

2.0 West Kent Downs

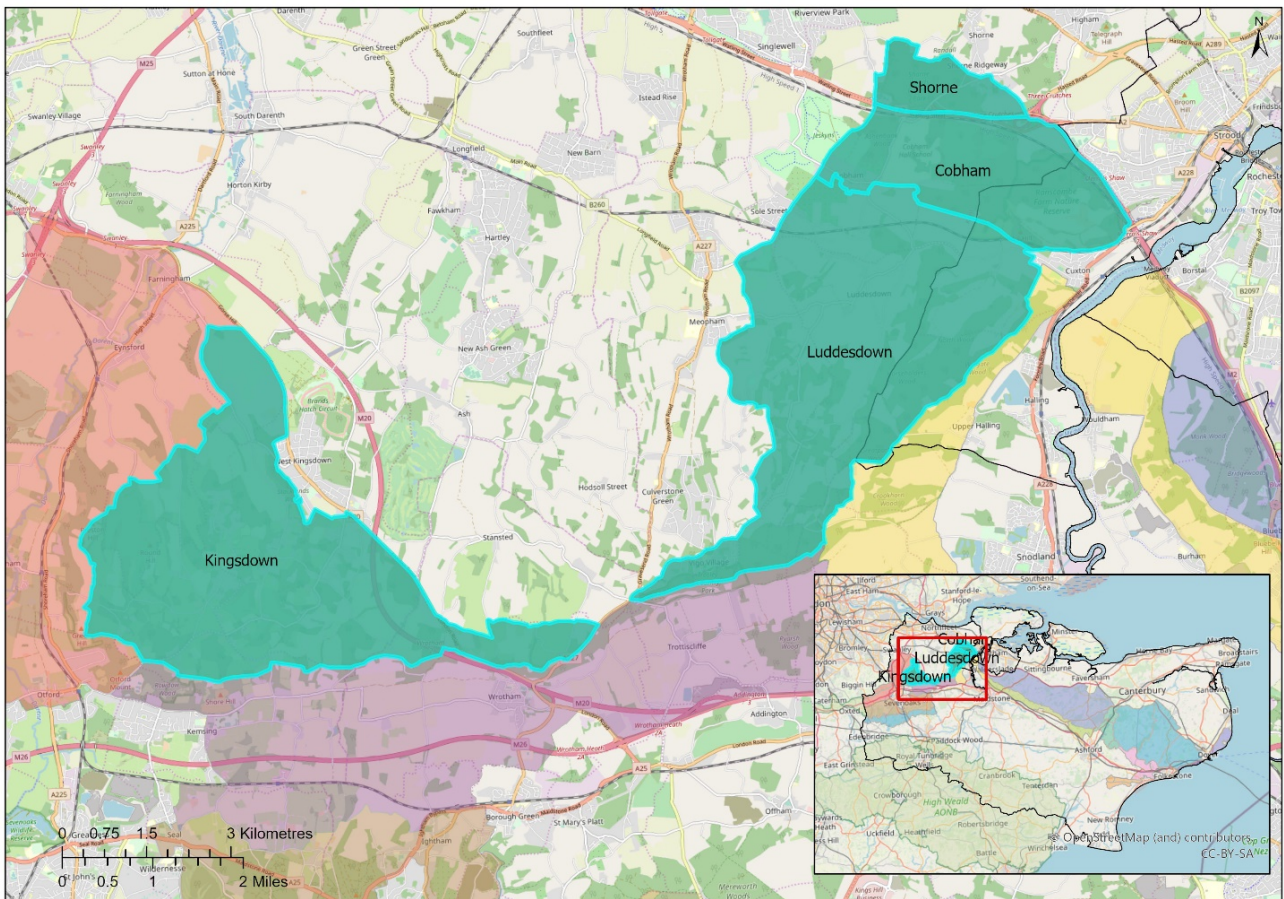
Landscape Character Area 1A

Landscape Character Type 1: Chalk Downs

Districts/ Boroughs: Sevenoaks; Tonbridge and Malling; Gravesham

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: Medway Valley Countryside Partnership; Small part of Darent Valley

Location and Context: The West Kent Downs LCA is located in the west of the Kent Downs AONB, between the Darent Valley LCA (to the west) and the Medway Valley LCA (to the east). To the south is the Kemsing Scarp and Vale LCA. The northern boundary follows the AONB boundary, and includes Cobham Park and Shorne Wood.



