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**By:** Keith Ferrin, Cabinet Member Environment, Highways & Waste  
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**To:** Cabinet

**Subject:** Adoption of Kent Downs and High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans

**Classification:** Unrestricted

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**Summary:** This paper provides an overview of the revised AONB Management Plans for the Kent Downs and High Weald and seeks approval for adoption by Kent County Council.

Under the terms of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 (part IV Section 89), Kent County Council and its local authority partners have a statutory duty to act jointly to prepare and review the Management Plans for AONBs.

This is the first review of the AONB Management Plans, which this council adopted in 2004 and strongly reflects the original adopted plan. The statutory deadline for adoption and publication of the Revised AONB Management Plans is April 1st 2009.

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## Introduction

1) The Kent Downs and High Weald are landscapes of national and international importance. The Management Plans have the potential to improve the quality of life for residents of Kent living and working in and around the AONBs, through the conservation and enhancement of its landscapes. They also act as a guide to all those that operate in the AONBs to conserve and enhance the components of natural beauty. The plans both contain an aspirational vision and associated policies/objectives, which will add value to existing plans and policies.

2) The Kent Downs and High Weald AONB Management Plans were originally published in 2004. These first reviews are fundamentally based on the original plans, which have already been adopted by this Council, and build on their strengths and new consultation and engagement that has included Kent County Council.

3) The first reviews of the AONB Management Plans have been prepared in accordance with national guidance and in close consultation with all of the local authorities for whom it is a statutory responsibility to act jointly to prepare and review AONB management plans. The revisions have been subject to wide public engagement and consultation.

4) The plans have been subject to rigorous assessment through a Strategic Environmental Assessment, Sustainability Appraisal and Appropriate Assessment.

- 5) Both plans are available for members to view in the Members' Lounge.

### **Background to AONB Management Plans**

6) AONBs are designated by Government under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949), for the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. Their legal status and importance were strengthened as part of the CROW Act in 2000 and are recognised by government as being on a par with the National Parks, although they do not have the same administrative powers. Government has made extra funding available for the management of AONBs.

7) Part IV of the CROW Act placed a statutory duty on constituent local authorities of AONBs to publish Management Plans by 1st April 2004 and to review them at five-yearly intervals. The Act also:

- a) places a duty on all public bodies and statutory undertakers to 'have regard' to the purposes of AONBs;
- b) reaffirms the original purposes of designation and confirms the powers of local authorities to take appropriate action to conserve or enhance the natural beauty of AONBs.

8) A secondary purpose of designation is to 'take account of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.' Whilst recreation is not an objective of designation, 'the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty...' Guidance for the production of management plans for AONBs is provided by the Countryside Agency in its publication 'AONB Management Plans: A Guide'.

9) The Kent Downs and High Weald AONBs lie within the boundaries of Kent County Council – 25% of the High Weald AONB is in Kent. See appendix 1 for a map of the AONB areas. The adoption of the revised AONB Management Plans is a Key Decision because of its significance for communities living and working in the AONBs.

10) Kent County Council, along with all the other participating relevant local authorities, has committed resources to the production of the entire Management Plan, including Member participation, officer involvement and funding. Funding for the Management Plan is shared between Government and the local authorities.

### **Management Plan Review and Key Changes**

11) Preparation of the original AONB Management Plans followed Management Plan Guidance and supplementary guidance from the Countryside Agency (CA23, November 2001). The review of the Plans followed the Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans (CA 221, 2006).

12) The revised Plans are based fundamentally on the original Management Plan and have been through a careful and thorough review process. There are no major changes in either of the Plans however some additional objectives/policies have been included.

13) The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan review has strengthened its aims with additions to the following natural beauty and quality of life components:

- a) Landform and landscape character:

