

6. Farmed landscape

Our vision

In 2034... the Kent Downs AONB is a place where agriculture is appreciated for its pivotal role in the conservation of natural beauty and landscape character. Sustainable farming is the predominant land use of the AONB and the heritage of mixed farming is retained. There is a greater understanding of the role of farming and more opportunities to visit and understand farming systems. Despite the volatility of agricultural markets and production a broad range of crops are produced that are suited to the increasing extremes of climate, local conditions and market forces as well as the landscape. Pasture is well managed by grazing and orchards, plats and hop gardens retain a vital role in the landscape. The high quality products of the Kent Downs are available locally and high environmental quality is a market advantage.

6.1 Overview

The Kent Downs AONB is principally a farmed landscape, with around 64% of its land classed as agricultural. Centuries of changing farming practices have shaped the landscape to create an important part of the natural beauty which is celebrated today.

Historically, the Kent Downs has supported mixed farming practices where arable crop production has co-existed with livestock grazing and horticulture. The complex seasonal colours and textures of cultivated land contrast with the constancy of permanent grassland.

The close-cropped texture of grass and arable accentuate the undulation of the land. The patchwork of land use created by mixed farming is also vital for many plant and animal species associated with farmland. The farmed landscape is much valued for the access afforded along Public Rights of Way, permissive paths and open access land.

Table 6 indicates that the Kent Downs AONB continues to be a landscape of mixed agricultural use. There has been a reduction in overall farmland area as well as a rationalisation of farming practice.



Tractor at work

Table 6 - Changes in patterns of agricultural land use in the Kent Downs

% of Farmed Land cover	1961	1972	1990	1999	2007	2008	2009	2010
Arable	53	64	58	55	50	54	55	54
Grassland	37	27	35	30	34	35	34	34
Grassland with scrub	0	0	1	9	<i>data not available</i>			
Orchards and hops	7	6	4	4	2	3	2	2
Parkland	3	3	2	3	<i>data not available</i>			
Area of farmed land (ha)	64,227	64,925	64,141	64,546	60,836	57,833	57,213	55,797

6.2 Farmed landscape - special characteristics and qualities

◆ Arable

The Kent Downs AONB has an unusually high proportion of grade 2 and grade 3 agricultural land for a protected landscape. Arable agriculture has always been an important part of the character of this valued landscape. The area of arable land has fluctuated slightly over the 45 years since designation, although the methods of arable farming have changed considerably within this period.

Since WWII early government policy and incentives encouraged increased food production. Modern farming responded by adopting new crops, technologies and practices, which have seen a marked increase in crop production and efficiency of scale. In some cases, the cost has been the loss of landscape quality, biodiversity and historic features that have been part of the mixed farming landscape for centuries; elsewhere farmers have chosen to conserve and enhance the landscape at the same time as increasing productivity.

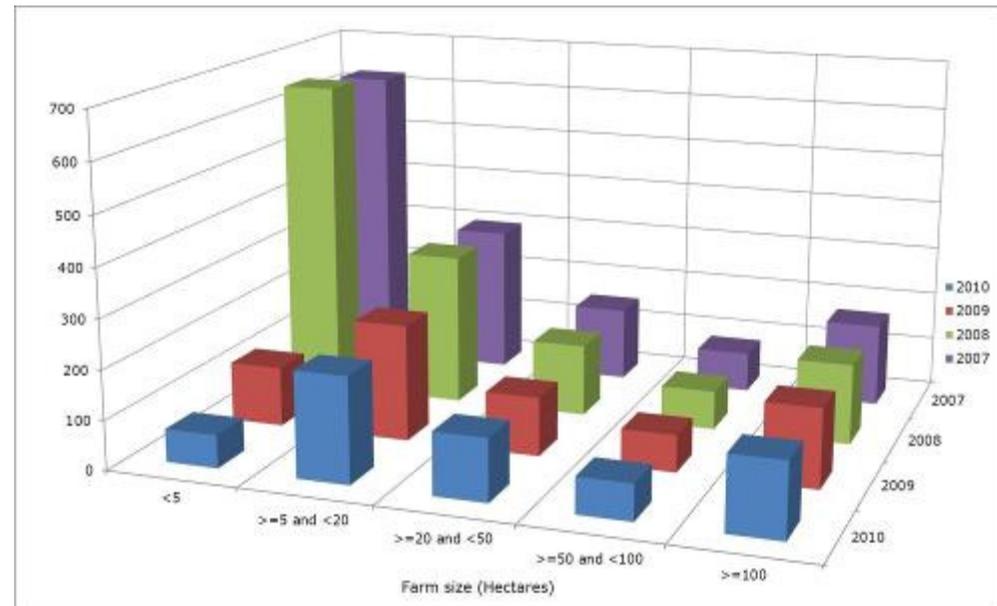
Where there has been removal of hedgerows and field margins, deep ploughing of grassland and drainage of wetlands, as well as the intensive use of pesticides and inorganic fertilisers the result is sometimes sterile farmscapes with little wildlife or reduced landscape interest.

