



Draft Strategic Environmental  
Assessment (SEA)

of the

High Weald AONB  
Management Plan review 2024-2029

Prepared by the

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## Non-technical Summary

Consultation on the scoping report for the Sea took place between 21<sup>st</sup> April and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022, and comments received from this consultation informed the environment report.

Objectives were taken from the SEA of the previous Management and were then used to assess the proposed objectives in the draft Management Plan against their reasonable alternatives. At this stage these alternatives include not having an objective on the subject area and the original wording of the objective where this is proposed to be changed.

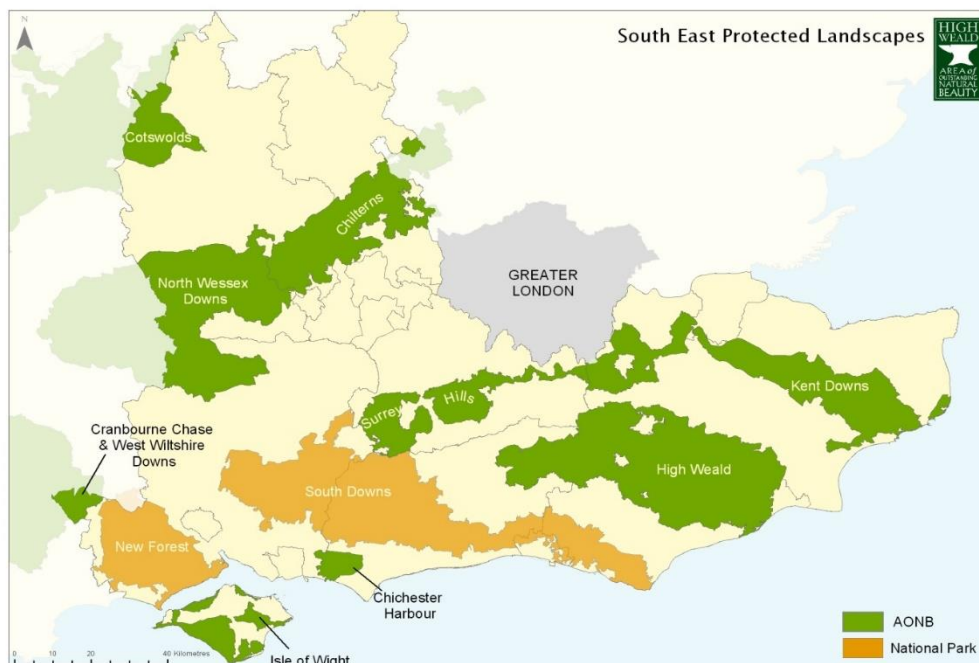
In all cases the SEA concludes that the proposed objectives in the draft Management Plan have the most or equal positive environmental effects compared to their reasonable alternatives.

In considering cumulative impacts and mitigation, the following conclusions were drawn:

W4	To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets (wording unchanged from existing Management Plan).	Mitigation for potential adverse effects provided by guidance from the AONB Unit on woodland management that does not damage archaeology or ecological assets of woodland.
FH1	To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management (wording unchanged from existing Management Plan).	Mitigation for potential adverse effects provided by guidance from the AONB Unit on agricultural land management practices that protect and enhance habitats, water systems and soils. Colour and design guidance can mitigate impact of new buildings.

## 1.0 Introduction to the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

- 1.1 The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) lies at the heart of South East England, covering 1,457 km<sup>2</sup> (570 sq. miles), across four counties. It is an historic countryside of rolling hills draped by small irregular fields, abundant woods and hedges, scattered farmsteads and ancient droeways and sunken lanes. The distinctive character of the High Weald arises from a long history of human interaction with the natural environment, and the exploitation of its resources – wood, iron, and food. The landscape of the High Weald is essentially medieval, and its present form was fundamentally established by the 14<sup>th</sup> century and has survived major historic social and technological changes. Its future evolution and conservation is dependent on understanding and reinforcing the traditional interactions between people and nature that are responsible for the landscape we value today.
- 1.2 Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities to have regard to ‘the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs’ in making decisions that affect the designated area. Local authorities with land in an AONB, acting jointly in the case of AONBs crossing administrative boundaries, are legally obliged under the same Act to prepare and publish a plan which ‘formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’, and to review this plan every five years. To assist the local authorities in meeting these statutory duties a High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) was established. This is a partnership of the 15 local authorities covered by the designation plus Natural England and other organisations representing farming, forestry, business and recreation interests. The Partnership is supported by the High Weald AONB Unit, a strategic, specialist team that advises on the management of this nationally valued landscape.



