

6.0 Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale

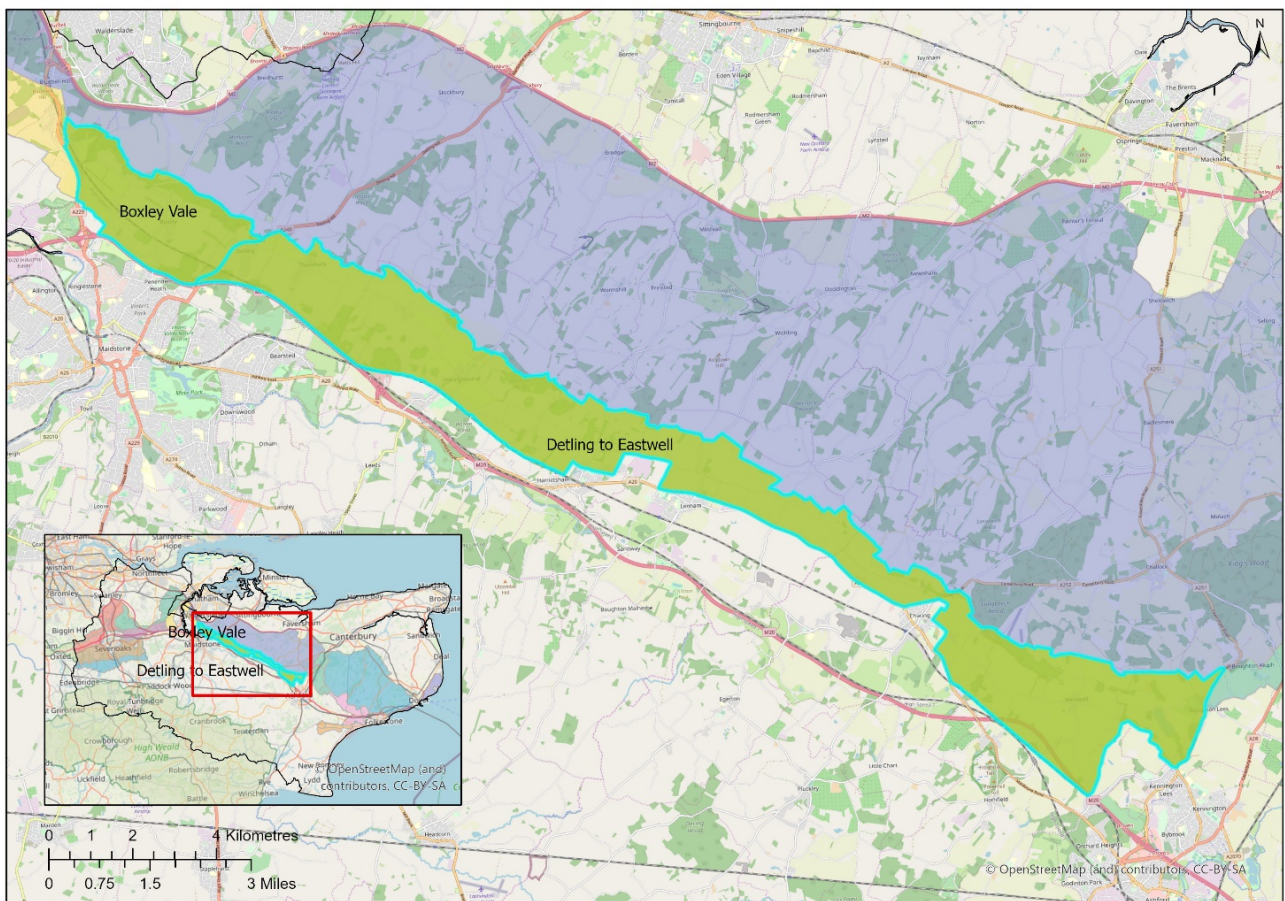
Landscape Character Area 2B

Landscape Character Type 2: Chalk Scarp and Vale

Districts/ Boroughs: Ashford; Maidstone

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: None

Location and Context: This LCA comprises the chalk scarp and vale which runs between the Medway Valley (to the west) and the Stour Valley (to the east). The AONB boundary follows the southern edge of the LCA, whilst to the north is the Mid Kent Downs LCA, which forms the dip slope to this scarp.



