



*“I know a land where the wild flowers
grow near, near at hand if by train you
go, Metroland, Metroland”.*

George R. Sims (1914)

8. ENJOYMENT AND UNDERSTANDING

The Chilterns has long been a place for leisure and recreation. Since the time of 'Metroland' (when the Metropolitan Railway arrived in the early 20th Century), good public transport has allowed Londoners to take the train out of the city and into the countryside. This ease of access to the opportunities the Chilterns offers makes it a valuable recreational resource.

It is a place for physical activity and an escape from busy and pressured lives. It is a landscape ideal for walking, cycling, horse-riding and an array of outdoor activities. There is an extensive rights of way network, two National Trails and dozens of promoted routes. The Chilterns provides an accessible natural health service, with health walks and green gym activities on offer. Organised events and endurance challenges have become increasingly popular over the last few years and new initiatives have developed such as Park Runs. There has been a notable increase in road cycling over the last few years, though walking is still by far the most popular activity.



The Barn at Turville

The Barn Café at Turville Heath is a popular oasis in the Chilterns for walkers, cyclists and riders, and serves as an outlet for the produce of Turville Heath Farm. Robin Harman is the fifth generation to have farmed here. In order to diversify the business and to see his meat reach the plate, Robin started up the Barn Café in 2015.

The Barn, also known as 'the no-car café' can only be reached along paths and has become a valued amenity for visitors.

Key Issues

Today, people are working longer hours, spending less time outdoors and leading lives that are more sedentary. The need for tranquil outdoors space is greater than ever. The Chilterns has capacity to accommodate greater use to help fill this need.

Attracting greater visitor numbers: The Chilterns already attracts a large numbers of local leisure users and this is increasing with new housing growth, however it has capacity for greater use. It can benefit a much greater proportion of the 1.6 million people who live within 8km of the Chilterns, in particular the least active.

Protecting sensitive sites: At present visitor numbers are unevenly spread with pressure concentrated on the most sensitive chalk downland. The challenge is to manage visits and countryside services to protect the most popular and vulnerable countryside sites and habitats. The development of a Chilterns-wide visitor management initiative will help with this ambitious vision, which will need to be adequately resourced and require new sources of funding.

Engaging the surrounding community: Establishing a multi-partner network extending beyond the AONB to surrounding urban communities, greenspaces and new growth areas is needed. Public engagement will be an important part of the vision, attracting greater support for the AONB and more volunteers and stewards to help care for it in the future.

Strategic Objectives

- EO1** Secure national recognition and greater resources for the wealth of accessible recreational opportunities the Chilterns countryside offers to residents and visitors.
- EO2** Ensure more high-quality opportunities for outdoor recreation, life-long learning and volunteering for all.
- EO3** Ensure more people can enjoy healthier and happier lives by enjoying the Chilterns.
- EO4** Make more people aware of what makes the Chilterns special and encourage them to help care for it and contribute to its protection. Inspire young people to build a lasting interest in the Chilterns.
- EO5** Encourage greater use of the Chilterns countryside by those from surrounding urban communities who currently have little connection with the AONB.



Policies

To achieve these objectives, we must work together to:

EO1

EP1 Secure greater support and funding for a well-maintained, high quality and better-connected rights of way network for walking, cycling and riding.

The recreational opportunities in the Chilterns rely on a high-quality rights of way network; it is one of the main ways to explore the AONB. Local Authorities have faced funding and staff cuts over the last few years, making it much more challenging to maintain standards and develop new opportunities. New funding opportunities should be sought, for example, planning gain could be secured through new developments. A new Environmental Land Management scheme could reward farmers and landowners to improve access, improving rights of way and creating new and better access to Open Access land.

EP2 Encourage greater use of the National Trails and regional promoted routes and maximise their contribution to the local economy.

The Chilterns has some iconic long-distance promoted routes. This includes two National Trails (the Ridgeway and the Thames Path) and regional routes such as the Chiltern Way and Chilterns Cycleway. Link routes to settlements should be developed and promoted.

EO2

EP3 Support initiatives to improve the accessibility of rights of way and countryside sites.

The Chilterns has benefited from widespread stile-removals, new 'access for all' trails and other initiatives to improve physical accessibility which makes it one of the leading accessible landscapes. Accessibility should be further improved to provide more and better opportunities for everyone to enjoy the

countryside. Priorities include improved access for those with limited mobility, new or improved access links between the AONB and urban areas, more multi-user routes, better bridleway connectivity and provision of facilities on appropriate sites (e.g. waymarked trails, information boards, cycle and car parking).

