

## Chapter 4: Protecting our natural environment

4.1 We hold our environment in trust for current and future generations. Kent's natural environment is a prized asset which in some parts of the county is recognised as superb. Protecting and enhancing the environment is fundamental to ensuring the well being and prosperity of this and future generations. The challenge for the Structure Plan is to protect the environment while at the same time allowing for essential development.

### Key Issues for Kent:

- Protecting the countryside, coast, fauna and flora
- Conserving and enhancing the differing landscapes of Kent and their distinctive character

### Countryside and Coast

4.2. Kent's countryside and coast are varied and have an intrinsic value of their own. Their many distinctive features include: the North Kent Marshes; the steep cliffs around Dover and Thanet; the scarp slopes of the North Downs; the intimate woodlands of the High Weald; the vast shingle beaches and open expanses of Romney Marsh; and the county's traditional patterns of streams, fields, hedgerows and orchards.

4.3 Landscapes operate at many levels, from local networks of wildlife habitats through river catchments such as the areas alongside the Stour and Medway to the way people live, work and enjoy

the countryside. Both natural and man made elements influence the structure of the countryside, including such things as geology and soils, topography, vegetation cover and enclosure patterns.

The **landscapes of Kent** are important for themselves and because of the impact they have on the quality of life of those who live, work and spend time in the county. The benefits include:

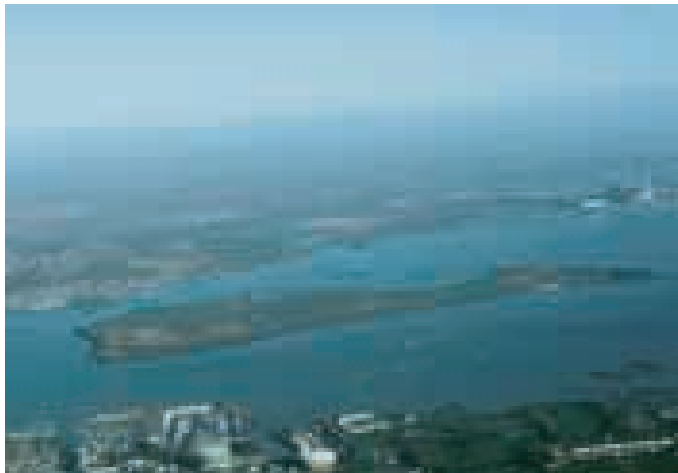
- Supporting the economy of rural areas, including farming;
- Influencing perceptions of Kent and encouraging tourism and investment;
- Contributing to people's enjoyment, education, health and well-being;
- Providing an attractive setting for Kent's villages and towns;
- Supporting features which help maintain day-to-day living, such as defence against flooding provided by coastal habitats;
- Maintaining natural systems which contribute to daily needs such as water catchments;
- Preserving our relationships with nature and with past cultures.

4.4 The Kent coast and estuaries are an important local and national resource, particularly in terms of nature conservation value, scenic quality and their importance for recreation. However, they are under pressure from a variety of commercial and recreational uses. Opportunities for development within undeveloped stretches of coast are





increasingly limited. Every effort should be made to protect undeveloped stretches of our coastline. However there may be developments that require a coastal location or direct access to the water e.g. port facilities and related development or sea defence works. In cases like these the local planning authorities should assess what impact the proposed development would have on the landscape, seascape and conservation of the stretch of estuary or coastline involved. They should also consider defining the extent of undeveloped coast and estuaries in Local Development Documents in order to allow the objectives of Policy E2 to be applied clearly. This should include assessment of the extent to which Policy E2 will apply inland of the undeveloped coast and estuaries. Within built up coastal and estuarial areas assessment of the impacts of development on townscape and the seascape or riverscape will also be important including the contribution made to the retention or opening up of views of the water.



4.5 The main river estuaries are important wildlife corridors. The Tidal Thames is a wildlife corridor of considerable importance bordered by the Thames Gateway growth area. Measures to sustain and improve the quality and quantity of its wildlife habitats (through, for example, the Tidal Thames Habitat Action Plan) should be pursued.

4.6 Protection and enhancement of the countryside and coast should reflect the way they are valued, take account of the factors which have helped shape them, and respect the functions they serve.

