



The countryside charity

Kent

## **Joint response from CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex to the October/November public consultation on the proposed new High Weald AONB Management Plan**

We are CPRE, the countryside charity. Formed in 1926, CPRE is a registered charity and one of the longest established and most respected environmental groups in England, with over 40,000 members and supporters living in our cities, towns, villages and the countryside.

Our vision is of a beautiful and thriving countryside that enriches all our lives, and our mission is to promote, enhance and protect that countryside.

We believe that the planning system is a toolbox for achieving better – for people, nature and the economy.

### **AONB Vision**

#### **Is the High Weald AONB Vision ambitious enough?**

CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex support the High Weald AONB Vision and Management Plan as a whole, as we do all the work of those charged with managing one of the South East's most important and valued assets. Our comments below are intended as positive suggestions further to improve the draft Plan, and to assist in the effective promotion of its designated purpose to conserve and enhance the High Weald's natural beauty as well as its subsidiary purposes.

At paragraph 2 of the vision there is mention of 'drivers for change'. Searching for drivers for change brings no results in the draft plan. It is noted, however, that there is a section on p.17 titled Key Drivers of Change – it would be helpful if the same terminology could be used throughout (either *of*, or *for* change) and cross-referenced to the table on p.17.

### **Statement of significance**

#### **Do you find the statement of significance useful in defining the landscape and natural beauty of the High Weald?**

No comments

### **Part 1 - Objectives and actions**

CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex are of the view that it is positive and useful to see natural capital facts and figures identified for the various natural systems discussed in Part 1. However, the failure to address the natural capital value of the High Weald is, in our opinion, a serious omission that undermines the potential to deliver the Management Plan's purposes and objectives. The intrinsic character of the High Weald is inextricably connected to the environmental, social and economic benefits inherent in its character, and all those benefits have a cumulatively significant economic value to which the Management Plan should give recognition.

The High Weald serves roles that include:

The Kent branch of the Campaign to protect Rural England exists to protect the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of the Kent countryside

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- as a driver of tourism to the District, with the jobs and revenues that generates;
- for its agricultural value, which also ensures employment opportunities and assists in delivering food security;
- its important social and economic contribution to supporting peoples' physical and mental health and wellbeing,
- its crucial importance in mitigating climate change e.g. in absorbing greenhouse gases, and
- as a home for nature and biodiversity which is essential to the effective delivery of the Government's 25-year Environment Plan and Environment Act, ELMS etc.

Given that the Management Plan is a material planning consideration when development is considered by planning authorities, we regard it as of paramount importance that the natural capital value of the High Weald should be expressed within the Plan so that this value can be fairly weighed as part of any planning balance considerations.

We therefore urge the inclusion within Part 1 of a section that sufficiently makes this crucial point.

## **1. Natural systems**

### **Do you agree with the four objectives for conserving and enhancing natural systems?**

1.1 In the section on key characteristics (p.19), the last bullet point (with regard to rain throughout the year) should be amended to reflect the fact we can no longer truly say we get rain throughout the year.

1.2 The last sentence should have the following additional text: "though periods of drought are becoming more frequent, especially in the eastern part of the High Weald. Kent is an area of water stress and has experienced numerous droughts events since the 1970s."

1.3 Under the Actions listed on p.21 reference to Drivers for Change at points (a) and (j) should be updated to reflect our comments set out above in response to the Vision.

1.4 Under point (g) it is considered that public bodies should be encouraging grey water recycling schemes (rather than just considering them).

1.5 Re Action k: *Water and sewage companies to provide water quality and pollution improvement plans to the Partnership as part of their s85 'duty of regard'* We urge the inclusion of an action commitment to work with the water and sewage companies to establish effective monitoring of water quality on at least the more vulnerable watercourses to ensure that the improvement plans are delivering, with measurable baseline quality target improvements to be achieved set within those plans.

