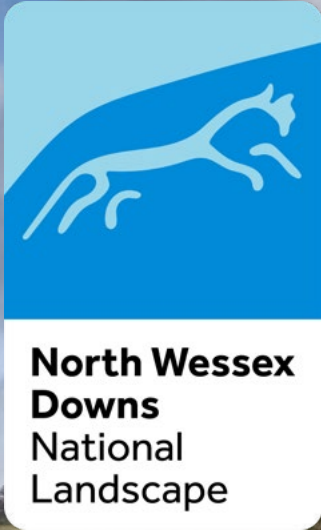


northwessexdowns.org.uk



Annual Review

2023-2024



From the Chair

Welcome to the Annual Review of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership for the financial year 2023-24.

November 2023 saw Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty across England and Wales rebrand ourselves as National Landscapes, as recommended in the Glover Landscapes Review. We have a new name and a new logo, but the North Wessex Downs remains the same beautiful place it has always been and our endeavours to conserve and enhance natural beauty remain unwavering. And the need to do so, and to deliver for nature, becomes ever more pressing.

As such, our very successful Annual Forum in October focussed on nature recovery. We announced the publication of our Nature Recovery Plan, fulfilling our commitment under the National Landscapes' Colchester Declaration. The Plan identifies what is needed to achieve the Government's aims for nature recovery, for example its ambition to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030, and identifies a set of priorities. You can read more about the plan on page 4 and about the Forum on page 11.

Meanwhile, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape team are working hard in a number of important areas which include:

- **Delivering for nature recovery.**
- **Projects developed and funded through the Mend the Gap programme on the eastern border of the North Wessex Downs which are making great progress.**
- **Our Farming in Protected Landscapes programme which has supported numerous nature-friendly initiatives and activities.**
- **And earlier this year we were successful in securing £1.5M from the government's Species Survival Fund for our Partnerships for Nature programme. Read on for more details about these programmes.**

The Partnership continues to make progress towards our aim of becoming the first UK protected landscape to attain the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Green List protected area status. To that end, we signed off our Business Plan in March, having established a set of key performance indicators to measure progress on Goals and Strategic Objectives agreed by the Partnership. We have also undertaken a governance review, with a strong focus on improving two-way communication and collaboration between local authority partners, the Partnership bodies and the staff Team. We aim to complete this process and submit our formal application to the IUCN by Q4 of this year (2024).

As always, we are grateful to our funding partners, volunteers and like-minded organisations for their continued support. Thank you all very much.

S. J. Nichols

Sarah Nichols, Chair of the Council of Partners



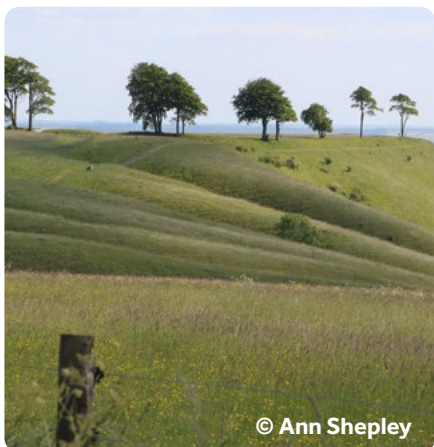
Partnership News.....	3
Enhancing and Sustaining	4
Farming in Protected Landscapes	8
Connecting	11
Protecting.....	13
Financial Summary.....	15



Strengthened Duty on relevant authorities towards the purpose of Designation

A Government-sponsored amendment during the passage of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 greatly strengthens the requirement on relevant authorities to support the purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes (AONBs) and contribute to the delivery of their Management Plans. This was one of the most significant recommendations of the Government-commissioned Landscapes Review chaired by Julian Glover, which reported in 2019.

The duty set out under s.85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 has changed from “a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty” to “a relevant authority ... **must seek to further** the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty”. This duty also applies to proposals outside the designated area (known as the setting) but impacting on its natural beauty.