### **Policy E1: Protecting Kent's Countryside**

**Kent's countryside will be protected for its own sake. Development in the countryside should seek to maintain or enhance it. Development which will adversely affect the countryside will not be permitted unless there is an overriding need for it which outweighs the requirement to protect the countryside**

### **Policy E2: Protecting Kent's Coast and Estuaries**

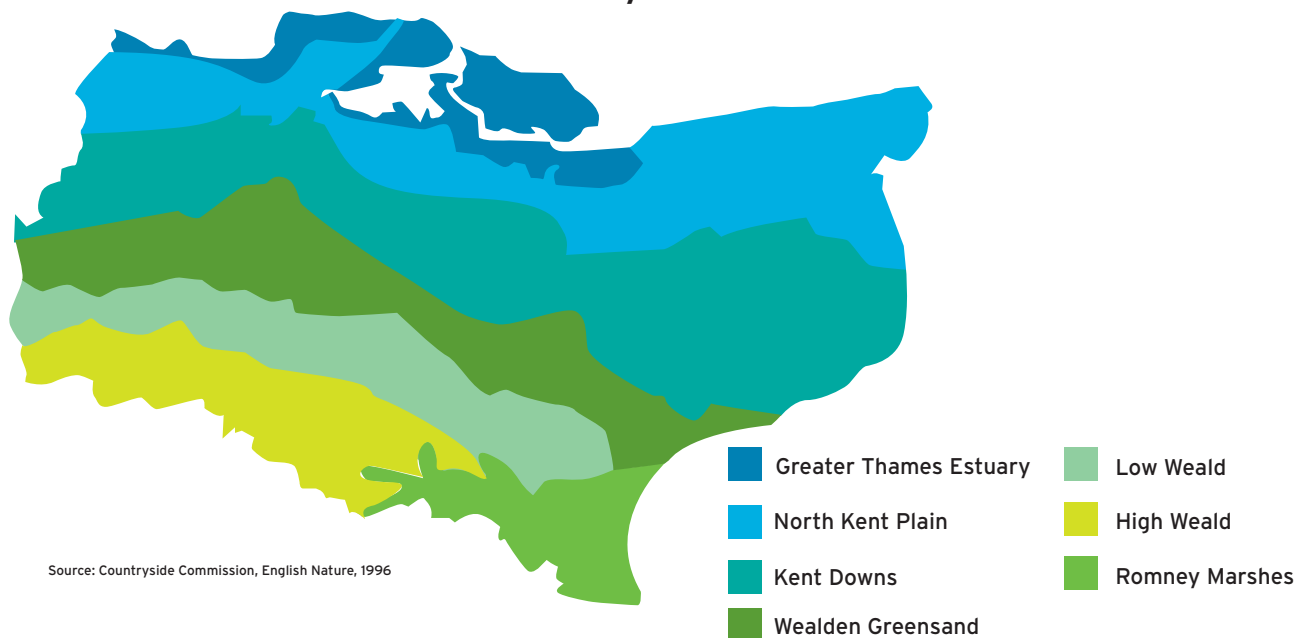
**Kent's undeveloped coast and estuaries, except where allocated for port development and associated infrastructure, will be conserved and enhanced. Development in such areas and in adjoining countryside will not be permitted if it materially detracts from the scenic, heritage, wildlife or scientific value of these areas.**

### **Landscape Character**

4.7 Kent's identity as the Garden of England is well established but its character is being eroded, even in areas where the landscape is protected. Changing agricultural practices, new transport infrastructure and other development have all had an impact.

The seven main natural character areas of Kent identified by the Countryside Agency and English Nature are:

### Countryside Character



Source: Countryside Commission, English Nature, 1996

- Greater Thames Estuary
- North Kent Plain
- Kent Downs
- Wealden Greensand
- Low Weald
- High Weald
- Romney Marshes

4.8 Changes in the countryside which are necessary and inevitable should be managed in a way which, as far as possible, strengthens its pattern and diversity rather than eroding character and distinctiveness. Government guidance places increasing emphasis on conserving the countryside by assessing the

character of its landscape. This approach will help to ensure that Kent's character and distinctiveness are safeguarded, and where possible, enhanced. Landscape character embraces not only visual appearance of the countryside and sense of place but also its natural and cultural heritage.

