

Ashford Landscape Character Assessment



June 2009

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Ashford
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Introduction

PPS 7 'Sustainable Development in Rural Areas' recognises that there are highly valued local areas of countryside which fall outside nationally designated areas. It encourages a criteria – based approach to protect these areas within emerging Local Development Documents. Landscape character assessments are considered an appropriate tool to justify this policy approach.

Ashford's adopted Core Strategy (July 2008), recognises the positive role of the Borough's countryside, and endorses national Government guidance on protecting countryside in general, particularly nationally designated areas. It also sets out that locally distinctive character areas should be protected from any adverse effects of development and highlighted the Tenterden and Rural Sites Development Plan Document (DPD) as the best vehicle to take this aspiration forward. The Tenterden and Rural Sites DPD will cover the area of the Borough that falls outside the Growth Area, which includes a large area of open countryside. Although its principal role will be to allocate sites for development, in a select number of rural settlements, it will also include several topic based planning policies that cover specific rural planning issues. A key issue which the DPD will address is the desire to protect or enhance the character of the Borough's countryside.

Jacobs were commissioned by Ashford Borough Council (ABC) in March 2009 to carry out a Review of the Landscape Assessment of Kent (LAK) published by Kent County Council in 2004. The aim of this Review was to report on the appropriateness, scale and level of detail provided by the LAK, where it covers Ashford Borough, to support forthcoming Local Development Framework (LDF) landscape policy. Policy C3 within the South East Plan (<http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/seplan.html>) identifies that,

'Landscape character assessments should be used to contribute to the framing of development policies and sustainable agri – environment, and other land management regimes.'

The Review recommended that the baseline data supporting the LAK should be revisited to re-establish whether the assumptions within Ashford Borough are still correct. It was also recommended that some of the larger LAK landscape character areas become subdivided, and that all boundaries should be revised to follow the study area boundary. The Review also recommended that landscape descriptions, landscape analysis and guidelines should be revised in order to provide an up to date assessment, which reflects the local distinctiveness of Ashford.

Based on the recommendations set out within the Review of Landscape Assessment of Kent ABC commissioned Jacobs to undertake a landscape character assessment of Ashford Borough, excluding the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the High Weald AONB and the urban fringe landscape which was covered at a local scale by the Ashford Local Development Framework Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback 2005). The landscape within the Kent Downs and High Weald AONB is excluded because it is protected by the status of a national designation. Landscape recommendations in the form of policies for the Kent Downs AONB are included within the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan from 2009 – 2014 (Kent Downs AONB Unit). Similarly, recommendations in the form of policies for the High Weald AONB are included within the High Weald Management Plan 2004. The relationship between this assessment and the Ashford Local Development Framework Landscape Character Study is described under Landscape Character Areas. The assessment should provide a

robust evidence base to protect highly valued local areas of landscape within Ashford which fall outside the Kent Downs AONB and the High Weald AONB.

The objective is to ensure that the decision making process of the local authority is underpinned by a robust and widely accepted assessment of the landscape character. The challenge is to find ways of identifying the importance of the landscape within Ashford Borough which assists the process of accommodating change, where this is both desirable and practicable, whilst maintaining the links with the past and the natural environment. There is a need to retain pattern and diversity in the landscape to ensure that character and local distinctiveness are maintained. This is not necessarily about keeping the landscape as it is but is more about preventing everywhere becoming the same. We need to also ensure that landscapes are visually satisfying, and give enjoyment to those who visit them and those who live and work in them.

Many of the judgments regarding landscapes are subjective, which means that they are open to equally valid but different individual interpretations. The process of landscape character assessment has to resolve this matter and has evolved so that current practice is now based on a logical and well thought-out procedure. This procedure breaks down the analysis into the component parts which collectively make up the landscape as we know it. This logical process enables decisions to be revisited over time as well as enabling different assessors to understand and contribute to the process.

Methodology

The methodology used to undertake the landscape assessment is based on up date guidance - Scottish Natural Heritage and The Countryside Agency's '*Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland 2002*'. There are essentially two elements to the Landscape Appraisal. Firstly the characterisation of the landscape where the landscape character areas are defined, and secondly the analysis of these areas where judgements are made about these character areas.

In the first instance the assessor interrogates the geological, soil and topographical information as well as accumulating as much information as is readily available regarding historic and cultural influences, nature conservation interests and land use. An aerial photographic study of the area assists with the identification of the landscape character areas as well as assisting with the appreciation of the conclusions subsequently reached.

Having initiated the desk based research, the field work commences. Two landscape assessors working together in the field debate and define the broad character distinctions using 'Field Assessment Sheets' and taking photographic records as data.

The Field Assessment Sheets are designed to analyse the component factors of the landscape, to reach a series of decisions on the:

- Aesthetics
- Key characteristics
- Visual unity
- Ecological integrity
- Condition of heritage features
- Impact of built development

Having identified the character areas as a series of largely homogeneous units the data collected is analysed in terms of each area's **Condition** and **Sensitivity**.

Each of these words is strictly defined to avoid as far as possible any subjective interpretation which could not be justified. The objective is also to define a standard methodology which can be used by other assessors for other landscapes so that comparisons can be made and priorities set.

Condition is strongly influenced by the impact of external factors. The process seeks to measure the continuity of land use and evaluates how well the landscape functions as a habitat for wildlife. This in turn is a useful measure of land use change. Condition also addresses the issues regarding the presence of incongruous features on the unity of the landscape. Urban fringe areas are often under pressure which can frustrate other land uses. This often means that these areas are described as being in a poor condition whilst other more remote areas may still have the same basic features but be in a better condition. It is therefore practical to assume that condition may vary throughout a character area so that any conclusions should be regarded as a summary of the overall situation.

In more technical terms condition is defined by an analysis of *Visual Unity* and *Functional Integrity* and is classified on a scale ranging from very poor, through poor, moderate, good and finally to very good.

Visual Unity is the result of an analysis of the *Pattern of Elements*, for example the pattern of vegetation, enclosure, settlement etc., set against the number of *Detracting Features* in the landscape.

Functional Integrity is an assessment of how the landscape functions and considers both the influence of man (*Cultural Integrity*) and the influence of nature (*Ecological Integrity*). Ecological integrity is itself a function of habitat size, quality and connectivity across the landscape, and therefore relates to this study's analysis of existing habitats and potential habitat networks (see below).

Sensitivity is a measure of the ability of a landscape to accept change without causing irreparable damage to the essential fabric and distinctiveness of that landscape. The term change refers to both beneficial change such as a new woodland as well as 'change' that may be brought about by new land uses. Again, in more technical terms, Sensitivity is defined by an analysis of *Sense of place* and *Visibility* and is classified on a scale ranging from very low through low, moderate, high and finally to very high.

Sense of place balances *Distinctiveness* with *Continuity*. Distinctiveness is defined by the number and pattern of characteristic features in the landscape. For example in a landscape where hedgerows are characteristic if the network is intact the landscape can be described as distinct. Continuity refers to the time depth of the landscape, ranging from recent to ancient

Visibility addresses the issues of *Landform* and intercepting features such as *Tree cover*. For example an open hilltop landscape is more visible than an enclosed lowland landscape.

The conclusions reached regarding each of the character areas are expressed using a matrix which encompasses Condition and Sensitivity. This analysis gives a broad indication of each area's ability to accommodate a change in management or use without loss of overall integrity. The words in the matrix help to assist in the direction of any policy that might be applied to the land in question.

It has to be recognised that whilst the process adopts a complex but logical critique of the landscape many of the individual decisions are still based on the trained but subjective judgements of the assessors. However by simplifying the conclusions into a series of generic actions it is possible to reach informed and well supported judgments on the landscape character.

Guidelines are offered which are locally appropriate to the character area and respond to the generic actions that have been identified. Many of these guidelines are not likely to be within the remit of the Local Authority to implement directly as they are not responsible for managing the land in most cases. Such references have however been included with the view to influencing opinions,

Condition	GOOD	REINFORCE	CONSERVE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE
	MODERATE	IMPROVE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE & IMPROVE	CONSERVE & RESTORE
	POOR	IMPROVE	RESTORE & IMPROVE	RESTORE
		LOW	MODERATE	HIGH
		Sensitivity		

generating support and guiding policy. In many instances certain forms of land management have a strong influence on the landscape character. These are often dependent on market forces and land management practices for their retention e.g. sheep grazing on marshland and fruit growing.

Geology and Soils

The solid and drift geology throughout the study area are illustrated on Figure 1. Soil types are illustrated on Figure 2, and agricultural land classification (defined by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) is illustrated on Figure 3.