## **2. Settlement**

### **Do you agree with the three objectives for conserving and enhancing settlement?**

2.1 Given that "*Declining housing affordability, including lack of social housing and key worker housing suitable for land-based workers*" is rightly identified as one of the top 5 settlement issues (p.24), there should surely be an additional objective aimed at addressing a correction of that issue, including through the prioritisation of social and affordable housing within development permitted within the AONB. See further under the "planning sections".

2.2 We applaud the actions list on p.25 and suggest an additional action for the Partnership to work proactively with others to identify and promote development of suitable rural exception sites within the AONB where this is compatible with other Plan objectives.

2.3 Under the Actions section on p.25 reference to Drivers for Change, point (c) should be amended as per our comments on the Vision.

### **3. Routeways**

#### **Do you agree with the two objectives for conserving and enhancing routeways?**

3.1 CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex would like to see added as an action point for public bodies the supporting of applications from parish councils and local community groups for the establishment of suitable Quiet Lanes (under the Quiet Lanes and Home Zones (England) Regulations 2006). It sits uncomfortably with the expectation in the Charter for Residents and Visitors (p.77) that they should “Slow Down for people, horses and wildlife” that the Partnership members should not use their own powers to facilitate and support this otherwise one-sided objective.

3.2 Under the Actions section on p.29, we would like to see point (g) amended to include reference to “roundabouts, signage, lighting and urban-style and metallic/galvanised materials, at least in village and rural settings.” It has been noticed that one damaging aspect of recent housing development (in Matfield) is the urban-style galvanised safety railings that have been installed around road crossings for new developments. These could easily have been green, to tone in with the vegetation behind. While the Parish Council has been successful in getting these railings painted green, others remain as a feature on the rural outskirts of this AONB village.

3.3 Point (j) should have an additional paragraph: “Consider how any new roadside or public right of way furniture that is required for safety reasons can be made less obtrusive in the landscape, for example by painting it green.”

### **4. Woodland**

#### **Do you agree with the four objectives for conserving and enhancing woodland?**

4.1 Notwithstanding that 28% of the High Weald is already wooded, we nonetheless consider that the High Weald should be able to play an important role in supporting the UK Government’s England Trees Action Plan to plant 30,000 hectares of new woodland in the UK every year. This section should include an objective to do so and an action point to work with the Partnership and others (including the Weald to Waves Partners) to do so for its carbon sequestration and other benefits.

4.2 Under Actions on p.33 at point (d) we would like to see the promotion of wider buffer zones to woodland.

4.3 Query why the use of untreated local timber at point (k) for traditional purposes such as fencing is being advocated, when untreated fence or gate posts don’t last long in wet soils.

4.4 Reference is made in the top five issues (issue 1) and at Action points (k) and (n) to Rhododendron. Not all species of Rhododendron are invasive – reference should be made specifically to Rhododendron ponticum.

## 5. Fieldscape and Heath

### Do you agree with the four objectives for conserving and enhancing fieldscape and heath?

5.1 A key issue for CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex is the loss of green fields to development (top five issues, number 4). It often seems to be argued by planning applicants that a field of high grade agricultural land is too small for the effective operation of modern farm machinery, or is said to have become too isolated by development, or by changes in ownership boundaries – and hence it is allowed to be developed, when if properly managed it could be used for food production. High Weald fields are vulnerable to this because of their (historic) small size. This issue should be drawn out in the top five issues section and made an action point (for public bodies) on p.37.

5.2 We are disappointed that there is no reference within this section to the important role of the field and heath landscapes, and their effective use by the agricultural sector, in supporting the drive to reduce climate changing emissions and to support soil and watercourse quality improvement. It is surely a vital objective of this Plan to contribute to the preservation of these landscapes and to best agricultural practices that support this objective, working with its member public bodies and others.

5.3 In furtherance of this additional objective, we would welcome the addition within action (b) of a reference to best practice land management guidance extending to climate change and pollution mitigation. Amongst other things, the widening of this action point in this way will assist in giving some practical value to the section on soil improvement and regenerative agriculture in Part 2 of the draft Management Plan.

