

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee



Agenda

High Weald JAC Meeting

Wednesday 27 March 2024

Merriments, Hawkhurst Road, Etchingham TN19 7RA

1. Apologies
2. Members' Interests
Members and officers are invited to make any declarations of any interest that they may have in relation to items on the agenda and are reminded to make any declaration at any stage during the meeting if it then becomes apparent that this may be required when a particular item or issue is considered.
3. Urgent matters
Members are asked to raise any urgent matters at this stage and not at the end of the meeting. The Chairman will decide whether the JAC should discuss any items so raised but asks members to give him prior notification of such matters unless urgency prevents it.
4. Minutes of the JAC meeting
To consider the minutes of the last meeting of the JAC held on 22 November 2023 (page 3)
5. Minutes of the Management Board Meeting
To note the matters arising from the Management Board meeting held on 12 March 2024 (page 10)
6. Minutes of the Officer Steering Group
To note the minutes of the last meeting of the OSG held on 14 February 2024 (page 14)
7. Revenue Budget for 2024/25
To consider and approve a report by the Treasurer on the draft Revenue Budget 2024/25 (page 20) Appendix A budget forecast; Appendix B Self-funded projects; and Appendix C 5-year budget forecast; Appendix D Reserves Policy 2024-2029 (page 24)
8. High Weald Management Plan 2024-2029
To consider the report (page 26) and approve the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 (Annex 1) and its supporting documents (Annex 2: Strategic Environmental Assessment, Annex 3: Habitats Regulations Assessment, Annex 4: Equality Impact Assessment) and to note the Consultation Statement (Annex 5).
9. High Weald Dark Skies Planning Advice Note
To consider a report on the draft High Weald AONB Dark Skies Planning Advice Note (page 31)
10. Risk Management
To consider a report by the NL Co-Director on risk management (page 33); Appendix A: High Weald JAC - Key Risks

11. High Weald National Landscape Partnership work plan 2024-2025

To consider a report by the NL Business Manager on the focus for 2024/25 (page 39)

12. Any other business

13. Presentation from Natural England Planning Team

To consider a presentation from Natural England's Kent & Sussex Team, Naill Walkden, Principal Advisor, Sustainable Development and LNRS) and Sarah Davies (Principal Advisor, Partnership Working) on setting out the role of their organisation with the AONBs, and the various work areas that they are involved with.

To: ALL MEMBERS OF THE HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex TN5 7PR

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Agenda item: 4

High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

Minutes of Meeting



22 November 2023 at Acorn Tourism TN5 7PR 10.30am, followed by lunch

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex TN5 7PR

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Members present:

Cllr P Bradbury	West Sussex County Council (JAC Chair)
Cllr Mrs E Kirby-Green	East Sussex County Council (JAC Vice-Chair)
Cllr Mrs M Evans	Hastings Borough Council
Cllr Mr A Meir	Rother District Council
Cllr Mrs L Carvalho	Mid-Sussex District Council
Cllr Sir Nicholas White	Tandridge District Council
Mrs S Tidy	Farming Cooptee
Mrs G Davison	Community Cooptee

Officers:

Mr J Lavender	AONB Co-Director
Mrs S Marsh	AONB Co-Director
Ms G Sherwin	AONB Business Manager
Ms D Russell	AONB Senior Planning & Design Advisor
Mr A Fowler	Finance Manager, East Sussex County Council
Ms J Hollingum	OSG Chair, Mid-Sussex District Council
Mr M Davison	OSG Hastings Borough Council
Mr A Sime	OSG, Ashford Borough Council

1. Access and Recreation presentation

1.1 Simon Fathers presented to the Members about the progress made with the new role in access and recreation. (presentation appended)

- The role is being developed to facilitate access and enjoyment to the AONB, ensuring that there is positive connection with people within the delivery process.
- Simon gives advice on various programmes that the High Weald Landscape Team manage, such as Farming in Protected Landscapes, Sussex Lund, and Defra's Access for All.

- The Access for All grant has funded several partners to move forward access projects within the AONB including KHWP, Buchan Country Park and Ashdown Forest which funded the installation of a 'changing places' facility; as well as supporting ESCC and KCC with installation of 90 accessible gates to date. The AONB has been granted a further £219,000 for 2024/2025. Simon requested that if any of the local authorities had schemes, to contact him to discuss whether the grant can support them.

1.1. The Chair thanked Simon for his interesting presentation.

2. Apologies

- 2.1 Apologies for absence were received from Cllr N Williams, Cllr A Wilson, Cllr N Warne, Cllr Sam Raby, Cllr Tony Hills, Ms J Hull of the Forestry Commission and Ms L Newland of Natural England. Ms L Charman of the CLA, Mr M Woodcock Forestry Commission.
- 2.2 Cllr Mrs S Carey, Kent County Council has recently stepped down from the Environment Cabinet. Cllr Tony Hills is caretaking the position until there is an official appointment. The Chair thanked Susan for her contribution towards the High Weald Landscape Partnership.

3. Members Interests

- 3.1 No declarations of interest were raised by the Members.

4. Urgent Matters

- 4.1 No urgent matters were raised.

5. Election of the High Weald Management Board 2023-2025

5.1 RESOLVED to elect the following Members to the Management Board;

Cllr Pete Bradbury	West Sussex CC	(Chair)
Cllr Eleanor Kirby-Green	East Sussex CC	(Vice-Chair)
Cllr Nigel Williams	Sevenoaks DC	
Cllr Lorraine Carvalho	Mid-Sussex DC	
Cllr Sir Nicholas White	Tandridge DC	
Mrs Sylvia Tidy	Farming Cooptee	

- 5.2 There are currently two vacant positions on the Management Board. Members were encouraged to join the Management Board or to attend one of the meetings as a guest.

6 Minutes of the JAC Meeting

- 6.1** the Chair informed the Members that Jason and himself had attended a meeting with Trudy Harrison MP, in Cuckfield where they had discussed the major issues around Deer Management strategy with two Landowners. They also discussed with the Minister the two pilot schemes that Sandy Williamson is managing to control the excess numbers of Fallow Deer. This will help to inform the Minister who is assessing the current deer strategy.
- 6.2** The Chair will also be attending the National Conference for National Landscapes on 23 November 2023 with Jason Lavender.
- 6.3** Jason Lavender updated the Members on the Service Level Agreement process. This had been discussed at the OSG meeting and there is a process in place for updating the current agreement through Teams Group. All the LAs seemed to be keen to participate in this although in the past only 9 LAs have signed up to the agreement which is voluntary.
- 6.4** **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the JAC meeting held on 22 March 2023

7 Minutes of the Management Board Meeting

- 7.1** **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the Management Board meeting held on 20 September 2023.

8 Minutes of the Officer Steering Group (OSG)

- 8.1** **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the OSG meeting held on 13 October 2023.
- 8.2** Jennifer Hollingum, the OSG Chair updated the Members on key actions from the meeting:
- Sarah Brotherton presented to the Group slides from a wider suite of Nature Recovery strategic maps and High Weald priorities including information on species diverse grassland, water quality, deer impact assessments and hedges. The officers found this information very useful for nature recovery policies as well as biodiversity net gain.
 - The officers had a discussion on preparation of Planning Advice notes which will support the Management Plan 2024-2029. Topics include Dark Skies policies; soft landscaping in housing developments (expanding the points on this in the Housing Design Guide) and potentially including boundary treatments (with reference to close-board fencing). Also, the potential to develop 'position statements' on matters such as solar farms in the AONB and issues around farm diversification such as vineyards and associated infrastructure.
 - Officers also had an opportunity to discuss the updates on the Service Level Agreement 2024-2029 and its potential changes.

9 Revenue Budget for 2023/2024

9.1 The Committee considered a report from Andy Fowler, from the ESCC Treasurer.

9.2 The report presented a draft budget position for 2024/25:

- Appendix A shows the forecasting budget which includes 3% inflation; £270, 600 core budget and increase with inflation should lead to a balance budget.
- Appendix C shows the 5-year unrounded picture for individual Local Authorities. It shows a surplus in 2025/2026 due to the rounding up of figures.
- A balanced budget is also dependent on whether all LA can increase their contributions in line with the Service Level Agreement. It was confirmed that Tunbridge Wells BC has agreed in principle to the uplift in funding.
- It was highlighted that there £230,000 in the reserves could be utilised as only £75,000 is required to be ring-fenced for redundancies.

9.3 A discussion took place on whether 3% is high enough increase, as real inflation is currently tracking at 4.6%. It was agreed that inflationary increases that since no increase has been given for over 10 years this would be a realistic percentage.

9.4 It was clarified that Hastings BC contribution has been contributing £1500 per annum and not £300 as stated in the meeting, prior to the uplift to £4000.

9.5 RESOLVED to approve:

- 1. the draft budget for 2024/25; and**
- 2. the commencement of budget consultation with the local authorities and Defra.**

10 High Weald Management Plan 2024-20229 update

10.1 Sally Marsh took the Members through the background to reaching this stage in the draft Management Plans process:

- The AONB Management Plan is a statutory document under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The Management Plan was produced 20 years ago, and reviewed every five since, and is now up for renewal. We are one of two National Landscapes (AONBs) to take the decision to commence with their Management Plan. The others have delayed this process by a year. The current AONB Management Plan review was initiated in March 2022 by the JAC. Sarah Brotherton, Diane Russell, and Sally Marsh took the lead on developing the new Plan with the support of Samantha Nicholas and Emma White. The JAC were last updated on the progress of the Plan at their meeting of 22nd March 2023, since which the OSG has had additional meetings to support the development of the actions in the Plan, and the JAC Management Board approved the draft Management Plan for public

consultation on 20th September, in accordance with the delegation approved by JAC at the meeting of 22/3/2023.

- The draft plan went out to public consultation on 25th September 2023 for six weeks. The team have started to process the responses from the consultation and the final copy will be presented to the JAC for approval at the meeting of 27th March 2024. Subsequently the Management Plan will then need to be adopted by the LAs.

10.2 Diane Russell took the Members through the high-level results from the consultation and following responses:

- Approximately 170 responses in total had been received, the majority through the website,
- Approximately 110 of those responses were members of the public,
- All LAs had responded except Surrey CC,
- Majority of the section 85 responded except for UK Power Network and Heritage lottery Fund. Within that group 9 Parish Councils had responded including Balcombe, Brenchley and Matfield, Dormansland, Rotherfield, Slaugham, Brightling, Withyham, Heathfield and Waldron, Northiam.
- Notable other organisations who had responded included the NFU, CLA, CPRE, the Ramblers and other community groups.

10.3 Gerry Sherwin took the Members through the StoryMap which has been developed alongside the Management Plan. This allows the public to access online information in the form of maps. These maps cover a wide range of components such as grasslands, places to visit, grant programmes and Dark Skies. It has the capabilities of zooming into the map detail and gives guidance on how to interpret the data on the maps. The members had a demonstration of how the map worked and they all agreed it was an excellent tool to support the Management Plan.

10.4 The StoryMap will be launched by January 2024 and will be found on the High Weald website. Gerry urged the Members to pass it round to others in their organisation to test how useful it will be. The link will be circulated to the Members.

10.5 RESOLVED to welcome the verbal update on the Draft Management Plan consultation initial results and introduction to the StoryMap.

11 National Policy update

11.3 Gerry Sherwin launched the new branding to 'National Landscapes'. The High Weald National Landscape will remain an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty insofar as all policy, legislation and guidance applies to the designated landscape. The statutory purpose of the designated landscape "to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the designated landscape" remains.

- 11.4 The Members were shown the slides of the new logo for website. There is publicity surrounding the launch, with an event the evening of the 22 November 2023, which Sally Marsh is attending. The team will do a wider reaching launch to fit support the Management Plan launch in March 2024. Local Authority communication officers will be sent an email, and this will also be circulated to the Members and officers.
- 11.5 The Committee considered a report from Diane Russell regarding the implications for AONBs of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (LURA). Diane took the Members through the key aspects of the LURA, which received royal assent on 26 October 2023. Of particular note was that section 245 of the LURA amends section 85 of the Crow Act, regarding the general duties of public bodies etc in carrying out their functions, to go from having “regard to the purpose of...” to: ***“must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.”***
- 11.6 Sally Marsh informed the Members that this amendment to the Act may be tested with the outcome of the challenge from Berkeley Homes to the Secretary of State’s decision to refuse permission for Turnden in the AONB, resulting in the quashing of his decision and the redetermination of the application.

11.7 RESOLVED: to note the report on Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

12 Risk Management

- 12.1 The Committee considered a report by Jason Lavender on risk management; Jason highlighted that:
- 12.2 Several of the current AONB team staff are employed on fixed-term contracts working on a range of high-profile time limited projects and national schemes funded by a range of external organisations. They also support and benefit the AONB Unit’s wider work and remit. These contracts are due to come to an end in March 2025 and this will result in the loss of a considerable amount of expertise, experience, and knowledge after this date if not before given those affected will be actively seeking alternative employment. This presents a very significant risk to the work of the AONB Unit and our ability meeting the current and future demands placed on the team and will severely hamper efforts to take advantage of any potential opportunities to develop and run future projects.
- 12.3 **RESOLVED: that the Management Board continues to work with the AONB Unit to consider the risks and identify measures and options to manage and mitigate the effect of these risks.**

13 A.O.B.

- 13.1 Next JAC Meeting will be held on Wednesday 27 March 2024, venue to be decided.

**HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Management Board**



**High Weald
National
Landscape**

Notes

Tuesday 12 March 2024, 10.30am

Acorn Tourism, Hastings Road, East Sussex, TN5 7PR

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Present: Members:

Cllr P Bradbury	West Sussex County Council/Mid Sussex District Council (Chair)
Cllr Mrs E Kirby-Green	East Sussex County Council (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Mrs L Carvalho	Mid-Sussex District Council
Cllr Sir N White	Tandridge District Council
Cllr N Williams	Sevenoaks District Council

Also Present:

Sally Marsh	Director (job-share)
Gerry Sherwin	Business Manager
Samantha Nicholas	Clerk to JAC
Diane Russell	Planning and Design Advisor

Actions

Paragraph 6	Reserves report to be presented at JAC on 27 March 2024
Paragraph 15	The Members agreed it would be beneficial to extend FiPL contracts, using reserves if needed, and that a recommendation should be taken to the JAC Meeting on 27 March 2024.
Paragraph 28	Recommend to the JAC on 27 March 2024 to approve the Management Plan to go to the LAs for adoption.

