



High Weald
National
Landscape

Consultation Statement

High Weald AONB

Management Plan 2024-29 review

February 2024

Prepared by the

High Weald AONB Unit
Woodland Enterprise Centre
Hastings Road
Flimwell
East Sussex
TN5 7PR

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N.B. From November 22nd2023 all AONBs are to be known as National Landscapes. This change is endorsed by Natural England. The High Weald National Landscape is the new name for this protected landscape. The High Weald National Landscape remains an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty insofar as all policy, legislation and guidance applies to the designated landscape. For this reason, this document is still titled and refers to the High Weald AONB Management Plan. Reference is made in the document to both ‘the AONB’ and ‘the High Weald National Landscape (NL)’. The statutory purpose of the designated landscape “to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the designated landscape” remains unchanged.

1. Introduction

The High Weald AONB Management Plan is subject to a 5-year review cycle, and work to review the previous Plan began in January 2022. A crucial part of the review process is consultation and engagement, and the decision was taken to start this at an early stage to ensure the revised draft incorporated as many different peoples' views from the outset, as possible. The engagement and consultation process may be divided into three broad parts:

2. Public engagement
3. Local authority engagement
4. Formal public consultation

This report provides an overview of the entire consultation and engagement process, as well as methods used in each stage. The table below shows how the consultation and engagement elements of the review (highlighted in **bold**) fitted into the wider Management Plan review process.

High Weald AONB Management Plan Review Timetable

Jan 2022	Public engagement via external survey company
Feb 2022	Scoping review
Feb 2022	Issues & principles report presented to OSG
Mar 2022	Scope of review approved by MB & JAC
Apr 2022	Statutory consultees alerted
Apr 2022	Survey to OSG and Parishes on how the MP is used
Jun 2022	Draft SEA completed
July 2022	Informal OSG sight of the early draft version of new sections
Sep 2022	OSG endorsement of structure and program of work
Oct 2022	Progress report to MB
Winter 2022	Document sharing and editing with OSG
Dec 2022	Public online survey regarding new sections
Jan 2023	Informal OSG meeting on draft settlement and planning sections
Feb 2023	OSG presented with revised MP text
Mar 2023	MB and JAC presented with revised text
Jun 2023	Informal OSG consultation on MP actions
Sep-Nov 2023	Formal public consultation
Winter 2023/24	Amendments and modifications
Feb-Mar 2024	Final draft agreed by OSG & MB
Mar 2024	Final draft approved by Joint Advisory Committee
Apr - June 2024	Local Authority adoption processes
June 2024	Plan submitted to Secretary of State
June - August 2024	Dissemination and distribution

The following sections outline the engagement and consultation for the High Weald AONB Management Plan, including ongoing local authority consultation, pre-consultation public surveys, and the formal public consultation. The report also summarises the outputs from these methods and explains how they have informed the new Management Plan 2024-2029.

2. Ongoing Expert Engagement

The High Weald NL Team engage with a wide range of experts on a continual and ongoing basis every year, through meetings and partnerships from local stakeholders to government departments, running and attending courses and webinars, and convening events which bring together experts. For example, *

- Carried out 356 sites visits, meeting a range of land owners, from different farming enterprises, a range of holding sizes and experience.
- 35 meetings with Defra group including Forestry Commission, Natural England, and the Environment Agency.
- Met with local stakeholder groups 236 times, including parish councils, CPRE, Rivers Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, RSPB etc.
- Sat on 17 partnership steering groups including local Nature Partnership, catchment partnerships, species reintroduction groups, and national agricultural groups.

Information, expertise and understanding gleaned as a result of this ongoing engagement has fed into the preparation of the Management Plan.

*Figures taken from the most recent High Weald Joint Advisory Committee Biennial Review 2020-2022.

3. Public Engagement

Savanta survey: spring 2022

In March 2022, a public survey was conducted by external company Savanta on behalf of the High Weald NL Team, to gain insight into how and why people access green spaces, including the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Access to green spaces and the countryside was already high on the agenda for protected landscapes following the Landscapes Review in 2019, and it has remained on the political agenda since.

The 15-minute online survey targeted people within the High Weald as well as those in the wider area, as far as south London, and also included questions on which aspects of the High Weald the public find particularly favourable, and how they most like to enjoy the area.

Just under 1,000 people completed the Savanta survey in March 2022. Forty-nine percent of respondents were from East Sussex, with 43% of respondents living in towns adjacent to the High Weald such as Horsham, Tunbridge Wells and Hastings.

