
North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 - 2030

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	12 November 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Denise Gaines
Report Author:	Rachael Lancaster
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4733

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To seek approval for adoption of the new North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 for this National Landscape legally referred to as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Executive approve the adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	There are no new financial implications arising from the proposal to adopt the Management Plan. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape receives annual revenue funding contributions according to the DEFRA funding formula: 75% central Government, 25% combined local authority contributions. West Berkshire Council contributes to the NWDNL Partnership in line with this formula.
Human Resource:	The workforce for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape is funded by DEFRA and contributions from local authorities whose areas overlap with the designated area. There are no known changes to this funding that would have implications for the current workforce and the ability to oversee delivery of the requirements of the Management Plan by stakeholders.

Legal:	<p>West Berkshire Council is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by the Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023, to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all AONBs in its area. The Management Plan is prepared by the NWDNL Partnership acting on behalf of the relevant local authorities to ensure consistency across the landscape. However, in order for the Council to be able to meet its obligation under the Act the Management Plan requires adoption by the Council.</p>			
Risk Management:	<p>The designation of the national landscape and the enhanced duty introduced by the Levelling up and Regeneration Act to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of Protected Landscapes presents a barrier to development as it must be applied to decision making in respect of planning applications as well as site allocations through any future Local Plan. This has implications for the District in terms of the ability to meet government housing targets and growth.</p> <p>However, National Landscape are required to review the Management Plan for the National Landscape at least every five years. An extension of 12 months was agreed by DEFRA but this will end in November. If the proposal is not approved the Council will be unable to demonstrate that it has fulfilled its obligations under Section 89 of the CRow Act 2000 which requires the Council to "prepare and publish a management plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it".</p>			
Property:	None			
Policy:	<p>Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the council to, "prepare and publish a Management Plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it."</p>			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 - 2030

A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?	X			National Landscapes strive to be inclusive and accessible to all. The Management Plan aligns with and supports this and the ability of people who share protected characteristics to experience and enjoy the benefits of these landscapes protected for the nation.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	X			National Landscapes strive to be inclusive and accessible to all. The Management Plan aligns with and supports this and the ability of people who share protected characteristics to experience and enjoy the benefits of these landscapes protected for the nation.
Environmental Impact:	X			<p>The Government has tasked National Landscapes to play their part in nature's recovery in line with its international declarations to manage 30% of our land and sea for nature by 2030 (30x30) and the national targets set through its Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF), emanating from its Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. There are ten targets in total with three of these specifically apportioned to each National Landscape.</p> <p>Details of how the North Wessex Downs National Landscape has considered nature recovery and climate change are set out in Chapters 5 and 7 respectively.</p> <p>A Habitats Regulation Screening Assessment has been carried out as required by the Habitats Regulations.</p>

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 - 2030

Health Impact:	X			<p>The mental, physical and emotional health benefits of experiencing natural beauty are becoming increasingly understood and appreciated. The Landscapes Review, led by Julian Glover and published in 2019, challenged Protected Landscapes to do more to welcome people and enable underrepresented groups in particular to enjoy these benefits too.</p> <p>Projects and programmes are delivered within the landscape to support access to, and enjoyment of, these nationally important areas. Each National Landscape has a website and literature to guide people to activities and locations that they may wish to visit</p>
ICT Impact:		X		None
Digital Services Impact:		X		None.
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			The Management Plan supports Priority Area 3 (Tackling the Climate and Ecological Emergency), specifically area 3.C (3.14). the management plan sets out how the National Landscape will be protected and enhanced.
Core Business:		X		Business as Usual
Data Impact:		X		None

