

5. Biodiversity

Contents

Summary record of changes	43
Our vision	43
5.1 Overview	44
5.1.1 Nature in the Landscapes of the Kent Downs	44
5.1.2 A rapidly changing context	44
5.1.3 IUCN Category V Protected Landscape Status and nature conservation	45
5.1.4 The Colchester Declaration	45
5.1.5 A Local Nature Partnership for Kent	45
5.1.6 Kent Biodiversity Strategy	45
5.1.7 The Lawton Principles	45
5.1.8 Wilding	46
5.2 Biodiversity - special characteristics and qualities	47
5.2.1 The wildlife of the Kent Downs	47
5.2.2. Designated nature conservation sites	51
5.3 Biodiversity - main issues, opportunities and threats	52
5.4 Biodiversity - aims	54
5.5 Biodiversity – principles	55

Summary record of changes

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

The 20% net gain principle has been amended to be clear that while supported it is still subject to further evidence and testing and any requirement will ultimately be decided and set out individual local authorities local plans.

It has been made clear that the Environment Bill is subject to amendment

EU legislation now forming part of the UK framework has been noted

Reference to biodiversity decline in the Kent Downs strengthened

Our vision for biodiversity in the Kent Downs AONB

By 2031... the distinctive nature of the Kent Downs is understood better, enjoyed, celebrated and is in favourable, resilient condition with key habitats and species flourishing. There is a far-sighted, effective nature recovery plan being implemented across the Downs, which

recognises and responds to the substantial changes that will be experienced and is connected with a wider national nature recovery network. An ambitious approach to intended biodiversity net gain is agreed and implemented, it is achieving secure advances in biodiversity across the Kent Downs. There has been an increase in the extent and quality of key characteristic habitats and abundance of species of the Downs. People, policy and funding regimes recognise, value and support the importance of nature in the Kent Downs.

5.1 Overview

5.1.1 Nature in the Landscapes of the Kent Downs

The unique landscapes and history of the Kent Downs created and contain a rich and distinctive biodiversity which contributes greatly to the natural beauty of this exceptional place, adding much of the detail which makes the Kent Downs significant, characteristic and special.

The natural vegetation of the Kent Downs is believed to have been broadleaved woodland. This would have been varied in structure and composition, with open glades and patches of grassland and heath created by fallen trees and grazing animals, and chalk grassland refugia found on exposed areas such as cliff tops. Many of the species originally contained in the wilder landscape of the Downs are now absent. The 'wildwood' would have been a dynamic system with varied habitats but much the woodland element has been cleared and managed over the last 6,000 years. Woodland clearance gave way to the expansion of grasslands, scrub and arable, however heavy, flint laden soils have meant that woodland clearance has been less than in many parts of Britain. The Kent Downs is a heavily wooded landscape and in many places a centuries-old landscape remains in place, nonetheless, farming and cultivation has been a significant influence on the biodiversity of the AONB.

5.1.2 A rapidly changing context

While the natural heritage of the Kent Downs is characteristic, distinctive, valued and vested through millennia, the strategic and policy context for biodiversity conservation and enhancement has changed substantively. This is partly due to multiple failures to prevent biodiversity loss at a local, national and international level, at the local level monitoring has indicated declines in species abundance and biodiversity across the AONB. The 2019 State of Nature Report shows that, at a national level, the 'UK's wildlife loss continues unabated' with 41% of species in decline since 1970, abundance of wildlife in decline and 15% under threat from extinction. At the same time the potential impacts and risks of climate change are now better researched and understood and the approach of the plan needs to be far sighted in its response, nature based solutions to climate change will be an important part of the tool kit.

Many of the Local Authority partners to the Kent Downs AONB have declared or recognise a Climate and in some cases Ecological Emergency; The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan gives us some idea of the ambition and direction of travel and stated clear intent for AONBs and National Parks; The Government's Review of Designated Landscapes has been clear that there is much more that can be done in National Landscapes to support nature recovery and what we have now is 'not good enough'. The AONBs and National Parks have been identified by the Government as potentially forming the key component of the UK's commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land for the recovery of nature by 2030 and are described as the 'backbone' of a national nature recovery network. The mechanisms by which the ambitions of the 25 year plan, the 30% commitment to recover nature and the Landscape (Glover) Review will be delivered are still in development.

