



Baseline & Screening Report

for the

Appropriate Assessment

of the

High Weald AONB Management Plan Review 2009



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Section 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has a complex of protected sites designated for their exceptionally important (rare, endangered or vulnerable) species and/or habitats. Grouped under the Natura 2000 network, these protected sites together provide an important ecological infrastructure across Europe. EU protected sites in England include:

- Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)
- Special Protection Areas (SPA)
- Ramsar Sites (Internationally important wetlands)
- Marine Protected Areas (MPA) [sometimes termed Offshore Marine Sites]

An Appropriate Assessment (AA) is required to ensure a proposal or plan is assessed in respect of the EU designated sites' conservation objectives. The Assessment is concerned with those plans or policies which are not directly connected with the management or conservation of a European designated site, but which may (inadvertently) affect these sites. The European Sites which are in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are:

- Ashdown Forest SAC
- Ashdown Forest SPA
- Dungeness to Pett Levels SPA
- Hastings Cliffs SAC

The Assessment is required by regulation 48¹ of the Habitats Regulations 1994, and is carried out at a regional and local level. The conclusions of the Assessment should allow the competent authority to ascertain whether a proposal or plan would adversely affect the integrity of the site. Candidate or potential European sites will also be considered during this process. Natural England is in the process of applying to extend Dungeness to Pett Levels SPA and having it designated as a Ramsar Site. This process is currently at an early stage and so far it is understood that this extension and re-designation will not bring any additional considerations over and above those already looked into as part of this process.

1.2 Evidence Gathering

As recommended by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), information for the AA has been gathered alongside information for the Management Plan review preparation – evidence was gathered with particular reference to:

- Protected sites within and surrounding the plan area
- Protected site characteristics
- Site conservation objectives
- Other relevant plans or projects

This evidence is then used to assess any implications that the review and revision of the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2004 may have on the designated sites.

1.3 Consultation

Natural England is the statutory consultee for the AA process. However, the report will also be presented to Authorities in which the sites are located, Authorities whose plans or projects may have an impact on the listed European Sites, Organisations with particular environmental interests in the listed European Sites. These organisations are detailed below.

Local Authorities (in which sites are located)

- Wealden District Council
- Hastings Borough Council
- Rother District Council
- Shepway District Council

¹ The Appropriate Assessment (Regulation 48) The Conservation (Natural Habitats &c) Regulations, 1994

Owners/Interested Organisations

- National Trust
- Sussex Wildlife Trust
- Woodland Trust
- Ministry of Defence (MOD)
- Forestry Commission
- Environment Agency
- The Crown Estate
- Government Office South East (GOSE)
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Conservators of Ashdown Forest
- East Sussex County Council
- Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre (SxBRC)

In addition, this and related documents will be made available to all stakeholders and members of the public via the High Weald AONB Unit's website.²

1.4 In Combination Test

In response to Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive, the AONB Unit must consider any implications the Management Plan review may have 'in combination' with other plans and/or projects. Therefore, it is necessary to review these plans and policies that may also (in combination), have significant impacts on these designated sites.

"The assessment of significant effects of a given option needs to take account of the option's impact, in combination with other plans and projects. Only other key plans and projects which the RPB (Regional Planning Board) or LPA (Local Planning Authority) consider most relevant should be collected for the 'in combination' test"³.

Local planning authorities will be asked to provide details of relevant plans/policies as part of the consultation process. Nevertheless, some generic relevant regional plans have been identified and are detailed below.

Identified Relevant Plans and Projects:

- Regional Spatial Strategy, 'The South East Plan' - draft (due to be adopted by the end of 2008)
- Local Development Frameworks and associated documents (LDDs)
- Local Transport Plans
- Waste Local Plan adopted Feb 2006 (East Sussex and Brighton & Hove)
- Minerals Local Plan (East Sussex and Brighton & Hove)

Many organisations have yet to produce a core strategy for the Local Development Framework in this region, so 'saved' policies from the existing Local Plans are still being used in some cases.

