

Chapter Five

COUNTRYSIDE

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INTRODUCTION

5.01 Countryside covers most of the District and is a valuable natural resource of outstanding quality, internationally recognised and protected by many designations. These include an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Heritage Coasts, Special Areas of Conservation, a Special Protection Area and Ramsar site, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserves and a Local Nature Reserve. In the countryside, farming is the dominant activity, with much of the agricultural land among the best and most versatile. Economically, agriculture and rural tourism make a small but important contribution to the number and range of jobs available in the District.

Existing Situation

5.02 The southern two thirds of the District are part of the North Downs 'natural area' (see Figure 5.1) a landscape of rolling chalk hills, escarpments and, in the main, dry valleys. The 'White Cliffs of Dover' international landmark and gateway to the continent - are in the south east corner of the District, where the downland meets the coast. The District contains some 626 Ha (1,547 acres) of unimproved chalk downland, a rich ecological resource supporting a number of rare species.

5.03 In the north, the downland gives way to the flat open landscape of the northern levels, the Lower Stour Valley and Sandwich/Pegwell Bay. The landscape of this part of the North Kent Plain 'natural area' (see Figure 5.1) is largely due to the Isle of Thanet becoming part of the mainland through falling sea levels, river silting and the draining of marshland for cultivation. This area has great nature conservation interest, which includes the last valley fen in South East England, some 280 km. (174 miles) of dykes and drainage ditches, an intertidal habitat of international importance, and dune and coastal grassland.

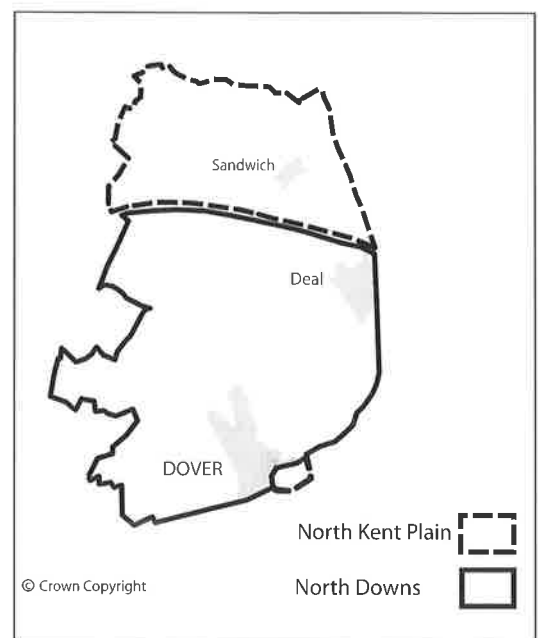


Figure 5.1 - English Nature's, Natural Areas

5.04 Despite the recognition and protection given to them, landscapes and wildlife habitats are under threat from development and changes in agricultural practice. The Council has been faced with some very difficult choices, particularly in relation to allocating sites for employment and the proposed expansion of Aylesham. In addition, there is private sector pressure for development in the rural area, particularly for dwellings, despite strong countryside protection policies. Finally, current changes in European agricultural policy, particularly set-aside and a decline in farm incomes, have led to a growing interest in farm diversification schemes. Such schemes may not always be compatible with other countryside interests.

5.05 The Plan's strategy is to concentrate and to direct development to the urban areas and through the policies of this chapter to give priority to the protection of the District's scenic and wildlife resources. Development in the countryside away from existing settlements or areas allocated for development in the Plan is to be strictly controlled.

Applying the Plan's Aims and Objectives

5.06 The countryside is an irreplaceable and non-renewable resource in that, by and large, its loss to development is permanent. In line with Aim 1 and Objectives 1 and 2, this resource needs to be conserved, its quality protected and development only allowed where it would benefit economic activity and maintain or enhance the natural environment. Economic and accessibility issues (Aims 2 and 3) are considered in Chapters 3 and 12, respectively.

Countryside Strategy

5.07 Based on Aim 1, the Plan's Countryside Strategy will minimise the loss of countryside and seek to:-

- (a) protect and enhance the character of the local landscape;
- (b) protect all ecosystems and maintain biodiversity;
- (c) create new sites for nature conservation;
- (d) maintain the regenerative and productive capacity of the land; and
- (e) restore areas which are degraded or polluted.

The economic and social well-being of a rural area is considered elsewhere in the Plan.

