



# The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A nationally protected landscape

## **AONB Management Plan**

A 20-year strategy for the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald's natural beauty

This edition: 2024-2029

A statutory plan adopted by 15 local authority partners setting out their policies for the management of the area and providing an agreed public policy vision for the High Weald 2024-2044

## The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024 - 2029

Published by the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, on behalf of:

- East Sussex County Council
- Kent County Council
- Surrey County Council
- West Sussex County Council
- Ashford Borough Council
- Crawley Borough Council
- Hastings Borough Council
- Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
- Horsham District Council
- Mid Sussex District Council
- Rother District Council
- Sevenoaks District Council
- Tandridge District Council
- Wealden District Council

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## Foreword

[to be added]



[image to be added]

The High Weald is an outstandingly beautiful landscape cherished by people and celebrated for its scenery, tranquillity and wildlife. Its ridges and valleys are clothed with an intricate mosaic of small fields interspersed with farmsteads and surrounded by hedges and abundant woods, all arranged around a network of historic routeways. One of the best surviving medieval landscapes in north-west Europe, the High Weald has remained a unique and recognisable area for at least the last 700 years. Covering 1461 sq. km and close to London, this extensive area offers millions of people the opportunity to experience the beauty of nature within working countryside. It was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983.

*'A landscape not yet bulldozed for speed'*

As I walked Out One Midsummer Morning, Laurie Lee, 1969

## High Weald AONB Partnership

The High Weald AONB Partnership is constituted as a Joint Advisory Committee involving the 15 local authorities that cover the AONB and representatives of local communities and other stakeholders. Its role is to champion the AONB, prepare a joint management plan and coordinate delivery of the Plan's objectives. The Partnership was set up in 1989 as an advisory body. It does not own or manage land in the AONB.

### Our commitment

- We will work together to recover nature and achieve a landscape-led net zero future for the High Weald through facilitating regenerative land management, encouraging pollution reduction and coordinating ambitious net-zero related planning policies.
- We will work together to protect the distinctive cultural character of the High Weald landscape and its human capital, supporting rural skills and a local economy for food and sustainable materials.
- We will work together to ensure fair access to the AONB as a natural health service, promote ecological literacy in schools and facilitate connections to nature in communities so everyone can enjoy the High Weald's natural beauty.
- We will use the Plan to inform plan-making and assess the impact of policies, proposals, and planning applications on the AONB purpose to fulfil our duty under Section 85 of the CROW Act 2000 to ensure they contribute to conserving and enhancing natural beauty.
- We will use the Plan to guide support for environmental land management and rural development to ensure they conserve and enhance the AONB.
- We will seek best practice in governance of the Partnership in relation to equity, diversity and inclusion, seeking to engage and empower local communities in decision-making and giving a voice to young people and future generations.

### Message from the Chairman

*The High Weald AONB Partnership has a vision that continues to develop the restoration and reinvigoration of our most beautiful cultural landscapes for future generation to enjoy and nature to thrive whilst supporting the journey towards net zero.*

*More sustainable green activities, farming and small community-scale land management will secure long-term economic and social benefits, creating more rural jobs and supporting vibrant community life. An unpolluted and biodiverse landscape ensures food security, clean air and water, and healthy soil for our children and grandchildren. Well planned housing, tailored to local needs, and designed as a high quality response to the character of the area, alongside more sustainable transport, with settlements and recreation facilities designed around safe and accessible low carbon travel, provides opportunities for everyone to enjoy the health and happiness that the High Weald's natural beauty offers.*

*This Plan sets out a route map to achieve our vision. A successful outcome relies on all our actions, large and small, and our collaboration as a community.*

*I would like to thank all those that contributed to this Plan, particularly the staff and colleagues who have worked so diligently to produce it and I commend it to our partners. We, in the High Weald Partnership will continue to lead and champion the protection of natural beauty so that the legacy bequeathed to us from past generations is passed on restored and renewed for the future.*

#### **Councillor Pete Bradbury**

Chairman, High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

**Members of the High Weald AONB Partnership:** Ashford Borough Council, Country Land and Business Association, Crawley Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, Forestry Commission, Hastings Borough Council, Horsham District Council, Kent County Council, Mid Sussex District Council, Natural England, the NFU, Rother District Council, Sevenoaks District Council, Surrey County Council, Tandridge District Council, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Wealden District Council, West Sussex County Council.

## High Weald Partnership 20-year vision

**The High Weald Partnership seeks to ensure that actions taken today leave the High Weald AONB as a beautiful and functioning biodiverse landscape for future generations, whether they work, live, or spend their leisure time here.**

This will require transformational change at a cultural level with a strengthened appreciation of AONB status amongst policymakers supported by increased investment and resources, and wider engagement and understanding.

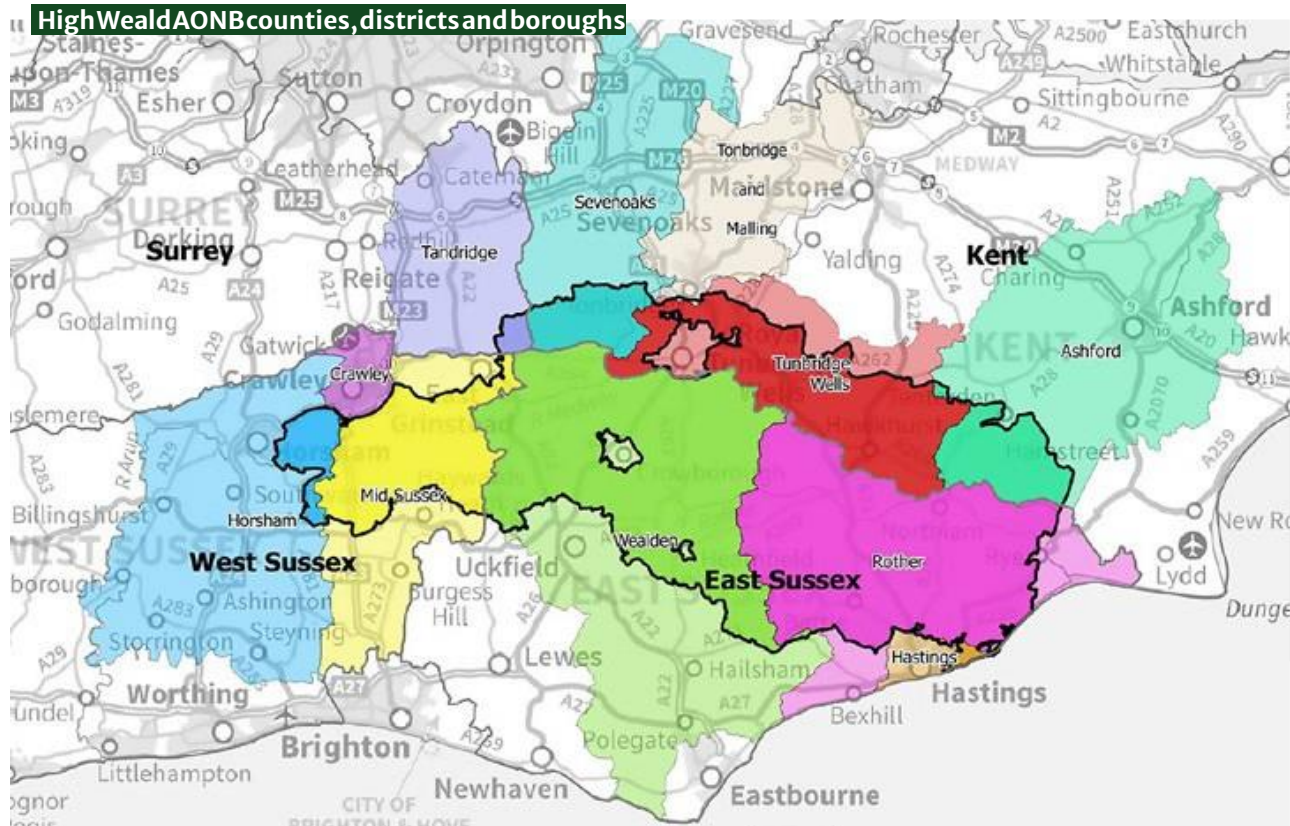
The High Weald Partnership seeks to respond proactively, ambitiously and urgently to 'drivers for change', including working towards the national goal of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, reversing the biodiversity crisis and reducing development pressure so that the High Weald:

- Retains its distinctive historic character and beauty as a small-scale anciently enclosed working landscape, with a mosaic of landscape features and habitats including woodland, shaws, native hedgerows, gill streams, traditional meadows and built heritage.
- Has restored its rich biodiversity and abundance of characteristic species, and reinstated healthy water, air and soil systems improving habitat connectivity, condition and ecological resilience.
- Is maintained as a working landscape with mixed farming and livestock producing nutrient dense food through sustainable land management practices, such as regenerative agriculture supplemented by leaving land to nature and agro-forestry, with activities and appropriate infrastructure supported and nurtured where they deliver public benefits.
- Celebrates its woodland history and has revitalised its woodland economy producing highly valued timber products sustained by sensitive small-scale woodland management.
- Sustains a diverse range of people and more young people working in farming, forestry and rural land management, supported by appropriate workspace, skills training and businesses investment.

- Retains its innate sense of rurality, tranquillity and perception of remoteness, allowing people to experience the sounds of nature and changing seasons.
- Has protected its historic landscape features and heritage assets, allowing people to experience the sense of history everywhere and the visibility of the medieval landscape.
- Has maintained and enhanced the quality of its dark skies and the ability to see the stars.
- Exhibits appropriate high quality and landscape-led new housing and workspace to support thriving rural communities, and which does not compromise the High Weald's character, aided by a consistent approach to planning across the AONB which has also halted the incremental erosion of natural beauty.
- Has adopted a net-zero future, relying on nature-based solutions to aid climate cooling and adapt to flooding and extreme weather events, with landscape-led green and renewable technologies, and non-fossil fuel transport underpinning a strong rural economy and thriving communities.
- Facilitates active participation by people, their communities and businesses, in conserving the area and managing change.
- Provides a warm welcome and high-quality experience for residents and visitors, and is a more accessible landscape, with modal shifts in transport and more opportunities for walking and cycling, allowing people to engage with nature and enjoy the 'natural health service' benefits offered by the landscape.
- Provides inspiration and enjoyment for people, businesses and communities and is valued and understood by them and championed by the High Weald Partnership.

To help achieve this, the Management Plan sets out a 20-year strategy for the High Weald AONB, supported by a five-year implementation strategy 2024-2029 with recommended actions to guide the activities of the partnership, partners, stakeholders and communities.

# About the High Weald



| Local Authority      |                     | % of the HW AONB within each local authority | % of each local authority that is within the HW AONB |
|----------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| County Councils      | East Sussex         | 60.19  | 50.99  |
|                      | Kent                | 25.41  | 10.21  |
|                      | West Sussex         | 13.68  | 9.87   |
|                      | Surrey              | 0.7  | 0.61   |
| Districts & Boroughs | Wealden             | 30.53  | 53.36  |
|                      | Rother              | 29.29  | 82.6   |
|                      | Tunbridge Wells     | 15.61  | 68.88  |
|                      | Mid Sussex          | 11.19  | 48.96  |
|                      | Ashford             | 5.69   | 14.34  |
|                      | Sevenoaks           | 4.05   | 16.0   |
|                      | Horsham             | 2.46   | 6.77   |
|                      | Tandridge           | 0.7  | 4.11   |
|                      | Hastings            | 0.37   | 17.63  |
|                      | Tonbridge & Malling | 0.07   | 0.39   |
| Crawley              | 0.03                | 1.05   |  |

AONB boundaries were drawn so as to include land of outstanding scientific value to ensure:

*‘The preservation of large tracts of country too large for strict preservation as National Nature Reserves, but yet of great value either physiographically or geologically or as containing complex communities of plant and animal life’.*

**The Report of the National Parks Committee 1947**



# High Weald AONB in facts and figures

2,570 km  
of public footpaths, bridleways and byways

**Ashdown Forest**  
the largest  
public open space in South East England

Over **13,000**  
man-made ponds

>700,000  
people within 5km

**68**  
Village  
Conservation Areas

**100**  
parishes

**57**  
Medieval Parish Churches

**124,000**  
residents

**174,000**  
hectares  
in environmental land management schemes

Dissected by  
**4,613**  
of small streams

**1,562**  
farm holdings  
average size 36ha,  
half the national average size

**3,500**  
historic farmsteads

>12,500km  
of ancient hedgerows

**40%** of fields managed with low chemical inputs

**639**  
recorded historic iron working sites

**671**  
inland sandstone outcrops

**272**  
sq km  
of ancient woodland  
highest coverage in any protected landscape

**15%**  
designated as wildlife sites

Covering  
**4 Counties**  
Across  
**11 Districts**

**4<sup>th</sup>**  
largest  
AONB

>1,800  
sites of internationally important gill woodland

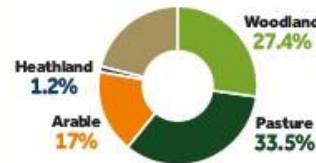
**5**  
reservoirs

Historic parks & gardens open to the public



**9.5 Million** tonnes of carbon sequestered in trees  
**18.6 Million** tonnes of carbon stored in soils

## Land-use



**71**  
Parishes with intrinsically rural Dark Skies

**41km**  
of heritage railways

**5,296**  
listed buildings

[www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org)

## About our Plan

What is an AONB?

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is an area of countryside designated by the government to protect its landscape character and the wildlife, natural systems and cultural factors on which it depends in order that people, now and in the future, can enjoy its natural beauty. AONBs are protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act), which sets out the legal purpose of AONB designation as being to “**conserve and enhance natural beauty**”.<sup>1</sup>

There are 34 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England, a further four AONBs wholly in Wales and eight in Northern Ireland. The 46 AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cover approximately 18% of the land surface.

Together with National Parks, AONBs represent our finest landscapes; unique and irreplaceable national assets, each with such distinctive character, biodiversity and natural beauty that they are recognised internationally as part of the global family of protected areas to be managed in the interest of everyone. The distinctive character and outstanding natural beauty of AONBs make them some of the most special and loved places in the UK.

AONBs are living, working landscapes that contribute some £16bn every year to the national economy. Land in AONBs is mostly owned and managed privately with limited ownership by third sector or public bodies. The commitment of all these communities is critical to the designation’s success.

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<sup>1,2</sup> [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

What is the purpose of the Plan?

AONB Management Plans are policy documents for the whole of the protected landscape; evidence based, locally owned and democratically accountable strategies for looking after these beautiful places in the interests of both people and natural systems. They are formulated to coordinate ambition, policy, investment and action in these nationally important landscapes to achieve the legal purpose of ‘conserving and enhancing natural beauty’ for the benefit of current and future generations, and to set out how peoples’ enjoyment of the area’s special qualities can be fostered. The Management Plan is, therefore, the principal vehicle for ensuring that the statutory purposes of the protected landscape are met.

Who prepares the Plan and what is its status?

AONB Management Plans are statutory documents. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities with land in an AONB to prepare and publish an up-to-date plan which

***‘formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’.***<sup>2</sup>

Where AONBs cross administrative boundaries, local authorities are required to act jointly to prepare the plan (ref). In the High Weald this requirement is delivered through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), a partnership which includes 15 local authorities covering the area together with community, environment and land-based sector representatives. Following a formal consultation process, the High Weald JAC recommends the Plan to individual local authorities who then each adopt the Plan as their policy for the management of the AONB. The Plan is reviewed every five years.

Who is the Plan for and how should it be used?

The Management Plan is relevant to everyone. It guides local authority plan-making and decision-taking, and also has a wider role, setting a 20-year strategy for everyone who lives or works in the High Weald, or visits it, to work towards. The Management Plan defines the Natural Beauty of the High Weald AONB, sets objectives for each component of natural beauty and sets out a five-year implementation strategy 2024-2029 of actions recommended to guide the activities of the partnership, partners and stakeholders.

Government, statutory undertakers and other public bodies (such as NHS England, Forestry Commission and Natural England) or person holding public office can use the Management Plan to help ensure they are fulfilling their Section 85 duty to 'have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty' of the High Weald AONB<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, the public can use the Management Plan to highlight to relevant bodies the natural beauty and needs of the AONB, and the actions that should be taken to protect it.

AONB 'setting'

The Management Plan may also be applied to the area's 'setting'. The term 'setting' is used to refer to areas outside the AONB where development and other activities may affect land within an AONB. Its extent will vary depending upon the issues considered, however, due to the high synergy in character between the AONB boundary and the wider High Weald National Character Area (NCA)<sup>4</sup>, certainly land within the NCA should be considered as falling within the setting of the AONB. Section 85 of the CROW Act 2000 requires public bodies to consider whether any activities outside the AONB may affect land in an AONB. Not all activities will be detrimental; conservation practices and economic activities outside the AONB can support the AONB's conservation purpose.

<sup>3</sup> [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

How was the Plan prepared?

Management Plan preparation follows a formal process requiring preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment and other appropriate assessments to comply with UK law. Public comment and engagement were sought throughout Plan preparation, and a formal consultation process undertaken in October 2023.

A full list of documents prepared in support of this Management Plan can be found at page 81 and on [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org).

### The AONB Management Plan and local authority functions

The Management Plan is relevant to any local authority function that may have an influence upon the natural beauty of the AONB, including:

- Planning and development, including neighbourhood planning
- Scheduled ancient monuments, listed buildings and conservation areas
- Building regulations and energy efficiency
- Waste, environment protection, pesticides and pollution
- Libraries and museums
- Animal health and welfare, biodiversity, flooding and marine areas
- Rights of way and coastal access
- Food and food safety
- Public health, mental health, social care and young people
- Highways, traffic management, public transport and parking
- Education

A full list can be found at [Statutory duties placed on local government - data.gov.uk](https://data.gov.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [NCA Profile:122 High Weald - NE508 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk)

## The High Weald's Landscape



**The High Weald occupies the ridged and faulted sandstone core of an area known from Saxon times as the Weald. It is an area of ancient countryside and one of the best surviving Medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. The mosaic of small mixed farms and woodlands is considered to represent a quintessentially English landscape.**

*97% of people find the High Weald's scenery, tranquillity and proximity to nature appealing.*

High Weald Public Survey, 2018

At first glance the High Weald appears to be a densely wooded landscape, but closer examination reveals a detailed agricultural tapestry of fields, small woodlands and farmsteads. Everything in the High Weald landscape is human scale. Wildflower meadows, alive with bees and grasshoppers, are now a rare delight, but the medieval pattern of small fields with sinuous edges surrounded by thick wooded hedges remain. Extensive views punctuated by church spires can be glimpsed along the ridge-top roads. Around almost every corner a harmonious group of traditional farm buildings comes into view with their distinctive steep, clay tile and hipped roofs.

The High Weald is crossed by one of the most famous routeways in English history, the one that took King Harold's army from victory at Stamford Bridge to defeat at Hastings in 1066. Today, its rich detail is still best explored through the myriad of interconnecting paths and tracks. Here you can walk in the footsteps of our Medieval and Anglo-Saxon ancestors, who used this dense network of routeways to move between the wooded Weald and settlements on its fringes where farming was easier. These tracks remain a visible legacy of the value communities placed on the resources of the forest.

Woodland still covers nearly a third of the area in an intricate network of farm woods, wooded shaws, pits and gills, and larger wooded estates. Medieval forests and deer parks were extensive, with significant remnants surviving in Ashdown Forest, Waterdown (Broadwater) Forest and St Leonard's Forest. Most of the woodland is ancient, managed in the past as coppice and swept with magnificent carpets of bluebells and wood anemones in the spring. Of the mature oaks for which the Weald was once famous, few remain. The drier sandy soils favour pine and birch within a patchwork of lowland heath.

More ancient woodland survives in the High Weald than anywhere else in the country owing to the small size of Wealden holdings, the importance of crafts to supplement the income from agriculture on poor soils and the high economic value of timber for ships and buildings, and to fuel the iron, glass and cloth industries. Woods were enclosed and managed as coppice with standards, producing underwood and construction timber. Large, widely spaced trees in hedgerows and parklands produced the crooked boughs required for shipbuilding. In the 17th and 18th centuries when hop growing expanded so did the extent of chestnut coppice for hop poles.

Indications of the area's busy industrial past are everywhere, from the large houses built by wealthy ironmasters and clothmakers, to the charcoal hearths, pits and ponds of the iron industry scattered through ancient woodlands.