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## **2.0 The High Weald AONB Management Plan**

- 2.1 The High Weald AONB Management Plan identifies and sets objectives for the key features of the landscape that have survived and form the essential basis of its natural beauty. These key components of Natural Beauty are being actively researched and understood to inform best practice in caring for and managing them, and to inform the choices for its future conservation and enhancement.
- 2.2 The High Weald AONB Management Plan was first published in 2004 as a twenty-year plan until 2024. It was reviewed in 2009, 2014 and 2019 but these reviews were limited in scope and did not change the fundamental basis of the Management Plan. The current review of the Management Plan is due in 2024 and will begin a new 20-year strategy, and therefore a more substantive review is planned than the previous reviews.
- 2.3 The Management Plan sets the context and background against which proposed policies and actions can be judged in terms of their impact on the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB. This allows decision-makers and their advisors to effectively audit their actions against the duty of regard to conserving and enhancing the AONB under section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.
- 2.4 In this way the Management Plan seeks to set the framework against which stakeholders and decision makers can set their own actions and programs. Where their activities meet and complement the objectives of the Management Plan then natural beauty should be conserved or enhanced. Activities that conflict with the Management Plan objectives are likely to have a negative effect on the quality and integrity of the natural and historic environment and hence the landscape and overall environment. The High Weald AONB Unit produces guidance and expert advice on the care and management of the AONB to inform and guide stakeholders.
- 2.5 The Management Plan does not set policies about individual issues, but sets the context and background against which these issues can be judged in terms of their impact on natural beauty. Thus, the Plan does not set planning policy or rules for land management but gives a framework against which decisions can be assessed.

### **3.0 Scope of Management Plan Review 2024-2029**

3.1 As stated above, the next review of the Management Plan will begin a new 20-year strategy, and therefore a more substantive review is planned than the previous reviews. The present Management Plan is robust and continues to be relevant subject to minor updates, so the majority of the review resource will focus on developing a new 20-year strategy and implementation section of the Plan (the Landscape Strategy).

3.2 The High Weald AONB Unit does not envision undertaking any specific research projects for the intended new sections, due to both budget and time constraints, but also because the new sections and content all fall into academically well researched areas e.g., climate change, soil science, dark skies, and the health and wellbeing benefits of accessing natural environments.

#### **3.3 What will remain unchanged?**

- The High Weald AONB Units approach to, and philosophy of natural beauty, and majority of its key components will remain unchanged.
- Most of the overall structure of the 2019-24 Management Plan and content will remain unchanged. Specifically, there are no changes planned for the chapters on The High Weald (facts and figures, landscape, brief history), About the Plan and AONB Policy and Legal Framework other to ensure they are up to date.

#### **3.4 What will be deepened and/ or enhanced?**

- The JAC Commitment and Vision will be strengthened.
- What is Natural Beauty is to be updated with contemporary research.
- The Key Characteristics: will be reviewed to ensure a good understanding of what characterises each key component. The individual component vision statements will be removed / incorporated into the overall vision.

#### **3.5 What will be reviewed and refreshed?**

- All key facts and figures within the Management Plan will be checked and up-dated as required, this includes High Weald and natural and cultural capital facts and figures, as well as maps throughout the document.
- The 'Other Qualities' sections will be revamped as 'Perceptual and Aesthetic Qualities'. This will address the qualities that are perceived from moving through the natural and cultural landscape of the High Weald, but which cannot be addressed through the characters of physical features alone. For example, long views, quietude, tranquillity, rurality, and other experiential qualities.
- Planning and development will be given its own section, including Planning Principles for the High Weald AONB.

#### **3.6 What will be added?**

- A new key component 'Dark Skies' will be added. This will build on substantial work that the High Weald Unit has been undertaking regarding dark skies over the past few years, including work with CPRE and the South Downs National Park Authority, and a number of local dark skies groups.
- High Weald Direction of Travel Strategy – this constitutes the largest change and forms an additional part of the Management Plan (key components and other existing sections

making up the first part). This section sets out the drivers for change to the High Weald for the next 20 years and will present an aspirational investment plan for the next 20 years for conserving and enhancing the functional landscape and natural beauty of the High Weald.

- This section is broken down into:

An introduction to the drivers for change, which will underpin the 20-year strategy.

1. Soil Health – addressing the neglected importance of soil health with a soil-up strategy based around the holistic land management approach of regenerative agriculture.
2. Climate change – coupling the ranging threats from climate change with sustainable, nature-based solutions to creating a climate resilient landscape.
3. Nature Recovery – addressing the ecological crisis and how delivery of recovery strategies may be expected to look across the High Weald.
4. People and Access - tackling inequity in access to the natural world, health, and education.
5. Planning and Development – with a dedicated section to providing guidance specific to Local Authority planners using the Management Plan.

### 3.7 This Strategic Environmental Assessment:

- Reviews the relevant plans, policies and programmes,
- Updates the baseline information,
- Updates key issues and environmental problems,
- Tests the proposed Management Plan objectives and their reasonable alternatives against environmental objectives as set out in section 8.

