

10.0 Medway Valley

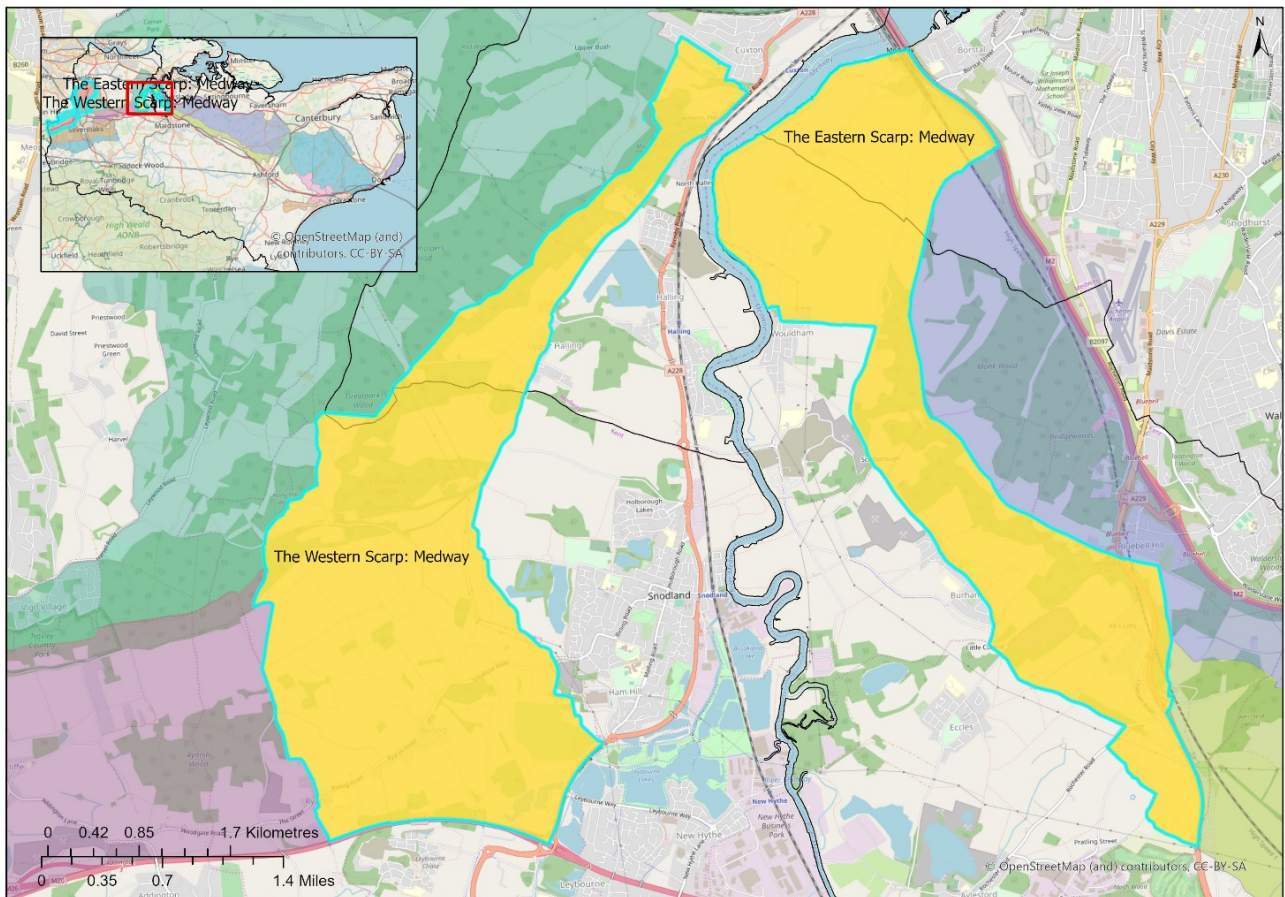
Landscape Character Area 4B

Landscape Character Type: River Valley

Districts/ Boroughs: Maidstone; Medway; Tonbridge and Malling

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: Medway Valley Countryside Partnership

Location and Context: This LCA is located towards the west of the Kent Downs AONB, and includes land on both sides of the Medway Valley, between the Medway Bridges and the northern edges of Maidstone and Ditton. It includes the villages of Birling and Ryarsh. To the east are the Mid Kent Downs and Hollingbourne Vale LCAs; to the west are the West Kent Downs and Kemsing Vale LCAs.



