

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Agenda

High Weald JAC Meeting

Wednesday 25 March 2026, starting at 10.30am at the Roebuck Hotel Wych Cross, Forest Row RH18 5JL, followed by working lunch



1. Presentation on mapping lost features

Presentation on mapping lost features from Peter Matthews, GIS officer.

2. Apologies

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Minutes of the JAC meeting

To consider the minutes of the last meeting of the JAC held on 26 November 2025 (page 3)

6. Minutes of the Management Board Meeting

To note the matters arising from the Management Board meeting held on 3 March 2026 (page 9)

7. Minutes of the Officer Steering Group

To note the minutes of the last meeting of the OSG held on 18 February 2026 (page 14)

8. Future JAC Partnership leadership

To approve changes to the JAC Partnership leadership by the Chair

9. Revenue Budget for 2026/27

To consider and approve a report by the Treasurer on the Revenue Budget 2026/27 (page 21) Appendix A budget forecast; Appendix B Self-funded projects; and Appendix C 5-year budget forecast.

10. National & Local Planning updates

To consider a verbal report by the HWNL Co-Director on current national and local planning matters.

11. Review of HWNL Grant programme and direction 2026-2029

To consider a report by the HWNL Business Manager on grant programmes and appendix A & B (page 26)

12. Devolution update

To consider a verbal report by the HWNL Co-Director on devolution.

13. Risk Management

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

14. Any other business

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

E: s.nicholas@highweald.org; T: 01424 723011

Agenda item: 5

High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee



Minutes of Meeting

26 November 2025, Uckfield Civic Centre

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex TN5 7PR

E: s.nicholas@highweald.org; T: 01424 723011

Members present:

Cllr Mr P Bradbury	West Sussex County Council (JAC Chair)
Cllr Mrs E Kirby-Green	East Sussex County Council (JAC Vice-Chair)
Cllr Mr T Lunnon	Crawley Borough Council
Cllr Mr J Barnett	Sevenoaks District Council
Cllr Mr I Tysh	Wealden District Council
Cllr Mrs L Carvalho	Mid-Sussex District Council
Cllr Sir N White	Tandridge District Council
Cllr Mr G Pullan	Ashford Borough Council
Cllr Ms J Walker	Hastings Borough Council
Cllr Mrs T Killen	Rother District Council
Cllr Mrs N Warne	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Mr P Cole	Forestry Commission
Mr J Marland	Co-optee (Farming and Forestry)
Mr A Wilson	Co-optee (Fundraising and Public Relations)

Officers:

Mr J Lavender	High Weald Unit
Ms G Sherwin	High Weald Unit
Mrs J O'Driscoll	High Weald Unit
Ms S Wheatley	East Sussex County Council
Ms J Hollingum	Mid-Sussex District Council (Chair, Officer Steering Group)
Mr M Davison	Hastings Borough Council
Mr L Coyne	Hastings Borough Council
Ms S Levy	Ashford Borough Council
Ms N Bumpas	Wealden District Council
Mr D Greenwood	Surrey County Council
Mr B Rainbow	West Sussex County Council

1. Mink-free High Weald Project

- 1.1 Jason Lavender gave a presentation introducing a new collaborative project between the High Weald National Landscape Partnership and the Waterlife Recovery Trust (WRT) to eradicate American mink from the High Weald National Landscape. The initiative is a coordinated, landscape-wide and humane trapping programme.
- 1.2 The presentation outlined why American mink - highly efficient predators with a broad appetite for native wildlife - are one of the most significant threats to the High Weald's wildlife.
- 1.3 Launched last July, the Mink-free High Weald project replicates the successful model first implemented in East Anglia in 2020, which achieved a landscape-scale eradication. With financial support from the High Weald Farming in Protected Landscapes grant and the High Weald Nature and Community Fund, more than 100 'smart' traps have been deployed. Two WRT project officers have been recruited to manage the project, supported by a dedicated team of farming and landowner volunteers who monitor and manage the traps.
- 1.4 To date, 500 mink have been captured and dispatched. Given that each mink is estimated to kill around 500 prey animals per year, their removal has prevented the loss of approximately 250,000 prey animals to these particular mink over the next year alone.

2. Election of Management Board Members and Co-optees to Joint Advisory Committee (JAC)

- 2.1 The following Councillors were elected to the High Weald Management Board

- Cllr Bradbury (Chair)
- Cllr Kirby-Green (Vice Chair)
- Cllr Carvalho
- Cllr White

Following the election, the Members were informed two positions remain vacant on the Management Board. Any Member interested in filling one of these positions is asked to notify Sam Nicholas. Councillor Barnett expressed an interest in joining the Management Board.

Two Co-optees were invited to join the Joint Advisory Committee: John Marland, representing Farming, and Andrew Wilson, representing fundraising and public relations.

Members were informed that Jill Davison had resigned from her position on the Joint Advisory Committee. On behalf of the JAC and the High Weald Unit staff, Councillor Bradbury thanked Jill for her many years of dedicated support to the High Weald Partnership.

3 Apologies and declarations of interest

3.1 Apologies for absence were received from David Scully, Lucy Charman, Heather Twizell, Sally Marsh, Diane Russell, Cllr Raby, and Craig Steenhoff.

4 Members' Interests

4.1.1 No declarations of interest were raised by the Members.

5 Urgent Matters

5.1. No urgent matters were raised.

6 Minutes of the JAC Meeting

- **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the JAC meeting held on 26 March 2025.

7. Minutes of the Management Board Meeting

- **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the Management Board meeting held on 15 October 2025.

8. Minutes of the Officer Steering Group (OSG)

- **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the OSG meeting held on 16 September 2025.

9. Draft Revenue Budget for 2025/26

9.1 The Committee considered a report from Sarah Walker, Treasurer to the Joint Advisory Committee. The report presented the budget position for 2025/6 and that the forecast outturn for 2025/26 is a balanced budget.

9.2 The JAC budget was reviewed in 2022/23 owing to:

- 20 years of static contributions to the core budget i.e. no increase in contributions since 2001/02
- Increased demands on the Partnership's services
- Need for budget confidence to retain and recruit staff
- Growing budget deficit despite significant savings

9.3 In 2025/26, 12 of the 15 local authorities increased contributions following the review of the core budget; three either did not increase their contributions or increased at reduced levels, and one will not increase their contribution beyond 2025/26.

9.4 A draft balanced budget for 2026/27 was presented to the JAC for consideration. This covered:

- Expenditure (staff costs, accommodation, office equipment, partnership running costs and support services);
- Income (Defra and local authority contributions, charges to self-funding projects for management and administration costs, and a contribution from reserves approved by the High Weald Management Board);
- Financial risks and issues for 2027/28 and beyond;

- An inflationary increase of 3% on all local authority contributions to the core budget.

9.5 Cllr Bradbury welcomed the report and encouraged local authority Members to support the 3% inflationary increase in their contributions, noting that this would typically add only a few hundred pounds to each authority's contribution. He emphasised that these contributions not only underpin the wider work of the High Weald team but also the statutory Management Plan, which all local authorities are jointly required to prepare and publish.

9.6 Gerry Sherwin explained that there has been a subtle shift in direction, with more funding streams being announced at very short notice with no lead-in time to support project development. This change is far from ideal, but the High Weald team is increasingly focussed on preparing projects in advance, so they respond quickly when funding becomes available with inadequate notice.

RESOLVED to approve:

1. **Approve the draft budget for 2026/27;**
2. **Agree to the commencement of budget consultation with the local authorities and Defra; and**
3. **Welcome Defra's commitment to supporting land management advice beyond the life of the Farming in Protected Landscape Programme.**

10 HWNL Planning Advice Note: Soft landscaping in Housing Development guidance

10.1 The Committee considered a report by Jason Lavender on behalf of Diane Russell. In conjunction with the High Weald team, the Officer Steering Group has developed this guidance to sit alongside and complement the High Weald Management Plan and the Housing Design guidance.

10.2 Cllr Killan confirmed that Rother District Council actively uses the Housing Design Guidance when assessing many planning applications.

RESOLVED to:

1. **Consider and approve the final version of the HWNL Soft Landscaping in Housing Developments Planning Advice Note, and**
2. **Promote, within their LPAs, the awareness and use of the HWNL Soft Landscaping in Housing Developments Planning Advice**

11 High Weald Projects update (presentation attached)

11.1 Gerry Sherwin presented a summary of the wide programme of work across multiple strategic themes that the High Weald team undertakes, including:

- Delivery of Defra targets, High Weald Management Plan development, and supporting local authorities on their nature recovery objectives
- Specialist planning advice and policy advocacy to support the National Landscapes Association

- Landscape-scale and collaborative initiatives such as American mink eradication, deer management, and data-led approaches such as drone and habitat surveys
- Successful bids for projects to support species and habitat recovery
- Ongoing support and advocacy for regenerative farming across the High Weald, farmer mentoring in collaboration with Pasture For Life, alongside the promotion of rural skills and practices, including venison butchery and deer-skinning courses
- Public engagement, which continues to be a key focus of the High Weald team's work, including the Walking Festival (seventh year), the Dark Skies Festival (third year), and the active participation of 12 parishes in the International Dark Skies Communities programme
- Access to the countryside improvements: accessible toilet at Ashdown Forest, 150+ accessible gates across the High Weald, new boardwalks to allow year-round access
- The High Weald Heroes primary schools programme continues to engage children from over 120 schools and supported by the Royal Countryside Fund, helps expand opportunities for farm visits and outdoor learning
- Land acquisitions funded by the High Weald Partnership to extend existing nature reserves and ensure long-term protection, including Hargate Forest (Woodland Trust) and land at Cuckfield (New England Trust).

11.2 Cllr Bradbury thanked the High Weald team for their significant achievements, particularly given their limited budget. It was agreed that a questionnaire would be circulated to Members to gather views on the most effective ways to communicate these achievements to the new unitary authorities once they are established.

RESOLVED to:

- 1. Note the presentation and the High Weald Unit activities**
- 2. Circulate a questionnaire to Members**

12 **Risk Management**

Jason Lavender updated Members, highlighting the impact of devolution, the importance of securing funding from the new unitary authorities, and engagement with the emerging mayoral offices. The earlier paper on devolution will be resent to Members to ensure that the newer JAC Members are fully informed.

RESOLVED: The Management Board will continue to work with the High Weald Unit to review risks and identify mitigation measures.

13 **Any Other Business**

13.1 Dark Skies International Communities. Cllr Bradbury presented a letter received from several Parish Councils in the High Weald requesting JAC support for pursuing Dark Sky International Community certification. Cllr Killen noted that Rother District Council is incorporating dark sky policies into the forthcoming Rother District Local Plan.

13.2 RESOLVED: Unanimously agreed that the JAC should formerly support the Parish Councils' request.

13.3 The next meeting will be held on 25 March 2026. Dates for the meetings will be circulated.



**High Weald
National
Landscape**

High Weald National Landscape Partnership Activity 2025-2026

Framing what the partnership does

Defra Targets and Outcomes Framework

High Weald Management Plan character components and objectives

Nature recovery ; net zero; health and well-being; equality diversity and inclusion

By local authority priorities

Growth

By funding stream

By stakeholder

Most our our work has multiple objectives and delivers a range of benefits

High Weald National Landscape Partnership

The primary purpose of the JAC is to

- conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB.
- The JAC will also:
- increase understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the AONB
 - seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the AONB.

