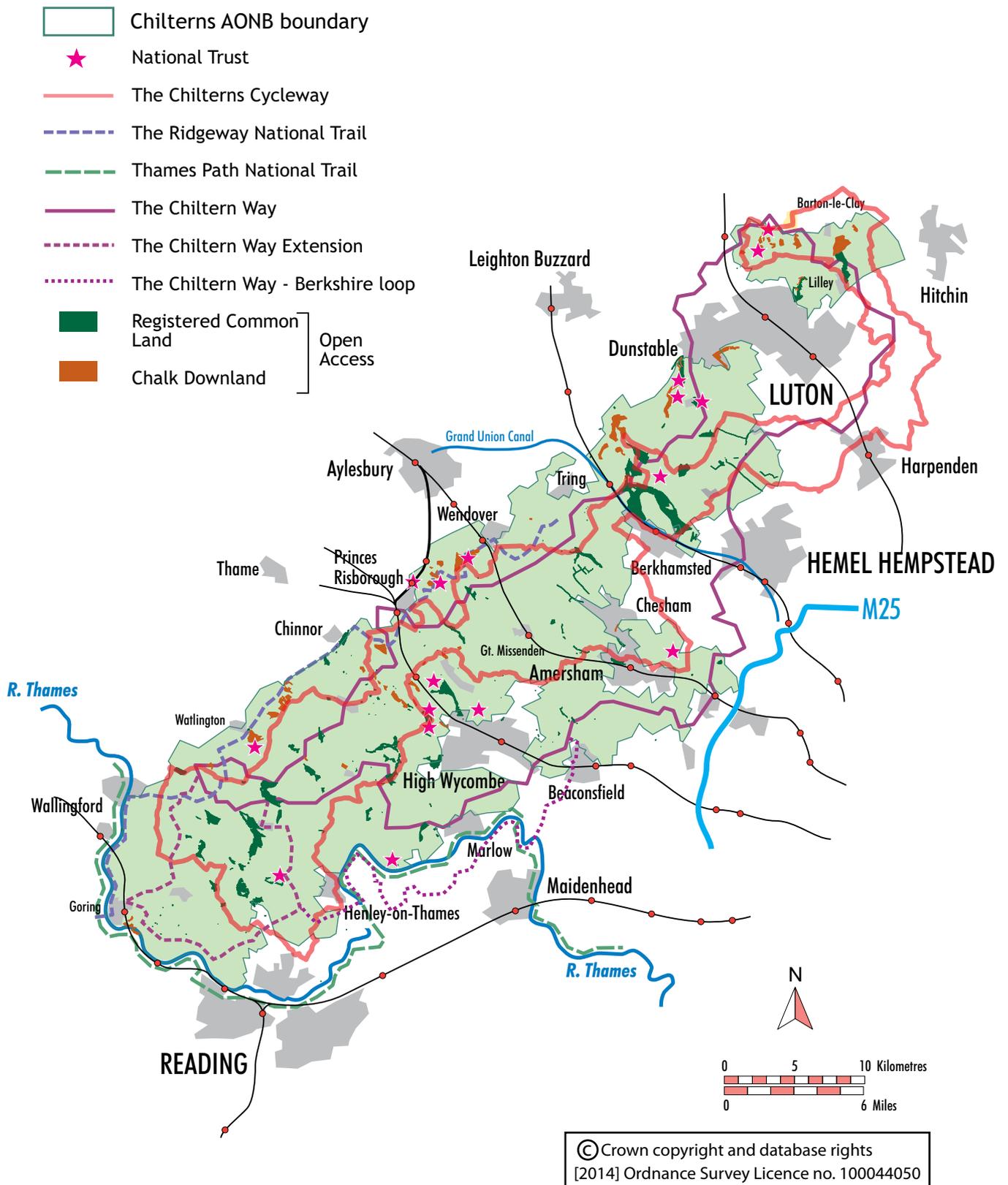


Recreation and access



Section 2

Understanding and enjoyment

Introduction

Cyclists in Turville



1. There are 55 million leisure visits to the Chilterns every year, making this one of the most popular protected landscapes in the world. Despite the popularity of the honeypot sites it is still easy to find isolation and peace and quiet.
2. The Chilterns' countryside is highly valued for the wide variety of recreational opportunities it offers, everything from walking, cycling and horse riding to gliding, canoeing and bird watching. Above all it is a landscape ideal for walking and informal recreation, with an extensive rights of way network, two National Trails and dozens of sites with open access. 44% of leisure visitors to the Chilterns said that walking was the main purpose of their trip¹.
3. One of the primary functions of the Chilterns Conservation Board is to 'increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the area of outstanding natural beauty'. This has the potential to increase respect for, and environmental awareness of, the countryside thereby encouraging people to care for and protect it.

¹ 2007 Chilterns Leisure Visitor Survey

4. The Chilterns countryside should be available for all to enjoy, which means making it accessible to those with limited mobility and ensuring that facilities and information are accessible and relevant to people at different life stages; there should be something for everyone.
5. The countryside and green spaces within settlements offer opportunities for fresh air and exercise, with benefits for physical and mental well-being. The proximity of accessible countryside to all the towns, small and large, on the AONB boundary, and London, means these opportunities are open to urban as well as rural communities.

Broad Aims

- High quality and enjoyable recreation and access opportunities should be available to all.
- Good health and a sense of well-being should be encouraged by promoting activities based on the sustainable enjoyment of the countryside.
- Every resident and visitor should be aware of, and enjoy responsibly, the Chilterns' special qualities.
- More people are interested in and involved with countryside activities and stewardship.

Special Qualities

1. The Chilterns is one of the largest and most popular rural areas for informal recreation in the UK. An estimated 55 million leisure visits are made to the Chilterns annually, with a high proportion of local users.