² <http://www.highweald.org>

³ Planning for the Protection of European Sites: Appropriate Assessment. (Dept. for Communities and Local Government 2006)

Section 2 - Evidence

European Sites within the High Weald AONB

This section comprises evidence for the designated sites which fall within or close to the High Weald AONB (a discrete area for which the Management Plan relates). It includes evidence gathered from published site details and through consultation with Natural England (NE).

2.1 Ashdown Forest

Designation: SAC

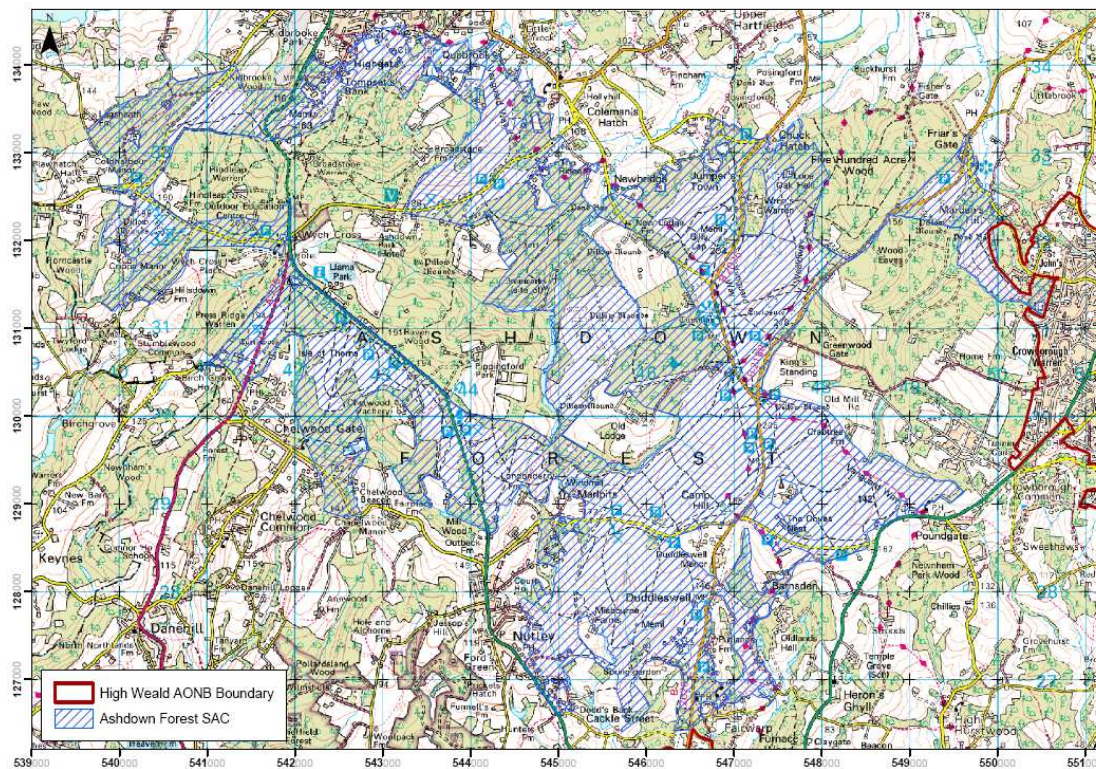
Grid reference: TQ450300 (site centroid)

Area: 2729 (ha)

Local Authority: Wealden District

Amount of site within AONB: Whole Site

Site Map



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved 100019601 (2008)
SAC Boundary data sourced from Natural England via www.magic.co.uk (June 2008)

Site Characteristics

Heath/scrub/maquis and garrigue/phygrana (60%)

Mixed woodland (40%).

Site Conservation Objectives

To maintain the following Annex I habitats in favourable condition:

Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*

Ashdown Forest contains one of the largest continuous blocks of lowland heath in south-east England. The M16 *Erica tetralix* – *Sphagnum compactum* wet heath element, provides suitable conditions for several species of bog-mosses, sphagnum spp., bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*, deergrass *Trichophorum cespitosum* amongst others. The site also supports important assemblages of beetles, odonata and butterflies.

European dry heaths

The dry heath in Ashdown Forest is an extensive example of the south-eastern H2 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Ulex minor* community. This vegetation type is dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea* and dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*. It supports important lichen assemblages and the most inland remaining population of hairy greenweed *Genista pilosa* in Britain.