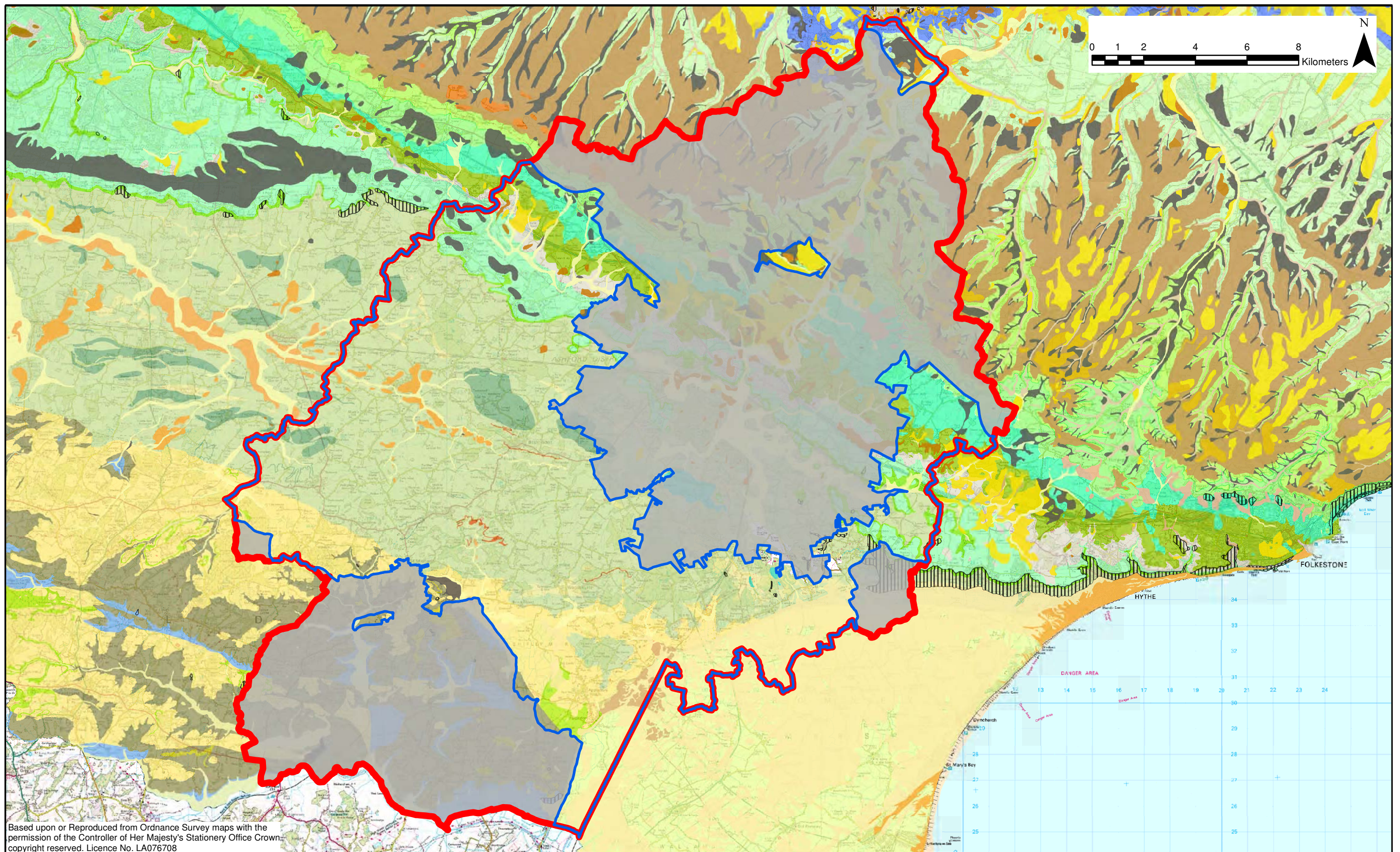
To the south of the Royal Military Canal, the flat and low lying Romney Marsh predominantly comprises Hastings Beds. Drifts of Alluvium and Marine (Estuarine) Alluvium extend along the channels across the Marsh, and swathes of Peat lie east of Appledore Heath and the Royal Military Canal. Soils across the Marsh are Clay, and are generally Agricultural Land Classification Grade 2 with an area of Grade 1 around the Highknock Channel south of Appledore and, in contrast, Grade 4 north of the B2080.

As the ground rises to the north, the old Romney Shoreline settlements of Appledore, Appledore Heath, Kenardington and Warehorne are situated on Tunbridge Wells Sand. Further east, Hamstreet, Ruckinge and Bilsington are situated on Weald Clay which extends to the north west in a broad band beneath a number of settlements located across the Weald including St. Michaels, Bethersden, Smarden and Ashford itself. Patches of Large 'Paludina' Limestone are located across higher ground north east and north west of Bethersden. The lower reaches of the River Beult valley support ribbons of drift Alluvium and 2nd Terrace River Gravels. Soils across the Weald are Loam to Clay, with Loam soils extending along the River Beult Valley. Soils across the Weald are generally Agricultural Land Classification Grade 3.

The Greensand Ridge extends in a diagonal band from the north west of Ashford to the south east and supports hilltop settlements including Pluckley and Egerton. The solid geology is composed of Hythe Beds and fringed with a southern ribbon of Atherfield Clay. Drifts of Head are scattered across the Greensand Ridge and bands of Sandgate Beds and then Lower Greensand run parallel to the north east. Soils are Loam across the Greensand Ridge, with Clay across the Sandgate Beds and Lower Greensand. The Agricultural Land Classification varies between Grades 2 and 3.

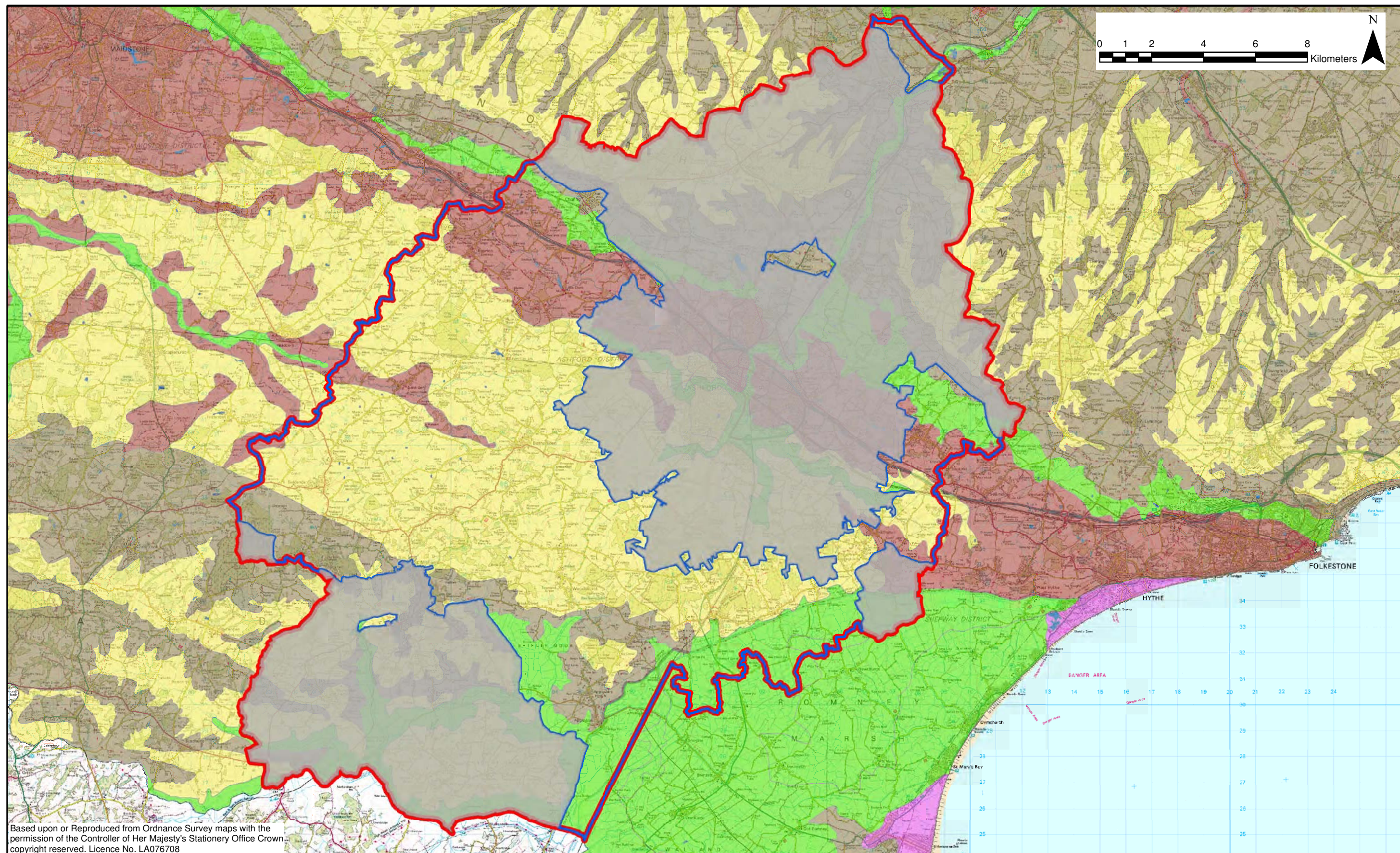
Gault Clay underlays the undulating foreground to the North Downs and, as the land rises, the solid geology comprises Chalk. Lower Chalk is situated across the lower contours of the Downs between Boughton Lees and Wye. Bands of Middle Chalk and then Upper Chalk run across the rising contours to the northern extent of the study area, beyond the Kent Downs AONB around Old Wives Lees.

Drifts of Alluvium, Head, Head Brickearth and 3rd Terrace River Gravels follow the Great Stour valley. Soils along the valley are silty, with some Agricultural Land Classification Grade 1 soils located immediately north of Ashford. The drift geology becomes more varied and complex as the undulations of the North Downs begin to the north east of Ashford. Although largely outside the extent of the study area, drifts of Clay with Flints extend across the North Downs, with narrow ribbons of Head, Head Brickearth and Dry Valley Nailbourne Deposits running along valleys. Soils across the Downs are Loam to Clay, becoming Silty where they run along valleys. The Agricultural Land Classification across the Downs is varied, and ranges between Grade 2 and Grade 4.



