

12. Access, enjoyment and understanding

Our vision

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

Improved management ensures that the Public Rights of Way and much of the highway network is safe, quiet and convenient for walkers, cyclists and horse riders and public transport is an attractive option to reach and enjoy the landscape. Maintenance of the Public Rights of Way and highway network is sympathetic to biodiversity and landscape character.

12.1 Overview

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

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

The AONB is crossed by or adjacent to four motorways, many trunk and 'A' roads, and hundreds of smaller roads. It is served by five railway lines with 27 railway stations and numerous bus routes and services. The Port of Dover, the UK's busiest ferry terminal, as well as the Channel Tunnel terminal are both immediately adjacent to the AONB. Ashford and Ebbsfleet International stations are in easy reach.

While there is often concern about the impact of recreation, carefully managed access to attractive countryside, particularly walking, cycling and horse riding can bring physical and mental health benefits, enable people to enjoy a great landscape, reconnect with nature and provide support to the local economy.



Children helping to plant new cherry trees



Sculptural interpretation - the Pilgrim



Walking across Ranscombe Farm



Interpretation panel

John Miller

◆ **Managing access in the Kent Downs**

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000), a Countryside Access Forum for Kent has been established. The role of the Forum is to advise on the improvement of public access to land within Kent for the purpose of open-air recreation and enjoyment. The Kent Countryside Access Forum (KCAF) also responds to Government consultations, contributes to the Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan and steers and monitors access and recreation policy in Kent. The Kent Countryside Access Forum has provided formal advice to the Joint Advisory Committee during the preparation of this revised Management Plan – this includes a focus on the access benefits of woodland and farmland, the impact of horses in the AONB, dogs in the AONB, country motor sports in the AONB and the importance of improving off road access in the AONB. An overriding issue is the importance of maintenance of Public Rights of Way – good maintenance is seen as a basic requirement which overcomes many other perceived problems.

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

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

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

◆ **Open access land**

Under the CRoW Act around 0.6% of Kent and Medway has been mapped for open access and the majority of this is chalk downland, along with registered common land and parkland within the AONB. 46% of open access land in Kent is within the Kent Downs AONB.

Open access land is managed by Kent County Council as the Access Authority. Additionally the Forestry Commission had dedicated its land for open access. In many cases access land was already available through time limited agreements. However where large tracts of land have been mapped, for instance around Dover, there are significant access opportunities.

◆ **Coastal access**

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



Horse riders

12.2 Access, enjoyment and understanding - special characteristics and qualities

◆ Visitors to the Kent Downs

Limited visitor information is available for the AONB as a whole. Visit Kent estimates a total number of visitors to the most favoured rural areas for tourism as nearly 19 million a year – the Kent Downs AONB is a key rural tourism destination. The expenditure incurred by visitors is estimated at £955m, sustaining over 20,000 jobs. Visit Kent has also researched the motivations for visiting Kent and found - 47.8% of visitors were motivated by Attractive Countryside (second only to Historic Aspects / Heritage) other key features of the Kent Downs include; country pubs - 36.7% of visitors (ranked 4th), walking - 32.3% of visitors (ranked 5th), local produce - 17.4% of visitors (ranked 14th). Source Visit Kent Rural Fact Sheet 2011.

