

North Wessex Downs

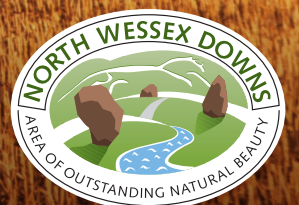
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Annual Review **2018 - 2019**



Landscapes
for life
.org.uk

NORTH WESSEX
DOWNS
One of the
AONB Family



Chair's welcome

Welcome to the Annual Review 2018-2019 for the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This report highlights our work over the year to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs – for the benefit of those living, working or visiting the area as well as for the benefit of the nation.

The year was one of major change for us. Having completed a structure review of the AONB team earlier in the year, we then undertook a recruitment programme which led to three new staff joining between October and February. Ann Shepley became our new Communications Officer in autumn 2018, and in February 2019 Ewa Prokop began her role as Senior Project Development & Fundraising Officer while Jacky Akam joined as our Project Officer.

Despite our small team being somewhat depleted by staff vacancies for much of the year we have managed to undertake the five-yearly review of our management plan, contribute to the delivery of a major arts project at Basildon Park, and progress our planned work programme. We have much to be proud of.

The AONB Partnership continues to face uncertainties resulting from the Brexit process and the immense challenges presented by the pressure for development within the AONB. Our ability to mitigate the pressures on the landscape and the environment relies on a much wider group, not only our funding partners, DEFRA and the nine local authorities, but also other members of the governing Council of Partners and Management Working Group as well numerous like-minded groups and individuals.

We are hugely grateful for your continued support – thank you!

Ted Hiscocks

Chairman, North
Wessex Downs AONB
Council of Partners

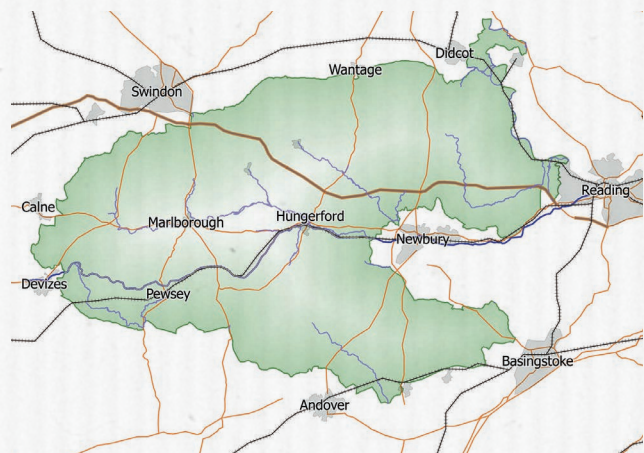


About the North Wessex Downs

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is the third largest of Britain's 46 AONBs and received its status as a protected landscape in 1972.

The AONB lies at the apex of the chalk band which stretches across England from Lincolnshire to Kent. It covers 668 square miles (1,730 square kms), taking in 173 parishes including the market towns of Hungerford and Marlborough, and reaching into four counties – Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.

The rolling chalk hills with their thin, well-drained soils, provide the ideal conditions for chalk grassland with chalk-loving flowers, insects and rare butterflies. They also give rise to internationally-rare chalk streams that support some of the UK's most threatened and fragile plants and animals as well as sustaining the beautiful valleys of this landscape.



Council of Partners

Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is the statutory responsibility of nine local authorities in Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.

They come together with community, farming, conservation, tourism and heritage representatives to make up a governing Council of Partners.

The governing Council of Partners meets three times a year and the smaller Management Working Group four times a year.

Life Cycles & Landscapes: Wayfaring

Basildon Park, July 2018

Wayfaring - a major new landscape art commission inspired by the chalk landscape and the ancient route of the Icknield Way which runs through the North Wessex Downs on its way from Dorset to Norfolk – lay at the heart of this project developed in partnership by Activate (an outdoor art production company), the National Association for AONBs and And Now: (artists), with a £367,000 grant from Arts Council England.

Presented as a journey of exploration, the artists created structures made from materials available from the landscape that audiences could move through, investigate and contribute to. They invited audiences to “step into the unknown”, to think about movement and migration: how we arrive at, understand, inhabit, and leave a space.

On the final evenings, fire, music and performance transformed the installations in rousing celebrations

of people coming together and of paths crossing in that one place for a single night.

As well as Basildon Park in the North Wessex Downs, Wayfaring took place in three other locations in 2018: the Dutch island of Terschelling as part of the Oerol Festival, and two other AONBs – the Norfolk Coast (Wells next the Sea) and Dorset (Maiden Castle).

The North Wessex Downs event ran for a week in July in partnership with the National Trust, the Newbury Corn Exchange and 101 Outdoor Arts Creation Space. We contributed in practical ways such as helping the artists find a suitable location, promoting the project and lending practical support in preparing the installation itself as well as getting directly involved in the educational activities.