4.9 Each of the main character areas shown on the map has a unique make-up of geology and soils, biodiversity, appearance, settlement and land use patterns, history, locally distinctive architecture, and degree of tranquillity. The main areas are divided further into local character areas which have been given broad priorities for the conservation, restoration, reinforcement and creation of distinctive landscape features.

4.10 Local Planning Authorities will need to carry out more detailed character assessments for their areas within the period of this Plan. Supplementary Planning Guidance on county wide landscape character assessments will accompany the Structure Plan and help authorities prepare Local Development Documents. Kent County Council's Landscape Strategy Map, Medway Council's Landscape and Urban Design Framework, and the Kent Historic Landscape Characterisation Study, all provide guidance and information to assist in implementing the policy. The historic dimension of the landscape is also addressed by Policy QL10. The Landscape Strategy Map offers guidance on a Kent wide approach to protecting and enhancing landscapes and sets out priorities for landscape action. It also suggests how the type, scale and form of development which is justified might respect the character of the countryside.

**Policy E3: Protection and Enhancement of Landscape Character**

**Kent's landscape and wildlife habitats will be conserved and enhanced. Development will not be permitted if it would lead to the loss of features or habitats which are of landscape, historic, wildlife or geological importance, or are of an unspoilt quality free from urban intrusion unless there is a need for development which outweighs these countryside considerations.**

**Where a need for development in the countryside**

is justified important features and characteristics will be retained. Proposals will be required to reflect the need for conservation, reinforcement, restoration or creation of countryside character and provide for the appropriate management of important features and the wider landscape.

## Designated Landscapes

### Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Heritage Coast

4.11 Kent has two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), the Kent Downs and the High Weald, and two stretches of Heritage Coast, which stretch from Kingsdown to Dover and from Dover to Folkestone. These are nationally important landscapes which have a similar status to national parks. The emphasis within them is to conserve their natural beauty whilst having regard to the area's economic and social well being. Development proposals outside the designated area of an AONB should be considered for any effect they might have on the natural beauty of the AONB.

4.12 Past policy has served these areas well but there is evidence that their natural beauty and distinctiveness are threatened by a range of activities, many of which are not under planning control. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the preparation of AONB Management Plans. Measures and actions set out in these plans, alongside policies in the Structure Plan and local plans/development documents, will be designed to ensure that Kent's AONBs are protected and enhanced.

### Policy E4: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Heritage Coast

Protection will be given to the nationally important landscapes of:

- the Kent Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and
- Kent's Heritage Coast between Kingsdown and Dover and between Dover and Folkestone.

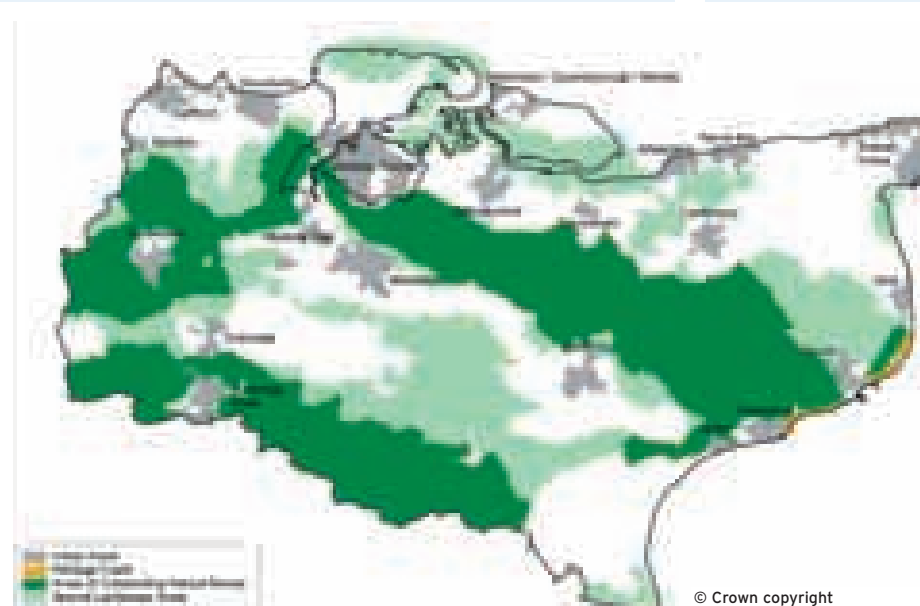
The primary objective in these areas will be to protect and enhance landscape character and natural beauty.

