Description

Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The curved Greensand ridge partially encircles the adjoining Low Weald NCA, while its outer edge is rimmed by the chalk outcrops of the North and South Downs, and the Hampshire Downs in the west. The ridge affords far-reaching views over the Low Weald, South Downs and London. In Kent, the ancient coastline reflected in the Lympne Escarpment overlooks the Romney Marshes.

In the south-west the Western Rother joins the Arun, which drains south into the South Downs NCA and on to the coast. In the north-west the rivers Wey and Mole drain north through the North Downs, and into the Thames. Further east the River Medway drains north through the downs, via the Medway Gap, and into the Greater Thames Estuary. The source of both the Upper Great Stour and the East Stour is on the Greensand ridge: these two rivers join to form the Great Stour, which flows north-east through the North Downs and the North Kent Plain. The Kent Lower Greensand groundwater body is considered a major aquifer, important for public and industrial water supply both within and outside the NCA.

Although it is only a short section, the management of the coastal stretch between Folkestone and Hythe influences and is influenced by the coastal stretches in adjoining NCAs (North Downs and Romney Marsh). Sediment supply in the development and denudation of beaches has a critical influence on the rate of coastal erosion and coastal squeeze.

A major transport corridor runs through the eastern part of the NCA, including the Channel Tunnel rail link connecting Folkestone to London.

View north from the Greensand ridge across Thursley Common. The dry heath, dominated by ling and bell heather, supports a wide range of widlife including uncommon reptiles and rare heathland birds.

Key characteristics

- A long, narrow belt of Greensand, typified by scarp-and-dip slope topography, including outcrops of Upper Greensand, Gault Clay and Lower Greensand. The Greensand forms escarpments separated by a clay vale: the overall undulating and organic landform – particularly in the west – gives a sense of intimacy to the landscape. Leith Hill in Surrey is the highest point in south-east England.

- There are extensive areas of ancient mixed woodland of hazel, oak and birch, with some areas having been converted to sweet chestnut coppice in past centuries. These areas reflect the diverse geology, including the distinctive chalk grassland elements within the East Hampshire Hangers Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the wooded commons ('charts') of East Surrey and West Kent, and conifer plantations.

- Semi-natural habitats include: remnant lowland heathland, mostly concentrated in West Sussex, Hampshire and West Surrey; the wetlands associated with the River Arun in West Sussex; and unimproved acid grasslands found in commons, parklands, heathland and other areas of unimproved pasture.

- Fields are predominantly small or medium, in irregular patterns derived from medieval enclosure. Boundaries are formed by hedgerows and shaws, with character and species reflecting the underlying soils. On the clay, hedgerows are dense and species-rich, with occasional standard oaks. On more acidic soils they generally consist of hawthorn and blackthorn, also with occasional oak trees, and often trimmed low.

- Agricultural land comprises a mosaic of mixed farming, with pasture and arable land set within a wooded framework. There is a fruit-growing orchard belt in Kent and also around Selborne in Hampshire.

- The rural settlement pattern is a mixture of dispersed farmsteads, hamlets and some nucleated villages. Large houses set within extensive parks and gardens are found throughout the area.

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Apple harvest at Blackmoor Estate, Hampshire.

Key characteristics continued

- In the east of Kent, the Wealden Greensand has a gentler and more open aspect than in the wooded west. This part of the area is also more marked by development, with the presence of major towns and communication corridors such as the M26, M25 and M20 motorways and railway lines including the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (High Speed 1).
- The local built vernacular includes the use of Greensand, ragstone and, in the west, malmstone, bargate stone, plus dark carrstone patterned in the mortar between stones ('galleting') in Surrey, as well as timber-framing and weatherboarding.
- There are a range of historic landscape features, including field monuments, old military defences, prehistoric tumuli, iron-age hill forts, Roman forts, the Royal Military Canal, small quarries and relics of the iron industry (including hammer ponds). Sunken lanes cut into the sandstone are a historic and characteristic feature, as are older deer parks and more recent 18th-century parklands.
- Surface water is an important feature across the Greensand, with many streams and rivers passing through the NCA: the Western Rother, Wey, Arun, Medway and the Great and East Stour.
- The Greensand ridge meets the coast of Kent between Folkestone Warren and Hythe. While most of the coastal strip is now built up and protected by sea defences, the undeveloped sea cliffs at Copt Point provide important geological exposures, are designated for their nature conservation interest and fall within the Dover–Folkestone Heritage Coast.

