

From: Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transportation

To: Rob Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment

Subject: **Kent County Council Adoption of the 4th Revision of the High Weald Area of Outstanding National Beauty Management Plan 2024- 2029**

Key decision 24/00067

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Electoral Division:

Cranbrook – Sean Holden
Maidstone Rural South – Lottie Parfitt-Reid
Maidstone Rural West – Simon Webb
Malling Rural East – Sarah Hudson
Sevenoaks Rural South – Margot McArthur
Tenterden – Mike Hill, OBE
Tunbridge Wells East – Paul Barrington-King
Tunbridge Wells North – Peter Oakford
Tunbridge Wells Rural – Sarah Hamilton
Tunbridge Wells West – James McInroy

Summary: This report provides an overview of the revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2024 - 2029 in order to seek endorsement for its adoption by Kent County Council.

Recommendation(s): The Cabinet Member for Environment is asked to agree to:

- (i) ADOPT the revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2024-2029 on behalf of Kent County Council (Appendix 1).
- (ii) To DELEGATE authority to the Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment to refresh and/or make revisions to the Management Plan as appropriate during the lifetime of the plan
- (iii) To DELEGATE authority to the Corporate Growth, Environment and Transport to take relevant actions, including but not limited to finalising the terms of, and entering into required contract or other legal agreements, as necessary to implement the decision as shown at appendix A.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 requires local authorities within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to act collaboratively to prepare and publish an up-to-date plan, which '*formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it*'. The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 has been prepared by the High Weald AONB Unit and the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee, a partnership which includes all 15 local

authorities that have land within the High Weald AONB together with community, environment and land-based sector representatives for, and on behalf of, the borough and district councils of Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Ashford, Tonbridge and Malling, as well as Kent County Council, and councils across Surrey, West Sussex and East Sussex. The Cabinet Member for Environment, Rob Thomas, represents KCC on the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee, Helen Shulver, Head of Environment represents KCC on the High Weald Officers' Working Group.

- 1.2. On November 22nd 2023 all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales became National Landscapes. This change was brought about as a result of recommendations published in January 2022 following the Governments Landscapes reviews (National Parks and AONBs). The new name reflects the national importance of these protected landscapes and is endorsed by Natural England. The High Weald National Landscape remains an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty insofar as all policy, legislation and guidance applies to the designated landscape. For this reason, the management plan document is still titled and refers to the High Weald AONB Management Plan. Reference is made in the document to both the AONB and the High Weald National Landscape interchangeably. The statutory purpose of the designated landscape “to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the designated landscape” remains unchanged.
- 1.3. The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 is now with all the relevant authorities for adoption. This paper provides an outline of the revised Management Plan and seeks endorsement from the KCC Cabinet Committee for Environment and Transport for its adoption by the Cabinet Member for Environment.

2. Overview of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2024-2029

- 2.1. The High Weald AONB Management Plan was originally adopted by the County Council in April 2004 and set out a 20-year vision for the AONB. Revisions to the Management Plan were subsequently adopted in 2009, 2014 and 2019. This is the fourth revision.
- 2.2. The overall vision for the AONB remains largely unchanged. This revision seeks to respond to the changing context in which the 20-year vision operates – including the level of housing growth expected in Kent and climate, agriculture and biodiversity challenges and opportunities including the restoration of historic character and nature recovery potential. Additional principles in this revision include the sustainable management of visitors, a strategy for revitalising the woodland economy, adoption of a net-zero future and the link between the High Weald landscape and health and well-being. The Government's 25-year Environment Plan and The Environment Act 2021 are also captured.
- 2.3. The document is supported by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (Appendix 2 and 2a), a Habitat Regulation Screening (Appendix 3 and 3a) and an Equality Impact Assessment (Appendix 4).

