

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee



Agenda

High Weald JAC Meeting

Wednesday 26 March 2025, 10.30am Uckfield Civic Centre Uckfield TN22 1AE, followed by working lunch

A minute's silence will be conducted at the beginning of the meeting in memory of Sylvia Tidy. Sylvia was on the JAC for over 20 years as an East Sussex Councillor, and became Chair in 2019, standing down in 2021 but continuing the Committee as a representative for the NFU, as well as member for the Farming in Protected Landscapes panel.

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 27 November 2024 (page 2)
5. Minutes of the Management Board Meeting
To note the matters arising from the Management Board meeting held on 4 March 2025 (page 6)
6. Minutes of the Officer Steering Group
To note the minutes of the last meeting of the OSG held on 26 February 2025 (page 11)
7. Revenue Budget for 2025/26
To consider and approve a report by the Treasurer on the draft Revenue Budget 2025/26 (page 19) Appendix A budget forecast; Appendix B Self-funded projects; and Appendix C 5-year budget forecast and to sign off the budget consultation for 2025/2026.
8. Local government reorganisation and devolution for Sussex, Surrey, and Kent
To consider a report from NL Co-Director on the impacts of moving towards Devolution and the JAC Partnership (page 23) and approve delegation to the Management Board for sign-off of the Paper.
9. Position Statement: Solar Farms and the High Weald
To consider a report by the NL Planning and Design Advisor and approve the Solar Farms Position Statement (page 25) (Appendix D: *Position Statement: Solar Farms and the High Weald Appendix*)
10. Protected Landscapes and Targets & Outcome Framework
To consider a report by the NL Co-Director and approve the Protected Landscapes and Targets & Outcome Framework (page 27) (PLTOF Appendix E)

11. Risk Management

To consider a report by the NL Co-Director on risk management (page 30)

12. Any other business

13. Presentation from Future Natures Ltd - Governance workshop with working lunch

Feedback from the workshop held on 27 November 2024 and next steps from Future Natures
Howard Davies and Richard Clarke

To: ALL MEMBERS OF THE HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald JAC, Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex TN5 7PR

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Agenda item: 4

High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

Minutes of Meeting 10,30am to 3pm

27 November 2024, Roebuck Hotel Wych Cross Forest Row, followed by Management Plan facilitated workshop.



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 Mr N Williams | Sevenoaks District Council |
| Cllr Mrs L Carvalho | Mid-Sussex District Council |
| Cllr Sir N White | Tandridge District Council |
| Cllr Ms J Walker | Hastings Borough Council |
| Cllr Mr S Raby | Horsham District Council |
| Cllr Mr A Wilson | Wealden District Council |
| Mr M Woodcock | Forestry Commission |
| Ms Lucy Charman | CLA |

Officers:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Mr J Lavender | HWNL Co-Director |
| Mrs S Marsh | HWNL Co-Director |
| Ms S Brotherton | HWNL Landscape Officer |
| 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 D Chambers | OSG Rother District Council |
| Mr C Steenhoff | OSG Wealden District Council |

1. Apologies

- 2.1 Apologies for absence were received from Ms J Hull, Forestry Commission, Cllr N Warne, Tunbridge Wells, Cllr T Killen Rother District Council, Diane Russell NL, Cllr R Thomas, Kent CC.

2.2 No declarations of interest were raised by the Members.

2. Urgent Matters

3.1. No urgent matters were raised.

5 Minutes of the JAC Meeting

5.1 **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the JAC meeting held on 27 March 2024.

6 Minutes of the Management Board Meeting

6.1 **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the Management Board meeting held on 15 October 2024.

6.2 Cllr White, Tandridge DC thanked Samantha Nicholas for managing the Dark Skies Festival and supporting the event in Dormansland Parish.

7 Minutes of the Officer Steering Group (OSG)

7.1 Jennifer Hollingum informed the Members the HWNL had undertaken research on affordable housing with The Rural Planning Project and this information is being developed through a subcommittee of officers from the group with housing officers from the Local Authorities.

7.2 **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the OSG meeting held on 1 October 2024

8 Revenue Budget for 2024/25 and to approve the reserves policy

8.1 The Committee considered a report from Andy Fowler, from the ESCC Treasurer. The report presented a budget position for 2025/6:

8.2 Appendix A shows the forecast outturn for 2024/25 is a balanced budget with a reserve position of £235,000 by 31 March 2025

8.3 Staff costs allow for a pay award of 3% and increase in employer national insurance contributions of 2.0%. The costs include a small travel and training budget

8.4 The three-year agreement with Defra ends on 31 March 2025. Defra are planning a one-year settlement for 2025/26 with a longer-term settlement from 2026/27. It has therefore been assumed. The 2025/26 core contribution is £270,600, the same contribution as 2024/25.

8.5 Defra have committed an additional £123,600 for 2025/26 and £95,700 for 2026/27 to the Partnership' self-funding projects to allow the officers employed in Farming in Protected Landscape Programme to be retained which ends on 31 March 2025.

8.6 It was noted that the Chair thank Andy Fowler and his team in bringing a balanced budget under the current financial climate.

8.7 Andy Flower also asked it to be noted for the Members to consider the increases in staff costs which may not be reflected in their budgets dependent on where they sit within their organisations.

8.8 **RESOLVED to approve:**

1. **Approve the draft budget for 2025/26;**
2. **Agree to the commencement of budget consultation with the local authorities and Defra; and**
3. **Welcome Defra's commitment to retaining project officers employed for the Farming in Protected Landscape Programme.**

9. **Risk Assessment**

9.1 The Committee considered a report by Jason Lavender on risk management. Jason highlighted the key areas that were in the report:

- Despite the recent general election, there is no sign the poor funding settlements the National Landscape Partnerships have suffered since 2010 will change given the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) faces a 2% cut to its budget for 2025-26. This cut is expected to be spread across the department, and National Landscape lead officers have been told not to expect any indication of next year's funding settlement until March 2025.
- 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 Jason thanked the LAs for their on-going commitment to the partnership and all the efforts Members and local authority officers have made.

9.2 **RESOLVED to:**

Request 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.

10. **National Landscape update**

10.1 Sally informed the Members that Defra has launched new Protected Landscapes Target and Outcomes Framework which will be used to measure progress on various metrics towards 30by30. These new targets are for the landscape and the HWNL team will support the facilitation of these targets. There will be put in an addendum to the newly made Management Plan and will be taken to the next JAC Meeting for approval in March.

10.2 Sarah Brotherton took the Members through a short presentation on the landscape lead targets. HWNL's team role will be to facilitate the meeting of the landscape's targets with their partners. Presentation slides are appended.

- Ten Targets for Protected Landscapes, five for thriving plants and wildlife, three for mitigating and adapting to climate change and two targets for enhancing beauty and heritage and engagement.

- The EIP states that new farming schemes are expected to contribute 80 to 100% of the target to restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat (Target 1); Contribute at least 50% of the target of bringing protected sites into favourable condition by 2042 (target 2&3); Support continued favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (target 4)

11 A.O.B.

- 11.1 The Service Level Agreements will be sent out once all the LAs have completed adoption of the Management Plan. This will be accompanied by the consultation budgetary contributions letter for 2025/26. Alongside this Gerry Sherwin, in response to the OSG request, will be sending out a list of key statistics to help support their budget papers.
- 11.2 It was noted that Cllr Kirby-Green and Cllr Bradbury are both up for election in May 2025.
- 11.3 Next JAC Meeting will be held on 26 March 2025. The meeting was followed by a facilitation workshop to support the Management Plan. There may be a requirement for an extra Management Board Meeting to support the

Agenda item: 5

**HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Management Board**



**High Weald
National
Landscape**

Minutes

Tuesday 4 March 2025, 10.30am followed by a facilitated workshop
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 (Chair) |
| Cllr Mrs E Kirby-Green | East Sussex County Council (Vice-Chair) |

Also Present:

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Cllr A Wilson | Wealden District Council (Guest) |
| Jennifer Hollingum | OSG Chair |
| Sally Marsh | NL Director (job-share) |
| Gerry Sherwin | NL Business Manager |
| Samantha Nicholas | Clerk to JAC |

Actions

Paragraph 9 **Devolution position paper to be produced and additional meeting of the Management Board will be scheduled for Tuesday 29 April 2025, with other JAC members invited to attend.**

Paragraph 15 **The PLTOF report to be included as part of the JAC agenda**

Apologies

1. Apologies were received from: Cllr White, Cllr Carvalho, Cllr Williams and Diane Russell
2. Chair sent his condolences to Sylvia Tidy's family and requested a minute's silence at the JAC in memory of Sylvia as she has been a great supporter of the partnership many years, and held the position of Chair, and later years as a Cooptee and a FIPL panel member.

Members' Interests

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

Minutes of the meeting from 15 October 2024

4. The minutes for 15 October 2024 were agreed to be an accurate record.

5. The Chair felt it was appropriate to open with a discussion on the Devolution white paper and the plans for the government to move towards Unitary Authorities across England. This may have a significant impact on the way the High Weald NL Partnership will be managed and funded in the future. The escalation of this devolution process has resulted in the May County Council elections being postponed for a year in Sussex. The Chair informed the Board:
 - Several options have been put forward to move towards three unitary authorities from East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove, including a coastal strip unitary authority proposal. These plans will be submitted by mid-March 2025. Once approved the next stage is to submit a detailed strategy by September 2025.
 - Sussex are on the early adopting timetable for Mayor elections in 2026. The Mayoral position will cover local infrastructure, transport, education, public health and wellbeing as well as environment and climate.
 - Kent CC is moving towards unitary authorities but is not in the Devolution Priority Programme. There are likely to be three or four unitary councils delivering services on the ground.
 - Surrey is among the first areas to take part in local government reorganisation and are looking at alternative options to split into two unitary authorities.
6. A discussion on alternative models of governance ensued. Sally Marsh informed Members that the partnership had looked at moving towards a conservation board in the early 2000s but this did not achieve full support from partner authorities. It may be worth re-considering as an option. Gerry Sherwin informed Members that The High Weald Landscape Trust had been set up 20 years ago specifically to support Meadow conservation. After many years excellent work the paths of the Trust and Partnership diverged. Members were reassured that there are examples of other AONBs that have managed to navigate changes to unitary authorities, such as Nidderdale and Northumberland, and the Partnership can draw on this experience.
7. **It was agreed that due to the potential impact of devolution to the Partnership that a position paper should be produced. A meeting will be set for Tuesday 29 April 2025 for the Management Board and other interested Members who wish to join this.**

Local authority budget consultation and service level agreements

8. Gerry Sherwin informed the Members that the budget consultation which is managed by East Sussex has been completed but they are still waiting for responses from six local authorities:
 - There have been mixed responses with some LAs agreeing to the increases and others querying the inflationary rate proved by ESCC of 4.5%. Some have wanted to cap at 3% inflation rate. Kent CC has maintained its contribution at the lower figure of £9,000 but have offered £15,000 towards the Deer Initiative.
 - Defra have agreed the same settlement as 23/24 with no inflationary uplift.
 - FiPl contract has been extended for another year, with £1.2 million allocated to the High Weald for 2025/26. There was a concern that the project pipeline had

been diminished as the programme was closing and it will take time to generate enough projects in such a short time.

- Access grant, £219K was committed in 24/25, but there was an underspend of £97,000 as Ashdown Forest could not meet the project timetable for an accessibility path.
 - Gerry reassured the Members that the team will endeavour to ensure that the grants are spent in the most appropriate manner given the time constraints.
9. **Service Level Agreements (SLAs):** Jason Lavender informed the Members that that the SLA were requested by the LAs as an informal agreement between East Sussex and the fourteen LAs to help with their budgeting process in parallel to the Management Plan timetable. In the past not all LAs have signed the agreement. Six LAs have signed the SLA to date. The officers have been requested to follow up this process at the Officer Steering Group held on 26 February 2025.

Risk Management and staffing update

10. Jason Lavender took the Members through the additional risks which have been highlighted since the last report at the November Meeting:
- Additional risk of the Devolution Paper and impacts that had been discussed at the meeting.
 - Jason raised the added risk of the ‘flooding the zone’ approach by government with multiple unexpected consultations, which has increased the pressure on the workload. The deadlines are often very tight, and the consultations are unpredictable. To counteract this the team are carrying out a stakeholder analysis to prioritise key audiences which will have the greatest influence on the Partnerships objectives.
 - It was suggested that as part of this process a Mission statement should be developed.

Management plan monitoring addendum

11. Sally Marsh took the Members through the updated Performance Landscape targets. Sally explained that the PLTOF is a working document that sits as a Monitoring Addendum to the AONB Management Plan 2024-2029. Some of the landscape targets have not been fully confirmed so this will be a working draft.
12. It covers the key targets around restore and create wildlife rich habitat, including tree coverage, SSSIs, reducing net greenhouse gas, improve and promote accessibility, and decrease number of heritage assets at risk.
13. **ACTION: The PLTOF report to for agenda item for JAC**

Update on planning matters

14. Jason took the Members through the update on planning matters which Diane Russell and Sarah Brotherton have had significant input:

- **High Weald National Landscape Solar Farms Position Statement** is going to JAC for sign off on 26 March 2025. This has been developed through extensive sifting through the research available and looks at the legislative and policy context of siting solar farms within the High Weald, developing the Management Plan position and expanding on harms to landscape character and impacts on wildlife. The position statement also highlights alternatives to using greenfield sites, reflecting the recent CPRE and University College research on rooftop solar. This includes placing solar panels on buildings rather than in fields.
15. **S85 - implications for relevant authorities, Defra guidance:** [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](#) and **NLP guidance for LPAs:** [CRoW-s.85-duty-guidance-for-LPAs_NLA-Briefing-Nov-24.pdf](#)
- The Defra Guidance covers all protected landscapes, and the wider implications of the new duty for them all.
 - Relevant authorities must now ‘seek to further’ the statutory purposes of protected landscapes in reaching decisions and undertaking activities that impact these areas. This replaces the previous duty on relevant authorities to ‘have regard to’ their statutory purposes.
 - Alongside the Defra guidance, the National Landscape has produced guidance to help LAs to apply the CRoW Act section 85 duty to ‘seek to further the purpose’ in National Landscapes (AONBs). This has been welcomed by the OSG, and they have been encouraged to circulate the guidance to their wider teams.
16. **National Planning publications and, [Planning Reform Working Paper: Development and Nature Recovery](#)**
- This paper invited views on proposals for a new approach to how housing and infrastructure development can meet its environmental obligations and contribute to nature recovery, and to streamline the development process and the discharge of environmental obligations, as part of wider planning reforms.
 - The OSG have instigated an affordable housing sub-group with housing experts and planning offices. This is looking at the affordable housing study to tackle issues around lower land values and what policies can be put in place to meet affordable housing targets within the context of the High Weald settlement patterns.
17. **Landuse Consultation, [Land Use Consultation.pdf](#):** The Government is consulting on the vision for land use in England and how to deliver it. The overall concern is that they are segregating use of land where a landscape approach should be a holistic approach. One piece of land can be use for multifunctional purposes such as agriculture, wildlife and carbon sequestration.
18. It was noted that the Chair thanked Diane Russell and Sarah Brotherton for their considerable work on the national consultations.