Legend									
	Ashford Study Area		Lower Tunbridge Wells Sand		Marine (/Estuarine) Alluvium		5th Terrace River Gravel		Head Gravel
	Ashford Borough Boundary		Tunbridge Wells Sand		Alluvium		2nd/3rd Terrace River Gravel		Clay-with-Flints
	Non Study and Urban Areas		Clay in Tunbridge Wells Sand		Dry Valley & Nailbourne Deposits		4th/5th Terrace River Gravel		Sand in Clay-with-Flints
	Landslip		Grinstead Clay		Peat		Head		Lenham Beds
	Lower Grinstead Clay		Wadhurst Clay		1st Terrace River Gravel		Coombe Deposits		London Clay
	Ardingley Sandstone		Sand in Wadhurst Clay		2nd Terrace River Gravel		Head Brickearth		Blackheath / Oldhaven Beds
	Ashdown Beds		Ironstone in Wadhurst Clay		3rd Terrace River Gravel		Head Brickearth (Older)		Woolwich Beds
			4th Terrace River Gravel		Head Brickearth 1st Terrace		Thanet Beds		Lower Greensand
			Upper Chalk		Melbourne Rock		Lower Chalk (Glaucconitic Marl)		Upper Greensand
			Atherfield Clay		Weald Clay		Sand in Weald Clay (/Sandstone)		Large 'Paludina' Limestone
			Hastings Beds		Upper Tunbridge Wells Sand		Upper		Cuxfield Stone
			Upper		Cuxfield Stone				
			'Cyrene' Limestone						

Figure 1: Geology



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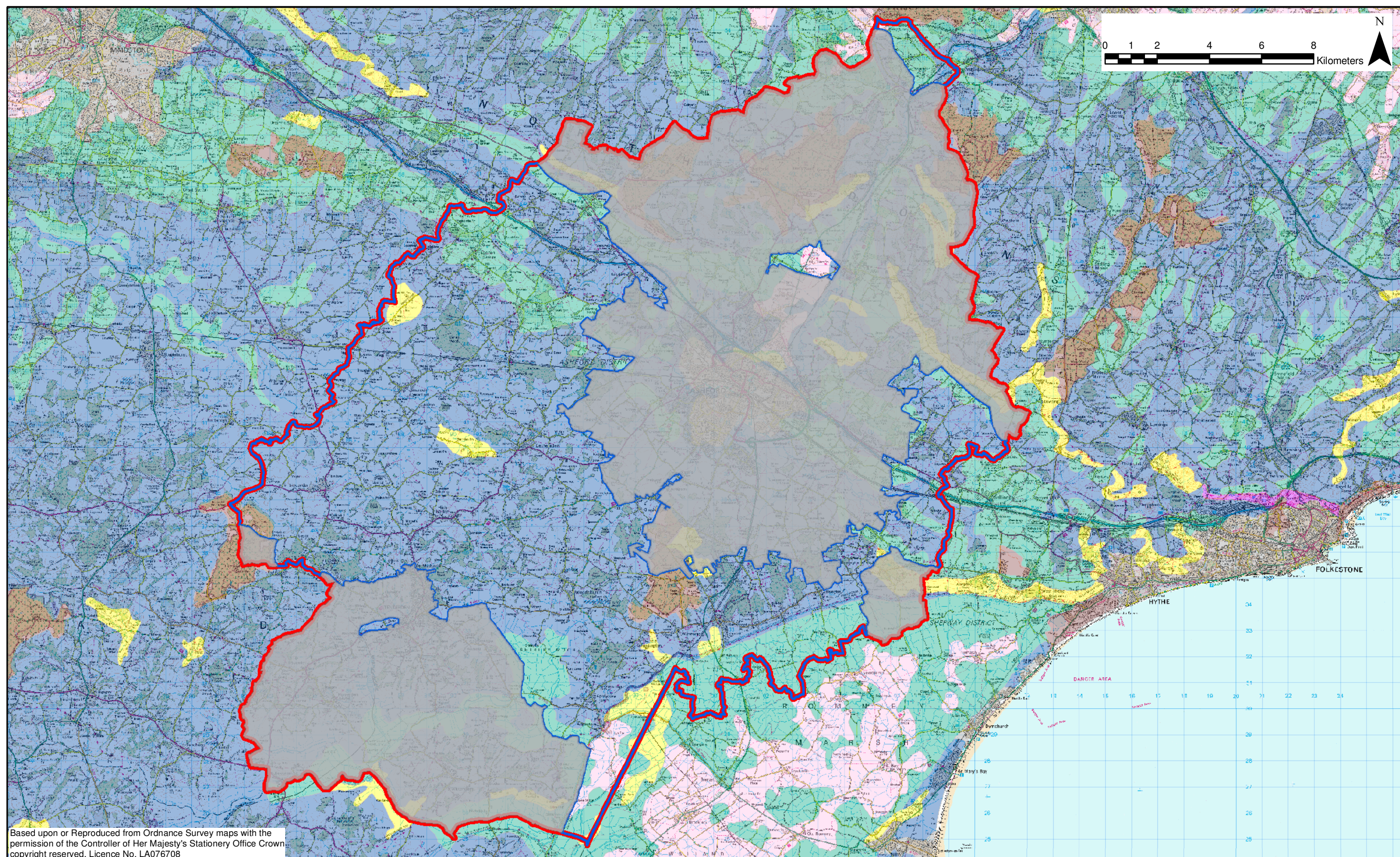
	Ashford Study Area	Soils		Loam		Silty
	Ashford borough Boundary		Clay		Loam to Clay	
	Non Study and Urban Areas		Dune Sand		Open Water	

Figure 2: Soils



Legend











	Ashford Study Area	Agricultural Grade			Grade 3		Non Agricultural
	Ashford Borough Boundary		Grade 1		Grade 4		Urban
	Non Study and Urban Areas		Grade 2		Grade 5		

Figure 3: Agricultural Land Classification
(Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

Landform and Drainage

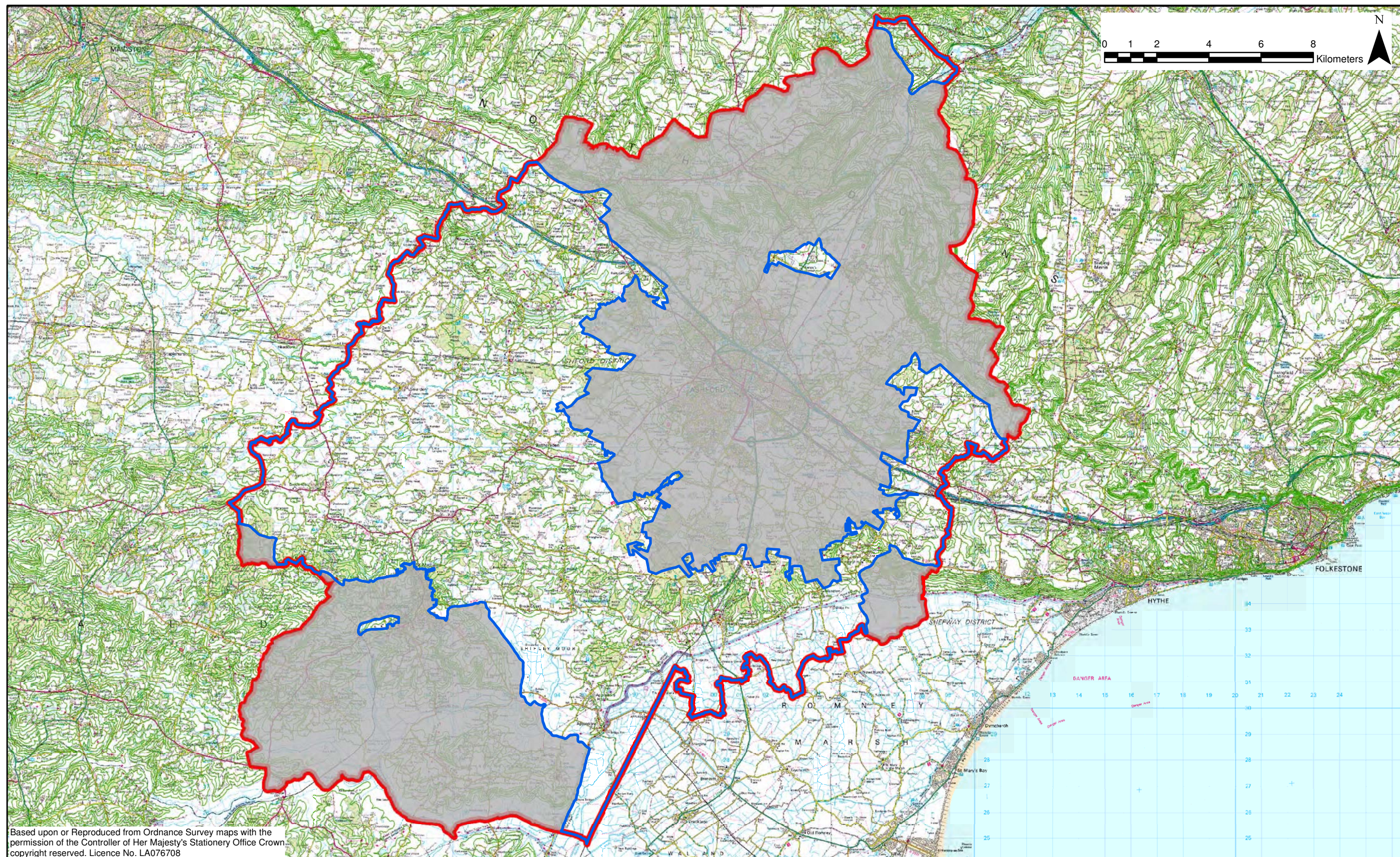
Landform is illustrated on Figure 4. To the south, the landform is flat and low lying across the northern extents of the Romney Marsh. Much of the Marsh comprises reclaimed land, therefore it falls below sea level in parts and relies on a network of channels, sewers and drainage ditches to remain dry. The Royal Military Canal flows across the Marsh and provides crucial drainage.

As the land rises to the north across the gently undulating Weald, drainage ditches and frequent small field ponds indicate the wet clays beneath. The incised channel of the River Beult meanders through a floodplain east and west of Smarden. Intermittently, weirs contribute to alternating pools and sections of fast flow in the channel, but generally the flow of the river is slow, reflecting the low fall from Smarden en route to the junction with the Medway at Yalding.

The Greensand Ridge rises to the north, running north west to south east in a diagonal band parallel with the North Downs. It forms part of a wider series of ridges running from west to east across South East England and is remnant of the Wealden dome, a denuded anticline which resulted from uplifting caused by the Alpine movements approximately 10 – 20 million years ago. The south western edge of the Ridge is formed by a scarp face, with extensive views across the lower weald to the south. The north eastern edge comprises the gently undulating Greensand dip slope.