Survey highlights:

- 90 % of respondents agreed or agreed strongly that green spaces were good for their physical and mental health, with nearly ¾ of people preferring to exercise in green spaces.
- 53 % would like a say in how their local green spaces are managed, and 48 % agreed they would like to be involved in activities to improve their local green spaces.
- Over one-third of people are visiting the countryside (including coastal areas) at least once a week, this is higher than the percentage visiting urban/suburban parks.
- 'Beautiful views' was ranked the topmost important trait or service that the High Weald NL has/should maintain.
- When asked why people were visiting the High Weald for leisure the top three responses were:
 - To relax

- To observe natural beauty / views
- A day out with family / friends
- The most common frequency of visits to the High Weald for leisure was once or twice a year.
- Of those who had visited the High Weald for leisure, 65 % of people still felt there had been a barrier to them visiting the AONB. Whilst distance was the main barrier, it may well be tied into lack of and price of transportation which accounted for 24 % of barrier reasons (compared to 12 % for transport barriers to green spaces in general).

How this information was used to shape the draft Management Plan

The information gathered from this survey was important in shaping the new Access section, which was first reported as part of the initial scoping review for the draft Management Plan, presented to the Joint Advisory Committee in March 2022. Natural England's new Management Plan guidance includes access to the countryside a topic to be covered in Management Plans, as well as access to green spaces forming part of one of the goals the governments Environmental Improvement Plan.

Website survey: winter 2022

A second public survey was conducted through November and December 2022. This survey was accessible via the High Weald NL website. There were 133 responses in total from the public.

The survey first asked whether respondents had heard of and used the then current High Weald AONB Management Plan. Fifty eight percent answered that they were aware the High Weald NL had a Management Plan, and over half of those had used the Management Plan, for mainly either conservation or planning purposes.

The survey then asked questions regarding the inclusion of potential new topics in dedicated sections: nature recovery, soil health and climate crisis in the Management Plan. 97% of respondents agreed that nature recovery & climate crisis should be included, and 97 % of respondents agreed these topics should have their own sections within the Management Plan.

The survey also asked what other topics or issues people would like to see covered in the next Management Plan. There were a range of responses, the most popular being:

- Stronger emphasis on stopping inappropriate housing development.
- Water management, including both pollution and to changing rainfall patterns with increasing drought and flooding events.
- Light pollution and the impact on local wildlife.
- How and whether renewable energy options such as wind farms and solar should and can be incorporated into the High Weald landscape.

How this information was used to shape the draft Management Plan

All the topics put forward, either by the High Weald team or raised by the public were addressed more fully in the draft Management Plan.

- Whilst the High Weald NL is not a planning authority, the new Management Plan aims to better support local authorities, residents, parishes, and community groups to use the Management Plan in responding to planning applications through a dedicated planning section.
- Dark Skies has become its own core component of the High Weald's natural beauty and is now reflected as such in the Management Plan, with objectives and actions for preserving the High Weald's dark skies.
- The new climate and nature recovery sections will address nature-based and technological solutions to the net-zero carbon goals, including the use of natural flood management.
- The condition of water ways, particularly pollution, has become one of the investment strategy principles for the Plan, and more overt actions targeted at water companies and other Section 85 organisations with duties to water ways have been included in the natural systems chapter.

4. Local Authority Engagement

The fifteen constituent local authorities of the High Weald NL were engaged with the revision of the Management Plan primarily via their representative on the Officers Steering Group (OSG). Several engagement activities, additional to the formal OSG meetings, were held to gather input and present progress on the Management Plan.

March 2022	Questionnaire
July 2022	Prototype of new sections
Oct-Dec 2022	Collaborative editing
June 2023	Actions workshop

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent to all OSG members and all parish council clerks in the High Weald, with an ask to share with wider teams. The questionnaire inquired how the current Management Plan was used and what they felt was missing, both in terms of content and usability.

There were responses from a third of the local authorities, and 11 parish councils. The questionnaire identified that the 'Key Components' in the Management Plan were frequently used and within these it was the 'Objectives' and 'Key Characteristics' that were most valued – especially within the Settlement component. The 'Statement of Significance' and description of 'natural beauty' were well used, as well as the 'About the Plan' and 'AONB Policy,' which are used regarding development and for planning purposes.

There was an overwhelming response that the current structure of the Plan worked well and should be maintained, however there was a desire to make the Management Plan further digitally accessible, such as hyperlinking to referenced documents, orientation to fit screens and interactive mapping. The following additions to the content of the Management Plan were suggested: dark skies, strengthening of wording on development, and for tourism be addressed.

New section meeting

In July 2022, the OSG members reviewed the new sections of the Management Plan: Soil health, climate, nature recovery, access, and planning. The sections were sent out to the members in advance of the meeting, so that discussion and feedback of the content could be gathered in the meeting. Feedback can be summarised as:

- Broad support for these topics having their own sections in the Management Plan.
- However, these sections were considered too long, and required editing to core messages.
- Ensure content was High Weald focused.