5.4 As a core promoter of hedgerow protection legislation CPRE is particularly pleased to see action (i) included here. We would like to see additional language there encouraging the planting of new, and reinstating lost, hedgerows (i.e. putting into action the benefits extolled on p.51). If you accept our point about supporting additional woodland planting within the High Weald, it may be sensible to clarify how it would be made compatible with action (p).

5.5 There is a typo on p.34: Predominately should actually read *predominantly*.

## 6. Dark Skies

### Do you agree with the two objectives for conserving and enhancing dark skies?

6.1 This has the full support of CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex. As with footnotes 8 and 9 on p.17 reference should please be made to CPRE's campaign work on dark skies <https://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-care-about/nature-and-landscapes/dark-skies/>

6.2 The current fashion for skylights, glass roofs and velux windows throws light upwards into the sky – especially when they're used to light hallway, kitchens and landings (where lights are left on for long periods). As such, top issue number 2 (on p.40) should include "and skylights" after floor-to-ceiling windows.

6.3 It is also considered that the floodlighting of iconic features such as Grade I listed buildings (for example, Matfield House) should be addressed, as this type of lighting is also altering the dark environment of rural High Weald villages.

6.4 The actions listed on p.41 should be amended at point (e) to read: “sports pitches, car parks and iconic buildings are turned off when not required.”

6.5 Point (h) should be amended to read: “discourage large areas of glazing in new building designs especially wrap-around glazing, floor-to-ceiling windows, skylights, glass roofs and velux-type windows, especially in rural areas with intrinsically dark skies.”

6.6 It is considered that a new section should be added after part (j): “Minimising light spill from windows and skylights by using blackout curtains, blinds or shutters, especially in rooms where lights are left on for long periods.”

## **7. Perceptual and aesthetic qualities**

### **Do you agree with the three objectives for conserving and enhancing perceptual and aesthetic qualities?**

7.1 The perceptual and aesthetic aspects of the High Weald’s special landscape bear directly on the vital health and welfare benefits that people derive from their access to it. So, we do not consider that action (h) (p.45) goes far enough: in our opinion local plans and planning decisions should give real value and appropriate weight to the significant health and welfare benefits derived from access to the High Weald.

7.2 The facts and figures box at the bottom of p.43 references “1 million people living within 5km of the AONB boundary”. This should be expressed more clearly as “one million people living within the AONB or within 5km of its boundary”. See also the opening paragraph on p.64 (people and access).

7.3 We question whether top issue No 5 (p.44) should more realistically be expressed not just as “degradation of nature”; but rather as the challenge of balancing the increasing visitor numbers and the objective of further widening access to the High Weald against the risk of environmental and biodiversity harm that increasing access causes; with an action for the JAC partnership of managing that balance.

7.4 Point 2 of the top five issues should be amended as follows: “Increasing visitor numbers and new residents relocating from urban areas leading to increasing visitor numbers ...”

7.5 Point (a) of the actions on p.45 should say “convening” (and not convene). Also, points (c) and (g) need clarification – see the of/for point in the Vision comments above.

## **8. Land based economy and rural living**

### **Do you agree with the three objectives for conserving and enhancing land-based economy and rural living?**

8.1 Your key characteristics may imply as much, but should it be said explicitly that the trend is increasing for land and property to be owned by people with no business within or connected to the High Weald (e.g. commuters) and by corporations, and the ever-increasing challenge this presents in retaining enough dwellings for local workers (whether or not in the agricultural sector) at prices that they can afford to buy or rent.

8.2 Equally, we believe that it needs to be an objective to encourage the deployment of high quality internet and other connectivity infrastructure to ensure that local businesses can be economically competitive.

8.3 We would like to see specific mention in point 2 of the five top issues to the recent collapse in top fruit in favour of vineyards and the impact this has on the AONB, although it is acknowledged that vineyards can bring significant benefits to the rural economy.

