

Section 3

Social and economic well-being

Introduction

1. The Chiltern Hills is a landscape of national importance, home to 80,000 residents and is a destination for 55 million visits every year. Over a million people live close to its boundary in major towns including High Wycombe, Luton, Dunstable, Hemel Hempstead, Hitchin and Reading. Approximately 10 million people live within an hour's travelling time. This landscape was, and still is, being shaped by people's everyday activities of work, leisure and movement, in addition to those whose business is that of managing the environment.
2. This management plan for the AONB is not the primary strategy for tackling the social and economic needs of the

Chilterns, but it does reflect the statutory duty on the Conservation Board to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities when pursuing its primary aim of conserving natural beauty. It is also a recognition that much of the natural beauty of the Chilterns derives from the activities of local people at work and play, and that much of that activity in its turn is dependent on the environmental assets of the Chilterns. Ultimately, economic and social activity have to be environmentally sustainable and this plan helps to identify and cultivate those links.

3. The Chilterns is perhaps best known for its beech woods, which were for centuries a home to sawyers, bodgers and other furniture makers. Their legacy is a landscape dominated by beech woods now



Farmers' market in High Wycombe

protected for their amenity and wildlife. The woodland workers, however, regarded the woods as a place of work using a renewable natural resource, supplying the wood fuel market in London and the furniture factories in High Wycombe and other local towns. The management of those woods is now often in the hands of those concerned with the amenity of a wooded landscape, but ultimately the scale of management required, not least to deliver the desired environmental benefits, will rest on supplying an economic good to a buyer willing to pay a market price.

4. A similar tale can be told for the landscape shaped by farmers who created the chalk downland, managed hedgerows, planted trees and dug ponds. They too built the brick and flint farm houses and timber barns and even carved out the sunken lanes and ancient tracks. They did so to serve social and economic needs and by working with nature created the landscape valued so highly today.



Felled timber at Moorend Common

5. Today tourism is a major part of the rural economy. There are over 55 million leisure visits a year to the Chilterns which result in a total spend of over £400m. These are people seeking to enjoy the countryside, and to indulge in recreation best suited to a rural landscape. The tourism industry both benefits from the Chilterns' natural beauty and has a vested interest in its conservation.

Broad Aims

- The local economy is based on environmentally sustainable principles.
- The natural beauty of the Chilterns is conserved as a result of sustainable social and economic activity.
- A high quality environment contributes to the social and economic well-being of local communities.
- Local communities are involved in caring for the local environment.

Special Qualities

1. The Chilterns has a high quality natural and cultural environment which attracts a large number of leisure visits.
2. Local people benefit from a high quality of life which is partly dependent upon a high quality environment.
3. The accessibility of the countryside provides excellent opportunities for its enjoyment and for taking exercise.
4. The close links between local communities and the environment provide opportunities for community-based activity and volunteering.

5. The natural and cultural environment provides a wealth of learning opportunities for all ages.
6. Many local people have valuable skills to help conserve and celebrate natural beauty, and are often willing to volunteer their services to help care for it.
7. The public transport network, especially the railways, is excellent and provides convenient car-free options to visit the countryside. The Chilterns is the only protected landscape accessible by underground railway (The Metropolitan Line to Amersham and Chesham).
8. The Chilterns is a wealthy area whose local communities have the spending power to generate significant demand for local products and services, the production of which can contribute to sustaining a high quality environment. The Chilterns is surrounded by a mixture of smaller market towns which although not in the AONB are nonetheless Chilterns' towns. There are also a number of much larger urban settlements including Luton, Dunstable, Reading, High Wycombe and Hemel Hempstead which are very different in character with a broader mix of communities and pockets of significant economic and social disadvantage.