Statements of Environmental Opportunity

SEO 1: Protect and manage the nationally recognised and distinctive character of the landscape, conserving and enhancing historic landscape character, tranquillity, sense of place, and the rich historical and geological heritage of the Wealden Greensand. Enhance access provision where appropriate, to maintain public benefit from and enjoyment of the area.

For example, by:

- Protecting the intimate rural character of the south-west of the NCA (part of the South Downs National Park) and the special qualities of the Kent Downs AONB and Surrey Hills AONB, working in partnership to identify management opportunities in accordance with the respective management plans.
- Conserving and enhancing the rural settlement pattern of dispersed farmsteads, hamlets and nucleated springline and riverside villages, and the network and character of ancient, winding, tree-lined, sunken lanes in the west, through sensitive planning and development control. This will benefit the landscape character, tranquillity and the sense of place and history. The management of trees alongside sunken lanes will maintain and enhance their botanical interest.
- Using an understanding of the area's traditional and historical architecture, its distinctive local materials (timber-framing with weatherboarding, Greensand, ragstone and, in the west, malmstone) and its patterns of settlement, to inform the appropriate conservation and use of historic buildings, and to plan for and inspire any new development so that it makes a positive contribution to local character.
- Maintaining and enhancing rights of way and open access throughout the area, improving links especially to the North Downs Way and South Downs Way national trails, and to towns and villages. Developing new permissive access to historical sites and quality green space as part of a cohesive network of inspiring access provision. Increasing the benefits of these routes for biodiversity, health and local businesses, and ensuring full compatibility with agriculture. Enhanced access permission will not be appropriate in all instances and needs to be balanced to ensure that areas that are particularly vulnerable to disturbance from recreational pressures are not compromised.
- Promoting sustainable tourism initiatives that help to reduce car dependency and can accommodate high visitor numbers while conserving the landscape and its tranquillity. Managing the impact of increased visitor numbers to sensitive sites.
- Restoring and creating broadleaved woodlands surrounding major transport corridors and urban areas to help reduce noise, light and air pollution, and to maintain and enhance the pockets of tranquillity.
- Maintaining the sense of intimacy within the landscape and the expansive views over the Low Weald, South Downs and London from the scarp tops.

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- Conserving, managing and enhancing the nationally important and locally characteristic geodiversity, including the undeveloped sea cliffs between Folkestone Warren and Hythe, plus inland exposures of Upper Greensand in Hampshire and West Sussex, and the ragstone exposures of the Lympne Escarpment in Kent.
- Maintaining and enhancing access to geodiversity, providing educational and research opportunities, and linking communities with their local heritage, including through the sensitive restoration of redundant quarries, exploiting their biodiversity, recreational and geological potential.
- Restoring and managing the nationally important parklands (for example at Knole), the more recent 18th-century parklands and designed landscapes (as at Petworth), and the wood pasture habitats. Management works should be prioritised and informed by an assessment of the historic design, use and significance of the parkland.
- Supporting local initiatives for the restoration of traditional orchards and hop gardens that are characteristic of Kent, and parts of Hampshire and Surrey. Using and promoting local fruit varieties where viable, and where this provides links to our heritage and sense of place, and maintains genetic diversity.
- Protecting the integrity of earthworks and monuments (including numerous bronze-age tumuli on the higher ground of the Sussex and Surrey heathlands, and prominent iron-age hill forts such as at Holmbury, Anstiebury and Oldbury Hill) through appropriate management, including the reversion of arable to grassland, scrub removal and protecting sites from erosion.
- Conserving and improving the management of historical landscape features such as relics of the iron industry (including hammer ponds) and water mills. Conserving and restoring historic buildings including oast houses and timber-framed barns, while promoting opportunities for access, education and sensitive interpretation at historic sites.

SEO 2: Protect, manage and significantly enhance the mosaic and connectivity of semi-natural habitats within the mixed farmed landscape – particularly the internationally important woodland and heathland habitats – for the benefit of biodiversity, pollination, soil and water regulation, landscape character and enhanced adaptation to climate change.