5.1.3 IUCN Category V Protected Landscape Status and nature conservation.

The Kent Downs AONB is recognised as an International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category V Protected Landscape. The primary objective of Category V status is, 'To protect and sustain important landscapes/seascapes and the associated nature conservation and other values created by interactions with humans through traditional management practices.' The conservation and enhancement of nature is a primary objective of this Plan and traditional management practices are a vital component of the methods available for the conservation of both the species and habitats of the Kent Downs. Be it in woodlands, farmed landscapes, heath or down, the integrity of the interaction between people and nature over time has produced the distinctive character and is an essential component of its future conservation and enhancement.

5.1.4 The Colchester Declaration

At its national conference in July 2019, the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty jointly agreed '[The Colchester Declaration](#)'.

The Declaration recognises the global concern for the future of the natural world and has established a series of pledges that the AONBs will take forward if Government provides the powers and resources to do so. The principles and actions of this plan will take forward the commitments made in the Declaration.

5.1.5 A Local Nature Partnership for Kent

The Natural Environment White Paper created the opportunity to develop Local Nature Partnerships to further objectives for the natural environment. The Kent Nature Partnership has a vision for the Garden of England to have a healthy natural environment that is rich in wildlife, is enjoyed and valued by all and underpins our long-term economic, social and personal wellbeing. The Kent Downs AONB partnership is represented on the Board of the Kent Nature Partnership and this plan is an important part of delivering that wider vision.

5.1.6 Kent Biodiversity Strategy

The Kent Nature Partnership's Biodiversity Strategy for Kent was published in 2020 and it is clear that most species and habitats important in the Kent Downs AONB have been recognised a significant part of the Kent Resource. This Management Plan and the Kent Biodiversity Strategy are closely aligned, within the wider context of the Colchester Declaration and national legislation.

5.1.7 The Lawton Principles

The Lawton Report 'Making Space for Nature' draws from a wide range of evidence to review England's wildlife and ecological network. The report reiterates that the natural world is fundamental to our wellbeing, health and economy and that priorities for action at a landscape scale should be:

- 1st Manage existing sites better
- 2nd Make existing sites larger
- 3rd Create new sites
- 4th Enhance connectivity
- 5th Create new corridors

While much emphasis is now being placed on new and larger areas for nature, landscape

scale approaches to enhancing biodiversity, the Lawton principles promote the better management of existing sites first in most cases. In addition the contribution of many small-scale individual enhancements can help support this more overarching approach, indeed it is a critical component.

5.1.8 Wilding

In recognition of the loss of biodiversity and that high input habitat management can be unsustainable and even counter-productive, there is a new emphasis on the restoration of natural processes. The 'wilding' approach calls for the establishment of large expanses of land set aside for nature and natural processes, connected by corridors which allow the movement of species between the larger areas. The approach encompasses terrestrial, aquatic and marine environments.

It is recommended that wilding takes place on sites of least risk first (i.e. where there is limited other value), this builds on the central idea that natural processes should be allowed to take their course, including natural succession on open habitat, fluctuations in population abundance and presence of species without deliberate intervention. This is in contrast to much conservation practice which often involves the close management of habitats to maintain them at a particular successional stage (such as grassland or heathland) in order to support a distinct array and abundance of species in 'favourable status'. Intervention under a rewilding approach is limited to restoring missing species and missing parts of the system which allow natural processes to occur. (Definition taken from Woodland Trust position statement). The charity Rewilding Britain emphasises the 'need to encourage a balance between people and the rest of nature where each can thrive'.

The most prominent example of wilding in southern lowland Britain is at the Knepp Estate in Sussex, in Kent more recent examples include the Wilder Blean and Wilder Nashenden projects (in the Kent Downs). The landscape generated by wilding evolves and differs from that which is described in the designation of the Kent Downs AONB and understanding of its biodiversity value is emerging and will change over time. Knepp represents wilding at a large scale, the concept of wilding can however be adopted at many different scales across urban and rural landscapes. It is expected that wilding will be an important part of a suite of tools deployed in nature recovery and climate mitigation, including in lowland Britain and in Designated Landscapes such as the Kent Downs AONB, where large scale wilding projects would create a new more natural landscape character.

Intended Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity net gain is an approach which, in the context of new development, aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than beforehand. It is expected that the Environment Act will mandate a net gain of 10% for all new developments when granting planning permission.

