

## Special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB

### 4. Landform and landscape character

#### Our vision

In 2034... the rich diversity of landscape character and qualities distinctive to the Kent Downs are protected, enhanced and managed to the highest standards in a coordinated and continual programme. The special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB are recognised, valued and strengthened and landscape character informs land management, responses to climate change and development decisions.

#### 4.1 Overview

The fundamental and special characteristics that distinguish the natural beauty of the Kent Downs landscape were identified when the Kent Downs AONB was designated in 1968. This was reconfirmed in the 1995 Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment and again in the views expressed in the public and stakeholder consultation for the original AONB Management Plan and its subsequent reviews.



Winchcombe Down

## 4.2 Landform and landscape character - special characteristics and qualities

The AONB landform underlies the area's natural beauty; it is complex and varied, but characterised by six key elements:

### ◆ The Chalk Ridge

The long arc of the North Downs chalk ridge is the most dominant element of the AONB, consisting of the steep, south-facing scarp slope rising above the Gault clay vale below, the open expansive plateau tops and gentle dip slopes traversed by many hidden, dry valleys. Spectacular views are offered along the chalk escarpment across the Vale of Holmesdale, Low Weald, the river valleys and the towns below making the setting important to the enjoyment and purposes of the AONB. Perhaps more surprising and intriguing are the views from the highest and most open parts of the plateau and dip-slopes looking towards London and the Medway, Thames and Swale estuaries.

### ◆ The White Cliffs Heritage Coasts

The chalk ridge ends at the English Channel forming the Dover White Cliffs, one of the most evocative and best known British landmarks. The scale of the Kent Downs landscape is at its greatest here. The high vertical cliffs and the white chalk contrast starkly with the foreshore and constantly changing sea below with the bustle of

ferries and shipping; overall the coast provides an awe-inspiring panorama. The expansiveness and drama is increased further by enticing glimpses of the French coast on the horizon.

### ◆ The Greensand Ridge and Lympne escarpment

The undulating Greensand Ridge rises to one of the highest points in southeast England at 250 metres at Toy's Hill. The views from along the length of the Greensand Ridge are some of the best in southern England, and on a clear day, the High Weald and the South Downs beyond can be seen. In the east Kent Downs, the Lympne escarpment of calcareous Sandstone and Ragstone provides a spur of higher ground affording dramatic views across the near-level Romney Marsh and Hythe Bay.

### ◆ The river valleys

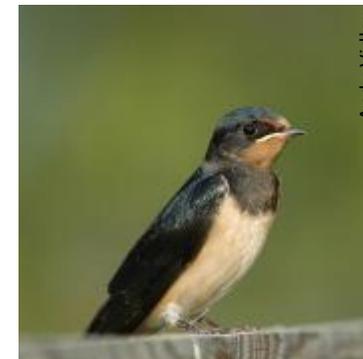
Further diversity is provided at the points where the three main rivers, the Darent, Medway and the Great Stour cut through the chalk. Each river flows in a northerly direction and they form broad, steep-sided valleys with open vistas along the river corridors. The River Medway does not lie in the AONB itself, although parts of its tidal flood plain are within the boundary.



The White Cliffs



Downland landscape



A swallow

◆ **Scalloped and hidden dry valleys**

Dry valleys are a beautiful, greatly valued and intimate feature of much of the Kent Downs landscape and they are often criss-crossed by a maze of tiny, sunken one track lanes. The valleys often have a narrow strip of rough grassland, scrub or woodland along their steepest slopes, locally known as shaves, which are important for wildlife. The larger dry valleys such as Elham and Alkham have the sporadic winterbournes such as the Nailbourne in Elham, flowing occasionally during the very wettest winters.

◆ **Expansive open plateaux**

North of the chalk scarp the plateaux offer huge open landscapes with a simple structure and sometimes surprising and dramatic views for instance to the Thames Valley. Often dominated by stiff clay with flint soils overlying the solid chalk, the soils were historically difficult to cultivate and were used extensively for sheep grazing. Much of the ancient woodland remains framing the plateaux and enclosing the dry valleys.

**4.3 The Kent Downs landscape character areas**

◆ **Landscape character**

Landscape character is described as the pattern that arises from particular combinations of different landscape components such as landform, land cover and settlement and can provide a helpful description and sense of place to our surroundings. A Landscape Character approach, supported by historic landscape character assessment, can assist in informing landscape management decisions and its use is supported by the National Planning Policy Guidance.

The Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment prepared by the Countryside Commission (1995 CCP 479) identified 13 Landscape Character Areas in the AONB. Many of these have been divided into local character areas which detail specific local characteristics and

identify some of the pressures facing them. Drawing from these descriptions, the 2004 Landscape Assessment of Kent described Landscape Character Area condition and sensitivity assessments. At a local level landscape character assessments have been prepared as part of the Local Plan Process for several Kent Downs Local Authorities.

Landscape Character Assessment is a helpful tool to inform the management of the Kent Downs AONB landscape. However the Kent Landscape Group (a group of landscape practitioners and managers established through the Kent Forum’s Kent Environment Strategy) has identified that the County and Local Landscape Assessments do not necessarily align and that there is a need for a review of the 2004 Landscape Assessment for Kent.



Alkham Valley



Parkland

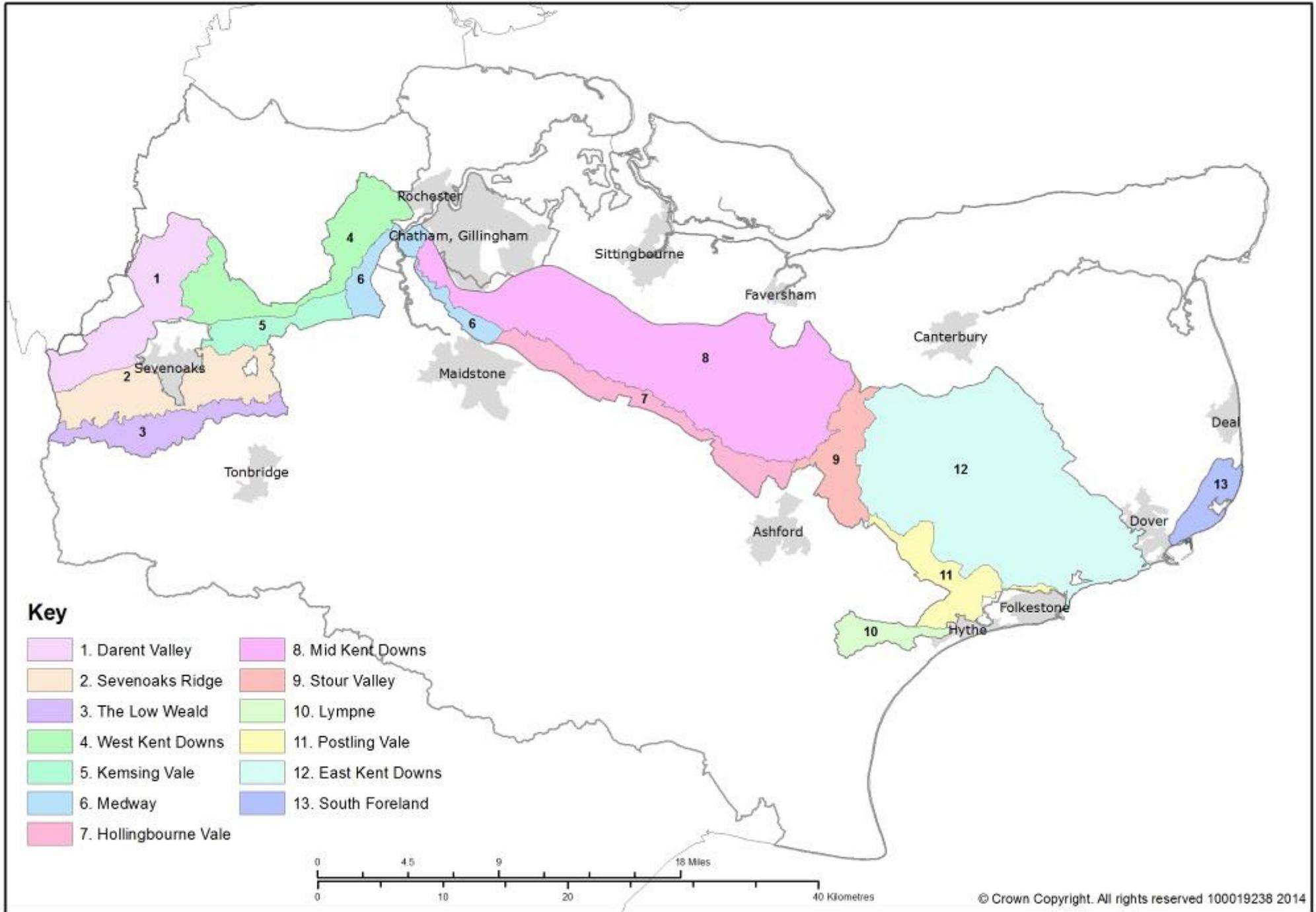


The Heritage Coast between Folkestone and Dover



River Stour

Figure 2 - Landscape character areas and local authority boundaries



\* for detailed landscape descriptions please refer to the Babbie landscape assessment. Search 'Kent landscape character assessment'.

