

Annual Review 2014-2015



Chairman's Foreword

This has been another busy year for the Partnership. I was appointed as the Chairman for the North Wessex Downs AONB in March 2015 and it is a pleasure to introduce this first annual review of my tenure.

The challenges of tighter public spending combined with the pressure for development, particularly new housing and power plants within the AONB, have been particularly apparent this year whilst the threats from many smaller incremental developments continue. However, the AONB designation was made to tackle challenges such as these and the work of the team has re-balanced and adjusted accordingly.

We objected strongly to the proposal for a 67-hectare solar power station within the AONB at Wroughton.

Alongside English Heritage and Natural England, we submitted a robust case to the Public Inquiry but were dismayed to see the application allowed. Similarly, we have continued to object to a proposal to allocate land for 1,200 houses at Harwell in the Vale of White Horse. It would seem that in the race for new housing the need to conserve and enhance even our most outstanding landscapes is all too easily ignored.

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Chairman's Foreward Contd.

The new Management Plan for the North Wessex Downs AONB to 2019 was published. Its aim is to guide the activities of local organisations, in particular all those bodies who have a statutory duty under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to "have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB".

There has been much to celebrate this year, including establishment of new Partnerships for the Ridgeway National Trail and the Thames Path, publication of a new Transport Strategy for Avebury World Heritage Site and major progress with habitat creation, restoration and management through the three landscape-scale conservation projects active in the North Wessex Downs: the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area, the Stepping Stones and Winning Ways for Wildlife Projects. We began to implement a new communications strategy focussed on raising awareness of the North Wessex Downs, and supported a host of local community projects through our Sustainable Development Fund.

During the year the work of the AONB Unit has undergone a fundamental review and a new project-based work programme has been agreed for 2015-2019 to ensure the team stays focused on its core strategy whilst delivering excellent value for money.

It is clear that collaborating with partners, both old and new, is the key to efficiency and value; sharing knowledge, building understanding and broadening impact alongside other organisations have proven invaluable in the progress made this year.

For several years we have sought to build closer relationships with the private sector and this year we have been pleased to work with National Grid on the Visual Improvement Project for protected landscapes, with Vodafone on an innovative communications project and with volunteers from Nationwide and Vodafone who have helped on conservation projects out on the Marlborough Downs. We are hopeful that we can build even closer collaborations with these organisations and others in the future.

We recognise that the work of the Partnership relies heavily on the support we receive from DEFRA, the Council of Partners, the Management Working Group, our local authority partners and from similarly minded organisations and individuals. I would like to thank them all for their support and look forward to continuing to work with them in the future.

Ted Hiscocks

Chairman of the Council of Partners
August 2015



The Partnership 2014-2015



White Horse at Cherhill photo: Blue Sky images

The North Wessex Downs was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1972 under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The primary purpose of the designation is “conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area”.

The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership is governed by the Council of Partners which includes representatives of the nine constituent local authorities, the local communities, the farming and rural business community, nature conservation, heritage, landscape, tourism and recreation interests.

During the year we said goodbye to our previous Chairman Byron Carron. We are very grateful for his leadership, enthusiasm and support over the previous four years. At the end of the year we welcomed the new chairman Ted Hiscocks along with five new members to the Council of Partners. (see below).

The small team of officers at the AONB office in Hungerford is led by Director Henry Oliver. At the end of 2014, Planning Advisor Andrew Lord left to take up a similar post for the Cotswolds Conservation Board nearer his home in Gloucestershire. We were sad to see him go after five years' hard work and we will miss his strong commitment to the work of the AONB. His replacement is Lucy Page who joined the team in April 2015 from Test Valley District Council.



The Partnership Contd.

The team is guided by the Management Working Group which meets quarterly to develop and test proposals, offer expert advice and review progress. This year we have undertaken a major review of the work programme for the period 2015- 2019. This involved revisiting core functions, clarifying our five year objectives and identification of priority projects. We are grateful to the members of the Management Working Group for their input. The new work programme was approved by the Council of Partners in March 2015.

The strategic objectives were identified as follows:

- To prevent major harm to the landscape (particularly with respect to development)
- The conservation, enhancement and improved management of key North Wessex Downs landscapes and habitat.

Underlying both of these is the need to maintain an active and adequately resourced partnership and supporting unit.

The key processes through which we aim to achieve these objectives are as follows:

- Increased capacity (in financial, human and other resources) to achieve AONB objectives
- Closer co-operation between members of the AONB Partnership and between partners and the AONB Unit
- Greater public awareness and appreciation of the North Wessex Downs AONB as a protected landscape and its special qualities
- Development of better fundraising skills within the AONB Unit to help secure external funding
- Development of the North Wessex Downs AONB as an asset and destination for responsible tourism, recognised by and supported by local businesses
- A fuller understanding of the value of the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape as shown by ecosystem goods and services.

Priority projects have been identified to support the strategy. Progress for each project will be reviewed regularly with the Management Working Group and reported to the Council of Partners. .



The North Wessex Downs straddles the boundaries of 9 local authorities. Closer cooperation with our partners in these councils was identified as a key focus in the new work programme.