The small scale and historical patterning of the landscape, intermingling woodland, wetland and open habitats, with many interconnected linear features supporting semi-natural vegetation makes for a rich and accessible landscape for wildlife. Sandstone exposed as outcrops or along the wooded gills is a nationally rare habitat and supports a rich community of ferns, bryophytes and lichens. The High Weald meets the sea at Hastings cliffs, an area of undeveloped coastline consisting of actively eroding soft cliffs of sands and clays. The numerous gill streams of the High Weald give rise to the headwaters and upper reaches of rivers, with those to the east important in the past as trade routes for timber, iron and wool out to the coastal ports on Romney Marsh.

The High Weald is well known nationally for its wealth of historic houses and gardens including Sheffield Park and Ashburnham Place, both of whose landscaped gardens were designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown; the ruined 13<sup>th</sup>-century Bayham Abbey, with grounds landscaped by Repton; the follies at Brightling created by 18<sup>th</sup>-century eccentric 'Mad Jack' Fuller; Bodiam Castle, moated and dating from the 14th century, Standen, the Arts & Crafts house designed by Philip Webb; the Jacobean house Batemans, home to Rudyard Kipling; Great Dixter, restored by Lutyens with an internationally-renowned garden created by Christopher Lloyd; and Great Maytham, home to Frances Hodgson Burnett, whose walled garden provided the inspiration for her classic children's book *The Secret Garden*.

Such accents stand out against a backdrop of a rich tapestry of vernacular architecture composed of materials distinct to the High Weald and which contribute to the unique sense of place, cultural identity and local distinctiveness of both the area as a whole, and its individual settlements.

Wilder elements reminiscent of the former forest survive amid this beautiful small-scale landscape, shaped by man, inspiring many notable people. These include the architect Norman Shaw, painter William Holman Hunt and William Robinson, who pioneered the creation of the English natural garden, as well as writers Rudyard Kipling and A.A. Milne, who set his much-loved stories about Winnie the Pooh in Ashdown Forest.

The High Weald forms the central core of a geological landform of sedimentary rocks, the Wealden anticline, which underpins the south east. The unique geology of the Weald is shared with only three places in Europe – the northern part of the Isle of Wight and parts of the Boulonnais and Pays de Bray in France. The Purbeck beds, which lie along the Battle ridge, form the oldest sediments, having been laid down in shallow lagoons at the end of the Jurassic period (142 million years ago). Iron-rich clays and sandstones followed as the landscape changed to one of flood plains and rivers. The area gradually sank below the sea and around 75 million years ago the great uplift began, followed by compression which folded and faulted the strata. Subsequent weathering has cut through the strata, exposing the layers as sandstone ridges and clay valleys. The amazing variability of soils produced has shaped the Weald's economic and therefore social history.

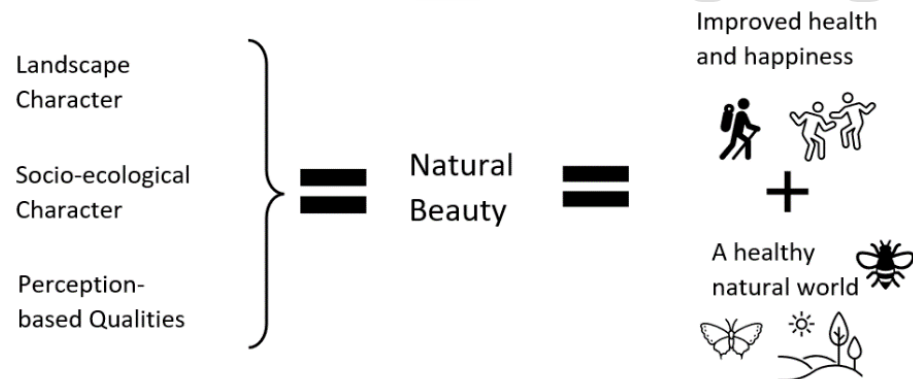
With rising temperatures at the beginning of the post-glacial period, and the continuing land link to Europe, arboreal species were able to expand with birch, hazel and pine being followed by oak, elm, alder, ash and lime. There is some evidence for small-scale, sporadic and temporary clearance by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. From c6000 BC, when Britain became separated from Europe, people had already begun to change the landscape; this is evidenced by the scatter of flints used for hunting and the use of fire to make clearings to entice prey. Periodic woodland clearance continued with Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age hill forts indicating active communities in Ashdown Forest, but it was the medieval practice of transhumance – the seasonal movement of people and animals between the settlements on the borders of the Weald and its interior – coupled with exploitation of the valuable resources of the forest, that transformed the Weald into the settled landscape we see today.

*Edited and adapted from The Kent and Sussex Weald, Peter Brandon, 2003*

## Natural beauty and the legislative purpose of AONBs

The legal purpose of AONB designation is to **conserve and enhance natural beauty** (CRoW 2000), (updated from ‘*preserve and enhance natural beauty*’ used in the NP&AC Act 1949).

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural landscapes such as the High Weald were deemed to be ‘natural’, reflecting centuries of human interaction with the natural world. Their distinctive patterns of land cover (landscape character) included unique settlement patterns, building forms and material palettes, and they were enriched by features of biological and geographic interest and cultural associations (socio-ecological character) closely tied to centuries of non-mechanised land management. Landscapes which had particularly valuable features of interest and were especially beautiful were designated as AONBs. The 1949 Act summed up this combination of character and qualities as ‘natural beauty’. Access to natural beauty was seen as a right for everyone now and in the future, and a necessary precursor of health and happiness for all<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> (Dower 1945).

<sup>6</sup> [Guide for AONB Partnership members 2001 CA24.pdf \(landscapesforlife.org.uk\)](#) (p6)

‘Natural beauty’ has been the basis for the designation of both AONBs and National Parks since the 1949 Act. Whilst the term has never been exhaustively defined in legislation, over the years, qualification and amendment to the legislation has made it clear that natural beauty includes considerations such as wildlife, geological features and cultural heritage but is not restricted by them. Government guidance relating to AONBs provides a useful non-technical definition:

**“Natural beauty” is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features, and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries”<sup>6</sup>**

This includes scenic quality, tranquillity and cultural heritage, including the built environment, that makes the area unique.

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 clarified that land used for agriculture, woodlands, parkland or with physiographical features is not prevented from being treated as an area of ‘natural beauty’.

For the purposes of this Plan, the High Weald’s natural beauty is defined by the Statement of Significance overleaf and expanded in the character component sections of this plan.

## High Weald AONB Statement of Significance

The High Weald is one of the best-preserved medieval landscapes in north-west Europe. Despite its large size (1,461 sq.km) and proximity to London, its landscape has remained relatively unchanged since the 14th century, surviving major historical events and accommodating significant social and technological changes. Essentially rural and small-scale in character, with a high proportion of natural surfaces, it is a landscape created by historic and locally distinctive agricultural and forestry practices with the story of its past visible throughout.

The extensive survival of woodland and traditional mixed farming supports an exceptionally well-connected green and blue infrastructure. Food production and semi-natural habitat are interwoven in a structurally diverse, permeable and complex mosaic supporting a rich diversity of wildlife. A dense network of paths and public rights of way provides access for people to get close to nature and experience its natural beauty. The pattern and landscape setting of dispersed historic settlements contributes to the distinct and picturesque landscape with small, irregular fields and pasture, hedgerows and small ancient woodlands interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofscapes of historic buildings.

Eight components of character combine to create a distinct and recognisable landscape whose natural beauty exceeds the sum of its parts. These comprise physical components of character that represent the cultural imprint of generations on the natural inheritance of the area, along with perceptual and aesthetic qualities and cultural associations.

Each component is of equal and stand-alone importance in its own right, (i.e., they cannot be ranked) and any policy or action may be considered harmful to the AONB if it results in the loss of, or material harm to, any of these components of character. Additionally, *all* the AONB is important; any areas perceived as 'degraded' landscape characters should be seen as opportunities for enhancement, contributing positively to the objectives of the Management Plan.

The Natural Beauty of the High Weald comprises:

1. **Natural systems (geology, soils, water and climate)** – a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone with highly variable, relatively undisturbed soils and numerous headwaters (gill streams) functioning under an oceanic climate.
2. **Settlement** – dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads, hamlets and late medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.
3. **Routeways** – a dense network of historic routeways (now roads, tracks and paths).
4. **Woodland** – an abundance of ancient woodland mostly in small holdings, highly interconnected with hedges and shaws.
5. **Landscapes and heath** – small, irregular and productive fields, bounded by hedgerows and woods, and typically used for livestock grazing; with distinctive zones of lowland heaths and inlined river valleys (reclaimed marshland).
6. **Dark night skies** – intrinsically dark at night with our own galaxy (the milky way) visible.
7. **Aesthetic and perceptual qualities and cultural associations** arising from the interaction of people with the landscape, including the notion of a quintessential English pastoral landscape, intimacy of scale, a sense of history and timelessness; rurality and tranquillity; glimpsed long views; freedom to explore and make connections with the natural world, and a rich legacy of features and ideas left by writers, poets and gardeners inspired by the landscape.
8. **Land-based economy and rural living** – with roots extending deep into history.

Each factor has its own unique set of key landscape and socio-ecological characteristics which are described in the following chapters.

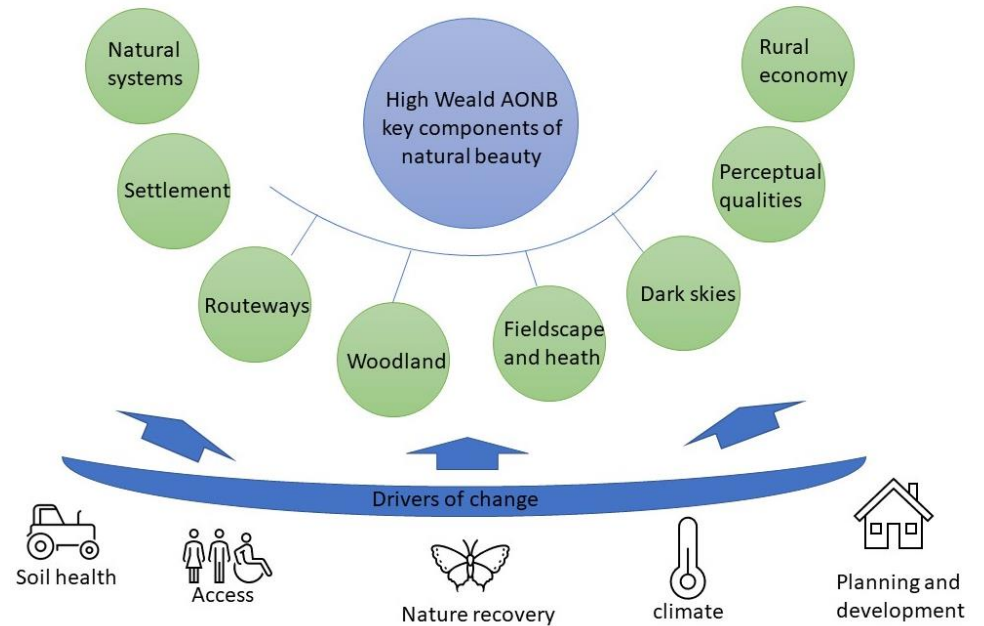
## Natural Beauty: Character Components

The following sections of the Plan describe each of the components of the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB in more detail, including **key characteristics** and **top five issues**, and sets out for each component a series of **objectives** along with **actions** recommended to guide the activities of partners and stakeholders.

The Actions are set under three headings:

- *“The partnership will...”*  
this means actions for the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC)
- *“Public bodies should ...”*  
this means actions for all relevant public bodies<sup>7</sup> including Local Authorities, Parish Councils, Highways Authorities, Statutory undertakers (such as telecoms, water and energy companies etc), and government departments and ALBs (arm’s length bodies) – such as Defra, Natural England, Historic England, Highways England, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission.
- *“Others can assist conservation and enhancement of natural systems by...”*  
this means actions for landowners, farmers, community groups and other organisations including environmental NGOs.

Over the next 20 years the High Weald AONB is facing a number of drivers of change which have the capacity to impact significantly on its core character, and which need to be addressed in this plan period.



Addressing the interconnected threats of the climate emergency, biodiversity and soil health are priorities for everyone over the next five years as we are able to mitigate many of these threats if real-world action is taken now. The challenge will be to capitalise on the High Weald AONB’s ability to restore nature, grow healthy food and reduce carbon emissions while supporting vibrant and diverse rural communities.

The **drivers of change** set out in Part 2 of the Plan are cross-cutting issues which can affect each of the character components and their objectives.

<sup>7</sup>

## Cross-cutting themes: Drivers of change 2024-2029

| Key Drivers of Change |  |
|-----------------------|--|
|                       | <p><b>Loss of soil and degradation of soil health</b></p> <p>Soil is an essential resource. Soil loss and degradation affect the AONB’s ability to produce healthy food, but soil also provides a huge array of other benefits from carbon sequestration and nutrient cycling to restoring the water cycle and flood mitigation. Degraded soil biology affects the health and biodiversity of above and below ground ecosystems that depend upon it, with soil erosion causing sediment loss which undermines the health of our river systems.</p>   |
|                       | <p><b>Biodiversity crisis</b></p> <p>While the High Weald retains rich assemblages of species (particularly associated with its patchwork historic countryside), habitat loss, pollution, pesticide use and inappropriate/lack of management of habitats have cumulatively harmed species diversity and abundance across key habitats such as ancient woodland and permanent grassland. The loss of plant and animal species affects the High Weald’s ability to be a functioning and resilient landscape.</p>   |
|                       | <p><b>Climate emergency</b></p> <p>This global issue threatens almost every aspect of the planet and our lives from economics to biodiversity, human health and wellbeing, to infrastructure and food production. The High Weald is already seeing changes in economic land use, more harmful tree diseases and increased flooding. The UK has committed to a legally binding net zero target by 2050 with interim targets to achieve a 68% reduction in UK carbon emissions by 2030 on 1990 levels (Climate Change Conference COP26).</p>   |
|                       | <p><b>People and access</b></p> <p>Inequitable access to the countryside means missing out on the range of health and wellbeing benefits associated with being able to spend time in nature and unequal access to the experience of living and working in the countryside. It concerns everyone today, as well as future generations. Disengagement with the natural world because of a lack of fair access impedes societies’ ability to robustly tackle issues affecting the natural world.</p>  |
|                       | <p><b>Planning and development</b></p> <p>The scale of housebuilding in the High Weald AONB is currently at an unprecedented level; the High Weald is experiencing the highest level of housing growth of any AONB in England<sup>89</sup>. Pressure from ever increasing numbers of new developments is eroding the historic settlement pattern of the High Weald and the rural landscape with its intrinsic sense of naturalness. Meeting the climate, biodiversity and inequality challenges of the next 20 years will require transformational change in the way that development is planned for and delivered in the High Weald AONB. Being nationally designated for their outstanding natural beauty, AONB landscapes should be exemplars of sustainable planning and design.</p> |

<sup>8</sup> [An-independent-review-of-housing-in-Englands-AONBs-2012-17.pdf \(cpre.org.uk\)](https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/An-independent-review-of-housing-in-Englands-AONBs-2012-17.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [Beauty-still-betrayed.pdf \(cpre.org.uk\)](https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Beauty-still-betrayed.pdf)

## *Natural systems (Geology, Soils, Water and Climate)*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone creating soils which are highly variable over short distances. The ridges tend east-west, and from them spring numerous gill streams that form the headwaters of rivers. Wide river valleys dominate the eastern part of the AONB. The landform and water systems are subject to, and influence, a local variant of the British sub oceanic climate.

*[images to be added]*

## Key Characteristics

- Impressive coastal cliffs of interbedded sandstones and clays (Hastings Cliffs to Pett Beach SSSI and Hastings Cliffs Special Area of Conservation); natural, dynamic, evolving and rich in Lower Cretaceous fossils.
- A principal ridge (Forest Ridge) running east- west from Horsham to Cranbrook with an attached ridge (Battle Ridge) extending to the sea at Fairlight.
- A pattern of faults and folds that distinguishes the High Weald from the rest of the south and east of England, with a high concentration of springs associated with fault lines.
- Numerous small streams descending the main ridges in narrow steep-sided valleys (gills), historically often dammed to power industry with many 'pond bays' and 'hammer ponds' surviving.
- Distinctive outcrops of sandstone in the form of crags (popular with climbers) and inland sea cliffs, gill stream bed and banks, old quarries, and along road edges associated with the survival of rare cryptogam communities (ferns, lichens, liverworts and mosses).
- A high density of pits, quarries and ponds resulting from a long history of stone quarrying, surface mining and marl extraction.
- Locally-distinctive geological materials – sandstone, clay bricks and tiles, and Horsham stone – contributing to high quality vernacular architecture.
- Carbon-rich soils, often undisturbed, that are distinguished by their variability over short distances – characterised as slowly permeable, seasonally wet, slightly acidic clayey soils, with pockets of sandy acidic soils.
- Heavily channelised and intensively managed river valleys in the eastern High Weald (Rother, Brede and Tillingham) originating in the medieval period, with natural floodplain wetlands rare.
- A high density of ponds, five times higher than the national average with a wide range of pond types supporting significant species such as great crested newts and emerald dragonflies.
- An oceanic climate featuring cool temperatures relative to the latitude, a narrow annual temperature range with few extremes, and rain throughout the year.

### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

7.6km of eroding sea cliffs designated an SSSI in recognition of the considerable biological, palaeontological and geological interest. \* A unique Lower Cretaceous mammal fauna at Fairlight, one of a handful of localities in the world to have yielded early Cretaceous mammal remains. \* 671 inland sandstone outcrops. \* >315sq km of undisturbed soils. \* 18.6 million tonnes of carbon stored in High Weald soils (to 150cm depth) \* Crowborough Beacon, the highest point at 242m above sea level. \* Headwaters of seven river catchments – Medway (Beult, Eden and Teise), Rother (Brede and Tillingham), Thames (Mole), Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere. \* 253km of main river channel supporting nationally rare species such as otter and water vole; and coarse and salmonid fisheries. \* A European hotspot for gills. \* 4,613km of water courses in total, including tributaries and streams. \* 13,401 ponds (9/sq. km compared with a national average of 1.8/sq. km) with an estimated 1600 supporting Great Crested Newts. \* 769 springs. \* Five reservoirs including Bewl Water, the largest body of inland water in the South East. \* 20 sq. km of wetlands including reedbeds, lowland fens, coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, purple moor grass and rush pastures. Home to a rich array of birds, including reed warbler and marsh harrier.

### Top Five Issues

1. Climate crisis – the impact of rising temperatures and extreme weather events such as flooding, drought, inundation, tidal surges and storms.
2. Pressure on sensitive geological features from invasive species and recreation.
3. Soil health, the need to improve soil conservation, and prevent detrimental soil erosion.
4. Pollution (and diffuse pollution) affecting biodiversity – including from public and private sewage treatment facilities; nutrient, pesticide and fine sediment run-off into ponds, streams and rivers.
5. Invasive species in rivers, water bodies, wetlands and bankside vegetation.

### Objective G1

**To restore the natural function of rivers, water courses and water bodies.**

#### Rationale

To enhance the role of rivers, water courses and water bodies in increasing biodiversity, improving water quality, cooling the environment, protecting people and communities from flooding, and promoting enjoyment of wetlands.

### Objective G2

**To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops.**

#### Rationale

To conserve landform and topography on which the High Weald's character depends, and maintain nationally important geological exposures, allowing for erosion where appropriate, conserving the fern, moss and liverwort communities they support and protecting their value as significant sites of prehistoric archaeology in the AONB.

### Objective G3

**To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty.**

#### Rationale

To ensure that transformative mitigation and adaption policies are tailored to the High Weald's defining landscape character.

### Objective G4

**To restore soil health across the High Weald.**

#### Rationale

To increase carbon sequestration and storage potential of soils, as well as water holding capacity to reduce flooding following high rainfall. Improve the soil ecosystem which supports above-ground and below-ground biodiversity and habitats across the High Weald. Healthy soil has higher nutrients for plants, which reduces the need for artificial fertilizer use in the long-term.

## Ambitions for 2029

Harnessing the regenerative power of natural systems and restoring their health will need to be the focus of land-use policy to prevent climate and ecological collapse. Monitoring of pollutants and operations damaging to water, air and soil will need to be improved, enforcement strengthened, and government support targeted at good practice. Climate mitigation and adaptation policies at a local level will need to be guided by the Management Plan in order that solutions are tailored to protect natural beauty.