Collaborative editing

Through the autumn and winter of 2022, the content of the Management Plan was released to the OSG for review and editing using Microsoft Teams Group, to allow collaborative editing from all members of the OSG. An online meeting to follow-up this collaborative work was convened in January 2023, which focused on the Settlement chapter as this was the section that generated the most editing and comments.

Actions workshop

An in-person OSG workshop was held in June 2023 to help refine the 'Actions' for each key component. OSG members highlighted those Actions they most supported and those which they felt required rewording or editing. A round-table discussion then followed focused on those which were considered in need of editing.

How this information was used to shape the draft Management Plan

Questionnaire

- The structure and format of the Plan has remained – however the new Management Plan has been re-orientated to landscape from portrait to benefit the predominately online use of the document.
- An online map resource ('story map') was created to address issues with the legibility of small static maps within the Management Plan.
- A dedicated planning section, including expanded wording, has been included in the Management Plan, making it easier for users to find all the relevant information in one place.
- 'Actions' have been separated by who is responsible for them, making it easier for local authorities to identify those relevant to themselves and those for other organisations which they may work with.

New sections

- All new sections presented to the OSG were edited to their core messages.
- Each section was written to ensure that it was delivered from a High Weald perspective as much as possible, whilst also ensuring key government and national commitments were included to set the context.

Collaborative editing

- Edits and comments from OSG members were considered during the development of the content of the Management Plan.

Actions workshop

- This highly productive meeting resolved all queries on the Actions at that point and allowed one of the final pieces of Management Plan to be completed before sign-off by the Management Board before being readied for the formal public consultation.

5. Work Undertaken Prior To Public Consultation

Responses from the public and local authority engagement stages of the review were generally supportive of the planned approach and provided valuable feedback and suggestions for changes, amendments, and the future of the Plan. Additionally, an internal review of the Plan was also undertaken and identified areas that needed change and more focus.

Three statutory assessments were carried out to inform the content of the Management Plan:

- Strategic Environmental Assessment
- Habitats Regulations Assessment Stage 1 (screening) Report
- Equalities Impact Assessment of the Management Plan

The Consultation Draft Management Plan and its supporting documents were approved by the Joint Advisory Committee on 20th September 2023 for public consultation.

6. Public Consultation

The consultation was launched on 25th September 2023 and ran through to the 5th November. It was hosted on the High Weald NL website. This included a downloadable copy of the draft Management Plan, and all supporting documents, as well as a survey which took respondents through the Plan. Responses were submitted directly from the website on completion. The following measures were taken to publicise the consultation:

- Individual letters were sent to all the local authority chief executives; all parish councils; and other Section 85 organisations including Natural England; the Environment Agency; Historic England; Highways England; the Forestry Commission; Heritage Lottery Fund; Southern Water; South East Water; and UK Power Networks.

- The Management Plan consultation was highlighted on the landing page of the High Weald NL website, with links to the specific pages.
- A range of organisations and community groups were also contacted via email.
- The consultation was advertised via social media and the High Weald AONB e-news before and during the consultation.
- All local authority comms teams were contacted with engagement material such as pdf posters for printing off.
- Reminders that the Management Plan consultation was underway was flagged up at various meetings with external stakeholders where appropriate.

Responses

- **175 responses were received**, 148 respondents used the online form.
 - This only includes completed survey forms or forms where permission was given to use partially completed forms.
 - A large number of partially completed forms is expected when running an online consultation of this kind. All respondents with partially completed forms were contacted and asked if they wanted their responses included.
 - Partially completed forms where responses could not be included were a result of the submit and/or GDPR consent box not being ticked.
- Fourteen of the 15 local authorities within the High Weald NL responded.
 - Most local authorities and other Section 85 organisations submitted direct email letter responses.
- 7 other Section 85 organisations responded, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Historic England, Southern and South East Water, and National Highways.
- The following Parish Councils within the High Weald NL responded: Balcombe, Brenchley and Matfield, Brightling, Dormansland, Heathfield and Waldron, Northiam, Rotherfield, Slaugham, Withyham.
- Other organisations who responded include CLA, CPRE, NUF, Ramblers, and the Woodland Trust, as well as a range of local interest and community groups.
- 120 members of the public used the online form to respond.

72% of respondents agreed that the High Weald AONB Vision was ambitious enough, and 90% of respondents agreed that they found the statement of significance useful in defining the landscape and natural beauty of the High Weald.

Overall, hundreds of comments were received across most sections of the draft Management Plan, which have all been carefully considered by the HW Unit. Responses ranged from recommendations of word changes or sentence restructure to suggestions for new content, or support for particular sections. It is worth noting that there were a number of competing and conflicting comments between organisations which needed careful consideration and professional judgement by the High Weald Unit, in the context of ensuring the Management Plan fulfils the function of furthering the purpose of designation, that is the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the AONB.

