



CD7.04

DEVELOPMENT AND SITE ALLOCATIONS LOCAL PLAN

Rother District Council
Town Hall
London Road
Bexhill-on-Sea
East Sussex
TN39 3JX

Adopted
16 December 2019

www.rother.gov.uk

6. Environment

Landscape character and the High Weald AONB

Landscape character areas

- 6.1 The importance attached to maintaining and reinforcing landscape character across Rother district is clearly set out in the Environment chapter of the Local Plan Core Strategy. Its 'Landscape Stewardship' policy, EN1, identifies the principal landscape assets and provides an over-arching framework to ensure that new development makes a positive contribution to the landscape character of the area in which it is to be located.
- 6.2 Landscape character varies across the district. At a national scale, much of Rother falls within the 'High Weald' national character area (NCA), with the south-eastern part in the 'Romney Marshes' area and a small swathe of land west of Bexhill in the 'Pevensey Levels' area. The boxes below summarises the key characteristics of each NCA in Rother district.³¹

High Weald

- a well-wooded landscape rising above the Low Weald;
- distinctive and scattered sandstone outcrops;
- main roads and settlements are sited along prominent ridgelines with a dense network of small winding lanes linking scattered villages, hamlets and farms;
- the legacy of the early iron industry has left extensive areas of coppice woodland and hammer ponds;
- high forest, small woods and copses, and a network of hedges, shaws link small irregular fields created from cleared woodland;
- flower rich meadows bordered by species rich hedgerows;
- heavy clay soils have reduced the impact of agricultural change in the area and it is still, in the main a quiet pastoral landscape with mixed farming predominating;
- the cultivation of fruit and hops, together with the associated distinctive oast houses;
- distinctive red tile, brick, local stone and timber building materials, often including hung tiles and white weatherboarding are characteristic of historic settlements, farms and cottages; and
- recent 'suburbanisation' of farmstead buildings is eroding the distinctive local style in many places.

31. See Countryside Character Volume 7: South East and London, The Countryside Agency, 1999

Romney Marshes

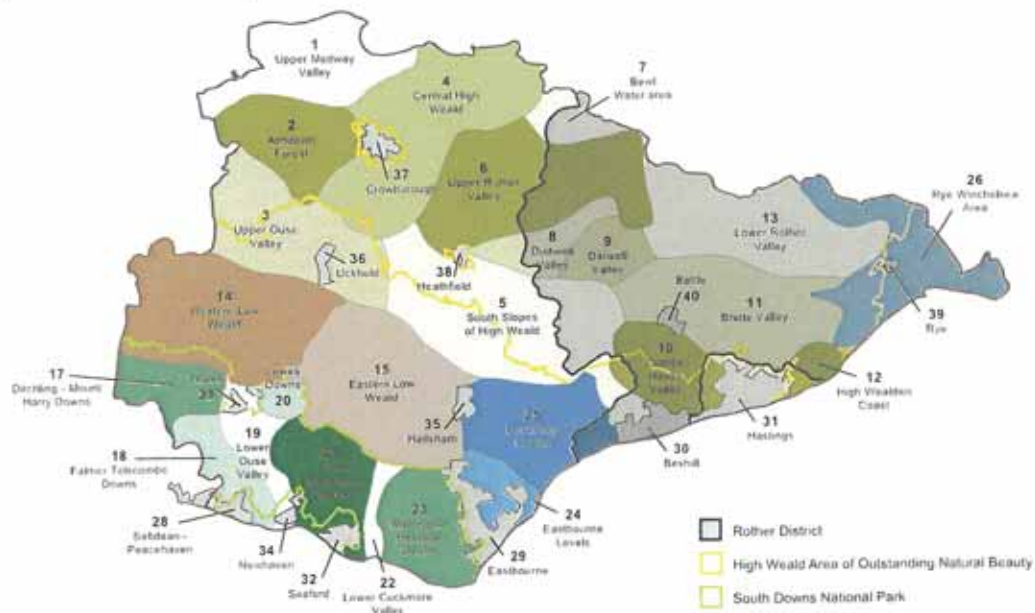
- flat open agricultural landscape with distinctive drainage dykes, marshes and open skies;
- extensive arable fields, open wet pasture land. Narrow straight roads and dispersed settlements. Open character and remoteness;
- high nature conservation value in wet grazing marshes;
- former sea cliffs mark the post glacial shoreline;
- the Royal Military Canal at the base of these cliffs;
- 20th century development in the coastal strip; and
- the sharp contrast between shingle coast, low lying agricultural land and the raised cliff.