Core: policy, planning and advice

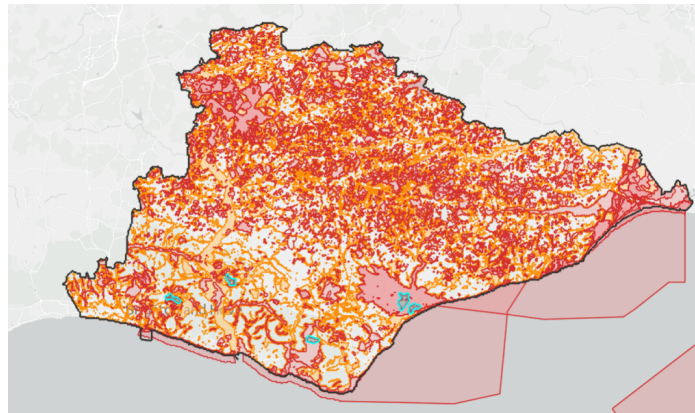
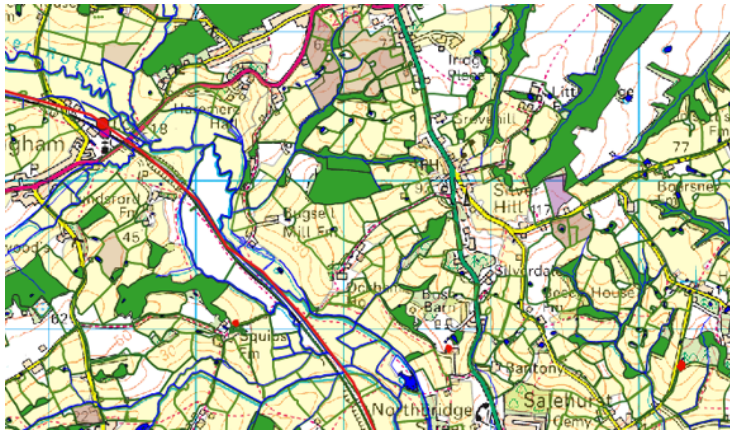
- **Promote High Weald Management Plan and its evidence base:** climate change adaptation plan
- **Development proposals:** local authorities, FC, NE, water companies etc
- **Inform other plans and strategies:** local nature recovery strategies
- **Advocate for the area's needs:** abattoir, irreplaceable habitat; veteran trees and gill woodlands
- **Share expertise:** co-design of local advisory models
- **Work with NLA to guide policy:** Duty of Regard guidance for local authorities
- **Collaborative approaches:** officers steering group, meadows group , deer management group, land management advisers – leading to outputs, for example soft landscaping guidance
- **High Weald landscape induction:** webinars, induction walks and talks



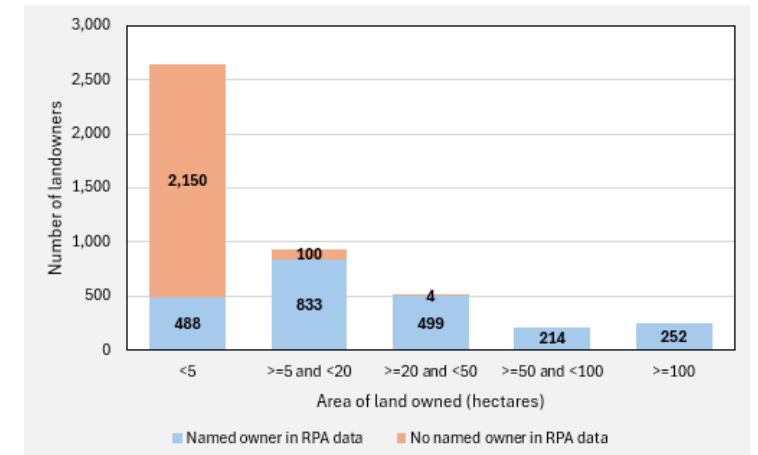
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Core: research, evidence and data

- High Weald character components
- Land holding and ownership analysis
- Drone surveys; deer numbers and extent; deer management groups; stalker home bases
- Project delivery: primary school engagement; grant awards
- Lost features dataset: AI tool developed with our support
- Grassland datasets: compilation, disclaimers and explanation
- Local nature recovery strategies
- Landscape Observatory: informing a model that will pilot AI mapping and habitat condition monitoring in context of climate change



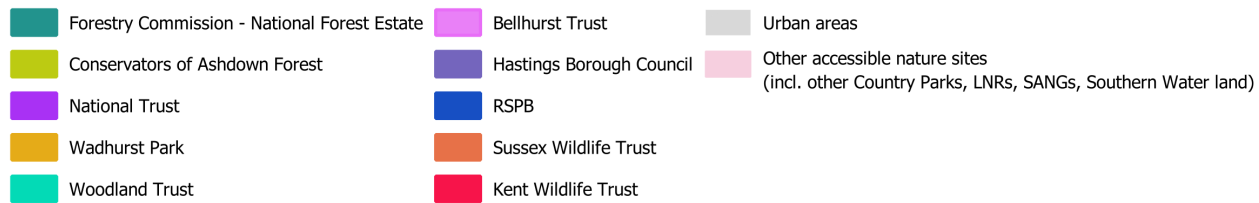
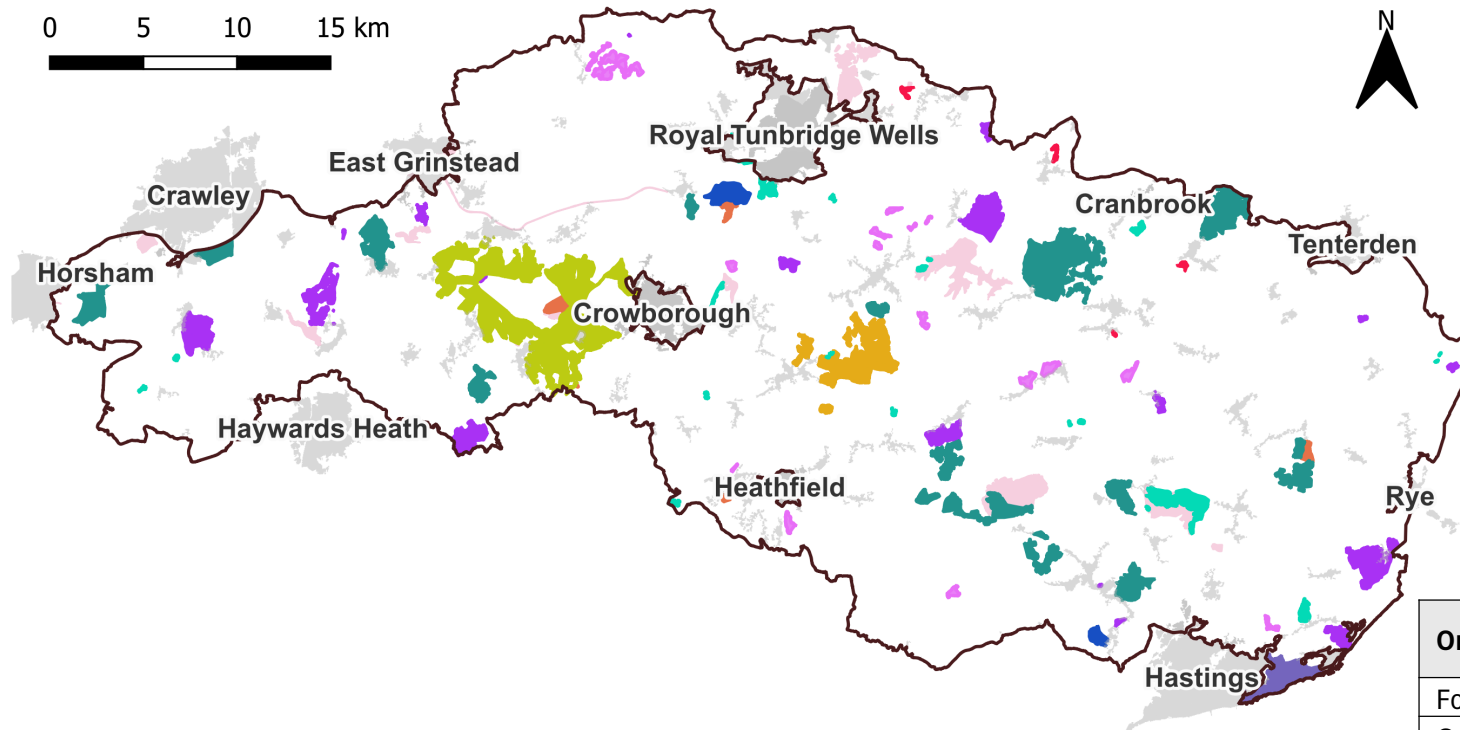
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Land ownership



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Organisation	Area (ha)	Rank (among High Weald rural landowners)
Forestry England	3,163	1
Conservators of Ashdown Forest	2,457	2
National Trust	1,631	3
Wadhurst Park	796	8
Woodland Trust	478	20
Bellhurst Trust	445	33
Hasting Borough Council	336	38
RSPB	238	68
Sussex Wildlife Trust	168	115
Kent Wildlife Trust	50	529
Total	9,762	

Core: securing and managing resources

- **Partnership:** JAC, management board, FiPL panel and NCF panel; devolution project
- **Securing resources:** four applications to species recovery programme; application for funds for a planning and design phase for a £5 million + Landscape Connections proposal in development; new MoA with Woodland Trust to deliver shared objectives; shovel-ready projects, particularly strategic projects
- **Managing self-financing projects:** four grant programmes: Farming in Protected Landscapes, Removing Barriers to Access, Management Plan Implementation Fund and Nature and Community Fund (Lund Trust); High Weald Heroes; Deer Initiative; Cuckmere and Coombe Natural Flood Management Project



High Weald
National
Landscape

Conserving and enhancing the national landscape: regenerative farming



**High Weald
National
Landscape**

Pasture for Life:

Grant support 2025: £53,630

Farmer-to-farmer mentoring and training for 75 land managers to support transition to high nature value farming methods including 20 small group mentoring events run by farmers themselves and 10 one-to-many training events across the High Weald.

Investment in system change: multiple grants to farmers to allow regenerative farming (mobile planned grazing systems – semi-permanent fencing, water supply

Demonstration sites: Springham and Shaw Farm



Conserving and enhancing the national landscape: deer management

High Weald Deer Project

- Landowner support: help with finding a deer stalker; setting expectations from a stalker; stalker agreements; deer management plans and cull targets; webinar; walks and talks
- Stalker support: help with night licences; qualifications; skills training (Plumpton College); communal larders; venison markets
- Collaborative management: drone surveys (4,000ha); 4 deer management groups; liaison via whats app; deer move days; deer conference; team work!