Management Plan 2014-2019

The Management Plan for 2014- 2019 was endorsed by the Council of Partners in March 2014 and adopted by all partners later in the year. The Plan was submitted to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for natural environment and science Lord de Mauley in December 2014. Lord De Mauley said of the Plan:

"AONBs are, and will continue to be, landscapes of change. Management plans such as this are vital in ensuring these changes are for the better. I would like to thank all those who were involved in bringing this plan together and I wish you every success in bringing it to fruition."

The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan presents objectives and policies that partners can apply to help conserve and enhance this nationally important landscape. For the first time, it sets out the Special Qualities of the AONB and identifies some of the goods and services they provide to society. The full Plan is [available on our website](#).



Landscape and Biodiversity

This was the third and final year for two important landscape projects with which we have been closely involved: Winning Ways for Wildlife and Stepping Stones

Winning Ways for Wildlife

This is a partnership project led by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust that has involved working with local landowners to improve management of woodlands and downland to benefit threatened species. Work has included enhancing and connecting existing patches of isolated woodland and chalk grassland, carrying out survey work and providing management advice.

During the year we secured funding from Hampshire County Council to carry out site management at valuable wildlife sites including Beacon Hill. This covered the management costs to enable scrub clearance, fencing and control of invasive plants to be carried out. Also, as part of the project we ran a course with Flora locale in June 2014 which looked at sourcing and using wildflowers to enhance biodiversity in the arable environment.

The final project report, published in March 2015, identified the significant achievements of the three year project:

- approx.2545 hectares of land influenced through surveys, advice and capital works
- 29 landowners engaged in active participation
- Habitat enhancements taken place over two years on 10 sites
- 30 volunteers taken part in surveys- equating to over 100 man days over the two years
- 29 sites surveyed for butterflies by volunteers and contractors
- 3 new Duke of Burgundy breeding sites identified plus a further sighting
- 54 woodlands surveyed for willow tit
- 20 new territories for willow tit found (only 4 known previously)
- 6 farms surveyed for arable flora
- 12 events held for landowners, volunteers and members of public
- 1 parish undertaking parish wildlife survey.



Willow Tit photo: Harry Hogg

Landscape and Biodiversity Contd.

Stepping Stones

The Stepping Stones Project was initiated in 2012 by Cranborne Chase AONB, North Wessex Downs AONB and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust working together with the following aims:

- To connect areas of high quality chalk grassland habitat around Salisbury Plain by creating 'stepping stones' between them, allowing animals like butterflies and beetles to successfully colonise new areas.
- To enhance areas adjacent to high quality sites: buffering valuable habitat so that populations of chalk grassland insects and plants can grow.
- To include and involve a large number of local volunteers in growing and planting plug plants to enhance species-poor areas

The project included an innovative piece of mapping that showed where to prioritise efforts and was supported by twenty-eight farmers on the Pewsey Downs and West Wiltshire Downs, creating or improving 344 hectares of chalk grassland.

We supported a wellbeing project with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. We recruited gardening clubs to germinate and grow chalk grassland plug plants which were then planted out by 20 vulnerable adults and young people who gave 230 hours of their time to help and pupils from Pewsey Primary School who enriched a grassland site near the Pewsey White Horse.

The final project report in March 2015 highlighted the scale and impact of the important work carried out over the three years:

- Twenty-eight sites were worked on, creating or improving 344 ha of chalk grassland.
- Nearly 23,000 plant plugs were put in to strategically important sites across the project area in the first year.
- A total of 658.5 hrs of volunteer time was contributed by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust Wellbeing Project alone.



Chiseldon Cubs plant trees to create homes for tree spar-

Landscape and Biodiversity Contd.

Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area



We have continued to support initiatives that resulted from the DEFRA White Paper 'Making Space for Nature'. Staff have helped the Marlborough Downs NIA community outreach group in pulling together its events programme to encourage the public to find out more about the Marlborough Downs and the work the local farmers have been doing to support wildlife in the area.

In 2014 there were more than a dozen public events including a bat walk and a tree identification day. We also represented the NIA at local events such as the successful 'Avebury Day' in September and at the national forum for NIAs in London.



Catchment Sensitive Framing MDNIA Workshop

Chalk landscapes

We have contributed to the Wessex Chalk Forum - an informal group which includes representatives of the RSPB, National Trust, Natural England, the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Wilts and Swindon local nature partnership and Wiltshire Council. We have also been involved in developing a bid for EULIFE along the lines of the Big Chalk concept. This is a collaboration across a number of AONBs and national parks led by the South Downs. The aim is to bid for funds in Autumn 2015 to assist in the development of the project.

Historic Environment



Stonehenge Photo by Neil Howard

Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Management Plan

We have been closely involved in the process of reviewing the Management Plans for Stonehenge, Avebury and the Associated World Heritage Site (WHS). The process has produced a new joint plan following a review of both Management Plans as well as extensive stakeholder participation, and involved a full public consultation which ran for 12 weeks from December 2014. The new plan will cover the period 2015 to 2021.

