Well on its way

In the past couple years we have been working with the Partnership to establish a coordinated approach to the development of policy and action to conserve and enhance this national treasure. We now have a strong inclusive partnership, celebrated Management Plan, a Landscape Character Assessment, a focus for activity, namely the AONB office, an AONB team and an array of ideas and actions leading to the better management of natural beauty.

I started as Director in May 2002 and was quickly joined in the Winter of 2002 by two colleagues—Caroline Kaneen as Finance and Administrative Officer (and who also manages the Geographical Information System); and Belinda Fowler as Development Officer.

Therefore I am now pleased to say that this AONB is well on its way towards realising the vision developed by the first Council of Partners of an independent specialist team dedicated to the AONB.

The AONB Office at Denford Manor.

Since October 2002 there has been a focus for the AONB – the AONB Office. Established just outside Hungerford, the AONB Office is rapidly becoming a repository for information, it also provides a venue for individuals with an interest and involvement in the area to meet, share thinking and agree on future coordinated action; it also has hosted regional workshops and the National Association of AONB’s meetings.

The North Wessex Downs Office also provides a base for the wildflower charity Flora locale and the RSPB’s Stone Curlew Project Officer. I hope over coming years that more related organisations will join us at Denford Manor.

Richard Clarke
Director of the North Wessex Downs AONB

CHAIRMAN’S REPORT

One of the most beautiful of England’s landscapes, the North Wessex Downs were designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty over 30 years ago. However, this AONB, the third largest in the country, has remained something of a sleeping giant until recently. Although enjoyed by those fortunate to live here, and many who visit the area, it has not had an individual identity of its own or a co-ordinated approach to its management. That is now changing.

In late 2001 a Council of Partners was formed to bring together key organisations and individuals with interests in the area. The Council, working closely with a much broader Forum of stakeholders, has taken on the task of creating a management plan for the AONB with great commitment and energy. In the past two years we have launched an Integrated Landscape Assessment for the area and established working groups to take forwards the development of key components of the management plan.

The Council is a unique partnership of government agencies, local authorities, community, conservation, farming, landowning, business and voluntary organisations. All have signed a Charter which sets out how we work together for the long term benefit of the AONB and all who live and work in it. This is a genuine partnership. No single group or organisation has a controlling or dominant role. This is borne out by the decision to elect an independent Chairman and I am both delighted and honoured to have been asked to take on this role during this important period in the AONB’s development.

Another important step has been the appointment of the AONB’s first Director. Richard Clarke has already made a considerable impact in helping to focus the work and aims of the Council of Partners, developing a vision for the AONB, and establishing an independent office for the AONB in a central location close to Hungerford. He is assisted by a small team of Development Officer and Administrative Assistant, another considerable step forwards.

The process of completing the management plan has been consultative, inclusive and open. The result has been the publication of a plan of which all involved can be proud. A plan which has received very complimentary assessments from the Countryside Agency and English Nature and the acclaim of its stakeholders.

This is just the start. There are great challenges we face ahead with changes in farming, the rural economy, tourism and the potential threats to the conservation of this wonderful landscape, rich heritage and natural environment. I am confident that the enthusiasm and commitment of all involved will ensure that we will achieve even more into the future.

I would like to thank all my colleagues on the Council of Partners and particularly members of the Executive Committee and the staff team who have achieved so much in such a short time.

Martin Spray
Chairman

The North Wessex Downs Office at Denford Manor.
A 20 year Vision for the North Wessex Downs

A vision of vast dramatic, undeveloped and locally distinct chalk downlands with extensive areas of semi-natural chalk grassland, contrasting with well-wooded plateaux, arable lands and intimate and secluded valleys, all rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage. A landscape supported by viable agriculture which has responded to the profound changes in agricultural support in ways that have been to the positive benefit of the natural beauty and sustainability of the North Wessex Downs, maintaining the continuity of this nationally important landscape whilst embracing positive change. It is an area where the qualities of remoteness, profound peace, and dark night skies have been retained as a rare and nationally important resource.

It is a vision of vibrant rural communities with a sustainable rural economy, offering local employment to local people, in harmony with the environment and with a well developed rural workforce with the skills and flexibility to manage the natural and cultural resources of the area – old and new. It is an area of national renown for Green Tourism and quiet enjoyment of the countryside which help underpin a sustainable rural economy and management of the landscape.

