

## NCA 119 North Downs

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### *Overview*

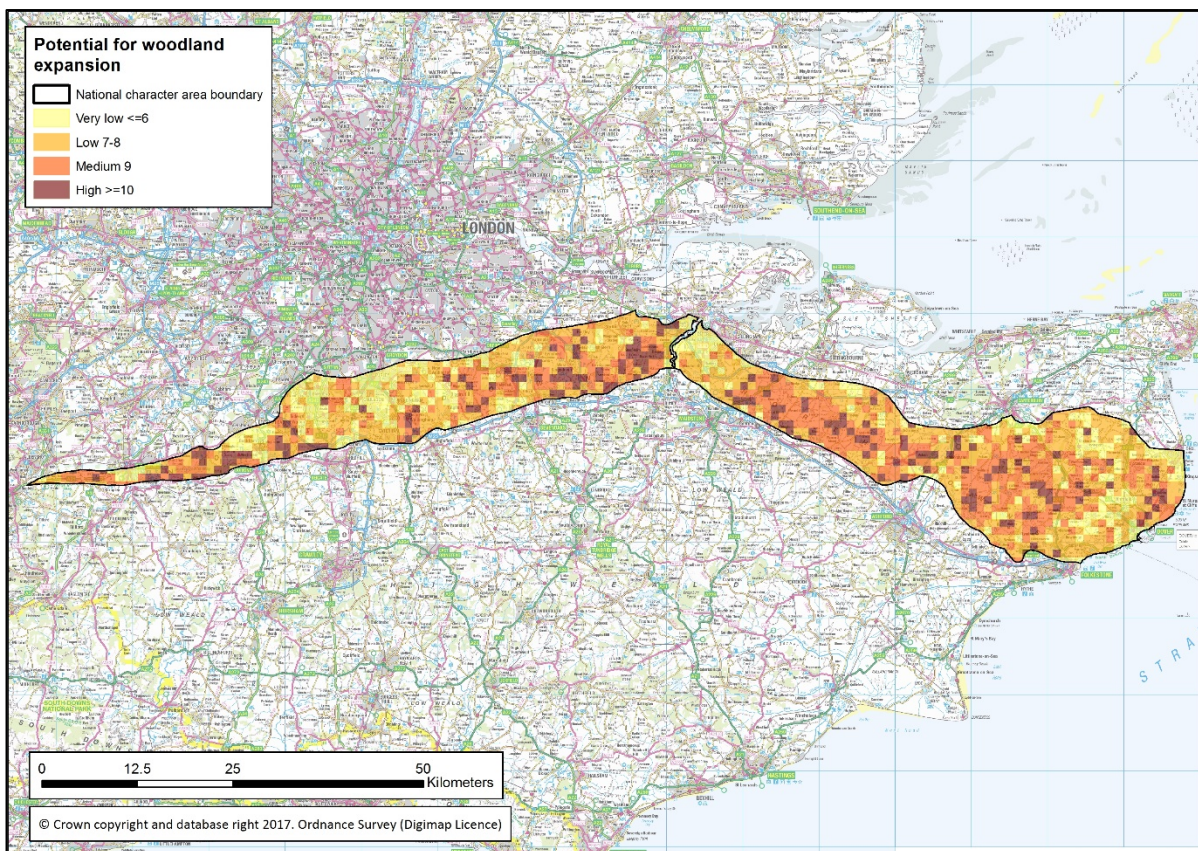
The North Downs NCA is a long, narrow band covering a chain of chalk hills, extending from the Hog's Back in west Surrey, eastwards to the coast at the White Cliffs of Dover. Around 60% of the NCA is covered by AONB landscape designations, with the Kent Downs to the east and the Surrey Hills to the west. The NCA lies within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and the underlying chalk provides a coherence to the landscape character, though the settlement and field patterns vary across its length. There is significant urban development in the Surrey and west Kent Downs section, where the proximity to London has affected the expansion of towns. Here, fields are larger and arable farming and market gardening predominate. The section from the north Kent Downs to Dover is dominated by the steep topography of the south-facing escarpment. Here there are small, irregular fields, though with boundary loss and enlargement of enclosures from modern arable practices, resulting in a mix of regular and irregular field patterns. Farming is mixed, between livestock and arable, but also horticultural use and some smallholdings. East of the Kent Downs, in an area between Dover, Deal and Canterbury, brickearth soils support cereal cultivation, and fields in this section of the NCA are large and regular. Outside the urban areas, the settlement pattern is dispersed in the western part of the NCA, with individual farmsteads and hamlets. In the eastern section, settlement is more nucleated, with small villages. Overall, the NCA is very well-wooded, with a coverage of 19%, of which almost half is ancient woodland. Despite the urbanised character of the western part of the NCA, the high percentage of woodland is the result of the limits to agriculture and development on the many steep-sided valleys and scarp slopes, and also of the limited agricultural potential where there are clay-with-flints soils. In Surrey, there are extensive areas of yew with box on parts of the scarp, whilst elsewhere there are large areas of replanted woodland with sweet chestnut or conifers. The hedgerows, shaws and individual trees, including many ancient and veteran trees, all contribute to the strongly wooded character of the NCA.

### *The Historic Environment Character*

There is a good survival of archaeological remains in the NCA, from prehistoric monuments, including numerous burial mounds and megalithic sites, through Roman settlements including villas, such as Lullingstone, rural and urban settlement, and a Saxon Shore Fort at Dover, to Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and settlements. A number of moated sites reflect the dispersed nature of much of the medieval settlement, and there seems to have been some settlement shrinkage and desertion in the later part of the medieval period. The surviving pattern of small villages and hamlets around small greens are thought to be an artefact of settlements developing around forstals (areas for holding stock in front of a farmhouse), where the local practice of gavelkind led to the splitting of holdings amongst heirs. Defence is a key feature of many archaeological remains, including the Saxon Shore Fort and medieval castle at Dover Castle, the line of forts built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to defend the Medway and the naval dockyards at Chatham, and the numerous 20<sup>th</sup> century coastal defences from World War I and II.

## Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low potential for woodland expansion, though this score is probably slightly skewed by the large areas of urban development. In the rural parts of the NCA, the mapping indicates potential across much of the chalk escarpment and steep slopes, and further east where there is clay-with-flints. These areas are already well-wooded, and new planting would link up or expand existing woodland. The NCA profile also identifies the importance of enhancing existing woodland, but also recommends seeking opportunities to create new areas of broadleaved woodland, in accordance with the landscape character. It is also important, however, to maintain areas of chalk grassland and to ensure the preservation of archaeological remains.



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