

**Public - Yes**  
**Key Decision – Yes**

## **HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**Title:** Self-Designation of the Great Ouse Valley Way

**Meeting/Date:** Informal Cabinet – 16<sup>th</sup> March 2026  
Overview and Scrutiny – Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026

**Executive Portfolio:** Councillor Sarah Conboy – Executive Leader, Chair of the Cabinet and Executive Councillor for Place, Group Leader, Liberal Democrats

**Report by:** Harriet Robinson – Place and Climate Lead  
Kirsten Taylor-Scarff – Projects and Policy Officer

**Ward(s) affected:** All

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### **Executive Summary:**

Work to secure formal landscape recognition for the Great Ouse Valley and Washes has been ongoing for more than a decade. The Great Ouse Valley Trust (GOVT) submitted a case for Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) status in 2014 at Natural England's request and by 2019 the area was listed as a potential future AONB. Since 2023, Natural England has prioritised selections of new national parks and is not advancing further AONBs, now known as 'National Landscapes' designations.

Given this pause and in light of Cambridgeshire's rapid growth, low levels of land managed for nature and the absence of any protected landscape – the GOVT and other partners are exploring a self-designation approach. This is based on the belief that this would strengthen nature recovery, protect landscape character and support health, wellbeing and the local economy, with excellent accessibility from Cambridge via the Guided Busway.

In order to establish whether there was an evidence base for this approach, and to consider its suitability, HDC agreed to work with GOVT. A joint business case commissioned by both organisations (£10,000 each) – the outcome of which is the work undertaken by Arkwood (hereafter referred to as the Arkwood Report or AR), which is Appendix 1 accompanying this report. The AR assesses 3 boundary options and indicates that the 'Option 2 - Core Valley plus Ouse Washes' option provides the best balance of ecological coherence, scale, deliverability and strategic fit.

Economic modelling suggests self-designation under Option 2 could safeguard between £98 million and £593 million of annual economic revenue, with indicative annual running costs of £840,000-£1.06 million, implying a strong cost-to-value ratio. The analysis is based on local official datasets and extrapolated pre-Covid studies. However, further local evidence is recommended to refine estimates.

To move from concept to deliverable programme, the report indicates further work would be required, including a time-bound development phase to establish partnership governance; complete targeted evidence gathering (business survey, visitor survey and natural capital account); prepare a draft management plan and develop a funding and communications plan and seeking CPCA involvement where appropriate. The AR also identifies the implications of self-designation, including ongoing revenue considerations relating to management of the designation; these along with risks, are important to consider in the context of the AR report, to ensure a balanced view against the benefits identified by it.

The AR aligns with and supports HDC's Place, Climate Strategies and within the local plan as follows:

- Climate Strategy: increase biodiversity and natural capital and sustainable travel with low emissions
- Corporate Plan Action 53 – expand positive climate action support for local businesses, celebrating, enabling and influencing best practice and sharing knowledge
- Current Local plan, LP3: Green Infrastructure – Great Ouse Valley
- Place Strategy: incorporation of all 5 journeys: Pride in Place, environmental innovation, inclusive economy, health embedded and travel transformed

Work connected with the GOV and the GOVT, specifically the taking forward of any proposals relating to self-designation, do not form part of any identified activities within the existing Corporate Plan; nor the 26/27 variation of the same which has been approved for adoption from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026. The continued support of HDC in relation to broad collaboration and working in partnership, do however broadly align with the Enable or Influence aspects of those plans. It is clear however, that these are discretionary activities.

Since the work was commissioned, there have been other changes which are relevant to how the work with the GOVT is taken forward in light of the AR. HDC currently lacks capacity and funding (based on the recently agreed budget) to lead the programme independently. Additionally, Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is a significant factor, both in terms of strain on resources, but also in terms of what is realistically achievable in the context of HDC ceasing to exist from 2028, and decisions being prudent and appropriate in the context of not binding the future authority.

Having considered the AR and recognising that this is not a formal validation or review of its findings, HDC has identified a number of concerns that shape its current position. While the work is valuable and the desirability of enhanced recognition for the GOV is acknowledged, questions remain about the overall value of a self-designation approach and the practicalities of taking the work forward. The potential benefits must be balanced against uncertainties around resourcing, deliverability and the wider strategic context. It is there suggested that

HDC continues to work closely with the GOVT to explore ways of addressing these underlying concerns but that it would not be appropriate at this stage to commit to any enduring governance or operational delivery arrangements.

**Recommendation(s):**

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel is invited to consider and comment on the Report..