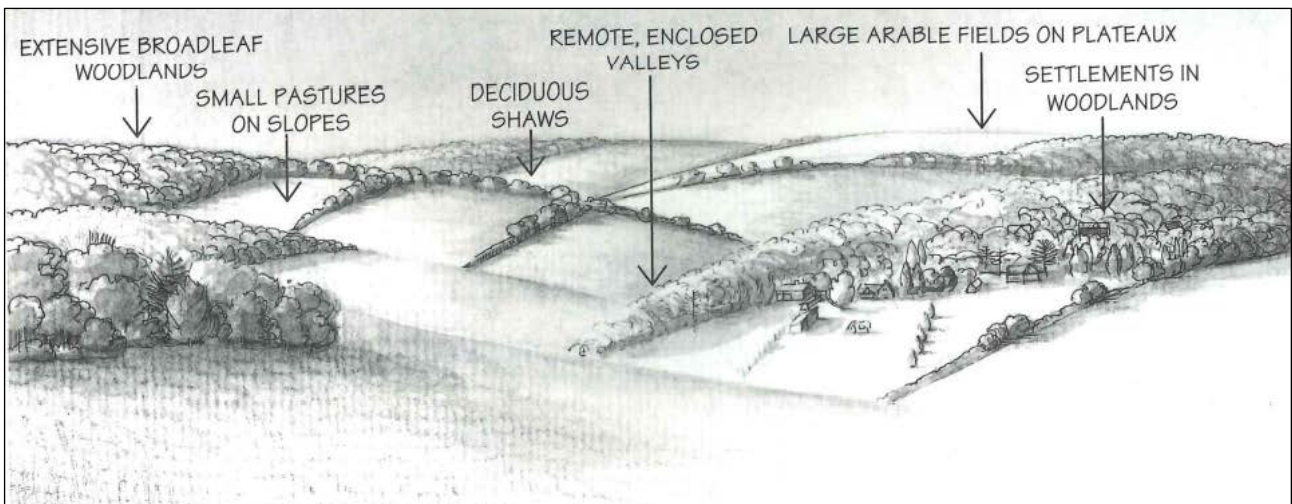
Location map for West Kent Downs LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Kingsdown, Luddesdown, Cobham and Shorne



A typical view within the West Kent Downs Landscape Character Area. It is a strongly rural and well-treed landscape with extensive woodlands, thick hedgerows and little settlement. A series of steep, enclosed, dry valleys are separated by rolling chalk ridges.

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Cretaceous chalk, overlain with clay-with-flints, and occasional pockets of sand and gravel.
- A dip-slope landform of dry valleys running roughly north-south, interspersed with broad undulating ridges and plateaux.
- Very little surface water, limited to occasional pools where clay impedes drainage.
- Extensive blocks of woodland, as well as strips of woodland on valley sides. Luxuriant hedgerows and (in places) parkland trees add to the sense of enclosure and of a well-treed landscape.
- Arable agriculture is the predominant land use, with some pasture. Fields vary in shape and size, but are generally hedged.
- Semi-natural habitats include ancient woodland, chalk grassland, scrub and occasional small quarry sites. Veteran trees occur in parkland and woodland.
- A strongly historic landscape, much of which has seen relatively little landscape change. Historic settlements and churches are linked by a network of ancient lanes, within a setting of fields, woodland and historic parkland.
- Main roads are limited to the periphery, and the lanes which run through it are generally narrow, quiet and lined with trees or hedges. Some are sunken, particularly where they cut through valley sides.
- In much of the area, the topography and/ or woodland restrict views, creating an insular and intimate feel, but with occasional long views along valleys.
- A peaceful, rural feel and a sense of isolation contrasts with the nearby urban areas and busy roads.
- Deciduous woodlands and trees create strong seasonal changes in the landscape, particularly in spring and autumn.
- Cobham Park, Ranscombe Farm Reserve, Ashenbank Woods and Shorne Woods Country park are popular places for local people to visit and enjoy the countryside.



