

## 4. Landform and landscape character

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### Summary record of changes

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

*The clarification of issue g discussed at the Jan 21 JAC has been included*

*The clarification of LLC4 discussed at the Jan 21 JAC has been included*

### **4.1 Our vision for landform and landscape character in the Kent Downs AONB**

In 2031... the rich diversity of landscape character and qualities distinctive to the Kent Downs are protected, enhanced and managed to the highest standards in a co-ordinated and continual programme. The special characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB are widely recognised, valued and strengthened and landscape character informs land and resource management, nature recovery plans, intended net gain and natural capital investments, responses to climate change and development decisions.

### **4.2 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. These were reconfirmed in the 1995 Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment and its reviews and again in the views expressed in the public and stakeholder consultation for the original AONB Management Plan and its subsequent reviews.

## 4.3 Landscape Character Types and Areas within the Kent Downs AONB

### Landscape character

Landscape character is described as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another and can provide a helpful description and sense of place to our surroundings. A landscape led, Landscape Character supported approach, further supported by historic landscape character assessment, can assist in informing landscape management decisions and its use is supported by Planning Practice Guidance for the Natural Environment.

The founding Kent Downs AONB Landscape Assessment was prepared by the Countryside Commission (1995 CCP 479); it 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.

As part of this review of the Management Plan a full review of the **Landscape Character Areas** (LCAs) was taken forward. This used a professionally led approach and up to date guidance and included defining Landscape Character Types and reviewing the established Landscape Character Area descriptions and some boundaries.