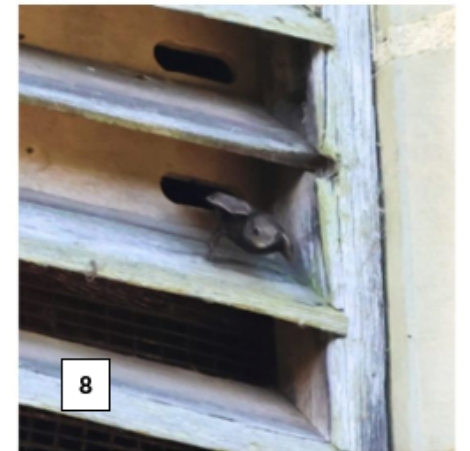


Investment in infrastructure: multiple grants for deer seats, deer larders, sight line creation; deer move days



Conserving and enhancing the national landscape: dark skies, hedges, wildflower grasslands, dark skies, wetland

- **Dark Skies:** engagement of over 18 communities in an event programme; guidance; data gathering; lighting assessments; international dark skies communities
- **Hedges:** grants for reinstating lost hedges; trialing hedge restoration approaches that are economic for farmers
- **Wildflower grasslands:** grants; surveys on behalf of multiple landowners to help with decision-making; co-host National Grassland Conference 2026
- **Natural flood management:** grants for leaky woody debris dams to slow the flow and prevent downstream flooding
- **Swifts, swallows and house martins:** new community project



Neil Burfield (Greening Chiddingly)

Awarded £10,097

Riparian habitat improvement with six leaky dams, tree cover enhancements through planting of 155 fruit trees, seven tree pens and 248m hedge planting



6

Scotney Estate. Awarded £9,100. Reintroduction of coppice management to 3.4ha of native wet woodland with traditional site-sensitive, low-impact extraction by heavy horse.

Beckley Parish Council. Awarded £5,365 in 2020. A range of works to diversify the habitat of a village wetland nature reserve.



9

Friends of Creatureland

Awarded £5,700

Management by contractor of 0.4ha of coppiced woodland with horse-drawn timber extraction; purchase of hand tools for coppicing by the community. Purchase of hand tools, equipment, fencing materials and 10 fruit trees to support community organic food production.



10

Furthering understanding and enjoyment: health and well being



High Weald
National
Landscape



Walks Festival 2025

- 624 walkers attending 58 guided walks, led by a range of partners
- Experience rated "Excellent" or "Good" by 96% participants
- **85%** reported knowing more about the High Weald 'National Landscape' as a result of the festival
- All reported being inspired to walk more.

Investment in removing barriers to access

- Free metal pedestrian gates to replace existing stiles – over 150 installed
- Path surfacing of PROW, country parks and nature reserves
- Changing places toilet Ashdown Forest.



High Weald
National
Landscape



Removing barriers to access

Diversity Resources International

Grant award: £6,499

Project summary: Seven walks for 70 ethnically diverse women who would not walk on their own, facilitated by travel bursaries and bilingual interpreters to enable women to overcome real and perceived barriers to countryside access.

Fabrica

Grant award: £16,362

Project summary: Twenty-four creative nature-based sessions for 48 men with mental health issues that draw inspiration from the High Weald landscape, reduce isolation and build trust.



Men Who Make – drawing session

Furthering understanding and enjoyment: outdoor learning



**High Weald
National
Landscape**

High Weald Heroes: Partnership's long-standing primary school education programme. Indoor and outdoor learning. Welly walks from school gate continue to be popular. Average year support 25 schools; 2500 children; new video



Country Trust

Grant award: £20.342

Provision of 18 inspiring, hands-on day visits across 6 farms/land holdings for c.450 children from disadvantaged communities in and around the High Weald National Landscape

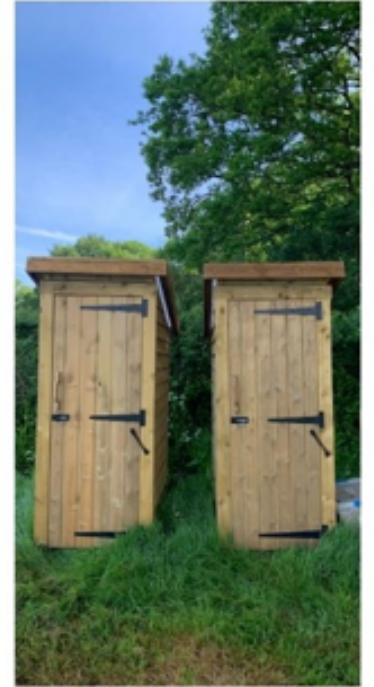
School education grant pilot: small grants less than £1,500 to enable outdoor education and visits to farms and nature reserves in the High Weald. Funds secured for continuation.



Garden Classroom

Grant award: various

Project summary: Purchase of two outhouses and wildlife monitoring equipment to improve the countryside visit experience; provision of a bespoke and immersive residential camp experience in the High Weald for 220 primary school children with high levels of support need due to poverty, food intolerances and allergies, cultural constraints and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).



St Mary's Special School

Grant award: £6,658

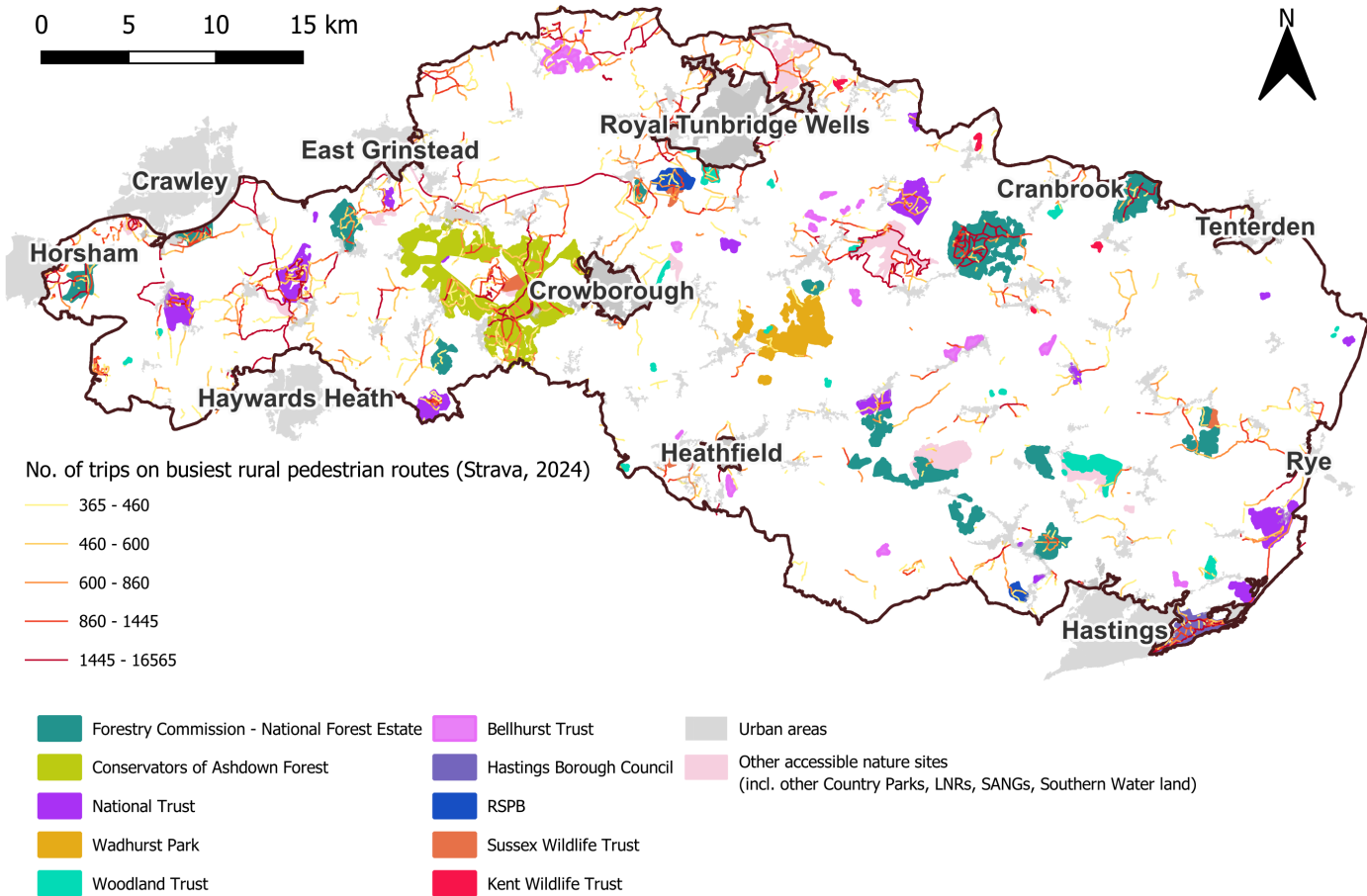
Project summary: Creation of an all-weather teaching and plant growing space by pupils with special needs (for boys aged 8 to 16) including purchase and installation of large, rainwater capture tanks. To develop pupils land-based vocational skills and facilitate employment opportunities

Grants for nature reserve extensions

Lawton review: wildlife needs bigger, better, more joined up habitat



High Weald
National
Landscape



Hargate Forest, near Tunbridge Wells
New England Wood, near Haywards Heath



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Rural economy

Supporting land-based business and local organisations and communities

- Since 2017, the NCF has awarded 288 grants totaling £1,557,000. 204 projects were complete on 31 March 2025.
- Since 2023, FiPL has awarded over £1.8 million to 183 projects (average grant £9,800)
- Partnership's existence has led to at least £3.3 million investment in the rural economy over the last 5 years.



High Weald
National
Landscape



High Weald National Landscape Partnership Team October 2025

Core staff 6FTE/Project staff 5.6 FTE (17 team members)



High Weald
National
Landscape

Sally Marsh/ Jason Lavender

Co-Director (1FTE)

Gerry Sherwin

Business Manager (0.8FTE)

BUSINESS TEAM

Samantha Nicholas

Team Support Officer (0.8FTE)

Jo O'Driscoll

Communications Lead (0.8FTE)

Fixed term 31.3.27

Daniel Cavill

Senior Administrator (EiRL)
(1FTE)

Fixed term to 31.3.26

Fiona McGuire

Senior Administrator
Zero hours contract

POLICY & RESEARCH TEAM

Diane Russell

Planning Advisor
(1FTE)

Sarah Brotherton

Landscape Officer
(0.6FTE)

COMMUNITY OUTREACH TEAM

Rachel Bennington

Education Officer (0.6FTE)

Lucy Bowyer

Community Engagement
Officer (0.6FTE)

Fixed term 31.10.26

LAND MANAGEMENT TEAM

Janet Whitman

Land Management Officer (1FTE)

Tobias Jackson

Land Management Project Officer (1FTE)

Fixed term to 31.3.26

Christine Meadows

Land Management Project Officer (0.2FTE)

Dean Morrison

Land Management Project Officer (Water specialist) (1FTE)

Fixed term 31.03.27

Steph Mason

Land Management Officer

Zero hours contract

Mark Smith

Deer Co-ordinator (0.6FTE)

Fixed term 31.3.27



Thank You

Local authority partners, FiPL panel members, Defra, Lund Trust and panel, Woodland Trust, Pfl, National Landscapes Association; The Ramblers; farmers and land managers; Wild About groups and many others

**HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Management Board**



Minutes

Tuesday 3 March 2026, 10.30am

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

Samantha Nicholas

Clerk to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Present: Members:

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

Also Present:

Jason Lavender	HWNL Director (job-share)
Gerry Sherwin	HWNL Business Manager
Diane Russell	HWNL Planning and Design Advisor
Samantha Nicholas	Clerk to High Weald JAC

Actions

Paragraph 5 Email to Leader of Kent CC from Chair requesting a representative for the High Weald JAC

Apologies

1. Apologies were received from: Jennifer Hollingum.

Members' Interests

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

Minutes of the meeting from 15 October 2025

3. The minutes for 15 October 2025 were agreed to be an accurate record.

Budget report

4. Gerry Sherwin reported on the 2026/27 budget:
 - Defra has confirmed a three-year flat revenue settlement for core and project funding. Savings will therefore be required within the core budget.
 - Core staff time will need to be allocated more directly to projects, potentially reducing resources available for the next Management Plan.
 - Concerns have been raised with Defra regarding the lack of revenue funding for project management of large landscape scale work.
 - FiPL staff revenue is retained, and spending aligns more closely with the £1m annual budget.