Consultation and Engagement:	<p>Three stages of consultation have been carried out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Pre-drafting (formal notification, key questions proforma of LA partners, initial consideration of considerations for the review by NWDNL Staff)b) Drafting Stage (meeting with LA partners, review of chapters)c) Public Consultation (6 week consultation ending 30 April 2025, online, 3 webinars, facilitated workshop for key stakeholders)
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4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 West Berkshire Council is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) that fall wholly or partially within its area. Whilst the legislation remains unchanged and refers to AONBs, these protected landscapes are now more generally referred to as National Landscapes following national rebranding in 2023.
- 4.2 Section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) 2023 strengthened the duty on relevant authorities in relation to National Landscapes, and the importance of their Management Plans, contained in sections 85 and 90A of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. The legal Duty under s.85 of the CRoW Act as amended makes it now a legal requirement for “relevant authorities”, including all public bodies, to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the national landscapes. This duty applies to relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions relating to or affecting land in the National Landscape areas. Helping to deliver the outcomes, policies, and targets of the Management Plan is an important component of fulfilling this Duty.
- 4.3 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Council of Partners has prepared a draft Management Plan on behalf of, and in consultation with, West Berkshire Council and other relevant local authorities. This Plan requires adoption by the respective authorities in order to fulfil the legal requirements placed on them by Section 89 of the CRoW Act 2000.
- 4.4 Successful delivery of Management Plans for protected landscapes can only be achieved by working collaboratively with other local authorities and key stakeholders across the whole National Landscape for each area. The council maintains a close working relationship with its partners in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership to achieve this and has been an integral part in the development of this Plan to help alignment with the Council’s current and emerging policies.

a) Proposal

- 4.5 That Council approve the adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan.

a) Reason for Proposal

- 4.6 Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the council to, “prepare and publish a Management Plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it.”
- 4.7 Adoption of the Management Plan prepared by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, for and on behalf of the local authorities that fall within the protected area, helps fulfil this part of the requirement.

5 Supporting Information

a) Introduction

- 5.1 West Berkshire Council (“the Council”) is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (“the Act”) to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (“AONB”) that fall wholly or partially within its area. AONBs remain legally designated as such but are now generally referred to as “National Landscapes” following national rebranding in 2023.
- 5.2 Section 89 of the Act requires the Council to “prepare and publish a management plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it.” A National Landscape partnership, if such one has been designated, prepares the Management Plan, on behalf of and in consultation with the relevant local authorities for the relevant AONB as a single plan, which is then adopted by those authorities.
- 5.3 Section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) 2023 amended Sections 89 and 90 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 and introduced a new Section 90A. Under these amendments the Secretary of State may by regulations make provisions:
- (a) requiring a plan under Section 89 relating to an AONB in England to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of part 1 of the Environment Act 2021 (“Improving the Natural Environment”)
 - (b) setting how such a plan must contribute to the meeting of such targets;
 - (c) setting out how a plan under Section 89 relating to an AONB in England must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area. This legal requirement is known as the ‘seek to further’ duty.
- 5.4 It is now a legal requirement for “relevant authorities”, including all public bodies, to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the national landscape (Section 85(1A) of the Act).

- 5.5 This duty applies to relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions relating to or affecting land in the National Landscape areas. Helping to deliver the priorities, policies, and targets of the Management Plan is an important component of fulfilling this duty.
- 5.6 Successful delivery of Management Plans for protected landscapes can only be achieved by working in partnership within local authorities, and collaboratively across the whole area of the National Landscape. The Council has a key role to play in this delivery. The Council maintains a close working relationship with its partners in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership to achieve this and has been an integral part in the development of this plan to help alignment with the Council's current and emerging policies.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan

- 5.7 National Landscape Management Plans are required to be reviewed every five years. However, in November 2022 the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership formally agreed to take up the option, proposed by DEFRA, to extend the Management Plan 2019-24 for one year, and approved the required Light Touch Review Statement 2024-25 in July 2024.
- 5.8 The extension was to enable the review of the Management Plan to follow Natural England's Management Plan Guidance for National Landscapes and incorporate DEFRA's Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF). In the event, although the Management Plan review has been informed by earlier drafts, publication of the Management Plan Guidance was delayed until June 2025, after the review process was largely complete.
- 5.9 The Management Plan sets out the long term goals for the management of the national landscape and sets out a set of overarching principles to be applied when using and implementing the Management Plan. These include:
- All change should be landscape-led, seeking to conserve and enhance natural beauty and landscape character
 - Management and change should respect the cultural landscapes and communities of the North Wessex Downs
 - Decisions about future landscape change should always be informed by an understanding of the past, using tools such as historic environmental characterisation
 - No major development should take place either in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape or where it would harm the setting, except where it has been demonstrated through supporting evidence that exceptional circumstances exist which clearly override the highest level of protection.
 - Farming, forestry and other land management systems should be environmentally sustainable and nature-friendly

