

Chapter 2

Wealden District Key Characteristics



Our District

2.1 Located in the economic powerhouse of the Southeast, close to London and within easy reach of Europe, Wealden District covers an area of 321 square miles. It is the 44th largest out of 317 local authorities in England, the second largest in the southeast region and the largest and most rural local authority in East Sussex.

2.2 We have 75 defined settlements, ranging from our larger towns of Hailsham, Crowborough, Uckfield, Heathfield and Polegate to a range of large villages, such as Forest Row and Wadhurst, as well as many other smaller villages and hamlets. In general terms, just over half of our residents (55%) live within our towns, with the remainder of our population (45%) living in our more rural areas. Overall, our location, as well as our high-quality environment, landscape and heritage makes Wealden a very attractive place to live, work and visit.

2.3 Wealden District Council is responsible for planning (both plan-making and Development Management) for 39 out of the 42 Town and Parish Council areas in the district. The South Downs National Park Authority is responsible for planning in the Alfriston, Cuckmere Valley and the East Dean and Friston Parish. Each of our parishes, towns and villages are unique and special in their own way, each with their own communities, character, history and heritage.

2.4 Our towns and villages are crucial, providing our communities with valuable local services and facilities and reducing the need for our communities to travel further afield. However, we are also located close to much larger, regional towns outside of our district including Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks to the north, Eastbourne to the south, Lewes and Brighton and Hove to the south-west, East Grinstead, Horsham and Crawley to the north-west, Haywards Health and Burgess Hill to the west and Bexhill and Hastings to the southeast. These centres also provide important retail, employment, leisure and other services for our communities.

Population Change

2.5 The makeup of our population and population change into the future are important considerations and key to understanding the issues and challenges we will face in the future. The district's population has grown and is expected to continue to grow, mainly due to people moving into the district from other parts of the country or less so, from abroad.

2.6 With a change in population, as well as an increase in life expectancy, comes changes to the district's age and health profile. We expect to see significant increases in residents aged 65 and over, a small increase in residents aged 16-64 and a small decrease in residents aged under 16. Although there are differences in our population age structure between our different towns and villages, we are faced with the overall challenge of ensuring that we provide for the needs of our residents both now and into the future. This means that we will need to provide a variety of more homes, jobs, services, community facilities and infrastructure in the right places and where people want to live and work. The district's ageing population and net out-migration of younger people has the potential to affect areas such as housing provision, as well as the economy and service provision, such as health care, especially as the proportion of the district's population living with a long-term illness or a disability is projected to increase within the plan period.



Health and Wellbeing

2.7 Health and well-being are impacted not only by people's choices and behaviour but also by much wider factors, such as the built and natural environment. It is also impacted by social conditions such as where we live and work as well as our age. Some of the most pressing health challenges such as obesity, mental health issues, physical inactivity, and the needs of an ageing population, can all be influenced by the quality of our built and natural environment.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Life expectancy - Average life expectancy in Wealden is above the national, southeast and East Sussex average at 85 years for women and 81.6 years for men.¹
- Limiting long-term health and disability - Data from the 2021 Census shows that 5.8% of the district's population has a limiting long-term health problem or disability, which limits their daily activities or the work they can do, including issues that are age related. This percentage is projected to increase significantly during the plan period as the population ages.²
- Access to GPs - Although there is variability for different settlements, only 54.6% of households overall have access to a GP practice within 15 mins by public transport or walking. This is below the average for East Sussex, which is 63.5%.³
- Childhood overweight and obesity - Around 1 in 5 children between the ages of 4 and 5 and around 1 in 4 children between the ages of 10 and 11 in Wealden are considered overweight or obese. This is below the national and county average.⁴
- Adulthood overweight and obesity - Around 3 out of 5 adults (58%) in Wealden are classified as being overweight or obese. This is similar to the national average.⁵
- Children in poverty - The percentage of children living in low-income families has also increased over the last decade rising from 12.6% in 2017/18 to 14.7% in 2021/22.⁶
- Ageing population - By 2039, it is estimated that there will be a 75% increase in the number of people aged 65+ with dementia and a 66% increase in those aged 65+ with mobility problems.⁷
- Deprivation - The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 ranks Wealden 254 out of 317 local authorities. Therefore, Wealden overall, has a low level of deprivation. However, there are areas of Wealden with pockets of deprivation.⁸
- Fuel poverty - In 2018, 8.5% of households in Wealden were living in fuel poverty, finding it difficult to afford sufficient fuel to maintain a satisfactory heating regime. This may of course increase this winter given the increase in the cost of fuel.⁹
- Economic Inactivity - Around 20.2% of the district's working population (16-64) are economically inactive in the district; this includes 2.8% of the working population who are inactive due to long-term sickness or disability.¹⁰
- Open space - There are 372 sites of open space covering around 1,965 hectares. The largest contributor is natural and semi-natural greenspace, which makes up 88% of provision. This does not include playing pitches.¹¹

