

11.0 Stour Valley

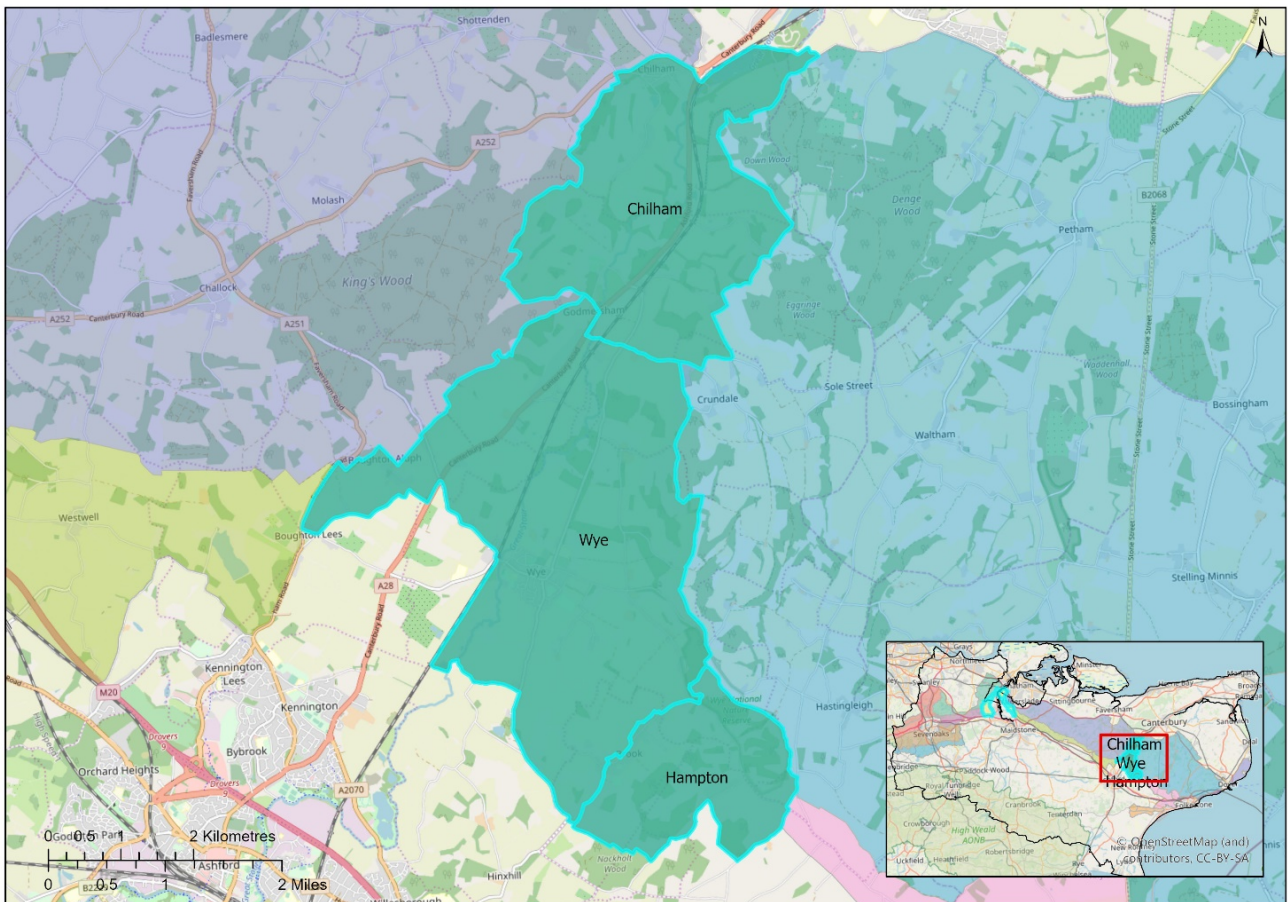
Landscape Character Area 4C

Landscape Character Type: River Valley

Districts/ Boroughs: Ashford Borough Council

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership

Location and Context: The Stour Valley is located towards the east of the Kent Downs AONB, between the Mid Kent Downs LCA and the East Kent Downs LCA. It runs broadly north-south between Ashford and Chilham, and includes the settlements of Wye, Chilham and Brook.