This change could substantially increase the investment made available for nature in Kent and the Kent Downs. Given the significant pressures on Kent's natural environment, land lost to, and fragmented by, development and urban creep, alongside the evidence that there has been major losses in Kent's wildlife over the past century, the Kent Nature Partnership is proposing a county wide 20% net gain standard (as measured by the Natural England metric). This increased target for net gain may also enable some of the net gain investment to be targeted off site, to areas of strategic opportunity for nature recovery and low threat of future development – this places the Kent Downs as a potential strategic area for net gain

investments. The proposed approach of the Nature Partnership is supported in principle for the Kent Downs AONB however it is recognised that this is subject to further evidence and testing and any requirement will ultimately be decided and set out individual local authorities local plans.

Nature Recovery in the Kent Downs AONB

The Environment Bill 2020 (subject to amendment after this plan is published) made commitments to recover nature through Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and a wider Nature Recovery Network. The Protected Landscape network of National Parks and AONBs has been described by Natural England as the 'backbone' of the Nature Recovery Network.

In the Colchester Declaration, each AONB has committed to developing a nature recovery plan.

LNRSs are described as forming spatial strategies for nature covering the whole of England. They will support delivery of mandatory intended biodiversity net gain and provide a focus for a strengthened duty on all public authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity which are expected to be introduced by the Environment Act they will also underpin the Nature Recovery Network.

In Kent the Kent Downs AONB Unit is part of a wider partnership established to agree priorities for nature's recovery which will map the most valuable existing habitat for nature and specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals. Unless the Environment Act directs a different approach, it is the intent of the AONB Unit and partnership that a Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB will be developed collaboratively and coherently with the county level strategy and as part of a wider national Nature Recovery Network, for which the AONBs and National Parks will be a key component.

5.2 Biodiversity - special characteristics and qualities

5.2.1 The wildlife of the Kent Downs

The wildlife of the Kent Downs is particularly rich and distinctive, it is also varied, reflecting historic land management approaches, changes in the local climate, geology, soils and topography and its close proximity to the European continent.

In planning to recover nature in the Kent Downs AONB there is a clear need to increase the scale and pace of nature conservation activity to restore and recover habitats and species at a landscape scale.

Key species of the Downs

In Britain, there are several very rare and charismatic species largely or wholly confined to the Kent Downs. This is true of several beautiful rarities, such as the lady, monkey and late spider orchids, black veined and straw belle moths as well as rare arable field wildflowers. Other rare and threatened species occur in good numbers; for example the dormouse, the edible or Roman snail, the adder and rare arable field wild flowers along with several

butterflies associated with downland. Many of these are recognised in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act as species of principle importance in England. Semi-natural habitats of particular importance in the Kent Downs are also recognised in the UK list of priority habitats and in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy and the Kent Downs is recognised as containing nationally ‘Important Plant Areas’ by the charity Plantlife and large parts of the Downs are included in Buglife’s ‘Important Invertebrate Areas’.

As part of the Colchester Declaration key species conservation will be an important priority of the nature recovery efforts in the Kent Downs, which has been identified by Natural England as an area with potential ‘Species Big Wins’. **Insert map**