The River Stour has Kent's second largest catchment area, upon which Ashford is situated. The Upper Great Stour flows within a valley from the north west towards Ashford, whilst the East Stour flows away from Ashford in a valley flowing south eastwards. The Great Stour runs north eastward through a flat narrow valley. The river is shallow, clear and fast moving and is characteristically well vegetated both within its channel and along its banks.

The North Downs rise to the north of Ashford in a long spine, comprising dramatic Chalk escarpments and secluded dry valleys. Although mostly outside the study area the Downs form a prominent backdrop to the undulating landscape north east of Ashford. To the north east, steep sided dry valleys carve their way down to the gentle northern dip-slope of the Downs across Old Wives Lees which forms part of a wider fruit belt.



Legend

- Ashford Study Area
- Ashford Borough Boundary
- Non Study and Urban Areas
- Contours

Figure 4: Landform

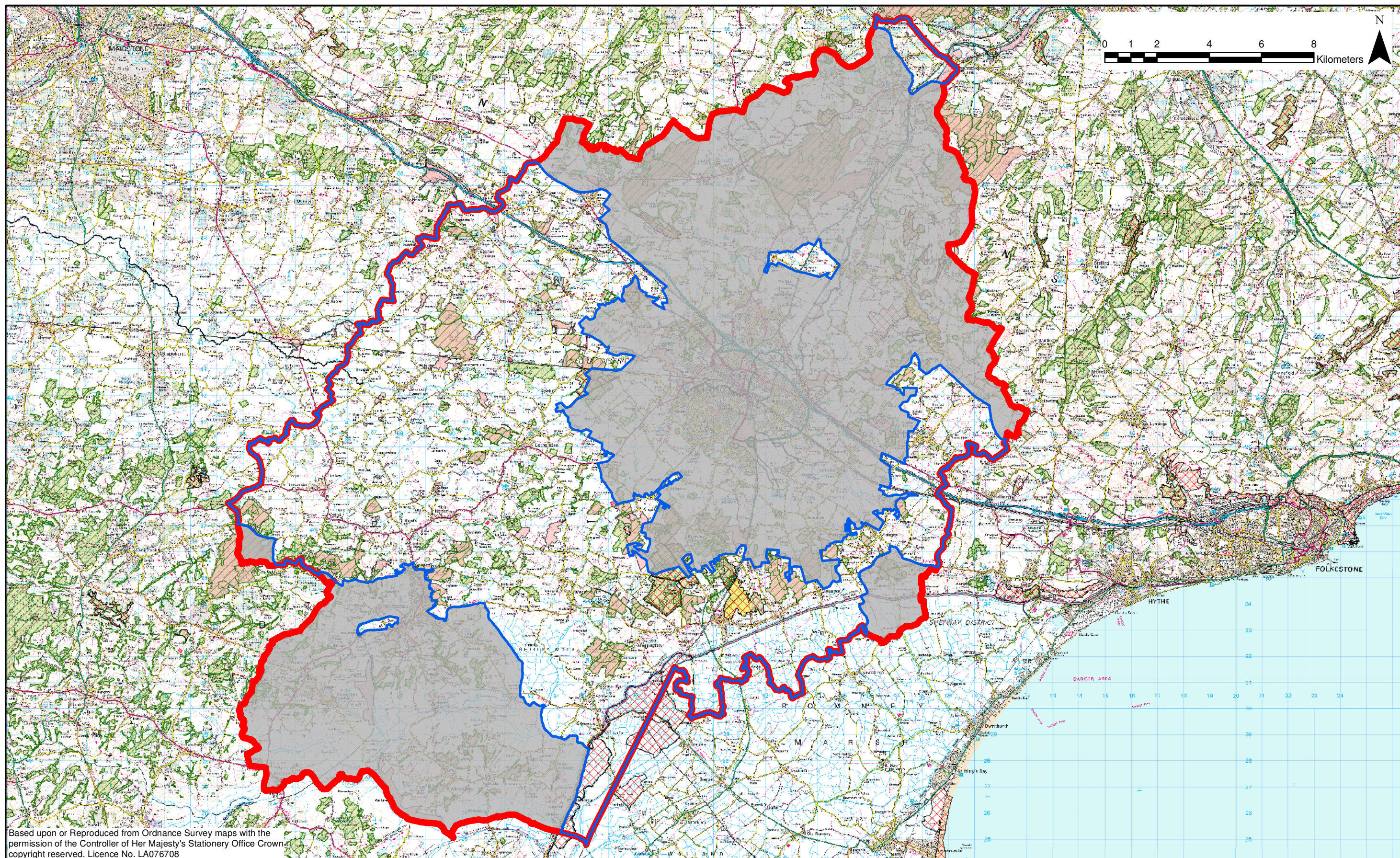
Ecological Designations

Ecological designations are illustrated on Figure 5. A significant proportion of the study area is covered by ecological designations at the, National and Local (County) level, and include:

- **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)** – A statutory UK designation under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. Designated by Natural England, these represent the very best wildlife sites in the country.
- **National Nature Reserves (NNRs)** - are almost always SSSIs thus receiving statutory protection, but are also either owned or controlled specifically for wildlife by Natural England or held by approved bodies such as Wildlife Trusts.
- **Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs)** – a non-statutory County designation, administered in Kent by the Kent Wildlife Trust and ratified by the Kent Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Partnership.
- **Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)** - are designated by local authorities for both people and wildlife. They are semi-natural places that are of special interest locally and can be managed as such. They offer people opportunities for nature study or informal enjoyment. They may include sites that have one of the other designations listed above.

Such sites are afforded protection in the planning process, either through legislation (for statutory sites such as SSSIs) or through planning policy (for local, non-statutory sites such as LWSs).

Ancient woodland throughout the study area is often highly designated with a combination of SSSIs and LWSs.



Legend








	Ashford Study Area		Site of Special Scientific Interest		Local Wildlife Site
	Ashford Borough Boundary		Ancient Woodland		
	Non Study and Urban Areas		National Nature Reserve		

Figure 5: Ecological Designations

Landscape Designations

Landscape designations are illustrated on Figure 6. The study area abuts both the Kent Downs and the High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). AONBs are a national designation, created under the same legislation as the national parks, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

The study area abuts the Kent Downs AONB to the north of Ashford and also to the south east, east of Bonnington. The Kent Downs AONB forms the eastern half of the North Downs, which comprises a wide ridge of chalk hills which stretch for 120 miles from Farnham in Surrey to the White Cliffs of Dover in Kent. The promoted North Downs Way National Trail runs along the North Downs from Farnham to Dover. Designated in 1968, the Kent Downs AONB is described as being a diverse and vibrant landscape with its dramatic chalk escarpments, secluded dry valleys, networks of tiny lanes and historic hedgerows, ancient woodlands, traditional orchards, locally distinctive villages, unique wildlife and many sites of historic and cultural interest.

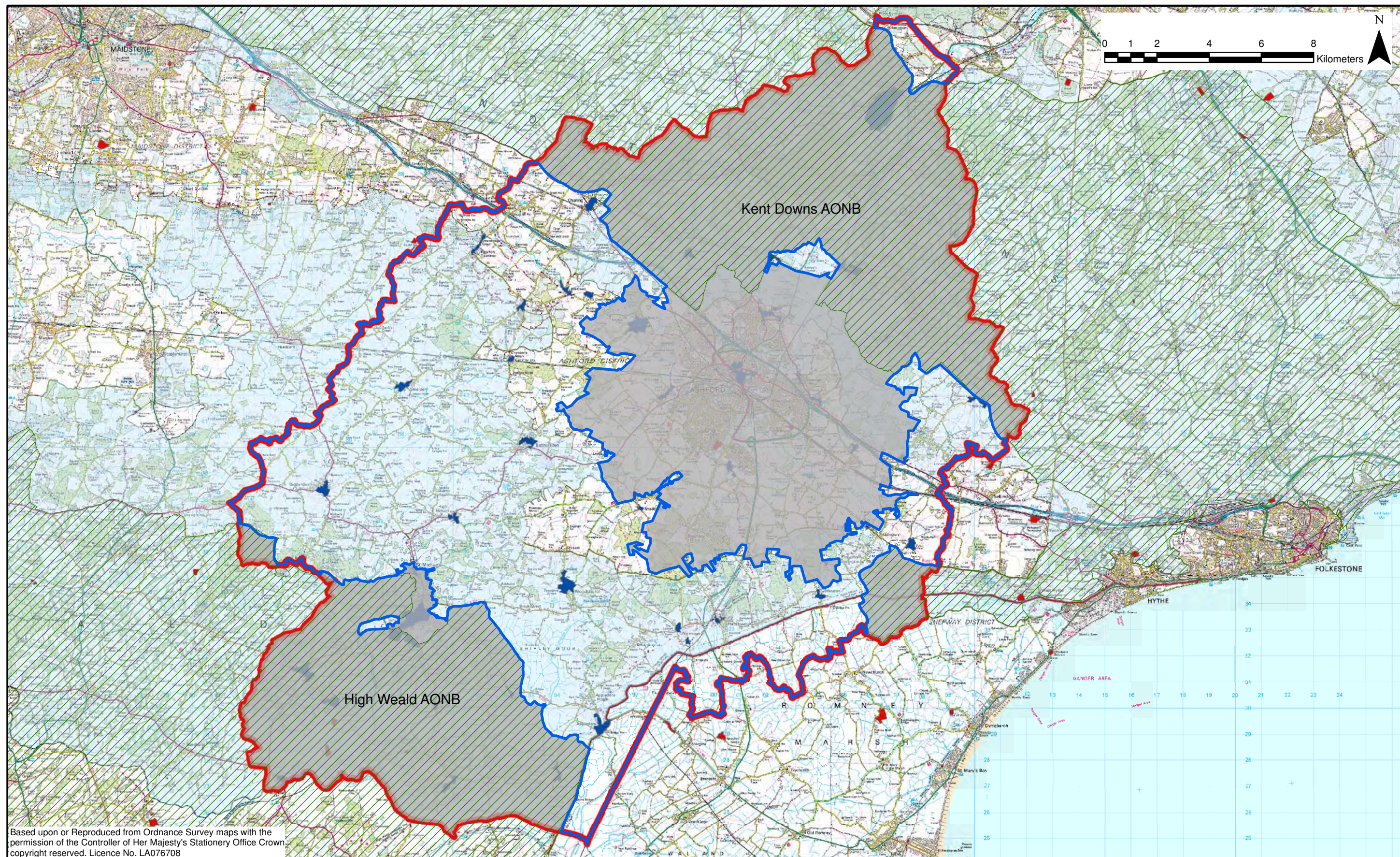
The study area abuts the High Weald AONB to the south west, lying adjacent to the flat marshland of Shirley Moor and undulating farmland around St Michaels. The area is designated for its rolling hills with sandstone outcrops and steep sided ravines, small irregular shaped fields and patches of heathland, abundant woodlands and hedges, scattered farmsteads and sunken lanes and paths.