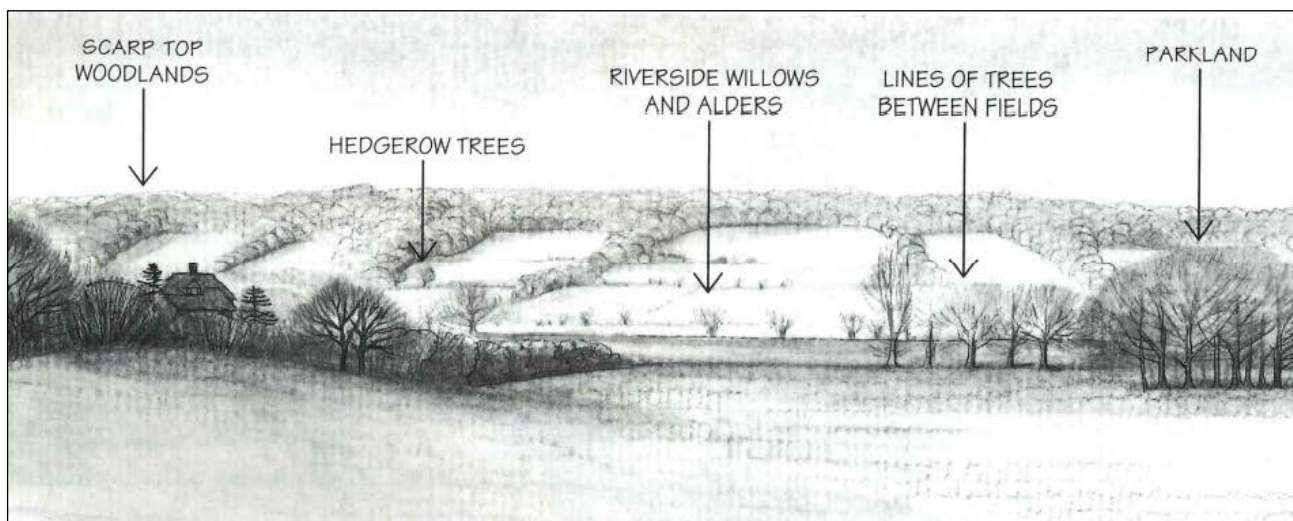
Location map for Stour Valley LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Hampton, Wye and Chilham



A typical scene within the Stour Valley, between Wye and Godmersham. The line of the river is marked by willow trees, and the floodplain contains arable land and parkland. The steep western valley side, with fields, woodland and grassland, forms the backdrop.

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying chalk geology, except in the far south of the LCA which is underlain by mudstone. Alluvial deposits alongside river, and patches of clay and clay-with-flints on valley floor and sides.
- Gentle slope on the west side, and steep, convoluted slope on the east. Flat valley floor broader in the south of the LCA, with narrower pinch points in the north.
- River Great Stour runs from south to north, meandering within floodplain. Fed by springs and tributary streams in southern part of the LCA.
- Blocks of plantation and estate woodland, particularly along the tops of the valley sides. Numerous parkland trees, riparian trees and hedgerow trees.
- Predominant land use is arable agriculture, with pasture locally dominant in clay area in the south, and parkland in the north.
- Valley floor is generally open, but valley sides are divided by hedged fields. Fields mostly regular/ semi-regular, but irregular in the far south.
- Semi-natural habitats include extensive chalk grassland on valley sides, as well as riparian habitats, woodland and scrub.
- Concentration of historic country houses and parks, as well as historic villages containing vernacular buildings of brick, tile and flint. Estate architecture locally dominant around Godmersham.
- Larger settlements generally nucleated in form, but historic linear settlement at Brook.
- A28 and railway between Canterbury and Ashford follow the valley floor. Relatively few roads on valley sides, but North Downs Way crosses valley at Wye, and runs along top of eastern valley side, parallel to Pilgrims' Way along the base.
- Parkland and woodland create distinctive patterns in the landscape, and riparian trees along the river pick out its sinuous course through the landscape.
- Valley sides form distinctive backdrops, particularly the steep and convoluted chalk slopes above Wye. Horizons are generally smooth and uninterrupted.
- Strong sense of tranquillity away from main roads and settlements.
- Long and dramatic views across valley from valley sides. Wye Crown is a distinctive landmark.