More recently the agricultural economy has been subject both to the removal of production based subsidy and to increasing volatility driven by global markets and climatic fluctuations affecting both produce value and production costs. These pressures require farmers to make increasingly market led decisions and to use up to date methods to retain competitive advantage and resilience. At the same time public opinion and Government policy has strengthened in favour of environmentally sensitive farming that produces high-quality food, with less cost on the public purse. Climate change adds a further powerful influence with agriculture having an important role both in adapting to the changes already in train and mitigating further impacts.

Table 7 shows an increase in the changing nature of farm holdings in the Kent Downs. There is a move to larger 'contract' farming and cooperative farming ventures, especially on the most productive land in order to achieve economies of scale often leading to crop rotations on a whole farm rather than field scale.

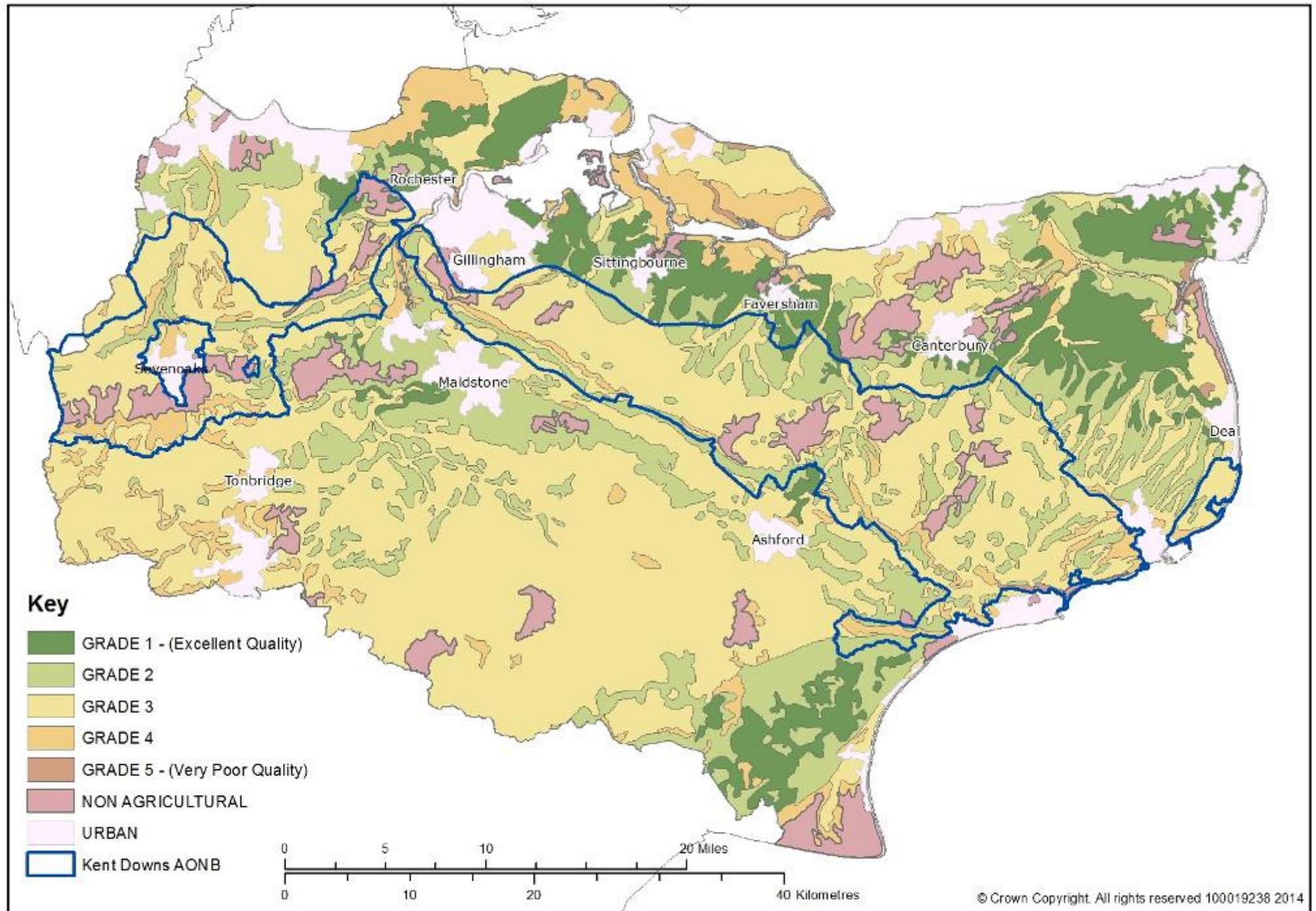
When medium sized farms are absorbed into larger holdings, farmhouses and buildings can be sold off with small holdings or to 'amenity' farmers and landowners who are not reliant on agriculture as a main income. This trend can bring with it landscape change and a loss of community and other intangibles such as 'attachment to place'. The setting and relationship between buildings in farmsteads and immediate landscape around farm buildings is becoming more 'suburbanised'. The separation of farm holdings and farm cottages and the increasing price of housing effectively prices the agricultural labour force out of the rural housing market.

Table 7 - Farm size in the Kent Downs AONB



DEFRA 2012

Figure 7 - Agricultural land classification



Historic farm buildings are an important cultural part of the landscape and are the category of historic building most at risk. Farmstead guidance prepared in partnership with English Heritage and Kent County Council seeks to secure this important special characteristic in the Kent Downs

The farm subsidy environment is critical to the management of the Kent Downs landscape with agri-environment and cross compliance schemes potentially making an important contribution to landscape conservation.