- Additional grants include:
 - £350k per annum for barrier to access capital funding
 - £240k per annum innovative grant supporting 30/30 targets.
 - Defra’s reporting requirements remain unclear, leading to significant data gathering demands.
 - Consistency in Defra staffing, particularly within the FiPL team has been beneficial.
5. Local Authority budget consultation outcomes:
- Ashford BC has increased its contribution.
 - Wealden DC and Rother DC have not agreed inflationary uplifts.
 - Kent CC and West Sussex CC have not responded to the budget consultation to date.
6. **ACTION: There was a discussion around the lack of representation from KCC, and it was agreed that an email should be sent to the Leader of Kent CC from the Chair, enquiring when we might have representation from Kent CC on the Committee.**
7. Jason Lavender noted increasing pressure on National Landscapes to deliver green finance and nature recovery work, responsibilities that organisations are not fully resourced to manage. This means the Management Plan risk being overshadowed despite being central to HWNL’s purpose.

Review of 2025 and direction and focus for 2026

8. Gerry Sherwin outlined the strategic approach enabled by Defra’s three-year funding settlement. Six to eight strategic projects are being developed to align with Management Plan objectives:
- Deer Initiative Expansion: A successful existing project; expansion requires additional officer time.
 - Waterlife Recovery Project, Mink control: Although in its early stages it is already achieving positive results and is now being scaled up to cover the Southeast.
 - Pastures for Life, focussed on Regenerative Farming: Supporting farmers and landowners; proposed expansion to a wider 3-year partnership programme.
 - Local Wildlife Sites Review: Updating condition assessments and improving management practices in partnership with Wildlife Trusts, utilising Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) funding.
 - Small Woodlands Rhododendron Removal project: Targeting small or hard to access sites where removal of Rhododendron is not otherwise economically viable.
 - FiPL Community Access Project: Supporting private landowners who welcome public access starting with a national pilot of 4–5 sites.
 - Youth Engagement Projects: Developing skills and employment opportunities in the rural environment. This is a resource intensive process but vital to sustainability of the rural skills.

9. Additional projects discussed:

- Swift and Swallow Boxes: Collaboration with community groups and contacts such as the High Weald Swallow Group. Swift boxes require specialist design and siting.
 - Asian Hornet Awareness Programme: Proposal to purchase monitoring boxes and run a 2026/27 awareness campaign; capital funding available but requires project management time. This will be led by Lucy Bowyer, HWNL Community Engagement officer.
 - Community Group Event: Planned for April to support volunteer engagement and training and to share information with the 'Wild about' and environmental groups in the High Weald.
10. The Members discussed invasive species such as Himalayan Balsam & Giant Hogweed. It is recognised as an ongoing challenge in control efforts. Cattle are one of the best options for controlling Himalayan balsam. However, past practices of fencing off streams to prevent cattle from grazing along the edges, combined with the steep sides of many riverbanks, have allowed Himalayan balsam to become more established and harder to eradicate.

National & local planning update

11. Diane Russell reported to the Members:

12. NPPF consultation: the government is currently consulting on some proposed reforms to the planning system (the National Planning Policy Framework) which could have important implications for the UK's National Landscapes, including the High Weald. Detailed responses were being coordinated across National Landscape groups, and Members had been circulated 'Key Messages' setting out the concerns of the National Landscapes Association (NLA). Primary concerns included that the proposed policy regarding the new 'spatial development strategies' do not reference landscape or the environment (including Protected Landscapes). Also, the Protected Landscapes' "highest status protection" wording has been omitted in the draft NPPF.

13. High Weald high planning workload:

- Amongst other consultations, nine major applications have been consulted on in the past 10 weeks that totalled 730 dwellings. This illustrates the high level of development pressure in the HWNL at present.
 - Multiple Local Plans are at Reg 18 stages across the High Weald. There is limited opportunity to influence site allocations due to compressed timescales. There will be a significant bottleneck in early autumn when all these reach Reg 19 consultation stage in advance of them meeting the end-of-year gov't set deadline for submitting under the current planning regime.
 - Mid-Sussex and Horsham Local Plans are at examination.
14. Cllr Kirby-Green informed the Members that the planning application for Bewl Water had been refused by Wealden District Council.
15. The Chair thanked Diane Russell for her extensive national and local planning work and contributions.

Update on NL Partnership governance

16. Defra is exploring soft governance approaches focusing on shared values, collaboration, and organisational culture across National Landscape and National Park teams. Hard governance reform is not currently under consideration. Previous reviews, including Glover (2019), had highlighted governance as an area for improvement.

Update on Sussex Mayoralty and Unitary Authorities

17. Jason Lavender confirmed that the HWNL Partnership position paper on devolution and local government was circulated in June 2025. Jason had attended a series of Sussex Devolution meetings at the end of the year. Feedback indicated insufficient recognition of the rural economy and land-based sectors, with discussions skewed towards tech industries.
18. Tandridge is preparing for a shadow council structure, splitting East and West Surrey.
19. High Weald JAC Chair and Vice- Chair changes:
 - Cllr Pete Bradbury will not be standing for re-election and will retire from Local Authority membership on 7 May 2026. Cllr Kirby-Green will also be up for election in May 2026.
 - As an interim measure, the Chair proposed that post the elections, Cllr Kirby-Green to become acting Chair, with Cllr Carvalho invited to become Vice Chair from 8 May. Should Cllr Kirby-Green not retain her seat at ESCC in the May elections, or be the ESCC nominated representative, then Cllr Carvalho would become acting Chair. This will be presented for approval at the JAC meeting in March.
20. Jason Lavender thanked Peter Bradbury for his service to the JAC steering us through a difficult few years.
21. Jason would be contacting any LAs where the current JAC representative did not retain their seat following the May elections, to request speedy appointment of a new JAC Member.
22. Risk management and staffing update
23. Jason Lavender informed the Members of the key risks:
 - Shift toward capital funding reducing capacity for staff recruitment.
 - Increasing complexity of reporting requirements.
 - Expanding remit without corresponding resources.
 - Uncertainty from devolution and LGR processes across Kent and Surrey.
 - New employees will need to be recruited to meet the needs linked to new projects.
24. He informed the Members of an upcoming walk at Hargate Forest with Woodland Trust on 26 March 2026.

Agenda items for the High Weald JAC meeting (Wednesday 26 November 2025)

25. Additional agenda items for the JAC:
 - Governance and Devolution
 - Future Leadership arrangements

- Planning update National and Local.
 - Presentation on mapping lost features using AI.
26. There was discussion to invite GreenBlue Urban to present at the meeting. This is an organisation which operates as the interface between nature and the built environment regarding the opportunities to incorporate successful tree planting in development schemes. However, it was considered too short notice, with an already full agenda, and this would instead be revisited for the November JAC meeting.
27. Gerry will produce a report on the review of the HWNL grant programme and direction for 2026-2029.

A.O.B

46. Next meeting will be held on 22 October 2026. It was suggested that an additional date in June/July may be required dependent on the Devolution status.

Agenda item: 7

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Officer Steering Group



Notes of a meeting of the High Weald Officer Steering Group held at Acorn Tourism on 18 February 2026 on Microsoft teams.

Samantha Nicholas
Clerk to the High Weald JAC

Present:

Jennifer Hollingum	Mid Sussex DC (Chairman)
Sophie Gilbert	Crawley BC
Vivienne Riddle	Sevenoaks DC
David Chambers	Rother DC
David Scully	Tunbridge Wells BC
Francesca Stevens	Tunbridge Wells BC
Natalie Bumpas	Wealden DC
David Chambers	Rother DC
Sophie Levy	Ashford DC
Mark Daly	Horsham DC (Vice-Chair)
Ben Rainbow	West Sussex CC
David Green	Surrey CC
Heather Twizell	East Sussex CC

High Weald Unit:

Jason Lavender	HWNL Joint Director
Diane Russell	HWNL Planning & Design Advisor
Sarah Brotherton	HWNL Research Advisor

Summary of Actions:

<u>Pt</u>	<u>Information</u>	<u>To be actioned by</u>
3.6	Rolling Programme Schedule of Planning and Design Guidance to be circulated to the Group	HWNL team
3.7	Circulate Rural Lanes practice note	David Scully
8.4	Circulate JAC presentations on HWNL workflow	HWNL team

Apologies

- 1.1 Jenny Knowles, Amy Coombes, Craig Steenhoff, Kate Boorman
- 1.2 The Chair welcomed new members to the group.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting

2.1 The Minutes of 16 September 2025 were agreed to be an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Update on High Weald National Landscape (HWNL) Guidance

Diane Russell updated the group on recent planning guidance published by the HWNL Unit:

Soft Landscaping Guidance

3.1 The Soft Landscaping in new developments Planning Advice Note has now been published and circulated to the group, having been signed off by the JAC in November 2025. Diane thanked the sub-group for their contribution to this guidance. Resources permitting, online training will be rolled out in late spring/ early summer 2026 to support understanding and implementation.

Standing Advice Note

3.2 A Standing Advice Note has been published to assist with the high number of applications on which full consultation response is not possible. The note provides practical guidance and signpost links to relevant planning considerations.

3.3 It was clarified that there had been some misunderstanding regarding whether HWNL would continue to be consulted. Diane clarified this is not the case; the Standing Advice note is a back-up when the HWNL are unable to respond to consultations due to balancing resources and workloads.

- **Tunbridge Wells BC** confirmed the note is useful and has circulated it to internal teams.
- **Sevenoaks District Council** would prefer the Standing Advice Note to be sent with every relevant application.

Site Assessment Template

3.4 The updated Site Assessment Template was circulated in 2025 to assist LPAs in assessing potential development sites in the HWNL. Members discussed whether further guidance is needed or whether HWNL would continue to review methodologies and provide comments to LPAs on a responsive basis. It was agreed to proceed with the latter approach for the time being.

Future Guidance Topics

3.5 Members were invited to suggest further topics for guidance. A rolling programme will be circulated by Diane Russell to keep the Group informed. Potential topics include:

- Highways and public realm management, which may be of particular relevance to County Councils (including historic fingerpost signs and urbanisation of rural roadside for example the increased use of crash barriers). Diane requested contact details of any colleagues in highways teams at the county councils that might be useful to liaise with on this. Tunbridge Wells BC suggested referencing their Rural lanes Practice note – this was originally published in 1993 but is still referenced by Inspectors.

3.6 Action: Rolling Programme Schedule of Planning and Design Guidance to be circulated to Group by Diane Russell.

3.7 Action: David Scully to circulate the Rural Lanes Practice note

4. Update on National Consultations

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) consultation

4.1 The officers discussed the NPPF consultation and the opportunity to share OSG views.

The National Landscapes Association Planning Working Group has been reviewing the proposed changes, and the HWNL Unit will be contributing to that joint NLA consultation response. There is concern that although policies relating to Protected Landscapes are theoretically retained, subtle wording changes (e.g. removal of “highest form of protection”) may weaken protections. Sections 4 and 5 regarding the presumption in favour of development and impacts on National Landscapes, Conservation Areas and designated heritage assets were noted.