It is an area where everyone can learn about the area’s special qualities: where local people take particular pride, understanding the AONB’s diverse needs and positively contributing to its future. Fundamentally, it is an area where the highest environmental quality is seen as a key economic driver and where all economic activity is in harmony with maintenance of the landscape.

For anyone privileged enough to have experienced the magnificence of this landscape – to have marvelled at its ancient origin – the importance of securing this vision will be obvious.

The Management Plan

A Vision for the North Wessex Downs. For the first time it can be said there is a shared vision for the North Wessex Downs in the form of the new AONB Management Plan. The “Plan” isn’t simply a wild aspiration for the area, but a clear route map setting out goals for the natural beauty, economy and communities of the area. Directions, setting a course to achieve the goals, are clearly expressed in a set of policies and actions.

The Management Plan for the North Wessex Downs Council of Partners has been prepared by the AONB team with the support of Land Use Consultants. It has not been written in a vacuum but it has benefited enormously from the detailed input of over 70 different individuals or organisations, who each invested a great deal of time in helping formalise the plan. The AONB team is also very grateful to the steering group who provided continuous support.

The “Plan” was not simply imposed on the Council of Partners and wider stakeholders, but went through extensive consultation over the summer of 2003. The final document was published in January 2004 and recommended to the local authorities of the AONB for them to formally adopt. After adoption The Management Plan will be sent to the Secretary of State.

The “Plan” has been sent to English Nature and Countryside Agency and has received “rave reviews”

To get your copy of the AONB management plan and see how you can play a part in the conservation and enhancement of this outstanding area contact the AONB Office.

Taken from English Nature’s Formal response.

“This is not the end of the story in the North Wessex Downs but very much the beginning as it is now important to follow that route map and get on with delivering the management plan”.

Taken from Countryside Agency’s Formal response.

“This is by any standards an outstanding AONB management plan”.

Taken from Embassy’s response.
The North Wessex Downs offers a spectacular, unique and little known landscape, lying at the hub of the chalklands of southern England. The rounded chalkland landform provides a unifying element to much of this area. The landscape shows great diversity and contains areas of significantly different character. The chalk is also fundamental in creating many valued habitats, including characteristic tracts of herb-rich downland turf and clear spring-fed chalk streams and rivers. Its ecological distinctiveness is reflected in the designation of numerous Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and several candidate Special Areas of Conservation.

The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape. The past is etched in every facet – in the fields and woods, tracks and lanes, villages and hamlets. The impact of land use and lifestyles over thousands of years has created the landscape of today and left indelible reminders of different points in history. The World Heritage Site of Avebury, carved white horses, such as at Uffington, and the Ridgeway National Trail are examples of the area's immense archaeological and cultural wealth and importance.

The senses of remoteness and tranquility are two of the defining characteristics of the North Wessex Downs and are vital to the enjoyment and appreciation of the landscape and its historical evolution. They result from the sparsely settled nature of the downlands, lack of urban intrusion and sparse road network.

The special qualities and national significance of the North Wessex Downs landscape were formally recognised by its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1972. Most of the area is Grade 3 arable farms. Most of the AONB is grade 3 agricultural land with concentrations of grades 1 and 2 in the Vale of Pewsey.

The Saxon name of Wessex reveals the area's literary connections, revived by Thomas Hardy and used as the setting for his novel Jude the Obscure. Perhaps most memorable however are the evocative, detailed descriptions of this landscape vividly portrayed in Richard Adam's Watership Down, which also highlighted the vulnerability of this landscape.
Historic Landscape Characterisation

Whilst records exist on individual known archaeological sites and monuments, little is known about their context in the Landscape. A three year study has been developed to produce a Historic Landscape Characterisation for the AONB. The results of which will inform decision making on planning issues, funding policies and site/area management plans and priorities. It will also give an additional tool to use in efforts to raise awareness of the cultural heritage and importance of this area. The Project involves the joint working of the Archaeologist from the County Councils’/ Unitary Authorities within the AONB, English Heritage, Avebury World Heritage Site Management Officer and the AONB team under the leadership of the West Berkshire Council.

