

# Context & Framework





Figure 3. Icons of The North Wessex Downs National Landscape





## Setting the Scene

**1.1** The first three chapters of the Management Plan 2025–30 present a vision and long-term ambitions for the North Wessex Downs explain the importance of the Plan; describe the legal and policy framework for the Plan; set out overarching principles for the Plan’s implementation; summarise the priorities for this Plan period; address implementation and monitoring; and suggest how all stakeholders can contribute to achieving the Plan priorities.

**1.2** This is followed by thematic chapters which describe and explain how the valued qualities for which the landscape is designated, set out in detail in the North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment, relate to different themes: Landscape, Farming and Land Management, Biodiversity and Nature Recovery, Natural Resources and Climate Change, Historic Environment, Planning and Development, Communities, and Access, Recreation and Tourism. In each thematic chapter are a list of 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 Management Plan is owned by the local authorities whose areas include part of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape; it 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.

**1.4** The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership has identified Partnership Goals and Strategic Objectives that support delivery 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

**1.5** From its western tip near Devizes in Wiltshire, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape reaches across central southern England in a broad eastward arc south of Swindon, through Oxfordshire to the western end of Berkshire. It abuts 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. It then stretch back across the northern fringes of the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low-lying Vale of Pewsey.

**1.6** The North Wessex Downs is the third largest National Landscape in the country. This protected landscape extends to 668 square miles / 1,730 square km, 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 14,702. 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 720,483. 1.23 million residents live within 10 km of the National Landscape boundary<sup>1</sup>.

**1.7** Two major highways, the M4 and A34, pass through the area, aligned east-west and north-south respectively. The A4 runs straight through the National Landscape, as does the Berks and Hants railway line from London towards the south west, following, successively, the Kennet, Dun and Avon river valleys. The 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 runs along the southern reaches of the National Landscape between Basingstoke and Andover.

**1.8** 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.

**1.9** 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.

<sup>1</sup> All data from ONS (2024) or relevant local authority.

**1.10** 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 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.

**1.11** 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.<sup>2</sup>*

**1.12** The 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. 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.

<sup>2</sup> [iucn.org](https://iucn.org)



Kennet and Avon Canal – Peter Orr



Marbled white butterfly – Natural England/Allan Drewitttt



Thames view towards Streatley – David Olinski



## Why is this Management Plan important?

**1.13** 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.

**1.14** 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 National Landscape Council of Partners has prepared this plan on behalf of the relevant local authorities of the National Landscape.

**1.15** 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.

**1.16** As detailed below, *“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]”* and not merely 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.

**1.17** 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. The Convention promotes landscape protection, management and planning through co-operation, public awareness and an effective policy framework. 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; and encourage public participation and the involvement of the public in decisions affecting their landscape.

**1.18** 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.

**1.19** 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.

**1.20** One way of satisfying the Section 85 duty placed on government and other public bodies by the CRow Act 2000 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

**1.21** 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

**1.22** 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 the Gap* programme is expected to run until 2028.

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

**1.23** The South East and East Protected Landscapes group (SEEPL) brings together the 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 and eastern 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.

**1.24** 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

**1.25** 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* 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.

**1.26** 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, ancient monuments and byways.

**1.27** 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.

# Legal and Policy Framework for the Management Plan

## National Landscape purpose and the meaning of 'Natural Beauty'

**1.28** 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>3</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>4</sup>

**1.29** 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)*".

**1.30** 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.





**1.31** 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. Paragraph 189 of the National Planning Policy Framework complements the Duty by stating that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Landscapes, which have the highest status of protection.

**1.32** 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.

**1.33** 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>5</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>6</sup>

**1.34** The North Wessex Downs is 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 National Landscape 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 valued qualities.



Holies hanging, Streatley  
– David Olinski



Chalk grassland restoration  
walk – David Olinski

<sup>3</sup> Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, Section 82.

<sup>4</sup> CROW Act 2000; Section 92.

<sup>5</sup> Countryside Commission (1991): *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: a policy statement*. CCP 356; p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act, 2006, Section 99.





