

## 4.0 East Kent Downs

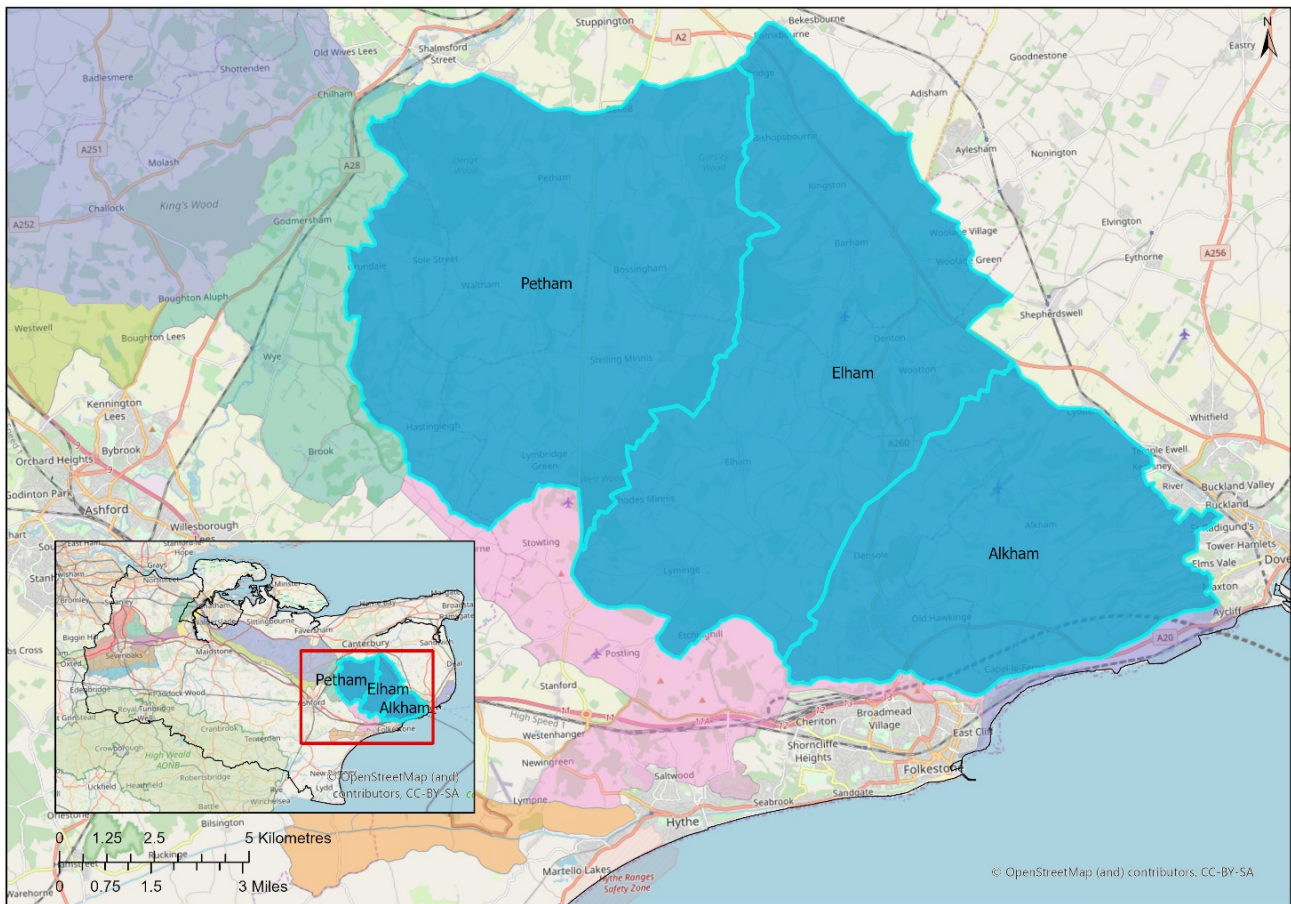
### Landscape Character Area 1C

**Landscape Character Type:** Chalk Downland

**Districts/ Boroughs:** Ashford; Canterbury; Dover; Shepway

**Landscape/Countryside Partnerships:** Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership

**Location and Context:** This large LCA is located in the east of the Kent Downs AONB, to the east of the Stour Valley LCA, and north of the Postling Scarp and Vale and the White Cliffs Coast LCAs. It includes several settlements, the largest of which are Lyminge, Hawkinge, Elham and Barham.