The Avebury Transport Strategy

The new Transport Strategy for Avebury was prepared by Atkins on behalf of Wiltshire Council and the Avebury (WHS) Steering Committee with major funding support and lots of partnership work from the North Wessex Downs AONB. The strategy looked at the impacts of roads and traffic around the Avebury part of the WHS. It provides a set of design principles to ensure that any proposed changes related to highways and other circulation within the WHS are sensitive to its unique characteristics.

The Strategy also identifies a detailed set of priority projects designed to protect and enhance the WHS. The Transport Strategy was produced as a result of the objectives and strategies set out in the Avebury WHS Management Plan 2005 and its recommendations are reflected in the [Stonehenge and Avebury WHS Management Plan 2015](#).



Traffic through the Avebury Stone Circle

Historic Environment Contd.

National Trails



The Ridgeway Photo David Hall

The Ridgeway Partnership

Early in 2014, the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails Management Group delegated work on developing a new partnership for the Ridgeway to the Ridgeway Review Group, of which we were a part.

An Action Plan for forming the new Ridgeway Partnership was submitted to Natural England. Consultants were engaged to advise on the future structure and management of the Ridgeway. A shadow Partnership with a more inclusive membership was established at the end of 2014 which then worked on the terms of reference and the delivery framework and the new Ridgeway Partnership formally assumed responsibility for the Trail on 1 April 2015, with plans for a public launch in mid 2015. The recruitment process began for a full time officer post, initially for ten months.

The Partnership will manage, develop and promote the Ridgeway National Trail and its wider Ridgeway corridor and environment.



Ridgeway Sign Photo by Jonathan Humphrey

The Thames Path

Progress was also made on the arrangements for the Thames Path using a similar model, and responsibility has now transferred to a new Thames Path Partnership, which now also includes London. The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails Management Group, chaired by AONB staff for the last 18 months, was formally dissolved end of March and its responsibilities transferred to the two new Trail Partnerships.

Historic Environment Contd.

Supporting small community heritage projects



The Boxford History Project at Work

We are able to support small scale heritage projects with grants from our Sustainable Development Fund and during the year we helped some diverse but very worthwhile community initiatives.

The Boxford History project undertook geophysical surveys of two possible Roman sites at Wyfield and Mudhall.

The Brightwell cum Sotwell Village Orchard Group planted a community orchard in the centre of the village creating a habitat for wildlife associated with traditional orchards, preserving vulnerable heritage apple varieties and providing a green space for villagers to continue the tradition of fruit growing in the village.

New interpretation panels were designed and installed at Cherhill Down, Lockeridge Dene and The Coombes at Hinton Parva by the National Trust. Each panel has a bird's eye illustration of the land, plus text and further illustrations to inform, educate and inspire.



Apple Day -Brightwell Cum Sotwell Orchard

Development



Solar panels at a site near Ramsbury

Planning

During the year, pressures continued for new housing sites, particularly in relation to Local Planning Authorities without adopted Local Plans and a proven 5 year housing supply. The Partnership has maintained its concern that the balance between the provision of housing and the conservation and enhancement of the North Wessex Downs AONB landscape has become too heavily weighted in favour of the former, which potentially may lead to non-compliance with Section 85 of the CROW Act 2000 (Section 85 of the CROW Act places a statutory duty on authorities to have regard to the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the AONB).

Examples of ensuring Section 85 compliance is being secured include Local Authorities that have adopted the Management Plan; reference to Section 85 duties by the Unit in its responses to DCLG consultations, Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and Local Transport Plans; continued responses by the Unit to Highways Authorities & Other Statutory Undertakers consultations; continued reference to Section 85 duties in responses to planning applications, the vast majority of which were in accordance with the Unit's comments; responses to relevant planning appeals and attendance at Public Inquiries; continual monitoring of appeal decisions locally and nationally and reporting outcomes to the MWG and CoP; through meetings with Officers, Councillors and Parish Councillors, pre-application advice, and co-operation with neighbouring AONBs, Natural England and DEFRA.



Development Contd.

The threat of major development continued with the solar power station at Wroughton (67 hectares and 150,000 solar panels) having been approved by the Secretary of State following a Public Inquiry; this was a huge disappointment. The arrays will be particularly visible from Barbury Castle and the Ridgeway National Trail. The proposed housing allocation at Harwell, a scheme of 1,400 dwelling (plus a reserve site) continued to move forward and stage 1 of the Vale of White Horse Examination in Public is scheduled for the end of September 2015 and additional Landscape Value Impact Assessment work will be required to support this.

The Swindon Borough Local Plan 2026 was adopted in early 2015 and the Wiltshire Core Strategy Development Plan Document was formally adopted by Wiltshire Council on 20 January 2015. A site for 220 dwellings was allocated on greenfield land at Salisbury Road, Marlborough through the Wiltshire Core Strategy. An outline application was submitted in March 2015 for 220 dwellings and a hotel on the site. The AONB unit raised a number of significant concerns with Wiltshire Council regarding the significantly harmful impact which this development proposal would have on this protected landscape.