Major commercial, mineral or transport

infrastructure developments will not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that:

- i. there is a proven national interest;
- ii. there are no alternative sites available or the need cannot be met in any other way; and
- iii. appropriate provision can be made to minimise harm to the environment.

Other development which would be detrimental to the natural beauty, quality and character of the landscape and quiet enjoyment of the area will not be permitted. Development that is essential to meet local social or economic needs should be permitted provided that it is consistent with the purpose of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Heritage Coast.



Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Heritage Coast and Special Landscape Areas

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## Special Landscape Areas

4.13 Certain areas within the county have been designated as Special Landscape Areas (SLAs) within previous Structure Plans because of their strategic landscape importance and scenic significance in a county-wide context. Their detailed boundaries have been defined in local plans. Recent studies county-wide have revealed that landscape character in some of these areas has declined.

4.14 SLAs are retained in this Plan and should continue to provide a focus for the conservation and restoration of landscape character, but they should no longer extend over the nationally designated AONBs.

### **Policy E5: Special Landscape Areas**

**Special Landscape Areas are defined as follows and indicated on the Key Diagram. Detailed boundaries of the SLAs will be reviewed and defined in local plans/development documents.**

**North Downs**

**Greensand Ridge**

**High Weald**

**Eastern Low Weald**

**Western Low Weald**

**Old Romney Shoreline**

**North Kent Marshes**

**Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay**

**Dungeness**

**Blean Woods**

**The primary objective in Special Landscape Areas will be the long term protection and enhancement of the quality of the landscape whilst having regard to their economic and social well being.**

4.15 Although the principal aim is to protect and enhance the landscape character and natural beauty of both AONBs and SLAs, the needs of agriculture, forestry, the rural economy and local communities should be taken into account. These areas of natural landscape can play an important part in providing informal recreation but only where it does not impact upon their natural beauty. New development which is needed to improve the social and economic life of local communities within AONBs and SLAs should be located within or immediately adjacent to existing settlements. Diversification of the rural economy is supported (Policies FP6 and FP7) within these areas but should be consistent with AONB and SLA objectives.

## Nature Conservation

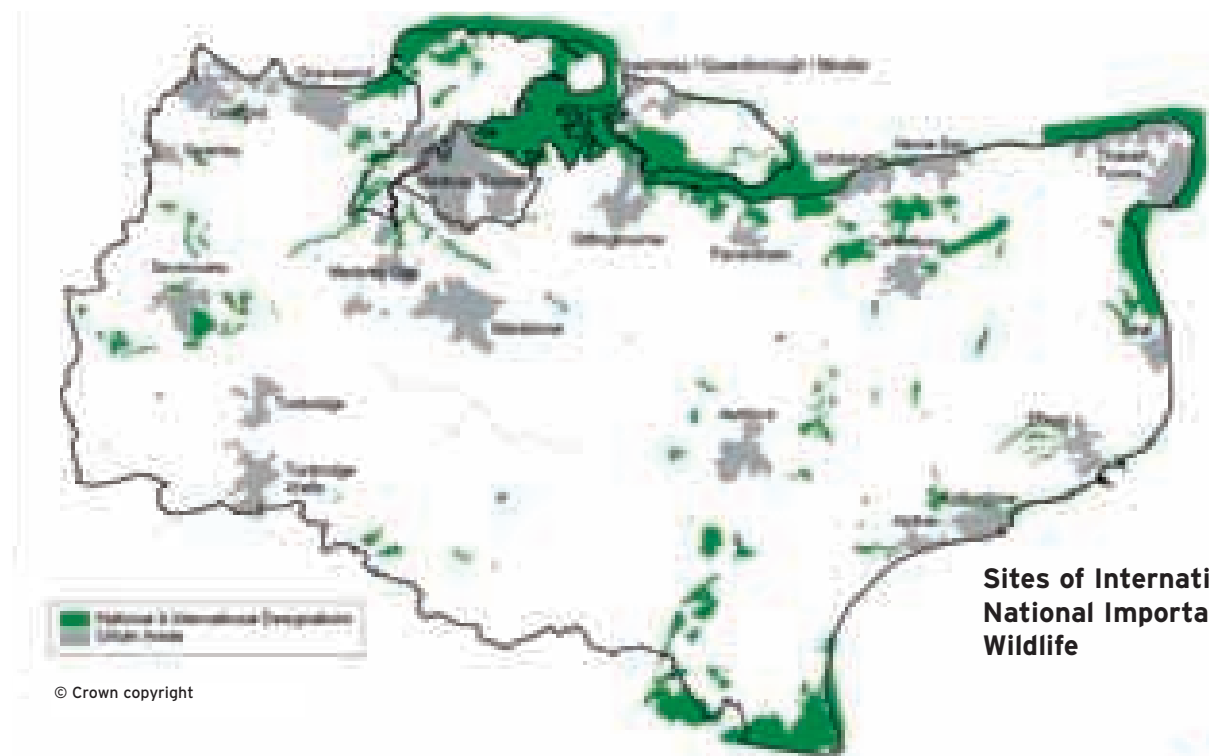
4.16 Kent contains a wide range of wildlife habitats and their associated species. These include downland, woodland, meadows, rivers, coastal habitats and wetlands. These nature conservation resources continue to come under pressure. One example of this is that wild bird populations, a general indicator for biodiversity, are continuing to decline in Kent. This reflects a national trend caused by development pressures and other activities such as more intensive agriculture. These important resources need to be protected and encouraged, both for their own sake, and for future generations.