The amendment also gives the Secretary of State the power to:

- make provision through regulations about how a relevant authority is to comply with the strengthened duty, including things that the authority may, must or must not do to comply with it; and
- make regulations requiring protected landscape Management Plans to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Environment Act 2021, including setting out how they will do so, and setting out how “any plan under section 89 relating to an area of outstanding natural beauty in England” must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

Relevant authorities include all levels of government from parish councils to county councils, Government agencies and ministers. Statutory undertakers are also covered by the duty. We hope this is a positive change which will bring all levels of government together with a strong purpose to conserve and enhance the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

These changes have implications for all aspects of local authorities’ activity where they affect the protected landscape and its setting, requiring active commitment to furthering the purpose of designation. Guidance on the new statutory duty is due to be published shortly by DEFRA. In the meantime, Natural England has advised that any relevant authority must take all reasonable steps to explore how the statutory purposes of protected landscapes can be furthered, and underlines the importance of avoiding harm to the statutory purposes of protected landscapes, going beyond mitigation and like-for-like measures and replacement. A relevant authority must be able to demonstrate with sound evidence what actions/measures it is taking to further the statutory purpose. It is Natural England’s view that the proposed measures to “seek to further” should align with and help to deliver the aims and objectives of the protected landscape’s Management Plan.

Making Plans for Nature

In 2019 the North Wessex Downs AONB (now National Landscape) was a signatory to the **Colchester Declaration** and in doing so we pledged to prepare a Nature Recovery Plan.

The draft plan for the North Wessex Downs was completed in Spring 2023. There was further stakeholder and public consultation over the summer, with the first edition of the plan launched at our Annual Forum in October 2023.

There are a number of governmental and global targets aimed at halting the decline of nature. Our plan sets out the scale of the problem in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, suggests priority habitats and species on which to focus, establishes targets and identifies opportunities for action.

We have been working hard to start contributing to the aspirations set out in our Plan across our varied programmes of work.



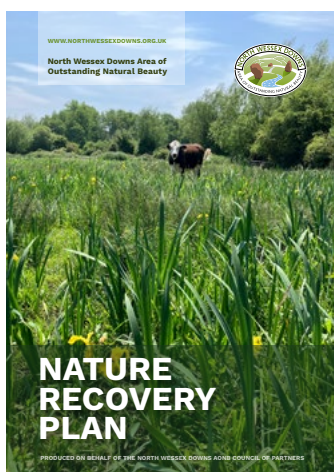
Bee orchid



Club-tailed dragonfly
© Steve Gozdz

- We led a successful £1.75m partnership bid to the Species Survival Fund based on kickstarting our **Nature Recovery Plan**. Read more about our Partnerships for Nature project on page 6
- Our **Farming in Protected Landscapes** programme in 23/24 contributed to 800ha of habitat improved for biodiversity
- The **Mend the Gap** programme has funded nature enhancements to 137 hectares of land in 2023/24 and planted 1.2 kms of hedges
- We have supported **farmer-led groups** in the North Wessex Downs, encouraging opportunities for habitat restoration and creation, and nature-based solutions
- We have continued to help support the development and establishment of the **Big Chalk concept** - an ambitious programme aiming to restore a mosaic of habitats across the calcareous (chalk and limestone) landscapes of southern England
- We contributed strategically to the developing **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** and the **Local Nature Partnerships** for Berkshire, Wiltshire and Swindon, Oxfordshire, and Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

The scale of the task to reverse the enormous loss and decline of our wildlife is gargantuan and will require multiple mechanisms, funding and systemic change if we are to succeed. Our **Nature Recovery Plan** is helping to plot the way and make the case for intervention and action. There's a lot to do, but we have made a start.



Knapweed

Mend the Gap

Mend the Gap is a collaborative programme led by the **North Wessex Downs** and **Chilterns National Landscapes** and the **Railway Action Group**. Funded by Network Rail it aims to heal and soften the scars left by the electrification of the Great Western main line between Reading and Didcot.



Mitigating the visual harm

Working closely with landowners the programme has funded the planting of over 6,000 hedgerow plants this year (all native species chosen to thrive in the local landscape) creating more than 1.2km of new hedgerow. A further 115 specimen trees have also been planted, including local signature tree species of wild pear, black poplar and disease-resistant elm. This mitigation planting will soften the visual impact of the gantries and distract the eye from the electrification infrastructure, whilst creating new wildlife habitat and connecting existing habitat. Planting has been coordinated by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South-East (FWAG) and delivered by local contractors.

