

Chapter 9 Theme 8: Access, Recreation and Tourism

“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)

9.1 The North Wessex Downs 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 square miles) Avebury World Heritage Site (taking in Avebury Village, 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 isolation that are the primary recreational and tourism attractions of the area.

9.2 There are different types of users for access, recreation and tourism in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape who have different priorities and needs, and will engage with different partners across the area. These include tourists visiting or touring in the National Landscape; tourists to major destinations outside the protected landscape, e.g. Stonehenge, Blenheim, Oxford, or visitors on business who are staying in the North Wessex Downs for its proximity to other places; residents in the National Landscape; residents of adjacent towns; and groups who use the area for recreation, including ramblers, runners, road cyclists, mountain bikers, youth and school groups, and carriage drivers.

Rights of Way and Access

9.3 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. There is widespread recognition of the importance of using and enjoying the natural environment for health and well being, yet the potential of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape to enable and support this has so far been largely untapped. Government funding for access in the National Landscape tends to be short-term in nature and restricted to capital projects. Long-term commitment and resourcing will be needed to build links with those communities, especially in the surrounding large towns, which are least likely to visit and enjoy the National Landscape, to understand their needs and facilitate their engagement with the landscape. The lack of convenient public transport imposes limits on the benefits and sustainable use of the protected landscape as a resource. The on-demand Wiltshire Connect bus service, which now serves a wide area linking Marlborough, Pewsey, Great Bedwyn, Hungerford and Devizes, is good example of what can be done to improve green travel options for residents and visitors.

9.4 Access and the needs of recreational users must be managed alongside those of farmers/land managers and objectives for nature recovery and heritage conservation. Wider and easier access should be encouraged where this can be achieved without conflicting with conservation aims or the landowner's use of the land. There may be opportunities arising from the growth of settlements on the fringes of the North Wessex Downs to mitigate some of the impact by improving and extending access.

[9.5 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 (2007) found that the North Wessex Downs National Landscape 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 found to indicate whether this has changed in recent years.]

[9.6 Of the accessible natural greenspace, 59% was woodland. In general woodland with open or partial access is owned by 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 or along one edge of a wood. However, 'open access' to woodland is at a different scale. Just 14% of the total National Landscape woodland area has open access.]

9.7 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 but 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 a diverse range of local authorities and national and local organisations, on the ground, online and in published walking guides.

Table: Walking routes of National and Regional significance in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape *[figures to be checked]*

Route name	Approximate Distance within the NWDNL	
	Kilometres	Miles
Ridgeway National Trail	88	55
Thames Path National Trail	14	9
Kennet & Avon Canal towpath	48	30
Lambourn Valley Way	29	18
Mid-Wilts Way	59	37

Pewsey Vale Circular Way	116	73
Test Way	22	14
Watership Down Trail	34	21
Wayfarer's Walk	27	17
White Horse Trail	29	18

[9.8 There are a large number of advertised cycle routes (on- and off-road) that pass through the area, taking advantage of quiet lanes, byways and bridleways. Route 4 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network (NCN4) runs for 47 km / 29 miles through the North Wessex Downs, in part following the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath. NCNs 45, 246, 403, 482 and 544 also pass through the National Landscape. Cycling UK has developed a 350 km / 217 mile circular leisure cycle route, King Alfred's Way, part of which goes along the Ridgeway National Trail.]

9.9 The Three Downs Link is a multi-user recreational route connecting The Ridgeway with the South Downs Way, utilised by riders alongside cyclists and walkers. The Ridgeway is promoted as a National Trail for riding. There are a number of shorter riding routes promoted by the British Horse Society that utilise the Ridgeway and link with the much wider multi-use network. Responsible recreational cycling and riding are two of the key activities to encourage in the North Wessex Downs. 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.

9.10 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 opportunities for improving and promoting access to the countryside. The Act also requires these authorities to establish a Local Access Forum with a membership representing a range of stakeholders, which advises the authority on matters relating to public rights of way and other types of access.

9.11 Landowners are often reluctant to dedicate new public rights of way so permissive paths may be the only way to improve connectivity of the existing network. The Eling Way in Berkshire is a good example of a permissive route created in the last few years.

Recreation and Tourism

9.12 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 education centre at Hampstead Norreys. There are many more attractions in the National Landscape or its setting that could benefit from greater collective promotion and support. These tend to be individual small sites, often managed by independent charities. They include museums and heritage centres in Devizes, Pewsey, Wallingford, Whitchurch and Wantage; nature reserves, commons and access land managed by the Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust and private owners; the wealth of ancient monuments across the whole landscape; prominent landmark sites such as Wilton windmill; and individual urban properties such as the Merchant's House in Marlborough. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust's Postcards Project (2025) may help to address this with the promotion of interesting, historic or quirky local landmarks.

9.13 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. Many visitors (and residents) are unaware that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape when they are in a particular town or village or passing through the area - most users of the Kennet and Avon Canal and walkers on the Ridgeway National Trail and the Thames Path are passing through the North Wessex Downs or Chilterns National Landscapes. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust's welcome signage programme for the North Wessex Downs will help address this issue. It is also important for any organisation promoting its town, village, or site to include information about the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. Tourists who use the National Landscape as a base for exploring external attractions also represent a potential market that could be encouraged to discover the North Wessex Downs. There are opportunities for the tourism sector to support investments in improving rights of way, providing accommodation, facilities, and information.

[9.14 At present, visitors to the National Landscape 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.] Budget accommodation for young visitors and others is very limited, but includes Streatley Youth Hostel in the Thames valley and the Court Hill Centre above Wantage in Oxfordshire. There is great potential to improve the performance of the area as a short break destination. This is especially with the development of bespoke activity packages, such as self-guided off-road cycle routes. The area can appeal particularly to affluent visitors from London and the Home Counties. That could bring significant benefits to the rural economy.

