

Public - Yes
Key Decision – Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title: Self-Designation of the Great Ouse Valley Way

Meeting/Date: Informal Cabinet – 16th March 2026
Overview and Scrutiny – Wednesday 1st April 2026
Cabinet – Tuesday 21st 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

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 1st 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):

Councillors are asked to:

1. Review and comment on the attached document entitled 'Arkwood Report' (AR) which sets out the rationale, options and implications of pursuing self-designation for the Great Ouse Valley and Washes.
2. Note the financial and resource commitments required to progress this work, including the significant Officer time need for coordination, engagement and governance development.
3. Note and accept that the majority of the Ouse Valley Way lies outside Huntingdonshire's administrative boundary, requiring cross-authority collaboration and limiting the HDC's direct influence.
4. Note and consider uncertainties arising from forthcoming local government reorganisation, including the lack of clarity on future revenue streams and HDC's ability to resource this work sustainably over the medium term.
5. Decide whether HDC should continue to explore further exploration of the self-designation proposal at this time:

A. **It is recommended that HDC should not proceed with further, detailed work with the GOVT in respect of self-designation at this time** for the reasons set out in this report. As such, it is recommended that HDC limits its involvement to limited activities relating to partnership and collaboration with the GOVT based on the principles of Influence and Enable within the Corporate Plan; and

B. Delegate to the Place and Climate Lead in consultation with the Executive Leader, to formally write to the GOVT, to outline the position and thank them for their partnership and engagement to date; to provide confirmation that HDC recognises the value of the GOV within Huntingdonshire as a result of the various contributory formal designations (e.g. ecological and heritage) and its relationship with our Place ambitions; and to advise that HDC will continue to collaborate with them on the basis of the "Enable" and "Influence" principles from the Corporate Plan.

OR

C. If it is determined that HDC should proceed with further detailed work, and deeper collaboration with the GOVT in respect of self-designation; Members are asked to recognise the concerns and risks as set out in this report, including recognition of the financial and resource implications and the uncertainty of the medium/longer-term appropriateness of the work in light of LGR.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update on partnership working with the GOVT and outline the case for self-designation of the GOV and Washes as a national landscape – based on the outputs derived from a jointly commissioned piece of work undertaken by Arkwood, (see Appendix 1).
- 1.2 Appendix 2 shows the difference between a statutory designation and a self-designation, lifted from Page 5 of the AR.
- 1.3 Self-designation could provide a proactive, locally led mechanism to manage the area as one connected landscape, which has the potential to bring environmental, social and economic benefits. However, it must be noted that self-designation does not have status through a formal governance or statutory designation process and has no legal powers, protections or planning controls.
- 1.4 The AR sets out the further work required to move forward with self-designation – including the next steps of the self-designation process, and long-term implications.
- 1.5 This report seeks to bring a Council lens to the work that has been undertaken. It does not seek to diminish or undermine the work. However, there must be a recognition that involvement in this work firmly sits within the Councils discretionary activities.
- 1.6 Since the work was commissioned, there have been changes in resourcing, and it must be recognised that continued support of the work is not directly aligned to the agreed Corporate Plan (existing and 26/27). The report therefore seeks to set out the implications of continuing to support the work from HDC's perspective, including estimated cost and time.
- 1.7 Further, it must be noted that LGR will make a self-designation of a national landscape impractical in the short-term. This includes uncertain geographical scope; unclear future governance and priorities; difficulty seeking cross-authority agreement; risk of misalignment with future structures (e.g. on existing District boundaries), and uncertainty over long-term funding and sustainability of the management of the designation.
- 1.8 This report seeks to provide a balanced analysis of the work to date, and the implications for HDC, in order to allow Members to consider if and how this work should be taken forward.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The GOV and Washes are one of the UK and Europe's most important wetland habitats, created as a 33km engineered flood storage system that produces seasonally flooded washlands. These conditions support rare species, extensive wet grassland and internationally significant bird

populations, which is why the area already carried multiple overlapping environmental designations:

- Ramsar site: it is recognised as one of Europe’s most important wetland complexes, supporting rare and migratory waterbirds and internationally significant wetland habitats
- Sites of special, scientific interest (SSSI): designated for their biological value, they include large areas of wet meadow, grazing marsh and wetlands that support rare flora and fauna
- Special area of conservation (SAC): protected for its habitats of European importance, such as wet grasslands, wet woodland and species-rich meadows
- Special protection area (SPA): identified for supporting internationally important populations of rare and migratory birds, including whooper swans, wigeon, garganey, avocet, black-tailed godwit and spotted crane

