

# 1. The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

## Contents

Summary of changes .....	2
1 Overview .....	2
1.1 A vision for the Kent Downs AONB in 2030.....	3
1.2 The special components, characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB .....	3
Dramatic landform and views; a distinctive landscape character .....	4
Biodiversity-rich habitats.....	4
Farmed landscape.....	4
Woodland and trees .....	con4
A rich legacy of historic and cultural heritage.....	5
The Heritage Coasts.....	5
Geology and natural resources.....	5
Tranquillity and remoteness.....	6
2 Quality of life in the Kent Downs .....	6
Vibrant communities .....	6
Access, enjoyment and understanding .....	6

## Summary of changes for final draft

***Note of changes following final comments from the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee/ Jan/ Feb 2021***

## Overview

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is an exceptional landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so precious that they are safeguarded in the national interest. The Kent Downs is recognised nationally and internationally for its quality and character. This is a landscape of drama and intimacy; there is diversity and contrast within the AONB; there are ancient places as well as the bright white of a new cliff fall, the quiet of a woodland walk, dramatic hills and tranquil valleys, birdsong, breathtaking views, dazzling wild flowers, stars at night and the crashing of waves. The landscapes of the Downs have been shaped by the combination of nature and human hands, creating a place that has inspired art and science; retains remarkable historic

places and patterns, internationally valued nature and is much valued by people. This is a distinctive, national landscape of outstanding quality and value.

## 1.1 A vision for the Kent Downs AONB in 2041

The first AONB Management Plan agreed a 20-year vision; while this 2004 vision remains fundamentally unchanged the context has changed markedly, with unprecedented growth predicted in Kent by the Kent Growth and Infrastructure Framework, adding around 25% to the population by 2031, just 10 years. The decline in biodiversity and impact of climate change which has been declared or recognised as an emergency by Parliament and most of the AONB partnership and there is a consensus that radical change is required by 2030 if we are to address these emergencies. The policy context that the AONB partnership is operating in is rapidly moving and in the light of this – while the partnership remains far sighted and ambitious for the AONB, with a long term overall vision for the landscape each section of the plan is re-focused order to spur impact and the achievement of the aims and principles of the plan in a 10 year period.

### Our vision for the Kent Downs

In 2041... the qualities and distinctive features of the Kent Downs AONB, the dramatic south-facing scarp, far-reaching views, secluded dry valleys, network of tiny lanes, isolated farmsteads, churches and oasts, orchards, dramatic cliffs, the ancient woodlands and delicate chalk grassland along with the ancient, remote and tranquil qualities, are valued, secured and strengthened.

The Kent Downs has become a landscape where change supports the AONB's distinctive and valued features. Nature recovery, responses to development pressures and climate change have enhanced the Kent Downs landscape. The Kent Downs is greener, healthier, wilder and more beautiful, it is recognised and valued, enjoyed and cherished and its future conservation and enhancement is a certainty.

Strong, assertive leadership from the AONB partnership along with positive partnerships with organisations, civil society, local people and land managers act together with wider publics to recover, conserve, enhance, enjoy and promote a nationally and internationally recognised and valued landscape.

## 1.2 The special components, characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB

The rich landscape of the Kent Downs AONB, is made up of landscape components with special characteristics and qualities which together distinguish it as a landscape of national and international importance and underpin its significance and natural beauty. Often the setting of the Kent Downs has great value and was a principle reason for the Kent Downs AONB designation. The identified components, characteristics and qualities are consistently recognised and valued by the public, individuals, institutions, organisations and experts alike; the Covid-19 pandemic brought a new spotlight on the importance of contact with nature and beauty and places the National Landscapes in a key position for societal and economic recovery.

The landscape components of Kent Downs have been identified as:

### **Dramatic landform and views; a distinctive landscape character**

The Kent Downs dramatic and diverse topography is based on the underlying geology. Key features comprise impressive south-facing steep slopes (scarps) of chalk and greensand; scalloped and hidden dry valleys, especially valued where they have a downland character; expansive plateaux; broad, steep-sided river valleys, and the dramatic, wild and iconic white cliffs and foreshore.

Breath-taking, long-distance panoramas are offered, often across open countryside, estuaries and the sea from the scarp, cliffs and plateaux. The dip slope dry valleys and river valleys provide more intimate and enclosed vistas.

The character of the Kent Downs is much valued; it arises from a distinctive, recognisable and pattern of elements in the landscape that make the Kent Downs particular and special as well as significant nationally and internationally.

### **Biodiversity-rich habitats**

The unique landscapes of the Kent Downs create and contain a rich and distinctive biodiversity of local and often national or international importance. This landscape provides a home to several species that are largely or wholly confined to the Kent Downs in Britain.

Habitats found in the Kent Downs include chalk grassland and chalk scrub; woodlands (ancient woodland, veteran trees and wood pasture), traditional orchards and cobnut platts, chalk cliffs and the foreshore, chalk streams and wet pasture, ponds and spring lines; heath and acid grassland. Hedgerows and trees outside woodlands are key features of the landscape and serve an important wildlife function along with networks of linear features of shaws, flower-rich field margins and road verges.