2. It is a landscape attractive to both local visitors and those from London and surrounding towns because of its accessibility. The Chilterns is served by four rail routes and the London Underground. Visitors are seeking peace

and quiet as part of their visit. Whilst by no means a wilderness the Chilterns does offer relative tranquillity compared to surrounding towns and cities.

3. It has a broad-ranging appeal based on its varied and intimate landscape of beech woodlands, chalk hills, common land, picturesque villages, country houses and parks and gardens. It is also an historic landscape, with hill forts, ancient barrows, medieval churches, and a strong cultural heritage.
4. There is an extensive and well-maintained public rights of way network in the Chilterns (over 2,000km), a wide range of promoted routes, two national trails passing through the area (the Ridgeway and the Thames Path) and some notable regional routes such as the Chiltern Way and the Chilterns Cycleway. There are also many rural lanes suitable for cycling, horse-riding and walking.
5. There are 2,883 ha of Open Access land available for informal recreation (889 ha of chalk downland and 1,994 ha of common land) in addition to the large areas opened to the public by bodies such as the National Trust, Forestry Commission, wildlife trusts and local authorities. There is a particular assemblage of these sites along the ridge of the escarpment on sites of exceptional quality with magnificent views. Much of the common land is in close proximity to towns and villages, making it particularly useful for local recreation and educational purposes.
6. There is a wide variety of sites managed specifically to encourage the public to visit, ranging from small picnic sites to large estates owned by the National Trust and Forestry Commission. Many sites are quiet tucked-away places with no facilities at all but others have car parks, toilets, visitor centres and a year-round programme of events.
7. The range of opportunities for outdoor recreation is extensive. Although walking and cycling are the most popular activities, there are plenty of

opportunities for alternative pursuits such as canoeing, gliding, orienteering, canal and river cruising.

8. There are a large number of organisations involved with managing recreation in the Chilterns. This means that there are plenty of events which appeal to a wide audience. Increasingly this is a year-round programme often with events held during the week as well as weekends.

