

## **North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan Consultation Appropriate Assessment Baseline**

### **Introduction**

The process of undertaking a review of the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan includes a requirement to undertake an Appropriate Assessment of the impact of policies contained in the revised Management Plan on any European designated sites within the North Wessex Downs AONB. The European sites identified are:

- Hackpen Hill SAC - (Oxfordshire)
- River Lambourn SAC - (West Berkshire)
- Little Wittenham SAC - (Oxfordshire)
- Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain SAC - (West Berkshire)
- Kennet Valley Alderwoods SAC - (West Berkshire)

The policies of the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan will be implemented in the context of pressure for increased development, as directed by the Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks which are, themselves, subject to Appropriate Assessment. The revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan does not propose any development or expansion of the built environment; its policies promote conservation and sustainable use of the natural environment and, if implemented, will have a positive effect on the five European sites.

### **Analysis of the Management Plan**

Although the revised Management Plan encourages countryside recreation, policies encourage environmentally sustainable access, minimising car use wherever possible and encouraging visits to countryside close to home. There are no policies in the plan designed to promote or increase visits to the European Protected Sites. Each site is detailed in Appendix A (attached) and assessed against the policies of the revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan.

### **Conclusion**

The policies (alone and in combination) in the revised Management Plan are considered to have no adverse effects on the European Protected Sites for a number of reasons, both general and site specific. It is determined that a full appropriate assessment of the revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan is not needed.

### **General Issues**

The purpose of the North Wessex Downs AONB is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs AONB. Policies and actions relating to this purpose will have only positive or neutral effects on the European Protected Sites. These include policies to support:

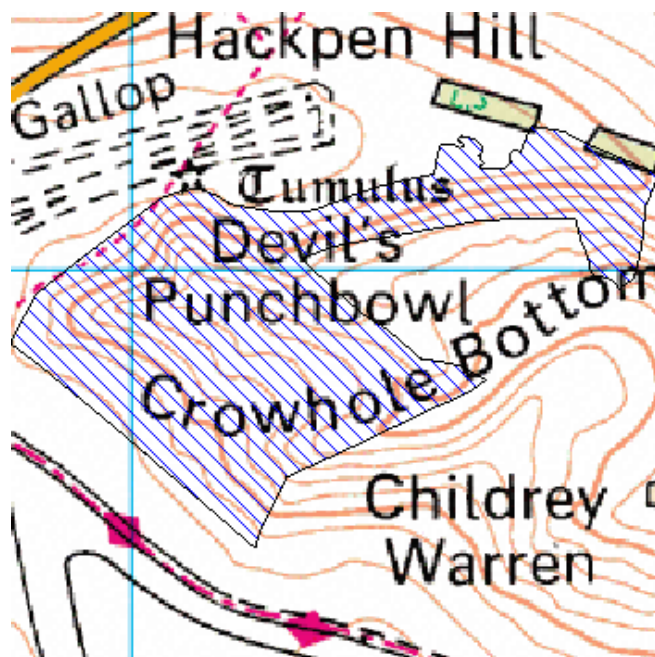
- The delivery of BAP targets
- The management and protection of all designated wildlife sites and European protected species to maintain favourable status
- Monitoring of the impact of visitor pressure and climate change on key habitats and species.
- Encouraging non-car use – including walking, cycling, horse riding
- Encouraging people to contribute to the area's conservation

Minimal air pollution is a Key Environmental Condition to support site integrity at all but one of the sites (Little Wittenham).

Although the revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan encourages countryside recreation, its policies encourage environmentally sustainable access, minimising car use wherever possible and encouraging visits to countryside close to home. There are no policies in the plan designed to encourage increasing number of visitors or visits to the European Protected Sites.

### **Site Specific Issues**

#### **1. Hackpen Hill, Vale of White Horse**



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The site, which is in private ownership, has a variety of aspects and gradients, with the grassland dominated by red fescue *Festuca rubra* and upright brome *Bromus erectus*. The herb flora includes a significant population of early gentian *Gentianella anglica*, as well as autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* and dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*.