Many of the comments received have resulted in adjustments to the Plan. Other comments were useful because they suggested areas for future work or for the High Weald Unit to look to provide training or liaison work with other organisations. Meanwhile some comments referred to matters outside the scope of the Management Plan, but provided a way for respondents, particularly members of the public, to express their thoughts on a wide range of topics, from access, and maintenance of footpaths, to development, and climate change within the High Weald. In Appendix 1 below, some of the more common comments outside the scope of the of the Plan are addressed as FAQs.

7. Conclusion

The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 has been subject to significant public and local authority engagement, consultation, and scrutiny. It has also been subject to statutory assessments designed to test its impact on the environment generally, designated habitats and equalities. The outcome of the consultation and assessments have informed its content where appropriate and ensured that the Management Plan remains up-to-date and relevant to everyone who lives, works, and spends their leisure time in the High Weald and provides clear and useful advice to those who have statutory responsibilities to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.

Appendix 1. Consultation FAQs

A number of comments received in the public consultation process referred to matters outside the scope of the Management Plan. To ensure better understanding of the role of the High Weald AONB Management Plan these are addressed here:

What about planning and development in the High Weald NL?

The High Weald NL is not a planning authority, and the responsibility for determining planning applications remains with the 15 local planning authorities within the High Weald NL (four county councils, and eleven district or borough councils). These LPAs have the responsibility for planning policy and development management functions. Like all public bodies, local authorities have a legal duty in their decision-making to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.

Whilst the High Weald NL Unit does provide comments to relevant Local Planning Authorities on Local Plans policy formulation and site allocation, and on a number of planning applications in or affecting the setting of the NL, the High Weald Unit is not a statutory consultee in planning matters. The advice provided by the Unit assists local authorities and other organisations to meet their duty as set out in Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Local planning authorities should take the High Weald AONB Management Plan into account when preparing local plans, and the Management Plan is also a material consideration for making decisions on planning applications within the AONB and its setting, but the Management Plan is not a planning document, nor is it written solely with planning matters in mind.

What are the responsibilities of the High Weald NL Unit and other organisations?

The High Weald NL Unit is first and foremost an advisory body, administrator for certain government grant awards and a statutory consultee for particular works. The Unit works with landowners, farmers, schools, community groups, local authorities including highways and PRow teams, government departments such as Defra, and other organisations such as the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and water and telecoms companies, offering advice, guidance, training, and education on a range of topics from regenerative farming to grassland restoration, and High Weald history, that helps conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald.

This means that while we work with a wide range of organisations and offer much advice, and are often aware of local issues, it is important to recognise that the responsibility of, for example the maintenance of footpaths, water pollution, planning applications, and parking charges etc. lies with the relevant organisations or local authority departments. Queries regarding these issues should be addressed directly to those organisations accordingly.

What about Ashdown Forest?

Ashdown Forest is the largest public open space in the south east of the England, and the most popular destination in the High Weald NL. The High Weald NL Team have worked with the Ashdown Forest Conservators on many projects and will continue to, going forward. However, whilst the Ashdown Forest sits within the High Weald NL, it is owned by the Ashdown Forest Trust and managed autonomously by the Conservators of Ashdown Forest. The High Weald NL Team is not responsible for the day-to-day running of the Forest, nor decisions taken by the Conservators beyond offering advice where it is sort from them.

What about changes to the boundary of the AONB?

The High Weald NL (AONB) was designated in 1984, and the boundary has not changed since designation. Boundary changes to protected landscapes are extremely rare and are led by Natural England following extensive technical assessment and government consultation processes.

Why does the Plan refer to Net zero?

The specific phrase 'net zero' is used in the Management Plan because this is the legal term as per the government policy Net Zero Strategy (2021) for the targets and measures undertaken to reduce carbon and other greenhouse emissions across the country.

Working towards net zero is a country-wide issue and not something for urban areas alone to tackle, although the challenges and solutions may be different in rural areas. Indeed, rural areas can often play a vital role in providing mitigation such as carbon storage in undisturbed soils and biomass.

Why does the Plan include 'access to the countryside'?

Access to green spaces which include the wider countryside as well as parks forms part of the government's Environmental Improvement Plan. Access for all was highlighted as a missing element of many protected landscapes in the Glover Report (2019) and is expected to be addressed in the forthcoming guidance for all National Landscape Management Plans by Natural England. It is also well understood that accessing green spaces confers a range of health and well-being benefits to people. The more nature rich the accessible sites the greater the well-being gains. Landscapes such as the High Weald have a rich cultural heritage, and encouraging people to visit provides educational opportunities as well as shifting behaviour positively towards protecting rural landscapes and wildlife.