### Actions

| The partnership will...  |
|--|
| a. Produce a climate cooling and net-zero plan for their own operations utilising near-term science-based targets, with the intention of achieving net zero for its own operations by spring 2029.   |
| b. Work with partners to develop a climate cooling and net zero vision for the HW landscape, taking into account the particular character components of the natural beauty of the High Weald, to inform and guide partner decision-making (refer to Drivers for Change: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail). |
| c. Champion regenerative land management focusing on soil health.  |
| Public bodies should ...   |
| d. Ensure developments seek to avoid substantive alterations to landform.  |
| e. Ensure new developments and land use changes protect undisturbed soils, minimise use of permanent impermeable surfaces, and ensure best practice is complied with to protect soils during construction from compaction, pollution and erosion.  |
| f. Design for new development to maintain and improve natural geomorphological processes (i.e., natural bank erosion) and natural flood capacity.  |
| g. Ensure water is retained / slowed e.g., by sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), being aware of possible impacts on vulnerable heritage assets, and considering grey water recycling schemes.  |
| h. Seek solutions (such as clear-span bridges) for crossing water courses that minimise adverse impacts on river and stream habitats; avoiding new culverts and remove existing culverts where possible.   |
| i. Work with landowners and other organisations to agree an invasive species control plan for water systems and geological sites.  |

| j. Promote ambitious climate cooling scenarios that lead to the earliest reductions in emissions and urban temperatures (refer to Drivers for Change: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail).   |
|--|
| k. Water and sewage companies to provide water quality and pollution improvement plans to the Partnership as part of their s85 'duty of regard' (CRoW 2000).                                   |
| l. Resist the use of carbon credit offsetting where the technologies exist to reduce carbon emissions.   |
| m. Support fossil fuel-free and public transport initiatives, encouraging walking, cycling and other travel alternatives where possible.   |
| Others can assist conservation and enhancement of natural systems by...  |
| n. Leaving buffer zones of minimum 5m (10m on slopes) along streams, rivers and ponds.   |
| o. Encouraging rivers, streams and ponds to develop naturally, with targeted support for vulnerable species such as water vole and rare habitats such as floodplain woodland.                  |
| p. Allowing natural processes and adopt approaches that allow nature to express its capacity to sequester carbon e.g., natural regeneration.   |
| q. Producing protection plans for ferns, mosses and liverworts at vulnerable sandrock sites.   |
| r. Adopting soil regeneration approaches to the management of farmland, public spaces and gardens, to prioritise soil health, including minimal soil disturbance practices e.g., no ploughing. |
| s. Avoiding run-off of sediment, inorganic fertilizers, pesticides and pollutants into streams, rivers and ponds.  |
| t. Restoring natural processes to water courses, such as re-meandering of channelised rivers.  |

Further information on maintaining the natural systems of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)

## *Character Component: Settlement*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by dispersed historic settlements of farmsteads, hamlets, and late medieval villages and market towns founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries. The landscape setting of these settlements underpins the distinct and picturesque small-scale landscape character, with the rolling pasture and small ancient woodlands of the countryside interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofscapes of historic buildings.

*[images to be added]*

## Key Characteristics

- High density of historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields, with a long continuity of settlement in the same place; their position strongly influenced by topography and routeways.
- Villages and towns mostly of medieval origin located at historic focal points or along ridge top roads, typically centred around open areas used for meeting places and trade, with markets' charters granted in the 13th and 14th centuries.
- Hamlets occurring around the junction of routeways or small commons (which became greens or forstals), or as clusters of cottages serving a particular industry.
- No significant nucleation prior to the 13th century (apart from Battle).
- Large-scale settlement extensions after AONB designation in 1983 are uncharacteristic.
- Pockets of small wayside cottages (peasant settlement enclosing roadside commons or later worker cottages) interspaced with fields.
- Distinctive settlement types and pattern in the eastern High Weald relating to history of the Rother Estuary and river trade.
- Separation between settlements formed by fields associated with individual historic farmsteads, and historic field systems abutting and containing historic settlement.
- Frequent interconnected green spaces within villages linking to the countryside and offering glimpse views to countryside beyond.
- Verdant character of settlements, with substantial soft landscaping; grass verges, lush hedgerows edging front curtilages, and full tree canopies breaking up the built form.
- Frequent – den and – fold place names echoing the area's history of pasturing cattle and pigs.
- A frequency of deer parks and later 18<sup>th</sup>-century estates.
- Farmsteads typically arranged around routeways, with loose courtyard plan-types common and dispersed plan-types particularly characteristic. Tend to be relatively modest, typically comprising a farmhouse and a barn, often aisled to at least one side with small-scale ancillary structures, mostly for cattle, which face into their own, generally small, yards.
- High numbers of pre-1750 timber-framed farm buildings with typologies representing locally-distinctive historic agricultural practices, including oast houses and other structures associated with the hop industry (hop-pickers' huts); where a complete range exists, these are rare and particularly significant.
- High concentrations of historic buildings in all settlement types, many listed, whose form and appearance reflects historic and socio-cultural functions (such as the prevalence of craft industries), with locally distinctive typologies, including medieval "Wealden Hall Houses" (found either as rural farmhouses, or incorporated into the fabric of villages and towns, and often much disguised through later alterations), and features such as catslide roofs.
- Villages and hamlets typically unlit contributing to intrinsically dark skies landscapes.
- A limited palette of local materials intrinsically linked to geology and landscape character, reinforcing local distinctiveness: clay as tiles and brick, timber as weatherboard and framing, and some localised instances of stone.

### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

17 market towns and villages with populations >2,000, the largest being Battle with a population >6,000. \* 11% households classified as isolated farms (compared with an average of 8% across all protected landscapes). \* 98.3% households in areas classified as rural. \* >3,500 historic farmsteads. \* 5,274 listed buildings. \* 57 Medieval parish churches. \* 50 registered parks and gardens on Historic England register. \* 64 village conservation areas. \* 91 scheduled ancient monuments.

### Top Five Issues:

1. Increase in greenfield development pressure for housing, threatening the character of the AONB.
2. Generic layout and design of new housing developments failing to reinforce AONB character.
3. Erosion of AONB character through the cumulative effects of suburbanisation, including the residential fragmentation of farmsteads; the extension of residential curtilage boundaries, additional annexes and outbuildings, inappropriate boundary treatments and hard surfacing, and large intrusive replacement buildings.
4. Declining housing affordability, including lack of social housing and key worker housing suitable for land-based workers.
5. Infill development eroding the greenness and open space of villages, threatening the character of settlement and reducing green connectivity and opportunities for community enjoyment.

*'[development should be] fully sympathetic to, and in scale with, the land use and local building style'.*

Lord Strang, Chairman of the National Parks Commission, speaking about designated landscapes in 1959.

*'Places and buildings... tend to be enriching elements in the sum of scenic beauty'.*

Report on National Parks 1945

### Objective S1

**To protect the historic pattern and character of settlement.**

#### Rationale

To protect the distinctive character and landscape settings of towns, villages, hamlets and farmsteads, remove despoiling influences, and maintain the hinterlands and other relationships (including separation and green infrastructure) between settlements that contribute to local identity.

### Objective S2

**To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald and ensure new development reflects the character of the High Weald in its siting, scale, layout and design.**

#### Rationale

To enhance the beauty and quality of buildings in the High Weald, and ensure new development reflects intrinsic High Weald character and place-making, embedded with a true sense of place, along with re-establishing the use of local materials as a means of protecting the environment and adding to local distinctiveness.

### Objective S3

**To conserve the distinct built heritage of the High Weald.**

#### Rationale

To protect and preserve the character and setting of heritage assets (designated and non-designated); historic traditional buildings and built features distinct to the High Weald area, including the historic public realm (e.g., traditional signs, railings, milestones and paving treatments).

### Ambitions for 2029

Conserving the dispersed historic settlement pattern, which arose before the advent of the private car, will require positive planning and innovative sustainable transport strategies. New housing development will be small-scale in keeping with the character of the area. Its location and design will be based on meeting local needs (including affordability and housing mix) through high quality and landscape-led place-making and design principles that reflect intrinsic High Weald character, embedded with a true sense of place, without stifling innovation and creativity in the use of local materials and net zero technologies. The energy performance of existing housing stock will be upgraded, whilst still preserving the special character and local distinctiveness of the historic built environment and heritage assets.

### Actions

|                                 |  |   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>The Partnership will...</b>  |  |   |
| <b>a.</b>                       | Develop technical appendices to support the High Weald Housing Design Guide, on topics such as sustainable and net zero design, soft landscaping, and the public realm.  | <b>h.</b> Seek to deliver a mix of housing sizes and types that respond to local needs, including the specific requirements of land-based workers.  |
| <b>b.</b>                       | Develop and deliver training and capacity-building programmes for LPAs and other partners regarding the Housing Design Guide, to improve design scrutiny in planning decision-making.  | <b>i.</b> Identify and protect areas of separation between settlements and green/blue infrastructure connections across settlements, for both landscape setting and ecological values.  |
| <b>c.</b>                       | Seek to support LPAs in developing landscape-led planning policies that contribute to net zero regarding settlement in the AONB, including location of development and sustainable transport strategies (refer to Drivers for Change: Climate Crisis Priorities for detail).   | <b>j.</b> Seek to minimise erosion of AONB character through suburbanisation in rural areas, including landscape-intrusive replacement dwellings, extensions to residential curtilages, annexes, and smaller interventions such as new accesses and solid fences, which have a cumulative effect.         |
| <b>d.</b>                       | Support neighbourhood planning groups to utilise the AONB Management Plan, data and guidance.  | <b>k.</b> Ensure the design and maintenance of highways and the public realm, including street furniture, has regard to local distinctive character and avoids suburbanisation or generic approaches.   |
| <b>Public bodies should ...</b> |  | <b>l.</b> Protect and preserve the character and setting of historic traditional buildings and features distinct to the High Weald area, including medieval hall houses, catslide roofs, oast houses and other traditional agricultural buildings, and structures such as cattle sheds and hoppers' huts. |
| <b>e.</b>                       | Promote use of the High Weald Housing Design Guide and historic landscape characterisation to guide settlement planning and to help avoid generic approaches to layout and design of new development.  | <b>m.</b> Increase local listing and pursue a listed building review to tackle the under-listing of historic farm buildings.  |
| <b>f.</b>                       | Ensure there is reference to the AONB Management Plan and to the AONB Housing Design Guide in local plans, neighbourhood plans and other public documents, and ensure its use as material consideration in planning decisions; planning policy, site allocations and development management.   | <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of High Weald settlement by ...</b>   |
| <b>g.</b>                       | Pursue landscape-led positive planning approaches to settlement planning and housing delivery in the AONB, seeking to prioritise the delivery of new housing primarily through small-scale development consistent with AONB character, recognising the potential for harm through the cumulative effects of separate developments on the designated landscape. | <b>n.</b> Adopting a local and renewable materials first procurement policy, and supporting activities which celebrate and promote local products and services.   |
|                                 |  | <b>o.</b> Making space for wildlife to thrive around buildings, gardens and urban spaces and the public realm, and encouraging planting for nature with native species of local provenance and pollinator-friendly plants.  |
|                                 |  | <b>p.</b> Avoiding operations which sterilise soil or cover it with impermeable materials or plastic grass.   |

Further information on maintaining the settlement pattern of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)

## *Character Component: Routeways*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by historic routeways (now roads, tracks, bridleways and paths), the oldest being in the form of ridge-top roads and a dense system of radiating droveways. These are often narrow, deeply sunken and edged with trees, hedges, wildflower-rich verges and boundary banks. These locally distinctive lanes and rights of way often display quietness and rurality in their visual and perceptual character. And are valuable green infrastructure, creating high public accessibility within the AONB and good connections between settlements.

*[images to be added]*

### Key Characteristics

- A dense radiating network with a variety of origins including:
  - Drove ways, used for moving livestock, radiating out to pre-historic sites on the edge of the Weald.
  - Ridgeways on high ground and often running east-west, closely associated with pre-historic sites and Medieval trading settlements.
  - Roman roads cutting across these patterns and strongly associated with iron-working sites.
- Typically present by the 14th century, with many extending back into pre-history and pre-dating settlements.
- Sunken routeways ('holloways') found on sloping land as a result of long use and erosion combined with water run-off.
- 'Braiding' common resulting from people, animals and vehicles finding alternative routes through impassable areas.
- Earth banks, lynchets and ditches typically indicating the former width of the routeway or to separate users from farmland or woodland.
- Wide grass verges common, indicating the historic width of routeways and their function as linear common grazing.
- Species-rich verges as well-preserved relics of their woodland or grassland habitat.
- Small-scale variations in habitat associated with a complex mixture of substrates, aspects and moisture levels supporting a rich biodiversity, especially invertebrates.
- Frequent sandstone exposures, adding diverse assemblages of specialist plants and animals.
- Linear nature facilitating foraging and dispersal and contributing significantly to the ecological interconnectedness of the High Weald.
- Veteran trees and ancient roadside coppice (often showing evidence of laying) frequent, providing niches for lichens and deadwood-dependent beetles.
- Many lost, stopped or diverted routeways evidenced by holloways, earth banks and depressions in the ground.
- Associated heritage public realm features – pre-1964 fingerposts, 'black and white' road signs, roadside milestones.
- Archaeology and cultural associations in the eastern High Weald from trade and the practice of exporting heavy goods (e.g., timber and iron) by floating them at high tide on waterways navigable until the late 13th century.

#### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

2,570km of public rights of way. \* More than 75% of public rights of way are historic (i.e., present on Ordnance Survey maps from at least 1860). \* 1,873km roads. \* More than 80% of roads are historic (i.e., in existence since at least 1800). \* The High Weald is crossed by one of the most famous routeways in English history – the one that took King Harold's army from victory at Stamford Bridge to defeat at Hastings in 1066. \* Two main Roman roads (London-Lewes and London-Hassocks/Brighton). \* Drove ways dating to the Anglo-Saxon period and earlier for moving livestock (pigs and cattle). \* More than 4,400km highly interconnected green infrastructure bounded by flower-rich verges, hedges and woods.

### Top Five Issues

1. Diversions of public rights of way (PROWs) from the historic route.
2. Loss of historic roadside character through development and erosion from motor vehicles and wide agricultural machinery, particularly in wet conditions
3. Damage to paths, tracks and BOATS (Byways Open to All Traffic) from the erection of fences; erosion from off-road vehicles, inappropriate surfacing and planting, fly-tipping, and ploughing up of lost routeways.
4. Insensitive management of veteran trees/roadside coppice and poorly planned verge cutting regimes and ditch clearance, resulting in the smothering of woodland flora on shady banks with wood chip, and of wildflowers on relic grassland verges with grass cuttings/spoil.
5. Insensitive highway engineering including passing bays, deep visibility splays to entrances, and urbanising features such as round-a-bouts, signage and lighting.

### Objective R1

**To maintain the historic pattern, morphology and features of routeways.**

#### Rationale

To maintain a routeway network that has a symbiotic relationship with settlement location, hinterlands and identity, and is a rare UK survival of an essentially medieval landscape; to protect the individual archaeological features of historic routeways; and to avoid harming character of routeways with urbanising features.

### Objective R2

**To protect and enhance the ecological function of routeways.**

#### Rationale

To protect, and improve the condition of, the complex mix of small-scale habitats along routeways, including verges, for wildlife and nature recovery, and maintain routeway boundaries as part of a highly interconnected habitat mosaic.

## Ambitions for 2029

Routeways walked for hundreds of years will need protection from unnecessary diversions, alterations, or suburbanisation, while the historic and ecological importance of associated routeway features such as verges, hedges, ditch and bank systems and roadside coppice, to connect and restore nature will need to be recognised, protected and appropriately managed. A re-prioritised hierarchy of routes, with functional routes for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport connecting homes, schools, services and businesses may be needed to meet the net zero challenge, along with improved public access to the countryside for leisure.

## Actions

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>The partnership will...</b>  |   |
| <b>a.</b>                       | Provide training for highway management engineers and contractors to ensure all roadside verges are managed sensitively for landscape character, including biodiversity and archaeology.  |
| <b>b.</b>                       | Provide guidance to PROW teams in local highway authorities for considering historic routeways in the High Weald in diversion applications.   |
| <b>Public bodies should ...</b> |   |
| <b>c.</b>                       | Identify historic routeways in highway improvement plans (including Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) and consider management tailored to enhance their historic character, including early intervention to protect banks. |
| <b>d.</b>                       | Have regard in decision-making and in the planning process, to the historic alignment of roads, tracks and paths, and avoid diversion of historic routeways.  |
| <b>e.</b>                       | Recognise historic routeways as non-designated heritage assets in the planning process.   |
| <b>f.</b>                       | Discourage new access points that would damage the character of sunken routeways.   |
| <b>g.</b>                       | Discourage lane widening, the introduction of lay-bys, or casual parking that erodes or dilutes the pattern of routeways.   |
| <b>h.</b>                       | Identify ecologically rich historic routeways in biodiversity and green infrastructure planning.  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>i.</b>  | Prioritise the specialist management of ecologically rich road verges in highway management, including following best practice advice <sup>10</sup> ; implementing appropriate cutting regimes, avoiding smothering with chip piles or grass cuttings and ditch dredging, and refraining from planting non-native species. |
| <b>j.</b>  | Support the identification, retention and restoration of traditional fingerposts, railings, boundary stones and turnpike features (e.g., milestone and toll houses), adding to the relevant Historic Environment Record where appropriate.   |
| <b>k.</b>  | Adopt careful approaches to any upgrading proposals to historic routeways as part of access enhancement, to ensure proposals do not adversely affect the natural beauty of the High Weald (refer to <i>Drivers for Change: People &amp; Access Principles</i> for detail).   |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of High Weald routeways by</b> |  |
| <b>l.</b>  | Avoiding fencing and other activity such as the use of machinery which damages routeway archaeology (including ditches and banks) or that alters its historic alignment.   |
| <b>m.</b>  | Encouraging the identification and protection of ecologically rich roadside verges and alerting the relevant Highways Authority to their presence or damage.   |

**Further information on maintaining the historic routeways of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)**

<sup>10</sup> [Managing\\_grassland\\_road\\_verges\\_2020.pdf](https://www.plantlife.org.uk/resources/Managing_grassland_road_verges_2020.pdf) (plantlife.org.uk)

## *Character Component: Woodland*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by the great extent of woodland including ancient woods, gills and shaws, the product of traditional long-term management. The nationally important assemblage of ancient woodland in the High Weald has immense wildlife, landscape and historical value, while the wider cumulative visual character of trees and hedgerows dividing small irregular fields is fundamental to the verdant nature and appearance of the landscape.

*[images to be added]*

### Key Characteristics:

- Highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of many small woods, larger forests and numerous linear gill woodlands, shaws, wooded routeways and outgrown hedges, and isolated trees.
- High proportion of woodland is categorised as ancient woodland (46%), typically broadleaved coppice with a rich ground flora, with many more woodlands equivalent in conservation interest. A further fifth of woodland is protected 'plantations on ancient woodlands' (PAWS), much of which is under restoration.
- Many irregularly shaped small woodlands interlinked with shaws, isolated trees, thick hedges and wooded sunken lanes, forming an intimate part of the farmed landscape.
- A few very large woods lying mostly along the high sandy ridges, such as Dallington and Bedgebury; and remnants of the area's medieval forests at Worth Forest and Ashdown Forest.
- High density of gill woodlands (deeply incised ravines with particularly humid and relatively stable microclimates) – the oldest and least disturbed woodland in the south east supporting a community of plants, vascular and non-vascular, not found together anywhere else in Europe, and important for rare plant species such as small-leaved lime, hay-scented buckler fern, Tunbridge filmy-fern, and rare invertebrates including beetles and molluscs.
- Frequent patches of wet woodland associated with surface water in the form of steep sided streams, springs, wet flushes and water-filled extraction pits, important for regionally distinctive species such as smooth-stalked sedge.
- Large numbers of isolated trees (often remnants from lost woodlands or hedges), such as in-field trees that provide additional connectivity to the wider landscape, as well as shelter and food source to a wide range of species.
- A stronghold for characteristic species such as dormice, and remnant populations of rare species such as pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly.
- Considerable variability in woodland types and tree forms over short distances reflecting the variety of soils, micro-climates and drainage conditions (Principle National Vegetation Classification communities are W10 and W8 with some W15 and W16 on sandier ridges).
- Wood-pasture and parkland, mostly originating from once extensive historic deer parks supporting veteran/ancient trees and their associated wildlife.
- Open woodland mosaics of wooded heath, which support both heath plants such as heathers and trees, and act as a transitional habitat.
- Nationally significant resource of epiphytic (plants that grow on other plants rather than the soil) and dead-wood dependent species supported by a wealth of veteran trees.
- A traditionally strong commercial woodland industry focused on coppice and locally grown hardwoods.
- A culture of small-scale management by people using hand tools to produce a wide variety of products mostly for local use.
- Visible evidence of historic use and exploitation (including coppice stools, stubs, pollards, boundary bank and ditch systems, routes and tracks; remains of Roman and medieval iron-working such as slag heaps and ponds, and large earthworks relating to the harnessing of waterpower to fuel furnaces, forges and mills).
- Trees used for boundary markers (including outgrown old laid hedges; stubs and pollards), many of which are accessible on public rights of way.