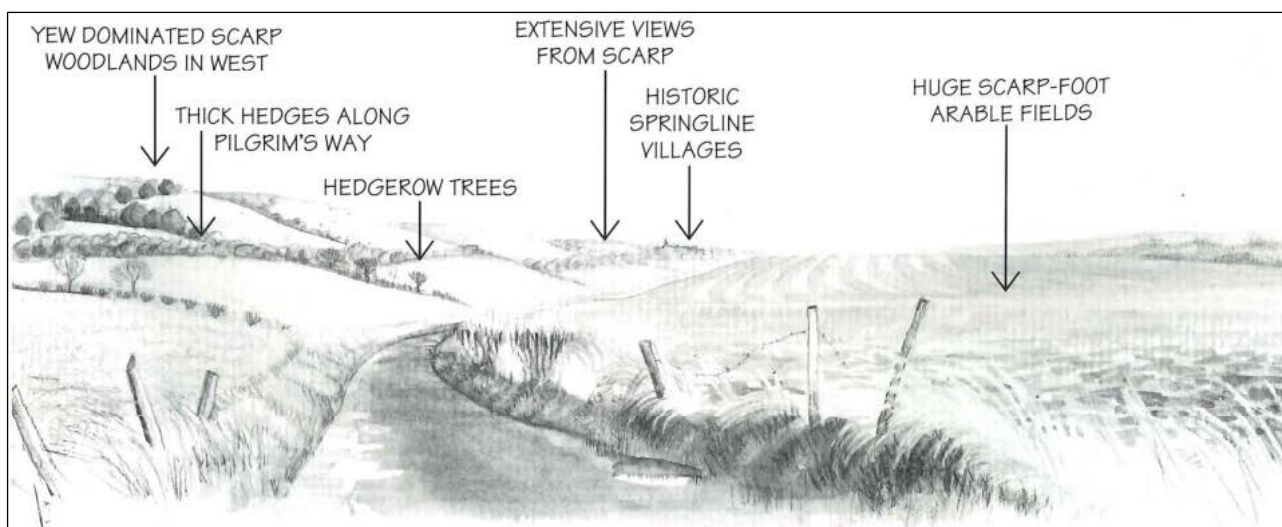
Location map for Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Boxley Vale and Detling to Eastwell



View of Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale near Thurnham

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Cretaceous chalk on the scarp, and gault clay in the vale. Also pockets of sand and gravel within superficial deposits.
- Landform comprises steep south-facing chalk scarp, often concave in profile, with lower-lying vale to the south. A series of dry valleys give the scarp a smooth, rolling profile.
- Springs emerge at the base of the scarp, at the junction of chalk and clay, feeding streams, ponds and wetland areas.
- Distinctive scarp woodlands with a high proportion of evergreen species. Rare box and yew woodlands in the west. Roadside and hedgerow trees add to the treed appearance of the Vale, particularly around villages.
- Distinctive field pattern of large regular fields within the most fertile agricultural land at the base of the scarp. Smaller and less regular field patterns around villages.
- Semi-natural habitats include chalk grassland, woodland and scrub on scarp, and ponds, streams and wetlands in vale.
- Historic network of lanes and tracks, including the Pilgrims' Way which follows the scarp. Norman castle at Thurnham occupies a commanding position overlooking the vale.
- Distinctive settlement pattern of attractive springline villages within the Vale, some of which have expanded into larger settlements. Numerous examples of vernacular buildings including houses, pubs, manor houses and churches.
- A dense network of historic narrow lanes within the vale and running up the scarp. More recent transport routes include the M20 and HS1.
- A distinctive landscape composition formed by the contrasting patterns and visual interrelationship of scarp slopes, scarp foot and vale. Evergreen woodland looks particularly dramatic in winter.
- The scarp forms a key backdrop and skyline in views from the vale and from land to the south. From the scarp there are expansive views across Hollingbourne Vale towards the Weald and the Greensand Ridge.