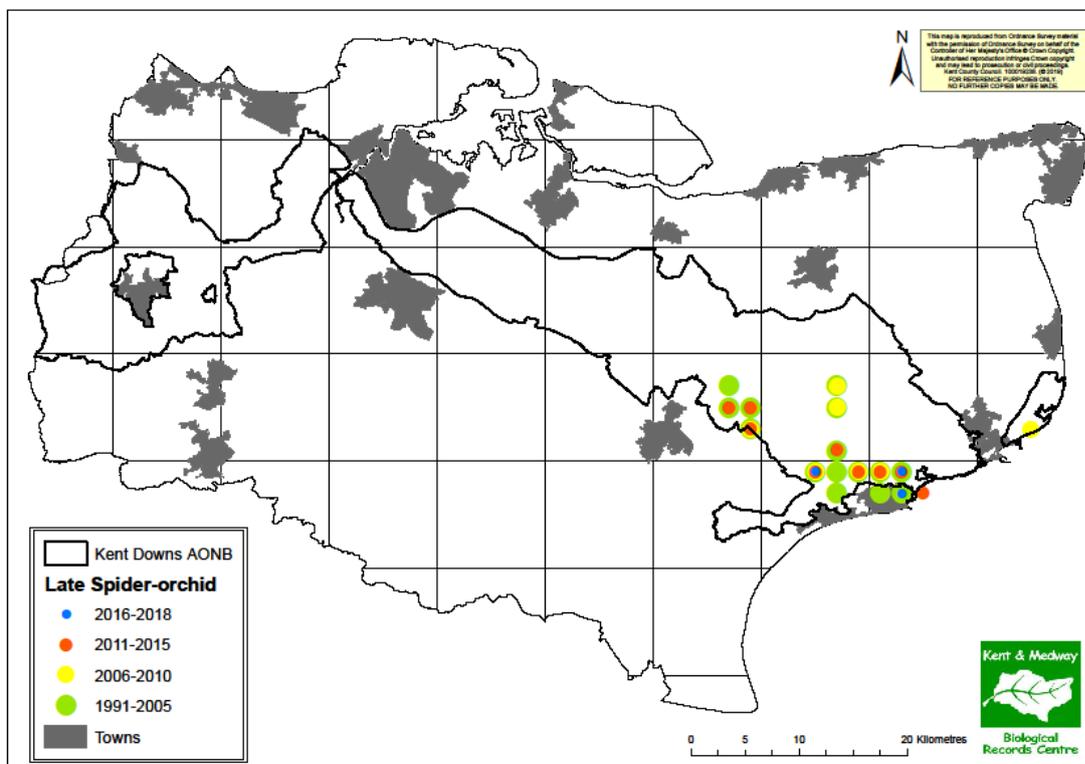


Figure 5.1 White Helleborine distribution in the Kent Downs AONB

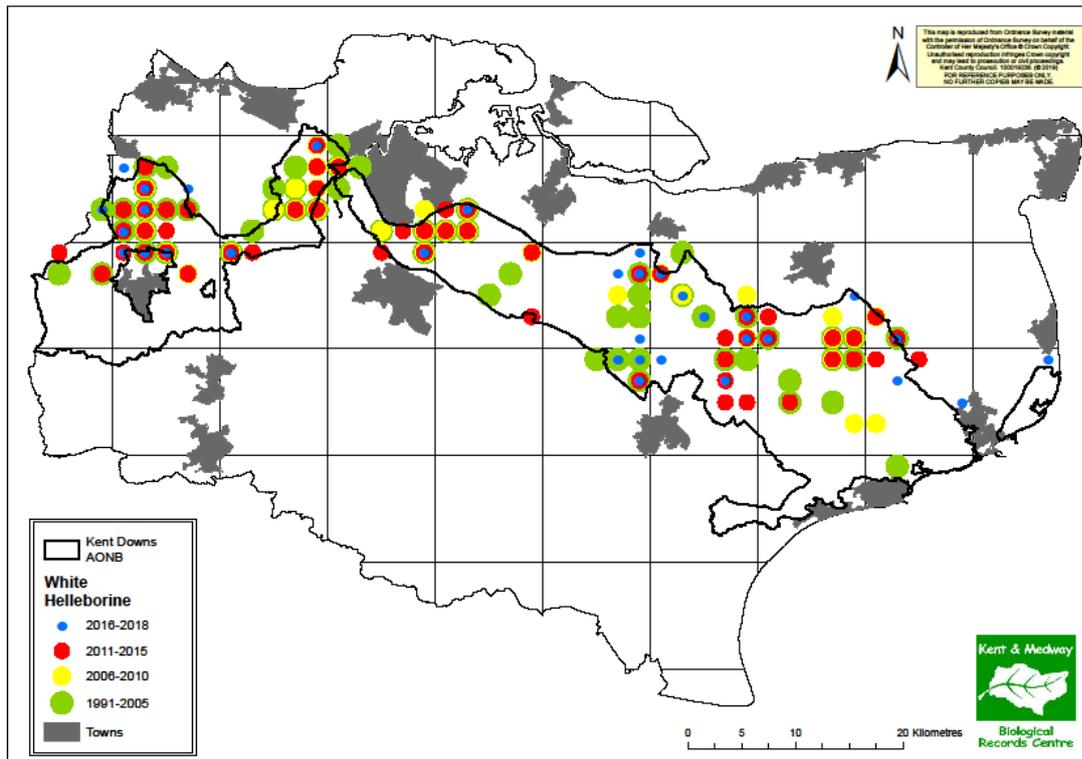


Figure 5.2 White Helleborine distribution in the Kent Downs AONB

Key habitats of the Downs

Grassland

Unimproved chalk downland is for many the essence of natural beauty in the Kent Downs landscape with its flower-rich, scented springy turf and profusion of insect life. Orchids and butterflies of chalk downland are symbolic of this habitat and the AONB supports populations of some of the country's rarest chalk species. Chalk grassland is an internationally important habitat, with over half the world's resource found in England. Although this habitat is one of the most valued features of the Kent Downs, the remaining extent of unimproved chalk grassland is less than 2% of the AONB land area (about 1500 ha or 80% of the Kent and 6% of the UK resource). For many rare species in the Kent Downs it is the warm, sunny south-facing chalk slopes which are most important.