*Location map for East Kent Downs LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Petham, Elham and Alkham*

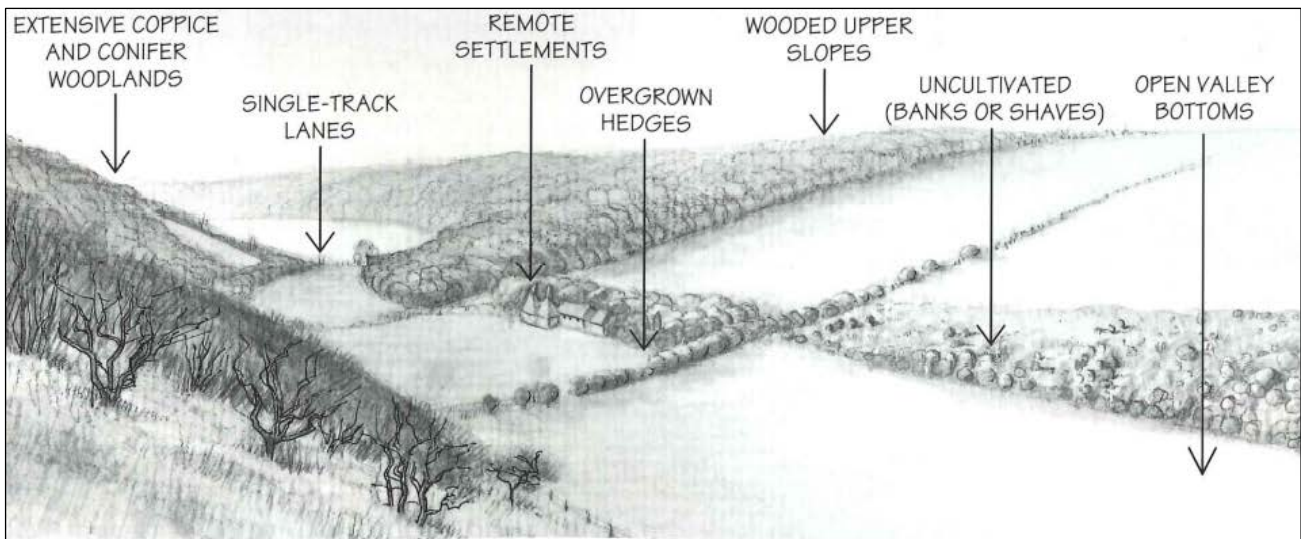


*A typical scene in the East Kent Downs- the Nailbourne Valley looking north towards Barham*

## Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Cretaceous chalk. In places the surface has weathered to create a layer of clay-with-flints, forming heavy, sticky soils.
- Rounded chalk plateau dissected by a series of parallel narrow dry valleys, becoming increasingly pronounced towards the south.
- Little surface water, but seasonal streams appearing only in winter (Nailbournes) are a distinctive feature.
- Extensive woodland blocks, particularly on ridge tops, and strips of woodland on steep valley sides. Extensive coppice and conifer woodlands. Shaves, copses and hedgerow trees throughout.
- Dominant land use is arable agriculture, but there are also areas of parkland, orchards, vines, woodland and pasture. Field patterns are variable, but are generally larger on ridges than in valleys, reflecting historic processes of enclosure.
- Semi-natural habitats include woodland, chalk grassland and parkland.
- Scattered historic buildings including churches, manors, country houses, farms and cottages.
- Relatively sparse settlement of scattered farms and occasional nucleated villages, often of brick and flint construction. Concentration of settlement in the Nail Bourne Valley, and notable common-edge settlement of Stelling Minnis.
- Dense network of historic roads and tracks, including Prehistoric routeways, Roman roads medieval drove roads and Turnpikes. Sunken single-track lanes are also characteristic.
- A relatively tranquil part of the Kent Downs AONB, with a strongly rural feel. The pattern of ridges and dry valleys gives the landscape a rhythmic feel, particularly in the south of the LCA.
- Views are often linear and channelled by landform. There are long views from high ground, overlooking adjacent valleys.





