

theme 8

Tourism, Leisure and Access

AONB Special Qualities: Tourism, Leisure and Access

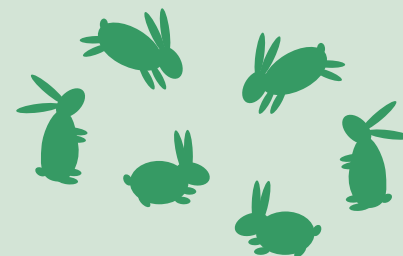
Historic attractions like country houses, Saxon churches and Neolithic monuments

An extensive rights of way network

One of the finest cultural landscapes, full of wildlife and history, which has inspired famous works

Picturesque market towns and villages with a variety of shops, pubs and hotels

Reflections of the social and industrial history of the area such as canals, railways and a windmill





“Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such a track is in some sort humanly companionable; it really seems to lead you by the hand.”

Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932)

Tourist attractions

include Avebury World Heritage Site, Uffington White Horse, the Ridgeway and Thames Path, and the Kennet and Avon Canal

2,200 full time jobs

are supported by visitors to the AONB



A Landscape for Leisure

The magical landscape of the North Wessex Downs AONB has attracted naturalists, antiquarians and travellers throughout history

Tourism and Leisure

9.1 The North Wessex Downs AONB is a landscape rich in historic sites and natural features. This magical landscape has attracted naturalists, antiquarians and travellers throughout history. Tourist attractions of international renown within the North Wessex Downs include: the 25 km² (9.6 sq miles) Avebury World Heritage Site (taking in Avebury Village and the Avebury Henge complex, as well as Silbury Hill, Windmill Hill and the West Kennet long barrow); the White Horse at Uffington; the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails; and the Kennet and Avon Canal providing a strategic waterways link between the Thames and Bristol Channel. But it is the spectacular scenery, highly attractive villages, and sense of tranquillity that are the primary recreational and tourism attractions of the area.

9.2 Although not large in number, there is a range of paying visitor attractions within the North Wessex Downs. These include Basildon Park, Lower Basildon (run by the National Trust) and Highclere Castle, near Newbury (owned by the Earl of Carnarvon), the Crofton Beam Engines and Pumping Station on the Kennet and Avon Canal at Great Bedwyn and the Living Rainforest environmental centre at Hampstead Norreys. There are many more attractions that could benefit from greater collective promotion and support.

9.3 Despite its close proximity to major areas of population, the North Wessex Downs is not well used as a place for quiet enjoyment. Green tourism offers enormous opportunities for the North Wessex Downs and a good business reason for conserving and enhancing the landscape. There may be opportunities for the tourism sector to support investment in rights of way

improvements and the provision of accommodation, facilities and information.

9.4 At present, visitors to the AONB directly support around 2,200 full time jobs. Of all visitors, 18% are from overseas, most of whom are travelling for business purposes and stay for a single night, during Monday-Thursday. Well over 90% of all foreign visitors are either business- or family-related. Nearly half of all visitors to the area stay with family or friends. The average length of stay by UK visitors is two days and it is estimated that a visitor spends an additional £27 in the North Wessex Downs. More than half of all serviced accommodation providers are un-graded for quality. There is potential to improve the performance of the area as a short-break destination, particularly with the development of bespoke activity packages, such as self-guided off-road cycle routes. The area has the opportunity to appeal to affluent young and older couples from London and the Home Counties, which would bring real benefits to the rural economy.

9.5 The North Wessex Downs can be an area for green tourism, with easily accessible information about its wildlife, culture and history, and with many opportunities to explore on foot, by bike and on horseback. In response the AONB Partnership has implemented two projects, the South East Protected Landscapes 'Our Land', and 'LEADER'-funded 'Love Your Land' initiative. Through a growing network of tourism businesses it is hoped that the value of the landscape will be reflected more widely in the tourism 'offer'.