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

11.1 Description

- 11.1.1 This Landscape Character Area comprises the valley floor and sides of the Stour Valley. It covers the full north-south extent of the AONB, with the east and west sides of the valley mirroring each other, and forming the backdrops to views across the valley. Its orientation means that the valley floor receives sunlight throughout the day, but in certain weather conditions, mists hang over the valley and are spectacular when viewed from above.
- 11.1.2 The Great Stour is the most easterly of the three rivers cutting through the Downs. It exhibits the characteristics of a chalk stream but is modified by water abstraction and treatment processes. It frequently floods, and has a wide floodplain. Like the Darent and the Medway, the River Stour provided an early access route into the heart of Kent and formed an ancient focus for settlement. It remains a sometimes busy transport route today, with layers of past land use and settlement still visible in the landscape. Today the Stour Valley is highly valued for the quality of its landscape, and the fact that it is peaceful, serene and relatively tranquil. It is accessible from nearby towns, and is popular for recreation, including walking, cycling and fishing. The North Downs Way and Stour Valley Walk pass through the area, with walkers appreciating the panoramic views of the valley. The attractive historic villages of Wye and Chilham receive large numbers of visitors, but there is also a strong sense of community within the valley.
- 11.1.3 Despite its proximity to both Canterbury and Ashford, the Stour Valley retains a strong rural identity. Enclosed by steep scarps on both sides, with dense woodlands and grassland on the upper slopes, the valley is dominated by intensively farmed arable fields interspersed by broad sweeps of mature parkland and woodland blocks. There are a number of historic houses within the area, including Chilham Castle, Godmersham Park and Olantigh. Their extensive parkland grounds and distinctive estate buildings and brick walls add to the character of the area. Unusually, there are no electricity pylons affecting the views across the valley but some railway infrastructure, albeit at a smaller scale, can have a similarly detracting impact. North of Bilting, the river flows through a narrow, pastoral flood plain dotted with trees such as willow and alder and drained by small ditches. To the south around Wye, however, the flood plain widens out and the pastures along the immediate riverside are surrounded by intensively cultivated arable fields on the rich, well-drained

brick-earth soils. The field pattern is picked out by a network of narrow, trimmed hedges and lines of mature trees, such as poplars.

- 11.1.4 On the valley sides, many of the arable fields are surrounded by thick hedges or dense, overgrown hedges which extend down from the woodlands on the upper slopes. Hedgerow trees, in particular oak and ash, are frequent and much of the woodland and grassland along the east side of the valley is of national importance for its plant, insect and other animal communities. Of particular note are the orchids and moths, including bee, pyramidal and spider orchids, the black veined moth and the Duke of Burgundy butterfly. Wye Downs National Nature Reserve includes several areas of chalk grassland and woodland on the steep scarp slopes on the eastern side of the valley. The 'Wye Crown' on the valley side east of Wye is a distinctive landmark feature.

11.2 Local Character Areas

- 11.2.1 There are three Local Character Areas within the Stour Valley, reflecting the diversity of underlying geology, and land use.

Wye

- 11.2.2 Around the ancient town of Wye, whose Georgian facades reflect a period of 18th Century prosperity, the Stour passes through a wide, flat floodplain before cutting north into the downs. Wye has many historic buildings, and is well-known for its agricultural college (now closed). Settlement is generally sparse, but there are a number of hamlets and historic farms, often containing 'cat slide' roofs, which add to both time-depth and distinctiveness. There is little woodland here, but narrow lines of trees, some plantations or overgrown hedges around field boundaries, cast veils of wooded vegetation across the open landscape. Below the great expanse of Challock Forest in the west, the slopes are open, still bearing traces of ancient field systems. The upper slopes are often permanent grassland wrapped by the scarp top woodland. On the lower slopes, arable is more dominant, with regular closely-trimmed hedges bounding the large fields. On the eastern scarp, however, the slopes are much steeper and more convoluted, producing a series of enclosed coombs, dominated by the rough grassland, scrub and deciduous woodland of the Wye National Nature Reserve. These areas of 'semi-natural' vegetation are in sharp contrast with the ornamental tree planting at Eastwell Park and Olantigh.
- 11.2.3 On the eastern side of the valley, above Wye Village, is the landmark of the Wye Crown, cut into the white chalk. It was originally created by Wye Agricultural College in 1902 to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII. From here, as from the rest of the scarp, there are splendid views across and along the valley, as well as out of the AONB to the south.
- 11.2.4 Recent village extensions have tended to have a higher density, taller buildings and greater massing than has previously been the case, which means they have a more direct immediate impact and can be more visible in the landscape in distant views.