- 2.2 The GOV and Ouse Washes contain nationally and internationally significant habitats, alongside distinctive floodplain meadows, engineered washlands, heritage sites and cultural landscapes that together form one of the most ecologically important rivers-valley systems in England.
- 2.3 The area is under increasing pressure from climate change, habitat fragmentation, pollution, peatland loss, flood risk and housing development.
- 2.4 Current management is fragmented across multiple authorities and landowners, limiting the ability to coordinate nature recovery, active travel improvements, heritage management and long-term investment.
- 2.5 At the time AR was commissioned, LGR had not yet been announced and both the political and economic landscapes were more stable. Given the long-standing working relationship between HDC and the GOVT, an opportunity arose to develop the business case and explore the potential for a self-designation of the GOV.
- 2.6 There are priorities in the corporate plan which support the creation of the business case: ‘lowering carbon emissions’ and improving the environment’ and ‘happiness and wellbeing.’ Enabling and influencing this business case represented a partnership attempting to secure outcomes beyond statutory duties and continuing a collaboration with the GOVT. Alongside this, action 53 in the corporate plan has a target of ‘supporting climate action by local businesses,’ which aligns with the GOV’s potential for environmental enterprise such as sustainable tourism and green business initiatives.
- 2.7 HDC’s Place Strategy’s 5 journeys; Pride in Place, Environmental Innovation, Heath-Embedded, Inclusive Economy and Travel Transformed all align with the broad direction of the GOV designation.
- 2.8 In HDC’s current local plan, policy LP3, Green Infrastructure designates the GOV as a Green Infrastructure Priority Area, setting out a strategic framework for habitat protection, enhancement, access and landscape-

scale ecological networks. The local plan also identifies the GOV as having key biodiversity corridors and nature recovery areas. There is an acknowledged importance in protecting flood meadows, river corridors and connected landscapes.

- 2.9 Self-designation could provide a proactive, locally led mechanism to manage the area as one connected landscape, which could bring substantial environmental, social and economic benefits. It would help establish governance to protect and enhance the valley's distinctive character, and build resilience to future climate pressures, and ensure that the landscape delivers long-term economic and environmental value.
- 2.10 Notwithstanding the above, the understanding of the landscape is already an important consideration in respect of matters pertaining to Council activities such as Planning and the Local Plan. In Huntingdonshire alone, there are already 4 SSSIs, 3 SACs and 2 Ramsar sites. This highlights there is already a keen interest in conservation and improving biodiversity in the GOV area.

3. KEY BUSINESS CASE FINDINGS – FROM ARKWOOD REPORT

- 3.1 The full report is attached to this report for Members to comment on. The work was undertaken by Arkwood who were jointly commissioned by HDC and GOVT, with funding being provided from HDC. The AR has been presented as an attachment to this report should Members wish to make any comments on it.
- 3.2 This section of the report seeks to identify key findings from the AR.
- 3.3 The GOV and Washes form one of the most distinctive, ecologically significant and culturally rich landscapes in Eastern England. The AR presents the strategic and economic rationale for self-designation. It describes coordinated landscape-scale protection and enhancement led locally by HDC and the GOVT.
- 3.4 The landscape currently lacks formal recognition as a whole - despite its nationally and internationally important habitats, heritage assets and environmental functions. The suggestion of self-designation offers a proactive, place-based mechanism to:
 - 3.4.1 Safeguard and restore vulnerable wetland and floodplain ecosystems
 - 3.4.2 Increase resilience to climate change – especially flooding, drought and soil loss
 - 3.4.3 Strengthen coordination across multiple local authorities, landowners and agencies
 - 3.4.4 Build public identity, access and pride in a landscape not widely recognised as 'whole' i.e. 'The Great Ouse Valley Way'
- 3.5 The following points describe key areas of ecosystems within the GOV that provide carbon sequestration, biodiversity support, water regulation and

natural flood management. These are all critical for one of England's most nature-depleted counties and are located in Huntingdonshire:

Table 1: Summary of GOV's Key Ecosystems

Ouse Washes	One of Europe's most important wetlands containing specific Ramsar, special areas of conservation (SACs), special protection areas (SPAs), and sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs)
Wicken Fen	The National Trust's oldest reserve containing Ramsar, SACs and SSSIs
Portholme Meadow	The UK's largest traditional managed floodplain meadow

- 3.6 The landscape faces escalating pressures including climate change (flooding, heat, drought), degraded peat soils, pollution, invasive species, development pressure, habitat fragmentation and limited access infrastructure. Current management is dispersed across multiple authorities, creating gaps and inefficiencies.
- 3.7 The business case assessed 3 options, visuals of which are shown in Appendix 3.