5.08 While the planning system will do as much as its powers allow, it cannot bring about a sustainable countryside on its own. Others - especially the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), landowners and farmers - have far greater influence and must play their part in achieving a more sustainable countryside. For example, DEFRA offer assistance to farmers to reconcile agricultural and environmental objectives through a combination of guidance and financial incentives. Advice in the form of leaflets, demonstrations and personal on-farm visits is provided to encourage farmers to employ good practice and environmental care. To complement this, there are economic incentives to encourage farmers to manage their land in a way that delivers particular environmental benefits eg the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. As well as DEFRA, a variety of other agencies, such as the Countryside Agency and Forestry Authority, offer assistance to landowners to provide environmental benefits.



The countryside a resource to be protected

5.09 To date, protecting the countryside has meant that the most important areas are covered by various agricultural, landscape or nature conservation designations. Although countryside protection will continue to play a major role, a sustainable approach requires a more integrated stewardship strategy, which protects and manages the whole resource. Such an approach is very new and, given the existing legal framework, this Plan can only apply it in a limited way to management issues.

5.10 The District's coast and countryside has great scenic quality and much of it is protected by national, countywide and local landscape designations. It is also to be safeguarded for its own sake in line with the PPG7 guidance and Structure Plan Policy ENV1, therefore, long term protection is given to all countryside whether or not designated. In applying Policy CO1, the countryside resource is defined as undeveloped land beyond urban boundaries and rural settlement confines. This excludes land allocated for development in the Plan together with formal open space, and existing buildings and their curtilage.

Policy CO1

Development which would result in the loss of, or adversely affect, the countryside will only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that:-

- (i) it is justified by the needs of agriculture; or**
- (ii) it is justified by an overriding need to sustain the rural economy; and**
- (iii) is of a type which demands a rural location.**

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, reducing pollution, recycling redundant resources, concentrating investment at the urban areas and minimising the need to travel. No Objectives are adversely affected.

LANDSCAPE

Designated Landscape

5.11 In designated areas, evidence of overriding need is also required. Overriding need will depend upon the status of the designation and the nature of the development. In situations where more than one designation applies, the proposals will be required to comply with the most stringent definition of need.

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

5.12 In recognition of the national importance of the North Downs landscape, the Countryside Agency has designated the Kent Downs AONB. Those sections of the AONB falling within the District are shown on the Proposals Map. The main objective of AONB designation is to conserve the natural beauty of the landscape in designated areas. Although not an objective, informal recreation in AONBs is encouraged if consistent with the main objective and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses. It is also appropriate to have regard to the economic and social well being of the area. Structure Plan Policy ENV3 supports this approach.

5.13 PPG7 states that major industrial or commercial development in the AONB should not be allowed unless a proven national interest and lack of alternative sites can be demonstrated. This is also reflected in regional planning guidance (RPG9). Examples of exceptional circumstances in the District include the A20 Dover-Folkestone Improved Route and the combined Dover-Folkestone Wastewater Treatment Plant at Broomfield Bank. PPG22 sets out the special considerations which apply to wind energy installations (see Chapter 7). Any development which can be justified under exceptional circumstances will require a very high standard of design (see Chapter 8).

5.14 In September 1995, the Countryside Agency published a landscape assessment to identify the distinctive elements which contribute to local landscape character within different parts of the AONB. It identifies vulnerable areas and sets out landscape guidelines for the designated area. In July 1997, a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) was set up to prepare a management plan for the Kent Downs AONB and to otherwise consider matters of AONB wide interest. The Council is a member of the JAC.

Policy CO2

Within the Kent Downs AONB, priority will be given to the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape over other planning considerations. Development which would have an adverse affect upon the natural beauty of the area, including the landscape character and its components, will not be permitted unless it is essential to meet a demonstrable economic or social need which cannot be met elsewhere. In all cases development must be appropriate in location, and incorporate design and associated landscape features and measures to minimise impact on both the immediate and the wider landscape.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, reducing pollution, recycling redundant resources, concentrating investment at the urban areas, limiting housing development in rural settlements and minimising the need to travel. No Objectives are adversely affected.

5.15 Further guidance on the requirements for the design of proposals within an AONB is provided in Chapter 8.

Special Landscape Areas (SLA)

5.16 Structure Plan Policy ENV4 requires local plans to give long term protection to SLAs, by normally giving priority to landscape over other planning considerations. SLA boundaries were broadly defined in the Kent Countryside Local Plan 1983 though the Structure Plan allows local plans to review the SLA boundaries. The District contains two SLAs, the North Downs SLA and the Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay SLA. Their extent is shown on the Proposals Map. Where not also an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the North Downs SLA is typified by gentle rolling chalk downland, overlain with the somewhat distant relationship of woods, hedgelines and tree belts in a large, open and predominantly arable field network. More intimate landscapes, closer to the dry valleys of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, do occur but are uncommon and small in size. In contrast, the Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay SLA is characterised by an open, flat and largely unspoilt coastal landscape. The SLA is widely visible but industrial development north of Sandwich is an intrusive feature, which also detracts from the SLA's sense of remoteness.