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

## 4.1 Description

- 4.1.1 This is a remote, peaceful area of downland, towards the eastern end of the AONB. Its character is strongly influenced by the underlying chalk geology. Above the southern scarp, the broad back of the chalk hills is furrowed by a series of long, narrow, parallel valleys, running north-east. In these dry valleys, the valley bottom streams or *nailbournes* are underground, only flowing at the surface occasionally, during very wet winters. Water management has always been a challenge in this landscape because of the lack of surface water. Between the valleys are expansive plateaux, often covered with heavy, sticky clay-with-flint soils.
- 4.1.2 The western valley systems are branching and intricate. The steep rounded slopes are crossed by thick shaws or overgrown hedges, often seasonally swathed in the white seed-heads of wild clematis. Although much of the area has been cultivated, there are still important grassland habitats, particularly at the tops of the valley sides which are too steep to plough. Large arable fields on the ridge top plateaux are visually contained by long strips of deciduous, ancient woodland along the valley sides, or ridge-top conifer forests west of Elham. Towards the coast, however, the landscape becomes more exposed. There is less woodland and the strongly linear pattern of parallel ridges and valleys is more distinct.
- 4.1.3 The countryside of the East Kent Downs is criss-crossed by a maze of tiny, sunken one-track lanes. Many of these tracks have ancient origins, and some may have been routeways from prehistoric times. The Roman road of Stone Street (B2068) cuts through the landscape, one of several Roman Roads in the area connecting Canterbury to the coast. These ancient routes are still in use today, with many as roads, or incorporated into routes such as the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs Way. Some lanes and tracks are relics of land divisions which can date back centuries. Houses are widely scattered and many villages, traditionally built of local flint, brick and tile, are still little more than a church, a manor and farm cottages. The place name 'Minnis' refers to common land. Although most common has now been enclosed for farmland, Stelling Minnis remains the last unenclosed downland common in the Kent Downs, representing an unaltered relic of the medieval manors. .



*Plateau scene near Elmsted*

- 4.1.4 This is still a strongly rural landscape with a sense of timelessness. Much of the land is agricultural, but there are also pockets of orchards, hop gardens, an increasing number of vineyards, extensive historic parklands, and woodlands. Together they contribute to variations in its character. The larger villages have a range of origins, including the coaching village of Bridge and the railway town of Lyminge. Hawkinge is a substantial recent settlement built on open farmland which was a former Second World War grass airfield. Several villages and historic parks are designated as Conservation Areas.
- 4.1.5 The presence of the coast nearby influences the weather, with sea mist filling valleys and hovering over plateaux. Views within this Landscape Character Area are often enclosed and channelled by the linear dry valley landforms. These views contrast with the wider, panoramic views experienced from the plateaux. Dover Castle is a significant landmark to the east, and in the far south of the area, views are dominated by the presence of the sea. Although there are some localised influences from main roads and larger settlements, in general this is a peaceful landscape which feels relatively tranquil and detached from urban life. With the exception of Hawkinge, it is one of the least developed parts of the Kent Downs AONB. The area is associated with the artist Henry Moore, who lived and worked at 'Burcroft' in Kingston in the Nail Bourne Valley. He later wrote 'living at Burcroft was what probably clinched my interest in trying to make sculpture and nature enhance each other.'



*Ancient trackway over Crundale Downs*

## 4.2 Local Character Areas

- 4.2.1 There are three Local Character Areas within the East Kent Downs LCA. **Petham** in the west contains a network of valleys and is the least settled part of the LCA. **Elham** in the centre contains several large villages and is more strongly influenced by parkland and estate landscapes. **Alkham** in the east comprises a series of steep parallel valleys running towards the Dour, interspersed by plateaux.