- **3 educational factsheets produced** - on veteran trees, parkland and chalk landscapes - to inform and guide schools' and artists' engagement in the project
- **13 school visits** made to explain the project and enthuse pupils and staff
- **1 short film created** of the Icknield Way landscape in the North Wessex Downs
- **400 primary school children attended art workshops** at Basildon Park involving storytelling, art, nature, walks, landscape and exploration.

“Thanks to all for an extremely, thought provoking, interesting event.”



© And Now, Photo - Nick Read

Farmer Clusters

Following a successful information event for farmers in March 2017, we developed our Farmer Cluster Development Project which aims to establish at least three new farmer-led groups across the North Wessex Downs, extending the success already achieved by Marlborough Downs Space for Nature and the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group.

In March 2018, we engaged Tim Clarke, an experienced local farm manager, advisor and Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer, to lead this work for us and help us achieve one of our corporate

aims of forging closer links with the area's farming community. The Southern Streams Farmer Group was established on 20th November 2018 and has 20



Erosion and sediment under discussion at Wexcombe Farm

members who, between them, farm and manage 10,000 hectares where the catchments of the rivers Dun and the Shal drain towards the Kennet in Hungerford. The group's primary focus is on improving water quality in the Dun and Shal but members are also keen to work together on a range of other environmental goals.

In March 2019, the group held its first event, hosted by David Lemon of Manor Farm in Wilton and George Hosier of Wexcombe Farm, looking at sediment run-off and trapping in the upper catchment.

We have also been exploring the potential for another farmer-led group along the Ridgeway National Trail running west from Bury Down in Oxfordshire. This links to an Oxford University PhD research project on techniques for managing the trail itself for biodiversity.

A meeting in late 2018 showed considerable interest and development work is continuing.

Future of Landscape and Farming in Focus at North Wessex Downs Annual Forum

Brexit and its possible effects on farming, landscapes and wildlife was the theme for our Annual Forum which took place at Rushall Farm near Bradfield in Berkshire in October 2018.

Around 100 farmers, landowners, councillors, conservationists, residents and supporters attended the event, hosted by the John Simonds Trust with support from our sponsors Doves Farm, Larkmead Farm Vets, Openfield and SoilBioLab.

With so many unknowns for farmers and the wider rural community, the Forum was an opportunity to discuss what the future might mean for the landscape and wildlife, and just what the Government means

when it says it wants to shift public farming support to paying for "public money for public goods".

Key speakers included Andy Guy of LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming), the farming and environmental charity, who addressed some of the big questions facing sustainable land management, food production and profitable farming.

Also speaking were Phil Jarvis from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust; Merrick

Denton-Thompson OBE, immediate past president of the Landscape Institute; Peter Lemon, local landowner and farmer; and Chris Musgrave, local farmer and conservationist.

After a lunch of locally-sourced produce delegates took the opportunity to take part in a number of site visits looking at woodland management, catchment sensitive farming, organic shared-enterprise farming and local history.



The Great West Way

Over 40 miles of the Great West Way run through the stunning landscape of the North Wessex Downs!

The Great West Way is a new touring route, approximately 125 miles in length, which joins up many iconic destinations and attractions along a corridor west of London through to Bristol. This project, led by Visit Wiltshire, is one of a number made possible by the Government's £40m Discover England Fund and is focused on creating a world-class tourism experience, winning new business and market share for Britain and growing the visitor economy along and around the route. The North Wessex Downs AONB forms the backdrop to much of the Great West Way so this presents us with an excellent opportunity to meet our Management Plan objectives

to support our local tourism industry.

We had some input to the project in its development stage prior to 2019 and have now joined the scheme as an Ambassador. Benefits include the development of visitor itineraries for the North Wessex Downs, focussing on the great outdoors and history, which are promoted through the Great West Way website and their travel trade brochure. Furthermore, the North Wessex Downs is featured in the newly-published "Rough Guide" and regularly mentioned in Great West Way social media content (which has an ever-growing following of over 16K).

"The landscape looked beautiful with a fine dusting of snow, I bet in the summer with a carpet of pretty flowers on the downland and the butterflies fluttering around it is a sight to be seen too.
Great West Way Blogger"

In March 2019 we took part in an "influencers" visit organised by the Great West Way team in which we took bloggers on a walk to the Alton Barnes White Horse and the AONB was subsequently included in their social media posts and blogs.



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[Discover our Way](#)
[Plan Your Way](#)
[Stay](#)
[Explore](#)

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SUGGESTED ITINERARIES

A Guide To History Through The Ages Along The North Wessex Downs

Along the way you'll enter medieval castles, historic inns and a watermill turned theatre. Contrast prehistoric mysteries with marvels of the...

A Guide To The Great Outdoors On The North Wessex Downs

Immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of the North Wessex Downs' natural landscapes. As a vast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty...

City Culture Break

Discovering the bright lights beyond London... If you're an urban adventurer, you're probably wondering what other cities you should...

Evening Entertainment Guide

Night owls will have lots of larks along the Great West Way... The adventure doesn't end after a day out seeing the sites or...