Annex II species are:

- Great crested newt *Triturus cristatus*

[Source: JNCC]

Vulnerability

Ashdown Forest is one of the most extensive areas of heathland in south-east England. The optimum site management is grazing, however only approximately 19% of the SAC is grazed. Spread of scrub and bracken is a major threat to the SAC.

The majority of the site (including the grazed area) is managed sympathetically by the Conservators of Ashdown Forest but there is high demand on resources for scrub clearance, bracken mowing, etc., particularly in the ungrazed area. There is ongoing liaison with the Conservators and other landowners/managers to increase the area of grazed heathland. Obstacles to grazing include public opposition to fencing, availability of graziers/suitable livestock, and constraints on dog walkers. In general, public access is not a threat to the SAC, unless it prevents expansion of the grazed area.

Also, possible long-term drying out of the site may take place, due to borehole extraction and transpiration from increased vegetation cover. Consultations with the Environment Agency over the possible impact of extraction are ongoing. Recent increased scrub clearance is likely to have a beneficial effect on wet heath.

[Source: JNCC]

Relevant Plans or Projects

PLANS

- Wealden Local Plan - Wealden currently in early preparation of Core Strategy
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Structure Plan 1991-2011
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Waste Local Plan
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Minerals Local Plan
- East Sussex Waste & Minerals Development Framework
- East Sussex Local Transport Plan (LPT2)
- River Ouse Catchment Flood Management Plan

PROJECTS

2.2 Hastings Cliffs

Designation: SAC

Grid reference: TQ856110 (site centroid)

Area: 183.72 (ha)

Local Authority: **Hastings Borough**

Amount of site within AONB: **Whole Site**

Site Map



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved 100019601 (2008)
SAC Boundary data sourced from Natural England via www.magic.co.uk (June 2008)

General Site Character

- Coastal sand dunes/sandy beaches and machair (1%)
- Shingle/sea cliffs/islets (30%)
- Inland water bodies (5%)
- Bogs/marshes/water fringed vegetation/Fens (2%)
- Heath/scrub/maquis and garrigue/phygrana (13%)
- Dry grassland/steppes (8%)
- Improved grassland (10%)
- Broad-leaved deciduous woodland (25%)
- Mixed woodland (1%)
- Inland rocks/screes/sands (5%)

Site Conservation Objectives

To maintain the following Annex I habitats in favourable condition:

Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts

Hastings Cliffs are an area of actively eroding soft cliff on the south coast of England. They include the most southerly geological exposures of the Lower Hastings Beds. The site contains three valleys cut into the strata, which support woodland and scrub habitats with an unusual Atlantic bryophyte flora. Closer to the sea the maritime influence stunts the trees, but other bryophytes become important here, with one species, *Lophocolea fragrans* fragrant crestwort, at its only south-east England locality. Maritime scrub and coastal heathland are found closer to the cliff edge, with grassland supporting maritime species such as thrift *Armeria maritima*. The clay cliff slopes are eroding and support a range of habitats from bare ground and flushes to maritime grassland and scrub, reflecting the successional development of vegetation following cliff-falls.

[Source: JNCC]

Vulnerability

Most of the SAC can be accessed by visitors through Hastings Country Park, so the number of visitors could potentially have an impact on the cliffs.

Hastings Cliffs is a short section of almost natural coastline of dramatic eroding cliffs. The very nature of this soft eroding material results in extensive landslides, with vegetation changing from year to year. The cliffs are known to support a good population of bryophytes, particularly sensitive to changes in water and air quality.

The effect on the rate of erosion by surrounding coastal protection measures and offshore activities is unknown, but may have an impact.