Sketch of Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)

6.1 Description

- 6.1.1 This Landscape Character Area comprises the south-west facing scarp slope and the clay vale below, between the Medway and Stour valleys. The underlying geology is fundamental to the character of the area, and consists of the dramatic chalk scarp, with clay and sand deposits in the lower vale. The steep scarp of the downs overlooks a wide, rolling landscape of mixed farmland. There are a series of splendid sweeping views from the scarp over Hollingbourne Vale towards Maidstone, the Weald and the Greensand Ridge. The presence of the scarp provides a strong sense of place and orientation both within the Landscape Character Area and in views towards it.
- 6.1.2 The steeper parts of the scarp are predominantly grassland or woodland, although some parts have been ploughed in the late 20th Century. This has exposed the highly visible white chalk below the shallow, unstable soils. The scarp is particularly steep and undulating in the west, becoming gentler towards the east. The long history of exploitation of the chalk and sand is shown in the former quarries and deneholes which are dotted over the area. The chalk pits often form wildlife habitats, with some designated SSSI. Uncommon scrub species such as wild box and purging buckthorn may be found on the grassland of the scarp, for example around Thurnham. Woodlands are varied, with yew dominating on the steep scarp at the western end. Woodland, plantations and hedgerow trees in the lower parts of the vale give much of the landscape a well-treed appearance. Springs occur at the boundary of the chalk and clay which feed surface ponds, streams and wetlands at the base of the scarp. Historically, these springs have been used to power mills, and also to supply water for osier beds on the valley floor.
- 6.1.3 The southern boundary of the AONB extends across the fertile strip of land along the scarp foot. The continual down-wash of soil from the scarp, combined with the sheltered aspect of the resulting fields, produces a belt of very productive agricultural land. For most of its length, the extent of this fertile strip is clearly evidence from the single-width and uniformity of the large, intensively cultivated fields which divide it up. Beyond this strip, the fields are often smaller and more irregular, with more trees and woodland scattered between them. Pockets of historic smaller fields and occasional orchards occur around settlements, along with some more recent subdivisions of land for horse-grazing.

- 6.1.4 The agricultural value of the scarp foot has long been recognised and exploited. The Ordnance Survey maps of the late 19th Century show a pattern of large, regular fields similar to that of today, which are often divided by luxuriant hedgerows containing a range of native species. The mid-late 20th Century saw some parts of the scarp foot denuded of the few trees and hedges which formerly occurred there. This has produced vast arable fields that in places sweep up over the scarp onto the downland plateaux.
- 6.1.5 The natural fertility of the soils mean that this area has been settled for a long time. Prehistoric standing stones occur in the western part of the area, and evidence of a Neolithic long house was found during construction of a cutting for HS1 near Boxley. Archaeological excavations associated with HS1 also revealed a Roman villa and medieval settlement on the valley floor east of Detling. The Norman castle at Thurnham was constructed in a commanding position high on the scarp, with excellent views over the Hollingbourne Vale.
- 6.1.6 The scarp foot is characterised by the string of old-established villages, such as Hollingbourne, Boxley and Detling which have grown up along the line of springs that seep out from the lower levels of the chalk. Hollingbourne Manor is a good example of Elizabethan brickwork, and there are many other attractive houses and farms in and between the villages, often with chequered red and grey brick and clay-tile roofs. There are also several splendid churches, some isolated or standing on village edges. Substantial vineyard planting is increasingly apparent along the foot of the scarp.
- 6.1.7 The scarp contains a distinctive pattern of roads and tracks. Throughout much of the Landscape Character Area, the ancient track of the North Downs Way runs east-west along the top of the scarp, and the Pilgrims' Way runs parallel, halfway down. Both are lined with thick hedges for much of their length and evoke a timeless quality. Parts of the Pilgrims' Way may have ancient origins as an alternative summer route to the higher path along the top of the scarp. The sticky clay underfoot would have made it difficult to use in winter. Running perpendicular, up the scarp face, are a series of sunken lanes and tracks which are likely to have had their origins as drove roads for moving animals between the high land and the vale. Many of the historic springline villages have developed along these routes. More recent transport additions to the Hollingbourne Vale include the M20 and HS1 railway line with their associated tunnels, bridges and wires are often brutal interventions in the landscape.

6.2 Local Character Areas

- 6.2.1 There are two Local Character Areas within Hollingbourne Vale, largely distinguished by the extent of woodland on the scarp.

