

ADOPTION OF AONB MANAGEMENT PLANS

Cabinet - 8 July 2021

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - Planning & Regulatory Services

Status: For Decision

Also considered by:

- Development & Conservation Advisory Committee - 6 July 2021
- Council - 20 July 2021

Key Decision: No

This report supports the Key Aims of: supporting the wellbeing of residents, businesses and visitors, and ensuring that Sevenoaks District remains a great place to live, work and visit.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Julia Thornton

Contact Officer: Helen French, Ext. 7357

Recommendation to Development and Conservation Advisory Committee:

To note the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan

Recommendation to Cabinet:

To recommend to Council to adopt the Kent Downs and High Weald AONB Management Plans.

Recommendation to Council:

To adopt the Kent Downs and High Weald AONB Management Plans.

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 Kent Downs & High Weald AONB.

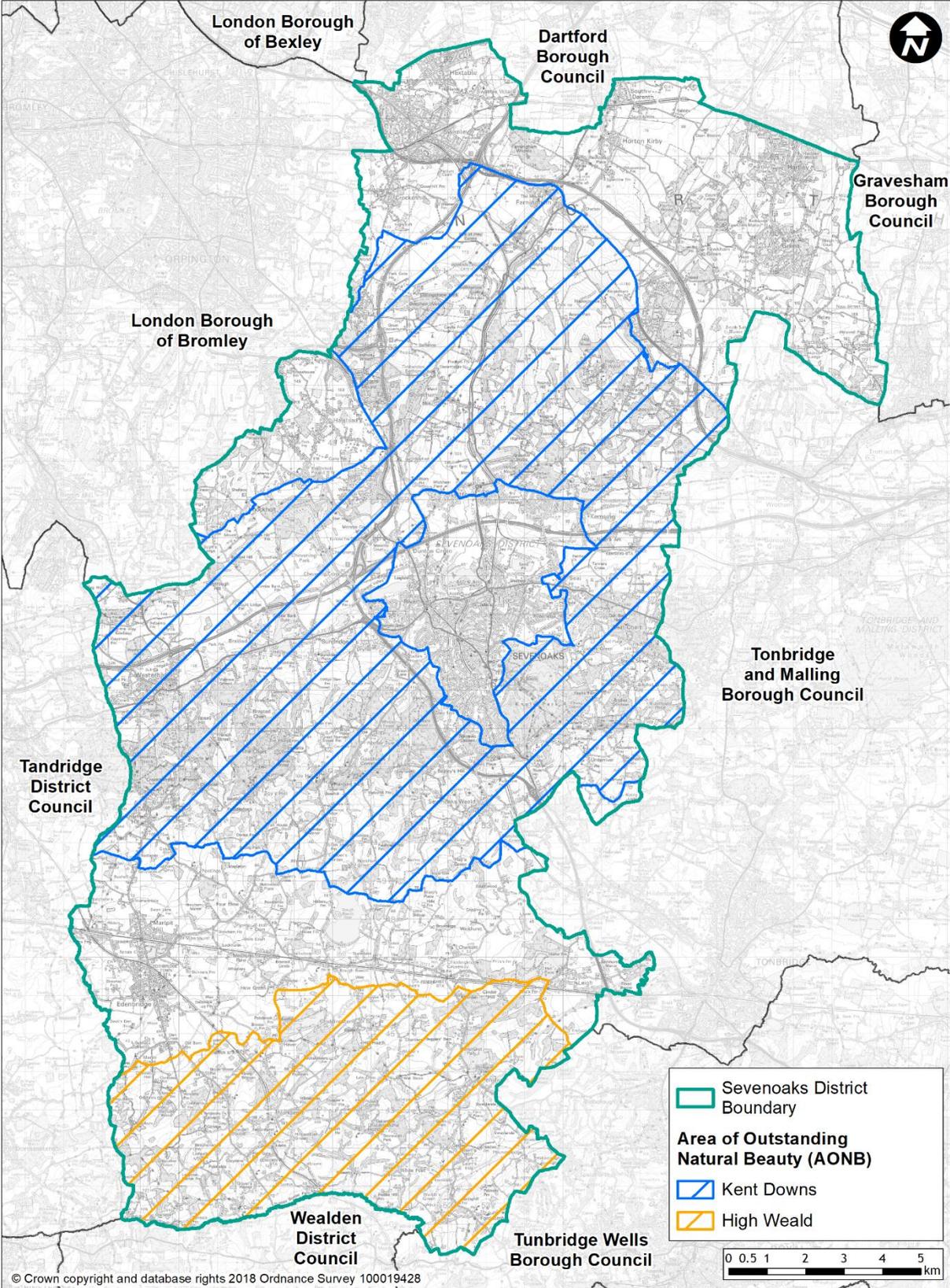
Introduction and Background

- 1 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are national designations established 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.

- 2 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.
- 3 Sevenoaks District has two AONBs as shown in Map 1, the Kent Downs AONB across the centre and north of the District and the High Weald AONB across the southern part of the District. A management plan is required for each. This report outlines the detail of the management plan for the Kent Downs AONB as the High Weald AONB Management Plan has already been agreed by Cabinet. The Management Plans are required to be adopted by Full Council.
- 4 Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) has a statutory responsibility with regards to the management of the AONBs. The CRoW Act 2000:
 - 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.