### Petham

- 4.2.2 To the east of the Stour Valley is an intimate, sparsely populated, and remote landscape of long, rolling valleys and widely scattered farms. Blocks of deciduous woodland (including extensive areas of Ancient Woodland) crown the narrower ridges or sweep along the upper valley slopes, providing a sense of enclosure and emphasising the curving landform. There are also occasional huge uninterrupted open fields on the high plateaux between the ridges. There are frequent tantalising views into secluded coombes and extensive areas of traditional chalk grassland, such as Winchcombe Downs, supporting colonies of rare orchids and butterflies.
- 4.2.3 Although the hedgerow network is more fragmented and generally less diverse than around Elham, many hedges are overgrown or contain significant numbers of hedgerow trees, producing strong lines of vegetation across the otherwise smooth folds of the valleys. Where they occur, infield trees are important landscape features. Many of the valley sides have a narrow strip of woodland along their steepest slopes, where cultivation has never been possible. Known locally as *shaves*, they are often rich wildlife havens and provide a valuable contrast with the otherwise intensively farmed valley landscapes. This was once an area of widespread hop cultivation, but although redundant oast-houses dot the landscape, there are almost no hop gardens still in production. The largest settlements are generally found in the river valleys and on valley sides, but there are also several villages (often with origins associated with routeways or common-edges, such as Stelling Minnis) which are on high ground. Large farms are scattered across the plateaux as well as nestled in valleys. The distinct built form includes some minor estate houses.



*Dry Valley near Crundale, in the Petham Local Character Area*



## Elham

- 4.2.4 This area is a transitional landscape between the remote, enclosed countryside east of the Stour Valley and the exposed, ridges and valleys between Folkestone and Dover. It has a more settled feel, with more frequent villages, and open views from the narrow ridge-top roads. The rolling downland is the dominant visual element, and its character is also influenced by the presence of parkland and large estates. There are several Conservation Areas in the northern part of the area, comprising villages and historic parkland. The Elham Way (between Canterbury and Hythe) runs through this area.
- 4.2.5 The Elham Valley carves its way through the centre of this area, in a wide attractive sweep, up to Barham and Patricbourne. It contains a line of large villages, including Lyminge, Elham, Barham and Bridge. To the west is one of the most densely-wooded ridges of the AONB, where expanses of conifer plantations are interspersed with remnants of deciduous, ancient woodland, still concealing the ancient double banks which once formed the boundary of Elham Park. It includes more recent woodland associated with Denton Court and Wootton Park, as well as sweet chestnut coppice around Lyminge.
- 4.2.6 To the east of the Elham Valley, the landscape is predominantly large, intensively cultivated arable plateaux interspersed by dry valleys. Woodlands are fewer and much smaller, frequently on the steep valley sides. Although there has been extensive loss of hedgerows, this area still has a high proportion of hedgerow trees and botanically-rich hedges, usually near the villages. The less exposed, northern slopes around Denton are still dotted with pockets of historic parkland and orchards, and there are larger parkland estates including Acrise Park, Broome Park, Bourne Park, Bifron Park and Charlton Park. Extensive areas of grassland, parkland and woodland are managed by the Ministry of Defence. Narrow roads linking farmsteads evoke a great sense of time-depth, with settlements, estates, buildings and hedgerows also contributing a historic influence. The Norman church at Paddlesworth is the highest church in the North Downs, and is one of many isolated churches in the East Kent Downs.



*The Elham Valley near Barham, with Charlton Park in the middle of the photo*

## Alkham

- 4.2.7 This area is dominated by the long parallel ridges and sometimes isolated valleys which feed into the Dour valley. Near the coast, the ridges become increasingly narrower and the valleys closer. There are long views to Dover Castle, which are often framed by valley landforms. There are fewer woodlands here than in the west, and most occur on the steep valley slopes, where cultivation has been uneconomic. Many, therefore, are very old and of high nature conservation value, but few are actively managed. Of particular note is surviving Elm woods and hedges near Elms Vale, Dover. There are also areas of scrub on valley sides, often occurring where grassland has been left ungrazed. Much of the hedgerow network on the plateaux, which was largely a 19<sup>th</sup> Century creation, was replaced by post and wire fence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, so that gradually the former unenclosed landscape was unintentionally re-created. In recent years the trend has reversed, with hedges planted on fenced and unfenced boundaries as part of landscape enhancement projects. There are extensive MoD training grounds near Lydden which tend to be cattle-grazed and include bands of conifers used in training exercises.
- 4.2.8 There are a number of surviving medieval buildings within this landscape. These include St John's chapel near Swingfield Street (associated with the Knights of St John) and the remains of St Radigund's Abbey east of Alkham, dating from 1191. There are also several medieval village churches still in use, and numerous historic houses. Steep sunken lanes and tracks wind up valley sides, connecting the dry valleys with the open downland above.
- 4.2.9 The former airfield at Hawkinge, effectively a new urban settlement, is now housing, with associated new buildings and roads visible within the landscape. The apparently undifferentiated design has little reference to its location in the Kent Downs AONB, and contrasts with the surrounding historic field patterns and ancient woodland. Management of land for equine use is a further concern in this area, particularly within the Alkham Valley.