## 4.0 Methodology and Timetable for Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 4.1 The requirement to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment is set out in ‘The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (Statutory Instrument 2004 No.1633)’, which transposes the European SEA Directive 2001/42/EC since leaving the European Union.
- 4.2 In broad terms a SEA requires;
- consultation on the scope of the SEA, including the policy context and baseline environmental data available, the identification of environmental issues and problems and the proposed framework for the SEA; and
  - the preparation of an environmental report which will test the proposed Management Plan Review and its reasonable alternatives against environmental objectives. This report will be consulted on, in parallel with the Management Plan, and will be finalised and published alongside the final Management Plan. The expected timetable is as follows.
- 4.3 Consultation on the scoping report for the SEA took place between 21<sup>st</sup> April and the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022 and comments received from that consultation have informed this environmental report. The expected timetable for subsequent stages is as follows.

Dates	Management Plan Review	SEA process
March 2022	Scope of review approved by JAC.	Draft SEA Scoping Report written
April-May 2022	Natural England formally notified of commencement of Plan process.	Carry out consultation on Scoping Report with statutory bodies (5 weeks).
May 2022 – August 2023	Draft Plan, having regard to findings of SEA Environmental Report	Draft SEA Environmental Report of emerging draft Plan
September 2023	Consultation Draft Plan approved by JAC.	Environmental Report to accompany report on Plan to JAC.
September-October 2023	Public consultation on Consultation Draft MP.	Public consultation on draft Environmental Report.
November – January 2023/24	Scope of revisions discussed and preparation of final draft Plan.	Scope of revisions discussed and preparation of final Environmental Report.
January 2024	Local authority & partner consultation and approval of revised MP.	Final Environmental Report to accompany local authority adoption reports on the Plan.
March 2024	Present final Plan to JAC for approval.	Present final Environmental Report to JAC for approval.
May 2024	Send Plan to SoS.	Send Environmental Report to SoS with Plan.

## 5.0 Policy Context – Relevant Plans, Policies and Programmes

5.1 In preparing, developing, and reviewing the Management Plan, regard will be had to the objectives and directions of other relevant plans, policies and programmes. The following policies are relevant in setting the context and parameters for the scoping stage of this strategic environmental assessment and setting out the areas in which the Management Plan may have an impact or needs to respond to, in setting the management guidelines and issues for Natural Beauty.

Title	Date	Purpose of Document and Links with Other Documents	Relevance to Management Plan & SEA
International			
UN Paris Climate Change Agreement <a href="https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement">https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement</a>	2016	International agreement to keep global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.	The Management Plan and SEA need to take account of Climate Change and agreed measures to address and mitigate it.
Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, United Nations <a href="https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf">https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf</a>	2015	Has set in place legally binding emission reductions targets for developed countries that have ratified it.	
UN Resolution 2015 Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development <a href="https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld">https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld</a>	2015	Details a set of 17 Goals which were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals.	
European Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) <a href="https://www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention">https://www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention</a>	1993	Promote the maintenance of biodiversity taking account of economic, social, cultural and regional requirements. Conservation of natural habitats and maintain landscape features of importance to wildlife and fauna.	The Management Plan will need to have regard to this Convention.

Title	Date	Purpose of Document and Links with Other Documents	Relevance to Management Plan & SEA
International Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention) <a href="https://www.ramsar.org/">https://www.ramsar.org/</a>	1976	This is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975.	The Ramsar and SAC sites at Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay and at Pevensey Levels are downstream of head waters within the High Weald and may be impacted by Management Plan objectives.
The Aarhus Convention - UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters <a href="https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text">https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text</a>	1998	Acknowledges the need for public participation in environmental issues and grants the public's rights to access to justice and information on the environment.	Public participation in the preparation and implementation of the Management Plan will be required.
European Landscape Convention <a href="https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236096/8413.pdf">https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236096/8413.pdf</a>	2006	To integrate landscape considerations into any policies with possible impacts on landscape.	Defines landscape as "an area perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and human factors". The Management Plan should take account of people's perceptions and how the landscape is affected by people.
Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories, IUCN <a href="https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf">https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf</a>	2008	Promotes 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.	AONBs are recognised as Category V Protected Landscapes under IUCN's (International Union for Conservation of Nature) global protected area framework.
<b>National</b>			
National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/97">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/97</a>	1949	Statutory basis for AONBs and National Parks	Sets purpose of AONB designation to conserve and enhance natural beauty, which the Management Plans defines for the High Weald.
Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). <a href="#">The Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (legislation.gov.uk)</a>	2017	To conserve habitats in Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and	Ashdown Forest SAC and SPA and Hastings Cliffs SAC are within