Agenda items for High Weald JAC Meeting on 26 March 2025

19. The next JAC Meeting is to be held on 26 March 2025 at the Uckfield Civic Centre

- Devolution update
- Solar statement
- Performance Landscape targets and objectives
- Governance strategy update

20. The Members present were taken through the report from the governance workshop held on 27 November 2024 and next steps

Agenda item:6

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Officer Steering Group

Notes of a meeting of the High Weald Officer Steering Group held at Acorn Tourism on 26 February 2025



High Weald
National
Landscape

Samantha Nicholas
Clerk to the High Weald JAC
Present:

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Jennifer Hollingum | Mid Sussex DC (Chairman) |
| Alan Sime | Ashford BC |
| Vivienne Riddle | Sevenoaks DC |
| David Chambers | Rother DC |
| David Scully | Tunbridge Wells BC |
| Craig Steenhoff | Wealden DC |
| Tom Bagshaw | Hastings DC |

Online:

| | |
|----------------|--------------|
| Renato Messere | Tandridge DC |
| Kate Boorman | Kent CC |

High Weald Unit:

| | |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Jason Lavender | HWNL Joint Director |
| Sally Marsh | HWNL Joint Director |
| Diane Russell | HWNL Planning & Design Advisor |

Summary of Actions:

| <u>Pt</u> | <u>Information</u> | <u>To be actioned by</u> |
|-----------|---|--------------------------|
| 3.4 | The Unit to look at the various methodologies recently used and convene an OSG working group meeting to discuss further. | DR/SM |
| 3.5 | Jennifer Hollingum and David Scully to forward to the Unit the Mid Sussex and Tunbridge Wells SHELAA assessments methodologies | JH / DS |
| 3.7 | OSG members to raise the matter of SDS housing numbers and protected landscapes with their Heads of Planning to feed into responses to devolution consultations. | All OSG members |
| 3.10 | Diane Russell to circulate to OSG the National Landscape Association response to the Planning Reform Working Paper: Development & Nature Recovery. | DR |
| 4.4 | David Scully agreed to circulate the TWBC Habitat Banking report to the Group. | DS |

1. Apologies

Kerry Culbert, Hastings BC, Sophie Gilbert Crawley BC, David Greenwood Surrey CC, Virginia Pullen East Sussex CC, Mark Daly Horsham DC

2. Minutes of the meeting 1 October 2024

2.1 The Minutes of 1 October 2024 were agreed to be an accurate account of the meeting.

3. Legislative and policy update and discussion

3.1 Diane Russell took the group through some of the large number of recent government updates/consultations on relevant legislation and policy which will impact on the local authorities:

3.2 **s.85 CRoW Act strengthened duty.** Diane reported that the long awaited Defra guidance had been published shortly before Christmas: [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](#) This had previously been circulated by e-mail to the OSG, and Diane took the group through the main points:

- The Defra Guidance covers all protected landscapes, and the wider implications of the new duty for them all.
- Relevant authorities must now ‘seek to further’ the statutory purposes of protected landscapes in reaching decisions and undertaking activities that impact these areas. This replaces the previous duty on relevant authorities to ‘have regard to’ their statutory purposes.
- The guidance highlights the importance of seeking to avoid harm to protected landscapes.
- The guidance specifically references the importance of relevant authorities considering the information contained in a protected landscape’s Management Plan (such as descriptions of the natural beauty and key characteristics, and targets and objectives for the designation) when seeking to further the purposes.

3.3 Diane also reminded the group that in addition to the Defra guidance, the National Landscapes Association (NLA) had produced a Briefing Note to provide guidance specifically to planning teams in Local Planning Authorities, on meeting the strengthened s.85 duty [CRoW-s.85-duty-guidance-for-LPAs NLA-Briefing-Nov-24.pdf](#) In parallel to these changes to section 85, the National Landscape Association produced a paper to support LAs to meet these changes in a practical manner. The Briefing Note aims to offer practical, easy-to-follow guidance tailored specifically to plan-making and decision-making in Local Planning Authority (LPA) functions, and includes: Legislative context and broad approach; use of the relevant AONB Management Plan; Local Planning Authority decision-making process; CRoW Act 2000 s.85 duty in planning policy plan-making such as Local Plans, Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment/Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment; and site allocations, Supplementary Planning

Documents and Neighbourhood Plan consideration; and S.85 duty in development management decision-making (including planning applications, tree preservation order decisions, and enforcement).

- Diane explained to the officers that it is important to note it is an active *duty* but not necessarily translated into ‘active’ enhancement works, i.e complying with the duty might in some cases mean not allocating a particular site, or refusing planning permission.

3.4 **The new NPPF** was published in December 2024; the key highlights discussed were:

- There is a bigger narrative around house building, but importantly paragraphs 189 and 190 remain intact as safeguards for protection towards the NL, along with para 11 b, which allows LAs to plan for less than their ‘objectively assessed needs’ for housing where the application of policies in the NPPF that protect areas or assets of particular importance (including National Landscapes) provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area.
- However, the new standard methodology set out in the NPPF for calculating Local Housing Need results in large increases for most of the LPAs in the High Weald. A discussion took place around the increase in housing numbers - Sevenoaks DC and TWBC by over 60% each, most around the 30-40% increases, (though Ashford BC had a slight reduction) and the implications of this for protecting the NL. Diane requested that LPAs consider what support/evidence the Unit might provide in order to support them proposing lesser than LHN numbers in their emerging Local Plans.
- OSG officers reported that most were about to restart calls-for-sites as a result of the new calculations, to inform new SHELAA processes, and guidance would be helpful on the SHELAA site assessment methodologies for sites in the NL.
- Diane shared an example of Wealden DC’s LUC assessment which aimed to enable a better understanding of impact to the character components within the Management Plan, on a site-by site assessment. (Diane showed an example in Bewls Yew Green of site assessment and the detail that is required to achieve this). This study did not offer recommendation of whether a particular site should be allocated but gives the necessary depth to make decisions. Whilst there was still room for improvement in this example methodology, it formed a useful starting point for developing a model for site assessment in the HWNL.
- Most LAs were taking far more detailed approach in site selections. There was a concern that this is putting a lot of pressure in terms of time and resources.
- Mid-Sussex DC and Tunbridge Wells BC also offered to share methodologies they had previously used, and Mid Sussex DC drew attention to the recent South Downs site selection assessment methodology. It was agreed some form of model site assessment methodology for the HWNL would be a useful

resource and it needs to be timely as LAs are looking at this evidence base in the next few months. The potential to set up small working group in early summer to look at this was discussed.

3.4 Action: The Unit to look at the various methodologies recently used and convene an OSG working group meeting to discuss further.

3.5 Action: Jennifer Hollingum and David Scully to forward to the Unit the Mid-Sussex and Tunbridge Wells SHELAA assessments methodologies

3.6 English devolution white paper [English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

- A discussion took round the implications of the move towards the unitary government and changes to the planning system.
- As part of the government's commitment to move towards a universal system of strategic planning (see section 3.5, Box: A Universal System of Strategic Planning), all areas, both areas with a Strategic Authority and those without, will be required to develop Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs). These SDSs will include an obligation to apportion an assessment of the housing need of the Strategic Authority across its constituent members. The government intends for that assessment to be the cumulative total of the local housing need of each constituent member, as determined by the Standard Method set out in national planning policy. The apportioned figure set for each constituent member in the SDS will then be the minimum housing requirement for the purposes of each member authority's next Local Plan.
- Diane highlighted that this appears not to take account of paragraph 11 b of the NPPF (discussed above), and the lesser housing number that LPAs are allowed to plan for in LAs with protected landscapes.
- Diane requested that that if the LAs have not looked at this issue that they highlight this in any consultation response (e.g. to the current Sussex & Brighton Devolution Consultation) as an area of concern.

3.7 Action: OSG members to raise the matter of SDS housing numbers and protected landscapes with their Heads of Planning to feed into responses to devolution consultations.

3.8 Government Planning reform working paper [Planning Reform Working Paper: Development and Nature Recovery](#):

- This paper invited views on proposals for a new approach to how housing and infrastructure development can meet its environmental obligations and contribute to nature recovery, and to streamline the development process and the discharge of environmental obligations, as part of wider planning reforms. Proposals in the working paper include moving away from individual site level assessments to a single strategic assessment covering a larger geographical area, to allow decisions to be made and actions to be taken to address environmental impacts from development strategically, rather than at individual site level.

- Diane reported that the NLA had submitted a response that the Unit had contributed to, and described the key concerns set out in the response, including that
 - the ambition to speed up housing and infrastructure delivery must not be pursued in a way that exacerbates the further decline of nature and inhibits nature recovery at a local and site-specific level.
 - concerns that the Working Paper appears to under-emphasise the avoidance of harm to existing on-site biodiversity and mitigation of impacts from development on this.
 - Strategic level nature recovery should not be provided at the expense of project-specific local conservation and enhancement. Both can and do work in tandem, and development aspirations do not excuse any ecological harms that arise from it, nor harms to the wider natural beauty of National Landscapes.
 - The maintaining and even strengthening of the current ‘Mitigation Hierarchy’ is an essential safeguard in ensuring environmental protections; it plays a key role in conserving habitats & species at a site and local landscape level.

3.9 No other LPAs present at the OSG had submitted responses to the working paper and the date for responding had now passed, though it was believed that the Sussex Nature Partnership were submitting a response that the ESCC County Ecologist was feeding into.

3.10 Action: Diane Russell to circulate to OSG the National Landscape Association response to the Planning Reform Working Paper: Development & Nature Recovery.

4. Protected Landscapes and Targets & Outcome Framework

4.1 Sally Marsh took the officers through the latest version of the Protected Landscapes and Targets & Outcome Framework (PLTOF) which had been discussed at the previous meeting in October:

- Sally explained that the PLTOF is a working document that sits as a Monitoring Addendum to the AONB Management Plan 2024-2029.
- Some of the landscape targets have not been fully confirmed.
- It covers the key targets around restore and create wildlife rich habitat, including tree coverage, SSSIs, reducing net greenhouse gas, improve and promote accessibility, and decrease number of heritage assets at risk.
- There are many issues around these targets with layering and the risk and uncertainties have also been laid out in this addendum.
- There seems to be a movement towards the landscape targets to meet 30 by 30 Nature Recovery Paper.

4.2 A discussion took place around Habitat Banking and issues with s106. Jason informed the group that EAI screening assessment processes have changed, so now applicants have to consult with the National Landscape prior to their

EIA screening opinion to NE, adding to the Unit's work in assessing these proposals effectively on behalf of NE. The NE website includes specific information on when a screening decision is needed for biodiversity net gain: [Check if you need a screening decision - GOV.UK](#) and confirms that the process of registering land as a BNG site is not an alternative to a screening decision assessment and does not include necessary assessment under EIA (Agriculture) Regulations.

4.3 Tunbridge Wells BC have been drafting a paper on Habitat Banking.

4.4 Action: David Scully agreed to circulate to the Group the TWBC Habitat Banking report.

5. Planning and non-planning matters affecting the High Weald NL

5.1 The officers gave feedback on their local plan status and other matters affecting the High Weald NL:

- Tunbridge Wells BC; waiting for Inspector's final comments on modifications and looking to adopt the Local Plan in Spring 2025
- Hastings BC; working towards Reg 19
- Sevenoaks DC; working towards Reg 18 in Autumn 25
- Wealden DC; aiming for a second Reg 18 by the end of 2025
- Rother DC; Have had a number of recent changes in the planning team; new Head of Planning Mike Hughes (formerly SDNP), new Planning Policy Manager Holly Harrison (internal promotion), new Development Manager Matt Worsley (internal promotion), and new ecology officer Harry Eldon. The local plan is working towards a new Reg 18 and site allocations late 2025.
- Ashford BC: considering a 'high level' Reg 18 Summer 2025 which may include proposed site allocations in the Tenterden and Rolvenden Parishes.
- Tandridge DC; starting afresh after last Local Plan withdrawn. In early stages of evidence gathering and scoping.
- Mid-Sussex DC: currently at Reg 19 examination, however waiting on Inspector since December 2024 to move to stage 2 of the examination for detailed sites.

5.2 Diane requested that it would be helpful for LPAs to contact us at the early stages of Local Plan policy drafting and site allocations, so we can provide informal advice prior to the formal consultation stages.

5.3 Diane highlighted a recent appeal at land at Old Manor House, Udimore Road, Broad Oak (Rother DC), appeal dismissed on the grounds of poor design and that the proposal would have a harmful effect on the character and appearance of the HWNL. In the decision notice the Inspector specifically referenced several instances of how the proposal would not accord with the

High Weald Housing Design Guide. Diane highlighted this as a useful example of how the Design Guide can be used and given weight in planning decisions.

6. Update on Solar Farms Position Statement

- 6.1 The Solar Farms Position Statement is going to JAC for sign off on 26 March 2025. This has been developed through extensive sifting through the research available and looks at the legislative and policy context of siting solar farms within the High Weald, developing the Management Plan position and expanding on harms to landscape character and impacts on wildlife. The position statement also highlights alternatives to using greenfield sites, reflecting the recent CPRE and University College research on rooftop solar. This includes placing solar panels on buildings rather than in fields.
- 6.2 The OSG felt that the Position Statement would give them good support for decision-making, and all were happy with the Position Statement going forward to the JAC for approval.

7. Update on HWNL programmes

- 7.1 Jason Lavender highlighted key areas that the team has been working on in addition to the main programmes:
 - **Deer conference, 1 February 2025-** a highly successful deer conference was held at Robertsbridge College with over 120 attendees. There was a mixture of stalkers and landowners. This is an on-going programme to reduce the impact of fallow deer on the High Weald habitat. Drone surveys have been conducted across Ashdown Forest and Bayham, Kent, on average showing 25 deer per sq. km whereas a safe level is around 2-7 sq. km. Mark Smith has taken over from Sandy Williamson to continue with this work for the Unit.
 - **American Mink programme** – Jason has been working with the Waterlife Recovery Trust to expand their programme of American mink trapping within the High Weald. They have a successful track record, and they are using new traps which can capture and monitor the traps occupancy remotely.
 - **The Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL)** programme has been extended for until 2026 and final details of the scheme has not been finalised yet.
- 7.2 Service Level Agreements (SLAs) update: 4 LAs have returned signed SLAs, Hastings, Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge & Malling and Sevenoaks.
- 7.3 Budget consultation update - 4 local authorities have responded to the budget consultation and Jason requested that the LAs responses should be sent in as soon as they are able. Defra contribution has remained the same as 24/25.

8. Items for the JAC

Additional agenda items:

- Protected Landscapes and Targets & Outcome Framework
- Solar Farm Position Statement
- Feedback on governance report

9. There was no AOB raised.

10. Next meeting will be held in September 2025 and there may be an opportunity to hold an interim meeting in the early summer if required.

Agenda Item: 7

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 26 March 2025

Title of Report: Revenue Budget 2025/26

By: Treasurer to the Joint Advisory Committee

Purpose of Report: To approve the Revenue Budget 2025/26

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the revenue budget for 2025/26
 2. Thank local authorities for their contributions to the High Weald National Landscape Partnership in 2025/26.
-

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report sets out the budget for 2025/26 following a consultation approved by the committee at its last meeting of 27 November 2024.
- 1.2 It reflects the need for the Partnership to respond to a changing context, with both opportunities for, and threats to, its service.

2. FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

- 2.1 Appendix A presents the forecast out-turn for 2024/25, the budget for 2025/26 and an indicative budget for 2026/27. Appendix B summarises the project budgets. Appendix C presents the indicative 5-year budget for 2024-2029, updated to reflect the outcomes of the 2025/26 budget consultation. For comparison, Appendix C also shows a 5-year plan with no increases to Defra or local authority contributions.
- 2.2 The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) 'single pot' contribution for 2025/26 has been confirmed as £318,130. A sum of £270,600, equivalent to 85% of the single pot contribution, has been allocated to the core budget.
- 2.3 The other income budget has been increased from £15,700 to £33,500 to achieve a balanced core budget for 2025/26.
- 2.4 The self-financing project budget has increased by almost £1 million, reflecting recent decisions by the new government.

3. BUDGET 2024/25

- 3.1 The High Weald core budget is forecast to have a surplus of £12,900 in 2024/25. This has been achieved by allocating more core staff time to project delivery, an approach that will be increasingly necessary to balance the core budget.