EP4 Expand opportunities for volunteering and lifelong learning and ensure it is better coordinated across the Chilterns.

Volunteers are more important than ever to countryside organisations and they are a critical resource to help care for the Chilterns. Volunteering can bring multiple health benefits; it can increase people's skills and confidence, and it can decrease health inequalities and isolation.

EP5 Ensure all young people in the Chilterns and surrounding towns have opportunities to experience and learn about the Chilterns informally and through formal education.

Many young people from urban areas have never experienced the Chilterns countryside even though it is on their doorstep. There is potential to nurture greater exploration and understanding at an early stage which will build a lasting interest. This can be done through events at countryside sites, Forest Schools, outreach to schools, getting young people involved in conservation projects or outdoor activities.

EO3

EP6 Broaden public engagement activity to attract new audiences and increase understanding and enjoyment of the AONB, targeting urban communities.

Many residents from towns adjoining the Chilterns do not visit the special landscape on their doorstep. Awareness of the AONB as a protected landscape is low, especially outside the AONB. Events can attract new and diverse audiences and stimulate an interest in the Chilterns.

EP7 Encourage better provision and take-up of car-free visitor experiences to access and explore the Chilterns.

Opportunities should be sought to reduce car use by visitors and residents by offering good alternatives and promoting their use. This should include:

- Safe, attractive and accessible infrastructure for walking and cycling in and around the Chilterns
- Promoting integrated public transport and Active Travel Plans to and across the AONB
- Lobbying for more and safer cycling routes
- Encouraging additional bike hire and cycle parking

EO4

EP8 Promote greater understanding of the Chilterns landscape and respect for other users, through communication and education.

People need to be aware of the potential effects their activities can have on both sensitive habitats and on other recreational users. Although some anti-social behaviour will always occur, education can go a long way to minimising the problems. It can also stimulate an interest in the landscape around them and encourage people to take practical steps to help care for the Chilterns, from reducing water use to following the Countryside Code.



EP9 Raise the profile and visibility of the Chilterns through high quality information, interpretation and appropriate AONB gateway signage.

Awareness of the Chilterns as a protected landscape is low, even within the AONB. People are often unaware they are in the AONB as there is little on the ground to welcome you and provide a sense of place. Raising the profile of the Chilterns is crucial to attracting support for the area and ensuring its future. There are many ways this can be achieved, for example through information boards, interpretation, AONB gateway signs/artworks, signage, leaflets and digital communications.

EO5

EP10 Increase the sustainable use of the Chilterns for recreation and physical activity.

The number of people living in or close to the Chilterns is increasing. However, there are still large numbers of people who do not make use of the Chilterns countryside. There is potential for more people to benefit from countryside recreation within the AONB, but there needs to be a visitor management initiative to ensure visitor use is sustainable.

EP11 Develop and secure support for a visitor management strategy for the Chilterns.

Increased recreational use of the Chilterns countryside must be managed in order to protect vulnerable sites. It requires a visitor management strategy which links in with the surrounding urban and growth areas. A key aim of the strategy will be to address the uneven spread of visitor pressure in the Chilterns. The first step will be to secure commitment and resource from partners to gather and commission data and research that will contribute to the development of the strategy.

EP12 Ensure the Chilterns benefits from new and improved access and green space provision linked to new built development.

There are a lot of major new housing and infrastructure developments on the edge of the Chilterns that will affect countryside access and the rights of way network. It is essential to maintain and enhance the connectivity and character of the rights of way network.

KEY ACTIONS

1. Seek funding to develop and deliver a new large-scale Chilterns public engagement programme, with a focus on urban audiences.
2. Develop a visitor management initiative to provide new and improved access while protecting the most vulnerable sites. To include:
 - An assessment of carrying capacity, identifying which areas are potentially robust to recreational pressure and which are likely to be vulnerable
 - Identify priority sites for new greenspace and new access links, to create recreational space close to where people live.
3. Enhanced walking and cycling routes from town centres to the countryside to encourage more non-car-based visiting to the Chilterns.
4. Expand and develop the Chilterns Walking Festival and make it sustainable once Leader funding has stopped (October 2019).
5. Coordinate a review and analysis of data relating to leisure use of the Chilterns, with a view to commissioning (and getting funded) a new Chilterns Leisure Visitor Survey. This will include a survey of non-users, especially those from urban areas surrounding the Chilterns.