Apologies

1. Apologies were received from: Jason Lavender and Sylvia Tidy.

Members' Interests

2. There were no members' interests that required noting.

Minutes of the meeting from 20 September 2023

3. The minutes for 20 September 2023 were agreed to be an accurate record.

Budget consultation

4. Gerry Sherwin informed the Members that that the local authority (LA) budget consultation is underway and those that have responded so far have all agreed to increase their contribution. This has given greater security to the core budget and will allow the budget to be balanced for 5-years. It was noted that:
 - Tunbridge Wells BC has agreed to uplift to the amount required
 - Crawley Borough Council from £300 to £1,500
 - Ashford Borough Council from £800 to £1,600.
5. Gerry informed the Members that a formal reserves policy has been drafted, consolidating discussion and recommendations presented in budget reports. The reserves policy will allow for:
 - redundancies
 - cyclical expenditure above £5,000 on areas such as website or IT, or, for example, costs of publishing management plan which is not allowed for in budget
 - continuity of staff, for example in cover for maternity leave or sickness absence
 - costs of role changes or contract extensions to assist with staff recruitment and retention
 - unexpected changes such as an in-year decline in funding from Defra or LAs
 - A policy review in line with the Service Level Agreement schedule.
6. **ACTION: It was agreed that a reserve policy should be presented to JAC.**
7. The Chair congratulated the High Weald officers on the work they had to put in to achieve this outcome.

Budget 24/25

8. Gerry Sherwin highlighted that the next financial year will be a challenging year for the team. This is partially due to the advocacy of the Defra protected landscape team, leading to an increase in funding. This is welcomed, but the funds are for capital expenditure only and need to be spent within a tight time frame. The following funding is available to the partnership:
 - FiPL funding (Defra)- although we have had a high number of applications only 50% of the budget is likely to be used for multiple reasons.
 - Access of All (Defra) - £219,000 which has been allocated to spend on stiles for gates, and on access improvements at Ashdown Forest, Buchan Country park and sites within Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.
 - Sussex Lund (Lund Trust) - the grant programme continues and is focused on 'grey to green' or 'green to greener' projects as well as looking at larger land scale projects.
 - Protected Landscape capital funds (Defra) – new and for 2024/25 only. Likely additional capital funding of £300,000. Guidelines on use yet to be issued. Funds can be used for project development. However, staff time is still

required to facilitate, the team is already working at full capacity and there is limited scope to increase the team resource for one year only.

Service Level Agreement (SLA) update

9. Gerry Sherwin informed the Members that Jason Lavender has reviewed the SLA with the officers and the document has been updated and circulated to the LAs for comment. The comments have led to further amends. Most local authorities have agreed to the new SLA and it is expected that the agreement process will be completed by end of June.
10. The Chair thanked Cllr Eleanor Kirby-Green and the officers for their on-going work with the SLA.

Risk Management and staff

11. Simon Fathers has left the team to return to ESCC within a PROW manager position.
12. The recently appointed ESCC finance officer has resigned which is putting pressure on Andy Fowler (ESCC finance manager) and the High Weald team to manage financial activity.
13. The Co-Director role is currently at 1FTE not 1.2FTE due to Sally Marsh taking time out to do a PHD and resources being reallocated. The team therefore has less management capacity than in the past, with associated risks, and this needs to be addressed.
14. Many project team contracts end on 31 March 2025. There is a need to retain FiPL staff beyond this date (ideally for 6 months) to ensure the programme can be operated and completed suitably in 2024/2025.
15. **ACTION: The Members agreed it would be beneficial to extend FiPL contracts, using reserves if needed, and that a recommendation should be taken to the JAC Meeting on 27 March 2024.**

Management Plan 2024 update

22. Sally Marsh updated the Members on the next steps for approving the Management Plan 2024 which was circulated to the Members. The Members were made aware that:
 - Over 175 responses were received through the public consultation. Of the LAs, only Surrey CC did not respond. 9 Parish Councils had responded to the consultation. Jennifer Hollingum (OSG Chair) confirmed that all OSG officers across the High Weald had contributed to the Plan with detail.
 - The team had 3 sessions going through the responses and ensuring that changes were made if required. This process highlighted several areas where further liaison/training with other stakeholders and organisations may be useful once the Management Plan has been approved.
 - The Officer Steering Group met on 14 February 2024 and agreed the post-consultation amended version. Sally advised the Members there had been one

outstanding area of concern around the wording in the Settlement ambition statement, however, the Unit sought responses from all the LAs, considered the matter further and concluded it was appropriate for the wording to remain – the OSG had been advised of this.

- The Members were made aware that due to the unforeseen delay in the MP production, due to the delay in the Defra new guidance on Management Plans which had still not been published, there may be a potential three-month gap between it being approved by the JAC and some LAs being able to adopt the Plan. Many of the LAs are putting in places measures to ensure it can be adopted as quickly as possible, but there are some delays due to the LAs internal processes and May elections. It was confirmed that weight will be given to the Plan as it will have been approved by the JAC Partnership.
- The Plan will be taken to JAC Members for approval and there will a soft launch where the Plan will be placed on the website. The more formal launch will be held later in the year when all LAs have adopted the Plan.
- Diane Russell confirmed that once the JAC have agreed to final Plan an accessibility layer will be put on for the online version which will be supplied to the LAs.

23. The Members complimented the team on producing a Plan that was visually appealing, and the that the new layout made it easy to follow. The Members requested hardcopies due to the size of the document but recognised that there may not be the funding to achieve large volumes.

24. A discussion took place around the differences between National Landscape Plans since some of the LAs have areas in multiple protected landscapes. Sally explained that the Defra guidelines that are currently being developed aim to help align the Plans and give common threads.

25. It was also confirmed that High Weald National Landscape is used for general publicity, but the term Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) remains a legal term and will be used for policy and planning matters. It was confirmed that the Management Plan must be referred to as an AONB Management Plan, to meet CRoW Act requirements.

26. The team was congratulated for all its hard work towards achieving the production of the new twenty-year Plan and the OSG was thanked for being so supportive.

27. ACTION: It was agreed to recommend to the JAC on 27 March 2024 to approve the Management Plan to go to the LAs for adoption

Project update

28. Gerry Sherwin highlighted new project developments that will affect delivery in 2024/2025:

- Cuckmere and Coombe flood management project is being extended for another 3 years with support from the Environment Agency. This will allow work that achieves natural flood management in the area.

- The Deer Management project is seen as exemplar and is informing projects across other National Landscapes.
- The team has been awarded funds for Dark Skies Festival for three years building on the team's existing work led by Samantha Nicholas.
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme has delivered £600,000 of projects benefiting climate, nature, people, and place in 23/24.
- Sussex Lund 2023 allocated £219,000 grants to 35 applicants for projects to benefit nature and communities.
- Landowners are being supported through events and specialist advice with agricultural transition, supported by the Royal Countryside Fund.
- Defra has rewarded the Partnership £90,000 for a test exploring the role of local convenors.

29. Diane Russell informed the Members of the latest planning projects:

- The team are working with the OSG in developing further planning technical advice notes that sit alongside the Management Plan. The first of these is the Dark Skies Planning Advice Note. A webinar workshop is being held on 21 March, where Dan Oakley (former Dark Skies officer for South Downs National Park) will present a draft document to the OSG and other LPA colleagues, for discussion.
- Other guidance they are working on is soft landscaping in housing developments and Biodiversity Net Gain and a position statement on solar farms.

30. Diane Russell has prepared consultation responses in the last couple of months for a large number of Local Plan Reg 18 and Reg 19 consultations, including for Sevenoaks District Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Horsham District Council, Mid-Sussex District Council and East Sussex County Council's Local Transport Plan. The team have also been responding to new information on the Turnden planning appeal which is in redetermination. Diane is also looking to work collaboratively with Kent Downs NL on public realm matters with Kent County Council.

JAC Agenda items 22 March 2023– additional items

31. Additional items are presentation from Natural England Planning Team.

A.O.B

32. The JAC Meeting is to be held on 27 March 2024 at Merriments Gardens near Hawkhurst.

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Service Level Agreement

This Service Level Agreement is made between:

A. East Sussex County Council (Host Authority for the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee)

and

B. *Local Authority* as a member of the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee.

1. Agreement Purpose

- 1.1 This Agreement provides a framework for the delivery of the duties and obligations arising from Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 as set out at Appendix 1. This Agreement is not intended to be legally binding, and no legal obligations or legal rights shall arise between the parties from the Agreement. The parties enter into the Agreement intending to honour their obligations.
- 1.2 A National Landscape Management Plan is central to meeting Local Authorities' statutory duty under Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 for the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape. The current High Weald Management Plan, approved by all the constituent Local Authorities, covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2029.
- 1.3 This Agreement indicates how the Authorities intend to co-operate to achieve the objectives set out in the Management Plan demonstrating that they are, collectively, meeting their continuing obligations in pursuance of the purposes of National Landscape designation.
- 1.4 This Agreement sets out the services to be provided by and through the Partnership, primarily through the activities of the High Weald National Landscape Unit.

2. Duration

The Agreement is for the duration of the Management Plan that is, over the next five years to 31 March 2029.

3. The Partnership

- 3.1 The High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) was formally established in 1996 and is composed of Defra and the 15 local authorities whose areas are covered by the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) designation: Ashford Borough Council, Crawley Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, Hastings Borough Council, Horsham District Council, Kent County Council, Mid Sussex District Council, Rother District Council, Sevenoaks District Council, Surrey County Council, Tandridge District Council, Tonbridge and Malling District Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Wealden District Council and West Sussex County Council. The JAC also includes representatives from co-opted organisations such as the Forestry Commission and the Country Land and Business Association. The co-opted

organisations do not contribute funds to the work of the National Landscape partnership and neither do they have voting rights.

- 3.2 The Partnership's current constitution and terms of reference were agreed on the 13 July 2005 (with minor amendments agreed 19 October 2009).

4. Partnership Purpose

- 4.1 The primary purpose of the High Weald JAC is to: conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald National Landscape. The JAC will also: increase understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the National Landscape; and seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Landscape.
- 4.2 The High Weald National Landscape Unit works on behalf of the JAC to achieve these purposes through the following activities:

A. Acting jointly to produce and review the National Landscape Management Plan as required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

- Undertaking the statutory process required to review and publish the Management Plan on behalf of the 15 local authorities including preparation of the Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment.
- Monitoring the condition of the High Weald National Landscape as required to inform the Management Plan review.
- Promoting the National Landscape vision and management plan to help distinguish the National Landscape from adjacent countryside.
- Advising upon, facilitating and co-ordinating implementation by others of the Management Plan.
- Securing resources for the delivery of National Landscape management activities.
- Developing and supporting an involvement by the community in the management of the High Weald National Landscape.
- Providing a management role to co-ordinate the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald National Landscape through the actions of the National Landscape Unit, the National Landscape Partnership, and other partners at a local and strategic level
- Problem solving, with the High Weald National Landscape Unit acting as co-ordinator and facilitator.

B. Providing technical National Landscape advice and support, and acting as an advocate for the High Weald National Landscape

- Advising local authorities, other public bodies, and the statutory undertakers on compliance with Section 85 of the CRow Act duty 'to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty'.
- Facilitating cooperation between local authorities on areas of common interest concerning the National Landscape.
- Advising local authorities and other partners on their activities within the National Landscape, to encourage them to attain the highest possible standards.

- Supporting and enabling the JAC, its Management Board, Officers Steering Group, and individual members to fulfil their purpose and act as advocates for the National Landscape.
- Providing landscape-led advice and guidance on related planning advice (to local planning authorities and in conjunction with Natural England as appropriate in line with, and underpinned by, protocols) on the High Weald landscape. Undertaking consultations, training events, site visits, National Landscape-specific research, technical guidance and sharing of National Landscape data.
- Working with and contributing to National Landscape Association (NLA) activities at a national and regional level, including sharing advice and best practice nationally and providing financial support for this in line with an agreed business plan.
- Supporting and contributing to regional activity between other National Landscape teams and partnerships and other protected landscape organisations to strengthen the status of National Landscape designation individually and collectively.
- Taking a lead in celebrating landscape beauty, helping local communities understand, enjoy, and take action to care for the area. Continuing to provide detailed guidance to residents, parish councils, and community groups and facilitate local community projects.
- Supporting farmers, foresters, and the land-based sector to transform their management practices to achieve net zero, restore nature, reduce flood and drought risk, and conserve landscape features, whilst also producing nutrient-dense food and sustainable timber.
- Facilitating initiatives that help landowners work together to recover nature in our woods, fields, and rivers at a meaningful scale by bringing people together to implement projects and secure resources. Improving the financial viability of the land-based sector through this work to ensure a vibrant land-based economy.
- Welcoming a wider and more diverse range of people from adjacent and nearby towns and cities to the High Weald countryside through projects and partnerships removing barriers to enjoying and taking part in the High Weald National Landscape.
- Involving younger generations by working with primary schools in and around the National Landscape and helping connect children to the countryside on their doorstep through indoor and outdoor learning adding value to the curriculum.
- Advocating nationally for appropriate policy and adequate resources that help and support the area's local authorities and other organisations, farmers land managers, and local communities conserve and enhance the High Weald National Landscape.

C. Monitoring and reporting on progress

- Monitoring and reporting on progress against the National Landscape Management Plan and annual business plan targets.
- Providing monitoring and reporting information to DEFRA, and any other funding bodies, as required.

4.3 The level of each activity is guided by High Weald National Landscape Management Plan objectives and the National Landscape Unit's three-year business strategy. It is subject to available resources.

5. The Host Authority

5.1 East Sussex County Council as Host Authority will be responsible for exercising its duties in relation to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and for: line managing the National Landscape Director, acting as employer for the High Weald National Landscape Unit, providing

human resources and IT support, and exercising responsibility for the financial management of the National Landscape Partnership.

6. Local Authority Partners

- 6.1 Local Authority Partners will be responsible for exercising their duties in relation to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and for: contributing to the costs of the Partnership in accordance with item 8; working with the Host Authority, DEFRA, Natural England and a range of other parties in relation to the management of the National Landscape; providing senior officer and member representation as set out in the constitution to support Partnership activity; and working with local government members to promote the role and value of National Landscapes to society and our natural environment.

7. DEFRA

- 7.1 Though not party to this SLA, DEFRA will remain responsible for exercising its duties in relation to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and for: contributing to the costs of the Partnership working to the principles set out in the tri-partite Memorandum of Understanding between DEFRA, Natural England and the NLA, supporting the work of the Partnership; and working across Government and with national organisations to promote the role and value of National Landscapes to society and our natural environment.