Pevensey Levels

- low lying tract of reclaimed wetland;
- open landscape with extensive grazed wet meadow windswept with few trees; and widely spaced roads and isolated settlements provide a sense of remoteness.

6.3 Within these regional areas, the East Sussex Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) provides more detailed descriptions at a local level, reflecting the particular pattern of elements derived from geology, landform, topography, flora and fauna, physical features and settlement. The LCA Index Map, as it relates to Rother is reproduced below. The key features and “action priorities” for each character area are identified in the Assessment document.

Figure 5: Local Landscape Character Areas in Rother



Landscape character and the High Weald AONB

- 6.4 Due to their nature conservation status and consequent very limited development, the Pevensey Levels and Romney Marshes enjoy a high degree of tranquillity, at least for the most part. Even though never far from a farm, some small-scale scattered dwellings or settlement, the same is true of large swathes of the High Weald. East Sussex County Council published 'Remoteness at the Local Scale – An Application in East Sussex' some time ago; its identified 'areas of remote countryside' and areas of exceptional remoteness' are still helpful maintaining the peace and tranquillity of remote rural areas.
- 6.5 Particular care will be taken, over and above the regard to the features of local landscape, to the feeling of remoteness that exists when a site is physically and visually separated from the noise and activity of urban areas, as well as from associated features and activities (such as busy roads, pylons, sport and leisure venues, etc.).
- 6.6 One aspect of this rurality is the existence of "dark skies"; that is, the relatively limited amount of night glow from street lights and other sources. Characteristics of tranquillity and dark skies are valued by local people. A separate policy in relation to lighting, put forward in the Environmental Pollution section, provides a policy basis, and associated guidelines to assist in maintaining these characteristics.

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

- 6.7 The High Weald is of national as well as local landscape value, as reflected by its status as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. In fact, it is regarded as one of the best surviving and most coherent medieval landscapes in northern Europe. The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Area. "Natural beauty" is seen as embracing both landscape character and its aesthetic experience.
- 6.8 The policy for the management of the AONB is set out in the High Weald AONB Management Plan, published on the [High Weald AONB website](#). This defines the natural beauty of its landscape in terms of the interplay of the components that make it distinctive. These are:

Geology, landform, water systems and climate

- Sandrock outcrops
- Gill streams

Settlement

- Dispersed settlement pattern
- Historic farmsteads

Routeways

- Droveways
- Sunken lanes

Woodland

- Ancient woodland
- Archaeological remains

Field and heath

- Unimproved grassland
- Heathland
- Historic field boundaries

Regard to landscape character and the High Weald AONB

- 6.9 A proper understanding of the local landscape, which will include its historic characteristics, is necessary in order to produce developments that respect landscape character. In assessing landscape impact of development proposals, the characteristics of the relevant Landscape Character Area and, where appropriate, the High Weald components provide a clear assessment framework for evaluating the siting, layout and design (including materials) of development.
- 6.10 Existing landscape features that are important to local character should normally be retained, while new features should be typical of the locality, fit naturally into the landscape and complements existing features.
- 6.11 National planning policy highlights the need to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside as well as the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services. Valued landscapes, which clearly include AONBs and their settings, should be protected and enhanced, which resonates with the specific provision that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty of AONBs. The National Planning Policy Framework further states that the scale and extent of development within AONBs should be limited, with planning permission not forthcoming for major developments 'other than in exceptional circumstances'. It adds that proposals for major development should include an assessment of the need for the development, the potential to meet it in another way and the net effect on the landscape and wider environment.
- 6.12 While a certain level of development has already been accepted through the Local Plan Core Strategy as being capable of being satisfactorily and sustainably accommodated in and around the towns and villages within the AONB, the scope for sustainable development was found to be limited. In particular, given that the High Weald is essentially an intricate, small scale and historic landscape, it is believed that there is little further opportunity to accommodate major development without compromising AONB objectives.