Key Issues

1. Most of the popular countryside sites in the Chilterns are on environmentally-sensitive sites, especially chalk grassland where there is a need to balance recreation and conservation. Certain sites experience intense recreational pressure and careful visitor management is required to prevent their degradation. Where such conflicts arise, the Board gives primary importance to conserving the environmental quality of the resource over its use for recreation. The creation of buffer areas and other methods of alleviating pressure at sensitive sites should be considered.
2. Sensitive management and guidance is required to ensure visitors behave responsibly and are aware of the need to protect the countryside they enjoy. This means working with partners to agree the key messages, on-going communication with user groups, promoting codes of conduct and through face-to-face communications by rangers or volunteers on the ground.
3. The last few years has seen a sharp increase in cycling, especially on-road cycling, in the Chilterns. There has also been an increase in organised cycling events, some of them on a large scale. Whilst the majority of cyclists and cycle events do not cause problems and provide a wonderful way to enjoy the Chilterns, conflicts with other users are becoming more widespread. There is a need to work with cycle groups and event organisers to promote a code of conduct and make cyclists more aware of the need to respect other users.
4. The rising traffic levels pose challenges for the Chilterns, in particular honeypot sites, with issues such as overflow parking and congestion. The 2007 Chilterns Visitor Survey showed that a third of visitors to the most popular countryside sites had travelled less than 5 miles, yet 94% of visitors came by car. There is clearly scope to encourage more people to walk from home or use public transport.
5. There are gaps in the rights of way network, particularly bridleways, forcing horse-riders, cyclists and walkers on to often busy roads. With the increase in volume and speed of traffic, roads which were once commonly used as link routes to public rights of way are no longer considered safe by many users.
6. Not all communities have access to green spaces close to where they live, with barriers such as roads or railways making it difficult to reach the surrounding countryside by foot or bike². Priority should be given to improving access for those communities with low green space provision. Plans for housing growth in and around the Chilterns need to include additional and accessible green spaces close to where the new homes will be built. It will not be appropriate to assume new residents can use existing, but sensitive and vulnerable, sites as the nearest green space.
7. Given the large number of visitors to the Chilterns, occasional conflicts between different users (e.g. mountain bikers and walkers/horse riders) are inevitable. Noisy activities such as trail biking and quad biking are a particular problem to users seeking peace and tranquillity. Problems are not widespread, but do occur, particularly on shared-use paths. The surfacing used on shared-use paths can cause problems, with different users requiring different types of surfacing. As ever a balance is required to ensure all users are catered for.

² *An analysis of accessible natural greenspace provision in the South East 2007*

8. New housing developments will exert additional pressure on the countryside, particularly at nearby honeypot sites. For example, the Ashridge Estate, Coombe Hill, College Lake, Tring Reservoirs, Wendover Woods, Dunstable Downs, Pegsdon Hills and Barton Hills will all receive additional visitors because of the nearby growth areas at Aylesbury, Dunstable and Luton.
9. Local authorities and organisations delivering countryside services and green spaces have faced funding cuts and reduced staff resources over the last few years which is exerting pressure on their ability to maintain and develop countryside access. There has been an increased amount of volunteer input to help fill the gaps but unless the funding situation changes, a deterioration in the quality of countryside access, green spaces and facilities is inevitable.
10. The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails have suffered from a lack of investment over the last few years due to funding cuts and a freeze on marketing and promotion of the Trails. It is hoped that the culmination of the National Trails review means a new way forward for the National Trails, starting with the development of a Trails Partnership and an increased emphasis on the development and marketing of the Trails for the future.
11. The provision of information and interpretation, in their many forms, is a vital means of increasing understanding and enjoyment of the Chilterns. It can help with the planning and visiting of sites in the Chilterns and should be present at key visitor points. The growth of smart-phone technology and QR codes will continue to provide new and exciting possibilities for presenting information and interpreting the Chilterns in imaginative ways. The growth of electronic media should supplement rather than replace face-to-face interpretation such as guided walks or events, which remain a popular and effective means of engaging visitors.



Walkers at Bison Hill near Whipsnade

12. Volunteers have become more important than ever to countryside organisations and there is a huge variety of opportunities for volunteering in the Chilterns. Volunteering encourages people to learn about and care for the Chilterns countryside. Although the engagement of volunteers requires investment, it can be especially valuable for under-resourced organisations.