Following a change of ownership in 2014, long standing proposals to develop a marina with 120 berths to the west of Hungerford were revived. We met the applicants and advised on landscape impact. The original scheme was granted planning permission in 2004 .

At the end of 2013, we commissioned a landscape impact assessment to inform our response to the proposal to construct 14 wind turbines with a height of 127.5 metres at Bullington Cross within the AONB in Hampshire. The application was refused by Winchester, Basingstoke and Deane and Test Valley Councils in June 2014. EDF appealed against the decision at the end of 2014 (subsequently withdrawn).



Hydraulic fracturing (fracking) is a technique used to extract gas from rock deep underground. Government believes shale gas has the potential to provide the UK with greater energy security, growth and jobs; however there are many environmental concerns. The Government has announced that although fracking wells will not be permitted in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), fracking companies will be allowed to drill horizontally under these areas and concerns remain that fracking outside the AONB could also have an adverse effect on the protected landscape. There are currently no applications in or around the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Development Contd.

Undergrounding



Pylons across the Vale of Pewsey

Approximately 570km, or seven per cent, of National Grid's high-voltage electricity transmission lines run through in AONBs or National Parks. National Grid's Visual Impact Provision project will make use of a £500 million allowance made available by Ofgem until 2021 to reduce the visual impact of this network. There are some particularly intrusive lines that cross the North Wessex Downs. Following detailed assessment of all the lines concerned and discussions with the project team at National Grid we were pleased to see that a section of transmission line near Pewsey was shortlisted along with sections in seven other AONBs and National Parks as having the most significant landscape and visual impact.

In collaboration with National Grid, our role has been to bring together the relevant groups and local stakeholders to investigate whether it is possible and advisable to mitigate the impact of this section of transmission line.



In March 2015 we participated in a technical stakeholder workshop to explore the issues and a drop-in event (pictured) for the local community to find out more and air their views. We were pleased to see more than 90 people at the drop-in event including representatives from the local parish councils and the farming community.

A decision is expected on which of the major projects shortlisted will go ahead to the next stage in September 2015.

Development Contd.

Alongside the major projects, a £24m Landscape Enhancement Initiative will also offer opportunities to apply for funding for smaller projects to mitigate the impact of National Grid power lines across AONBs and National Parks.

We have now developed a very positive relationship with SSE, the Distribution Network Operator in the North Wessex Downs, identifying and delivering schemes to put low voltage overhead electricity lines underground.

We are pleased to report progress with stretches of lines that we have identified for action so far:

- The overhead lines between Wansdyke and New Town (above Alton Barnes) have been removed.
- Work to remove the overhead lines across Hungerford Common began in spring 2015(see photos.)
- Other proposed undergrounding schemes are also progressing at Barbury Castle and at West Kennet Long Barrow.



Power lines across Hungerford Common



Work starts to move the lines underground

Tourism

Landscape Ambassador Training

In January 2015, a new module within Our Land aimed at encouraging tourism providers and supporters of protected landscapes to become 'landscape ambassadors' was launched. The online [Landscape Awareness Tool](http://knowour-land.co.uk) (<http://knowour-land.co.uk>) takes the form of themed multiple-choice questions that test knowledge about the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It can be used by anyone from tourism businesses, residents and supporters, to visitors and those who simply want to find out more.

This new fun training scheme is designed to equip participants with a sound knowledge of their local area.

A wide range of topics are covered - including wildlife, historic buildings, landscape features, famous people - and, after successful completion, participants can print out and display their own 'Landscape Ambassador' certificate.

One B&B owner who has helped to test the tool had this to say;

"I have completed the Landscape Ambassador training and passed! I was surprised how much I already knew and enjoyed learning new information about the landscape."



We are continuing to provide support and information for businesses through the North Wessex Downs AONB and the new Visit North Wessex Downs websites. There is an interactive map that shows walks, where to stay and local producers plus a tourism toolkit with professional photos and useful content ready for local business owners to use on their own sites.

Tourism Contd.

In April and May 2014 we held two photography workshops. Many tourism businesses show their premises on their websites but not the stunning scenery that surrounds them.



The photography workshops included a practical session around Hungerford

The day was designed to help them feature the landscape on their doorsteps and included a tutorial by a professional landscape photographer followed by a walk when all participants had chance to try out the ideas with guidance. Feedback from the participants was very positive.

Staff have been working with Visit Wiltshire on the development of new “brand positioning” for the county. The result is the new ‘Time for Wiltshire’ marketing campaign, which features the North Wessex Downs as “the perfect antidote to overcrowded cities, a place to escape, press pause and let time stand still”. We are also contributing to the strategic direction of tourism in AONBs with our partners in the National Association for AONBs

Raising the Profile of the North Wessex Downs

Communications Strategy

In 2014 we introduced a new communications strategy for the North Wessex Downs to address three main issues:

- Many people, live and work in the North Wessex Downs without recognising the name or knowing that there are in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Tourism businesses tell us that they'd like visitors and tourists to recognise the North Wessex Downs in the same way as the Cotswolds or the Chilterns. We'd like to help them actively promote the area
- We work with nine local authorities and numerous other conservation, wildlife and tourism organisations. We need to keep them up to date with what we are doing so that we can work together to achieve our mutual goals more effectively.

