7. Woodland and trees

Our vision
In 2034... the Kent Downs network of woodland and trees is greater in extent and is conserved and enhanced for its landscape, wildlife and historic value. Diverse and sustainably managed woodlands and trees are resilient to climate change and provide inherent mitigation to that change. The woodlands supply buoyant local markets for timber, coppice products and wood fuel, and high quality multi-functional management provides well-used places for leisure and recreation which are rich in characteristic wildlife.

7.1 Overview

The Kent Downs AONB is one of Britain’s most wooded landscapes. Woodland covers around 23% of the AONB and is the second largest land use after farming.

Woodlands and trees are a vital part of the Kent Downs’ natural beauty, providing a green mantle to the upper slopes of the escarpments and valleys. They emphasise the undulating nature of the dip slopes and scarp, and frame the agricultural lower slopes and settlements. Individual, fine and ancient field trees are an important, characteristic and sometimes dramatic element of the landscape.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woodland type</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>% of AONB woodland resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadleaved woodland</td>
<td>15,479</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumed Woodland</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Density</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppice</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conifer</td>
<td>2,134</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground prepared for planting</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppice-with-standards</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felled</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrub</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young trees</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,969</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 - Woodlands over two hectares (2012)

Woodland in autumn

Forestry Commission 2012
7. Woodland and trees - special characteristics and qualities

Almost 70% (12,129 ha) of the Kent Downs woodland resource is ancient woodland (continuously present since at least 1600). The Kent Downs’ ancient woodland is nationally important representing (3.3%) of the total resource of England and Wales (Natural England, Ancient Woodland (England) Inventory 07/03/2013).

Ancient woodland is irreplaceable and is valued for its cultural, landscape and biodiversity importance and the products it supplies. Some ancient woodland may represent our only link with the original post glacial ‘wildwood’ and is more likely to contain vulnerable animal and plant species than any other habitat. Ancient woodlands can also include physical evidence of former landscape management practices. The rich ground flora of ancient woodlands – bluebells, wood anemones, ramsons and yellow archangel – and the bird song of warblers, nightingale and nightjar are part of the natural beauty of the AONB. Much of the valued woodland wildlife, invertebrates, lichens and fungi, are associated with old trees, deadwood or open ground and are restricted to ancient woods and wood pasture. The ancient woodlands of the Kent Downs also preserve the evidence of thousands of years of human activity in earthworks, monuments and place names.

The Kent Downs has a significant area of plantation on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) (3,606ha or 30% of the ancient woodland resource); areas of ancient woodland where non-native species have been planted, generally in the 20th century. The careful, gradual restoration of PAWS sites is a national priority for woodland management, and the National Planning Practice Guidance proposes that local planning authorities should pay more attention to development threats to it.

The highest woodland concentrations in the AONB are found on the Greensand Ridge between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge; along the chalk escarpment in West Kent; in large blocks in the mid Kent Downs; above the Stour Valley and in areas of the East Kent Downs plateaux. However, much of the AONB’s woodland comprises small, fragmented sites in disparate ownership, a situation exacerbated by the increase of wood lotting (breaking up woods into multiple small ownerships). Wood lotting research in Kent has found some negative impacts. More often woodland management is absent and the ability to manage woodlands as a whole can be compromised. However, new owners are often motivated to improve and understand woodland wildlife and heritage.

### Table 10 - English Woodland Grant Schemes in the Kent Downs AONB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kent Downs AONB</th>
<th>Area (hectares)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) Agreements live between 2005 - 2011</td>
<td>4,437.8 ha (area of WGS within AONB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) with Ancient Woodland live between 2005 - 2011</td>
<td>3,064.5 ha (area of AWI within WGS in AONB)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*DEFRA 9th February 2012*
7. Woodland and trees

Figure 9 - Woodland cover in the Kent Downs

Legend
- Ancient Woodland
- National Forest Inventory
- Kent Downs AONB

Forestry Commission 2012
The diversity of woodland types broadly follows the different soil types within the AONB, including clay (with ash, hornbeam and oak); chalk (with ash, beech and yew) and free draining sands (with oak, birch and beech). Lowland beech yew woodland is particularly distinctive in the Kent Downs and is of European importance. Significant blocks of conifer plantation date back to the early 1900s; planting continued into the 1990s and is now largely being phased out and the conifers are beginning to be harvested.

Ash is a particularly prominent tree in the Kent Downs AONB. Both in the woodlands and hedgerows ash forms a prominent and important part of the landscape. Kent Downs woodlands were one of the first areas in Britain to experience widespread infection from Ash Dieback (Chalara fraxinea) and the landscape implications are thought to be serious with the expected death and weakening of the ash population – the Kent Downs has been identified as an Important Ash Area by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). Ash Dieback is only one of many tree diseases and pests which are expected to affect the Kent Downs landscape.