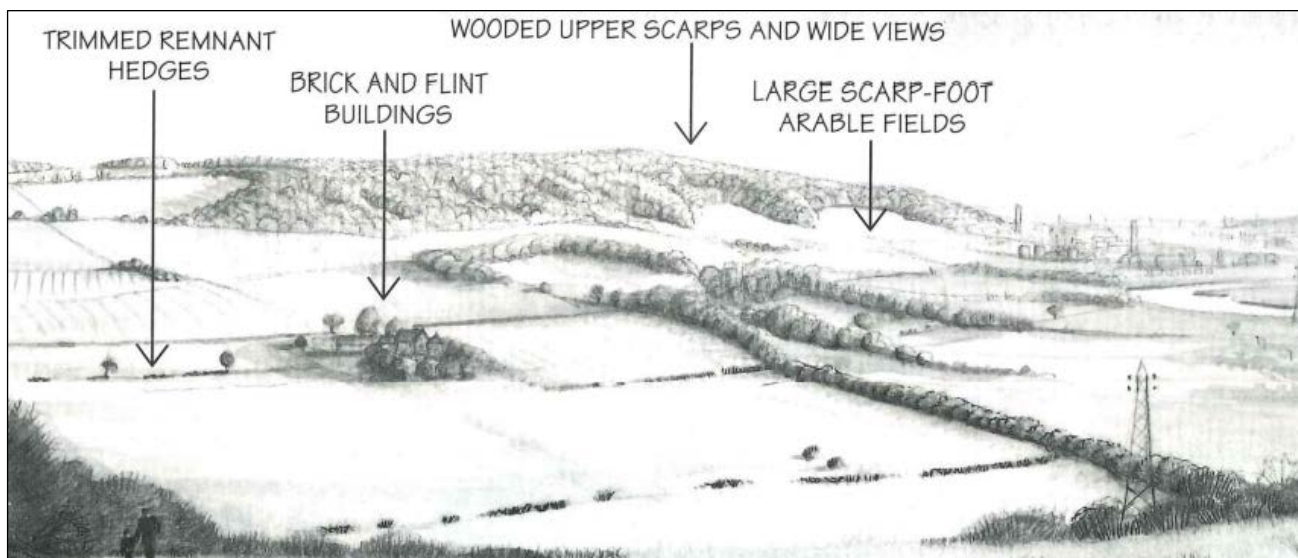
Location map for Medway Valley LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Western Scarp and Eastern Scarp



View south along the Medway Valley, as seen from HS1. The Landscape Character Area includes land on both sides of the River Medway.

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of layers of cretaceous chalk, cut through by the Medway Valley., and containing numerous chalk quarry sites.
- Overlying alluvial deposits on the valley floor, and head deposits (mostly clay derived from chalk) on the lower slopes of the valley sides, creating fertile soils.
- Symmetrical and dramatic landform of valley sides (becoming steeper towards the tops) are strong landscape features.
- Drainage dominated by the River Medway, which flows south-north. Marshes and ditches are found adjacent to the river. Concentration of springs, streams and ponds around Birling.
- Extensive scarp woodlands with irregular boundaries including shaws. Some copses, infield, hedgerow and parkland trees.
- Land uses are primarily agricultural (mostly arable), with parkland around Birling, and former chalk quarry sites throughout.
- Field pattern largely unchanged since the 1880s, comprising large fields on lower slopes, and smaller, more irregular fields above. Many hedgerows lost or denuded on lower slopes, but higher fields are bounded by woodland, shaws or thicker hedgerows.
- Semi-natural habitats include woodland, scrub, grassland (much restored in recent years) and wetland.
- Rich prehistoric archaeology includes some of Kent's earliest sites, including Kit's Coty burial chamber, and a Neolithic cursus monument. Also a legacy of later industrial archaeology from the cement industry.
- Within the AONB settlement is limited to small rural villages and farms, but several larger villages, and urban areas of Rochester and Maidstone are nearby.
- Main transport corridors are adjacent but outside AONB. AONB contains a network of lanes and tracks, including North Downs Way along the top of valley sides.
- Strong and contrasting patterns in colour and texture between irregular woodland blocks on upper slopes, and regular large arable fields on lower slopes.
- Outstanding views across the valley in both directions, and to the south, due to the height and curve of the valley sides. The Medway Bridges dominate views to the north.
- Sense of peacefulness and detachment away from settlements and transport infrastructure, particularly on valley sides.