Much of the undulating landscape within the study area immediately to the south of the Kent Downs AONB, the landscape to the south of the Borough, including the area which forms The Old Romney Shoreline and the foreground to the High Weald AONB, was designated as Special Landscape Areas (SLA).

Special Landscape Areas (SLAs) were identified under the Kent and Medway Structure Plan (KMSP 2006) and rolled forward as such in the Ashford Borough Local Plan (2000) which sought to place the protection and enhancement of these areas above other planning considerations.

However the KMSP was formally superseded by the South East Plan in May 2009 which reinforced the shift to criteria based policies, as eluded to in Planning Policy Statement 7. The SLA has therefore, in effect, been removed from the Statutory Development Plan and carries little weight in planning terms.

It is considered that the Landscape Character Assessment will provide a greater clarity and depth of detail in relation to the countryside and the key characteristics and features that lie within it. This should provide a more robust local level of detail based on each landscape character area, rather than a blanket coverage.



Legend








- | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|---|
|  | Ashford Study Area |  | Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty |  | Special Landscape Area
(Deleted on publication of the South East Plan) |
|  | Ashford Borough Boundary |  | Conservation Area | | |
|  | Non Study and Urban Areas |  | Scheduled Monument | | |

Figure 6: Landscape and Heritage Designations

Cultural Heritage

Heritage Designations

Many of the settlements throughout the area are designated by ABC as Conservation Areas, for their special architectural or historic interest. There are few Scheduled Monuments within the study area, which are nationally designated archaeological sites or historic buildings. The striking ragstone and flint Archbishop's Palace, and associated buildings and walling, within Charing is a Scheduled Monument. Grade 1 listed, the Palace dates back to the 12th century. The Royal Military Canal which runs through the Romney Marsh is also designated as a Scheduled Monument. A number of listed buildings are scattered throughout the landscape, and concentrated within historic settlements.

History

Ashford is thought to have originated in the late 9th century, and became a market town around 1242. Parts of the central Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin date back from the 13th century, although the church was substantially restored in the 15th century. By 1600 Ashford had risen to become an important market town, primarily for livestock. In 1842, the railway was built and in 1846 the railway works were constructed. Ashford had doubled in size by 1861, and the railway community had its own shops, schools, public houses and bathhouse. The present Middle Row was known as The Shambles, and provided markets for livestock, meat, fish and corn.

The River Great Stour runs through the urban centre of Ashford, on its path through the Low Weald and the Kent Downs towards Canterbury, the wetlands of Westbere and Stodmarsh, through Sandwich and out to sea at Pegwell Bay. In Ashford, the River Great Stour accommodated a water and steam mill, which was a corn mill.

The historic settlement of Charing is situated beneath the North Downs to the north west of Ashford, and is along the route of the ancient Pilgrims Way which runs along the bottom of the North Downs between Winchester and Canterbury. Thought to have evolved during the late Saxon period, much of the village history appears to be connected with the Archbishop's Palace which is adjacent to the Church of St Peter and St Paul. The Palace originally served as an important stopping off point for the archbishops travelling between the religious seats of Lambeth and Canterbury and was also visited by various royals, including King Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon. The earliest fragments of the palace - including parts of the Great Library and the private chapel – date back as far as the 12th century. The Palace is Grade 1 listed and is also a Scheduled Monument. For the past hundred years the Palace and its various buildings have been used as a farm and have fallen into disrepair, although a planning application has recently been submitted to the local authority for planning consent ahead of a proposed application for funding.

The Dering family have had an influence on the local architecture within settlements and individual historic properties along the Greensand Ridge, in particular Pluckley. The Dering family inherited Surrenden Manor to the east of Pluckley and Sir Edward Dering, the first baronet, allegedly escaped from the roundheads through a narrow, curved, round topped window at Surrenden Manor. As a consequence, all properties owned by the Dering family were fitted with round topped 'Dering' windows. The round topped windows remain a prominent, locally distinct feature within historic buildings throughout Pluckley and Egerton. Surrenden Manor, situated within a visually enclosing high brick

wall, remains privately owned and its gardens are recorded on the register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

To the south of the study area, the Romney Marsh has been built up over the centuries, partly through natural geological processes and partly through artificial land reclamation. The Romans built a wall around the northern part of the area, possibly to create salt pans and by the middle of the 13th century the land was slowly being reclaimed by local residents. Today, a significant amount of the Romney Marsh lies below sea level, and is protected by sea defences and walls throughout the area which now supports rich and fertile farmland. The promoted Saxon Shore Way National Trail/Long Distance Route follows the coastline as it was approximately 1500 years ago prior to the reclamation of the Romney Marsh.

The proximity of the Romney Marsh to the European mainland led to the sensitivity of the area to invasions. In AD 892, one such invasion was successful when a fleet of 250 Danish ships sailed into the River Rother and took the fortress at Appledore. Although once a port on the estuary of the River Rother, storms in the 13th century caused the river to change its course and the village street now leads down to the Royal Military Canal. Now situated along the northern edge of the Romney Marsh, the Royal Military Canal was constructed by hand as part of the defences against Napoleon between 1804 and 1809. The canal stretches for 28 miles, and was designed to be 19 metres wide and 3 metres deep. Napoleon never invaded and the canal was opened to navigation to cover some of the costs although it gradually fell into disrepair. Today it is crucial for drainage on the Romney Marsh and is used for public recreation.

The Rhee Wall forms a prominent ridge to the south of the study area, east of Appledore. A distinct earthwork constructed as an historic sea defence between Appledore and New Romney, the Rhee Wall was extended as a waterway in three stages in the 13th Century. Sluices controlled the flow of water, which was then released to flush silt from the harbour at New Romney. Ultimately the battle was lost; the harbour silted up and New Romney declined in importance. The Rhee kept part of the old port open until the 15th century.

In the 9th century, the Marsh became the property of the Priory of Canterbury, who granted the first tenancy on the land to a man called Baldwin approximately between 1152 and 1167. The marsh has since become covered by a dense network of drainage ditches, which are maintained and managed for sustainable water levels by the Romney Marsh Area Internal Drainage Board.

Ashford Borough Within the Broader Landscape

Ashford Borough falls within six 'Joint Character Areas' (refer to Figure 7) defined by Natural England:

- Romney Marshes
- Low Weald
- High Weald
- Wealden Greensand
- North Downs
- North Kent Plain

Profiles for these areas describe their key physical, wildlife and land use features, and outline the main issues affecting them. A summary is provided below.

Romney Marshes

The Romney Marshes comprise an area of reclaimed open marshland. The landscape is characterised by the flat, open and agricultural landscape, drainage dykes and open skies. The often treeless, low lying marshland is maintained by manmade drainage and river floodplain improvements. Agricultural fields are extensive, with some traditional open wet pasture land. Clumps of trees are often situated on higher ground around farmsteads and random tree groups and lines are scattered within the wider landscape. Whilst sheep grazing was the traditional land use in the Romney Marshes up until World War II, most of the land has been subject to widespread drainage and improvement with much arable conversion.

Low Weald

The Low Weald is described as an intimate landscape enclosed by an intricate mix of fields, small woodlands and hedgerows. The underlying geology comprises a series of broad, low lying and gently undulating clay vales. There are a number of ponds and small stream valleys and wet woodlands of alder and willow. There is a well wooded character with tall hedgerows, numerous mature trees and orchards in the east. There is a distinctly rural character with scattered farmsteads and small settlements often composed of traditional buildings.

High Weald

The High Weald is described as a well wooded landscape which rises above the Low Weald and is deeply incised in places to give a complex pattern of ridges and steep stream valleys. This is mainly a pastoral landscape, with a network of hedges and shaws linking small, irregular fields. The cultivation of fruit and hops, with distinctive hop poles and oast houses, are characteristic features. Characteristic building materials include white weather boarding, hanging tiles and local stone, and there are frequent farm building conversions.

Wealden Greensand

The large belt of Greensand is characterised by its scarp/dip-slope topography and a gentle, open aspect. Within Kent, there are many wooded commons known as 'charts'

with a predominance of oak and birch woodland. Fruit production is characteristic of the Kent Greensand. Tree lined sunken lanes are often characteristic of the area, linking small settlements which generally comprise scattered villages and hamlets. However there is a significant amount of human influence, marked by major towns including Ashford and major infrastructure routes.

North Downs

To the north of Ashford, the North Downs are characterised by the distinctive chalk geology, with a continuous steep scarp providing extensive views across Kent. The broad dip slope is incised by a number of valleys containing rivers, including the River Stour. There are large woodland and plantation blocks of conservation interest, but areas of unimproved chalk grassland are now scarce. Whilst there are pockets of traditional downland grazing, the landscape is largely dominated by arable fields. However this remains a largely rural landscape, with flint walled farm houses and large properties.

North Kent Plain

The study area includes a very small part of land to the north which falls within the North Kent Plain, and many of the key characteristics of the wider North Kent Plain are not relevant to the study area. The land, largely derived from the Tertiary deposits, includes some of the most fertile and productive farmland in South East England. The predominant land uses of the North Kent Plain are intensive arable farming and horticulture.