4. BUDGET 2025/26

Core Budget – Expenditure

- 4.1 The budget for 2025/26 is presented in Appendix A. It is based on the 2024/25 figures with an average inflation of 4.56%. 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 2025/26 is £318,130: £270,600 has been allocated to Core and £47,530 to self-funding Projects.
- 4.4 Recently 2025/26 Defra have confirmed that there will be a one-year extension to the Farming in Protected Landscape and also advised there will be additional funds (details still being discussed) for capital projects that can be delivered by 31 March 2026.
- 4.5 Defra's estimated contribution to Core and Self-funding Projects for 2025/26 is therefore shown in Appendix A as £2,023,600.

Local Authority Contributions

- 4.6 The levels of support from each authority are shown in Appendix A.
- 4.7 The local authority response to the budget consultation has been variable. The majority of partner authorities have maintained their increased contribution to the Partnership following the budget and SLA review.
- 4.8 Kent County Council's contribution remains an exception. Their contribution remains at 2022/23 levels, does not include an uplift and has not been increased by inflation.
- 4.9 For 2025/26 the pay award and the effect of the changes to the N.I. rate result in an increase of 5.12% to payroll costs (£323,800) and 2.20% (inflation as at Sept 24) (£77,3200), resulting in an overall increase of 4.56%. Some, but not all, authorities have agreed to this level of inflationary increase for 2025/26. Five authorities have not responded, and it is assumed that they will increase their contributions for 2025/26.
- 4.10 The cumulative impact on the budget of Defra and local authority contributions not rising in line with inflation is illustrated in Appendix C.

Self-funding projects

- 4.11 JAC expenditure on self-funding projects is presented at Appendix B and is estimated to be £2,322,000 in 2025/26.
- 4.12 The project budget is presented as five programmes and allows for 5.4FTE project offers to facilitate delivery.
- 4.13 A sum of £47,530 has been allocated to Projects from the Defra single pot contribution.
- 4.14 The budget also includes additional, and significant, one-off contributions from Defra for 2025/26 to support:
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (confirmed High Weald grant award of £1,393,363)
 - A capital fund for management plan implementation (indicative High Weald grant award of £312,100), most of which will be awarded as grants to facilitate management plan delivery by other bodies.
- 4.15 The Partnership will therefore be operating three grant programmes in 2025/26: the Farming in Protected Landscapes Grant Programme, the High Weald Nature and Community Fund (formerly Sussex Lund) and the Management Plan Implementation Fund. Each programme has its own criteria and administrative system, reflecting the funding body requirements.
- 4.16 It is unlikely that the one-off contributions from Defra will be spent. Development and delivery of capital projects, either by the Partnership or others, requires lead in

times of more than one year. Additional staff to develop and oversee the projects area also required. A one year time frame does not allow for a useful recruitment and induction process.

- 4.17 Appendix B indicates the contributions from local authority partners to Partnership-led management plan delivery.
- 4.18 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 2026/27 AND BEYOND

- 5.1 Achieving a sustainable budget (Appendix C) will be challenging without inflationary increases to the contributions made by all Partnership members, particularly if inflationary pressure does not reduce.
- 5.2 An increasing proportion of the Defra grant could be allocated to core to balance the budget. However, this would make it harder for the Partnership to raise external funds for the Partnership's self-financing projects.
- 5.3 A greater proportion of the core team's time could be allocated to self-financing projects, but this would further impact the delivery of the Partnership's core service.
- 5.4 Another review of the JAC's budget will be needed given the government's agenda for Local Government Review and also an agreed proposal from East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove City Council to form a Strategic Sussex Mayoral Authority.

Reserves

- 5.5 The forecast reserve at 31 March 2025 is £247,900. The forecast reserve at 31 March 2026 is £247,900.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 The 2025/26 core budget is a balanced budget.
- 6.2 The budget projection suggests a longer-term balanced budget can be achieved for the life of the service level agreement with ongoing support from Defra and 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 2024/25, BUDGET for 2025/26 AND INDICATIVE BUDGET 2026/27

Appendix A

| 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | | 2025/26 | | | | | 2026/27 |
|----------------|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Outturn | Core Budget | Budget | Forecast | Original | Budget | | | Indicative | |
| £'000 | | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | Inflation | Pressures | Other | Budget | |
| | | | | | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | |
| | Expenditure | | | | | | | | |
| 323.8 | Staff costs | 323.8 | 325.6 | 323.8 | 9.70 | 3.6 | 6.9 | 344.0 | 354.3 |
| 31.2 | Accommodation/office equipment | 36.4 | 34.1 | 36.4 | 1.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 37.5 | 38.6 |
| 9.5 | Partnership running costs | 7.2 | 7.7 | 7.20 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 7.4 | 7.6 |
| 33.5 | Support services | 33.6 | 33.6 | 33.6 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 34.6 | 35.5 |
| 398.0 | Total Core Expenditure | 401.0 | 401.0 | 401.0 | 12.0 | 3.6 | 6.9 | 423.5 | 436.0 |
| | Income | | | | | | | | |
| (270.6) | Defra | (270.6) | (270.6) | (270.6) | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | (270.6) | (278.7) |
| (27.4) | East Sussex County Council | (28.2) | (28.2) | (28.2) | (1.3) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (29.5) | (30.4) |
| (14.0) | Kent County Council | (9.0) | (9.0) | (9.0) | (0.4) | 0.0 | 0.4 | (9.0) | (9.3) |
| (14.4) | West Sussex County Council | (14.7) | (14.7) | (14.7) | (0.7) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (15.4) | (15.9) |
| (3.0) | Surrey County Council | (3.1) | (3.1) | (3.1) | (0.1) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (3.2) | (3.3) |
| (9.7) | Wealden District | (10.0) | (10.0) | (10.0) | (0.5) | 0.0 | 0.2 | (10.3) | (10.6) |
| (9.7) | Rother District Council | (10.0) | (10.0) | (10.0) | (0.5) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (10.5) | (10.8) |
| (8.1) | Mid Sussex District Council | (8.3) | (8.3) | (8.3) | (0.4) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (8.7) | (9.0) |
| (6.7) | Tunbridge Wells Borough Council | (8.9) | (8.9) | (8.9) | (0.4) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (9.3) | (9.6) |
| (5.0) | Horsham District Council | (5.2) | (5.2) | (5.2) | (0.2) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (5.4) | (5.6) |
| (6.1) | Sevenoaks District Council | (6.3) | (6.3) | (6.3) | (0.3) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (6.6) | (6.8) |
| (0.8) | Ashford Borough Council | (1.6) | (1.6) | (1.6) | (0.1) | 0.0 | 0.1 | (1.6) | (1.6) |
| (4.0) | Hastings Borough Council | (4.1) | (4.1) | (4.1) | (0.2) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (4.3) | (4.4) |
| (2.2) | Tandridge District Council | (2.3) | (2.3) | (2.3) | (0.1) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (2.4) | (2.5) |
| (0.3) | Crawley Borough Council | (1.5) | (1.5) | (1.5) | (0.1) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (1.6) | (1.6) |
| (1.2) | Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council | (1.5) | (1.5) | (1.5) | (0.1) | 0.0 | 0.0 | (1.6) | (1.6) |
| (20.4) | Other income | (15.7) | (28.6) | (15.7) | (0.7) | 0.0 | (17.1) | (33.5) | (34.2) |
| (403.6) | Total Core Income | (401.0) | (413.9) | (401.0) | (6.1) | 0.0 | (16.4) | (423.5) | (435.9) |
| 5.6 | Surplus/(deficit) transfer to/(from) reserves | 0.0 | 12.9 | 0.0 | (5.9) | (3.6) | 9.5 | 0.000 | 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 B for detail | | | | | | | | |
| 874.1 | JAC expenditure on self-funded projects | 1,360.0 | 1,618.4 | 2,322.0 | | | | 2,322.0 | 726.4 |
| (68.9) | Defra contribution to self-funded projects (Excluding FiPL) | (351.0) | (207.2) | (359.6) | | | | (359.6) | (39.1) |
| (545.3) | Defra contribution to FiPL Project | (545.3) | (999.3) | (1,393.4) | | | | (1,393.4) | (96.8) |
| 0.0 | Local authorities contributions | (38.2) | (4.5) | (135.5) | | | | (135.5) | (138.3) |
| (259.9) | Other contributions to self-funded projects | (425.5) | (407.4) | (433.5) | | | | (433.5) | (452.2) |
| 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 | | | | | | | | |
| 1,277.7 | Total core and project expenditure | 1,761.0 | 2,019.4 | 2,723.0 | 12.0 | 3.6 | 6.9 | 2,745.5 | 1,162.4 |
| (1,277.7) | Total core and project income | (1,761.0) | (2,032.3) | (2,723.0) | (6.1) | 0.0 | (16.4) | (2,745.5) | (1,162.4) |
| 0.0 | Total High Weald JAC Budget | 0.0 | 12.9 | 0.0 | (5.9) | (3.6) | 9.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

| Defra Funding | 2024/25 | 2025/26 |
|------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | £000 | £000 |
| Defra funding on core budget | (270.6) | (270.6) |
| Defra funding on projects budget | (351.0) | (359.6) |
| Defra contribution to FiPL Project | (545.3) | (1,393.4) |
| Total Defra Funding | (1,166.9) | (2,023.6) |

| Reserves | £000 |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Reserves at 31 March 2024 | 235.0 |
| Transfer to/(from) reserves 2024/25 | 12.9 |
| Reserves at 31 March 2025 | 247.9 |
| Transfer to/(from) reserves 2025/26 | 0.0 |
| Reserves at 31 March 2026 | 247.9 |

HIGH WEALD AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
SELF-FUNDING PROJECTS OUTTURN for 2023/24 and INDICATIVE BUDGET 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27

Appendix B

| 2023/24 Outturn £'000 | Budget 2024/25 | | | Forecast 2024/25 | | | Indicative Budget 2025/26 | | | Indicative Budget 2026/27 | | |
|-----------------------------|---|-----------|-------|------------------|-----------|-------|---------------------------|-----------|-------|---------------------------|---------|-------|
| | Exp | Income | Net | Exp | Income | Net | Exp | Income | Net | Exp | Income | Net |
| | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 |
| | 1 Community Outreach/Access for All | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 22.5 | JAC expenditure | | | 104.9 | | | 46.9 | | | 47.8 | | |
| (14.0) | Defra | (233.0) | | (104.5) | | | (14.0) | | | (14.0) | | |
| (8.2) | Local authorities | (23.6) | | 0.0 | | | (25.5) | | | (26.4) | | |
| (0.3) | Other | (0.4) | | (0.4) | | | (7.4) | | | (7.4) | | |
| (0.0) | Total Community Outreach and Access for All | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | High Weald Heroes | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 32.9 | JAC expenditure | | | 29.3 | | | 30.3 | | | 31.3 | | |
| (14.5) | Defra | (18.0) | | (25.1) | | | (18.0) | | | (18.0) | | |
| (10.1) | Local authorities | (7.3) | | (0.1) | | | (12.3) | | | (13.3) | | |
| (8.3) | Other | (4.1) | | (4.1) | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| 0.0 | Total High Weald Heroes | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | 2 Management Plan Evidence and Guidance | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 17.8 | JAC expenditure | | | 8.9 | | | 19.2 | | | 17.0 | | |
| (12.0) | Defra | (7.0) | | (7.0) | | | (9.2) | | | (7.0) | | |
| (5.8) | Other | (7.0) | | (1.9) | | | (10.0) | | | (10.0) | | |
| 0.0 | Total Management Plan Evidence and Guidance | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | 3 Landscape Enhancement* | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 239.0 | JAC expenditure | | | 413.9 | | | 499.1 | | | 512.5 | | |
| (7.0) | Defra | (8.5) | | (8.5) | | | (6.3) | | | (0.1) | | |
| (4.5) | Environment Agency | (65.0) | | (61.0) | | | (60.1) | | | (73.2) | | |
| (1.3) | Local authorities | (7.3) | | (4.4) | | | (76.7) | | | (77.6) | | |
| (60.1) | Other | (13.9) | | (7.5) | | | (21.0) | | | (26.6) | | |
| 0.0 | Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund | 0.0 | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| (36.8) | National Grid Grant programme | 0.0 | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| (129.3) | High Weald Nature and Community Fund (Charities Aid Foundation) | (335.0) | | (332.5) | | | (335.0) | | | (335.0) | | |
| 0.0 | Total Landscape Enhancement | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | 4 Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme (FIPL) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 671.8 | JAC expenditure | | | 999.3 | | | 1,393.4 | | | 96.8 | | |
| (671.8) | Defra | (545.3) | | (999.3) | | | (1,393.4) | | | (96.8) | | |
| 0.0 | Total Farming in Protected Landscapes | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | Management Plan Implementation Fund | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0.0 | JAC expenditure | | | 244.9 | | | 312.1 | | | 0.0 | | |
| 0.0 | Defra | 0.0 | | (244.9) | | | (312.1) | | | 0.0 | | |
| 0.0 | Total | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | 5 Project Development | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2.7 | JAC expenditure | | | 62.1 | | | 21.0 | | | 21.0 | | |
| (2.7) | Defra | (84.5) | | (62.1) | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| 0.0 | Other | 0.0 | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| 0.0 | Local authorities | 0.0 | | 0.0 | | | (21.0) | | | (21.0) | | |
| 0.0 | Total Project Development | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| 986.7 | JAC expenditure (to Appendix a) | | | 1,618.4 | | | 2,322.0 | | | 726.4 | | |
| (722.0) | Expenditure funded by Defra (to Appendix A) | | | (1,206.5) | | | (1,753.0) | | | (135.9) | | |
| (19.6) | Expenditure funded by LAs (to Appendix A) | | | (4.5) | | | (135.5) | | | (138.3) | | |
| (245.1) | Expenditure funded by Other (to Appendix A) | | | (407.4) | | | (433.5) | | | (452.2) | | |
| 0.0 | TOTAL JAC expenditure/income | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | | 0.0 | | |
| | 1,360.0 | (1,360.0) | 0.0 | 1,618.4 | (1,618.4) | 0.0 | 2,322.0 | (2,322.0) | 0.0 | 726.4 | (726.4) | 0.0 |

(2,023.6)

* 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

With not all LAs increasing contributions in 2025/26 and all increasing from 2026/27

| | 2024/25 | 2025/26 | 2026/27 | 2027/28 | 2028/29 |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Expenditure | £ | £ | £ | £ | £ |
| Staff costs | 323,800 | 344,000 | 354,320 | 364,950 | 375,900 |
| Accommodation/office equipment | 36,400 | 37,500 | 38,625 | 39,780 | 40,970 |
| Partnership running costs | 7,200 | 7,400 | 7,622 | 7,850 | 8,090 |
| Support services | 33,600 | 34,600 | 35,638 | 36,710 | 37,810 |
| Total Core Expenditure | 401,000 | 423,500 | 436,205 | 449,290 | 462,770 |
| Income | | | | | |
| Defra | (270,600) | (270,600) | (278,718) | (287,080) | (295,692) |
| East Sussex County Council | (28,222) | (29,509) | (30,394) | (31,306) | (32,245) |
| Kent County Council | (9,000) | (9,000) | (9,270) | (9,548) | (9,834) |
| West Sussex County Council | (14,729) | (15,401) | (15,863) | (16,339) | (16,829) |
| Surrey County Council | (3,090) | (3,231) | (3,328) | (3,428) | (3,531) |
| Wealden District | (9,991) | (10,447) | (10,760) | (11,083) | (11,415) |
| Rother District Council | (9,991) | (10,447) | (10,760) | (11,083) | (11,415) |
| Mid Sussex District Council | (8,343) | (8,723) | (8,985) | (9,255) | (9,533) |
| Tunbridge Wells Borough Council | (8,900) | (9,306) | (9,585) | (9,873) | (10,169) |
| Horsham District Council | (5,150) | (5,385) | (5,547) | (5,713) | (5,884) |
| Sevenoaks District Council | (6,283) | (6,570) | (6,767) | (6,970) | (7,179) |
| Ashford Borough Council | (1,600) | (1,600) | (1,648) | (1,697) | (1,748) |
| Hastings Borough Council | (4,120) | (4,308) | (4,437) | (4,570) | (4,707) |
| Tandridge District Council | (2,266) | (2,369) | (2,440) | (2,513) | (2,588) |
| Crawley Borough Council | (1,500) | (1,568) | (1,615) | (1,663) | (1,713) |
| Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council | (1,545) | (1,615) | (1,663) | (1,713) | (1,764) |
| Other income | (15,670) | (33,421) | (34,425) | (35,456) | (36,524) |
| Total Core Income | (401,000) | (423,500) | (436,205) | (449,290) | (462,770) |
| Surplus/(deficit) transfer to/(from) reserves | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