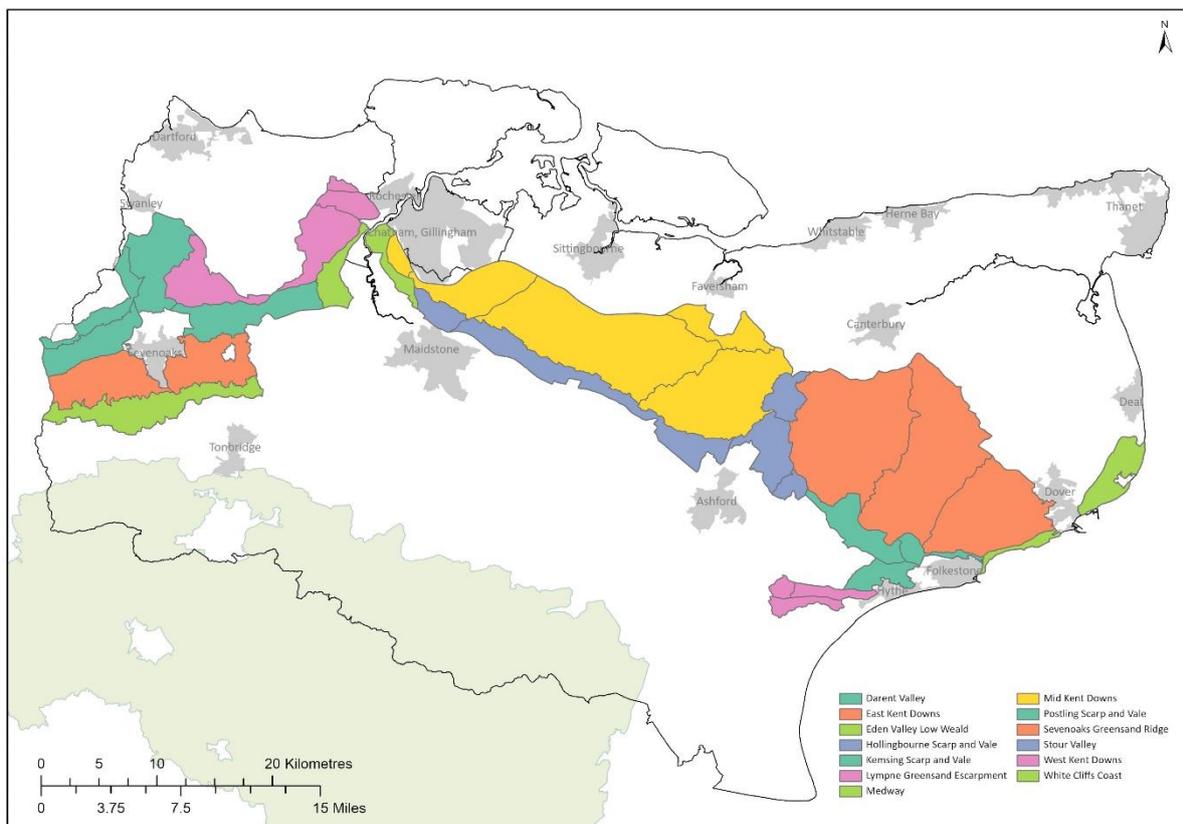


Figure 4.1 Kent Downs AONB landscape character areas

**Landscape Character Types (LCTs)** are defined as distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogenous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different areas but wherever they occur, they share broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, drainage patterns, vegetation, historical land use and settlement pattern.

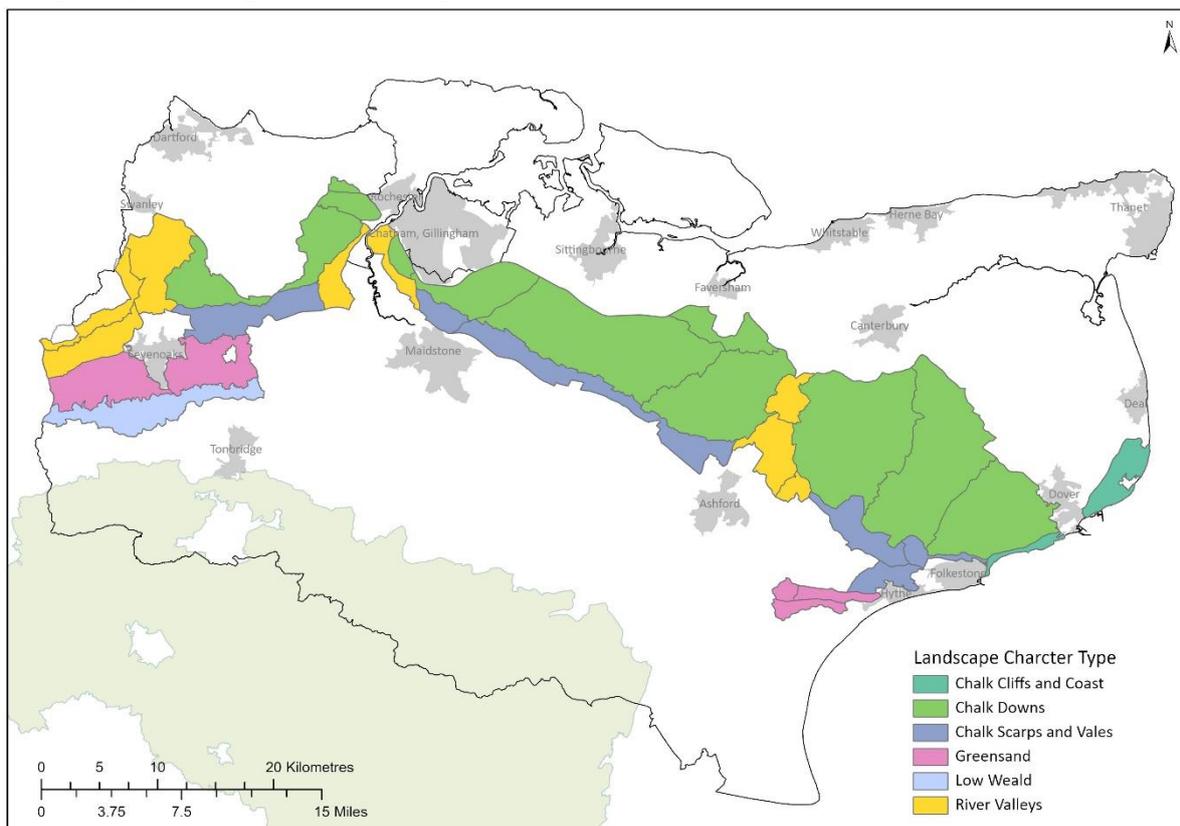


Figure 4.2 Kent Downs AONB landscape character types

There are six LCTs within the Kent Downs AONB, reflecting the area's underlying geology and its topography; these are Chalk Scarp and Vales, Chalk Cliffs and Coast, Chalk Downs, Greensand, Low Weald and River Valleys.