4.17 Nature conservation can improve our quality of life. Green spaces supporting wildlife interest, for example, can be very important to local communities. Contact with, and access to, wildlife as an everyday occurrence can contribute greatly to our health and wellbeing.

4.18 Development and other activities can have direct and indirect impacts on areas of nature conservation interest. Development sites can have an impact on a natural resource a considerable distance away, particularly if the effect is related to air quality or water resources. The impact of one development may be small but the cumulative effect of several can be significant. Impacts can be avoided and gains achieved by careful design and by guiding development away from sensitive sites. Opportunities to deal with the impacts of development on sensitive sites through mitigation measures should be taken.

4.19 The Plan provides protection for wildlife. It seeks to identify opportunities for enhancement taking account of the international, national or local importance of wildlife populations. Supplementary Planning Guidance on Nature Conservation will be provided which will elaborate the aims, objectives and targets of the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plans and how these can be delivered and made to work alongside development.

## Kent &amp; Medway Structure Plan



### Policy E6: International and National Wildlife Designations

Development will not be permitted where it would directly, indirectly or cumulatively, materially harm the scientific or nature conservation interests of any of the following categories of sites:

- a European site;
- a proposed European site;
- a Ramsar site;
- a Site of Special Scientific Interest;
- a National Nature Reserve

### Other Sites of Strategic Importance

4.23 The network of local sites is of strategic importance for delivering biodiversity targets as they contain many important habitats such as ancient woodlands and lowland grassland.

4.24 Local Nature Reserves are designated by statute and are designed to increase the public enjoyment and understanding of nature, as well as nature conservation. County Wildlife Sites (designated by the Kent Wildlife Trust) and Regionally Important Geological/ Geomorphological Sites are of both strategic and local importance for wildlife and the earth's heritage. Many contain nationally important habitats and contribute to wildlife diversity.

### Internationally and Nationally Important sites

4.20 Internationally and nationally designated sites contain the best examples of our natural heritage. Sites of international importance are designated under the terms of:

- the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites);
- the European Habitats Directive as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs);
- the European Birds Directive as Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

4.21 Natura 2000 is the network of European sites (SPAs and SACs). Development likely to affect such sites is subject to thorough assessment (Conservation [Natural Habitats &c.] Regulations 1994).

4.22 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) have been notified for their nationally important wildlife or geological features. Some are managed as National Nature Reserves (NNR). There is a duty on public bodies, including local authorities, to further the conservation and enhancement of the special interest of SSSIs. Development proposals must demonstrate that they will not adversely affect these sites.