High Weald AONB Five year budget plan

With no LA or Defra increase in contributions

| | 2024/25 | 2025/26 | 2026/27 | 2027/28 | 2028/29 |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Expenditure | £ | £ | £ | £ | £ |
| Staff costs | 323,800 | 344,000 | 354,320 | 364,950 | 375,900 |
| Accommodation/office equipment | 36,400 | 37,500 | 38,625 | 39,780 | 40,970 |
| Partnership running costs | 7,200 | 7,400 | 7,622 | 7,850 | 8,090 |
| Support services | 33,600 | 34,600 | 35,638 | 36,710 | 37,810 |
| Total Core Expenditure | 401,000 | 423,500 | 436,205 | 449,290 | 462,770 |
| Income | | | | | |
| Defra | (270,600) | (270,600) | (270,600) | (270,600) | (270,600) |
| East Sussex County Council | (28,222) | (28,222) | (28,222) | (28,222) | (28,222) |
| Kent County Council | (9,000) | (9,000) | (9,000) | (9,000) | (9,000) |
| West Sussex County Council | (14,729) | (14,729) | (14,729) | (14,729) | (14,729) |
| Surrey County Council | (3,090) | (3,090) | (3,090) | (3,090) | (3,090) |
| Wealden District | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) |
| Rother District Council | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) | (9,991) |
| Mid Sussex District Council | (8,343) | (8,343) | (8,343) | (8,343) | (8,343) |
| Tunbridge Wells Borough Council | (8,900) | (8,900) | (8,900) | (8,900) | (8,900) |
| Horsham District Council | (5,150) | (5,150) | (5,150) | (5,150) | (5,150) |
| Sevenoaks District Council | (6,283) | (6,283) | (6,283) | (6,283) | (6,283) |
| Ashford Borough Council | (1,600) | (1,600) | (1,600) | (1,600) | (1,600) |
| Hastings Borough Council | (4,120) | (4,120) | (4,120) | (4,120) | (4,120) |
| Tandridge District Council | (2,266) | (2,266) | (2,266) | (2,266) | (2,266) |
| Crawley Borough Council | (1,500) | (1,500) | (1,500) | (1,500) | (1,500) |
| Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council | (1,545) | (1,545) | (1,545) | (1,545) | (1,545) |
| Other income | (15,670) | (33,421) | (33,421) | (33,421) | (33,421) |
| Total Core Income | (401,000) | (418,751) | (418,751) | (418,751) | (418,751) |
| Budget deficit to come from reserves | 0 | (4,749) | (17,454) | (30,539) | (44,019) |

Agenda Item: 8

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 26th March 2025

Title of Report: Local government reorganisation and devolution for Sussex, Surrey, and Kent

By: National Landscape Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are recommended to:

1. Note the report and;
2. Request that the Management Board works with the National Landscape Unit to:
 - (i) consider the implications for the High Weald National Landscape Partnership resulting from the proposed local government reorganisation and devolution and;
 - (ii) write a position paper on the implications for the Partnership and detailing points for government and the local authorities to consider and address to ensure the reorganisation and devolution supports the work and remit of the Partnership.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 In December 2024 the government published its devolution white paper inviting submissions to join the government's Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). This white paper sets out the government's strategy and policy for local government over the medium-term including devolution and local government reorganisation. The government has proposed the creation of Mayoral Strategic Authorities and unitary councils in counties that do not have them at the moment such as Sussex, Kent, and Surrey.
- 1.2 In response to the invitation, all the Sussex, Kent, and Surrey local authorities sent letters to the Minister for Local Government and Devolution to request that their councils be included in the DPP. In February the government accepted Sussex and Surrey's request to be part of the priority programme for devolution but rejected Kent's request. However, the government has suggested that further devolution opportunities may arise and although no definitive timetable has been provided, Kent's councils have jointly stated they will continue advocating for the alignment of devolution proposals with the implementation of new Unitary Councils.
- 1.3 Advocates of devolution state it will provide greater freedoms and flexibilities at a local level, meaning councils can work more effectively to improve public services for their particular areas. They also claim this will result in more effective, better targeted public services, greater growth and stronger partnerships between public, private and community leaders in local areas.
- 1.4 The timescales for completing the local government reorganisation and devolution are very tight. Mayoral elections for Sussex and Surrey will be in May 2026, and the elections to shadow unitary authorities in Sussex, Surrey, and Kent will be in May 2027.

2.0 Devolution – implications for the High Weald National Landscape partnership

- 2.1 As Members will be aware, the High Weald National Landscape designation covers parts of four counties – East and West Sussex, Kent, and Surrey. The High Weald National Landscape Partnership was set up in 1989 as an advisory body constituted as a Joint Advisory Committee involving the 15 local authorities that cover the National Landscape and other stakeholders.
- 2.2 The Partnership’s role is to advocate for the National Landscape, and it is supported by a small and dedicated team that prepares a joint Management Plan for the area and advises on and coordinates the delivery of the Management Plan’s objectives. Both the Partnership and the team are hosted by East Sussex County Council and the core funding is provided by DEFRA and the fifteen constituent local authorities.
- 2.2 Inevitably changes of such magnitude to the current organisation of local authorities in Sussex, Kent, and Surrey will affect the Partnership, its likely future structure and governance, its funding, role and responsibilities, and the remit of the National Landscape team. However, the precise implications of devolution remain unclear at this early stage of the process.
- 2.3 It is unlikely either the DPP or the local authorities affected will have considered the implications to the High Weald partnership given the scale and pace of the proposed change. In view of the diverse range of options for devolution and local government reorganisation within the three counties, and to ensure the Partnership experiences a coherent and strategic transition, it is essential the High Weald National Landscape Partnership has a strong voice in this process.

3.0 Conclusion and recommendation

- 3.1 It is vital to the National Landscape Partnership that the process ensures a reorganisation and devolution that works for the Partnership and supports the on-going implementation of the High Weald Management Plan and the major and collaborative efforts to date working to protect the distinctive cultural and natural character of the High Weald landscape.
- 3.2 To help achieve this, it is recommended that the Management Board works with the National Landscape Unit to consider the implications of devolution and writes a position paper with points for government and the local authorities to consider and address.
- 3.3 Among other things, this paper will ask: who in the new structures will have responsibility for the High Weald National Landscape designation and the High Weald team; what form of new governance arrangements will be required; from where will the financial contributions to the work of the Partnership and the team come; and how will the statutory obligations of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 be met by the new unitary authorities and the two Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

Contact: Jason Lavender, High Weald National Landscapes Co-Director

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Agenda item: 9

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee
Date: 26 March 2025
Title of Report: **Position Statement: Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape**
By: Planning & Design Advisor

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to

- a) consider and approve the Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape Position Statement
 - b) Promote, within their LPAs, the awareness and use of the Position Statement.
-

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 The first to be developed was the High Weald Dark Skies Planning Advice Note (PAN) which was approved by the JAC (delegated approval to the Management Board) in August 2024 and has subsequently been published and distributed to the Local Planning Authorities.

2.0 Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape Position Statement

- 2.1 The Position Statement has been produced in response to an increasing development pressure for commercial scale solar farms, and at the request of the OSG, in order to support the Management Plan and the purpose of conserving and enhancing the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (National Landscape).
- 2.2 The Position Statement Summary sets out that:
 - The High Weald AONB Management Plan recognises the global importance of addressing the climate crisis and meeting the UK's net zero GHE targets. The High Weald National Landscape Partnership supports maximising the benefits of renewable energy projects, while conserving the natural beauty of the National Landscape and avoiding adverse impacts.
 - Sites within, or affecting the setting of the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL) are not considered suitable locations for commercial scale greenfield ground-mounted solar farms;
 - o they represent significant and uncharacteristic incursions into the rural area,
 - o they would have a heavily industrialising and urbanising impact on the small-scale medieval landscape, which is so distinctive of the High Weald,
 - o as such, they would fail to conserve or enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the designated National Landscape

- Alternative solutions to delivering renewable energy, in particular commercial-scale rooftop solar, should be prioritised at a national, regional and local level, to prevent harm to the natural beauty of the HWNL, whilst still delivering a decarbonised energy system.
- This approach is considered to align with national planning policy and guidance set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the NPPG and National Planning Statements (NPS)

2.3 The main text of the Position Statement covers:

- Climate Change and the High Weald National Landscape,
- National legislative & policy basis for considering Solar Farms in National Landscapes
- Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape - The issues
- Alternative solutions

2.4 The draft Position Statement was circulated to the OSG in early February 2025, and the OSG provided feedback at their meeting of 26th February. The OSG felt that the Position Statement would give them good support for decision-making, and all were happy with the Position Statement going forward to the JAC for approval.

3.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

3.1 The publication of the *Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape* Position Statement will support the AONB Management Plan, helping to deliver its objectives, and will support the LPAs in determining planning applications and defending refusals at appeal.

3.3 It is requested that JAC Members proactively promote within their LPAs the awareness and use of the *Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape* Position Statement.

4.4 The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to

- a) consider and approve the 'Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape' Position Statement
- b) promote within their LPAs the awareness and use of the 'Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape' Position Statement.

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

Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape



This Position Statement supplements and supports the High Weald AONB Management Plan.

Summary

- The High Weald AONB Management Plan recognises the global importance of addressing the climate crisis and meeting the UK's net zero GHE targets. The High Weald National Landscape Partnership supports maximising the benefits of renewable energy projects, while conserving the natural beauty of the National Landscape and avoiding adverse impacts.
- Sites within, or affecting the setting of the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL) are not considered suitable locations for commercial scale greenfield ground-mounted solar farms;
 - they represent significant and uncharacteristic incursions into the rural area,
 - they would have a heavily industrialising and urbanising impact on the small-scale medieval landscape, which is so distinctive of the High Weald,
 - as such, they would fail to conserve or enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the designated National Landscape.
- Providing a responsible and meaningful contribution to meeting national net zero targets with solar photovoltaic generation does not have to mean relying on ground-mounted solar farms. Alternative solutions to delivering renewable energy, in particular commercial-scale rooftop solar, should be prioritised at a national, regional and local level, to prevent harm to the natural beauty of the HWNL, whilst still delivering a decarbonised energy system.
- This approach is considered to align with national planning policy and guidance set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the NPPG and National Planning Statements (NPS).

Introduction - The High Weald National Landscape

Considered one of the best surviving coherent medieval landscapes in north-west Europe, the High Weald has remained a unique and recognisable area for at least the last 700 years. An outstandingly beautiful landscape cherished by people and celebrated for its scenery, tranquillity and wildlife, its ridges and valleys are clothed with an intricate mosaic of small fields interspersed with farmsteads and surrounded by hedges and abundant ancient woods, all arranged around a network of historic routeways.

A nationally important, iconic landscape, it was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983 and is now known as the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL).

Further detail on the special character of the High Weald is set out in the [High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029](#). The Management Plan is a statutory document, which has been adopted by all the Local Authorities within the HWNL and which formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it, in accordance with the CRoW Act.

The HWNL Unit recommends that the content of this Position Statement be used by Local Planning Authorities in developing planning policies regarding solar farms, and in determining planning applications, within or affecting the setting of the High Weald National Landscape.

Climate Change and the High Weald National Landscape

The climate crisis is a key cross-cutting theme in the High Weald AONB Management Plan, which recognises the global importance of tackling the climate crisis and meeting the UK's net zero greenhouse emissions (GHE) targets. However, it is important to recognise that not all solutions need to be delivered within protected landscapes, and particularly not when those solutions come at the expense of other features that it is important to conserve and enhance. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the larger scale renewable energy developments. National Landscapes are better placed and more able to contribute to addressing climate change causes and effects in other ways, that do not compromise other important aspects.

The Management Plan describes a holistic strategy for how the High Weald National Landscape can address climate change; it sets out that, as a nationally protected landscape, the area's priority for climate change mitigation is based on local creative solutions along with new collaborative partnerships within the NL and connecting to adjacent areas, in particular to promote nature-based solutions which simultaneously work to mitigate aspects of the climate and biodiversity crisis, cool the local environment and restore naturally functioning systems.

The Management Plan is the principal vehicle for ensuring that the statutory purposes of the HWNL are met, and is a material consideration in the planning process. It describes the High Weald's natural beauty by eight key components of character, with a series of Objectives and Actions for each.

Management Plan Objectives

Solar energy can make a valuable contribution towards carbon reduction targets, and towards Management Plan Objective G3 *"To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty"*. However, this should not be at the expense of other harms to the AONB; all proposals need to conserve and enhance the AONB and need to be considered against *all* objectives in the AONB Management Plan not just those related to climate. Objective G3 is underpinned by the following rationale: *To ensure that transformative mitigation and adaption policies are tailored to the High Weald's defining landscape character.*

Other Objectives in the Management Plan particularly relevant to the consideration of solar farms on fields in the High Weald include;

- **Fieldscapes and Heath** is one of the eight defining components of the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB set out in the Management Plan, and Objective FH2 is underpinned by the following rationale: *'To maintain fields and field boundaries that form a part of the habitat mosaic of the High Weald; and to maintain this key component of what is a rare UK survival of an essentially Medieval landscape.'*
- **Aesthetic & Perceptual Qualities** is a further defining component of natural beauty, and Objective PQ2 seeks *'To protect the unspoilt rural landscape with its intrinsic sense of naturalness, valued views, and the extent of green space which foster experiences of rurality and tranquillity.'*

The Management Plan sets out that renewable energy systems in the High Weald NL can be best accommodated into this small-scale landscape through smaller scale and domestic projects, and advocates prioritising solar panels on roofs of existing development, particularly on the larger roofscapes of modern commercial and agricultural buildings, rather than solar fields (i.e. ground mounted solar arrays).

This position statement expands that principle, and builds on the detailed analysis of the High Weald NL's natural beauty set out the Management Plan, to set a specific position regarding commercial-scale solar farms on greenfield sites in, and affecting the setting of, the HWNL.

National legislative & policy basis for considering Solar Farms in National Landscapes

Legislation

National Landscapes (AONBs)¹ are designated by the Government to ensure that the special qualities of our finest landscapes are conserved and enhanced.

- Section 82 of The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000, confirms the primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.
- Section 85 of the CRoW Act places a statutory duty on all relevant authorities requiring them, in exercising or performing any function that affects AONBs in England, to “**seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**”²

In relation to the S.85 duty, Defra has published [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](#) The National Landscapes Association has published a Briefing Note [CRoW-s.85-duty-guidance-for-LPAs_NLA-Briefing-Nov-24.pdf](#) to provide practical, easy-to-follow guidance on meeting the strengthened S.85 duty tailored specifically to plan-making and decision-making in Local Planning Authority functions.

Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the High Weald National Landscape will normally mean avoiding harm, and conserving and enhancing the character components identified in the AONB Management Plan; supporting the Management Plan Objectives as set out for each of these; and following any Management Plan Actions set out for each.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Paragraph 189 of the NPPF sets out that:

“Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues” and that “The scale and extent of development within all these designated areas should be limited, while development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas”.

Paragraph 190 sets out that permission should be refused for major development in AONBs other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.