Policy DEN1: Maintaining Landscape Character

The siting, layout and design of development should maintain and reinforce the natural and built landscape character of the area in which it is to be located, based on a clear understanding of the distinctive local landscape characteristics (see Figure 5 above), in accordance with Core Strategy Policy EN1.

Particular care will be taken to maintain the sense of tranquillity of more remote areas, including through maintaining 'dark skies' in accordance with Policy DEN7.

Biodiversity and green space

Context

- 6.23 The biodiversity interest in Rother is substantial and wide-ranging. There are large areas of internationally designated sites, many nationally-important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), covering about 9% of the district in total, as well as some 60 Local Wildlife Sites. Ancient woodlands, of which Rother has the highest concentration in the South-East, are also associated with biodiversity interest. Many nationally-defined 'Habitats and Species of Principal Importance'³³ (also referred to as "Priority Habitats and Species") are also represented, often beyond the internationally, nationally and locally designated sites.
- 6.24 Core Strategy Policy EN5 provides an over-arching policy commitment to protect and enhance the biodiversity, geodiversity and green space. This relates not only to designated sites, but also to sites of local biodiversity value and the array of multi-functional green spaces that make up the 'Green Infrastructure' of the district, which variously provide recreational opportunities, flood management, climate change mitigation and 'green' corridors, as well as for nature conservation.
- 6.25 The policy at the end of this section supplements Core Strategy Policy EN5, highlighting the expectations of the Council in relation to conserving biodiversity when considering planning applications.

Internationally protected sites

- 6.26 Internationally important wildlife sites in and around the district are shown on Figure 9 below. The two sites extending into the district are the Pevensy Levels, to the south-west, which are designated as being of international importance as a wetland habitat and as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC); and the Dungeness Complex of Natura 2000 sites³⁴, on the eastern side of the district, which are designated for their value for birds and as wetland habitats.
- 6.27 Only in exceptional circumstances could a proposal that would impact negatively on an international wildlife site be permitted - where there are no alternative solutions and the proposal is necessary for imperative reasons of over-riding public interest. The policies in this Plan have been assessed to determine that they will not adversely affect the integrity of any of the international sites.³⁵

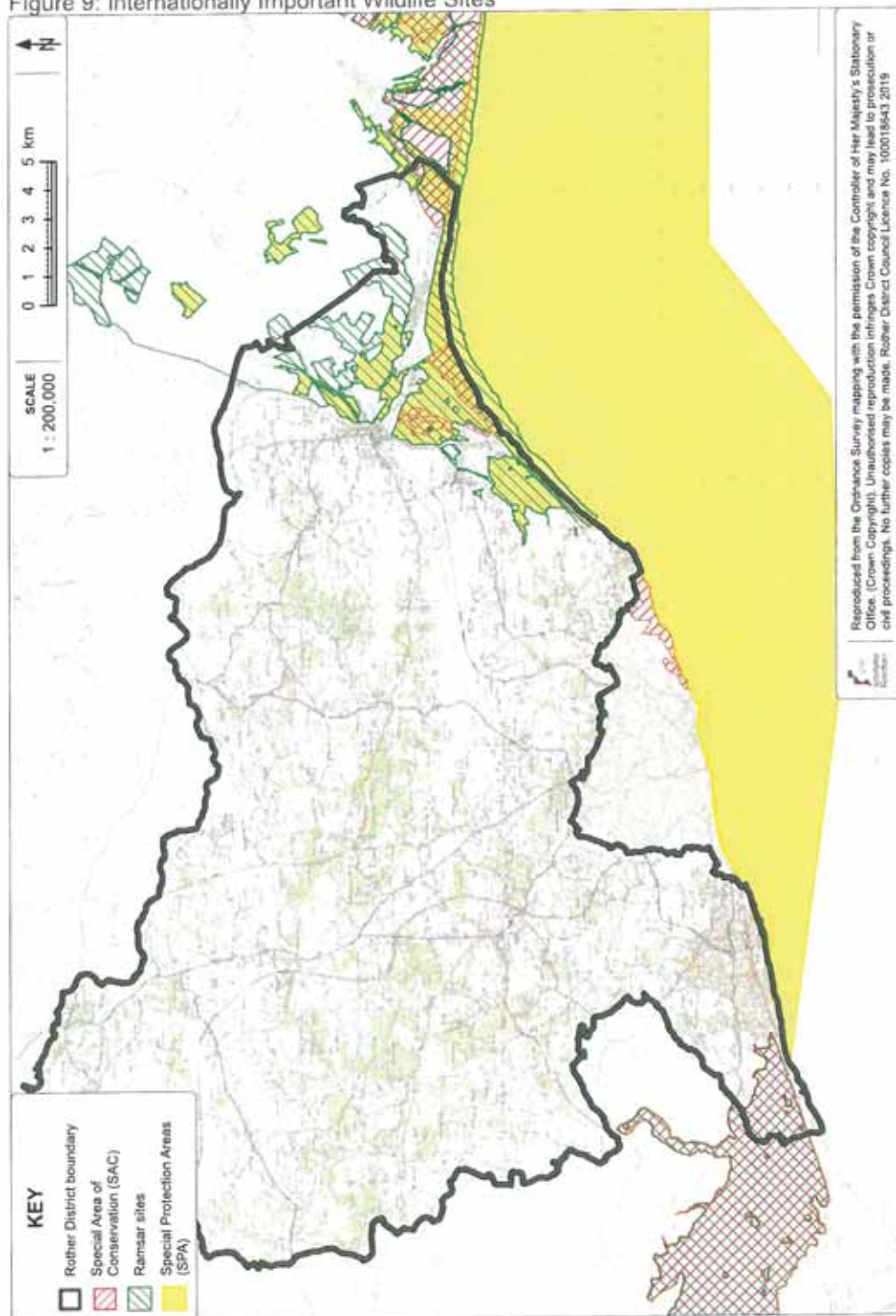
33. As listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006