The strategic communication goals are to:

- Raise public awareness of the North Wessex Downs AONB and the role of the Partnership
- Work with local businesses so that they can benefit from and contribute to the North Wessex Downs AONB
- Improve links with all partner organisations, demonstrating value and building support for the work of the North Wessex Downs AONB.

To support this strategy, three new projects were launched.

Measuring awareness

During February and March 2015 we were very grateful to a team from Vodafone who undertook to develop a robust and efficient methodology that we could use to measure awareness and thus track progress of the communications strategy over time.

They created an online survey and explored new ways to encourage participation, provided very helpful analysis and made recommendations for repeating the exercise

Nearly 200 people completed the survey and 54% said they were aware of the North Wessex Downs



The team from Vodafone

Raising the Profile of the NWD Contd.

Supporting Local Tourism Businesses

At the end of 2014 we started a new programme of visiting local tourism businesses across the North Wessex Downs. We have lots of resources in our tourism toolkit and we want to help these businesses feature the landscape in their own promotional materials. By meeting the business owners face to face we can explain how we can help and gain direct feedback on what they find of value and interest.

The Story of the North Wessex Downs

Work began on a new presentation to tell the story of the North Wessex Downs AONB, it starts with the geology and moves on to look at how people have shaped the landscape over generations and why this area provides a perfect environment for many rare wildlife species. When complete, it will be used by the team and partners to reach new audiences, raise awareness and set the context for the work of the Partnership.

Annual Forum

The Annual Forum was held in October and we were pleased to welcome around 80 people to Oaksey House in Lambourn. The theme was “Water” with speakers from the Environment Agency, Thames Water, Aldbourne Drainage Improvement Group and the five Catchment Partnerships covering the North Wessex Downs.

In the afternoon there were visits to the Bagnor estate at Hunt’s Cross to see habitat creation following extensive river restoration and to Farncombe and Nugent Farms near Lambourn to see Catchment Sensitive farming measures.

There was a tour of Oaksey house followed by a demonstration by Action for the River Kennet (ARK) of their new Em River (an educational model that demonstrates basic principles of river behaviour).

Radio Wiltshire recorded interviews during the day for a follow up feature they ran the following weekend and there was a full report in the local press.



Chairman Byron Carron welcomes delegates to the Forum

Raising the Profile of the NWD Contd.

Publicity

We undertook a varied programme of communication activities in support of the communications strategy:

- We had a stand at the Royal Berkshire Show (see photo below). More than 300 people signed up to receive regular updates from us
- We attended BBC Radio Wiltshire's 25 year celebration at Etchilhampton, a busy day with a live broadcast and interview from the North Wessex Downs tent.
- The 'Icons' exhibition of ten original contemporary paintings of the North Wessex Downs by Anna Dillon has continued to tour venues around the AONB including Wantage, Hungerford and Andover
- Honey Bee Nectar is produced by Ramsbury brewery in partnership with the North Wessex Downs to raise awareness of the need to protect our bees. In the summer of 2014, the donations from the previous year 's beer sales went to the Kennet Bee Keepers for new equipment to help them educate more people in how to look after bees properly
- We reviewed our website and began to simplify it and to refresh the look with new images and focus the content to more closely reflect the aims of the Management Plan
- The updated Visitor Guide was distributed throughout the area during 2014 and distribution was tested in early 2015. A revised plan for 2015-2016 was then put in place to distribute a further 30,000 copies through four companies.
- Relevant events in the area were listed on the website and through social media
- Members of the team gave talks to local community groups
- News and events were publicised via 12 press releases to local media (more than 80% were printed or used online) and via social media.

The distribution list for the quarterly [e-bulletin](#) has grown by over 30% during the year to more than 1300 addresses.



Ready for Visitors at the Royal Berkshire Show

Raising the profile of the NWD Contd.

We replaced our rather ancient marquee with two smaller units (pictured below) that together provide the same footprint. As well as having clear branding and graphics, these new marquees are much simpler to erect so we can attend more events and we now offer them for use by our partners so we can promote the North Wessex Downs even when we are not there!

Several members of the team have been interviewed by the press and have featured on the radio. This included a BBC TV interview for Inside Out on Wroughton, a feature on the Lambourn Downs for Radio Berkshire and coverage on local radio about the National Grid VIP project.



To coincide with the Tour of Britain (see photo) coming through the North Wessex Downs in September we issued a guide to "the best places to cycle across the North Wessex Downs" to local press and on-line media..



We attended a "wildlife safari " for local children (pictured right) at Freeman's Marsh near Hungerford and generated follow-up publicity in the local press



Working in Partnership

The North Wessex Downs AONB is the third-largest AONB in the country. It takes in 173 parishes and straddles the boundaries of nine local authorities. However, it operates with a very small team and budget in comparison with other protected landscapes. Working with partners is key to its success.