**North Wessex  
Downs**  
National  
Landscape

**totals**

**1,730km<sup>2</sup>**

(668 square miles)

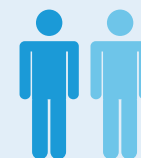
**4 COUNTIES**

**9 LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

**173 PARISHES**

**102,000** INHABITANTS

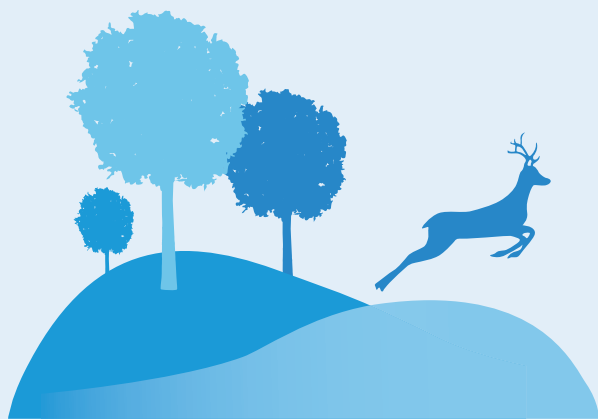
**1.23 million** within  
10 km of the NATIONAL  
LANDSCAPE BOUNDARY



**66** Sites of SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC  
INTEREST (SSSIs) totalling 3,330 ha

**1** NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES (NNRs)  
at Pewsey Downs

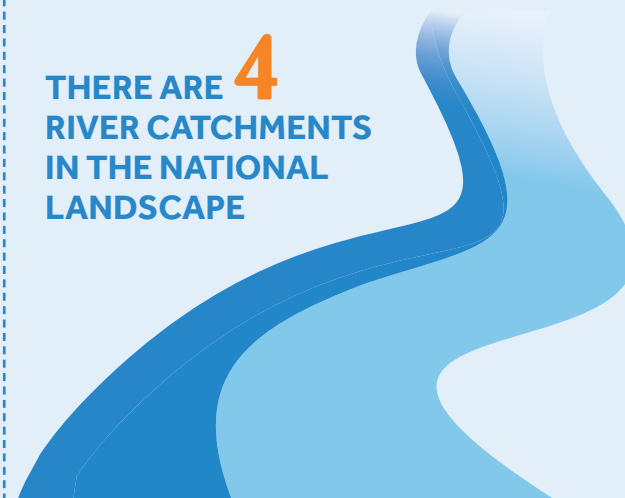
**9** Special AREAS OF CONSERVATION  
(SACs) protecting chalk grassland,  
wetland and woodland habitats



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 NATIONAL  
LANDSCAPE



**27,688 ha**

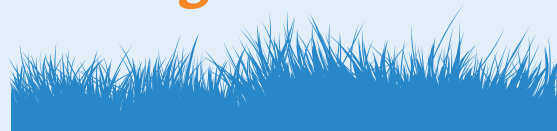
**OF WOODLAND**

(just under 16%  
of land cover.)

*About one-third is  
ancient woodland*



Holds **9%** of  
the UK's remaining  
**chalk grassland**



**478** SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

**15** REGISTERED PARKS AND GARDENS

**1** REGISTERED BATTLEFIELD

**4,069** LISTED BUILDINGS



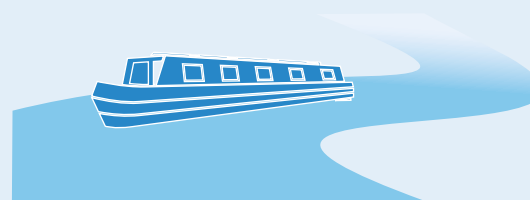
Agriculture is the dominant  
land use in the National  
Landscape with

**84%** of the  
LAND CLASSIFIED  
AS FARMLAND

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

**2,858 km** (1,776 miles)  
OF RIGHTS OF WAY

**102 km** (64 miles)  
OF NATIONAL TRAILS



**47 km** (29 miles)  
OF CANALS

**15%** of the area enjoys  
PRISTINE NIGHT SKIES

**73%** of the area is in the  
TWO DARKEST NIGHT  
SKY CATEGORIES



**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