¹ONS, 2020. Life expectancy at birth statistics

²ONS, 2023. Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021

³DT, 2021. Journey time statistics, 2019

⁴OIH&D, 2022. Local Health – Small Area Public Health Data

⁵East Sussex JSNA, 2019. Wealden district area profile

⁶DWP, 2023. Children in low-income families

⁷Wealden District Council, 2019.

Freedom Leisure Scoping Paper.

⁸MoHC&LG, 2019. Indices of Deprivation (2019)

⁹BEIS, 2022. Households in fuel poverty, 2008-2020

¹⁰ONS, 2022. Economic activity and inactivity in 2021

¹¹Wealden District Council, 2022. Open Space – Assessment Report

Housing

2.8 An increasing population, alongside the attractiveness of the district in relation to its environment and access to employment centres creates a high demand for housing. It also contributes to an upward pressure on house prices, and this is seen particularly in the north of the district. Overall and across the whole district, there is a significant mismatch between household incomes and the cost of market housing. This leads to significant shortages of market housing that is affordable and results in difficulties for people to get onto the housing ladder, particularly younger people. In addition to high house prices, it is also expensive to rent a property within Wealden, which again goes to affordability, especially for those on lower incomes who are also unable to access market housing.

HOUSING

- Households - In 2021, the census recorded that Wealden has 68,300 households with at least one resident.¹²
- Housing occupancy - It is reported by DLUHC that Wealden has a stock of 72,733 net dwellings and a primary dwelling occupancy rate of 93.9%. Around 91% of the district's housing stock is private sector, with the majority being owner occupied. In 2021, the census recorded 13.5% of the district's housing stock was private rented and 8.4% was social rented.
- Council housing - In 2022, the Council owned 3,043 dwellings in the district. 93.3% are social rental stock. 6.7% are affordable rental. The majority of these dwellings have one or two bedrooms.
- Social housing - There are 3,047 dwellings owned by Registered Providers in Wealden. This takes the total social/affordable stock to 6,090, which equates to around 8.4% of all housing stock in the district.¹³
- Housing mix - Wealden has far less one, two and three bedroom homes and flats than the national, regional and sub-regional average. This has ramifications for supporting younger people onto the housing ladder and facilitating downsizing.
- Housing stock divide - Settlements in the north of the district have higher proportions of larger 4 and 5+ bedroom stock and settlements in the south of the district have higher proportions of smaller 2-bedroom stock (particularly Polegate and Hailsham).
- Housing type - 74.7% of all homes in the district are either detached or semi-detached as of the 2021 Census.
- Local housing prices - The south of the district around Hailsham and Polegate achieves lower house prices than the north of the district around Crowborough and those areas close to Tunbridge Wells.
- Housing affordability - Affordability has significantly deteriorated in Wealden since 1998 and in 2022; the median house price in Wealden was 13.25 times median annual workplace-based earnings (higher than across the Southeast region (10.75) and across England and Wales (8.28)).¹⁴
- Completions - Housing completions (net) in the district have averaged 726 dwellings per annum between 2011/12 and 2021/22. Overall, the rate of growth has been around 0.9% per annum.
- Housing need - In 2021, there were 656 households on the Wealden housing register.

¹²ONS, 2023, Census 2021

¹³DLUHC, 2023, Live tables on dwelling stock

¹⁴ONS, 2022.

Transport and accessibility

2.9 Although Wealden is located within the southeast, the rurality of the district brings its own challenges in relation to transportation and connecting our communities with key employment locations, education provision, services and facilities. The public transport network within the district is currently considered poor. There are bus and rail services for some settlements to neighbouring larger key destinations, such as Eastbourne, Brighton and Tunbridge Wells as well as from some settlements to our towns. However, whilst some services are regular, others provide a limited frequency, especially at weekends or in the evenings. There are also often poor connections for onward journeys.