◆ **Grazing pasture**

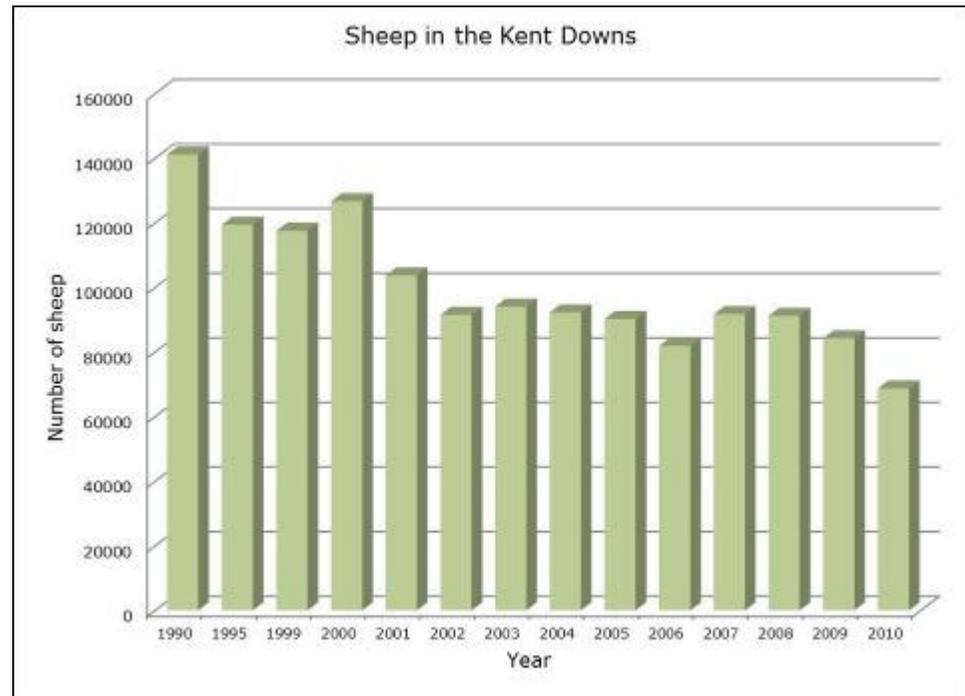
Sheep and beef cattle play an important part in the AONB land-based economy. Livestock farming is important to retain the special character of the AONB. Yet there has been a significant decline in livestock farming, particularly sheep, which have nearly halved in number since 1990. This decline has been experienced in other AONBs; the High Weald AONB has researched opportunities to redress the change (Restocking the High Weald report) – many of the proposals are applicable to the Kent Downs.

The effects of BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease and the arrival of Bluetongue in 2007 (although the UK was declared free in 2008), as well as other factors such as imports and the lack of adequate infrastructure such as local abattoirs and markets, have put increasing pressure on the livestock industry. The loss of grazing livestock and skilled graziers due to the poor economics of grazing,

has led to areas of grassland that were previously grazed, falling out of use only to be ploughed up for crops, planted with trees, converted to leisure use or scrubbed over through abandonment.

Horses are an increasingly common grazing animal in the AONB. The continued growth in equine activities play an important role in the future of the AONB land-based economy and can provide a market for local farm produce for feed and bedding for instance. If managed in a sustainable and sympathetic manner, horse grazing can make a positive contribution to the management of grassland in the Kent Downs, helping to maintain the important pastoral quality of the AONB’s natural beauty. However examples of good practice can be difficult to find and the impacts of growth in the equine industry have tended to harm Kent Downs landscape character – good practice guidance has been published for the management of land for horses in the Kent Downs AONB.

Table 8 - Number of sheep in the Kent Downs AONB



Hare



Wheat field

◆ Orchards and horticulture

Historically, orchards and horticulture have played an important part in the special character of the AONB landscape, the regular striate form enhancing the rise and fall of the land. Teynham (just north of the AONB) became the site of the first 'mother' nursery for commercial fruit orchards in England in the days of Henry VIII, and there is still a concentration of top and stone fruit (tree fruit) and hop growing along the northern fringes of the Mid Kent Downs, including the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale. In the Kent Downs it is the traditional cherry orchards which are particularly distinctive.

Traditional orchards of large trees with understorey grazing are difficult and uneconomic to manage and are being grubbed or replaced by more productive and labour-efficient, safer, smaller fruit trees grown in closely spaced rows. Their greater uniformity and more intensive management have reduced the associated wildlife and landscape value of these orchards. They do, however, provide a modern and important link to a valued historic landscape. Research by Natural England found orchards are important for biodiversity, carbon storage and the local economy.

Other horticultural activities add variety and interest to the AONB landscape. For example, lavender, as a crop for essential oils has replaced a number of hop gardens, and an increasing number of vineyards have been planted adding a new hue to the AONB scenery. A further locally distinct landscape feature is the production of



Kentish cherries

cobnuts in the southeast corner of the Greensand Ridge, centred around Platt and Plaxtol (a cobnut orchard being called a plat).

The area of orchards and hop gardens in the AONB has decreased by nearly 50% since 1961 (70% nationally). There has however been a recent upturn in orchard planting including walnuts and fruits such as apricots, as well as vineyards, which could increase significantly if the predicted climate changes take place. Additionally the use of polytunnels has increased slightly.