National policy guidance is also supportive of a more restrictive approach to solar farms on greenfield sites in protected landscapes:

National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)

Regarding renewable energy, the accompanying National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)³ importantly clarifies that:

*‘The National Planning Policy Framework explains that all communities have a responsibility to help increase the use and supply of green energy, **but this does not mean that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections**’* (Paragraph: 003 Reference ID: 5-003-20140306).

¹ From November 22nd 2023, all AONBs are known as National Landscapes. The statutory designation remains an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is referred to as such in policy and legislation.

² [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [Renewable and low carbon energy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

The NPPG further sets out that, in identifying suitable areas for renewable energy, local planning authorities will need to ensure they take into account *'critically, the potential impacts on the local environment, including from cumulative impacts'* (Paragraph: 005 Reference ID: 5-005-20150618), and that, in shaping local criteria for inclusion in Local Plans and considering planning applications, it is important to be clear that:

'the need for renewable or low carbon energy does not automatically override environmental protections'

and that

'proposals in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and in areas close to them where there could be an adverse impact on the protected area, will need careful consideration'.

(Paragraph: 007 Reference ID: 5-007-20140306)

With specific regard to large scale ground-mounted solar photovoltaic farms, the NPPG further recognises:

'The deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes' and that LPAs should encourage *'the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non agricultural land'*. (Paragraph: 013 Reference ID: 5-013-20150327)

National Planning Statements (NPS)

National Planning Statements apply to the consideration of 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects' (NSIPs) under the Planning Act 2008. Solar farms with a generating capacity over 50 MW are considered NSIPs⁴, which are determined by the Secretary of State rather than the LPA.

Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1)⁵ sets out (*inter alia*) that:

'National Parks, the Broads and AONBs have been confirmed by the government as having the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and natural beauty. Each of these designated areas has specific statutory purposes which help ensure their continued protection and which the Secretary of State should have regard to in their decisions.' (Para 5.10.7)

'The duty to seek to further the purposes of nationally designated landscapes⁶ also applies when considering applications for projects outside the boundaries of these areas which may have impacts within them. In these locations, projects should be designed sensitively given the various siting, operational, and other relevant constraints.' (Para 5.10.8)

'When considering applications for development within National Parks, the Broads and AONBs the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty should be given substantial weight by the Secretary of State in deciding on applications for development consent in these areas. The Secretary of State may grant development consent in these areas in exceptional circumstances...' (Para 5.10.32)

'For development proposals located within designated landscapes the Secretary of State should be satisfied that measures which seek to further purposes of the designation are sufficient, appropriate and proportionate to the type and scale of the development....' (Para 5.10.33)

Para 4.7.2 of EN-1 acknowledges that the nature of energy infrastructure development will often limit the extent to which it can contribute to the enhancement of the quality of the area.

The National Policy Statement for Renewable Energy Infrastructure (EN-3) adds further detail regarding assessing impacts of proposals.

⁴ [The Town and Country Planning \(Development Management Procedure\) \(England\) Order 2015](#)

⁵ [EN-1 Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

Solar Farms and the High Weald National Landscape - The issues

Major Development

Commercial scale solar farm proposals (also known as ground-mounted solar arrays) on greenfield sites in the High Weald NL should usually be considered to constitute ‘major development’ in the context of paragraph 190 of the NPPF; as a result of the potential for both the scale and the nature of the applications to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty for which the area has been designated as an AONB. This is due to the large areas of ground-mounted photovoltaic cells laid out over a large area of countryside, along with associated infrastructure; usually comprising access tracks, perimeter deer/security fencing, lighting, and ancillary structures such as battery storage and substations.

As such, in accordance with paragraph 190, permission should be refused (unless there are exceptional circumstances **and** the development was in the public interest) – in this regard, it should be noted that exceptional *need* does not necessarily equate to exceptional *circumstances*.⁷ For example, there may be other, more suitable ways of mitigating the impacts of climate change (or delivering renewable energy) or less harmful locations for the proposed development.

Where proposals constitute ‘critical national priority’ (CNP) nationally significant low carbon infrastructure – that is solar farms with a generating capacity above 50 megawatts (MW)⁸, for which applications are made under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) regime - National Planning Statement EN-3 sets out that the Secretary of State will take as the starting point that the relevant tests regarding exceptional circumstances and public benefit have been met.

However, that starting point does not apply to non-NSIP proposals of less than 50 MW, where the test of NPPF 190 should still apply; Government Briefing confirms that LPAs are responsible for determining planning applications for solar farms with a generating capacity under 50 MW, and that they will decide applications in line with their local plan unless ‘material considerations’ indicate otherwise⁹(material considerations include the NPPF, NPPG and the AONB Management Plan).

General Considerations

Notwithstanding the above considerations of ‘major development’, solar farms on greenfield sites present a number of additional issues for the HWNL, with adverse impacts on natural beauty including landscape character, the agricultural economy, and wildlife and biodiversity. These specific impacts are all expanded in more detail below.

Such proposals will not usually be considered to accord with para 189 of the NPPF, which requires that great weight be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Landscapes, and as such, the application of policy 189 will provide a strong reason for refusing the development under the provisions of para 11 of the NPPF.

Impacts on landscape character

Utilitarian in appearance and industrial in character, commercial scale solar farms on greenfield sites represent a significant introduction of built development into undeveloped open fieldscapes. They represent significant and uncharacteristic incursions into the rural landscape, having a heavily urbanising impact on the small-scale medieval landscape which is so distinctive of the High Weald with its intrinsic sense of naturalness and rurality. As such, the developments would not conserve or enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the High Weald NL, and would be contrary to Objectives FH2 and PQ2 of the High Weald AONB Management Plan.

⁷ This principle is recognised in relevant case law (R (Mevagissey Parish Council) v Cornwall Council [2013] EHC 3684 (Admin) (link), paragraph 52): ‘Even if there were an exceptional need ... that would not necessarily equate to exceptional circumstances for a particular development, because there may be alternative sites that are more suitable because development there would result in less harm to the AONB landscape’.

⁸ Threshold to be increased to 100MW by end of 2025 via legislation to be introduced in spring 2025 [Government response to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system consultation - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ House of Commons Library, ‘Planning for Solar Farms’ Research Briefing, May 2024

While the solar array development would usually take place within the framework of the historic field boundaries, nevertheless the quantum and disposition of development in such schemes; the near wholesale infilling of fields with solar panel structures, along with the associated infrastructure (access tracks, perimeter deer/security fencing, lighting, and ancillary structures such as battery storage and substations) would urbanise and significantly undermine the character and natural beauty of the High Weald NL.

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments (LVIAs) often erroneously focus solely on *views* of a proposed solar farm, however the fact that a site might not be widely visible in longer landscape views, or that adverse impacts are 'only' experienced at a 'local level', should not be considered reasons for development, and does not diminish the potential for adverse impacts of the development on the full range of components of natural beauty of the High Weald NL set out in the Management Plan. It is not only views, but also the intrinsic character of the landscape that forms part of its natural beauty, as set out in the AONB Management Plan, and which must also be considered, within the context of Section 85 of the CRoW Act and para 189 of the NPPF.

The extent to which a proposed renewable energy development might affect the landscape and scenic beauty of the High Weald NL is a key consideration. However, natural beauty is a holistic concept; it is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features, and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries.¹⁰ i.e. it includes landscape and scenic impacts, and also impacts on the natural heritage (such as landform, geology, species or habitats), tranquillity and dark skies, and cultural heritage (including the historic built environment), as described by the eight character components of High Weald natural beauty set out in the Management Plan.

Setting of the High Weald National Landscape

Additionally, solar farm development **in the setting of the High Weald NL** has the potential to adversely affect the natural beauty of the NL, not only on views to and from the NL and perceptual qualities, but also on dark skies and on interconnected habitats within and outside the boundary that have a functional relationship.

National planning policy guidance recognises that land within the setting of National Landscapes often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, especially where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary, and where poorly located or designed development can do significant harm.¹¹

Impacts on farming capacity and the agricultural economy

Land-based Economy & Rural Life is a key character component of natural beauty in the High Weald. The area is characterised by a broad-based economy but with a significant land-based sector and related community life. Management Plan Objective LBE1 *"seeks to improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture, and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty."*

However, the Plan clarifies that the pursuance of the above objective should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the High Weald NL.

Whilst solar array development is often promoted as farm diversification and an income source for farmers and landowners, there are alternative means of supporting the agricultural economy through sustainable farming grants such as Defra's agri-environment schemes.

¹⁰ Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB Partnership members, Countryside Commission, CA24, Nov 2001

¹¹ NPPG paragraph: 042 Reference ID: 8-042-20190721

Best & Most Valuable Land

Within the context of ‘Conserving & Enhancing the Natural Environment’, the NPPF sets out that:
“planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by [inter alia]:

- a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);*
- b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;”* (para 187)

While para 188 sets out that *“Plans should...allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in this Framework...”* and footnote 65 clarifies that *“where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality”*¹².

The NPPG clarifies Natural England’s Agricultural Land Classification system, that there are five grades of agricultural land, (with Grade 3 subdivided into 3a and 3b), with grades 1-3a considered the ‘best and most versatile land’.¹³

The NPPG further sets out, with specific regard to renewable energy, that:

“where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether (i) the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land.” (Paragraph: 013 Reference ID: 5-013-20150327)

Within the context of the agricultural economy of the High Weald, land graded 3b, whilst it may not be classified as ‘best and most versatile land’, nevertheless should not be considered poorer quality; Natural England’s guidance describes ‘Subgrade 3b – moderate quality agricultural land’ as land capable of producing *‘high yields of grass which can be grazed or harvested over most of the year’*¹⁴ (inter alia). This definition is critical, reflecting the predominant pasture grazing agricultural character and tradition of the High Weald AONB and the significant value of grade 3b land to the landscape and rural economy. In addition, 3b grassland can be ecologically important and wildlife rich. As such, the Management Plan Fieldscapes & Heath Action (i) sets out that public bodies should:

‘Recognise in decision-making the food productivity value and quality of grade 3a and 3b soils as being of greater importance to the High Weald’s pastoral agriculture economy and landscape character than simply the ALC grade.’

The agricultural grade of the land in the High Weald NL is therefore not considered to justify development of solar farms, when cumulatively taken into consideration are: the Management Plan Objectives and Actions, the NPPF qualification of development on agricultural land being ‘demonstrated to be necessary’, the fact that not all renewable energy solutions need to be delivered within protected landscapes, and the alternative options for solar photovoltaic energy generation within and outside the NL described in the following pages.

Impacts on wildlife and biodiversity

Applications for greenfield solar arrays may include proposals for biodiversity mitigation and ‘improvements’ such as changing land management, habitat restoration and habitat creation. Whilst such work may be laudable in itself, such mitigation measures should not be achieved at the expense of the natural beauty of the High Weald NL, and in themselves in no way compensate or excuse any ecological harms arising from the proposal itself, nor do they excuse wider harms to the natural beauty of the AONB and its landscape and scenic character.

¹² Para 181, footnote 62

¹³ Paragraph: 001 Reference ID: 8-001-20190721

¹⁴ [Guide to assessing development proposals on agricultural land - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guide-to-assessing-development-proposals-on-agricultural-land)

Moreover, habitat enhancement and improved land management is not predicated on, or contingent on, development proposals of solar arrays; especially where other mechanisms such as agri-environmental schemes deliver specifically for habitat creation and management. (The HWNL team can provide advice to landowners and farmers on such schemes.)

The Biodiversity Net Gain Metric is now mandatory and applies to solar farm proposals as for other development. Whilst many schemes propose large on-paper biodiversity gains, in reality this is often limited to fragmented habitats e.g. narrow strips around the perimeter of solar sites, between existing hedgerows and proposed deer fencing of solar arrays. Such fragments would be difficult to maintain amongst the infrastructure of the solar farms, and their meaningfulness and their genuine contribution to improving local biodiversity is therefore questionable.

Evidence suggests that foraging bats are significantly impacted by the introduction of solar arrays on fields previously used within their forage areas, or where bats used hedgerows at the edge of fields for navigation¹⁵, as well as reducing the area available for foraging. This is considered to be particularly relevant to the High Weald context, due to the mosaic character of the landscape of small, irregular shaped fields bound by woodland, shaws and hedgerows. The erection of 2m tall deer/security fencing is also likely to hinder continued use of fields and hedges as routeways and forage areas by bats active in the area. There is evidence of bat collisions with solar panels or mistaking the panels for water bodies and trying to drink from them¹⁶. Additionally, Natural England report that there are potential risks to birds from disturbance and displacement as solar farms create barriers and habitat loss¹⁷. For example, skylarks, a ground nesting bird much in decline and a red listed species, are displaced from open fields by solar panel structures; they do not nest near tall structures as these can obscure lines of sight to see predators.

Alternative solutions

Providing a responsible and meaningful contribution to meeting national net zero targets with solar photovoltaic generation does not necessarily mean relying on ground-mounted solar farms. There are a number of alternative solutions for solar photovoltaic energy generation:

Rooftop Solar

Currently only 5.5% of large-scale solar systems (that have a capacity of at least 1 MW) in the UK are installed on rooftops¹⁸ and the Building Research Establishment cites that this is in marked contrast to many other European countries, and that for example in Germany in 2016 more than half of solar PV deployment was on commercial roofs.¹⁹ However, a major new report based on research by University College London's Energy Institute for CPRE²⁰ has found that over half the solar panels needed to hit national net zero targets could be fitted on rooftops of existing buildings, especially industrial and commercial properties such as supermarkets, warehouses, distribution centres and in car parks²¹, generating electricity at large capacity that feeds into the National Grid.

This research demonstrates that decarbonising the national energy grid in this way would require far less land than relying solely on large ground-mounted solar farms in the countryside. The key finding of the research is that installing solar panels on existing rooftops and other land such as car parks could provide at least 40GW in England by 2035, over 50% of the national target of 70GW of solar energy generation by 2035.

¹⁵ Tinsley E et al (2022), ground-mounted solar photovoltaic sites on bat activity, *Journal of Applied Ecology* 60, 1752-1762.

¹⁶ (NE TIN 101). Natural England. (2011) Technical Information Note TIN101, Solar parks: maximising environmental benefits [archived].

¹⁷ [NEER012 Edition 1 Evidence review of the impact of solar farms on birds, bats and general ecology 2016](#)

¹⁸ House of Commons Library, 'Planning for Solar Farms' Research Briefing, May 2024

¹⁹ BRE (2016) Solar PV on commercial buildings: a guide for owners and developers, (K. Arora, S. Diu, J. Roper and G. Hartnell)

²⁰ [123160-NSC-Solar-Roofs-Good-Practice-Guide-WEB.pdf](#)

²¹ [Rooftop-Revolution-Report.pdf \(cpre.org.uk\)](#)

²¹ CPRE cite the fact that [the government estimates](#) there are 250,000 hectares of south-facing, commercial roof space across the country.

Professor Mark Barrett of the UCL Energy Institute, lead author of the research, said:

‘This study found there is more than sufficient potential solar capacity on rooftops and car parks in urban areas. It’s clear we can get close to meeting the government’s solar energy target without necessitating the development of large solar farms in sensitive rural areas. Urban photovoltaic panels on car parks, and new and large buildings, would be relatively cheap although retrofitting solar panels onto existing homes would be more costly.’²²

This approach to large-scale rooftop solar aligns well with existing policy that seeks to protect valuable landscapes, in particular for the High Weald NL, where the finite land resource can be better used for delivering a wider range of public goods and services such as the enjoyment of its landscape and scenic beauty, nature recovery, public amenity, and sustainable food production; all of which would conserve its inherent natural beauty.

This approach also aligns with government commitments to seek the widespread deployment of rooftop solar on commercial and industrial properties²³²⁴.