Full Moon pub in Cholesbury

Key Issues

1. The management of the landscape needs a range of skills which, until comparatively recently, were supplied by people living in local communities. That is no longer the case and many of the skilled workers needed are in short supply, for example foresters and flint workers.
2. The economic viability of farming and forestry has suffered in recent years, resulting in a relative lack of management of many valued landscape features. Downland and common land is under-grazed, hedge-laying is rare and many small woods are under-managed. Increasingly these features are no longer managed as part of day to day operations and their care depends upon considerate owners using funds earned elsewhere, public subsidy or with the help of local volunteers.
3. Diversification of the rural economy has long been underway and for many small to medium sized farms is essential to remain viable. Diversification is not always straight-forward in the AONB because of restrictive planning policies. What is approved needs to be sympathetic to its immediate setting and wider landscape.
4. The growth of farmers' markets in recent years has demonstrated the strength of demand for local produce, reflecting an increased interest in where food and other products come from. Not only does this encourage environmentally-sustainable activity, although it does not guarantee it, it also helps support the management of features which contribute to the landscape. For example, demand for local lamb will help to maintain sheep grazing of chalk downland.

5. The local tourism economy is significant and much of it is based on visitors coming to enjoy the countryside and seek peace and quiet. Currently there is a good balance between visitors and their environmental impact with relatively few examples of unsustainable visitor activity. There is scope for tourism-related businesses to be 'greener' and for a closer economic relationship between tourism spending and the need for resources to manage the landscape they come to enjoy. An ongoing issue is to ensure that the tranquillity, which is important to local residents and an attraction to visitors, is not spoiled by noisy activities, road traffic and overflying aircraft.
6. Increasingly the management of the environment is dependent upon local people volunteering their services. The work of The Chiltern Society, National Trust, Green Gyms (BTCV) and Wildlife Trusts are good examples of what can be achieved by many thousands of hours of effort by, often experienced and highly skilled, volunteers. There are also many examples of local businesses supporting the work of voluntary bodies. Such relationships help to strengthen the link between local communities and their environment as well as giving many thousands of volunteers the opportunity to learn new skills and become more involved in their community.
7. There is significant evidence to show that the sense of physical and mental well-being improves when taking outdoor exercise in the countryside. Nearly all communities in and around the Chilterns enjoy good access to the countryside and many are close to places which are managed to encourage active exercise with way-marked routes, fitness trails, cycle routes and even organised walks and other health programmes.
8. The environment provides opportunities for learning as a place for school field trips, work as a volunteer, an outdoor workshop for learning new skills and to hear from experts on guided walks and countryside events. Unless local people have a good understanding of the environment they are unlikely to care about it or for it. Many Chiltern communities have common land near to where people live, often providing opportunities to get involved and take pride in caring for their local area.



Kite-flying at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve near Watlington

Policies

SE1 Support an increase in the provision of affordable housing which respects local landscape and settlement character.

The cost of housing in the Chilterns, amongst the highest in the country, is causing significant problems for local people wishing to remain in the area and those wishing to move into the Chilterns. There are inevitably consequences for businesses which find it difficult to attract and retain skilled workers. The AONB, in combination with greenbelt designation, can potentially have an impact on the supply of affordable housing because of the strict planning policies applied. However, this plan recognises that fact and urges that an imaginative approach is taken to increase the supply of affordable housing whilst ensuring the design and location of new housing is sympathetic to, and respects, the special qualities of the Chilterns' landscape. In appropriate cases rural exceptions affordable housing schemes will be supported.



Producing bricks at a local brickmakers

SE2 Promote the provision and use of public transport to assist local people to gain access to services and facilities.

Car ownership in the Chilterns is amongst the highest in the country and yet 1 in 12 of households does not have access to a car. Those in this position in rural settlements are reliant on public transport services. It is also an aim to encourage more visits to the countryside, by local people and visitors, by public transport rather than car. The benefits include making rural roads safer for other users and helping to combat the cause of climate change by reducing the emission of greenhouse gases.

SE3 Promote the rural economy by supporting rural diversification and innovation which add value to local products and services which contribute to environmental sustainability.

This policy aims to encourage economic activity which contributes to the conservation and enhancement of the environment, especially those products and activities which helped to create the special qualities of the landscape. The way these products are created also needs to be environmentally sustainable.

SE4 Encourage buying policies which reduce or minimise the impact on the environment generally, and the Chilterns in particular.