Friends' group

Some of the AONB family are supported by a "Friends' Group" - usually an independent group who attract support and raise funds for projects to support the conservation and enhancement of the AONB. The purpose, scope and form of these groups are diverse. At the Council of Partners meeting at the end of 2014 the directive was clear: as funding for the partnership becomes more uncertain the need to establish such a group has become more urgent. A small working group led by a former member of the Council of Partners has been formed to take this forward.

Partnership events

In June 2014 we hosted a joint event with the Catchment Sensitive Farming project and Action for the River Kennet, bringing together landowners and professionals to look at management that reduces the potential for issues such as compaction and runoff.

Our links to communities, landowners and conservation projects have helped to bring about a number of volunteer tasks and public events.

Two groups of young people, a group of young carers from across Wiltshire and a group of cubs and young leaders from Chiseldon were kept busy creating the ideal habitat for tree sparrows on farms in the heart of the Marlborough Downs.



Young Carers from across Wiltshire show off the tree sparrow boxes they made on their day out on the Marlborough Downs

We have contributed to the work of the Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) - Link2Nature (Wiltshire), Berkshire LNP, Wild Oxfordshire and Hampshire LNP - as they built strategic partnerships and developed plans for action. We also took on the role of chairing the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership Steering Group and feedback from our experience was put to the DEFRA evaluation, published in October 2014.

Working in Partnership Contd.



Exploring Arnside and Silverdale AONB with colleagues from the National Association of AONBs

National engagement

Keeping in touch with other AONBs to share new ideas, understand the challenges and discuss collaboration has continued to be an important part of our work. During the year we were regular contributors to meetings of the National AONB lead officers, the South East and East Protected Landscapes lead officers and the South West Protected Landscapes planning officers.

We have been involved in the National Association for AONBs work to develop successful models of 'Social Forestry'. Essentially, this includes everything from small woodland owners and small-scale production to volunteer and conservation projects. We took a number of members of our Woodland Forum to events in Birmingham and Dorset to gather ideas and contribute to a Big Lottery Fund bid in collaboration with the Plunkett Foundation.

We attended a joint National Park and AONB workshop with Lord de Mauley (the then Minister for AONBs) and his officials on the recommendations arising from the Cabinet Office-funded LUC report Maximising Revenues for Protected Landscapes. In July 2014, two staff together with chairman of the Management Working Group attended the National AONB conference in Penrith(pictured above) This was a good opportunity to hear ideas from other AONBs.

We showcased the "Tourism Toolkit" that we have developed to help local businesses feature the AONB in their own publicity materials.

Also, following re-structuring at Natural England, we began to build relationships with the new regional teams and specialists.

Working in Partnership Contd.

Working with the Private Sector

We made good progress engaging new partners from the private sector.

In addition to projects with National Grid and Vodafone mentioned elsewhere, in December 2014, a team from Nationwide planted around 250 whips of scrub species for a “tree sparrow village” next to a new dew pond in Ogbourne St Andrew.

In March, two Vodafone teams helped to re-instate a hedge on the Marlborough Downs at Berwick Bassett which will provide a valuable wildlife corridor.



A team from Vodafone planting whips

Developing new projects

In addition to the established projects, we also devoted time to working with partners to explore new ideas for conservation and enhancement:

- We held discussions with the Kennet and Avon Canal trust and Crofton trustees on their proposed large bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for major restoration and improvement at the Crofton beam engines site near Great Bedwyn
- We helped Action for the River Kennet (ARK) with its Stonebridge Meadow forum which involved a public survey to gather opinion on future management
- We participated in and made detailed input to a series of workshops on the targeting of the New Environmental Land Management Schemes (NELMS) organised by Local Nature Partnerships for Natural England and DEFRA. This involved using our local knowledge to help shape the targeting of resources for the widest benefit to the landscape. We enabled a small project with Hungerford primary school, following an approach piloted by Charles Flower in Chieveley, to plant perennial wildflower plugs grown from local seed for use in Key Stage 1 science teaching.

Working in Partnership Contd.

Meetings and events

Keeping in touch with partners and other relevant groups and understanding what they do is an important part of our work. During the year, we participated in the following groups, meetings and events:

- Avebury World Heritage Site Steering Committee
- Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Management Plan Review Project Board
- The Chilterns Conservation Board Annual Forum
- The Chalkstream Headwaters Forum
- The Canal and River Trust Kennet & Avon Forum in Newbury
- The Thames Water Resources Forum
- The Earth Trust Annual Rose Ceremony and open day.
- National Trails event in Birmingham
- CPRE Hampshire Countryside Awards and National Brownfield Research Seminar
- Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB AGM
- The inaugural meeting of the Test and Itchen Catchment Partnership, which covers the Bourne Rivulet
- Open Farm Sunday at North Farm in West Overton (Wilts)
- The West Berkshire Countryside Society Reception in Bucklebury
- The Wessex Chalk Forum – along with representatives from the RSPB, National Trust, Natural England, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Wilts and Swindon Local Nature Partnership and Wiltshire Council
- The “Visit Wiltshire tradeshow “(we had a stand) in Salisbury
- “Systems thinking” , a Wiltshire Council training workshop attended by the whole team
- National Association of AONBs Conference
- Thames Water Technical Stakeholder Group
- National Grid Stakeholder Reference Group
- North Wessex Downs LEADER Transition Group and Local Action Group
- Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails Management Group
- Wantage Neighbourhood Plan workshop
- Hampshire, Avon, Kennet, South Chilterns and Upper Thames Catchment Partnerships
- Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire NELMS Targeting Workshops
- The Ridgeway Shadow Partnership
- Hungerford Town Council LDF Sub-Group
- Health and Safety training
- Our Land Steering Group.

