

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

To: Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste

Decision No: 19/00013

Subject: Kent County Council adoption of High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-24

Electoral Division: Cranbrook, Maidstone Rural South, Maidstone Rural West, Malling Rural East, Sevenoaks Rural South, Tenterden, Tunbridge Wells East, Tunbridge Wells North, Tunbridge Wells Rural and Tunbridge Wells West.

Summary: This report provides an overview of the revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2019-24 in order to seek endorsement for its adoption by Kent County Council.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste is asked to formally adopt the reviewed and revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-2.

1. Introduction

1.1 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 High Weald AONB Unit has prepared such a plan 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 for the period 2019-24.

1.2 The High Weald AONB Management Plan 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 Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste.

2. Financial Implications

2.1 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 HWAONB). It is not anticipated that the revised Management Plan will place any additional financial obligations on the County Council.

2.2 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.

3. Policy Framework

3.1 The Management Plan supports the Council's second Strategic Outcome of *"Kent communities feel the benefits of economic growth by being in-work, healthy and enjoying a good quality of life"* by helping to support:

- rural business and economic growth;
- a good quality of life;
- well planned housing growth;
- and a physical and natural environment that is protected, enhanced and can be enjoyed.

3.2 The Management Plan also supports a number of the themes for action in the Kent Environment Strategy.

4. Overview of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2019-24

4.1 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 High Weald AONB Unit leads the development of this plan on behalf of the relevant local authorities, overseen by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). Matthew Balfour attends the JAC for Kent County Council.

4.2 The High Weald AONB Management Plan was originally published in 2004 as a 20-year strategy and this is reviewed every five years. Reviews, with minor revisions, have taken place in 2009 and 2014. In 2017, the third review was instructed by the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee. This review has taken account of the potential impact of Brexit on agri-environmental policy and the significant increase in development pressures within the AONB since the last review. The plan has also required amendments to bring it in line with the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, published in 2018.

4.3 The High Weald AONB Unit has overseen the consultation process for the Plan. This included a series of technical workshops based around the key components of the plan in summer 2017; followed by early public engagement through an on-line questionnaire, with nearly 400 people taking part.

4.4 Public Consultation on the Management Plan and its supporting documents was carried out between 13th June and 25th July 2018; this included consultation with all the local authorities. 143 responses were received, 115 from individuals and 28 from organisations; 82% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' with the AONB Vision.

4.5 KCC submitted Officer comments in response to the formal consultation in July 2018. Officers are satisfied that these have been adequately addressed and the proposed actions of the management plan do not place any new or unnecessary obligations on the County Council.

4.6 The review is accompanied by a Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitats Regulations Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment.

4.7 The amended plan is framed around 22 objectives, which fall under the five defining components of the High Weald's AONB character (and a further two elements considered of relevance to the High Weald AONB Management Plan):

- Geology, landform, water systems and climate
- Settlement
- Routeways
- Woodland
- Field and heath
- Land-based economy and related rural life
- Other qualities and features that are connected to the interaction between the landscape and people, such as access and enjoyment

4.8 The Plan's objectives remain largely the same from the previous High Weald AONB Management Plan adopted by the appropriate KCC Cabinet Member in 2014. New or amended objectives include:

4.8.1 To protect and enhance soils, the sandstone outcrops, and other important landform and geological features. This objective has been amended from the previous management plan to specifically include soils, reflecting the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan's priority in this regard.

4.8.2 To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald and ensure development reflects the character of the High Weald in its scale, layout and design. The addition of reflecting the AONB's character in scale, layout and design is in response to the increase in development pressure. It aims to protect and enhance the character and quality of buildings in the High Weald; and re-establish the use of local materials as a means of protecting the environment and adding to this distinctiveness.

4.8.3 To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty. This is a new objective for the Management Plan, which looks to sustain an economically viable land management sector, with a particular emphasis on sustainable and small-scale farming and forestry.

4.8.4 To improve amenities, infrastructure (including the provision of appropriate affordable housing), and skills development for rural communities and related sectors that contribute positively to conserving and enhancing natural beauty. This is a new objective for the Management Plan, which looks to foster community life and economic activities – including heritage conservation, sustainable tourism and outdoor education – that support conservation of the AONB.