Landscape Assessment of Kent

At the county level, the Landscape Assessment of Kent (Kent County Council 2004) provides a more refined study. The following 24 landscape character areas (refer to Figure 8) fall wholly or partly within the study area:

- Aldington Ridge
- Bethersden Farmlands
- Beult Valley
- Biddenden – High Halden Wooded Farmlands
- Brabourne Lees Mixed Farmlands
- Brabourne Vale
- Greensand Fruit Belt – Egerton
- Highknock Channel and Dowels
- Hollingbourne Vale East
- Hothfield Heathy Farmlands
- Mersham Farmlands
- North Kent Fruit Belt
- Old Romney Shoreline Wooded Farmlands
- Romney Marsh Mixed Farmlands
- Romney Marsh Settlements
- Sellindge Plateau Farmlands
- Shirley Moor

- Sissinghurst Wooded Farmlands
- Staplehurst-Headcorn Pasturelands
- Sutton Valence to Pluckley Mixed Farmlands
- The Stour – Stour Gap
- The Stour – Stour Valley
- The Stour Valley
- Upper Stour Valley

A summary of the key characteristics of each of these areas is given below.

Aldington Ridge

- Raised landscape with steep slopes
- Good quality loam soils
- Mixed, generally open farmland
- Dramatic views to the Low Weald, Romney Marsh and the North Downs

Bethersden Farmlands

- Flat, open arable land use
- More intimate, undulating landscape of mixed farming towards Shirley Moor
- Remote, unpopulated character
- Pastures

Beult Valley

- Flat, low lying land around incised river channel
- Small, slow flowing river of high ecological value
- Rural open landscape of mixed farmland
- Sparse but historic settlement

Biddenden – High Halden Wooded Farmlands

- Undulating topography with views over the Low Weald
- Frequent small woodlands and field ponds
- Small to medium scale field pattern
- Small woodlands and hedgerows with standard oaks

Brabourne Lees Mixed Farmlands

- Gentle undulating landscape with fine loamy soils
- Medium sized woodlands
- Mixed farmland
- Remnant heathy habitats such as valley bogs, acid grasslands and woodlands

Brabourne Vale

- Gentle sloping landform with poor quality soils subject to waterlogging
- Mixed farmlands with a large amount of grassland

- Small copses and larger woodlands, often of high nature conservation value

Greensand Fruit Belt - Egerton

- Gentle, undulating landform over well drained loams
- Mixed farmland including orchards and shelterbelts
- Steeply sloping Greensand scarp with extensive views over the Low Weald
- Vernacular buildings of ragstone and brick

Highknock Channel and Dowels

- Unenclosed, wide views
- Raised water channels and drainage ditches
- Pastoral, ragged grasses
- Very little development comprising few large farms

Hollingbourne Vale East

- Gently undulating landscape on heavy Clay soils
- Small streams drain east to the Great Stour
- Mixed farming of small sheep grazed pasture and larger arable fields
- Extensive loss of hedgerows and woodland to exploit good quality soils at scarp foot
- Scarp foot villages

Hothfield Heathy Farmlands

- Undulating landscape of mixed farmlands
- Heathland or heath characteristics on the Folkestone Beds
- Historic Parkland

Mersham Farmlands

- Undulating landscape with good quality soils
- Mixed farmland with small scale pastoral farming and more open arable fields
- Small copses and gappy hedgerows

North Kent Fruit Belt

- Well enclosed, medium scale field pattern
- Rolling, quiet, picturesque. Traditional Kentish elements such as hops and orchards
- Well managed, simple form
- Outlying villages are quiet and rural, but with an increasing suburban influence

Old Romney Shoreline Wooded Farmlands

- Flat or gently undulating with distinctive ridges and valleys dropping down to Romney Marsh

- Large broadleaf or mixed woodlands
- Small scale pattern of pastoral fields
- Scattered settlement with historic churches along the Old Romney Shoreline

Romney Marsh Mixed Farmlands

- Flat, open, long views
- Arable land use and large agricultural buildings
- Clusters of willow and poplar around settlements
- Open, cleared ditches

Romney Marsh Settlements

- Distinctive lowland with dominant flat landform and drainage ditches
- Remnant willow pollards
- Scattered farmsteads and small villages
- Narrow, ditch lined roads

Sellindge Plateau Farmlands

- Flat to undulating farmlands across good quality soils
- Open, arable landscape with pasture on more undulating ground
- Small copses and gappy hedgerows

Shirley Moor

- Flat centre to tidal basin between gently rolling hills
- Open agricultural landscape with patchwork of fields and ditches
- Remnants of sheep farming activity, including remnant hedgerows
- Few roads, no settlement

Sissinghurst Wooded Farmlands

- Multicoloured enclosed patchwork of fields
- Well wooded
- Small scale hops and orchards, oasts and weatherboarded barns
- Long views to Greensand Ridge

Staplehurst – Headcorn Pasturelands

- Flat, low lying and wet
- Small scale intimate landscape of pastoral farming enclosed by hedgerows and hedgerow trees
- Numerous field ponds
- Winding historic lanes, broad verges and flowery ditches
- Dispersed settlement including historic farmsteads and villages

Sutton Valence to Pluckley Mixed Farmlands

- Undulating or sloping landform
- Enclosed to north by Greensand Ridge with extensive views to the south
- Mixed farming with sheep grazing and remnant orchards, shelterbelts and hedgerows

The Stour – Stour Gap

- Low lying, flat or gently undulating landscape with good quality soils
- Open arable farmland enclosed by the North Downs to the north

The Stour – Stour Valley

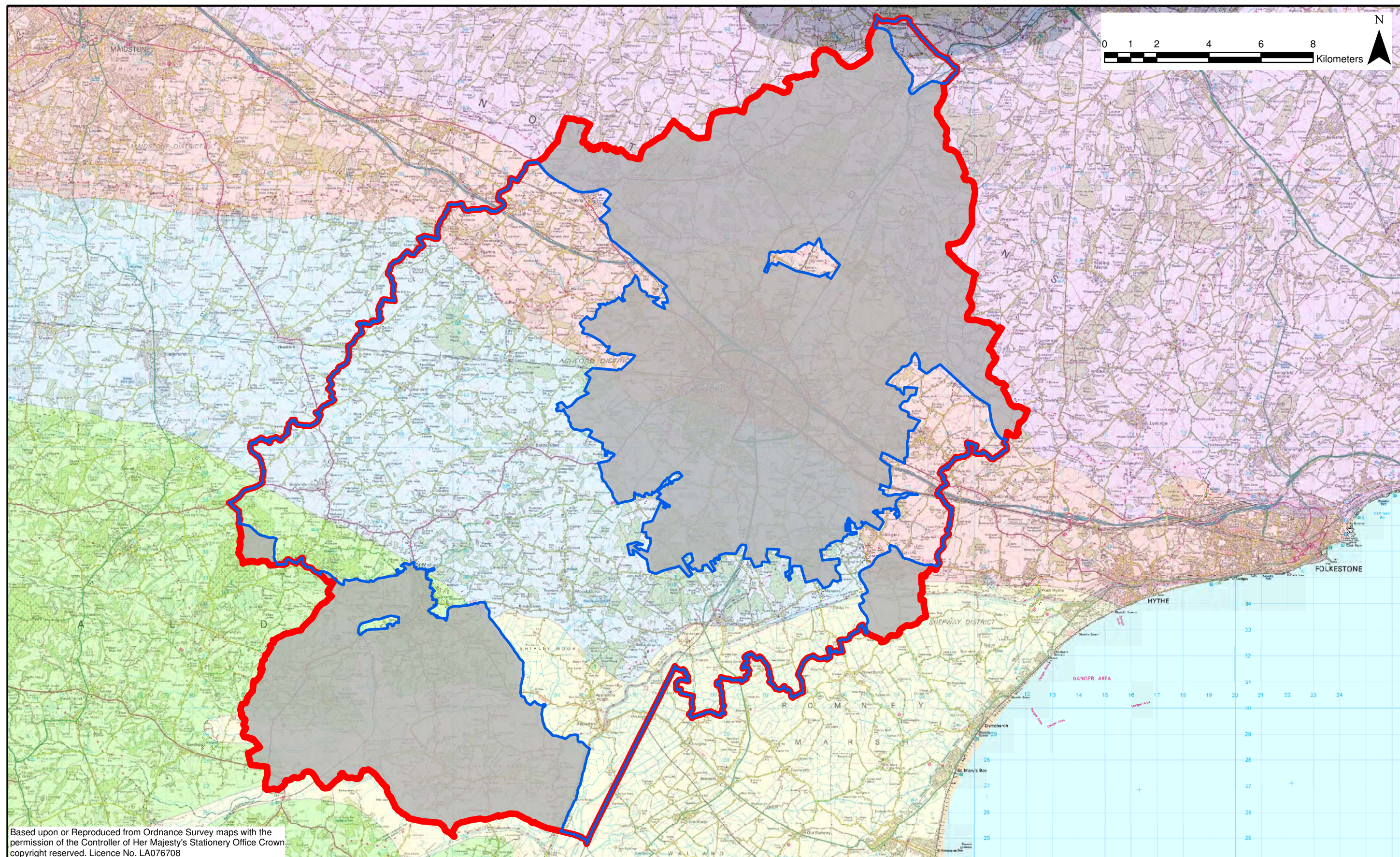
- Flat, low lying valley with alluvial soils subject to seasonal waterlogging
- Shallow, clear, fast flowing river with well vegetated banks of high nature conservation value
- Mixed farmland of irregular sheep grazed pasture and larger arable fields
- Sparse settlement
- Long views to the North Downs

The Stour Valley

- Flat valley floor, widening towards the river mouth
- Valley sides are steep, dropping in height as the valley widens
- Wetland pasture drained by well vegetated ditches and dykes; small scale, well enclosed field pattern. Marshland, colourful reeds and grasses, lakes and open water
- Settlement on river at edge of floodplain and linear settlement surrounding the valley