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Title	Date	Purpose of Document and Links with Other Documents	Relevance to Management Plan & SEA
The 2017 Regulations are one of the pieces of domestic law that transposed the land and marine aspects of the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) and certain elements of the Wild Birds Directive (Directive 2009/147/EC). The changes are made by the Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.		Special Protection Areas (SPA). It establishes a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs)	the High Weald AONB. The Management Plan will need to avoid damaging these areas – see HRA.
Wildlife and Countryside Act (as amended) <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/contents">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/contents</a>	1981	Principal legislative mechanism for the protection of wildlife in Great Britain. Affords certain protection to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).	The Management Plan will need to have regard to this Act in its biodiversity objectives, policies and targets.
The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/section/1">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/section/1</a>	2000	Statutory basis for AONBs	Gives public bodies the 'duty to have regard to conserving and enhancing the AONB'. Sets statutory requirement for AONB Management Plans.
The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/contents">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/contents</a>	2006	Sets up Natural England and the Commission for Rural Communities and imposes a duty on public bodies to have regard to conserving biodiversity.	The Management Plan should have regard to this Act, particularly in relation to its biodiversity objectives, policies and targets.
Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017 <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2017/407/made">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2017/407/made</a> Since the UK left the EU, the EU Water Framework Directive has been revoked and replaced in England by the above noted law	2017	The Regulation commits to achieving good qualitative and quantitative status of all water bodies.	The Management Plan will need to have regard to this Regulation.
The Equality Act 2010 and National Disability Strategy 2021 <a href="https://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/the-equality-act-2010-and-un-convention">https://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/the-equality-act-2010-and-un-convention</a>	2010 and 2021	Seeks to level up opportunity at every stage and area of disabled people's lives	The Management Plan and SEA contents and preparation process should comply with this legislation and support this strategy.
The Climate Change Act 2008 <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/27/contents">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/27/contents</a>	2008	To ensure that by 2050 the UK greenhouse gas emissions are 80 % lower than 1990 baseline.	The Management Plan and SEA need to take account of Climate Change and agreed measures to address and mitigate it.
The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019 <a href="http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2019/1056/contents/made">http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2019/1056/contents/made</a>	2019	To reduce greenhouse gas to net zero by 2050.	
The Climate Change Committee: Net Zero – The UK's Contribution to Stopping Global Warming <a href="https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Net-Zero-The-UKs-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming.pdf">https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Net-Zero-The-UKs-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming.pdf</a>	2019	To make sure there is net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.	

Title	Date	Purpose of Document and Links with Other Documents	Relevance to Management Plan & SEA
Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/biodiversity-2020-a-strategy-for-england-s-wildlife-and-ecosystem-services">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/biodiversity-2020-a-strategy-for-england-s-wildlife-and-ecosystem-services</a>	2018	Provides aims for reducing biodiversity loss, improving networks and guiding development.	Management Plan should complement this strategy.
DEFRA. A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment <a href="https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf">https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf</a>	2018	Detail and targets for the next 25 years.	The Management Plan should have regard to this Plan.
Historic England's 'Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment' Advice Note <a href="https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/sustainability-appraisal-and-strategic-environmental-assessment-advice-note-8/">https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/sustainability-appraisal-and-strategic-environmental-assessment-advice-note-8/</a>	2016	Provides advice on historic environment considerations as part of the SEA process	The Management Plan and SEA should have regard to this advice
National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2</a>	2021	To set out the government's planning policies.	The Management Plan should have regard to these policies.
National Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-practice-guidance">https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-practice-guidance</a>	Ongoing	To provide further detail and application of policies in the NPPF.	The Management Plan should have regard to this guidance.
Conservation of Species and Habitats Regulations 2017 <a href="http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2017/1012/contents/made">http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2017/1012/contents/made</a>	2017	Seeks to ensure that plans or projects do not adversely affect the protected features of a habitats site.	The Management Plan should take account of this legislation
The Environment Act <a href="https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted">https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted</a>	2021	Introduces Nature Recovery Strategies, Biodiversity Net Gain and other environmental legislation	The Management Plan should take account of this legislation
Environmental Improvement Plan <a href="https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133967/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf">https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133967/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf</a>	2023	First revision of the 25YEP, setting out how landowners, communities and businesses deliver each of the goals for improving the environment.	The Management Plan should have regard to these policies.
<b>Regional/Local</b>			
Environment Agency Catchment Flood Management Plans for the Cuckmere and Sussex Havens; the Ouse; the Rother and Romney; and the Medway.	Various	Considers all types of inland flooding, from rivers, groundwater, surface water and tidal flooding. Shoreline management plans consider flooding from the sea.	Management Plan should have regard to but also influence these plans.
Local Plans produced by the 15 local planning authorities in the High Weald and their supporting assessments and evidence.	Various	Set out local planning policies for the area.	The Management Plan should have regard to but also influence these plans.