- 2.4. The High Weald AONB Unit has overseen the consultation process for the Plan. Consultation on the revision of the plan commenced in January 2022 and has included:
- Engagement with officers and elected members from the AONB Local Authorities (through the Joint Advisory Committee) through questionnaires, collaborative editing and a series of actions workshops with discussion and debate about the key issues and opportunities they wish to see addressed in this Plan and how to best present policies.
 - Expert engagement through meetings and partnerships from local stakeholders to government departments, running and attending courses and webinars, and convening events which bring together experts including site visits and steering groups.
 - Public engagement via online surveys to support to formation of the plan and a full formal public consultation that ran between the 25th September 2023 and 5th November 2023.
- 2.5. The plan was approved by the Joint Advisory Committee on 27th March 2024 for adoption by each of the Local Authorities
- 2.6. Key changes and additions to the Management Plan in this revision include:
- Whilst the High Weald National Landscape is not a planning authority, the new Management Plan aims to better support local authorities, residents, parishes, and community groups to use the Management Plan in responding to planning applications through a dedicated planning section.
 - Dark Skies has become its own core component of the High Weald's natural beauty and is now reflected as such in the Management Plan, with objectives and actions for preserving the High Weald's dark skies.
 - The new climate and nature recovery sections will address nature-based and technological solutions to the net-zero carbon goals, including the use of natural flood management.
 - The condition of water ways, particularly pollution, has become one of the investment strategy principles for the Plan, and more overt actions targeted at water companies and other Section 85 organisations with duties to water ways have been included in the natural systems chapter.
- 2.7. Officers are satisfied that the County Council response has been adequately addressed and the proposed actions of the Management Plan do not place any new or unnecessary obligations on the County Council.
- 2.8. Policy Framework
- The Management Plan supports the following priority actions for Infrastructure for Communities and Environmental Step Change as set out in Framing Kent's Future: Our Council Strategy 2022- 2026
- Ensure that new development provides the appropriate physical and social infrastructure to support new and existing communities' way of life through an Infrastructure First approach.
 - Invest in Kent's high-quality landscapes and rural environment, protecting and enhancing productive farmland and protected landscapes and working with partners to tackle climate change challenges as the growing demands on water supply as our county grows.

- Improve access for our residents to green and natural spaces especially in urban and deprived areas and through our Public Rights of Way network to improve health and wellbeing outcomes.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1. Kent County Council makes an annual revenue contribution of £9,500 towards the core funding of the High Weald AONB (as do the other local authorities within the boundaries of the High Weald AONB).
- 3.2. It is not anticipated that the adoption of the revised Management Plan will place any additional financial obligations on the County Council. However, on 26th December 2023 a strengthened duty for relevant authorities to 'seek to further the purposes of the National Landscape' came into force. This enhanced duty requires all relevant authorities, which includes KCC in relation to the High Weald National Landscape, to work together to conserve and enhance natural beauty. Therefore, future requirements or opportunities to contribute to the work of the AONB unit outside of the adoption of the Management Plan may be presented.
- 3.3. Relevant services within the County Council will need to consider the revised Management Plan in relation to their operations (as they are already bound to do). The plans are of particular relevance to services concerned with commissioning, climate change, planning, heritage and natural environment, economic development, highways and public rights of way. Any change to these services resulting from the Management Plan would be required to be within the existing funding envelope - unless part of a wider plan for supporting the Net Zero agenda, which will be considered on an invest-to-save and case-by-case basis. There will undoubtedly be burdens and obligations on KCC as such initiatives are progressed, but the Management Plan itself will not impose such burdens.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1. The High Weald National Landscape is recognised and protected nationally and internationally for its natural beauty as one of the best surviving medieval landscapes in north-west Europe. The High Weald has remained a unique and recognisable area for at least the last 700 years. A statutory requirement in the CRoW Act is placed on the council to act jointly with the other local authorities to prepare and review a management plan for the landscape.
- 4.2. The High Weald AONB Management Plan review has been undertaken by the High Weald AONB Unit and overseen by the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee. The County Council is represented at a senior level on the Joint Advisory Committee by an elected Member and Officer.

5. Equalities implications

- 5.1. An Equality Impact Assessment of the Plan (Appendix 4) was carried out in February 2024 by the High Weald AONB Unit and concluded that the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024 – 2029 complies with the Equality Duty 2010.

6. Other Corporate Implications

- 6.1. Relevant services within the County Council will need to consider the revised Management Plan in relation to their operations (as they are already bound to do). The plans are of particular relevance to services concerned with commissioning, climate change, planning, heritage and natural environment, economic development, highways and public rights of way.

7. Governance

- 7.1. There are no new delegations as a result of the adoption of the Management Plan.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1. It is considered that the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029 as amended can be adopted by KCC. It is not anticipated that the new Management Plan will place any additional obligations or burdens on the County Council in terms of finance or resources - relevant services within the County Council must continue to consider the Management Plan in relation to their operations and services and will need to familiarise themselves with the Plan as revised.

9. Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Environment is asked to agree to:

- (i) ADOPT the revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2024-2029 on behalf of Kent County Council (Appendix 1).
- (ii) To DELEGATE authority to the Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment to refresh and/or make revisions to the Management Plan as appropriate during the lifetime of the plan
- (iii) To DELEGATE authority to the Corporate Growth, Environment and Transport to take relevant actions, including but not limited to finalising the terms of, and entering into required contract or other legal agreements, as necessary to implement the decision as shown at appendix A.

10. Appendices and Background Documents

Appendix A -Proposed Record of Decision
Appendix 1 – High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029
Appendix 2 and 2a - Strategic Environmental Assessment
Appendix 3 and 3a - Habitat Regulation Screening
Appendix 4 - Equality Impact Assessment

11. Report Author

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