[Source: JNCC]

Relevant Plans or Projects

PLANS

- Shaping Hastings: Core Strategy Preferred Approaches, (consultation) May 2008
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Structure Plan 1991-2011
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Waste Local Plan
- East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Minerals Local Plan
- East Sussex Waste & Minerals Development Framework
- East Sussex Local Transport Plan (LPT2)
- Air Quality Management Plan, Hastings BC
- Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Plan 2005-2010

PROJECTS

2.3 Ashdown Forest

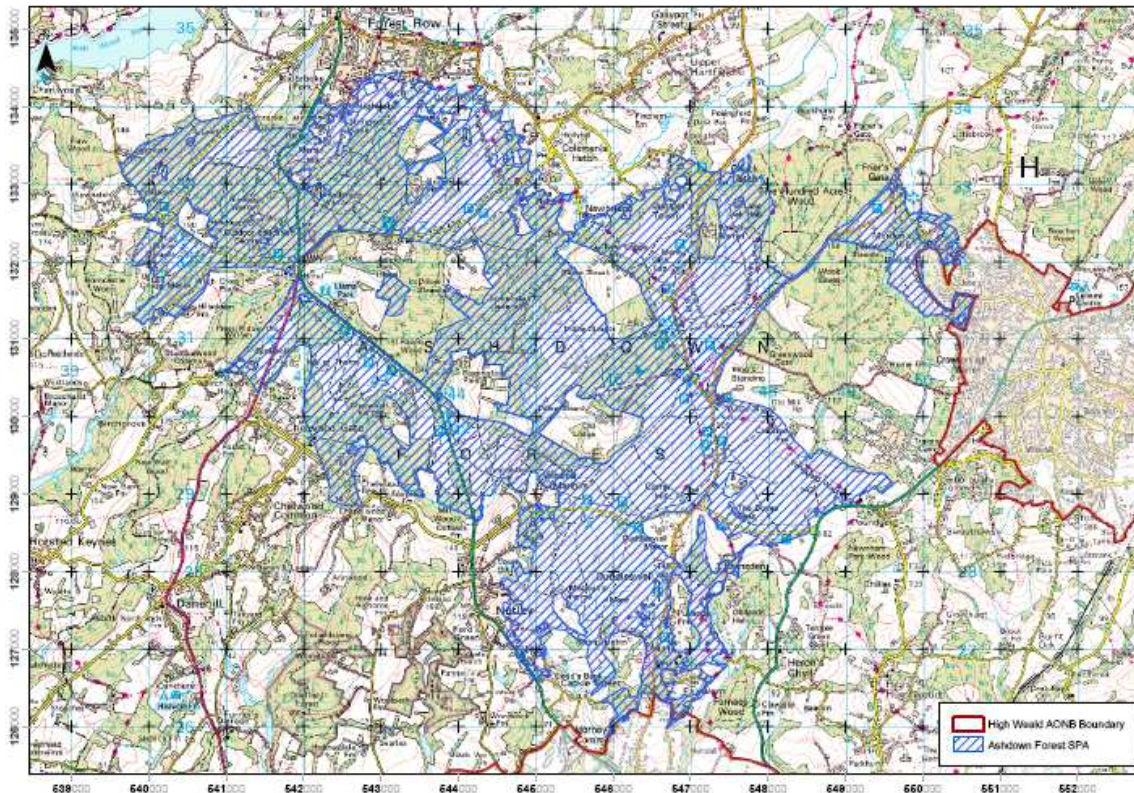
Designation: SPA

Grid reference: TQ450300 (site centroid)

Area: 3207.08 (ha)

Local Authority: Wealden District

Amount of site within AONB: Whole Site



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SAC Boundary data sourced from Natural England via www.magic.co.uk (June 2008)

General Site Character

Heath/scrub/maquis and garrigue/phygrana (50%)

Mixed woodland (40%)

Bogs/marshes/fens/water fringed vegetation (10%)

Site Conservation Objectives

To maintain, in favourable condition, habitats that support the Annex I birds *Caprimulgus europaeus* nightjar and *Sylvia undata* Dartford warbler, for which the site is designated.