34. The Dungeness Complex of Natura 2000 sites comprises three overlapping international designations - the Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site, and the Dungeness Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

35. See DaSA Local Plan Habitats Regulations Assessment

Environment Biodiversity and green space

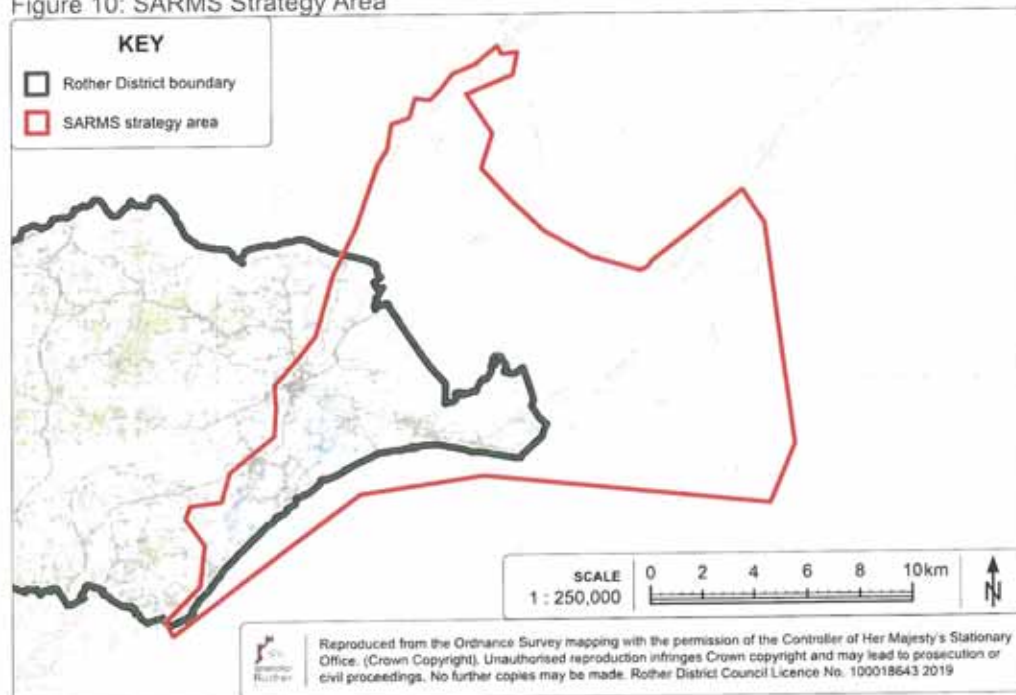
Figure 9: Internationally Important Wildlife Sites



- 6.28 In relation to the potential impact of tourism policies on the Dungeness Complex of Natura 2000 sites, which was an issue first highlighted through the Core Strategy's 'Habitat Regulations Assessment' (HRA), the Council, in partnership with Folkstone & Hythe District Council with advice from Natural England, has prepared a 'Sustainable Access and Recreation Management Strategy' (SARMS).