8. Funding

- 8.1 See Appendix II for the five-year indicative budget for the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee
- 8.2. The annual contribution from XXXXXX Local Authority for five years from 2024/25 until 2028/29 will be £XXXXXX with a request for an inflationary increase determined by the JAC Treasurer for the subsequent four years following 2024/25.

9. Monitoring

- 9.1 The High Weald Unit will submit an annual review to the Partnership and report biannually on its activities at the Partnership's November and March meetings.

10. Dispute Resolution

- 10.1 The officers of the Council and the High Weald National Landscape team shall use all reasonable endeavours to work together cooperatively to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the High Weald National Landscape and to resolve any disagreements that arise respecting that there will from time to time be differences of professional opinion between officers.
- 10.2 In the event of a dispute between officers of the Council and the High Weald National Landscape team, the dispute shall be resolved quickly, fairly, and without reprisal. The following steps should be taken:
- The officers of either party shall in the first instance raise the matter with the officers concerned and they will seek to resolve the dispute informally.

- If the dispute is not resolved informally and to the satisfaction of the officers concerned, the officers can raise the matter in writing to the Council's Head of Service and the Director of the High Weald Unit who shall provide a written response within 14 days.
- If the dispute has not been resolved to the satisfaction of both parties, it shall be referred by either party to the CEO of the Council and the CEO of East Sussex County Council. On considering the matter, the decision and the recommendations made by these most senior officers will be final.

11. Termination

11.1 A partner may, by giving not less than six months' notice, terminate this agreement setting out their reasons for termination.

Signed Date

Position

Signed Date

Position

Appendix I

Statutory Duties

The designation of the High Weald as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) places several statutory duties on local authorities under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000:

- **Section 82** affirms the primary purpose of National Landscapes: to conserve and enhance natural beauty
- **Section 84** confirms the powers of local authorities to take 'all such action expedient to achieve the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty'.
- **Section 85** places a duty on all public bodies and statutory undertakers to 'further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty'. This duty is in addition to the power under section 84 (above).
- **Section 89** creates a statutory responsibility for local authorities to produce and review AONB management plans, where appropriate acting jointly. Management Plans formulate the local authorities' policy for the management of the National Landscape and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it.

These duties are principally discharged through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee, acting jointly on behalf of the local authorities, although they apply to all council functions and activities where they affect the use of land in the National Landscape.

Appendix II

High Weald JAC five-year indicative budget

	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £	2026/27 £	2027/28 £
<u>Expenditure</u>					
Staff costs	314,400	323,800	333,500	340,200	347,000
Accommodation/office equipment	35,300	36,400	37,500	38,300	39,100
Partnership running costs	7,000	7,200	7,400	7,500	7,700
Support Services	32,700	33,600	34,700	35,400	36,100
Total Core Expenditure	389,400	401,000	413,100	421,400	429,900
<u>Income</u>					
Defra	270,600	270,600	278,700	284,300	290,000
East Sussex County Council	27,400	28,222	29,069	29,941	30,839
Kent County Council	14,000	14,420	14,853	15,299	15,758
West Sussex County Council	14,300	14,729	15,171	15,626	16,095
Surrey County Council	3,000	3,090	3,183	3,278	3,376
Wealden District	9,700	9,991	10,291	10,600	10,918
Rother District Council	9,700	9,991	10,291	10,600	10,918
Mid Sussex District Council	8,100	8,343	8,593	8,851	9,117
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	6,700	8,901	9,168	9,443	9,726
Horsham District Council	5,000	5,150	5,305	5,464	5,628
Sevenoaks District Council	6,100	6,283	6,471	6,665	6,865
Ashford Borough Council	800	3,624	3,733	3,845	3,960
Hastings Borough Council	4,000	4,120	4,244	4,371	4,502
Tandridge District Council	2,200	2,266	2,334	2,404	2,476
Crawley Borough Council	300	2,609	2,687	2,768	2,851

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	1,500	1,545	1,591	1,639	1,688
Other Income	6,000	7,200	7,500	7,700	7,800
Total Core Income	389,400	401,084	413,184	422,794	432,517
(Deficit)/Surplus	-	84	84	1,394	2,617
Reserves	229,879	229,963	230,047	231,441	234,058

THIS BUDGET IS INDICATIVE ONLY. This draft budget was presented at the November 2023 JAC meeting. The High Weald JAC Members agreed this draft budget for 2024/25 and approved the commencement of budget consultation with the local authorities and DEFRA. This draft budget is based on guidance and on information available to East Sussex County Council in November 2023 and will be subject to change.

Agenda item:6

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee Officer Steering Group

Notes of a meeting of the High Weald Officer Steering Group held on online
Microsoft teams 14 February 2024 10am.



Samantha Nicholas
Clerk to the High Weald JAC
PRESENT:

Jennifer Hollingum	Mid Sussex DC (Chairman)
Mark Daly	Horsham DC (Vice-Chairman)
Alan Sime	Ashford BC
Sophie Gilbert	Crawley BC
Virginia Pullen	East Sussex CC
Murray Davidson	Hastings BC
Vivienne Riddle	Sevenoaks DC
David Greenwood	Surrey CC
Katya Fox	Tandridge DC
Julian Ling	Tonbridge & Malling BC
David Scully	Tunbridge Wells BC
Kelly Sharp	Wealden DC
Natalie Bumpus	Wealden DC

High Weald Unit:	
Jason Lavender	AONB Joint Director
Sally Marsh	AONB Joint Director
Gerry Sherwin	AONB Business Manager
Diane Russell	AONB Planning & Design Advisor

Summary of Actions:

<u>Pt</u>	<u>Information</u>	<u>To be actioned by</u>
2.3	outstanding action to circulate Bat and light pollution ILP guidance	NL Team
3.5	OSG members to advise Diane of their intended adoption timescale.	Local Authorities
3.7	Look at MP for accessibility issues	Tunbridge Wells BC and Rother DC
3.10	Review use of National Landscape and AONB and look to standardise use or add as glossary	NL Team
3.12	Send in views to Sally Marsh on word changes to p27 ambition section of Settlement	Local Authorities
6.11	To consider the scope of additional guidance notes for BNG	NL Team

1. Apologies

1.1 Apologies were received from Sarah Brotherton, Chris Walker and Kate Boorman.

2. Minutes of the meeting of 12 October 2023

2.1 The Minutes of 12 October 2023 were agreed to be an accurate account of the meeting.

2.2 Jennifer noted that the Access presentation postponed from the last OSG meeting was not on the agenda for this meeting; Jason explained that the team's Access Officer was shortly leaving the team for a new post with ESCC, so unfortunately there was no capacity for this at present.

2.3 Action: outstanding action to circulate Bat and light pollution ILP guidance

3. Management Plan update

3.1 The group had been circulated the post-consultation version of the Management Plan 2024-2029, which included a number of revisions to the Management Plan following the HW Team's consideration of the consultation responses, including

- various additional 'Actions' in the Character Component sections – in response to comments received from a range of organisations.
- Additional text relating to BNG, in response to conversations with LPA officers and as a precursor to requested HW specific BNG guidance which will be developed with the OSG.
- An additional page relating to 30x30 and habitat restoration, in response to Natural England feedback.
- Revisions to the Monitoring page revised to reflect national guidance and consultation feedback, and to include Local Monitoring Indicators of Success.

3.2 Jennifer asked the Group if they find any typos or if local authorities have a new logo, please send them to Diane and Sarah to ensure that these are addressed in the final Plan.

3.3 Sally Marsh described to the group the process that the HW Team had undertaken to consider all comments received in the public consultation process. A Consultation Summary Report had been circulated to the OSG, which included a table detailing the section 85 feedback and changes to the Plan from those.

- 175 total respondents to the consultation through the online forms and by email, including Local Authorities, other Section 85 public bodies, other organisations and members of the public.
- There has been general overall support for Vision and Statement of Significance.
- Natural England has yet to circulate the national guidance for National Landscape Management Plans. Also the national outcomes framework has not yet been published; it is intended this will be a monitoring addendum to the MP when received.
- The final version will be submitted for approval at the JAC Meeting on 27 March 2024.

- 3.4 Diane had requested that OSG members advise the Unit of their individual LA's adoption process and timescale, to ensure that the adopted Plan can be submitted to the Secretary of State in a timely manner, ideally in June 2024.
- 3.5 **Action: OSG members to advise Diane of their intended adoption timescale.**
- 3.6 There was a discussion around ensuring that the Management Plan needs to be an accessible document needs to be published on local authority websites. It was suggested that an alternative additional version may be required e.g. plain text or audio version – it was noted the current design lends itself to a better layout and understanding. However, if any accessibility issues could be addressed within the designed document, that would be a preferred option. Alan advised that from a quick check, it appeared only a few alterations might be necessary. David and Jeff kindly agreed to run the document through their LA IT systems to check the extent of any alterations required to make the document accessible, and advise Diane accordingly, following which the team would discuss with the document designer.
- 3.7 **Action: TWBC and Rother DC would look at final document to check accessibility and advise Diane.**
- 3.8 A discussion took place on using consistent terminology between National Landscape and AONB terms. The team explained the challenge of dual terms, one relating to the 'brand name' (National Landscape) and one being the legal term (AONB), and explained that they had gone through the document in detail to select the most appropriate term throughout, but were happy to revisit this to improve clarity.
- 3.9 There was general discussion about the use of the terms in Local Plans, etc, Diane's advise was that whichever terms LPAs chose to use, they should ensure they included an explanatory paragraph explaining the two terms, for clarity (text on the HW website that can be used).
- 3.10 **Action: The NL team will review the use of National Landscape and AONB within the Plan.**
- 3.11 Tunbridge Wells and Wealden DC were concerned about the use of terminology in the MP p27 Settlements ambition section and requested that the wording could be adjusted to 'primarily' or 'generally' small scale. It was explained that this terminology was used in the 'ambition' as it was consistent with AONB character. Rother DC confirmed that within their Local Plan Policy they do say that development should be small scale.
- 3.12 **Action reflect p.27 Sally and team to consider the matter and report back to the OSG.**

4. Legislative and policy update

- 4.1 Diane Russell informed the Group of the changes to the CRoW act amendment (introduced at the last OSG meeting), and requested that officers should ensure this information is circulated to their wider LA teams, for example to those responsible for economic development strategies, amenities and climate change plans. Mid-Sussex have already communicated to senior officers the importance of the strengthened wording in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act.

Planning and non-planning matters affecting the High Weald AONB

5.1 There was round table discussion and updates from each of the LAs, including

- Horsham DC – Reg 19 Local Plan out to consultation until 1 March 2024
- Mid Sussex DC – Reg 19 Local Plan out to consultation until 23 February
- Tunbridge Wells BC - Local Plan is expected to be back for examination in June 2024, and further hearing sessions are expected.
- Rother DC – reg 18 Local Plan going to Cabinet in March and then consultation in early April.
- Wealden DC – reg 18 Local Plan was approved for consultation by Cabinet, and scheduled to go out to consultation in mid-March, progressing a further call for sites as part of this consultation.
- Ashford BC – is currently assessing sites and outcomes will be published in March.
- Crawley BC – main modification consultation is underway until 25 March.
- Sevenoaks DC – reg 18 Local Plan consultation finished earlier this year. They are currently going through consultation responses. Reg 19 consultation is expected early summer.
- ESCC – Issue with enforcement around a new build in Battle and edge of gill woodland has been damaged due to landfill damage. Very visible from A2100 and they are looking at enforcement to make changes to improve ecology and landscape damage.

6. Planning advice notes - progression on Dark Skies and scoping of other advice notes, including potential for BNG guidance

- 6.1 **Dark skies technical guidance** – Diane advised that Dan Oakley (consultant) has completed a first draft of this guidance, and is looking to present this at an online meeting to have a discussion on content. We would like to OSG members to invite Development Management colleagues to be involved in this process.
- 6.2 David Scully raised an issue with Highways authority and discussed an example of a green corridor area where they wanted to remove a column, and this was refused even though there is flexibility in the approaches. It was agreed that the Highways teams should be invited to the meeting in March so that they are part of that discussion – County Council OSG members are requested to invite colleagues as appropriate.
- 6.3 **Soft landscaping in housing developments guidance** - Diane informed the Group that she is starting to pull together a document which is looking at different types of soft landscaping such as buffer zones, hedges, boundary treatment and green amenities space, and asked the group if there were specific matters that would be helpful for the guidance to include.
- 6.4 The group generally felt this guidance would be useful, and discussion took place on potential guidance content, including planting mix, differences for shaw versus hedgerow habitat to replicate traditional features. There was a concern that the planning inspectors were still using a 5-year conditions so advice on a longer term maintenance would be helpful to counteract this. Also to think about planting schemes which reflect climate change and diseases.

- 6.5 **Biodiversity Net Gain guidance:** - Diane set out that following the discussions at the last OSG, the team had been discussing the potential scope of High Weald specific BNG guidance. Jennifer informed the group that Guidance specific to the High Weald surrounding BNG would be very helpful, several types of guidance may be required to look at on-site ('significant' which has to be secured for 30 years, and 'not significant'), offsite BNG and habitat banks. It would be useful to have guidance when Habitat bank providers approach local authorities and whether they are appropriate to the High Weald.
- 6.5 TWBC has agreed that at phase 1 survey isn't appropriate and more detail botanical surveys are required for grassland. However, this needs to have regard to the legislation.
- 6.7 A discussion took place around:
- offsite purchase for BNG credits and the current uncertainty of how this process will work in practice.
 - % of BNG that LPAs were including in Local Plan policies, for example Rother DC is proposing 20% and gathering evidence to support on this whereas Horsham DC is proposing a minimum of 12% BN. The BNG formulae makes it harder to achieve if there is existing grassland rather than arable. Sally Marsh gave a word of warning to the Group that BNG does not equal more biodiversity, caution with this process and realistic use of it needs to be taken. Jason Lavender highlighted that the reality was that a lot of what the High Weald already is, is what other landscapes are seeking to aspire to through BNG, and that with the landscape's existing 30% overall woodland cover and good hedgerow connectivity, uplift through the BNG metric is difficult. Also BNG provision needs to be balanced with food security and continued agricultural activity (as per Land-based economy objectives in the MP).
 - Types of High Weald specific BNG guidance required – e.g. separate Habitat bank guidance regarding suitability and realistic high priority habitat creation.
 - How this aligns with local nature recovery strategies.
 - Potential for charging for BNG advice.
- 6.11 **Action: It was agreed that the team will continue scoping High Weald BNG guidance for both on-site BNG and for habitat banks, and will liaise with the OSG on this.**

7. Training

- 7.1 Management Plan training is the priority in 2024 and Diane will be looking at how to support training for LAs for officers and Members.