Vulnerability

Lack of management, succession from open heathland to woodland is rapidly taking place, lack of resources make sustainable management difficult. Habitat fragmentation is also an issue for the heathland. This lack of grazing is now being managed via a Grazing Strategy which should address the issue. Most recreation on the site is informal, such as walking and horse-riding. There are areas where intense use is resulting in damage to some rights of way and disturbance to the Forest. The use of the Forest as an area of greenspace to facilitate new development is putting increased visitor pressure on the site. [Source: JNCC]

Relevant Plans or Projects

- East Sussex Waste & Minerals Development Framework
- East Sussex Local Transport Plan (LPT2)
- Strategic Forest Plan of the Board of the Conservators of Ashdown Forest 2008-2016

2.4 Dungeness to Pett Levels

Designation: SPA

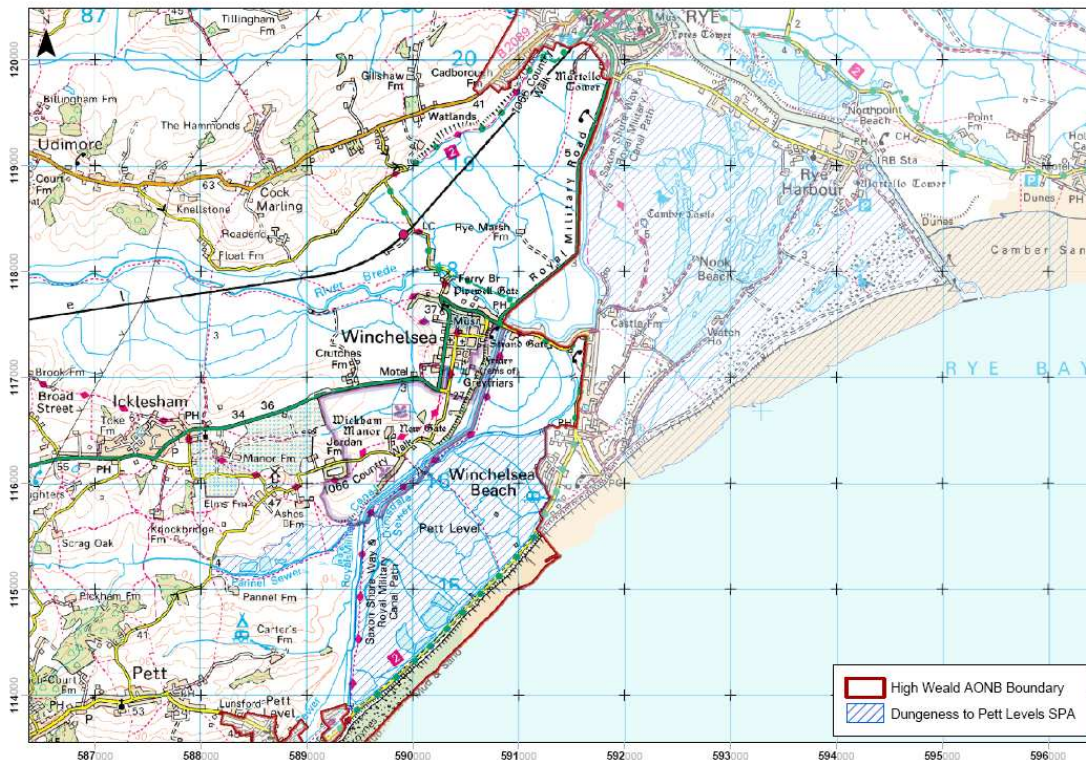
Grid reference: TQ920118

Area: **1474.04** (ha) *entire site*

Local Authority: **Rother & Shepway Districts**

Amount of site within AONB: **Partial Site** - Site extends much further to the east than can be shown on this map.

Site Map



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved 100019601 (2008)
SAC Boundary data sourced from Natural England via www.magic.co.uk (June 2008)

General Site Character

- Tidal rivers/estuaries/mud flats/sand flats/lagoons (15%)
- Salt marshes/pastures/steppes (1%)
- Shingle/sea cliffs/islets (15%)
- Inland water bodies (standing/running water) (12%)
- Bogs/marshes/water-fringed vegetation/fens (5%)
- Dry grassland/steppes (4%)
- Improved grassland (35%)
- Other arable land (9.5%)
- Broad-leaved deciduous woodland (0.5%)
- Other land (3%)

Site Conservation Objectives

To maintain in favourable condition, the habitats that support the Annex I bird species for which the site was designated; the breeding populations of *Larus melanocephalus* Mediterranean gull, *Sterna albifrons* little tern, *Sterna hirundo* common tern and the overwintering populations of *Cygnus columbianus bewickii* Bewick's swan and *Anas clypeata* northern shoveler.