The Urban Fringe Study

The Urban Fringe Study was established in late 2003 and seeks to ensure a positive relationship between the AONB and its surrounding urban areas. The study is focussed upon the southern fringes of Swindon and will work with people in this area to tackle some of the pressures and opportunities presented by their location within this transition area between the town and the nationally protected landscape. The project will include a series of workshops to allow residents, landowners and policy makers the opportunity to explore an integrated way forward. The project team includes Great Western Community Forest, farmer representatives including Country Landowners and Business Association and National Farmers Union and the AONB Team.

The Quiet Lanes Enhancement Project

In 2003 the AONB Team became involved with the establishment of a Quiet Lanes Network in the Pewsey area of Wiltshire. The AONB Team are now working with Wiltshire County Council, Kennet District Council and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group to demonstrate how targeted environmental enhancements can be integrated into a Quiet Lanes Network. This winter a survey of road verges within the network has started.

Local Products

Over the past year the Development Officer has pulled together information on local producers and organisations that promote and support local products in the AONB. This is the basis for the Local Products Directory which will highlight the range of land based produce in the area and the contribution that they make to the management of the AONB landscape. The guide will be published and distributed throughout the AONB in the coming year.

Planning Officers Working Group

The AONB Team have established close links with the Planning Officers for the Local Authorities within it. In 2003 a planning officers working group was established allowing the AONB Team to meet with the planners and discuss issues which may affect this nationally important landscape. In the coming year, the AONB team hope to recruit a member of staff to work with the planners.

Downland Heritage Project

The AONB team are working in partnership with English Nature and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust in the development of the Downland Heritage Project. The project will focus on the integrated management, enhancement and expansion of one of the core areas of chalk downland within the AONB. This area is a veritable “hotspot” for chalk grassland and other habitats and related species such as the stone curlew. It hosts a concentration of archaeological sites including the Avebury World Heritage Site and offers a wide range of opportunities for access and quiet recreation. The project team have sought input from a wide range of other bodies and individuals including local farmers.

If you require any more information on any of these projects please contact the AONB Team.
The North Wessex Downs website was launched in July 2003. The site contains a wide range of information on the designation of the AONB, its landscape, heritage and communities. The site was also used in the consultation process for the Management Plan and hosts an information forum of the Council of Partners Members. The site is continually changing, holding new information on projects and press releases as the work of the partnership progresses. Links to other organisations working in the North Wessex Downs can also be found. This new resource is proving to be a vital tool in the promotion of the area and the work within it.

www.northwessexdowns.org.uk

North Wessex Downs e-bulletin

The e-bulletin is written and produced in house every two months and contains news on the latest activities and work being carried out by the AONB Team. It also features on work by other partners and organisation impacting on the North Wessex Downs. The bulletin is circulated to AONB Partners ensuring that they are up to date with our work. If you would like to added to the distribution list please email info@northwessexdowns.org.uk.

GIS Development Project

In January 2003 the AONB Team received additional funding to develop a Geographical Information System (GIS) for the use to the Team and the wider Partnership. The system now holds a wide range of datasets covering the area which allow the team to make informed decisions on the landscape, economy and environment. The GIS played an essential role in the development of the Management Plan and will be used to monitor the changes and processes that occurs as a result of the actions defined in the plan.

Up!

During the winter of 2003-2004 the AONB Team, with the support of Economic Development, Communications and Tourism Officers from the Council of Partners Members, have started work on the first North Wessex Downs AONB Newguide. The guide, to be called “Up! On the North Wessex Downs” will contain features on local places of interest, people and the work of the partnership. Designed to appeal both local residents and visitors to the area the guide is made available through Tourist Information Centres and Libraries from early June onwards.

North Wessex Downs Annual Review 2002 - 2004

Financial Statement

2003 — 2004
Countryside Agency £173,500
Local Authorities £78,500
Other £3,800

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North Wessex Downs AONB

E-bulletin containing content with a digital map of the AONB

Public response to draft Management Plan now in

The first Management Plan to look at the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has been returned to the Council of Partners Members by the end of the spring. Participants have given their comments and suggestions on the new plan and these will now be considered by the Council of Partners Members before the final version is published in the autumn of 2003.