A significant feature throughout the AONB is a predominance of coppiced sweet chestnut planted into much of the ancient woodland over the last two centuries. Historically sweet chestnut coppice was used for pit props in the east Kent coalfields and for fencing and hop poles. Latterly, as these industries declined, chestnut coppice went for hardwood pulp at the nearby paper mills in Sittingbourne and the Medway Valley. These industries no longer use hardwood pulp and the closest paper mills are now in North Wales or Northern France. Chestnut is still coppiced for high value fencing and more recently for the supply of wood chip for heat. Like ash, sweet chestnut is facing several diseases which may seriously affect its productivity and viability in the Kent Downs.

The continuation of coppicing is important for landscape and biodiversity conservation. Much of the AONB’s woodland landscape was once characterised by blocks (cants) of coppice stools cut on regular cycles. Many ancient woodland animal and plant species require coppice management which cyclically opens up the woodland floor to light. Coppice creates edges and mosaics of high canopy with taller and shorter coppice stands, providing a diversity of ecosystems within the woodland habitat. Establishing coppicing is difficult where deer populations are high because re-growth can be browsed off. It has been noted that deer populations in Kent woodlands are growing (The Deer Initiative); it is important to maintain deer numbers at a level that does not prejudice the re-establishment of coppicing.

In Kent, Sussex and Surrey there remains a coppice industry which, although small and threatened, is showing signs of resurgence and could provide a basis from which to return the coppice woodland of the Kent Downs to rotational management and thus continue a management tradition with origins in the Neolithic period.

The Kent Downs landform and landscape character makes its woodlands particularly suitable for shooting, particularly pheasant shooting which is thought to be one of the most important economic drivers for woodland management.

Climate change puts a special focus on the woodlands of the Kent Downs. The Forestry Commission has identified a series of key impacts which include declining tree health and limited mortality, changes to ground flora, loss of drought sensitive species particularly on shallow soils, damage from extreme events and the likelihood that forests and woodland are likely to be increasingly seen as a cool shady refuge for healthy exercise, whilst public access to forests may be interrupted by closures due to storm damage, and roads and paths being washed away.
Figure 10 - Ash locations across Kent

Legend
- Veteran Ash Trees
- Ancient Woodland containing important Ash
- Special Area of Conservation where Ash is a major component
- SSSIs containing Ash habitat
- Kent Downs AONB
- High Weald AONB

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JNCC 2012
The Woodland Trust report ‘Adapt or Die’ suggests that beech will no longer be viable in the Kent Downs by as soon as 2050 if the high carbon emissions scenario is followed. Forestry Commission research indicates that the Kent Downs will be a refuge for lowland woodland types as climatic conditions change. Additionally sweet chestnut, being a species of Southern Europe, is likely to be well adapted to the predicted conditions and coppicing is thought to be a way to make the woodland ecosystem more resilient to these changes. However the relatively single species nature of many chestnut woodlands makes them potentially less resilient to the predicted impacts of climate change and disease. At the same time wood chips from coppice woodland could provide a significant resource of low carbon energy for heating and power. The Kent Downs AONB Wood Fuel Pathfinder Project has identified the most appropriate routes to secure sustainable woodland management to supply wood chip for heat.

The woodlands of the Kent Downs AONB are much valued, for their landscape, wildlife and the recreation and access opportunities they afford; the public reaction to the proposed review of the Forestry Commission Estate showed more widely the general importance attached to woodland. The Kent Downs AONB contains large areas of Forestry Commission land (1,560ha) and public usage is high. There are several examples of community owned and managed woodlands in the Kent Downs and this enthusiasm is an important opportunity for the future sustainable management of the woodlands and trees of the AONB.

The strategic background
This Plan acknowledges and supports the English Forestry Strategy, the UK Forestry Standard which sets out criteria and standards for the sustainable management of all forests, and the Joint National Accord between the Forestry Commission and the National Association of AONBs which demonstrates the Forestry Commissions’ commitment to deliver their strategy within protected landscapes. Forest Design Plans, produced by the Forestry Commission, set out management proposals for the next thirty years for the woodlands they look after. They aim to fulfil a number of objectives:

- Provide descriptions of the woods as they are now.
- Show the process the Forestry Commission goes through when deciding what is best for the woods in the long term.
- Show how the woods should develop over the 30 years.
- Show tree felling and re-establishment in detail for 10 years and in outline for the succeeding 20 years.

The West Wood and Clowes Wood Forest Design Plans have been approved by the Forestry Commission.

In July 2012 the Independent Panel on Forestry published a vision, aspirations and recommendations for the future of forestry. Much of these were accepted in the Government’s response which particularly noted the need to protect trees, woods and forests, improve valuable woodland assets, expand the woodland resource and realise more value from our woodlands. These ambitions support the aims for woodlands and trees in the Kent Downs AONB.
7. Woodland and trees - main issues, opportunities and threats

a. Need to establish new and retain existing markets to regenerate sustainable woodland management to support landscape character, wildlife and the local economy.

b. Need to build a robust and appropriately trained work force with the capacity to take advantage of new markets as they arise.

c. Restocking on woodland sites, woodland creation and tree planting – need to use a diverse range of appropriate species of local provenance if available. In many situations, natural regeneration should be encouraged and current best practice should be adhered to. (It should be noted that the use of appropriate non-native stock is being considered as a response to the impacts of climate change but this is not conclusive and there is a need to be open to new policy on this matter).

