

ADOPTION OF THE HIGH WEALD AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2019-2024

Cabinet - 4 April 2019

Report of	Chief Planning Officer
Status	For Decision
Also considered by	Planning Advisory Committee - 12 March 2019
Key Decision	Yes

Executive Summary: Sevenoaks District Council is legally required to adopt a management plan for the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The High Weald AONB unit have produced a management plan that was agreed by its Joint Advisory Committee in November 2018 after public consultation and with input from the Council.

The management plan sets out the key characteristics of the High Weald in terms of natural beauty and is an important guidance document for development within the AONB.

This report supports the Key Aim of ensuring that Sevenoaks District remains a great place to live, work and visit.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Robert Piper

Contact Officer Helen French, Ext. 7357

Recommendation to the Planning Advisory Committee: That it be recommended to Cabinet to adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan and to provide a link to this Document on the Council's website.

Recommendation to Cabinet: To adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan and to provide a link to this Document on the Council's website.

Reason for recommendation: To fulfil the statutory duty arising from the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to prepare a management plan for the High Weald AONB.

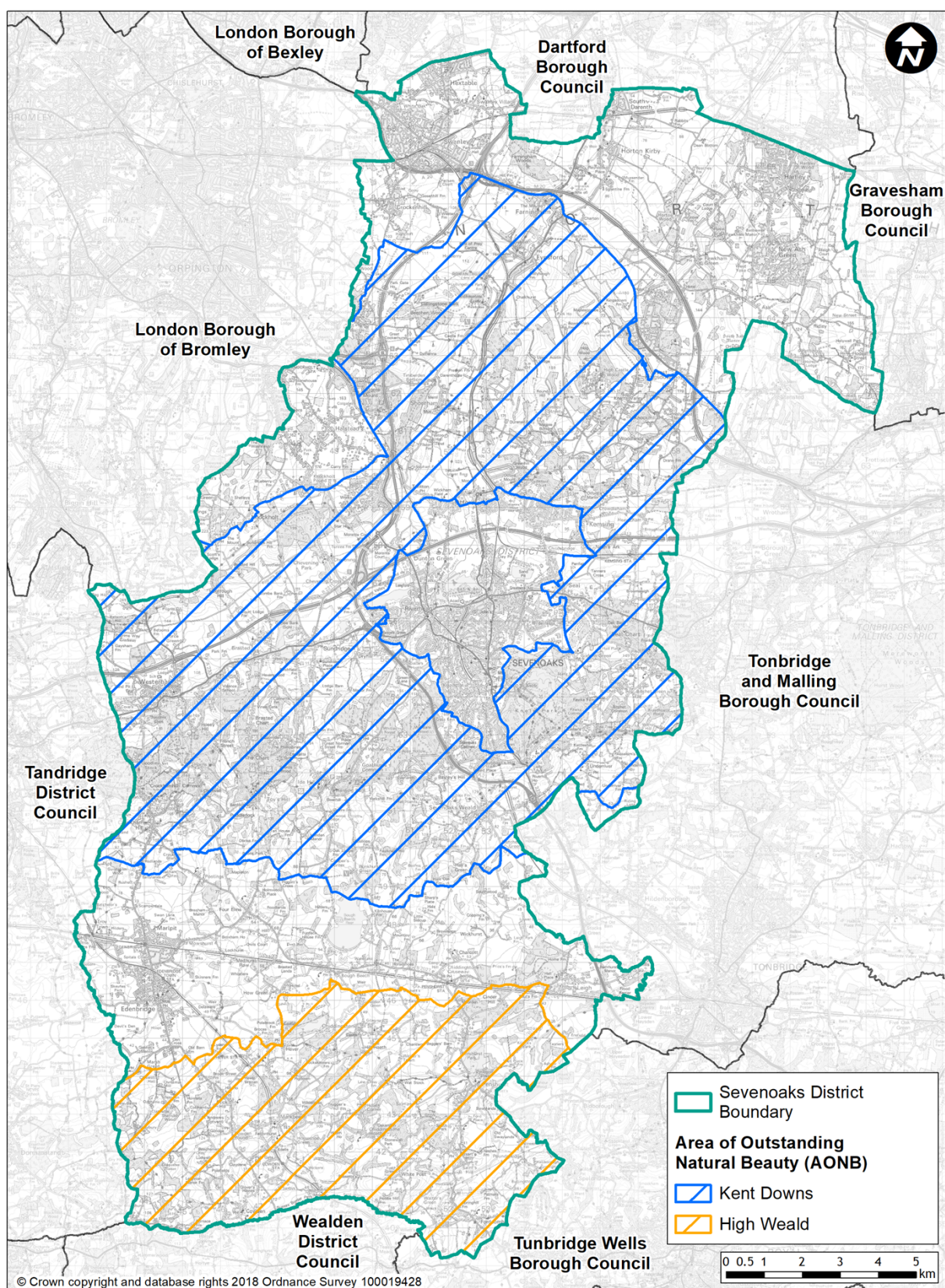
Introduction and Background

- 1 Under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, Section 89, local authorities with land in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are legally obliged to prepare and publish an AONB Management Plan which

'formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it', and to review this Plan every five years. Where an AONB crosses administrative boundaries local authorities are required to act jointly to produce the Plan.

- 2 Sevenoaks District Council has two AONBs as shown in Map 1, which includes the Kent Downs AONB which runs across the centre and north of the District and the High Weald AONB which runs across the southern part of the District. A management plan is required for both; however this report outlines the management plan for the High Weald AONB only, with the Management Plan for the Kent Downs AONB expected shortly and which will be discussed at a later date.
- 3 The partnership of 15 local authorities with land in the High Weald AONB first published a joint management plan for the area in 1994. In 2004 a statutory plan was produced as a rolling 20 year strategy to be reviewed every 5 years. The last Management Plan Review was carried out in 2013 and this was presented to the Local Planning and Environment Advisory Committee in January 2014. The document was adopted by the Council in February 2014. The current review covers the period 2019-2024.
- 4 This High Weald AONB Management Plan (2019-2024) was approved by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) of the AONB unit on 28th November 2018.
- 5 The AONB Management Plans are important guidance documents. They are referenced in the current and emerging Local Plan and have helped to shape the environmental and landscape policies. They are also used in decision making in Development Management. In addition to this they are used as a tool for developers to help them understand what elements of the natural beauty are important to this AONB and what issues any new development should avoid, preventing further harm to the natural beauty of the landscape.
- 6 It should be noted that this is not a consultation document as considerable consultation has already taken place on the proposed Management Plan between 13th June and 25th July 2018. The Council has been involved in the development of the Plan through its membership of the AONB unit and through comments on the draft plans. Any changes requested through the adoption process should be minor in nature and not materially affect the plan.

Map 1: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Sevenoaks District



Background

- 7 AONBs are national designations carried out by Natural England. The main purpose of an AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape. The legal status and importance of AONBs is on a par with National Parks although they do not have the same administrative arrangements.
- 8 The designation of the High Weald AONB was confirmed in 1983. It is the fourth largest covering areas of Surrey, Kent, East Sussex and West Sussex. Sevenoaks District Council is a member of the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), a partnership of the 4 County and 11 District authorities that cover the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and who each according to their relative interest jointly fund the JAC. Cllr Matthew Dickins currently represents SDC on the JAC and Helen French is the lead officer.
- 9 The CROW Act:
 - places a duty on all public bodies and statutory undertakers to ‘have regard’ to the purposes of AONBs; and
 - reaffirms the original purposes of designation and confirms the powers of local authorities to take appropriate action to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of AONBs.
- 10 The National Planning Policy Framework places great weight on conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, giving them the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. It also states that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment, which this document will assist us in.

Links to other Council Policy and Strategy

- 11 The AONB Management Plan has the potential to improve the quality of life for residents of Sevenoaks District living and working in and around the AONBs through the conservation and enhancement of their landscape and supporting the social and economic wellbeing of communities.
- 12 The guidance provided in the AONB Management Plans is supported by the Council’s Core Strategy (2011) under Policy SP1 and in paragraph 2.33 of the Allocations and Development Management Plan. It is also supported in Policy LA1 of the Proposed Submission Version of the Local Plan. More widely, the use of the Management Plans can assist the Council in delivering the greener aims contained within the SDC Community Plan.