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<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Purpose of Document and Links with Other Documents</b>	<b>Relevance to Management Plan &amp; SEA</b>
Local Transport Plans produced by the 4 local highway authorities in the High Weald.	Various	Set out the transport strategy and priorities for the area.	The Management Plan should have regard to but also influence these plans.

## 6.0 Baseline Environmental Information

6.1 Extensive data and GIS resources are used regularly to develop the understanding and advice relating to each of the features of the components of natural beauty. A wider range of statistical and data sources are available to assist in our understanding of the features and qualities of the landscape. The following data is available to inform the SEA process and Management Plan review in general.

Data sources for Management Plan review and SEA		
<b><i>Landscape - Key components of natural beauty from AONB Management Plan</i></b>		
Natural systems	Sandrock outcrops Geology Gill Streams Soils	British Geological Survey Environment Agency – Flood Maps and Water Quality High Weald AONB datasets Soil Classification System for England and Wales
Settlement	Built development (settlement pattern) Historic Farmsteads Listed Buildings Historic Parkland	Heritage England – Extensive Urban Surveys High Weald AONB datasets Historic Landscape Characterisation Ordnance Survey Tithe Maps Historic Farmstead mapping
Routeways	Historic Droeways Public Rights of Way Roman roads	High Weald AONB datasets Ordnance Survey Tithe Maps
Woodland	Ancient Woodland Other woodland (not ancient) Woodland Archaeology	Ancient Woodland Inventories
Field and Heath	Unimproved/semi-improved grassland (Meadows) Heathland Historic field boundaries Archaeology of field and heath	High Weald AONB High Weald AONB datasets Fieldscapes Study
Dark skies	Dark skies mapping Star counts	High Weald (with CPRE) dataset
<b><i>Other data sources</i></b>		
Biodiversity	SSSI SAC SPA Sites of Nature Conservation Importance	Defra <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs/about/statistics">https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs/about/statistics</a> Natural England – MAGIC data sets and Monitoring Information <a href="http://www.magic.gov.uk/">http://www.magic.gov.uk/</a> Natural England <a href="http://www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk/">http://www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk/</a> Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre <a href="http://sxbrc.org.uk/">http://sxbrc.org.uk/</a> Kent Wildlife Trust <a href="http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/">http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/</a> Surrey Biodiversity Information Centre <a href="http://www.surreywildlifetrust.org/SBIC">http://www.surreywildlifetrust.org/SBIC</a>
Cultural Heritage	Archaeological sensitive areas Scheduled ancient monuments	County Councils – Historic Environment Records Historic England – <a href="https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/">https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/</a>
Material Assets	Farm Holdings Farmed Area Farm Size  Public Rights of Way Network	Defra June Agricultural Census <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/structure-of-the-agricultural-industry-in-england-and-the-uk-at-june">https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/structure-of-the-agricultural-industry-in-england-and-the-uk-at-june</a> Local Highway Authorities

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Population Statistics and Human Health	Population of the AONB Health of the population	Office of National Statistics - Census 2021
Air Quality	Air Quality Management Areas	Local Authorities
Climate change	Soil and biomass carbon flux, stores and stocks Habitat climate vulnerability	NAAONB and Cranfield University Carbon Audit  Natural England 2021 climate change adaptation manual NE571 <a href="http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5679197848862720">http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5679197848862720</a>
Public access and perceptions	access, use, perceptions of natural beauty and climate mitigation	Bespoke external consultant lead engagement 2022

## Summary of Baseline Information

### 6.2 Landscape

The High Weald was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983. It is one of 34 AONBs in England. Twenty percent of Britain's finest countryside in England and Wales is protected by law as National Parks or AONBs. The High Weald also lies almost entirely within the High Weald National Character Area, which in places extends beyond the AONB boundary.

Time depth and objective analysis has defined the High Weald AONB as characterised by dispersed settlement particularly historic farmsteads; ancient tracks and routeways; an abundance of ancient woodland, wooded heaths and shaws with a heritage of woodland industries and iron working; and small, irregularly shaped, and productive fields. These are all draped over a deeply incised and ridged landform of clays and sandstones with numerous gill streams and are closely related to socio-economic characteristics that have roots extending deep into history.

### 6.3 Geography

The High Weald AONB covers 1461 sq. km. It extends across four counties, 11 districts and 100 parishes.

### 6.4 Population

In 2021 the AONB had a population of 124,111 (51,000 households) with a density of 84 people per sq. km. An additional 80,800 people lived in urban areas directly adjacent – Tunbridge Wells, Crowborough and Heathfield – but which are excluded from the AONB designation boundary. A further 716,000 people lived in wards wholly or partly within 5km of the AONB boundary.

### 6.5 Settlements

The High Weald AONB has no urban areas but has 17 market towns and villages with populations greater than 2000, the largest being Battle with a population over 6000. Adopted Green Belt covers 7.7 % of the area.