2.10 In relation to rail, Wealden has a number of train stations that connect Frant, Wadhurst, Uckfield, Buxted, Crowborough and Eridge to London. Also connecting Pevensey, Westham, Polegate and Berwick to Hastings, Eastbourne, Brighton and Lewes, with an onward journey from Lewes to Gatwick and London. In general terms, rail services in Wealden are located within the eastern and southern part of the district. This means that many urban areas, such as Hailsham and Heathfield, as well as many other of the district's settlements, do not have direct access to rail services.

2.11 Overall, with nearly half of the district's population living in rural or remote areas, many of our communities have either no or very limited access to public transport. Consequently, most households within Wealden have access to either one or more cars and there is a heavy reliance within the district on the use of private vehicles for journeys.

2.12 The district is connected to the Major Road Network (MRN) largely via the A22 and A26, which run through the district providing access to and between Eastbourne, Tunbridge Wells, East Grinstead as well as providing links to Gatwick and London via the M23 and M25. Several key junctions and roads on these corridors are currently at, or reaching capacity, and experience congestion and delay during peak hours. A package of highway improvement schemes to the southern part of the A22 are currently being progressed as part of a MRN funding programme. These improvements were included in the Government's growth budget announcements; however, we will not know the outcome of the Major Road Network bid until 2025⁸.

2.13 The A27, which is part of the Strategic Road Network (SRN), is situated in the southern part of the district, providing connections with Lewes and Brighton. National Highways (NH) have recently implemented highway improvements on the A27. An offline A27 to improve capacity issues has also been mooted as part of future opportunities to improve congestion between Polegate and Lewes. However, should this be an option, it is unlikely to be delivered until after this plan period.

2.14 Whilst Wealden has some A-road connectivity, the more rural areas of the district are poorly connected by road.

2.15 Key to reducing traffic and congestion on our road network and reducing carbon emissions will be the promotion of active travel. The district benefits from National Cycle Network Route 21 running north-south through the middle of the district. This route makes use of the Cuckoo Trail, which is mainly an off-road route running between Polegate to Heathfield incorporating, Hailsham, Horam and Maynards Green. It continues on-road from Heathfield to Groombridge and Tunbridge Wells. The Cuckoo Trail provides a safe route for cycling, walking and horse riding. In addition to the Cuckoo trail, improvements have recently been delivered alongside the A27 corridor connecting Polegate with Lewes, which offers an alternative to driving along this busy route. In all other locations across the district cycle paths are currently very limited.

2.16 In 2021, East Sussex County Council published their Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. This identified a number of priorities for walking and cycling improvements. Potential schemes are identified with a focus around Wealden's main towns of Hailsham, Polegate, Crowborough and Uckfield. These schemes will however rely on growth and partnership working for both their funding and delivery. East Sussex County Council's Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) also provides a key focus upon active and sustainable travel.

Economy

2.17 The district's economic performance has been relatively strong in recent years considering its size, rural nature and the Covid 19 pandemic. This performance is expected to continue into the future.

2.18 Wealden supports a range of manufacturing industries, professional service activities, construction and land-based industries including viticulture, tourism and the visitor economy.

8 [Department for Transport, 2018. Major Road Network and Large Local Majors Programmes: programme investment planning.](#)

Sector strengths for the Wealden economy, when compared to England as a whole are agriculture, construction, other services, arts, accommodation and food (tourism) that are largely low value sectors.

2.19 Overall, Wealden has a diverse and resilient economy, which is characterised by a high number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and a highly qualified workforce. However, for the past decade, jobs growth has been below the national average.

2.20 Wealden is located near to other employment centres who provide higher paid jobs for a significant number of commuters. This has resulted in local gross added value and employment growth being below the national average. The main commuting routes for Wealden residents are out of the district, including Eastbourne, Tunbridge Wells, Lewes and Mid Sussex. More Wealden residents commute to these locations than those commuting into Wealden from these locations, although jobs taken up by residents from Eastbourne, Rother and Lewes is notable. The provision of additional employment land in the district will assist in reducing out commuting.

2.21 Fifty percent of employment within Wealden is in the five key towns with the highest number in Crowborough, Uckfield and Hailsham and to a lesser extent Polegate and Heathfield. There are over 20 industrial estates and 8,820 active businesses within Wealden and there is a high demand for business premises, especially for manufacturing.

