

2. The management of the Kent Downs AONB

Our vision

In 2034... the Kent Downs AONB is recognised and valued. It is a landscape cherished and held in the highest esteem by those who visit, live and work there and by those who influence its future. Residents and visitors know where the AONB is and they understand and support the purpose of its designation. The Kent Downs AONB Partnership is acknowledged and supported as the main advocate and champion for the AONB; organisations delivering positive action on the ground are collaboratively engaged in the Partnership and management planning. The Partnership is open to all opinions about the conservation and management of the AONB and is adaptive to short and long-term change such as climate change.

2.1 The Kent Downs in context

2.1.1 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Areas of Outstanding National Beauty are part of a global family of protected areas recognised and classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). AONBs, National Parks and Heritage Coasts in England and Wales fall into Category V – Protected Landscapes. These are areas that have been moulded by centuries of human activity, where there is a diversity of land use with a ‘sense of place’. Equivalent areas in other countries include the French Parcs Naturels Régionaux. The Kent Downs AONB has a strong partnership with the Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d’Opale. The IUCN definition of Protected Landscape aims to maintain the harmonious balance between people, landscapes and nature for now and for future generations.

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 legislated for the designation of AONBs and National Parks. Their purpose was to be similar – to conserve and enhance natural beauty. The Countryside Commission further defined the purpose of AONB designation in a statement of 1991.

Purpose of AONB designation...

‘...is primarily to conserve and enhance natural beauty’.

‘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.’

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement (Countryside Commission, CCP 356, 1991, p.5).

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, (CRoW Act) revised and partially replaced the AONB provisions of the 1949 Act, including a requirement that a management plan be prepared for each AONB. In the case of the Kent Downs AONB (and others covered by more than one local authority), the management plan must be prepared by the local authorities acting jointly. It must also be reviewed every five years.

The 33 AONBs in England amount to 15% of the total land area. They vary greatly in landscape character and size ranging from the smallest, the Isles of Scilly (16sq. km) to the largest, the Cotswolds (2,038 sq. km). In Kent, the High Weald and Kent Downs AONB cover around a third of the county's land area.

2.1.2 The Kent Downs AONB

The Kent Downs AONB is a nationally important landscape and one of the most enchanting parts of southern England. The AONB was designated in July 1968; it covers 878sq.km (326 sq. miles) stretching from the Surrey/Greater London border to the Strait of Dover. Aside from a small area within the London Borough of Bromley, the AONB lies wholly within the county of Kent and covers around 23% of the total land area of the county. It rises to an altitude of 250m above sea level at its highest point at Toy's Hill south of Sevenoaks, and is crossed in three places by the river valleys of the Darent, the Medway and the Stour, all flowing northwards.



The Kent Downs in the snow



Elmsted Valley



River Stour



Eynsford viaduct

Adam Swaine

Four common aims unite AONB Partnerships and management plans:

- Conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the UK's AONBs ensuring they meet the challenges of the future.
- Support the economic and social well-being of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty.
- Promote public understanding and enjoyment of AONB landscapes and encourage people to conserve and enhance them.
- Value, sustain and promote the benefits that AONBs provide for society including clean air and water, food and carbon storage.

The Kent Downs are the eastern half of the North Downs ridge of chalk stretching from Farnham in Surrey to the English Channel. The western half of the chalk ridge lies within the Surrey Hills AONB, which adjoins the Kent Downs. The same ridge of chalk reappears on the French side of the Channel, where it is designated le Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d'Opale. In Kent, the North Downs, along with part of the Greensand Ridge and Lympe Escarpment form the Kent Downs AONB.

The Kent Downs is the eighth largest AONB in England and Wales, and administratively one of the most complex falling within twelve

local authorities and lying partly or wholly within 137 parish council boundaries.

When the Kent Downs were confirmed as an AONB, the overall remarks of the designation committee were summarised as:

“The scarp slope and dry valleys of the Kent Downs are the main target for designation, particularly where they retain a downland character, that woodlands are highly valued throughout the designated area and particularly on the scarp slope and dry valley sides, and that other qualities of note are views from the escarpment, pastoral scenery, parklands, villages, churches and castles.”