### 6.6 Economy

In 2021, 12 % of High Weald businesses were land-based businesses compared with 2.4 % in the South East. Eighteen percent of those in employment in the High Weald are self-employed compared to 13 % in England as a whole, with the vast majority working without employees. Twenty-nine percent of the High Weald population were retired compared with 22 % of the South East in 2021. Average house prices in the High Weald are higher than in the South East.

### 6.7 Agriculture

In 2021 there were 1,562 registered farm holdings in the AONB, down from 3,192 in 2008. The total area used for agriculture fell by 7.5 % in the same period with farms under 5 ha showing the greatest fall in numbers down from 1,363 to 216. The number of farms engaged in livestock production reduced by 15.5 % while horticulture declined by 50 % and those engaged in cereals and general cropping increased by over 100 %. The number of people employed in agriculture also fell from 4,698 in 2008 to 3,853 in 2021.

## **6.8 Soils**

There is no Grade 1 agricultural land in the High or Low Weald. Grade 2 covers 2.5 % of the High Weald with 85 % being Grade 3 and 4, compared to 3.7 % Grade 2 in the Low Weald and 90 % Grade 3 and 4.

Whilst this is the traditional way of measuring soil quality, it does not take into account its biodiversity or carbon sequestration function. There are more soil microorganisms in the form of fungi, bacteria, and soil microbes living in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on the earth. These microorganisms along with earthworms, beetles, ants, and mites all have a different job to do to boost soil and plant health. Healthy soil life works together to reduce plant diseases and provide a range of nutrients and minerals for the plants. This nourishes wildlife, crops and other plants and in turn the grazing livestock.

Regenerative farming reveres soil health. It regenerates and builds the soil and then protects and nurtures the life in the soil by working with nature rather than against it. As the health of the soil recovers it becomes naturally fertile and productive and allows soil life to return and thrive. This stabilises the farm ecosystem, stops soil erosion, builds more soil, improves water infiltration and increases the farm's ability to absorb carbon from the air and store it within the soil.

## **6.9 Water**

The High Weald covers part of the headwaters of eight river catchments: the Arun; the Adur; the Ouse; the Mole; the Medway; the Teise; the Rother; and the Cuckmere. Thirteen river catchments fall at least partly within the boundary of the AONB. There are 4,613 km of water courses in the High Weald, including 253 km of main river channels. There are 13,401 ponds (many of which originated as small-scale extraction sites for clay, stone and marl). Five reservoirs cover 744 ha, including Bewl Water, the largest body of inland water in the South East.

## **6.10 Cultural Heritage**

The essential character of the High Weald was established by the 14th century and has survived major historical events, and social and technological changes. It is considered to be one of the best surviving coherent medieval landscapes in Northern Europe: this fundamental and largely immutable character is the essence of the natural beauty of the AONB.

The High Weald is also renowned for the site of the 1066 Battle of Hastings. There are 5,296 listed buildings; 91 Scheduled monuments; 57 medieval parish churches and 44 registered historic parks and gardens. Historic parkland especially medieval deer parks and 'designed landscapes' are a distinctive feature of the High Weald.

## **6.11 Biodiversity**

Nearly 15 % of the High Weald is publicly owned, owned by conservation organisations, or designated under international or national law to protect wildlife. Internationally important sites for nature conservation (SPAs, SACs and Ramsar sites) cover 3,400 ha of the High Weald. In the High Weald 51 SSSIs cover 5,538 ha. The High Weald AONB offers a highly interconnected ecological infrastructure network with a mosaic of intermingled semi-natural habitat.

## 7.0 Statement of Key Environmental Issues

7.1 The following key environmental issues are relevant to the High Weald landscape and its Management Plan. These are scoped in terms of the key components of natural beauty identified by the 2019-2024 Management Plan, and then a range of other external factors that may have impacts on the environment of the AONB. Additionally, any predicted trends that may occur in the absence of any intervention (or inappropriate intervention) are outlined.