◆ Road users

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

◆ Walking

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

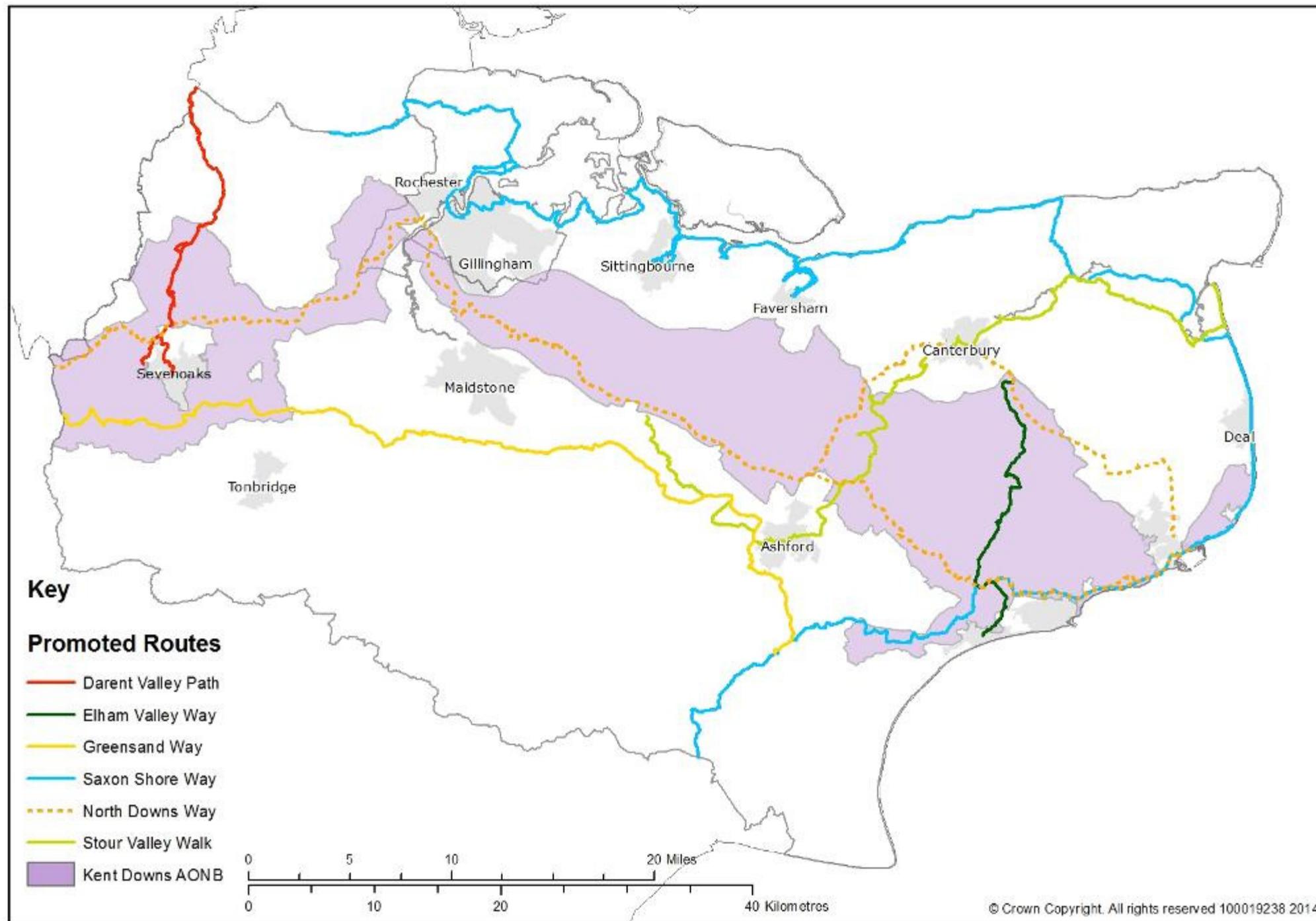
The Kent Countryside Access Forum cites that between 50% and 90% of walks in the countryside are accompanied by dogs. There are many benefits to walking with dogs, including and particularly for health and well-being. The KCAF has noted also the potential negative impacts such as chasing stock, damaging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

Of national importance is the North Downs Way National Trail which starts at Farnham in Surrey and follows the North Downs through Surrey and Kent to Dover with a loop via Canterbury. Of the 153 mile trail, 70 miles lie within the AONB. Research by the North Downs Way National Trail Team shows an estimated 250,000 visitors use the trail each year between May and October. National Trails are promoted as long distance routes, although user surveys show that the majority of use on the North Downs Way tends to be for shorter walks. The opportunity to upgrade appropriate sections of the North Downs Way to include cyclists and horse riders is being considered and is supported. Two regional routes, the Saxon Shore Way and Greensand Way also pass through the Kent Downs, and there are a number of county recreational routes.