13. The tranquillity of the Chilterns is under increasing threat from increased vehicular traffic, aircraft flying over and population growth in and around the area. Whilst localised noisy activities are a feature of larger settlements and along the urban fringe, increasingly traffic noise along busy roads and, in particular, over-flying aircraft of all types are reducing the places and times when peace and quiet can be found.
14. Several new tourism initiatives have sprung up in the Chilterns over the last few years, all aimed at increasing short breaks in the Chilterns: Our Land, Cycle Chilterns and Walkers are Welcome. The Chilterns Tourism Network has been established, a Chilterns tourism website has been developed and 'Choose the Chilterns' branding established. These resources provide a platform for other sustainable tourism initiatives and the economic benefits that these can bring to Chilterns businesses.

Policies

UE1 The management of countryside suitable for recreation should be promoted and supported whilst conserving its environmental quality.

The Conservation Board will continue to work with local authorities, the National Trust, Natural England, community groups, landowners and the many other organisations managing the Chilterns countryside to ensure that recreational opportunities are maintained and promoted. The maintenance, waymarking and promotion of the rights of way network remain a priority. Access must be managed appropriately, taking into account sensitive species and habitats so that the environmental quality of countryside sites is maintained.

UE2 There should be a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of countryside access and services across the Chilterns.

The AONB straddles many local authority boundaries, but there is no unified countryside service. The Conservation Board has an important role to play in bringing together the many different partners on joint projects, co-ordinating access initiatives and encouraging consistency in standards of information and interpretation provision (for example maintaining the successful Chilterns Country brand) and in the quality of countryside services and facilities.

UE3 The use of public rights of way should be promoted and routes improved by covering gaps in the network.

The public rights of way network provides the basic resources for the large numbers of visits to the Chilterns' countryside. They are generally well maintained and waymarked. However there are gaps in the network, particularly the bridleway network which is fragmented, forcing users onto busy roads. This is a particular problem for horse-riders. The challenge is to link up bridleways where gaps exist, preferably by creating new rights of way.

Initiatives such as the Bucks Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan can play an important role in improving the connectivity and accessibility of the rights of way network, and should be strongly supported.

UE4 People should be encouraged to make the most of the countryside on their doorstep.

Research indicates that the average car journey is less than two miles. People should be encouraged to make more use of the countryside close to where they live rather than driving to sites further afield. The CCB will continue to promote the 'Countryside Close to Home' concept, linking in with initiatives such as Cycle Chilterns which encourages people to walk or cycle rather than drive a short distance and to improve cycle links to/from gateway towns in the Chilterns.

UE5 Access links between town and country for walkers, cyclists and other recreational users should be strengthened.

The rights of way network potentially offers many people an opportunity to walk, cycle or ride from their homes to the countryside (or from their village into town). There are many large settlements both within and immediately adjacent to the AONB and the challenge is to create new links where there are gaps and to improve the quality of routes linking town and country. The development of new housing in the Chilterns and associated green infrastructure initiatives offer opportunities to design important new access links.

UE6 Understanding and appreciation of the area's special qualities should be promoted.

Work with partners to provide high quality information and interpretation. This can be done in many different ways, from on-line information and leaflets, to information boards, guided walks and events, use of QR codes and the latest technologies.

UE7 Countryside users should be encouraged to behave responsibly.

The Chilterns is one of the most heavily-visited protected landscapes in the UK, receiving millions of visitors every year. Every opportunity should be taken to make people aware that the Chilterns is a protected landscape and at the same time a working landscape which requires careful management; there is a need to give people an appreciation of what makes it special and why it needs protection.

Sometimes there are conflicts between recreation and conservation/land management or between different types of users, particularly at the most heavily visited countryside sites and honey pot areas. Visitors need to be made aware of their rights and responsibilities when visiting the countryside and the need

to respect other users. Particular effort needs to be directed to the management of dogs in the countryside and to managing the increase in cyclists and cycling events. This requires not only wider communication and education but also countryside staff on the ground undertaking face-to-face engagement with visitors.

