

11. Quality of Life and Vibrant Communities

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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

It has been made clear that Neighbourhood Plans have to be in conformity with relevant development plans.

Quality of life

Secondary purposes of AONB designation

The landscape comes first. The primary purpose of AONB designation is to 'conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape'; this is the focus of the Management Plan.

The secondary purposes of AONB designation are to take account of the needs of land-based and rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. The demand for recreation should be met in a way that is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses. These needs came into clear focus during the Covid pandemic are expected to come into ever greater focus in the lifetime of this management plan.

The following sections set out how the secondary purposes of AONB designation will be addressed, it recognises that, without the support of a wide range of people the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape will not be achievable. A principal consideration is how secondary purposes relate back to the primary purpose of designation. The challenge for this Management Plan is to find ways in which social and economic well-being, inclusion, public understanding and enjoyment, can be complementary to, and can further support, the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

11. Vibrant communities

'Any attempt to create a division between what visitors need and what locals want will always be arbitrary: lots of people who live in national landscapes love their natural beauty, and lots of people who visit want to be in places which are real communities. It is a shared interest.'
Government's Landscape Review 2019

Our vision for quality of life and community benefit afforded by the Kent Downs AONB

In 2031... a wide diversity of people and communities are central to the conservation, enhancement and enjoyment of the Kent Downs; they value this special place and feel welcome and are able to enjoy, experience and benefit from the AONB. People and communities have a strong, positive influence over change through being engaged and active participants. Communities' work and voluntary activity marries social and economic well-being with landscape conservation and enhancement. Individuals and organisations choose to buy goods and services that in themselves benefit the Kent Downs landscape and economy.

The health and well-being benefits of contact with nature and beauty for all have become central to the purposes and management of the landscape and the Kent Downs partnership.

11.1 Overview

The Kent Downs AONB is a 'living part of modern England, not isolated from the forces which shape the rest of society' the beautiful Downs are located close to millions of people. One aim of this Management Plan must be to find ways of achieving thriving, vibrant communities and a sustainable and prosperous local economy that conserves and enhances this nationally important area. This is why the IUCN Category V definition (see section 2) is

so important and why combining both people and nature is a particular challenge for this plan.

While an AONB Management Plan is not the primary means for tackling social and economic needs, without the right social and economic conditions, it is difficult to conserve and enhance the valued landscape. In recognition of the importance of vibrant communities to supporting the purposes of the AONBs the Landscape Review has recommended a new purpose for AONBs and National Parks which would be to 'Foster the economic and community vitality of their area in support of the first two purposes'.

11.2 Vibrant communities

"Rural communities and the economies in them have been ignored and underrated for too long. We must act now to reverse this trend, but we can no longer allow the clear inequalities between the urban and rural to continue unchecked. A rural strategy would address challenges and realise potential in struggling and under-performing areas and allow vibrant and thriving areas to develop further. Doing nothing is not an option." Lord Foster of Bath – Chair of the House of Lords Select Committee for the Rural Economy.

The findings of the House of Lords Select Committee (April 2019) for the rural economy and the context, issues and opportunities identified in this plan are largely coherent, but the plan also looks to the important communities beyond the boundary of the AONB seeking a welcoming and inclusive approach.

The population of the Kent Downs AONB in 2011 (most recent census information) is estimated to be approx. 96,000 or around 5.5% of Kent's population.

Social and economic information is difficult to establish at an AONB level but the most recent information available shows an AONB population which is generally older, with fewer minority ethnic groups than the rest of the county. This is supported by information provided to the independent Landscape Review. The population of the Kent Downs has more white-collar and professional workers than the county as a whole, with higher owner-occupancy and car ownership per household. A higher percentage of people are self-employed, probably resulting in more home-working and indicative of an increasing knowledge-based economy within the AONB, a trend that is thought likely to be accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ease of access to main urban areas, including Greater London, and the attractiveness of the villages and countryside places great demand on most parts of the AONB as a place to live and work and from which to commute. House prices are high and the percentage increase has been higher than the regional average.

There is a lack of affordable and/or rented housing within or adjacent to the AONB particularly for young people and families, and people on lower incomes (including public sector workers and those employed in the land-based industries). This creates 'hidden households' where young adults continue to live with parents rather than establishing themselves independently.

Incomes are higher than the regional average and are around the average for people living in a protected landscape.