8. Service Level Agreement (SLA)

- 8.1 Jason thanked officers who have submitted their comments to update the Service level agreement which he will be looking at in the next couple of weeks. This will be submitted for approval at the next JAC on 27 March 2024.
- 8.3 Jason will take a view on the dispute resolution clause which he has discussed with TWBC, to ensure the wording is proportionate and appropriate for the SLA.

9. Items for JAC

- Management Plan
- NE presentation for planners (subject to NE availability).
- Update on progression of Planning Advice Notes

10 A.O.B

- 10.1 TWBC confirmed that due to May elections the next cabinet meeting for sign off for the MP will be in June 2024.
- 10.2 Samantha Nicholas informed the group of the Dark Skies Festival running on 28 October to 10 November and Walking Festival 9 to the 17 September 2024.
- 10.3 Emma White (the team's communication officer) is aiming to run a webinar to discuss dissemination of information of work programmes and would appreciate it if the officers could send the main email addresses of LA comms officers to contact.
- 10.4 The JAC meeting will be held on 27th March 2024, venue tba.
- 10.5 The next OSG meeting will be in September 2024.

Agenda Item: 8

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 27 March 2024

Title of Report: Revenue Budget 2024/25

By: Treasurer to the Joint Advisory Committee

Purpose of Report: To approve the Revenue Budget 2024/25

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. approve the revenue budget for 2024/25
 2. approve the reserves policy
 3. thank local authorities for their contributions to the High Weald AONB Partnership in 2024/25.
-

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report sets out the budget for 2024/25 following a consultation approved by the committee at its last meeting of 22 November 2023.
- 1.2 The budget 2024/25 reflects the budget review in 2022/23.

2. FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

- 2.1 Appendix A presents the forecast out-turn for 2023/24, the budget for 2024/25 and an indicative budget for 2025/26. Appendix B summarises the project budgets. Appendix C presents an indicative 5-year budget and Appendix D presents the reserves policy.
- 2.2 The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) 'single pot' contribution for 2024/25 has been confirmed at £318,130.
- 2.3 The allocation of £270,600, equivalent to 85.1% of the Defra single pot contribution, to core activities, and other income of £15,700 will achieve a balanced budget for 2024/25.

3. BUDGET 2023/24

- 3.1 The High Weald core budget is forecast to have a surplus of £5,300 in 2023/24. The surplus arises from increased income from project delivery by the core team in 2023/24.

4. BUDGET 2024/25

Core Budget – Expenditure

- 4.1 The budget for 2024/25 is presented in Appendix A. It is based on the 2023/24 figures with inflation at the ESCC applied rate of 3% for salaries and 3% for other costs. The budget allows for:
- (i) Staff costs: a budget for a core team of 5.8FTE staff which includes travel, training and any incremental progression and contributions to the pension fund.
 - (ii) Accommodation/office equipment costs: rent, rates, office equipment, office running costs and the website.
 - (iii) Partnership running costs: National Landscape Association membership fees, JAC and partnership meetings, annual review production and miscellaneous public relations costs.
 - (iv) Support services: East Sussex County Council's charges for IT, HR and Finance support and a lump sum contribution to the pension fund.

Core Budget – Income

Defra

- 4.2 The long standing agreement with the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) provides a flexible single pot contribution for core and projects from a dedicated protected landscape budget.
- 4.3 The single pot contribution in 2023/24 is £318,130: £270,600 has been allocated to Core and £47,530 to self-funding Projects.
- 4.4 Defra's potential total contribution to Core and Self-funding Projects for 2024/2025 is shown in appendix A as £1,671,900.

Local Authority Contributions

- 4.5 The levels of support from each authority are shown in Appendix A.
- 4.6 Most local authorities have increased their contribution to the Partnership following the budget and SLA review. Most have increased their contributions as requested, the remainder have increased their contribution by an alternative amount.

- 4.7 Kent County Council was able to increase their contribution for 2023/24 but have advised that they are likely to reduce their contribution for 2024/25 to 2022/23 levels.

Self-funding projects

- 4.9 JAC expenditure on self-funding projects is presented at Appendix B and is estimated to be £1,801,700 in 2024/25.
- 4.10 The Community Outreach programme includes High Weald Heroes (supported by an 0.6 FTE), High Weald Walks Festival and the Access and Recreation project. The Land Management programme includes the Deer Initiative project (supported by an 0.6 FTE) and the Cuckmere and Coombe Slow the Flow project (supported by 1 FTE).
- 4.11 A sum of £47,530 has been allocated to Projects from the Defra single pot contribution.
- 4.12 The budget also includes additional, and significant, one-off contributions from Defra for 24/25:
- Access for all projects £219,000 – confirmed
 - National test of protected landscape’s convening role £85,000 – confirmed
 - Protected landscapes capital fund £300,000 - indicative, final award still to be advised.
- 4.13 The budget therefore reflects that operation of five grant programmes in 2024/25: the Farming in Protected Landscapes Grant Programme (Defra) supported by 2FTEs; Sussex Lund; the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative, the Access for All grant programme, and the Protected Landscapes capital fund.
- 4.14 Appendix B indicates the contributions from local authority partners to Partnership-led management plan delivery.
- 4.15 All projects have a balanced budget over the total life of the project. Income is allocated on a pro rata basis over the relevant number of financial years to give a net balance of zero.

5. FINANCIAL ISSUES 2025/26 AND BEYOND

- 5.1 A five-year budget projection (Appendix C) suggests a balanced budget can be achieved without use of the Partnership’s. It assumes that:
- (i) inflationary pressure beyond 2024/25 will reduce on all costs from current levels to 3% or below.
 - (ii) that local authorities can maintain their contributions at 2024/25 levels with an annual inflationary increase
 - (iii) an increasing proportion of the Defra grant is allocated to the core budget each year

- (iv) the core team can generate an income by charging its services (project management, communication, advice and administration) to self-financing projects.

Reserves

- 5.2 The forecast reserve at 31 March 2024 is £235,200. The forecast reserve at 31 March 2025 is £235,200. The partnership's reserve policy is attached as Appendix D.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 The 2024/25 core budget is a balanced budget.
- 6.2 The five-year budget projection suggests a longer term balanced budget can be achieved with ongoing support from local authority partners.
- 6.3 These conclusions form the basis of the report recommendations.



Jill Fisher, Treasurer to the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

HIGH WEALD AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

FORECAST OUTTURN for 2023/24, PROPOSED BUDGET for 2024/25 AND INDICATIVE BUDGET 2025/26

Appendix A

2022/23		2023/24		2024/25					2025/26
Outturn	Core Budget	Budget	Forecast	Original Budget	Inflation	Budget Pressures	Other	Budget	Indicative Budget
£'000		£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
	Expenditure								
265.3	Staff costs	314.4	323.9	314.4	9.4	0.0	0.0	323.8	333.5
32.8	Accommodation/office equipment	35.3	34.7	35.3	1.1	0.0	0.0	36.4	37.5
4.7	Partnership running costs	7.0	8.3	7.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	7.2	7.4
31.7	Support services	32.7	31.7	32.7	0.9	0.0	0.0	33.6	34.5
334.5	Total Core Expenditure	389.4	398.6	389.4	11.6	0.0	0.0	401.0	412.9
	Income								
(249.3)	Defra	(270.6)	(270.6)	(270.6)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(270.6)	(278.7)
(22.4)	East Sussex County Council	(27.4)	(27.4)	(27.4)	(0.8)	0.0	0.0	(28.2)	(29.0)
(9.0)	Kent County Council	(14.0)	(14.0)	(14.0)	(0.4)	0.0	5.4	(9.0)	(9.3)
(9.3)	West Sussex County Council	(14.3)	(14.3)	(14.3)	(0.4)	0.0	0.0	(14.7)	(15.1)
(2.9)	Surrey County Council	(3.0)	(3.0)	(3.0)	(0.1)	0.0	0.0	(3.1)	(3.2)
(7.2)	Wealden District	(9.7)	(9.7)	(9.7)	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(10.0)	(10.3)
(7.2)	Rother District Council	(9.7)	(9.7)	(9.7)	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(10.0)	(10.3)
(5.6)	Mid Sussex District Council	(8.1)	(8.1)	(8.1)	(0.2)	0.0	0.0	(8.3)	(8.5)
(6.7)	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	(6.7)	(6.7)	(6.7)	(0.2)	0.0	(2.0)	(8.9)	(9.2)
(4.7)	Horsham District Council	(5.0)	(5.0)	(5.0)	(0.2)	0.0	0.0	(5.2)	(5.4)
(3.6)	Sevenoaks District Council	(6.1)	(6.1)	(6.1)	(0.2)	0.0	0.0	(6.3)	(6.5)
(0.8)	Ashford Borough Council	(0.8)	(0.8)	(0.8)	0.0	0.0	(0.8)	(1.6)	(1.6)
(1.5)	Hastings Borough Council	(4.0)	(4.0)	(4.0)	(0.1)	0.0	0.0	(4.1)	(4.2)
(2.2)	Tandridge District Council	(2.2)	(2.2)	(2.2)	(0.1)	0.0	0.0	(2.3)	(2.4)
(0.3)	Crawley Borough Council	(0.3)	(0.3)	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(1.2)	(1.5)	(1.5)
(0.6)	Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	(1.5)	(1.5)	(1.5)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(1.5)	(1.5)
(7.9)	Other income	(6.0)	(20.5)	(6.0)	0.0	0.0	(9.7)	(15.7)	(16.2)
(341.1)	Total Core Income	(389.4)	(403.9)	(389.4)	(3.3)	0.0	(8.3)	(401.0)	(412.9)
6.6	Surplus/(deficit) transfer to/(from) reserves	0.0	5.3	0.0	(8.3)	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0
0.0	Net Core Budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Self Funding Projects								
	See Appendix C for detail								
874.1	JAC expenditure on self-funded projects	1,350.0	1,027.2	1,801.7				1,801.7	536.0
(68.9)	Defra contribution to self-funded projects (Excluding FiPL)	(47.4)	(59.7)	(651.0)				(651.0)	(41.2)
(545.3)	Defra contribution to FiPL Project	(999.3)	(709.8)	(750.3)				(750.3)	0.0
0.0	Local authorities contributions	(42.3)	(22.3)	(38.3)				(38.3)	(105.3)
(259.9)	Other contributions to self-funded projects	(261.0)	(235.4)	(362.1)				(362.1)	(389.5)
0.0	Net Self-Funded Project Budget	(0.0)	0.0	(0.0)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Total High Weald JAC								
1,215.3	Total core and project expenditure	1,739.4	1,425.8	2,191.1	11.6	0.0	0.0	2,202.7	948.9
(1,215.3)	Total core and project income	(1,739.4)	(1,431.1)	(2,191.1)	(3.3)	0.0	(8.3)	(2,202.7)	(948.9)
0.0	Total High Weald JAC Budget	0.0	5.3	0.0	(8.3)	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0

Defra Funding	2023/24 £000	2024/25 £000
Defra funding on core budget	(270.6)	(270.6)
Defra funding on projects budget	(47.4)	(651.0)
Defra contribution to FiPL Project	(709.8)	(750.3)
Total Defra Funding	(1,027.8)	(1,671.9)

Reserves	£000
Reserves at 31 March 2022	223.3
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2022/23	6.6
Reserves at 31 March 2023	229.9
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2023/24	5.3
Reserves at 31 March 2024	235.2
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2024/25	0.0
Reserves at 31 March 2025	235.2

HIGH WEALD AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

SELF-FUNDING PROJECTS OUTTURN for 2023/24 and INDICATIVE BUDGET 2024/25 and 2025/26

Appendix B

2022/23 Outturn £'000		Budget 2023/24			Forecast 2023/24			Indicative Budget 2024/25			Indicative Budget 2025/26		
		Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000
	<u>1 Community Outreach/Access for All</u>												
0.4	JAC expenditure	20.8			29.5			257.0			40.1		
(0.4)	Defra		(14.0)			(20.4)			(233.0)			(14.0)	
0.0	Local authorities		(6.0)			(7.9)			(23.6)			(25.7)	
0.0	Other		(0.8)			(1.2)			(0.4)			(0.4)	
0.0	Total Community Outreach			0.0			0.0			(0.0)			(0.0)
	High Weald Heroes												
26.2	JAC expenditure	28.9			32.6			29.4			30.3		
(26.2)	Defra		(14.5)			(14.6)			(18.0)			(18.0)	
0.0	Local authorities		(14.4)			(14.0)			(7.3)			(12.3)	
0.0	Other		0.0			(4.0)			(4.1)			0.0	
(0.0)	Total High Weald Heroes			0.0			(0.0)			0.0			0.0
	<u>2 Management Plan Evidence and Guidance</u>												
5.7	JAC expenditure	25.0			17.4			14.0			20.0		
(5.7)	Defra		(12.0)			(12.0)			(7.0)			(7.0)	
0.0	Other		(13.0)			(5.4)			(7.0)			(13.0)	
0.0	Total Management Plan Evidence and Guidance			0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0
	<u>3 Landscape Enhancement*</u>												
296.6	JAC expenditure	276.1			232.2			366.5			424.6		
(36.7)	Defra		(7.0)			(7.0)			(8.5)			(2.2)	
(32.5)	Environment Agency		(14.1)			(4.5)			0.0			0.0	
0.0	Local authorities		(21.9)			(0.4)			(7.4)			(67.3)	
(0.4)	Other		(47.4)			(60.3)			(15.6)			(20.1)	
0.0	Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund		0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0	
(84.9)	National Grid Grant programme		(0.7)			(36.8)			0.0			0.0	
(142.1)	Sussex Lund Grant programme (Charities Aid Foundation)		(185.0)			(123.2)			(335.0)			(335.0)	
(0.0)	Total Landscape Enhancement			0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0
	<u>4 Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme (FIPL)</u>												
545.3	JAC expenditure	999.3			709.8			750.3			0.0		
(545.3)	Defra		(999.3)			(709.8)			(750.3)			0.0	
0.0	Total			0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0
	<u>5 Protected Landscapes capital fund</u>												
0.0	JAC expenditure	0.0			0.0			300.0			0.0		
0.0	Defra		0.0			0.0			(300.0)			0.0	
0.0	Other		0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0	
0.0	Total PL Capital Fund			0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0
	<u>5 Project Development</u>												
0.0	JAC expenditure	0.0			5.7			84.5			21.0		
0.0	Defra		0.0			(5.7)			(84.5)			0.0	
0.0	Other		0.0			0.0			0.0			(21.0)	
0.0	Local authorities		0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0	
0.0	Total Project Development			0.0			0.0			0.0			0.0
874.1	JAC expenditure (to Appendix a)	1,350.0			1,027.2			1,801.7			536.0		
(614.2)	Expenditure funded by Defra (to Appendix A)		(1,046.7)			(769.5)			(1,401.3)			(41.2)	
0.0	Expenditure funded by LAs (to Appendix A)		(42.3)			(22.3)			(38.3)			(105.3)	
(259.9)	Expenditure funded by Other (to Appendix A)		(261.0)			(235.4)			(362.1)			(389.5)	
0.0	TOTAL JAC expenditure/income	1,350.0	(1,350.0)	0.0	1,027.2	(1,027.2)	0.0	1,801.7	(1,801.7)	0.0	536.0	(536.0)	0.0

