

High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

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High Weald
National
Landscape

www.highweald.org

Working together to care for an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mid-Sussex District Council

Emailed to steve.ashdown@midsussex.gov.uk

1st August 2025

Dear Mr Ashdown

DM/23/2867 Land East Of Ansty Way Cuckfield Bypass Cuckfield West Sussex
Change of use of farmland and woodland to parkland reserve to include public access and instigation of long-term management and rewilding regime, including establishment of pedestrian and cycle tracks, with new pedestrian and cycle access points off Cuckfield Road to the south and Staplefield Road to the north. Proposals to include the addition of two wooden viewing platforms and two hides. Sports pitches at Beech Farm Field to remain in sports use.

Thank you for consulting us on the above application.

In summary, the High Weald National Landscape Unit objects to this proposal on the following grounds:

- **The proposals generally are an unsatisfactory response to the land management approaches set out in the High Weald AONB Management Plan; in particular the disturbance of ancient woodland (PAWS) with the introduction of cycle paths, proposals relating to 'rewilding', specifically the introduction of deer (including into woodland areas of the site), the erection of 6m high deer fencing which would introduce a hard, artificial barrier around the majority of the site, and the re-use of an existing derelict building as an 'educational hub', for which no information regarding the refurbishment of this building as a non-designated heritage asset has been submitted, nor information regarding access to it.**
- **The proposals would therefore be contrary to objectives W2, FH1, FH3, and LBE1 of the High Weald AONB Management Plan, and would conflict with a number of the 'Recovering Nature: Principles And Investment Priorities 2029' set out in the Management Plan, such that the proposal would fail to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the HWNL, and would therefore be contrary to paragraph 189 of the NPPF.**

It is the responsibility of the Local Planning Authority to decide whether the application meets legislative and policy requirements in respect of National Landscapes (AONBs). Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities to **seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs** in making decisions that affect the designated area.

Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the High Weald National Landscape will normally mean avoiding harm, and conserving and enhancing the character components identified in the AONB Management Plan; supporting the Management Plan Objectives as set out for each of these; and following any Management Plan Actions set out for each.¹²

¹ [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/seeking-to-further-the-purposes-of-protected-landscapes)

² [CROW-s.85-duty-guidance-for-LPAs NLA-Briefing-Nov-24.pdf](https://www.nla.gov.uk/briefing/nla-briefing-nov-24.pdf)

One of the National Landscapes family

Anglesey
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Blackdown Hills
Cannock Chase
Chichester Harbour
Chilterns
Clwydian Range
Cornwall
Cotswolds
Gower
Cranbourne Chase and Dee Valley
West Wiltshire Downs
Dedham Vale
Dorset
East Devon
Forest of Bowland
Howardian Hills
High Weald
Isle of Wight
Isles of Scilly
Kent Downs
Lincolnshire Wolds
Llyn
Malvern Hills
Mendip Hills
Nidderdale
Norfolk Coast
North Devon
North Pennines
North Wessex Downs
Northumberland Coast
Quantock Hills
Shropshire Hills
Solway Coast
South Devon
Suffolk Coast and Heaths
Surrey Hills
Tamar Valley
Wye Valley

Paragraph 189 of the NPPF requires that: “Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues.”

The [High Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2029](#) is adopted by all the relevant local authorities with land in the High Weald National Landscape as their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it, and is a material consideration for planning applications.

Analysis of the Proposal Against the High Weald AONB Management Plan

The Management Plan Statement of Significance defines what makes the High Weald special and identifies the qualities that justify its designation as a nationally important landscape. The High Weald’s natural beauty is described by eight key components of character around which the Management Plan is structured, including Objectives for each component.

Of particular relevance to this proposal are Management Plan Objectives:

- R1: *To maintain the historic pattern, morphology and features of routeways*
- W2: *To protect and restore the ecological quality and functioning of woodland at a landscape scale.*
- FH1: *To secure agriculturally productive use for the fields of the High Weald, especially for local markets, as part of sustainable land management.*
- FH3: *To protect and enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats.*
- PQ3: *To foster and promote equitable access and informal enjoyment of the High Weald landscape and the integrated management of its resources for the enjoyment of natural beauty by all.*
- LBE1: *To improve returns from, and thereby increase entry and retention in, farming, forestry, horticulture and other land management activities that conserve and enhance natural beauty.*

The Management Plan clarifies that the pursuance of objective LBE1 should not harm the other character components or be at the expense of their contribution to the natural beauty of the HWNL.

The Management Plan also sets out a number of Principles & Investment Priorities under various cross-cutting themes, including ‘Soil Health’, ‘Recovering Nature’, and ‘People and Access’. These set out specific practices and actions appropriate to the High Weald. The *People & Access Principles And Investment Priorities 2029* specifically sets out that pursuance of any of these priorities or actions should not involve harm to any of the character components within the Management Plan, nor cause harm to the biodiversity of the area.