4.8.5 To develop and manage access to maximise opportunities for everyone to enjoy, appreciate and understand the character of the AONB while conserving its natural beauty. This objective has been amended to give emphasis on wider engagement with the AONB through access; alongside the

need to ensure that access infrastructure, services and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment.

4.8.6 To protect and promote the perceptual and aesthetic qualities that people value. This objective has been amended so that action is taken to not only promote but protect what is valued.

4.9 A full list of the High Weald AONB Management Plan objectives is provided in Appendix 1. This table also provides a comparison with the 2019-24 objectives to those of the previous 2014-19 Plan.

4.10 All of the Management Plan's actions have been amended as a result of the review. Many of them are in direct accord with those contained within the Kent Environment Strategy and other relevant strategies. Actions of particular note or relevance to KCC in respect of the services it delivers include:

Climate change and environmental impact

4.10.1 Consider AONB characteristics in climate change mitigation and adaption strategies with particular attention paid to achieving reductions in energy demand and supporting alternative sustainable transport options.

4.10.2 Support fossil fuel-free and public transport initiatives, encouraging walking, cycling and other travel alternatives where possible.

4.10.3 Encourage all new habitable buildings to be constructed using ultra-low energy building techniques, with landscape-sensitive on-site renewable energy generation where appropriate.

4.10.4 Reduce through management interventions by-products which are burnt or sent to landfill (consider opportunities for new markets for waste products).

Local goods and services

4.10.5 Preferentially select goods and services which support AONB landscape conservation in procurement decisions e.g. locally produced food, fuel, fencing, timber for construction.

4.10.6 Choose local food and support local food growers through procurement policies.

Planning

4.10.7 Ensure there is reference to the AONB Management Plan in local plans and other public documents and ensure its use as material consideration in planning decisions.

Highways and PRow

4.10.8 Ensure the design and maintenance of highways and the public realm, including street furniture, has regard to local distinctive character and avoids suburbanisation or generic approaches.

4.10.9 Identify historic routeways in highway improvement plans and consider approaches in management that are tailored to enhance their historic character including early intervention to protect banks.

4.10.10 Invest in creative highway engineering solutions, delivering quality, best practice highway alterations which are sensitive to AONB character.

4.10.11 Prioritise the appropriate management of ecologically-rich road verges in highway management and avoid damaging operations.

4.10.12 Undertake sensitive management of old coppice on routeway banks.

4.10.13 Maintain routeway verges in their 'natural state' and refrain from planting non-native species along routeways.

4.10.14 Jointly produce an access strategy that sets out areas for strategic investment to improve rights of way and increase access for all users.

4.10.15 Recognise and act to minimise the impact of traffic noise and congestion on rural lanes.

Rural economy

4.10.16 Support investment in small-scale businesses including dedicated small loans and promote innovation funds and improved rural broadband.

4.10.17 Support improved digital connectivity across rural areas.

5. Equality Impact Assessment

5.1 The Equality Impact Assessment screening was carried out by the High Weald AONB Unit, using the East Sussex County Council standard template. The screening concluded that the High Weald AONB Management Plan Review 2019-2024 complies with the Equality Duty 2010. It is available through the link below (see 8.3).

6. Conclusions

6.1 It is considered that the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-24 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.

7. Recommendation(s)

7.1 The Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste is asked to formally adopt the reviewed and revised High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2019-20.

8. Background Documents

8.1 Appendix A – Record of Decision

8.2 HWAONB Management Plan 2019-24

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/joint-advisory-committee-papers/2018-2019/2247-jac-approved-high-weald-management-plan-2019-2024-1/file.html>

8.3 Supporting information for review <http://www.highweald.org/high-weald-aonb-management-plan/management-plan-review.html>

8.4 Equality Impact Assessment for High Weald AONB Management Plan

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/joint-advisory-committee-papers/2018-2019/2235-hwmp-equality-impact-assessment-november-2018-version-for-jac/file.html>

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APPENDIX 1 – High Weald AONB Management Plan amendments to objectives

The following table notes the objectives of the 2019-2024 HWAONB Management Plan and the corresponding objective of the previous 2014-2019 Plan; where notable changes have been made, the rationale for this change is provided.