Table 2: Great Ouse Valley Designation Boundary Options

Boundary Option	Area and Size	Estimated Gross Value Added (GVA)
Option 1	Core Great Ouse Valley – 14,972 hectares	£1.57 billion
Option 2	Great Ouse Valley + Ouse Washes – 33,131 hectares	£1.98 billion
Option 3	External landscape including Ely Ouse and Fen Isles – 54,305 hectares	£ 2.88 billion

- 3.8 The business case recommended pursuing Option 2 for self-designation as it captures the full ecological and hydrological system. This includes internationally designated sites, supports sustainable tourism and is comparable to established National Landscapes.
- 3.9 Option 2 estimates a self-designation partnership would cost £840,000 to £1.06 million per annum to run. **Option 2 does include areas outside the administrative boundary of HDC.**
- 3.10 The AR includes a table showing the projected impacts on the wider economy through GVA estimates, highlighting potentially significant economic benefits to the area. However, these benefits would not translate into direct income for HDC. At present, these are hypothetical estimates and it is unclear how much additional revenue HDC itself would receive. This could be through business rates or other funding mechanisms and

could assist to support this self-designation in the long term. While the broader place and economy may benefit, the financial return to HDC remains uncertain. Further, it also remains unclear how long-term funding sustainability to support the designation would be achieved or supported.

4. KEY IMPACTS / CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 The self-designation allows strong alignment with HDC's local plan and strategies such as the Climate and Place Strategies as highlighted in the 'Background' section of this report. HDC's role would be as an 'enabler' and an 'influencer' for this work.
- 4.2 This work is not included specifically within the agreed Corporate Plans for the current or future year but does support actions within these strategies. Further investment is required for further management plans and stakeholder collaboration. This is broken down into estimated costs as mentioned in section point 9.2. HDC has not currently planned for any further, or significant engagement with this work as part of its immediate priorities as established by the Corporate Plan or the budget decisions. Supporting this work would fall within the discretionary business of the Council, and given it only broadly aligns with the Influence and Enable principles within the Corporate Plan; Officers consider that the implementation of the recommendations and outcomes from the AR could have unnecessary and unaccounted for burdens upon the Council. It would have the potential to take away from other, priority work.
- 4.3 The AR articulates that self-designation is rarely seen in public or policy but could drive local recognition. It does not afford any formal protection to the landscape nor demonstrate a clear return on investment to HDC. It does not represent a valuable tool in respect of decision-making and development of future plans and strategies – for example within Local Plan making or Planning decision-making. Its weight would be limited and would not be as significant as formal designations. In some ways the existing designations (ecological and heritage) which currently form part of this landscape would be of greater significance and use than self-designation. At best, the self-designation would be an early or material consideration.
- 4.4 The self-designation could have a balanced impact when it comes to considering growth potential. The AR identifies a number of ways in which the designation could contribute towards growth, particularly in relation to the visitor economy. In this area, both the Local Growth Plan and Local Plan (existing and emerging) have ambitions for growth to occur; and both HDC and the CPCA want to encourage economic growth and support the visitor economy. The designation is not expected to hinder progress but is also unlikely to deliver significant added value. It could however set unreasonable expectations, particularly when looking at restricting inappropriate growth, with stakeholders and the public considering that self-designation would afford a significant level of protection, which it would not. These expectations would need careful management.
- 4.5 Part of the case in support relates to the opportunities to restore over 400 hectares of degraded habitat, strengthen biodiversity networks and

enhance flood resilience which may be delayed or missed entirely. The absence of a shared identity and governance structure would also mean reduced stability to attract funding, which could in turn limit investment in conservation, sustainable tourism and active travel improvements. However, it does not automatically follow that these negative impacts would occur, as HDC has already seen investment in conservation and climate change as a result of programmes such as Biodiversity4All; and its proposed Habitat Banking. HDC's economic development team continue to support growth in the visitor economy through activities such as our Tourism Action Plan and working with the CPCA on the Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP). This takes a District wide view, as opposed to the narrow view relating to the GOV. HDC continues to use its role in supporting those objectives relating to conservation, active travel, and tourism.