The wildlife of the farmed landscape is special in the Kent Downs. Many key habitats are farmed and the Downs support some of the most important arable weed communities in Britain.

### **Farmed landscape**

A long-established tradition of mixed farming has helped create and maintain the natural beauty of the Kent Downs. The pastoral scenery is a particularly valued part of the landscape. Farming covers around 64% of the AONB. Disconnected 'ribbons' of permanent grassland (shaves) are found along the steep scarp, valley sides, and on less-productive land having been created by grazing. Locally concentrated areas of orchards, cobnut platts (nut orchards), hop gardens other horticultural production are also present, their regular striate form can enhance the rise and fall of the land, increasingly widespread vineyards add to this ordered character.

### **Woodland and trees**

The Kent Downs is one of Britain's most wooded landscapes. Broadleaf and mixed woodland cover around 23% of the Kent Downs and frame the upper slopes of the scarp, dry valleys and plateaux tops. Almost 70% of the woodlands are ancient woodland meaning they have been continuously present at least since at least 1600; they support nationally important woodland plant and animal species. Large areas of sweet chestnut coppice are present throughout the Downs. Woodland is a much-valued component of the landscape, the sights, changing colours, smells and sounds adding to the perceptual qualities of the landscape.

Individual, hedgerow, fine and ancient trees outside woodlands are a most important, characteristic and sometimes dramatic element of the landscape.

### **A rich legacy of historic and cultural heritage**

Millennia of human activity have created an outstanding cultural inheritance and strong 'time depth' to the Kent Downs. In the original designation the characteristic villages, churches and castles are particularly noted and the historic settlement pattern remains an important distinctive component of the AONB. There are the remains of Neolithic megalithic monuments, Bronze Age barrows, Iron Age hill-forts, Roman villas, roads and towns, medieval villages and hamlets focused on their churches, post-medieval stately homes with their parks and gardens and historic defence structures from Norman times to the twentieth century.

Fields of varying shapes and sizes and ancient wood-banks and hedges, set within networks of droveways and sunken lanes have produced a rich historic mosaic, which is the rural landscape of today. Architectural distinctiveness is ever present in the scattered villages and farmsteads and oast houses, barns and other characteristic agricultural buildings, farmsteads, churches and historic country houses. The diverse range of local materials used, which includes flint, chalk, ragstone, timber, brick and peg tile, contributes to the character, colour, tone and texture of the countryside.

The AONB landscape has long been an inspiration to artists, scientists and leaders, from Shakespeare to Samuel Palmer, Darwin to Churchill and Turner to Moore; it was Toys Hill, in the Kent Downs, 'that inspired Octavia Hill to found the National Trust'. Today contemporary and more diverse publics are drawing their own inspiration from this extraordinary place. The inspiration that the landscape of the Kent Downs offers is not confined to the influential and famous, we know that a wide variety of people greatly value this place for many of the same reasons.

### **The Heritage Coasts**

The Heritage Coasts either side of Dover, include the shoreline, marine flora and fauna cliffs, heritage features and adjacent downland. The White Cliffs form part of our national identity and display internationally important geological exposures, they form a soaring land and seascape of vast horizons of sea and sky extending westwards to the subtle crumbling Greensand and Clay cliffs of Folkestone.

The wildlife of the Heritage Coasts is internationally important, the clifftops consisting of nationally important chalk grassland and scrub, the cliff-faces supporting important breeding sea bird colonies including Fulmars, Rock Pipits, Lesser-black backed Gulls and the only Kent population of Kittiwakes. Seabirds wheeling high in the sky connect the sea and sky.

### **Geology and natural resources**

The imposing landform and special characteristics of the Kent Downs is underpinned by its geology. This is also the basis for the considerable natural capital and natural resources which benefit society. These include the soils which support an important farming sector and can sequester carbon; soil represent and is important biodiversity resource in its own right. The water and the water resources which support rivers teeming with wildlife and offering enchanting landscapes. Hidden below the chalk is a significant aquifer providing 75% of Kent's drinking water and feeding the much-valued chalk

streams of the Downs. Fresh, clean air is experienced across the AONB and the vegetation patterns of the Downs are effective at removing air pollution.

### **Tranquillity and remoteness**

Much of the AONB provides surprisingly tranquil and remote countryside – offering dark night skies, space, beauty and peace. Simply seeing a natural landscape, hearing birdsong, seeing and hearing the sea, watching stars at night or ‘bathing’ in woodland are important perceptual qualities of the AONB.

## **2. Quality of life in the Kent Downs**

While not defined as characteristics and qualities of the landscape, the social and economic components of the Kent Downs are vital to the communities of Kent, the Kent Downs and beyond and key to its future conservation and enhancement.

### **Vibrant communities**

The Kent Downs is a living, working landscape shaped and managed by people. The most up to date population estimate as shows a total population of 96,000. While changing in nature, many of the Kent Downs communities are strong and vibrant, assertively seeking to conserve and enhance the place that they live in. Surrounding the AONB are large, rapidly growing and increasingly diverse urban communities, the Kent Downs offer a greatly valued landscape of peace, beauty and space to breath.