Not surprisingly, the percentage of people employed in land-based economic activities is

double that for the county as a whole, although this figure is a small part of the overall AONB workforce (3.8%). However AONB residents from other industry sectors are in similar proportion to the county as a whole; hotels and restaurants have been important employers in the Kent Downs AONB but the hospitality industry has been very severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Kent Rural Delivery Framework evidence base described Kent's rural communities as active and entrepreneurial; they are a considerable asset which can be harnessed to secure the future of the AONB. Rural poverty and exclusion is regarded as a hidden but real issue in a number of communities particularly for isolated elderly people, people with disabilities, migrant workers and some young families. While lower than the regional average the Index of Multiple Deprivation is higher than for other South East National Landscapes. Added to this, there are five wards on or immediately adjacent to the AONB boundary with high social and economic needs.

The importance of traditional land-based economic activities to the AONB's rural income is small and declining. However, a number of other employment sectors and industries (such as transportation, distribution, tourism and retail) depend on land-based activities and landscape to some extent. The diversification of the employment base in a way which supports the landscape character and special characteristics of the AONB needs to be encouraged and developed. The community heritage knowledge which resides with older generations of residents is a valuable resource for the celebration of the landscape and community vibrancy.

Some of the challenges for communities of the Kent Downs are to maintain balance and diversity given limited housing availability and high house prices, an aging population and sometimes difficult access to services. The provision of affordable local needs housing which is of sensitive design and location is a high priority identified by Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) through their community engagement, and this has been supported by the Landscapes Review evidence.

Evidence from the Kent Downs partnership and other Protected Landscapes shows that to be 'thriving and vibrant' communities need good access to services, social and community links, places to meet and interact, places for recreation and work, links beyond the immediate community, access to jobs, good digital connectivity and community activities and engagement. Rural deprivation issues also require close attention and support. In the context of a protected landscape these community needs should be met in ways which support the qualities and characteristics of the landscape; indeed landscape and environmental conservation and design can be a good focus for community development.

The Kent Downs AONB has benefitted from substantial investment supporting sustainable rural development through various EU programmes including Interreg and LEADER. The exit from the EU places these at risk and there is concern that the Shared Prosperity Fund may not provide a comparable or improved replacement.

'One thing stood out, talking to people in the course of this review and examining the responses to our call for evidence. They worry that longstanding communities feel under great pressure, and point in particular to house prices and jobs.' Government's Landscape Review 2019

Community, parish planning and neighbourhood plans

There has been long running support for community and parish planning in the Kent Downs AONB. Community engagement in understanding the built and cultural heritage can be important to community identity and activity. There are a variety of community planning approaches including Village Design Statements, Parish Plans; neighbourhood planning and Conservation Plans.

The Localism Act introduced the neighbourhood planning system, Neighbourhood planning gives communities the opportunity to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and help shape the development and growth of their local area. Neighbourhood plans can influence where communities propose new homes, shops and offices are built, have their say on what those new buildings should look like and what infrastructure should be provided. Neighbourhood Plans have to be in conformity with relevant development plans.

Community services and enterprises

There has been long run concern about the decline in community and village services such as village shops, post offices, churches and pubs and a fear that the Covid Pandemic will accelerate this. Consequently the loss of such assets can trigger the creation of community run enterprises which in themselves are a community development catalyst and can be a vehicle to support a sustainable local economy which supports landscape character there are several examples across the AONB of successful community run facilities working alongside more 'traditional' businesses.

Volunteering

There is already a strong voluntary ethic in and around the Kent Downs; Parish Councils, conservation volunteers, charities, tree and river wardens, footpath volunteers, walks leaders, religious groups, village and community enterprises and the Countryside Partnerships all rely on voluntary efforts and often this supports landscape conservation and the enhancement of communities. Participating in volunteering can provide healthy exercise and social interaction and is known to benefit health and well-being; even life expectancy is greater for those who participate in volunteering. Given the wide and established volunteer groups the AONB Partnership has deliberately sought not to 'compete' with existing volunteer organisations but to support them.

The Government's Landscape Review strongly promotes expanding volunteering in our national landscapes through the support of a National Landscape Service, as this emerges the Kent Downs AONB response should be positive but should not undermine but strengthen existing volunteer groups.

Much of the volunteer 'force' benefiting the Kent Downs AONB is made up of actively retired individuals; there is a concern that as work and life patterns change this resource may reduce substantively.

Our neighbours

The Kent Downs AONB is in a unique position of being so close to major urban and growth areas and London. There are well over 1 million people living within one kilometre of the Kent Downs AONB boundary, many are areas of high social and economic need and the growth trajectory for Kent is unprecedented (see sections 2). The AONB offers a place for recreation, health and well-being to these communities, but the relationship needs to be

carefully developed so that all benefit and landscape qualities and community life are not compromised. We know from the Landscape Review and Kent Downs AONB led research that there are considerable barriers to many people and communities to accessing and enjoying the Kent Downs landscape, these are covered in more detail in section 12.