- 4.6 The AR outlines the estimated GVA allocated across Options 1, 2 and 3. It notes that most of this benefit would accrue to the wider area and businesses located outside Huntingdonshire. The report also highlights uncertainty around how HDC could capture any indirect benefits, such as through business rates. The lack of security regarding long-term funding is also a risk to the management of the self-designation and also represents a future liability in terms of management of expectations and expectations regarding future funding. This is of particular importance given that this is a matter falling within discretionary activities.
- 4.7 If the self-designation does not go ahead, the existing status quo would be maintained - the area would remain vulnerable to ongoing habitat fragmentation, climate-related flood risk and the deterioration of rare wetland and meadow ecosystems. The lack of strategic coordination between multiple authorities and landowners at a landscape-scale could mean that existing issues such as declining water quality, peatland loss, invasive species and inconsistent access provision are likely to continue and potentially worsen. There is however no guarantee that self-designation would contribute significantly to addressing these concerns; further, the value it would add over and above the existing consideration of these factors is questionable.
- 4.8 The AR proposes Option 2 as the recommended solution. This covers areas beyond HDC's administrative boundary. Without commitment from other Councils, it is unlikely that the full benefits of the Option could be achieved. It is our understanding that the GOVT proposals do not form a key priority of neighbouring councils.
- 4.9 Neighbouring councils have tried to achieve similar including the Fenland Biosphere bidding for a UNESCO designation but were unable to receive council backing owing to the expense and uncertain stated return on investment. These same factors apply here.
- 4.10 There are also a number of further unknowns which create uncertainty for the Council. In order to make a formal decision regarding formal commitments, more detail is required setting out the full financial, legal and governance implications of self-designation. This would need to include

liabilities, staffing, funding responsibilities and ongoing operational costs. At present these are all unclear, although estimations have been made in this report by Officers regarding the potential implications relating to the next steps.

- 4.11 Further sections of this report deal with the legal and resourcing risks in more detail, as such, they have not been repeated here.
- 4.12 The core issue relates to the balance between the costs and the benefits. While the AR identifies that HDC will incur costs, it also notes that partners are likely to face additional financial requirements to progress the work. Although some of these costs could potentially be mitigated through grants or other funding sources, the absence of a long-term plan to manage the ongoing revenue implications of the designation means the proposals are not financially sustainable at present and could pose a future financial risk to HDC. There may be limited gains through business rates but there is currently no certainty that this income would be sufficient to offset costs. Given the current financial climate and uncertainty around LGR, the expectation that non-statutory and discretionary activity should at least break even or generate revenue. As a result, it is difficult to support taking the project forward at this time.
- 4.13 **The Key Reality is that most AONB-style partnerships that recover their costs do so because they:**
- run **major funded environmental projects**
 - actively manage **visitor infrastructure**
 - use **biodiversity funding and developer contributions**
- 4.14 Furthermore, given the uncertain landscape for HDC as a result of upcoming elections; LGR; and emerging work being undertaken by the CPCA through the Local Visitor Economic Partnership (LVEP) work; it is considered that the timing of this proposition makes it difficult for HDC to commit to. It is suggested that a more balanced approach would be to note the report, and recognise the potential to keep this under review, but also recognise that the work falls within the Enable and Influence areas of work for the Council, and not the Do – as set out in the Corporate Plan.

5. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

- 5.1 Corporate Plan: [Corporate Plan](#)
- 5.2 Climate Strategy: [Climate Strategy Appendix 1](#)
- 5.3 Huntingdonshire Futures Place Strategy: [Huntingdonshire Futures Place Strategy](#)
- 5.4 HDC's current local plan: [Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036](#)
- 5.5 HDC's emerging local plan: [Preferred Options Draft Local Plan to 2046](#)

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1 HDC and the GOVT have collaborated under their initial memorandum of understanding (MoU) created back in March 2025. Pursuing self-designation will require cross-authority collaboration as the majority of the Ouse Valley Way lies outside HDC's current geographical boundary. This MOU was required in order for the AR to be jointly funded by HDC and GOVT.
- 6.2 The MoU states that both HDC and the GOVT are expected to contribute equally to the governance structure, share responsibility for project outcomes and communicate openly about risks, changes or opportunities.
- 6.3 The MoU recognises that each party may have different levels of resource available at different times, giving HDC's flexibility to scale involvement while still maintaining the collaborative spirit of the agreement.
- 6.4 It is likely that HDC Officer resource will be significantly higher than initially suggested in the MoU as there would need to be immediate and ongoing engagement and development work. This would involve working with all councils and landowners involved along the Ouse Valley Way.
- 6.5 Further engagement with partner councils, stakeholders, landowners, residents and businesses will need to be undertaken during this further development phase.
- 6.6 The GOVT are obviously keen for HDC to continue to support this work. Both Officers and Members have been in dialogue with representatives of the trust. They have identified:
- A desire for the long-standing co-operation with HDC to continue
 - Acknowledgement of the conclusions of the AR
 - HDC to join the GOVT and other significant partners in the formation of an Action Group to look at potential governance and funding.
 - GOVT are happy to take on the role of secretariat for the Group
 - No funding is being asked for at this time
 - They seek support in principle to the concept of the Great Ouse Heritage Landscape as a key marker as we head towards LGR.