- Tunbridge Wells BC is responding. Concerns relate to landscape character and biodiversity net gain (BNG). DS is also contributing to a Landscape Institute task and finish group on the consultation.
- Mid Sussex and Horsham DC are reviewing implications for development near railway stations and impacts on Protected Landscapes. Horsham is responding in detail alongside its Heritage and Landscape teams.
- Rother DC is responding to both the NPPF and Design Policy consultations.

Design Policy Consultation

4.2 The consultation proposes merging the NPPF and national design guidance into a single document. David Scully noted the document appears urban-centric and insufficiently addresses rural and greenfield sites. There are concerns that “slimming down” may remove wording that sets high design standards. It was agreed that from a usability perspective, a single document could be beneficial; however, concerns remain about content quality and detail. It was considered that retaining some reference to design quality in the NPPG was essential for parity with other planning issues, and to maintain a high profile for this matter.

Land Use Framework Consultation

4.3 Jason Lavender updated the Group, referring to the consultation response previously submitted by the HWNL Unit. The debate between land sparing and land sharing was discussed:

- Intensive farming interests tend to favour land sparing.
- Environmental groups are divided.
- National Landscapes favour a land sharing approach to maintain landscape character.

4.4 Cllr Bradbury has requested that the Secretary of State to is invited to visit the High Weald National Landscape Partnership.

5. Challenges of Local Plan Production and Timescales

Diane requested discussion about Local Plan production and timescales, highlighting the significant volume of Local Plan activity across LPA partners and emphasised the importance of understanding Local Plan timescales, and the most effective stages for the HWNL Unit to be involved both at informal plan-making drafting, and at formal reg18 consultation stage. David Chambers confirmed that the government has imposed that all Reg 19 Plans must be submitted by December to be considered under the current planning regime.

5.1 Local Authority Updates

- Tunbridge Wells BC – Plan now adopted; subject to immediate review, so work on new Plan to commence in 2026. Currently looking at what studies will be required and methodologies.
- Mid Sussex DC – Examination reopened, Hearing sessions resumed with a new Inspector.
- Horsham DC – Examination reopening April 2026 with new Inspector; new Plan to follow later in the year under Government-imposed requirements.
- Sevenoaks DC – The third Reg 18 consultation closed in September 25, Regulation 19 consultation scheduled for September; submission by year end.
- Rother DC – Regulation 18 (Part B) site allocations currently out to public consultation; Regulation 19 consultation scheduled for the autumn, submission in December under the current regime.
- Wealden DC – second Regulation 18 (focussed - sites and Pevensey coastal policy) currently out to public consultation. Previous Reg 18 consultation comments will be carried forward. Regulation 19 consultation scheduled for July–September; submission by year end under Government-imposed requirements.
- Ashford BC – Regulation 18 consultation closed last year; further consultation expected autumn, likely to be further Reg 18 to reflect high-level nature of previous consultation; not intending to submit Reg 19 under transitional arrangements.
- Surrey and East Sussex County Councils – No updates regarding minerals or waste Local Plans.

5.2 Diane highlighted that the earlier the National Landscape team is involved, the easier it is to provide constructive input. Members agreed that engagement at early Local Plan stages improves time management and outcomes.

5.3 Tunbridge Wells is beginning evidence base work and may start discussions on SHELAA sites in Autumn 2026 / early 2027.

Landscape Sensitivity Assessments

5.4 Concerns were raised that some Regulation 18 consultations are proceeding without completed landscape sensitivity work. Diane reminded the group that advice regarding this is provided in the AONB Management Plan Planning Principle 1.

- Rother DC noted that they may need further site-by-site assessment work.
- Sevenoaks DC is focusing on the Kent Downs National Landscape and one major site under discussion.

- Tunbridge Wells BC – Engage with HWNL team at SHLAA stage. Major development allocations include full LVAs; smaller sites often have less-detailed prior sensitivity work.
- Wealden DC approach to Landscape Sensitivity Studies for potential site allocations was highlighted as positive, with approximately eight pages per site objectively assessing impacts on MP character components.

6. Planning and Non-Planning Matters Affecting HWNL

6.1 Round table updates:

- At Horsham, a site on the National Landscape boundary was refused on appeal but has returned in amended form via pre-application.
- Tunbridge Wells BC raised issues relating to the Nature Recovery Strategy and the usability of data layers.

6.2 Sarah Brotherton provided brief LNRS updates:

- Kent has been published.
- Sussex due shortly.
- West Sussex expected around May.
- Surrey launching in March.
- LNRS are working hard and aim to align with and support the HWNL Management Plan.

6.3 Diane Russell informed the Group that development pressures have increased significantly, with, amongst others, 8 planning applications with over 1,100 dwellings coming in in the last eight weeks, including 309 dwellings on two sites within the National Landscape south of Tunbridge Wells (within Wealden DC).

7. Dark Skies

7.1 Samantha Nicholas informed the Group that eight parishes are preparing pre-applications for Dark Sky International Community status, including Wadhurst, Ticehurst, Crowhurst, Brightling, Battle, Burwash, Mayfield and Etchingham. The applications include lighting plans, dark skies case studies, showing improvement in light pollution and light surveys of the Parishes. The JAC expressed support at its November meeting. ESCC Highways have also confirmed that they will look at their lighting policy as a matter priority to align with the darks skies standards. The Wild about Dark Skies Festival is in its last year and LAs were invited to communicate with their Parishes to encourage events in their area.

8. National Landscape Unit Activities

8.1 Jason Lavender reported that a comprehensive presentation was given to JAC in the autumn outlining the breadth of activity. The presentation will be circulated. The LAs were thanked by Jason Lavender for their ongoing core funding contributions.

8.2 Current work includes managing grant schemes:

- Removing Barriers to Access

- Capital Funds
- Farming in Protected Landscapes (now in its third year)

Other activities the HWNL team are managing include:

- Community and land management engagement
- Yellow-legged hornet project, invasive species management concerns around numbers present in Kent so they are encouraging Sussex to put out fake hornets' nests to capture the invasive species which impacting on our own native hornet.
- American mink eradication. Since the programme has started 600 minks have been removed since August last year which should show significant positive ecological outcomes on the native bird and vole populations. They are looking for funding to expand this programme to the south coast.
- Use of AI and QGIS to identify lost landscape features such as hedgerows and ponds.
- Woodland Trust partnership to remove rhododendron from more woodlands
- Pasture to Life mentoring for farmers continues to offer support to the farming community.
- There is also a proposal to develop a Community Ranger post to support local nature sites across the High Weald NL.

8.3 The deer management programme has continued and although population densities are high (30–50 per sq km, compared to a target of 8 per sq km) they are now showing a reduction in numbers. Drone surveys are underway in Ashdown Forest and across Bayham Abbey, Lamberhurst. The October 2024 deer stalking conference was well received, and the work has gained national interest.

8.4 Action: Samantha Nicholas will recirculate relevant presentations from JAC.

9. High Weald Local Nature Sites

9.1 Sarah Brotherton informed the Group that the HWNL are developing a three-year programme to support the Local Nature Sites. There is a growing concern with the changes to the planning framework that these will be targeted for development and there is limited funding to help with ongoing management plans. The focus will initially be on Grassland and woodland sites (particularly those impacted by deer) and this will be grant funded through FiPL.

9.2 The Officers were invited to identify sites under threat from development to assist prioritisation of Local Nature Sites and send these to Sarah Brotherton.

10. Items for High Weald JAC – Wednesday 26 November

- Governance
- National planning updates
- Devolution

11. Any Other Business

11.1 Jason Lavender encouraged Local Authorities and County Councils to support increased recognition of local abattoirs. The NFU business plan includes funding

for consultants to develop a case. Horsham DC's Economic Development team have led the way in undertaking related work to secure a new site.

11.2 The Chair requested that officers respond to emails from Gerry Sherwin on historic building repair grants and Jo O'Driscoll on communications and marketing for HWNL.

11.3 Jason Lavender informed the Officers that Murray Davidson (Hastings DC) will be retiring in March.

Date of Next Meeting

11.4 22 September 2026 at Acorn Tourism.

Agenda Item: 9

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 25 March 2026

Title of Report: Revenue Budget 2026/27

By: Treasurer to the Joint Advisory Committee

Purpose of Report: To agree the Revenue Budget 2026/27

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Agree the revenue budget for 2026/27
 2. Thank local authorities for their contributions to the High Weald National Landscape Partnership in 2026/27.
 3. Support the use of the 2025/26 surplus to reduce the 'Other Income' target over the next three years.
-

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report sets out the budget for 2026/27 following a consultation approved by the committee at its last meeting of 26 November 2025.
- 1.2 It reflects the need for the Partnership to respond to a changing context, with both opportunities and challenges for its service.

2. FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

- 2.1 Appendix A presents the forecast out-turn for 2025/26, the budget for 2026/27 and an indicative budget for 2027/28. Appendix B summarises the project budgets. Appendix C presents the indicative 3-year budget for 2026 to 2029, updated to reflect the outcomes of the 2026/27 budget consultation. Appendix C also presents the 5-year budget scenario if there are no inflationary increases to Defra or local authority contributions.
- 2.2 The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) 'single pot' contribution for 2026/27 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 decreased from £33,500 to £23,700. To achieve a balanced core budget for 2026/27 a planned draw of £16,900 from reserves is included in the budget.

2.4 The self-financing project budget is forecast to be over £2 million, reflecting the new government's support for protected landscape partnership's work.

3. BUDGET 2025/26

3.1 The High Weald core budget is forecast to have a surplus of approximately £50,800 in 2025/26.

3.2 This surplus has arisen from:

- An opportunity to capitalise the Partnership's rent using the Partnership's 2025/26 capital fund. This allows Defra to allocate £15,180 per annum of Capital funds for 10 years from 2025/26 to pay annual rent fees.
- Core staff time being charged to projects, reflecting the resource required to managing several self-financing projects, and four grant funds.

3.3 The surplus will be used to reduce the 'other income' target for the next three years and manage risks.

4 BUDGET 2026/27

Core Budget – Expenditure

4.1 The budget for 2026/27 is presented in Appendix A. It is based on the 2025/26 figures with an average inflation of 3%. The budget allows for:

- Staff costs: a budget for a core team of 6FTE staff which includes travel, training, any incremental salary progression and contributions to the pension fund.
- Accommodation/office equipment costs: rent, rates, office equipment, office running costs and the website.
- Partnership running costs: National Landscape Association membership fees, JAC and partnership meetings and miscellaneous public relations costs.
- 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 2026/27 is £318,130: £270,600 has been allocated to Core and £47,530 to self-funding Projects.
- 4.4 Defra have confirmed three-year extensions to:
- the Farming in Protected Landscape programme
 - the Removing Barriers to Access Fund
 - the Management Plan Implementation Fund
- 4.5 The extensions are confirmed for 2026/27 and provisional for 2027/28 and 2028/29.
- 4.6 Defra's estimated contribution to Core and Self-funding Projects for 2026/27 is therefore shown in Appendix A as £2,267,000.

Local Authority Contributions

- 4.7 The levels of support from each authority are shown in Appendix A.
- 4.8 The local authority response to the budget consultation has been variable. Most partner authorities have maintained their contribution with an inflationary increase, as requested. Four authorities have not paid the requested amount for 2026/27 resulting in a reduction of £1,663.
- 4.9 The cumulative impact on the budget of Defra and some local authority contributions not rising in line with inflation is illustrated in Appendix C.

