



Report title:

The potential of the High Weald to supply the food needs of its population under conventional and organic agriculture

Commissioned by: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC)
Commissioned from: Centre for Agricultural strategy and the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, the University of Reading
Funded by: Natural England and the High Weald JAC
Status and date: Final report, July 2009

Research purpose: Evidence gathering to inform low carbon approaches to land management in order to meet objectives G3 and FH1 of the statutory AONB Management Plan; to assess the extent of food provisioning services provided by the High Weald to its resident population and the wider region and to inform policy responses to biofuels, farm holding fragmentation and the loss of agricultural capacity in farmsteads

Research aims:

- To assess the extent to which the High Weald can provide for the food needs of its resident population under the current production methods;
- To examine whether lower input farming practices, in particular conversion to organic agriculture, would impact on ability to meet food demand.

Research findings: The study found that whilst the High Weald currently does not come close to being self sufficient in local food supply, it has the potential to be self sufficient if land used to produce surplus was redirected to areas of shortage such as beef, potatoes and field scale vegetables. Significant surpluses are currently being produced in some food commodities such as cereals, milk, top and soft fruit, with the bulk of production being exported from the region. Utilising the land used in producing this surplus would allow High Weald agriculture considerable flexibility to readjust production to meet local food needs under all scenarios examined including a move to a healthier diet and adoption of organic production methods.

AONB Unit comment: Critical to achieving local self sufficiency is a move from sheep to cattle and pigs and an increase in vegetables and salad growing. Whilst the latter may present a challenge to planning through an increase in demand for polytunnels, there is no reason why this cannot be achieved without damage to this nationally important landscape providing the focus is on small scale growing under glass or polythene (for example less than 3 small to medium polytunnels per average size holding) supplemented by support for allotments, forest gardens and horticultural small holdings. It is considered that the holding and land ownership profile of the High Weald (with relatively small holding size and high proportions of holdings in part time or non farming ownership) would not be a barrier to change but would require investment in targeted communication and advice.