Sketch of Medway Valley from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)

10.1 Description

- 10.1.1 The tidal River Medway, running between Maidstone and Rochester, divides the AONB into two sections. This Landscape Character Area comprises the lower valley sides and scarp of the Medway Valley, and a small part of the valley floor. Despite the industrial/ post-industrial character of the valley floor outside the AONB, this Landscape Character Area still provides an important, attractive, rural buffer between the Medway Towns and Maidstone, and is a quiet and peaceful landscape in close proximity to large urban areas. It also forms the setting of the River Medway and its associated valley-floor settlements.
- 10.1.2 In common with the other river valleys crossing the Downs, this was one of the earliest areas of permanent settlement in Kent. The long history of human activity in this area is illustrated by the group of prehistoric sites, such as Kit's Coty standing stones, which form the most important group of Megalithic monuments east of the Berkshire Downs. Other prehistoric sites include a Neolithic Cursus monument, and a Bronze Age site associated with the production of shale bracelets. There are several Roman sites and the ancient routes of the North Downs Way and the Pilgrim's Way pass through the area. The symmetrical landform, and the height and 'loop' of the scarp means that interesting and unique views can be appreciated across the valley (in both directions) and to the south. The Medway Bridges (carrying HS1 and the M2) are imposing structures, high above the northern end of the valley.
- 10.1.3 The steep scarp slopes, which enclose the river valley, rise sharply up behind rolling, intensively cultivated fields. Historic maps shown that in the 1880s there was not a strong hedgerow network on the lower part of the scarp foot, and this remains the case today. However, the routes of paths across the fields shown on historic maps suggest that there may have been earlier enclosures which were already lost by the end of the 19th Century. The few hedges that do exist today are narrow and gappy. It is characteristic, however, to find thicker, overgrown hedges surrounding the fields on the upper slopes, above which swathes of dense, mixed woodland dominate the skyline, separating the valley and the downs. These woodlands, and the mosaic of unimproved grassland and scrub associated with them, are of international nature conservation importance, both for their

flora and fauna. The woodland boundaries remain largely unchanged between the 1880s and today.

- 10.1.4 The Medway Valley has a long association with cement production, and although this has now ceased, the valley contains a number of sites of cement works on the valley floor, chalk quarries on the valley sides, and lakes formed by mineral extraction. Some of the cement works are now being redeveloped as housing, whilst some of the former quarries and lakes are valuable wildlife habitats. Historically, the valley would have been white with cement dust.
- 10.1.5 The AONB landscape in this area provides a coherent backdrop of scarp woodlands and fields, which offsets the jumbled diversity of the industry and redevelopment in the valley below. Contained by the strong bones of the landscape in this way, the dominance of buildings on the valley floor is reduced, but they can still form detracting focal points within the wider countryside, especially where the built form, density and pattern becomes more imposing. Any development that threatens the integrity of the pastoral backdrop of the valley sides, therefore, can be particularly damaging to the whole valley. This applies in particular to activities which create scars in the chalk, such as quarries or scrambling tracks, but also to the loss of features such as hedges, trees and shaws. Such losses also reduce the capacity of the landscape to absorb the visual impact of development.

10.2 Local Character Areas

- 10.2.1 There are two Local Character Areas within the Medway Landscape Character Area – the Western Scarp and the Eastern Scarp – which are roughly symmetrical on either side of the valley.

NOTE- The 1995 and 2004 Landscape Assessments also included the Boxley Vale Local Character Area within Medway Valley LCA, but it has now been included in Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale LCA, as its physical, cultural and perceptual landscape characteristics have more in common with Hollingbourne Scarp LCA and Vale than Medway Valley LCA.