Self-funding projects

- 4.10 JAC expenditure on self-funding projects is presented at Appendix B and is estimated to be £2,614,700 in 2026/27.
- 4.11 The project budget is presented as five programmes.
- 4.12 A sum of £47,530 has been allocated to Projects from the Defra single pot contribution.
- 4.13 The budget has been updated to include the Defra contributions for management plan delivery.
- the Farming in Protected Landscape programme (£1,122,415)

- the Removing Barriers to Access Fund (£359,255)
 - the Management Plan Implementation Fund (£467,236)
- 4.14 All of these funds involve grant awards to third parties for delivery of management plan objectives. The Partnership will therefore be operating four grant programmes in 2026/27: the Farming in Protected Landscapes Grant Programme, the High Weald Nature and Community Fund, the Removing Barriers to Access Fund, and the Management Plan Implementation Fund. Each programme has its own criteria and administrative system, reflecting the funding body requirements.
- 4.15 There is a risk that the funds offered by Defra will be unused. They are offered within the context of declining Defra contributions to the core revenue budget and without revenue funds to employ staff to promote and manage the Removing Barriers to Access and Management Plan Implementation funds.
- 4.16 However, consolidating contributions from multiple projects with some capitalisation of revenue costs allows for an increase in the number of project staff from 5.4FTE to 7.4FTE to enable investment of Defra funds in the area over the next three years.
- 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 2027/28 AND BEYOND

- 5.1 Achieving a sustainable budget (Appendix C) will be challenging without inflationary increases to the contributions made by Partnership members, particularly Defra.
- 5.2 The Other Income target has increased significantly due to the flat revenue settlement from Defra and some local authorities. The target can only be achieved by diverting core staff to project delivery. This affects the Partnership's core service.
- 5.3 The Government's three-year commitment to capital investment in protected landscapes via their dedicated partnerships is welcome. However, to maintain the Partnership's core service additional staff are needed to direct and manage the annual budget of £2 million which has now become the norm.
- 5.4 Expansion of the project team to enable the capital investment is proposed in 2026/27 and will reduce the pressure on the core team. The benefits will be apparent from 2027/28 onwards.
- 5.5 The 2025/26 surplus will be used to reduce the Other Income target until 2029, to allow a focus on the Partnership's core projects which will include managing transition through devolution, reviewing the High Weald Management plan and developing a £5 million partnership project suited to the National Heritage Lottery Funds 'Landscape Connections' programme.

- 5.6 Local Government Review will require consideration of the Partnership's constitution, supporting agreements and finances. This will be an opportunity to present the Partnership's value, strengthen its direction and operation, and reconsider the formula that underpins local authority contributions

Reserves

- 5.7 The forecast reserve on 31 March 2026 is £303,200. The forecast reserve on 31 March 2027 is £286,300.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 The 2026/27 core budget is a balanced budget.
- 6.2 The budget projection suggests a 3-year balanced budget can be achieved for the life of the service level agreement with ongoing support from Defra and local authority partners, an achievable other income target and use of the 2025/26 surplus.
- 6.3 These conclusions form the basis of the report recommendations.



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

HIGH WEALD NATIONAL LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP
 FORECAST OUTTURN for 2025/26, PROPOSED BUDGET for 2026/27 AND INDICATIVE BUDGET 2027/28

Appendix A

2024/25		2025/26		2026/27					2027/28
Outturn	Core Budget	Budget	Forecast	Original Budget	Inflation	Budget Pressures	Other	Budget	Indicative Budget
£'000		£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
	Expenditure								
323.8	Staff costs	344.0	311.7	344.0	10.3	0.0	12.1	366.4	377.4
36.4	Accommodation/office equipment	37.5	33.7	37.5	1.1	0.0	0.0	38.6	39.8
7.2	Partnership running costs	7.4	6.1	7.4	0.2	0.0	0.0	7.6	7.9
33.6	Support services	34.6	34.6	34.6	1.0	0.0	0.0	35.6	36.6
401.0	Total Core Expenditure	423.5	386.1	423.5	12.7	0.0	12.1	448.3	461.7
	Income								
(270.6)	Defra	(270.6)	(270.6)	(270.6)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(270.6)	(270.6)
0.0	Defra capitalised rent	0.0	(15.2)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(15.2)	(15.2)	(15.2)
(28.2)	East Sussex County Council	(29.5)	(29.5)	(29.5)	(0.9)	0.0	0.0	(30.4)	(31.3)
(9.0)	Kent County Council	(9.0)	(9.0)	(9.0)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(9.0)	(9.0)
(14.7)	West Sussex County Council	(15.4)	(15.4)	(15.4)	(0.5)	0.0	0.0	(15.9)	(16.4)
(3.1)	Surrey County Council	(3.2)	(3.2)	(3.2)	(0.1)	0.0	0.2	(3.1)	(3.2)
(10.0)	Wealden District	(10.3)	(10.3)	(10.3)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(10.3)	(10.3)
(10.0)	Rother District Council	(10.5)	(10.5)	(10.5)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(10.5)	(10.8)
(8.3)	Mid Sussex District Council	(8.7)	(8.7)	(8.7)	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(9.0)	(9.3)
(8.9)	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	(9.3)	(9.3)	(9.3)	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(9.6)	(9.9)
(5.2)	Horsham District Council	(5.4)	(5.4)	(5.4)	(0.2)	0.0	0.0	(5.6)	(5.8)
(6.3)	Sevenoaks District Council	(6.6)	(6.6)	(6.6)	(0.2)	0.0	0.0	(6.8)	(7.0)
(1.6)	Ashford Borough Council	(1.6)	(1.6)	(1.6)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(1.6)	(1.6)
(4.1)	Hastings Borough Council	(4.3)	(4.3)	(4.3)	(0.1)	0.0	0.0	(4.4)	(4.5)
(2.3)	Tandridge District Council	(2.4)	(2.4)	(2.4)	(0.1)	0.0	0.0	(2.5)	(2.6)
(1.5)	Crawley Borough Council	(1.6)	(1.6)	(1.6)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(1.6)	(1.6)
(1.5)	Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	(1.6)	(1.6)	(1.6)	0.0	0.0	0.0	(1.6)	(1.6)
(15.7)	Other income	(33.5)	(31.7)	(33.5)	(1.0)	0.0	10.8	(23.7)	(24.1)
(401.0)	Total Core Income	(423.5)	(436.9)	(423.5)	(3.7)	0.0	(4.2)	(431.4)	(434.8)
17.4	Surplus/(deficit) transfer to/(from) reserves	(0.0)	50.8	(0.0)	(9.0)	0.0	(24.8)	(16.9)	(26.8)
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								
1,360.0	JAC expenditure on self-funded projects	2,322.0	1,545.6	2,614.7				2,614.7	2,016.2
(351.0)	Defra contribution to self-funded projects (Excluding FiPL)	(359.6)	(406.8)	(874.0)				(874.0)	(380.3)
(545.3)	Defra contribution to FiPL Project	(1,393.4)	(663.0)	(1,122.4)				(1,122.4)	(1,122.4)
(38.2)	Local authorities contributions	(135.5)	(28.2)	(129.0)				(129.0)	(136.6)
(425.4)	Other contributions to self-funded projects	(433.5)	(447.6)	(489.3)				(489.3)	(376.9)
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								
1,778.4	Total core and project expenditure	2,745.5	1,931.7	3,038.2	12.7	0.0	12.1	3,063.0	2,477.9
(1,761.0)	Total core and project income	(2,745.5)	(1,982.5)	(3,038.2)	(3.7)	0.0	(4.2)	(3,046.1)	(2,451.0)
17.4	Total High Weald JAC Budget	(0.0)	50.8	(0.0)	(9.0)	0.0	(7.9)	(16.9)	(26.9)

Reserves	£000
Reserves at 31 March 2024	235.0
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2024/25	17.4
Reserves at 31 March 2025	252.4
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2025/26	50.8
Reserves at 31 March 2026	303.2
Transfer to/(from) reserves 2026/27	(16.9)
Reserves at 31 March 2027	286.3

HIGH WEALD NATIONAL LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

SELF-FUNDING PROJECTS OUTTURN for 2024/25 and INDICATIVE BUDGET 2025/26, 2026/27 and 2027/28

Appendix B

2024/25 Outturn £'000	Budget 2025/26			Forecast 2025/26			Indicative Budget 2026/27			Indicative Budget 2027/28		
	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000	Exp £'000	Income £'000	Net £'000
	1 Community Outreach/Removing Barriers to Access											
106.2	JAC expenditure											
62.1	Defra											
(0.2)	Local authorities											
(168.1)	Other											
0.0	Total Community Outreach and Access for All											
	High Weald Heroes*											
29.7	JAC expenditure											
(25.0)	Defra											
0.0	Local authorities											
(4.7)	Other											
0.0	Total High Weald Heroes											
	2 Management Plan Evidence and Guidance*											
9.2	JAC expenditure											
(7.0)	Defra											
(2.2)	Other											
0.0	Total Management Plan Evidence and Guidance											
	3 Landscape Enhancement*											
277.0	JAC expenditure											
(8.7)	Defra											
(60.0)	Environment Agency											
(3.0)	Local authorities											
100.2	Other											
0.0	National Grid Grant programme											
(305.5)	High Weald Nature and Community Fund (Charities Aid Foundation)											
0.0	Total Landscape Enhancement											
	4 Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme (FIPL)											
866.4	JAC expenditure											
(866.4)	Defra											
0.0	Total Farming in Protected Landscapes											
	Management Plan Implementation Fund											
224.2	JAC expenditure											
(244.9)	Defra											
20.7	Other											
0.0	Total											
	5 Project Development											
63.9	JAC expenditure											
(61.0)	Defra											
(2.9)	Other											
0.0	Local authorities											
(0.0)	Total Project Development											
1,576.6	JAC expenditure (to Appendix a)											
(906.0)	Expenditure funded by Defra (to Appendix A)											
(3.2)	Expenditure funded by LAs (to Appendix A)											
(443.2)	Expenditure funded by Other (to Appendix A)											
224.2	TOTAL JAC expenditure/income											
	2,010.1	(2,010.1)	(0.0)	1,185.7	(1,185.7)	0.0	2,614.7	(2,614.7)	(0.0)	2,016.2	(2,016.2)	0.0

* Forecast 25/26 reflects allocation of planned project expenditure to FIPL and MPiF budgets to avoid double counting

Appendix C

Indicative (non-rounded) five year budget with inflation applied to 2025/26 baseline for expenditure and requested LA contributions

Supports a core team of 6.0FTE: 1FTE Director, 0.8FTE Operations Manager, 1FTE Planning and Policy Officer,
1 FTE Land Management Adviser, 0.6FTE Research officer, 0.8FTE Administrator, 0.8FTE Comms Officer.

