CHAPTER 9

Communities

MIGGS sign unveiling, Goring and Streatley station – David Olinski

Overview:

- Containing a dispersed and relatively small population spread over a large area, the majority live in the small villages and the two market towns of Marlborough and Hungerford with the high downs including large expanses without any significant habitation. The trend of young people leaving to relocate to areas with better service provision and cheaper housing continues, resulting in a higher proportion of middle aged and elderly people in many communities.
- Unemployment remains low and economic activity rates high, with many jobs in high value-added industries within a short journey from villages in the National Landscape. Swindon, Newbury and Basingstoke in particular maintain international reputations within the technology sector with some of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Remote working practices have increased since the pandemic, enabling more residents to work for distant employers while living in the National Landscape. The economic influence of London, the Thames Valley and north Hampshire is most keenly felt to the south east and east of the National Landscape and in particular those villages with good access to mainline stations.
- The Armed Forces continue to play a significant role in the local economy, especially in places such as Tidworth and Ludgershall to the south of the National Landscape on the Wiltshire-Hampshire border.
- Good access to the wider area and road network means that much of the National Landscape is highly accessible to commuters working in the adjacent towns. The east of the National Landscape continues to experience greater pressure on housing stock in West Berkshire, Basingstoke and Deane and South Oxfordshire.
- A well-structured and resourced farming industry, with substantial assets of land, machinery, knowledge and entrepreneurial ability, though facing significant challenges with the continuing transition to Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS). Many examples of diversification into food processing, tourism and provision of space for economic activity can be seen across the North Wessex Downs.
- Villages and small towns with a strong sense of identity and wellbeing linked to the historic landscape, active and resourceful community groups.
- There is a strong local resonance and affinity with the landscape of the North Wessex Downs, particularly the individual downs and the river valleys and other outstanding features.

Bucklebury Common Walking Festival – Ann Shepley

Communities of the North Wessex Downs

9.1 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape is not a wilderness. It is a distinct and recognisable area arising from a long history of human occupation and the sustainable use of its natural resources. There is a clear relationship between land stewardship, community, the economy and natural beauty; these features and functions combine to give the area its special character.

9.2 Within the North Wessex Downs there are 173 parish councils and two market towns, Marlborough and Hungerford. In mid-2022, the total population of the National Landscape was estimated as 102,352[1]. Post-pandemic working patterns have evolved, with a notable increase in remote and hybrid working arrangements. Many villages are now largely occupied by those who split their working time between home and offices outside the area. This has continued to stimulate rising house prices, with very significant pressure placed on the affordable housing stock. In addition, villages often have a reduced population during parts of the day, undermining the viability of village services such as post offices, pubs and doctors' surgeries. There is a need for a broad mix of housing to maintain sustainable communities and support village services.

9.3 To have sustainable communities in the North Wessex Downs they must be places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. Sustainable communities should be:

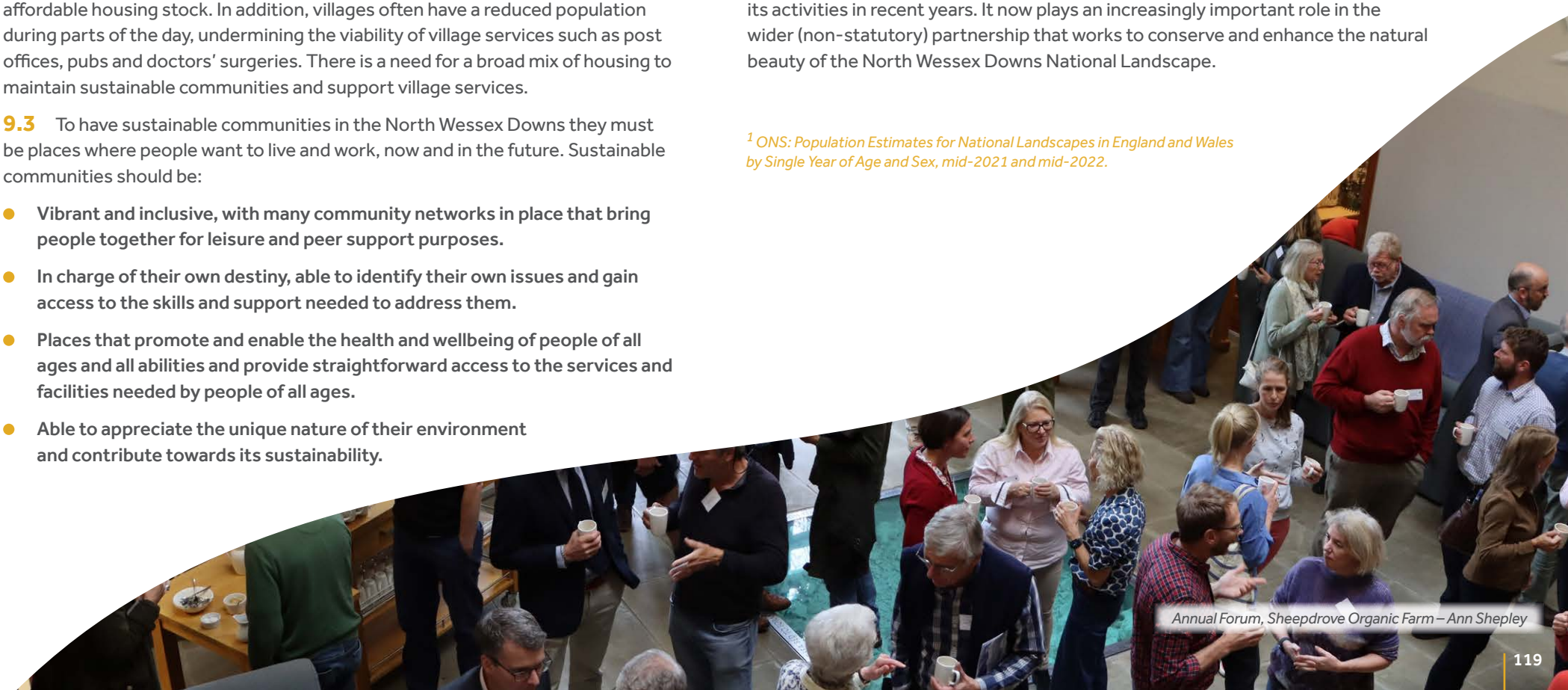
- **Vibrant and inclusive, with many community networks in place that bring people together for leisure and peer support purposes.**
- **In charge of their own destiny, able to identify their own issues and gain access to the skills and support needed to address them.**
- **Places that promote and enable the health and wellbeing of people of all ages and all abilities and provide straightforward access to the services and facilities needed by people of all ages.**
- **Able to appreciate the unique nature of their environment and contribute towards its sustainability.**