The Kent Downs is home to other grassland habitats often overlooked and less designated; neutral grassland can be found in valley bottoms and often forms part of Local Wildlife Sites, road verges and church yards, providing flower rich areas supporting a variety of pollinators, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Where grassland is managed primarily for production or equine uses there is a tendency to overgrazing which means that potentially diverse habitats are depleted.

Ancient woodland, chalk cliffs, foreshore and seabed platform

These are important, special and characteristic habitats of the Kent Downs AONB which are covered in detail in separate sections of the plan.

Chalk streams and wetlands

Chalk streams, river corridors, winterbournes, flood plains and spring lines, together with ponds, dew ponds and small wetland areas, are the principal wetland types in the Kent Downs. Winterbournes and ponds are frequently seasonal in nature and often host characteristic species. Chalk streams are very special and highly valued with only around 200 in the world, most of which are found in the southern half of England. In the Kent Downs the Darent, Little Stour, Stour and Dour are defined as chalk streams.

Acid grassland and heaths

Acid grassland and heaths on the greensand and clay plateau typically survive in parkland, common land and Chart Woods. Acid grassland can occur on clay caps near downland adding an interesting diversity to the landscape.

Species-rich hedgerows and road verges

Species-rich hedgerows, headlands, ditches and road verges and the sunken lanes of the Downs are a special, diverse and distinctive feature. Often the road verges and hedges are rich in plant and animal diversity, providing important and very beautiful habitats and connectivity. Hedgerow trees are particularly striking in the landscape and, in combination with the hedge, provide important ecological connectivity.

Farmland habitats

Farmland habitats and species adapted to traditional mixed farming practices; in particular the Kent Downs supports a nationally important site for arable weed communities – supporting some of the UK's most threatened native plant species and farmland birds. More generally farmed parts of the landscape are capable of supporting a much wider diversity of nature and intensive farming practices have been responsible for the loss of significant amounts of biodiversity

Wood pasture and parkland

There is a strong legacy of parkland and wood pasture in the AONB where there are often large, open-grown and veteran trees which are special features in their own right. Trees outside woodlands are particularly threatened and important part of the beauty and ecology of the landscape of the Downs.

Traditional orchards

The Kent Downs landscape is strongly associated with fruit growing, with orchards making a significant contribution to the local distinctiveness of parts of the Downs. The terms 'traditional' or 'old' orchard, usually refer to orchards of apples, pears, plums and, in the Downs, cherries with large, widely spaced fruit trees, traditionally with grazed grassland below; traditional Kentish Cobnut platts are important and distinctive, particularly in the western portion of the AONB.