#### Natural Capital and cultural – facts and figures

28% woodland cover (nearly 3x English average). \* 83% broadleaved woodland, the majority as coppice. \* Highest coverage of ancient woodland in any protected landscape (3/4 all woodland or 19% land cover) covering 273sq km of undisturbed woodland soil. \* >2,800 parcels of ancient woodland under 2ha. \* Nationally significant: 8% of England's ancient woodland resource. \* <22% ancient woodland classified as Plantations on Ancient Woodlands (PAWS). \* 191sq km gill woodland in > 1,800 sites supporting internationally rare cryptogams. \* 56sq km UK BAP priority habitat: wood pasture and parkland. \* More than 7.5m tonnes of carbon stored in woodlands and their soils with an additional > 0.75m tonnes sequestered every year. \* 3sq km traditional orchards containing 34 apple varieties.

### Top Five Issues

1. Predicted increase in tree diseases such as ash dieback and spruce bark beetle, partly through imported stock or soil, and continued damage from invasive species including rhododendron, grey squirrel and deer damage from over-population of deer across the High Weald.
2. Procurement practices and lack of investment restricting market growth for higher value locally sourced wood products.
3. Lack of management where needed, particularly cessation of traditional coppicing affecting ground flora and species such as fritillaries.
4. Impact of increasing mechanisation and machinery size on soils, the variation and structural complexity of woodlands, and archaeology.
5. Impact of development close to ancient woodland resulting in increased noise and disturbance, and pressure to fell trees and hedgerows as part of development, (including post-development) with a cumulative impact on ecology and reduction in tree cover.

### Objective W1

**To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.**

#### Rationale

To ensure irreplaceable habitats and biodiversity loss are repaired for the benefit of nature and future generations. To maintain a key component of the cultural landscape, and to preserve the high levels of carbon storage in woodland soils and biomass.

### Objective W2

**To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.**

#### Rationale

To increase the viability of the woodland habitat for wildlife, by identifying and extending the area of appropriately managed woodland (including restoring plantations on ancient woodland) to link and enhance isolated habitats and species populations, providing greater connectivity between woodlands and other important wildlife areas, and helping to facilitate species' response to climate change.

### Objective W3

**To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands.**

#### Rationale

To protect the historic environment of the AONB woodlands.

### Objective W4

**To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets.**

#### Rationale

To achieve the most effective management that will deliver the other objectives for woodland, to contribute to sustainable domestic timber production, and to support a working countryside.

### Ambitions for 2029

With the beauty and biodiversity of woodlands in the High Weald already under threat from a combination of pests and diseases, disturbance, a warming climate and invasive species, protection will need to focus on fostering healthy and resilient woodlands and buffering through natural regeneration to allow nature to thrive. Tackling invasive species and deer will be a priority. Non-intervention approaches will become more common unless traditional coppice regimes are being maintained or woodlands are being managed for high quality timber. In these cases, management will be predominantly small-scale with industrialised mechanical harvesting avoided to protect archaeology and soils. Local timber and underwood will once again be essential materials for buildings, fencing and other uses.

### Actions

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>The Partnership will...</b>   |   |
| <b>a.</b>  | Support landscape scale initiatives and nature recovery projects to reverse the decline in key woodland species and protect and enhance vulnerable habitats such as gill woodlands and wet woodland.  |
| <b>b.</b>  | Seek to ensure ELMS are tailored to the specific needs of the High Weald woodland.  |
| <b>Public bodies should...</b>   |   |
| <b>c.</b>  | Resist development that risks the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or veteran trees, including ASNW and PAWS, through direct and indirect impacts.   |
| <b>d.</b>  | Ensure appropriate buffer zones to woodland, (minimum 15m zones, when justified by survey, otherwise 25m) to protect from the detrimental direct and indirect impacts of nearby developments, including activity and light spill.   |
| <b>e.</b>  | Seek to retain existing woodlands, shaws and other trees in and adjacent to housing development, for ecological and landscape character benefits.   |
| <b>f.</b>  | Request woodland archaeology surveys when woodland work is planned and provide data to county Historic Environment Records, ensuring this is used in the planning process.  |
| <b>g.</b>  | Recognise the ecological and landscape value of non-designated woodland and ensure detailed surveys and assessments are carried out if change is proposed.  |
| <b>h.</b>  | Protect ancient woodland soil and ground flora from inappropriate management practices such as heavy machinery damage and chipping-to-mulch, and to consider such practices as part of assessments of felling licence applications and in highways management / statutory undertakers' protocols. |
| <b>i.</b>  | Enhance and restore shaws and gill woodlands.   |
| <b>j.</b>  | Support the forestry industry, in particular tailored support for a vibrant timber economy in the High Weald woodland landscape.  |
| <b>k.</b>  | Promote the use of small dimension roundwood timber in construction and use of untreated local timber for traditional purposes such as fencing, public realm seating, signs and weatherboard.   |
| <b>l.</b>  | Adopt UK tree and plant health biosecurity policies.  |
| <b>m.</b>  | Tailor environmental land management support to control invasive species, including landscape-scale deer management; grey squirrel eradication; and removal of rhododendron and other damaging invasive plants from ancient woodland, particularly gill woodland.                                 |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of woodlands by:</b> |   |
| <b>n.</b>  | Controlling invasive species such as rhododendron and deer.   |
| <b>o.</b>  | Avoiding activities, such as fencing or use of heavy machinery, which damage archaeological features (e.g., ditch and bank systems, holloways and saw pits).  |
| <b>p.</b>  | Maintaining stock-proof fences around ancient woodland to avoid livestock damage.   |
| <b>q.</b>  | Avoiding use of large-scale machinery and instead using traditional techniques such as hand cutting, horses or small-scale machinery for woodland management to avoid damage to High Weald woodland.  |
| <b>r.</b>  | Allowing natural regeneration in and around ancient woodland (unless the land is ecologically important grassland or heathland).  |
| <b>s.</b>  | Keeping woodlands, including buffer zones, free of litter, garden waste and ornamental plants, and avoiding disturbance to breeding birds or trampling damage to ground flora.  |

**Further information on maintaining woodland in the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)**

## *Character Component: Fieldscape and Heath*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by small, irregularly shaped and productive fields often bounded by (and forming a mosaic with) hedgerows, shaws and small woodlands and in-field trees, and typically used for livestock grazing and small-scale horticulture; within which can be found distinctive zones of lowland heath and inned / reclaimed river valleys. Predominately undisturbed and highly productive Grade 3 good agricultural grazing land, reflecting the typical and historic agricultural practices of the area, and as such is intrinsically valuable to the landscape character.

*[images to be added]*

## Key Characteristics

- A generally irregular field pattern with individual fields relatively small (less than three hectares).
- Fieldscape dominated by historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields resulting from medieval farming in severalty i.e., land held by individuals rather than in common.
- Strong influence exerted by topography with many field systems aligned to or 'hanging' from (at right angles to) linear features such as watercourses or ridge-top roads.
- Predominantly pastoral mixed farming with an absence of industrial scale livestock farming, and undisturbed soils.
- Fields mostly permanent pasture used for grazing livestock with some small-scale horticulture and cropping.
- Medieval fieldscape character dominant, with a high proportion of field systems created by assarting (woodland clearance) with sinuous mixed woody boundaries and shaws, and thick hedges common.
- Boundary ditch and bank features typical, along woodland edges or topped with hedges and veteran trees.
- A rich, extensive network of ancient mixed species hedgerows of high ecological and landscape character value.
- Wide, verdant historic hedgerows traditionally managed by laying.
- Unmanaged fields quickly succeed back towards woodland because of abundant tree seeds from the pattern of small woodlands bounding many fields.
- Nationally important fragments of unimproved neutral grassland (such as NVC MG5 and variants), often small and isolated, supporting an incredibly rich variety of plants, animals, waxcaps and other fungi.
- High proportion of good quality species-rich grassland acting as a buffer for, and link to, fragments of unimproved grassland, including a high proportion of good quality semi-improved grasslands.
- Traditional orchards and hop gardens scattered across the landscape forming part of the visual fieldscape and also providing dead and decaying wood for invertebrates, and a mosaic of other habitats.
- Ashdown Forest (an extensive area of common land and one of the largest continuous blocks of lowland heath, semi-natural woodland and valley bog in the south east) supporting internationally important populations of nightjar and Dartford warbler.
- Distinctive areas of wooded heath and lowland heath scattered along the sandy ridges supporting a complex mosaic of plant communities, rare species such as marsh clubmoss, and more than half of UK's dragonfly species.
- Fragmented heath is found along woodland ridges and old hedge banks throughout the High Weald.

*'The existence of a flourishing and progressive agriculture is fundamental to...the preservation and enhancement of the characteristic landscape.'*

Report of the National Parks Committee, Sir Arthur Hobhouse, 1947

### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

>1,500 farm holdings (2nd highest number of holdings in an AONB) with >750 livestock holdings. \* 17,000 RPA registered parcels of land <1.5ha. \* Average farm size is less than half the national average. \* 70% of fields remain unaffected by reorganisation in the late 20th century. \* >12,500km of hedgerows and field boundaries providing homes for pollinating insects and a source of wild food. \* 220sq km land owned by conservation organisations or designated under international or UK law to protect wildlife, including 64sq km internationally important sites and 51 SSSI's covering 55sq km. \* <3% land cover known wildflower meadows with estimated <40% fields semi-improved grassland with potential for enhancement. \* Nearly 50% of AONB supported by government-funded schemes to encourage environmentally sensitive land management (NE, 2013) \* 85% of land is Grade 3 and 4 under the Agricultural Land Classification. \* <5% agricultural holders under 35 years old. \* Steep decline in livestock numbers with sheep and cattle numbers down by one-third since 2000.

### Top Five Issues

1. Fragmentation of farm holdings due to an increase in non-farming land ownership and loss of farm infrastructure e.g., barns at a holding level
2. Declining agricultural skills, knowledge and ambition leading to a reduction in sustainable livestock production
3. Increasing costs of maintaining grazing infrastructure (including reducing supporting agricultural infrastructure such as livestock markets and abattoirs) and costs of managing significant levels of associated habitats such as hedgerows.
4. Loss of green fields to development and infrastructure, or conversion to other land uses such as woodland.
5. Loss of high value grasslands (unimproved and semi-improved) and hedgerows through land use change, inappropriate management and lack of management, leading to fragmentation of habitats, affecting biodiversity and species resilience.

### Objective FH1

**To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management.**

#### Rationale

To contribute to sustainable domestic food and non-food agricultural production, to support a working countryside, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to reduce the dependency of the UK on non-sustainably managed agricultural land and the need for long-distance transport that produces air pollutants, causing harm to health and the environment.

### Objective FH2

**To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands.**

#### Rationale

To maintain fields and field boundaries that form a part of the habitat mosaic of the High Weald; and to maintain this key component of what is a rare UK survival of an essentially medieval landscape.

### Objective FH3

**To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.**

#### Rationale

To improve the condition, landscape permeability and connectivity of fields and heaths and their associated and interrelated habitats (such as hedges, trees, woodlands, ditches, ponds and water systems) for wildlife.

### Objective FH4

**To protect individual archaeological features as well as historic assets and pattern of fields and heath.**

#### Rationale

To protect the historic environment of the AONB that includes the pattern of fields, and individual archaeological features.

## Ambitions for 2029

The management of fieldscapes will need to change substantially over the next five years with regenerative approaches to food production and nature recovery becoming the norm. The comprehensive decline in biodiversity will not be reversed by focusing on nature reserves only (although this is important). Fieldscapes will need to be restored so all wildlife can thrive there. Productive land farmed using regenerative agricultural practices will need to be interspersed with wilder areas providing reservoirs for pollinators and other wildlife. New and innovative approaches, such as agroforestry, will need to be trialled with layered production of nuts, soft and top fruit becoming more common, taking advantage of the High Weald's ability to grow trees and grass well. Small scale vegetable production using regenerative agriculture practices to supply local markets will need to increase, drawing on the High Weald's mixed farming history. Chemical input from pesticides and artificial fertilizers will need to be drastically cut. There may be a small increase in tree cover and scrub, but most of the fieldscape and heathy areas will remain as open habitats.

### Actions

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>The Partnership will...</b>  |   |
| a.  | Seek to ensure ELMS and other farming support schemes are tailored to the specific needs of the High Weald landscape.   |
| b.  | Prepare best practice guidance for sustainable land management of the High Weald.   |
| c.  | Facilitate landscape scale initiatives aimed at reversing biodiversity loss associated with field management.   |
| d.  | Continue to provide a High Weald specific land management advisory service (specialising in regenerative approaches) to landowners and managers, including providing support to farmers entering agri-environment schemes.  |
| e.  | Support and facilitate scientific research in collaboration with academic institutions to further knowledge and understanding of the semi-improved grassland spectrum, and support dissemination of best practice management to advisors and site managers.   |
| f.  | Provide specialist advice to support the management of boundary features including hedgerows, coppice and veteran trees.  |
| <b>Public bodies should...</b>  |   |
| g.  | Require development to protect and enhance existing field patterns, including hedges, ditches or other boundary features, and where possible to restore them when lost, and have particular regard to medieval field systems in planning and decision-making, especially where there is a high degree of intactness or relationship with other notable landscape and heritage features. |
| h.  | Recognise in decision-making the food productivity value and quality of grade 3a and 3b soils as being of greater importance to the High Weald's pastoral agriculture economy and landscape character than simply the ALC grade.  |
| i.  | Promote and enforce the Hedgerow Regulations 1997, in recognition of the importance of hedgerows in the High Weald.   |
| j.  | Develop and deliver tailored support for pasture-fed livestock farming utilising regenerative grazing and soil conservation management techniques.  |
| k.  | Foster small-scale horticulture (soft and top fruit, nuts and vegetables) and support necessary infrastructure.   |
| l.  | Support development of an audit of unimproved and semi-improved meadows.  |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of fieldscape and heath by...</b> |   |
| m.  | Developing veteran tree replacement plans for hedges and shaws.   |
| n.  | Utilising local provenance wildflower seeds and plant plugs to create or enhance grassland.   |
| o.  | Restoring derelict and overgrown hedges, protecting and managing hedgerows as part of a diverse hedgerow mosaic, and reinstating lost hedgerows.  |
| p.  | Avoiding new woodland planting on field and heath, to protect grassland and heathland biodiversity, and avoiding planting trees on species-rich grassland or medieval fieldscapes or heathland.   |
| q.  | Protect local and heritage breeds and crop varieties to preserve genetic diversity.   |
| r.  | Proactively encourage management and monitoring of local wildlife sites and review the designation of new sites.  |

**Further information on maintaining the fieldscapes of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)**

## *Character Component: Dark Skies*

The High Weald AONB is characterised by having some of the darkest skies in the south-east of England. This gives the AONB a sense of remoteness and peacefulness and connects the natural environment to the cultural and historic landscape.

*[images to be added]*

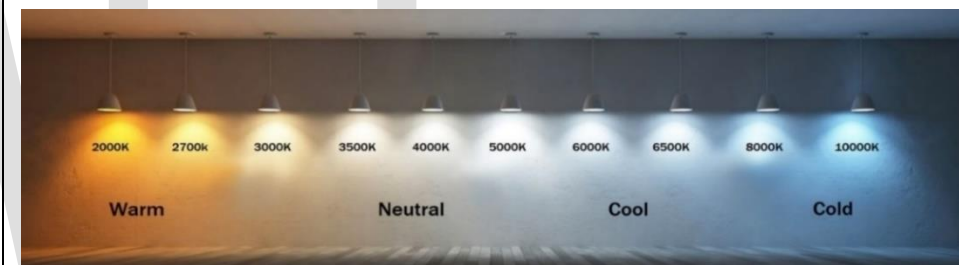
## Key Characteristics

- Intrinsically dark landscapes with a sense of naturalness.
- Our own galaxy the Milky Way is observable, as well as the planetary bodies.
- Key constellations such as Orion, Ursa Major and Cassiopeia are visible to the naked eye.
- Deep sky objects are visible to the naked eye, such as the Andromeda Galaxy and Orion Nebula.
- The High Weald has some of the intrinsically darkest skies in Southern England with the least skyglow.
- Much of the central and eastern parts of the AONB are intrinsically dark.
- Many rural villages have few street lamps or no street lighting.
- There are numerous unlit roads, including A-roads, throughout the High Weald.
- The High Weald supports a range of nocturnal species which are dependent on dark skies for feeding, including Natterer's bat, serotine bat, brown long-eared bat, common pipistrelle, noctule bat, Bechstein's bat, dormice, hedgehog, the heart and marsh-mallow moths, and glow-worms.

Best lighting practice:



Kelvin lighting spectrum:



### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

41 of the 99 parishes within the AONB have wholly dark or intrinsically dark skies. \* A further 15 having 95% coverage of intrinsically dark skies. \* 20 parishes in the AONB have collected light meter readings. \* Fifteen of the 17 UK bat species are found in the High Weald, all of which are protected.

### Top five issues

1. Lack of minimum standards for external lighting that can be enforced. Standards are needed to set out basic principles of dark skies lighting and signpost to guidance and advice where needed.
2. Increased light pollution in rural areas from a variety of buildings and structures including new developments (street lighting and domestic light spill); housing designed with extensive glazing, such as wrap-around or floor-to-ceiling windows; external security lighting; rural out-buildings; public buildings and spaces such as railway stations; and domestic lighting used to light-up homes and gardens at night.
3. Sky glow from adjacent built-up areas which reduces views of celestial bodies such as the Milky Way and Orion, leading to a loss of public connection and enjoyment of night skies.
4. Impacts on local wildlife, with light pollution disrupting circadian rhythms, migration, feeding and breeding across all animal groups including invertebrates, mammals, birds and amphibians.
5. Lack of education on the importance of dark skies to human health and wellbeing, as well as their significance to the natural environment.

### Objective DS1

**To preserve the dark skies of the High Weald AONB by minimising light pollution, obtrusive external lighting and internal light spill from domestic, commercial and public premises in both existing and new developments within the High Weald, and from highways lighting.**

#### Rationale

To protect and maintain the existing dark skies within the High Weald for the benefit of all, including future generations, for our health, wellbeing and enjoyment, to increase our understanding and sense of place in the universe; and for the benefit of wildlife and to reduce energy consumption.

### Objective DS2

**To protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.**

#### Rationale

Light pollution affects a wide range of nocturnal species and those out during the day, from feeding to finding a mate and the ability to safely migrate. Light pollution is an additional stress to habitat loss for already declining populations of many species across the High Weald.

## Ambitions for 2029

Protection of the night-time environment of the High Weald, for nature, and to ensure astronomical dark sky objects such as the Milky Way remain visible to the naked eye, will require the level of artificial light at night to stay at its present low level, with everyone (individuals, communities, businesses (including developers and public bodies such as Highways Authorities)) committed to environmentally responsible approaches to outdoor lighting, and adopting new technologies.