5.17 An assessment of the appropriateness of the detailed boundary of the SLAs, as defined in the Kent Countryside Local Plan and the Dover and Western Parishes Local Plan, has been carried out. The SLA boundaries remain the same except for minor amendments to the North Downs SLA. This includes a small area of countryside to the south of Wingham, and east and west of the B2046, which is proposed as an extension to the area identified as a SLA in neighbouring Canterbury District and Hawkshill Down, the area of countryside between Walmer and Kingsdown.

Policy CO3

Within the North Downs SLA and the Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay SLA, priority will be given to the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape over other planning considerations. Development which would have an adverse affect upon the landscape character will not be permitted unless there is a demonstrable economic or social need for the development. In all cases development must be appropriate in location, and incorporate design and associated landscape features and measures to minimise visual impact.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, reducing pollution, recycling redundant resources, concentrating investment at the urban areas, limiting housing development in rural settlements and minimising the need to travel. No Objectives are adversely affected.

Ash Levels Area of Local Landscape Significance (ALLS)

5.18 The Structure Plan encourages local plans to identify, protect and, where possible, manage and enhance areas and features of local landscape significance. The open landscape and system of dykes to drain marshlands, which typifies the area between Stourmouth and Richborough (known locally as the Ash Levels), is unique within the District and worthy of additional protection. This landscape extends into the neighbouring Districts of Canterbury and Thanet, where local plan protection has also been given.



The Ash Levels

5.19 The ALLS is characterised by a lack of both buildings and mass planting, such as woodland, shelter belts or orchards. It is unlikely that development, other than that associated with agriculture or nature conservation, would be acceptable. Particular care will be needed in the siting and design of agricultural buildings, as no mitigation would be achieved by screening.

Policy CO4

Within the Ash Levels Area of Local Landscape Significance priority will be given to the protection of the open quality of the local landscape over other planning considerations, consistent with the economic and social well-being of the area. In all cases development must be appropriate in location, and incorporate design and landscape features and measures to minimise visual impact.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, reducing pollution, recycling redundant resources, concentrating investment at the urban areas and minimising the need to travel. No Objectives are adversely affected

The Coast

Undeveloped Coast

5.20 PPG20 states that development should not be allowed on the coast if a coastal location is not required, or in areas of eroding cliffs or land instability which would require coastal protection works (see also Chapter 6). It also requires the off-shore impact of on-shore development to be taken into account when determining proposals for development on the coast. Structure Plan Policy ENV10 seeks to conserve and enhance the scenic, heritage and scientific value of all undeveloped coast in the County. Development along the undeveloped coast and in adjoining countryside will only be permitted if no suitable alternative site exists on the developed coast and if it does not affect the interests identified in Policy ENV10. However, the siting of development on the undeveloped coast will always be preferred to a location on a Heritage Coast.

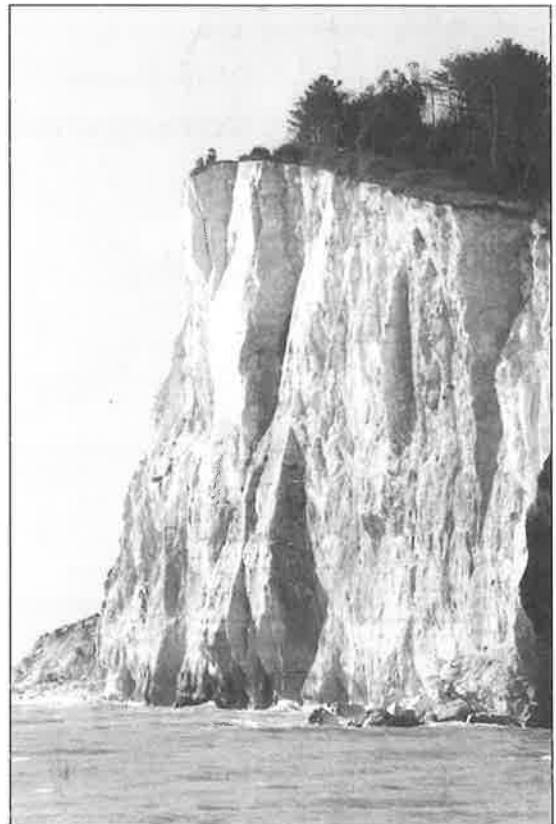
5.21 The Plan does not define the inland boundary of the undeveloped coast as the extent to which Policy CO5 will apply depends on the nature of the development, and the character and interest of the area. In addition, the undeveloped coast has been defined to exclude areas designated Heritage Coast.

