

Section 3

Social and economic well-being

Introduction

A wine bar and deli in Wendover



1. 80,000 people live within the Chilterns AONB and over 1 million people live close to its boundary, in major towns like High Wycombe, Luton and Reading. Looking wider, approximately 10 million people live within an hour's travelling time of the AONB. It is no surprise that the Chilterns is hugely popular as a place for recreation, with 55 million leisure visits every year. The impact of people, in the past and today, as they live, work and move around, is fundamental to the character of the Chilterns' landscapes.
2. The Chilterns Conservation Board has a statutory duty to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities when pursuing its primary aim of conserving natural beauty. This management plan reflects that, and also recognises that much of the natural beauty of the Chilterns has been created through people's economic and leisure activities, and that in turn those activities have often been stimulated by the environmental assets of the area.
3. Economic and social activities must be environmentally sustainable to create and maintain 'natural' beauty over the long-term. Economic activities such as planting and managing woodlands to produce timber and grazing livestock on the hills have made a profound contribution to the character of the Chilterns. However, if markets decline, as they have done for local timber, meat and wool, the activity decreases and the character of the area is at risk of being lost.
4. Tourism is a major part of the current rural economy of the Chilterns. Leisure visits to the area every year result in a total spend of over £400m. The vast majority of these visitors are seeking to enjoy the countryside, and to indulge in recreation best suited to a rural landscape, such as walking and cycling. The tourism industry both benefits from the Chilterns' natural beauty and has a vested interest in its conservation.

Broad Aims

- The natural beauty of the Chilterns is conserved as a result of sustainable social and economic activity.
- The local economy is based on environmentally sustainable principles.
- People make the link between social and economic well-being and a high quality environment.
- Local people are involved in caring for the local environment.
- The natural beauty of the Chilterns is recognised for the economic benefits it brings to the AONB and its surrounding areas.

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 physical activity.
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. However, the Chilterns is surrounded by a mixture of smaller market towns which although not in the AONB are 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.

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 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. What is approved needs to be sympathetic to its immediate setting and wider landscape.

4. The growing interest in local produce in recent years reflects an increased awareness of 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. Much of the local tourism economy is based on visitors seeking a tranquil rural experience and countryside activities such as walking and cycling. There is generally a good balance between visitors and their environmental impact with relatively few examples of unsustainable activity. There is scope for a closer economic relationship between tourism spending and 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 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. Such organisations are now stepping in to take on the management of some sites that used to be in the care of local authorities. This volunteer effort helps to strengthen the link between local communities and their environment.
7. It is now well-proven that 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 physical activity with way-marked routes, fitness trails, cycle routes and even organised walks and other health programmes.
8. Fast broadband connections are essential to many rural businesses and to those who prefer to work from home rather than commute. High speed rural broadband supports the economic activity of existing businesses and encourages new ones to be established. It can also reduce traffic levels on the roads by enabling people to work from home. At present there is great variability in speeds, depending on location, with some communities suffering very slow connections.

Policies

SE1 The provision and use of public transport by people who live and work in the Chilterns and who visit it should be promoted.

There are many benefits to encouraging local people and visitors to use public transport to travel to, and around, the Chilterns. They include making rural roads safer for other users, such as walkers and cyclists, and helping to combat the cause of climate change by reducing the emission of greenhouse gases.

SE2 Rural diversification which adds value to local products and services which contribute to natural beauty should be supported.

Economic activity which contributes to the conservation and enhancement of the environment should be encouraged, especially those products and activities which helped to create and promote the special qualities of the landscape. The way these products are created also needs to be environmentally sustainable.

SE3 The use of products which contribute to the natural beauty of the AONB should be promoted.

The spending power of the public, public bodies and local businesses can help boost the demand for local products produced in an environmentally-sustainable way. This helps support the rural economy and helps maintain the natural beauty of the Chilterns.

SE4 The sustainable development of the local tourist economy should be promoted, to increase the economic impact of visitors, and their understanding of the Chilterns.

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 and there is considerable unrealised potential to attract more staying visitors who spend considerably more per visit. There is a strong desire amongst local tourism businesses to raise the profile of the Chilterns as a destination through marketing its special qualities and attractions.

SE5 The special distinctiveness of market towns and villages should be promoted, 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, are based in the Chilterns.

SE6 The role of villages and market towns as centres in the rural economy should be promoted.

The role of market towns as vibrant centres of the rural economy is being promoted, by organisations as diverse as groups of local traders and parish councils to larger local authorities and tourism networks, to help retain those economic functions and to strengthen community identity and spirit.

Boats on the Thames at Henley



SE7 The health and well-being benefits of enjoying the countryside and through volunteering should be promoted.

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, promoted for public use. Many studies have shown the benefits to physical and mental well-being of spending time in a natural environment and taking exercise. Health Walks programmes have become very popular as a way of preventing ill-health. There are also many opportunities for physical voluntary work, such as provided by the Green Gyms and bodies including the Chiltern Society and the National Trust.

SE8 The provision of training in traditional and modern rural skills should be supported.

Skills such as hedge-laying are no longer wide-spread but still have an important role in maintaining the health of local habitats and the character of the AONB. It is very important that a reservoir of rural skills is maintained and expanded.

SE9 The impact of major development and infrastructure schemes on the economy and social well-being of local communities should be minimised.

Economic activity and the quality of life of local residents can be severely disrupted by major development projects, as they are built and then when they are operating. Impacts on local roads, on the tourism industry and other local businesses and on people's ability to carry out their daily lives all have serious consequences for the economic and social well-being of affected communities. If development schemes are approved these impacts must be accounted for and avoided or minimised as much as possible, for example, by including high quality green infrastructure in the scheme.

SE10 The provision of high speed broadband in the AONB should be encouraged.

High speed broadband brings economic and environmental benefits to rural communities.

SE11 Local Enterprise Partnerships should be encouraged to support activities that enhance the natural beauty of the AONB.

Local Enterprise Partnerships are encouraging economic recovery and growth in their areas by supporting businesses and providing skills training.

Children at Swyncombe Downs