For example, by:

- Protecting the distinctive beech and ash hanger woodlands of Hampshire on the steep chalk and Upper Greensand escarpment, including the East Hampshire Hangers SAC, supporting the continued small-scale management on the difficult scarp slopes and buffering the woodlands through appropriate land management options on adjoining land. These woodlands provide important links to the surrounding landscape, and so any opportunities to enhance their connectivity to other habitats should be maximised, integrating them into the wider farmed landscape and enhancing adaptation to climate change while benefiting biodiversity and the sense of place and history.
- Restoring and managing the extensive belts of ancient mixed woodland throughout the rest of the NCA, including the sessile oak woods on the acid, sandy soils of Surrey, West Sussex and Kent, the pedunculate oak woods with hazel coppice on the heavy Gault Clay, and the ash woodland on lime-rich Kentish ragstone outcrops. (Consideration must be given to those trees that may have been affected by ash die-back disease, adapting to the implications through a combination of selection, propagation and planting of resistant ash trees, and diversifying as appropriate.) Ancient mixed woodland should be significantly expanded on steeper slopes, helping to prevent soil erosion, especially within important valley catchments such as that of the Western Rother.
- Promoting opportunities for productive woodland management, to support existing markets for local wood products (including wood for fuel) and to encourage new ones. Where smaller woodlands form part of the mixed farm mosaic, seeking to integrate their management into the wider farm business.
- Maintaining or (where appropriate) restoring stock grazing in parks and wood pastures, and stimulating the re-introduction of traditional tree and woodland management (including pollarding, the encouragement of new tree generations and the restoration of woodland glades), benefiting biodiversity, and the sense of place and history.
- Managing and monitoring the threats posed by tree diseases and pests, and planning for climate change, researching appropriate species mixes to create robust and resilient woodlands.
- Restoring hedgerow boundaries and shaws, especially where they will help to impede cross-land flows (and thus further aid the regulation of water quality), maintain the predominantly irregular field pattern to benefit cultural heritage and the sense of place, improve the landscape character, and help to create a robust, interlinked wildlife network with enhanced resilience to climate change.

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- Working with landowners to integrate arable habitats into the farming system. Encouraging the uptake of measures such as conservation headlands, low-input cereals and resource protection options on the sandy soils (such as grassland buffer strips) – to optimise the multiple benefits for biodiversity, water and soil regulation, and pollination services.
- Restoring the dry, humid and wet lowland heathlands (including large areas with SPA and SAC designation) through remedial work, including scrub and bracken management, and targeted conifer removal. This will enhance the adaptation of this important resource to climate change and will maximise the benefits for biodiversity. Where appropriate, considering opportunities for heathland creation, to improve connectivity of habitats and to allow for corridor management for the movement of species.
- Seeking to work with communities to reconnect them with their local heathland and common land habitats and to explore a combination of new and traditional management practices (such as stock grazing). This will help to create and maintain the structural diversity needed to support the range of plants and animals associated with these habitats. Appropriate management will also be needed to control invasive species.
- Managing woodland adjacent to heathland to help filter views of development beyond, enhancing habitat diversity while also allowing for species migration. These woodland belts can provide a robust recreational space close to where people live, and can help to relieve pressure on and buffer the more sensitive heathland habitats.
- Working in partnership to stimulate new markets for heathland products, providing a market driver to encourage and maintain viable and sustainable heathland management.
- Managing heathlands to maintain their ecological interest, while providing for the needs of the local communities and visitors. When considering changes to management practices, land managers should ensure that there is an engagement strategy in place and that this is implemented at an early stage of any decision-making process. The experience and understanding of the user should be enhanced through a variety of methods, including sympathetic interpretation and education, and the creation of local volunteer and 'friends of' groups. It may be appropriate to manage access so as to reduce disturbance, through the creation of 'desire lines' and the careful siting of gates and signage to create a visible route. In some cases, alternative access provision on less sensitive sites nearby might be feasible.
- Restoring and enhancing unimproved acid grasslands in parklands, on commons and on golf courses. Maintaining localised bare sand habitats on the Greensand ridge that support nationally rare wildlife species, to further protect and enhance biodiversity, while benefiting the sense of place and history.

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- Improving the ecological connectivity of woodlands, heathlands, copses, grasslands, road verges, hedgerows and wetlands, strengthening the overall network of habitats, reducing fragmentation and improving the permeability of the landscape for species movement. This ecological connectivity should extend out from the NCA and link with adjoining areas, creating a coherent suite of quality habitats.
- Creating a mosaic of semi-natural woodland, grassland and wetland habitats that assimilate disused mineral workings and landfill sites into the landscape, while providing new wildlife havens and recreational space.