While currently covering a small area of the AONB the use of polytunnels is anticipated to increase (together with the associated transport and storage infrastructure) in order to meet quality standards and a longer season as required by customers. Polytunnels can be important detractors to landscape character. The horticultural sector is a small but important component of the AONB landscape and significant to the rural economy.

In the Kent Downs it is the traditional cherry orchards which are particularly distinctive.



Vineyard in the Kent Downs

◆ Agri-environment schemes

Since its inception in 1991, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) and subsequently the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) has brought positive changes to the landscape, wildlife and historic features of the AONB. Until 2013 such schemes have achieved significant enhancements to the landscapes of the Kent Downs.

39,699ha (45%) of the AONB (this equates to 74% of the utilisable agricultural area) is managed under agri-environment schemes, 262 agreements are in place. This includes 5,538ha of managed grassland with 487ha with public access payments. 734ha of unimproved chalk grassland and 250ha of semi improved chalk grassland.

◆ New collaborative approaches to farming and the landscape

Research (Relu research note 38, Sept 2012) and pilots in the South Downs and Nature Improvement Areas, such as the Marlborough Downs, show the greater potential for landscape and biodiversity gain from wide collaborative management across farm holdings (clusters) rather than at a single farm holding level. This approach can address the issues of managing ecosystem services and seeking payment for them. Given future natural resource management issues and the importance of the farmed landscape to the natural beauty of the Kent Downs, a wide collaborative approach to farming and

landscape could form an innovative future approach to landscape management in the Kent Downs.

◆ Nitrate Vulnerable Zones and catchment sensitive farming

Currently about half of the AONB is covered by a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ). The NVZ programme aims to reduce nitrate pollution in water through regulation of how and when nitrogen is applied to land, the management and storage of manure and the use of cover crops. A Catchment Sensitive Farming programme operates in the Kentish Stour and Medway Catchment within the AONB. Catchment sensitive farming offers free, practical advice and training to farmers and land managers on how to reduce diffuse water pollution from agriculture.

◆ Farm Diversification Activity

Farms have been diversifying their businesses for many years; this provides a way to increase returns for the enterprise, stabilise incomes and utilise farm resources effectively. Farm diversification can be carried out in a way which supports the wide objectives of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan. Equally diversification, for instance to some renewable energy technologies or intrusive leisure activities can run counter to the characteristics and qualities which are valued. The Kent Downs Farm Diversification Tool Kit provides an integrated approach to farm diversification, balancing business, planning and environmental issues when considering diversification proposals.