9.4 A number of parishes in the North Wessex Downs have undertaken community-led planning, and the number of Neighbourhood Plans in the National Landscape has continued to increase since 2019. Community-led plans include actions relevant to the social, economic and environmental objectives of the North Wessex Downs. The NWDNL supports this approach and provides advice and support to parishes where requested.

9.5 Most North Wessex Downs residents continue to have poor access to services when compared to regional averages, though digital service provision has improved access to some services.

9.6 The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust, established in 2016 "*To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and its setting*" and "*To advance the education of the public in the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment*", has expanded its activities in recent years. It now plays an increasingly important role in the wider (non-statutory) partnership that works to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

[1] *ONS: Population Estimates for National Landscapes in England and Wales by Single Year of Age and Sex, mid-2021 and mid-2022.*



Annual Forum, Sheepdrove Organic Farm – Ann Shepley

Thames water testing, Pangbourne – David Olinski

Helen Browning's Royal Oak – greatwestway.co.uk

Employment and Training

9.7 The majority of the local economy remains part of a larger urban economy, a characteristic that is likely to have been reinforced and extended by the changes to living and working patterns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many businesses benefit from the area's high landscape quality to attract staff or customers. Agriculture, forestry and fishing businesses are the third-largest business types in the North Wessex Downs, accounting for approximately 10% of all businesses in the area.

9.8 The fundamental changes in the area's land-based economy continue to require new skills and the re-learning of old skills. There is a need to understand, define and then meet training and education needs. Support comes from National Training Organisations such as LANTRA, further education and training colleges, and community groups.

Travel and Transport

9.9 Local communities and visitors need access to services – a key issue for social inclusion. That access should be sustainable. The North Wessex Downs is within easy reach of three mainline railways: The Waterloo to Exeter line with stations at Basingstoke, Overton, Whitchurch and Andover; The Paddington to Penzance line with stations at Kintbury, Hungerford, Bedwyn and Pewsey (and connections to Marlborough); The Paddington to Bristol and South Wales line with stations at Pangbourne, Goring, Cholsey and Didcot.

9.10 Outside the main towns that ring the North Wessex Downs, bus services remain limited and have faced further reductions in some places since 2019. Although the distribution of bus routes suggests that rural areas are well served, many of these services run only infrequently. Some routes between significant towns, e.g. Hungerford and Wantage, are not served at all. However, a number of innovative and flexible community transport schemes continue to operate within the North Wessex Downs. These often rely on the support of charitable funding and volunteers. During the last Management Plan period, the new Wiltshire Connect service has been rolled out to cover much of the western half of the North Wessex Downs. This includes both timetabled services and a flexible on-demand bus service, supported by a dedicated app, that allows passengers to book from seven days to 30 minutes in advance.

