

## Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee

8 September 2020

### Outside Body Report

<b>Outside Body</b>	Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee
<b>Councillor(s) represented on the Outside Body</b>	Patrik Garten
<b>Report Author</b>	Patrik Garten
<b>Date of Outside Body Meeting Attended</b>	Current Update via email

#### **Purpose of the Outside Body:**

The Kent Downs relies on many stakeholders who have a role in managing the landscape, supporting local business and communities and enabling quiet recreation. The Joint Advisory Committee plays a pivotal role in helping realise the strategic vision for the Kent Downs AONB and oversee the Management Plan.

Its purpose is to provide advice to its members with statutory responsibilities for the effective management of the Kent Downs AONB. An Executive of representatives from the JAC, with some outside advisors, advises the work of the Kent Downs AONB Unit.

The Kent Downs 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.

#### **Funding partners & Members**

Defra, Ashford Borough Council, Canterbury City Council, Dover District Council, Gravesham Borough Council, London Borough of Bromley, Medway Council, Maidstone Borough Council, Sevenoaks District Council, Folkestone & Hythe District Council, Swale Borough Council, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, Country Land and Business Association, Environment Agency, Kent Association of Local Councils, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, National Farmers Union, English Heritage

## **Update from the AONB Unit to all JAC members:**

- **AONB Management Plan Consultation live from 14<sup>th</sup> July.**

There have been several delays to the management plan consultation process, but the consultation commenced on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July and closed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September – a consultation period in line with the advice of the JAC.

A (virtual) JAC meeting will be arranged when the consultation responses have been received.

- **Experience Project Commencing Work**

The AONB Unit have recruited two new members of the team who will be helping us deliver this exciting €3.2m sustainable tourism project in the Kent Downs AONB and along the North Downs Way. Early action includes:

- North Downs Way long distance riders' route – feasibility work for surface and status upgrades for improved access
- North Downs Way signage audit on the Canterbury to Dover Via Francigena pilgrim route section
- Market research on the European pilgrim market and development for Kent
- Information film on how to use Public Rights of Way (PRoW) responsibly
- Training for businesses and guides in PRoW guided walks – Gravesham pilot
- North Downs Way Surrey Section Arts Installation – a pilot for the Kent section

- **Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme – Rescheduling**

There has been a lot of work going on to reschedule the delivery and spend profile of the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme. This is a £4.5m scheme which was gearing up to deliver a lot of our public engagement and practical landscape management and enhancement work this year. Clearly Covid has significantly delayed this and so the Unit have requested (and expect to receive) an 18-month scheme extension but much of the scale of the scheme remains in place. Some of our projects have been redefined so that they respond to the impacts of Covid and all will be taken forward in a way that is as safe as it can be and within Government guidelines.

- **Kent Downs AONB Tests and Trials**

As previously reported, the AONB Unit are running 3 'Tests and Trials' for Defra, these are in support of developing the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) Scheme which will frame how, in the order of £3.5bn, is spent each year supporting farmers and land managers to deliver 'public goods' (defined as; 'Thriving Plants and Wildlife, Clean and Plentiful Water; Beauty, Heritage and Engagement; Mitigation and adaptation to Climate Change, Protection from and Mitigation of hazards and Clean Air').

The first Tests and Trial is focusing on **enhancing access to the landscape** – this will focus on supporting farmers and land managers who are willing to increase

access on their land and supporting a wider diversity to access the countryside in a responsible and valued way.

The second Test and Trial is focusing on the burgeoning number of **vineyards** in the Kent Downs and elsewhere. As part of this work we have found that nearly 1/5th of all vineyards by area in England are in the Kent Downs AONB and planting is continuing. We are seeking ways to enhance the wildlife and landscape value of the vineyards and increase public access where appropriate.

The third Test and Trial is working on **Natural Drought and Flood Management** and seeking interventions to make this, nature based solution to the impacts of climate change, more effective and for it to secure other benefits (for example also enhancing landscape character).

- **Positive Planning role.**

The AONB Unit continues to be active on their positive planning role; the focus is currently on emerging Local Plans with potential implications for the AONB. The Unit always tries to engage at the initial stages of the Local Plan process and work closely with the policy teams to ensure AONB matters are agreed early on.

The AONB Unit are also working closely with Highways England on major Highways Schemes including the Lower Thames Crossing – which has major implications for the AONB; J5 of the M2 – a Public Inquiry has been re-scheduled and the A2 Dover Access - preliminary discussions.

The AONB Unit are working on an update Landscape Design Handbook and hope to bring a draft to the JAC soon.

- **Kent Downs AONB and the Covid Recovery.**

The AONB Unit have been very active in working at a County (Kent Recovery Plan), SELEP and national level (Defra) to seek to secure recovery funding that would benefit the AONB. They have also worked closely with colleagues at KCC to promote principles for a green recovery which are being fed into the Kent Resilience Forum's Renewal and Resilience Plan. This is a very fast-moving area of work and whether this work is effective at securing new investment or in greening the recovery is uncertain. They have specifically promoted a delegated **Green Recovery Fund** (based on the Sustainable Development Fund they used to run). This would be focused on green jobs and growth. They have also advocated the **acceleration of the delivery of the Landscape review**, especially where it will deliver jobs and sustainable economic growth in the AONB context. Finally, they have been developing and submitting 'shovel ready projects' through a number of routes.

- **Undergrounding of overhead electricity cables**

This valuable work continues. The Unit are working in partnership with UK Power Networks on 6 schemes in the AONB. All of these have been approved by the Steering Group and are in the wayleave negotiation process. It is likely that no practical work on these schemes will be achieved this year, so we will be looking at 2021 for work to happen on the ground. A new scheme near Swingfield has been approved; this is a 5.4km/ £600 000 scheme which will enhance the landscape

adjacent to St John's Commandery. Currently the Unit are continuing with the local land-owner consultations

Two National Grid projects landscape enhancement projects have started. The delivery partner Kent Wildlife Trust have appointed an officer to manage the delivery of one project, which is focused on the landscape around Park Gate Down and Stelling Minnis Common. The other project in partnership with Kentish Stour Countryside partnership has so far successfully planted 1.6km of hedges. Both projects have been paused for the moment but will pick up again as soon as is possible.

Further information can be obtained from the AONB Unit [Mail@kentdowns.org.uk](mailto:Mail@kentdowns.org.uk)