During the Management Plan review the Kent Downs AONB Unit carried out a 'field review' of several landscape character areas and considered the relevance of the existing Management Plan policies at a landscape character area level. This approach considers both opportunities and threats in each area. This work is ongoing. Landscape Character Assessment has formed an important basis for the Landscape and Streets and Lanes Design Guides which form part of this Plan.

#### ◆ National Character Areas

Natural England has a programme to describe National Character Areas (NCAs) which divide England into 159 distinct natural areas. Each is defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural and economic activity. Their boundaries follow natural lines in the landscape rather than administrative boundaries, making them a good decision making framework for the natural environment. The National Character Areas Profiles which cover the Kent Downs AONB include the North Downs (119), Wealden Greensand (120) and Romney Marshes (123).

#### ◆ Landscape condition

Landscape condition is strongly influenced by external factors which can contribute or detract from landscape character. The assessment of condition evaluates the landscape pattern and the presence of incongruous features (detractors). It also evaluates how well the landscape functions as a habitat for wildlife and the condition of cultural or 'man-made' elements such as enclosures, built elements and roads. Urban fringe areas are often under pressure and are therefore often described as being in poor condition whilst other more remote areas may still have the same basic features but be described as in a better condition. It is therefore practical to assume that condition may vary throughout a character area and any conclusions should be regarded as a summary of the overall situation.



Fackenden Down in the Darent Valley

John Miller

## 4.4 Landform and landscape character - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Loss of and damage to the quality of views in and out of the AONB through development and occasionally obstructing tree growth and vegetation.
- b. Degradation of the setting and urban fringe impacts in certain Kent Downs landscape character areas through development, infrastructure, urbanisation and recreational pressure.
- c. The erosion of natural beauty and special character through illegal activities particularly fly-tipping, abandoned cars and illegal off-road vehicles.
- d. The importance of the setting of the Kent Downs has been emphasised in policy development management decisions which provides an opportunity to work with Local Planning Authorities to develop planning policy protection for the setting of the Kent Downs and to ensure that the setting is taken into account when Local Planning Authorities determine planning applications.
- e. The opportunity to promote landscape character conservation and enhancement specifically focusing on addressing and seeking to remove or mitigate identified detractors from it.
- f. General lack of awareness of the importance and value of the Kent Downs landscape, its characteristic features and the social and economic benefits it brings.
- g. Landscape character approach not used sufficiently or appropriately in land use, land management and development management decisions and landscape character assessments are not always consistent or up to date.

***Landscape Character Assessment is a helpful tool to inform the management of the Kent Downs AONB landscape.***



Parking issues at Chilham Square



Houses at Bessels Green



River Stour

## 4.5 Landform and landscape character - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The diversity of landscape character across the Kent Downs is properly described and understood, maintained and enhanced, and the strong sense of place of individual localities is recognised, reinforced and celebrated.
2. A landscape character approach is used to inform AONB management decisions and areas of opportunity and threat are identified and become the focus for action.
3. The highest standards of landscape conservation, restoration and enhancement are encouraged and integrated into all land uses in the Kent Downs and its setting.
4. There is better understanding of which landscape features local people and visitors value and all people are encouraged to play a part in retaining and enhancing these features.

## 4.6 Landform and landscape character - 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.

- LLC1 The protection, conservation and enhancement of special characteristics and qualities, natural beauty and landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be supported and pursued.
- LLC2 The promotion, management, restoration and appropriate creation of prominent views and viewpoints will be supported.
- LLC3 The provision of co-ordinated and high quality landscape conservation guidance and funding advice to all AONB farmers and landowners, including the equestrian sector, woodland owners and field sports, will be pursued, focusing on the special characteristics and qualities, natural beauty and the landscape character of the AONB.
- LLC4 The detection, prevention, and prosecution of illegal and overtly damaging activities such as fly-tipping, dumping of abandoned cars and non-permitted off-road vehicular use will be pursued.

- LLC5 The revision, development and use of coordinated landscape character assessments for the Kent Downs AONB will be supported and pursued.
- LLC6 The improved awareness and appreciation of all the special qualities of the AONB landscape and its conservation to people who influence the future of, live, work in or visit the AONB will be pursued.
- LLC7 The development of strategic landscape action plans for Landscape Character Areas of the AONB with the greatest threats or opportunities will be supported and pursued.



View from Queendown Warren

Dan Tuson