Vulnerability

The site itself is vulnerable to coastal erosion. The birds for which the site is designated are at risk from predation by foxes, mink and badger – localised pest control is in force. The site is well protected from visitor disturbance, but leisure activities can be a problem so the area is zoned to try to control this activity.

The site provides a diverse coastal landscape which is vulnerable to changing agricultural practices, particularly the ploughing of grasslands for crops. Changes to turf production may also affect the bird population. Management agreements are addressing the issue of lowering water levels.

[Source: JNCC]

Relevant Plans or Projects

PLANS

- Rother LDF Core Strategy (draft) – consultation due September 2008
- Rother District Local Plan (July 2006)
- Rother & Romney Catchment Management Plan (draft) EA
- NE Application to extend the SPA and designate it as a Ramsar Site also

PROJECTS

Section 3 - Screening

3.1. Introduction

The Appropriate Assessment process can be described in three steps:

Assessing likely significant effects. This refers to the screening process, which involves Natural England as statutory consultee for nature conservation. The significance needs to be assessed objectively, with particular reference to the site's conservation objectives, integrity and condition. The subsequent section of this report forms the screening process and will be undertaken by High Weald AONB Unit staff. In combination effects will also be taken into account during the process. If it is believed that the effects highlighted as a result of screening are deemed significant – an appropriate assessment (i.e. the next 2 steps will be required).

Appropriate assessment and ascertaining the effect on site integrity. To be carried out only if significant effects have been highlighted during task 1. The evidence gathered for the baseline report will be drawn upon to assess whether options will have an impact upon site integrity.

Mitigation and alternative solutions. Finally where an objective has been found to have a significant effect through tasks 1 and 2, task 3 provides the opportunity to mitigate that effect. This could be through amending or modifying policies. If mitigation measures are deemed to not be sufficient and the effect remains significant, the objective may need to be dropped altogether. An objective which still poses significant effect on European site integrity can only be justified by 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest.'

Altogether these three steps form an Appropriate Assessment.

3.2 Screening Methodology

Clear distinction exists between the conservation objectives of the designated sites and the objectives of the High Weald Management Plan. Broadly speaking, the designated sites are concerned with the conservation of biodiversity; their objectives reflect conservation of key species and/or their associated habitats. The High Weald Management Plan is a strategic (i.e. not site specific) landscape management plan and its objectives are principally concerned with the protection and enhancement of natural beauty. This requires a broader approach; consequently the objectives reflect this and are primarily concerned with conserving and enhancing landscape features.

Nonetheless, having made the distinction above, the objectives for the conservation and enhancement of landscape features are often inextricably linked with the objectives of designated sites. For example:

'To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands' (High Weald AONB objective FH2).

Rationale: to maintain fields and field boundaries that form part of the habitat mosaic of the High Weald; and to maintain this key component of what is a rare UK survival of an essentially medieval landscape.

In parallel with this, historic field boundaries also (amongst other things):

- Are a key habitat, supporting a wealth of species
- Support and contribute to local archaeology and cultural heritage (often marking very old parish boundaries for instance).
- Have a clear role to play in functioning agricultural landscapes

So where a designation exists with an objective for a hedgerow-dependent species, its objectives would be broadly complementary with those of the HW objective, even though the rationale behind the objectives may differ. In such a case the objectives are deemed compatible, but the management regimes (the way organisations choose to go about fulfilling their objectives) may differ. The need to ensure compatible management regimes has therefore, where necessary, been highlighted in the matrix

The Assessment Matrix (see over page)

The assessment matrix: a list of the objectives of the revised High Weald AONB Management Plan, presented to the public for consultation (July 2008 to September 7th 2008) were assessed against the conservation objectives of the European sites. The assessment is designed to determine whether or not a plan option (objective, in this case) is likely to have a significant effect on a European site.