2.1.3 Definition of natural beauty and landscape

The term ‘natural beauty’ remains at the heart of the purpose of AONB designation. Part IV of the 2000 Act provides the following definition of natural beauty:

“Any reference in this Part to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area includes a reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features”. *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, section 92.*

The term ‘natural beauty’ was always intended to embrace more than just the visual or scenic elements of the landscape and the definition has been updated and broadened to include historic and cultural heritage. Government agency guidance specifically on 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.”

(Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB Partnership members – Countryside Agency, CA24, November 2001)

At the core of the secondary purpose of AONB designation is the understanding that the landscape is not just scenery, but it is the result of the historic and on-going interaction between people and place. Social and economic activity that contributes to the landscape and natural beauty is fundamental to shaping the future of the AONB.

The important link between people and place is emphasised in the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe) where landscape is defined as “an area, as perceived by people, whose

character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”. The convention, ratified by the UK in 2006, also recognises that “the landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere; in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas”.



Bluebells at Kings Wood

2.2 Management planning for AONBs

In recognition of the national and international importance of AONB landscapes the CRoW Act 2000 required relevant local authorities to jointly prepare, publish and subsequently review a management plan. It is required that the plan formulates their policies for the

management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. The Management Plan is essentially about conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, the statutory purpose of the designation.

2.2.1 The role of this Management Plan review

The first statutory Kent Downs AONB Management Plan was adopted in April 2004. This is the second review. In their formal observations the Countryside Agency and subsequently Natural England recognised the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan and its first review as representing 'exemplary practice'.

This revised Management Plan is based on the original Plan and its first review. It justifies and details policies and actions for the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs AONB. It has been prepared by the Kent Downs AONB Unit and Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) for, and on behalf of, the twelve local authorities that have land within the Kent Downs, thus fulfilling their statutory obligations.

2.2.2 The status and role of Management Plan policies

The overarching aim of this Management Plan is to achieve the purpose of AONB designation. The scope of the CRoW Act was wide for AONB Management Plans requiring policies both for the management of the AONB and for the local authorities to carry out their many functions. The Guidance for the review of AONB

Management Plans (CA 221 September 2006) describes a policy as the means by which to achieve the objective saying 'this is how we will get things done'. Primarily policies are there as plans of action which help define what will be encouraged, promoted, supported and pursued; policies are also needed to help stop or mitigate negative



Andy Vidler

Kestrel



Agrimony and greater knapweed



Cow pat fungus



Adam Swaine

Cattle grazing alongside the River Darent

impacts on Kent Downs. In this Plan policies have been divided into control and intent policies, both are critical to ensure the conservation and enhancement of the AONB.

An action is what the AONB Partnership wants to do and should be grounded in policy e.g. investment in on the ground delivery, guidance, engagement in a process or research etc. An Action Plan is developed in partnership with the Joint Advisory Committee and other partners once the Management Plan has been confirmed and adopted.

The Management Plan does not formulate land use planning policies but is a component of the decision making process in planning applications. The status of the Management Plan combined with the thorough process of plan making and review means that the AONB Management Plan and its policies are a material consideration in planning matters and should be afforded weight in decisions. The National Planning Practice Guidance confirms this, and supports the evidence and principles established in the Management Plan being taken into account in local planning authorities' Local Plans and in Neighbourhood Plans.

AONB Management Plan policies will be reflected and in part implemented through policies in each Local Plan and in development management decisions. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that local planning authorities should set criteria-based policies against which proposals for any development affecting landscape will be judged, reflecting the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is commensurate with their status. The principles and priorities set out in this Management Plan will assist the preparation of criteria-based policies for the Kent Downs AONB.



Adam Swaine

Lavender fields in the Darent Valley

Table 2 - Control policies

Policy wording	Intervention proposed
Oppose	The AONB Unit and Partnership will engage in the active opposition (for instance to development proposals) or through responses to development control consultations or attending public inquiries.
Resist	The AONB Unit and Partnership will provide evidence and support to seek to overcome risks to the qualities and special characteristics of the AONB.
Will and shall	A strong intention for the AONB Unit, Partnership and others to achieve the aim/s and objective/s stated in the policy.
Expect/ed	AONB Unit, Partnership and others to comply with the level of quality and action inferred by the policy and no support or encouragement would be given by the Partnership to actions that run counter to the spirit of the policy.