Sketch of the West Kent Downs from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)

2.1 Description

- 2.1.1 This Landscape Character Area comprises the dip slope of the chalk between the Darent Valley in the west, the Medway Valley in the east, and the Kemsing Scarp and Vale to the south. The Mid Kent Downs and Kemsing Scarp are separated by both extensive tracts of woodland. The West Kent Downs contains a series of deep dry valleys running roughly north-south, separated by ridges and areas of broader plateaux.
- 2.1.2 It is a well-wooded area, which creates an enclosed and often intimate landscape. Where it opens out there are occasional long views, including striking views along valleys. With the exception of high land around Ranscombe and above the Darent Valley, there are few views out of the area, giving it quite an insular quality. The deeply rural and historic character of much of the area is particularly remarkable given its close proximity to urban centres.
- 2.1.3 Woodland is very significant in this landscape, providing an important backdrop for the rolling landform, the network of small country lanes, the scattered settlements and the extensive valley pastures. In the east, around Luddesdown, the fields are contained by thick 'walls' of woodland, and strips of remnant coppice, or shaws, occur frequently along the steeper valley sides. There are also areas of coppice woodland, including sweet chestnut and hornbeam. Much of the woodland is ancient, and the luxuriant, species-rich hedgerows add to the well-treed character of the landscape. There are also significant areas of chalk grassland, particularly on steeper slopes, although scrub encroachment and fragmentation of grassland habitats is a concern. Many of the woodland and grassland sites are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
- 2.1.4 Hidden away among the trees are several medieval buildings, such as Luddesdown Court and Upper Bush, constructed from the local Kentish ragstone or timber-framed using local oak. The villages of Vigo and West Kingsdown are set deep in the woodlands themselves. A network of narrow, winding lanes connects the villages and farms. Local features related to the underlying geology are the chalk quarries, ponds (some in old gravel pits) marl pits and ditches. Many attract wildlife and have their own ecosystems. Some are also threatened by fly tipping and other antisocial behaviour.

- 2.1.5 Historically, the heavy clay-with-flints soil on the higher land meant these areas were used for woodland or pasture. Arable cultivation generally took place on finer silt soils in the valley bottoms. From the mid twentieth century, increased mechanisation and intensification of farming resulted in the ploughing of some higher pastures, particularly in the north of the area. The downland therefore becomes increasingly open in the north, where the intimate character of the scarp top gives way to a larger-scale landscape of intensively farmed, rolling valleys and large blocks of deciduous woodland. Analysis of historic maps shows some loss of field boundaries, particularly in areas of intensive arable agriculture, but survival of most of the woodland which was present in the late 19th Century.
- 2.1.6 Although the topography and the presence of woodland remains fairly consistent across the West Kent Downs, there are four Local Character Areas which reflect the variations in historic land ownership, settlement patterns and transport corridors.

2.2 Local Character Areas

Kingsdown

- 2.2.1 The name 'Kingsdown' comes from being part of a large pre-Norman Conquest royal estate, centred on the Darent Valley. In Kent, '-down' or '-dun' implied thickly forested hills, indicating that at this time the area was heavily wooded. Today, the southern part of this area has a smaller scale field pattern, tiny sunken lanes and still contains a considerable amount of formerly coppiced, mixed woodland and Scots pine, interspersed by small, irregular pastures and thick hedges. Ash Dieback is increasingly affecting the mixed woodlands; only skeletal dead and dying ash trees are present in many places and the effect is expected to intensify. Sweet chestnut coppice (traditionally used for fencing) is typical. This woodland has a strong ecological value and also results in an enclosed, intimate landscape, which successfully absorbs much of the residential development that has spread through parts of the area. In the north, however, the landscape is slightly more open, revealing rolling sweeps of downland and the chalky white soils of intensive arable cultivation.
- 2.2.2 The area is under considerable pressure from suburbanisation, and its local character is influenced by the presence of low-density late 20th Century residential ribbon development along lanes, particularly around Knatts Valley and East Hill. This has introduced a wide and disparate range of fences, gateways, sheds and ornamental conifers into the landscape, giving an inappropriate urban-edge feel to the area, reinforced by recreation developments, such as golf courses and caravan parks. Many properties have long back gardens which extend up the valley sides or into the surrounding trees, resulting in a landscape of tiny smallholdings, subdivided horse paddocks and 'gardened' woodland.
- 2.2.3 Nevertheless, historic and ancient landscape patterns remain dominant elements in the wider countryside, and the sense of place remains strong with attractive, secluded chalk valleys, grazed downland rich in wildflowers, and species-rich hedgerows. The historic settlement pattern can still be identified through isolated farm buildings of a traditional flint, weatherboard and brick vernacular, accessed by narrow, winding lanes. This network of tiny lanes is supplemented by a good Public Rights of Way network, including the North Downs way along the southern boundary.