*The Farthingloe Valley looking towards Dover Castle*





*Chestnut coppice (and chestnut pale fencing) at Pillars Wood near Paddlesworth*



*Some of the steepest land has never been cultivated and supports strips of woodland known locally as 'shaves'.*



*Elham Village*



*Elmsted Church with its unusual shingled tower and ancient churchyard yew tree*



*Soft fruit-growing near Bridge*



*Acrise Park*



## 4.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 4.3.1 This is a landscape with a sense of timelessness, and for much of the area, large-scale or modern development is not apparent. The landscape appears well managed, and its condition is generally good. This area has been the focus of many habitat restoration schemes. However, the landscape is not static, and it is affected by changing practices in land management as well as development pressure. Some of the changes, such as the change in crop choice from orchards to vines, the increasing use of land for equine management, and the introduction of suburban-style gates, boundaries and road junctions are incremental, but can add up to considerable landscape change across the area.
- 4.3.2 The 1995 Assessment noted *the decaying hedges, derelict buildings and abandoned farm machinery which also occur in this area are further signs of a landscape under economic stress*. Today, although there are very occasional untidy farms, there is not a sense of abandonment or economic stress. Comparison of the 1995 and 2017 photographs below shows that there has been some loss of parkland/ hedgerow trees, and that the foreground hedgerow has grown up, but otherwise the landscape looks very similar.
- 4.3.3 The dominance of the landform within this LCA means that skylines can be particularly prominent and therefore sensitive to change. The woodlands provide some screening function, but with tree disease becoming an increasing issue such screening cannot be relied on in the long term.



View west from Elmsted, GR 114449 in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below)

<b>Issue</b>	<b><i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i></b>
Changing farming practices	<p>The trend for vine growing reflects changes in the Kent climate, as well as changing fashions. The French champagne maker Tattinger has recently started planting vines in this part of Kent, so this change is likely to continue – significant parts of the LCA are thought suitable for vine growing.</p> <p>The use of polytunnels for soft fruit growing is also having an impact on the landscape in the north of this LCA, although it is not currently prevalent. The light colour and reflective nature of the plastic covers mean that they stand out within the wider landscape, especially where they cover an extensive area.</p> <p>Intensification of farming has occurred over recent decades, and can be seen in the larger farm buildings and structures, and in the large open arable fields from which hedgerows have been removed. There has also been some diversification, particularly letting of land or change of use for horse grazing. This can result in the use of high visibility fencing, heavy grazing pressure and subdivision of fields which have a locally-significant detrimental landscape impact. The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.</p>
Condition of habitats	<p>Some areas of particular wildlife value, such as chalk grassland and woodland exist simply because the land is too steep or difficult to plough. They are not intentional, and therefore often may not be in active management. Growth of scrub on grassland is noticeable around the LCA, due to reduction in grazing pressure.</p> <p>Woodland is also often under-managed, although there are areas of coppice. Past decades have seen planting of extensive conifer plantations, particularly in the central part of the LCA. Some (e.g. Park Wood) are owned by the Forestry Commission and have some recreational function. The trend for ‘woodlotting’ when woodlands are broken up into multiple ownership makes co-ordinated management of woodlands much more difficult and can have direct landscape impact through subdivision of woods and the introduction of fences, sheds and hard-standing areas.</p> <p>Ash Dieback is affecting hedges, woodlands and in-field and roadside trees, and is currently particularly noticeable in the south of the LCA. There are also localised impacts from increasing deer populations.</p> <p>Intensification of agriculture over past decades has resulted in loss of hedgerows and field margins. Recent years have seen a focussed effort on improving habitats locally, including bringing contiguous areas of farmland and grassland (across multiple farm holdings) into positive management. Schemes include field margins, hedgerow restoration/ planting and some of the largest areas of wildflower-seeded arable reversion in the county. Nevertheless, there are still further opportunities for restoration of habitats and wildlife corridors.</p>
Recreation	<p>There are a small number of recreation sites such as Lydden Race Circuit, caravan sites, and golf courses, which do not currently sit comfortably within the surrounding landscape, affecting landscape quality and in the case of Lydden having significant temporal noise effects, harming the tranquillity of the landscape</p> <p>There is also some recreation pressure, particularly on popular footpaths and bridleways near larger settlements which is resulting in path erosion and dog waste. Off-road vehicles damage paths and track surfaces in some areas, particularly during the winter months.</p>