HDC notes the GOVT's ambition to broaden its circle of partners and secure further funding for which the Council offers its full support for this endeavour.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Upon consultation with HDC's legal team, they have advised that there are significant legal, governance and organisational risks associated with progressing self-designation at this stage, particularly in the context of LGR.
- 7.2 A cautious approach is essential, as any future responsibility for overseeing the designated landscape (whatever governance

arrangements are agreed to) would represent a substantial, long-term commitment for whichever new unitary or unitaries ultimately inherits the function. LGR will reshape structures, budgets and service priorities, which elevates the significant risk that the project could be deprioritised, delayed or require full consideration by the incoming unitary administrations.

- 7.3 These concerns alone are considered to represent significant reasons for why HDC should not continue with the work towards self-designation.

8. LOCAL PLAN IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The proposed GOV self-designation could provide a useful evidence base to inform decision-making and future policy development. Shaping or restricting development would remain limited as a self-designation carries minimal formal influence and would not, on its own, provide a robust basis for refusing development proposals.

- 8.2 As set out earlier, many of the individual features and designations (ecological and heritage) already provide a more robust basis for local planning policy and planning decision-making; and there is already a wider recognition of the landscape value.

- 8.3 For the current local plan, the designation would have very little relevance or policy impact. Those policies being already established, and moreover there is already recognition of the landscape.

- 8.4 For the emerging local plan, the designation may offer some limited alignment, particularly where it overlaps with the work on the Nature Recovery Network (NRN), Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and the emerging policy LP12 in the emerging local plan. Initial mapping suggests that the proposed area largely avoids major strategic allocations, aside from Huntingdon Racecourse. This could present opportunities for green infrastructure linkages.

- 8.5 Option 1 as shown in orange in Appendix 2 raises concerns about consistency with existing evidence, emerging policy frameworks, and potential unintended implications for development expectations. As set out earlier in this report, there could be unintended consequences in respect of management of expectations from stakeholders and the public.

- 8.6 Overall, the advantages of pursuing self-designation appear limited when considered alongside the resources required and the potential for it to be attributed greater weight than is warranted. On its own, the self-designation is unlikely to provide a sufficiently robust basis for policy formulation or decision-making, particular in relation to proposals involving development constraints.

9. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 HDC's role in any future work would require focus on structured project management, governance assurance, financial accountability, coordination with partner authorities and ensuring that work aligns with

wider local policy frameworks e.g. Local Plan, the Council's Climate priorities and nature-recovery duties

- 9.2 The following table outlines the estimated cost from the Council of staffing resource to initiate further progress of the GOV self-designation:

Table 3: Estimated Resource for further progression of GOV self-designation

Resource	Estimated Amount	Description
Officer Time	£12,000	Core work undertaken by Place, Climate, Policy, Communications and Democratic Services teams. Covers material prep, boundary refinement, internal and external engagement and report drafting.
Senior Management and Corporate Leadership	£2,000	Limited but necessary oversight from Directors and statutory officers to ensure alignment with corporate priorities and governance requirements
Legal Resource	£1,000	Focussed internal legal input required to review implications and confirm compliance
Room Hire, Diary Coordination and Stakeholder Management	£2,000	Making use of Council venues where possible with modest costs for facilitated sessions and targeted engagement meetings
Development of Governance Framework	£2,000	Creation of proportionate governance structures largely prepared in-house, with minimal need for external consultancy or facilitation
Total estimated resource	£19,000 per annum	

- 9.3 In addition, the Ouse Business Case recommends further strengthening of the evidence base. This would be done by further locally specific studies, which are recommended as the following:

- A survey of businesses along the Ouse (150-300 responses) ~ £10,000
- A visitor opinion survey ~ £15,000
- Natural capital account ~ £5,000-£10,000
- A landscape charter assessment
- Further engagement with stakeholders and residents to assess feasibility of proposed options

- 9.4 Given that this project and work fall within the discretionary areas of work for HDC; it is not identified in the Corporate Plan as a priority; and that there has been no budget identified within the 26/27 budget process; it is

considered that these financial implications would be significant. Furthermore, the resource expectations would draw away from other work which has been prioritised, and this is particularly pertinent as we move forward post elections in May and towards LGR.