View looking west from the chalk scarp on the North Downs Way, above Wye Crown

Hampton

- 11.2.5 This small corner of the Stour Valley reflects a change in the soils and differences in historic land management. The linear settlement of Brook, with its 13th Century church and barn, is one of very few villages built on the sticky gault clay. The land here is gently undulating, irrigated by several scarp-foot springs, and there are pockets of damp pasture as well as a considerable amount of woodland, much of it of high nature conservation value. Between the woodland blocks are small, irregularly-shaped fields with large well treed hedgerows. In the north-east of the area, the steep, convoluted wooded scarp encloses the rich chalk grasslands of the Devil's Kneading Trough coombe and forms a dramatic backdrop to the gentle farmland below. The National Nature Reserve has wide, dramatic views and is a popular spot for visitors and walkers. This enhances its sense of place, and also increases visibility of the landform. At the base of the Downs runs the Pilgrims Way, often surrounded by thick species-rich hedges and woodland edges.
- 11.2.6 This Local Character Area has a strong sense of place, influenced by the woodland characteristics, the small scale of the historic farmland and the characteristic diversity of hedge and woodland species, which include clematis, viburnums, etc. Within the lower part of the area, views are often constrained or framed by woodland, but there are long views from the scarp across the area and over the surrounding countryside.



The wooded character of the Hampton Local Character Area can be particularly well-appreciated from the scarp near Cold Blow Farm.

Chilham

- 11.2.5 North of Bilting, the Stour Valley becomes increasingly enclosed. The rolling sides of the valley support large arable fields in the east, while notable sweeps of parkland belonging to Godmersham Park and Chilham Castle cover most of the western slopes and contribute to a sense of historic time depth. Stretches of the river itself have also been incorporated into ornamental parkland and contribute to designed views, such as at Godmersham Park (see photos below). On either side of the valley, dense woodlands dominate the skyline and a number of substantial shaws and plantations on the lower slopes reflect the importance of game cover in this area. There are also pockets of wood pasture, where animals graze under mature trees.
- 11.2.6 The chalk scarp to the north-east provides a backdrop and sense of place. On the valley bottom, the river is picked out in places by waterside alders and occasional willows, and there are sinuous riverside pastures. The railway line is obscured for much of its length by trees. However, where it is apparent, the associated infrastructure is sometimes highly visible.
- 11.2.7 The area contains two large country estates, and the associated architecture contributes to the strong sense of place. The cottages of the Godmersham estate are particularly distinctive, built of red brick with arched doorways. Chilham Castle is a spectacular Jacobean country house dating to 1607, and built on the site of an earlier castle. Godmersham Park, also constructed in brick, dates from 1732 and has a neo-classical design. It was owned by Jane Austen's brother, and she is reputed to have written several of her books whilst staying there. Visitors to the estates enjoyed country pursuits such as shooting, equine eventing and hunting, and these activities continue to have an influence on the landscape.
- 11.2.8 The Stour Valley is a very popular area for recreation and attracts considerable numbers of visitors. Historic villages such as Chilham, with its wealth of timber-framed buildings and famous castle suffer from severe parking problems in the high season. The village, with its 'quintessential English' character, is used as a film-set on a regular basis. Churches are also a feature of the landscape, and are generally constructed of flint, sometimes with brick or stone detailing.



View looking east across the Stour Valley from the gardens of Chilham Castle



The convoluted wooded scarp at Giddy Horn, in the Hampton Local Character area



The River Stour in its floodplain, looking south from near Chilham



Spectacular views across the Stour Valley can be seen from Broad Downs (part of the Wye National Nature Reserve)



Chilham Castle



Godmersham Estate cottage



Wye College was founded in 1447 as a theological college, and was an agricultural college from 1898 until 2005.