### Policy E7: County and Local Wildlife Designations

Development which would materially harm the scientific or nature conservation interests, either directly, indirectly or cumulatively, of:

- Local Nature Reserves
- County Wildlife Sites identified in Local Development Documents
- Regionally Important Geological/ Geomorphological Sites

will not be permitted unless there is a need which outweighs the local nature conservation or geological/ geomorphological interest and adverse impacts can be adequately compensated.

### Biodiversity

4.25 The Kent Biodiversity Action Plan underlines the commitment to safeguarding biological diversity in Kent. It considers whole ecosystems, recognising that safeguarding and enhancing wildlife cannot be done by just conserving sites. It seeks to safeguard and improve priority habitats and species found in the wider countryside and to identify areas of biodiversity potential where net improvements can be achieved.

4.26 Habitats often occur as fragments within the landscape, providing wildlife corridors, links or stepping stones from one habitat to another. Preventing further fragmentation by safeguarding existing habitats and improving linkages between

them will help to maintain the current range and diversity of our flora and fauna.

4.27 Future development should seek to maintain existing habitats and reverse fragmentation by identifying areas where the biodiversity potential is greatest. Restoration and enhancement efforts should be concentrated in areas where there is scope for significant nature conservation gain or where the most valuable and fragile habitats and species occur.

### Policy E8: Protection and Enhancement of Biodiversity

**Important wildlife habitats and species will be protected, maintained and enhanced, especially through long term management and habitat creation schemes, particularly where they have been identified as national and county priorities in the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plan(s), or where they are protected under wildlife legislation. This will be secured by:**

- (i) **Ensuring that site evaluation is undertaken to establish the nature conservation value of proposed development sites;**
- (ii) **Identifying, safeguarding and managing existing and potential land for nature conservation as part of development proposals, particularly where a connected series of sites can be achieved;**
- (iii) **Local planning authorities identifying locations and proposals for habitat and species**

**management, restoration and creation.**

**Development likely to have an adverse effect, directly, indirectly or cumulatively, on important habitats or species will not be permitted unless:**

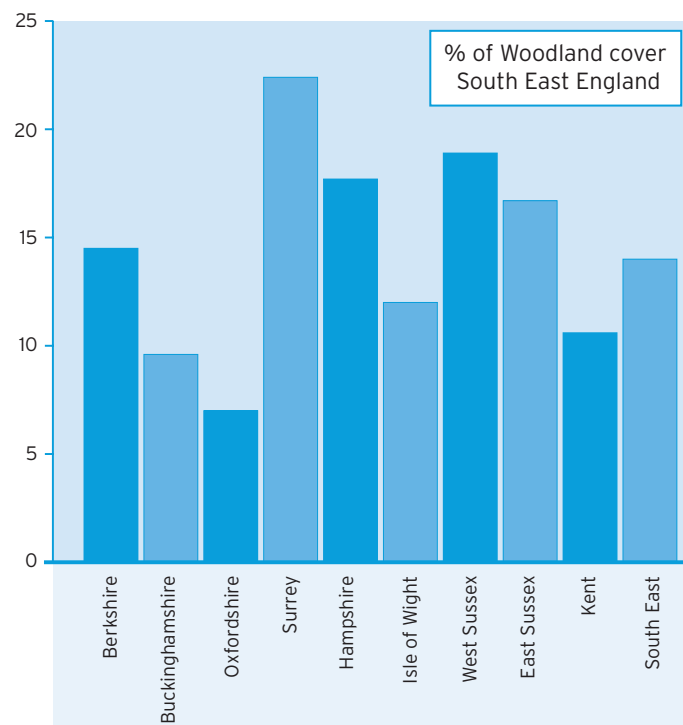
- **there is an overriding need for the development that outweighs the nature conservation interest; and**
- **loss of an important nature conservation resource can be adequately compensated and lesser impacts mitigated.**

### Trees, Woodland and Hedgerows

4.28 Trees, woodland and hedgerows are important features in the Kent and Medway landscape. Woodland and hedgerows have many benefits. They contribute to landscape character, provide wildlife habitats, contribute to biodiversity, and help to maintain the balance of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Woodland can also have a commercial value. Woodland within built-up areas and around the urban fringe can provide further wildlife habitats and enhance damaged landscapes.