- 6.29 The SARMS provides a strategic, cross boundary approach to managing recreational pressure and disturbance, both in relation to additional usage resulting from development and more generally to ensure sensitive management of the Natura 2000 sites. It identifies a need to raise the profile of the nature conservation value of the strategy area in a way that will also benefit the visitor economy, to improve visitor education and, in some areas, change behaviour to support the habitats and species of the protected sites. The SARMS can be viewed in the [HRA section](#) of the Council's website, while the Strategy area, which covers the protected sites as well as a wider area of functional land providing an important supporting role, is shown at Figure 10 below.

Figure 10: SARMS Strategy Area



- 6.30 Further HRA assessment has refined the Core Strategy's approach to controlling the quantity and rate of run-off within the hydrological catchment of the Pevensey Levels, which is reflected in Policy DEN5 of this Plan.

Nationally protected sites and irreplaceable habitats

- 6.31 SSSIs and irreplaceable habitats³⁶ including ancient woodland; and aged and veteran trees outside Ancient Woodland, are highly protected. National policy gives a very strong presumption against any development that would have an adverse effect on such areas. This is reflected by Natural England and Forestry Commission advice for planning authorities on protecting ancient woodland and veteran trees from development.³⁷

36. The NPPF defines irreplaceable habitats as including ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees, blanket bog, limestone pavement, sand dunes, salt marsh and lowland fen.

37. 'Ancient woodland and veteran trees: protecting them from development' at: www.gov.uk

Environment

Biodiversity and green space

- 6.32 Whilst Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are landscape designations for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, the term 'natural beauty' includes conservation of flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features of an area. Furthermore, some of the key High Weald character features are also Priority Habitats (ghyll woodland, sandstone outcrops, ancient woodland, heathland, wildflower meadows and ponds). Hence, particular consideration should be given to biodiversity gains that meet AONB objectives.
- 6.33 Information on nationally and internationally protected sites is available from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The Ancient Woodland Inventory for Rother district is available on the Council's website.

Locally designated sites

- 6.34 'Local Wildlife Sites' (previously known as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs)) and 'Local Geological Sites' (previously known as Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites (RIGGS)) are identified and selected locally using agreed criteria. Information on locally designated sites is available from the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre.

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas

- 6.35 Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) have been identified in recognition that a focus on protecting designated sites alone will not sustain biodiversity in the long term. These areas are seen as offering the greatest potential to benefit wildlife, taking into account existing concentrations of Priority Habitats and Species, often being buffers around existing reserves or linkages between designated sites.
- 6.36 There are nine separate BOAs within, or partially within, the District. Within these areas, consideration should be given to whether development will affect habitat connectivity and integrity, either positively or negatively; and whether there are opportunities to achieve the aims of the BOAs, including enhanced habitats and linkages to off-site habitats via green corridors. Further information on the BOAs is available from the Sussex Local Nature Partnership³⁸ and within the Council's Green Infrastructure Study and its Addendum.

Protected species

- 6.37 European Directives give protection to several species (generally referred to as 'European Protected Species'); the most commonly occurring in Rother include great crested newt, bats and dormouse. There are also varying degrees of protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act for other species, certain rare plants and for bird nesting habitats (limiting their removal to outside of the bird breeding season). Protected species that can be found in Sussex include badgers, water vole, common lizard, grass snake, slow worm and Roman snail.

38. <http://sussexlnp.org.uk>

Priority Habitats and Species

- 6.38 As noted above, Priority Habitats and Species (also referred to as “Habitats and Species of Principal Importance”) are those listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Those habitats and species on the list are conservation priorities and are used to guide decision-makers in implementing their statutory duty to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their normal functions. Priority Habitats within Rother include woodland, maritime cliff and slopes, hedgerows and lowland meadows, and Priority Species include hedgehog, common toad, house sparrow, brown-banded carder bee and pennyroyal.