Table 12 - Public Rights of Way in the Kent Downs

Footpath	1,424,352
Bridleway	291,502
Restricted Byway	39,642
Byway Open to all Traffic (m)	118,222
Unknown (m)	85
Grand Total (m)	1,873,802
<i>Kent County Council 2013</i>	

Figure 16 - Long distance walking routes in Kent



◆ Cycling

Cycling is increasingly popular and can be a sustainable means of transport and recreation and is generally a quiet activity with low impact on the countryside. Opportunities for off-road cycling in the AONB have been developed by Sustrans. Sections of two National Cycle Routes and two regional routes pass through the AONB and the Pilgrims Cycle Trail, from Rochester to Canterbury, provides an arterial route through the Kent Downs. There are also a number of locally promoted on and off road cycle routes. Dedicated cycling routes are proposed as an effective and low impact link between the Kent Downs and nearby urban and growth areas.

◆ Horse riding and driving

Although the network is limited, 40% of Kent's bridleways are in the AONB, making the Kent Downs a significant area for horse riding. The latest information estimates 100,000 riders in Kent, 50,000 regular riders, and horse numbers between 30 and 40,000 (Land Use Consultants/KCC). Evidence from the British Horse Society (BHS) and the Public Rights of Way teams (from maintenance spend) indicates that the increasing use of bridleways is damaging the route

fabric. The BHS in Kent estimates a population of 90 horses per kilometre of bridleway, creating significant pressure on the network. Horse riding, driving and equine events provide important opportunities for access, exercise, health and well-being and can provide access opportunities for those with disabilities.

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

Other opportunities for informal countryside recreation are generally provided on the many open access sites, picnic sites and facilities across the AONB. These include 12 Country Parks and picnic sites, 44 Village Greens (44.9ha) and 48 areas of Registered Common Land (442.7ha). Access for informal recreation is also available at a number of National Trust properties concentrated on the Greensand Ridge south of Sevenoaks, parts of the White Cliffs Heritage Coast, Forestry Commission-owned woodland and sites owned and managed by Kent Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust.



Breakfast in the orchard event

◆ Organised events

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

◆ Field sports

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

Fishing is also popular although the Kent Downs offers limited scope for coarse and freshwater fishing, such as along the river and gravel pits of the Great Stour valley. Sea fishing is also popular off parts of the Heritage Coast, such as St Margaret's Bay and Samphire Hoe where national competitions are held.

◆ Country motor sports

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

the use of byways to access the wider landscape. These and other recreational activities can negatively affect the tranquillity of the AONB which is a much valued component of natural beauty.

◆ Access for people with restricted mobility and socially excluded groups

Greater recognition of the needs of socially excluded groups, and legislation including the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005, are leading to enhanced efforts to meet the needs of all, including people with disabilities, on low incomes or without access to private transport.

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



Access for all at Samphire Hoe

For people with mobility restrictions there are a growing number of promoted routes and sites and user groups are taking active and welcome steps to support wider access for all.

◆ **Health and well-being**

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

◆ **Education and children**

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



Children learning how honey is made

the opportunities to address it have been documented in a National Trust report.

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

◆ **Information and interpretation**

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

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

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



Printed leaflets

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

- a. Estimated day visitor numbers are high and probably increasing. Pressure on the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB as well as particular countryside routes, sites and areas can be very high but unevenly distributed.
- b. Urban and growth areas in close proximity to the AONB will generate new opportunities for enjoyment, health and well-being but also pressure for travel and access.
- c. The Countryside Access Improvement Plan provides opportunities to focus on the AONB, given the special access pressures and the landscapes national importance.
- d. There is a need to identify how the CRow Act open access sites can bring wider benefits and links to education and information provision.
- e. Differences in requirements and uses between rightful PRow users (horse riders, cyclists, motorbikes, 4x4s and walkers, those with dogs) can result in conflicts.
- f. Conflicts between rightful PRow users and illegal users, fly-tipping, dumping and path obstruction.
- g. The increasing popularity of horse riding and off road cycling which is focused particularly on the AONB, putting pressure on the rights of way network. The need to enhance, extend, connect and improve fragmented bridleway links and secure higher rights on PRow without harming the characteristics and qualities of the AONB.
- h. Special needs groups who experience barriers to enjoying the landscape require special attention and support.
- i. Need to ensure that the PRow network is well signposted, way-marked and maintained using materials and equipment appropriate in design and sustainably sourced.
- j. Improving the rural road network for its landscape quality and to promote quiet countryside recreation by managing traffic pressures to provide quiet and safe access.
- k. Need to increase and enhance people's understanding of and access to the AONB, its landscape and countryside practices and to provide coordinated information in a number of formats appropriate to their setting.
- l. Need to maximise coastal access opportunities through the newly defined Coast Path National Trail and support the enhanced management of the coastal corridor.
- m. Need to promote exciting and engaging education and interpretation schemes for children and young people.
- n. The opportunity to promote the availability and use of safe non-car based countryside transport and recreation opportunities and seek integrated public transport initiatives.