Species-rich hedges and pasture at Magpie Bottom, with glimpsed views of higher chalk downs.

Luddesdown

2.2.4 This is a rich agricultural patchwork of rolling, valley-side pastures and undulating arable fields. The field pattern is irregular, with fields of various shapes and sizes, generally divided with native hedgerows. Large areas of native mixed woodland dominate the skyline, and form thick ‘walls’ around the fields, giving a strong definition to the fields and providing valuable ecological habitat. Late twentieth century hedgerow removal in areas of arable cultivation, has increased the importance of woodland in giving structure to the landscape. Recent vineyard planting is generating a notable change to the agricultural patterns of the landscape.

Settlement is limited to occasional hamlets and isolated farms within valleys, reflecting the fact that the soils were difficult to work and could only support a small population. The lack of settlement is one of the area’s characteristic features. The settlements of Luddesdown and Lower Luddesdown comprise clusters of traditional buildings, including Luddesdown Court (Grade 1 listed) and the thirteenth century church of St Peter and St Paul. A church was recorded here in the Domesday Book, and the adjacent house and farm are late eleventh century in origin. There are good examples of traditional timber-framed buildings and Kent peg tiles, including the Upper Bush Conservation Area. The farms and hamlets are linked by a network of narrow and winding lanes which follow the contours of the rolling downland landscape, and Buckland Road runs through a valley known as ‘bowling alley’. The Wealdway Long Distance footpath runs north-south through the area.

2.2.5 The village of Vigo, set within coppice woodland at the top of the scarp was built in the mid-late twentieth century on the site of a former army barracks. It is contained by trees and does not impact on the wider landscape character.

2.2.6 This is a tranquil, complex and distinctive landscape, with a peaceful remote feel, strong sense of place and few detracting features. It has a strong sense of time-depth, and the structure of the landscape has remained largely unchanged since the late nineteenth century, although there has been some field boundary loss. The thick belt of woodland along the eastern and southern scarp

top plays an important role in preserving this atmosphere, by sheltering the area from the surrounding settlements and transport corridors.



A typical valley view near Luddesdown

Cobham

- 2.2.7 In the north around Cobham, the character of the landscape begins to change. The dominance of farmland gives way to parkland and extensive mixed woodlands associated with Cobham Hall. The topography is slightly undulating, with occasional non-natural features.
- 2.2.8 The cultural integrity of the landscape is strong, with the estate parkland and management creating a distinctive character and sense of time depth. Cobham Hall (which is on the site of a Roman villa) is an Elizabethan Manor House set in a parkland landscape designed by Humphrey Repton. A dramatic lime avenue extends from Cobham Village towards the house, although the main vehicular approach is along a sweeping driveway. Cobham Park has its origins as a medieval deer park, and contains several veteran trees. There are also extensive dense Ancient Woodlands (containing exceptionally tall ash trees), parklands and wood pasture. Part of the park is now used as a golf course. There are a number of estate features, including lodges and the recently-restored Darnley Mausoleum. Boundaries include native hedgerows, wrought iron estate railings and timber fencing. Cobham Village is a traditional village centre, typical of the north Kent landscape, and contains a rich diversity of historic buildings constructed in timber, brick and flint. Elsewhere small pockets of orchard and pony paddocks occur in the area.
- 2.2.9 Ashenbank Wood (to the west of Cobham Park) is also extensive and dense Ancient Woodland, and contains a range of archaeological sites including a Bronze Age burial ground and WW2 bunkers. It is an accessible area of woodland popular for recreation. To the east of Cobham Park, Ranscombe Farm is managed as a wildflower reserve. From high points here there are views across the Medway Valley and glimpses of the urban edge of Strood. A further 'country park' at Jeskyns Farm extends from the western portion of the area. In combination with Shorne, there is an extensive collection of sites in protective ownership managed primarily for landscape, nature and public access.