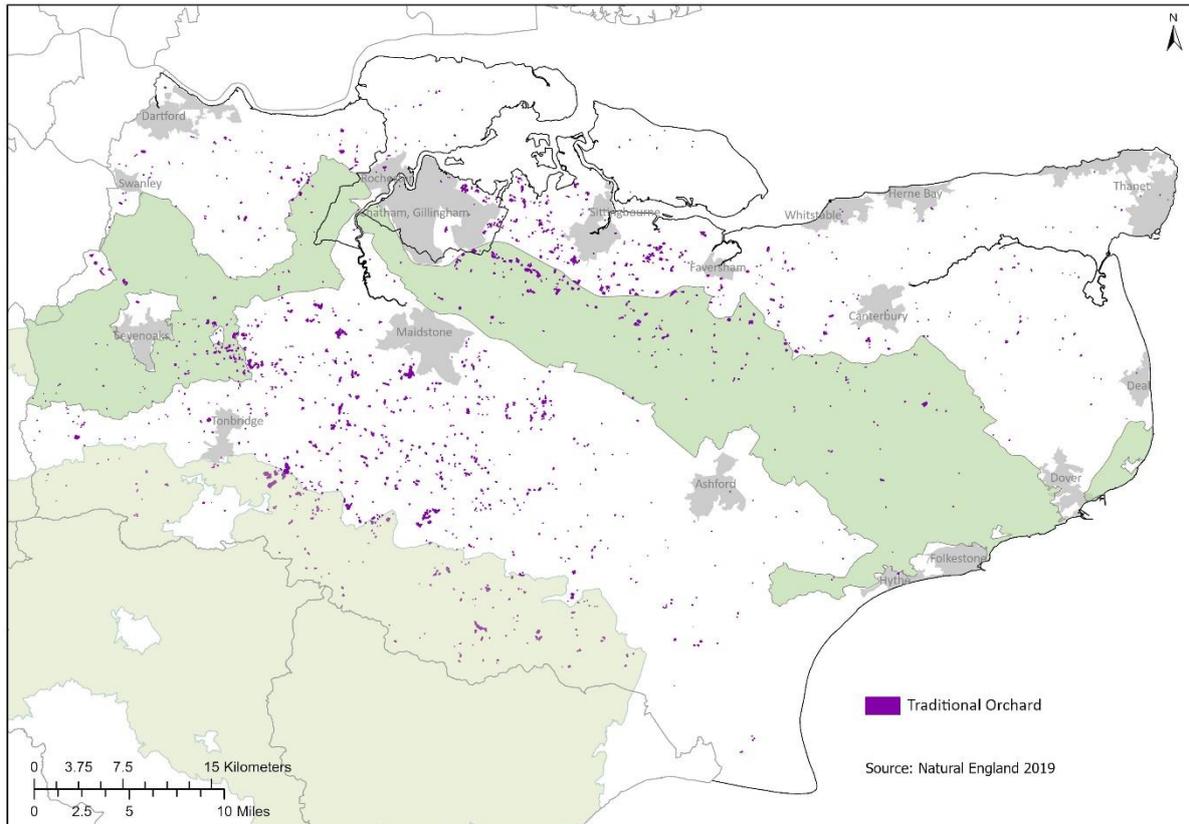


Figure 5.3 Traditional Orchards in Kent

5.2.2. Designated nature conservation sites

A number of the most important nature conservation sites in the Kent Downs are legally protected and managed primarily for their biodiversity value. There are 38 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the Kent Downs AONB covering some 4420 Ha, of these the following sites are of international importance and were protected under the European Union's Habitats Directive as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and now form part of the UK legal framework following the UK's exit from the EU:

- Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment
- Wye and Crundale Downs, National Nature Reserve
- Queendown Warren, Local Nature Reserve
- Lydden and Temple Ewell, National Nature Reserve (on the AONB boundary)
- Park Gate Down
- Dover to Kingsdown Cliffs (the only SAC for the maritime chalk cliff features in the country)
- North Downs woodlands. The scarp slopes of the Medway Valley are designated for internationally important beech-yew woodland communities.

Management of these important sites rests largely with Government and public bodies, and specialist conservation organisations. However a number of key sites are in private ownership, such as parts of the Folkestone and Etchinghill escarpment owned by Eurotunnel, and the Medway Valley escarpment by Lafarge or Trenport Holdings.

Of recognised county level importance the Local Wildlife Site network is also critical in conservation of the landscape and wildlife and is felt to be at increasing risk; research by the Kent Nature Partnership showed limited reference to Local Wildlife Sites and Biodiversity Opportunity Areas in Local Plans despite the importance of these sites is recognised in the Natural Environment White Paper and Lawton review. In total Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) cover some 16% of the AONB.