#### **Qualifying Feature**

Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*)

#### **Environmental status and Trends**

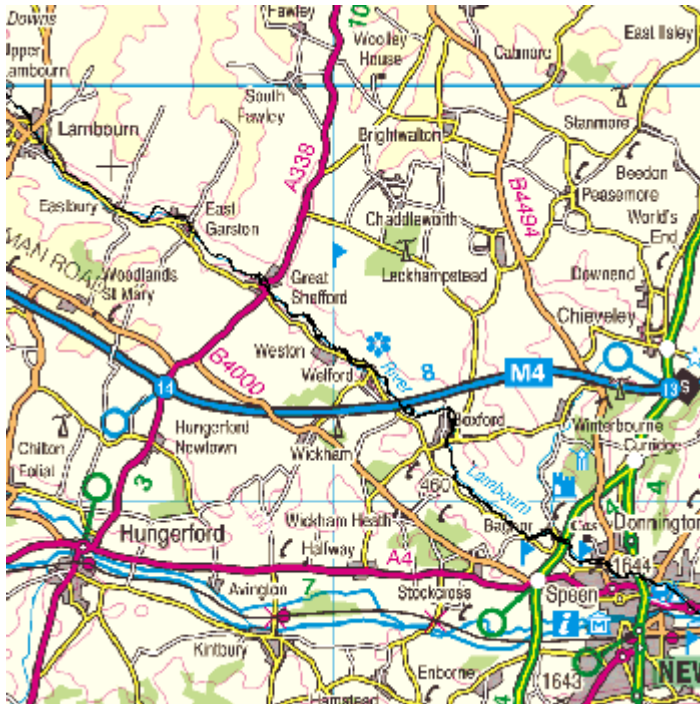
Hackpen Hill is an extensive area of unimproved chalk grassland in the Downs. A grazing regime which maintains suitable conditions for early gentian is supported financially through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding under a Natural England management agreement. Nevertheless, the site is subject to periodic damage by rapid fluctuations in rabbit numbers. Means of reducing the threat from this source are being investigated.

This area is a designated area of Open Access Land under Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and subject to the right of access in perpetuity. There are also HLS access measures in place that connect the site to the surrounding public rights of way network, promoted through Natural England's Countryside Walks website as well as the County Council's Access land web-pages. Under the Leisure and Tourism section of the North Wessex Downs Management Plan access land is mentioned in the context of its value in increasing people's enjoyment of the countryside. Hackpen therefore forms a part of the countryside access resource to be promoted.

#### **Conservation Objectives**

To maintain, in favourable condition, the unimproved calcareous grassland, with particular reference to semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (CG3 & 5 grasslands).

## 2. River Lambourn



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The River Lambourn is considered to have one of the least modified catchments in southern England and has one of the lowest levels of abstraction. The majority of its length is in private ownership with limited or no public access

### Qualifying Feature

Bullhead fish *Cottus Gobio*

### Environmental status and Trends

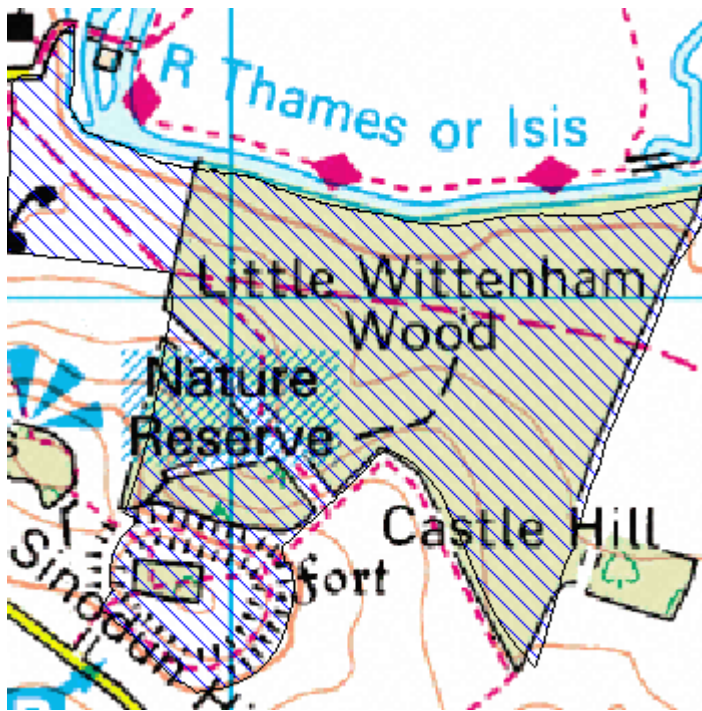
Water quality, water quantity and habitat quality are all considered to be high. However, localised higher water nutrient levels and siltation problems are associated with sewage treatment works though phosphate nutrient levels are being reduced by phosphate stripping. There are issues associated with diffuse pollution from agricultural land. Measures to reduce these problems are being investigated through the AMP5 water company investment programme.

River Lambourn is in unfavourable condition. Natural England and the Environment Agency have produced an agreed protocol for dealing with issues affecting the river.

