

Context and Framework

Setting the Scene

Providing a vision and long-term ambitions for the North Wessex Downs AONB from 2019 to 2024

1.1 The first two chapters of the 2019-24 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan set out a vision and long-term ambitions for the North Wessex Downs and the legal and policy framework for the Plan.

1.2 This is followed by thematic chapters which describe and explain the special qualities that make this landscape unique: Landscape, Rural Land Management, Biodiversity, Natural Resources, Historic Environment, Development, Communities, and Tourism, Leisure and Access. At the end of each thematic chapter are: a summary of the Special Qualities relating to that theme; the key issues relating to the theme; Strategic Objectives for the Plan period; and the AONB Policies to support these objectives and which are intended to guide and inform the policies and actions of all members of the North Wessex Downs Partnership.

1.3 The final chapters of the Plan cover implementation and monitoring of the Plan, including an outline of how stakeholders are expected to contribute to delivering Strategic Objectives and Policies. The Management Plan is supported by an AONB business plan that sets out the priorities for action on an annual 'review and revise' cycle.

About the North Wessex Downs

1.4 From their western tip at Calne in Wiltshire, the North Wessex Downs reach across central southern

England in a broad eastward arc through southern Swindon and Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. They about the Chilterns AONB along the River Thames in the Goring Gap area north-west of Reading, dipping south and then sweeping west along the River Kennet valley then south to encircle Newbury, encompassing the northern reaches of the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs. They then stretch back towards Devizes, across the northern fringes of the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low-lying Vale of Pewsey.

1.5 The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is the third largest AONB in the country. This protected landscape extends to 1,730 km² (668 sq miles), an area equivalent to a medium-sized English county. Its resident population is just over 100,000 people (an average density across the AONB of 58.3 residents per km²); the two largest settlements inside the AONB boundary, Hungerford and Marlborough, have a total population of 13,100¹. In contrast, in the immediate setting of the North Wessex Downs, lie the significant urban centres of Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke, Andover, Swindon and Didcot, with a combined population of 615,000. An estimated 1.1 million residents live within 20 minutes' drive time of the AONB.

1.6 Two major highways – the M4 and A34 – pass through the area, aligned east-west and north-south respectively; the twin-track railway from London Paddington to Exeter and the South West passes through the centre of the AONB, following, successively, the Kennet, Dun and Avon river valleys; and the broader, larger four-track Great Western Railway route to Bristol and South Wales cuts through the north-eastern extremity of the area along the River Thames valley,

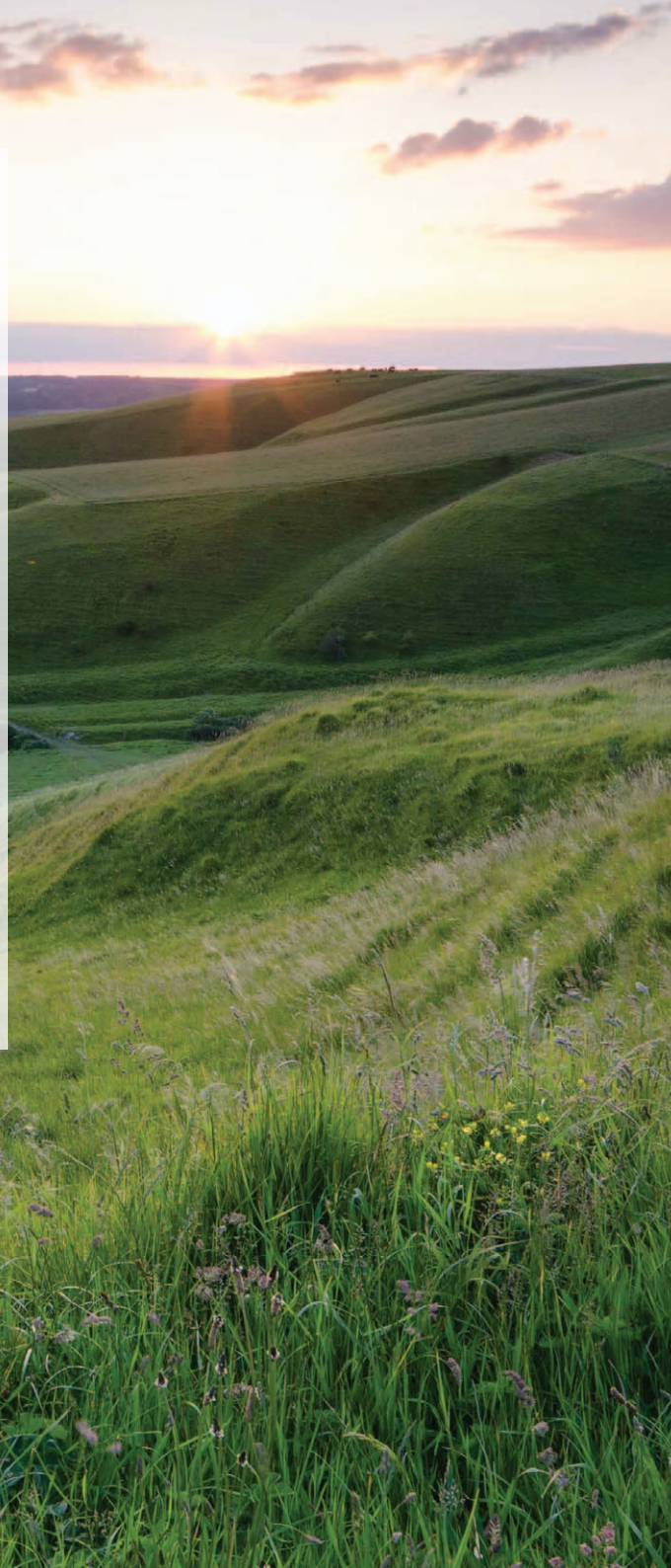
The North Wessex Downs is the third largest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the country

