



High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-24

Consultation Statement

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Public Understanding & Enjoyment workshop
Image ©Matt Pitts

For Further information please contact:

High Weald AONB Unit
Woodland Enterprise Centre
Hastings Road
Flimwell, East Sussex
TN5 7PR
01424 723011



1. Introduction

The High Weald AONB Management Plan is subject to a 5 year review cycle and work to review the Plan began in March 2017. A crucial part of the review process is consultation and engagement, and the decision was taken to start this at an early stage to ensure the revised draft incorporated as many different peoples' views from the outset as possible. The engagement and consultation process may be divided into three broad parts:

1. Expert engagement
2. Public engagement
3. Formal public consultation

This report provides an overview of the entire consultation and engagement process, as well as the method used to complete each stage. The table below shows how the consultation and engagement elements of the review (highlighted in green) fit into the wider Management Plan review process.

High Weald AONB Management Plan Review Timetable

Dec 2016	Scoping review
Feb 2017	Issues & principles report presented to OSG
Mar 2017	Scope of review approved by MB & JAC
Apr 2017	Statutory consultees alerted
May 2017	Expert engagement
July 2017	Public engagement
July 2017	Performance and Condition Monitoring
July 2017	Plan redrafting
Oct 2017	Progress report to JAC
Jan 2018	Consultation draft produced
Mar 2018	JAC agree Consultation Draft
June-July 2018	Formal public consultation
Aug 2018	Amendments and modifications
Sep-Oct 2018	Final draft agreed by OSG & MB
Nov 2018	Final draft agreed by Joint Advisory Committee
Dec-Mar 2018	Local Authority committee processes
Mar 2019	Plan sent to Secretary of State for formal adoption
Apr 2019	Adoption
May 2019	Dissemination and distribution

The following sections outline the methods used for engagement and consultation in the expert engagement workshops, the public engagement online questionnaire and the formal public consultation. The report also summarises the outputs from these methods and explains how they have informed the new Management Plan 2019-2024.

2. Expert Engagement

In order to gather expert input at an early stage, practitioners and representatives from a range of partner organisations were invited to a series of character component-themed workshops. Invitees were selected from the AONB Unit's database of contacts and invitations were sent out via Eventbrite several weeks in advance of the events.

The workshops themselves all took place in mid-May 2017, with each workshop consisted of either a morning (10am-1pm) or afternoon (2pm-5pm) session. They involved a series of introductory presentations (outlining the importance of the AONB and Management Plan, as well as introducing the character and significance of the component in question) and the use of facilitators to note down responses to a range of questions written in advance on a flip chart. Some of the questions also involved a ranking component to help highlight what the attendees considered the most important issues and targets, and the session was broken up by a guest speaker with specialist knowledge of an aspect of a particular component.

After the workshops were completed, attendee responses were transcribed and some basic analysis was undertaken. This consisted of tabulating and categorising these responses against the issues, indicators of success, and targets in the existing Management Plan. By doing this it was possible to clearly identify support for existing issues, indicators of success, and targets, whilst also highlighting omissions and new issues that may have arisen since the last Plan. These detailed reports can be accessed on the [Management Plan Review](#) webpage

In addition, weighted word clouds were generated for certain questions by feeding in attendee responses. In this way the most frequently occurring words could be quickly identified thus quickly highlighting the things attendees consider most important. An example of one of these word clouds for the Woodland-themed workshop can be seen below:



As well as informing the redrafting of the revised Plan, the information gathered at through the expert engagement process also fed into the Performance and Condition Monitoring reports – which help measure the effectiveness of the last plan and thereby highlight areas that require improvement in the next Plan.

3. Public Engagement

In summer 2017 a public survey was launched to explore what aspects of the High Weald the public find particularly beautiful and how they most like to enjoy the area. Questions on the public's values, perceptions of the biggest threats and desired improvements were posed and results were counted and analysed. The survey was distributed through a weblink via social media, email, e-news and through distribution via organisational stakeholders, including the area's local authorities.

A total of 294 people completed the survey. Of these 294, the largest proportion were aged between 45 - 64, however respondents did span all given age categories. Running themes were evident throughout the survey results and highlighted the enjoyment gained through just being within the landscape and the countryside and the sensory experiences – through sights, sounds and smells – that people valued most. Walking through the countryside was a key mechanism through which most people gain enjoyment, and public footpaths were the most used form of access. The threat of increased building developments and urban expansion was of great concern to the vast majority of people and restrictions on developments were the most popular way to improve and conserve the High Weald countryside. A full report of the survey results can be accessed on the [Management Plan Review](#) webpage.

The information gathered during this stage of the review was fed into the revised draft which was prepared for approval of the JAC and Management Board and subsequently made available for formal public consultation.

4. Work Undertaken Prior To Public Consultation

Responses from the public and expert engagement stages of the review were generally supportive of the plan approach and provided valuable feedback and suggestions for changes, amendments and the future of the plan. Following their incorporation, an internal review of the plan was also undertaken and identified areas that needed change and more focus. This stage of the review included a complete Condition Monitoring Assessment and Performance Monitoring Assessment.

The results of the stakeholder engagement and internal review confirmed that the plan was still fit for purpose and that it was fundamentally sound. Amendments to the plan therefore concentrated on the indicators and actions and particular gaps identified during the review, as well as factual and technical updating of the text.

In addition, three statutory assessments were carried out to inform the content of the Management Plan. These were:

- A Strategic Environmental Assessment
- A Habitats Regulations Assessment Stage 1 (screening) report
- An Equalities Impact Assessment of the Management Plan

The Consultation Draft Management Plan and its supporting documents were approved by the Joint Advisory Committee on 28th March 2018 for public consultation.

5. Public Consultation

The consultation exercise was launched on 13th June 2018 and ran through to the 25th July. The following measures were taken to publicise the consultation:

- Individual letters were sent to all the local authority chief executives; all the parish councils; Natural England; the Environment Agency; Historic England; Highways England; the Forestry Commission; Heritage Lottery Fund; Southern Water; South East Water; and UK Power Networks.
- Printed copies of the Management Plan were sent to all the local authorities for placing on deposit in their offices and placed in public libraries and the Ashdown Forest Centre.
- The Management Plan and its supporting documents were made available on the High Weald AONB Partnership website.
- Paper copies of response forms were also made available at deposit points and an online version was on the website .
- The consultation was advertised via social media and the High Weald AONB e-news.

143 responses were received, 115 from individuals and 28 from organisations. 82% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' with the AONB Vision and 84% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' with the Statement of Significance. There were 34 comments on the overall Plan and 234 comments on the character components, with the highest numbers on the Geology and Settlement components. The comments and proposed actions as a result can be viewed on the [Management Plan Review](#) webpage.

6 Conclusion

The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024 has been subject to significant public and expert engagement, consultation and scrutiny. It has also been subject to statutory assessments designed to test its impact on the environment generally, European designated habitats and equalities. The outcome of the consultation and assessments have informed its content where appropriate and ensured that the Management Plan remains up to date and relevant to everyone who lives, works and spends their leisure time in the High Weald and provides good advice to those who seek to conserve and enhance the AONB.