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30
<u>Expenditure</u>	£	£	£	£	
Staff costs	344,000	366,400	377,390	388,710	400,370
Accommodation/office equipment	37,500	38,625	39,780	40,970	42,200
Partnership running costs	7,400	7,622	7,850	8,090	8,330
Support services	34,600	35,638	36,710	37,810	38,940
Total Core Expenditure	423,500	448,285	461,730	475,580	489,850
<u>Contributions</u>					
Defra	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)
Defra Capital Contribution to Rent	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)
East Sussex County Council	(29,509)	(30,394)	(31,306)	(32,245)	(33,212)
Kent County Council	(9,410)	(9,692)	(9,983)	(10,282)	(10,590)
West Sussex County Council	(15,401)	(15,863)	(16,339)	(16,829)	(17,334)
Surrey County Council	(3,231)	(3,328)	(3,428)	(3,531)	(3,637)
Wealden District	(10,447)	(10,760)	(11,083)	(11,415)	(11,757)
Rother District Council	(10,447)	(10,760)	(11,083)	(11,415)	(11,757)
Mid Sussex District Council	(8,723)	(8,985)	(9,255)	(9,533)	(9,819)
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	(9,306)	(9,585)	(9,873)	(10,169)	(10,474)
Horsham District Council	(5,385)	(5,547)	(5,713)	(5,884)	(6,061)
Sevenoaks District Council	(6,570)	(6,767)	(6,970)	(7,179)	(7,394)
Ashford Borough Council	(1,673)	(1,723)	(1,775)	(1,828)	(1,883)
Hastings Borough Council	(4,308)	(4,437)	(4,570)	(4,707)	(4,848)
Tandridge District Council	(2,369)	(2,440)	(2,513)	(2,588)	(2,666)
Crawley Borough Council	(1,568)	(1,615)	(1,663)	(1,713)	(1,764)
Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	(1,615)	(1,663)	(1,713)	(1,764)	(1,817)
Other income	(33,500)	(40,600)	(43,600)	(44,908)	(46,255)
Total Core Income	(439,242)	(449,939)	(456,647)	(461,770)	(475,623)
Surplus/(deficit)	15,742	1,108	(5,083)	(13,810)	(14,227)

Indicative (non-rounded) five year budget with inflation applied to 2026/27 baseline for expenditure but not to contributions

*NB 2025/26 = Actual contributions 2026/27 = Agreed contributions as at 25.3.26.

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30
<u>Expenditure</u>	£	£	£	£	
Staff costs	344,000	366,400	377,390	388,710	400,370
Accommodation/office equipment	37,500	38,625	39,780	40,970	42,200
Partnership running costs	7,400	7,622	7,850	8,090	8,330
Support services	34,600	35,638	36,710	37,810	38,940
Total Core Expenditure	423,500	448,285	461,730	475,580	489,840
<u>Contributions</u>					
Defra	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)	(270,600)
Defra Capital Contribution to Rent	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)	(15,180)
East Sussex County Council	(29,509)	(30,394)	(30,394)	(30,394)	(30,394)
Kent County Council	(9,000)	(9,000)	(9,000)	(9,000)	(9,000)
West Sussex County Council	(15,401)	(15,863)	(15,863)	(15,863)	(15,863)
Surrey County Council	(3,077)	(3,169)	(3,169)	(3,169)	(3,169)
Wealden District	(10,291)	(10,291)	(10,291)	(10,291)	(10,291)
Rother District Council	(10,447)	(10,447)	(10,447)	(10,447)	(10,447)
Mid Sussex District Council	(8,723)	(8,985)	(8,985)	(8,985)	(8,985)
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	(9,306)	(9,585)	(9,585)	(9,585)	(9,585)
Horsham District Council	(5,385)	(5,547)	(5,547)	(5,547)	(5,547)
Sevenoaks District Council	(6,570)	(6,767)	(6,767)	(6,767)	(6,767)
Ashford Borough Council	(1,600)	(1,648)	(1,648)	(1,648)	(1,648)
Hastings Borough Council	(4,308)	(4,437)	(4,437)	(4,437)	(4,437)
Tandridge District Council	(2,369)	(2,440)	(2,440)	(2,440)	(2,440)
Crawley Borough Council	(1,568)	(1,615)	(1,615)	(1,615)	(1,615)
Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	(1,615)	(1,663)	(1,663)	(1,663)	(1,663)
Other income	(33,500)	(40,600)	(40,600)	(40,600)	(40,600)
Total Core Income	(438,449)	(448,231)	(448,231)	(448,231)	(448,231)
Surplus/(deficit)	14,949	(54)	(10,499)	(24,349)	(38,609)

Appendix A: High Weald National Landscape Partnership Grant Programmes

Grant programme	Nature and Community Fund	Farming in Protected Landscape Programme	Removing Barriers to Access	High Weald Management Plan Implementation Fund
Start date	2018	2021/22	2022/23	2025/26
Funder	Lund Trust	Defra	Defra	Defra
Value p.a.	£300,000	£970,851	£359,255	£467,236
Eligible applicants	Non-profit organisations such as charities, schools, community groups, public bodies and churches. Private landowners and land managers may apply if their proposed work provides a clear, direct public benefit.	Farmers and other landowners and managers, or organisations that work on their behalf	All	All
Criteria	Support for capital and revenue projects that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create new wildlife-friendly green spaces • Improve habitats and enhance connections between them Engage communities in the management of green spaces for nature and food growing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate connections to nature for individuals disconnected from it. 	Support for capital and revenue projects that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recover nature • tackle climate change • provide opportunities for people to discover the landscape • support sustainable farm businesses. 	Supports for capital projects that making protected landscapes more accessible for people of all ages, abilities and needs, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gates to replace stiles • walking routes inclusive cycles, E-trikes, bikes or wheelchairs • volunteer equipment • accessible visitor facilities. 	Support for capital projects that meet the Governments' targets used on any activity which supports the protected landscapes' contribution to 30by30, or which has income generating or cost saving potential, including maximising capital spend potential on activity to further protected landscape purposes.
	Grants range from £500 up to £20,000, with up to two larger awards p.a.	Grants of up to £250,000. Most applications are for less than £20,000.	No cap on grant value, but usually less than £100,000	No cap on grant value, but usually less than £100,000

Appendix B: High Weald Strategic Projects 2026-2029 (indicative)

These projects will meet High Weald Management Plan objectives and priorities, and contribute to national protected landscape targets, primarily:

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

Strategic project	Delivery partners
Reviving the High Weald’s Local Wildlife Sites: A three-year partnership to breathe new life into the High Weald’s most precious habitats - surveying, restoring, and expanding Local Wildlife Sites to secure their future for nature and people.	Kent Wildlife Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust
Pastures for Life: supporting land managers with nature-friendly grazing through a dynamic programme of mentoring, collaboration, and business support - helping pastoral systems thrive across the High Weald.	Pastures for Life, Farming and Wildlife Group (FWAG)
From Browsed to Balanced: scaling up deer management to restore balance in the High Weald’s ancient woodlands - protecting fragile ecosystems and enabling natural regeneration to flourish once more.	Deer stalking community
Mink-Free Rivers: a five-year mission to bring rivers back to life by tackling invasive mink—creating safe havens for water voles, kingfishers, moorhens, and other wetland wildlife.	Waterlife Recovery Trust
Rhododendron Riddance: empowering woodland owners to tackle invasive rhododendron together—unlocking cost-effective, landscape-scale action through shared expertise and coordinated contracts.	Woodland Trust
Wild about High Weald: supporting communities to take action for nature - protecting dark skies, boosting pollinators, creating homes for threatened bird species, and celebrating the unique character of the High Weald.	Wild About groups, parish councils, Ramblers and community groups
Welcoming People, Protecting Places: Working with communities and landowners to manage visitor pressure - improving access while safeguarding landscapes, especially around villages and towns.	Bellhurst Trust, parish councils

Agenda Item: 11

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 25 March 2026

Title of Report: Grant programme evaluation and direction

By: Business Manager

Purpose of Report: To outline the challenges associated with managing four distinct grant programmes and set out a strategic approach for 2026-2029.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Welcome the Defra commitment to protected landscape partnerships and acknowledge the scale of the funds now being managed by the Partnership's staff team
 2. Note the challenges and risks associated with delivering grant programmes under the current model
 3. Support the strategic plan to build fund management capacity, manage risks and improve outcomes
 4. Advocate for funding certainty for the Partnership through local government reorganisation.
-

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 One of the Partnership's functions is to secure and broker funds from multiple sources to enable the delivery of the High Weald AONB Management Plan.
- 1.2 The Partnership is now administering four grant funds, alongside its core activity and self-funded projects. Each fund has separate criteria, processes and target audiences.
- 1.3 The total value of the funds is now significant, at approximately £2 million per annum. All the funds involve grants to third parties.
- 1.4 Over the last four years the Defra funding allocations have been subject to short-term and intermittent approvals, resulting in a stop-start approach to delivery.

1.5 However, Defra have now confirmed the 2026/27 allocations and advised that for planning purposes, the 2026/27 allocation should be considered indicative of expected allocations for 2027/28 and 2028/29. Final confirmation will follow their annual business planning process.

1.6 This advice allows a more strategic and planned approach to the fund's operation.

2. FUND SUMMARY

2.1 The four funds are:

- Nature and Community Fund (supported by Lund Trust)
- Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme (supported by Defra)
- Removing Barriers to Access Fund (supported by Defra)
- Management Plan Implementation Fund (supported by Defra)

2.2 Key facts and figures for each fund are presented as Appendix A.

2.3 The value of the Defra contribution to each of the English protected landscapes is derived from formulas applied nationally that consider protected landscape size, number of land holdings, and populations within and near the protected landscape.

2.4 The formulas favour the High Weald National Landscape as it is a large landscape with many small holdings, a high population, and coastal towns and London nearby.

3. EVALUATION 2022-2026

3.1 The High Weald National Landscape Partnership has extensive experience in administering grants to third parties in support of management plan delivery. However, the scale of funding now available is unprecedented.

3.2 The funds are being operated against a backdrop of rising costs and wider financial pressures, which can be a barrier to people taking an interest in, and applying to the grant programmes. Alongside this overarching challenge, four key issues to date have shaped the management and delivery of the funds.

Stop-Start Nature of Funding

3.3 The intermittent nature of the Defra funding allocations, so far, has led to: uncertainty for the partnership, applicants and delivery partners; a reduced ability to develop a forward pipeline of projects; operational inefficiencies due to the need to mobilise and demobilise funds; and limited opportunities to develop and deliver strategic, long-term projects.

Fund Complexity

3.4 The four funding programmes vary in scope, eligibility criteria, and delivery requirements. Effective administration therefore requires: targeted promotion and

engagement across diverse sectors; provision of technical advice across a wide range of subject areas; appraisal of applications against differing criteria; and management of varied decision-making, reporting and monitoring systems.

- 3.5 As a result, successful fund management depends on a combination of project management, technical, communications and administrative expertise. These skills typically span multiple roles within the High Weald team, making delivery an inherently team-based effort.

Project Development Capacity

- 3.6 Many of the intended beneficiaries of the funds have limited capacity to develop projects. Common constraints include lack of individual or organisational time for project development; lack of experience with grant application processes; gaps in technical expertise; and difficulties identifying and securing suitable contractors for capital projects.
- 3.7 Historically, the High Weald team has played a key role in initiating and delivering large, strategic projects. However, in the last four years, capacity to fulfil this role has been constrained, as staff resources have been largely directed towards fund administration.

Limited Revenue Funding for Staff

- 3.8 Effective fund delivery is highly dependent on staff capacity. Core activities include promoting the four funds, advising applicants, developing and maintaining a project pipeline, appraising applications and producing reports, supporting grant panels, issuing and monitoring contracts, ensuring compliance, managing risk, reporting on outcomes and maximising the impact of capital investment.
- 3.9 While some revenue funding has been made available to support advice and administration, delivery remains heavily reliant on allocating a substantial proportion of the Partnership's core team to fund management. This approach has been necessary given the intermittent nature of the funding.
- 3.10 In the absence of dedicated resource, delivery has tended to be constrained and reactive, rather than strategic and proactive.