Communities: Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Communities Valued Qualities:

a) Widespread lack of awareness of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among local residents and businesses.

b) The towns which surround the National Landscape are all expected to accommodate significant housing and employment development.

c) Impact of the main strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, including the M4 and A34. Increased volumes of traffic or an increasing demand for quicker journey times may lead to pressure for widening and other 'improvement' schemes on these and other roads in the National Landscape and its setting.

d) Greater prosperity enjoyed by some people leads to other environmental impacts such as more over-flights by aircraft, more use of roads and rights of way for motorised leisure pursuits, and increased demand for second homes.

e) Loss of affordable housing, reducing the social mix within settlements and leading to a loss of essential rural skills and services.

f) Potential changes in demographic profile, social exclusion, access to services and loss of public transport routes and other key facilities.

g) The trend of commuting to higher paid jobs outside the National Landscape whilst living in the area is resulting in rising house prices, though increased remote working is changing some of these patterns.

h) High demand for traditional buildings to convert to residential use, so reducing the opportunities for business conversions.

i) The positive benefits of a strong and active community spirit in many National Landscape communities, including a rich artistic and cultural life.

j) Perceived limitations on opportunities for businesses in inaccessible locations, although improved digital connectivity is reducing some barriers.

k) Opportunities and risks for the National Landscape associated with instruments such as Neighbourhood Plans, which form an increasingly important element of local decision-making.

l) Financial pressures reducing the ability for town and parish councils to participate in partnerships and community activities.

m) Lack of understanding of the impacts of daily lifestyle decisions on the environment of the North Wessex Downs – from individual travel decisions to the use of water as if it were an unlimited natural resource.

n) Increasing volume of HGVs, delivery vans and commuter traffic on rural lanes. 'Rat-running' on minor lanes to escape congestion on the main arterial roads.

o) Government requirements that businesses running apprenticeship schemes must have business premises (many traditional land-based contractors do not have formal business premises).

p) The need for better understanding and awareness of the links between high environmental quality and ecosystem services and local business.

q) There are opportunities to increase involvement in local community activities to improve social cohesion and sense of belonging.

r) The need for local sources of employment and opportunities for local people to develop skills that could support them into self-employment or enterprise.

s) The need for a wide range of skills training for land managers and other rural enterprises within the North Wessex Downs.

t) The impacts of the transition to the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) on farming businesses and communities.

u) The opportunities and challenges presented by changes to living patterns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, including increased remote working and use of telecommunications for shopping and access to services.

v) The role of communities in climate change mitigation and adaption.

w) Poor level and extent of bus services across some parts of the National Landscape.

x) The need to decarbonise travel and transport.

y) The challenges of enabling school-age children to learn about the history, management and conservation of the National Landscape.

Communities: Priorities

1. Support the development of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust in pursuit of its charitable purposes to promote actions which underpin the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.
2. Support and facilitate community-led initiatives that help deliver National Landscape purposes and Management Plan objectives.
3. Encourage an enhanced sense of respect and pride in the North Wessex Downs among local people and their increased participation in activities that raise the understanding and profile of the National Landscape.
4. Assist the development of connectivity, based on principles of planning and integrating multi-functional green infrastructure assets, from neighbouring urban areas and within the area, facilitating active and sustainable access to and around the National Landscape to make it easier for communities to experience and benefit from the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.

Credit: greatwestway.co.uk


Eel release – ARK

Communities: Policies

CO 01 Support efforts to raise the profile of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among communities within and surrounding the area.

CO 02 Provide parishes and all other relevant community groups and individuals with information and training as necessary to raise awareness of the valued qualities of the National Landscape and the need to conserve and enhance it.

CO 03 Encourage, support and celebrate local communities' engagement in the planning, conservation and enhancement of their local environment, protecting its natural beauty and enhancing the sense of local pride and ownership.

CO 04 Support communities to play their part in climate change mitigation and adaption, including projects to promote community use of renewable energy sources, consistent with National Landscape objectives.

CO 05 Publicise relevant community activities and events across the North Wessex Downs.

CO 06 Support community initiatives aimed at retaining rural services, including the combining of services where this will improve their viability.

CO 07 Support initiatives to foster awareness, understanding and appreciation of the National Landscape in local schools and encourage greater connectivity with nature and the environment in line with proposals in DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan and the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan.

CO 08 Support initiatives to address the specific needs of different groups within and around the National Landscape, such as access to training and social activities for young people and engagement with under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups.

CO 09 Support provision of reliable and affordable broadband and mobile telephone connections throughout the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect the valued qualities of the area.

CO 10 Ensure the development and implementation of transport plans and programmes, including those related to the strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, addresses the needs of North Wessex Downs communities, reduces transport impacts on the environment, and conserves and enhances the valued qualities of the landscape.

CO 11 Support measures to enable active travel and provide integrated and demand-responsive passenger transport, including easily accessible information, across the North Wessex Downs that serves the needs of local people and visitors.

CO 12 Secure Travel Plans for new developments with significant traffic generation potential within the North Wessex Downs and its setting to reduce car use and encourage active and sustainable travel.

CO 13 Support good practice examples of community approaches that respond to locally identified needs and promote them as an inspiration to others (e.g. the establishment of local housing trusts, support for new village shops, community transport schemes, etc).

CO 14 Support communities in landscape-led approaches to enable the availability of housing for identified local needs that will be – and will remain – genuinely affordable in perpetuity, consistent with National Landscape purposes.