Enhancing the landscape for nature

The programme has now committed over £500,000 to projects in the North Wessex Downs that will support nature and landscape recovery. These include:

- **Chalk grassland restoration at Rectory Farm, Streatley.** This project is improving nearly 86 hectares of grassland for nature and biodiversity by the reintroduction of local native wildflowers. The seed is being harvested from a neighbouring donor site on the farm using specialist equipment and a careful sheep grazing regime will give the sown seed the best chance of successfully 'taking'. This restoration project is a trial and will be carefully monitored. with the results and learnings shared with other landowners and the wider landscape conservation sector.
- **Wetland creation at Sulham, near Reading.** A former arable field is being transformed to create a two-hectare wetland habitat, which will provide a home for a variety of species from dragonflies to wading birds. The surrounding field is being seeded with species-rich grassland and wildflowers, whilst areas of scrub and new woodland are being planted around the field boundary to help screen the adjacent railway gantries.
- **Support for Local Wildlife Sites.** Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust has been funded to employ a member of staff to engage with landowners along the river and create new management plans for a number of Local Wildlife Sites in the area, many of which may never have had management plans in place before.

Looking ahead

In 2024/25 the programme will continue to deliver mitigation planting, focusing on the northern end of the programme area around Cholsey to Didcot. Further funds will be committed to project work that supports the North Wessex Downs Nature Recovery plan, and in particular helps conserve and enhance the precious and sensitive habitats along the Thames, and the chalk and arable habitats of the Goring Gap.

www.mendthegap.uk

"2023/4 has been a year of rapid growth for Mend the Gap. We are excited to be developing a pipeline of projects to deliver in the coming years that will continue to support the North Wessex Downs's strategic priority of nature recovery."

Ruth Staples-Rolfe, Programme Manager



Walkers discuss chalk grassland restoration near Streatley with the Mend the Gap team.

Partnerships for Nature

In July 2023 Expressions of Interest were invited for Defra's Species Survival Fund (SSF), administered through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. A total of £25 million would be awarded to 20 projects aiming to promote species abundance. The SSF were looking for proposals at a landscape scale and we saw this fund as a great opportunity to kickstart delivery of our Nature Recovery Plan.

Timelines were short so, with only three weeks to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) we put out a call to a number of partners. After submitting our EOI on time, we were pleased when, at the end of August, we were one of 48 applicants invited to make a full application within two months.

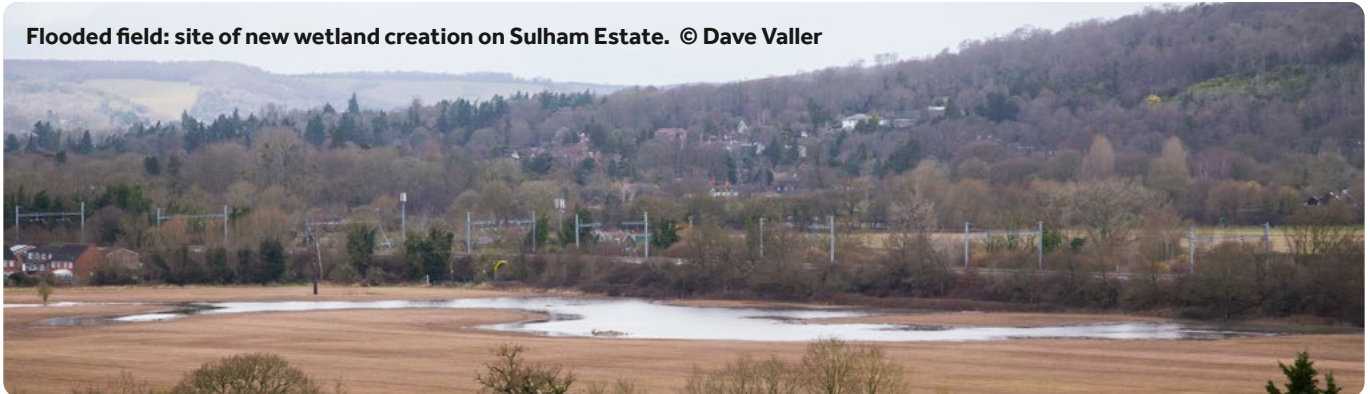
Our full application for the Partnerships for Nature (P4N) project was completed by November. We were thrilled to hear at the end of February that ours was one of the 20 successful projects. The SSF awarded us £1,559,636 which, together with £185,810 of match funding, comes to a total project value of £1,745,446.