Key Issues for High Weald Management Plan Strategic Environmental Assessment		
Topic	Key Issues	Predicted trends and impacts without intervention
Natural systems	Flooding	Extended hard engineering management of rivers and flood defences with damage to environment and landscape quality around river basins
	Poor aquatic systems – failing to meet their potential for water quality, biodiversity, and amenity	Degradation of river and stream quality, reduction in fresh water biodiversity and natural function of small-scale water systems essential to gill woodland
	River restoration policies that can utilize natural processes to reduce flooding, improve the aquatic systems, and reduce costs of maintaining the current systems	Hard engineering river defences inappropriate in scale and function to the landscape and traditional interactions. Archaeological impacts
	Threats to sandstone outcrops – inappropriate use, management, and neglect of key geological features and the ecology that they support	Loss of, or continuing damage to the resource leading to erosion of the features
	Loss of soil through erosion and inappropriate management, and reduction in soil health	Increased need for petrochemical fertilizer use, loss of food growth medium, loss of water storage and water holding capacity, increased risk of flooding
Settlement	Need for greater understanding – e.g., of the dispersed settlement pattern of the High Weald, and the connections between settlements and the countryside	Inappropriate development and artificial expansion of key settlements to the detriment of the rural areas
	Suburbanization – erosion of AONB character through extension of curtilages, and inappropriate modifications, or treatments, of boundaries and buildings	Unsustainable patterns of development dependent on local key services not providing services to local rural areas and small-scale settlement typical of the Weald. Impact on settlement archaeology.
	Suburbanization – introduction of non-native species inappropriate boundaries and gates, and intrusive highway engineering	Gradual decline in landscape quality and traditional indigenous species and distinctive features
Routeways	Poor understanding – of the resource and the management needed to conserve the roads and non-vehicular routeways, for their ecology, archaeology, and their potential for informal recreation and non-vehicular transport	Threat to localised habitats dependent on the routeway character and loss of biodiversity. Threat to the quiet enjoyment and character of the country lanes and paths through inappropriate management
Woodland	Neglect – e.g., lack of management and poor stock Increased commercialization and archaeological impact	Degradation of existing woodland, loss of biodiversity and development of scrubby woodland and inappropriate species
	Lack of deer control	Failure of coppice, regenerative and new planted woodlands. Loss of distinctive ground flora.
	Extent of non-native species. Non-native species include invasive rhododendron, cherry laurel, sycamore, and grey squirrels	Spread of invasive species leading to degradation of biodiversity and decline in landscape quality.
	Fragmentation – the poor connectivity, increasing isolation, fragmented ownership, and small size of many woodlands is degrading their ecological value	Reduction in quality and spread of woodland and links between them, further degradation of biodiversity value.

Field and Heath	Declining extent of agriculture – land falling out of productive use into amenity and residential use, with consequent suburbanization and neglect	Loss of biodiversity, particularly plant species common to flower rich meadows, reduction in finite resource of un-improved grassland
	Environmental degradation – neglected fields scrubbing up, increasing run-off and agrochemical inputs, loss of key habitats (e.g., meadows and heaths), and damage to historic features (e.g., field boundaries/pattern, and archaeological sites and monuments)	Continued scrubbing up of fields, decline in biodiversity and loss of specialist habitats, heathland and unimproved grassland. Threat to field boundaries and historic and archaeological features of these landscape features.
	Lack of identification and understanding of the importance and potential of semi-improved / low input grasslands	Further loss of semi-improved / low input grasslands to development, woodland creation schemes, and loss of carbon stores if soils are disturbed.
Climate Change	Temperature rise, threat to species, hotter summers, migration, or loss of habitats	Threat to local indigenous species and habitats, loss of biodiversity, fundamental change in land cover and locally distinctive species
	Sea level rise	Risk to coastal areas, challenge of managed retreat or hard engineering sea defences
	Higher rainfall, wetter winters, risk of flooding	Damage to water courses, risk of flooding, threat of need to engineer against high water levels in water courses
	More frequent, increased intensity, longer duration extreme weather events.	Threat of irreversible damage or loss to habitats and features
	Approaches to and types of mitigation against the effects of climate change	Need to understand and scope the possible effects and impacts of any actions to mitigate for climate change in terms of their impact on landscape character and locally distinctive features. E.g., renewable energy – effects of wood fuel, bio crops etc.
	Approaches to and types of adaptation against the effects of climate change	Need to understand and scope the possible effects and impacts of any actions to adapt to the effects of climate change in terms of their impact on landscape character and locally distinctive features. E.g., need to understand the effects of temperature rise on specific species and ability of habitats to migrate.
Biodiversity	Loss of habitats	Continued declines in both habitat quality and quantity, such as continued loss of semi-improved grasslands to other land use types, and loss of quality of woodland and unimproved grasslands from lack of appropriate management.
	Species loss	Continued decline in many species across all taxa due to decreases in habitats, used for feeding and breeding, loss of habitat corridors and continued use of chemicals in the environment. This is particularly an issue for specialist species and those which are less mobile.
	Loss of soil health	Lack of education and understanding of the importance of soil health on planetary health, including climate cooling, water storage and flood mitigation, biodiversity and human health. Unnecessary surface sealing, chemical inputs and soil disturbance all contribute to loss of soil health.
Farming	Intensification of farming, concentration of holdings,	Intensive farming is a threat to biodiversity and traditional land management. Trend to increase farm holdings threatens to break down the traditional small-scale approach to farming in the High Weald. Intensive farming may lead to larger field sizes, loss of boundaries and features and degradation of landscape quality. Archaeology impacts.
	Agricultural profitability	Low or non-profitable farming, especially traditional farming practices, is a threat to the continued use of the land. Holdings are going out of production and management leading to a degradation of landscape quality, and habitats.
	Hobby farming, loss of traditional farming families & traditions	Small scale buying up of farm holding and hobby farming is a threat to the integrity of holdings and the traditional structure of agriculture in the High Weald, leading to a break down in land use, management, and biodiversity/habitat maintenance.
Development	Housing development	High levels of house building cumulatively, the potential of major development in the AONB, plus inappropriate scale, form, and details of housing generally, are aspects of inappropriate development that threatens local character and distinctiveness