* Does not include the costs of the FIPL-funded Deer co-ordination project to avoid double counting of expenditure

High Weald AONB Five year budget plan

Appendix C

Assumes 3% inflation increase

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
<u>Expenditure</u>					
Staff costs	323.8	333.5	341.9	350.4	359.2
Accommodation/office equipment	36.4	37.5	39.4	41.4	43.5
Partnership running costs	7.2	7.4	7.8	8.2	8.6
Support services	33.6	34.5	36.2	38	39.9
Total Core Expenditure	401.0	412.9	425.3	438.0	451.2
<u>Income</u>					
Defra	270.6	278.7	287.1	295.7	304.6
East Sussex County Council	28.2	29.0	29.9	30.8	31.7
Kent County Council	9.0	9.3	9.6	9.9	10.2
West Sussex County Council	14.7	15.1	15.6	16.1	16.6
Surrey County Council	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5
Wealden District	10.0	10.3	10.6	10.9	11.2
Rother District Council	10.0	10.3	10.6	10.9	11.2
Mid Sussex District Council	8.3	8.5	8.8	9.1	9.4
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	8.9	9.2	9.5	9.8	10.1
Horsham District Council	5.2	5.4	5.6	5.8	6.0
Sevenoaks District Council	6.3	6.5	6.7	6.9	7.1
Ashford Borough Council	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
Hastings Borough Council	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5
Tandridge District Council	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7
Crawley Borough Council	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.6
Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.6
Other income	15.7	16.2	16.6	17.1	17.6
Total Core Income	401.0	412.9	425.3	438.0	451.2
Surplus/(deficit) transfer to/(from) reserves	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Total reserve expected at 31 March 2024	235.2
Movement	
2022/23	0.0
2023/24	0.0
2024/25	0.0
2025/26	0.0
2026/27	0.0
Projected reserves at 31 March 2029	235.2

High Weald National Landscape Partnership

Reserves Policy 2024-2029



1. Introduction

The High Weald National Landscape Partnership (HWNLP) has an unrestricted fund, or reserve, which has been built using local authority contributions to the Partnership and charges for services since 2000.

Creating a reserve is in line with good practice. Reserves protect the Partnership against drops in income and unexpected costs and allow the Partnership to take advantage of new opportunities.

The HWNLP plans for a balanced budget, only adding to reserves from unrestricted income if savings have been achieved or additional income sourced. The reserves cannot be used to fill long-term funding gaps.

2. Reserve purpose

The HWNLP aims to ensure that there are sufficient reserves for five purposes.

- **Dissolution**

The reserves provide for the costs of dissolution should the partnership be unable to continue. They will only be used if Defra and East Sussex County Council (as host authority) decide the partnership should cease to exist. The reserves will be used to pay notice periods, redundancies, and the expenses of running the partnership until closure. Any reserve balance will be distributed amongst local authority partners according to their % contribution to the partnership's budget in the year of dissolution.

The reserves also provide for the costs of ending self-funding projects and will be used to pay notice periods and redundancies if such costs are ineligible expenditure under external funding bodies rules.

It is estimated that £180,000 would be needed to cover the costs of the Partnership's dissolution.

- **Cyclical maintenance**

The reserves provide for cyclical spend i.e. one-off but significant items of expenditure that cannot be accommodated in the annual budget without a one-off request for further funding from Defra or the 15 local authority partners. Cyclical spend includes replacing IT hardware, upgrades to the website's content management system, management plan publishing costs (every five years) and office-related maintenance (for example roof repairs and redecorating).

It is estimated that £20,000 is needed in reserve to cover cyclical maintenance over the next 10 years.

- **Continuity**

The reserves provide for backfilling staff members on maternity or paternity leave, sickness absence or other absence to allow service continuity. They provide for the short-term costs of retaining a staff member whilst awaiting funding decisions. They allow for the re-instatement of budgets for full time core posts and post re-gradings if required to enable recruitment, retention, and succession.

It is estimated that £60,000 is needed in reserve to ensure continuity in a worst-case scenario.

- **Restructuring and investment**

The reserves provide for professional advice and support to enable development of the partnership's governance structure and service delivery if needed. They provide for investment, if needed, to secure large-scale external funding to enable the Partnership to deliver management plan objectives.

It is estimated that £30,000 is needed in the reserve should the partnership want to undertake activity to meet this purpose.

- **Unexpected changes or costs**

The reserves allow for unexpected in year cost increases or drops in income. Additional costs may arise from changes to Government or East Sussex County Council policy, higher than expected inflation rates and increases in staff costs due to changes to forecast pay awards and national insurance and pensions contributions. Unavoidable reductions in contributions may arise from in-year budget squeezes within Defra and local authorities. The reserves also allow for legal fees if needed.

It is estimated that £20,000 is needed in the reserve for this purpose.

3. Reserves Policy Review

It is proposed that the policy is reviewed every 5 years, alongside the renewal of the service level agreement, unless there are significant changes in the Partnership's business activities. The review will aim to ensure:

- the dissolution element reflects redundancy payment obligations.
- the cyclical maintenance element reflects inflationary increases
- the continuity element reflects the financial context for the Partnership
- the restructuring and investment element matches the Partnership's business activities.

The next review will be March 2029.

Agenda Item: 8

Committee: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 27 March 2024

Title of Report: AONB Management Plan Review 2024 - 2029: Final Plan for Sign-Off

By: AONB Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are recommended to:

1. Agree the final Management Plan 2024-2029 (subject to minor editorial and presentational amendments post proof-reading) and its supporting papers and recommend that individual local authorities formally adopt the Plan by the end of June 2024.
-

1. Background

- 1.1 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' (S89 (2)). Where AONBs cross administrative boundaries, local authorities are required to act jointly to prepare the plan (S89 (11)(b)). In the High Weald this requirement is delivered through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). Following a formal consultation process, the High Weald JAC recommends the joint Plan to individual local authorities who each adopt the Plan. The Plan is reviewed every five years.
- 1.2 This Plan will be the first edition of a new 20-year strategy, with a five year implementation plan. The first such strategy was published in 2004, and the approach was designed to be robust and future-proof, resulting in an objective led Plan rooted in an understanding of landscape pattern, and structured around AONB purpose and character. To allow for cost-effective review, the published Plan was kept concise with supporting evidence, data and guidance available online. This approach has allowed for 'light touch' reviews in 2009, 2014 and 2019. There is a requirement to publish the new Plan by 2024.
- 1.4 Substantive work has been tailored towards the new 20-year strategy within the new Management Plan. The review has needed to take account of the current and future major challenges/issues of biodiversity crisis, climate change, fairer access to nature, and development pressure. The Plan needs to be cognisant of the National Guidance for AONB Management Plans, currently in preparation, which is anticipated to require Plans to address these issues. Therefore, while the character components and management policy objectives (the most important aspects of the HWMP) remain broadly appropriate, the range of character components has broadened, and other aspects of the Plan have needed a more substantive re-consideration, including the inclusion of cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action and investment strategy 2024-2029, to reflect the afore-mentioned challenges/issues.

2. Summary of the Plan and Supporting Documents

The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 (appended to this report at Annex 1)

2.1 The Management Plan incorporates the following sections:

- A foreword by Philip Hygate, Chairman, National Landscapes Association
- A message from the Chairman of the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee, including the JAC's commitment and vision
- A section on the High Weald including key facts and figures, and a description of the landscape.
- A section explaining what a Management Plan is, how it was prepared and how it should be used. Also how it will be implemented and monitored and the documents that accompany it.
- A section explaining what Natural Beauty includes, and setting out the legislative purpose of AONBs
- The Statement of Significance
- A section explaining the core character components that underpin the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB, along with introducing the five cross-cutting themes: Drivers of Change 2024-2029
- Chapters on the core character components of the High Weald's Natural Beauty (each including Key Characteristics, Objectives and Actions):
 - Natural Systems (Geology, Soils, Water and Climate)
 - Settlement
 - Routeways
 - Woodland
 - Fieldscape and heath
 - Dark Skies
 - Aesthetic & Perceptual Qualities
 - Land-based economy and related rural living
- Chapters on the Cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action and investment strategy 2024-2029
 - Restoring Soil Health and Regenerative Land Management
 - Nature Recovery and Biodiversity
 - The Climate Crisis: Achieving Net Zero
 - People and Access
 - Planning and Development in the High Weald AONB
- High Weald Charter for Residents and Visitors
- Monitoring
- Definition of terms
- List of evidence and further reading considered in the preparation of the plan
- An appendix setting out AONB Designation, Policy and Legal Framework
- An appendix describing the history of the High Weald.

Supporting Papers (appended to this report at annex 2 – annex 5)

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

- 2.2 Consultation on the scoping report for the SEA took place between 21st April and 27th May 2022 and comments received from that consultation informed the environmental report. Objectives were taken from the SEA of the previous Management Plan with some slight variation in wording. These objectives were then used to assess the proposed objectives in the draft Management Plan against their reasonable alternatives. Consultation on the draft SEA took place alongside the Consultation Draft Management Plan between 25th September and 5th November 2023, and no comments were received.
- 2.3 In all cases the SEA concludes that the proposed objectives in the Management Plan have the most or equal positive environmental effects compared to their reasonable alternatives.

Habitats Regulations Assessment

- 2.4 Post-Brexit, a number of sites are designated for their exceptionally important (rare, endangered or vulnerable) species and/or habitats, referred to as European Sites or National Sites Network, under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, or the Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendments) (EU exit) Regulations 2019. Sites within or close to the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty are:
- Ashdown Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
 - Ashdown Forest Special Protection Area (SPA)
 - Dungerness Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
 - Dungerness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site.
 - Hastings Cliffs Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
 - Pevensey Levels Special Area of Conservation and Ramsar (SAC and Ramsar).
- 2.5 A Stage 1 (screening) assessment was carried out. This includes:
- 1) Determination of whether the AONB Management Plan is directly connected or necessary to the management of the above sites;
 - 2) Description of the AONB Management Plan;
 - 3) Characteristics of the above sites; and
 - 4) Assessment of the significance of any effects.
- 2.6 The assessment concluded that
- the AONB Management Plan is not directly connected or necessary to the management of the above sites;
 - The Management Plan does not determine the amount or location of development but rather sets objectives that should be taken into account by those taking decisions that affect the AONB. Since these objectives are intended to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB, provided the objectives themselves do not conflict with the conservation objectives of the above sites, then the Management Plan will not have a significant effect on these sites.
 - The Management Plan objectives were assessed against the conservation objectives and, where there were considered to be potential conflicts or uncertain effects, measures were proposed to avoid these potential adverse effects. These measures have been incorporated into the Management Plan.
 - Overall, the assessment concludes that the Management Plan review 2024-2029 will not result in a significant effect on the integrity of the above sites either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. There is therefore no requirement to carry out a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment.

Equality Impact Assessment

- 2.7 An Equality Impact Assessment screening has been carried out using the East Sussex County Council standard template. This concludes that the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 complies with equalities legislation, including the duty to promote race, disability and gender equality. This assessment was consulted on alongside the other documents in autumn 2022 and no comments were received.

Consultation Statement

- 2.8 The Consultation Statement documents all the consultation activity carried out to inform the Plan and its supporting documents, and how responses received were taken into account.

3. Process and Consultation

- 3.1 Formal notice of the intention to review the High Weald Management Plan was sent to Natural England on 21st April 2022, as required by Section 90, Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
- 3.2 A scoping review paper setting out the main issues to be considered in the review, along with a timetable setting out key decision points through to publication in spring 2024 as required by CROW Act 2000, was considered by the JAC on 30th March 2022, and the scope and timetable of the review was agreed.
- 3.3 Early public engagement was developed through
- an on-line survey conducted by external company Savanta in March 2022 on behalf of the High Weald NL, to gain insight into how and why people access green spaces, which was completed by just under 1000 respondents, the information gathered from which has helped shape the new Access section promoted to AONB contacts and via social media.
 - A second public survey conducted through November and December 2022, accessible via the High Weald NL website, regarding the inclusion of potential new topics in dedicated sections in the Management Plan: nature recovery, soil health and climate crisis. This generated 133 responses, and analysis of the responses has helped shape the content of the Plan.
- 3.4 A further JAC meeting on 23rd November 2022 set out an updated Plan timetable and content structure, and included a visioning session to collect Members' thoughts towards creating the JAC vision for the next Management Plan.
- 3.5 In parallel with the public consultation and JAC meetings, the Management Plan has gone through an extensive process of consultation with the OSG in 2022 and 2023, and has evolved as a result of reviewing the feedback received during that process. A first draft of the new sections circulated to the Officer Steering Group (OSG) members in June 2022. An edited version of the new sections in context with the rest of the draft plan was circulated to the OSG on 29th September 2022. Following extensive OSG and AONB Unit feedback through the winter, ongoing work in reviewing the Plan was discussed with the OSG at an extra meeting on 24th January 2023 and again at the OSG meeting on 28th February 2023, following which OSG members were given additional time to submit comments and feedback on the draft Plan. These comments were then considered by the Unit. An updated full draft of the Plan was issued to the OSG on 1st June 2023. This was followed by a full day workshop for the OSG on 14th June 2023 to discuss and finalise the Actions within the Plan.
- 3.4 The JAC received a further update report in March 2023, along with the draft text for the new Management Plan. The report set out how the structure and content of the plan had developed since November, and the results of liaison with the Officer Steering Group, along with other updates including the progress of the various supporting documents, and the delayed timing of Natural England's national guidance for AONB Management Plans. At that meeting, the JAC agreed to delegate to the Management Board the final consultation draft of the HWMP 2024-2029.
- 3.6 The Management Board received an update report on 20th September 2023, including revisions to the Plan's content, along with an update on the supporting documents, and an explanation as to the revised timetable, due to the delays in the publication of the national guidance by Natural England. At that meeting, the Management Board agreed to approve the draft Management Plan for public consultation, to allow public consultation to proceed according to the agreed timetable, in accordance with the delegation approved by JAC at the meeting of 22nd March.