Icons of the North Wessex Downs



A Vision for the North Wessex Downs

Vast, dramatic, undeveloped and distinct chalk downlands with nationally significant areas of semi-natural chalk grassland, contrasting with well-wooded plateaux, arable lands and intimate and secluded valleys, all rich in wildlife and cultural heritage; a high quality landscape of national and international significance which persists in increasingly urbanised surroundings; where people live, work and relax; where visitors are welcomed and contribute to a vibrant rural economy; and access to which supports the health and wellbeing of local residents and visitors alike.



then follows the northern boundary outside the AONB, but within its setting and clearly visible from the northern scarp.

1.7 The North Wessex Downs was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1972 under the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act 1949. Following the introduction of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, the Government confirmed that the landscape qualities of National Parks and AONBs are equivalent.

1.8 The North Wessex Downs AONB contains all or part of 173 parishes, straddling the boundaries of two counties, three unitary authorities and four district/borough councils. It sits on a regional divide, with roughly half of the area in the South East and half in South West England, occupying a central position along the line of chalk-dominated landscapes from the Dorset coast to the northern edge of the Chiltern Hills.

1.9 The North Wessex Downs AONB is one of a family of nationally protected landscapes across England comprising 34 AONBs and 10 National Parks. Together, these finest, most outstanding English landscapes cover over 23% of the country. The importance of these designated landscapes is also recognised at international level, and North Wessex Downs is one of the UK's Category V Protected Landscapes, as defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Natureⁱⁱ.

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- i All population data are based on the 2011 Census unless stated otherwise.
 - ii IUCN –officially the 'International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources'– is a global intergovernmental organisation. The IUCN maintains a database of the world's protected areas, categorised using definitions based upon management objectives.

The long-term goal is that the North Wessex Downs AONB will be a place:

- ▶ where land use, management and development are driven by an overarching principle of stewardship of the protected landscape; where people have the imagination, skills and energy to accommodate and adapt to change in ways that respect the unique qualities of the North Wessex Downs AONB and deliver wider environmental, economic and social benefits;
- ▶ where the highest environmental quality is seen as a key economic driver; where all economic activity is in harmony with maintenance of the landscape and its special qualities; where new buildings and other forms of development display high quality design worthy of one of England's designated finest landscapes;
- ▶ with thriving land-based and other rural enterprises where conserving and enhancing the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs is core to these businesses, ensuring a countryside rich in wildlife, heritage and recreational opportunities while producing high quality products, including sustainable farming that benefits the local economy and surrounding countryside;
- ▶ with high quality habitats reflecting the distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs and stable and recovering populations of key species; landscapes that are protected, expanded, linked and under beneficial management resilient to the pressures of climate change;
- ▶ with a rich and conserved cultural landscape where the pervasive historic landscape character is understood and appreciated, and informs future change; where iconic monuments, both designated and undesignated heritage areas, archaeological sites, buried archaeology and historic landscapes and historic settlements and their settings remain as indelible and visible footprints in an evolving scene, managed to the very highest standards;
- ▶ where the integrated management of land conserves high quality soils and water resources whilst retaining the distinctive seasonal winterbourne flows and the nationally and internationally significant chalk streams of the AONB;
- ▶ where a sense of remoteness and tranquillity predominates, and where vast night skies can thrill the eye, unaffected by light pollution; where these special qualities are recognised in development decisions within in the setting of the region, so that the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs AONB is protected;
- ▶ where development responds to genuine local need and where new buildings show continuity with the past, respecting and complementing the beauty of the landscape and the character of local vernacular building materials and styles;
- ▶ where the integrated approach to transport and travel satisfies local needs and minimises negative effects on the environment; where the dominance of roads and the impact of clutter are reduced;
- ▶ with vibrant rural communities, where villages and market towns meet the needs of local communities and visitors; where there is great local pride in the landscape and positive local contribution to the stewardship of its special qualities;
- ▶ that is a nationally recognised centre for responsible tourism and enjoyment of the countryside, developed and promoted in ways that are in harmony with the high environmental quality and the local community, helping to underpin the broader rural economy;
- ▶ that is recognised as a vital community resource, with potential benefits to physical and mental wellbeing of both local residents and visitors arising from access to nature and the countryside, to a tranquil environment, and to the opportunities presented for social interaction and volunteering;
- ▶ where there is wide public recognition of the protected status and special qualities of the North Wessex Downs among communities in and around the AONB; where all responsible bodies understand and respect the protected status of the area and their duties towards the AONB in their plans and proposals.