The application site is an area of land in the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL), to the west of Cuckfield and north of Ansty. The site covers approximately 200 acres of farmland and an area of 15 acres of private recreation grassland to the north.

It is noted the proposed ‘Parkland Reserve’ of this application is proposed to come forward as part of the Green Infrastructure associated with the proposed large-scale residential development (‘Garden Community’ to the east of Ansty (application reference DM/23/2866), to provide additional recreational resources and opportunities for biodiversity gain. For clarity, this response focusses only on the ‘Parkland Reserve’, and not on the associated residential development, though it is noted that the residential scheme itself proposes extensive, significant green infrastructure within its own site boundary to the east of the A272, including ancient woodland, other retained woodland, ‘community growing areas’, ‘wild open spaces to connect with nature’, ‘multi-functional public open space’, sports facilities and a range of other green open spaces as shown on the illustrative masterplan material. In view of this, is therefore difficult to consider that the proposed ‘Parkland Reserve’ on the west of the A272 is in any way necessary to provide green space and recreational access for the new ‘Garden Community’.

Additionally, it is noted that the residential application is not subject to mandatory BNG, due to the date of its submission, and therefore these comments do not address the suitability of any proposals for BNG purposes.

General response to Land Management as promoted in the AONB Management Plan

Firstly, it should be noted that the term 'parkland reserve' is not an established term within the ecological and conservation industry in England. Therefore the site will not benefit from any statutory regulation, protection, monitoring, and governance had it been proposed to be for example a Local Nature Reserve.

In terms of the 'site's' ability to be enhanced for locals to experience biodiversity, it should be noted that the 'site' already has three historic PRoW already running through or bordering it, including a section of the High Weald Landscape Trail.

A number of the broad proposals for the 'parkland reserve' would be contrary to the natural beauty of the High Weald and fail to align with many of the Objectives, Actions and Priorities of the High Weald AONB Management Plan as listed above.

The parkland reserve positions itself as a rewilding scheme, however, rewilding is generally not consistent with the High Weald landscape which has been a human managed landscape of semi-natural habitats, with a history extending well before the Roman period. The High Weald is the best preserved example of a medieval landscape in western Europe, consisting of small irregular fields bounded by hedges and woody shaws for over 600 years. The AONB Management Plan specifically references 'Wilding' on p61, setting out that within the HWNL, small-scale wilding projects should be considered which complement the existing medieval landscape character and which help buffer other core habitats, provide connectivity across the landscape, but do not adversely impact on land which is needed for agriculture or is being managed to enhance other vulnerable habitats.

Meanwhile, whilst Cuckfield Park may have been an historic deer park, the current high deer numbers in the High Weald and the pressure this puts onto the landscape do not appear to have been taken into consideration in this application. The AONB Management Plan sets out that over-population of deer across the High Weald is one of the 'Top 5 Issues' facing woodlands in the HWNL, while deer management (active strategies to reduce deer numbers to prevent over-population of deer having a significant impact on the flora of High Weald woodlands and other habitats) is one of the Management Plan's Recovering Nature: Priorities. Additionally, the proposed deer grazing areas and fencing covers the woodland portions of the site including priority and PAWS woodland. The BNG appendix report suggests deer will also have access to the wider parkland as well as the woodland. Given the commentary within the EclA and ecology reports for this site identifying the existing high fallow deer presence damage in the woodlands, and the significant potential for deer species to suppress woodland vegetation, to strip trees and browse out ground vegetation, these proposals are extremely concerning.

Within this context, the proposals to introduce more deer as part of the 'wilding' proposals would be contrary to a number of Objectives and Land Management Advice advocated in the HW AONB Management Plan.

Proposed deer fencing

The proposed 6m high deer fencing will introduce a hard artificial barrier around the majority of the site, including the boundary with ancient woodland (ASNW) 'Oldmill Shaw' at the southern end of the site. At certain points footpaths would consist of a narrow path between two high fences between which walkers would be funnelled, which would be oppressive and which would negatively impact people's enjoyment of the countryside and the sense of natural beauty across this site.

Cycle way

The proposed new cycle way would run north-south mainly through priority woodland and PAWS woodland to the west of the site, with a small portion touching the southern parkland. According to the Transport Statement, this would introduce a 2.5m width engineered path, plus 1m cleared and maintained grass verge either side, i.e. a total intervention of 4.5m, through the centre of what is a relatively thin strip of woodland, fragmenting the habitat, creating disturbance to wildlife from the clearing and construction of the cycle path, and disturbance from cyclists and walkers using the route including those with dogs. Such an intervention, with potential direct and indirect effects, would not be considered good practice [Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions - GOV.UK](#), and would be likely to be contrary to Management Plan Objective W2; there is no ecological benefit to installing a cycle path in such a sensitive area which currently has little to no public access.