- i. The use of a landscape character approach to inform decision making and identify areas of opportunity and threat and therefore action.
- b) Biodiversity:
  - i. The provision of functional ecological networks to assist with biodiversity adaptation to climate change.
  - ii. The agreement of spatial priorities in the Kent Downs for biodiversity management.
  - iii. The agreement that recreation and countryside pursuits should support the conservation of biodiversity.
- c) Woodland and trees:
  - i. The sustainable management of woodland to provide recreation, construction materials, a source of renewable energy, wildlife habitat and carbon offsetting.
- d) Historic and cultural heritage:
  - i. The support and strengthening of the historic character of the AONB through appropriate responses to climate change.
  - ii. The engagement and involvement of the community in the historic environment.
- e) Geology and natural resources:
  - i. The recognition, conservation and enhancement of important geological sites and exposures.
  - ii. A more positive and proactive approach to the implications of climate change, with intelligent mitigation and adaptation responses.
  - iii. The stabilisation and reduction of AONB ecological footprint.
- f) Vibrant communities:
  - i. The recognition of the area as a 'green' or 'sustainable tourism' destination.
- g) Sustainable development and travel:
  - i. The conservation and enhancement of the AONB at the heart of development and transport plans, policies and proposals.
  - ii. Encouragement of visitors to walk, cycle and use public transport.
- h) Access, enjoyment and understanding:
  - i. New connections between public rights of way and the highway network.
- 14) Notable changes to the High Weald AONB Management Plan include:
  - a) The recognition of climate change as an issue for the AONB and the provision of an objective to address this. Under this, the High Weald will play its role in mitigating climate change whilst ensuring that the landscape is able to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

- b) An increased profile for biodiversity throughout the plan, following concern that it was not featured sufficiently in the previous plan.
- c) The inclusion of a new objective for public understanding and enjoyment to ensure that perceptions and social and cultural aspirations for the landscape are recognised and taken account of in AONB management.

### **Implications of Kent Downs and High Weald AONB Management Plans**

15) Kent County Council is already committed to providing resources, both funding and officer time, to the two AONBs. It is not anticipated that the revised Management Plans will place any additional obligations on the County Council in terms of resources.

16) Both of the AONB Management Plans have considered the social, economic and environmental needs of the area (see paragraph 7) and have reflected these in their revisions. In particular this has included a greater emphasis on the need to address climate change within the Kent Downs and High Weald AONB.

17) Relevant units within the County Council will need to consider the revised policies (Kent Downs AONB) and objectives (High Weald) within the two Management Plans in relation to their operations. The plans are of particular relevance to the Environment (and Waste) Division and the Strategy and Planning Division within the Environment & Regeneration Directorate.

### **Consultations**

18) The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan review included an initial public consultation on the content and priorities of the existing plan, a series of expert debates on the AONB's natural beauty and quality of life components and a final public consultation throughout summer 2008 on the draft AONB Management Plan revision.

19) Following a review of the existing High Weald AONB Management Plan, and associated research projects, a public consultation on the draft AONB Management Plan revision was carried out during summer 2008.

20) Kent County Council contributed throughout all the above consultation periods and comments have been satisfactorily taken on board.

### **Local members**

21) Kent County Council is represented on the Kent Downs AONB and High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committees (JAC) by Keith Ferrin and Roy Bullock respectively. District authorities also have member representation on the JAC.

### **Conclusion**

22) Both plans have been reviewed to a rigorous standard, in strict accordance with national guidance, and have been subject to consultation.

23) On the 20th and 22nd of October the Joint Advisory Committees of the High Weald and Kent Downs AONBs (respectively) recommended the Management Plans to be taken forward for adoption by the individual relevant authorities, of which Kent County Council is one.

24) The formal date for the adoption, by all authorities, of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan and High Weald AONB Management Plan is set at 27th February 2009.

### **Recommendations**

25) The following recommendations are made to Cabinet:

- a) That Kent County Council adopts the First Revision of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan in fulfilment of its statutory duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.
- b) That Kent County Council adopts the First Revision of the High Weald AONB Management Plan in fulfilment of its statutory duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.
- c) That the Council delegates to the appropriate portfolio holder and/or officer the responsibility to accept changes made by other local authorities during the adoption process. The formal date for adoption of both plans is set at 27<sup>th</sup> February 2009.

### **Background documents**

- 26) Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – Management Plan First Revision 2009-2014 (May 2008)
- 27) Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - A Management Plan for 2004-2009 (April 2004)
- 28) The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2004 - a 20-year strategy: Review (June 2008)
- 29) The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2004 - a 20-year strategy (March 2004)
- 30) Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans - A guide, Countryside Agency, November 2001

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# APPENDIX 1 - MAP ILLUSTRATING KENT DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY AND HIGH WEALD AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