Table 3 - Intent policies

Policy wording	Intervention proposed
Pursue	The AONB Local Authorities, wider Partnership and Unit will actively seek to ensure that the policy intention is achieved through leading a series of their own interventions, developing policies, actions and development control decisions. This will include seeking resources and support from other agencies.
Support	The AONB Local Authorities, wider Partnership and Unit will provide support through policy and development control decisions, influence others, seek resources and occasionally intervene to seek to achieve the policy intention.
Encourage	The AONB Local Authorities, wider Partnership and Unit will endorse the actions of others, develop policies and development control decisions and occasionally seek resources and influence to achieve the policy intention.
Maintain	Little or no intervention expected from Local Authorities, Partnership or Unit but policies and actions required to prevent negative change will be expected.
Monitor	To seek to understand change in condition of issue.

2.2.3 Who is the plan for?

First and foremost, the Management Plan and its policies belong to the AONB local authorities – this is the policy and action framework which will influence and help determine decision-making, advice and resource allocation for all their relevant functions in, and affecting, the AONB.

Second, this Management Plan is for all the government agencies, statutory undertakers, utilities and public bodies which have a ‘duty of regard’ for the purposes of the AONB designation in their functions and operations. All public bodies and relevant authorities have to demonstrate that they have taken into account the purposes of the AONB designation in all their functions within the area. This Management Plan will inform, guide and influence that process.

Finally, and importantly, this is a plan for everyone who cares for and manages the AONB, for those who live, work or play in the Kent Downs. The impact and difference that can be made by farmers, land managers, individuals, countryside management organisations, and community and voluntary organisations, when viewed as a whole, is critical to the future of the Kent Downs. We intend that this Management Plan is practical and relevant, and that it will help advise and influence activities, decisions and the perception people have of the Kent Downs.

◆ A Duty of Regard

The strengthened status of AONBs through the CRoW Act has brought commitments from a wide range of organisations – including those who are not directly involved in the AONB Partnerships. Section 85, Part IV of the CRoW Act requires all public bodies and relevant authorities to demonstrate that they have taken account of the purposes of the AONB in their decision making.

The Kent Downs AONB Partnership has prepared a series of guidance documents, which form part of the Management Plan and inform and provide practical ways for organisations and individuals to implement their Duty of Regard.

In support of the Duty several public bodies and statutory undertakers have either signed Joint Accords or have developed practical projects to deliver the conservation and enhancement of Natural Beauty on the ground. Notable amongst these are the Forestry Commission, Natural England, UK Power Networks and English Heritage.



Butcher's shop at Doddington



Children running at Bredhurst



Sheep in winter



Spuckles Cottage, Eastling

2.2.4 The role of the Kent Downs AONB Partnership

Within an area as large and varied as the Kent Downs, there are many hundreds of stakeholders who have a role in managing the landscape, supporting local business and communities and enabling quiet recreation. The Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), above all others, plays a pivotal role in realising the strategic vision for the Kent Downs AONB and overseeing the Management Plan.

The JAC for the Kent Downs AONB was established in July 1997 and is at the heart of the Partnership. JAC membership includes the twelve local authorities who have joint responsibility to prepare and review the Management Plan, namely: Ashford, Bromley, Canterbury, Dover, Gravesham, Kent, Maidstone, Medway, Sevenoaks, Shepway, Swale and Tonbridge & Malling; as well as Natural England. Additional advisory members are the Environment Agency, Country Land and Business Association (CLA), the National Farmers Union (NFU), Kent Association of Parish Councils (KAPC) and Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK).

An Executive of JAC representatives and some outside advisors steer the work of the Kent Downs AONB Unit. At a much larger scale, a Kent Downs Forum is held at an annual 'Countryside Day' for a wider audience, to discuss current issues and to inform the agenda for the forthcoming year.