- Nature recovery should be pursued hand in hand with economically viable farming and land management
- Nature recovery should aim to restore ecological connectivity, contributing to the Nature Recovery Network to build and support resilient wildlife populations in the face of climate change.
- Land management should support climate mitigation and adaptation, using nature-based solutions that deliver multiple benefits and respect landscape character.
- The importance of engagement, outreach and landscape accessibility for all, including underrepresented communities, removing physical, cultural and perceptual barriers and creating equitable opportunities to connect with the landscape and be active partners in its stewardship, should be recognised.
- The value of the landscape for access, education, health and well being should be realised in ways that resolve, remove and prevent conflicts between access and biodiversity and the historic environment
- Change should not future exceed environmental limits of natural resources, eg. demand for water must not exceed levels that threaten the ecology of chalk streams
- Actions within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape should take place with an awareness of the wider context, including the landscape setting and the geography of Big Chalk.

Consultation

5.10 Consultation on development of the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2025 has taken place in three main stages, as follows:

(a) Pre-drafting:

- Formal notification of the Plan review to local authority partners and Natural England.
- Key Questions proforma survey of local authority partners.
- Initial consideration of considerations for the review by NWDNL staff.

(b) Drafting:

- Meetings with local authority partners to discuss survey responses and provide briefing on associated developments, inc. PLTOF.
- Thematic chapter reviews by NWDNL staff, Partnership members and experts.
- Follow-up meetings with chapter reviewers.
- PLTOF target apportionment.
- Drafting by chapter reviewers and NWDNL staff, with additional external input on selected points.

(c) Public Consultation

- Summary of main changes circulated among local authority partners.
- Six-week public consultation, ending on 30 April 2022.
- Short web survey.
- Online consultation on the whole draft Management Plan.
- Three public webinars, attended by 30-40 people.
- Promotion inc. NWDNL web site, newsletter and social media posts.
- One-day facilitated workshop for key stakeholders – around 75 people invited, 26 attended.
- Some consultees asked for and were given extensions to the deadline so they could still respond.

5.11 In parallel with these stages, a number of other work streams have been running for some or all of this time:

- North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment review: led by Land Use Consultants and managed by the NWDNL staff unit.
- Habitats Regulations Screening by Craggatak Consulting.
- Publication design led by Blooberry Creative Ltd.

5.12 The review process has been guided by the Management Plan Review Group (MPRG), a sub-group established by the Management Working Group on behalf of the Council of Partners to oversee the review. The MPRG has met periodically throughout the process. There have also been regular reports to Management Working Group and Council of Partners meetings.

Processing Comments Received

5.13 For each chapter, each individual response was read, considered and annotated according to whether the comment was accepted, partly accepted or noted. Where a response was only partly accepted or noted, a brief note was added explaining the reasoning behind the decision (except where a comment was simply supportive or did not suggest any change). Where a change was accepted or partly accepted, a brief reference to that part of the Plan to be amended was added.

5.14 The default position has been to accept changes where they correct errors or rectify omissions, clarify or helpfully illustrate the meaning of the text, and/or represent additions or improvements that support the thrust of the Management Plan and the purposes of designation.

Amendments to the Consultation Draft

5.15 Most comments have been supportive and helpful. In a few cases, there was pressure for a significantly different approach to certain subjects. In these cases, as with all the comments, our response has been based principally on the purposes and national status of the designation and the Landscape Character Assessment. A small number of comments have required consultation with colleagues or external experts who contributed to chapter reviews and drafting earlier in the process to check facts and revised or new text before deciding on amendments to the Plan.