| New objective | Objective previously within 2014-2019 plan | Rationale for change |
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| Objective G1: To restore the natural function of rivers, water courses and water bodies. | G1 Objective: To restore the natural function of river catchments. | Expanded to detail specifically what river catchments embody. |
| Objective G2: To protect and enhance soils, sandstone outcrops, and other important landform and geological features. | G2 Objective: To protect the sandstone outcrops and other important geological features of the AONB. | This objective has been slightly amended from the previous management plan to specifically include soils, reflecting the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan's priority in this regard. |
| Objective G3: To help secure climatic conditions and rates of change which support continued conservation and enhancement of the High Weald's valued landscape and habitats. | G3 Objective: Climatic conditions and rates of change which support continued conservation and enhancement of the High Weald's valued landscape and habitats. | To recognise that partners have a role to play in the larger agenda to tackle climate. |
| Objective S1: To reconnect settlements, residents and their supporting economic activity. | S1 Objective: To reconnect settlements, residents and their supporting economic activity <i>with the surrounding countryside</i> . | Minor edit. |
| Objective S2: To protect the historic pattern and character of settlement. | S2 Objective: To protect the historic pattern of settlement. | Minor edit. |
| Objective S3: To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald and ensure development reflects the character of the High Weald in its scale, layout and design. | S3 Objective: To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald. | The addition of reflecting the AONB's character in scale, layout and design is in response to the increase in development pressure. It aims to protect and enhance the character and quality of buildings in the High Weald; and re-establish the use of local materials as a means of protecting the |

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| | | environment and adding to this distinctiveness. |
| Objective R1: To maintain the historic pattern and features of routeways. | R1 Objective: To maintain the historic pattern and features of routeways. | (no change) |
| Objective R2: To enhance the ecological function of routeways. | R2 Objective: To enhance the ecological function of routeways. | (no change) |
| Objective W1: To maintain the existing extent of woodland and particularly ancient woodland. | W1 Objective: To maintain existing extent of woodland and particularly ancient woodland. | (no change) |
| Objective W2: To enhance the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale. | W2 Objective: To enhance the ecological functioning of woodland at a landscape scale. | Minor edit. |
| Objective W3: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands. | W3 Objective: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of AONB woodlands. | (no change) |
| Objective W4: To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets. | W4 Objective: To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets. | (no change) |
| Objective FH1: To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management. | FH1 Objective: To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management. | (no change) |
| Objective FH2: To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands. | FH2 Objective: To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands. | (no change) |
| Objective FH3: To enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats. | FH3 Objective: To enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats. | (no change) |
| Objective FH4: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of field and heath. | FH4 Objective: To protect the archaeology and historic assets of field and heath. | (no change) |
| Objective LBE1: To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, | | This is a new objective for the Management Plan, which looks to sustain an economically |

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| farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty. | | viable land management sector, with a particular emphasis on sustainable and small-scale farming and forestry. |
| Objective LBE2: To improve amenities, infrastructure (including the provision of appropriate affordable housing), and skills development for rural communities and related sectors that contribute positively to conserving and enhancing natural beauty. | | This is a new objective for the Management Plan, which looks to foster community life and economic activities – including heritage conservation, sustainable tourism and outdoor education – that support conservation of the AONB. |
| Objective OQ1: To increase opportunities for learning about and celebrating the character of the High Weald. | UE1 Objective: To increase opportunities for learning about and celebrating the character of the High Weald. | (no change) |
| Objective OQ2: To increase the contribution of individuals and communities to the conservation and enhancement of the AONB. | UE2 Objective: To increase the contribution of individuals to the conservation and enhancement of the AONB. | Minor edit. |
| Objective OQ3: To develop and manage access to maximise opportunities for everyone to enjoy, appreciate and understand the character of the AONB while conserving its natural beauty. | UE3 Objective: To increase community involvement in conservation and enhancement of the AONB. | This objective has been amended to give emphasis on wider engagement with the AONB through access; alongside the need to ensure that access infrastructure, services and activities are consistent with conserving and enhancing natural beauty and its quiet enjoyment. |
| Objective OQ4: To protect and promote the perceptual qualities that people value. | UE4 Objective: To develop and manage services that support informal open-air recreation to facilitate 'green' use by all residents and visitors. | This objective has been amended so that action is taken to not only promote but protect what is valued. |