### Conservation Objectives

To reach unfavourable recovering status for habitats for the population of Bullhead fish *Cottus Gobio*

### 3. Little Wittenham, South Oxfordshire



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The site is managed by the Northmoor Trust as a nature reserve. The areas which are most important to the population of great crested newts have restricted access which is designed to prevent conflicts between the visiting public, the newts and their habitat.

The revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan contains no proposals to encourage visits to Little Wittenham SAC.

#### **Qualifying Feature**

Great Crested Newt - *Triturus cristatus*

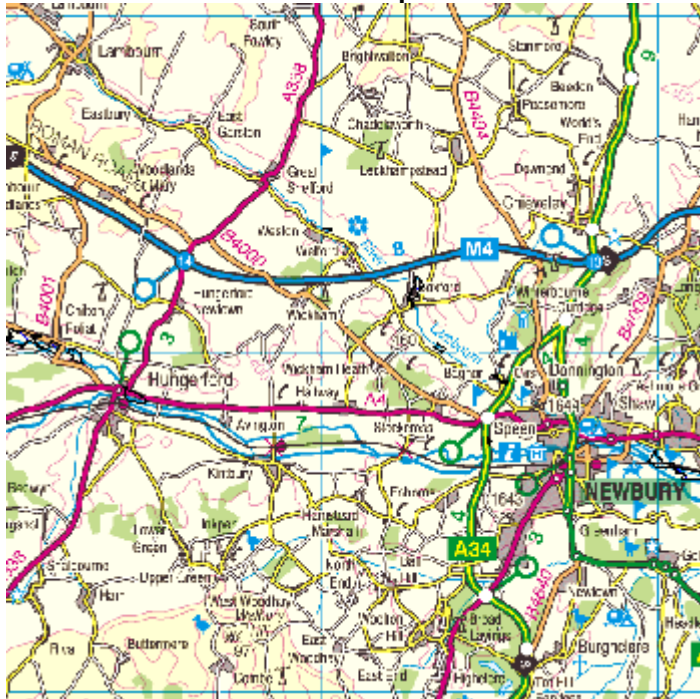
#### **Environmental status and Trends**

The site is comprised of a single unit which was considered in favourable condition at last assessment in August 2004

#### **Conservation Objectives**

Subject to natural change, to maintain in favourable condition the habitat for the Great Crested Newt *Triturus cristatus*.

#### 4. Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain



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The site is comprised of inland water bodies (standing water, running water) (1%) Bogs; Marshes; Water fringed vegetation. Fens (59%) Humid grassland. Mesophile grassland (40%).

The revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan contains no proposals to encourage visits to the Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain SAC.

#### Qualifying Feature

Desmoulin's whorl snail *Vertigo moulinsiana*

#### Environmental status and Trends

Within the entire site, current management practises are maintaining the required open, unshaded conditions. The management of one component part is supported by Countryside Stewardship grant-aid and two units are part of Higher Level Stewardship agreements (South East region only). *Vertigo moulinsiana* is critically dependent upon an adequate supply of high quality water. The Environment Agency and Natural England are working together to ensure that all parts of the site have appropriate water levels, through measures such as the production of water level management plans and regular monitoring of water quality.

#### Conservation Objectives

The cluster of sites selected in the Kennet and Lambourn valleys supports one of the most extensive known populations of Desmoulin's whorl snail *Vertigo moulinsiana* in the UK and is one of two sites representing the species in the south-western part of its range in the important chalk stream habitat. Integrity of the population is being maintained by taking measures, including habitat creation, to safeguard populations. The habitat occupied at this site differs from the Fenland sites in East Anglia in that it is predominantly reed sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima* swamp or tall sedges at the river margins, in ditches and in depressions in wet meadows.

## 5. Kennet Valley Alderwoods



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These, the largest fragments of alder-ash woodland on the Kennet floodplain, lie on alluvium overlain by a shallow layer of moderately calcareous peat. The wettest areas are dominated by alder *Alnus glutinosa* over tall herbs, sedges and reeds, but dryer patches include a base-rich woodland flora with much dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and also herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia*. The occurrence of the latter is unusual, as it is more typically associated with ancient woodland, whereas the evidence suggests that these stands have largely developed over the past century.

The revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan contains no proposals to encourage increased access to the Kennet Valley Alderwoods SAC.