Following advice for the in combination aspect of the assessment, stakeholders are also requested to consider other relevant plans and projects when looking at the matrix. Four possible outcomes from undertaking the screening process were chosen:

Compatibility Concerns

This outcome relates to the compatibility of the objectives and/or management of the sites. Both where compatibility issues are either known or where there is the *potential* for incompatibility.

Occasionally the objectives of both the designated sites and the AONB Management Plan are broadly complimentary, yet they have divergent management regimes. An example of this is Hastings Cliffs SAC, and the AONB Management Plan objective (G2) 'to protect sandstone outcrops'. Hastings Cliffs is a naturally dynamic vegetated sea cliff system, with regular coastal erosion and slippage of the sea cliffs, exposing fresh sandstone. These two objectives clearly cannot be reconciled through the application of compatible management regimes. The Management Plan has been amended to recognise the specific management needs of the Hastings Cliffs SAC.

Positive Reinforcement

Sometimes, High Weald Management Plan objectives and designation objectives are clearly aligned, in these cases positive reinforcement is the result in the matrix.

Not Applicable/No Effect

Where the two sets of objectives are un-related or have no effect upon one another then the matrix has been left blank.

Uncertain

Where it is felt the objectives fall into none of the other categories.





3.3 Screening Results

The result of screening shows most objectives are unrelated and therefore not applicable or have no effect. Almost a quarter of the outcomes highlighted compatibility concerns between the two sets of objectives. The majority of these are *potential* concerns and many can be reconciled by ensuring management regimes are compatible.

10% of the objectives screened produced an 'uncertain' result. All of these objectives related to climate or socio-economics, and it was unclear how these would affect (positively or negatively) the conservation objectives of the designated sites. These objectives may need to be re-assessed on a case by case basis.

Finally, 5% of the objectives screened positively reinforced the objectives of the designated sites.

Matrix colour Key

	Positive Reinforcement
	Not applicable or no effect
	Compatibility Concerns
	Uncertain

HWU Objectives

Key Component	Code	Description
Geology, Landform, Water Systems and Climate	G1	To restore the natural function of river catchments
	G2	To protect the sandstone outcrops of the AONB
	G3	To maintain the appropriate local climatic conditions
Settlement	S1	To reconnect settlements, residents and their supporting economic activity with the surrounding countryside
	S2	To protect the historic pattern of settlement
	S3	To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald
Routeways	R1	To maintain the historic pattern and features of routeways
	R2	To enhance the ecological function of routeways
Woodland	W1	To maintain existing extent of woodland and particularly ancient woodland
	W2	To enhance the ecological functioning of woodland at a landscape scale
	W3	To protect the archaeology of AONB woodlands
	W4	To increase the output of sustainably produced high-quality timber and underwood for local markets
Field & Heath	FH1	To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald AONB, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management
	FH2	To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands
	FH3	To enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats
	FH4	To protect the historic features of field and heath
Public Understanding & Enjoyment	UE1	To increase opportunities for learning about and celebrating the character of the High Weald
	UE2	To increase the contribution of individuals to the conservation and enhancement of the AONB
	UE3	To increase community involvement in conservation and enhancement of the AONB
	UE4	Integrated management of the resources for informal open-air recreation to facilitate 'green' use by residents and visitors
	UE5	To acknowledge and increase peoples understanding of our shared cultural values and aspirations for the High Weald

Ashdown SAC	Ashdown SPA	Dungeness to Pett Levels SPA	Hastings Cliffs SAC
To maintain in favourable condition, the European dry heaths and Northern Atlantic wet heaths, and habitats which support GCN – Open Standing Water	To maintain in favourable condition the habitats for the population of <i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i> Nightjar and <i>Sylvia undata</i> Dartford Warbler	To maintain in favourable condition the habitats for the populations of Annex I birds	To maintain in favourable condition the annex I habitat, Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic & Baltic coasts.
Compatible management regimes required	Compatible management regimes required		
Compatible management regimes required	Compatible management regimes required		
Compatible management regimes required	Compatible management regimes required		
Compatible management regimes required	Compatible management regimes required		
Compatible management regimes required	Compatible management regimes required		
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