The High Weald AONB Management Plan

- 13 The AONB Management Plan sets out the key features of the High Weald and what contributes to the natural beauty and distinctive character of the area. Some of the main visions from the Plan, includes, that it:
- Retains its distinctive landscape character and beauty.
 - Displays a thriving wildlife and improves ecological quality in its highly connected and biodiverse landscape.
 - Engages people with nature and contributes to the health and well being of people within and outside the area.
 - Demonstrates a consistent approach to planning across the AONB, allowing for appropriate housing and economic needs of thriving communities without compromising the historic settlement pattern.
 - Celebrates woodland history and nurtures a woodland economy.
 - Facilitates participation by people, their communities and businesses in conserving the area and managing change.
- 14 The Plan can be used to guide environmental land management and assess the impact of development or other changes on the AONB
- 15 Local Planning Authorities use the document for the following:
- To identify detrimental effects of proposed development on the AONB helping ensure that development is ‘landscape led’ and contributes to conserving and enhancing natural beauty,
 - Use the plan and underpinning data to assist with green infrastructure planning across the AONB and wider South East.
 - Use the Plan as a checklist against which to assess the impact of policies and other activities on AONB purpose to fulfil the requirements of CROW Act 2000 Section 85.
- 16 In particular it sets out key characteristics for each component of natural beauty, which identify what is special about the High Weald Landscape and beauty, and that should be afforded great weight in planning decisions. The plan and the objectives for each component in particular act as a check list or set of criteria against which policy and actions can be assessed.

- 17 The Natural Beauty of the High Weald has five defining components of character:
- Geology, landform and water systems- as it is a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clay and sandstone.
 - Settlement - as it consists of a dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads and late Medieval villages founded on trade and on-agricultural rural industries.
 - Routeways - as it has a dense network of historic routes
 - Woodland - as it consists of an abundance of ancient woodland, highly interconnected and in small holdings.
 - Field and heath - as it consists of small irregular and productive fields, bounded by hedgerows and woods.
- 18 The Management Plan looks at each of these components and identifies key characteristics of each one and how it contributes to the natural beauty of the landscape. It also lists the top five issues under each component that can threaten the natural beauty of the landscape, including development. It also lays out some clear objectives for each one. This helps Local Authorities and also developers to identify what contributes to the natural beauty of the landscape, how development can be in keeping with the existing identified characteristics and also what issues need to be addressed by any new development within it.
- 19 In addition to the above it also considers the land-based economy and related rural life, and how this is bound up with, and how it underpins the observable character of the landscape.
- 20 It also considers other qualities, such as:
- High Weald Charter for Residents and Visitors - how people relate to and connect with the landscape.
 - Locally distinct features such as historic parks and gardens, orchards, biodiversity and locally distinctive historic buildings and how they enrich the character and components of the landscape.

21 The plan is supported by the following documents:

- Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA)
- Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA)
- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)
- Monitoring the Condition of the AONB and Performance of the AONB Management Plan
- Consultation Statement

Summary of main amendments to the current Management Plan.

22 This review does not represent a significant policy shift in the Management Plan, but is generally a light touch review of the existing document. The main changes in this new Plan include:

- Each of the five main components now identifies a number of key characteristics that contribute to the natural beauty of the landscape, which assist in understanding the existing character of the AONB and also how to take development forward.
- Updates to the relevant facts and figures.
- The document now includes a brief history of the High Weald
- An updated vision
- The top 5 issues to each component have been updated but many of the objectives remain the same, with amended indicators for success (rather than targets).

Summary of Review Process

23 The process of reviewing the Management Plan began in March 2017 led by the AONB unit with input from both Officers and Councillors from each local authority.

24 In 2017 a series of technical workshops based around the key components of natural beauty were held and early public engagement was developed through an on-line questionnaire promoted to AONB contacts and via social media. Nearly 400 people completed the questionnaire and analysis of their responses helped shape the Plan.

25 A public consultation on the Plan was held between 13th June and 25th July 2018. This included consultation with all the local authorities, as well as with statutory bodies and was publicised via e-news and social media. 143 responses were received, 115 from individuals and 28 from organisations.

82% of the respondents ‘strongly agreed’ with the AONB Vision and 84% of the respondents ‘strongly agreed’ with the Statement of Significance.

- 26 The High Weald AONB Management Plan review (2019-2024) was approved by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) of the AONB unit on 28th November 2018 and it is recommended that the Council adopt the Plan as it will assist us in understanding the key characteristics of the AONB and therefore developing policies and making development management decisions to protect and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape of the High Weald AONB.

Key Implications

Financial

Any cost will be met out of the existing budget.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

The Council has a statutory duty to prepare and review a Management Plan for any areas within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. By not adopting the plan the council is in breach of the CROW Act 2000.

Equality Assessment

The High Weald AONB Management Plan has been subject to an EQIA which found that the plan is unlikely to any significant negative impacts on equality.

Appendices

High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/joint-advisory-committee-papers/2018-2019.html>

Background documents

Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA)

Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA)

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Monitoring the Condition of the AONB and Performance of the AONB Management Plan

Consultation Statement

All available at

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/joint-advisory-committee-papers/2018-2019.html>

Richard Morris
Chief Planning Officer