Upper Stour Valley

- Flat, open valley enclosed by outliers of Greensand
- Mixed farming including a high percentage of arable
- Historic mills on river



Legend

- Ashford Study Area
- Ashford Borough Boundary
- Non Study and Urban Areas

Joint Character Area

- High Weald
- Low Weald
- North Kent Plain
- North Downs
- Romney Marshes
- Wealden Greensand

Figure 7: Joint Character Areas (Natural England)

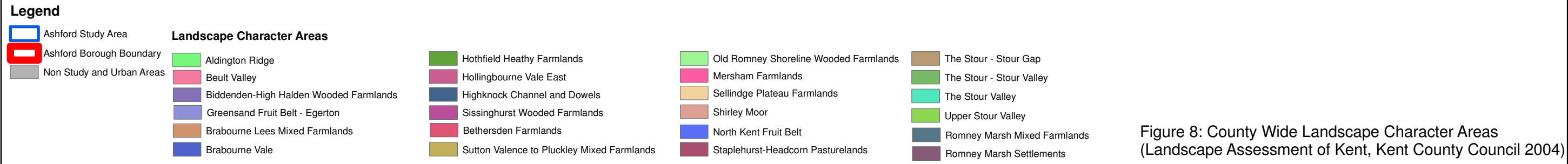
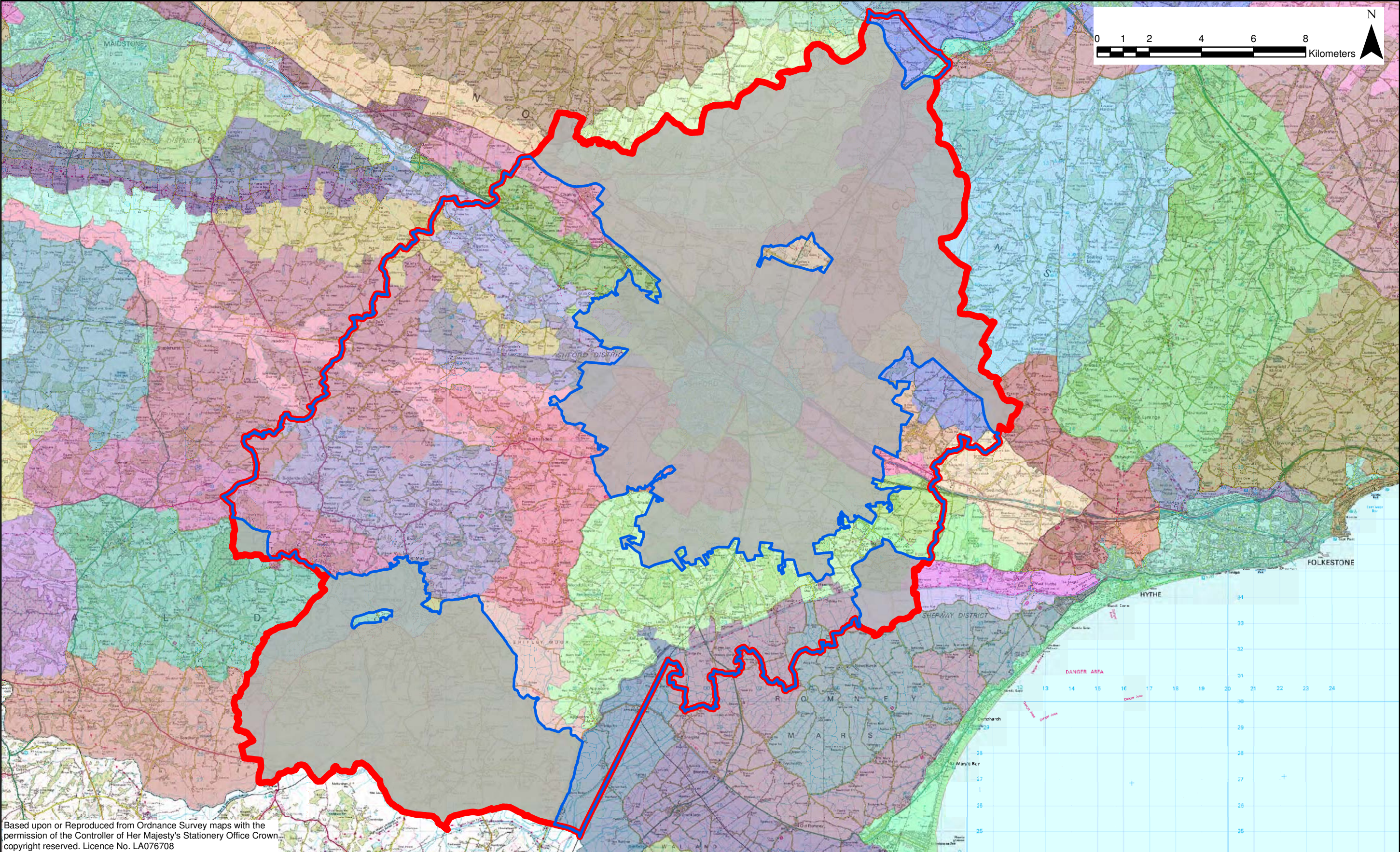


Figure 8: County Wide Landscape Character Areas
(Landscape Assessment of Kent, Kent County Council 2004)

Landscape Character Areas

The field and desk study identifies 33 local landscape character areas, illustrated on Figure 9. The relationship between the 33 landscape character areas within the study area and the landscape character areas within the adjoining boroughs has been considered where they fall outside the Kent Downs and High Weald AONB. The defined character areas do not conflict with the landscape character areas within Canterbury to the north, and Tunbridge Wells to the west. To the south and east, Shepway have not published a landscape character assessment. To the north west, Maidstone Borough are in the process of updating their landscape character assessment, and the character areas within the study area are compatible with the proposed draft revised landscape character areas for Maidstone. Dover have a published landscape character assessment, although its boundary with Ashford is entirely within the Kent Downs AONB so is not therefore relevant to this assessment.

The detailed local landscape character areas defined within the Ashford Local Development Framework Landscape Character Study, produced by Studioengleback 2005, have been taken into consideration. Up to date guidance recommends that landscape character studies at different scales should 'nest' within one another:

'Ideally assessments at different scales should fit together as a nested series or a hierarchy of landscape character types and/or areas so that assessment at each level adds more detail to the one above. The analogy of Russian Dolls is often used to describe this hierarchical relationship, but the idea of a camera zooming in, from a distant broad view, to a detailed small-scale portrait, also makes the point'. (Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and The Countryside Agency 2002).

Both the landscape character areas defined within this study and the local landscape character areas defined within the Ashford Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback 2005) are subdivisions of the larger, county scale character areas defined within the Landscape Assessment of Kent (Kent County Council 2004). As a result of both landscape character assessments within Ashford being based on the larger, county scale Landscape Assessment of Kent, as well as the consistent approach between methodologies, the landscape character area boundaries do not conflict..

Figure 10 illustrates this point, providing an overlay of the borough scale landscape character areas defined within this study, and the local landscape character areas defined within the Ashford Landscape Character Study. However, very minor amendments to the Landscape Assessment of Kent boundaries have occurred in places at the borough and local studies where the assessments have reviewed the landscape at a more detailed level. The boundaries of the landscape character areas defined within this study where they abut the area covered by the Ashford Landscape Character Study are simply defined by the edge of the study area rather than the true landscape character boundaries, which would extend into the non study area. It should be noted that the Ashford Landscape Character Study is at a more detailed scale than this borough wide study. The detailed landscape character areas defined within the Ashford Landscape Character Study would therefore form sub – divisions of the larger, borough wide, landscape character areas should they extend into the non study area towards Ashford's urban edge.

Both landscape character assessments within Ashford provide conclusions for each landscape character area, which are based on landscape condition and sensitivity (refer

to Methodology). As illustrated below, the wording of the conclusions between the two studies differs slightly. The word 'Create' has been substituted by the word 'Improve' in this study because it was considered that 'Create' could perhaps be interpreted as new landscape features or developments in an area which may not tolerate a significant amount of change. This does not disallow a direct comparison of conclusions because they are reached on the same basis.