Rights of Way and Access

9.6 Access to the countryside is an important part of the lives of people who live in the area and also for visitors as a tourism asset. The importance of using and enjoying woodlands and green spaces as part of an everyday healthy lifestyle has been demonstrated by Forestry Commission research. Exercise in the North Wessex Downs can have positive effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership will look to build on initiatives such as the circular

Green tourism offers enormous opportunities and a good business reason for conserving the landscape

walks developed in partnership with the Ridgeway National Trail. The lack of convenient public transport imposes limits on the benefits and use of the resource.

9.7 Access and the needs of recreational users must be balanced with land-managing interests, as well as other issues such as conservation. Greater and easier access should be encouraged where this can be achieved without undue cost to conservation or the landowner’s use of the land. There may be opportunities from the growth of settlements on the fringes of the North Wessex Downs to offset some of the impact through improving and extending access.

9.8 The CRoW Act 2000 established access land which the public has the right to enjoy under certain conditions. There are 1,189 ha of open access land and 694 ha of registered commons in the North Wessex Downs. There are also permissive arrangements by which landowners grant access voluntarily or as part of inheritance tax agreements. At present some of this access can be difficult to determine due to the patchwork nature of its provision. In addition, there are 100 hectares of National Trust land to which there is access. An analysis of accessible natural greenspace provision in South East England a decade ago (February 2007) found that the North Wessex Downs AONB had the smallest proportion of all accessible natural greenspace (4% of the total) across the South East Protected Landscapes. No more recent data have been uncovered to indicate whether this has changed in recent years.

9.9 Of the accessible natural greenspace, 59% was woodland. In general, woodlands with open or partial access are owned by either the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust or the National Trust. A surprising 69% of the woodland area has a public right of way either crossing through it or along one edge of a woodland. However, ‘open access’ to woodland is at a different scale. Just 14% of the woodland area in the AONB has open access.

9.10 One of the most important resources of the North Wessex Downs is its extensive rights of way network, providing access to some of the most spectacular views and secluded valleys in Southern England. Not only does it underpin the recreational and tourism sectors, it also affords some opportunities for sustainable



and safe journeys to school and work. Important national and regional walking routes within the North Wessex Downs are set out in the table below. In addition, a very large number of other paths are promoted as recreational walking routes by the National Trust, partner local authorities, and the Ramblers Association.

Table 12. Walking routes of national and regional significance in the North Wessex Downs

Route name	Distance within the AONB	
	kilometres	miles
Ridgeway National Trail	88	55
Thames Path National Trail	14	9
Test Way	22	14
Wayfarers Walk	27	17
Lambourn Valley Way	29	18
Kennet and Avon Canal towpath	48	30

Page 91 Walking on Cherhill Down, greatwestway.co.uk
Page 92 Avebury World Heritage Site, David Hall
Page 93 Walking through bluebells at West Woods, Sharyn Ladds

Page 94 Wayfaring event at Basildon Park,
And Now/Nick Read
Page 95 Cycling at Hackpen Hill,
greatwestway.co.uk; Buying local produce,
Nigel White



9.11 A large number of advertised cycle routes (on- and off-road) pass through the area, taking advantage of quiet lanes, byways and bridleways. Route 4 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network also runs for 47 km (29 miles) through the North Wessex Downs AONB, in part following the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath.

9.12 The 'Three Downs Link' is a multi-user recreational route connecting the Ridgeway with the South Downs Way, and is used by horse riders, cyclists and walkers. The Ridgeway is promoted as a National Trail for horse riding. A number of shorter riding routes promoted by the British Horse Society use the Ridgeway, linking it with the much wider multi-use network. Responsible recreational cycling and horse riding are two of the key activities to encourage in the North Wessex Downs AONB. Supporting the provision of facilities, such as accommodation with access to stables or drying rooms, and the construction of bike wash facilities and cycle hubs, are examples of how this could be achieved.

9.13 The CRoW Act 2000 requires every county and unitary authority to set out their plans for improvement of the rights of way network. This is through the production of a 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan' (ROWIP; sometimes called a Countryside Management Plan or a Countryside Access Improvement Plan). These plans set out how an authority will maintain countryside access resources and take up opportunities for improving and promoting access to the countryside. The North Wessex Downs Partnership supports the work of the Wiltshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Mid and West Berkshire Local Access Forums (LAFs).