The Western Scarp

- 10.2.2 The area is physically defined by the western chalk ridge that encloses the valley, with steep, treed scarp slopes rising up behind cultivated fields. The cultivated belt of arable land along the scarp foot is the result of the slow but constant washing of light chalky soils from the scarp. The resulting land is very fertile and many of the apparently modern, huge ploughed fields along this belt have, in reality, scarcely changed in appearance for over a century (although there may have been older field boundaries which were lost prior to the 1880s). Nevertheless there is a sense of 'prairie farming' here, which is increasingly accentuated by the gradual loss or decay of hedges, especially around Birling, and along the roadsides. The lower slopes of the scarp bear the scars of former chalk quarries, which are gradually 'greening-over'.
- 10.2.3 Ancient woodland (designated Special Area of Conservation) is a dominant feature in the north of the area, clothing the scarp and the tops of the steeper slopes. The woodlands form habitat mosaic with unimproved grassland (large areas of which have been reclaimed in recent years) and scrub, and include large areas of hazel coppice and beech-yew woodland. Dry valleys are a feature of the top of the Western Scarp around Holly Hill, but to the south, around Birling, the landscape has a gentler, agricultural feel with some estate and parkland influences.
- 10.2.4 There are many historic trackways and sunken lanes running along and up the scarp, and a number of other historic features including a Saxon church at Paddlesworth, and ancient yews in Birling churchyard. The sense of time-depth is enhanced by the scarp-foot settlements and farms which include many locally-distinctive ragstone buildings. Parkland provides a distinctive feature on the scarp top at Holly Hill.
- 10.2.5 There are long views looking east across the Medway Valley, which include the industry and settlements in the valley floor, and also south towards Maidstone and the Greensand Ridge.



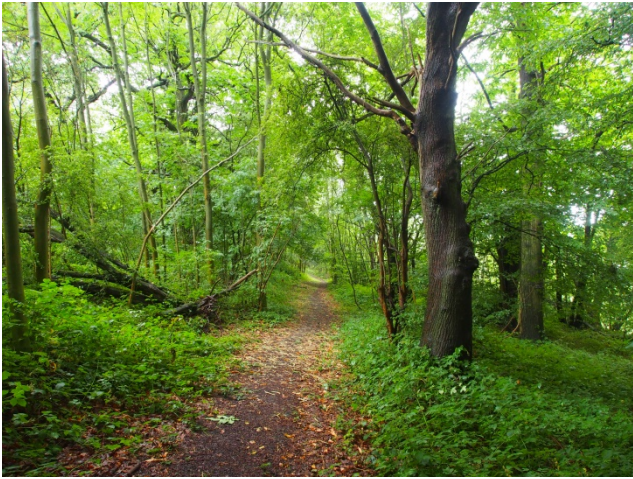
The Western Scarp, as seen looking across from the opposite valley side near Burham Court. This viewpoint was the location of a Neolithic cursus monument, and has a 360 degree view of the surrounding landform.

The Eastern Scarp

- 10.2.6 The pattern of intensively farmed scarp-foot fields and dense woodland above is continued on the eastern side of the valley. Woodland along the scarp comprises large areas of beech and yew woodland, with patches of calcareous grassland. The long history of human occupation within the Medway Valley is strongly in evidence here through the presence of Kit's Coty House, a unique Scheduled early Neolithic monument with a striking extant sarsen stone structure. A second (collapsed) burial chamber is located to the south. The Pilgrim's Way also runs north-south through the area along the line of the road, from which a series of ancient drovers' roads run up the scarp slopes. In a letter to a friend, Dickens describes Kit's Coty as a favourite spot of his to picnic and lay on the grass – "a splendid example of laziness".
- 10.2.7 The hedges on the lower valley slopes are generally lost or in poorer condition, but the woodlands on the upper slopes give weight and emphasis to the scarp, helping to contain the influence of the valley developments outside the AONB. There have been cement works on the river here since the 19th Century, but there are currently no active cement works within this part of the Medway Valley.
- 10.2.8 In the north, a small area of flat, riverside marshes is included within the AONB at Wouldham Marshes. Despite being dominated by overhead wires and pylons, narrow, scrub-flecked ditches and rough tussocky grass give the area a sense of wildness. Wouldham Marshes are characterised by drainage ditches, hedges, unimproved grassland and reed beds. The River Medway forms an important and distinctive feature in views, and there are long, open views towards Rochester Castle and Cathedral, with the motorway bridge forming a strong foreground feature. This area was a former military training ground for building bridges and pontoons, and in WW2 a bailey bridge was constructed over the River Medway in case Rochester Bridge was bombed or stormed.
- 10.2.9 Lines of pylons along the valley form detracting elements within the landscape. Industrial / post-industrial elements are visible in views across to the lower valley, and the new housing development at Peter's Pit is still under construction just outside the AONB boundary.