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		and traditional settlement patterns. Significant Archaeological impacts, particularly in un-surveyed areas.
	Sustainable development (rural / environmental sustainability)	Inappropriate definition and interpretation of sustainable development and communities threatens to impose uncharacteristic forms and patterns of development on the landscape to the detriment of the built environment and local social and economic patterns in rural areas.

## 8.0 Framework and Methodology

### Objectives

- 8.1 The following objectives have been taken from the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the previous review of the Management Plan. This is because they remain relevant to present day environmental issues, and it retains consistency of approach.
1. To protect and enhance the landscape
  2. To protect and maintain cultural heritage (inc. archaeology and architecture)
  3. To protect and where practical enhance and connect diverse habitats
  4. To protect, enhance and connect flora and fauna
  5. To protect water systems and promote sustainable flood and drought risk management
  6. To safeguard the quality of soil, air, water and maintain appropriate climatic conditions
  7. To protect natural resources and encourage sustainable energy use and production
  8. To safeguard human health, wellbeing and ensure no adverse effects on population
  9. To avoid significant adverse effects generated through the interrelationships or cumulative effects of the above criteria.

### Potential conflicts between objectives

- 8.2 It is considered that the most likely conflicts are:
- Between 1 and 7, for instance where sustainable energy development has a significant landscape impact; and
  - Between 1-7 and 8, for instance where initiatives to support the health and wellbeing of the population of the High Weald cause other environmental effects such as loss of habitat, landscape or historical feature or other natural resource.

### Scoring methodology

- 8.3 As part of the Environmental Report the High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives and targets will be assessed against the nine environmental objectives listed above to identify their likely significant environmental effects. The possible outcomes used will be;
- |     |                              |
|-----|------------------------------|
| ++  | significant positive effect, |
| +   | partial positive effect,     |
| ?   | uncertain effect,            |
| -   | partial negative effect,     |
| --  | significant negative effect, |
| n/a | not applicable               |

## Consultation

- 8.4 Consultation on this Scoping Report will be carried out with the statutory bodies (Natural England, Historic England, and the Environment Agency) and the local authority and other partners on the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee. The Environmental Report will be published at [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org) alongside the draft Management Plan Review as set out in the timetable in section 4.

**Table 1: Quality Assurance Checklist for Scoping Report**

<b>Strategic Environmental Assessment Requirements (Scoping Stage)</b>	<b>Where these are met</b>
<b>Objectives and Context</b>	
The AONB Management Plan's purpose and objectives are made clear.	2.0 The High Weald AONB Management Plan; and 3.0 Scope of Management Plan Review 2024.
Environmental issues and constraints, including international and EC environmental protection objectives, are considered in developing objectives and targets.	5.0 Policy Context – Relevant Plans, Policies and Programmes. 6.0 Baseline Environmental Information; and 7.0 Statement of Key Environmental Issues and Problems.
SEA objectives are clearly set out and linked to indicators and targets where appropriate.	8.0 Proposed Strategic Environmental Assessment Framework.
Links with other related plans, programmes and policies are identified and explained.	5.0 Policy Context – Relevant Plans, Policies and Programmes.
Conflicts that exist between SEA objectives, between SEA and plan objectives and between SEA objectives and other plan objectives are identified and described.	8.0 Proposed Strategic Environmental Assessment Framework.
<b>Scoping</b>	
The assessment focuses on significant issues.	3.0 Scope of Management Plan Review 2024.
Technical, procedural, and other difficulties encountered are discussed; assumptions and uncertainties are made explicit.	3.0 Scope of Management Plan Review 2024.
Reasons are given for eliminating issues from further consideration.	3.0 Scope of Management Plan Review 2024.
<b>Baseline information</b>	
Relevant aspects of the current state of the environment and their likely evolution without the plan or programme are described.	6.0 Baseline Environmental Information.
Environmental characteristics of areas likely to be significantly affected are described, including areas wider than the physical boundary of the plan area where it is likely to be affected by the plan.	6.0 Baseline Environmental Information.
Difficulties such as deficiencies in information or methods are explained.	6.0 Baseline Environmental Information.
<b>Consultation</b>	
Consultation Bodies are consulted in appropriate ways and at appropriate times on the proposed content and scope of the Environmental Report.	4.0 Methodology and Timetable for Strategic Environmental Assessment.