

Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Highways Design Handbook

A report by the Director, Kent Downs AONB Unit, to the Highways Advisory Board on 14th November 2006

Introduction

1. The statutory Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan, adopted by Kent County Council, identifies the design and maintenance of highways in the AONB as a key issue for action. Issues such as sign clutter, creeping urbanisation and traffic speeds and volume are key issues. The agreed action is to produce a Highways Design Handbook for the AONB.
2. The Kent Downs AONB unit, working with Kent County Council highway officers, has recruited and appointed consultants, Halcrow, to produce a draft Highways Design Handbook for the AONB. A first draft is attached as an annex. This report is to make the Highways Advisory Board aware of work currently being undertaken to produce a Kent Downs AONB Highways Design Handbook, share the early draft and to seek early comments and support for the identified next stages including establishing the Design Handbook as policy.

Background

3. The Kent Downs AONB is a nationally protected landscape – given legal equivalence to the National Parks. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 places a ‘Duty of Regard’ for the purposes of the AONB on all local authorities and public bodies when carrying out their activities. The scope of this duty includes the design and maintenance of highway infrastructure. The primary purpose of AONBs is to ‘conserve and enhance natural beauty’.
 - The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan was produced and submitted to Secretary of State by the AONB Unit on behalf of the AONB partnership in April 2004, the AONB partnership includes Kent County Council. Each of the local authorities in the partnership has formally adopted the Plan, its policies and actions.
4. Adopted sustainable development and travel policies from the Plan include:

SDT1	Ensure that the need to conserve and enhance the fundamental and special characteristics of the AONB is reflected within the new Regional Spatial Strategy, Local Development Frameworks, Area Action Plans Supplementary Planning Guidance and Local Transport Plans .
SDT5	Measures to reduce the long-term impact of major transportation infrastructure on the natural beauty, amenity and tranquillity of the AONB will be supported.
SDT6	A strategic approach will be taken to the use of road signage, furniture, design and maintenance that promotes or enhances the local character and distinctiveness of the AONB, and promotes better route management.
SDT8	Seek sustainable and effective solutions to identified problems or rural traffic density, speed and type of traffic particularly in rural settlements or where there is a conflict with walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

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Highways Design Handbook

5. A series of actions were adopted to respond to these policies, the key action with regard to this report is Action SDT 8 ..'produce environmental and landscape guidelines for the management of Kent Downs roads'.

Draft Kent Downs AONB Highways Design Handbook

6. The aim of the Highways Design Handbook is to encourage a more appropriate approach to the design of existing and new highways (streetscapes) in the Kent Downs. This Handbook is intended to reverse the trend towards generality and restore the distinctive quality and character of the highways or streetscapes in the Downs but will be subject to signing legislation and guidance.
7. The audience for the Handbook is wide and will include:
 - Highway and transportation engineers.
 - Developers, architects, planners, urban designers and surveyors.
 - Local planning authorities, elected members of local and parish councils, environmental organisations and local heritage groups.
 - Public utilities, telecommunication providers, local businesses, farmers, landowners and farm contractors.
8. The objectives of the Handbook are as follows:
 - To identify the special characteristics and features of the rural roads network that contribute to the distinctive character and quality of the AONB.
 - To provide high quality detailed guidance for consideration in the development of new highway treatments and improvements.
 - To ensure the conservation and maintenance of the key characteristics and features.
 - To raise awareness and understanding of the importance of the rural roads network, including its historic/heritage, landscape and biodiversity importance.
 - To do so in a way which increases safety and is practical and cost effective.
9. The Handbook will draw on best practice examples of similar work from across the UK and Europe. Case studies from the Kent Downs are being developed for the Handbook.
10. Two consultation workshops have already been held for local authority officers, highways engineers, parish councils and other stakeholders. We have also met twice with KCC Highways Engineers and the Kent police.

Next steps

11. Comments from initial consultations with the police, highways engineers and this board will be included in the Design Handbook before it is released as a consultation draft (Jan 2007).

Recommendations

12. Subject to the views of this Board and wider consultation it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste that the Kent Downs AONB Highways Design Handbook is approved and adopted as policy in summer 2007.

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Background Documents: Draft copy of the Kent Downs Highways Design Handbook