

3. Sustainable development

Our vision

In 2034 ... the principles of sustainable development are at the heart of the management of the Kent Downs. Change reinforces and enhances the characteristics, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs, its communities and economy. While the surrounding urban areas have expanded considerably, innovative management techniques and policy approaches successfully address the pressure and opportunities presented to the AONB and its Partnership.

The impacts of climate change are being felt but the mitigation and adaptive responses taken are intelligence-led, effective and carefully chosen to enhance the characteristics, qualities and distinctiveness of the landscape rather than detracting from them.

3.1 Overview

Achieving sustainable development is an overarching principle for much national and international policy. The UN General Assembly defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The principles of sustainable development underpin the UK Sustainable Development Strategy and are reiterated in the National Planning Policy Framework. AONB management plans are an important way to help achieve sustainable development in the context of a Protected Landscape.

Sustainable development has economic, social and environmental dimensions. In the context of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, sustainability should be judged primarily against the objective of AONB designation set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This is "for the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area".

Applying this to the local circumstances of the Kent Downs, particular attention should be given to the special characteristics and qualities of the area and the reasons for designation.

These in turn help to apply the National Planning Policy Framework, which advises setting criteria based policies in Local Plans, against

which proposals for any development on or affecting the AONB can be judged. The protection afforded should be commensurate with the national status of the area and give appropriate weight to the AONB's importance and the contribution it makes to wider ecological networks.

To assist this process, this Management Plan identifies key issues, threats, opportunities and aims, together with policies which respond to them. Strategic issues are identified in this section: over-arching 'guiding themes' arising from the purposes of designation and the need to respond to climate change, and 'recurrent themes' which arise frequently across the topics in this plan. These themes will be considered first when implementing the NPPF's criteria-based approach, before turning to specific policy areas later in the Management Plan. In the absence of local criteria-based policies, the intention is that this Management Plan's policies will provide a helpful basis for planning decisions (though the policies of the Plan are more widely cast than the town and country planning system alone).

Change reinforces and enhances the characteristics, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs, its communities and economy.

3.2 Guiding themes

Some of the sustainability issues to be addressed in the Kent Downs AONB are of a high-level, over-arching nature which should inform actions and decisions in the area generally. These are 'natural beauty' (outlined in section 1.2.1), 'local character' and 'climate change'.

◆ Local character

Local characteristics and qualities are the triumph of the distinctive and the diverse over the uniform. Each section in this Management Plan explains what that means in the Kent Downs. Many aspects of local characteristics and qualities are specific to the designated area, such as the landform and landscape of the scarp and dip slope, the woodland and biodiversity which thrive on the steep scarp slopes, and access routes and farming practices which respond to them all. Many more local characteristics are distinctive to individual places or small localities, from building materials to traditional events, fruit trees to dew ponds. These provide enormous variety around different parts of the AONB, in addition to the sense of place which comes from being within the designated area. These qualities, features and experiences should not be seen in isolation but as vital components of an approach to AONB management which reveres what is locally special.

◆ Climate change in the Kent Downs

Climate change will affect the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The UK Climate Impact Programme (UKCIP 09) identifies likely impacts of a series of emission scenarios and the UK Climate Risk Assessment assesses these for a number of key landscape characteristics and qualities. Headline changes include hotter, drier summers and warmer wetter winters with greater rainfall intensity. A key issue, which generally creates more change, is the impact of greater uncertainty and extremes such as drought and flood, which are predicted to become more frequent.

The Kent Downs is vulnerable to changes in the natural environment being generally a dry and free-draining landscape, and located in one of the driest parts of the country where predicted climate change will be most strongly felt.

A 2009 pilot study carried out by Natural England for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB showed a likely 2080 climate similar to Lisbon today; if anything the impacts in the Kent Downs are predicted to be more severe. A changing climate will affect all characteristics and qualities of natural beauty in the Kent Downs and mitigation and adaptation responses can be chosen which support landscape qualities. The Cranborne Chase study provides some responses appropriate to the Kent Downs.



Kemsing Vale

John Miller

3.3 Recurrent themes

Some topics arise so frequently when seeking to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs that they should be understood for their strategic importance to the management of the AONB. These cross-cutting topics are usually one of a number relevant to any action or decision affecting the AONB. They are assembled here to highlight their overall importance, and should be viewed as matters to address first whenever this Management Plan is relevant, before turning to specific topics in each of the following sections. This does not mean that each one will necessarily be significant to every action or decision, but that their possible applicability should always be considered. On this basis, these recurrent themes are not referred to again in the policies in later sections. For instance, this means that, with the AONB setting as a recurrent theme, reference to development 'in the AONB' will also apply as appropriate 'in its setting' too.