The Chilterns is a wealthy area and has considerable spending power. The way that spending power is used by the public, public bodies and local businesses can help boost the demand for products produced in an environmentally-sustainable way. This can both increase local production of environmentally-sustainable products and minimise the environmental impact of other goods brought into the area with, for example,

scope to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide from unnecessary travel and goods produced in an unsustainable way.

SE5 Promote the sustainable development of the local tourist economy, to increase the contribution of visitors, in particular the increased provision of accommodation for visitors.

Over 55 million leisure visits are made to the Chilterns each year, with an estimated value of over £460m. However the per capita spend per trip is low (approx £5) and there is considerable unrealised potential to attract more staying visitors who spend considerably more per visit (£190 per capita). This low level of spending is probably a reflection of the preponderance of local visitors who have not travelled far from home. Currently only 2% of visits are accounted for by visitors staying overnight in the AONB.



Farm shop near Marlow

SE6 Promote the special distinctiveness of local towns and villages to help develop their visitor appeal.

The towns and villages of the Chilterns have a distinctive charm and character of their own which contributes considerably to their attractiveness to visitors and the media. Many films and well known TV programmes, such as Midsomer Murders and The Vicar of Dibley, are based in the Chilterns.

SE7 Promote the role of villages and market towns as centres in the rural economy.

Traditionally many local towns and villages held their own market and were home to cottage industries. Today many have become largely residential, often dormitory towns home to many commuters who spend their working day in London, Reading and other major towns nearby. However, their role as market towns is being promoted, by organisations as diverse as groups of local traders and parish councils to larger local authorities and regional development agencies, to help retain those economic functions and to strengthen community identity and spirit. This trend is being fostered by the increasing number of people who wish to give up commuting and work at, or closer to, home.

SE8 Promote healthy lifestyles by using the countryside for exercise and opportunities for volunteer work.

Although people are living longer, obesity and other illnesses related to lack of exercise are on the increase. The population of the Chilterns has almost unrivalled easy access to countryside close to where they live. This is largely based on an excellent public rights of way network and the large number of sites with open access, often owned by

public bodies for the purpose of encouraging public use. Many studies have shown the benefits to physical and mental well-being of spending time in a natural environment and taking exercise. Such benefits are compounded if that can be combined with volunteering work, such as provided by the Green Gyms and bodies including The Chiltern Society and the National Trust.

SE9 Provide opportunities for local people and visitors to learn about the Chilterns and to help care for its environment and heritage.

The Chilterns is a man-made landscape that requires continuous management to retain its special qualities and to enable wildlife to flourish. Its natural environment is complemented by a rich historic and cultural environment, the combination of which is attractive to local people and visitors. The aim of this policy is to help both residents and

visitors learn about the Chilterns thus enhancing both their enjoyment of, and desire to help conserve, its natural beauty.

SE10 Advise local communities on how climate change might affect the Chilterns and on courses of action to help them adapt to the effects and mitigate the causes.

Climate is and will continue to change and will affect the environment and communities of the Chilterns. It is important that it is better understood how those changes will affect the natural beauty of the Chilterns and that this is communicated to everyone affected. It is an equal and contemporary challenge to boost activity to mitigate the causes and help adaptation to likely impacts. This will affect, for example, how woods and fields are managed, events organised, buildings designed, water resourced and wildlife conserved.

Actions

- 1. Provide information on public transport especially to reach sensitive recreation sites.
- 2. Provide support and advice to enable sensitive diversification of the rural economy.
- 3. Actively promote local products which benefit the local environment.
- 4. Encourage the adoption of local procurement policies which benefit the environment of the Chilterns.
- 5. Promote the Chilterns as a visitor destination to local people and potential tourists from further afield.

- 6. Assist local business to green their activities and develop marketing and activities sensitive to the local environmental heritage.
- 7. Actively seek the introduction of policies and measures which conserve tranquillity by restricting noise pollution from all sources and, in particular, from road traffic, railways and over-flying aircraft.
- 8. Develop initiatives to encourage volunteering, participation and local pride in the Chilterns' environment.
- 9. Support appropriate activities in the countryside which promote good health and a sense of well-being, such as health walks and conservation work projects.