Strategic Development in Relation to the 'London City Region'

9.14 An initiative of the South East and East Protected Landscapes Group (SEELP) brings together the dozen AONBs and National Parks which surround London. These provide the basis for an interconnected network of valuable green spaces stretching from Central London across South East England, and an opportunity to collaborate at an appropriate scale to promote the enjoyment of, and care for, these diverse, treasured landscapes by the growing population of the City Region.

9.15 The North Wessex Downs is a partner in SEPLG, sharing the seven key objectives in the Group's 25 year vision in relation to the protected landscapes of the London City Region to:

- ▶ conserve their intrinsic value;
- ▶ recognise their ecosystem value;
- ▶ maintain natural buffers;
- ▶ improve access and connections;
- ▶ promote appropriate jobs and industry;
- ▶ support physical and mental health and wellbeing; and
- ▶ engage stakeholders and work together.

AONB Special Qualities: Tourism, Leisure and Access

9.16 Some of the finest **cultural landscape** in England including chalk downland, river valleys, ancient woodland, historic sites. There is recognition of the landscape in literature and the arts, with locations such as Watership Down, Uffington White Horse and the Wittenham Clumps inspiring well known works.

9.17 **Historic attractions** reflecting the industrial and socio-economic history of the area including the Kennet and Avon Canal, Didcot and Swindon Railway Museums, Crofton Beam Engines and the Wilton Windmill.

9.18 **Picturesque market towns** and small villages with independent shops, superb pubs, restaurants and plenty of B&Bs and hotels. A growing reputation for local food and produce.

9.19 **Rich archaeological history** and evidence of our ancestors that can be found in greater concentrations than in much of the rest of the country.

9.20 **Great country houses** at Highclere, Basildon Park, Littlecote and Ashdown and the medieval, Norman and Saxon churches.

9.21 An **extensive rights of way** network offering many opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the countryside away from crowds, by ramblers, cyclists and horse-riders,



including the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails, access land, commons and accessible woodland.

9.22 A 'hot spot' for antiques between the towns of Hungerford, Marlborough and the village of Pewsey.

Tourism, Leisure and Access: Key Issues, AONB Strategic Objectives and Policies

Tourism, Leisure and Access in the North Wessex Downs AONB faces a range of challenges which this Plan will address through the implementation of key objectives and policies

9.23 Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the AONB's Tourism, Leisure and Access Special Qualities:

a) The opportunity to raise the profile of North Wessex Downs as a short break destination and the opportunities for quiet recreation and green tourism that it can offer.

- b) Weakly co-ordinated marketing of the North Wessex Downs AONB as a whole, despite significant progress under the last AONB Management Plan.
- c) Fragmented and poorly co-ordinated provision of tourism in the AONB, supporting few jobs and limited income.
- d) Multiple destination management organisations across the AONB increase fragmentation.
- e) Generally poor (but increasing) recognition amongst AONB communities of the opportunities that association with a landscape of national importance offers for quiet recreation and green tourism and their associated economic benefits, e.g. for local food.
- f) Potential for insensitive, inappropriate or excessive tourism development to harm the special qualities of the AONB landscape.
- g) Popularity of a few 'honeypot' locations with resulting sprawl of car parking, wear and tear on verges and paths, litter and lower enjoyment, and potentially intrusive traffic management measures.
- h) Opportunities arising from changes to the management and promotion of the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails.



Limited public transport

links between key attractions and amenities reduces sustainable options

Noise pollution

is associated with certain recreational pursuits, such as trail biking and flying aircraft