◆ **Tranquillity and remoteness**

The perception of being away from the noise, sights and smells of modern life is a much valued feature of many parts of the AONB where people can refresh body and soul. In the south east of England tranquillity is an increasingly rare resource. Research by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) has shown that since the 1960s England has lost over 20% of its tranquil areas to urban sprawl, traffic and light pollution. The average size of our

tranquil areas has reduced by 73%. As Kent's population increase, this resource will become more important and increasingly under threat. National tranquillity mapping carried out by the CPRE has confirmed that the Kent Downs offers important areas of relative tranquillity.

A 2003 CPRE survey documents the loss of dark night skies over the last 20 years through badly designed and sited night lighting. An accepted and often valued part of country living has always been dark, star-filled skies. These qualities are increasingly difficult to enjoy in the AONB.

The importance of tranquillity has been noted in the NPPF which requires (paragraph 123) that planning policies and decisions should aim to 'identify and protect areas of tranquillity which have remained relatively undisturbed by noise and are prized for their recreational and amenity value for this reason'.

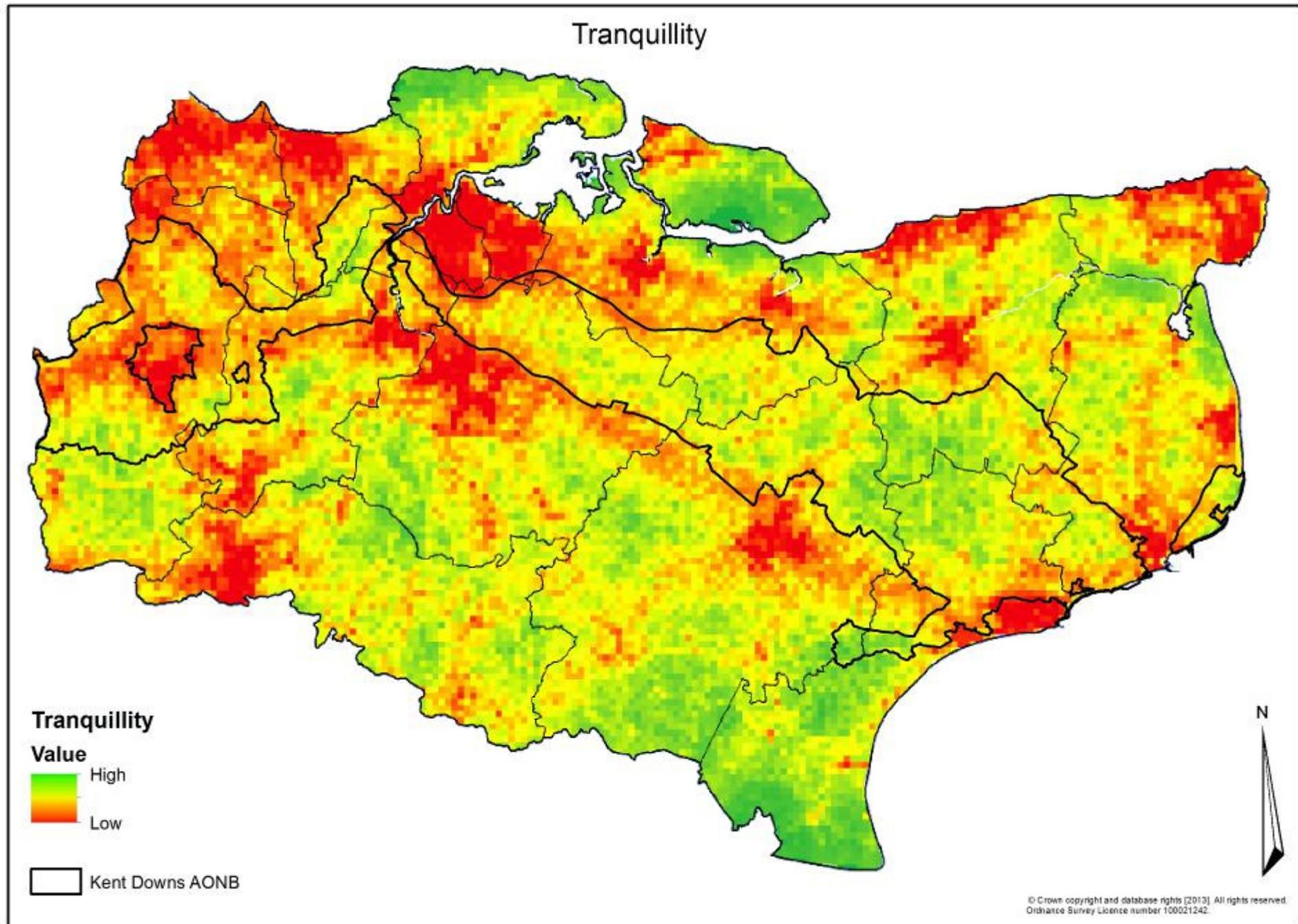
◆ **Setting**

The setting of the Kent Downs AONB is broadly speaking the land outside the designated area which is visible from the AONB and from which the AONB can be seen, but may be wider when affected by intrusive features beyond that. It is not formally defined or indicated on a map. The setting of the AONB landscape should be



Otford Mount in the Darent Valley

Figure 1 - Tranquillity map



distinguished from the setting of listed buildings and other heritage assets (on which there is legislation and also policy in the NPPF and elsewhere).

Proposals which would affect the setting of the AONB are not subject to the same level of constraint as those which would affect the AONB itself. The weight to be afforded to setting issues will depend on the significance of the impact. Matters such as the size of proposals, their distance, incompatibility with their surroundings, movement, reflectivity and colour are likely to affect impact. Where the qualities of the AONB which were instrumental in reasons for its designation are affected, then the impacts should be given considerable weight in decisions. This particularly applies to views to and from the scarp of the North Downs.

The importance of the Kent Downs AONB setting has been recognised in the AONB Management Plan 2009-2014. This included policies to protect the AONB from inappropriate developments in its setting unless they could be satisfactorily mitigated. The Management Plan was adopted by all planning authorities with land in the AONB. National policy issued by DEFRA also explains that: "it may sometimes be the case that the activities of certain authorities operating outside the boundaries of these areas [nationally protected landscapes] may have an impact within them. In such cases, relevant authorities will also be expected to have regard to the purposes of these areas." Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, DEFRA, March 2005.