The Eastern Scarp as seen from Kit's Coty. The field in the foreground contains a rich diversity of herbs and grasses, including orchids. The scarp woodland and shallower arable fields can be seen beyond. A former chalk quarry can be seen as a white scar on the right of the picture.



Beech/ Oak/ Yew woodland on the western scarp



Early purple orchids in a traditional meadow near Kit's Coty



Wouldham Marshes, on the northern part of the valley floor.



Kit's Coty Neolithic burial chamber, which would originally have been covered by an earth mound.



Hollow Lane climbing the western scarp, with 'cliffs' of chalk and yew tree roots forming the edges



View over Maidstone and the Medway Valley from Bluebell Hill viewpoint

10.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 10.3.1 The 1995 and 2004 Assessments identify many detractors both within the AONB and outside it (including industrial sites, pylons, large-scale agricultural buildings, landfill sites, main roads, hedgerow loss and former quarries). As a result, the 2004 Assessment gives the condition of the Western Scarp as moderate, and the Eastern Scarp as very poor. Many of these negative features are also picked up in the 2012 *Medway Gap Strategic Landscape Enhancement Plan* (A Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership legacy document), which refers to a number of issues, including denuded hedgerows, visual detractors within the open landscape, fragmentation of habitats, the indistinct pattern of historic farmsteads and highways, and anti-social behaviour such as fly-tipping. The presence of large numbers of people living nearby can also result in increased footfall and habitat disturbance. Today there is still concern about the extent of damage to this landscape, including the impact of roads and the associated light, noise and air pollution. Centuries of human intervention, and the intensification of farming, have resulted in depleted biodiversity.
- 10.3.2 The floor of the Medway Valley (just outside the AONB boundary) is one of the most dynamic landscapes in the vicinity of the AONB, and changes here will inevitably affect views from within the AONB, as well as the overall character of the area. The main change (which has happened since the 1995 Assessment was undertaken) is the change from an industrial to a post-industrial landscape, with the old cement works replaced with modern housing. This process is ongoing, with the Peter's Pit development currently under construction on the east side of the valley. Movement patterns in the valley are also changing with the construction of a bridge between Halling and Wouldham (opened in 2017) and new access roads. Comparison of the 1995 and 2017 photos shows the replacement of industrial structures with housing, and how much the scars of the former chalk quarries have 'greened-over'. However, the overall pattern of fields and woodlands seems to have changed very little between 1995 and 2017.
- 10.3.3 Recent years have seen a number of projects to enhance the landscape and habitats within the Medway Valley, and to engage local people. Many of these projects have been undertaken through the Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership and/ or the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership, and have included paths, public art, interpretation projects, reversion of arable land on the scarp to grassland, and woodland and grassland management schemes along with management of antisocial activity in the landscape. These have had a very positive impact on improving the accessibility and structure of the landscape, including significant areas of chalk grassland restoration and hedge planting. However, there is more which can be done, particularly with regard to hedgerow restoration, reinstatement of lost field boundaries, and habitat connectivity.
- 10.3.4 As mentioned above, the open views and dominant landform of the Medway Landscape Character Area make it a highly sensitive landscape. Its sensitivity is increased by its role in the setting of the Medway Valley; its function as a gap between large settlements; the inherent value of its cultural and biodiversity sites, and its remarkable survival as a peaceful, rural landscape despite its proximity to settlements, industry and transport infrastructure.