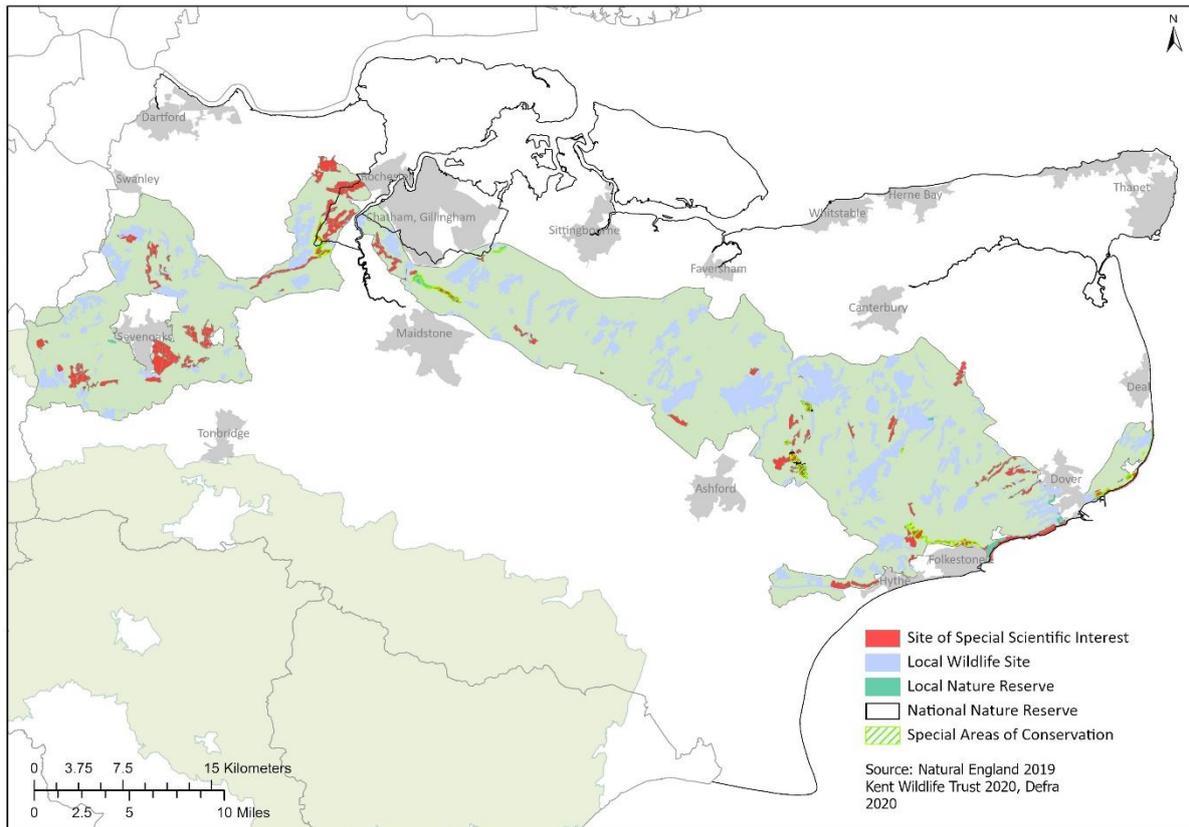


Figure 5.4 Nature Conservation Sites in the Kent Downs AONB

5.3 Biodiversity - main issues, opportunities and threats

Despite the extent of recognised and recorded nature conservation sites in the AONB some are losing species and condition, elsewhere habitat loss and change, alien species, pests and disease and the impact of climate change are damaging and degrading the biodiversity of the Kent Downs. Many important plant and animal species depend on suitable long-term management of appropriate habitats in the wider countryside.

In the context of continued biodiversity loss and while a wide range of national and local policy development is live there is an opportunity for the Kent Downs AONB partnership to influence policy development so as to benefit the characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs.

a. Growth and an increasing population along with increased public access to sensitive sites have been identified by site managers as a key issue in maintaining the quality of special habitats. This is in part a 'problem' of the successful promotion of access to nature and creates the opportunity to create new, less sensitive places for people and nature and to reduce pressure on the most sensitive sites and species. Such an approach can be an important part of achieving intended biodiversity net gain.

b. Habitat fragmentation, damage from intensive agriculture, introduction of invasive species, decline, damage, and loss are recognised as issues across Kent Downs habitats. In response there is the opportunity to manage, extend and connect existing priority protected and designated sites and habitats as well as promote sustainable farming, create new habitat and areas of wilding as a critical step to conserve and enhance biodiversity and generating high quality Green Infrastructure for Kent in which the Kent Downs could play a focal role. Examples of new habitat creation, for instance from green hay from chalk grassland, show how positive changes can be achieved over time and with consistent intervention. The Kent Downs has been identified as a key area for enhancement for pollinators and is mapped as a 'B line' by Buglife, the Downs can also make an important contribution to Kent's Plan Bee.

c. Great uncertainty prevails over the livestock industry. A lack of grazing livestock or poor returns from managing remaining areas of semi-natural grassland, and other traditionally grazed habitats important in the Kent Downs (particularly small, inaccessible or unprotected sites) means that often the most effective and landscape appropriate way of securing the established wildlife interest as well as landscape quality (by grazing) is increasingly uncertain.

d. There is a general lack of awareness and understanding of the biodiversity resource and its designations; trends in biodiversity; the value of the nature of the Kent Downs and how it contributes to landscape condition, carbon sequestration, the quality of life, health and wellbeing and the economy is combined with an associated lack of funding and support for management. The Colchester Declaration promotes the restoration of nature if sufficient resources are made available.

e. Need to provide accessible and well-managed sites with easy access from urban areas to provide contact with nature, health and wellbeing benefits, as well as to reduce pressure on existing particularly sensitive sites is seen as an important opportunity particularly for the new Environmental Land Management Systems.

f. Need to respond to the repeated failure to meet UK Biodiversity targets (2010/ 2020*) and the opportunity for the Kent Downs AONB to make a significant local contribution to meet future targets.