Before it was abolished, the South East Regional Spatial Strategy had an AONB settings policy. The NPPF (2012) has no AONB settings policy. Nonetheless, partner Local Planning Authorities have been proposing, and the Secretary of State through his Inspectors accepting, that such policies remain appropriate in Local Plans. Likewise, the Secretary of State has been supporting local authority decisions to refuse damaging proposals in the setting of the AONB. In particular, following an inquiry, he refused a road-rail freight interchange in 2010 in the immediate setting of the Kent Downs scarp at Bearsted (the 'Kent International Gateway'), with a key reason being substantial harm to the AONB setting.

◆ Design and materials

The special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs include the quality of the built heritage and settlement patterns. To conserve and enhance the natural and scenic beauty of the Kent Downs, the scale and design of new development, re-development and restoration is critical. The NPPF focuses on the importance of design, stating that 'permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions'.

To support the statutory Duty of Regard towards the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty placed on public bodies and statutory undertakers the Kent Downs AONB Partnership has produced a series of design guidance documents:

- The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Design Handbook.
- The Kent Downs AONB Rural Streets and Lanes: A Design Handbook.
- The Kent Downs AONB Farmsteads Design Guidance.
- Managing Land for Horses – a guide to good practice in the Kent Downs AONB.
- A Buildings and Settlement Design Guide is planned.

The Kent Downs has a rich tradition of half-timbered and weather-boarded buildings. There is also a legacy of locally



Woods Court Valley, Sheldwich

distinctive architecture in locally derived building materials such as Ragstone, flint and chalk. Soft red bricks and peg-tiles lend colour and here and there long-straw thatching can be seen. The predominance of local materials helps to establish the distinctive character of the built environment. The conservation and enhancement of these diverse buildings requires local sources of building materials, as well as skilled craftsmen who understand and respect the building traditions of the past and the architectural vernacular. High quality modern design can draw from the past. New development should use available, sustainably sourced traditional as well as appropriate new materials and a design approach which fits neatly with and complements the valued traditions, forms and patterns of the past, while securing environmental efficiency and affordability.

