn was produced as animal feed and for home consumption rather than as an export crop.

Villages, such as Goudhurst, Burwash (planned along a ridgeway), Wadhurst and Ticehurst, with marketplaces for trading local products (iron, livestock, cattle hides and woodland products) developed in the 13th century along and at the meeting point of routeways. Fine medieval houses attest to their relative wealth, and their occupants often combined farming with trade.

For five hundred years the rivers of the Eastern High Weald were an important link for trade and war between the wooded interior and the seaports of Winchelsea and Rye, which after the storms of 1285 and into the early 14th century gradually silted. Many routeways connected the Weald to navigable rivers and ports. Timber and firewood, mostly bound for France and Flanders, were the major exports from Kent and Sussex ports through to the 16th century, and the relative ease of export stimulated the woodland industry in this part of the Weald. Up to the late 15th century, the river Rother was navigable to Reading Street, Smallhythe and Newenden, with Henry V’s 1000-ton ship, *The Jesus*, built at Smallhythe in 1414. The last Royal Commission at Smallhythe was Henry VIII’s great ship, the 300-ton *Great Gallyon*, ordered in 1546. Silt and the great storm of 1636 saw the end of the shipbuilding industry, but wooden barges were still moving timber and goods from the interior of the High Weald until the end of the 19th century when the last barge, *Primrose*, was built.

The post-medieval period (1540-1750)

Some colonisation of the woodland continued up to the 17th century, by which time there was a considerable growth in population linked to the growth of industries such as broadcloth manufacture and iron founding. More houses were built along routeways, enclosing areas of common land along them. In some areas, as many as a quarter of families were housed in areas enclosed from wayside common.

The Weald again became a centre of British iron making from the early 16th century, following the successful import of blast furnace technology from the Low Countries in the 1490s, concentrated in the eastern and central Weald but with significant expansion to the north and west. Interconnecting chains of leats, dams and hammer ponds were constructed to provide sufficient head of water for the forges, and wealthy ironmasters built notable mansions such as Gravetye and Great Shoemiths. The industry declined in the late 17th and 18th centuries as a result of cheaper imports, the rising price of fuel, the successful development of the use of coke, and the loss of naval contracts to provide cannons.

Most of the wool for dyeing was imported from Romney Marsh into the main cloth manufacturing areas around Cranbrook and Tenterden. Cloth was then transported overland by packhorse and, more rarely, wheeled transport to dealers in London. Smaller items including ironwork such as horseshoes and glass were also exported in this way. By the end of the 17th century, many clothiers and ironmasters were moving into cattle rearing in response to the increasing demand for beef. The hop industry developed on an industrial scale from this period, supplying maltings and breweries and stimulating the management of woodlands and shaws for fuel, and the growing of chestnut for hop poles.

The Industrial Revolution (1750-1914)

Over this period, the Weald shifted from a diverse industrial and farming economy to one that was more linked to the development of capital in London and the coastal resorts, and the enjoyment of its landscape by new residents and visitors.

Social commentators Arthur Young, William Cobbet and others noted the ornamental landscapes of the new gentry and admired the area's wayside cottages with their gardens. As droving of livestock continued to decline, there was further enclosure of roadside commons and greens for new houses (called 'purpesture' settlement), mostly driven by the large numbers of smallholders who were bereft of employment on account of the decline in the cloth and iron industries.

Most turnpikes in the High Weald were built on pre-existing highways between the 1730s and 1770s. They were of particular importance in easing the export of timber and corn, and in supplying goods and services for the burgeoning south coast resorts such as Brighton and Hastings. Although many turnpike trusts had closed down by the 1880s, they stimulated property transactions and enabled significant amounts of residential development. These were concentrated in the areas south of Tunbridge Wells and around the Brighton-London road to the west. From the 18th century, a trend in 'pleasure farms' saw some farmsteads converted into residential use, with routeways diverted and made into private drives, which were approached through new ornamental landscapes.

Farmland was reorganised with enlarged fields, existing or straightened hedgerows dotted with trees. Farmsteads were also reorganised often around courtyards to help produce manure for fields yielding more corn for export.

The railway network intensified these developments, often increasing the demand for improved roads to connect new housing to railway stations. Additional cattle yards were built around railway stations (for example at Hawkhurst and Paddock Wood) and rail was increasingly used for

exporting livestock, hops and milk. Railways, and at the end of this period motor cars and buses, also enabled tourism accompanied by guides and books such as Arthur Beckett's *The Wonderful Weald* (1911).

