

Quality of life components

Secondary purposes of AONB designation

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

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

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



Wye farmers market



Countryside walking



Interpretive panel

11. Vibrant communities

Our vision

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

11.1 Overview

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

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

11.2 Vibrant communities - special characteristics and qualities

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

The AONB population is generally older, with fewer ethnic minority groups than the rest of the county. The population has more white-collar and professional workers than the county as a whole, with higher owner-occupancy and car ownership per household. A higher percentage of people are self-employed, probably resulting in more home-working and indicative of an increasing knowledge-based economy within the AONB.

The ease of access to main urban areas, particularly Greater London, and the attractiveness of the villages and countryside places great demand on most parts of the AONB as a place to live and work and

from which to commute. House prices are high and the percentage increase has been higher than the regional average.



Community orchard meeting

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

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

Not surprisingly, the percentage of people employed in land-based economic activities is double that for the county as a whole, although this figure is a small part of the overall AONB workforce (3.8%). However AONB residents from other industry sectors are in similar proportion to the county as a whole; hotels and restaurants are important employers in the Kent Downs AONB.

The Kent Rural Delivery Framework evidence base describes Kent's rural communities as active and entrepreneurial; they are a considerable asset which can be harnessed to secure the future of the AONB. Against this background of apparent higher living standards, 3% of the work force is unemployed compared to 4% for Kent. Rural poverty and exclusion is regarded as a hidden but real issue in a number of communities particularly for isolated elderly people, people with disabilities, migrant workers and some young families. While lower than the regional average the Index of Multiple Deprivation is higher than for other South East Protected Landscapes. Added to this, there are five wards on or immediately adjacent to the AONB boundary with high social and economic needs.

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

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

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



Local fruit cookery demonstration

◆ **Community and parish planning**

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

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

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

◆ **Community services and enterprises**

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

◆ **Volunteering**

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

◆ **Our neighbours**

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

◆ **Sustainable rural leisure and tourism**

Sustainable rural leisure and tourism has been identified as a key way to supporting the socio-economic well-being of rural areas. Providing jobs and supporting community services, sustainable rural tourism of itself can be a catalyst for community development. Sustainable tourism can be defined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities." Making Tourism More Sustainable – A Guide for Policy Makers, UNEP World Tourism Organization, 2005.

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

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

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

Local people are central to the conservation of the Kent Downs.

11.3 Vibrant communities - main issues, opportunities and threats

◆ Social exclusion, deprivation and access to services

- a. A number of areas and wards around and within the AONB have high levels of social deprivation. Rural poverty and social exclusion can be 'hidden' and is an issue for some elderly people, ethnic minority groups, migrant workers, people with disabilities and those on low incomes.
- b. Retaining and improving access to, and provision of, local services and facilities including super-fast broadband, post offices, village shops, public houses and garages.
- c. Community facilities, such as schools, libraries, social care and doctors surgeries, are unevenly available and accessible.
- d. Rapidly changing and lack of consistency in support structures for community development in rural areas.

◆ The availability of affordable housing

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

◆ Maintaining and diversifying the employment base

- g. Decline in farming and forestry employment, although both industries are still important economically in terms of maintaining Kent Downs character.

- h. Skills gap for some local employers, such as locally based skilled forestry contractors and business marketing.

◆ Sense of community and belonging

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

◆ Sustainable leisure and tourism

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



Cycling along the Chalk and Channel Way between Dover and Folkestone

11.4 Vibrant communities - aims

A landscape in which:

1. Thriving, vibrant communities understand, recognise and value the special qualities of the AONB and play an active role in its conservation and enhancement while reducing their environmental impact.
2. A strong and sustainable rural economy supports the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB and is supported by residents and visitors, who value and use sustainable local produce and services.
3. There is well designed, sustainable and affordable housing, particularly for workers employed in the land-based economy and conservation of the AONB's landscape, social and economic vitality.
4. Accessible, affordable local services and facilities are available and are well-used throughout the AONB.
5. The high quality environment and landscape of the AONB is seen as an asset to local businesses, which in turn contribute to the conservation of the landscape through the use of local sustainable goods and labour.
6. The area is recognised by both local communities and visitors as a premier sustainable tourism destination.
7. The environmental impact of AONB communities is stabilised and reduced.

11.5 Vibrant communities - policies

The Sustainable Development section (3) identifies guiding and recurrent themes for the management of the Kent Downs AONB. These themes and the Management Plan policy responses should be considered before referring to specific policies set out below.

- VC1 Community and business initiatives that improve the recognition, engagement in and conservation of the AONB and encourage community life will be pursued.
- VC2 Positive and sustainable links between the AONB (landscape, communities and partnership) and nearby communities, particularly from excluded groups and from neighbouring deprived areas will be pursued.
- VC3 Initiatives which are in line with existing policies of the Local Planning Authority that increase and improve the supply of affordable housing for (i) those with proven local needs, and (ii) workers whose activities directly contribute to the purposes of the AONB designation, will be supported where it is demonstrated that the proposals are of high quality design, limited quantity and scale and are built to the best current environmental standards.
- VC4 The retention and development of local services, facilities and employment opportunities in order to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB or reduce the need to travel by car and maintain viable rural communities will be supported.
- VC5 Skills training and business development assistance will be encouraged where they contribute to the viability of communities and meet the purposes of the AONB.
- VC6 The development of sustainable visitor and tourism facilities will be pursued where they enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the AONB without detracting from the special characteristics and qualities.
- VC7 Tourism and leisure businesses in the AONB will be encouraged to adopt the principles of sustainable tourism and to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through achieving nationally recognised green accreditation and/or becoming part of the Our Land project.
- VC8 Local communities will be encouraged to prepare and promote Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and Neighbourhood Plans as appropriate to assist in the conservation and enhancement of local distinctiveness as settlements evolve. These documents should address development requiring planning permission, automatically permitted development, and change outside the scope of the planning system.