Sustainable rural leisure and tourism

Sustainable rural leisure and tourism has been identified as a key way to support the socio-economic well-being of rural areas. Providing jobs and supporting community services, sustainable rural tourism of itself can be a catalyst for community development.

Sustainable tourism has been defined as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities.” Making Tourism More Sustainable – A Guide for Policy Makers, UNEP World Tourism Organization.

Perception research taken forward by Visit Kent in 2017 show that the main perceptions of Kent are to do with the coast, scenic countryside, the culture, gardens and historic buildings, food and festivals. The countryside is referred to frequently. In particular there are mentions of a variety of scenery, ‘quiet countryside’, the garden of England, orchards, hops, oast houses. Kent sustains a leadership position when it comes to tourist perceptions. Even amongst those who have never visited Kent, the region is seen more positively than its neighbours on the most motivating imagery dimensions including, Coastal, Rural, Historic, Nature, Food & Drink and Seaside.’ Visit Kent 2018 Many of these features are provided ‘in spades’ by the landscapes of the Kent Downs

As part of the evidence gathering for this Management Plan review it became clear that ‘over visiting’ has rapidly become an issue across the AONB particularly on countryside with heritage sites. Visitor site car parks are often full by mid-morning on a sunny weekend and the visitor experience at risk of declining, along with erosion to paths, damage to the historic, natural and cultural heritage as well as loss of tranquillity. Making tourism and recreation more sustainable is not just about controlling and managing the negative impacts, tourism and recreation are in a special position to benefit local communities economically and socially, and to raise awareness and support for environmental conservation.

In recognising the importance of sustainable rural tourism, the Kent Downs AONB Unit has taken a lead, the EXPERIENCE project a £3m E.U. funded project which seeks to improve facilities to promote off season visiting, encourage sustainable tourism and promote new sites and visitor resources so reducing pressure on ‘honey pots’. In support the Kent Downs AONB, Visit Kent and Produced in Kent have agreed a Joint Statement and Action Plan.

‘There are lots of benefits to communities from designation – pubs and village shops are kept busy, and more visitors means more people who might support bus services. Studies, which are largely based on surveys of businesses in national landscapes, provide strong evidence that environmental quality in general, and in national landscapes in particular, help to support a significant proportion of local economic activity.’ Government Landscape Review

Community health and well-being

The evidence is clear that there are multiple physical and mental health benefits from access and contact with beautiful places; these range from just feeling enlivened after a walk in the open air to significant therapeutic interventions with those with dementia, have experienced trauma or, for instance, suffer from cardio-vascular disease. The desire to visit the countryside was made incredibly apparent after the first national ‘Lock Down’ during the

Covid-19 pandemic. The NHS recruitment of link workers along with local authority and primary care social prescribers to boost social prescribing demonstrates that the evidence has effected change in practice. The AONB landscape and partnership has a significant opportunity to collaborate with local authorities, charities, Public Health and the NHS to support social prescribing and to develop partnership projects and strategic programmes that can change lives including for seriously affected families and individuals.

The Government's Landscape Review promotes a new statutory duty for AONBs and National Parks; one of the 27 proposals specifically supports the landscapes catering for and improving the nation's health and wellbeing and promotes a new statutory purpose, to: 'actively connect all parts of society with these special places to support understanding, enjoyment and the nation's health and wellbeing'. The Kent Downs AONB partnership strongly supports this ambition.

11.3 Vibrant communities - main issues, opportunities and threats identified

Social exclusion, deprivation and access to services

- a. A number of areas and wards around and within the AONB have high levels of social deprivation, health inequality and communities experience substantial barriers to experiencing and benefiting from the AONB. Within the AONB community diversity is low, rural poverty, social exclusion and isolation can be 'hidden' and is an issue for some elderly people, minority ethnic groups, migrant workers, people with disabilities and those on low incomes.
- b. Retaining and improving access to, and provision of, local services and facilities including super-fast and gigabit capable broadband, post offices, village shops, public houses and community infrastructure.
- c. Community facilities and services, such as schools, libraries, public transport, social care and doctors' surgeries, are unevenly available and accessible.
- d. There is limited up-to-date specific data on the social and economic profile of the Kent Downs.