9.15 A number of sites in the National Landscape offer educational visits. There is increasing interest among farmers in hosting school visits and the North Wessex Downs Farming in Protected Landscapes programme has enabled more farms to do so, helping to fund training and infrastructure such as classrooms and trailers. To deliver a greater benefit from grant funding, beneficiaries are encouraged to make agreements to share use of trailers, for example with other members of the same farmer-led group. Rushall Manor Farm in Berkshire (run by the John Simonds Trust, Oxenwood Outdoor Education Centre in Wiltshire and Linkenholt Countryside Adventure Centre in Hampshire, (both run by Community First, the latter in partnership with the Blagrove Trust) offer outdoor learning facilities for school and youth groups.

9.16 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. Following the previous Our Land and Love Your Land initiatives to encourage local businesses to reflect the protected landscape better in their offer, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership has become a Designated Ambassador under the Great West Way (London to Bristol) destination touring initiative led by Visit Wiltshire.

National Landscape Valued Qualities: Access, Recreation and Tourism

- 9.17 Offering some of the finest **cultural landscapes** 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.
- 9.18 **Historic attractions** reflecting the industrial and socio-economic history of the area including the Kennet and Avon Canal, Crofton beam engines and Wilton Windmill.
- 9.19 **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.
- 9.20 **Rich archaeological history** and evidence of our ancestors that can be found in greater concentrations than much of the country.
- 9.21 **The great country houses** at Highclere, Basildon Park, Littlecote, Tottenham and Ashdown and the medieval, Norman and Saxon churches
- 9.22 The **extensive Rights of Way** network offering many opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the countryside away from crowds, by ramblers, cyclists and riders, including the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails, access land, commons and accessible woodland
- 9.23 A **'hot spot' for antiques** in Hungerford, Marlborough and Pewsey.

Access, Recreation and Tourism: Key Issues, Priorities and Policies

9.24 **Key issues** with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Access, Recreation and Tourism Valued Qualities:

- a. Increasing pressure on local authority funding for management and maintenance of rights of way, poor condition of some rights of way, especially byways used by off-road vehicles, and poor connectivity of the rights of way network in some areas for circular walks and rides.
- b. Irresponsible use of the rights of way network by motorised vehicles, of particular concern along the route of the Ridgeway and on some commons, e.g. at Bucklebury.
- c. Impact of behaviour of some rights of way users, including littering, dogs off leads disturbing wildlife and worrying livestock, leaving gates open etc.
- d. Noise associated with some recreation pursuits, including that from trail bike courses and powered aircraft, affecting tranquillity and others' enjoyment.
- e. Lack of information and provision for the less able and other disadvantaged groups to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs.
- f. Popularity of a few 'honeypot' locations with resulting impact of car parking, wear and tear on verges and paths, litter and lower enjoyment, and potentially intrusive traffic management measures.
- g. Management and resourcing challenges and opportunities presented by the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails.
- h. Infrequent or non-existent public transport links to and between points of access, key attractions and accommodation. Limited services at some railway stations reduce green travel opportunities.
- i. Increasing recreational pressures and associated opportunities arising from the predicted growth in the population of settlements surrounding the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- j. Tourism provision in the National Landscape is fragmented and poorly co-ordinated, supporting relatively few jobs and limited income considering its accessibility, natural beauty and historic interest.
- k. Multiple destination management organisations and Local Visitor Economy Partnerships across the National Landscape mean that co-ordinated marketing of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape as a whole remains weak, despite significant progress in recent years.
- l. Lack of indication such as road/railway station, bus stop and waymark signs that visitors are entering or in the National Landscape.
- m. Generally limited recognition amongst North Wessex Downs 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 produce.
- n. Potential for insensitive, inappropriate or excessive recreational or tourism development to harm the valued qualities of the National Landscape.

Access, Recreation and Tourism: Priorities

1. Facilitate opportunities for more people of all backgrounds and abilities to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect and promote the valued qualities of the National Landscape and its setting.
2. Greater awareness of the value of access and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for public health and well being.
3. Develop a strategic framework to guide the use of funding provided to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for access enhancements.
4. Co-ordinated promotion of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape by the tourism and recreation sector as a destination for responsible access that respects and promotes the valued qualities of the protected landscape and its setting.

Access, Recreation and Tourism: Policies

- ART 01** Enable greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for users of all backgrounds and abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and well-being.
- ART 02** Support local initiatives by communities and businesses to promote responsible recreation and tourism across the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- ART 03** 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.
- ART 04** Promote and encourage responsible use of rights of way, including byways, consistent with National Landscape purposes.
- ART 05** 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.
- ART 06** Recognise and protect those areas which are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance, for example archaeologically or ecologically, for the promotion of public access.
- ART 07** Promote a strategic, collaborative, approach among destination management organisations, Local Visitor Economy Partnerships and other partners to marketing responsible access and tourism and in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- ART 08** Encourage events such as walking festivals that celebrate the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs, introduce new audiences to the landscape and contribute to the visitor economy
- ART 09** Facilitate signage or other ways of informing visitors and residents that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, consistent with the purpose of designation.
- ART 10** Encourage greater recognition among commercial transport providers such as train operating companies and bus operators of the recreational / leisure potential of stations in and around the North Wessex Downs.
- ART 11** Support initiatives to help communities and businesses reduce the outflow of revenue, retaining and recycling income from visitors in the area for longer.
- ART 12** Support more and better monitoring of the distribution and demography of visitors and promote management approaches that reduce pressure on sensitive habitats.