The High Weald NL Unit therefore supports roof-first planning policies that prioritise opportunities for generating solar energy for the National Grid from areas that are already built on, including rooftops, both through installations on existing structures, and through policies requiring such infrastructure to be included on new buildings.

Example Case Study ²⁵

Case study 1: Solar PV - Bentley Motors – UK’s Largest Rooftop Array



The Bentley Factory in Crewe built in the 1940s is ideally situated to generate solar power as the “saw tooth” factory roofs are south facing at an angle of 20 degrees. It is the UK’s largest rooftop solar PV array, owned and operated by solar power generator, Lightsource Renewable Energy and installed by main contractor Solarcentury.

Over 20,000 solar PV panels have been installed generating enough electricity adequate to power over 1,200 households covering 3.45 hectares

of roof space which would otherwise be un-utilised. Lightsource Renewable Energy entered into a power purchase agreement with Bentley Motors, making it possible for the electricity generated during working hours to be used directly by the factory and for the electricity generated at weekends and times of low demand, to be fed back into the National Grid. At peak generation times, the system will produce up to 40% of Bentley’s energy requirements.

The installation on Bentley’s factory demonstrates the potential for solar energy to be generated on commercial roof-tops in the UK and is a clear example of how businesses can gain greater pricing certainty for the future whilst reducing their carbon footprint. With the build only taking 16 weeks, it shows the speed at which installations of this size can be completed even when constructed in tandem with existing business activity.

²² [Rooftops can provide over half our solar energy targets, report shows - CPRE](#)

²³ House of Commons Library, ‘Planning for Solar Farms’ Research Briefing, May 2024

²⁴ [Powering Up Britain - Joint Overview](#)

²⁵ [Microsoft Word - UK Solar PV Strategy Part 1 Roadmap to a Brighter Future 08.10.13 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Small scale solar installations, Microgeneration and Local solutions

The HWNL Unit supports in principle solar and photovoltaic (PV) provision at a local microgeneration scale, that is small-scale generation of renewable energy by households for domestic use, and small businesses such as farms, for their own use.

Small-scale freestanding ground-mounted solar arrays (i.e. up to 0.05ha (500sqm)/50kw) to serve individual buildings, such as schools, hotels, community buildings such as village halls, and agricultural properties etc., alongside domestic use, may be acceptable in the High Weald NL, as their lesser ground coverage is often more able to be accommodated into the small-scale landscape without industrialising its character or scenic natural beauty.

The suitability of such small-scale installations on a case-by-case basis will depend on the consideration of a number of site and context specific factors, such as the topography and landscape character of the site, the presence of protected habitats and ecology, the ability for the array to be well screened within existing building complexes or by other landscape features such as hedgerows, walls or trees, and do not detract from any architectural or historic interest.

As with any development proposal, regard should be had to the Objectives and Actions of the High Weald Management Plan. Where new screening is proposed, care would need to be taken to ensure that the screening itself did not adversely affect wider views or landscape character.

With regard to zero carbon and the historic environment, Planning Principle 5 of the AONB Management Plan sets out that decision-making affecting the historic built environment should follow best practice advice from Historic England, in order that energy conservation measures are balanced with conserving the historic environment that contributes to the natural beauty of the AONB. With regard to microgeneration specifically, extensive guidance is available via [Low and Zero Carbon Technologies in Historic Properties | Historic England](#)

Sources used in the preparation of this Position Statement

[High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029](#)

[National Planning Policy Framework](#)

[Natural environment - GOV.UK \(NPPG\)](#)

[Renewable and low carbon energy - GOV.UK \(NPPG\)](#)

[Government response to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system consultation - GOV.UK](#)

[UK Solar PV Strategy Part 1 Roadmap to a Brighter Future 08.10.13](#) (Department for Energy & Climate Change)

House of Commons Library, 'Planning for Solar Farms' Research Briefing, May 2024

[Powering Up Britain - Joint Overview](#) (DESNZ 2023)

[123160-NSC-Solar-Roofs-Good-Practice-Guide-WEB.pdf \(bregroup.com\)](#)

[Our rooftop solar campaign - CPRE](#)

[Rooftop-Revolution-Report.pdf \(cpre.org.uk\)](#)

[Low and Zero Carbon Technologies in Historic Properties | Historic England](#)

[Evidence review of the impact of solar farms on birds, bats and general ecology 2016 - NEER012](#)

Agenda Item: 10

Committee: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 26 March 2025

Title of Report: High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029: Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Monitoring Addendum: Working Document March 2025 for Sign-Off

By: AONB Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Agree the Management Plan 2024-2029 Monitoring Addendum ‘Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Monitoring working document’ (subject to minor editorial and professional presentational design) for submission to Natural England and publication.

1. Background

- 1.1 In January 2024 the Government published its Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PL TOF) which established targets for National Landscapes and National Parks. It recognised the crucial role Protected Landscapes play in achieving positive change for nature, climate, people and place.
- 1.2 The PL TOF builds on new legislation in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) that strengthens how relevant authorities must seek to further the purposes for which Protected Landscapes were designated. The PL TOF is to be embedded in statutory management plans where the management plan is currently in review, or as an addendum where the management plan is published. The targets relate to the following three goals from Defra’s Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP):
 - Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife
 - Goal 7: Climate mitigation and adaption
 - Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and enhancement with the natural environment.
- 1.3 Defra has selected ten targets under these three EIP goals set at the national level for all Protected Landscapes to prioritise and focus on delivery. The targets are for the ‘landscape’ and will be delivered by a range of partners. The targets are those considered by Defra to be most relevant to Protected Landscapes statutory purpose, where data is available at the right spatial level, and where Protected Landscapes teams have the ability to drive influence through convening partners.
- 1.4 The High Weald Management Plan 2024-2029 sets out, within the ‘Monitoring’ section, that targets set by national government will form part of a subsequent Monitoring Addendum to the Management Plan.
- 1.5 It should be noted that PL TOF is an indicator-based assessment mechanism mandated by government to monitor progress towards EIP goals within Protected Landscapes. As such it does not represent the full scope of the statutory purpose of National Landscapes,

which is to conserve and enhance natural beauty, for which objectives, actions and local monitoring are set out in the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029.

2. Summary of the High Weald PL TOF Monitoring Addendum

The High Weald PL TOF Management Plan Monitoring Addendum (appended at Annex E)

2.1 The High Weald PL TOF Monitoring Addendum incorporates the following:

- An introduction to the PL TOF
- The relationship to the High Weald Management Plan objectives
- A summary of the 10 targets
- Explanation of the apportionment of three of the targets
- The current role of the High Weald NL team
- In depth tables for each of the ten targets which includes:
 - What the target means in plain English
 - Defra related statistics associated with the target where available for the High Weald
 - Relevant Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles to the target
 - Delivery responsibility
 - How progress is measured
- For the three apportioned targets there is additional detail on:
 - High Weald locally evidenced target
 - How the landscape could meet the Defra apportioned target
- List of the risks and uncertainties associated with delivery of the PL TOF

2.2 The High Weald National Landscape PL TOF Monitoring Addendum makes clear that pursuance of any of the targets within the PL TOF should not be at the expense of, or cause harm to the character and natural beauty of the High Weald NL as defined in the Statement of Significance in the High Weald AONB Management Plan or contradict any Management Plan objectives.

3. Process and Consultation

3.1 The statutory requirement to embed PL TOF in Protected Landscapes Management Plans (or as addendums) was made by Defra in January 2024. Initial PL TOF guidance from Natural England came out in April 2024. This was followed by the first tranche of statistics relating to the targets released by Defra and Natural England. Several workshops were held by Natural England and the Protected Landscapes Partnership over the summer to aid understanding of the statistics.

3.2 Work on the High Weald PL TOF Monitoring Addendum started in late summer 2024. The High Weald PL TOF Monitoring Addendum is a ‘working document’ in order to accommodate the fast-changing pace of current Government policies, particularly those involving the environment and land use. This allows the addendum to be updated when required, and to more accurately reflect current Government environmental priorities.

3.3 Timeline of the rollout of the PL TOF and associated work undertaken.

| Time | TOF work |
|------------------|--|
| Jan 2023 | EIP published |
| Jan 2024 | Defra PL TOF published |
| June 2024 | PL TOF workshop – SSSI data |
| July 2024 | Initial PL TOF guidance published by LUC |
| Aug 2024 | PL TOF NL drop-in session |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Aug 2024 | PL TOF workshop – demographic data |
| Sep 2024 | PL TOF cluster workshops for SE mixed woodland PLs lead by LUC (consultants) |
| Dec 2024 | Final guidance on apportionment from LUC |
| Jan 2025 | HW Unit sets targets internally with available evidence |
| Feb 2025 | HW PL TOF Monitoring Addendum presented to OSG |
| Mar 2025 | HW PL TOF Monitoring Addendum presented to Management Board |
| Mar 2025 | JAC consider and approve HWNL PL TOF Monitoring Addendum working document |
| Apr 2025 | High Weald Monitoring Addendum is professionally designed ready for publication |
| Jul 2025 | Apportioned targets agreed with Natural England by July at the latest |
| Jul 2025 | Annual PL TOF report produced by NE/Defra alongside the EIP report |
| Beyond 2025 | Annual data collection & sharing by NE and Defra Annual reports produced by NE PL TOF reviewed in 5 years' time by Defra |

3.4 Apportioned targets need to be agreed between individual local partnerships in each Protected Landscape and Natural England by July 2025. The Monitoring Addendum will then be published on the High Weald NL website alongside the Management Plan by July 2025 but is not required to go through the full Management Plan adoption process.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1 The High Weald Unit has worked quickly to respond to this incoming statutory requirement. Having published the Management Plan the previous year, in 2024, has helped to allow adequate time to be allocated to engage and undertake the PL TOF Monitoring Addendum in a thorough manner.

4.2 It is recommended that the JAC agrees the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029: Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Monitoring Addendum: Working Document, and the High Weald evidenced apportioned targets. This will then be submitted to Natural England and subsequently published on the High Weald website following professional document design.

4.3 The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Agree the Management Plan 2024-2029 Monitoring Addendum 'Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Monitoring working document' (subject to minor editorial and professional presentational design) for submission to Natural England and publication as a working document.

Contact: Sally Marsh, Co-Director. s.marsh@highweald.org

High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029

Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework

Monitoring Addendum: Working Document March 2025

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

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

The High Weald Partnership seeks to respond proactively, ambitiously and urgently to ‘drivers of change’, including working towards the national goal of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, reversing the biodiversity crisis, and reducing development pressure.”

High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029

The High Weald National Landscape Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PL TOF) Monitoring Addendum is a working document. It should be considered in conjunction with the Local Monitoring Indicators of Success in the published High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029.

Pursuance of any of the targets within the PL TOF should not be at the expense of, or cause harm to the character and natural beauty of the High Weald NL as defined in the Statement of Significance in the High Weald AONB Management Plan or contradict any Management Plan objectives.

Introduction

Defra released its Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP)¹ in 2023, which set out the government's goals for the environment in England. There are ten goals in the EIP (Box 1), which cover a wide range of environmental factors. The Office for Environmental Protection, created in 2021 under the Environment Act, will hold the government and other public authorities to account on the EIP goals.

Three of the goals have non-statutory targets (highlighted goals in Box 1) which make up the 'Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes Framework'. These set out how the government expects Protected Landscapes to deliver outcomes under three EIP goals. The PL TOF aligns with the High Weald AONB Management Plan's cross-cutting themes on nature recovery (including 30x30), the climate crisis and net zero, soil health, and access.

PL TOF is an indicator-based assessment mechanism mandated by government to monitor progress towards EIP goals within Protected Landscapes. **The PL TOF does not represent the full scope of the statutory purpose of National Landscapes, which is to conserve and enhance natural beauty,** for which objectives, actions and monitoring are set out in the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029.

Box 1: EIP environmental goals for England

Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Goal 2: Clean air

Goal 3: Clean and plentiful water

Goal 4: Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides

Goal 5: Maximise our resources, minimise our waste

Goal 6: Using resources from nature sustainably

Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change

Goal 8: Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards

Goal 9: Enhancing biosecurity

Goal 10: Enhanced beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment

¹ [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/environmental-improvement-plan-2023)

Relationship between the PL TOF and the High Weald AONB Management Plan

Character components of natural beauty and drivers of change



Local monitoring Indicators of Success

Local Monitoring for the duration of the current Management Plan are specific to the High Weald landscape and associated with the objectives set out in the Plan.

The Partnership will look to develop a programme to identify appropriate, effective and proportionate mechanisms to measure or judge progress towards indicators of success, and will seek to work with wider partners to secure a long-term programme of monitoring along with appropriate resources.

A full list of the 36 ambitions for local monitoring in the High Weald NL are set out on page 76 of the Management Plan.

National Monitoring Targets and Outcomes Framework



Thriving plants and wildlife
Targets 1-5



Mitigating and adapting to climate change
Targets 6-8



Enhanced beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment
Targets 9-10

The targets

There are ten targets for Protected Landscapes under the PL TOF, which are nested within three of the EIP goals. Each of these targets and their application to the High Weald NL is explained in more detail in the following pages.

It is important to note **the targets**:

- **are for the landscape** (i.e. the geographic area), not Protected Landscape teams,
- **are non-statutory**²², being ambitions only,
- **will be delivered by a range of public bodies, and partnerships between these bodies and land managers.**

| Box 2 | National targets |
|-----------|---|
| Target 1 | Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline). |
| Target 2 | Bring 80% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes into favourable condition by 2042. |
| Target 3 | For 60% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes assessed as having ‘actions on track’ to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028. |
| Target 4 | Continuing favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (from a 2022 baseline) and increasing to include all newly restored or created habitat through agri-environment schemes by 2042. |
| Target 5 | Ensuring at least 65% to 80% of land managers adopt nature friendly farming on at least 10% to 15% of their land by 2030. |
| Target 6 | Reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in Protected Landscapes to net zero by 2050 relative to 1990 levels. |
| Target 7 | Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050. |
| Target 8 | Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline). |
| Target 9 | Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using existing metrics in our Access for All programme. |
| Target 10 | Decrease the number of nationally designated heritage assets at risk in Protected Landscapes. |

Apportionment

Targets 1, 7 and 8 (highlighted in box 2) are apportioned to individual Protected Landscapes. This means there is a spatial target for creation of wildlife rich habitats (1), peatland (7) and tree planting (8). For these specific targets, Protected Landscape teams set the level of ambition that could be achieved based on their local knowledge of the landscape capacity to deliver these targets, and local circumstance. Ambitions are set for the short and long-term. Short-term is defined as within the lifecycle of the current management plan (until 2029), and targets 1 and 8 can be referred directly back to the current High Weald Management Plan objectives, actions and investment priorities. The long-term ambition reflects the wording specific to each target, which ranges from 2028 to 2050.

² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (2024). Policy Paper: Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework [Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK](#)

Target monitoring

Target progress is evaluated by Natural England (NE), based mainly on proxy data deemed representative of the target. Monitoring and reporting are conducted annually by Natural England as part of the EIP annual reporting process. Defra is working (as of late 2024) to develop a reporting system that PLs can use to report progress towards any of the targets that is not captured through national programme monitoring (e.g. ELMS) and the arm's length bodies such as the Forestry Commission and Natural England.

Target delivery and the role of the High Weald National Landscape Partnership

Government departments and arm's length bodies such as Natural England, Forestry Commission and Environment Agency will lead delivery of the actions. These organisations have legal responsibilities, regulatory powers, and are in control of key investment mechanisms such as agri-environment schemes. The High Weald National Landscape Partnership will facilitate local action through its small multidisciplinary team of 6FTEs (2025/26) and project staff. The Partnership will:

Lead strategic environmental action

- Using the co-created **High Weald AONB Management Plan** to guide and shape the activities needed to achieve environmentally beneficial action and land-use change.
- Translating the strategic ambitions of multiple organisations into clear, actionable information for High Weald farmers and land managers while ensuring local needs are effectively communicated to policymakers to align priorities.