4. STRATEGIC APPROACH 2026-2029

- 4.1 Defra's three-year commitment is welcome and allows for a more strategic and planned approach to fund management.
- 4.2 Continuing with the existing fund management arrangements is unsustainable. The core team have been agile, adapting to facilitate the opportunity provided by the funds. However, over the next three years the core team needs to focus on steering the Partnership through local government reorganisation, undertaking the

management plan review and securing resources for important projects that don't meet any of the fund criteria.

4.3 To more effectively manage the funds the following is proposed:

- Consolidation of revenue funds from the four funds and the Partnership's self-financing projects to allow recruitment of a project manager, an additional project officer and part time administrative and communication support for three years. This would create a project team suited to the scale and scope of the funds.
- Development of three-year strategic, and complementary, projects that will have more impact than ad hoc support for individual projects. These are in development and indicated in Appendix B.
- Development of the High Weald Partnership's governance to enable more stakeholder input into the management of the funds, whilst maintaining agility in decision-making.

4.4 These actions should lead to:

- More strategic or high-impact projects
- Greater levels of interest and uptake in all funds
- A stronger pipeline of projects
- Enhanced support to applicants
- Enhanced programme oversight and reporting
- Increased likelihood of full and effective use of the capital funding
- Better achievement of strategic outcomes.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Managing large grant funds to meet AONB Management Plan targets (and those of other national and local strategies) is now a greater part of the Partnership's service.

5.2 The effective use of multiple funds requires a dedicated staffing resource.

5.3 Defra's three-year commitment to national landscape partnerships enables the consolidation of funds for the recruitment of a project manager, a project officer and additional administrative and communication support for three years.

5.4 Appropriate staffing resource will reduce risks and maximise the value and impact of external investment.

5.5 These conclusions form the basis of the report recommendations.

Gerry Sherwin, Business Manager to the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Agenda item: 13

Committee: High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 25 March 2026

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 review risks and identify measures and options to manage and mitigate their impacts.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 For over 25 years the JAC has been a strong partnership supported by the High Weald National Landscape Unit, a small specialist team that provides advice and guidance on the conservation and enhancement of a nationally important landscape.
- 1.2 The work of the JAC relies on three things: partner contributions to the core budget; success in raising external funds for the project budget; and the ability to retain and recruit staff with the appropriate skills and experience. The most significant risk to the success of the High Weald National Landscape Partnership remains the increasing constraints and demands on the High Weald team's financial and staff resources.

2.0 Key risks for 2026/27

Government core budget funding settlement

- 2.1 Members will be aware that, since 2010, English National Landscape Partnerships have accommodated significant cuts in the government contribution to core budgets. Total government core funding for all 34 English National Landscape Partnerships is reported to be around half the core funding provided to a single National Park Authority.
- 2.2 The national economic context, and its influence on the government's policies and priorities for our sector, remains a significant factor and is likely to continue to have negative consequences for the funding and support provided by government and local authorities.

- 2.3 Despite a recent proposal by government for a one-off and limited increase to the core revenue grant for 2026/27 (not confirmed to date) there is no sign that the inadequate funding settlements experienced by National Landscape Partnerships since 2010 will improve. Clearly, a continued or worsening funding position presents a major risk to the High Weald National Landscape Partnership's core, particularly if the government does not reinstate an adequate, stable, and long-term funding settlement for National Landscape Partnerships. If the core team falls below four full-time equivalents, meeting current work demands will become even more difficult (and may be impossible).
- 2.4 This risk would be exacerbated if the government continues to require National Landscape Partnerships to undertake additional duties (including those arising from the previous government's response to the Landscapes Review) without providing adequate, commensurate, and sustained resources. The government's medium and longer-term intentions for a stable and adequate funding settlement for the sector remain unclear.

Local Authority annual financial contributions

- 2.5 Until 2023/24, local authority contributions to the work of the High Weald Partnership had not increased since 2001. Most of the 15 local authority partners maintained agreed contributions (without inflationary increases) to the core budget from 2010, despite increasingly difficult financial circumstances.
- 2.6 In 2022, the JAC recognised that, if left unaddressed, this would contribute to an increasing shortfall in the High Weald Partnership's core budget and a growing deficit over the next five years. The JAC agreed to review local authorities' annual financial contributions and, following that review, unanimously agreed to propose a set increase for each local authority, with contributions linked to inflation from the start of 2024/25.
- 2.7 However, local authority budgets and funding settlements remain under severe pressure. There is a major risk that some or all local authorities may not be able to maintain current contributions (or increase them in line with inflation) to support the work of the High Weald Partnership.
- 2.8 Planned local government reorganisation and devolution in Sussex, Surrey, and Kent may affect local authority financial contributions. Despite the scale of the proposed changes, the implications for local authority support for the work of the High Weald Partnership are not yet fully understood.

Self-funded projects

- 2.9 Each year, the High Weald's core team secures and manages considerable external funding to support residents, schools, farmers, community groups, visitors, and others through projects across the National Landscape under four main programmes:

- Community engagement (education, access, and health and wellbeing)
- 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 four distinct grant programmes on behalf of others which also deliver considerable benefits across the High Weald. The four grant programmes are: High Weald Nature and Community Fund, High Weald Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme, Removing Barriers to Access, and the High Weald Management Plan Implementation Fund.
- 2.11 As with the core budget settlement, there is a major risk to the ongoing management and success of these self-funded programmes, and any associated grant budgets, should the existing constraints on the High Weald team's financial and staff resources continue or worsen.
- 2.12 DEFRA's advocacy of, and support for, greater investment in designated landscapes has resulted in a considerable increase in capital project funding for three years starting in 2026/27. While this additional investment is welcomed, it has not been accompanied by commensurate funding for the core team (which oversees scheme development and fund management). This capital funding requires potential projects to be identified and developed by the High Weald team and to meet criteria specified by government with an expectation the funds will be spent within defined timeframes. This places further pressure on an already under-resourced core team.
- 2.13 Given this, Members should be aware of the risk that the capital funding allocations for the period 2026 - 2029 may not be fully spent, despite significant efforts by the High Weald team. Any unspent funding would need to be returned to DEFRA for reallocation elsewhere.

New and greater expectations and demands

- 2.14 In recent years, pressure on the High Weald has increased, alongside a number of new and growing expectations placed on the team. These additional demands continue to place significant strain on the team's core work and remit. They include:
- A considerable rise in the number and scale of housing development applications (particularly 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, statutory undertakers, and others to meet their statutory duties for conserving the National Landscape, and to respond to

emerging climate change and nature recovery policies, have increased demand for our advice and guidance.

- The transition to new agri-environment and other schemes requires farmers to change practices, and demand is increasing for our guidance to help deliver the multiple objectives now expected by government.
- Changing land ownership in the High Weald is an increasing factor. New and inexperienced owners need tailored, integrated guidance and longer-term support to help them manage farms and woodlands responsibly and to prevent harm to the High Weald.
- Expectations to encourage a wider and more diverse range of people, and to improve public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, require increased input and involvement from the team.
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme and other DEFRA/government funds place considerable demands on limited resources, including establishing and managing suitable governance and grant administration, and using existing staff capacity to implement scheme objectives and support farmers, land managers, and others to develop strong grant applications.

Staff on fixed-term contracts

- 2.15 Several members of the High Weald team are employed on fixed-term contracts to deliver high-profile, time-limited projects and national schemes funded by a range of external organisations. These roles also support and strengthen the core team's wider work and remit.
- 2.16 Inevitably, as contracts approach their end, those affected will actively seek alternative employment before projects and schemes conclude. When this happens, it creates an immediate and significant risk to the successful completion of projects and results in the loss of expertise, experience, and knowledge from the team and, more widely, from the High Weald.
- 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. It also reduces capacity to identify, develop, and deliver future projects.

Staff succession planning

- 2.18 Several High Weald staff are approaching the end of their careers, and succession planning is therefore an important issue to address. Recruiting and retaining younger people with relevant skills and experience is increasingly difficult and, unless addressed, this will adversely affect the team's work in future.

3.0 Risk mitigation

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

- 3.1 The long-standing financial and resource challenges facing English National Landscape Partnerships have yet to be addressed by the government. As a result, securing an adequate, stable, and long-term core funding settlement remains the High Weald Partnership's primary concern.
- 3.2 Our experience of dealing with funding cuts since 2009 reminds us that all members of the High Weald Partnership must continue to demonstrate at the local and national government level the value of the Partnership's work and to lobby for adequate, stable, long-term funding.
- 3.3 This is particularly important in light of the planned local government reorganisation and devolution across Sussex, Surrey, and Kent. It will require Partnership members to remain vocal and influential advocates, ensuring that future unitary authorities maintain appropriate funding levels and provide long-term certainty.
- 3.4 Developing secure, alternative long-term income streams to support the Partnership's core remit may be possible and this has been explored on several occasions. However, the challenges involved are often underestimated, and any funds raised are unlikely to address longer-term shortfalls in core budget contributions. The focus is to remain a government and local authority supported partnership, with close relationships with public, private, and charitable organisations whose policies and practices influence the management of the High Weald.
- 3.5 The High Weald team's business strategy aims to respond to risks arising from constraints on both financial and staff resources. Where possible, it is adapted to reflect emerging risks associated with increased pressures on the High Weald landscape and newer expectations and demands. Specific risks associated with major projects and grant schemes are assessed routinely.
- 3.6 The risks associated with managing and delivering the four self-funded grant programmes have been mitigated through a comprehensive evaluation and the development of a strategic plan to increase delivery capacity over the three-year period to March 2029. Further details are set out in the 'Grant Programme Evaluation and Direction' report presented earlier.
- 3.7 However, the assumption that the current but inadequate resources provided by government to the core work and remit of the High Weald Partnership can meet both existing and emerging demands - while also delivering the government's stated vision that National Landscape Partnerships are at the heart of nature recovery, landscape conservation, and climate change mitigation

- must be challenged. Expecting the High Weald Partnership to do more with less is no longer viable.

Staff on fixed-term contracts

- 3.8 Mitigating the risks associated with the increasing use of fixed-term contracts is not straightforward. Funding bodies and central government often prefer time-limited projects and initiatives focused on short-term objectives. In the absence of an adequate long-term funding settlement that creates more permanent roles, it is likely that we will continue to lose talented and experienced staff.

Staff succession planning

- 3.9 Identifying and implementing a succession planning process and strategy should help us develop existing and new staff so they can move into leadership roles as vacancies arise. Succession planning will also support efforts to attract, recruit, and retain younger people with the skills required to work for the High Weald Unit.
- 3.10 We have begun to investigate options, but progress has stalled, primarily owing to existing and new work commitments. The intention remains to restart this work and develop a succession planning strategy for the team.

4.0 Conclusions

- 4.1 Risk management systems are in place and conform to the relevant East Sussex County Council policy.
- 4.2 It is reasonable to assume that 2026/27 will continue to be characterised by the challenges outlined above. Constraints on the High Weald Unit's financial and staff resources, together with the need to retain fixed-term staff to complete projects in their final year, remain the most significant and immediate 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 local circumstances and specific needs. It seeks to address risks to the Partnership's work; however, this is no longer sufficient. The expectation that the Partnership can continue to absorb existing and additional demands without adequate resources must be challenged and addressed.

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