The last hundred years, 1914 to the present

The increased appreciation of the High Weald's historic landscape and heritage has been accompanied by the decline of traditional agriculture, cattle droving (cattle were still being driven to markets in the 1930s) and woodland management. Car ownership increased dramatically, leading to the further decoupling of settlement from land use. The building of bungalows and renovation of historic houses became common, and the areas around the Weald experienced a substantial and disproportionate increase in housing compared to the rest of England in the inter-war period.

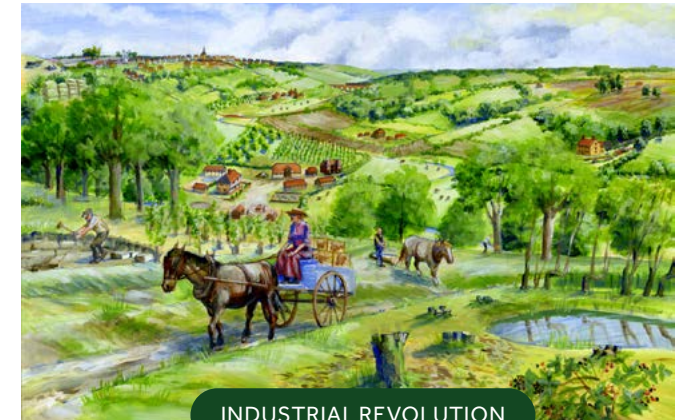
Until the 1950s, the Weald changed at a slower pace than most other regions in Britain. For 700 years prior to this, agriculture and the pattern of fields, hedges and surrounding woodland remained relatively unaltered. Since then, farming and forestry, always difficult on the poor soils, have been pushed further to the economic margins. This decline in mixed farming and woodland management is a major threat to the long-term survival of the High Weald's distinctive landscape character.

Edited and adapted from:

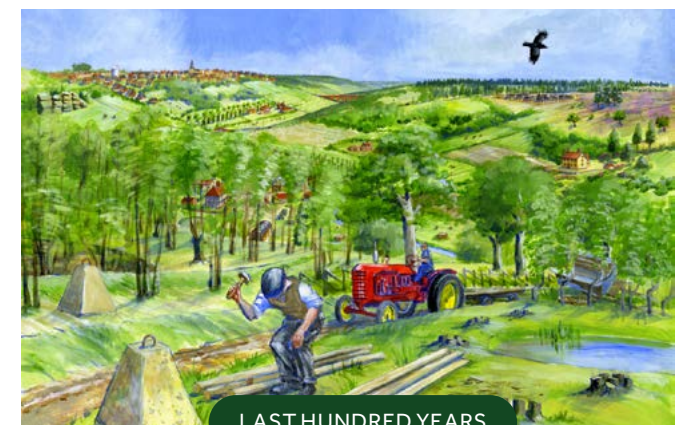
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POST-MEDIEVAL



INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION



LAST HUNDRED YEARS

Notes



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www.highweald.org

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WORK PROGRAMME 2023 – 2024		
DATE OF MEETING	SUBJECT – MAIN ITEM IN BOLD	Cabinet Portfolio Holder
22.04.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call-in and Urgency Procedures • Draft Annual Report to Council • High Weald National Landscape (AONB) Management Plan 	Killeen
WORK PROGRAMME 2024 – 2025		
03.06.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Report: Fourth Quarter 2023/24 • State of the District • Report of the Digital and Customer Services Strategy Task and Finish Group • Health and Well-Being Board – Update Report • Review of Progress Against the Recommendations of the Health and Well-Being Task and Finish Group • Impact of Airbnb and Second Homes in Camber, Rye and Winchelsea • Annual Work Programme 	
08.07.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Outturn 2023/24 • Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 1 2024/25 • Active Rother Partnership Strategy 	
09.09.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Report: First Quarter 2024/25 • Annual Report of the De La Warr Pavilion 	
14.10.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2029/30 	
18.11.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Report: Second Quarter 2024/25 • Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 2 2024/25 	
20.01.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Revenue Budget Proposals 2025/26 • Key Performance Targets 2025/26 	
17.03.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime and Disorder Committee: to receive a report from the Community Safety Partnership • Performance Report: Third Quarter 2024/25 • Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 3 2024/25 	
28.04.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call-in and Urgency Procedures • Draft Annual Report to Council 	

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of New Corporate Plan • Development of New Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy • Litter Strategy • Local Strategic Partnership – Update Report • Regeneration inc. Leisure Centre, Fountains, Skate Park and Accessibility of Green Spaces Across the District • Review of Progress Against the Recommendations of the Health and Well-Being

Task and Finish Group (Year 3)

- Review of the Economic Regeneration Strategy
- Review of the Tourism Strategy