### Qualifying Feature

Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion*, *Alnion incanae*, *Salicion albae*) \*  
Priority feature

### Environmental status and Trends

The conservation interest of the site is critically dependent upon maintenance of constantly high groundwater levels. There are, however, no known threats to groundwater levels. The site is subject to low levels of intervention and natural processes are allowed to prevail to a large extent. A WGS scheme is in place which favours the maintenance of the characteristic alder woodland composition.

### Conservation Objectives

To maintain habitats in favourable condition.

**Special Areas of Conservation within the North Wessex Downs AONB assessed for significant adverse effects of the revised North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan**

Name	Location	Area (ha)	Qualifying Features	Comments on Nature Conservation Importance	Key Environmental Conditions to Support Site Integrity	Possible Impacts Arising From Plan	Risk of Significant Effect?	Other Plans To Be Considered in Combination	Risk of Significant Effect In Combination?
Hackpen Hill	Vale of White Horse District Oxfordshire	35.83	<b>Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates</b> ( <i>Festuco-Brometalia</i> )	Hackpen Hill is an extensive area of unimproved chalk grassland in the Downs. The site has a variety of aspects and gradients, with the grassland dominated by red fescue <i>Festuca rubra</i> and upright brome <i>Bromus erectus</i> . The herb flora includes a significant population of early gentian <i>Gentianella anglica</i> , as well as autumn gentian <i>Gentianella amarella</i> , fragrant orchid	A grazing regime which maintains suitable conditions for early gentian is supported financially through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding under a Natural England management agreement. Nevertheless, the site is subject to periodic damage by rapid fluctuations in rabbit numbers. Means of reducing the threat from this source are being	This area is a designated area of Open Access Land under Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and subject to the right of access in perpetuity. There are also HLS access measures in place that connect the site to the surrounding public rights of way network, promoted through Natural England's Countryside Walks website as well as the County Council's Access land web-pages. Under the Leisure and Tourism section of the North Wessex Downs Management Plan, access land is mentioned in the context of its value in increasing people's enjoyment of the	No	Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDF).	No Although RSS and LDFs propose housing growth, they will be subject to Appropriate Assessment themselves, and the revised Management Plan policies specifically encourage environmentally sustainable access.

				<p><i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>, frog orchid <i>Coeloglossum viride</i>, horseshoe vetch <i>Hippocrepis comosa</i>, common rock-rose <i>Helianthemum nummularium</i> and dwarf thistle <i>Cirsium acaule</i></p>	investigated.	countryside. Hackpen therefore forms a part of the countryside access resource to be promoted. But the Management Plan only promote sustainable access.			
River Lambourn	West Berkshire	27.27	<p><b>Bullhead</b> <b>Cottus</b> <b>Gobio</b></p>	<p>The Lambourn represents <b>Bullhead Cottus gobio</b> (a bottom-living fish) populations inhabiting chalk streams in central southern England. Good water quality, coarse sediments and extensive beds of submerged plants again provide excellent habitat for the species. The community is characterised by pond water-</p>	<p>The River Lambourn is considered to have one of the least modified catchments in southern England and has one of the lowest levels of abstraction. Water quality, water quantity and habitat quality are all considered to be high. However, localised higher water nutrient levels and siltation problems are</p>	<p>No negative impacts. The plan actively promotes management of sites to meet conservation objectives.</p>	No	<p>Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDF).</p>	<p>No Although RSS and LDFs propose housing growth, they will be subject to Appropriate Assessment themselves, and the revised Management Plan policies specifically encourage environmentally sustainable access.</p>