2.22 The key issue that has been highlighted within a number of reports (i.e. the Locate East Sussex, Land and Premises Supply Study – Market Assessment for East Sussex (2020) and the Employment and Economic Study for Eastbourne and Wealden (2022)) at both a local and strategic level is that employment premises/sites within Wealden, and East Sussex more generally, are constrained in terms of their availability. Moreover, in some cases, the stock is outdated for modern needs, with much of the stock built in the 1980s/1990s and in need of renovation/replacement. Locate East Sussex reviewed the local land and premises market in East Sussex and stated that existing stock within the industrial market is relatively old and in poor condition, whilst Sussex in general is not considered a typical investment destination. However, it was concluded that one of the key barriers to employment growth (amongst others) was the lack of allocated land within Wealden District, and that there was significant demand for businesses in Uckfield, Hailsham and Polegate specifically (i.e. where demand was outstripping supply), with the latter town potentially being suitable for major distributors.

2.23 In terms of the commercial market, over the past 19 years (i.e. between 2000/01 and 2019/20) the net growth of office floorspace has been strong across Wealden, with growth of over 22%, that compares favourably with England as a whole (at only 10%), despite a reduction in office floorspace more recently. In terms of industrial floorspace over the same period, this has also been very strong across Wealden, with growth over the period at 20%, compared to a shrinkage of 3% for England as a whole. Wealden's latest industrial vacancy rate is only 2%, which is below the regional rate of 3.7%, with rents rising by 47% over the same period. This shows strong economic performance for industrial uses over the past two decades in Wealden.

2.24 Whilst there has been recent development and provision of high quality, new employment sites within Wealden, overall, there are limited available sites to accommodate medium and large businesses.

2.25 Housing growth is likely to support economic growth in the district, especially in sectors such as construction, but also through remote working practices in areas of business and professional services.

2.26 Agriculture, viticulture and tourism are also employment specialisms within the district with opportunities for economic growth. However, like elsewhere across the country, there is an issue around labour supply for these sectors given the low paid nature of work and high house prices, particularly in the local area.

2.27 Overall, the aging population and workforce, coupled with recruitment, retention and skills shortages are pressing issues for employers.

THE ECONOMY

- **Business numbers** - The district has a high business density with 93 businesses per 1,000 working-age residents as of 2020.¹⁵ This is higher than the national average (72).
- **Business stock and survival rate** - The business stock has grown by 9% over ten years – a lower rate of growth than England (27%) and Southeast England (19%). Business survival rates are very similar to the national average.¹⁶
- **Employment rate** - The 2022 employment rate in Wealden is higher than both the national average and the southeast average. This suggests that whilst more could be done to get more people into work, it is not an urgent policy issue.¹⁷
- **Qualifications** - In 2021, 32.6% of Wealden's residents have a level 4 qualification or above, which is slightly below the southeast and national level, but higher than the rest of East Sussex. Just 14.9% of Wealden's residents have no qualifications, which is significantly lower than at the regional and national level.¹⁸
- **Levels of out-commuting** - The average (mean) full-time pay of Wealden's residents sits above both the southeast and national average at £816.00. However, workplace average (mean) full-time earnings in Wealden (£693.00) are around £75 lower than resident earnings suggesting that significant levels of out-commuting occur.
- **Sectors of employment** - The largest employment sectors in Wealden are wholesale and retail trade followed by human health and social work activities then construction. Education, manufacturing, professional services, agriculture and tourism are also large employment sectors.
- **Economy** - In 2020, Wealden contributed £2,774m to the economy equating to a GVA £17,257 per head and is considered a low value economy compared to the southeast and England as a whole but is similar to East Sussex.
- **Decreasing working age population** - The working age population of Wealden has decreased (by 2.5%) from 2011 to 2021. This compares to a 2% decrease across the Southeast and a 1.8% decrease across England as a whole over the same period.
- **Employment Opportunities** - Wealden's latest job vacancy rate is 1.8%, which is far below the regional value of 6.3% and significantly below the UK value of 3.7%. It is also below the average long-term (since 2005) job vacancy rate for Wealden of 3.4%. The vacancy rate has been declining in Wealden since 2012, reflecting the positive net absorption, which has occurred over this period.
- **Reliance on Tourism** - Tourism within Wealden is a key part of the economy. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, the sector supported 8,743 jobs and around 18.2% of the district's population are employed because of tourism in Wealden.