Furthermore, our project was chosen for a Ministerial visit by Rebecca Pow, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, as part of the SSF funding announcements. She visited Bucklebury Common to see the restoration to date and to hear about the plans for the SSF funding and hosted a round table discussion, to explore the issues and challenges currently being faced by farmers and landowners.

Silver-washed fritillary
© Jim Higham



Flooded field: site of new wetland creation on Sulham Estate. © Dave Valler



Partners and Projects

The Partnerships for Nature project comprises nine partners, including private landowners and farming business, estates, and local and national charities and involves habitat creation, restoration and enhancement on seven separate sites across the NWDNL. The project will result in improved and increased habitat that will benefit a range of species. Partnerships for Nature started in May 2024 and is due for completion at the end of February 2026.



Otter © Allen Watkin

Benham Estate & Action for the River Kennet (ARK) will repair 3.2 km of chalk stream on the River Kennet, restoring the natural form and function of the river with opportunities for volunteer tasks and biological monitoring

Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust will restore some of the hazel coppice at Moor Copse Nature Reserve which is dominated by diseased veteran and standard ash trees, which means the coppice can't be worked safely. The ash trees will be felled, 'veteranized' and 'monolithed' which will create habitat and enable the two coppice coupes (3.6ha) to be worked by volunteers. Fifteen volunteers will be trained.

Bucklebury Estate will purchase a non-breeding herd of native cattle to enable the grazing of 31ha of newly created heath, 26ha of restored heath and 200ha of restored wood pasture on Bucklebury Common. Tree works will be carried out, pollarding up to 200 veteran trees. A full-time ranger will be employed, a Friends of Bucklebury Common group created and there will be volunteering opportunities.



© Millbank Creative for Defra

Earth Trust will turn a 26ha productive arable field near Little Wittenham into an innovative, regenerative demonstration site. They will establish 8ha of flower-rich pasture, with 1.5ha new wildflower infield margins, 88m of new species-rich hedgerows, 1000m of fruit tree lines and 400 native trees planted as silvo arable/pasture. A full time Regenerative Farming & Species Recovery Officer will be employed by the Earth Trust and mentored by FWAG South East.

FWAG South East & a member of the Southern Stream Farmers Group will enrich and restore 20ha of semi-improved chalk grassland at Tidcombe Down. This will include overseeding, plug planting and clearing scrub to reclaim 3ha of chalk grassland. Volunteers will be involved in surveying and monitoring plants and butterflies.

Sheepdrove Farm Partnership & Plantlife International will establish permanently cultivated plots near Lambourn, for a nationally-important assemblage of arable plants, install arable plant interpretive signs and create an arable plant 'app'. They will also restore two large dewponds.

Sulham Estate & ARK will create a new 2ha wetland on the edge of Pangbourne, including open water and margins that will support a tall herb community. They will also manage 0.3ha for arable plants.



Wetland generation, Sulham Estate ©Dave Olinski

SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

Funded by UK Government 

Partnerships for Nature is funded by the Government's Species Survival Fund. The fund was developed by Defra and its Arm's-Length Bodies. It is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency.

Sustainable Development Fund

After two quiet years following the pandemic and a review of the application process the residual grant monies had been rolled over to this financial year. This year more applications were received for the SDF and grants have been allocated totalling £12,615. We are very grateful to the volunteers at the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust for managing the Sustainable Development Fund on our behalf.

