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## **Introduction**

**By Sarah Nichols, outgoing Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Council of Partners**

It has been an immense privilege to serve as Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership during the past four years. As we look ahead to the 2025–2030 Management Plan, I reflect with pride on the progress made under the 2019–2024 Plan (extended to 2025), during which we strengthened our commitment to conserving and enhancing this extraordinary landscape for future generations.

One of the most exciting developments of my tenure has been our work to seek International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green Listing accreditation—an internationally recognised standard for well-managed protected areas. This ambitious undertaking has required rigorous evaluation of our conservation efforts, governance, and community engagement, ensuring that the North Wessex Downs meets the highest global benchmarks. The process has fostered stronger partnerships and deeper collaboration, reinforcing our commitment to sustainability and biodiversity.

Over the past four years, we have faced both challenges and opportunities. Climate change and biodiversity loss have required decisive action, while new initiatives in regenerative agriculture, nature recovery, and heritage conservation have enhanced the resilience of our landscapes. We have also strengthened our engagement with communities, landowners, and policymakers, ensuring a shared vision for the future.

As I step down, I do so with confidence in the dedication of the Partnership, the staff team and our many stakeholders. The 2025–2030 Management Plan builds upon our achievements and sets an ambitious course for the future. I look forward to seeing the North Wessex Downs thrive in the years ahead.

Sarah Nichols

Outgoing Chair, North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership

## Chapter 1: Context and Framework

### Setting the Scene

- 1.1 The first two chapters of the 2025-30 National Landscape 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, Farming and Land Management, Biodiversity and Nature Recovery, Natural Resources, Historic Environment, Planning and Development, Communities, and Access, Recreation and Tourism. In each thematic chapter is a summary of the Valued Qualities relating to that theme; the key issues relating to the theme; Priorities for the Plan period; and Policies to guide and inform delivery of the Plan and the purpose of designation..
- 1.3 The final chapters of the Plan cover implementation and monitoring of the Management Plan, including an overview of how stakeholders and rightsholders are expected to contribute to delivering Strategic Objectives and Policies.
- 1.4 The Management Plan is owned by the local authorities whose areas include part of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape; is their Plan. However, its implementation is the responsibility of everyone whose policies, decisions and actions affect the natural beauty of the National Landscape and its setting.
- 1.5 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership has identified Partnership Goals and Strategic Objectives that support deliver of the Management Plan. These guide the work of the National Landscape staff unit on the Partnership's behalf. The governing Council of Partners monitors progress against the agreed Business Plan, which is regularly reviewed and rolled forward..

### About the North Wessex Downs

- 1.6 From their western tip near Devizes in Wiltshire, the North Wessex Downs reach across central southern England in a broad eastward arc south of Swindon, through Oxfordshire to the western end of Berkshire. They abut the Chilterns National Landscape along the River Thames in the Goring Gap north-west of Reading, dipping south and then sweeping west along the Kennet valley, then south to encircle Newbury, encompassing the northern reaches of the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs. They then stretch back across the northern fringes of the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low-lying Vale of Pewsey.
- 1.7 The North Wessex Downs is the third largest National Landscape in the country. This protected landscape extends to 1,730 square km / 668 square miles, an area equivalent to a medium-sized English county. Its resident population is just over 100,000 people (an average density across the National Landscape of 58.3 residents/square km); the two largest settlements inside the National Landscape boundary, Hungerford and Marlborough, have a total population of 13,100.i 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 National Landscape.

1.8 Two major highways, the M4 and A34 pass through the area, aligned east-west and north-south respectively. The double-track Berks and Hants railway from London Paddington towards Exeter and the far south west passes through the centre of the National Landscape, following, successively, the Kennet, Dun and Avon river valleys. The broader, four-track Great Western Railway route towards Bristol and South Wales cuts through the north-eastern extremity of the area along the Thames valley, then follows the northern boundary, outside the National Landscape but within its setting and clearly visible from the northern scarp. The South Western main line from London to Exeter via Salisbury runs along the southern reaches of the National Landscape between Basingstoke and Andover.

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

1.10 In 2023 all AONBs in England and Wales became known as National Landscapes, reflecting their national importance and a consistency of approach across all the National Landscapes. The North Wessex Downs remains formally designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan is legally an AONB Management Plan.

1.11 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape contains all or part of 173 parishes, straddling the boundaries of two county councils, three unitary authorities and four district/borough councils. It sits on a regional divide, with roughly half of the area in [*south east and half in south east England,*] occupying a central position along the line of chalk-dominated landscapes from the Dorset coast to the northern edge of the Chiltern Hills.

1.12 The North Wessex Downs is one of a family of nationally protected landscapes across England comprising 34 National Landscapes and ten National Parks. Together, these finest, most outstanding English landscapes cover around 25% of the country. The importance of these designated landscapes is also recognised at international level, and the North Wessex Downs is recognised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as one of the UK's Category V Protected Landscapes. The IUCN defines a Category V Protected Landscape as:

*A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values. ii*

## IUCN Green List

1.13 The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List is the internationally recognised standard for well-managed protected areas. In 2022 the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership embarked on an intensive process of internal review covering governance, design and planning, effective management and conservation outcomes with the aim of achieving Green List accreditation.<sup>iii</sup> In early 2025, the IUCN accepted the North Wessex Downs as an applicant

for Green List status, piloting the standard in the UK. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership is committed to completing this process during this Management Plan period.