Parkland trees and woodland in Cobham Park



Ranscombe Wildflower Reserve, with the woodlands of Luddesdown visible beyond.

Shorne

2.2.10 The local character area of Shorne has been severed from the more extensive landscape of similar character to the south by the A2 road corridor. The wooded ridge forms a discrete tract of steeply undulating landscape lying between the extensive built-up areas of Rochester and Gravesend. It is bounded to the north by the open farmland of the Hoo Peninsula. The extent of woodland is the key distinguishing feature, in combination with the ridge landform. This significant landform feature provides an attractive backdrop in views from the north.

2.2.11 The area contains Ancient Woodland, much of which is actively worked chestnut coppice, and more recent woodland established on former clay workings. The Ancient Woodlands contain several notable and veteran trees. They also generate a strong sense of enclosure. The heathy vegetation, reflecting a local change in the underlying geology, adds to the area's ecological value. Shorne Wood is important for recreation, containing a country park, historic remains (including Randall Manor) and visitor centre. There are few roads within the area, although the busy A2 runs along its southern boundary.



Shorne Country Park



Ashenbank Wood, near Cobham



Veteran tree at Cobham Park



Valley-side farm, near Luddesdown



Timber-framed buildings in Upper Bush Conservation Area



Dog walkers on the North Downs Way enjoy the long views from Ranscombe Reserve



The quiet lanes and peaceful countryside of the West Kent Downs are only a few miles from busy urban areas

2.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 2.3.1 Much of the West Kent Downs appears to be relatively unchanging on the surface, but like all landscapes, in reality it is subject to various forces for change. The 1995 Assessment notes threats from suburbanisation (particularly in the Kingsdown Local Character Area), intensive arable agriculture, and loss of character at Cobham Park. The 2004 Assessments considers the West Kent Downs to be in good/ very good condition. It too notes the linear development of some hamlets, and amenity uses of land such as golf courses and caravan parks. Agricultural intensification, with associated loss of hedgerows and ecological connectivity, is recorded, particularly in the north of the area. The main visual detractors are pylons, as several high voltage transmission lines cross the area. Major roads are recorded as having local landscape impacts at the periphery of the area, particularly around Cobham and Shorne.
- 2.3.2 These issues are still apparent in today's landscape (see following table), and are recorded in Landscape Character Assessments by Local Authorities and by Landscape Partnerships. In addition, anti-social behaviour such as fly tipping seems to have become a bigger problem in recent years, and there is concern over the already apparent impacts of Ash Dieback and other tree diseases on this very wooded landscape.
- 2.3.3 Positive landscape changes are also taking place, including woodland management, and grassland management. Over the last 25 years agri-environment schemes have delivered landscape enhancement projects throughout the West Kent Downs, including some large scale scrub/ secondary woodland removal on escarpment and dry valley grasslands, projects to revert arable land to species-rich grassland, field margin networks and hedge planting schemes. The Cobham-Ashenbank Management Scheme (CAMS) enabled a major landscape restoration project in this area, including restoration of the Darnley Mausoleum which had been vandalised and was 'At Risk'. Park railings have been replaced, estate buildings are in good repair, and Highland cattle have been introduced to graze wood pasture areas.
- 2.3.4 In addition, Ranscombe Farm is now a Nature Reserve. It is managed jointly by Medway Council, Plantlife and landowners to enhance its biodiversity, particularly with regard to wildflowers. The Ranscombe area is now characterised by wildflower-rich arable fields, neutral grasslands and actively managed woodlands. The new visitor centre at Shorne Country Park is increasing visitor numbers to the northernmost part of the West Kent Downs, and recent archaeology and woodland management projects in the vicinity are increasing understanding of woodland sites as well as their conservation value.



The West Kent Downs as seen from near the railway bridge over Cobhambury Road in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below). The main change is in the growth of trees in the middle ground, meaning that longer views are now obscured.