SEO 3: Manage and significantly enhance the quality of the characteristic wetland and water environment of the Greensand. This will contribute to sustainable flood risk management, will benefit the regulation of water quality and water availability, as well as enhancing the sense of place, biodiversity, recreation and wetland habitat adaptation to climate change.

For example, by:

- Restoring, expanding and re-connecting important wetland habitats within flood plains (particularly of the Arun – including Amberley Wildbrooks – the Western Rother, flood plain grazing marsh, wet lowland meadows, reedbeds, lowland fens and wet woodlands of willow and alder), to improve adaptation to climate change, enhance biodiversity and landscape character, while improving water quality and water storage, for the benefit of flood alleviation and aquifer recharge.
- Restoring natural river geomorphology where this is viable and where it is of particular benefit to biodiversity, including to fish populations. Bringing rivers back into continuity with their flood plains, and re-establishing backwaters as a refuge for aquatic species in times of drought. Allowing the seasonal inundation of wetlands and flood plain pastures as part of flood alleviation measures. This reflects the policies of the Catchment Flood Management Plans, as well as being essential to sustaining wetland habitats.
- Creating and maintaining low-input grasslands in river valleys and where this can bring significant benefits for water quality, along with low-input grasslands and wide grass buffer strips on sandy soils that are susceptible to erosion. Locating buffer strips to run across slopes and on either side of watercourses, to intercept sediment and associated nutrients – particularly within the Defra priority catchments of both the East Stour and the Arun and Western Rother, and the valleys of both the Medway and Wey – to aid improvements in water quality. Encouraging good soil management, including increasing organic matter content to enhance the structural condition of the soil, and improving water-holding capacity and water infiltration to aid aquifer recharge.
- Maintaining and restoring the numerous manmade lakes and ponds for the benefit of biodiversity, the landscape, the historic environment and water storage, to reduce runoff and soil erosion.
- Maintaining areas of tranquillity within the river valleys; deeply tranquil areas are still present, particularly in the extensive wetland areas of Amberley Wildbrooks, in the west.
- Ensuring that the ditch systems and wet grasslands (which support a rich ditch flora and attract nationally important populations of winter birds) are appropriately managed to maintain their biodiversity value as core sites.
- Conserving the historic bridges and heritage features of the flood plain landscapes, benefiting the sense of place and history.
- Enhancing the recreational assets of the wetland environment, including its aesthetic qualities, any water-based activities, and walking and cycling routes along the river corridors. This will provide benefits for local communities and tourists as local access networks are maintained and enhanced, while also benefiting health and wellbeing.
- Encouraging sustainable water use – both within and outside the boundaries of the NCA, and across sectors – to protect the sandstone aquifer from over-abstraction and to mitigate the negative impacts of low river flows on biodiversity (particularly on the internationally important wetland and heathland sites), while improving resilience to climate change.

SEO 4: Plan to deliver a network of integrated, well managed green spaces in existing and developing urban areas, providing social, economic and environmental benefits, and reinforcing landscape character and local distinctiveness – particularly on or alongside the boundaries of the designated landscapes within the Wealden Greensand.

For example, by:

- Where appropriate, creating areas of broadleaved woodland (under coppice management where possible) around towns to provide a buffer to new development. Providing local recreational opportunities that divert pressures from the SPA and SAC designated areas of heath, helping to provide climate change adaptation, flood alleviation, enhanced landscape character and biodiversity benefits.
- Creating enhanced areas of new – and improving any existing – multifunctional natural green space, including community food gardens, orchards, and extensive wetlands that form part of sustainable urban drainage systems. These link into the heart of urban areas and provide sustainable recreational links into the wider countryside as part of green infrastructure planning. They will help to meet Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt), and ensure that developments retain soil functionality, as much as possible and do not have a negative effect on flood risk within the NCA.
- Ensuring that development and its associated infrastructure (including light, noise and air pollution), does not intrude on the rural landscapes or the special qualities of adjacent protected landscapes (the South Downs National Park, the Kent Downs AONB and the Surrey Hills AONB) conserving remaining areas of tranquillity.
- Promoting the use of sustainable and locally sourced materials, vernacular building techniques and styles, and existing landscape character, to inform design and ensure integration with the surrounding landscape.
- Developing a strategic approach to green infrastructure across the NCA and its boundaries, to take account of the existing urban areas and areas of growth. Planning a network of green spaces across the urban areas, urban fringe and adjacent countryside, which can result in multiple benefits for the environment and communities.