Heritage Coasts

5.22 The District includes the South Foreland Heritage Coast and the Dover-Folkestone Heritage Coast. These are the only stretches of Heritage Coast in Kent. The Dover-Folkestone Heritage Coast includes a large area reclaimed from the sea at the foot of Shakespeare Cliff. This area, named Samphire Hoe, was created by depositing spoil from the Channel Tunnel.

5.23 The objectives of Heritage Coast designation are outlined in PPG20. Of equal importance are preserving the coast's heritage and scenic beauty, as well as protecting its nature conservation value. The Council and the Countryside Agency have agreed both inland boundaries and these are shown on the Proposals Map.

5.24 Structure Plan Policy ENV9 gives general protection to heritage coasts from intrusive development. This is developed in Policy CO5 below, which recognises that the two Heritage Coasts also fall within the AONB and a SLA. The District Council continues its commitment to conserving, enhancing and managing the landscape, wildlife and recreational value of the Heritage Coasts and to limiting development which is inconsistent with these objectives. The Council supports a coordinated approach to the protection, conservation and enhancement of the Heritage Coasts and the preparation of a management plan.



South Foreland Heritage Coast

Policy CO5

Development will only be permitted on the Undeveloped or Heritage Coasts, if:-

- (i) a coastal location is essential and no suitable alternative site exists;
- (ii) the development is not in an area of eroding cliffs or unstable land;
- (iii) it would not result in the need for coastal protection works; and
- (iv) there is no adverse off-shore impact.

Additionally, on the Heritage Coasts, development will not be permitted if it would adversely affect the scenic beauty, heritage or nature conservation value of a Heritage Coast or the Undeveloped Coast.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works toward the Objectives of protecting the countryside, managing and enhancing habitats, species and landscapes. No Objectives are adversely affected.

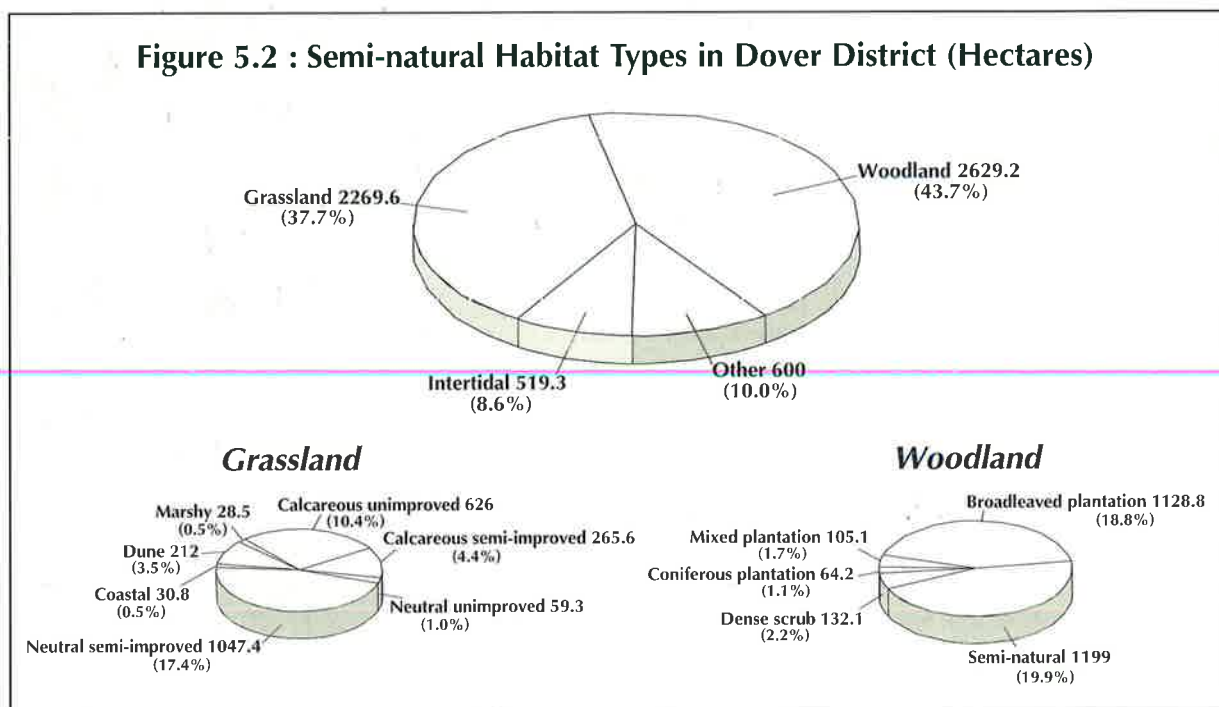
NATURE CONSERVATION

General Principles of Protection

5.25 International conventions and national legislation afford special protection to many species and their habitats. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it a criminal offence to remove or harm them. Protected species found within the District include the little tern, the grey plover, all bats, the adder, the adonis blue and silver spotted skipper butterflies, and several orchids.