Further understanding of the High Weald's habitats, species and historic environment and promote land management practices suited to the area's character

- Working directly with land managers to understand and promote practices suited to the High Weald's unique landscape character.
- Providing practical guidance and support for their adoption and implementation, demonstrated by the Partnership's early advocacy and facilitation of regenerative farming practices.

Create flexible investment mechanisms to support environmental action

- Developing holistic support packages that balance convening, advisory support, and grant funding to address local environmental challenges, for example targeted initiatives such as the **Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites Project** and the **Weald Meadows Initiative**.

Fill investment gaps to complement national agri-environment programmes

- Managing funding streams that address gaps left by national programmes, ensuring tailored support for High Weald farmers and land managers, for example the **Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme** and the **High Weald Nature and Community Fund grant programmes have enable removal of long-standing barriers to SSSI management.**

Drive environmental project development

- Leading strategic and landscape-scale initiatives such as the **Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme**. Recognising that investment in project development is essential part of the process of achieving action and delivering high quality environmental outcomes at every scale.

Facilitate farmer and land manager collaboration

- Supporting both **topic-focused and geographically-focused** collaborations to enable collective action that delivers greater impact than individual efforts alone. For example, the **Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster** (a geographically focused cluster) and the **High Weald Collaborative Deer Management Initiative** (set up to address a landscape-scale challenge).

Strengthen advisory and support networks

- Facilitating a **National Landscape-focused advisory network** to improve landscape-led advice, encourage integrated, multi-objective land management, and reduce conflicting guidance.
- Co-designing **environmentally focused training, mentoring, and CPD programmes** tailored to the specific needs of High Weald farmers and land managers.

Ensure focused environmental investment to maximise impact

- Using local knowledge to guide environmental proposals and funding allocations, ensuring maximum deliverability and impact, supported by sounding boards with diverse representation such as the **High Weald Local Advisory Panel**, which provides local direction and scrutiny of investment via the **Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme**.

The High Weald National Landscape Partnership currently does not have the powers or resources to:

- own land, supervise or directly carry out any active land management including habitat restoration, tree planting, farming etc.
- Regulate and enforce actions by any organisation or individual to conserve and enhance the High Weald National Landscape
- Force landowners or community group etc. to take up a funding opportunity even when it would benefit the PL TOF
- Campaign or join local campaigns even if they would benefit the PL TOF
- Survey habitats or species to industry standard for PL TOF monitoring purposes
- Hold individuals or organisations to account for failing to contribute to targets.

The Protected Landscape Targets and Outcomes

The 10 targets are set out in the table below. Information about each target includes proposed baseline data, relevant AONB Management Plan objectives, delivery responsibilities, and monitoring approaches. Where targets have been apportioned, proposed locally evidenced targets are explained together with what is required for more ambitious targets to be met.

Delivery of all these targets are subject to risks and uncertainties including:

- Targets selected in the PL TOF are proxy indicators for some aspects of environmental health. The measures used to support the targets rely on currently available national data sets which may have a symbolic relationship to the target rather than a causal one.
- Lack of an independently verifiable mechanism to address qualitative judgements or identify a target range for what might count as ‘favourable condition,’ ‘nature friendly farming’ or ‘wildlife rich habitats’ may militate against these measures being reliable evidence to track progress.
- Creation of ‘new’ habitats (e.g. woodland) will only happen at the expense of losing other habitats (e.g. scrub, heathland or grassland) and productive agricultural land, as well as having potentially adverse impacts on existing landscape character.
- The drive to deliver targets set at a national scale may have unintended consequences in reducing resources and focus on locally important issues. For example, the AONB Management Plan recognises as a priority the need to identify wildlife-rich core sites and protect them from harms including pollution, pesticides, disturbance, and habitat destruction. These outcomes are poorly represented in the PL TOF.
- Inadequate evidence for the current baseline state of nature may erode trust in the measures. For example, grasslands across the High Weald are currently poorly recorded, and this could manifest in projects destroying existing sites to (re)create similar habitats (this is already a known issue with BNG where semi-improved grassland is undervalued, and creation garners greater units compared to enhancement).
- Governance gaps for the long-term preservation and maintenance of habitats created through agri-environment schemes (which currently have a lifespan of 5-10yrs) may undermine confidence in the targets.
- Inconsistent use of terms such as ‘restore’, which do not align with the meaning assigned in LNRS, 30x30 policy and the High Weald Management Plan adds confusion for users.
- Resources may be inadequate to provide the long-term support necessary to secure change on the ground, particularly in a landscape where maintaining the existing small-scale habitat mosaic is costly. Land use policy, advisory services, and incentives for land managers (such as agri-environment schemes) need to be coordinated, consistent, and tailored to the landscape’s and land manager’s needs.
- Land in the High Weald has always provided multiple functions. The downplaying of food and material production systems which foster a healthy environment, healthy food, and economic benefits to the local area may undermine the necessary engagement of land managers.
- Habitat creation and enhancement targets risk being meaningless in terms of positive outcomes for nature if losses (e.g. to development or through damage, disease or pollution) are not counted alongside gains.
- The nature of High Weald land ownership – the predominance of small holdings/ family farms – generally necessitates a greater need for facilitation and support at a farming cluster level to secure large scale changes in practice.
- If Section 85 is not strengthened to protect National Landscapes from inappropriate development, it could undermine the PL TOF.

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Target 1: Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline).

Actions should result in an increased extent of wildlife-rich habitat, which is of sufficient quality to support the species that are typically found in that habitat (improvements or maintaining the condition of existing wildlife-rich habitat are excluded from this target).

Defra proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL 2024:

There is currently no supplied data on the restoration and creation of habitats from Defra grant-based schemes

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G1: to restore the natural function of rivers, water courses and water bodies

G2: To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops

G4: To restore soil health across the High Weald

R2: To protect and enhance the ecological function of routeways

W1: To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.

W2: To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.

FH2: To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands.

FH3: To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

DS2: To protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.

Recovering Nature: Principles and Investment Priorities (MP p 61)

High Weald habitat and 30x30 (MP p60)

Information on habitat restoration and creation can be found here:

[Natural England - Habitat management and restoration](#)

[Priority Habitat Creation and Restoration - data.gov.uk](#)

Delivery responsibility: primarily Defra

The EIP¹ states that new farming schemes nationally (e.g. ELMS) are expected to:

- Contribute 80 to 100% of the target to restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected areas by 2042, including the contribution from peat restoration and biodiverse woodland creation.

Restoration and creation actions may include but are not limited to the following³:

- Agri-Environment Schemes or Environmental Land Management (including woodland) schemes.

- Biodiversity Net Gain where an excess of wildlife-rich habitat has been created or restored beyond the direct replacement of existing habitat (the direct replacement habitat does not count).
- Local Planning Authority/Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects where habitat delivery is planned through permissions beyond replacement of existing habitat.
- Nature-based solutions such as those that address coastal erosion and flooding.
- Work under the “Plan for Water” for waterbodies to reach Good Ecological Status, although further actions may also be required.
- Work under the Water Industry National Environment Programme.
- Grant funded nature projects e.g., Peat Grant, Species Recovery Grant, Species Survival Fund, Heritage Lottery nature projects, Big Nature Impact Fund.
- Nature markets based on high-integrity standards set by appropriate standards agencies.
- Regulatory or licensing activities for example via statutory authorities such as Forestry Commission, Natural England and Environment Agency.
- Management plan agreements – these cover action taken by individual farmers/landowners not covered under existing schemes.

³[Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions - TIN219 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

Progress is measured by the extent of wildlife rich habitat created or restored within Protected Landscapes, outside of protected sites.

Apportionment of Target 1

High Weald locally evidenced target

Short-term ambition: **25ha**

Long-term ambition: **700ha**

Defra proposed apportioned target: 11,544ha

Evidence to support this target:

- The Farming in Protected Landscapes grant scheme (FiPL) supported 15ha of habitat creation but over 10,000ha of habitat enhancement over its three-year period 2021-24
- No further Defra supported evidence has been provided of other grant supported habitat creation in the High Weald over the last five years
- The easy wins have already been achieved
- Target 1 is not the primary focus for ongoing nature recovery work in the High Weald where enhancement is more important. This includes reducing deer grazing pressure in ancient woodlands and enhancing semi-natural grassland
- The amount of off-site BNG anticipated in the High Weald is unclear
- Higher tier funding in the High Weald NL is overwhelmingly used for maintaining habitats, which is not currently included in this target
- There is concern that habitat creation projects may be at the expense of other valuable habitats and productive agricultural land

The landscape could accommodate a substantially higher target if...

- Enhancement of existing habitat counts towards target 1
- Management of existing habitat counts towards target 1, allowing stacking with 30x30 targets
- Soil-focused regenerative nature friendly farming counts towards target 1
- Agri-environment schemes are tailored to the needs and characteristics of the High Weald NL
- The SFI option GRH6 is amended so that good quality semi-improved grasslands are not lost because of inconsistencies in species frequencies compared to BEHTA and UK Habs guidance
- A core of independent land management advisors is consistently funded to facilitate trust and cooperation with land managers during transition to nature-friendly farming
- Restoring the natural function of rivers, water courses and other water bodies is prioritised and funded in the High Weald
- Habitat creation includes support for wood pasture and agroforestry

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Restoration of 8,730ha of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) may contribute to this target but easy wins have already been achieved and without careful intervention, restoration using heavy machinery can cause extensive damage to woodland soils- PAWS restoration can mean the loss of locally economic timber extraction | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Support for farming clusters is increased to mitigate the dominance of small holdings which make large scale restoration projects challenging- Restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) is supported by dedicated advisors able to assist with work planning and contract supervision- Rapid development of conservation management and rural craft related skills are supported in economic development plans- Rapid scaling up of Weald native origin wildflower and grass seeds is supported in economic development plans- Flooding the lower reaches of the rivers is acceptable to increase wet woodland habitats at the expense of lost productive farmland and some built environment |
|---|--|

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Target 2: Bring 80% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes into favourable condition by 2042

SSSI are Sites of Special Scientific Importance for wildlife, geology and landform, designated by Natural England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). This is the highest level of statutory designation in England.

SSSIs in 'favourable' condition, are sites conserved through appropriate management, and the SSSI assets are in a healthy condition. NE advise landowners with SSSIs on their land on appropriate management, condition assessing SSSIs, and should be consulted by landowners wishing to change management or other operations within a SSSI.

Natural England proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:

- **141 SSSIs**
- **40 (28%) are in favourable condition**

Our role: Seek external funding to support SSSI management and utilise our strong relationship with land managers to support SSSI owners. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G2: To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops.

W1: To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.

W2: To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.

FH3: To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

DS2: To protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.

Recovering Nature: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 61)

Information on SSSI can be found here:

[Sites of special scientific interest: managing your land - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/sites-of-special-scientific-interest-managing-your-land)

The location of SSSI can be found here:

[Sites of Special Scientific Interest \(England\) | Natural England Open Data Geoportal \(arcgis.com\)](https://data.naturalengland.org.uk/datastore/arcgis/rest/services/Sites_of_Special_Scientific_Interest_England/FeatureServer)

Delivery responsibility: Primarily Natural England

Natural England will need to bring an additional 73 SSSI within the High Weald into favourable condition by 2042, or 6 per year over the next 18 years.

Natural England's Action Plan KPI E³:

- all SSSIs will have an up-to-date condition assessment by 31 January 2028

Natural England Action Plan KPI A:

- Roll out Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) monitoring and develop and implement SSSI improvement plans that drive favourable condition as part of a phased programme towards the 2042 target for 75% of sites to be in favourable condition.

The EIP states that new farming schemes nationally (e.g. ELMS) are expected to:

- Contribute at least 50% of the target of bringing protected sites into favourable condition by 2042.

³[Natural England Action Plan 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

Progress is measured by percentage of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes in favourable condition.

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Target 3: For 60% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes assessed as having ‘actions on track’ to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028.

SSSIs are Sites of Special Scientific Importance for wildlife, geology and landform, designated by Natural England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). This is the highest national statutory designation.

SSSI ‘actions on track’ mean the site has an up-to-date assessment to take or maintain the site to favourable condition.

Natural England proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:

- **141 SSSI**
- **20 (14%) have actions on track**

Our role: Seek external funding to support SSSI management and utilise our strong relationship with land managers to support SSSI owners. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G2: To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops.

W1: To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.

W2: To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.

FH3: To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

DS2: To protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.

Recovering Nature: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 61)

Information on SSSI can be found here:

[Sites of special scientific interest: managing your land - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

The location of SSSI can be found here:

[Sites of Special Scientific Interest \(England\) | Natural England Open Data Geoportal \(arcgis.com\)](#)

Delivery responsibility: Natural England

Natural England will need to have an additional 64 SSSI within the High Weald with actions on track by 2042, or 3-4 per year over the next 18 years.

Natural England TIN216 Environment Act Interim Target for protected sites⁴:

50% of SSSIs to have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028

⁴[TIN216 Edition 2 Environment Act Interim Target for protected sites - TIN216](#)

Progress is measured by percentage of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes assessed as having 'actions on track' to achieve favourable condition

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Target 4: Continuing favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (from a 2022 baseline) and increasing to include all newly restored or created habitat through agri-environment schemes by 2042.

There are 56 priority habitats in England. The list of these priority habitats helps:

Public bodies – to help them meet their 'biodiversity duty' to be aware of biodiversity conservation in their policy or decision making

Landowners – to inform their nature recovery planning, action and funding applications

Funding bodies – to support suitable nature recovery

Defra proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:

- **13 priority habitats including good quality semi-improved grassland**
- **Priority habitats cover 37,511ha (25.7%)**

Our role: Seek to secure the tailoring of agri-environment schemes to the needs of the High Weald landscape and its land managers (in particular the enhancement of good quality semi-improved grassland) and raise awareness of what favourable condition looks like. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G2: To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops.

W1: To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.

W2: To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.

FH3: To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

DS2: to protect wildlife and habitats from light pollution across the High Weald.

Recovering Nature: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 61)

High Weald habitat and 30x30 (MP pg. 60)

More information on priority habitats can be found here:

[Habitats and species of principal importance in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/habitats-and-species-of-principal-importance-in-england)
[Priority Habitats Inventory \(England\) - data.gov.uk](https://data.gov.uk/dataset/priority-habitats-inventory-england)

Delivery responsibility: Primarily Defra via ELMS and other agri-environmental grant schemes

The EIP states that new farming schemes nationally are expected to:

Support continued favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (from a 2022 baseline) and increasing to include all newly restored or created habitat through our new farming schemes by 2042.

Progress is measure by extent of priority habitat within Protected Landscapes, outside of protected sites, in favourable management through agri-environment schemes.

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife

Target 5: Ensuring at least 65% to 80% of land managers adopt nature friendly farming on at least 10% to 15% of their land by 2030.

Nature friendly farming is delivered through countryside stewardship, and environmental stewardship and the sustainable farming incentive, excluding pilot, test and trial, and grant schemes.

Defra proposed baseline data* for the High Weald, 2024:

- **29,300ha of farmland in nature friendly farming schemes (not including linear features such as hedge restoration)**

*There is currently no data on the number of farms adopting nature friendly farming

Our role: Working with land managers already leading in nature friendly farming, seek to provide advice, guidance and demonstrations of what nature friendly farming looks like in the High Weald, how success can be judged and how it can be part of an economically productive and socially valuable farmed landscape. Seek to secure resources to support a transition to nature friendly farming. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G4: To restore soil health across the High Weald.

FH1: To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management.

FH3: To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.