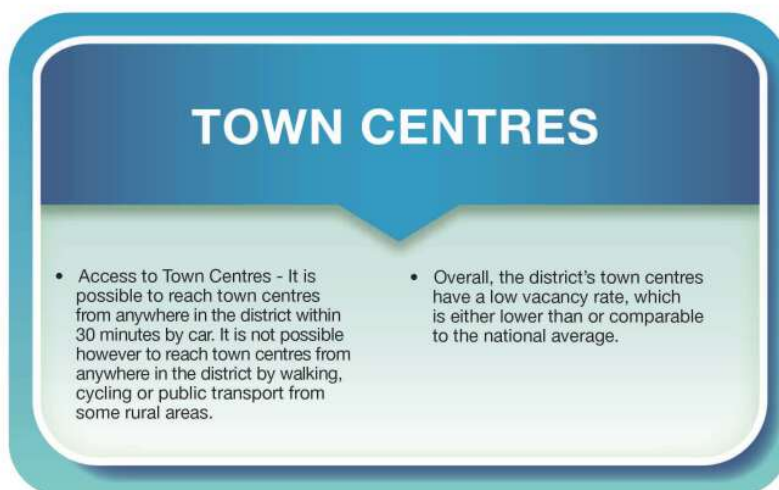
¹⁵Employment and Economic Study Eastbourne and Wealden, (April 2022)
¹⁶ONS, 2023, Business demography, UK
¹⁷ONS, 2022, Unemployment estimates, 2004-2022
¹⁸ONS, 2022, Unemployment estimates, 2004-2022

Town Centres

2.28 In relation to our town centres, the district faces significant competition from other major towns in both Kent and Sussex, such as Tunbridge Wells, Eastbourne, East Grinstead, Lewes, and Brighton and Hove (amongst others) in respect of retailing and leisure, and there is a need to recognise the function and role that the district's town centres play in the wider region.

2.29 However, our **Town Centre Study (2023)** has confirmed that our town centres are generally performing well. This includes in recent years where our towns have faced a transition

including Brexit uncertainty, the Covid 19 pandemic and business investment and expenditure decline, which all had a knock-on effect for the retail and leisure industries. There is little vacant commercial space in our town centres and the provision of independent shops rather than national retailers has meant that our town centres have survived and thrived. However, whilst our town centres and high streets have shown resilience, there is a continuing challenge in terms of maintaining vibrancy, attracting visitors and retaining commercial floorspace.



Climate Change

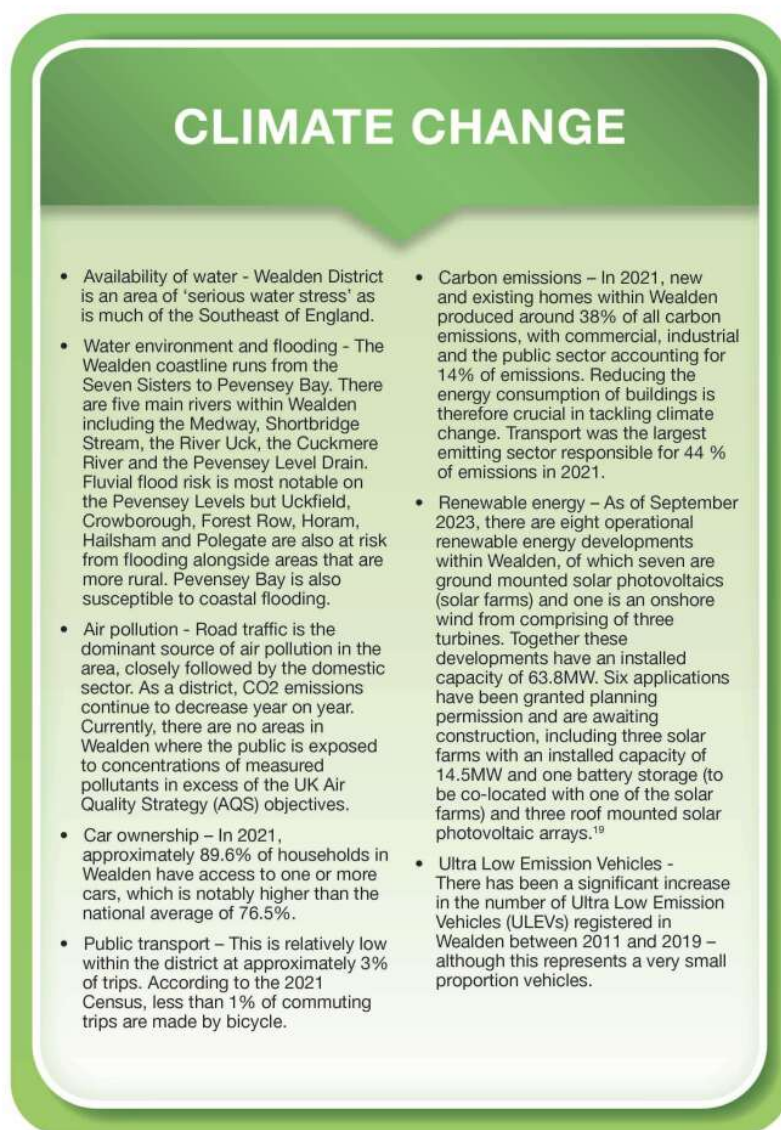
2.30 Climate change is a key challenge for this plan to address. It is relevant to all sections of the plan to ensure that the district is resilient to the predicted impacts of climate change, which can lead to increased incidences of rainfall, storms, flood events and extended periods of heat. Even with concerted action now, it is recognised that current levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will lead to changes in the climate. Therefore, there is a responsibility on us all to minimise our carbon emissions whilst ensuring that our built and natural environments and our communities are able to adapt to the expected impacts. Mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change must therefore be the central consideration for our local plan.