5.26 A Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for Kent has been produced in line with the UK BAP. Its purpose is to identify important wildlife habitats and species and set targets for habitat conservation and enhancement in the long term.

Figure 5.2 : Semi-natural Habitat Types in Dover District (Hectares)



Source: Kent Wildlife Habitat Survey – Dover District Report (Volume 1)

Small errors may exist due to rounding

'Other' includes swamp and inundation, standing water, coastal habitats above the high water mark and bare ground

5.27 The 1991 Kent Wildlife Habitat Survey indicates that whilst the District's habitat resource is below the county average, it is still custodian of a major habitat resource, with semi-natural habitat covering about 20% of the District's area. However, the Survey notes that this resource is under threat.

5.28 English Nature and PPG9 advise that, while protection of individual sites is important and should continue, there is also a need to protect all wildlife habitats. Structure Plan Policy ENV2 confirms the requirement to provide general protection and does not distinguish between designated sites and the natural resource at large. Policy CO6 reflects this approach to nature conservation in the District.

Designated Sites

Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI)

5.29 PPG9 encourages local planning authorities to identify nature conservation interests of local importance and to include such areas in local plans. The Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) has identified 41 SNCIs in the District. These sites, which are shown on the Proposals Map, are protected by Structure Plan Policy ENV6. This list is not necessarily exhaustive as reviews undertaken by KWT may reveal more sites suitable for SNCI designation. Policy CO6 will apply to SNCIs shown on the Proposals Map as well as to those which become designated during the life of the Plan.

Statutory Nature Reserves

5.30 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are areas of national conservation importance, which attract financial support from English Nature. To be declared a NNR the area must be a designated SSSI. There are two NNRs in the District:-

- (i) Sandwich Bay and Pegwell Bay NNR; and
- (ii) Lydden and Temple Ewell Downs NNR.

Policy CO6 gives protection to NNRs in the District.

5.31 English Nature encourages the designation of Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). Declaring LNRs helps provide a firm basis for managing and enhancing the nature conservation value of particular sites. Structure Plan Policy ENV6 protects LNRs and Policy CO6 gives local protection to LNRs in the District. The District contains one Local Nature Reserve, the Western Heights SNCI.



Western Heights Local Nature Reserve, Dover

5.32 Shepway District Council has designated a LNR and established a Country Park on that part of the Folkestone Warren SSSI within its area. Part of the Warren lies within Dover District and the Council will explore the possibility of establishing a complementary LNR and Country Park with landowners. Should other areas prove suitable, the Council may consider further designations. The declaration of a LNR can take a long time and, therefore, Policy CO6 will apply to LNRs not shown on the Proposals Map but which may be proposed or become designated during the Plan Period.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

5.33 English Nature notifies the District Council of these sites. Designation is a means of protecting flora, fauna and geological features of particular importance. Structure Plan Policy ENV5 implements this intention.

5.34 In the District, the main concerns are the protection of particular habitats (including ancient woodland, chalk grassland and marshes), species and the geological features of the coast-line. The

location and extent of SSSIs is reviewed periodically and six sites in the District have been notified:-

- (a) part of Sandwich Bay and Hacklinge Marshes;
- (b) part of Preston Marshes;
- (c) Dover to Kingsdown Cliffs;
- (d) part of Alkham, Lydden and Swingfield Woods;
- (e) part of Folkestone Warren; and
- (f) Lydden and Temple Ewell Downs.



Folkestone Warren SSSI

5.35 These sites are shown on the Proposals Map and given local protection through Policy CO6. In addition, Policy CO6 will apply to SSSIs not shown on the Proposals Map but which may be proposed or become designated during the Plan Period.

Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar Site

5.36 The Pegwell Bay/Sandwich Bay area is of international significance for wetland and migratory birds and other species. The intertidal zone and the areas of grazing marsh, part of which lies in Thanet District, have been classified a SPA under the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (79/409/EEC) and listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention (Command 6465). The boundaries of each designation are shown on the Proposals Map.

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

5.37 The European Union Habitats Directive requires the Government to identify and conserve plant and animal habitats of international importance. Following consultation with English Nature and government departments, the former Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions drew together a list of candidate SACs for forwarding to the European Commission. In the District, this includes two areas, both of which contain priority habitats or species:-

- (i) part of Sandwich Bay and Hacklinge Marshes SSSI; and
- (ii) Lydden and Temple Ewell Downs SSSI.