11.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 11.3.1 This landscape has undergone a considerable amount of positive change in recent years. The 1995 Assessment noted a number of issues within the Stour Valley, including hedgerow loss, tree loss / damage following the 1987 hurricane, and traffic problems. The 2004 Assessment noted that the Chilham and Hampton Local Character Areas were in good condition, but the Wye Local Character Area was in very poor condition due to loss of landscape structure (e.g. hedgerows, and riverside trees) and some urbanisation.
- 11.3.2 Since the previous Assessments were carried out, positive landscape management (including through Environmental Stewardship schemes) has included replanting of hedgerows and riverside willow trees. Parkland trees have been planted, to provide eventual replacements for those lost through over-maturity or the 1987 storm. Natural England has a number of ongoing projects within the area, including the Crundale Grasslands project, which is creating a more balanced landscape of grassland and arable land uses through arable reversion; floodplain wetland habitat creation projects, and restoration of Godmersham Park. There is some localised linear development, and village extensions (particularly along the A28 corridor) which can erode local character, but the majority of the area feels rural and well cared-for.



The River Stour at Godmersham Park in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below). The riverside trees and bankside vegetation have grown a lot in 23 years, so the scene feels less open.

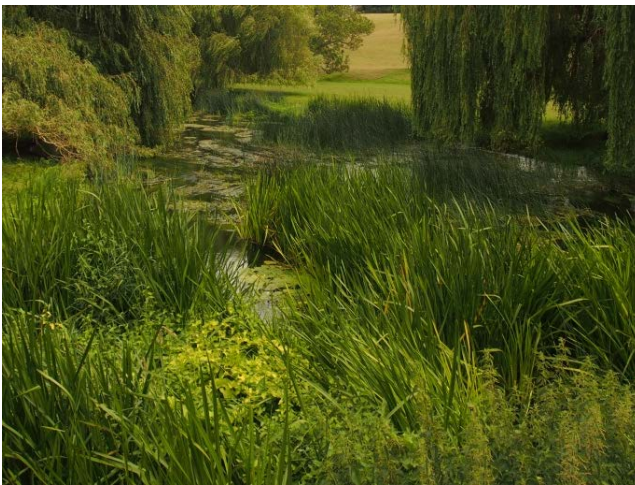
| Issue | <i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| The River Stour | Water flow and quality is affected by a number of factors, including abstraction, flooding, development in the river catchment, run-off from agriculture, discharge from storm drains/ water treatment works and litter. There are also invasive species along the river banks, such as Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed. Variations in water quality and bankside vegetation affect both the appearance and the ecology of the river. There are stretches around Wye where water meadows and riverside trees have been lost, and ploughing continues up to the riverbank. |
| Upgrading of transport infrastructure | The Stour Valley is an historic transport corridor, currently used by the A28 and the Ashford- Canterbury railway line. Upgrading the road and rail infrastructure would result in loss of rural character and tranquillity, and related issues such as light pollution from road lighting. Rural lanes are vulnerable to insensitive highways measures. Traffic volume and parking issues are a problem in popular visitor locations e.g. Chilham and Wye. |
| New development | The redevelopment of Wye College is likely to impact on the character of the village in terms of the design of new housing and increasing the size of the village. Telecoms masts are visible, particularly on valley sides. Development in the setting of the AONB (particularly around Ashford) impacts on views from the scarps, and also affects light pollution, traffic levels, wildlife, recreation and water quality. These issues are likely to increase if further development occurs. |
| Land management | The late 20 th Century saw a loss of landscape subtlety and detail as a result of intensification of agriculture. This included loss of hedgerows, ploughing of grassland areas; loss of riverside meadows, and removal of riverside trees. Recent years have seen a partial reversal of this process with a number of projects to restore and enhance the landscape. It is important that this positive change continues into the future, and that landscape restoration continues to enhance both its appearance and its ecological and recreational value. The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape. There are currently changes in land management within and outside the AONB (e.g. viticulture, polytunnels) which may expand in coming years. |
| Recreation | The popularity of villages such as Chilham can result in loss of the character which people come to enjoy, particularly when views of the village square are dominated by parked cars, and streets are clogged with traffic. Incidences of anti-social behaviour such as litter can also be an issue in areas popular for recreation. There is concern that further development in the vicinity of the AONB will increase recreational pressure for which management arrangements should be put in place. |
| Climate change and natural forces | Ash Dieback is a concern in this area and is already visible with hill tops punctuated by dying ash trees, Ash Dieback will continue to affect woodlands and hedgerow trees. Trees are also vulnerable to storms, which are likely to increase in intensity and frequency due to climate change. |



Telecommunications mast on valley side near Wye



Parked cars dominate the village square in Chilham



Vegetation choking the river at Godmersham. Invasive Himalayan Balsam is also present in this area, which outcompetes native river bank vegetation.