- 9.5 The final version of the AR was received on 22nd December 2025 following requested changes by both the GOVT and HDC. This arrived after HDC's budget-setting process was already well advance. Regardless, it is important to note that this work sits within HDC's discretionary activities rather than its statutory responsibilities, meaning there is no requirement for HDC to fund it.
- 9.6 Based on the financial and resource implications alone, it is considered that there are not grounds for moving forward at this stage.
- 9.7 Should Members wish to proceed with recommendation C highlighted in the front of this report under 'Recommendations,' a more detailed piece of work will be required to set out the next steps and the resourcing implications. Necessary funding and associated decisions would need to be secured and would represent a further phase of work.

10. HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Improved access to green and blue spaces is well-evidenced to support reductions in stress, anxiety and social isolation.
- 10.2 There are no significant health impacts anticipated. However, should increased recognition lead to higher visitor numbers, careful coordination will be required to ensure that routes remain safe, well-maintained and accessible for all users, including those with mobility changes. Effective visitor management and infrastructure planning would mitigate any associated risks but would come with an additional cost.
- 10.3 If self-designation does not proceed, the area may continue to experience fragmented management, potentially resulting in declining ecological quality and reduced accessibility over time. This would diminish the landscape's value as a health-promoting resource for local residents and visitors. However, this is not guaranteed to occur and in essence the status quo would be maintained.

11. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Self-designation would support coordinated nature recovery across more than 40 wildlife sites, enhance ecological connectivity and strengthen flood resilience across the washlands. A partnership management plan could help address pressures including habitat fragmentation, water quality, peatland loss and improve long-term resilience to climate change.
- 11.2 As set out elsewhere, if it does not proceed, the existing status quo is likely to be maintained.

12. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 12.1 The report provides an opportunity to update on and allow Members visibility of the latest work relating to the potential self-designation of the GOV.
- 12.2 The AR is considered to be a well-produced and helpful piece of work, which recognises the potential benefits arising from self-designation; along with setting out various steps, issues, and considerations that need to be evaluated as part of determining how things move forward. In particular it notes additional work (and cost) required.
- 12.3 The report has been evaluated by Officers, and it is recognised that whilst there could be benefits arising, there are significant areas of concern; in particular, any progression of a self-designation proposal has significant implications for staffing, resourcing, and legal risks.
- 12.4 Given the substantial Officer implications and the complexity of the work, Members are asked to consider whether continuation is justified at this time. This decision is required to ensure that resources are directed towards Corporate Plan priorities and statutory services, and that any new commitments are taken on only where the benefits clearly outweigh the costs. It also provides clarity to officers and partners about HDC's position.
- 12.5 The majority of the recommended Option 2 lies outside HDC's administrative area, meaning HDC cannot deliver change unilaterally. Acknowledging this constraint is essential to ensure Members understand the need for collaboration with other authorities and bodies, and the limited direct control HDC has. This recognition supports transparent decision-making and helps set realistic expectations around influence, delivery and outcomes.
- 12.6 The emerging reorganisation landscape creates genuine uncertainty around future responsibilities, revenue streams and capacity. These factors may affect HDC's ability to resource prolonged development work on the proposal. Noting these uncertainties ensures that Members make informed decisions in a changing organisational context and avoid committing to new workstreams that may become unsustainable or unviable in the medium term. Further, with the complexity of forthcoming reorganisation through LGR, there may be more appropriate opportunities in the future if the area in its entirety were to fall within the responsibility of a single authority; or moreover a role for the CPCA as a result of devolution.
- 12.7 Despite the current concerns and uncertainties arising from LGR, it is recommended that HDC remains open to future opportunities that can support our shared ambitions. There is recognition of the potential benefits associated with protecting the GOV, as well as the linked economic opportunities such as sustainable or "quiet" tourism. This aligns well with the Corporate Plan principles of "Influence" and "Enable," while remaining mindful of the resources available.

- 12.8 In summary, for the reasons set out in the report it is recommended that HDC should not proceed with further, detailed work with the GOVT in respect of self-designation for the reasons set out in the report. As such, it is recommended that HDC limits its involvement to limited activities relating to partnership and collaboration with the GOVT based on the principles of Influence and Enable within the Corporate Plan.
- 12.9 Given the uncertainty around the return on investment for the new unitary authority following LGR, it would not be appropriate to commit a future authority to further work at this stage.
- 12.10 However, HDC may wish to keep this under review and agree to continue to work with the GOVT on a limited basis under the principles of Influence and Enable as set out within the Corporate Plan.

13. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – Copy of the Arkwood Report, this is a separate file to this report

Appendix 2 - Statutory Designation vs Self-Designation (taken from the Arkwood Business Report

Appendix 3 – Final Boundary Options (taken from the Arkwood Report)

Appendix 4 – GVA Estimations (taken from the Arkwood Report)

14. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 14.1 The Overview & Scrutiny (Performance & Growth) Panel discussed the report at its meeting on 1st April 2026.
- 14.2 Councillor Pickering expressed confusion regarding the Council's position in not supporting the proposal. He questioned why Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) had been cited as a reason, noting that the Panel had previously been advised that LGR should not prevent the Council from committing to future projects.
- 14.3 The Panel was advised that the Council's position is not negative but appropriately cautious. The report has highlighted several new risks that must be fully considered. It was further noted that the external environment is evolving rapidly, which presents an additional challenge. The Council expressed a desire to undertake further work on potential partnerships, as there are other organisations interested in collaborating who may be better placed to deliver elements of the work. Attempting to deliver the project solely in-house would expose the Council to significant risk. The Council emphasised that it is not giving a definitive "no"; rather, it is considering the available options, including what can be delivered internally and where partnership working may be appropriate. It was also noted that this proposal emerged after the budget-setting process and would therefore currently represent an unfunded pressure.
- 14.4 Councillor Pickering agreed with a partnership approach and urged the Council to remain as part of the conversation.

14.5 Councillor Martin expressed his support for the outcome and agreed that, yes he wants to support the Great Ouse Valley Trust but feels there are alternative ways to do that, especially with elections and LGR coming up. He put forward 3 recommendations for Cabinet to consider; these were:

- To recommend to Cabinet recommendations 5 A and B as per the published report and;
- To recommend to Cabinet an additional recommendation that the item and future working with the Great Ouse Valley Trust noted as a potential item for the future Administration of the Council to consider, post the May elections.

It was originally suggested that the above could be by way of a Task & Finish Group; but following advice from the Deputy Chief Executive, it was agreed that the route for consideration was best left for the new Administration to determine.

14.6 Councillor Taylor expressed her support for the points raised. She advised that, should the Council become involved in the future, appropriate budget provision should be made and residents should be consulted

14.7 Councillor Gleadow asked for confirmation relating to the specific wording for the new recommendations to Cabinet.

14.8 Councillor Gardener seconded the recommendations raised by Councillor Martin.

14.9 The Panel re-heard the Recommendations including the additional Recommendation and a vote is called. 7 Members are For, 0 Against and 2 Abstainers.

14.11 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for Cabinet to make a decision upon the recommendations within the report, and additionally, the Panel request that the Cabinet consider adding the following recommendation to their report;

That Cabinet are recommended to proceed with recommendations 5 A and B of the published report (repeated below)

- A. It is recommended that HDC should not proceed with further, detailed work with the GOVT in respect of self-designation at this time for the reasons set out in this report. As such, it is recommended that HDC limits its involvement to limited activities relating to partnership and collaboration with the GOVT based on the principles of Influence and Enable within the Corporate Plan; and
- B. Delegate to the Place and Climate Lead in consultation with the Executive Leader, to formally write to the GOVT, to outline the position and thank them for their partnership and engagement to date; to provide confirmation that HDC recognises the value of the GOV within Huntingdonshire as a result of the various contributory

formal designations (e.g. ecological and heritage) and its relationship with our Place ambitions; and to advise that HDC will continue to collaborate with them on the basis of the “Enable” and “Influence” principles from the Corporate Plan.







AND

To recommend to Cabinet that the item and future working with the Great Ouse Valley Trust be noted as a potential item for discussion by the future Administration of the Council to consider, post the May elections; to determine appropriate next steps forward.