### Actions

|  |
|--|
| <b>The partnership will...</b>   |
| <b>a.</b> Promote dark skies awareness and education, including walks and talks aimed at a diverse range of people and organisations, across different geographical areas of the High Weald, and the promotion of International Dark Skies Week.   |
| <b>Public bodies should...</b>   |
| <b>b.</b> Include 'Dark Skies' policies in Local Plans and support their inclusion in neighbourhood plans, which seek to maintain dark skies in rural areas and reduce dark skies light pollution in urban areas in the AONB and ensure the use of such policies in the decision-making process.   |
| <b>c.</b> Follow the Institute of Lighting Professionals (ILP) guidance on reducing obtrusive lighting, and other relevant guidance to aid protecting dark skies, including ensuring that lighting designers use exterior light control environmental zone E1 to inform any proposed lighting in, or affecting the setting of, the AONB. |
| <b>d.</b> Seek to protect wildlife-rich sites and habitats such as ancient semi-natural woodland from external lighting, and where lighting is needed, require minimised and ecologically informed lighting schemes regarding location, direction, lux levels, colour temperature and light fitting design.                              |
| <b>e.</b> Seek to reduce light pollution by ensuring that flood-lit facilities such as sports pitches and car parks are turned off when not in use, through agreements and planning conditions.  |

|   |
|---|
| <b>f.</b> Work with organisers of light festivals to reduce impacts, including avoiding light and illumination shows in or near to wildlife sensitive areas.  |
| <b>g.</b> Avoid new street lighting where possible and ensure any street lighting required for junctions on adopted roads is kept to the minimum necessary and adheres to best practice in terms of location, illuminance and equipment design and light temperature, to avoid unnecessary skyglow and light spill. |
| <b>h.</b> Discourage large areas of glazing in new building designs especially wrap-around glazing and floor-to-ceiling windows, especially in rural areas with intrinsically dark skies.   |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of dark skies by...</b>   |
| <b>i.</b> Following best practice for external lighting on domestic premises including gardens and garages, to minimise light pollution.  |
| <b>j.</b> Ensuring new external lighting is installed at the lowest height possible to achieve lighting levels, and is angled downwards (including roof lighting), and using dark sky friendly fixtures.  |
| <b>k.</b> By using sensors to switch off lighting when not needed, to reduce light pollution and save energy.   |
| <b>l.</b> Collecting local light meter readings and using satellite data to inform policies at a parish level and highlight light pollution hot spots.  |

Further information on maintaining the dark skies of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)

## *Character Component: Perceptual and Aesthetic qualities*

Aesthetic qualities are those perception-based qualities and cultural associations which are experienced in the High Weald's landscape and arise from people's interaction with nature.

*[images to be added]*

### Key qualities<sup>11</sup>

- **History-related qualities** such as a sense of history and timelessness arising from an ancient countryside with a human-scale agricultural tapestry; veteran and ancient trees; medieval forests, heaths and commons; churches, historic buildings, and tangible legacies from the iron and wood industries (such as hammer ponds and place names) and major historic events such as the Battle of Hastings in 1066.
- **Qualities associated with emotion and imagination** such as:
  - a) a sense of intimacy, enclosure and remoteness owing to the heavily treed landscape.
  - b) a sense of wonder, renewal and connection with the natural world arising from the proximity of wildlife and opportunities for immersion in nature.
  - c) a sense of freedom arising from access to a dense network of public rights of way and quiet roads suitable for walking and cycling, and opportunities to discover many accessible green spaces (including sandrock areas and rivers, reservoirs and coast) and unexpected features such as the ‘mini-landscapes’ of gill streams.
  - d) a deep sense of rurality unusual in south east England.
- **Character and gestalt qualities** such as:
  - a) the homely, pastoral feel to the whole landscape arising from its human-scale pattern and productivity.
  - b) colour palette of greens (vegetation) and browns (clay, timber and iron) representing the materials from which the landscape is constructed.
  - c) a rich and varied biodiversity.
  - d) a recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats.
- **Sensory qualities** such as:
  - a) unexpected panoramic and long views, often uninterrupted, extending out along the valleys beyond the High Weald with natural skylines and forested ridges occasionally punctuated by church spires, and often framed by field gates and wooded holloways.
  - b) quietude and tranquillity with large areas of natural rural soundscape and perceived distance from urban noise.
  - c) natural soundscapes including the ability to enjoy varied birdsong.
  - d) exposure to seasonal sensations such as wind and warmth, and diurnal fluctuations in light and dark.
  - e) Vivid seasonal changes including the whites and blues of ancient woodland ground flora in the spring and the oranges and browns of autumnal trees and woodlands.
- **Symbolic and inspiration qualities** such as:
  - a) the idea of the High Weald as a ‘quintessential English pastoral landscape’
  - b) the association of dark autumnal nights and local tradition of High Weald village bonfire societies.
  - c) the legacy of physical features and ideas left by writers, artists, poets, gardeners and craftspeople inspired by the landscape such as Kipling’s house at Batemans, Christopher Lloyd’s house and garden at Great Dixter, the Cranbrook Colony of artists, and A.A. Milne.
  - d) traditions illustrating the close relationship between nature and place including skills and crafts; traditional breeds; locally produced food and drink.
  - e) distinctive public realm features such as fingerposts and milestones.

#### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

1 million people living within 5km of the AONB boundary. \* 2,126km footpaths, 383km bridleway, 61km byway (density 1.8km per sq.km.). \* 83% population within 5km of a ≤100ha natural greenspace site. \* 4 disused railway lines – Cuckoo Trail, Forest Way, Worth Way and Hop-picker’s Line. \* 87.3km of mainline railway and 41km of heritage railway line. \* 30 manor houses, castles and gardens open to the public, including Battle Abbey (the most visited English Heritage site after Stonehenge). \* 2km of climbable sandrock.

<sup>11</sup> Quality categories based on Brady 2003

### Top five issues

1. Declining knowledge, connection and involvement with the countryside and its role in producing food and materials.
2. Increasing visitor numbers leading to urbanising infrastructure around villages and popular sites, and lack of awareness of the countryside code by new users, creating tension between different user groups.
3. Difficult accessibility for many, particularly those from urban areas, with declining or expensive public transport services and lack of travel routes for pedestrians, cyclists and riders, declining rights of way maintenance, and lack of signage.
4. Erosion of rurality and tranquillity through 'urbanising' development including new housing, camping/glamping accommodation and activity, telecoms equipment, traffic and noise (including aircraft), including cumulative impacts.
5. Degradation of nature, including biodiversity decline, erosion of habitats and damage to natural systems reducing people's rich experience of nature.

### Objective PQ1

**To increase opportunities for learning about and celebrating the High Weald's character and aesthetic qualities, and to promote and facilitate contributions by communities and individuals to the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald.**

#### Rationale

To help develop emotional connection to the landscape, encouraging and enabling people to care for the High Weald and support its conservation.

### Objective PQ2

**To protect the unspoilt rural landscape with its intrinsic sense of naturalness, valued views and the extent of green space which foster experiences of rurality and tranquillity.**

#### Rationale

To prevent the loss of contained green space, glimpsed and long views, and tree-canopied skylines, especially regarding developments that fringe existing settlements in the High Weald, which would impinge on people's perception of greenness and rurality.

### Objective PQ3

**To foster and promote equitable access and informal enjoyment of the High Weald landscape and the integrated management of its resources for the enjoyment of natural beauty by all.**

#### Rationale

To meet the demand for informal recreation from residents and those living close to the AONB, whilst ensuring infrastructure, services and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment for this and future generations.

**N.B. For clarity, the pursuance of the above objectives or actions set out in this section should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB.**

## Ambitions for 2029

Policy and actions will need to protect the physical features that aesthetic qualities rely on. Conserving and enhancing the High Weald AONB will increase its contribution to a 'Natural Health Service' for people now and in the future, drawing on the area's aesthetic qualities to foster enjoyment and wellbeing, and encourage fair access for everyone to so that everyone feels welcome and included, while ensuring that nature and beauty are not harmed. Improved and fair access will not just relate to opportunities for recreation but to everything that a naturally functioning healthy countryside can provide including clean air, clean water, healthy food, and the opportunity to learn new skills and interact with nature.

### Actions

|  |
|--|
| <b>The partnership will...</b>   |
| a. Convening relevant stakeholders to develop best practice and collaborative approaches to managing High Weald greenspaces.   |
| b. Coordinate and deliver the primary school education programme to encourage children to enjoy and understand the landscape, including its history and wildlife.  |
| c. Promote health walks, celebratory landscape-inspired outdoor events, self-guided trails and other outdoor activities encouraging the wider community into the landscape (refer to <i>Drivers for Change: People &amp; Access Principles</i> for detail).  |
| d. Develop and manage the High Weald website and produce information and interpretation promoting the High Weald and its special qualities.  |
| <b>Public bodies should...</b>   |
| e. Include information about the High Weald AONB on websites and help to promote the purpose and objectives of the AONB Management Plan and the High Weald Charter for Residents and Visitors, encouraging care for the countryside.                         |
| f. Jointly produce an access strategy that sets out areas for strategic investment in public greenspaces, to meet increasing population needs and increase access for all users in the High Weald AONB.  |
| g. Recognise and seek to address the potential harm to landscape character, including tranquillity and wildlife, from intensified recreational and tourism related activity (refer to <i>Drivers for Change: People &amp; Access Principles</i> for detail). |

|  |
|--|
| h. Ensure that planning decisions (site allocations and development management decisions) consider the impact of development on the intrinsic rural character of the landscape and seek to avoid intrusive development.                            |
| i. Use the High Weald Housing Design Guide for best practice on incorporating green-ness into new developments, by including grass verges, trees and shrubs, and greenspaces, to ensure a strong sense of place and help minimise noise intrusion. |
| j. Ensure that installations of infrastructure and equipment for telecoms and utilities services are located and designed so as to avoid introducing urbanising features (such as security fencing, lighting etc) into the rural landscape.        |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of perceptual and aesthetic qualities by...</b>  |
| k. Promoting, sustaining and expanding volunteer heritage and conservation groups.   |
| l. Sharing best practice in visitor management and producing visitor management plans for sensitive sites and areas.   |
| m. Promoting the rich cultural, artistic and historical associations with the landscape, and highlighting local distinctiveness in the visitor 'offer'.  |
| n. Maintain rights of way, particularly promoted routes, and enable responsible and fair access for all to the landscape.  |
| o. Seek to retain and enhance panoramic long-distance public viewpoints to enable people to connect with the High Weald and its natural beauty.  |
| p. Choose native hedges, shrubs and trees for boundaries for domestic curtilages.  |
| q. Support conservation measures that protect a wide variety of bird species.  |

**Further information on maintaining the perceptual and aesthetic qualities of the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)**

## Character Component: Land-based economy and rural living

The High Weald AONB is characterised by a broad-based economy but with a significant land-based sector and related community life focused on mixed farming (particularly family farms and smaller holdings), woodland management and rural crafts.

*[images to be added]*

### Key Characteristics:

- Land-based workers at a proportion higher than the rural average but with an ageing profile.
- Strong influence of London and other employment areas such as Gatwick on the social character and commuting patterns.
- Tendency for greater self-sufficiency in smaller communities to the east of the area, away from major population centres.
- Retention of woodland workers and their families who have a multi-generational relationship with, and whose livelihoods rely on, the area's coppice woodlands.
- An expensive landscape to manage owing to its small-scale nature and hedged bank and ditch boundaries.
- High house prices in relation to wages, leading to increasing tendency for land-based workers to live out of the area.
- Strong rural community life based around small towns and villages supported by a network of valued and accessible local services and amenities, such as village halls, shops and post offices, clubs and societies, and infrastructure including bus services and IT provision.
- Increasing rural population, coupled with the popularity of home-based working increasing people moving into and working within the High Weald.

### Lord Strang, Chairman of the National Parks Commission in 1959 called on the government to

*'Secure modern standards of living in the countryside with improved rural housing and new small rural industries to provide employment' but observed that these must be 'fully sympathetic to, and in scale with, the landscape and local style of building'.*

#### Natural Capital and cultural – fact and figures

Agriculture, forestry and fishing account for 13% of businesses (employing 8% of the workforce) compared with 3% in the south east (employing 1% of the workforce). \* 38% of employment is in micro businesses compared with 17% in the south east. \* 29% of the working age population are retired compared with 21% in the south east. \* Rural incomes are slightly lower than those in the south east but average house prices are 42% higher. \* Self-sufficient in cereals, fruit and lamb but an under-supply of potatoes, beef, fresh vegetables and salads.

### Top Five Issues

1. Low wages and lack of affordable housing and well-designed workspace affecting recruitment and retention of workers and constraining ability of land-based businesses to thrive.
2. Holdings which are typically small (by national standards) struggling to remain economic in the current market under traditional livestock management regimes and uncertainty over future agri-environmental schemes; compounded by reducing agricultural infrastructure, such as livestock markets and abattoirs, while high cost of land and decline in affordable farm tenancies are a barrier to new entrants to agriculture.
3. Changing land use away from traditional agricultural enterprises, which cumulatively threatens long-term food production.
4. Loss of traditional skills owing to aging workforce and contracting farm and woodland economies, and lack of economic value in land-based products constraining innovation.
5. Closures and cuts to rural services and amenities, including bus services, Post Offices, village shops, pubs and banks.

### Objective LBE1

To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty.

### Rationale

To sustain an economically viable land management sector, with a particular emphasis on sustainable and small-scale farming and forestry.

### Objective LBE2

To reconnect settlements, residents and their supporting economic activity with the surrounding countryside, and maintain and improve rural amenities and services that support communities within the context of the rural settlement pattern.

### Rationale

To understand and enhance the synergy of the local economy, society and environment, and the relationship with the surrounding countryside and wild species, that defines sustainable rural settlement. To provide opportunities for economic activity that supports land management objectives and AONB designation.

### Objective LBE3

To improve infrastructure (including the provision of appropriate affordable housing and workspaces), and skills development for rural communities and related sectors that contribute positively to conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

### Rationale

To foster community life and economic activities – including heritage conservation, sustainable tourism and outdoor education – that support conservation of the AONB.

**N.B. For clarity, the pursuance of the above objectives or actions set out in this section should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB.**

### Ambitions for 2029

A renaissance in land-based activity and rural living will be needed to meet the net-zero challenge. Support should be focused on reconnecting people with the land and driving innovation in carbon-neutral agricultural and timber infrastructure, small-scale food production, forestry and rural skills development. Investment in land-based education, skills, and businesses will need to be significantly enhanced to ensure sufficient land management capacity is created alongside the resilient and flexible skills required to adapt to a warming, more unpredictable, climate. Innovative mechanisms to deliver affordable housing for local people, including land-based workers, will need to be explored, such as developing local criteria for key workers, exploring local thresholds for First Homes, and supporting local community land trust ambitions (whilst still having regard to the other Management Plan objective, particularly those relating to Settlement). Increased working from home will continue to stimulate community activities, rural services, and demand for access to countryside resources creating opportunities for new relationships with nature.

### Actions

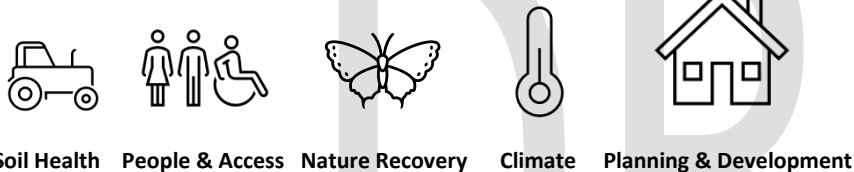
|   |
|---|
| <b>The partnership will...</b>  |
| <b>a.</b> Work collaboratively with local authorities to ensure rural business strategies and investments meet the requirements of the AONB management plan.  |
| <b>Public bodies should...</b>  |
| <b>b.</b> Work together to plan for appropriate scale and type of development to ensure continuing vitality of local communities and viability of community services, including seeking to deliver a mix of housing sizes that responds to local needs and key worker housing, including for land-based workers.                              |
| <b>c.</b> Engage positively with mechanisms capable of delivering affordable housing and housing tailored to the specific needs of land-based workers for rural housing needs.  |
| <b>d.</b> Seek to retain and support rural services and amenities including bus services, village shops, pubs and post offices, and support investment in rural services such as improved rural broadband and digital connectivity across rural areas and community transport initiatives.  |
| <b>e.</b> Ensure that proposals for small-scale farm diversification projects, including camping /glamping sites, conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald, and would support, and not adversely impact on, the agricultural viability of a holding in terms of retention of sufficient productive land and compatible uses. |

|   |
|---|
| <b>f.</b> Support maintenance and development of agricultural infrastructure and food processing facilities e.g., abattoirs and livestock markets.  |
| <b>g.</b> Promote, use, and resist removal of, agricultural occupancy conditions and seek to retain capacity for land management within farmsteads.   |
| <b>h.</b> Ensure support for farming and associated rural development is tailored to the particular needs of the High Weald.  |
| <b>i.</b> Support organisations offering career introductions to the land-based sector and explore opportunities to work collaboratively with others to offer viable longer-term tenancies to young farmers and new entrants. |
| <b>j.</b> Collate and maintain AONB level data on farming and forestry.   |
| <b>Others can assist conservation and enhancement of the land-based economy by...</b>   |
| <b>k.</b> Supporting and investing in improved working conditions and manufacturing technology for land-based businesses.   |
| <b>l.</b> Retaining affordable farm tenancies and seeking creating new affordable tenancies, jobs and accommodation for new entrants to land-based businesses.  |
| <b>m.</b> Facilitating and encouraging collaborative farming, food processing and marketing enterprises.  |
| <b>n.</b> Supporting initiatives that develop skills in land management and rural crafts, and promoting and celebrating local crafts.   |
| <b>o.</b> Establishing buy-local procurement policies and choosing locally produced food, fencing and furniture.  |

Further information on supporting the land-based economy in the High Weald landscape, including best practice guidance and practical advice, can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)

## Part 2: Cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action and investment strategy 2024-2029

Achieving the Management Plan's objectives and its 2029 targets will require urgent and ambitious action by all to address the main drivers of change.



This section of the Plan sets out our strategic aims for focusing resources and targeting investment on cross-cutting programmes that address these main drivers and can deliver multiple benefits across the High Weald's character components.

To change course on climate and nature recovery, and to improve equality, inclusivity and diversity of access for people to enjoy nature, participate in the countryside and sustain a decent living, there will need to be action at multiple levels and through new collaborative partnerships. Local creative solutions will need to be found to reconcile competing national priorities at a High Weald level while conserving its distinctive character, but key threats are national and long term, requiring action at a national level.

Effective delivery of the Management Plan is dependent upon:

- Statutory regulation and enforcement of minimum standards for air, soil and water quality, and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Adequate resourcing for the public bodies, including the High Weald AONB Partnership, responsible for coordinating and implementing necessary actions.
- Alignment of rural support and environmental land management schemes with the character of the High Weald and aims of this Management Plan.
- Appropriate regulatory protection for landscape character and biodiversity.
- Suitable data and forecasting to aid monitoring and review.

Despite current threats, there are many actions and policy solutions that will help the High Weald AONB landscape remain culturally and environmentally important for future generations. To do so, this Management Plan recommends that actions by all stakeholders should adopt the following hierarchy:

1. Avoid harm to wildlife, climate and natural systems.
2. Restore and regenerate nature and natural systems.
3. Transform our relationship with nature at multiple levels such that nature and beauty are protected for their non-instrumental value as well as the joy they bring and services they provide to people.<sup>12</sup>

**There is a range of national investment programmes, agri-environmental schemes and local grant programmes that can help deliver this Plan's priorities. Further details and up-to-date information on grant schemes can be found on the High Weald AONB website at [Grants - High Weald](#)**

<sup>12</sup> (Based on the mitigation hierarchy used by Environmental Impact Assessment and the action framework proposed by the Global Commons Alliance)

The key drivers are interconnected; the climate crisis is in part driving the biodiversity crisis. But loss of biodiversity is exacerbating climate change. Extreme weather events erode soil, soil erosion releases carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere, and so it goes on.

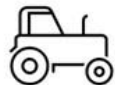
However, this means that a solution or mitigation for one of the drivers is often part of the solution or mitigation for another priority, especially regarding more nature- focused solutions which result in win-win outcomes. A good example of this is the reinstatement of lost hedgerows, which confers multiple benefits:

**Example: Multi-benefits of hedgerow restoration; hedge-laying, replanting lost hedgerows and gapping-up**



**Nature recovery**

- Provides habitats - shelter and food resource for multiple wild species above and below ground including for pollinators.
- Protects freshwater ecosystems – slows soil run-off and pollution.
- Improves connectivity between habitats – provides corridors for species to move along between patches of habitat.
- Reduces the need for pesticide use – by providing a habitat for common pest predators.



**Soil health**

- Protects soils from erosion – reduces runoff, improves soil health.
- Provides protection for crops - provides shelter from wind.
- Improves structure and drainage of soils – improves soil health and increases soil biota.



**climate**

- Increases carbon storage and sequestration – in both the soil and plant biomass.
- Cuts down wind speeds - protects crops and other habitats, reduces wind throw of trees.
- Provides natural flood prevention – soil can hold more water and reduces runoff.
- Helps regulate water supply to crops – better water storage capacity of the soil.



**People and Access**

- Enhances and maintains a key characteristic of the High Weald’s cultural landscape – hedges are an integral landscape feature to the High Weald ‘mosaic’.
- Absorbs noise and pollution – increases tranquillity.
- Provides shelter and winter feed for livestock – supports farmers to keep livestock outside all year round and reduces costs.
- Makes available ‘wild’ food for foraging – provides access for people to experience the rural environment.

## *Restoring Soil Health and Regenerative Land Management*

Soil health underpins the unique character and distinct form of the High Weald's landscape and biodiversity.