				<p>crowfoot  <i>Ranunculus peltatus</i> in spring-fed headwater streams (winterbournes), stream water-crowfoot  <i>R. penicillatus</i> ssp.  <i>pseudofluitans</i> in the middle reaches, and river water-crowfoot  <i>R. fluitans</i> in the downstream sections.  <i>Ranunculus</i> is typically associated in the upper and middle reaches with <i>Callitriche obtusangula</i> and <i>C. platycarpa</i>..          (Source: Joint Nature Conservation Committee)</p>	<p>associated with sewage treatment works though phosphate nutrient levels are being reduced by phosphate stripping. There are issues associated with diffuse pollution from agricultural land. Measures to reduce these problems are being investigated through the AMP5 water company investment programme. River Lambourn is in unfavourable condition. Natural England and the Environment Agency have produced an agreed protocol for dealing with issues affecting the river.</p>				
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Little Wittenham	South Oxfordshire District Oxfordshire	68.76	<b>Great crested newts</b> <i>Triturus cristatus</i>	One of the best-studied great crested newt sites in the UK, Little Wittenham comprises two main ponds set in a predominantly woodland context (broad-leaved and conifer woodland is present). There are also areas of grassland, with sheep grazing and arable bordering the woodland to the south and west. The River Thames is just to the north of the site, and a hill fort to the south. Large numbers of great crested newts <i>Triturus cristatus</i> have been recorded in the two main ponds, and research has revealed that	Little Wittenham is managed primarily for nature conservation and environmental education. The great crested newt population has been the subject of intensive research and ongoing management includes the provision of new ponds and the creation of hibernation sites. The great crested newt population appears to be relatively stable and is not considered to be under any known threat. (Source: Natura 2000 Standard Data Form – Joint Nature Conservation	No negative impacts. The plan actively promotes management of sites to meet conservation objectives.	No	Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDF).	No Although RSS and LDFs propose housing growth, they will be subject to Appropriate Assessment themselves, and the revised Management Plan policies specifically encourage environmentally sustainable access.
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				they range several hundred metres into the woodland blocks.	Committee [JNCC]).				
Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain	West Berkshire	114.47	<b>Desmoulin's whorl snail</b> <i>Vertigo moulinsiana</i>	The majority of the Desmoulin's whorl snail <i>Vertigo moulinsiana</i> populations within the site are not considered to be under threat. Two of the component parts of the site lie immediately adjacent to the Newbury bypass. The road design has incorporated features to reduce possible impacts, such as spray and run-off. These measures are intended to prevent direct damage or habitat change to populations adjacent to the road. Monitoring is in place to determine the	The cluster of sites selected in the Kennet and Lambourn valleys supports one of the most extensive known populations of Desmoulin's whorl snail <i>Vertigo moulinsiana</i> in the UK and is one of two sites representing the species in the south-western part of its range in the important chalk stream habitat. Integrity of the population is being maintained by taking measures, including habitat creation, to safeguard populations.	No negative impacts. The plan actively promotes management of sites to meet conservation objectives.	No	Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDF).	No Although RSS and LDFs propose housing growth, they will be subject to Appropriate Assessment themselves, and the revised Management Plan policies specifically encourage environmentally sustainable access.

				<p>status of the populations potentially most at risk from impacts arising from the new road. The results of monitoring to date indicate that conditions for the species are favourable.</p> <p>Within the entire site, current management practises are maintaining the required open, unshaded conditions. The management of one component part is supported by Countryside Stewardship grant-aid and two units are part of Higher Level Stewardship agreements (South East region only). <i>Vertigo moulinsiana</i> is critically</p>	<p>The habitat occupied at this site differs from the Fenland sites in East Anglia in that it is predominantly reed sweet-grass <i>Glyceria maxima</i> swamp or tall sedges at the river margins, in ditches and in depressions in wet meadows.</p>				
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				<p>dependent upon an adequate supply of high quality water. The Environment Agency and Natural England are working together to ensure that all parts of the site have appropriate water levels, through measures such as the production of water level management plans and regular monitoring of water quality. (Source: Natura 2000 Standard Data Form – Joint Nature Conservation Committee [JNCC]).</p>					
Kennet Valley Alderwoods	Bath and North East Somerset and West Berkshire	56.77	<b>Alluvial forests</b> with <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> and <i>Fraxinus excelsior</i> ( <i>Alno-</i>	These, the largest fragments of alder-ash woodland on the Kennet floodplain, lie on	The conservation interest of the site is critically dependent upon maintenance of	No negative impacts. The plan actively promotes management of sites to meet conservation objectives.	No	Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks	No Although RSS and LDFs propose housing growth, they will be subject

			<p><i>Padion</i>,  <i>Alnion</i>  <i>incanae</i>,  <i>Salicion</i>  <i>albae</i>)        * Priority        feature</p>	<p>alluvium overlain by a shallow layer of moderately calcareous peat. The wettest areas are dominated by alder <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> over tall herbs, sedges and reeds, but dryer patches include a base-rich woodland flora with much dog's mercury <i>Mercurialis perennis</i> and also herb-Paris <i>Paris quadrifolia</i>. The occurrence of the latter is unusual, as it is more typically associated with ancient woodland, whereas the evidence suggests that these stands have largely developed over the past century.</p>	<p>constantly high groundwater levels. There are, however, no known threats to groundwater levels. The site is subject to low levels of intervention and natural processes are allowed to prevail to a large extent. A WGS scheme is in place which favours the maintenance of the characteristic alder woodland composition. (Source: Natura 2000 Standard Data Form – Joint Nature Conservation Committee [JNCC]).</p>			<p>(LDF).</p>	<p>to Appropriate Assessment themselves, and the revised Management Plan policies specifically encourage environmentally sustainable access.</p>
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