Map 1: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Sevenoaks District



The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan

- 7 The Kent Downs AONB was designated in 1968, covers 878sq.km (326 sq. miles) and stretches from the Surrey/Greater London border to the Strait of Dover. Sevenoaks District Council is a member of the Kent Downs Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), a partnership of Kent County Council and the 11 local authorities that cover the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and who each, according to their relative interest, jointly fund the JAC. Cllr Avril Hunter currently represents SDC on the JAC and Helen French is the lead officer.
- 8 The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan can be used to guide environmental land management and assess the impact of development or other changes on the AONB. It 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
- 9 The plan sets out the key components, characteristics and qualities of the Kent Downs AONB. It states:

“The rich landscape of the Kent Downs AONB, is made up of landscape components with special characteristics and qualities which together distinguish it as a landscape of national and international importance and underpin its significance and natural beauty. Often the setting of the Kent Downs has great value and was a principle reason for the Kent Downs AONB designation. The identified components, characteristics and qualities are consistently recognised and valued by the public, individuals, institutions, organisations and experts alike; the Covid-19 pandemic brought a new spotlight on the importance of contact with nature and beauty and places the National Landscapes in a key position for societal and economic recovery.”

- 10 The landscape components of Kent Downs have been identified as:
 - Dramatic landform and views; a distinctive landscape character
 - Biodiversity-rich habitats
 - Farmed landscape
 - Woodland and trees
 - A rich legacy of historic and cultural heritage
 - The Heritage Coasts
 - Geology and natural resources
 - Tranquillity and remoteness

11 The following social and economic components are also included:

- Vibrant communities
- Access, enjoyment and understanding
- Public Perception of the Kent Downs

12 The Management Plan identifies the key characteristics of each component and how it contributes to the natural beauty of the landscape. It also sets out the main issues, opportunities and threats, and includes clear principles for each component. 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 what issues need to be addressed by any new development within it.

Summary of Review Process

13 In 2004 a statutory plan for the Kent Downs was produced as a rolling 20 year strategy to be reviewed every 5 years. The current review covers the period 2021-2026 and was approved by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) of the AONB unit on 26th January 2021.

14 The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty partnership has worked closely with many individuals and organisations to prepare and produce this revision of the Management Plan. SDC has been involved in the development of the Plan through its membership of the JAC and through comments on the draft plans.

15 The review process for the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan has been delayed for a number of reasons; there was a question about the role of policies within the plan and consequently its consistency with the CRoW Act and subsequent guidance; this was resolved to the satisfaction of Natural England and the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee. Once a draft plan was agreed for consultation this was delayed by purdah for the 2019 General Election and subsequently the impact of the first Covid-19 lock down.

16 There has been careful and thorough engagement and consultation leading to the revised plan that is recommended for adoption. There has also been a statutory process which has included the production of a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environment Report, a Sustainability Appraisal, an Equalities Impact Assessment and Habitat Regulations Assessment.

17 A participation and engagement process has been carried out involving over 1000 individuals and organisations who have an interest and role to take in the Kent Downs AONB. The process has included:

- meetings with officers and elected members from the AONB Local Authorities (through the Joint Advisory Committee) with discussion and debate about the key issues and opportunities they wish to see addressed in this Plan, and the way that policies need to be presented.
- An extensive engagement process linked to the celebration of the Kent Downs AONB 50th Anniversary.
- A series of ‘expert opinion debate’ meetings, presentations and discussion with a wide range of other key stakeholders including public bodies and voluntary organisations, town and parish councils and farmers, to examine what is important and what are key issues to them, and solutions that the Management Plan can take forward.

18 A formal consultation process was supported by Kent County Council’s consultation team on behalf of the Joint Advisory Committee. Copies of the draft third revision of the Management Plan were distributed to the Joint Advisory Committee and widely through the KCC consultation portal and contact lists which included relevant officers, parish councils, appropriate government agencies, public bodies, businesses, interest and amenity groups relevant to the Kent Downs as well as interested members of the public. Special efforts were made to contact and engage ‘hard to reach’ groups.

19 A good response was received with feedback and comments from over 140 individual respondents from the main groups of organisations and many members of the public. Summary findings included:

- 92% of respondents strongly agree or tend to agree with the overarching vision for the Kent Downs AONB in 2030
- 96% of respondents strongly agree or tend to agree that the Management Plan identifies what makes the area distinctive and special
- 85% of respondents strongly agree or tend to agree that the key social and economic components have been identified

20 Following the consultation a final draft plan was circulated to the Joint Advisory Committee in December 2020 and reviewed by the JAC on the 26th January 2021. The JAC recommended it for adoption.

Other options Considered and/or rejected

The Council could consider not adopting the AONB Management Plans however the CRoW Act 2000 requires local authorities with land in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to prepare and publish an AONB Management Plan.

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 AONB Management Plans have been subject to an EQIA which found that the plans are unlikely to any significant negative impacts on equality.

Net Zero 2030 and Environmental Impact

The Management Plan will assist in identifying potential opportunities to reduce carbon emissions within the AONB. SDC will continue to work with the AONB Units to identify, develop and support projects which enhance the landscape, reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the inevitable changes in climate.

Conclusion

The Council is legally required to have an AONB Management Plan in place and to keep this under review. Together with the relevant local authorities, the Council has worked with the AONB Units to review the plans. The review has been carried out within the relevant guidance and statutory requirements and reflects the Council's aims and objectives and it is considered appropriate for the Council to adopt it.

Appendices

Appendix A - Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2021-2026

<https://www.kentdowns.org.uk/management-plan-2021-2026/>

High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024

<https://cds.sevenoaks.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=120&MId=2242&Ver=4&J=7>

Background Papers

Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA)

Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA)

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Available at:

<https://www.kentdowns.org.uk/management-plan-2021-2026/>

Richard Morris

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - Planning & Regulatory Services