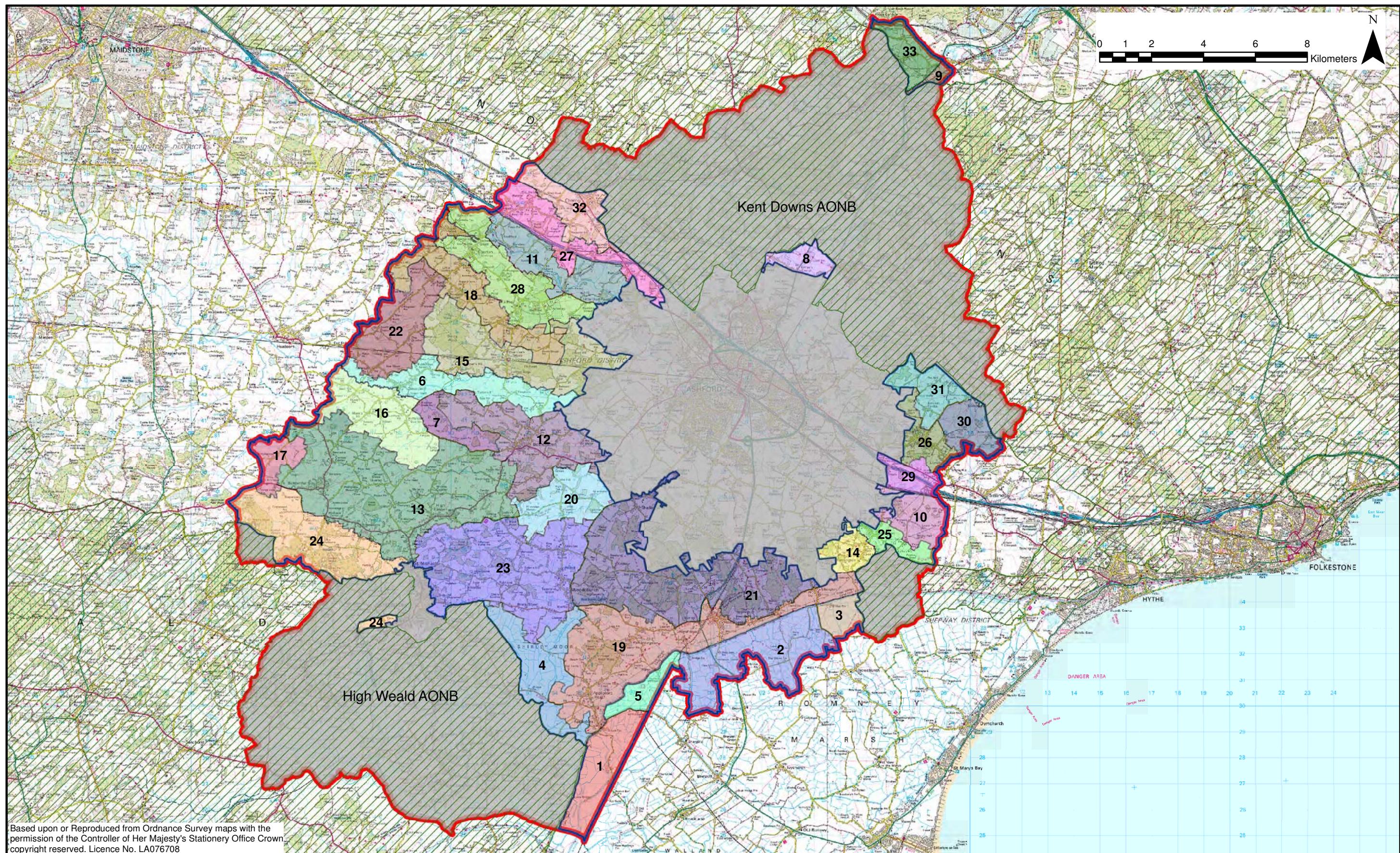
Ashford Landscape Character Assessment					Ashford Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback)				
Condition	GOOD	REINFORCE	CONSERVE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE	Condition	GOOD	REINFORCE	CONSERVE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE
	MODERATE	IMPROVE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE & IMPROVE	CONSERVE & RESTORE		MODERATE	CREATE & REINFORCE	CONSERVE & CREATE	CONSERVE & RESTORE
	POOR	IMPROVE	RESTORE & IMPROVE	RESTORE		POOR	CREATE	RESTORE & CREATE	RESTORE
		LOW	MODERATE	HIGH			LOW	MODERATE	HIGH
		Sensitivity					Sensitivity		

Figure 11 provides an illustrative comparison between the conclusions drawn within this study and the local landscape character areas defined within the Ashford Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback 2005). There are many differences between adjoining landscape character areas in terms of condition, sensitivity and the overall conclusions because the two assessments are at different scales. Throughout one borough wide landscape character area, levels of condition and sensitivity vary and the overall conclusions are therefore an average. Conversely, if the local scale landscape character areas within the Ashford Landscape Character Study were amalgamated to form borough wide landscape character areas, the conclusions would need to be an average of the varying local scale analysis.

Not all areas within a landscape character area exhibit all the characteristics of that area and it is usual to have some pockets with very few distinctive features. Often this is due to changes in land use that have resulted in the loss of landscape features, or the addition of features not naturally associated with that area. The proximity of the built environment often affects the condition of the landscape, particularly on the boundaries where pressures are greatest. The landscape character areas therefore identify common characteristics across an area rather than grouping areas that are identical. Where there are marked changes across a character area these are described and, where appropriate, different guidelines are given.

In the sections that follow, each of these areas is described and the key landscape characteristics are identified. An analysis is undertaken to identify the condition and sensitivity of the landscape and, following the methodology previously outlined, guidelines for each area are proposed. It should be noted that changes in the natural landscape are often gradual relating closely to changes in geology and soil type. It is

therefore normal to find some characteristics of one area overlapping into another. For ease of use this document groups landscape character areas into landscape types, as illustrated on Figure 12. Descriptions of landscape character areas are grouped alphabetically within the document in accordance with landscape types.



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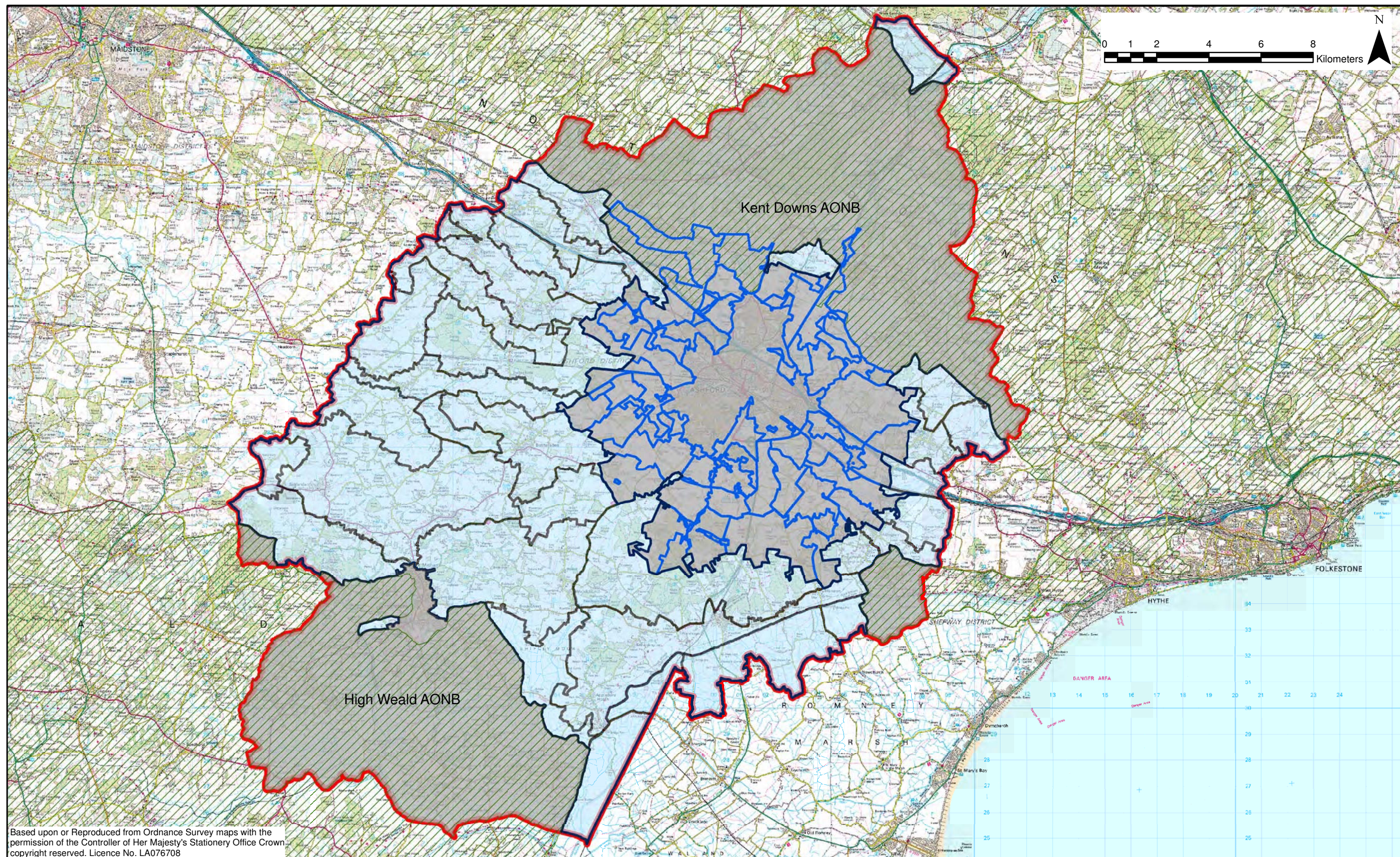
Legend

- Ashford Study Area
- Ashford Borough Boundary
- Non Study and Urban Areas
- Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Landscape Character Areas

- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| 1 Highknock Arable Marshlands | 6 Beult Valley Farmlands | 11 Great Stour Valley | 16 Haffenden Quarter Farmlands | 21 Shadoxhurst Wooded Farmlands | 26 Brabourne Lees Hilly Farmlands | 31 Brabourne Farmlands |
| 2 Romney Marsh Mixed Farmlands | 7 Beult Valley Wooded Farmlands | 12 Bethersden Mixed Farmlands | 17 Hareplain Farmlands | 22 Smarden Bell Farmlands | 27 Charing Heath Farmlands | 32 Charing Farmlands |
| 3 Royal Military Marshlands | 8 Boughton Lees Horticultural Valley | 13 Biddenden and High Halden Farmlands | 18 Mundy Bois Mixed Farmlands | 23 Woodchurch Undulating Farmlands | 28 Egerton - Pluckley Greensand Fruit Belt | 33 Old Wives Lees Orchards |
| 4 Shirley Moor Arable Lands | 9 Stour Valley Shalmsford | 14 Bonnington Wooded Farmlands | 19 Old Romney Shoreline Settlements | 24 Clapper Hill Wooded Farmlands | 29 Evegate Mixed Farmlands | |
| 5 The Dowels Marshland Pasture | 10 East Stour Valley | 15 Dering Wooded Farmlands | 20 Plurinden Arable Plateau | 25 Aldington Ridgeline | 30 Brabourne Arable Farmlands | |

Figure 9: Ashford Landscape Character Areas



Legend

- Ashford Study Area
- Ashford Borough Boundary
- Non Study and Urban Areas
- Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- Ashford Landscape Character Areas
- Ashford Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback)

Figure 10: Relationship between Ashford Landscape Character Study (Studioengleback) and Ashford Landscape Character Areas