In total the SDF has contributed to seven projects over the year including:

- **£3000 to Liddington Parish Council** for a new platform around the trig point and the bronze Millennium Compass
- **£3000 to St Andrews Parochial Church Council**, Boxford towards the roof and improved drainage scheme across the church grounds
- **£577 to Pewsey Vale Tourism partnership** for a bike repair stand
- **£3190 to Hungerford Town Council** towards a new website and on-line heritage trail
- **£900 to Hills Stores Charity Shop** in Ramsbury High Street
- **£478 to Wilcot, Oare & Huish Parish Council** for the replacement of two existing benches in Oare and Huish. Memorial plaques will be retained and re-installed
- **£1470 to Oare Primary School PTA** for a rain garden design.





Year Three in the North Wessex Downs

Jemima Sellwood joined us as our new Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer in September 23. Jemima has wide agricultural experience from lambing to land management, and extensive knowledge of the local area and the farming community.



Over the last year we have continued to run the hugely successful DEFRA-funded programme, Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL). The programme provides grants under four themes of Nature, Climate, People and Place, for activities which also contribute to the delivery of the objectives of the North Wessex Downs Management Plan.

FiPL was originally a three-year programme to run from 2021 to 2024. As a result of the national success of the first year, DEFRA announced the extension of the Programme for an additional year, to March 2025. The North Wessex Downs was given an uplift for the third year and a generous budget of over £1.3M for the final year. Crucially this includes funding for administration, advice and guidance. The Programme has been extremely well regarded at a national level and we are pleased to be part of that success.

In the financial year 2023 – 2024 we awarded grants to 35 projects, ranging from under £3,000 to over £45,000, amounting to a total spend of over £900,000.

The broad remit of the programme has resulted in a huge variety of projects. We have funded ponds and wetland creation, new fencing to enable conservation grazing and biodiversity projects such as chalk grassland restoration and bird surveys. Under the Access theme grants have been awarded for projects such as trailers for school visits and signage, and a very well attended series of courses for farmers wishing to host schools. We have also provided funding for local food businesses, including a mushroom growing business and a venison curing facility. We continue to support Farmer Groups (clusters), across the area, bringing together farms in similar landscapes to work together on environmental projects across boundaries. Read on for more information on this.

Project Assessment

The 12-strong Local Assessment Panel plays an important role, making decisions on applications over £10,000. The Panel provides expert advice and strategic guidance to the programme staff, supporting project identification and development. Panel members include farmers and experts in wildlife, agriculture and the historic environment. We are extremely grateful for their ongoing time commitment and the experience and knowledge that they bring to the panel.



The impacts of the third year of the programme include:

For Climate

- 4 projects reducing flood risk
- 6 new or restored ponds and dew ponds
- A 2-day course on soil health for farmers
- Over 500 trees planted
- 1 strip till cultivator supported to reduce field run-off into the watercourse

For Nature

- 240 metres of new hedgerow planted
- Over 800 ha of habitat improved for biodiversity
- 1 heathland restoration project
- 23ha scrub clearance on valuable chalk grasslands
- Support for hedge coppicing equipment to improve hedgerow conditions
- Species benefitted by these activities include juniper, dung beetles, tree sparrows, lapwings, black poplar and blue butterflies

For People

- 3 trailers for educational visits on farms (2 shared by farmer groups)
- 2 training courses for farmers to learn how to host school visits, run by LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming)
- 1 programme to educate and support farmers considering new grazing systems. Run by 'Pasture for Life' in collaboration with the Cotswolds and the Chilterns National Landscapes.
- 2 community projects supported (1 community vegetable garden and 1 local environmental group)
- 4 environmental surveys for farm clusters

For Place

- Support for a venison curing and training facility in Berkshire
- Support for a young farmer's mushroom growing business in Wiltshire
- 1 project supporting no-fence collars to enable more precise grazing on an SSSI and around a Scheduled Monument
- 1 signage project for a new walking route around a site of historical significance
- 3 surveys to identify improvements of chalk grassland.

Supporting Farmer-Led Conservation Groups

We have continued to support the development of farmer groups in the region and last year the FiPL team worked with farmers in South Oxfordshire to facilitate the formation of the 'Clumps' group.