8.4 We suggest that action point (c) (p.49) should make explicit reference to rural exception sites (see our comments re section 2 above).

## **Part 2 – Cross cutting themes**

### **Introduction (p.50)**

CPRE Kent and CPRE Sussex struggle to understand the logic of separating out the issues covered on section 2 such that the vital themes covered here are not backed up, as are the topics in part 1, with objectives and actions that can promote the delivery of the principles identified in the various sections in part 2. When planning authorities are considering (as they must) the impact of development plan policies and planning applications on the High Weald's management plan, there are no specific policies, objectives or action points for the planning authorities to address on any of these Part 2 cross-cutting themes. That omission materially undermines both the regulatory purpose of requiring development proposal impacts on the Management Plan to be taken into account and the effectiveness of the Management Plan itself.

Should not the list of pre-requisites to the effective delivery of the Management Plan also include as an additional bullet "the existence of, and the consistent and effective implementation of, compatible policies with the JAC partners' local plans and relevant neighbourhood plans"?

## **9. Soil health and regenerative agriculture**

Please see our comments re Part 1: Fieldscape and Heath.

## **10. Nature Recovery/biodiversity**

10.1 Whilst we support the identification of the principles and best practices on pp 59 and 63, we are left to ask how and where within the Management Plan these principles are correlated to Management Plan objectives and action points? It all left far too vague as to how the JCT Partnership, acting through the Management Plan, is going to manage the High Weald so as to contribute towards wider nature recovery and climate change net zero goals.

10.2 We encourage you to consider with your partner LPAs whether and, if so, how the AONB Unit can play an active role in attracting developer funding for off-site biodiversity net gain opportunities that the Management Plan refers to, and to establish that role as a specific principle to aid nature recovery. This would enable the enhancement of nature recovery areas etc within the High Weald."

10.3 On p.59 (recovering nature: principles 2029), the last bullet point should make reference to pollution from fertilisers/nitrates.

## **11. The climate crisis: achieving net zero**

- 11.1 Our comments at paragraph 10.2 apply equally to this (at p.63) and subsequent sections.
- 11.2 In the last bullet point on the spotlight on trees (p.62) it should read “than planting” (rather than “that planting”).
- 11.3 In the section on climate crisis: principles 2029 (p.63) the second bullet point should be amended to read: “modern commercial *and agricultural* buildings” and the last clause deleted (“before considering solar fields”).
- 11.4 The justification for deleting this last phrase is to ensure that where Councils have local plan policies that favour renewable energy, that they do not by default add undue weight to the consideration of such schemes on the basis that the AONB Management Plan has an objective to make the AONB net zero.
- 11.5 There is a danger that there may be stronger reasons for granting a green field solar array in the AONB, than say, on productive farmland outside the AONB, as the former would contribute to both the LPAs and the AONB’s climate change policies. This would leave the AONB, perversely, being less protected than land outside the AONB.
- 11.6 The management plan should emphasise the contribution the AONB can make towards climate change objectives of its constituent LPAs, rather than having a net zero objective for the AONB in isolation.
- 11.7 This section should also be amended to include reference to wind power – in order that it is not assumed that no special protection is needed in the AONB in this regard.

## 12. People and Access

- 12.1 On p.64 (and in the fact and figures box at the bottom of p.43) it states that there are “one million people living within 5km of the High Weald AONB”. This should be expressed more clearly as “one million people living within the AONB or within 5km of its boundary”.
- 12.2 Re bullet 1 principle (p67), we question the wisdom of the promotion of investment in SANGs within the Management Plan. They have a specific purpose in the context of diverting visitors away from the Ashdown Forest SPA on the pretext of avoiding disturbance to protected Dartford warblers and nightjars. There is scant evidence that SANGs in and around the High Weald achieve that purpose so as to justify new local development that is dependent on them. SANGs sites involve replacing natural habitats with “manufactured” green spaces alien to the naturalness of the High Weald, and the merits of that in some locations is very questionable. The accessibility that SANGs offer to this manufactured landscape comes at too high an environmental cost in the absence of robust evidence of the achievement of their primary diversionary purpose.
- 12.3 Re bullet 3 principle, please add “*within*” before “*into and around*” in the heading **Improving transport into and around the High Weald**, and extend this principle to visitor accessibility within the High Weald itself. We would, for example, like to see the creation of disabled-friendly, wheelchair and mobility scooter routes within rural parts of the High Weald, consistent with your objective of widening accessibility to the AONB.