5.38 The Government and European Commission is required to agree the areas to be designated as SACs by June 1998. Accelerated arrangements apply to SACs hosting priority habitats or species and it is likely that out of those areas included on the list these will be agreed first. For the purposes of considering development proposals affecting them, PPG9 requires candidate SACs to be treated in the same way as designated SACs. These sites and named species are protected by the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994. Together, the SPA and SACs will form a network of internationally important wildlife sites within the European Union. This network will be known as Natura 2000.

Development Proposals

5.39 When development would adversely affect any part of the habitat resource, the applicant will need to demonstrate that no alternative solution is available. The 'habitat resource' is defined as all those semi-natural habitats which show affinity to unimproved land or species rich aquatic systems, identified in surveys verified by the Council. An 'alternative solution' would be one which causes no harm to the resource and is appropriate for the development having regard to known planning constraints. When no alternative solution exists, the applicant will be required to make arrangements to either re-establish the threatened habitat in another location or to secure habitat management of land. The purpose of these compensatory measures is to ensure that there is no net long term loss of the affected habitat(s). Additionally, in the case of a SPA or SAC, the Council will wish to ensure that the overall coherence of

the Natura 2000 network is protected. The developer is encouraged to consult the Council on this matter before an application is submitted.

5.40 When development would adversely affect a designated site, the applicant will also need to demonstrate an overriding case for the development. For a SNCI or LNR, this will mean demonstrating at least a Countywide interest. A Countywide interest is defined as being important to the District as a whole, as well as a wider area. In the case of a SSSI, a proven national interest for the development will need to be demonstrated. When a proposed development would affect the integrity of a Ramsar site, or a SPA or SAC which does not host a priority habitat or species, a development will have to demonstrate that there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest which are sufficient to outweigh the ecological importance of the site. When a SPA or SAC site hosts a priority habitat or species, a development will have to demonstrate overriding reasons of human health and public safety, or beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment or, further to an opinion from the European Commission, other imperative reasons of overriding public interest.

5.41 If the Council wishes to grant planning permission within a SSSI and this is contrary to the advice of English Nature, an opportunity will be given to English Nature to consider whether they wish to ask the Secretary of State to call in the application in accordance with the advice given in PPG9. In addition, certain notified operations, which could damage habitats and species, are controlled by English Nature. If the proposed development is likely to affect a SSSI, an Environmental Assessment may be required (see Chapter 8) and English Nature may need to be consulted

Policy CO6

Development which would adversely affect the wildlife habitat resource will only be permitted if:-

- (i) no alternative solution is available;**
- (ii) protected species would not be harmed;**
- (iii) an overriding case for the development can be demonstrated; and**
- (iv) full compensatory measures are provided.**

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, managing and enhancing habitats, species and landscapes. No Objectives are adversely affected.

LANDSCAPE AND NATURE CONSERVATION FEATURES

Trees and Woodland

5.42 PPG9 notes that woodland can have great nature conservation and amenity value. Structure Plan Policy ENV7 requires local plans to include policies for protecting woodland. The District contains large areas of woodland, including ancient woodland (semi-natural and replanted) dating from the Middle Ages or earlier, and a substantial number of scattered trees in rural and urban areas.

5.43 Individual trees, tree groups and woodland can be, and often are, protected by Tree Preservation Orders. Protection is also given if they are located in a Conservation Area. In addition, felling a substantial amount of timber requires a licence from the Forestry Authority. Nevertheless, trees remain under threat from development pressures. When necessary, Tree Preservation Orders will be used to protect individual trees, tree groups and woodland if their loss would be significant in landscape, visual amenity or nature conservation terms.

Policy CO7

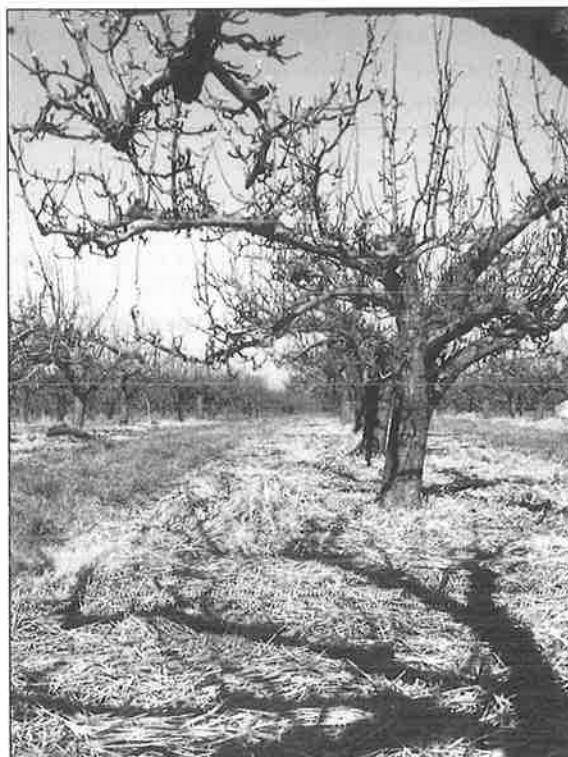
Proposals for development which would adversely affect Ancient Woodland, shown on the Proposals Map, will not be permitted.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside and reducing pollution. No Objectives are adversely affected.