◆ **Pressure of growth and infrastructure**

The Kent Downs AONB, probably more than any other protected landscape, is under pressure from growth, demographic change, development and infrastructure. The management plan policy framework needs to support the principles of sustainable development and reflect these challenges so that decisions (both within and outside the Kent Downs) have regard to the AONB and the benefits it offers. Significant urban areas adjoin the AONB boundary, or lie within close proximity, and most of these areas will expand in the coming twenty years.

Against this backdrop of large-scale development, there is continual pressure for small-scale development and change creating a cumulative impact on the special character and qualities of the AONB.

The Kent Downs landscape has been influenced by infrastructure development for many years. The AONB is bound by two major road routes, the M20 and M2/A2. In recent years the impact of traffic and transport infrastructure has become a significant detractor to the quality of the landscape; international traffic flows are predicted to increase. The rail network could be used to much greater extent to access the AONB, however the treatment of railway land can be out of character with AONB landscapes. Several main flight paths from London to mainland Europe pass over the Kent Downs, and the western part of the landscape is passed by aircraft descending to London Gatwick. The impact of overflying airplanes on landscape tranquillity can be significant.

Energy, water supply and fast communications are critical to the functioning of society, but their supply infrastructure can detract from landscape characteristics and qualities. In recognition of this UK Power Networks and the National Grid have joined forces with Protected Landscapes to underground power lines where there is strong environmental and public benefit and economic justification where it is technically possible without detracting from statutory duties.



Dan Tuson

Train passing through the Kent Downs



Oak clad woodfuel boiler



Removing overhead cables

The generation of renewable energy is an increasing priority and several technologies can have a detracting impact on the special qualities and characteristics of the Kent Downs. The JAC has supported a renewables position statement for the Kent Downs, which considers each significant renewable energy technology, judges its effectiveness at reducing greenhouse gasses and impact on the landscape.

Fast telecommunication is necessary to support social and economic activity and where it reduces the need to travel it can have significant environmental advantage. Enabling high speed rural broadband is an important priority for Kent and the Kent Downs AONB Partnership; delivery of these services should be met in a way that does not detract from landscape character and quality.

◆ Mitigation

The National Planning Policy Framework sets out a 'mitigation hierarchy' in the following terms: "Local planning authorities should seek opportunities to achieve each of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and net gains across all three. Significant adverse impacts on any of these dimensions should be avoided and, wherever possible, alternative options which reduce or eliminate such impacts should be pursued. Where adverse impacts are unavoidable, measures to mitigate the impact should be considered. Where adequate mitigation measures are not possible, compensatory measures may be appropriate" (paragraph 152).

This Management Plan follows the priorities set out in the NPPF by focusing on the avoidance of damage to the characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB. However, mitigation is also important. Reducing the impacts of unavoidable change from infrastructure and growth and a growing population close to the AONB, changing land management, the needs of the AONB population and access and enjoyment, for instance, is an ongoing challenge. Likewise, infrastructure and growth in the setting of the AONB can challenge the qualities of the AONB itself. Mitigation will also be needed where schemes which have benefits for the AONB also themselves have adverse effects, for example where:

- affordable housing to sustain local AONB communities is needed but must be constructed in ways which minimise impacts on their surroundings;
- infrastructure to reintroduce woodland management (with benefits including biodiversity, wood products, renewable energy, and employment) may also need road access, harm local amenities or erode tranquillity; and
- improved recreational access to enjoy the qualities of the AONB could erode those very qualities.

In addition, the AONB must play its part in appropriately mitigating the impacts of climate change, which demands responses by all sectors of local life. This should be achieved in a way which supports rather than harms the character and qualities of the AONB.



Shorne Woods visitor centre



Wealden Wheels



Local road sign



National cycle route sign



Local produce

3.4 Sustainable development - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. To conserve and enhance the natural and scenic beauty of the Kent Downs, the design of new development, redevelopment and restoration is critical.
- b. Cumulative loss of landscape features, tranquillity and character due to incremental development, climate change (and adaptation and mitigation responses), intensive agricultural and forestry practices, pressure from traffic and significant levels of urban growth and development.
- c. The potential for climate change mitigation and adaptation responses to detract from landscape character and the opportunity to adopt those which support it.
- d. The need to support project-based sustainable development initiatives and exemplars in the AONB and to increase the scale, integration and impact of activity and funding.
- e. Despite a significant loss and continuing pressure, the Kent Downs still provides important relatively tranquil areas; the National Planning Policy Framework places a requirement on Local Planning Authorities to identify and protect tranquil areas.
- f. Fewer places have dark night skies.
- g. The setting of the Kent Downs is recognised as important in the original designation of the Kent Downs and in the enjoyment of the landscape today.
- h. The choice of design and materials in restoration, new development and landscape management are recognised as critical when seeking to conserve and enhance the landscape of the Kent Downs AONB.
- i. General development pressures, including major transport and infrastructure proposals; knock-on pressure from the Greater London area and growth areas, and the opportunity to provide positive outcomes from growth as well as effective mitigation strategies.
- j. Estimated day visitor numbers are high and probably increasing. Pressure on the characteristics and qualities of the AONB as well as particular countryside routes, sites and areas can be very high but unevenly distributed.
- k. 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.