### **Access, enjoyment and understanding**

The Kent Downs is an easily accessible and charming landscape well provided with access opportunities; well over 1 million people live within a kilometre of the AONB boundary. There is considerable demand for access and recreation in the Kent Downs and providing this in a way which supports the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB is an increasingly important but challenging task; many site managers are reporting ‘over-visiting’ with sites being at and beyond their capacity on many occasions.

The AONB provides a public rights of way network four times as dense as the national average and there is a high relative density of bridleways and byways. Active user groups help to promote the sustainable management and use of the AONB for quiet countryside recreation.

Access to the Kent Downs AONB particularly through walking, cycling and riding provide demonstrable benefits to health and well-being at the same time visiting can support the local economy and services.

Improving the understanding and enjoyment of the AONB is an important task, without this the landscape may not be fully recognised, valued or enjoyed and its future conservation and enhancement may not be assured.

### **Public Perception of the Kent Downs**

In the preparation of the 2004 Management Plan and its subsequent reviews, comments and engagement have been sought from many participants including local authorities, stakeholders, local residents and visitors to the AONB. A key issue was to confirm what is

most valued about the Kent Downs and what are the most important related issues and priorities in the view of respondents. The main consultation method used for the 2004 plan was a written questionnaire in the Kent Downs newspaper, *The Orchid*. Respondents could also complete an online questionnaire.

For this 2019/20 review the AONB Unit used the 'Head for the Hills' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Kent Downs AONB to reach a wider audience. Nearly 1000 individuals and organisations participated and, as in previous consultations, the special characteristics and qualities that formed the basis of the original AONB designation are still those most valued by people today.

*Nb in final printed version this table will be presented in order of importance as per 2019 survey*

<b>Most important components of natural beauty in the Kent Downs AONB</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
Chalk Downland	59%	74%	71%	70%
Woodland	52%	43%	41%	48%
Landform & Geology	45%	41%	34%	34%
Ancient Lanes and Paths	33%	47%	40%	45%
Orchards/Cobnut Platts	21%	17%	14%	12%
River Valleys	20%	21%	19%	13%
Hedgerows	20%	19%	18%	15%
Historic Settlements	17%	25%	24%	23%
Mixed Farmland	14%	17%	12%	14%
Dry Valleys	7%	7%	8%	11%
Historic Parklands	6%	9%	7%	9%
<b>Most valued features of the Kent Downs AONB</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
Scenery and Views	86%	83%	79%	74%
Wildlife	49%	48%	39%	58%
Peace and Quiet	46%	49%	39%	45%
Outdoor Recreation	33%	10%	12%	16%
Villages and Village Life	32%	32%	29%	21%
Historic Buildings	24%	17%	14%	13%
Dark Skies	n/a	6%	7%	12%
Amenities	10%	8%	7%	4%
Available Local Produce	7%	8%	5%	6%
Visitor Attractions	n/a	n/a	7%	4%
PROW Network	n/a	41%	45%	47%
Locally Distinct Highways	n/a	1%	3%	2%
<b>Priorities for Action</b>				
Prevention of Illegal Activities	56%	77%	71%	62%
Conserving Wildlife	54%	63%	59%	69%
Conserving Views and Scenic Beauty	50%	55%	56%	53%

Conserving Tranquillity	38%	36%	43%	59%
Preventing Loss of Historic Buildings	8%	22%	20%	22%
Management of Equine Land Use	n/a	8%	5%	4%
Information about Access to Countryside	2%	10%	15%	8%
Information on Features of AONB Landscape	12%	8%	2%	7%
More organised events	9%	6%	8%	5%
Research and Response to Climate Change	n/a	12%	7%	12%
Access	n/a	n/a	4%	n/a
<b>Action Needed to Improve Enjoyment of AONB</b>				
Encourage farmers to use more environmentally friendly techniques	45%	39%	44%	52%
Improve Sustainable Transport	23%	39%	38%	32%
Ensure Peace and Quiet	29%	64%	50%	50%
Greater Emphasis on Development Control	27%	34%	43%	39%
Getting Out and About	23%	14%	13%	15%
Better Information on Wildlife in Area	22%	9%	10%	13%
More Information on Where to Go in AONB	20%	17%	21%	17%
Improve or Increase Visitor Facilities	16%	17%	15%	12%
More Information on Local Produce	11%	11%	12%	9%
Highways Management that respects sensitivity of AONB	n/a	23%	22%	27%
Control of Light Pollution to Protect Dark Night Skies	n/a	19%	18%	26%

Figure 1.1 'Have Your Say' Survey Results 2003-2019

In addition to the AONB Survey, the Kent Downs AONB partnership participates in the Kent Environment Strategy Public Perception Survey (2018) which demonstrates that 97% of Kent respondents felt that the countryside was either important or very important to them with over 80% using the countryside at least once a fortnight; for many people walking, benefits to their children, loving nature were important motivators, the most important elements of the Kent countryside were woodlands, rivers and lakes, undeveloped coast, low lying hills and wildflower grasslands, all important components of the Kent Downs AONB.