4.29 It is strategic policy to increase tree cover in Kent, one of the least wooded of the counties in the South East (see chart). Hedgerows and woodland have been lost largely through agricultural intensification and development. However, Kent does possess more identified ancient woodland than any other county in the UK - around 10% of the national

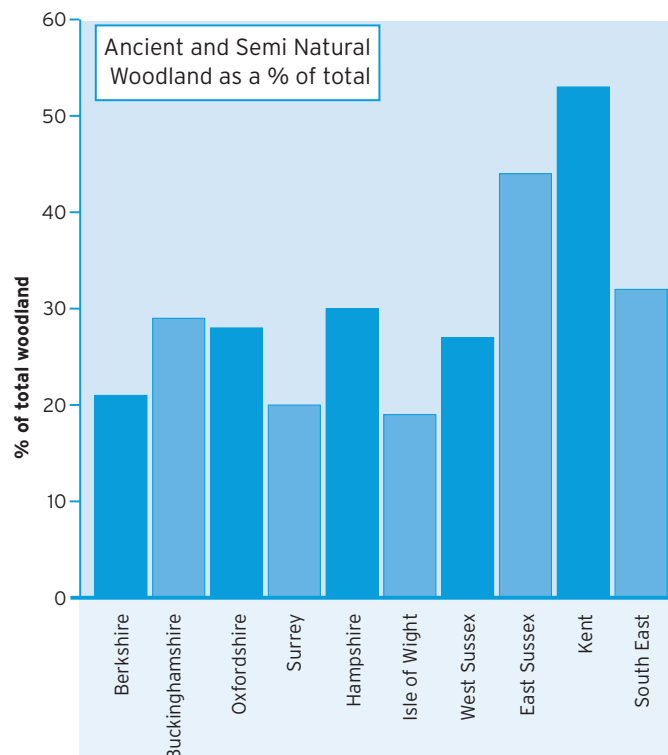
Kent & Medway Structure Plan



Source: Forestry Commission. National Inventory of Woodland and Trees 2002

total. This is a unique resource in terms of biodiversity, heritage and landscape character.

4.30 New development provides an opportunity for planting trees, woodland and hedgerows. This can improve the character of settlements and enhance the appearance of the nearby countryside. It can link remnants of ancient woodlands, enhance biodiversity and improve access for recreation. The scope for major new woodlands will be greatest adjoining larger urban areas, particularly where significant new development is planned such as in Kent Thameside, Ashford and in urban fringe locations where it could help to restore damaged land. At other appropriate



locations, such as Thanet or in the former East Kent Coalfield area, smaller areas of woodland planting will be encouraged.

4.31 Kent and Medway Councils will continue to carry out tree planting and manage trees and woodlands on their own land and to promote these activities to other woodland owners. A specific objective will be to increase the cover of broad-leaved woodland. Other priorities will include improving the management of small woodlands including the county's significant resource of coppice, marketing woodland products, and fostering community interest in woodlands.

**Policy E9: Trees, Woodland and Hedgerows**

Provision should be made for the creation of new woodland, especially indigenous broad-leaved species at appropriate locations in Kent, including provision of new habitats as part of development proposals.

Tree cover and the hedgerow network should be maintained and, where it would improve the landscape, enhanced. Ancient and semi-natural woodland will be protected and, where possible, enhanced.

**Community Forests and Woodlands**

4.32 Creation of 'Community Forests' around major urban areas can give communities access to green space and provide an important way to manage and enhance the urban fringe. Such forests, especially when made up of native species, can enhance the landscape, create opportunities for recreation, bolster economic confidence and encourage investment. Existing wildlife habitats and landscape character must be protected. The Government's Sustainable Communities Plan encourages consideration of Community Forests in the regional growth areas. Their potential in Thames Gateway (Kent) and Ashford should be examined and, where this is confirmed, proposals included in Local Development Documents. At other appropriate locations smaller community woodland planting should be examined.