- 3.6 Public Consultation on the Management Plan and its supporting documents ran from September 25th for six weeks to 5th November 2023. The consultation was hosted on the High Weald National Landscape (NL) website. There were a total of 175 respondents, including
- 14 of the 15 local authorities within the High Weald NL.
 - 7 other Section 85 public bodies responded; Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Historic England, Southern and South East Water, and National Highways.
 - 9 Parish Councils within the High Weald NL responded: Balcombe, Brechley and Matfield, Brightling, Dormansland, Heathfield and Waldron, Northiam, Rotherfield, Slaugham, Withyham.
 - Other organisations who responded include CLA, CPRE, NUF, Ramblers, and the Woodland Trust, as well as a range of local interest and community groups.
 - 120 members of the general public.

72% of the respondents agreed that the High Weald AONB Vision was strong enough, and 90% said that found the statement of significance useful in defining the landscape and natural beauty of the High Weald. Overall, hundreds of comments were received across most sections of the draft Management Plan, which have all been carefully considered by the HW Unit. More detail is provided in the Consultation Statement.

- 3.7 The Unit's consideration of the consultation responses resulted in a number of revisions to the Management Plan. These responses were discussed by OSG on 14th February 2024 and the subsequent amendments to the Management Plan were agreed.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 has completed all of the statutory stages of a review and has been subject to significant public engagement and scrutiny. It is therefore recommended that the JAC agrees the Agree final Management Plan 2024-2029 (subject to minor editorial and presentational amendments post proof-reading) and its supporting papers and recommend that individual local authorities formally adopt the Plan according to their own procedures by the end of June 2024. The Plan and its supporting documents will then be submitted to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Agenda item: 9

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee
Date: 27 March 2024
Title of Report: **Dark Skies Planning Advice Note**
By: Planning & Design Advisor

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to

- a) Delegate to the Management Board the responsibility to consider and approve the final version of the HW AONB Dark Skies Planning Advice Note
 - b) Promote, within their LPAs, the awareness and use of the HW AONB Dark Skies Planning Advice Note, once approved by Management Board.
-

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At the OSG meeting of 12th October 2023, officers advised that they wished to see a suite of planning guidance developed to sit alongside and support the Management Plan. It was resolved to take forward in the first instance two Planning Advice Notes; 'Dark Skies' and 'Soft Landscaping in Housing Developments', and two position statements; 'Solar Farms in the AONB' and 'Farm Diversification (including vineyards and associated infrastructure)'. Further, at the OSG meeting of 14th February 2024, it was agreed that Unit would scope High Weald specific Biodiversity Net Gain guidance and would liaise with the OSG on this.
- 1.2 Earlier in 2023 the OSG had received a presentation on Dark Skies policies and best practice from Dan Oakley (ex SDNPA and a specialist in this field), and it was agreed that further guidance on this matter should be taken forward. This subject has therefore been the first of the Planning Advice Notes to be developed.

2.0 High Weald Dark Skies Planning Advice Note (PAN).

- 2.1 In January 2024, the Unit commissioned Dan Oakley, to prepare a draft Dark Skies PAN. The purpose of the PAN will be to provide focussed and useable advice on High Weald Dark Skies conservation and management to those involved in the planning process, including to Local Planning Authorities' planning teams, Highways Authorities, Neighbourhood Plan groups and developers.
- 2.2 The High Weald Unit have also contributed to the draft Dark Skies PAN by way of High Weald specific context and common issues.
- 2.3 The draft PAN is being presented at a virtual meeting of the OSG in March 2024, to which Local Planning Authorities' (LPAs) development management teams and highways teams have also been invited. The presentation will be followed by a round table discussion and opportunity to ask questions. Following the presentation will be 4 week period for LPAs to consider the draft PAN and respond to the High Weald Unit with any comments and suggestions, and a final version of the draft PAN will then be prepared.

3.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

- 3.1 The production of the High Weald AONB Dark Skies PAN will support the AONB Management Plan, helping to deliver its objectives, and will support the LPAs in
- 3.2 In view of the timing constraints of the JAC meeting dates, and the desire to finalise the Dark Skies PAN and make it available to LPAs to use as soon as possible, it is recommended that the JAC delegate the approval of the final Dark Skies PAN to the Management Board.
- 3.3 It is requested that JAC Members proactively promote within their LPAs the awareness and use of the Dark Skies Planning Advice Note, once approved by Management Board.
- 4.4 The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to
 - a) Delegate to the Management Board the responsibility to consider and approve the final version of the HW AONB Dark Skies Planning Advice Note
 - b) promote within their LPAs the awareness and use of the HW AONB Dark Skies Planning Advice Note, once approved by Management Board.

Contact: Diane Russell, Planning & Design Advisor Diane.Russell@highweald.org

Agenda Item: 10

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 27 March 2024

Title of Report: Risk Management

By: National Landscape Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are recommended to:

1. Agree to the use of the budget reserves, if needed, to extend the contracts of the two members of staff working on the Farming in Protected Landscapes grant programme.
2. Request that the Management Board continues to work with the National Landscape Unit to consider the risks and identify measures and options to manage and mitigate the effect of these risks.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The JAC is a strong partnership supported by the High Weald National Landscape Unit, a small specialist team providing advice and guidance on the conservation and enhancement of a nationally important landscape.
- 1.2 The work of the JAC relies on three things: partnership contributions to the core budget; success raising external funds to the project budget; and retaining/recruiting staff with the appropriate skills and experience to do this work. The most significant risk to the success of the High Weald National Landscape Partnership remains the increasing constraints and demands placed on both the financial and personnel resources of the High Weald team.
- 1.3 The key risks to the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) are set out in Appendix A.

2.0 Key risks for 2024/25

Government core budget funding settlement

- 2.1 Members will be aware that since 2010 the English National Landscape Partnerships have accommodated a 36% cut in the government contribution to the core budgets. The total core funding from the government for all the 34 English National Landscapes Partnerships is only half the core funding provided to a single National Park Authority.
- 2.2 The current financial situation's influence on the government's policies and priorities for our sector remain considerable and these continue to have negative consequences for funding and support provided by government and local authorities. Despite the impending general election later this year, there appear to be no signs to suggest this will change.
- 2.3 Inevitably there remains a major risk to the core work of the High Weald National Landscape Partnership should the current funding situation continue or worsen, and should the government choose not to re-instate an adequate, stable, and long-term funding settlement

for National Landscape Partnerships. Should the core team decline to fewer than four Full Time Equivalents maintaining the current work demands will be even more difficult (if not impossible) than it is today.

- 2.4 This will be exacerbated should the government continue to require National Landscape Partnerships to undertake further duties as part of the government's response to the Landscapes Review and other things but not provide adequate, commensurate, and sustained resources. As reported at previous JAC meetings, the current and any future government's intentions on a stable and adequate funding settlement for the sector are unclear.

Local Authority annual financial contributions

- 2.5 Until 2023/24 local authority contributions to the work of the High Weald Partnership had not increased since 2001 although most of the 15 local authority partners had maintained the agreed contributions to the core budget (without an increase in line with inflation) since 2010 and under increasingly difficult financial circumstances.
- 2.6 In 2022 the JAC recognised this situation, if left to continue, would contribute to the increase in the shortfall of the High Weald Partnership's core budget leading to an increasing deficit over the next five years. The JAC agreed to review the local authorities' annual financial contributions and following this review, the JAC unanimously agreed to propose a set increase in annual contributions for each local authority and that these contributions will be in line with inflation from the start of 2024/2025.
- 2.7 To date 14 of the 15 local authorities have agreed to increase their annual contributions to the High Weald Partnership's core budget. This is a very considerable achievement by the local authorities given the severe budget constraints each is currently dealing with, and we fully appreciate the on-going commitment to the partnership and all the efforts Members and local authority officers have made.
- 2.8 However, it is important to note that local authority budgets and funding settlements will remain under severe pressure for some time to come and there is a major risk that some or all local authorities may not be able to maintain their current contributions to the work of the High Weald Partnership.

Self-funded projects

- 2.9 Every year the high Weald team secures and manages significant amounts of external funds to support residents, schools, farmers, community groups, and others with a range of projects throughout the National Landscape under four main programmes:
- Community Engagement (education, access and health and well-being)
 - Management Plan (research, evidence, consultation, and production)
 - Landscape Enhancement (farming, forestry, nature recovery, climate change and flood management)
 - Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) grant programme
- 2.6 In addition, the team administers and manages grant programmes on behalf of others (e.g. Sussex Lund, National Grid) which also bring considerable benefits across the High Weald.
- 2.7 As with the core budget settlement, there is a major risk to the on-going management of these self-funding programmes and any associated grant budgets should the existing

constraints on the financial and personnel resources of the High Weald team continue or worsen. This risk is exacerbated by the number of fixed-term staff contracts that are due to expire in March 2025 (see sections 2.11 – 2.13 below).

- 2.8 DEFRA's advocacy of and support for a greater investment in designated landscapes has resulted in a considerable increase in the budget allocation for capital projects for 2024/2025. While this additional investment is welcomed, it does not come with any commensurate funds to support the core team, which oversees the management of the funds and the scheme. In addition, the new DEFRA Capital Fund is for the next year only and will need to be allocated to projects and spent within a tight time frame.
- 2.9 Given this, Members need to be aware there is a risk that the budget allocations for the final year (2024/2025) of the FiPL grant programme and the one-year DEFRA Capital Fund are unlikely to be fully spent for several reasons, and any unspent funding would need to be returned to DEFRA for re-allocation elsewhere.

New and greater expectations and demands

- 2.10 Recent years have seen a greater pressure on the High Weald landscape along with several increasing and new expectations placed on the team. These extra and new demands requiring the High Weald team's attention continue to place a significant strain on the existing core work and remit of the team. New demands include:
- The considerable rise in the numbers and the scale of housing development applications (particularly for major developments) affecting the National Landscape. Residents, consultants, local authority officers and Members are increasingly seeking our specialist advice, guidance, and input
 - Greater efforts by public organisations, the statutory undertakers, and others to meet their statutory duties towards the conservation of the National Landscape and their emerging climate change and nature recovery policies has resulted in an increasing demand for our advice and guidance
 - The transition to a new agri-environment scheme will require farmers to change their practices and demand is increasing for our guidance to help them achieve the multiple objectives the government now expects
 - The changing nature of landownership in the High Weald is a growing factor and new and inexperienced owners need tailored and integrated guidance and longer-term assistance to help them manage their farms and woodlands responsibly, and to prevent harm to the High Weald
 - The expectation that more needs to be done to encourage a wider and more diverse range of people, and better public access to and enjoyment of the countryside requires our input and involvement
 - Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) has placed considerable demands on our existing resources - the setting up and managing a suitable governance structure and a grant administration system and the use of existing staff to implement the scheme's objectives and support farmers and land managers submit strong grant applications

Staff on fixed-term contracts

- 2.11 Several of the current High Weald team staff are employed on fixed-term contracts working on a range of high-profile time limited projects and national schemes (such as the Farming in Protected Landscapes) funded by a range of external organisations. They also support and benefit the core team's wider work and remit.
- 2.12 These contracts are due to expire in March 2025 and, understandably, those affected will be actively seeking alternative employment before these projects and schemes end. This represents an immediate major risk to the successful completion of the projects while also resulting in the loss of a considerable amount of expertise, experience, and knowledge from the team specifically and the High Weald as a whole.
- 2.13 More generally, the loss of these colleagues puts at risk the wider work of the High Weald team and our ability to meet current and future demands placed on the team, hampering our efforts to take advantage of any potential opportunities to develop and run future projects.

Finance and budget management support

- 2.14 Members will be aware that East Sussex County Council (ESCC) provide a finance and budget management service to the High Weald team and play a significant role in the preparation of the High Weald annual budget and associated papers for the JAC along with the collation and submission of the High Weald Partnership's annual financial claim to DEFRA. Owing to matters beyond its control, ESCC has not been able to provide the necessary financial and budget support to the High Weald team since May last year. Some of this work has been picked up by the team and this has put a considerable extra strain on our already limited time and resources and particularly during the run up to the end of the current financial year.
- 2.15 Unless resolved soon, this situation presents a risk to the work of the team in view of the size of next year's budgets and that the team is already working at full capacity.

Staff succession planning

- 2.16 Several of the High Weald staff are approaching the end of their careers and staff succession planning is an important issue needing to be addressed. The recruitment and retention of younger people and those with the relevant skills and experience is increasingly difficult and, unless addressed, this will adversely affect the work of the team in the future.

3.0 Risk mitigation

Core budget funding settlement, self-funded projects, and new expectations and demands

- 3.1 The continuing financial and resources predicament facing the English National Landscape Partnerships (and exacerbated by recent events) has yet to be addressed by the government. By necessity, the need for an adequate, long-term, and stable core funding settlement is the primary concern of the High Weald Partnership.
- 3.2 Our experience dealing with the funding cuts since 2009 reminds us that all members of the High Weald Partnership will need to continue to demonstrate at the local and national government level the value and the worth of the work the Partnership does, and lobby for adequate and stable long-term funding.

- 3.3 The development of secure and alternative long-term income streams to support the core remit of the partnership may be possible and have been examined on several occasions. However, the difficulties achieving this are often under-estimated and any funds raised are unlikely to address any longer-term shortfall in contributions to our core budget. The focus is to remain a governmental and local authority supported partnership with a close relationship to government bodies whose policies influence management of the High Weald landscape.
- 3.4 The High Weald team's business strategy aims to respond to the risks caused by the constraints on both the financial and personnel resources of the staff. It will be adapted where possible to accommodate the emerging risks associated the greater pressures placed on the High Weald landscape and the newer expectations and demands. The specific risks associated with the larger projects and grant schemes (e.g. FiPL) will continue to be assessed.
- 3.5 However, the assumption the current and inadequate resources provided by government to the High Weald Partnership can continue to cover the current and emerging demands while also meeting the government's stated vision that National Landscape partnerships are at the heart of nature recovery, landscape conservation, and climate change mitigation need to be challenged. Asking the High Weald Partnership to do more with less is no longer a viable option.

