

Adoption of High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029

Development and Conservation Advisory Committee – 26 March 2024

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

Status: For Decision

Also considered by:

- Cabinet – 18 April 2024
- Council – 23 April 2024

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: Sevenoaks District Council is legally required to prepare and publish a management plan for the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In the High Weald this requirement is delivered through the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee. A draft management plan has been prepared, after public consultation and with input from the Council, setting out key character components of the High Weald's natural beauty. It is an important guidance document for functions affecting the AONB and its setting.

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

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Reay

Contact Officer: Vivienne Riddle, Ext. 7357

Recommendation to Development and Conservation Advisory Committee:

That, subject to its approval by the High Weald JAC on 27 March 2024, it be recommended to Cabinet to recommend to Council to adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

To recommend to Council adopt the High Weald AONB Management Plan.

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.

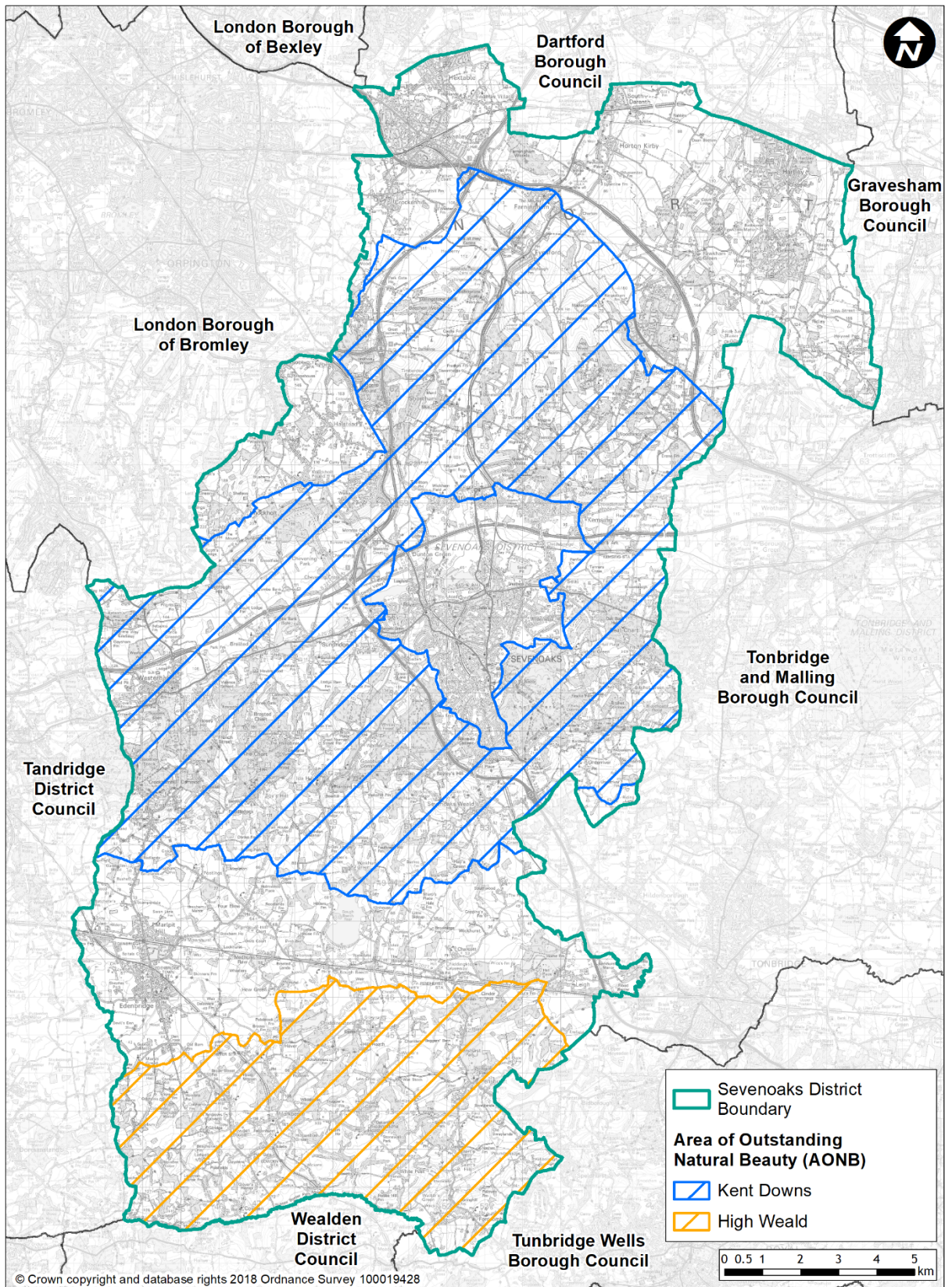
Introduction and Background

- 1 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 On 22 November 2023 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were renamed as National Landscapes, to highlight their national importance and to elevate them alongside National Parks. Despite the renaming, they remain known as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty within the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and within the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance. Accordingly, the High Weald AONB Management Plan refers to it as such and for the sake consistency and clarity they have also been referred to as AONBs throughout this report.
- 3 Under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, Section 89(2), 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 of outstanding natural beauty 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 (Section 89(11)(b)).
- 4 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; however, this report relates to the management plan for the High Weald only, as the Kent Downs AONB management plan covers the period 2021-2026 and the review process has yet to commence. The management plan is required to be adopted by Full Council.
- 5 Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) has a statutory responsibility with regards to the management of the AONBs. This duty has recently been strengthened through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, which has inserted an amendment into section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000. The amended duty came into force on 26 December 2023 and is as follows:

'In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty in England, a relevant authority ... must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.'

The CRoW Act also 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.

Map 1. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Sevenoaks District



- 6 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 these issues (paragraph 182, NPPF 2023). 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.
- 7 The guidance provided in the AONB management plan 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 NE1 of the emerging Local Plan (Plan 2040), as well as being referenced within other policies e.g. our proposed policy on design quality. 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

- 8 The High Weald AONB was designated 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 Williams currently represents SDC on the JAC and Vivienne Riddle attends the Officer Steering Group meetings.
- 9 The High Weald 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 AONB through the conservation and enhancement of their landscape and supporting the social and economic wellbeing of communities.
- 10 The management plan contains various sections, including a Statement of Significance and 8 components of character which together combine to create its distinct and recognisable landscape, comprising physical components and perceptual and aesthetic qualities and cultural associations. Each component is described in detail, including key characteristics, the top 5 issues and objectives and actions recommended to guide the activities of partners and stakeholders. 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.
- 11 The character components of the High Weald have been identified as:
 - Natural Systems (Geology, soils, water and climate)
 - Settlement
 - Routeways

- Woodland
- Fieldscape and Heath
- Dark Skies
- Perceptual and Aesthetic qualities
- Land-based economy and related rural living

12 It also includes the following cross cutting themes, including programmes, principles for action and investment strategy:

- Restoring soil health and regenerative land management
- Nature recovery and biodiversity
- The climate crisis; achieving net zero
- People and access
- Planning and development in the High Weald AONB

Summary of Review Process

13 In 2004 a statutory plan for the High Weald was produced as a rolling 20-year strategy to be reviewed every 5 years. The approach taken was designed to be robust and future-proofed, resulting in an objective led plan rooted in an understanding of landscape pattern, and structured around AONB purpose and character. To allow for cost-effective review, the published plan was kept concise with supporting evidence, data and guidance available online. This approach allowed for 'light touch' reviews in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

14 A new management plan is now required to be published in 2024. This is the first edition of a new 20-year strategy, covering the period 2024-2029, and includes a 5-year implementation plan. The review has taken account of the current and future major challenges/issues of biodiversity crisis, climate change, fairer access to nature, and development pressure. The plan also needs to be cognisant of the National Guidance for AONB Management Plans, currently in preparation, which is anticipated to require plans to address these issues. Therefore, while the character components and management policy objectives (the most important aspects of the HWMP) remain broadly appropriate, the range of character components has broadened, and other aspects of the plan have needed a more substantive re-consideration, including the inclusion of cross cutting themes: programmes, principles for action and investment strategy 2024-2029, to reflect the afore-mentioned challenges/issues.

15 The High Weald Joint Advisory Committee launched the current review in 2022 to cover the period 2024-2029. The draft management plan has gone through an extensive process of consultation with the Officer Steering Group

in 2022 and 2023, evolving as a result of reviewing the feedback received during that process. Public consultation on the management plan and its supporting documents ran from 05 September 2023 to 05 November 2023, over a 6 week period, to which we responded. Our response touched on and made suggestions and recommendations regarding a number of aspects, including highlighting the backdrop of a Government target for housing of 300,000 per year, a high local housing need and a highly constrained context.

16 The draft management plan is also supported by a Consultation Statement, a Strategic Environmental Assessment, a Habitat Regulations Assessment and an Equality Impact Assessment.

17 The next step is for the management plan to be considered by the JAC, who, if they approve it, recommend individual local authorities to adopt it. In this instance, the Joint Advisory Committee of the AONB will be considering the draft management plan on 27 March 2024, the day after DCAC, as such the recommendation to adopt the management plan, is subject to its approval at the High Weald's JAC. The timing of this report is to support the High Weald with their aim of submitting the management plan to the Secretary of State by the end of May.

Other options Considered and/or rejected

The Council could consider not adopting the AONB Management Plan 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 High Weald AONB Management Plan has been subject to an EQIA which concludes that the management plan complies with the equalities legislation.

Climate Change Implications 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.

Conclusions

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 Unit to review the plan. 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 – High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029

[Link](#)

Background Papers

Consultation Statement

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA)

Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)

[Available at LINK](#)

Richard Morris

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer – Planning and Regulatory Services