View west across the Medway Valley from above Wouldham in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below)

Issue	<i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i>
The River Medway	<p>Past industrialisation led to a lack of connection and access to the river. Within the AONB there is riverside access (Wouldham Marshes) but outside the AONB (to the north and south), the Medway Valley Walk has several sections where it does not follow the riverbank. This reduces the ease of access to the river and AONB by local people, although St Peter's Village provides new public access to the riverside.</p> <p>Water abstraction is a concern, leading to reduced flows in tributary springs and streams.</p>
Changing patterns of development	<p>The proximity of urban conurbations results in traffic impacts, light, air and noise pollution, and increased footfall which can damage habitats. This is an area of considerable development pressure. Re development of former industrial sites for housing is currently taking place just outside the AONB, affecting views across the valley and the character of the AONB's setting. These changes are not necessarily negative, as some industrial structures are now being removed. The river banks are also vulnerable to development, particularly downstream of the AONB.</p> <p>Some of the new development outside the AONB does not fit with local vernacular styles, patterns or densities - the reflective roofs of some developments are particularly noticeable when viewed from above.</p>

Issue	<i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i>
Transport and infrastructure	<p>Transport infrastructure is particularly noticeable in the northern part of the valley, where the Medway Bridges carrying the M20 and HS1 cross high above the valley. There are also other major roads, including the A228 and A229 which all contribute to increased noise, air and light pollution. 'Rat-running' on rural lanes is a problem, particularly when main roads are closed/ busy. Changes to road volumes and junctions associated with the proposed Lower Thames Crossing may also impact on this area visually, as well as through increased noise, air and light pollution.</p> <p>There are several lines of pylons, both within and outside the AONB. These run along the valley, but also climb the scarps, and are noticeable in many views within and across the Medway valley. However, undergrounding of lower-voltage lines (e.g. around Halling and Birling) has reduced the local visual clutter in the landscape.</p>
Anti-social behaviour	<p>Anti-social behaviour remains a problem in the area, although much has been done to improve the situation through the Securing the Landscape partnership. Issues such as litter, flytipping and vandalism are a problem, particularly close to urban areas. Anti-social behaviour involving vehicles is also a concern, including informal routes through woodland, illegal use of off-road vehicles (which erode tracks and are intimidating for legitimate users) and illegal parking.</p>
Heritage	<p>There is a risk that the recent industrial heritage of the Medway Valley associated with the cement industry will be lost as former industrial sites are redeveloped for housing; it is important that this heritage is recorded. There is also concern about the setting of some historic sites.</p>
Land management and habitat fragmentation	<p>Fragmentation of habitats (woodlands, wetlands and grassland) is a particular concern in this area, especially given the rate of development, and the uncertainty over future agricultural grant schemes. Positive steps have been taken, particularly in terms of grassland restoration. However, there are many opportunities to further improve the connectivity of habitats. It is hoped that the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) will aid habitat enhancements.</p> <p>Woodland management is variable, with some areas vulnerable to anti-social behaviour such as erosion of tracks by off-road vehicles, or becoming degraded due to lack of management. Ash Dieback is affecting woodlands and hedgerow trees. Past loss of hedgerows as a result of intensive farming has also damaged the landscape structure and reduced biodiversity, and fragmented the network of wildlife corridors between woodlands.</p> <p>Like many parts of the AONB the Medway LCA is a focus for equine activity and the pattern of subdivided fields, in-field structures, overgrazing and field jumps detracts from the otherwise farmed landscape.</p>
Climate change and natural factors	<p>Changing weather patterns associated with climate change are likely to impact on the river corridor, particularly an increase in the level and frequency of flooding due to increased intensity of rainfall. Warmer weather and changing seasonal patterns are likely to affect crop choice and farming regimes, for example an increase in viticulture. Trees in hedgerows and woodlands are threatened by new pests and diseases, and some species (such as beech) may decline as a result of prolonged drought.</p>



Former cement works, currently being demolished and redeveloped for housing



The new bridge across the Medway at Halling has made travel within the valley much easier and re-connected communities on opposite sides of the river.



Pylons and substation near Wouldham



Open fields where hedgerows have been removed



Newly created wildflower meadow near Nashenden Farm, looking towards the Medway Crossing and M20



Grassland restoration of former arable land on the Western Scarp, looking towards Birling

10.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The Medway Valley Character Area retains its rural character, despite the proximity of settlement and infrastructure, and continues to function as a strategic, attractive gap between urban areas. It is easily accessible on foot and cycle from surrounding urban areas and is a popular resource for quiet countryside recreation. Partnership working enables a continuous multi-user riverside path within and outside the AONB. Best practice extends outside the AONB to include adjacent areas of countryside.