[JNCC report](#)

g. Kent Downs landscape is sensitive to changes in climate, pollution and to more abrupt changes caused by extreme weather events; both are predicted. The UK and Kent Climate Change Risk Assessments identify key risks to Kent Downs biodiversity. At the same time the ability of each habitat to sequester carbon has been identified and could be an opportunity to link habitat creation to climate change mitigation; the so called 'nature based' solutions which will achieve multiple benefits for the public good.

- h. The opportunity to develop significant collaborative partnerships and large-scale investment areas to secure intended net gain funding and to help meet biodiversity objectives of the plan.
- i. In the light of new approaches to nature conservation such as wilding and intended net gain; there is an opportunity to create new and valued habitats and landscape character at a large scale, reflecting what exists and is valued but also resilient for the future increasing the abundance of nature in the Kent Downs. At the same time a significant risk exists for the loss of sites where previous environment schemes have achieved significant gains.
- j. New crops (such as vines) and cropping patterns (such as zero tillage, agro-forestry and regenerative agriculture) create both challenges and opportunities for biodiversity landscapes of the Kent Downs.
- k. In the context of the recent departure of the UK from the EU there remains considerable uncertainty covering wildlife regulations and payments for the enhancement of nature.

5.4 Biodiversity - aims

A landscape in which:

1. The rich diversity of natural features, wild animals, plants and habitats are recognised, conserved, enhanced and positively managed so that the extent and condition of key habitats is enhanced and the pace and scale of nature conservation is accelerated in a way that allows both rare and characteristic species to flourish and to be resilient to future change.
2. A functionally connected nature recovery network of well-managed, functioning, wilder and connected sites of biodiversity importance covers the Kent Downs. These provide habitats for locally typical and rare species and communities, places for people to connect with nature and the essential building block to achieve functional, resilient ecological networks.
3. Rare species confined to the Kent Downs are conserved and increased and distinctive and characteristic species of the Kent Downs which are more common and widespread flourish due to careful and sensitive management.
4. Comprehensive and easily accessible data informs and influences land management and development decisions and monitors changes to biodiversity.
5. The natural heritage and wildlife is recognised for its inherent value for contributing to the landscape character, nature based solutions to climate impacts, quality of life and the economic value of the Kent Downs.
6. Collaborative management at a landscape scale secures significant enhancement to the habitats and species, of the Kent Downs, improves resilience as a local response to the national and international challenges to biodiversity.
7. At least 75% of the 38 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Local Wildlife Sites in public or protective ownership in the Kent Downs are restored to favourable

condition by 2030.

5.5 Biodiversity – principles

- BD1 Creation of new habitats, wilding and connecting habitat corridors will be pursued, informed by the Lawton principles, landscape character, the needs for new recreation, the needs for resilience and the threats to existing habitats and species. Delivery will be through collaboration to establish resilient, functional ecological nature recovery networks and high-quality green infrastructure.
- BD2 Local, regional and national biodiversity targets and spatial priorities for habitats and species distinctive to the Kent Downs will be supported; a role for Kent Downs AONB landscape and partnership in delivering a wider Nature Recovery Network, the Kent Biodiversity Strategy and Colchester Declaration will be defined and delivered.
- BD3 Targeting of advice, grants and agreements to reduce fragmentation and enhance the biodiversity of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.
- BD4 The collection, promotion and sharing of information on land cover, designated wildlife sites, habitats and species to assist in effective biodiversity and landscape character management and monitoring will be supported.
- BD5 The protection, conservation, enhancement and extension of Kent Downs AONB priority and distinctive habitats and species will be pursued; the Biodiversity Duty of Regard will be actively promoted.
- BD6 The generation of sustainable markets for the products of sensitively managed UK Priority Habitats characteristic to the Kent Downs AONB will be supported.
- BD7 The Kent Downs AONB Partnership will be active in seeking to secure the best outcome for the biodiversity of the Kent Downs from the changing national policy framework.
- BD8 Generating a greater connection between people and nature will be pursued at the same time as dispersal of visitor pressure from sensitive wildlife sites where the biodiversity interest is at threat.
- BD9 The opportunities presented by intended Biodiversity Net Gain and other legislative changes are secured in the Kent Downs AONB in a way that support the vision, aims and principles of the Management Plan. Development permitted in the Kent Downs will secure 20% biodiversity net gain subject to further evidence and testing; any requirement will ultimately be decided and set out individual local authorities' local plans.