- i) Infrequent public transport links to and between points of access, key attractions and accommodation. Very limited services at some railway stations, such as Pewsey, reduces sustainable transport opportunities.
- j) Increasing pressure on funding for management and maintenance of rights of way, poor condition and inadequate waymarking of some rights of way, and poor connectivity of the rights of way network in some areas for circular walks and rides.
- k) Irresponsible use of the rights of way network by motorised vehicles, of particular concern along the route of the Ridgeway.
- l) Noise associated with some recreation pursuits, including that from trail bike courses and powered aircraft and drones, affecting tranquillity and others' enjoyment.
- m) Need to encourage responsible and courteous use, where motorised users have a legitimate right of access that is compatible with AONB purposes and recognises the needs of other users; for example, as promoted by the Trail Riders' Fellowship (TRF).
- n) General lack of facilities for the non-horse owner to gain access to the recreational riding opportunities of the North Wessex Downs.
- o) Lack of indication (such as road signs) that visitors are entering, or in, the AONB.
- p) Lack of information and provision for the less able and other disadvantaged groups to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs.
- q) The expected increase in visitors from the predicted growth in the population of London, associated with opportunities for, and pressures on, all protected landscapes in South East England.

9.24 AONB Strategic Objectives for 2019-2024: Tourism, Leisure and Access

- S.23 Facilitate opportunities for more people of all abilities to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs that respect and promote the special qualities of the area and its setting.
- S.24 Support well-managed and sustainable tourism and recreation businesses to promote the North Wessex Downs as a destination for responsible tourism that respects and promotes the special qualities of the AONB and its setting.
- S.25 Encourage an enhanced sense of respect and pride in the North Wessex Downs amongst local people and their increased participation in activities that raise the understanding and profile of the AONB.
- S.26 Work in partnership with other AONBs and National Parks in southern and eastern England to promote the value and contribution of nationally protected landscapes to the future of the 'London City Region'.



9.25 AONB Policies: Tourism, Leisure and Access

TLA 01	Promote a strategic, partnership approach to planning and marketing green tourism and improved countryside access in the North Wessex Downs.
TLA 02	Work with destination management organisations, protected landscapes and other partners to promote responsible tourism in the North Wessex Downs, including through the Great West Way initiative.
TLA 03	Support the development of markets for short break opportunities that emphasise the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs.
TLA 04	Nurture tourism businesses and help to develop tourism networks across the North Wessex Downs. Support constructive and community-led projects that benefit the tourism economy.
TLA 05	Promote greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs for users of all abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and wellbeing.
TLA 06	Encourage the provision of easily accessible information regarding access to and around the North Wessex Downs by public transport.
TLA 07	With relevant partners, identify and promote signs – or other ways of indicating to visitors that they are in the North Wessex Downs – that do not conflict with AONB purposes.
TLA 08	Encourage greater recognition among commercial transport providers such as train operating companies of the recreational / leisure potential of stations in and around the North Wessex Downs.
TLA 09	Support more and better monitoring of the distribution and demography of visitors and promote management approaches that reduce pressure on sensitive habitats.
TLA 10	Support events such as walking festivals that celebrate the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs, introduce new audiences to the landscape and contribute to a viable visitor economy.
TLA 11	Work with local authorities, Local Access Forums and others to manage and improve the network of public rights of way, ensuring that relevant plans for development and delivery of access to the area take full account of the local distinctiveness, character and quality of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
TLA 12	Support efforts by user groups to promote and encourage responsible use of rights of way, including byways, consistent with AONB purposes.
TLA 13	Encourage the creation and maintenance of new permissive and definitive routes that link existing routes and enable recreational walkers, cyclists, riders and carriage-drivers to avoid busy roads.
TLA 14	Identify spinal and circular routes to be promoted in AONB publicity that are supported by the recreation and tourism infrastructure e.g. bicycle hire, farmhouse B&B/bunk barns and recreational bus links.
TLA 15	Support increased provision and management of accessible greenspace and the promotion of new and existing recreational opportunities in line with AONB purposes.
TLA 16	Recognise and protect those areas which are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance, for example archaeologically or ecologically, for the promotion of public access.
TLA 17	Support research, tools and projects which support the development of a thriving recreation and tourism sector.
TLA 18	Support initiatives to help communities and businesses reduce the outflow of revenue, retaining and recycling wealth in the area for longer.
TLA 19	Promote and support the vision and activities of the South East Protected Landscapes Group to integrate development of the London City Region with the protection and enhancement of the protected landscapes surrounding the capital.