Biodiversity opportunities in development

- 6.39 Proposals which are focused primarily on conserving or enhancing biodiversity or geodiversity will be supported in principle. These could include developments that increase public understanding and enjoyment of biodiversity and green spaces, such as through “green corridors” and interpretation facilities. This approach accords with the NPPF in terms of the regard to biodiversity.
- 6.40 The NPPF looks to the planning system to not only minimise impacts on biodiversity but also to pursue opportunities for net gains in biodiversity, as well as to promote the protection and recovery of protected species populations. Core Strategy Policy EN5 part (ix) also promotes habitat restoration and creation.
- 6.41 There will be opportunities for supporting biodiversity in virtually all developments. This may range from retaining and enhancing existing biodiversity features including hedgerows and ponds, providing landscaping and amenity green spaces that support biodiversity, creating new habitats (including as part of SuDS), ensuring adequate buffering of, and management regimes for, existing priority habitats within or adjacent to a site, and in maintaining and restoring ecological networks and habitat connectivity.
- 6.42 Provision for biodiversity will largely depend on the particular local context and also on the scale of development. Larger developments will generally provide more scope for biodiversity gains. In order that opportunities specific to a particular site are properly considered and, where appropriate, incorporated into the development planning and design processes, larger developments (of more than 2 hectares or 50 dwellings) will be expected to produce a “green infrastructure master-plan” as an integral part of proposals. Such masterplans should include measures for the on-going management of habitats and other green spaces and should deliver multiple benefits where possible and appropriate, including provision for biodiversity, recreation, and other ecosystem services such as flood protection.
- 6.43 Table 1 in the Council's Green Infrastructure Study Addendum provides advice on biodiversity opportunities within the landscaping of a development scheme to enhance its biodiversity value and ensure net gains for nature. Table 2 provides an overview of the biodiversity opportunities by settlement, while Table 3 indicates some actions that developers should consider incorporating within built fabric to help conserve species that rely on buildings and ancillary developments for nesting.

Environment

Biodiversity and green space

- 6.44 Ecological surveys and reports will be required to be submitted with planning applications for major development; proposals which impact on a designated site or Priority Habitat; and proposals where there is a reasonable likelihood of a protected or Priority species being present and affected by the development. Assessments should be proportionate to the nature and scale of development proposed and the likely impact on biodiversity. These need to be undertaken by a suitably qualified ecologist in accordance with prevailing guidance.³⁹ It is important to be aware that survey work needed to inform such assessments and any necessary mitigation/ compensation measures will be seasonally restricted.
- 6.45 The Council has already adopted open space standards through the 'Open Space, Sport and Recreation Study', as applied in Core Strategy Policy CO3. These standards, which include accessible natural or semi-natural green-space, apply in both urban and rural areas, where practicable and appropriate in the environmental context.
- 6.46 Separate policy consideration is given to landscape conservation, including the High Weald AONB, elsewhere in the Section. The Combe Valley Countryside Park is considered in the Hastings Fringes Chapter.

39. CIEEM Technical Guidance on Ecological Impact Assessments and Report Writing, BS42020:2013 – Biodiversity Code of Practice for Planning and Development

Policy DEN4: Biodiversity and Green Space

Development proposals should support the conservation of biodiversity and multi-functional green spaces in accordance with Core Strategy Policy EN5 and the following criteria, as applicable:

- (i) proposals where the principal objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity or geodiversity will be supported in principle;
- (ii) development proposals should seek to conserve and enhance:
 - (a) The biodiversity value of international, national, regional and local designated sites of biodiversity and geological value, and irreplaceable habitats (including ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees);
 - (b) Priority Habitats and Species; and Protected Species, both within and outside designated sites.

Depending on the status of habitats and species concerned, this may require locating development on alternative sites that would cause less or no harm, incorporating measures for prevention, mitigation and (in the last resort) compensation.

- (iii) in addition to (ii) above, all developments should retain and enhance biodiversity in a manner appropriate to the local context, having particular regard to locally present Priority Habitats and Species, defined 'Biodiversity Opportunity Areas', ecological networks, and further opportunities identified in the Council's Green Infrastructure Study Addendum.
- (iv) larger developments of more than 2 hectares or 50 dwellings (whichever is the smaller) should produce a Green Infrastructure masterplan as part of their proposals.
- (v) all developments within the strategy area of the Dungeness Complex Sustainable Access and Recreation Management Strategy should have regard to the measures identified in that Strategy.