Page 10 Roundway near Devizes, Andrew Perrott

Page 11 Wittenham Clumps, Wilton Windmill, Cow at Wansdyke Way, all David Hall

North Wessex Downs

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

totals

1,730 km²
668 square miles

4 counties
9 local authorities
173 parishes

“Vast, dramatic, undeveloped and distinct chalk downlands, rich in wildlife and cultural heritage”



21,475 ha
of woodland

(12.4% of land cover)

About one-third is ancient woodland

The main rivers flowing through the Downs are the Pang, the Lambourn and the Kennet

Chalk streams support a huge range of plants and animals like pea mussels, water voles and river water-dropwort

THERE ARE 4 RIVER CATCHMENTS IN THE AONB



100,000 inhabitants

1.1 million within 20 minutes' drive

- ▶ 2,858 km (1,776 miles) of **rights of way**
- ▶ 102 km (64 miles) of **National Trails**
- ▶ 47 km (29 miles) of **canals**



UNESCO World Heritage Site

Stonehenge and Avebury is the only prehistoric World Heritage Site in England. Listed in 1986, it includes the world's largest prehistoric stone circle at Avebury

Agriculture is the dominant land use in the AONB with

84% of the land classified as farmland



479

Scheduled Monuments

15

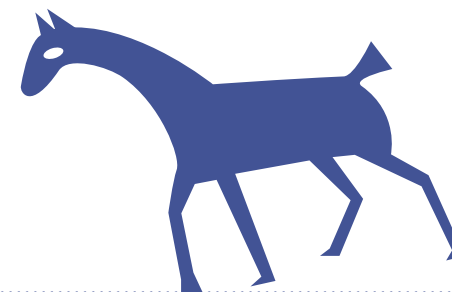
Registered Parks and Gardens

1

Registered Battlefield

4,069

Listed Buildings



66

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) totalling 3,330 ha

2

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) at Pewsey Downs and Fyfield Down

9

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) protecting chalk grassland, wetland and woodland habitats

Holds 9% of the UK's remaining chalk grassland

15% of the area enjoys pristine night skies

73% of the area is in the two darkest night sky categories*

* <0.5 NanoWatts/cm²/sr.

Legal and Policy Framework for the Management Plan

The primary purpose of AONB designation is “conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area”

AONB Purpose and the Meaning of ‘Natural Beauty’

1.10 The primary purpose of AONB designation is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 as “*conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area*”ⁱⁱⁱ. The Act elaborates on this primary purpose, stating that any reference “*to the conservation of natural beauty of an area includes a reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological and physiographic features*”^{iv}.

1.11 Natural beauty goes well beyond scenic or aesthetic value. The natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is a function of the relationship between people and place over time. It encompasses everything that makes the area distinctive: the area’s geology and landform; its climate, soils and rivers; its wildlife and ecology; its rich history of human settlement and land use over millennia; its archaeology and buildings, and cultural associations; and the people who have occupied the area in the past and those who live and work here now.

1.12 This relationship is encapsulated in a policy position set out 25 years ago, stating that “*In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken 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 and social development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses*”^v. More recent legislation in defining ‘natural beauty in the countryside’ establishes that “*land used for agriculture or woodlands, ... as a park ... or whose flora, fauna*

or physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention ... [may be] treated as being an area of natural beauty (or of outstanding natural beauty)”^{vi}.

1.13 The North Wessex Downs is thus an ancient, evolved cultural landscape, managed and nurtured by people over time. Those who manage the land are central to the future of this landscape. The North Wessex Downs Partnership is committed to long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values in the protected landscape, contributing to a wider network of protected areas. It is inevitable and appropriate that this cultural landscape will continue to change and develop but this needs to be in ways that conserve and enhance its special qualities.