## 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 farmland, heathland 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.**

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

- where land use, management and development are driven by an overarching principle of long-term 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 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 that prioritise conserving and enhancing the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. This ensures a countryside rich in wildlife, heritage, and recreational opportunities, while producing high-quality products through sustainable farming practices that benefit both the local economy and the 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 by nature recovery networks 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, 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 and improves high quality healthy soils and water resources whilst retaining the distinctive seasonal winterbourne flows and the nationally and internationally significant chalk streams of the National Landscape.
- 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 the setting of the National Landscape, so that the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is protected.
- where development responds to genuine local need and where new buildings show continuity with the past, respecting and complimenting the beauty of the landscape and the character of local vernacular building materials and styles.
- where the integrated approach to transport and active travel meets local needs and minimises negative effects on the environment; where the dominance of roads and 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 valued 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 local community, helping to underpin the broader rural economy.
- that is recognised as a vital community resource, welcoming to local residents and visitors of all backgrounds and abilities, with benefits for physical and mental wellbeing arising from access to nature and the countryside, to a tranquil environment, and to the opportunities it presents for social interaction and volunteering.
- where there is wide public recognition of the protected status and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs among communities in and around the National Landscape; where all responsible bodies understand and respect the protected status of the area and their active duties towards the National Landscape in their plans and proposals.

## Legal and Policy Framework for the Management Plan

### National Landscape purpose and the meaning of ‘Natural Beauty’

2.1 The primary purpose of AONB (National Landscape) designation is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 as *“conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area”*.<sup>iv</sup> 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.”*<sup>v</sup>

2.2 In 2023, the CROW Act 2000 was amended by s.245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. The s.85 duty on public bodies, which had required that “a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty” was much strengthened. The s.85 duty now requires that “a relevant authority ... must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty [National Landscape]”.

2.3 The legislative amendments also give the Secretary of State the power to:

- make provision through regulations about how a relevant authority is to comply with the strengthened duty, including things that the authority may, must or must not do to comply with it; and
- make regulations requiring protected landscape Management Plans to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Environment Act 2021, including setting out how they will do so, and setting out how “any plan under section 89 relating to an area of outstanding natural beauty in England” must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

2.4 These changes have implications for all aspects of local authorities’ activity where they affect the protected landscape and its setting, requiring an active commitment to furthering the purpose of designation.

2.2 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; the rich history of human settlement and land use over millennia, its archaeology and buildings, cultural associations; the people who have occupied the area in the past and those who live and work here now.

2.3 This relationship is encapsulated in a policy position set out by the Countryside Agency in 1991, 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."*<sup>vi</sup> 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)."*<sup>vii</sup>

2.4 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?

2.5 This National Landscape Management Plan presents an agreed agenda for the North Wessex Downs for the next five-year period, 2025-2030. It sets out priorities and policies for all those whose activities affect the National Landscape 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, protected landscape.

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

2.7 The Partnership comprises representatives of the constituent local authorities; the local communities; the farming and rural business community; nature conservation, heritage and recreation interests; ; Natural England; and the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust.

2.8 As detailed above, *"in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty"* all relevant authorities *"must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty [National Landscape]"*. *have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area"* Relevant authorities' include all statutory bodies and all tiers of government, including parish councils and holders of public office.

In addition to obligations under national legislation, the UK is a signatory to the Council of Europe Landscape Convention, a multinational treaty which is devoted exclusively to the protection, management and planning of landscapes throughout Europe.<sup>viii</sup> The Convention promotes landscape protection, management and planning through co-operation, public awareness and an effective policy framework.

2.9 In particular, the Convention highlights the need to:

- recognise landscape in law
- Integrate landscape into other policy areas
- develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of landscapes
- Raise awareness of landscape value  
Encourage public participation and the involvement of the public in decisions affecting their landscape.

2.10 The Convention 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 National Landscape Management Plan is a significant contribution to the UK's implementation of the Convention.

2.11 Successful implementation of this Management Plan is beyond the resources of the Council of Partners and National Landscape staff unit alone. It requires the active collaboration and participation of all those involved in its scope. This is a Plan for the North Wessex Downs 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.

2.12 One way of satisfying the Section 85 duty placed on Government and other public bodies by the CRoW Act is by supporting the implementation of this Plan. Town and parish councils, statutory agencies and local bodies acting individually or through partnerships can all contribute to fulfilling the Management Plan vision.

## Context and Collaboration

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership does not work in isolation: the National Landscape is part of the national network of protected landscapes that includes National Parks, National Trails and other National Landscapes. The National Landscapes Association represents National Landscapes at national level, and leads or guides collaborative initiatives. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape actively participates in ambitious collaborative programmes and initiatives that look far beyond our boundaries. Some current examples are described below.