Plantation Woodland and Traditional Orchards

5.44 Although planted rather than naturally occurring, broadleaved plantation woodland and remnants of traditional orchards have considerable landscape and nature conservation value, and are found throughout the District. As they are generally planted for their productive value, specific protection is not considered appropriate though Policies CO1 and CO6 will apply. Grants are available through the Forestry Authority's Woodland Grant Scheme and DEFRA's Farm Woodland Premium Scheme. The Council will support proposals for plantation woodland and encourage native species to be used provided there is no conflict with existing wildlife interests or landscape character. The Council will also offer advice in obtaining grants.



Traditional orchard

Community Woodland

5.45 Structure Plan Policy ENV8 commits the County Council to investigate the potential for woodland planting in the East Kent Coalfield. The Council supports the afforestation of the three spoil tips and is particularly keen to explore, with landowners and other interested parties, a Community Woodland at Betteshanger to serve Deal. In addition to schemes described in paragraph 5.44, funds are available from the Forestry Authority for Community Woodlands and funding is available from English Partnership. However, the Council is aware of technical difficulties associated with greening such sites, not least heat and the acidity of shales (see also Chapters 3, 7 and 15). The first step is to assess the viability for such schemes.

Hedgerows

5.46 In addition to their landscape significance, hedgerows act as habitats and corridors for wildlife. Although the District has an extensive network of hedgerows, many are fragmented and, in these cases, their ecological role may be diminished. Hedgerow loss has occurred mainly through agricultural intensification.

5.47 Structure Plan Policy ENV7 makes it a strategic objective to maintain and enhance the County's hedgerow network. The Hedgerow Regulations 1997 are intended to protect hedgerows which are considered to be 'irreplaceable'. Policy CO8 seeks to protect the remaining 'replaceable' network. When development would threaten a hedgerow, the developer will be required to demonstrate that no practicable alternative solution exists, for example, through the resiting of an access road or building. In cases where damage is unavoidable, remedial measures will be required.

Policy CO8

Development which would adversely affect a hedgerow will only be permitted if:-

- (i) no practicable alternatives exist;**
- (ii) suitable native replacement planting is provided; and**
- (iii) future maintenance is secured through the imposition of conditions or legal agreements.**

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of protecting the countryside, managing and enhancing habitats, species and landscapes and reducing pollution. No Objectives are adversely affected.

5.48 Funds are available through DEFRA's Field Boundaries Option of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme to restore existing and establish new hedgerows. The Council will support proposals to enhance the District's hedgerow network and will offer advice in obtaining grants.

AGRICULTURE

Relationship to Landscape and Nature Conservation

5.49 Traditionally, priority has been given to conserving agricultural land for its productive value. However, changes in farming policy and techniques have led to a surplus of some agricultural produce and this has led to some agricultural land being temporarily taken out of production. The agricultural industry is, therefore, undergoing a period of great change which is likely to extend some way into the future. While reaffirming the need to give long term protection to agricultural land, particularly the best and most versatile, PPG7 has now shifted the balance in favour of safeguarding the countryside for its own sake and encouraging diversification of economic activity in the rural area so as to provide wide and varied employment opportunities. The priority to protect the countryside for its own sake and support the agricultural and horticultural industries through diversification is reflected in Structure Plan Policies ENV1 and ED5.

Protecting the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

5.50 Agricultural land covers about 80% of the District's area. It is likely that a significant proportion of this is 'best and most versatile', as defined by the DEFRA system of Agricultural Land Classification. PPG7 defines such land as Grades 1, 2 and 3a.

5.51 The best and most versatile agricultural land should be protected as a national resource for future generations and considerable weight should be given to protecting such land from development. Therefore, a developer will need to demonstrate an overriding need if a proposal would lead to loss.