FiPL helped the group by funding, running and promoting an initial meeting, in partnership with Wild Oxfordshire, at which the group chose Sophie Cunnington as their facilitator. Sophie is a PhD student specialising in yellow wagtails and working at Wild Oxfordshire. With support from the team, she has successfully applied for facilitation funding through Countryside Stewardship (CS). Facilitation funding helps with the costs of running the group, collaboration and training.

Sophie also agreed to facilitate the Ridgeway group - a previously-existing group that required some support to get going again. Unfortunately, they did not manage to achieve facilitation funding but we have continued to provide financial support through the FiPL programme and Sophie hopes to grow the numbers to gain funding in 2024-25.

Bringing Facilitators Together

Farmer group facilitators can face many challenges. They deal with anywhere between 6-30 farmers in each group, covering huge areas of land which can be made up of high priority habitat, SSSIs, chalk downland, rivers, woodland, arable, chalk streams etc. They need to arrange interesting, appropriate and motivating speakers for their meetings, find ways for their group to work together to create better connectivity across the landscape and, finally, to help the group apply for funding to meet their objectives. A tough job!

To support facilitators, the FiPL team are organising quarterly meetings where North Wessex Downs facilitators are invited to share ideas, discuss projects, ask questions and explore opportunities for collaboration across groups.

Case Study

Lucy Tyler: Supporting Facilities for School Visits

One of the four themes of FiPL is People – providing support to landowners and farmers to encourage more people into the countryside to “explore, enjoy and understand the landscape”.

We have supported projects under this theme in a range of ways - replacing stiles with kissing gates, improving signage and improving permissive paths. Furthermore, we have provided funding to several farmers to help them run school visits. FIPL grants have been used to contribute to the purchase of trailers, toilets and educational supplies; we have also funded courses for farmers on hosting school visits, run by LEAF (Linking Education and Farming).

One farmer we have been privileged to help is Lucy Tyler, a dairy and arable farmer near Calne on the western edge of the North Wessex Downs. She attended one of the LEAF courses, which she found extremely useful, and alongside that we have been able to partially support facilities to improve her school visits. We have part-funded a trailer and toilet facilities and we are supporting the creation of a new classroom by converting a disused building on the farm. The trailer will mean lessons can be held anywhere on her beautiful farm; the classroom will also allow visits throughout the year, increasing the total number of schools they can host. Lucy has been working closely with two local schools to develop lessons and activities that support the national curriculum, and she is hoping that every year-group will have at least one annual visit to the farm. Lucy's aim is that children will develop a relationship with her farm and a greater understanding of farming and the landscape, and that some may even be inspired to consider farming as a career.

“Words cannot express how grateful we are for the funding we have received from FiPL, which has enabled us to increase the number of farm visits, including school visits, we host and enhance the experience we offer our visitors, helping us to demonstrate what we are doing to farm sustainably for the future and conserve and enhance the beautiful North Wessex Downs.” Lucy Tyler



Downs view at Fawley

Annual Forum 2023

Over 130 people gathered at Sheepdrove Organic Farm for our Annual Forum on 11 October. Focussing on the theme of Nature Recovery, our programme placed the nature crisis in a global, national and regional context before discussing nature conservation projects taking place in the North Wessex Downs currently. We also launched our Nature Recovery Plan.

After an introduction from Partnership Chair Sarah Nichols, Henry Oliver, Director, reviewed the work of the team over the last year. Howard Davies, independent environmental advisor and former CEO of the National Association for AONBs, then explored how nature recovery here fits into the national and international context. Simon Smith, Nature Recovery Lead for Cotswolds NL spoke of tackling nature recovery on a landscape scale and explained how the Big Chalk partnership is laying the foundations to do just that.

Further presentations introduced four local projects, each taking a different approach to nature conservation. Dr Robin Buxton, farmer and former Chair of the Earth Trust and Wild Oxfordshire, and Sophie Cunnington, Project Officer spoke about the systems-focussed approach taken by the Yellow Wagtail Partnership. Simon Smart, Facilitator of the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group, discussed the nature-friendly farming that that group is undertaking. Wendy Davis, Founder and Trustee introduced the community-led project, Andover Trees United. Matt Pitts, Meadows Specialist from Plantlife, then explained how their juniper restoration project was taking a species-led approach to nature recovery.