<b>Issue</b>	<b><i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i></b>
Management and maintenance of historic buildings, structures and designed landscapes	<p>There are a small number of Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments ‘at risk’ within this LCA, including barrows, estate buildings, churches and St Radigund’s Abbey. The settings to historic buildings are also vulnerable to changes, particularly new development and highways measures.</p> <p>Maritime defence heritage is particularly vulnerable due to its coastal location and lack of public awareness of its existence.</p> <p>There are a number of historic parklands within this LCA, and without pro-active management, such as the planting of young parkland trees, the parklands will gradually disappear from the landscape as trees become over-mature and die or become damaged in high winds or affected by tree pests and disease. At the moment, some historic parkland is in MOD ownership, and is well managed, but should land ownership change, its future management is not guaranteed.</p>
Development	<p>Development which is of a scale or type that does not sit comfortably within the AONB landscape is largely confined to the peripheries of this LCA, particularly around Hawkinge and on the edge of Dover, although there have been large-scale development proposals elsewhere, such as at Bridge. Such developments risk undermining the area’s rural nature, and the distinctive character of its buildings.</p> <p>Linear expansion of valley-floor settlements up the valley sides has occurred in several villages, and is noticeable within the landscape.</p> <p>Urbanising and urban-fringe influences are most prevalent along the main roads within the area, particularly around larger settlements. These can reduce the rural character, and also introduce elements which are not designed to be locally-distinctive.</p>
Highways and transport	<p>The location of the proposed new Lower Thames Crossing is likely to increase traffic levels on the A2, which may in turn lead to more traffic management features and further erode its rural character. Potential widening of the A2 and pressure for lorry parks along its routes are also concerns.</p> <p>Loss of character of rural lanes and impacts on the tranquillity of the small lane and rural road network is a further concern, particularly given increased traffic levels and numbers of delivery vehicles and inappropriate highway treatments.</p> <p>This LCA is generally quite tranquil but tranquillity can be interrupted by overflying airplanes following principle designated international flight paths for Heathrow and Gatwick.</p>
Water management and coastal change	<p>The LCA’s underlying chalk geology means that is vulnerable to both drought and occasional flooding, when the nailbourne streams run.</p>
Climate change and natural forces	<p>The gradual warming of temperatures is reflected in the land use changes which are already occurring within the LCA, particularly the growing of vines. Hotter, drier summers are likely to result in drought conditions and water shortages. These may also affect the types of trees, plants and animals which can thrive. Wetter winters and more frequent storm events are likely to result in flooding.</p>



*Newly-planted vines near Barham*



*Polytunnels near Bridge*



*Scrub growth on valley side, Farthingloe Valley*



*Ash Dieback in woodland edge near Hemsted*



*New development on former airfield at Hawkinge*



*Increased traffic levels are affecting the tranquillity of rural lanes*



## 4.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

### Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The LCA retains its strongly rural character, which is conserved and enhanced. Any visual and landscape impacts from surrounding urban areas, main roads and new developments are kept to a minimum through high quality design and careful land management. Development within the LCA is at a scale and of a quality that does not detract from, and seeks to conserve and enhance, the character and qualities of the area. Local communities, Planning Authorities and other agencies work together to achieve this. Rural lanes retain their historic character and are not unduly influenced by signage, kerbs or other urbanising features.