Game crops within extensive arable fields.



Positive management of parkland- a new avenue at Olantigh Park.



View of Ashford from the eastern valley side

11.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The mosaic of land uses (woodland, arable, grassland and parkland) is preserved, conserved and enhanced, with local variations in its make-up reflecting the local character areas. All elements of the mosaic are in active, sustainable, management, and woodlands and grasslands are linked to maximise their biodiversity value. The landscape structure and character continues to be enhanced through carefully thought-out tree and hedgerow planting, such as willows alongside the river, and new parkland trees. The River Stour retains its chalk stream characteristics, and is as close to its natural state as possible with excellent water quality. River and bankside vegetation is healthy and dominated by native species. Pollarded riverside willows remain a distinctive feature of the water course, and watermeadows help to provide natural flood storage capacity.

The valley retains its rural character, with minimal impacts from new developments which seek to reflect, conserve and enhance the distinctive character of the area, or from upgrades to transport infrastructure. Light pollution and increased noise is avoided. Any new development respects and enhances local styles, materials and scales of building. The impacts of new developments outside the AONB but in its setting (particularly in views from high land) are taken into consideration.

Protect

- Protect historic buildings and their settings, and the special character of historic villages and farmsteads.
- Protect the distinctive built form associated with estate villages.
- Protect undeveloped skylines along the top of the valley sides, avoiding development which breaks the horizon in views across or from the valley.
- Protect the highly valued landscape heritage and quality, peace, serenity and relative tranquillity.

Manage

- Manage river banks, controlling invasive species such as Himalayan Balsam and encouraging watercourses to function as biodiversity corridors. Continue to replant riverside trees (particularly willow and alder), pollard existing willows and graze water meadows. Promote wetland habitats.
- Manage agricultural land to maximise biodiversity value and enable linking of habitats such as woodland and grassland through a network of hedgerows and field margins. Retain the surviving irregular historic field pattern around Hampton.
- Manage game shoots to minimise landscape impacts, for example planting game cover crops at the edges of fields, parallel to existing boundaries, and avoiding artificial straight lines. Consider the impacts on ground flora when locating pens in woodland. Apply the Kent Downs AONB game management guidance.
- Manage historic parklands and veteran trees, ensuring that all estates have a Parkland Management Plan in place. Have an active programme of tree establishment and promotion from hedgerow trees/ natural regeneration to replace trees lost through storm damage or over-maturity. Ensure that parkland trees remain a feature of the landscape.
- Continue to manage woodland, using traditional techniques such as coppicing to achieve a varied age and species structure.
- Promote new hedgerow and roadside trees from existing hedge stock.

- Manage chalk grasslands, and seek opportunities to revert arable land to grassland, and to link grasslands through field margins and road verges.
- Basic highways management techniques such as cutting verges and hedgerows at appropriate times will enhance their appearance and their ecological value.

Plan

- Design any new developments to retain the distinctive character of built form. What is appropriate design will depend on the location and context. For example, recently built cottages in Godmersham incorporated local estate cottage detailing, but this would not be appropriate for a larger development in another location. Use high quality and sensitive design and materials supported by planting to integrate new development into the landscape, and pay attention to boundary treatments, avoiding suburban features such as elaborate gates. Traditional local materials include brick, tile and flint.
- Work with rail companies and the Highways Agency to ensure that any upgrading projects have minimal impacts on the landscape and the rural character of the area and the existing infrastructure fits better in the landscape. Minimise use of lighting and retain the character of rural lanes, avoiding urbanising influences such as kerbs and unnecessary or overly large signage.
- Work with Highways authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Work with water companies and the Environment Agency Catchment Partnership to enhance water quality, and to keep river flows as close as possible to their natural state. Introduce natural flood management/ water quality enhancement approaches.
- Within the setting of the LCA, work with Local Planning Authorities and designers to achieve the best possible landscape and ecological integration and minimal impacts on views, with compensation achieved for lost qualities.
- Encourage partnership working between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB. Consider environmental and landscape limits on planning and place making.
- Look at opportunities for the creation of new waterbodies, wetlands and wet woodlands to enhance biodiversity, and to help counteract climate change and its effects.