Discussion and networking amongst the delegates continued over lunch which was followed by field visits.



Walkers near the Ridgeway above Letcombe Bassett. © Ann Shepley

North Wessex Downs Walking Festival 2023

Our third North Wessex Downs Walking Festival ran from 2-11 June 2023. A programme of 27 walks across ten days included easy strolls as well as more challenging hikes and provided opportunities to discover the history, culture, and wildlife of the landscape in the company of knowledgeable and welcoming guides.

- Many of the walks proved extremely popular with 20 of the walks having waiting lists for places; overall **84% of places were booked**.
- **411 people attended walks** - an increase of **21%** on 2022.
- **70%** of walkers who responded to our survey said this was the first North Wessex Downs walking festival they had attended.
- **23** partner organisations delivered walks.
- **60%** of bookings were taken in the first week after the box office opened.

"I've been impressed, this year and last, by the range of walks and the enthusiasm and commitment of the walk leaders and NWDAONB representatives. I think the festival is a great way of raising the profile of this beautiful area and promoting it as a place to visit."

"Excellent knowledge on both flora and fauna and approachable people. As it was my first of these, I really enjoyed it."

Dark Skies

The **North Wessex Downs** team have continued a collaboration with **Marlborough Town Council** and the astronomers at Marlborough College to further promote the benefits of dark skies and work towards reducing light pollution.

- Organised by the **Town Council**, we funded a visiting planetarium for a day in the summer holidays which proved extremely popular and enjoyed by a continuous stream of families.
- **Sheepdrove Organic Farm** hosted the Marlborough astronomers for a public evening in November. Unfortunately, weather conditions on the night meant that attendees were unable to enjoy the location's inspiring dark skies, but the astronomers gave an engaging and informative talk instead.
- We participated in a **Dark Skies Q&A at Marlborough Town Hall** in January which was well-attended with fascinating questions and answers.

We have also partnered with the **Friends of the Marlborough Telescope** to start a dark sky measuring scheme. We funded a Sky Quality Meter (SQM) for the Blakett Observatory as well as a number of hand-held Sky Quality Meters. The fixed meter measures the sky darkness every night at the observatory. The hand-held meters are used by a team of volunteers to measure the skies across the North Wessex Downs.



Marlborough Dark Skies
SQM Project

MPSAS Readings - January 2024



North Wessex
Downs
National
Landscape



The first readings received in January 2024 were rather alarming, with the effects of light pollution proving to be more extensive than we had thought. But it is early days, and we will monitor the results over the coming months and years. **You can see the latest readings on their website at: www.blakettobservatory.org**

View from Lardon Chase towards Goring & Stratley





View from Moulford Down towards South Stoke © Dave Olinski

Development News

In October last year, the 2023 Levelling up & Regeneration Act brought national changes to planning policy which will result in planners and planning departments transition to a new way of working. The aim of the Act is to speed up the planning process and hold developers to account. The year ahead (2024/2025) will see us get to grips with this new legal landscape and we will start to see the impact of the changes..

During 2023/24 there was a 3% decline in planning applications nationally, however there was only a minor decrease notable in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape as we responded to approximately 340 of the 891 consultations received. We were put under pressure when the local authorities reacted to Michael Gove's threat to put them in 'emergency measures'; as a result, we responded to four local plans and one minerals and waste plan in the space of four months and commented on a further three planning policy consultations. Furthermore, we commented on all the pre-application consultations we received. We commented on five Neighbourhood Plans (Regulation 14 and 16 consultations). We received 15 appeal notifications and made 10 representations to the Planning Inspectorate in response.