Local farms are thriving, and where farms are diversifying (for example into or vine growing) this is being done in a way which conserves and enhances the landscape. Farmland management promotes wildlife and landscape enhancements through the provision and linking of habitats, and the positive management of landscape features. Woodland, forestry and grassland areas are in active sustainable management, and are interconnected.

The area's rich heritage is celebrated and looked after, and local people are aware of the history and importance of their local landscape.

#### Protect

- Protect historic/ archaeological sites and their settings, particularly those identified as 'at risk'.
- Protect non-designated historic landscape features such as lanes and field patterns, particularly where they are threatened with highways works or other development.
- Protect the small scale, isolated pattern and rural character of settlements within this LCA. Avoid ribbon development along roads and large scale development.
- Protect the isolated nature of farmsteads.
- Protect skylines and consider the impacts of new developments (including communications masts) on open skylines.
- Protect trees and woodlands, particularly where they have a screening function.
- Protect open views and long views along valleys, avoiding the introduction of new developed elements into these views.
- Protect tranquillity, resisting developments which increase levels of noise and movement in the landscape, and maintain the remote, undeveloped qualities of the valleys.

#### Manage

- Manage tree and woodland cover, promoting a characteristic and resilient species mix (using The Ash Project species recovery mixes) and hazel and chestnut coppice where appropriate. Replace dead ash trees with alternative species as necessary, and increase the proportion of deciduous woodlands. Promote deciduous planting at the edges of plantations. Extend woodland edges and create shaws to define arable fields and pastures.
- Manage hedgerows and shaws and try to link them with woodlands to enhance the habitat network. Reinststate hedgerows lost through intensive agricultural practices. Manage in-field trees and replace and replant to increase their number across the LCA. Promote in-field and roadside trees using existing hedge stock.
- Enhance ecological connectivity in arable areas, for example through provision of field margin strips and re-connecting hedgerows.

- Manage common land around Stelling Minnis to improve biodiversity and retain distinctive character. Use considered reintroduction of grazing if feasible.
- Conserve treed avenues alongside roads where they are a feature of the landscape.
- Conserve and enhance chalk grasslands, particularly where invasive scrub is taking hold, through appropriate grazing, and connecting and expanding them where possible. Consider reversion of arable land to grassland.
- Continue to promote best practice with regard to equine management, work with Local Authorities to require and condition best practice, where planning permission is granted for a change of use from agricultural to equine management
- Manage public rights of way, ensuring that popular routes are robust enough to cope with the level of use. Provide new paths where required (e.g. dog-walking circuits near new developments) and work with landowners to address issues of illegal off-road vehicles and to minimise conflicts between off-road vehicles and legitimate users.
- Manage the impact of highways and highway schemes through the use of the Rural streets and lanes design guidance.

#### Plan

- Promote high design standards for rural developments to ensure that they make a positive contribution to landscape character, for example through careful choice of materials, and an appropriate scale and massing of building. Seek the sympathetic use of local materials – brick, tile and flint.
- Ensure that high quality design of settlement edges is integrated into any plans for development within the LCA or on its periphery.
- Promote landscape enhancements and the mitigation of effects in and around recreational facilities (e.g. golf courses, caravan sites and Lydden motor circuit) to aid their integration into the landscape.
- Provide guidance on best-practice for planting vines with regard to the local landscape. This could include (for example) considering the alignment of vines, working within (or restoring) the surrounding hedgerow network, avoiding vines being seen against the horizon from key viewpoints, and the introduction of wildlife friendly habitats.
- Work with local communities to raise awareness of the landscape's value.
- Work with Highways Authorities to minimise the visual and landscape impacts of gantries, signage and other highways measures and ensure the application of the Kent Downs AONB Rural Streets and Lanes Design guidance.
- Work with Highways Authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Develop guidance to ensure that impacts on views from the LCA are taken into account when considering development in the vicinity of the AONB.
- 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 lost qualities.
- Use the existing and valued landscape characteristics and qualities to design new tree establishment as part of climate change mitigation.