UE8 The accessibility of the countryside for all users should be enhanced and, in particular, special needs should be addressed, whilst taking care to conserve environmental character.

The provision of high quality access opportunities and facilities remains a priority. The last few years has seen the removal of hundreds of stiles in the Chilterns and the development of new and improved wheelchair-accessible trails at several countryside sites, creating much more accessible countryside for those with restricted mobility. The Conservation Board will work with partners to ensure this area of work continues as it has potential to benefit such a large sector of the population.

In addition to improving physical access, efforts should also be focused on improving the quality and accessibility of information, the waymarking of rights of way and promoted routes, and encouraging participation through events and guided walks.

UE9 The quality of welcome given to visitors, including the development of new facilities and services where appropriate, should be enhanced.

For many people the provision of visitor facilities such as car parking, toilets, information and waymarked trails is integral to their visit. The last few years have seen considerable improvements at the formal countryside sites, however, in parts of the Chilterns provision is relatively sparse. The Board should promote investment in access and recreation facilities on appropriate sites to improve the quality of visitor experience.

UE10 Visits to the AONB should be made using environmentally sensitive modes of transport and new provision should be encouraged.

Most visitors to the Chilterns arrive by car: visitor surveys at key countryside sites show that over 90% of visitors to the popular countryside sites arrive by car. Visitors should be encouraged to use public transport, and once in the Chilterns, opportunities to explore the area by foot or bike should be promoted. Initiatives such as Cycle Chilterns will improve facilities at railway stations and gateway towns, including the provision of bike hire, bike racks, information boards, leaflets and signage. Walkers are Welcome and Cyclists are Welcome should also be encouraged. New housing and infrastructure developments in the Chilterns also provide the opportunity to seek private developer funding to improve sustainable transport provision, for example new cycle lanes.

Walks and rides from railway stations should be further developed and promoted through initiatives such as Cycle Chilterns and Our Land, capitalising on the excellent rail links which can bring urban visitors directly into the Chilterns countryside.

UE11 Effective management of the highways network should be encouraged, to promote its safer use for walking, cycling and horse riding.

The Chilterns has a large network of quiet lanes which are ideal for walking, cycling and riding. However, many of the busier highways have become less safe for users, due to the increase in volume and speed of vehicular traffic. Highways should be managed to encourage their use for recreational activities, particularly those which have public rights of way along them or are included in promoted routes. This may include the introduction of traffic calming measures, providing safe crossing points and introducing speed restrictions (as done on the Ashridge Estate). In some cases there may be opportunities to make more of road

verges for walkers. On very busy roads, the creation of separate routes for cyclists / riders is the ideal to be encouraged wherever possible.

UE12 The health and other benefits of visiting the countryside and taking part in low impact activities should be promoted.

Inactivity is now recognised as a serious health issue, with increasing levels of obesity, particularly among young people. The countryside offers opportunities for fresh air and exercise, with benefits to peoples' physical and mental well-being. National initiatives have led to a large number of successful healthy walking schemes in the Chilterns, where it is now firmly established. The health benefits of visiting the countryside and the opportunities to participate in healthy walking schemes should be actively promoted by the Board. The Board should also promote the full range of new and niche activities which will appeal to different audiences, such as geocaching, play trails, Nordic walking and other outdoor activities.

UE13 The economic contribution of all types of visitor to the local economy should be enhanced.

Recreation and tourism have the potential to make a substantial contribution to the local economy. The Chilterns is predominantly a day visitor destination but there is scope to develop and promote the short break market which will contribute far more to the local economy. The Chilterns does not have a unified tourism service, however the Chilterns Tourism Network has a key role to play in bringing together tourism businesses and stakeholders. It should be supported in its efforts to promote the Chilterns as a visitor destination and generate more overnight stays, for example through the Visit Chilterns website, 'Choose the Chilterns' branding and other marketing activities.

A number of sustainable tourism itineraries have been developed in the

Chilterns and these should continue to be promoted, for example short breaks based on the Chilterns Cycleway.