Issue	Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts
Anti-social behaviour	Fly tipping can be a major issue in this area, with numerous examples of trade and domestic waste dumped along roadsides. It appears to be a particular problem on quiet lanes with little passing traffic, and can also occur in old quarries and ponds. The dumping of rubbish is a reminder of the proximity of this area to large settlements and main roads, despite its peaceful and rural character. Illegal access by 4x4 vehicles is damaging woodlands and tracks, although the Valley of Visions ‘Securing the Landscape’ project is helping to address this issue in the eastern part of the Landscape Character Area. Perceptions of anti-social behaviour deter visitors, and the lack of people and signage in some areas can make it feel more intimidating, particularly in the Cobham Local Character Area which is close to large settlements.
Suburbanisation leading to an ‘urban fringe character’	This is a particular issue in the Kingsdown Local Character Area around Knatts Valley and East Hill but present elsewhere. Past sub-division of woodland into small plots has led to construction of residential properties along lanes. Many of these have suburban-style property boundaries such as close-boarded fences, brick walls, elaborate gateways and ornamental planting. These introduce urban-fringe features into the rural landscape. Also, some twentieth century development does not respect the local vernacular of the area. The urban fringe feel is increased by the presence of golf courses, caravan parks etc.

Issue	Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts
Land management	<p>Changes in land management in the mid-late twentieth century have resulted in the loss or fragmentation of a number of habitats, although post-1994 agri-environment grants have helped to reverse this trend in parts of the Landscape Character Area.</p> <p>Whilst some woodland remains in active management, much is currently unmanaged, including former coppice. Woodland, including Ancient Woodland, is also threatened by tree disease, particularly Ash Dieback. Many parkland trees are in poor condition with some having received heavy surgery.</p> <p>Chalk grassland traditionally occurred on steep pastures. However, the decline in sheep and dairy farming within the area means that most grassland is no longer grazed, and is being lost to scrub unless it is actively managed through cutting. Grassland habitats are particularly vulnerable to fragmentation. This is currently being addressed through the 'Old Chalk New Downs' project which aims to bring grassland sites back into active management. In addition over the past 25 years agri-environment schemes have also focussed on scrub clearance and reconnection of chalk habitats.</p> <p>Agricultural intensification in the late twentieth century led to a loss of hedgerows and decline in landscape structure, particularly in arable areas. This also reduces the ecological connectivity of woodland, shaw and hedgerow habitats. Extensive areas of mown grass have relatively low ecological value. The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.</p>
Roads and infrastructure	<p>There are localised impacts from main roads in the north-east corner of the West Kent Downs, and concerns that traffic and infrastructure (including lighting) could be increased following construction of the proposed new Thames crossing, and the proposed theme park at Swanscombe Peninsula. The proposed road upgrade could also result in loss of existing planting which screens both the highways infrastructure and the HS1 line.</p> <p>Several pylon lines cross the area, and are particularly noticeable where they cross open areas or are viewed against the skyline. There are also lines of poles and wires along roads.</p>
Climate change, pests and diseases	<p>Climate change is also likely to affect species composition of woodlands, for example through the loss of beech which is relatively intolerant of drought. Woodlands are likely to be vulnerable to high-intensity storm events, which are becoming more frequent as a result of climate change.</p> <p>Warmer temperatures provide conditions for a range of pests and diseases to thrive and attack native species.</p>



Piles of dumped rubbish are a fairly frequent sight alongside rural lanes in the West Kent Downs



Kerbs, driveways, walls and gateways create a suburban feel to lanes around Knatts Valley and East Hill



Magnificent mature ash trees in Cobham Park woodland are vulnerable to Ash Dieback



Scrub growth on a chalk grassland bank which is no longer being grazed near Luddesdown



Intensive arable agriculture (found particularly in the north of the West Kent Downs) has a more open feel and fewer wildlife habitats.



The Darnley Mausoleum in Cobham Park has been rescued from dereliction and restored. It is now occasionally open to the public.

2.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The West Kent Downs retain their rural character despite their close proximity to urban areas, and the suburbanisation which affects parts of the area is reduced. The historic features of the landscape, including woodlands, hedgerows, farms, villages and historic parks become an enhanced part of the landscape fabric.