The valley sides and wooded scarps above continue to provide a strong rural setting for the surrounding settlements. Woodland, grassland and wetland habitats are extensive and well-connected, and support a wide range of plants, animals, insects and birds. The landscape structure is strengthened, and lost hedgerows and trees outside woods are replaced.

New development within the valley is of the highest quality and sustainable design, incorporating sustainable access routes and enhancing wildlife habitats and networks. Careful design and planting mean that development is well-integrated into the surrounding landscape and has minimal impact in views.

The recent industrial heritage of the Medway Valley is recognised, recorded and marked, as well as its important prehistoric and medieval archaeology.

Protect

- Protect undeveloped skylines (horizons which are currently free from development) and scarps, avoiding development which breaks the horizon.
- Protect riverside habitats from development, and look at opportunities to enhance their biodiversity and accessibility where appropriate.
- Protect historic sites (including non-designated sites) and their settings, taking into account the full range of heritage in this area - from prehistoric burial sites to 19th Century industry. Enhance the settings of historic farmsteads and seek sympathetic restoration of derelict traditional farmsteads.
- Protect the attractive rural landscape of the area.

Manage

- Manage wetland habitats, working to connect wetlands inside and outside the AONB.
- Manage lanes and tracks, continuing to employ a Community Police Support Officer to monitor and discourage illegal use by 4x4 vehicles. Restore hedges alongside highways.
- Manage agricultural land, including hedgerow restoration, replacement and establishment of trees outside woodlands and promotion of grass strips along field margins, with the aim of creating a strong habitat network and reducing habitat fragmentation. Continue to promote reversion of arable land to grassland on steep scarp slopes and to reduce the intensive nature of arable farming to enhance wildlife and enable soil regeneration. Restore hedgerows which are becoming degraded (for example around Birling) and replace/ supplement infield and hedgerow trees where they have been lost. There are also opportunities to create new shaws on slopes, and to establish a network of hedgerows to act as habitat links
- Work with landowners and partner organisations to promote positive management of scarp woodlands. Encourage traditional management such as coppicing where appropriate, and aim to achieve a mix of ages and species of trees, including locally-distinctive woodland species such as

yew and beech. Where woodland biodiversity is particularly depleted, tree planting using local provenance species may be required.

- Manage historic parklands, ensuring that they have a Parkland Management Plan, and plant replacement parkland trees when necessary so that they continue to be a feature of the landscape.

Plan

- Promote partnership working between Local Authorities to improve footpath access to the River Medway, to provide a continuous path along the River Medway, and to improve footpath and cycle links to the urban areas.
- Develop an aspirational plan for a large-scale natural parkland with woodland, scrub, grassland and wetlands, to help mitigate and ameliorate climate change, enhance biodiversity, and provide recreational opportunities for the expanding local population.
- Consider setting empirical targets to monitor habitat increase for woodland, wetland, grassland and scrub.
- Work with water companies to reduce groundwater abstraction, and to keep water volumes in springs and streams as close as possible to their natural levels.
- Work with Local Authorities and developers to promote high standards of new development. It should respect local building styles and materials, and be designed to fit into its landscape setting (for example through enhancing the surrounding hedgerow structure). It should also incorporate connected habitat areas.
- Consider and reduce the visual impacts of new developments when viewed from above (i.e. from the top of the scarps) as well as when viewed from within the valley.
- Provide opportunities for local people to volunteer on landscape enhancement initiatives and for health and wellbeing; work with other organisations (e.g. community service co-ordinators) to address the results of anti-social behaviour.
- Build on the physical link created by the new bridge at Halling, and encourage partnership working on landscape and access projects between parishes on both sides of the river.
- Work with Highways Authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Ensure that new agricultural buildings, and conversions of agricultural buildings to other uses, are of an appropriate scale and design, and do not undermine the distinctive built character.
- 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 lost qualities.
- Encourage partnership working with between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB. Consider environmental/ landscape limits in planning and placemaking.
- Use the recognised and valued character and qualities of the LCA to inform climate adaptation and mitigation including new tree establishment.