Soils are one of the most valuable natural resources we have and are critical to life on Earth. Recognising the importance of soil and its linchpin role in planetary health means prioritising soils and soil health across the High Weald AONB.

Healthy soil, like any other ecosystem, is complex with abundant biodiversity. Soil biodiversity is made up of thousands of species such as springtails, nematodes, fungi and bacteria, many of which are microscopic. These species account for between a quarter and a third of all species on earth. A teaspoon of healthy soil is estimated to contain billions of organisms from thousands of different species.

Protecting and enhancing soil health provides better food security through increased self-sufficiency. Soil provides a medium to grow our food in and underpins many ecosystem services that sustain life. The loss or degradation of healthy soils has a knock-on effect to these services and is a major problem because soil creation is an extremely slow process, taking anywhere between 100 to 1,000 years for one inch of soil to form.

Damage to soils from compaction, erosion and use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides degrades soil structure, affects its ability to absorb and hold water, depletes soil biodiversity, reduces plant growth capacity, and effects nutrient flow to below ground food webs. This leads to a reduction in soil functioning which compromises its ability to store carbon and imbalances soil nutrient content,

Soil and soil health underpins all the character components of natural beauty in the High Weald. Protecting and restoring soils helps restore natural systems, enhances the ecological function of fields, and improves food production and the economic returns from farming and horticulture.

"The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. Without proper care for it, we can have no life."

**Wendell Berry (poet and environmentalist)**

### **Spotlight on: Regenerative Agriculture**

Regenerative agriculture is a suite of practices that put soil health front and centre, allowing farming to be more in tune with nature. As a result, it is seen as a more climate resilient approach to farming whilst also supporting nature recovery.

Regenerative agriculture starts with building healthy soil by focusing on rebuilding organic matter and the natural living biodiversity in the soil.

This improves the ground's ability to:

- draw down carbon from the air and store it underground,
- hold and clean water,
- help wildlife above and below the ground,
- produce nutrient-dense food year after year.

Regenerative agriculture also delivers on climate change via minimally disturbing soils, which improves soil carbon storage and sequestration, and aids nature recovery from the ground up. The High Weald landscape of small, irregularly shaped fields is ideally suited to regenerative agriculture, and a growing number of farms across the High Weald are incorporating regenerative practices, particularly with livestock grazing.

*Image to be added*

## Soil health: Principles 2029

The priority for delivering soil health in the High Weald AONB over the next five years is through the continued investment in the promotion and guidance of soil monitoring and regenerative agricultural practices for soil health and restoration. This will help conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald landscape by helping to deliver objectives of the Management Plan character components.

The High Weald AONB Partnership recommends that the following practices and actions are pursued in the High Weald in relation to soil health:

**Regenerative agriculture and horticulture practices** – Many of the techniques associated with regenerative agricultural practices will lead to pastures becoming more resilient to the climate crisis and reduce their vulnerability to droughts; mitigate for flooding by increasing water infiltration in the soil; and increase carbon storage because of healthier root and fungal networks. Helpful practices include:

- **Monitoring soil health** – collecting base-line data which can be used to adjust management approaches.
- **Practising no or min-till farming** – reducing or stopping mechanical disturbance by ploughing and discing helps to rebuild the soil ecosystem.
- **Adopting rotational grazing practices** – short duration high density grazing techniques which improve pasture and grazing productivity, increase water retention and the drawdown of carbon from the air and its storage in the soil, and enhance the soil ecosystem.
- **Increasing agroforestry and multi-layered growing** incorporating trees and hedges into the farm enterprise, growing trees for their fruit or nuts, planting crops between rows of trees, or grazing livestock amongst rows of trees.
- **Utilising cover cropping** – growing a non-commercial crop for the benefit of the soil, both to prevent erosion, and to improve the soil health for future crops.
- **Adopting companion / intercropping** – growing two complementary crops together to utilize space and ensure soil coverage.

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## *Nature Recovery and Biodiversity*

Biodiversity is a fundamental component of natural beauty and enriches the distinctive landscape patterns of the High Weald AONB. Biodiversity drives opportunities for people to access and engage with the natural world and fosters understanding of the importance of the High Weald AONB. In 2020 the UK Government committed to the UN target of protecting 30% of the UK's land for nature by 2030.

Recovering nature in the High Weald AONB means giving nature more space, providing quality, well-managed habitats and ensuring connectivity between those habitats; in other words, providing bigger, better, more and joined up places for nature<sup>1</sup>.

The High Weald AONB contains many different habitats and landscape features that collectively support a wide diversity of species. Habitats range from broadleaf woodland to wildflower meadows, open heath and sandstone outcrops to ponds, rivers and coastal cliffs. The importance of the region's biodiversity stems not only from the rarity and variety of species, but also from the ancientness, interconnectedness and assortment of the habitats that support them, and the quality and tranquillity of these habitats. The essentially medieval origin of the High Weald landscape, with its patchwork of small-scale and linear features created through long-standing human-environment interactions, significantly enhances the region's ecological connectivity and its resilience. In the High Weald, the biodiversity value of its landscape is greater than the sum of its parts.

All areas and habitats in the High Weald are valuable for supporting nature recovery and nature recovery is fundamental to conserving all the character components of natural beauty, from ancient woodlands which support a wide range of plants, and animals including birds, bats and invertebrates, to the numerous undisturbed pastures that support wildflower species and waxcap communities. This plan supports protection and recovery of all characteristic species, from the small invertebrates to reintroductions of charismatic fauna.

Global goals aim to conserve 30% of land and marine habitats by 2030, known as 30x30. Protected landscape areas such as the High Weald AONB and their dedicated Partnerships are at the forefront of national work to conserve, enhance, protect and create nature rich habitats.

### Statutory requirements relevant to Nature Recovery

The Environment Act (2021) has brought with it responsibilities for local authorities in the fight to halt biodiversity loss:

#### Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) <sup>13</sup>

- LNRS are delivered by county councils. The High Weald AONB crosses East Sussex, West Sussex, Kent and Surrey.
- LNRS underpin the national Nature Recovery Network (NRN) by establishing spatial mapping and planning tools to identify existing and potential habitat for wildlife and agreeing local priorities for enhancing biodiversity.
- LNRS identify investment opportunities for nature locally rather than being the delivery mechanism for nature recovery.
- All public bodies must have regard for any relevant LNRS

The LNRS regulations require responsible authorities to engage with supporting authorities, as well as other local partners (such as AONBs), to develop their strategy so that it can build on existing or planned nature recovery and environmental work and align with relevant strategies.

#### Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

BNG is legal mandate for a minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity associated with new developments. Developers must demonstrate this net gain in biodiversity for new developments from late 2023 onwards. The gains should be achieved on site. Where this is not possible, off-site gains can be considered and agreed with the LPA.

Importantly, the provision of BNG does not override the 'mitigation hierarchy' set out at paragraph 175 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The National Planning Policy Guidance makes it clear that *"Biodiversity net gain complements and works with the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy set out in NPPF paragraph 175a. It does not override the protection for designated sites, protected or priority species and irreplaceable or priority habitats set out in the NPPF. Local planning authorities need to ensure that habitat improvement will be a genuine additional benefit and go further than measures already required to implement a compensation strategy."*

(Paragraph: 024 Reference ID: 8-024-20190721)

<sup>13</sup> [Local nature recovery strategy statutory guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/101422/local-nature-recovery-strategy-statutory-guidance.pdf)

### **Spotlight on: Wilding**

Wilding allows restoration of naturally functioning ecosystems at nature's pace. It does not always equate to abandonment and can be far more nuanced. Expert guidance may be needed, and species introduction should be carried out with careful planning and in collaboration with landowners and neighbours. Projects in the High Weald AONB should consider:

- Small-scale wilding projects which help buffer other core habitats, provide connectivity across the landscape, but do not adversely impact on land which is needed for agriculture or is being managed to enhance other vulnerable habitats such as species rich grassland.
- Agricultural wilding projects using livestock, preferably traditional breeds such as Sussex cattle.
- Working with adjacent landowners to explore the reintroductions of lost species and expansion of diminished species (such as beavers, pine martens and White-letter Hairstreak)
- Wilding which compliments the existing medieval landscape character.

*Image to be added*

## Recovering nature: Principles 2029

Delivering nature recovery within the High Weald over the next five years is through investment in programmes and actions which enhance habitats, increase biodiversity, and build a more resilient and connected network for wildlife across the area. These actions feed into Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and are the nature recovery priorities for Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) in the High Weald AONB, both of which help to deliver global ambitions to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (known as 30x30).

These also deliver the largest gains towards nature, stack benefits for climate change and soil health, and conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald landscape by helping to deliver objectives for character components.

The High Weald Partnership recommends that the following priorities are pursued in relation to nature recovery:

- **Restoration of species rich grasslands** – identification, audit and appropriate management of our most threatened habitat in the High Weald (often undervalued, under recognised and over or under managed) with buffering and improved connectivity achieved by protecting semi-natural grassland and enhancing modified grassland.
- **Recovery of the abundance of characteristic High Weald species** such as hedgehogs, glowworms, marsh tits, small red damselflies and serotine bats, focusing on understanding their specific habitat needs and adapting management accordingly.
- **Deer management** – reduction in deer numbers to prevent over-population of deer having a significant impact on the flora of High Weald woodlands and other habitats.
- **Hedge restoration and reinstatement** – hedge-laying, gapping-up and replanting lost hedgerows, to provide habitat for a variety of species, and provide connectivity between parcels of woodland and species rich grasslands.
- **Creation and management of scrub and wilder boundaries** – allowing for outgrown hedges, scrub and tall grasses which provide structural diversity between different habitats, and support wildlife by providing additional shelter, feeding and breeding sites, as well as being valuable habitats with their own ecosystem and dependant species.
- **Restoration of a pesticide and pollution free environment** – avoidance of air and water pollution (especially water pollution from septic tanks and sewage treatment plants) and significant reduction in use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to allow freshwater ecosystems and insect populations in the High Weald's rivers and tributaries and ponds to recover.

In delivering the High Weald's principles for nature recovery, the following approaches should be adopted:

- Identify, buffer and link, protect for the long term, and manage appropriately, existing remnants of semi-natural habitats such as ancient woodland and important invertebrate and plant areas to form the wildlife-rich core of a nature recovery network.
- Prevent damage to wildlife-rich core sites from pollution, pesticides, poor management, over-exploitation, invasive non-native species, habitat destruction and development.
- Restore wildlife richness to its pre-industrialised farming baseline through regenerative land management, allowing natural processes to flourish and creating structural diversity.
- Foster management of land for multiple objects, investing in approaches that maximise nature recovery alongside food production.
- Address Shifting Baseline Syndrome through education and understanding; recognising that the human-led biodiversity crisis has shifted people's perception of what good environmental condition looks like.
- Utilise this Management Plan to ensure appropriate and consistent delivery of the statutory duties arising from the Environment Act (2021) including Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and Biodiversity Net Gain.



## *The Climate Crisis: Achieving net zero*

The High Weald AONBs distinctive Atlantic climate is found nowhere else in the south east of England. These cool and wet conditions which are found predominately in gill woodlands are a distinctive part of the natural beauty of the High Weald, however climate change threatens these Atlantic microclimates.

A dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is required to prevent the world reaching an unassailable tipping point. To ensure the UK reaches its target of net-zero GHG emissions by 2050, the UK carbon budget target is an emissions reduction of 68 % (compared to 1990 levels) by 2030 which includes shipping and aviation emissions, as a stepping stone towards the 2050 goal.

Tackling the climate crisis in the High Weald AONB requires a net-zero emissions, rather than a carbon neutral, strategy. Referring to emissions seeks to tackle *all* greenhouse gas emissions, not just carbon dioxide. Net-zero strategies actively work to reduce emissions by setting targets, rather than off-setting or compensating current emissions.

#### **Local Authorities' declaration of a Climate Emergency**

Since 2019, local authorities nationally have been declaring climate emergencies and producing action plans to tackle the emergency. Most of the fifteen local authority partners to the High Weald AONB have produced plans and set net-zero carbon targets.

#### **Carbon Sequestration in the High Weald**

The High Weald AONB already stores large amounts of carbon in its soils owing to the undisturbed nature of many grasslands (fields) and ancient semi-natural woodlands, making a sizeable contribution to climate mitigation:

- Up to 26.8 million tons of carbon (0-150cm depth) is stored in High Weald soils.
- Woodland covers 28 % of the High Weald AONB, well above the national average, and as such the amount of carbon dioxide sequestered across this landscape is substantial, averaging 149,910 tons of carbon a year.

Predicted changes in the climate for the south east of England suggest hotter, drier summers, and warmer wetter winters. Extreme weather events will also become more frequent, of longer duration and greater intensity. These changes pose a threat to the character of the High Weald landscape, impacting both its cultural and natural heritage.

For example, increases in damaging storm events are likely to exacerbate erosion of the coastal cliffs at Hastings, and cause further tree loss, escalating flooding of properties and infrastructure. The changes to our climate will alter the delicate biodiversity found in the High Weald's woodlands, grasslands and heathlands, as some species struggle to adapt and survive whilst others move in, with the potential for increased pests and tree diseases in woodlands. Some habitats found across the High Weald AONB are particularly sensitive to the climate crisis, such as rivers and gill streams, and other wetter habitats. Woodland and grassland will also be affected by hotter, drier summers and wetter winters.

The climate crisis will affect all the character components of natural beauty in the High Weald in different ways, but the AONB can support climate change mitigation; trees and soils are crucial to carbon sequestration. As a nationally protected landscape, the AONB's priority for climate change mitigation is nature-based solutions which simultaneously work to mitigate aspects of the climate crisis, cool the local environment and restore naturally functioning systems; while changes in agricultural practices, such as regenerative farming practices, can improve carbon sequestration and lead to greater water-holding capacities in soils.

### **Spotlight on: Tree Cover**

Increasing tree cover is a nature-based solution to help mitigate the climate crisis through helping to store more carbon dioxide. The High Weald already has the highest cover of woodland in England. However, increases in tree cover can be accommodated in the High Weald through increased scrub habitat (managed), thickened hedgerows, in-field trees, wood pasture (ideally by natural regeneration) and the planting of fruit or nut trees. The importance of the High Weald's small-scale medieval fieldscape means large woodland creation schemes are usually unsuitable. Instead:

- Hedges can accommodate trees either directly planted or left to mature through natural regeneration.
- Agroforestry – introducing trees to the farmed landscape within fields. These trees can also provide shelter for livestock.
- Leaving unmanaged fields and verges to naturally return to woodland through natural regeneration.
- Urban tree planting within towns and villages throughout the High Weald.
- Reinstating traditional woodland management such as coppicing where it has been lost is often more important than planting new woodlands.

**Right tree, right place, right reason.**

*Image to be added*

## Climate crisis: Principles 2029

Whilst the High Weald AONB stores and sequesters large amounts of carbon dioxide, this is not a replacement for continued work towards net-zero emissions targets.

The priority for addressing the climate crisis in the High Weald AONB over the next five years is through building a resilient landscape for future generations through investment in nature-based solutions, modal shifts in transport and landscape-led renewable energy solutions.

The High Weald AONB Partnership recommends that the following practices and actions are pursued in the High Weald in relation to the climate crisis:

- **Development of nature-based solutions** – i.e., those solutions which provide mitigation to the climate crisis through rebuilding the natural functioning of ecosystems. For example, floodwater attenuation (e.g., ‘slow-the-flow’ projects), natural cooling systems, and increasing carbon storage in soils and woody plants.
- **Developing renewable energy appropriate to the landscape** – renewable energy systems in the High Weald can be best accommodated into this small-scale landscape through smaller scale and domestic projects, for example prioritising solar panels on roofs of existing development, (particularly on the larger roofscapes of modern commercial buildings, and avoiding external roofslopes of historic and listed buildings), in gardens and on brownfield land (depending on visibility in the landscape), before considering solar fields.
- **Promoting modal shifts in transport** – including shifts away from car-centric thinking in planning and development, supporting continued investment in existing public transport options and development of other community transport initiatives, coupled with reductions in speed limits to support walking and cycling options.
- **Achieving net zero in housing design** – including following the principles of whole life carbon assessment, considering not just energy efficiency measures in the in-use operation of buildings, but also embodied energy (including use of existing building stock and sustainable use of materials in new building), water recycling, etc and site-wide design strategies such as sustainable drainage systems, layouts that minimise natural resource requirements, and soft landscaping to support climate resilience.

## *People and Access*

The High Weald AONB provides a respite from the highly developed south east of England, spreading over four counties, with over one million people living within 5km of the High Weald AONB, as well as being accessible to those in London, Brighton and other cities in the south east. The AONB contains a high amount of publicly accessible countryside, along with a range of landscape-based leisure destinations popular with both residents and visitors alike.

There is a wealth of countryside with public access across the High Weald which includes 2,570 km of Public Rights of Way, Country Parks at Hastings and Buchan, long distance trails such as the Cuckoo trail and the Forest Way, Forestry Commission woodlands, and both council and eNGO run reserves such as Crane Valley, Brede High Woods, Broadwater Warren and St Leonard’s Forest. Popular leisure destinations include Ashdown Forest; the largest area of open access land in the south east; Bewl Water, the largest area of inland water in the south east; Harrison’s Rocks, a 1.5km sandstone climbing crag, and Bedgebury Forest, with its 22km of cycle tracks, along with a number of parks, gardens and estates throughout the AONB.

We are intimately connected to the natural world, and it is now readily accepted that exposure to nature and natural environments, especially those of good quality, confers many benefits to human health at every age, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. Meanwhile, a deeper understanding of biodiversity and the natural world affects our connection to it and how we interact with it. Understanding how the rural environment is managed increases environmental awareness and supports appreciation of countryside.

Peoples’ opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the High Weald relies on fair access – for example, to experience the tranquillity of woodlands, to be able to afford to farm or work land within the High Weald, or to use the extensive network of public rights of way. However, for a variety of reasons not everyone has equitable access to the natural environment. Barriers may include disabilities which prevent access or limit interpretation and enjoyment, lack of supporting facilities and infrastructure, including transport, and financial barriers. Improving equity, inclusivity and diversity of access for people to enjoy nature in the countryside, and to farm and sustain a decent living there, requires transformational policies at a national level, along with innovative local solutions and collaborative partnerships that empower communities.

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<sup>14</sup> [The Countryside Code: advice for countryside visitors - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code)

Increased access, however, also brings additional pressures on the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB and its character components, particularly around popular visitor destinations. Pressures include disturbance of habitats, increased activity, traffic and pollution, and additional infrastructure such as car-parking facilities, hard-surfacing, lighting and signage. Innovative and landscape-led solutions, including sustainable transport plans and carefully tailored visitor management, will be required to balance the positive benefits of improved access with the duty of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.

The new Countryside Code, relaunched in 2021<sup>1415</sup>, seeks to help people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy the health and wellbeing benefits that nature offers, while affording nature the respect it deserves. It aims to help everyone enjoy the countryside in a safe way, encouraging people to act responsibly when visiting outdoors, by respecting those who manage the land, and to look after our natural environments and the livelihoods of those who work there.

Maintaining and improving access to the High Weald in a landscape-led manner sensitive to local character, and with responsible behaviours will help support objectives relating to historic routeways, public enjoyment objectives to experience rurality and tranquillity, including dark skies, and the reconnection of settlements to the surrounding countryside. The public network of historic routeways can also play a valuable role in meeting the net zero challenge in association with sustainable transport options.

<sup>15</sup> [The Countryside Code: advice for land managers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code)

### Spotlight on: Woodlands and people

Woodlands contribute to a sense of place and provide a link to our past which make them culturally and spiritually important, as well as offering healthy environments to get immersed in.

**The High Weald AONB has the highest cover of woodland in England at 28%, which is well above the average of 10% for the rest of the country.**

Woodlands often hold a special place in people's hearts and can be awe inspiring places to visit. Research shows that woodlands are also especially good for our wellbeing. Because of their physical structure they are able to screen out noise and other intrusions from the modern world, absorb large numbers of people without feeling crowded, and offer a wide range of activities (Forestry Commission, 2005). The mental health benefits of woodlands are estimated to be worth around £141 million in England alone. This is thought to arise from more natural sounds such as bird song, being physically active and lower air pollution levels (see e.g., Saraev et al., 2020 (FC)).

*Image to be added*

## People & Access: Principles 2029

The priorities for delivering People and Access within the High Weald AONB over the next five years are set out below.