### **Policy E10: Potential for Community Forests and Woodlands**

**The potential for community forests or community woodland sites will be investigated in North Kent and at Ashford and other suitable locations and where appropriate, defined and safeguarded in Local Development Documents.**

### **Urban Fringe**

4.33 The countryside around our towns can make an important contribution to our quality of life. It connects built-up areas with the wider open countryside allowing people access to green space, woodland and recreational activities. The urban fringe is subject to a wide range of pressures, particularly from new development and other activities, and it often contains damaged land. But there are opportunities to improve its appearance and wildlife value, as well as making it more accessible by careful management and planning. Enhancing the urban fringe is particularly important in areas such as Kent Thameside and Ashford and other places where significant changes to the form and structure of the urban areas is proposed.

### **Policy E11: Planning and Management of the Urban Fringe**

**Local Planning Authorities will work together and with others to draw up strategies for ensuring effective environmental management and high quality design for urban fringe areas, particularly in Dartford/Gravesham (Kent Thameside), at Ashford and where other large-scale new developments are proposed.**

**Local Development Documents will provide policies for such areas that ensure:**

- **The maintenance or enhancement of landscape and urban character;**
- **The creation of new habitats;**
- **The safeguarding of land for public access and the provision of recreational networks, including linkage with existing communities/built-up areas;**
- **Where appropriate, the enhancement of damaged or degraded land.**

**Where directly related, contributions from developments to the implementation of such programmes may be required**



## Kent & Medway Structure Plan

### River Corridors

4.34 Kent contains the main river valleys of the Darent, Medway, and Stour. Rivers and their adjoining areas are of great importance for water resource and flood risk management, nature conservation, fisheries, recreation and tourism. They often make a significant contribution to the character of the landscape and they provide pleasant green corridors in many of Kent's towns. They can provide safe and convenient walking and cycling. Both new development and redevelopment should minimise flood risk and enhance the river and riverside environment. This could be by increasing public access, improving water-related habitats, landscape or water quality, or securing the restoration of natural river features.

#### **Policy E12: River Corridors**

**The environment within river corridors, including the landscape, water environment and wildlife habitats, will be conserved and enhanced. Where consistent with this provision will be made for:**

- **increased opportunities for access and water recreation;**
- **increased public access for walking and cycling and links to existing rights of way and cycleway networks.**

**Sustainable water resource and flood risk management should deliver environmental benefits.**



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### Enhancement of Primary Routes

4.35 Kent's primary road and rail routes are used by large numbers of people from within and outside the county and include routes which carry significant tourist traffic. The character and quality of the landscape along these routes is important because it influences the perceptions of visitors and potential investors and because it can help to mitigate the impact of the routes themselves and the traffic which uses them.

4.36 Considerable advances have been made in the quality of landscaping treatment achieved on such routes through local authorities working in partnership with other bodies such as the Highways Agency and Network Rail. The construction of the

Channel Tunnel Rail Link through Kent is testament to the benefits that can be achieved from a concerted programme of environmental treatment and enhancement. Policy E13 promotes enhancement of environmental quality along the county's motorway and primary road and passenger rail networks as identified on the Key Diagram.

#### **Policy E13: Environmental Enhancement of Primary Routes**

**Enhancement of landscape quality and character along primary road and rail routes, including important tourist routes, will be promoted.**

## Rural Lanes

4.37 Kent possesses a rich heritage of ancient lanes which date back to medieval, Saxon and even pre-historic times. As well as having historic value they contribute to nature conservation and add to the distinctive character of the countryside. Some are coming under pressure and need to be protected and enhanced. Local authorities should identify such lanes in Local Development Documents supported as appropriate by surveys and environmental and archaeological advice.

4.38 Measures to safeguard Kent's rural lanes should include traffic restraint, imposing speed restrictions, limiting road upgrading, planting initiatives and making tree preservation orders. Other options include traffic orders, and voluntary routeing agreements with adjoining landowners and key industrial, commercial or agricultural users. The Greensand Ridge Quiet Lanes scheme is one of two national demonstration projects which aims to make lanes more attractive for cyclists, horse riders and walkers while maintaining essential access for local residents, essential services and businesses. Other rural transport initiatives and policies can be found in the Transport Chapter of this Plan and in the Local Transport Plan for Kent.

### *Policy E14: Rural Lanes*

**Rural lanes which are of landscape, amenity, nature conservation, historic or archaeological importance will be protected from changes and management practices which would damage their character, and where possible will be enhanced.**