2.31 As well as taking action to reduce emissions, it will also be important to maximise natural processes that can take carbon out of the atmosphere, known as 'carbon sequestration'. Green infrastructure and nature recovery will have a major role to play in this, helping to mitigate the impacts of high temperatures, reduce flood risk, and maintain biodiversity.

2.32 In July 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency and made the commitment to become carbon neutral by 2050 at the very latest to play its part in meeting the UK's legally binding climate change targets, as specified in the United Nations Paris Agreement. Both the Council's Climate Emergency Plan (2019)⁹ and Wealden District Council Strategy¹⁰, highlight the key actions, priorities and intervention measures required to meet the district's net-zero carbon emissions target by 2050, at the latest. These measures include reducing energy use in buildings, moving away from the use of fossil fuels to low or zero emission technologies and a transformation in the way the district's population travels. The Council will shortly be updating its Climate Change Emergency Plan and will set out a new strategy for addressing the climate crisis.

9 [Wealden District Council, 2019. Climate Emergency Plan](#)

10 [The Wealden District Council Strategy](#)



The Natural Environment

2.33 Wealden District is situated within a diverse and distinctive landscape, including some of the most attractive countryside in the country. Landscape character varies across the district and is defined by numerous processes and variables including geology, soils, topography, land cover, hydrology, historic and cultural development and climate. The combination of these processes and the resultant characteristics provide the district with a diverse and distinctive landscape as well as a historic, unique and distinctive settlement pattern. The quality of the landscape is also a valuable resource and asset contributing to the district's rural economy, ecosystem services as well as providing opportunities for recreation. It also contributes to making Wealden an attractive place to live.

2.34 The district has a significant biodiversity resource, with many European, national and local designated sites. Within the hierarchy of sites, European Sites have the greatest level of protection through the Habitats Directive and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. Within the district there are two sites that have this level of protection – the Pevensy Levels and Ashdown Forest. In addition to designated sites, we have one of the greatest concentrations of ancient woodland in the country, with around 3% of England's entire

designated ancient woodlands located in our district. Ancient woodlands are home to many rare and threatened species, and they are often described as an irreplaceable resource or considered as 'critical natural capital'.

2.35 As well as designated sites and habitats, we have an array of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Species. Those species are identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). UK BAP priority species are most prevalent in our designated sites, however, many live outside the boundaries of designated sites.

2.36 There are numerous BAP habitats present within Wealden and the majority of these areas are identified as Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs). Outside of the formally designated sites, these areas are considered the most important areas for habitat enhancement, restoration and creation and will likely form the starting point for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy when this is identified. These areas will provide us with an opportunity to positively contribute to increasing biodiversity within the district.

2.37 In recent years the natural environment and biodiversity has grown in prominence within the planning context of the UK. Nationally, the Environment Act 2021 has legislated mandatory net gains for biodiversity and require development to exceed the pre-development biodiversity value of onsite habitats by at least 10%.



Quality of the built environment

2.38 The places that we live, work or spend our leisure time are really important. How they look or feel influence our experience, our enjoyment and can enhance our mood. They can make us feel at home and if designed well, they can impact our health and well-being through feelings of belonging, safety, security, inclusion and can provide us with a sense of community cohesion. As a district we are fortunate that we have a number of well-defined villages and towns as well as a historic environment that is rich and varied across both our urban and rural contexts. Our built heritage contributes to 'local distinctiveness' which helps to define and

distinguish our built environment from other towns and villages across the country, as well as distinguishing between the many settlements that we have within our district. Each settlement in our district is unique and distinctive in its own way, with its own history and architecture. These historic and unique places and the landscape that they sit within also provides the backdrop to sustainable tourism and the local economy.