d. The implications of climate change put a special focus on Kent Downs woodlands for both adaptation and mitigation responses; the resilience of woodlands and trees is a key consideration. The Renewable Heat Incentive provides an important financial stimulus for woodland management which is expected to gain momentum in the plan period.

e. The diversity of type and motivation of wood owners and the rapidly changing woodland context means there is a need for consistent intervention and advice to sustain good woodland management.

f. The emphasis on multi-purpose woodland use brings challenges for owners and managers where recreation, biodiversity and landscape management are unlikely to bring commercial returns.

g. Intensive agriculture, infrastructure and building developments have led to the loss of woodland and transitional habitats around woods.

h. Pheasant and other game bird shooting can cause a loss of biodiversity and landscape value but can also generate sustainable woodland management.

i. Need to take a strategic approach and propose long term management solutions to minimise biodiversity loss, to promote woodland regeneration and to limit the long term impact of disease and deer population growth in Kent Downs woodlands.

j. Need to consider and monitor the potential re-emergence of commercial conifer plantations in the AONB following market improvements.

k. Need to support the use of the UK Forestry Standard and certification for woodland products in a way which does not limit opportunities to expand sustainable woodland management.

l. Need for the restoration and management of open space in woodlands, particularly woodland rides and glades.

m. Insufficient understanding of the value, condition and location of ‘veteran’ trees, specimen trees and standing /lying deadwood in woodlands and parkland – for landscape, biodiversity, cultural and historic reasons.

n. The need to harness the popular value of woodlands to improve understanding, engage new management arrangements and wider community and individual involvement.

o. The opportunity to act strategically and collaboratively to master plan woodland management and where appropriate creation in the Kent Downs to meet the multiple objectives of the AONB Management Plan.

p. The historic features contained in woodlands can often be overlooked, there is a need to ensure that they are conserved and protected during woodland management operations.

q. The need to continue to promote and secure the restoration of PAWS sites through guidance and management support.
7.4 Woodland and trees - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The irreplaceable fine tree and ancient woodland characteristics and qualities, cultural heritage and landscape character is conserved, restored and managed.

2. The sustainable management of woodlands provides recreation and education, timber, a source of renewable energy, a wildlife habitat and mitigates the impacts of climate change.

3. Woodlands form functional ecological networks alongside other key habitats of the AONB in order to encourage resilience to the impacts of climate change.

4. Woodland ecology and archaeology is well understood, conserved, enhanced and recognised for its value.

5. There is promotion of public understanding, engagement and the sensitive use of woodlands for recreation and leisure.

6. The production of high quality timber and valuable underwood is stimulated through significant new local markets.

7. A collaborative management approach to the woodlands of the Kent Downs seeks to achieve the objectives of the plan.

The Kent Downs AONB is one of Britain’s most wooded landscapes covering 23% of the AONB.
7.4 Woodland and trees - 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.

WT1 Threats to the existing extent of woodland and transitional habitats around woodland will be resisted. Extension of both habitat types will be supported where appropriate to landscape character. The loss of ancient woodland will be opposed.

WT2 A strategic approach will be pursued to secure sustainable multipurpose woodland and tree management and planting that conserves and enhances the special qualities and character of the landscape and the resilience of woodlands and trees.

WT3* The managed, gradual conversion of plantations on semi-natural ancient woodland to deciduous woodland will be supported where locally distinct woodland types and tree species and local provenance tree stock or natural regeneration are used. New non-native plantations will be resisted.

WT4 Training, accreditation and wider understanding of woodland management to woodland owners and workers, local people and visitors will be encouraged and supported.

WT5 The restoration and management of woodland open habitats and spaces, such as rides, glades, and wood pasture, for landscape, biodiversity and archaeology conservation purposes will be supported.

WT6 The identification, protection, management and planned replacement and reintroduction of fine specimen and ‘veteran’ trees will be pursued.

WT7 Activities and developments causing damage to woodlands, such as disease, illegal and harmful recreation, an expanding deer population, poorly managed use for game rearing and development associated with wood lotting, will be addressed by appropriate means. Inappropriate developments subject to planning control will be opposed, other available regulatory mechanisms supported, and positive, strategic management interventions pursued.

WT8 In response to pressures on woodlands and the positive motivations of many new woodland owners, coordinated actions and the development and promotion of guidance and support which integrates sound landscape, heritage and biodiversity management will be pursued.

WT9 New markets for sustainably produced, appropriately certified woodland products, particularly wood fuels and construction materials, will be pursued and marketing initiatives supported.

WT10 Research to understand the ownership patterns and motivations of woodland owners will be encouraged to support a master planning approach to the conservation and enhancement of the woodlands and trees of the Kent Downs.

WT11 The identification and review of ancient woodlands using up to date methodology will be supported.

* Policy WT3 may be amended only on the basis of sound evidence to reflect the possibility that non-native tree stock of native species could be more resilient to climate change impacts.