Boxley Scarp and Vale

- 6.2.2 Boxley Scarp and Vale Local Character Area lies to the north of Maidstone and is almost encircled by major roads. Nevertheless, this is an attractive and anciently settled area of countryside. The scarp woodlands have a significant amount of yew and some box, whose dark, evergreen foliage is particularly prominent in winter. Rose is present on woodland edges. The chalk grassland at Boxley Warren Nature Reserve contains many different species and the rabbit-grazed turf is springy underfoot and scented by the wild thyme and other herbs. However, the area is currently seeing declines in biomass and biodiversity. The place name Boxley ('clearing in the box') suggests box has been a dominant species in this area since Saxon times. To the west, the traditional large fields of the scarp foot are in evidence, but east of Boxley a series of small, hedge-lined fields are interspersed by attractive parkland. The striking stone walls around the site of the medieval abbey at Boxley in the west add to the strong, historic feel of the landscape.
- 6.2.3 Boxley is a springline village with many traditional buildings including a medieval manor complex adjacent to the church, a maltings and traditional cottages. Similar vernacular brick and timber-framed buildings are also found in the farmsteads scattered across the area. The poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson frequently visited Park House, and was inspired by this landscape when he wrote his poem 'The Brook'.
- 6.2.4 HS1 and main roads are prominent in some views, along with urban development outside the AONB. The noise and movement associated with the transport corridors also reduce the sense of tranquillity.



View looking towards the wooded scarp at Boxley Warren

Detling to Eastwell

- 6.2.5 This long, narrow Local Character Area runs from Detling in the west to Eastwell in the east, and includes the springline villages of Detling, Thurnham, Hollingbourne and Westwell. Further springline villages (Lenham, Harrietsham, Charing and Eythorne Street) are close to its southern boundary. Although these villages themselves are outside the AONB, much of their parishes lie within it.
- 6.2.6 In contrast to the dense woodlands above Boxley, much of this area has only an intermittent fringe of yew woodland along the scarp top and some scattered trees along field boundaries. Nevertheless, the scarp-top woodland and trees play an important role in creating a treed backdrop. Where hedges and trees extend down the scarp slope they reinforce the rolling pattern of the downs. Further east, there are larger blocks of woodland including Westwell Downs, and woodland and plantation associated with Eastwell Park. Ash Dieback is increasingly evident in these woodlands. The estate of Eastwell Park also contains a number of historic parkland features, including veteran trees and the ornamental Eastwell Lake - one of the largest waterbodies in this part of the AONB.
- 6.2.7 A strip of chalk grassland follows the top of the scarp for much of its length, and this has been extended through reversion of arable land, although some arable gaps remain. The lower slopes of the scarp, and the vale below, are mostly in arable use, and the line of the historic trackways which run east-west along the scarp are marked by horizontal lines of trees and hedgerows. A chalk cross carved into the scarp above Lenham as a memorial to those who fell in WW1 is a local landmark.



View looking east from below Thurnham Castle. The narrow belt of woodland along the top of the scarp can be seen on the left, with grassland below. The grassy fields, including the one in the foreground, have recently been reverted from arable.



Chalk grassland growing on an old chalk and sand quarry above Lenham



Clear chalk stream at Goddington near Harrietsham



Woodland with a high proportion of evergreen species, including yew and box, Boxley Warren Nature Reserve



Traditional buildings in the typical springline village of Hollingbourne



The Pilgrims' Way forms a hedged track between fields, and has a strong sense of timelessness.



Sweeping view from Boxley Warren across Maidstone towards the Greensand Ridge.

6.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 6.3.1 Parts of the Hollingbourne Vale suffered from the removal of hedgerows and shaws in the 1970s and 1980s, a fact which was noted in the 1995 and 2004 Assessments, along with the impacts of pylons, HS1 and the M20. The 2004 Assessment described Hollingbourne Vale as being in poor condition with weak ecological integrity and 'prairie' fields.
- 6.3.2 In the intervening years there have been several projects aimed at enhancing the structure and management of the landscape. Some have been funded through Higher Level Stewardship, and others through landscape schemes associated with the Channel Tunnel Rail link. These have included replanting and/ or gapping-up hedgerows, reverting arable land on the scarp slope to grassland, and linking patches of grassland along the scarp. However, some areas of large scale arable fields still remain, and the grassland along the chalk scarp is not continuous, being broken by busy roads and arable fields. Planting along the transport corridors has matured and therefore forms a more effective screen. Nevertheless, the local impacts of HS1 and the M20 are sometimes significant and noticeable in terms of noise, lights, structures and movement
- 6.3.3 Comparison of the photos from 1995 and 2017 shows considerable tree growth on the valley floor and sides. The sheds on the right of the 1995 image are now larger (although screened by a tree in the 2017 photo).
- 6.3.4 The location of the Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale on the edge of the AONB, and within a transport corridor, means that there is significant pressure for development in the immediate vicinity of the AONB and in its wider setting. Were this to go ahead it would impact on views from within the AONB looking out, and also threatens its tranquillity and rural character.
- 6.3.5 The prominence of the scarp landform makes it particularly sensitive to development, and the narrow shape of the Landscape Character Area means that it is vulnerable to fragmentation.
- 6.3.6 The numerous springs found within this Landscape Character Area feed a series of chalk streams which eventually run into the Medway or Stour. The springs and headwaters of these streams are vulnerable to pollution and variations in flow, which in turn impact on water quality downstream.