Why is this Management Plan Important?

1.14 This AONB Management Plan presents an agreed agenda for the North Wessex Downs AONB for the next five-year period, 2019-2024. It sets out strategic objectives for AONB partners that are judged to be realistic and achievable during the Plan period, and policies which support the long term goals set out in the Vision Statement. Working together, the partners can realise these targets to the benefit of the landscapes and communities of this nationally designated, and internationally recognised, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

1.15 Responsible local authorities are required to prepare an AONB Management Plan and review the Plan no less than every five years. The North Wessex Downs Council of Partners have prepared this plan on behalf of the relevant local authorities of the AONB.

1.16 The Partnership comprises representatives of the constituent local authorities, the local communities, the farming and rural business community, and those interested in nature conservation, heritage, landscape and recreation.

1.17 All relevant authorities are legally obliged, “*in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty*” to “*have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of*

Page 13 Hackpen Hill, greatwestway.co.uk



Local authorities

must prepare an AONB Management Plan and review it at least every five years

This Plan sets out strategic objectives for AONB partners that are realistic and achievable in the Plan period

the area. 'Relevant authorities' include all statutory bodies and all tiers of government, including parish councils and holders of public office.

1.18 In addition to obligations under national legislation, the UK is a signatory to the European Landscape Convention (ELC), a multinational treaty which is devoted exclusively to the protection, management and planning of landscapes throughout Europe^{vii}. The ELC seeks to ensure that enhanced landscape planning, protection and management are achieved through 'quality objectives and an effective policy framework'. In particular, the Convention highlights the need to:

- ▶ recognise landscape in law;
- ▶ develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of landscapes; and
- ▶ establish procedures for the participation of the general public and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of landscape policies.

1.19 The ELC encourages the integration of landscape into all relevant areas of policy, including cultural, economic and social policies, with a particular emphasis on the need for co-operation when administrative boundaries are crossed. The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2019-24 is a significant contribution to the UK's implementation of the Convention.

1.20 Successful implementation of this Management Plan is beyond the resources of the Council of Partners and AONB team alone. It requires the active collaboration and participation of all those involved in its scope. This is a Plan for the North Wessex Downs AONB in its entirety; it is not for any single organisation within it. Implementation requires the support and involvement of the many organisations and individuals who play key roles in the future of the area, many of whom have been involved in preparation of the Plan.

1.21 One way of satisfying the 'Section 85' duties placed on government and other public bodies through the CRoW Act 2000

is by supporting the implementation of this Plan. Local parish councils, statutory agencies and local bodies acting individually or through partnerships can all contribute to fulfilling the Management Plan vision.

Planning for Change

1.22 This Management Plan sits alongside other plans and strategies prepared at national and local levels and a range of environmental legislation and policies and international commitments. The Plan period will be a time of transition as the UK adjusts domestic policy and legislation following its expected withdrawal from the EU.

1.23 The areas of EU policy and law that have greatest impact on the North Wessex Downs AONB's primary purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty are the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the canon of EU environmental policy and legislative instruments. The UK Government has committed to maintain existing environmental protection arising from EU policy and law, so the objectives of, for example, the Water Framework

Directive, the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive are to be retained under national legislation. Agricultural support payments, including incentives to enhance biodiversity of the farmed environment, are also guaranteed to continue at least for the first years of this Management Plan. However, it is very clear from, for example, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) 25 Year Environment Plan launched in January 2018, the consultation on future of food, farming and the environment launched in February and the Glover review of National Parks and AONBs announced in May this year, that significant reform of support mechanisms and incentives for agriculture

– the predominant land use in the North Wessex Downs – and of wider countryside policy and protected landscape can be expected. While the precise time frame for any changes cannot be predicted, it is quite possible that new opportunities will arise during this Plan period that will benefit the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Successful implementation of this Plan requires the participation of all those involved in its scope



1.24 In response to the opportunities and challenges presented through the process of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the Management Plan has included proposals for priorities of a new environmental land management system (ELMS) which would support the special qualities of the AONB Landscape Character Types (Tables 3-11, pages 35-39). These proposals will be kept under review and adjusted as the proposed new ELMS develops.

- iii Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000; Section 82.
- iv CROW Act 2000; Section 92.
- v Countryside Commission (1991) Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement. CCP 356; p. 5.
- vi Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act, 2006; Section 99.
- vii The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is a treaty of the Council of Europe. The UK's participation in the ELC is unaffected by withdrawal from the European Union.



Page 15 Horse-drawn barge at Kintbury, Peter Orr; Combine harvester, Lord Carnarvon; Short-eared owl, David White