### Mend the Gap

Network Rail planned and carried out the Great Western Route Modernisation project in the mid-2010s, electrifying the Great Western main line through the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes. Network Rail's failure to have regard for the purposes of protected landscape designation, as required by its duty under s. 85 of the CRoW Act 2000, caused a public outcry from communities nearby and has done major harm to the Thames valley landscape shared by the two



protected landscapes between Reading and Didcot. After several years of discussion which did not result in any mitigation of the landscape impact, Network Rail agreed to fund the Mend the Gap programme, which has been run jointly by the two National Landscapes and the community-led Railway Action Group since 2020. Mend the Gap consists of two principal elements: tree/hedge planting and management to mitigate the visual impact of the electrification, and a larger landscape enhancement programme. The latter prioritises chalk grassland, arable and wetland habitat enhancements; and improved knowledge, access and enjoyment of the landscape between Reading and Didcot. The Programme has transformed the two National Landscapes' approaches to the Thames valley from viewing it as two unconnected boundary zones to a coherent, connected single landscape providing the focus for active community engagement, nature recovery and landscape enhancement. The Mend Gap programme is expected to run until 2028.

### Strategic context in relation to the London global city region

10.14 The South East and East Protected Landscapes group (SEEPL) brings together the dozen National Landscapes 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 care for and promote the enjoyment of, these diverse, treasured landscapes by the growing population of the London city region.

10.15 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership is a partner in SEEPL, sharing the seven key objectives in the group's 25-year vision for the protected landscapes of the London city region to:

- conserve and enhance their intrinsic value;
- recognise and increase 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, working together.

### Big Chalk

One of the ways wildlife adapts to climate change is to move northwards to a new 'climate space'. This means that we need to think about the National Landscape's future wildlife in addition to that currently present, particularly that currently found to the south of the North Wessex Downs. Big Chalk<sup>ix</sup> is a hugely ambitious partnership programme that aims to improve ecological connectivity across and between the calcareous landscapes of southern England from the south coast to the midlands.

Covering 19% of England, Big Chalk has the primary objective of building a robust nature recovery network over a vast area. This will be achieved by identifying opportunities to transform these landscapes by the application of the Lawton principles on a hitherto unimagined scale. Thriving chalk landscapes can deliver an array of public goods including sustainable employment and products, carbon sequestration, water supply (to tens of millions of people) and quality, flood management and soil stabilisation. Restored species-rich landscapes can also support public health and wellbeing, giving access to beautiful open spaces and connections to our past, for example through chalk carvings, and ancient monuments and byways.

Due to their history and the character of the underlying geology, these Calcareous (chalk and limestone) landscapes in the south of England are the most species-rich habitats in the UK. When combined across the whole landscape, these habitats make it the best place to allow wildlife to recover and adapt to climate change. Given the rarity of chalk geology on a world scale, this is a programme of global importance.

## Overarching Principles for Delivery of the Management Plan

The following overarching principles summarise what the Management Plan means in practice. Delivery of the Management Plan is the responsibility of all those whose policies, decisions and actions have a bearing on the purpose of designation: to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

1. All change should be landscape-led and seek to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
2. Management and change should respect the cultural landscapes and the communities of the North Wessex Downs.
3. Decisions about future landscape change should always be informed by an understanding of the past, using tools such as historic environment characterisation.
4. No major development should take place either in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape or where it would harm the setting.
5. Farming, forestry and other land management systems should be environmentally sustainable and nature-friendly.
6. Nature recovery should be pursued hand in hand with economically viable farming, food production, forestry and other land management.
7. Nature Recovery Networks should build and support climate resilience.
8. Action for climate mitigation and adaptation, such as nature-based solutions, should respect and reinforce landscape character.
9. The importance of engagement, outreach and landscape accessibility for all, including underrepresented communities, removing physical, cultural and perceptual barriers and creating equitable opportunities to connect with the landscape and be active partners in its stewardship, should be recognised.
10. The value of the landscape for access, education, health and well being should be realised in ways that resolve, remove and prevent conflicts between access and biodiversity and the historic environment.
11. Change should stay within environmental limits of natural resources, e.g. demand for water must not exceed levels that threaten the ecology of chalk streams.
12. Actions within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape should take place with an awareness of the context, including the setting and the geography of Big Chalk.

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<sup>i</sup> <sup>(3)</sup> All population data are based on the 2011 Census unless stated otherwise.

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ii <sup>(4)</sup> 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.

iii <https://iucngreenlist.org/standard/components-criteria/>

iv <sup>(5)</sup> Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000; Section 82.

v <sup>(6)</sup> CRoW Act 2000; Section 92.

vi <sup>(7)</sup> Countryside Commission (1991) ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement. CCP 356; p. 5.

vii <sup>(8)</sup> Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act, 2006; Section 99.

viii <sup>(9)</sup> The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is a treaty of the Council of Europe. The UK’s participation in the ELC is unaffected by its withdrawal from the European Union.

ix <https://www.big-chalk.org/>