The availability of affordable housing

- e. Housing prices have continued to rise, in some parts, well above and faster than the national average.
- f. Considerable demand for affordable and local needs housing in many parishes in the AONB

Maintaining and diversifying the employment base

- g. Decline in farming and forestry employment, although both industries are still important economically in terms of maintaining Kent Downs character.
- h. Skills gap for some local employers, such as locally based skilled forestry and farm

workers as well as heritage skills.

- i There are opportunities to widen the employment base in ways that can support the purposes of the AONB which should be pursued as part of the 'green recovery'.

Sense of community and belonging

- j The need to attach people to place and landscape heritage where an increasing proportion of the population are not directly involved in landscape management.
- k The need to overcome barriers to accessing and enjoying the landscape for a more diverse range of people
- l. The need to improve community recognition and value of the special characteristics of the AONB to secure its future conservation and enhancement.
- m. The need for support to achieve greater and a more diverse community capacity and involvement in decisions affecting the AONB.

Sustainable leisure and tourism

- n. There is an opportunity and demonstrable need to sustainably manage the numbers, impact and income from visitors to benefit local people, local services and support the conservation and enhancement of the AONB landscape.
- o. Some areas within the AONB suffer either from over capacity or overuse, leading to a detrimental impact on both the landscape character and qualities, visitor experience and host communities, the advent of E.L.M. funding provides an opportunity to invest in better provision
- p. The departure of the UK from the EU raises concerns about how sustainable rural development will be supported.

11.4 Vibrant communities - aims

A landscape in which:

1. Thriving, diverse, vibrant, welcoming communities understand, recognise and value the special qualities of the AONB and play an active role in its conservation and enhancement while reducing their environmental impact.
2. A strong and sustainable rural economy supports the special characteristics and qualities of the AONB and is supported by residents and visitors, who value and use sustainable local produce and services.
3. There is well designed, sustainable and affordable housing, particularly for workers employed in the land-based economy and conservation of the AONB's landscape, social and economic vitality.
4. Accessible, affordable local services and facilities are available to all and are well-used throughout the AONB.

5. The high quality environment and landscape of the AONB is seen as an asset to local businesses, which in turn contribute to the conservation of the landscape through the use of local sustainable goods and labour and through active conservation and enhancement.
6. The area is recognised by both local communities and visitors as a premier sustainable tourism destination.
7. The environmental impact of AONB communities is stabilised and reduced.
8. The health and wellbeing benefits offered to communities and individuals are actively pursued.
9. Barriers to more and more diverse communities benefitting from the inspiration and beauty afforded by the landscapes of the AONB are overcome.

11.5 Vibrant communities - principles

- VC1 Community and business initiatives that improve the recognition, engagement in and conservation of the Kent Downs AONB and encourage community life will be pursued.
- VC2 Positive and sustainable links between the Kent Downs AONB (landscape, communities and partnership) and nearby communities, particularly from excluded groups and from neighbouring deprived areas will be pursued.
- VC3 Initiatives which are in line with existing policies of the Local Planning Authority that increase and improve the supply of affordable housing for (i) those with proven local needs, and (ii) workers whose activities directly contribute to the purposes of the AONB designation, will be supported where it is demonstrated that the proposals are suitably located, of high-quality design, limited quantity and scale and are built to the best current environmental standards.
- VC4 The retention and development of local services, facilities and employment opportunities in order to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Kent Downs AONB and reduce the need to travel by car and maintain viable rural communities will be supported.
- VC5 Skills training and business development assistance will be encouraged where they contribute to the viability of communities and meet the purposes and principles of the AONB designation and partnership.
- VC6 The development of sustainable visitor and tourism facilities will be pursued where they enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the AONB without detracting from its special characteristics and qualities. The Kent Downs AONB partnership will pursue sustainable tourism zone status.
- VC7 Tourism and leisure businesses in the Kent Downs AONB will be encouraged to adopt the principles of sustainable tourism and to demonstrate their commitment to

sustainability.

- VC8 Local communities will be encouraged to prepare and promote Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and Neighbourhood Plans (in conformity with relevant development plans) as appropriate to assist in the conservation and enhancement of local distinctiveness as settlements evolve.
- VC9 Opportunities to better understand the social and economic profile of the Kent Downs AONB will be pursued.
- VC10 Support will be given to groups that encourage volunteering in the Kent Downs. In the event of the recommendations of the Landscapes Review regarding AONBs roles in volunteering being supported by Government an approach with continues to support local groups will be established.
- VC 11 Opportunities to enhance the health and wellbeing of communities and individuals both within and around the Kent Downs AONB will be actively pursued to increase provision and better bring together and coordinate provision of health and wellbeing 'assets' in local settings within the AONB.