5.16 To improve the structure and clarity of the Management Plan in response to comments the Vision has been separated from Chapter 1 Context and Framework and placed on

its own. A new chapter 2 has also been added near the beginning of the Plan which incorporates the Overarching Principles, lists all the thematic Priorities in one place and highlights the role of all stakeholders in implementation.

5.17 The amended Management Plan reflects the broad range of comments received. It is an improvement on the consultation draft: clearer, more accurate and more comprehensive, with better coverage of certain topics.

5.18 Remaining elements to be added to the published Management Plan are additional partner logos, acknowledgments and a revised glossary.

Main Changes to the Management Plan

5.19 A summary of the main changes from the Management Plan 2019-24 (extended to 2025) was circulated to all NWDNL local authority partners at the start of the public consultation period in March. They are:

- (a) Updated background and context, including reference to legislation and policy, the global and national nature recovery context, farming and land management support, collaborative initiatives beyond the boundaries of the National Landscape, and the IUCN Green List standard for protected areas and the importance of cultural landscapes.
- (b) Reference to the strengthened duty on relevant authorities under s.85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by s.245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2024, and the increased importance of protected landscape Management Plans.
- (c) A new set of overarching principles to guide use of the Management Plan by everyone involved in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- (d) A much stronger emphasis on nature recovery, with reference to the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan, 30 by 30, the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan (2023) and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- (e) Reference to the DEFRA Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework, including the full set of targets and those apportioned to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- (f) Greater prominence given to climate change, and the contribution the National Landscape can make to mitigation and adaptation.
- (g) More attention to the importance of healthy soils and other opportunities for responsible farming and land management to contribute to the purpose of designation.
- (h) A shift in emphasis from responsible tourism towards improving and widening access more generally for health and well being.
- (i) Special Qualities of the protected landscape are now referred to as Valued Qualities, in accord with current landscape character assessment practice.

- (j) Priorities, designed for all those involved in the National Landscape, replace Strategic Objectives, which were principally designed for the NWDNL staff unit.
- (k) Key Issues reviewed, updated and amended where appropriate.
- (l) Policies reviewed, strengthened and where possible rationalised.

b) Proposals

- 5.20 Executive is asked to approval of the Adoption North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30.
- 5.21 A joint meeting of the Management Working Group and the Management Plan Review Group was held on 11th June 2025 to approve proposed changes to the Consultation Draft Management Plan in light of the consultation responses received. The Adoption Draft Management Plan was recommended to the Council of Partners for approval.
- 5.22 The Council of Partners approved the Management Plan subject to some minor amendments (now incorporated) on 16th July 2025 and recommended it to the local authority partners for formal adoption.
- 5.23 The Management Plan is presented in the latest designed version to give members a clearer picture of the document they are being asked to adopt. Note that design work is continuing. There will be further refinements to graphics and other illustrations, and the final document will be carefully proof-read to correct any remaining errors.

6 Other options considered

- 6.1 Whilst there is an option to not adopt the Management Plan there remains a duty on the Council under the CRow Act 2000 to have such a plan in place and a strengthened duty that the local authority “seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty”.
- 6.2 Furthermore, the Council has been an integral part of the development of the Management Plan and the consultation process that followed. All comments received were given due consideration, and the final Management Plan has been extensively amended to in response.
- 6.3 Given the above, the option to not present the Management Plan for adoption has been dismissed.

7 Conclusion

- 7.1 The adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan fulfils the duties placed on the authority under Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. The Management Plan, as proposed, has been given due consideration by the Council as part of the development and consultation process.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 – 2030

8.2 Appendix B – Habitat Regulation Assessment Screening

Background Papers:

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☒ No: ☐

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval ☐

Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council ☐

Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position ☐

Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months ☐

Item is Urgent Key Decision ☐

Report is to note only ☐

Wards affected: Aldermaston, Basildon, Bradfield, Bucklebury, Burghfield & Mortimer, Chieveley & Cold Ash, Downlands, Hungerford & Kintbury, Lambourn, Newbury Speen, Pangbourne, Ridgeway, Tilehurst & Purley and Tilehurst Birch Copse

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