Footpath towards St Margaret's Bay

Sarah Loftus

12.4 Access, enjoyment and understanding - aims

A landscape that provides:

1. Sustainable opportunities and facilities to enable everyone to safely enjoy and understand the AONB countryside without detracting from it.
2. A legally defined, well maintained, connected and promoted Rights of Way network that provides safe, well designed and satisfying routes for walkers, cyclists and horse riders where conflicts between rightful uses are minimised.
3. New routes and connections between public rights of way and a highway network which is increasingly available and safe for walkers, cyclists and horse riders.
4. Access where illegal or damaging recreational activities are actively controlled.
5. Special places, events, media and appropriate support available throughout the year for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn about their environment, enjoy the AONB landscape, know they are there and celebrate its diversity and richness.
6. Innovative and stimulating opportunities for all people to be involved artistically and culturally and to exercise and improve their health and well-being, in tranquil and inspiring surroundings.



Interpretive car park sign at Perry Wood



Volunteers at work

12.5 Access, enjoyment and understanding - 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.

- AEU1 Coordinated information and interpretation for recreation, access, education, and health and well-being across the AONB which is accurate, well presented and appropriate to its setting, readily available in a variety of formats and fosters a greater understanding and respect for the AONB will be pursued.
- AEU2 Diversions and stopping up of PRoWs will be resisted unless it can be demonstrated that they will not have a detrimental impact on opportunities for access and quiet enjoyment of the AONB landscape and historic character.
- AEU3 Investment to secure sustainable, high quality, low impact and easy access, multiuser routes from towns and growth areas to the AONB will be pursued.
- AEU4 The sustainable and enhanced management and promotion of open access sites will be pursued.
- AEU5 Mechanisms will be supported to resolve conflicts between rightful users of Public Rights of Way. Where there are irreconcilable conflicts from legal but damaging activities, quiet recreation will be supported above other activities.
- AEU6 Robust mechanisms to resist and overcome illegal use and poor maintenance which harm the opportunity to explore and enjoy the AONB will be pursued where design is in accordance with the Landscape Design Handbook.
- AEU7 Improvements to the Rights of Way Network to provide and improve countryside access, health and well-being opportunities, including way-marking, signposting and maintenance, new routes and establishment of higher rights which conforms with AONB policies and design guidance, will be supported.
- AEU8 High standards of landscape and recreational management, accessible visitor facilities, access opportunities and increased opportunities for learning and health enhancement through a coordinated programme of training, events, guided walks and gateway routes and sites will be supported.
- AEU9 Initiatives for children, schools and youth groups which encourage interest in and learning about the AONB and reconnection with nature will be pursued.
- AEU10 Support will be given to the North Downs Way and England Coast Path National Trails as the main promoted route in the Kent Downs.
- AEU11 A reduction in the need to travel by car will be supported through new and improved measures to provide integrated, attractive and affordable public transport in the Kent Downs. New business, community and other initiatives in support of the vision, aims and policies of the Management Plan will seek to relate to existing public transport links.
- AEU12 Sustainable solutions to problems of rural traffic will be supported, particularly in rural settlements or where there is a conflict with landscape quality or walkers, cyclists and horse riders.
- AEU13 A strategic approach to the use of road signage, furniture, design and maintenance that conserves and enhances the local character and distinctiveness and encourages non-motorised access will be pursued through the adoption and implementation of the AONB Rural Streets and Lanes Design Handbook.
- AEU 14 Proposals which detract from the amenity and enjoyment of users of the Public Rights of Way network will be resisted.