

From: Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director, Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Susan Carey, Cabinet Member for Environment

Decision No: **21/00027**

Subject: **Kent County Council Adoption of the third revision of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2020-2025**

Electoral Division: Countywide, with the exception of all electoral divisions within Dartford Borough, Tunbridge Wells Borough and Thanet District administrative areas.

Summary: This report provides an overview of the revised Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2020-25 in order to seek its adoption by Kent County Council.

Recommendations: The Cabinet Member for Environment is asked to adopt the revised Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2020-2025 as shown at Appendix A.

1. Background

- 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 Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2020-2025 has been prepared by the Kent Downs AONB Unit and the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee for, and on behalf of, the twelve local authorities that have land within the Kent Downs AONB.
- 1.2. The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2020-2025 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. Financial Implications

- 2.1. Kent County Council makes an annual revenue contribution of £26,200 towards the core funding of the Kent Downs AONB Unit. The County Council and Kent Downs AONB Unit also work collaboratively to secure and leverage external funding to maximise outcomes and opportunities.
- 2.2. It is not anticipated that the revised Management Plan will place any additional financial obligations on the County Council.

- 2.3. Relevant units 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.

3. Policy Framework

- 3.1. The Management Plan supports the following priority actions as set out in Setting the Course: Kent County Council's Interim Strategic Plan (December 2020)
- Priority actions to help address the economic challenge – Champion the rural and green economy.
 - Priority actions to help address the environmental challenge – build sustainable, liveable homes and communities.
- 3.2. The Management Plan supports these priority actions by supporting the economic and social wellbeing of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty. The Management Plan also promotes the enjoyment of the AONB landscapes and the health and wellbeing opportunities it offers.
- 3.3. The Climate Change Risk Assessment and Adaptation Programme / Implementation Plan also features similar themes of land reclamation, soil erosions and protecting and replenishing woodland.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1. The Kent Downs AONB is recognised and protected nationally and internationally for its natural beauty. 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 Kent Downs AONB Management Plan review is being taken forward by the Kent Downs AONB Unit and overseen by the Kent Downs 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. Overview of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2020-2025

- 5.1. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to act jointly 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 Kent Downs AONB Unit leads the development of this plan on behalf of the relevant local authorities, overseen by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). Council member Matthew Balfour and Stephanie Holt-Castle, Interim Director for Environment, Planning and Enforcement, represent KCC on the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee.
- 5.2. The Kent Downs 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 adopted in 2009 and 2014. This is the third revision.
- 5.3. The overall vision for the AONB remains 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. Additional principles in this revision include the promotion of an arts and cultural strategy, sustainable management of visitors, conservation of soil, benefits the Kent Downs landscape offers for clean air and the link between landscape and health and well-being. The Government's 25-year Environment Plan and emerging Environment Bill are also captured.
- 5.4. The document is supported by an Environment Report, a Sustainability Appraisal and an Equality Impact Assessment.
- 5.5. The Kent Downs AONB Unit has overseen the consultation process for the Plan. This has included:
 - Meetings with officers and elected members from the AONB Local Authorities (through the Joint Advisory Committee) with discussion and debate about the key issues and opportunities they wish to see addressed in this Plan, and the way that policies need to be presented.
 - An extensive engagement process linked to the celebration of the Kent Downs AONB 50th Anniversary.
 - A series of 'expert opinion debate' meetings, presentations and discussion with a wide range of other key stakeholders including public bodies and voluntary organisations, parish councils, farmers and land managers, to examine what is important and what are key issues to them, and solutions that the Management Plan can take forward.
- 5.6. Cabinet Committee views were sought on the key areas for revision at the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee meeting on 23 January 2020,

in advance of the draft Management Plan public consultation which was carried out between 14 July 2020 and 7 September 2020.

- 5.7. The Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee was then asked to consider and make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Environment on the proposed KCC response on 15 September 2020. The County Council responded to the consultation on 22 September 2020.
- 5.8. A final draft plan was then circulated for comment to the Joint Advisory Committee in December 2020 and reviewed by the Committee on the 26 January 2021. All local authorities were then afforded a final opportunity to comment on the plan and this final adoption version reflects these comments. Key changes and additions to the Management Plan include:
- The plan policies have been re-defined as “principles” to be more consistent with the NPPF and Government guidance.
 - The plan has been reframed to respond positively to the rapid growth trajectory identified for Kent.
 - There is greater focus on biodiversity recovery, wilding and nature-based solutions to climate change impacts.
 - A revised Landscape Character Assessment has been produced.
 - It reflects changes in legislation, such as the Agriculture Act.
 - It reflects the findings of the Government’s Independent [Protected] Landscape Review (the Glover Review).
 - It reflects changes resulting from the UKs exit from the EU.
 - The plan is more clearly positive on issues of diversity and inclusion.
 - It identifies how the AONB landscape and partnership can take an active part in the recovery from the impact of Covid-19.
- 5.9. 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.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1. Equality Impact Assessment screening was carried out by the Kent Downs AONB Unit, using the Kent County Council standard template. The screening concluded that the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan Review 2020-2025 complies with the Equality Duty 2010. It is available through the link below at 9.(iv)

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. It is considered that the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2020-25 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 resources - relevant units 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.

8. Recommendation

8.1 The Cabinet Member for Environment is asked to adopt the revised Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2020-2025 as shown at Appendix A.

9. Appendices and Background Documents

- (i) Appendix A – Proposed Record of Decision
- (ii) Kent Downs AONB Management Plan:
<https://www.kentdowns.org.uk/management-plan-2021-2026/>
- (iii) Environment Report and Sustainability Appraisal: [Environmental Report for the Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan](#)
- (iv) Equality Impact Assessment: [Equality Analysis/ Impact Assessment \(EqIA\) for the statutory review of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan.](#)

10. Contact details

Report Author:

Francesca Potter, Senior Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Officer
03000 415673
Francesca.Potter@kent.gov.uk

Relevant Director:

Stephanie Holt-Castle, Interim Director Environment, Planning and Enforcement
03000 418817
Stephanie.Holt-Castle@kent.gov.uk