Grant Funding

Leader

Following the successful completion of the 2007-13 LEADER programme in the North Wessex Downs, the Local Action Group (LAG) were keen to run another Programme between 2015 and 2020. So during 2014, with some financial support from DEFRA, Wiltshire Council and the AONB Partnership, the LAG developed a new Local Development Strategy and bid for a part of the national LEADER budget.

The work was led by a small group of LAG members including the North Wessex Downs representative. In November the LAG was awarded 2.132m Euros (currently £1.705m) to run a programme and prepared to start delivery. Unfortunately, an early 2015 start proved too ambitious – DEFRA have been working at length on the detail of the application, appraisal and claim processes and on refining the eligibility criteria and programme guidance. An autumn 2015 start is looking most likely.

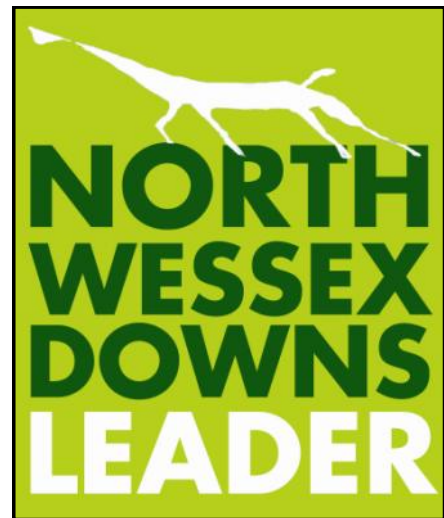
The North Wessex Downs LEADER strategy aims to help the area to become renowned for:

- **thriving and sustainable local businesses**, businesses which use the landscape as an economic driver and which value and respect the land and environment
- **quality as a destination for sustainable and responsible tourism**, making the most of the area's fantastic natural, historical and cultural heritage
- **well managed farmland and woodland**, where land managers are encouraged and supported to maximise sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits of the high quality landscape;
- **vibrant and cohesive communities** which meet the needs of those who live and work here and of visitors.

Funding will focus on six priority areas: Farming, Rural Tourism and the visitor economy, forestry, rural services and connectivity and culture and heritage.

These priorities directly reflect the local rural development needs identified via extensive local engagement work and an analysis of the state of the area carried out this year. Each project funded will need to support key objectives of economic growth, sustainability, innovation, equal opportunities and integration.

The LAG have taken the opportunity to review the NWD LEADER boundary and have extended the coverage to include villages and rural areas which were either previously only partially covered by the programme or uncovered by LEADER. It has also worked with its Accountable Body, Wiltshire Council, to streamline processes wherever possible to minimise management and admin costs.



Grant Funding Contd.

Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)

The SDF supported 17 projects across the North Wessex Downs AONB with a total grant allocation of £25k and this in turn attracted match funding and in kind contributions worth over £50k and generated 228.5 days of volunteer time. The trend is to support smaller projects (the average grant was £1,473) with a practical focus.

The range of projects supported continues to be imaginative and diverse. There is a full list [on our website](#).

This year's projects included:

A grant to West West Berkshire Countryside Society, this enabled them to invest in new equipment and training to undertake more tasks at some of the important sites they manage such as: Grove Pit, Leckhampstead, Furze Hill, Hermitage and Ashampstead Common.

Bridleway MARL33 (Treacle Bolly) is an attractive link between Manton and Marlborough which can be used by walkers, cyclists and riders. It provides a safe, quiet link away from the A4 but it can often become flooded and muddy.

The grant will support drainage and surfacing works to enable the path to be accessible year round.



The "Treacle Bolly" Bridleway

A grant was made to support the Savernake Forest Barbastelle Bat Project which monitors bat colonies around the Savernake forest. The grant will be used for equipment to study the breeding Barbastelle bat colony and a survey of one of the most important sites in the UK for Natterer's bats.



A Ringed Barbastelle Bat

Financial Summary

The Partnership is grateful for the continuing support of DEFRA and our local authority partners.