View towards the scarp with Chegworth Court Farm in the foreground in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below). The exact location of the original view is no longer on a public right of way.

| Issue | Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts |
|--------------------------|--|
| Transport infrastructure | <p>The transport corridor containing the A20, M20, Maidstone-Ashford railway line and HS1 runs along the southern edge of Hollingbourne Vale. The A249 also climbs the scarp west of Detling, and the A252 climbs it west of Charing. These transport routes have localised visual and noise impacts and can be detrimental to the tranquillity of the area. They also function as a catalyst for development (see below).</p> <p>Most other roads within Hollingbourne Vale are narrow lanes or tracks and are often sunken and not suitable for heavy traffic, but can become rat runs, particularly when major roads are congested. Banks and hedgerows can be damaged by wide or passing vehicles.</p> |

| Issue | <i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i> |
|------------------|--|
| Development | <p>Within the AONB, main road corridors tend to be a focus for more urban fringe-style development such as garages and garden centres. These (together with suburban-style residential gates and curtilages) can have localised impact on the rural character of the area. Development pressure may lead to developments which do not reflect the form or style of older buildings, and therefore do not sit comfortably within the landscape.</p> <p>However, the greatest pressure is for development outside the AONB, but visible from it, or within the setting of the AONB when viewed from the south. This includes commercial development along the A20/ M20 corridor. There is also currently rapid expansion of settlements just outside the AONB (for example at Lenham, Charing and Harrietsham) which impact on the landscape and also on traffic levels. Other structures which may have a detracting impact on views include solar farms, polytunnels and quarrying infrastructure.</p> |
| Land management | <p>The landscape has suffered from intensive farming in the past, particularly loss of hedgerows and shaws, and ploughing of grassland. Whilst efforts have been made to restore the landscape in recent years, there are still areas where large arable fields dominate. These large fields lack character and visual interest, and are also less beneficial to wildlife. They can also lead to fragmentation of wildlife habitats such as woodland and chalk grassland. Soil compaction (leading to water run-off and flooding) can also be an issue. Lack of woodland management is a problem in some areas, and there are localised problems with predation from unsustainably large reared pheasant populations. Some woodland sites (including Boxley Warren and The Larches) are seeing declines in biomass and biodiversity.</p> <p>Future agricultural practices, cropping patterns etc. will depend in part on agricultural grant schemes, which are currently unknown. However, the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.</p> <p>There is a need to remove or find positive, sensitive new uses for agricultural buildings which can no longer serve their original purpose. New agricultural buildings tend to be larger, bland in design and constructed of reflective materials which make them more intrusive.</p> <p>Viticulture is an increasing land use in the Vale. There are opportunities to enhance the wildlife benefits of vineyards and mitigate the infrastructure associated with them.</p> |
| Water management | <p>Abstraction of groundwater affects surface water flows, which in turn affects water quality and habitats through drying out of streams, springs, ponds, seepages and marshy areas. Pollution levels are a concern, and agricultural chemicals, including nitrates, also affect water quality, although attempts are being made to reduce this. In addition, springs and the headwaters of chalk streams are particularly vulnerable to pollution from run-off from roads and development, and discharge from sewage treatment works. Ploughing of steep land, particularly where there are no hedgerows, can lead to soil erosion and run-off into rivers, particularly after heavy rain.</p> |