Sheep

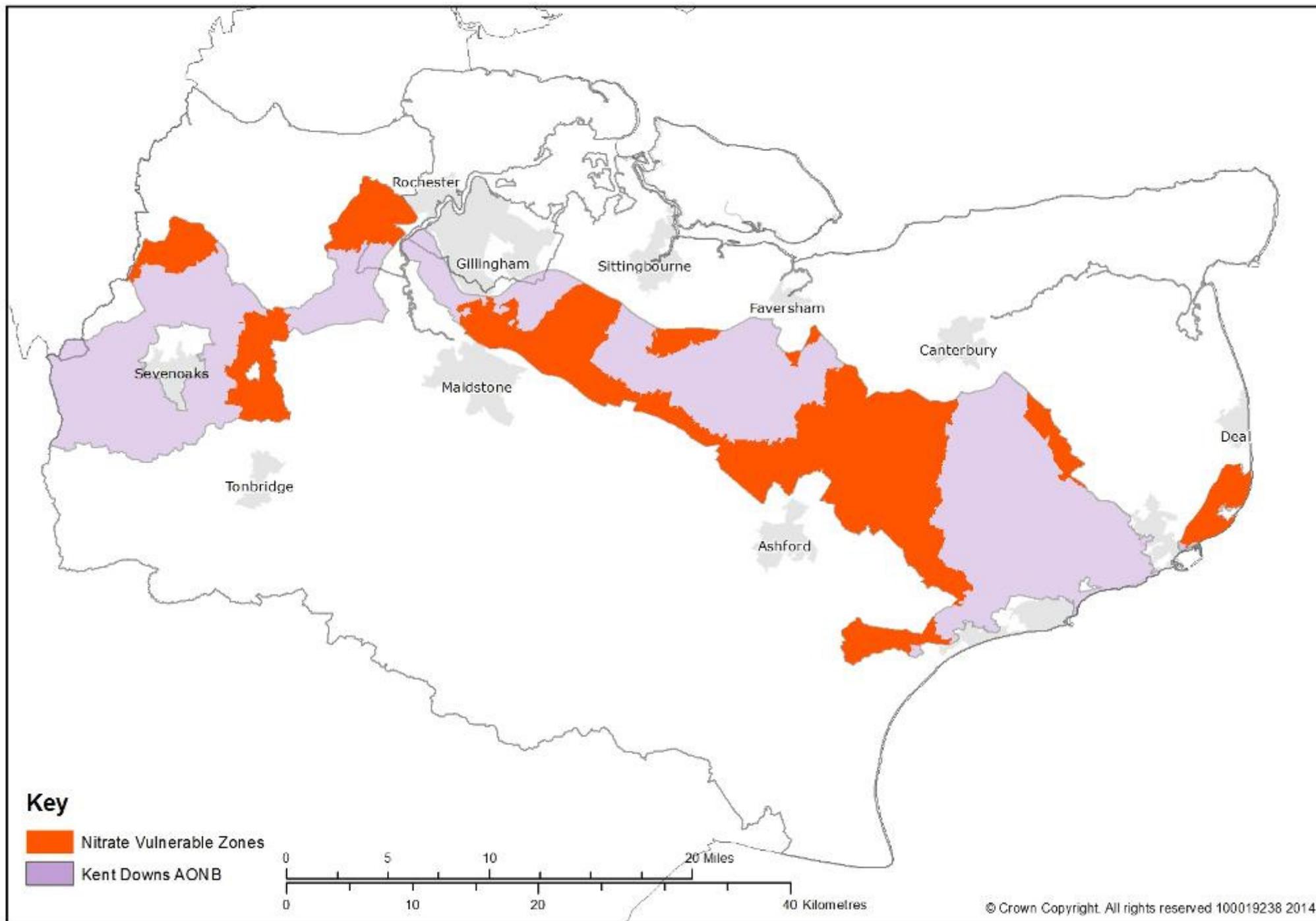


Straw bales



Pheasant

Figure 8 - Nitrate Vulnerable Zones in the Kent Downs AONB



6.3 Farmed landscape - main issues, opportunities and threats

- a. Need to balance a viable, resilient and competitive farming industry with the need for sensitive environmental management in a landscape of national importance.
- b. Decline in farmland area and grazing livestock industries and loss of skilled graziers.
- c. Greater volatility in agricultural commodity prices (both scale and speed) leading to uncertainty about the future direction of agriculture in the Kent Downs.
- d. Uncertainty and limited funding for agri-environment schemes and the incentives they offer, particularly in the face of rising farm gate prices, along with the ending of long run Stewardship schemes.
- e. In the short term the ploughing of permanent grassland as a response to uncertainty about the future subsidy environment.
- f. Changes in landholdings and land management practice. Loss or amalgamation of medium-sized mixed farms and growth of large units with 'share' or 'contract' farming, and establishment of small farming units/residential or leisure owners, where farming is not the main source of income and experience and continuity of land management are not guaranteed.
- g. Rationalisation of the farming system and loss of landscape diversity and distinctiveness and selling off of farmhouse and buildings/cottages from the farmland estate; separating land and accommodation changing the character and landscape setting of former farmhouses; estate cottages and farm buildings.
- h. Given the relatively high proportion of grade 2 and 3 land there is a need to encourage investment in landscape character management.
- i. Farm diversification and development activities such as increased equine facilities, permitted rights afforded to farm building conversions, shooting and field sports, alternative crops (e.g. lavender, biomass energy crops, vineyards) and non-agricultural enterprises (e.g. self-catering cottages and new uses for traditional farm buildings) can have important detracting impacts as well as benefits to the characteristics, qualities, and rural economy of the Kent Downs.
- j. Increasing use of polytunnels to provide high quality, low 'food mile' soft and stone fruit and other high value produce.
- k. The need to manage adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate change, promote low carbon farming, sensitive water storage, new livestock housing or bio energy crops, to create a positive impact on the farmed landscape.
- l. The opportunity to develop a wide collaborative approach to farmland management in the Kent Downs.
- m. Lack of public awareness of the links between farming and land-based activities, environmental issues, landscape conservation and management and the opportunity to develop local markets for products which conserve and enhance the landscape.
- n. Farm buildings are the category of historic building identified as being most at risk and the historic character of farmsteads is being lost.