Sympathetic chestnut fencing



Post Office at Farningham



Rethatching



Medieval house at Plaxtol

3.5 Sustainable development - aims

A landscape in which:

1. AONB conservation and enhancement and sustainable development principles are the starting point of development and infrastructure plans, local policies and proposals.
2. The character and distinctiveness of villages, farmsteads and individual buildings are conserved and enhanced by combining the best traditions of the past with the best technologies of the present to create environmentally sustainable and locally enhancing development.
3. A positive, proactive and urgent approach is taken to the implications of climate change and intelligent and effective mitigation and adaptation responses are chosen which support landscape character and ecosystem services.
4. All development achieves landscape enhancement; conservation and mitigation is delivered in every case.
5. A comparatively tranquil environment is protected, conserved and enhanced.
6. The setting and views in and out of the AONB are conserved and enhanced.
7. New developments respect and reinforce the traditions of the past, whilst integrating sustainable technologies and sensitive new design.
8. The impact of infrastructure on the qualities of the AONB is significantly reduced.



Shoreham village

3.6 Sustainable development - policies

- SD1 The need to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB is recognised as the primary purpose of the designation and given the highest level of protection within statutory and other appropriate planning and development strategies and development control decisions.
- SD2 The local character, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs AONB will be conserved and enhanced in the design, scale, setting and materials of new development, redevelopment and infrastructure and will be pursued through the application of appropriate design guidance and position statements which are adopted as components of the AONB Management Plan.
- SD3 New development or changes to land use will be opposed where they disregard or run counter to the primary purpose of the Kent Downs AONB.
- SD4 A strategic, evidence led approach to both the adaptation to and mitigation of the impacts of climate change on the natural beauty and historic character of the Kent Downs, and its human consequences, will be pursued.
- SD5 Local renewable and sustainable energy initiatives will be pursued where they help to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and landscape character of the AONB and bring environmental, social and economic benefits to local people. Proposals will be opposed where they do not conform with the Kent Downs AONB Renewable Energy Position Statement.
- SD6 Activities to increase understanding of the importance and extent of tranquillity, remoteness and 'dark night skies' within the Kent Downs and the factors that affect them, will be supported and pursued.
- SD7 To retain and improve tranquillity, including the experience of dark skies at night, careful design and the use of new technologies should be used. New developments and highways infrastructure which negatively impact on the local tranquillity of the Kent Downs AONB will be opposed unless they can be satisfactorily mitigated.
- SD8 Proposals which negatively impact on the distinctive landform, landscape character, special characteristics and qualities, the setting and views to and from the AONB will be opposed unless they can be satisfactorily mitigated.
- SD9 The particular historic and locally distinctive character of rural settlements and buildings of the Kent Downs AONB will be maintained and strengthened. The use of locally-derived materials for restoration and conversion work will be encouraged. New developments will be expected to apply appropriate design guidance and to be complementary to local character in form, setting, scale, contribution to settlement pattern and choice of materials. This will apply to all development, including road design (pursued through the adoption and implementation of the AONB Rural Streets and Lanes Design Handbook), affordable housing, development on farm holdings (pursued through the farmstead design guidance), and rights of way signage.
- SD10 Positive measures to mitigate the negative impact of infrastructure and growth on the natural beauty and amenity of the AONB will be supported.
- SD11 Where it is decided that development will take place that will have a negative impact on the landscape character, characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB or its setting, mitigation measures appropriate to the national importance of the Kent Downs landscape will be identified, pursued, implemented and maintained. The removal or mitigation of identified landscape detractors will be pursued.
- SD 12 Transport and infrastructure schemes are expected to avoid the Kent Downs AONB as far as practicable. Essential developments will be expected to fit unobtrusively into the landscape, respect landscape character, be mitigated by sympathetic landscape and design measures and provide environmental compensation by benefits to natural beauty elsewhere in the AONB.