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Appendix 2 – Statutory Designation vs Self-Designation

	Statutory Designation	Self-Designation
 <p>Protection</p>	<p>Legal protections from inappropriate development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 • Countryside and Rights of Way act 2000 • Town and Country Planning Act 1947 	<p>Commitment between stakeholders to protect landscape value</p> <p>Integration with Local Plan and council strategies</p>
 <p>Recognition</p>	<p>Political as well as public awareness, especially locally (e.g. through signage and maps), plus evidence of local businesses awareness in research*</p>	<p>Self-designation rarely seen in public or policy now but could drive local recognition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas of Great Landscape Value – Surrey Hills • Special Landscape Areas • Areas of Special Landscape Importance
 <p>Management</p>	<p>Legally required up-to-date management plans and legal duty to conserve and enhance landscape</p>	<p>Management plan could be commissioned depending on priorities and resources, potential for stakeholder collaboration</p>
 <p>Governance</p>	<p>Designated landscapes can either be run internally within local authorities or externally as a charity or partnership</p>	<p>Freedom to choose governance model, will influence funding availability and flexibility</p>
 <p>Funding</p>	<p>Core funding provided by Defra, able to bid for special funding pots through other sources e.g. Lottery</p>	<p>Not funded by Defra, potential to access funding through other sources e.g. Lottery, but dependent on form of governance and partnership working</p>
 <p>Place Identity</p>	<p>Awareness and identity is not the goal of statutory designation but may be a secondary effect that builds over time</p>	<p>Branding, identity and signage could be developed as part of the self-designation to build momentum around landscape protection</p>

*See section 5.1

Appendix 3 – Final Boundary Options

3.6 Final boundary options

The criteria were applied in the study areas to define three options for self-designation, from the minimum area to an extended area. The options are nested such that the area of the "core" option 1 is included in all options, and option 2 is also included in option 3 (Figure 22).

Note that these boundaries will be subject to further review and refinement, and can be adapted in the context of Local Government Reorganisation (see Section 6 - Next Steps).

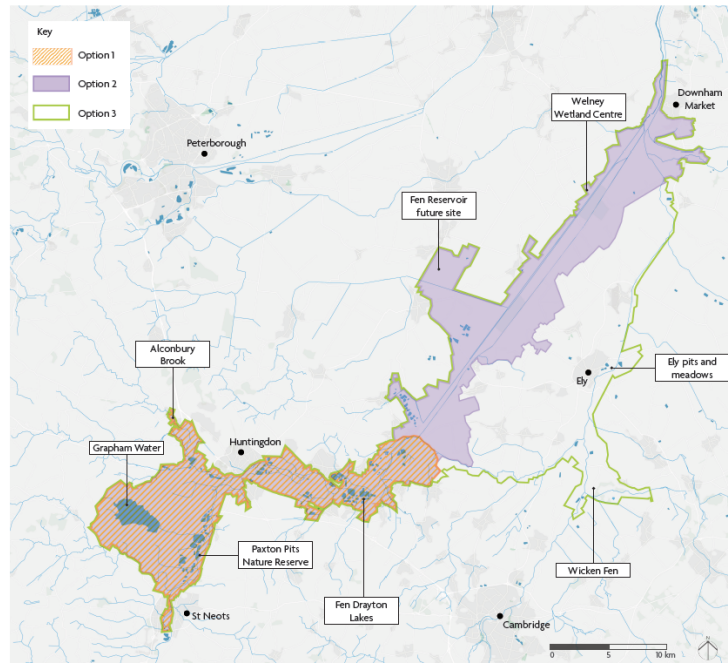
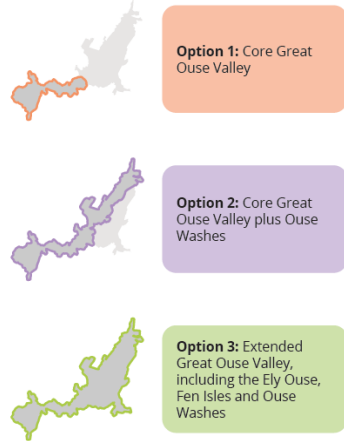


Figure 22. Map of the three nested boundary options

Appendix 4 – GVA Estimations

KPI	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Size (Hectares)	14,972	33,131	54,305
MSOAs covered (in part or full)	21	30	37
Employment (apportioned estimate)	20,083	25,267	37,614
Annual employment pay (estimate)	£650,148,793	£808,053,092	£1,205,868,928
Annual direct GVA (estimate) - see below	£1,573,217,148	£1,979,040,349	£2,882,717,531

Table 1. Estimated current GVA for each option

Annual Direct GVA by Local Authority (£m est.)	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Bedford	0	0	0
East Cambridgeshire	0	136	985
Fenland	-	120	120
Huntingdonshire	1,457	1,526	1,526
King's Lynn and West Norfolk	-	77	91
South Cambridgeshire	117	119	161
Total	1,573	1,979	2,883

Table 2. Estimated GVA for each option by local authority coverage