UE14 Learning and volunteering opportunities which will develop an understanding of, and caring for, the environment should be encouraged and promoted.

The Chilterns countryside offers people the opportunity to learn through formal education programmes, and informally, thus enhancing both their enjoyment of, and desire to help conserve, its natural beauty. There are numerous opportunities to get involved through volunteering, the Board should promote these and encourage participation in wider learning activities including talks, guided walks, workshops and training events.

UE15 The use of the River Thames corridor and Grand Union Canal for quiet leisure activities, which are consistent with maintenance of environmental character, should be promoted.

The Chilterns waterways are much loved and provide numerous possibilities for quiet leisure activities and water-based activities such as boating and canoeing. Access improvements have been made to many stretches of the River Thames and Grand Union Canal towpaths to make them more accessible to all, but there is still scope to improve access for all; this should be a priority near urban areas. The availability and quality of visitor facilities, waymarking and interpretation is integral to many people's enjoyment and understanding of the waterways and the Board must work with its partners to support this, for example the Canal & River Trust which provides advice to guide developments on canals. The use of the Thames for leisure boating has been in decline for some years and provides potential for growth.

UE16 A regional network of walking routes based on the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails and other high quality promoted routes such as the Chiltern Way should be promoted.

The National Trails in the Chilterns provide a spine, linking in with other rights of way and promoted routes to offer numerous opportunities for walking loops. The Board needs to work with partners to ensure routes, signage, interpretation and visitor facilities are maintained to a high standard and that they provide a high quality visitor experience. There needs to be investment in new technologies to draw in broader and younger audiences, for example developing apps, using QR codes on way marker posts and leaflets, making the web site more interactive and enabling users to download route maps onto their smart phones and other mobile devices.

UE17 The use of the Chilterns Cycleway and other cycle routes as part of a regional network should be promoted.

The Chilterns Cycleway links up market towns, attractions and connecting cycle routes across the Chilterns. It provides numerous opportunities for day rides and longer routes and can be used to encourage greater cycle use amongst residents as well as visitors. The Chilterns Cycleway should capitalise on projects such as 'Cycle Chilterns' which will provide better cycle facilities at gateway towns, wider availability of bike hire (including electric bike) and programmes of led rides.

UE18 Tranquillity should be conserved by resisting noisy/damaging activities. A reduction in the level of noise and other forms of pollution caused by development and transport infrastructure should be sought.

Getting out into the country for many people means a search for peace and quiet, a chance to get away from it all for a short while. Occasionally the peace is disturbed by a noisy activity such as quad biking, although the main source of noise pollution is from traffic and, increasingly, aircraft. The Board should work with partners to resist activities which threaten tranquillity, or to minimise their impacts.

UE19 The planning process should protect and enhance the public rights of way and access networks for walkers, cyclists and horse-riders.

There are many development pressures in the Chilterns, some which threaten the accessibility of the rights of way network, in particular new housing and transport infrastructure. It is essential that the connectivity, character and setting of the rights of way network is maintained. In addition to protecting this resource, the planning process can also lever in funding to enhance and upgrade rights of way. For example new housing developments can provide the opportunity to develop new walking and cycling routes through developer funding such as the Community Infrastructure Levy and can lead to better links between town and country and improvements in the accessibility of the network.

UE20 Young people's exploration and understanding of habitats and species in the Chilterns should be facilitated.

Children are naturally inquisitive about the world around them and this should be nurtured to encourage greater exploration and understanding of the Chilterns countryside; if this interest is developed early in life, people are more likely to continue exploring and valuing the Chilterns in the future. This could be done through formal educational activities (such as schools or youth groups) or informally through provision of relevant facilities (natural play areas, play trails) and activities such as orienteering, bushcraft, den-building, geo-caching, as well as participation in initiatives such as Open Farm Sunday. The main countryside sites have done a great deal over the last few years to attract young people, the challenge will be to broaden this to other locations and wider audiences.



*Horse rider
Berkhamsted Common*