Policy CO9

Development which would result in the irreversible loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land will only be permitted if:-

- (i) it can be demonstrated that it cannot be located on previously developed sites or, failing that, on land within the boundaries of existing developed sites or, failing that, on poorer quality farmland; and**
- (ii) an overriding need for the development which outweighs the agricultural considerations can be demonstrated.**

If land in Grades 1, 2 or 3a does need to be developed, and there is a choice between sites in different grades, development should be directed towards land of the lowest grade.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works toward the Objective of protecting the countryside. No Objectives are adversely affected.

MANAGING THE COUNTRYSIDE

An Integrated Stewardship Strategy

5.52 Government Guidance, including PPG7, supports the enhancement of the countryside. Structure Plan Policy ENV2 encourages District Councils to include enhancement and management policies in local plans. A comprehensive and integrated approach to managing the countryside is being developed in the District, using the two distinct natural areas of the North Downs and North Kent Plain as its basis.

Managing the North Downs Natural Area

5.53 The importance of the North Downs is signified by the number of protective countryside designations it has. In particular, some of the chalk grassland in the District has been recognised as internationally important for its wildlife habitat value and is designated a SAC (See paragraph 5.37). However, threats exist which planning policies cannot directly influence. For example, unimproved chalk grassland is being lost through a decline in traditional grazing methods.

5.54 The Council is a core funder of the White Cliffs Countryside Project (WCCP), which helps manage the majority of unimproved chalk grassland in the District. The Council strongly supports the work of the WCCP and would welcome further inter-agency management initiatives involving farmers and other landowners. In particular, major changes in the agricultural sector provide an opportunity to, for example, use 'set-aside' land for nature conservation and introduce organic farming methods.

5.55 Funds for this type of conservation work are available from a variety of sources. The Council will continue to provide financial and technical support to the White Cliffs Countryside Project and will support initiatives which encourage the adoption of more sustainable management practices on the North Downs.

North Kent Plain Natural Area

5.56 The northern part of the District has a distinctive landscape, contains some of the most productive soils and is of significant ecological value. Protective designations apply but the planning system has little control over threats to marshy pasture, fenland, the River Stour, associated drainage dykes and the estuary from pollution, habitat destruction and interference.

5.57 Structure Plan Policy ENV11 seeks the conservation and enhancement of river corridors, while taking into account recreation and access issues. The Council considers that a management plan for the Lower Stour Valley and its surrounding marshy SSSI is essential. This might occur through the extension of the Kentish Stour Management Plan, which currently covers the river from its source to the west of Canterbury, and through a proposed Estuary Management Plan (see Chapter 6). Neighbouring Thanet District Council supports such partnership initiatives. In July 1997, the Council became a core funder of the Kentish Stour Countryside Project (KSCP).



The North Kent Plain

Green Corridors

5.58 PPG9 seeks the development of nature conservation objectives for built-up urban areas and the preservation of wildlife corridors. The Structure Plan encourages District Councils to identify and protect areas and features of local wildlife importance. Survey work has identified a number of green corridors based on railway embankments, roadside verges and river courses. Shown on the Proposals Map, these

linear features provide wildlife corridors, linking the countryside with the built-up area of Dover and are often important habitats in their own right.

5.59 The value of these areas to wildlife largely depends on the way in which they are managed. For example, employing particular grass management techniques along the edge of a recreation ground can significantly increase the potential for wildlife. The active cooperation of landowners to agree and implement management plans is required. Such plans would complement the planning activities of the Council. The identification of green corridors is, therefore, only the first step towards conserving and enhancing an integrated system of wildlife habitats. New development may allow for new links, which extends the network. There may also be limited opportunities to increase public access, which will be examined through management plans prepared by the District.

Policy CO10

Proposals for development which would sever or destroy a green corridor, shown on the Proposals Map, will not be permitted. Where practical, proposals for development should include new links in the green corridor network.

Environmental Appraisal

The policy works towards the Objectives of managing and enhancing habitats, species and landscapes, protecting open space and reducing pollution. No Objectives are adversely affected.

Promotion

5.60 The outstanding quality of the District's countryside is a valuable asset, both for its own sake and in helping to boost the local economy. In promoting the countryside for tourism, emphasis will continue to be placed on the quality of management schemes and accompanying promotional material. However, the Council is concerned that promotion is handled sensitively in order to strike a balance between countryside protection and visitor generation. If not, damage could be done to the very qualities which the Council is seeking to protect.

5.61 Promotion includes the provision of interpretive facilities, development and management of paths, schools' liaison and the publication of educational material, establishing a volunteer workforce and developing international links. It is essential that all initiatives are co-ordinated and compatible. To be successful, these bodies must work closely with landowners and farmers to, for example, encourage farm based tourism initiatives. The Council will seek to ensure that countryside management and promotional initiatives will enhance and sustain the special qualities of the natural environment.