Staff on fixed-term contracts

- 3.6 Adequately mitigating the risks associated with the established and increasing use of staff on short-term fixed contracts is not straight forward given a general preference among funding bodies and central government of focusing on short-term objectives using time-limited projects and initiatives. In the absence of an adequate and long-term funding settlement by government offering greater permanent employment opportunities, it remains inevitable we will continue to lose talented and experienced staff members.
- 3.7 To mitigate against the immediate risks associated with the final year of the Farming in Protected Landscapes grant programme, it is recommended the Members agree to the use of the budget reserves, if needed, to extend the contracts of the two members of staff

Staff succession planning

- 3.8 Identifying and implementing a process and strategy for succession planning should allow us to develop existing and new members of staff who can move into leadership roles when they become vacant. Succession planning will also help us attract, recruit, and retain younger people and those with the appropriate skills to work for the High Weald Unit.
- 3.9 We have begun to investigate possible options and have held an initial meeting with a consultant that may be able to develop a succession planning strategy for the team, and we will inform the JAC on any progress.

4.0 Conclusions

- 4.1 Risk management systems are in place and conform to the appropriate East Sussex County Council policy.
- 4.2 It is probably safe to assume that 2024/2025 will continue to be characterised by the challenges outlined above. The constraints on both the financial and personnel resources of

the High Weald Unit and the retention of the fixed-term staff to complete projects in their final year remain the most significant risks to the core and project work of the High Weald partnership.

- 4.3 The High Weald Unit's current business strategy is tailored to the High Weald's local circumstances and specific needs. It aims to address the risks to the work of the High Weald partnership, but this is no longer enough. The expectation that the Partnership can continue to absorb the existing and additional demands without adequate resources needs to be challenged and then addressed.

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Agenda item: 11

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 27 March 2024

Title of Report: **Work Plan 2024 -2025**

By: Business Manager

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

- Promote the Partnership's planned activities for 2024/25 within their LPAs and communities, encouraging participation in activities that deliver the management plan.
-

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Each year a work plan is produced to set out the Partnership's focus within the context of the High Weald Management Plan vision, objectives and priorities and the Partnership's overall business direction.
- 1.2 The scope of the Partnership's work is broad, a reflection of the number of stakeholders that influence our nationally important landscape.
- 1.3 This report summarises the draft work plan which is attached as Appendix A.

2.0 High Weald Work Plan 2024-25

- 2.1 Landscapes are a unifying framework for addressing issues from food and energy security to housing provision, biodiversity, climate change resilience and transition to a low carbon economy.
- 2.2 The NL partnership's work is therefore cross-cutting, and it is not presented under specific themes, for example nature recovery or health and wellbeing, as most work activity aims to achieve multiple objectives.
- 2.3 Instead the NL Partnership's work is presented under three programmes which reflect groups of High Weald's stakeholders and our work with them.
- 2.4 The work programme next year is substantial, a reflection of changing and increased enthusiasm and expectations from stakeholders, particularly Defra.

3.0 Partnership programme

- 3.1 This programme focuses on work with national and local decision makers, for example Defra and DLUC, arms-length bodies (ALBs) such as NE, EA and FC; local authority members and officers and statutory undertakers.

3.2 Defra and Arms-length bodies (ALBS)

We will continue to provide specialist advice to Defra and ALBs on their policies and actions and how they help or hinder the purposes of protected landscapes and delivery of the High Weald Management Plan. In 2024/24 a particular focus will be on the new strengthened Section 85 duty and its application, the new protected landscapes target and outcomes framework and its application, and the protected landscapes management plan guidance (yet to be published and may require an addendum to our new plan).

3.3 National Landscape Association (NLA)

Our focus will be sharing our technical expertise in landscape policy and management with the expanded NLA team to ensure national advocacy reflects national landscape partnership needs. We will attend the annual NLA conference and participate in the NLA's communities of practice.

3.4 Local organisations, statutory undertakers and partnerships

We advocate for the High Weald with many organisations and through a wide array of groups and partnerships. This work is critical to developing people's understanding of the area's character and actions that can harm, conserve, or enhance it. We will prioritise our resources where there is greatest need and influence and in 2024/25 will be proactive in working with highways authorities on the public realm.

3.5 Local convening test project

Bringing people together to share knowledge and find solutions to issues lies at the core of the National Landscape Partnership. Additional financial support from Defra for 2024/25 will allow us to scale up this role. We plan to run a series of events to enable collaboration and behaviour change that will assist with management delivery and achievement of the protected landscape targets and outcomes framework.

3.6 Protected landscapes capital grant programme

A time limited capital grants programme that will support projects that deliver management plan objectives. Given the tight timeframe for the allocation and use of the funds, the emphasis will be on working with partners to identify and deliver well-developed projects ideas (hence its inclusion in the partnership programme).

4.0 **Evidence and guidance programme**

4.1 This programme focuses on the written comment and guidance that we produce as guidance to a range of stakeholders.

Policy including local plans and local nature recovery strategies

4.2 Providing expert advice on a range of local policies, including those within local plans, transport plans and neighbourhood plans will be ongoing. In 2024/25 we will continue to commit a significant amount of staff time to supporting the Kent and Sussex Local Nature Recovery NRS teams with the production of spatial plans to direct investment in nature recovery, sharing our knowledge of opportunities in the High Weald based on our extensive and detailed knowledge of the landscape and its community.

Development proposals

4.3 Providing expert advice on development proposals, including planning applications, land use changes e.g. tree felling and tree planting and rights of way diversions, is ongoing. We will continue to seek constructive conversation with the relevant authorities around these changes, continuing to advocate the integration of professional views from a wide range of

disciplines to enable decisions that recognise the High Weald's status as a national landscape and its unique character and sense of place.

Research and guidance

- 4.4 Now that the 2-year process of producing the High Weald AONB Management Plan is complete we will be focusing on guidance and position statements with management plan delivery. The High Weald National Landscapes Dark Skies planning advice notes will be the first publication, followed by Guidance on Soft Landscaping in High Weald Housing planning advice note. Other guidance notes are likely to focus on biodiversity net gain, solar farms and farm diversification in the High Weald.
- 4.5 Emerging research needs, for example around the carbon value of High Weald's soils and the efficacy of grassland assessment methodologies for identifying important grasslands will be achieved through FiPL-funded projects.

5.0 Community engagement programme

- 5.1 This programme focuses on our work with community groups, residents and the wider public.

High Weald Heroes

- 5.2 The Partnership's popular primary school education programme will continue to bring the landscape alive through curriculum-linked education sessions on school premises or on welly walks to and from the school gate. In 2024/25 schools from nearby towns will have an opportunity to experience the landscape, accessing the High Weald by train through a joint project with the community rail partnerships.

Dark Skies community project

- 5.3 This project will help local communities celebrate the area's dark skies and raise awareness of the negative impacts of light pollution on wildlife and our own wellbeing. The emphasis in 2024/25 will be on providing guidance and support to enable communities to run their own dark sky events, whether simple dark sky walks or larger festivals.

High Weald Walks Festival

- 5.4 The seventh annual walking festival will take place over 10 days in September 2024. This popular event is run in collaboration with all the local branches of The Ramblers and aims to help walkers of all abilities explore and learn about the national important landscape. The emphasis in 2024/25 will be on offering more walks for a range of abilities.

Access for All grant programme

- 5.5 Grants for projects that will improve physical and digital access to the High Weald national landscape. Investment will largely be in popular countryside sites and public rights of way working with local authorities. A sum of £220,000 has been provisionally committed to:
- 5.6 East Sussex and Kent county councils for replacing stiles with gates (75k), West Sussex County Council for improvements to a permissive path than enable access to Buchan Country Park (45k) and Ashdown Forest Conservators for boardwalks to improve accessibility to the Forest from the visitor centre (100k).

6.0 Landscape enhancement programme

- 6.1 This programme focuses on our work with landowners, farmers and other land managers.

High Weald deer management project

- 6.2 Support for landowners experiencing deer impact, involving drone surveys, training events for landowners and stalkers, linking up neighbouring landowners and stalkers to achieve collaborative deer management, and operating a culling incentive scheme.
- High Weald Farm for the Future project
- 6.3 Delivery of a programme of workshops, online learning, signposting, 1:1 support and peer networking focused on business and the environment to help land managers tackle challenges and grasp the opportunities on offer linked to the agricultural transition.
- Natural flood management project (Cuckmere and Coombe)
- 6.4 A project that advocates and puts in place measures that harnesses the landscape to reduce the impact of heavy rainfall events, reduce flood peaks and help protect smaller, flood-prone communities. The emphasis in 2024/25 will be on delivering targeted projects, enabling knowledge-sharing of NFM delivery across catchments and building contractor expertise to deliver NFM projects.
- High Weald Nature and Community grant programme (previously known as Sussex Lund)
- 6.5 Grants that benefit nature and people across the High Weald including the villages and towns in and around it. The emphasis in 2024/25 will be on reaching out to communities managing small greenspaces, enabling larger partnership projects, and promoting the new Sussex Lund Fellowship which will support individuals to build knowledge and confidence in an area of relevant to the High Weald's landscape.
- Farming in Protected Landscapes grant programme
- 6.6 Grants for projects that recover nature, tackle climate change, provide opportunities for people to discover the landscape and support sustainable farm businesses. The emphasis in 2024/25 will be on facilitating larger projects that deliver benefits for multiple farmers.
- Resources and systems**
- 6.7 Underpinning the Partnership's work is essential day-to-day organisational management, for example staff, office, IT, and financial management including reporting to and claiming from 22 different funding partners. This activity is also presented in the work plan.
- 6.8 In 2024/25 we will continue to ask for greater Government commitment to our core resource to help realise the Management Plan and enable stakeholder expectations to be met. Succession planning will also be a work focus.
- 7.0 Conclusion**
- 7.1 The National Landscape Partnership continues to deliver a broad work programme that ensures engagement with all key stakeholders: Government, national and local decision-makers, farmers, other land managers and communities.
- 7.2 The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to promote the Partnership's work within their authorities, highlighting how its activities deliver both the management plan and local authority strategies, policies and plans relating to, for example, climate, health and well-being, and the economy.

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HIGH WEALD PARTNERSHIP WORK PLAN 2024 - 2025

DRAFT subject to Management Board agreement, review of 23/24 delivery and staffing levels 24/25 (planned to be 5.8FTE core and 5.4FTE project)

Partnership functions by work programme	25 Year Environment Plan themes addressed by work programme
A. Partnerships b) Promoting the NL vision and management plan to help distinguish the national landscape from adjacent countryside c) Advising upon, facilitating and co-ordinating implementation by others of the Management Plan d) Advising Local Authorities on their activities within the national landscape, to encourage them to go beyond normal levels of service (attain the highest possible standards) in land management h) Working with and contributing to the National Landscape Association activities, sharing advice and best practice nationally and regionally. i) Providing a management role to co-ordinate national landscape protection through the actions of the national landscape team, the NL partnership and other partners at a local and strategic level. B. Evidence and Guidance a) Developing reviewing, preparing and publishing the NL vision and the CroW Act AONB Management Plan e) Monitoring and reporting on progress against AONB Management Plan targets f) Monitoring national landscape condition k) Providing landscape related planning advice (CroW Act Section 85) C. Land Management and D. Community Outreach c) Advising upon, facilitating and co-ordinating implementation by others of the Management Plan i) Providing a management role to co-ordinate NL protection through the actions of the national landscape team, the NL partnership and other partners at a local and strategic level. j) Developing an involvement by the community in the management of the national landscape E. Resources and Systems g) Accessing resources for management activities	A. Partnerships a) Mitigating and adapting to climate change b) Thriving plants and wildlife (nature recovery) c) Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment d) Clean and plentiful water e) Using resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently B. Evidence and Guidance a) Mitigating and adapting to climate change b) Thriving plants and wildlife (nature recovery) c) Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment C. Land Management and D. Community Outreach a) Mitigating and adapting to climate change b) Thriving plants and wildlife (nature recovery) c) Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment d) Clean and plentiful water e) Using resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently f) Enhancing biosecurity g) Reducing the risks of harm from environmental hazards h) Managing exposure to chemicals E. Resources and Systems b) Thriving plants and wildlife (nature recovery) c) Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