### ***The Chalk Scarp and Vales***

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. Spectacular views are offered along the chalk escarpment across the Vale of Holmesdale; the scarp along with the dramatic views it affords was a key target for the original designation of the Kent Downs AONB.

### ***The Chalk Cliffs and Coast***

The Chalk scarp ends dramatically at the English Channel forming the 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**

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.

### **Chalk Downs**

Behind the scarp, open plateau and dry valleys offer 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 downland 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. The plateaux areas 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.

### **National Character Areas**

Natural England has described 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 and change**

Landscape condition is strongly influenced by external factors which can contribute to 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.

Landscapes are not static; they change and evolve over time. In a Protected landscape setting the purpose of management planning is to drive positive change that '*conserves and enhances*' the character and qualities that are valued and for which the landscape was designated. It is remarkable and re-assuring how consistently the public attitude of what is

most valued in the Kent Downs reflects the original targets for designation.

More than for any previous revision of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan the context is changing rapidly; there are new opportunities and threats from leaving the EU and a shared urgency to respond to climate change, biodiversity loss and the economic and social impacts of the Covid pandemic. In this context this Management Plan seeks to be forward looking and to promote positive landscape change that supports the purposes of the designation, reflects what is valued by the public and takes a positive approach to the climate and ecological emergencies, this means that the plan will promote more tree establishment than has been suggested in the past, is positive about wilding and will be more active on low carbon land management and encourage new opportunities for access for health and well-being.

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

While the Landscape Character Area review found an overall positive picture driven by the interventions of the AONB partnership, partner organisations, farmers and land managers and many others there remains concern and further opportunity, these are picked up in detail in the revised Landscape Character Assessment of the Kent Downs AONB 2020.

- a. Loss of and damage to the quality and character of the AONB through the cumulative effect of inappropriate, poorly designed general development, unsustainable land management approaches and land use change, the impacts of growth in visitor pressure.
- 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 impact of Ash Dieback disease with the consequent loss of tree cover in woodland, roadsides and in open landscapes is already impacting significantly on landscape character and will continue to do so.
- d. The erosion of natural beauty and special character through illegal and antisocial activities such as fly tipping, abandoned cars and illegal off-road vehicles.
- e. The opportunity to promote landscape character conservation and enhancement through at a substantial scale new funding mechanisms (E.L.M.s, Net Gain etc.) and new partnerships specifically focusing on proposed positive management actions as well as addressing the enhancement to ecosystems services and seeking to remove or mitigate identified detractors.
- 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. A landscape led approach, supported by a landscape character assessment is not used sufficiently or appropriately in land-use, land management, design and development management decisions, Landscape and Visual Appraisals, Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments and design; landscape character assessments are not always consistent or up to date.

- h. Major potential threats and opportunities lie in responses to climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of intended net gain policies and natural capital/ecosystems services payments. These could drive outcomes which are either contrary or supportive of the valued landscape characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs.
- i. New and innovative forms of land management which meet natural capital enhancement objectives (such as wilding, regenerative agriculture and agro-forestry) may bring new and potentially valued character to the landscape.

#### 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, conserved and enhanced, and the strong sense of place of individual localities is recognised, reinforced and celebrated.
2. A landscape led approach supported by landscape character 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.
5. New interventions in the landscape developed to provide, public good, intended net gain, natural capital enhancement, nature recovery and climate mitigation support the valued characteristics of the Kent Downs, seeking to manage, enhance, change positively so as to amplify and augment landscape character and qualities and make it more resilient and more valued for the future.

#### 4.4 Landform and landscape character - principles

- 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 viewpoints will be supported.
- LLC3 The provision of co-ordinated and high-quality landscape conservation guidance will be pursued, focusing on the special characteristics and qualities, natural beauty and the landscape character of the Kent Downs AONB.

- LLC4 The prevention, detection and enforcement action against illegal and overtly damaging activities which detract from landscape character will be pursued.
- LLC5 The revised Kent Downs AONB Landscape Character Assessment forms an integral, interconnected, component part of the AONB Management Plan and should be used to inform proposals and land management impacting the AONB.
- LLC6 The improved awareness and appreciation of all the special qualities of the Kent Downs 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, long-term, landscape action and enhancement plans for areas of the Kent Downs AONB which present the greatest threats or opportunities or where natural capital enhancement, intended net gain, nature recovery, ELM or climate mitigation investments are proposed, will be pursued.