Our Achievements

- Standing with the local community of Whitchurch to oppose the development north of the railway station and to the East of Bere Hill. The community have continuously opposed speculative development to the north of the station and have been an asset in providing detailed local knowledge.
- Providing feedback and local context to the South-east Water Strategy
- We took part in a stakeholder workshop to provide landscape comments on the Joint Vale and South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment. The Local Plan went out for consultation at the start of 2024 and we were pleased it included a strong focus on climate and the environment.
- We have commissioned LUC to review our Landscape Character Assessment which is due to be completed early in 2025.
- The North Wessex Downs, Cotswolds and Cranbourne Chase worked together in response to Wiltshire's Local Plan consultation.



Pangbourne Boathouse © Dave Olinski

Disappointments

- An appeal was made to South Oxfordshire Council against the refusal of an application for 350 dwellings, commercial development, and a nursery on land at Papist Way, Cholsey. The North Wessex Downs NL and the Chilterns Conservation Board opposed the appeal. The site abuts the NL boundary and therefore would have significant impacts on the setting of both protected landscapes. The site is not allocated within the Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan. Therefore, we opposed the principle of development and the harm caused to an important green gap on the edge of the village and the urbanisation of this rural settlement by such a large expansion. We also argued that the proposed landscape scheme failed to reflect the local landscape character (open plains and downs) and that it merely acted to screen the development. The appeal was called in the by Secretary of State and has been dismissed; the Inspector also recommended it be dismissed because the development would undermine the Local Plan process and the Neighbourhood Plan. We were disappointed that the reasons did not include impact on the setting of the protected landscapes as this would have strengthened future arguments made on that basis.
- A number of applications are still being received and assessed by LPAs without any consultation with the National Landscape team.



At National Level

- The National Landscape family submitted a response to the new Permitted Development (PD) changes which would allow barns to be converted into dwellings more easily. Concern was raised as no restrictions have been given for sites in Protected Landscapes.
- The NPPF was revised and included changes to housing delivery, particularly to how applications are dealt with when the LPA is not meeting its five-year land supply, changes to the assessment of housing supply, greater flexibility for local authorities in assessing local housing need (sees support for community led development).
- In October 2023 the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act came into force which made changes to the plan-making process and decision-making on planning applications. This included abolishing the duty to cooperate (which had required LPAs to cooperate with each other when preparing local plans). Most importantly for the National Landscape it replaced the 'duty to have regard' for the purposes of the designation to 'seek to further' those purposes. See page 3 for more detail on this change.



Pylons at Roundway Hill. © Ann Shepley

VIP Roundway Hill Update

National Grid submitted a planning application in the summer of 2023. Stakeholder involvement at pre-app stage, which included the North Wessex Downs, ensured the process was smooth and the application was approved by Wiltshire Council in the Autumn of 2023 (subject to conditions).

Archaeological work has and is taking place at set sites across the application area prior to any construction works.

National Grid will be publishing newsletters over the lifetime of the works to update local residents and stakeholders.



Cholsey Marshes

Financial Summary

Income 2023-2024		Expenditure 2023-2024	
	£		£
DEFRA contribution	289,125	Salaries (core)	252,538
NWD NL unrestricted income	8,479	Travel & subsistence	3,397
Wiltshire Council	17,432	Staff training & development	2,202
Hampshire County Council	9,457	Recruitment	815
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council	4,207	Accommodation: office lease	17,864
Test Valley Borough Council	4,207	Accommodation: rates	7,990
Swindon Borough Council	5,469	Accommodation: utilities & ancillary	12,020
Vale of White Horse District Council	4,207	IT	1,374
Oxfordshire County Council	7,796	Partnership and national working	6,255
West Berkshire Council	14,110	Events and publicity	785
South Oxfordshire District Council	4,207	Other general office costs	1,514
Rebranding grant from National Landscapes Association	2,218	Web site hosting & maintenance	949
Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) grant	1,007,250	DEFRA projects	63,211
Total Income	1,378,164	FiPL advice and guidance	51,351
		FiPL admin	34,197
		FiPL projects	921,702
		Total Expenditure	1,378,164

Adding Value

In 2023-2024 every £1 contributed by our local authority partners generated £22.46 in benefits to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

For every £1 awarded by the SDF, a further £15.32 has been contributed by partner organisations towards projects in the National Landscape during 2023-24.



**North Wessex
Downs**
National
Landscape



northwessexdowns



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Thames view towards Streatley