Investment is required to enable the High Weald to offer fair access to the widest range of people. Although the High Weald AONB has a rich network of public rights of way and nature reserves, not all people are able to reach these, or use them. The following priorities and actions will help people to access the High Weald and secure a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits, whilst conserving and enhancing its natural beauty. Pursuance of any of these priorities or actions should not involve harm to any of the character components set out in Part 1 of this Plan.

- **Investment in new green spaces** – such as SANGs, Country Parks and nature reserves within the High Weald, which are close to where people live and have the infrastructure to support a range of access needs and recreation opportunities, whilst ensuring infrastructure and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing the High Weald’s natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment.
- **Promotion and maintenance of the High Weald’s extensive public rights of way network** – including mitigating damage from the effects of climate change, encouraging their use for active travel for recreation, short journeys, wellbeing, and appreciation of the historic and cultural landscape, designating quiet lanes, keeping bridleways and footpaths clear, ensuring paths, gates, bridges and benches are in working condition, and signposts and other signage are maintained.
- **Improving transport into and around the High Weald** – developing innovative solutions to active and shared transport solutions for those who live and work in, and close to the AONB.
- **Management and landscape-sensitive improvement of on-site green space infrastructure** – including
  - the development of holistic, landscape-led visitor management strategies for larger tourism destinations, and
  - catering for a range of needs including ethnically diverse and socially deprived groups, and those with mobility or visual impairments, including the provision of disabled parking spaces, wheelchair/mobility scooter friendly paths and routes, rest points such as benches, and interpretation boards, waymarked trails or routes. The quantum, siting and design of onsite infrastructure and furniture must be carefully planned to be consistent with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the High Weald.
- **Development of training programmes in traditional land management practices and skills, and promotion of celebratory landscape-inspired outdoor events and cultural activities** - including promoting the enjoyment of dark skies, and walking festivals, that benefit health and wellbeing, and increase understanding of the natural world.



## *Planning and development in the High Weald AONB*

Meeting the climate, biodiversity and inequality challenges of the next 20 years will require transformational change in the way that development is planned for and delivered in the High Weald AONB. Being nationally designated for their outstanding natural beauty, AONB landscapes should be exemplars of sustainable planning and design. As the AONB continues to evolve to meet the needs of current and future generations, this must happen in a way that respects its landscape character, natural resources and cultural heritage.

## Local plan policies and the AONB

Responsibility for planning in AONBs lies with the relevant local authority. The AONB Management Plan does not form part of the statutory development plan, but local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning bodies should take the AONB Management Plan into account when preparing local and neighbourhood plans. AONB Management Plans should also be material considerations for making decisions on planning applications within AONBs and their setting.

The 11 districts and boroughs with land in the High Weald AONB each have local plans and strategies that contain policies specific to the AONB, as do many of the parishes that have a 'Made' Neighbourhood Plan. The waste, mineral and highway strategies prepared by the four county councils with land in the AONB may also have AONB specific policies.

As part of their shared ambition to coordinate policies across the AONB, High Weald partners commit to providing a representative with sufficient experience and seniority from each local authority to the Officers' Steering Group (OSG) which meets regularly during the year to build policy consensus and develop joint working initiatives.

## AONB Setting

It is not only development within the boundary of the High Weald AONB that needs to be informed by consideration of the Management Plan; national planning policy and guidance makes clear that land within the setting of AONBs often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, and here poorly located or designed development can do significant harm. This is especially the case where long views from or to the designated landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary. Development within the settings of these areas will therefore need sensitive handling that takes these potential impacts into account.



## National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and AONBs

National planning policy is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2021. The NPPF applies as a whole to AONBs as it does to non-designated areas and sets out that planning policies and decisions should [inter alia] recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside<sup>16</sup>. However, two paragraphs refer specifically to AONBs: paragraphs 176 and 177.

The NPPF and the accompanying Planning Practice Guidance form important material considerations with regard to development management and confirm that:

- **The scale and extent of development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) should be limited.**<sup>17</sup>
- **The presumption in favour of sustainable development does not automatically apply within the High Weald AONB (where the application of policies in the Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed, OR where any adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the Framework taken as a whole)**<sup>18</sup>.
- **There is a presumption that planning permission should be refused for major development in AONBs other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.**<sup>19</sup>
- **Policies for protecting AONBs may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for housing and other development in full**<sup>20</sup>.
- **AONBs are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs arising from adjoining, non-designated, areas**<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> NPPF 2021 para 174

<sup>17</sup> NPPF 2021 para 176

<sup>18</sup> NPPF 2021 para 11 (d) and its footnote 7

### **Paragraph 176 of the NPPF states:**

*'Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads. The scale and extent of development within all these designated areas should be limited, while development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas.'*

### **Planning Principle 1**

In order to demonstrate that planning applications are consistent with national policy, and in particular reflect the great weight to be given to the protection of the AONB in the NPPF para 176, and to ensure planning decisions take full account of the importance of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, the High Weald Partnership recommends that proposals be accompanied by suitable assessment reports which:

- specifically set out how proposals have been informed by the Management Plan and, where relevant, the HW housing Design Guide
- set out how any adverse impacts on the character and conservation purpose of the AONB, and on the specific components of character as set out in this Plan, including cumulative impacts, have been avoided or minimised in the proposals. LVIA reports, assessments of impact on scenic beauty and Design & Access Statements are all useful tools in this regard
- are used to clearly inform planning decision-makers in considering the scale, extent, location and design of development, in accordance with para 176

and that production of local plans, site allocation proposals and Neighbourhood Plans should be informed by similar assessments.

<sup>19</sup> NPPF 2021 para 177

<sup>20</sup> NPPF 2021 para 11 (b) (i)

<sup>21</sup> NPPG Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721

**Paragraph 177 of the NPPF states:**

*'When considering applications for development within National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest. Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:*

- a) the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;*
- b) the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*
- c) any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreation opportunities and the extent to which they can be moderated.'*

**Major development as referred to in paragraph 177 of the NPPF is not defined, but Footnote 60 of the NPPF explains:**

*'For the purposes of paragraphs 176 and 177, whether a proposal is 'major development' is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined.'*

**Planning Principle 2**

Noting that whether development is major or not in the context of the AONB (under para 177 of the NPPF) is a matter of planning judgement for the decision maker, the High Weald Partnership recommends that, in forming that judgement, specific consideration be given to the following:

- The potential of the proposal to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty for which the AONB is designated and defined, as set out in this Management Plan, for example, where the nature, scale and setting of the proposal could significantly harm any of the character components.
- The potential for such adverse impact from cumulative development

and that on a precautionary basis, such consideration is also applied to the plan making stage and any proposed allocations for development in the AONB.

N.B. It is important to remember that even where development is not considered to be 'major' under para 177, the provisions of para 176 still apply.

New Housing Development in the HW AONB

The built character of the High Weald, in terms of settlement form and structure, siting in the landscape, the relationships of buildings to streets, and building form and massing, is highly important to the natural and scenic beauty of the High Weald.

The High Weald Partnership recommends that new development should be 'landscape-led' and consistent with the objectives set out in this Plan and expanded on in the **High Weald Housing Design Guide**<sup>22</sup>. The Guide sets out the urban design expectations for all new housing developments within the High Weald AONB, with the objective of achieving higher quality and landscape-led design that reflects intrinsic High Weald character, that steers away from generic or suburban layout and design approaches, and that is instead embedded with a true sense of place, without stifling innovation and creativity.

Landscape-led design means using landscape as a framework to understand the site and formulate a design response. The term landscape used here includes landscape history, physical character and perceived qualities, and socio-economic and ecological functioning – all of which contribute to understanding a place. A design response includes issues such as site capacity, layout, form, scale and detailing as well as any landscaping and ecology plans which combine to make a place beautiful and distinctive and integrate it into the surrounding AONB.



As well as providing a brief explanation of the High Weald AONB and its settlement character, the Design Guide format is intended to help structure the design process, with 10 Design Themes ranging from **Responding to Site & Landscape Context**, **Layout & Structuring the Site**, and **The Right Built Form**, to more detailed matters such as **Parking Strategies**, **Building Appearance**, and **Reinforcing Local Planting Character**. Each Design Theme contains detailed analysis and advice, illustrated with photographs and diagrams, and a summary checklist, with a particular emphasis on tailoring design approaches to support the overall character and identity of the High Weald. As such, it aligns with the advice in the NPPF (para 128) and in the National Design Guide advocating locally based design guides and regarding their scope and purpose.

### **Planning Principle 3**

The High Weald Partnership recommends that:

- the High Weald Housing Design Guide is used by developers and designers to create schemes which contribute positively to the character and natural beauty of the High Weald AONB, and by Neighbourhood Plan groups to help inform Neighbourhood Plans, and by LPAs to inform planning policies, site allocations and development management decision-making.
- local plan policies for new housing development in the High Weald should aim towards net-zero standards.
- new development should contribute positively to nature recovery, ensuring that opportunities for biodiversity gains are maximised, and the functioning of existing on-site and site-adjacent features and natural processes are protected and enhanced.
- local plan policies consider alternative mechanisms to improve delivery and affordability while minimising land take, to help deliver housing within the AONB in a manner that complies with the NPPF, and which can help conserve the character and beauty of the HW AONB. For instance, encouraging the subdivision of larger homes into smaller ones and the efficient utilisation of the existing building stock and brownfield sites, along with ensuring that energy-efficient new development makes most efficient use of land, whilst still having appropriate regard to retaining and incorporating landscape features.

<sup>22</sup> [Design Guide and Colour Study - High Weald](#)

## Historic built environment in the High Weald AONB

The historic environment is fundamental to the distinctive character, sense of place and natural beauty of AONBs<sup>23</sup>. The rich built heritage greatly informs the character of the High Weald AONB; historic hamlets and farmsteads are an intrinsic part of the distinct and picturesque landscape, with the rolling pastureland and small ancient woodlands of the countryside interspersed with the rich clay-tiled roofs of historic buildings. Along with the domestic building stock of farmhouses and cottages, building typologies reflect locally distinct historic agricultural practices, for example the distinctive brick roundels of the hop industry's oast-houses, fine timber-framed barns and modest brick cowsheds, dairies and outbuildings.

National planning policy places great importance on the conservation of these Heritage Assets (Chapter 12 of the NPPF) which can be classified as:

- **'designated'** – i.e., those benefiting from statutory designation, such as Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas, and
- **'non-designated'** – other historic features and structures which contribute positively to the physical, historic and socio-cultural character of the area, and which warrant retention and interpretation, and which can be identified in 'Local Lists' (prepared by LPAs or via Neighbourhood Plans), or during the decision-making process.

### Planning Principle 4

The High Weald Partnership recommends that, with reference to the contribution that Heritage Assets and their settings make to the cultural value, character and natural beauty of the AONB, appropriate regard is had to their conservation in the planning process, including in planning policy and site allocations process, neighbourhood planning and in decision-making.

## Energy Efficiency and Historic Buildings

To help meet net zero ambitions, the energy efficiency of historic buildings is an important consideration; Historic England recognises the urgent need for climate action and believe that England's existing buildings have an essential role to play in fighting climate change. Sustainability in building is not just associated with operational energy consumption, but also the embodied energy used in the construction of buildings, and to meet carbon neutral targets we must recycle, reuse and responsibly adapt our existing historic buildings. Continuing to upgrade, repair and maintain historic buildings makes good social, economic and environmental sense, and will help conserve and enhance the AONB, contributing to the Management Plan objectives and Climate Change priorities.

It is important to recognise that retrofitting measures which may be suitable for modern (post-war) housing stock can be damaging to older buildings, either through causing unacceptable damage to the character and appearance of historic buildings, or through causing damaging technical conflicts with traditional construction.

Historic England's extensive research in the complex area of understanding and improving the energy performance of historic buildings has led to their overarching guidance: [Energy Efficiency and Historic Buildings: How to Improve Energy Efficiency | Historic England](#). This sets out their holistic 'whole building approach' which can help in meeting the combined objectives of increasing energy efficiency and sustaining significance in heritage assets while avoiding unintended consequences, and is supported by a more detailed suite of guidance on practical measures.

### Planning Principle 5

The High Weald Partnership recommends that energy efficiency planning policies and decision-making affecting the historic built environment should follow best practice advice from Historic England, in order that energy conservation measures are balanced with conserving the historic environment that contributes to the natural beauty of the AONB.

<sup>23</sup> [Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty | Historic England](#)

### Public Realm in the High Weald AONB

The historic public realm across the High Weald plays an important role in defining the special character of the AONB. Historic features such as locally distinctive paving, railings, milestones and historic fingerpost signs, along with red telephone kiosks and letterboxes, contribute positively to the character of the rural public realm. The materials, finishes and elements used within the public realm often make a significant contribution to an area's sense of place, and the retention, sensitive repair, and, where appropriate, reinstatement of such features is important in maintaining the AONB's character.

Rural areas can also suffer suburbanisation through inappropriate creation of footways with raised kerbs, the loss of verges, the introduction of excessive road signage, or of signage and railings in inappropriate modern and generic styles and materials, and the introduction of street lighting. Meanwhile, wildflower verges are part of the High Weald's natural beauty and often a refuge for wildlife that has disappeared elsewhere, and the appropriate management of both woodland verges and grassland verges is important for ecology.

The public realm is also important in the quality of everyday life throughout the AONB, from the accessibility and convenience of bus stops, benches and litter bins to the community activities and events enabled by quality public spaces.

Meanwhile, considerable new public realm is created in new developments, which offers the opportunity to enhance the landscape character and ecological value of existing retained green infrastructure on-site or adjacent, as well as providing new positive planting. Within new developments, existing site features such as trees, hedgerows, ponds and streams should be retained as part of the public realm to embed a genuine local sense of place in new schemes, while new green spaces and habitats for wildlife should be

maximised, with a range of native plantings. Further, green spaces within sites bring with them opportunities to enhance the locality through their management, drawing on local traditional land-management skills (e.g., coppicing) and supporting local industry.

#### **Planning Principle 6**

The High Weald Partnership recommends that:

- Historic public realm features in the AONB are given consideration as Heritage Assets, and should be retained in situ and repaired appropriately, in order to conserve their contribution to the natural beauty of the AONB.
- Partners responsible for management of roadside verges and works in their vicinity follow best practice advice, including [Managing grassland road verges 2020.pdf \(plantlife.org.uk\)](https://www.plantlife.org.uk/resources/management/Managing_grassland_road_verges_2020.pdf).
- Design choices for new or replacement public realm infrastructure, including paving, signage and lighting, are sensitive to the character of the AONB, use traditional designs and materials, and have regard to the objectives of the Management Plan.
- New public realm soft landscaping schemes are informed by the advice in the High Weald Housing Design Guide regarding creating multi-layered planting strategies of native trees, hedging plants and wildflowers, avoiding ubiquitous, suburbanising planting of ornamental ground-cover shrubs or locally non-native or invasive species.

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# Monitoring

## Local Monitoring

1) For the duration of the management plan, to adapt monitoring and targets to align with the new Outcomes Framework, but that remain specific to the High Weald landscape, and are within resources to carry out such activities. This includes:

- Taking a science-based approach to evidence
- Building access to the relevant information
- Developing a cost-effective, light-touch and inclusive monitoring programme

2) Reporting biodiversity duties within the High Weald AONB<sup>1,2</sup>

Local authorities and local planning authorities must publish a biodiversity report to comply with biodiversity duties. This can include action taken within the area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) in the biodiversity report. Where the boundaries of AONBs cross multiple local authorities, as is the case regarding the High Weald AONB, local authorities should agree how to approach reporting together. Reports are published on a five-year cycle, with the first report published no later than January 2026.

## National Monitoring

Targets set by national government, as part of the 25-year Environment Plan Outcome indicator framework. This monitoring will cover the following themes:<sup>24</sup>

Air  
Wildlife  
Natural resources  
International

Water  
Resilience  
Natural beauty and engagement

Seas and estuaries  
Biosecurity, chemicals and noise  
Resource use and waste

<sup>24</sup> Awaiting further information from Defra, due late 2023

# High Weald Charter for residents and visitors

The following are actions that all residents, visitors and businesses can take to help care for this nationally important landscape.

## **Buy local products and services from farmers and woodland managers who actively manage their land to benefit the environment**

The landscape and wildlife value of the area's woodlands, hedges, meadows, heathlands and field margins are dependent on traditional management. Money invested in products and services that help support this management is money invested in conserving the AONB and its local economy.

## **Take pride in the High Weald – promote its special features and places to family, friends and visitors**

Promoting what you find special about the High Weald is the best way of encouraging commitment and action by others to the area.

## **Slow down for people, horses and wildlife**

Traffic spoils enjoyment of the High Weald for 80 per cent of its residents. Speeding cars kill people, horses, badgers, deer and foxes, and ancient routeways and their rare plants are damaged by inconsiderate driving and parking.

## **Help prevent the spread of invasive and harmful plant and animal species**

Introduced plant, animal and fish species spread rapidly in the High Weald countryside, competing with our native wildlife and leading to its loss.

## **Have a say**

Your views can influence care of the area – use consultation processes operating at parish, district, county and AONB level to steer policy and action that affects the area.

## **Use less water**

Demands for water lead to high levels of water extraction, damaging the wildlife of the AONB's streams, rivers and wet grasslands. Increased demand in future will create pressure for new reservoirs within the AONB.

## **Avoid using the car where possible and consider using renewable energy in your home**

Emissions from petrol and other non-renewable fossil fuels contribute to climate change and lead to degradation of valuable habitats such as sandrock, and gradual loss of wildlife such as bluebells.

## **Get involved – support local conservation organisations**

With your financial and practical support, local conservation organisations can take action to care for the area such as monitoring threatened wildlife, undertaking practical conservation tasks, and lobbying government.

## **Respect other users – follow the Countryside Code**

Through responsible behaviour we can all use and enjoy the countryside without damaging the enjoyment or livelihoods of others.

**Manage your land for wildlife and maintain the rural nature of your property**

Fields, woodland, paddocks and gardens support valuable and threatened wildlife. Inappropriate materials and features, often associated with urban areas, are leading to the gradual loss of the AONB's valued rural feel.

**Reduce, reuse and recycle, and dispose of all litter responsibly**

Litter spoils enjoyment of the countryside for the majority of residents. Less rubbish means less pressure for landfill sites and incinerators in the AONB.

*97% of people enjoy the High Weald countryside.*

High Weald Public Survey 2018

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## Definition of terms

**Aesthetic** – Concerned with beauty, or the appreciation of beauty.

**Assart** – Land enclosed from woodland, often still with numerous trees on boundaries.

**Character** – A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements (or components) that makes an area different from other areas.

**Conservation** – The preservation, protection or restoration of the landscape.

**Culture** – The sum total of people's beliefs, customs, social groupings, knowledge and technology, not inherited through biology.

**Dark skies** – Where you can see starry skies and our own galaxy, the Milky Way.

**Diffuse Pollution** – The release of potential pollutants from a range of activities that, individually, may have no effect on the water environment, but, at the scale of a catchment, can have a significant effect.

**Field** – An area of land, often enclosed, traditionally used for cultivation or the grazing of livestock.

**Field system** – A group or complex of fields sharing a common character which appear to form a coherent whole (in the High Weald, this usually results from the influence of topography and land use but also historic features).

**Geomorphology** – Landform origins, and the processes which shape or modify them, such as erosion.

**Gestalt qualities** – Concepts which refer to the essential nature of a perceptual experience, where the whole is greater than the parts.

**Gill** – A deep cleft or ravine, usually wooded and forming the course of a stream.

**Greenhouse gases** – Gases that trap heat in the atmosphere. The gases are water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases.

**Green and Blue Infrastructure** – All the individual parcels of natural space and features that, when connected, deliver quality of life and environmental benefits for communities and the nature that thrives within them. Green infrastructure usually refers to land; fields, woods and hedgerows, while blue infrastructure includes water bodies.

**Heritage Asset** – Defined in the NPPF as a building, monument, site, place, area, or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and non-designated assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).

**Historic Landscape Characterisation** – Method of identification and interpretation of the varying historic character within an area looking beyond individual heritage assets to an understanding of the whole landscape.

**Holloways** – Sunken routeways generally in wooded areas.

**Human-scale** – A pre-industrial farming landscape managed by human labour using traditional tools, created prior to heavily mechanised farming and intensive agricultural practices.

**Inned rivers** – Reclaimed often marshy land through draining and other engineering techniques of the day.

**Key characteristics** – Combinations of elements particularly important to character that help make that character distinctive.