Educational 'hub'

The Design & Access Statement (p9) describes part of the proposal as being *"Refurbishing the existing building on the fringe of woodland to provide a base for a full-time warden and educational hub to involve the local schools and community groups."* However, this proposal does not form part of the application description, nor does it appear to be referenced on any masterplan, nor in the Transport Statement. Having located the faint outline of the existing building on the plan, there appears to be no existing vehicular access, and there appears to be no information about how such an 'educational hub' would be accessed, or any parking that would be proposed – indeed Transport Statement para 3.3. confirms that 'No vehicular access to the parkland reserve will be provided'. The impact of this on the HWNL therefore cannot be assessed at this stage.

Moreover, despite the existing building being described in the Habitat & Ecological Restoration Management Plan (para 4.2.13) as a *'traditional timber frame and timber clad barn ... considered to be of mid-19th century origin'*, the Heritage Statement has failed to recognise this building as a non-designated heritage asset. Nor does the Heritage Statement describe any physical works proposed to bring this barn back into use. Such works would fall under consideration of AONB Management Plan Objective S3.

In the absence of fuller information, should the LPA be minded to grant planning permission, it is recommended that the refurbishing of the existing building to provide an educational hub be specifically excluded from any approved application, and that a further, separate application for planning permission would be required for that proposal, which would need to address matters of building restoration, access, hours of use, lighting etc.

Conditions

Without prejudice to our objections to the proposal set out above, should the LPA be minded to grant planning permission, it is recommended that the following detailed requirements are met by the imposition of planning condition:

- Any new planting should comprise native, locally sourced plants and seeds, to support local wildlife and avoid contamination by invasive non-native species or plant diseases in the High Weald (Management Plan objective FH3)

The above comments are advisory and are the professional views of the HWNL Unit's Planning and Design Advisor on the potential impacts on the High Weald landscape. They are not necessarily the views of the HWNL Joint Advisory Committee.

Yours sincerely,

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Planning & Design Advisor, HWNL Unit

Advising on an outstanding medieval landscape; connecting people, protecting beauty, restoring soils and nature.

Appendix 1: National Planning Policy for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2024 paragraph 189 requires **great weight** to be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation of wildlife and cultural heritage are important considerations in all these areas. **The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited**, while development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas.

Paragraph 190 says “When considering applications for development within National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes, permission should be refused for major development⁶⁰ other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.

Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- a) the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
- b) the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
- c) any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated”.

Footnote 67 says: “whether a proposal is ‘major development’ is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined”. **It is recommended that the case officer undertakes a clear and transparent assessment of whether the proposal is major development, using the key characteristics and landscape components of the National Landscape as set out in the Management Plan.**

NPPF paragraph 11 explains the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Part d says that where there are no relevant development plan policies or the relevant ones are out of date (for instance in applications involving new housing where there are housing supply or delivery deficits) then permission should be granted unless:

- i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for refusing the development proposed⁷; or
- ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole”.

National Landscapes are listed in footnote 7 and the most relevant policies in the Framework are paragraphs 189 and 190. A recent court of appeal case³ confirms that, if a proposal’s impact on an AONB (NL) is sufficient to provide a clear reason for refusal under NPPF 189 or 190, then the presumption in favour (or ‘tilted balance’ expressed in ii) above) should be disengaged. The decision-maker should therefore conduct a normal planning balancing exercise, applying appropriate weight to each consideration, to come to a decision. This will of course include giving great weight to the National Landscape as required by NPPF 189.

³ Monkhill Limited vs Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and Waverley Borough Council Case No: C1/2019/1955/QBACF

Background Information about the High Weald National Landscape (AONB)



N.B. From November 22nd 2023, all AONBs are to be known as National Landscapes. The High Weald National Landscape remains designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is referred to as such in legislation. The statutory purpose “to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the designated landscape” remains unchanged.

The High Weald was designated in 1983 as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is an exceptionally beautiful medieval landscape covering 564 square miles across the counties of East and West Sussex, Kent and Surrey.

The High Weald National Landscape Joint Advisory Committee is a partnership established in 1989 of 15 local authorities, Defra, Natural England and organisations representing farming, woodland, access and community interests. The JAC is responsible for publishing and monitoring the statutory AONB Management Plan. The JAC is supported by a small, dedicated staff team, the High Weald NL Unit, which provides advice on how to conserve and enhance the NL. The advice provided by the NL Unit assists public bodies and statutory undertakers to meet their duty as set out in Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 **to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs in making decisions that affect it.**

The High Weald NL Unit is not a statutory body but an advisory one. It is not a local planning authority and the responsibility for determining planning applications remains with the 15 local authorities. The NL Unit is not a statutory consultee on planning matters and it remains each local planning authority’s decision whether or not they seek its advice on a particular planning application.

The scope of the advice in this letter is set by the statutory High Weald [AONB Management Plan](#), which has been adopted by all partner authorities, as ‘their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it’.