The AONB Unit is employed by Kent County Council and works on behalf of the JAC to carry out the preparation and review of the Management Plan, to advocate its policies and work in partnership to deliver a range of actions described in the Action Plan.

The objective of the JAC is to ensure that the AONB Unit is effective, efficient and authoritative, recognised and valued by partners and policy makers as a professional body delivering significant added value and enabling action on the ground. To achieve this the Unit:

- Builds knowledge in order to inform and realise the ambitions of the Management Plan.
- Provides great value to partners, providing helpful advocacy, advice and support and leading activity where appropriate.
- Carries out a timely, inclusive and authoritative review of the AONB Management Plan on behalf of local authorities.
- Leads on the delivery of the AONB Management Plan and generates partnerships and collaboration in support.
- Builds capacity, motivation and professionalism and retains expertise and high quality staff.
- Actively seeks finance and other resources to support the delivery of the Management Plan.



Countryside day event



JAC site visit



The AONB Unit office



A walk across the Downs

In doing this the Unit retains the highest standards of business management.

Together the JAC, its Executive and the Unit form the Kent Downs AONB Partnership.

◆ **The AONB Partnership's role in planning decisions**

Planning issues have a fundamental impact on the statutory purposes of AONB designation. Until the CRoW Act 2000 enactment, the statutory land use planning system was the main legal mechanism by which AONBs were protected, conserved and enhanced. The relationship between AONB Management Plan policies and land use planning policies is set out in 2.2.2.

The Kent Downs AONB Partnership has agreed to take on a limited land use planning role, in summary this is to:

- Provide design guidance in partnership with AONB local authorities.
- Comment on forward/strategic planning issues e.g. Local Plans.
- Involvement in development control only in exceptional circumstances, e.g. in terms of scale and precedence.
- Provide planning advice/comments on development control at the request of a Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory member and /or Local Authority Planning Officers.

This Management Plan is required by the legislation to formulate the local authority policies for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. The planning function of local authorities is a critical way to conserve and enhance the Kent Downs.

◆ **Delivering in partnership and developing wider collaboration**

Much that has been achieved since the publication of the first Kent Downs Management Plan has been through the many delivery partners who work on the ground in the AONB. The Kent Downs AONB Partnership is recognised nationally as one of the most effective at securing activity and resources in support of the Management Plan and its policies; this revision recognises that even greater benefit could be generated through even larger scale collaborative partnerships working across sectors and at a landscape scale.

The Joint Advisory Committee plays a pivotal role in realising the strategic vision for the Kent Downs AONB.



The Kent Downs

John Miller

2.3 The management of the Kent Downs AONB - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The vision, policies and actions of the AONB Management Plan are supported, promoted and delivered through strong collaborative partnerships, individual actions, strategy and policy and development management decisions.
2. The AONB Partnership provides leadership and direction for the future of the AONB but is open to the views of all people, and is adaptive and flexible to change.

2.4 The management of the Kent Downs AONB - policies

- MPP1 The Kent Downs AONB partnership and Management Plan will be supported as the primary means to develop, coordinate and promote policies and new opportunities for the management, conservation and enhancement of the AONB.
- MPP2 Individual local authorities will give high priority to the AONB Management Plan vision, policies and actions in Local Plans, development management decisions, planning enforcement cases and in carrying out other relevant functions.
- MPP3 The development of strong working partnerships and landscape scale collaborations to implement the vision, policies and actions of the AONB Management Plan will be pursued.
- MPP4 Public bodies and statutory undertakers have a statutory Duty of Regard for the purposes of the AONB: this will be pursued.
- MPP5 Collaborative working partnerships and initiatives with other Protected Landscapes will be supported.
- MPP6 The involvement of relevant interest groups, especially local communities, in decisions about the Kent Downs AONB future will be supported at a strategic level through the Management Plan and AONB Forum and at a local level through local consultations and project development.
- MPP7 The preparation and review of the Management Plan, advocacy of its policies and work in partnership to deliver the actions described will be pursued through the AONB Unit.
- MPP8 The promotion of the importance, qualities and sensitivity of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.



Pastoral landscapes are an important characteristic of the Kent Downs