| <i>Issue</i> | <i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i> |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Recreation | <p>Illegal use of off-road vehicles on tracks (particularly the Pilgrims' Way) is a problem in parts of the area (especially around Boxley). Such use can lead to intimidation of legitimate users, and also damage the surface of the track and nearby land.</p> <p>Sub-division of land for horse-grazing is noticeable in some parts of Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale, particularly around villages.</p> <p>Increased use of 'keep out' signage and security measures can discourage legitimate countryside recreation.</p> |
| Loss of tranquillity | <p>The presence of traffic (both on main roads, and on lanes) is a particular concern within this Landscape Character Area. Places without traffic noise are relatively few. The wider impacts of loss of tranquillity on nature (for example reduction in bird and bat numbers) cause further detriment to the soundscape. Light pollution from surrounding roads and settlements is a further concern.</p> |
| Climate change, pests and diseases | <p>Climate change is likely to have a range of impacts on the area, including exacerbating the frequency and intensity of storms, and also longer drier periods. These will affect flooding, water quality, and the ability of various tree and plant species to survive. Warmer temperatures also enable new pests and diseases to thrive. Ash Dieback is already a concern, and will continue to affect woodlands and hedgerow trees over the coming years. There is further concern about other tree diseases in the area. Invasive species such as Japanese knotweed also threaten native vegetation on riverbanks.</p> |

6.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The strongly rural character of the area is retained, despite the pressure for development in the vicinity. Views from the scarp, and towards the scarp, remain free from large-scale development which has an adverse effect on the setting of the AONB.

Progress continues to be made on repair and enhancement of the landscape structure, including hedgerows, shaws and woodlands, particularly in areas of large arable fields where hedgerows have been lost, or where semi-natural habitats are fragmented. Habitat networks of grassland and woodlands are robust and well-managed. The distinctive woodland and grassland vegetation along the top of the scarp is thriving, and the skyline is clear of development. The water quality of chalk rivers and streams is high, and flows are as close as possible to their natural state.

Historic buildings and villages are well-maintained, and any new development is sensitive to traditional settlement character. The network of lanes and tracks- particularly the long distance footpaths- are enjoyed by legitimate users, and retain their timeless quality and magnificent views. The landscape and visual impacts of road and rail networks continue to be reduced.

Protect

- Protect the rural character of roads and tracks, and avoid the spread of linear development along road corridors.
- Protect skylines at the top of the scarp, avoiding structures which disrupt the undeveloped horizon formed by grassland and woodland.
- Protect the rural character of the scarp. The landform is prominent and particularly sensitive to development.
- Protect the settings of historic buildings and settlements, including farms. These include the wooded settings of many villages. Make sure that new farm buildings are sited and designed to blend into their surroundings, for example using recessive colours, stepped ridgelines and avoiding skylines.

Manage

- Manage farmland, particularly arable areas, to promote a network of hedgerows, hedgerow and in field trees and grassland strips. Promote good soil management to reduce surface water run-off.
- Continue to develop and link the grassland and woodland strips along the top of the scarp, including promoting the return of cultivated areas of scarp to species-rich chalk grassland.
- Manage woodland to promote age and appropriate species diversity, and also to encourage locally-distinctive woodland species such as box, yew and whitebeam. Promote new hedgerow/ roadside trees from existing hedge stock.
- Manage historic parkland and ensure that all parklands have a conservation management plan. Plant replacement parkland trees where necessary to ensure that they remain features of the landscape.
- Manage recreational routes to minimise conflicts between off-road vehicles and legitimate users.
- Continue to promote best practice with regard to management of land for equine use and enforce planning conditions and limit further development of equine management where a change of use is proposed

- Manage watercourses and ponds to improve water quality, enhance their biodiversity and (where appropriate) amenity value.
- Promote best practice in vineyard management encouraging wildlife rich grasslands in the vineyards, species rich hedgerows and carefully designed infrastructure where essential

Plan

- When considering new development in the vicinity of the AONB, take into account the impacts on views from within the AONB, and how new development will appear in the context of the AONB (particularly in views from the south looking towards the AONB, and in views along Hollingbourne Vale). Use carefully-designed planting schemes and sensitive building design/ choice of colour to help integrate development into the landscape.
- Promote use of sympathetic local building materials, including red brick, tile hanging, weatherboarding, flint and ragstone.
- Work with water companies and the Environment Agency to monitor pollution levels and water flows and to try and retain the natural conditions of chalk streams. Reduce abstraction from drought-stressed aquifers. Continue to encourage farmers, land managers, water companies, Highways Authorities and developers to reduce levels of water pollution, promoting a partnership approach. Consider increasing meadow 'buffers' alongside streams to help improve water quality and regulate flow.
- Work with Highways Authorities to reduce noise levels from traffic on main roads, and enhance the wildlife value of road verges without compromising safety.
- Promote retention of the area's narrow lanes, ideally keeping them to a single lane plus a footpath/ cycle lane.
- Work with utility companies to promote undergrounding of cables and removal of poles and pylons.
- Encourage partnership working between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB.
- 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.