The area retains its extensive woodland cover, and woodland, shaws, grassland, and hedgerows are managed and connected. Historic parkland, and the features within it, are positively managed.

The recent projects to enhance the landscape in this area are taken forward and their positive legacy continues to be felt. The area feels welcoming, and local people and visitors are able to access the countryside without feeling intimidated by anti-social behaviour or uncertainty about where they can go.

Protect

- Protect the deeply rural character of the area, resisting development which gives it a more urbanised character. This includes retaining the character of rural lanes.
- Protect the extent of woodland and shaws, and the small-scale pastures and enclosures. In particular, important woodland and trees within the landscape, especially ancient semi-natural woodland should be protected. Veteran trees should be protected. Conserve the unity between landform and land cover.
- Protect historic features of the landscape- these include Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas etc. (and their settings and views), but also the historic hedgerows, farms and lanes which have formed the fabric of the landscape for centuries.
- Protect the enclosed landscapes of the dry valleys formed by the steep valley sides and numerous woodland blocks.

Manage

- Continue to manage historic parkland, grazing wood pasture and planting replacement parkland trees so that they remain a presence in the landscape in the future. Veteran trees should be appropriately managed. Conserve and restore features associated with historic parklands, including estate structures such as lodges, memorials, follies and fencing.
- Manage arable areas to encourage a diversity of pollen and seed rich habitats, hedgerow replanting and field margins to enhance the structure of the landscape and improve habitat connectivity. Encourage continued management and support for long term farm-based arable reversion projects to allow species richness of the grasslands to develop further. Promote new hedgerows and roadside trees from existing hedge stock.
- Manage the extensive new vineyard areas to maximise the potential to enhance landscape and biodiversity
- Manage chalk grassland through cutting or grazing, and encourage linking of grassland habitats through field margins. Continue to manage and develop Ranscombe Farm Reserve.
- Manage woodlands and shaws, including traditional techniques such as coppicing, to achieve age and species diversity, and to retain locally-distinctive mixes of species. In particular ancient semi-natural woodland should be appropriately managed, and where possible expanded and enhanced to create ecological habitat networks. Investigate new uses/ markets for harvested timber and

where appropriate replace coniferous plantation with native deciduous trees. At planted ancient woodland sites, explore opportunities to plant appropriate native trees and shrubs as continuous cover to enable pockets of ancient woodland species to spread and flourish. Enhance woodland edges where they abut arable areas.

- Promote access and sensitive recreation in this area, including signage, interpretation, path restoration etc. where needed and generate a coherent shared plan between individual sites. This should be balanced with enabling a viable agricultural landscape. Work with local communities to raise awareness of the countryside on their doorstep. Conserve dramatic views where they occur (for example over the Medway Valley) and encourage people to visit and appreciate these views.
- Work with golf clubs to promote positive environmental management of golf courses.
- Work with equine owners to enhance the landscape and wildlife value of facilities
- Manage hedgerows, including alongside roads, encouraging replanting rather than repair where they have become gappy.

Plan

- Continue to work with outside agencies to address fly-tipping and other anti-social behaviour issues.
- Ensure that any new development around historic villages respects the scale, layout, massing and materials of existing buildings, and also their relationship with the landform. Landscape proposals should reflect local character, using appropriate form, structure and species.
- Restrict further suburbanisation of rural lanes resulting from linear or ad-hoc development. Prepare design guidance for property boundaries, gateways and driveways, and encourage Local Planning Authorities to apply it.
- Work with Highways authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Investigate opportunities for undergrounding wires and poles along lanes and tracks.
- Secure financial support for local projects from any funding resulting from the Thames Crossing. Work with appropriate agencies to ensure that there is no loss of screen planting associated with upgraded roads serving the proposed Lower Thames Crossing or the proposed new theme park at Swanscombe Peninsula. Landscape and visual impacts from the proposed Lower Thames Crossing should be minimised.
- Encourage partnership working between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB. Consider environmental/ landscape limits in planning and plan making.
- Within the setting of the LCA, work with Local Planning Authorities and designers to achieve the best possible landscape and ecological integration and minimal impact on views, with compensation achieved for any lost qualities.
- Use the existing and valued landscape characteristics and qualities to design new tree establishment as part of climate change mitigation