### 13. Planning and Development in the High Weald AONB

13.1 Given the Management Plan commitment (p.6) that *“We will use the Plan to inform plan-making and assess the impact of policies, proposals, and planning applications on the AONB purpose to fulfil our duty under Section 85 of the CROW Act 2000 to ensure they contribute to conserving and enhancing natural beauty”* we would wish to see stated at least an expectation that the advice of the AONB Unit will be sought on (at least) any planning application that has the potential to be deemed by a partner planning authority to involve material development for NPPF paragraph 177 purposes.

13.2 In our view it is a systemic weakness that the JAC partners maintain no specific records of the number of dwellings etc that they permit to be built, and are built, within their respective parts of the High Weald AONB, yet alone annual consolidation of that data. We do not see how the local authorities can be confident of honouring their statutory and regulatory responsibilities vis a vis the AONB when they do not know how much development is actually occurring within this designated landscape that enjoys the highest status of protection from inappropriate development pressures. We would urge that the JCT’s Officers’ Steering Group be tasked with developing a suitable data assembly and consolidation tool, and for the annual publication of its results.

13.3 In order to clarify the fact that the Management Plan should be treated as a material consideration for local plan development purposes as well as planning applications (and to correct drafting anomalies), please consider changing the sentence in the first paragraph of p.69 from: *“The AONB Management Plan does not form part of the statutory development plan, but local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning bodies should take the AONB Management Plan into account when preparing local and neighbourhood plans. AONB Management Plans should also be material considerations considerations [sic] for making decisions on planning applications within AONBs and their [sic] setting.”* to *“The AONB Management Plan does not form part of the statutory development plan. However, the potential impact on the AONB Management Plan of development plan policies affecting, and of planning applications within, the High Weald and its setting is a material consideration for all planning authorities.”*

13.4 Re planning principle 1 we call for assessment reports also to *“record local and parish council evidence of the types and mix of housing most needed in the area proposed for development.”*

13.5 The NPPF paragraph 176 requirement that new development within the High Weald must be limited in scale and extent necessitates prioritising the types and mix of housing that is to be permitted. Given the development pressures on the High Weald we consider that there is a role for guidance on how that NPPF requirement should be applied in practice by prioritising development that positively contributes to meeting the needs of those living and working in the High Weald. That guidance should recognise the importance of prioritising the types and mix of housing needed by people living and working locally within the High Weald and its immediate surroundings. The Management Plan clearly identifies the promotion of housing for local workers as a priority objective, and that is a material planning consideration. The development of that guidance could usefully be added as an action point for the partners in the section on Rural Living in Part 1. Ensuring that limited scale and extent prioritise actual local need is every bit as important as good design guidance for any development allowed.

13.6 We would have liked to see some discussion here as to the types of non-housing development that would, or would not, support the furtherance of the Management Plan’s purposes and objectives.



#### **14. Monitoring**

We do not understand the reference to the “Outcomes Framework” which is not otherwise referred to in the draft Plan.

We would have liked the Plan to explain how the effectiveness of the Plan’s objectives are being achieved is intended to be monitored, and by whom, and for any delivery targets for actions by the JCT partners stated within the Management Plan to be identified. The AONB annual report should also address progress in the context of this local monitoring section.

#### **15. Miscellaneous**

15.1 We have no comments on later pages of the draft Management Plan.

15.2 Please would number your individual sections and paragraphs within them. This will enable easier and more accurate cross-referencing in the years to come.