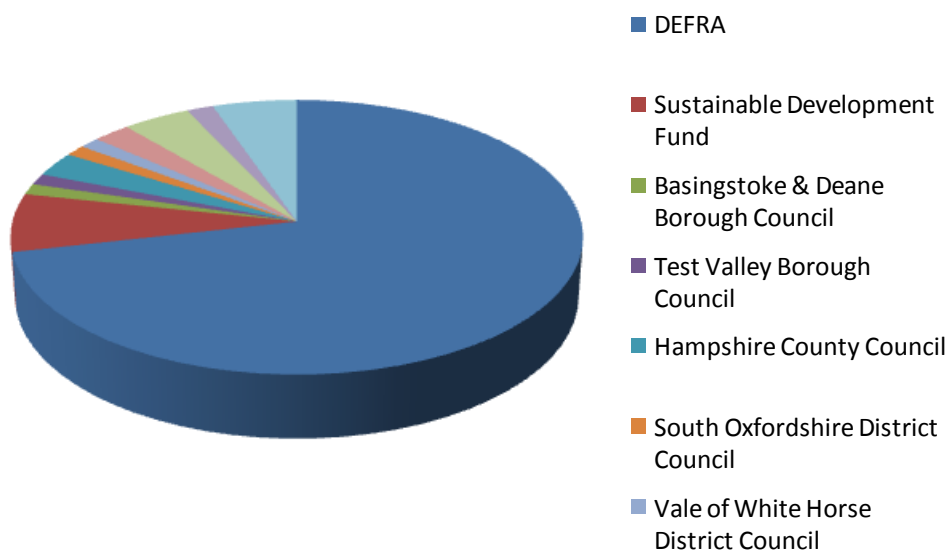
The following pages set out more detail on the income and expenditure for the period.

Value for Money

Although project income fell this year, we continue to deliver excellent value for money. During 2014/15 we generated on average, additional benefits of £5.79 for every £1 contributed by our local authority partners.

Income 2014-15

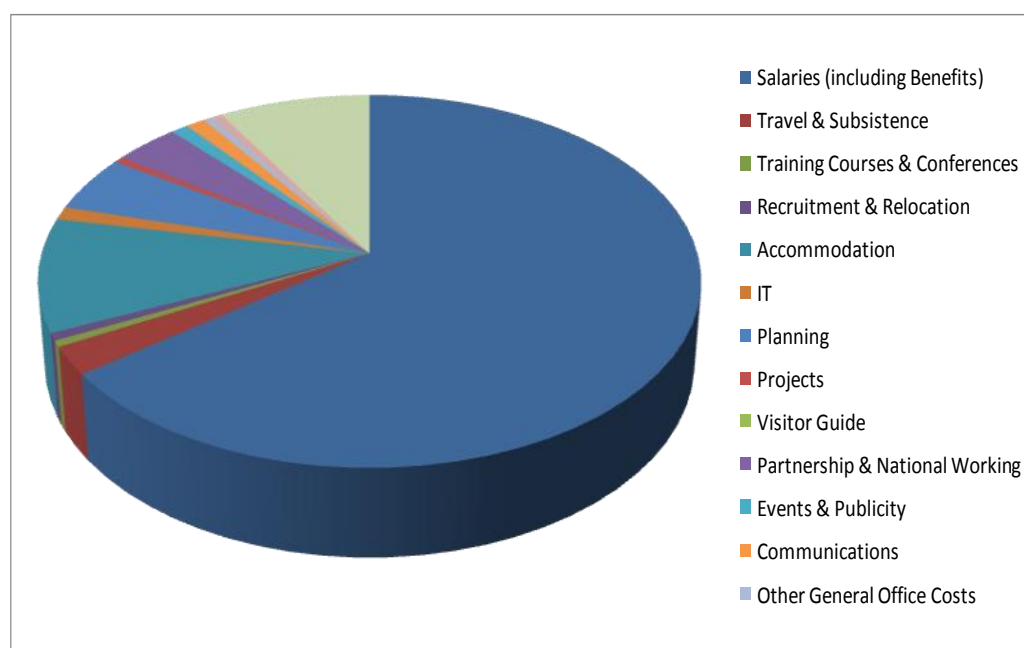
DEFRA	£	211,954.16
Sustainable Development Fund	£	20,330.84
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council	£	3,806.59
Test Valley Borough Council	£	3,806.59
Hampshire County Council	£	8,557.77
South Oxfordshire District Council	£	3,806.59
Vale of White Horse District Council	£	3,806.59
Oxfordshire District Council	£	7,054.23
West Berkshire Council	£	12,767.67
Swindon Borough Council	£	4,949.28
Wiltshire Council	£	15,774.75
Total	£	296,615.06



Financial Summary Contd.

Expenditure 2014-15

Salaries (including Benefits)	£ 191,895.08
Travel & Subsistence	£ 7,192.87
Training Courses & Conferences	£ 1,555.00
Recruitment & Relocation	£ 1,885.00
Accommodation	£ 29,180.28
IT	£ 3,359.28
Planning	£ 14,586.50
Projects	£ 1,561.19
Visitor Guide	£ -
Partnership & National Working	£ 10,845.50
Events & Publicity	£ 2,874.59
Communications	£ 3,257.00
Other General Office Costs	£ 1,488.55
Forum & CoP	£ 1,720.70
Sustainable Development Fund	£ 25,283.07
Total	£ 296,684.61



North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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www.visitnorthwessexdowns.org.uk



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