Soil Health: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 57)

High Weald habitat and 30x30 (MP pg. 60)

More information on agri-environment schemes can be found here:

[Environmental Land Management \(ELM\) update: how government will pay for land-based environment and climate goods and services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environmental-land-management-elms-update-how-government-will-pay-for-land-based-environment-and-climate-goods-and-services)

[Future of farming in England - GOV.UK](#)

Delivery responsibility: Defra via ELMS and other agri-environmental grant schemes

The EIP states that to reach EIP goal 1 the government will 'support a transformation in the management of 70% of our countryside by incentivising farmers to adopt nature friendly farming practices' And, that the governments new farming schemes are expected to: Support 65 to 80% of landowners and farmers to adopt nature friendly farming on at least 10-15% of their land by 2030.

Progress is measured by percentage of land managers adopting nature-friendly farming on a percentage of their land.

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change

Target 6: Reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in Protected Landscapes to net zero by 2050 relative to 1990 levels.

Climate change is one of the two big crisis's which everyone must contend with (along with biodiversity loss). Both climate mitigation and adaption are required to prevent temperatures exceeding a 2°C rise and having a critical impact on all lives.

Defra proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:

- **Up to 50.4 million tons of carbon is stored in High Weald soils and plants**
- **High Weald habitats sequester on average 757,000 tons of carbon a year**

Our role: Produce a climate change adaption plan for the High Weald by 2028. Promote polices and actions which reduce carbon emissions; foster land management approaches which protect soil and sequester carbon or lock up carbon for the longer term e.g. in building materials and rooftop solar panels on farm buildings. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G3: To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty.

Climate Crisis: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 64)

Planning Principle 5.

More information on emissions within Protected Landscapes can be found here:

[UK local authority and regional greenhouse gas emissions statistics, 2005 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Delivery responsibility: Primarily Defra

The EIP proposes that government will:

- Explore how a range of actions through farming schemes can be paid for to support nature-based solutions and decarbonisation in the land-based sector.
- Use the Farming Innovation Programme, and Farming Investment Fund to explore innovation, science and technology to support climate adaptation and net zero.
- Support agroforestry through SFI and CS Plus with new grant offers

Calculate carbon through farm-level Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV)

Progress is measure by the level of greenhouse gas emissions within Protected Landscapes – current data sources unknown, current lead unknown

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change

Target 7: Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050.

Peat soil is defined as soil with 30% or more of organic matter. Deep peat has a depth greater than 40cm, peat soils between 10-40cm are referred to as shallow peat. The peat target refers only to deep peat.

Defra proposed baseline data for the High Weald, 2024:

- **Deep peaty soils 34.45ha (0.02%)**
- **England peat map is due to be published in March 2025, with updated evidence of extent, depth and condition expected in April 2025 and will be not comparable to the current statistics.**

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G2: To protect landform and geological features including sandstone outcrops

G3: To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty

G4: To restore soil health across the High Weald

Soil Health: Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 57)

More information on peat soils can be found here:

[With a lot of help from our friends: assembling an England Peat Map – Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

[Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Delivery responsibility: Natural England/Defra

Natural England's Action Plan KPI A³:

2.15 mega tonnes carbon secured through 25,000ha peat restoration under Nature for Climate Peatland grant scheme.

Beyond 2025, the main delivery vehicles for peat will be incentives through the government's new farming schemes:

- From 2024, Countryside Stewardship will provide a key funding stream for wetter modes of farming.
- Develop new farming scheme options to support the restoration of lowland peat and wetter farming methods.
- Landscape Recovery will provide long-term funding to support large-scale peatland restoration projects.
- The Farming Innovation Programme supports applications for research and development in paludiculture.
 - Launch a £6.6 million lowland peat research and development programme.
 - Continue to deliver the £5.6 million Paludiculture Exploration Fund.
- Developing further a Peatland Code for private investment
- Publish the new England peat map

Progress is measured by extent of peat under restoration in Protected Landscapes on the Peatland Restoration Register (under development by Defra)

Apportionment of Target 7

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>High Weald locally evidenced target Short term ambition: understand the accuracy of peatland mapping Long term ambition: 0ha</p> | <p>Defra apportionment target: 14.43ha</p> |
| <p>Evidence to support this target:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are no targeted peatland grants schemes in the High Weald - The current grants schemes do not cover the High Weald - Uncertainty around current peat mapping and no evidence of where deep peat has been lost from the High Weald - There is a lack of expertise to lead on peat restoration locally - Peatland restoration is not a local priority - The peatland restoration register is still in development by Defra. | <p>The landscape could accommodate the Defra target if...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peatland grant schemes included the High Weald landscape - Funding for development of appropriate expertise was available in this landscape - Funding was available to improve peatland mapping locally and understand peat restoration regionally |

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change

Target 8: Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).

This target includes tree canopy cover both within woodlands, and outside woodlands including, traditional orchards, wood pasture and parkland, infield trees and tree cover in urban areas which provide many benefits for wildlife and people. This target is key to achieving the government’s Net Zero Strategy.

- Defra proposed baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:
- **Tree canopy and woodland cover 51,624.07ha (35.3%)**

- **This includes all types of woodlands, trees outside woodlands (e.g. trees in parks, urban areas, in field trees), orchards, ancient woodland, conifer plantations, coppiced woodland and shrubs.**

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

G3: To pursue net zero across the High Weald without compromising its characteristic landscape beauty.
 W1: To maintain and restore the existing extent and pattern of woodland cover and particularly ancient woodland.
 W2: To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.
 W3: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands.
 W4: To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets.
 FH1: To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management.
 FH2: To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands.
 LBE1: To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty.
 High Weald Management Plan sets out guidance on tree planting and woodland creation (MP pg. 64).
 High Weald habitat and 30x30 (MP pg. 60)

For more information on woodlands:
[The benefits of woodland creation: Woods and Carbon - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/articles/2019/04/the-benefits-of-woodland-creation-woods-and-carbon)
[Tree planting and woodland creation: overview - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/articles/2019/04/tree-planting-and-woodland-creation-overview)

Delivery responsibility: Defra /Forestry Commission

The EIP sets out the government’s national targets as:

- Increase tree canopy and woodland cover to 16.5% of total land area in England by 2050
- Interim target to increase this by 0.26% (equivalent to 34,000 hectares) by 31 January 2028, in line with the trajectory required to achieve the long-term target.

The tree canopy and woodland cover target will also play a key role in meeting government species abundance targets, delivering around 20% of the total hectares of new habitat creation and restoration (target 1).

Progress is measured by extent of tree canopy and woodland cover in Protected Landscapes

Apportionment of Target 8

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|---|---|
| <p>High Weald locally evidenced target Short term ambition: 20-100ha Long term ambition: 2,000ha</p> | <p>Defra apportionment target: 4,385ha</p> |
|---|---|

Evidence to support this target:

- It is unclear how much canopy will be lost to tree diseases such as Ash Die Back (ADB) and the Ips spruce bark beetle, and how these losses will be accommodated in the target
- England Woodland Creation Offer has not delivered increased canopy cover in the High Weald so far beyond a handful of small (1ha~) creation schemes
- The easy wins have already been achieved in woodland creation
- The risk of loss to unregistered quality grasslands is considerable (2024 survey of 316 unregistered fields revealed the majority to be good quality semi-improved or lowland meadow)
- High deer pressure across the whole landscape are hampering tree establishment
- Not aligning with High Weald Management Plan objectives on woodland maintenance and enhancement before tree planting – the Management Plan sets out the importance of the High Weald’s small-scale medieval fieldscape which means large woodland creation schemes are usually unsuitable
- increases in tree cover can be best accommodated in the High Weald through increased scrub habitat (managed), thickened hedgerows, infield trees, agroforestry, and wood pasture (ideally by natural regeneration) and street trees.
- The current tree cover figure may be an underestimate - there is an additional 1,942ha of unrecorded trees outside of woodland not accounted for in the NFI⁵
- Forestry Commission woodland sensitivity mapping is currently unsuitable for the High Weald as it does not take adequate account of historic field systems, archaeology and many good quality species rich grasslands

Although this landscape cannot accommodate the apportioned Defra target without damage to open habitats, landscape character or agricultural production, it could accommodate a higher tree cover target if...

- Enhancement of existing woodland habitat counts towards target 8 and is prioritised in policy and adequately resourced
- Natural regeneration is prioritised in policy (including the BNG metric) and the High Weald is recognised as an area-wide natural regeneration zone
- Tree planting in the High Weald focuses on growing timber for construction (including appropriate conifers)
- Grant support for trees and woodlands is tailored to the needs of the High Weald and its land managers including support for in-field trees, wood pasture, agroforestry, wet woodland, and maintenance of trees in hedgerows
- Deer are effectively tackled through a coordinated, adequately funded whole landscape approach
- Trials of agroforestry schemes tailored to the High Weald are promoted and supported
- Local tree nurseries are supported to grow local and climate resilient varieties of trees and shrub, at scale to supplement natural regeneration where needed
- The provision of specialist advice on trees outside of woodlands is adequately resourced
- Ambitious standards for street trees and urban forestry are required in new developments
- The long-established culture of timber and wood utilisation in the High Weald is supported through economic regeneration policy and funding
- Support for orchards and nut-producing trees is improved
- If PAWS restoration could be included in this target

⁵Friends of the Earth [Mapping English tree cover: results, ranking and methodology | Policy and insight](#)

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

Target 9: Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using existing metrics in our Access for All programme.

The benefits of access to green space on health and wellbeing has become universally understood in recent years, however equity of access remains a challenge. The Access for All programme started in 2006, and specifically addressed the issues faced by disabled passengers, and those with

mobility issues when using railway stations across the nation. Further guidance from Defra on what is meant by the 'AfA metrics' and how these will be applied to furthering access in protected landscapes, is yet to come.

Within the High Weald NL boundary there are:

- **2,126km of footpaths**
- **384km of bridleway**
- **61km of byway**
- **30 manor houses, castle and gardens with public access**
- **2km of climbable sandrock**

Our role: Promote emotional engagement with nature and the health and wellbeing benefits this brings to people. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

R1: To maintain the historic pattern, morphology and features of routeways.

PQ3: To foster and promote equitable access and informal enjoyment of the High Weald landscape and the integrated management of its resources for the enjoyment of natural beauty by all.

People & Access Principles and Investment Priorities. (MP pg. 67)

For more information on access to green spaces:

[Access to green space in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Improving access to greenspace: 2020 review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Delivery responsibility: primarily government investment

The EIP sets out how the government will deliver promotion of accessibility nationally:

- Increase the accessibility of green and blue spaces through the £14.5 million 'Access for All' programme.
- Create or significantly refurbish over 100 green spaces through the Levelling Up Parks Fund.
- Complete delivery of the England Coast Path and the new Coast to Coast National Trail.
- Green the Green Belt as set out in the Levelling Up White Paper by identifying key areas for nature restoration through the roll out of Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- Invest in a new national landscapes partnership for National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and National Trails.
- Extend the delivery of our successful Farming in Protected Landscapes programme, using lessons learned to inform future farming schemes.
- Publish government ambitions for improving the quantity, quality and permanency of woodland access.
- Invest in active travel, with a vision for half of all journeys in towns and cities to be cycled or walked by 2030. £35 million funding has already been committed this fiscal year.

- Continue to progress assessments to designate two new Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and two AONB extensions.
- Scale up green social prescribing across the healthcare system.
- Develop the Climate Action Award pilot and roll out in 2024. This will recognise the achievements of children and young people in taking action to increase biodiversity and develop their skills and knowledge of climate change.
- Deliver a new Natural History GCSE by 2025.

Continue contributions to targeted grant schemes which support our work on heritage.

Progress is measured by improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using existing metrics in the government's Access for All programme.

Environmental Improvement Plan Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

Target 10: Decrease the number of nationally designated heritage assets at risk in Protected Landscapes.

The Heritage at Risk (HAR) programme is a Historic England initiative which identifies those historic sites that are most at risk of being lost because of neglect, decay or inappropriate development. Historic England maintains and updates annually the [Heritage at Risk Register](#).

Historic England baseline data for the High Weald NL, 2024:

- **5,301 listed buildings of which five (0.09%) are at risk.**
- **92 scheduled monuments of which eight (8.7%) are at risk.**
- **44 registered parks and gardens of which three (6.8%) are at risk.**
- **There is one registered battlefield, and it is not at risk.**

Our role: Promote awareness of Heritage Assets as an important part of the natural beauty of the High Weald NL. Promote awareness of relevant Management Plan Objectives, Actions, and Principles and Investment Priorities with relevant stakeholders.

Relevant High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives, priorities and principles

S3: To conserve the distinct built heritage of the High Weald.

W3: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands

FH4: To protect individual archaeological features as well as historic assets and pattern of field and heath

Planning Principle 4.

For more information on heritage at risk:

[Heritage at Risk in the South East 2023 | Historic England](#)

Delivery responsibility: Historic England

Progress is measured by number and percentage of nationally designated heritage assets in Protected Landscapes to be deemed at risk

Agenda Item: 11

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 26th March 2025

Title of Report: Risk Management

By: National Landscape Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are recommended to:

1. Note the report and;
 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.
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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.

2.0 Key risks for 2025/26

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 national financial context and its influence on the government's policies and priorities for our sector remain considerable and these will continue to have negative consequences for funding and support provided by government and local authorities.
- 2.3 Despite the recent general election, there is no sign the poor funding settlements the National Landscape Partnerships have experienced since 2010 will change given the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) was told last autumn it faced a 2% cut to its budget for 2025-26.
- 2.4 Clearly 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 yet again 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.

- 2.5 This will be exacerbated should the current government continue to require National Landscape Partnerships to undertake additional duties as part of the last government's response to the Landscapes Review among other things but not provide adequate, commensurate, and sustained resources. The government's immediate and longer-term intentions on a stable and adequate funding settlement for the sector are unclear.

Local Authority annual financial contributions

- 2.6 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 (without an increase in line with inflation) to the core budget since 2010 and under increasingly difficult financial circumstances.
- 2.7 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 would be in line with inflation from the start of 2024/2025.
- 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 (or increase their contributions in line with inflation) 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, visitors, 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
- 2.10 In addition, the team administers and manages grant programmes on behalf of others (e.g. High Weald Nature and Community Fund, National Grid), which also bring considerable benefits across the High Weald.
- 2.11 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.
- 2.12 DEFRA's advocacy of and support for a greater investment in designated landscapes has resulted in a considerable but temporary increase in the budget allocation for capital

projects for 2025/2026. While this additional investment is cautiously welcomed, it has not come with any commensurate funds to support the core team (which oversees the management of the funds and the scheme) and potential projects for the forthcoming year will need to be sought and funds spent within a tight time frame applying further pressure on the already hard-pressed and under-resourced High Weald team.

- 2.13 Given this, Members need to be aware of the risk that the budget allocations for the extended one year (2025/2026) of the FiPL grant programme and the one-year DEFRA Capital Fund may not be fully spent despite significant efforts by the High Weald team, and any unspent funding would need to be returned to DEFRA for re-allocation elsewhere.

New and greater expectations and demands

- 2.14 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) and the one-year Capital Fund places 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, land managers and others submit strong grant applications

Staff on fixed-term contracts

- 2.15 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.

- 2.16 Inevitably when these contracts are approaching their end those affected will be actively seeking alternative employment before these projects and schemes end. When this happens, it 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.
- 2.17 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

- 2.18 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 was not able to provide the necessary financial and budget support to the High Weald team since May 2023. Some of this work has been picked up by the High Weald 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.
- 2.19 ESCC has recently been able to recruit an additional finance officer who will be providing finance and budget support, and we expect the risks to the High Weald team to decline once the new recruit becomes familiar with our budget, work, and remit.

Staff succession planning

- 2.20 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 long-standing financial and resources predicament facing the English National Landscape Partnerships has yet to be addressed by the government and, as a consequence, 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 is 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 will continue to be assessed on a routine basis.
- 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.

Staff succession planning

- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 We have begun to investigate possible options but progress on this has stalled primarily because of existing work commitments. We aim to re-start this in the hope we can 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 safe to assume the rest of 2025/2026 and beyond 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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