Programme	Project	Tasks	Targets	Priority	Outcome
A. Partnerships	JAC Partnership - Members	Plan and run 2 Joint Advisory Committee and 3 Management Board meetings; produce reports; provide member briefings; support JAC representatives at relevant events (Conference, NAAONB AGM, SE Chairs etc); induct new members and engage individual LAs in Unit-led projects as required. Consider opportunities to evolve Partnership in line with Glover recommendations.	5 x meetings	H	Ongoing support for the SLA; members acting as advocates for the High Weald (HW) and Management Plan (MP) vision and objectives; greater stakeholder involvement in the Partnership
A. Partnerships	JAC Partnership - Officers	Plan and facilitate OSG meetings to enable LAs to take forward their Duty to Co-operate and input into Partnership programmes (esp. evidence and guidance). Run working group to consider dark skies guidance, soft landscaping and developments, solar panels, farm diversification and BNG.	2 x meetings	H	Ongoing support for the SLA; officers acting as ambassadors for the HW and MP objectives; joint projects initiated
A. Partnerships	JAC Partnership - Subgroups	Set up and facilitate 5 working/networking groups: Sussex Lund Grants Panel; FiPL Local Appraisal Panel, High Weald Meadows Group and High Weald advisers group. Plan and run meetings; enable consultations, produce reports as required.	4 x working groups supported	H	Stakeholder and technical input/scrutiny of projects; more joined up thinking/approach to AONB Management Plan delivery; stakeholders interests reflected in AONB Partnership work
A. Partnerships	National Association for AONBs (NAAONB)	Attend lead officers meetings and participate in 'communities of practice' Provide input as required: policy advice; communications information (e.g. AONB metrics, annual review, website case studies) and enable local delivery of strategic direction e.g. rebranding.	3 x activities supported, leading if required. 3 x consultations responses.	M	National policy that reflects AONB needs. Greater awareness and understanding of value and relevance of AONB family.
A. Partnerships	South East Protected Landscapes (SEPL)	Enable PL liaison at a regional level with a focus on common issues or projects e.g. planning, arts engagement	1 x project supported, leading if required	M	Effective engagement and influencing of policy and decision makers to achieve AONB objectives
A. Partnerships	Partnerships - national/regional	Provide professional expertise to NELAP; liaise with national/regional partnerships as required to further AONB Management Plan objectives and projects, attending meetings and supplying AONB briefing material.	Relationship with 10 key national and regional partners maintained and developed- Defra, LNEPs, LEAs, LEAs, LEAs etc; 3 (non-planning)	M	Better understanding of HW character and MP objectives application of understanding to policy/planning/project decisions
A. Partnerships	Local Nature Partnerships (Kent, Sussex, Surrey)	Proactively support LNP boards/working groups etc with HW-specific guidance; assist with landowner and wider consultation.	18 x meetings attended	M	LNRs reflect AONB Management Plan direction/objectives and action and are guided by the extensive evidence base underpinning the AONB management plan
A. Partnerships	Partnerships - local	Promote NL vision, provide guidance on AONB Management Plan objectives and practical advice and support with actions to deliver the objectives: attending meetings (e.g. Water Catchment Partnerships, Wealden Food Partnership etc). Supply AONB briefing material.	Relationship with 30 key local partners maintained and developed; 3 (non-planning) consultation responses	M	Better understanding of HW character and MP objectives application of understanding to policy/planning/project decisions
A. Partnerships	Partnerships - local	Establish and promote project, liaise with stakeholders, identify projects for capital investment , make grant awards, monitor contracts	5 capital projects implemented	M	Direct conservation and enhancement of the High Weald
B. Evidence and Guidance	Management Plan 2019-2024	Publish plan. Enable adoption by 15 local authorities. Launch plan and enable its use by stakeholders.	1 x Management Plan (with three supporting assessments) published	H	Relevant evidence collated and analysed; Engagement of stakeholders in needs and objectives for the HWNL
B. Evidence and Guidance	Management Plan 2019-2024	Consider approach to NL monitoring 2024 onwards considered following Defra/NIE direction; set up any monitoring baseline determined.	1 x presentation/video on how to use the plan produced	H	Greater ability to assess changes to landscape condition
B. Evidence and Guidance	High Weald Nature Recovery priorities	Develop nature recovery objectives (habitat and species) and spatial plan for the High Weald to extend management plan.	1 x proposal publicised	H	Opportunity for tackling key issues and resourcing gaps in management plan delivery explored.
B. Evidence and Guidance	High Weald character component datasets	Maintain, develop and promote AONB character component datasets. Explore new ways of sharing and interpreting data.	1 x High Weald story map updated and promoted 5 x sharing of datasets with other partners	H	Wider use of AONB evidence to support decision- making
B. Evidence and Guidance	Policy & Planning - Duty to co-operate	Run general CPD events, webinars etc for LA planners (individual LA or joint LA events) as required to meet partnership's need but with a particular focus on components and supporting evidence/data and guidance	2 x themed CPD events	H	Better understanding of HW character and application of understanding to policy/planning decisions
B. Evidence and Guidance	Policy and planning consultations - strategies	Provide advice and respond to consultations on local and neighbourhood plans and related background documents	Input to 8 x local plans; input to 8 neighbourhood plans	H	AONB character and management objectives explicitly acknowledged.
B. Evidence and Guidance	Development consultations - sites	Respond to consultations on development proposals (including planning applications) and provide specialist interpretation/support as required.	Input to 85 x site-specific development proposals; 40 x general planning enquiries	H	AONB character and management objectives explicitly acknowledged.
B. Evidence and Guidance	Policy issues	Produce information/briefing notes as required on topical issues that affect the AONB e.g. future of agri-environment schemes, tree planting, biodiversity net gain.	1 x policy briefing; 1 x stakeholder event	M	Relevance of HW to topical issues recognised.
B. Evidence and Guidance	Guidance	Promote existing guidance e.g. Design Guide, Colour Guidance; run events; produce case studies. Develop new guidance e.g. soft landscaping.	2 x advice notes	M	Better understanding of HW and better decision-making
B. Evidence and Guidance	Management Plan - promotion	Review reference to AONB and management plan in LA communication; identify opportunities for improvement and enable updates	11 X LA High Weald communications updated	L	Better promotion of HW and more use of Plan
B. Evidence and Guidance	Management Plan - evidence base	Sign off existing non-published reports/info notes and produce summaries; review old reports and produce summaries; upload to website as an archive	2 x reports	L	All of AONB evidence base accessible
C. Land Management	Farming in Protected Landscapes	Promote programme; manage enquiries, undertake site visits, support applicants with project development and grant applications; manage grant panel; support applicants with delivery	300 x enquiries; 75 site visits; 30 applications	H	More land holdings managed to meet AONB management plan objectives
C. Land Management	Sussex Lund 2024 - small-scale, site-specific projects	Promote case studies to inspire applications; undertake site visits to offer practical suggestions; enable applications to Sussex Lund 2023; undertake 30+ assessments; produce reports for Grants Panel; make grant awards.	30 x site visits to enable/support projects.	H	High quality land management and community engagement projects that achieve AONB Management Plan objectives
C. Land Management	Sussex Lund 2024 - larger partnership projects	Promote opportunities for collaborative or larger scale projects to potential partners, identify suitable projects, lead/facilitate applications if required (Chiddingfold Cluster and Dark Skies).	2 x large, collaborative projects submitted	H	
C. Land Management	National Grid - VIP LEI scheme	Wrap up programme and consider demand/need for a new project.	3 x contracts completed	H	Visual enhancement of transmission line corridor.
C. Land Management	Deer Co-ordination Initiative	Run training for land managers and stalkers; develop evidence base to support policy/investment in change; enable deer impact assessments; enable local liaison groups; enable deer monitoring with drones. Run innovative FiPL-funded project.	1 x Yr3 project plan successfully delivered	H	More deer managed, more effectively to recover nature
C. Land Management	Cuckmere NFM Project	Develop relationship with land managers, build project proposals, oversee project delivery. Develop strategic case for investment. Extend project to the upper reaches of the Mole catchment.	1 x partnership project developed; 30 site visit; 5 projects progressed.	H	Better understanding of opportunities for NFM measures in a HW catchment and development of best practice in implementation and monitoring of practical delivery.
C. Land Management	Land Management Events Programme - PFLA FiPL scheme	Support develop and delivery of PFLA High Weald events programme (steer re MP objectives and landowner needs through meetings).	10 x events attended/supported	M	Land managers more aware of actions that meet AONB MP objectives and increase business resilience.
C. Land Management	Land Management Events Programme - RCF Transition programme	Set up and deliver of farming transition events working in partnership with RCF.	1 x training programme set up, promoted and delivered. 6 events p.a. x advisory visits p.a.	M	Land managers more aware of actions that meet AONB MP objectives and increase business resilience.
C. Land Management	UK Power Networks undergrounding scheme	Maintain a watching brief. Keep up-to-date with progress of approved projects.	2 x approved projects delivered by UKPN.	L	Visual enhancement of key areas within the High Weald.
C. Land Management	Land Management advice (general)	Provide heritage advisory visits to landowners (not linked to grant programmes) supported by bespoke feedback/maps	5 x general landowner visits	L	Landowners with a better understanding of heritage features and making decisions that further their conservation/enhancement

D. Community Outreach (Access and Recreation)	Access for All capital project	Establish and promote project, liaise with stakeholders, identify access projects for capital investment 24/25, oversee delivery for stiles to gates project.	5 x grant awards; 140 pedestrian gates installed	H	HW more accessible to more people
D. Community Outreach (Access and Recreation)	Visitor management	Liaise with stakeholders, explore visitor management approaches, facilitate knowledge sharing between professional site managers and others, deliver visitor management projects, produce on-site interpretation to educate visitors (as per hedge boards, whats in the field, QR codes).	3 x visitor management projects delivered	H	Land managers more able to manage visitors, improved visitor behaviour
D. Community Outreach	High Weald Walking Festival 2024	Develop and promote High Weald Festival website - self-guided if necessary. Support Rambler's with development and management of walks programme. Deliver walks during the Festival.	1 x 9-day High Weald Walks Festival delivered with 50+ events and and 500 + participants	M	Greater awareness of the High Weald as a walking destination. Greater understanding of the landscape by walkers.
D. Community Outreach	Dark skies project	Develop partnerships, produce interpretation material for community use; facilitate community events; collate and promote dark skies data working with community and partners; promote dark skies guidance.	3 x communities proactively promoting dark skies 8 x events	M	Greater awareness of the High Weald's dark skies. Action to reduce light pollution.
D. Community Outreach (HWH)	HWH - General	Promote programme; produce PR material; meet heads, visit schools, run teacher training sessions. Promote and recruit 5 x schools to participate in Heritage project.	12 x new schools engaged or re-engaged; 1 new themed resource packs; 1 x website pages updated; 3 x enews; 12 x staff advisory sessions; 1 x site-based teacher training session	H	Greater use of the High Weald as an outdoor learning resource; increased understanding of value of countryside to curriculum delivery
D. Community Outreach (HWH)	HWH - Outdoor learning/Welly Walks	Identify Welly Walk route; walk to risk assess, write directions, take images; Welly Walk workshop; Welly Walk; Welly Walk assembly; guide production (script, images and checks); flag up problems with ROW teams; explore opportunities for partnership working to promote and run themed Welly Walks linked to local and national campaigns/events.	6 x mapping workshops; 6 x new school Welly Walks; 6 x assemblies; 6 x leaflets; 6 x enhancements. 12 x themed Welly Walk sessions.	H	HW landscape valued and used by schools as an outdoor learning resource relevant to national curriculum
D. Community Outreach (HWH)	HWH - Indoor learning/workshops	Promote and deliver existing themed workshops linked to the curriculum e.g. Anglo-Saxon; Rocks and Soils; Stone Age etc	18 x indoor workshops & 6 x assemblies.	M	HW landscape valued and used by schools as an outdoor learning resource relevant to national curriculum
D. Community Outreach	Website and social media (develop)	Launch new website; train staff in using backend, set up monitoring system, evolve website to reflect business needs and feedback.	1 x launch; 1 x website monitored; new sections/amended pages as required.	H	Website and social media evolving to meet user needs
D. Community Outreach	Website and social media (maintain)	Update website with Partnership projects and news and promote to database and social media followers.	1 x plan in place; 1 x section of website updated; 6 x enews to promote website content; active social media	M	Profile of the NL, Unit and activities that meet AONB MP objectives maintained. All publications accessible.
D. Community Outreach	AONB Information & Interpretation material	Review AONB comms materials in light of rebranding proposals, identify need for replacement/refresh, prioritise and produce to support business needs. Project delivery. likely focus temporary information boards, High Weald ppt presentation and High Weald	1 x interpretation material refreshed	L	Promotional material that adds value, promotes HW brand and highlights the area's informal recreational resource
D. Community Outreach	General events	Deliver events in response to requests; proactively in support of neighbourhood plans, including road verges.	3 x walks and talks	L	Greater understanding of the High Weald's character.
E. Resources and systems	Delivery team	Produce annual work plan and associated risk assessment; hold regular management meetings; lead and manage team, undertake appraisals; enable individual and team training. Scope out business direction post 31 March 2025. Develop succession plan and implement.	1 x delivery team with clear focus	H	Directed, motivated and skilled staff able to deliver AONB MP objectives/Unit business plan
E. Resources and systems	Delivery team	Seek to retain existing staff; recruit new staff if needed: produce JDs, manage evaluation, advertise, run interviews, appoint and induct new staff. Identify other personnel e.g. contractors to support delivery as required	3 x staff members retained 3 x contractors recruited	H	Skilled team able to deliver AONB MP objectives/Unit business plan in place
E. Resources and systems	Delivery contracts	Manage contracts (Defra x 4, Sussex Lund, Woodland Trust, National Grid, RCF, EA, HE), manage risks, compile reports and claims for funding bodies	10 x contracts managed/delivered 30 x reports produced 11 x grant claims submitted	H	Resources to sustain AONB Partnership; work to achieve AONB Management Plan objectives delivered.
E. Resources and systems	Grant programmes	Administer grant awards of around £1 million p.a. scheme: produce guidance and forms, process applications, service grants panel, produce grant contracts, consider variation requests, manage claims and reports, track project delivery, undertake independent annual audit/report (SL).	3 x grant schemes administered with 30-50 grant awards p.a.	H	A scheme that adds value to other schemes and enables delivery of donors and AONB Management Plan objectives. Landscape projects successfully delivered.
E. Resources and systems	Landscape-scale projects	Encourage and support large partner-led projects that deliver MP objectives e.g. Ashdown Forest Nature recovery proposal, Weald to Waves; develop HWP project (Hands on High Weald) if needed/to add value; explore partners, seek support, develop proposal.	1 x EoI submitted	H	Opportunity for tackling key issues and resourcing gaps in management plan delivery explored.
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - health and safety	Review operational risk assessments: ensure H&S equipment in place/being used; lone working policy being adhered to; event risk assessments undertaken	1 x health and safety system in place	H	ESCC policy and procedures adhered to and H&S risks minimised
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - finance	Undertake budget forecasting and monitoring; compile and submit grant claims; raise and process orders, invoices and grant requests; P-card purchases; travel claims and expenses; time recording system. Produce reserves policy and establish online payment system.	1 x effective financial management system	H	ESCC policy and procedures adhered to and financial risks minimised
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - GIS data	Generate, develop, manage and share spatial data as required; support staff in use of QGIS; develop GIS system to reflect changing technology, identify and manage GIS support if needed	1 x GIS system maintained	M	HW team able to use GIS for day-to-day activities
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - contact data	Maintain and build Unit contact databases and social media contacts. Revise RPA data sharing agreement.	1 x contact database maintained and developed	M	Efficient management of data; High Weald information and guidance disseminated to more people
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - IT	Review IT to reflect changing technology (e.g. cloud storage) and business needs (e.g. hybrid meetings; capturing data on site visits). Consider solutions.	1 x IT upgrades as required	L	Ongoing IT maintenance and development programme in place
E. Resources and systems	Office systems - office	Maintain and improve office environment; manage hot desking and sub-letting (Arborweald); continue to explore options for reducing office costs; encourage sustainable development of WEC site.	1 x suitable working environment maintained	L	Good working environment; office relocation averted; cost savings