Sheep grazing

6.4 Farmed landscape – aims

The Kent Downs remains principally a farmed landscape with a strong and viable farming industry where:

1. Public subsidies support farmers who meet the objectives of the AONB. The conservation of landscape character and diversity, the restoration and enhancement of wildlife habitats, the conservation of historic and cultural features, responses to climate change and the welcoming of people to enjoy the landscape, are all integrated and complementary activities to contemporary, competitive mainstream farming.
2. The mixed farming landscape is promoted in a modern collaborative context and at a landscape scale; the benefits of agri-environment and former set aside schemes are retained and good land management practice is encouraged to all agricultural businesses and farm owners.
3. Farm diversification and development activities conserve and strengthen landscape character and local distinctiveness, and provide benefits to the farm and local economy and rural communities.
4. Locally produced, high-quality and sustainably produced food is bought by people and businesses from local shops, farmers' markets and in regional supermarkets with environmental quality being a market advantage.
5. There is heightened awareness and understanding by residents and AONB visitors of the importance and fundamental role played by farming, and the connection between landscape conservation. Environmentally responsible farming and high quality food are appreciated by all people.



Cattle grazing



Cabbage harvesting

6.5 Farmed landscape - 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.

- FL1 The AONB will retain the principally farmed character for which it is valued.
- FL2 The targeting of public agricultural subsidy to make a positive, landscape scale contribution to conserving and enhancing the special characteristics, qualities and landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.
- FL3 Farming practices that improve AONB landscape character, or mitigate damaging impacts, will be supported.
- FL4 The use of integrated whole farm planning, as set out in the Kent Downs Farm Diversification Toolkit, which includes a business plan, landscape, heritage, biodiversity and habitat assessments and shows how the farm business will support the wider rural economy and AONB objectives will be pursued.
- FL5 Farm diversification activities will be supported if they help achieve the aims of the AONB Management Plan and resisted or opposed where they run counter to the purposes of the designation.
- FL6 The production, supply and marketing of AONB produce derived from environmentally sensitive management will be encouraged and supported, particularly where it supports landscape character.
- FL7 Conversion from agricultural to leisure use and the creation of non-agricultural structures will only be supported where there is not a cumulative loss to the principally farmed landscape of the AONB.

- FL8 Proposals for polytunnels will be assessed for their impact on the AONB landscape, including by reference to their siting and mitigation. Proposals for polytunnels should be justified by an integrated whole farm plan. Best practice guidance for the use and landscaping of polytunnels will be pursued.
- FL9 Where farming practices run counter to the special characteristics and qualities of natural beauty and landscape character of the AONB they will be resisted where these are subject to control.
- FL10 A collaborative, 'cluster farm' approach to achieving the farmed landscape objectives of the AONB will be pursued.
- FL11 Activities will be supported that increase wider public understanding of farming and the benefits that the farmed landscape bring for high quality food production, recreation, well-being, nature conservation, the historic environment, landscape and a buoyant rural economy.



A view across the landscape around Lenham