**Landform** – Natural features in the landscape that make up the terrain, such as hills, valleys and plains.

**Landscape** – An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.

**Landscape-led** – Landscape-led means shaped and informed by an understanding of the High Weald's landscape as described in this Management Plan. Landscape-led design means using landscape as a framework to both understand the site; its context, character, qualities and functioning, and to formulate a design response in terms of site capacity, layout and design.

**Natural beauty** – For the High Weald AONB, natural beauty is defined by the Statement of Significance.

**Natural assets** – Biological assets, land and water areas with their ecosystems, subsoil assets and air.

**Near-term targets** – These outline how organisations will reduce their emissions, usually over the next 5-10 years, to galvanise the action required for longer term targets.

**Net zero** – Net zero means that any greenhouse gas emissions created are balanced (cancelled out) by taking the same amount out of the atmosphere. In 2019, the UK government became the first major economy to pass a net zero emissions law with a target that will require the UK to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

**Oceanic Climate** – A climate sub-type typical of much of north-west Europe, characterised by cool summers and mild winters, with a narrow annual temperature range and few extremes due to maritime influence.

**Public Realm** – All external spaces that are publicly accessible, such as streets, lanes and paths, verges, village greens and squares, and the features within them, such as signage, lighting and street furniture.

**Regenerative agriculture** – A system of farming principles and practices that increases biodiversity above and below the soils' surface, restores soil health, and rebuilds soil organic matter, improves watersheds and enhances ecosystem services.

**Routeway** – Any route between places across either land or water.

**Setting** – The surroundings in which the AONB is experienced by people.

**Shaw** – A narrow strip of woodland.

**Shifting Baseline Syndrome** – The generational loss of historic understanding, knowledge and experience of environmental conditions and the acceptance of more recent ecological conditions, erodes sustainable baselines for nature recovery. In practice this means that environmental targets set today would have been considered poor yesterday, whilst what is considered a poor baseline today may sadly be considered a good target in the future if shifting baseline syndrome persists.

**Significance** – What is special and valued about the AONB to this and future generations.

**Species-rich grassland** – A grassland displaying a wide variety of wildflowers and grasses with the exact composition varying according to the dynamic interaction of factors such as management, drainage, history and soils.

**Sustainable land management** – Farming and other land management activity that conserves the character of the AONB, enhances the diversity and biomass of characteristic wildlife, improves soil quality and the functioning of natural systems; and supports local livelihoods and social structure.

**Topography** – The arrangement of the physical features of an area, including both natural and artificial.

**Undisturbed soils** – Soils that haven't been disturbed over the long term by activities such as ploughing/chemical input/construction works.

**Wooded pasture** – The product of historic land management resulting in a typical vegetation structure of large, open-grown or high forest trees (often pollards) at various densities in a matrix of grazed grassland, heathland or woodland.

**Zero carbon** - Zero carbon means that no carbon emissions are being produced from a product or service.

## Glossary

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| HLC         | Historic Landscape Characterisation                   |
| JAC/HWJAC   | High Weald Joint Advisory Committee                   |
| LPA         | Local Planning Authority                              |
| NAAONB      | National Association for AONBs                        |
| NP & AC Act | National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 |
| NPPF        | National Planning Policy Framework                    |
| NPPG        | National Planning Policy Guidance                     |
| RIGs        | Regionally Interesting Geological Sites               |
| SAC         | Special Areas of Conservation                         |
| SSSI        | Site of Special Scientific Interest                   |

### Disclaimer

Adoption of this management plan by partner authorities does not necessarily imply endorsement of the views and conclusions of documents identified in this Plan as 'Evidence and further reading'.

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The above documents can be found at [www.highweald.org.uk](http://www.highweald.org.uk)

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# Appendix 1: AONB designation, policy and legal framework

## Purpose of designation

The primary purpose of AONB designation is to ‘conserve and enhance natural beauty’<sup>25</sup> but the architects of the 1949 Act recognised other underlying principles which were important aspects of the designations’ success. These included the need to maintain a ‘thriving community life’ with particular emphasis on farming and forestry, and the need to promote understanding and enjoyment of the area’s special qualities by people.

These subsidiary purposes – in effect, qualifications of the primary purpose – are those defined in the Countryside Commission statement 1991<sup>26</sup>, restated in 2006<sup>27</sup>. The basis for the wording of the subsidiary purposes can be found in the Countryside Act 1968 (section 37):

- In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries, and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.
- Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.

Although AONBs do not currently have the statutory second purpose of National Parks, which is ‘to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities [of the area] by the public’, the 1949 Act assumed that AONBs would also fulfil this function<sup>28 29</sup> and this intent is reflected in the subsequent duty placed on AONB conservation boards by Section 87 of the CRoW Act 2000 which adopts the same language<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/12/section/1)

<sup>26</sup> Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement. (Countryside Commission, CCP 356, 1991)

<sup>27</sup> Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans (Countryside Agency, CA 221, 2006, p.6)

## High Weald designation history<sup>31</sup>

The report of the first National Park Committee, set up in 1929, mentioned the wooded hill country of the High Weald, essentially Ashdown Forest, as an area requiring measures to protect its bird interest. A subsequent report in 1945, the Dower Report, included the ‘Forest Ridges (Horsham to Battle)’ in its list of ‘Other Amenity Areas not suggested as National Parks’. Dower had recognised that some areas might not be suitable for National Park status because of their size or lack of ‘wildness’, but they nonetheless required safeguarding for their ‘characteristic landscape beauty’. A follow-up report, the Hobhouse Report, in 1947 included the Forest Ridges in a list of 52 Conservation Areas (largely based on Dower’s ‘Other Amenity Areas...’) which, it proposed, should be designated for their high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value. It wasn’t until 1969, following coordinated landscape surveys by county and district councils, that the wider High Weald was put forward to the Countryside Commission for consideration as an AONB. Detailed work on the boundaries was then carried out and designation of the High Weald was confirmed in 1983.

<sup>28</sup> [ukpga\\_19490097\\_en.pdf \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1949/0097/en.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> [Report of the National Parks Committee 1947.pdf \(landscapesforlife.org.uk\)](https://landscapesforlife.org.uk/Report_of_the_National_Parks_Committee_1947.pdf)

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<sup>31</sup> Woolmore, R (2013). Designation History Series: High Weald. High Weald JAC

## Responsibility for conservation and enhancement of AONBs: the legal framework

AONBs exist within a legal framework which has been progressively strengthened since the first AONBs came into existence after the Second World War.

- **The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act** made provision for the designation of AONBs and National Parks. It provided AONBs with protection, under planning law, against inappropriate development and gave local authorities permissive powers to take action for ‘preserving and enhancing natural beauty’.
- **The Countryside Act 1968 (Section 37)** placed a responsibility on local authorities, statutory conservation bodies and civil servants, in exercising their functions under the 1949 Act (as amended by subsequent legislation) to ‘have due regard to the needs of agriculture and forestry and to the economic and social interests of rural areas.’ Within AONBs this means a responsibility to acknowledge and, where appropriate, to promote farming, forestry and the rural economic and social context wherever this can be done without compromising the primary purpose of conserving natural beauty.
- **The Environment Act 1995** confirmed replacement of ‘preserve and enhance’ with ‘conserve and enhance’ in relation to the purpose of National Parks and duties of public bodies towards them.
- **The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW)** subsumed and strengthened the AONB provisions of the 1949 Act. It brought the primary purpose in line with that of National Parks, clarified the procedure for their designation, and created a firm legislative basis for their protection and management giving responsibility for their conservation and enhancement primarily to local authorities. In particular:
  - Section 82 reaffirms the primary purpose of AONBs: to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
  - Section 83 establishes the procedure for designating or revising the boundaries of an AONB, including Natural England’s duty to consult with local authorities and to facilitate public engagement.

- Section 84 confirms the powers of a local authorities to take ‘all such action as appears to them expedient’ to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of an AONB and sets consultation and advice on development planning and on public access on the same basis as National Parks in the 1949 Act.
- Section 85 places a statutory duty on all relevant authorities ‘...in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect land [in an AONB] to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty...’. ‘Relevant authorities’ include all public bodies (county, borough, district, parish and community councils, joint planning boards and other statutory committees); statutory undertakers (such as energy and water utilities, licensed telecommunications companies, nationalised companies such as Network Rail and other bodies established under statute responsible for railways, roads and canals); government ministers and civil servants. Activities and developments outside the boundaries of AONBs that have an impact within the designated area are also covered by the ‘duty of regard’.
- Sections 86 to 88 allow for the establishment in an AONB of a Conservation Board to which the AONB functions of the local authority (including development planning) can be transferred. Conservation boards have the additional but secondary function of seeking to increase public understanding and enjoyment of the AONB’s special qualities. They also have an obligation to ‘seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities’ in co-operation with local authorities and other public bodies.
- Sections 89 and 90 create a statutory duty on all AONB partnerships (local authorities and Conservation Boards) to prepare a management plan ‘which formulates their policy for the management of their area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’, and thereafter to review adopted and published Plans at intervals of not more than five years. Where an AONB involves more than one local authority they are required to do this ‘acting jointly’.
- Section 92 makes clear that the conservation of natural beauty includes the conservation of ‘flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features.’

■ **The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC):**

- Section 99 formally clarifies in law that the fact that an area consists of or includes land used for agriculture or woodlands, or as a park, or ‘any other area whose flora, fauna or physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention in the landscape’ does not prevent it from being treated, for legal purposes, ‘as being an area of natural beauty (or of outstanding natural beauty).’
- Schedule 7 asserts that an AONB joint committee of two or more local authorities, or a conservation board, can constitute a ‘designated body’ for the performance of functions allocated to Defra.

The international context

AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are part of the international family of protected areas. As cultural landscapes, produced through the interaction of humans with nature over time, they have a special significance (together with UK National Parks) being recognised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as ‘Category V – Protected Landscapes’. These offer a unique contribution to the conservation of biological diversity, particularly where conservation objectives need to be met over a large area with a range of ownership patterns and governance. They can act as models of sustainability, promoting traditional systems of management that support key species.

Category V protected landscapes are defined by IUCN as:

*‘A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values.’*

The Council of Europe Landscape Convention (2000) ratified by the UK government in 2006 provides a definition of landscape as ‘An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.’ This is a rich concept that puts people at the heart of landscape (the commonplace and ‘degraded’ as well as the eminent), each of which has its own distinctive character and meaning to those who inhabit or visit it.

**Since the 1949 Act there has been continuous development in the policy and legislative context of AONBs, shaped by a number of key policy documents including:**

- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – A Policy Statement (Countryside Commission & Countryside Council for Wales, CCP356, 1991)
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – A Guide for Members of Joint Advisory Committees (Countryside Commission & Countryside Council for Wales, CCP461, 1994)
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- Guidance for the Review of AONB Management Plans (Countryside Agency, CA221, 2006)
- Guidance for assessing landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England (Natural England, 2011)

## Appendix 2: A brief history of the High Weald

*‘Unless a man understands the Weald, he cannot write about the beginnings of England...’*

**Hilaire Belloc**

Termed Anderida silva by the Romans, it was referred to as Andredesleah (‘leah’ suggesting wood pasture) in the Anglo- Saxon Chronicle, and later as Andredesweald (the high forest of Andred) shortened to Weald in Saxon charters (sometimes associated with weald-bera or den-bera – a right to feed swine in the forest). The Weald is one of the longest lasting regional names in Britain.

### Prehistory

It is possible that the system of moving livestock into seasonal grazing areas in the Weald from the surrounding downs and vales originated in the Neolithic period, or even earlier. Mesolithic and Palaeolithic flint scatters are concentrated close to springs and on the drier ridgetops. There is significant evidence for communities using and clearing woodland, cultivating land and for the formation of heathland by the Bronze Age.

Iron Age ironworks are concentrated around the northern and eastern fringes of the High Weald, enabling the export of iron via tributaries of the River Thames and the Brede and Rother. The location of routeways close to Iron Age forts and camps suggest a degree of control and supervision over trade in livestock, and also the export of iron and other products out of the Weald.

### The Roman period (AD 43-420)

The High Weald was the premier iron producing district in Britannia during the Roman occupation, with up to 2,000 bloomeries scattered across the area and nine industrial scale sites. Iron production, which peaked in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, was located within 3.5km of known Roman roads and concentrated to the east, where it was managed as an Imperial estate by the Roman Fleet (the Classis Britannica). Here it had good access to the navigable waterways of the Brede and Rother, and to major highways linking to both the London market and the wealthy villas and cornlands of the South Downs.

The Roman roads that intersect the High Weald, and which enabled the movement of military force and the extraction of iron, broadly correspond in their alignment with earlier routeways and in some cases intersect them. Unlike most routeways which avoid boggy ground, Roman roads drove across the landscape and required paved fording points where they crossed rivers and streams. Recorded Roman villas are very rare in the High Weald because the control of the Roman Fleet inhibited the development of private estates.

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| Prehistory | Roman   |
| Image 1    | Image 2 |

### **The Saxon period (420-1066)**

Routeways provided the framework for territorial units – called ‘lathes’ in Kent and Surrey, and ‘rapes’ in Sussex – that developed after the Roman period and up to the adoption of counties and then the parish system from the 8th and 9th centuries. These routeways connected parent manors in surrounding arable landscapes to the woodland resources and rich pastures of the Weald, often at distances of 20 or 30 miles apart. These included the temporary swine pastures or ‘dens’ (concentrated in Kent) where pigs and sometimes cattle and sheep were herded to feed on acorns and beech mast in the autumn.

The surveyors for the Domesday Book (1086-7) used pigs as a way of calculating the value and extent of woodland. The right of tenants to graze pigs in wood pasture areas (called ‘pannage’) developed from the 9th century and continued into the 14th and 15th centuries. Other areas along routeways were used as seasonal pastures or stopping-off points, including ‘folds’ and areas which became greens and forstals within farming settlements.

### **The medieval period (1066-1540)**

The practice of temporary grazing from outlying manors had declined by the 11th century, probably owing to the gradual break-up of the large estates by the Saxon kings through granting of lands to secular and ecclesiastical holders. Between the 9th and 12th centuries, seasonal pastures had developed into individual and clustered groups of farmsteads as more land was enclosed for growing crops and pasturing cattle. By the 14th century the High Weald’s characteristic dispersed settlement pattern was well established, with the land mostly worked from individual family farms set in anciently enclosed fields for managing crops and pasturing animals carved out of woodland and wood pasture.

The numbers of permanent farmsteads increased until the 14th century, requiring an increasingly dense network of routeways to link them and provide access to fields and common land. A number of new farms were created out of the woodland from the 11th century. By the late 13th century, the Wealden landscape comprised a scattering of gentry properties intermingled with a mass of small peasant holdings, many of which developed – as a result of amalgamation – in the 14th and 15th centuries into

larger freehold properties. Yards in farmsteads were used to manage pigs, which continued as an important part of the local farming economy, and cattle, which continued to be driven out of the area on the hoof for finishing. Cattle became an increasingly important export between the 14th and 18th centuries, and most locally produced corn was produced as animal feed and for home consumption rather than as an export crop.

Villages, such as Goudhurst, Burwash (planned along a ridgeway), Wadhurst and Ticehurst, with marketplaces for trading local products (iron, livestock, cattle hides and woodland products) developed in the 13th century along and at the meeting point of routeways. Fine Medieval houses attest to their relative wealth and their occupants often combined farming with trade.

For five hundred years the rivers of the Eastern High Weald were an important link for trade and war between the wooded interior and the seaports of Winchelsea and Rye, which after the storms of 1285 and in the early 14th century gradually silted. Many routeways connected the Weald to navigable rivers and ports. Timber and firewood, mostly bound for France and Flanders, were the major exports from Kent and Sussex ports through to the 16th century, and the relative ease of export stimulated the woodland industry in this part of the Weald. Up to the late 15th century, the river Rother was navigable to Reading Street, Smallhythe and Newenden, with Henry V’s 1000-ton ship, *The Jesus*, built at Smallhythe in 1414. The last Royal Commission at Smallhythe was Henry VIII’s great ship, the 300-ton *Great Gallyon*, ordered in 1546. Silt and the great storm of 1636 saw the end of the shipbuilding industry, but wooden barges were still moving timber and goods from the interior of the High Weald until the end of the 19th century when the last barge, *Primrose*, was built.

### **The post-medieval period (1540-1750)**

Some colonisation of the woodland continued up to the 17th century, by which time there was a considerable growth in population linked to the growth of industries such as broadcloth manufacture and iron founding. More houses were built along routeways, enclosing areas of common land along them. In some areas, as many as a quarter of families were housed in areas enclosed from wayside common.

The Weald again became a centre of British iron making from the early 16th century, following the successful import of blast furnace technology from the Low Countries in the 1490s, concentrated in the eastern and central Weald but with significant expansion to the north and west. Interconnecting chains of leats, dams and hammer ponds were constructed to provide sufficient head of water for the forges, and wealthy ironmasters built notable mansions such as Gravetye and Great Shoemiths. The industry declined in the late 17th and 18th centuries as a result of cheaper imports, the rising price of fuel, the successful development of the use of coke, and the loss of naval contracts to provide cannon.

Most of the wool for dyeing was imported from Romney Marsh into the main cloth manufacturing areas around Cranbrook and Tenterden. Cloth was then transported overland by packhorse and, more rarely, wheeled transport to dealers in London. Smaller items including ironwork such as horseshoes and glass were also exported in this way. By the end of the 17th century, many clothiers and ironmasters were moving into cattle rearing in response to increasing demand for beef. The hop industry developed on an industrial scale from this period, supplying maltings and breweries and stimulating the management of woodlands and shaws for fuel, and the growing of chestnut for hop poles.

| Image 1 medieval | Image 2 post-medieval |
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### The Industrial Revolution (1750-1914)

Over this period the Weald shifted from a diverse industrial and farming economy to one that was more linked to the development of capital in London and the coastal resorts, and the enjoyment of its landscape by new residents and visitors.

Social commentators Arthur Young, William Cobbet and others noted the ornamental landscapes of the new gentry and admired the area’s wayside cottages with their gardens. As droving of livestock continued to decline, there was further enclosure of roadside commons and greens for new houses (called ‘purpestore’ settlement), mostly driven by the large numbers of smallholders who were bereft of employment on account of the decline in the cloth and iron industries.

Most turnpikes in the High Weald were built on pre-existing highways between the 1730s and 1770s. They were of particular importance in easing the export of timber and corn, and in supplying goods and services for the burgeoning south coast resorts such as Brighton and Hastings. Although many turnpike trusts had closed down by the 1880s, they stimulated property transactions and enabled significant amounts of residential development. These were concentrated in the areas south of Tunbridge Wells and around the Brighton-London road to the west. From the 18th century, a trend in ‘pleasure farms’ saw some farmsteads converted into residential use with routeways diverted and made into private drives, which were approached through new ornamental landscapes.

Farmland was reorganised with enlarged fields, existing or straightened hedgerows dotted with trees. Farmsteads were also reorganised often around courtyards to help produce more manure for fields yielding more corn for export.

The railway network intensified these developments, often increasing the demand for improved roads to connect new housing to railway stations. Additional cattle yards were built around railway stations (for example at Hawkhurst and Paddock Wood) and rail was increasingly used for exporting livestock, hops and milk. Railways, and at the end of this period motor cars and buses, also enabled tourism accompanied by guides and books such as Arthur Beckett’s *The Wonderful Weald* (1911).

### The last hundred years, 1914 to the present

The increased appreciation of the High Weald’s historic landscape and heritage has been accompanied by the decline of traditional agriculture, cattle droving (cattle were still being driven to markets in the 1930s) and woodland management. Car ownership increased dramatically, leading to the further decoupling of settlement from land use. The building of bungalows and renovation of historic houses became common, and the areas around the Weald experienced a substantial and disproportionate increase in housing compared to the rest of England in the inter-war period.

Until the 1950s, the Weald changed at a slower pace than most other regions in Britain. For 700 years prior to this, agriculture and the pattern of fields, hedges and surrounding woodland remained relatively unaltered. Since then, farming and forestry, always difficult on the poor soils, have been pushed further to the economic margins. This decline in mixed farming and woodland management is a major threat to the long-term survival of the High Weald’s distinctive landscape character.

*Edited and adapted from:*

- *Harris, R.B. (2004). Making of the High Weald, &*
- *Lake, J. (2018). Routeways of the High Weald. High Weald Joint Advisory Committee.*
- *Della Hooke, (2010) ‘The Woodland Landscape of Early Medieval England’*
- *N.J Higham and Martin J Ryan, Place-Names, Language and the Anglo-Saxon Landscape, 2011, p.150.*
- *Robert Furley (1871). A History of the Weald of Kent, p.88.*

| Image 1 Industrial revolution | Image 2 last hundred years |
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