Family Fun Guide

From Legoland to Longleat, there's lots kids will love. If you're bringing the whole gang, you'll want some ideas for things...

Festivals & Events Guide

Dates for your calendar, from music festivals to royal races... There are a huge range of fun festivals and events to attend along the Great...

Film And TV Locations Guide

From Poldark to Harry Potter, step into your favourite drama... With its sleepy villages and sensational countryside, the Great West Way...

Food & Drink Guide

From street food to fine dining feasts: enjoy the bounty of the Great West Way. Appreciation of local food and drink is at the heart of many...

Great West Way Discoveries With Hotels & More

Travelling along the Great West Way is a true adventure. Discover some of England's greatest hidden treasures such as Bath, Clifton Suspension...

DEFRA Awayday

In November we were again delighted to host an awayday for DEFRA staff from Bristol and London.

After their team meeting at Hungerford Town Hall, we hired the Ramsbury Flyer community minibus and took the group on a brief tour of the immediate area. This included a visit to the Salisbury Road site in Hungerford for a discussion about planning and housebuilding in AONBs, and a short walk on the downs at Walbury Hill / Combe Gibbet showcasing the restoration undertaken there by the Kirby Estate with support from Natural England and English Heritage.

Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) Grants

The SDF, which has been managed on our behalf by the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust since July 2017, provides funding for projects that support the aims of the AONB Management Plan and bring environmental, social and economic benefits to the North Wessex Downs AONB.

This year through the SDF we helped six projects with grants totalling £16,000 which in turn attracted nearly £147,000 of cash and in-kind match-funding contributions, including over 700 volunteer days.

This year's grants included:

- A community club house for Chilton Foliat located within the grounds of Chilton Foliat C of E Primary School with the potential to be used by multiple groups including a toddler group, older people and providing a home for the existing breakfast and after-school clubs
- Replacement of the crumbling 90+ year-old Avebury sports pavilion with a fit-for-purpose facility reflecting its dual use as a sports pavilion and community facility
- A heritage information board at Ogbourne St Andrew
- An on-line promotional video for the Pewsey Vale as well as walking and cycling leaflets to support the area's tourism industry
- Boxford History Project – a project to reveal the unique Boxford mosaic part of which was originally discovered in 2017 by volunteers excavating the Roman villa at Mud Hole.

“Both the film and leaflets have been extremely popular, encouraging visitors and residents alike to get outside and enjoy this fabulous countryside. Without this support, these projects just would not have happened – we are extremely lucky to have had this resource available and are extremely grateful to the North Wessex Downs for their support.”

Pewsey Vale
Tourism Partnership

Taking the Past into the Future

Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS)

We are actively developing our close links with the World Heritage Site by involvement with this initiative, not only through match funding but also by helping to steer the project as a member of the project board.

The long-term aim of 'Taking the Past Into the Future' is to develop and establish a sustainable, resilient operating model capable of securing adequate funding for co-ordination across the WHS landscape and the implementation of the WHS Management Plan.

Supported by the WHS Partnership, the WHS Co-ordination Unit has secured a £55,000 grant from Heritage Lottery Fund's Resilient Heritage programme to support this work.

The work is due to be completed in 2020.

Volunteers working on the Boxford Mosaic



North Wessex Downs LEADER Programme

The 2018-19 year was a very busy one for the North Wessex Downs LEADER Programme.

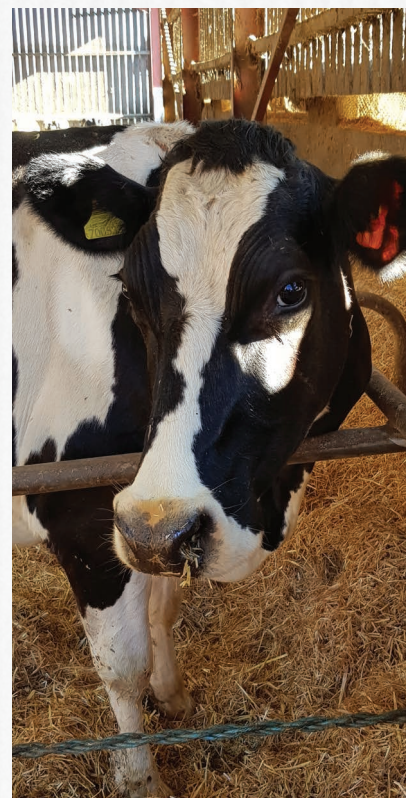
During the year, the Local Action Group (LAG) approved 24 projects with a total of £899k grant funding and since the start of the 2019-20 year the project budget has been fully committed.

Applications closed in early 2019 and grant contracts were issued before the deadline of the end of June. Having made some administrative savings and successfully bidding for a small amount of additional funding the programme could commit £1.621m to projects across the LAG area, which is broadly aligned with the AONB. Total investment (including match funding) will be £4.344m. Projects supported during the year in Wiltshire, West Berkshire, Swindon Borough, South Oxfordshire, Vale of the White Horse, Basingstoke and Deane and Test Valley have been

in tourism, dairy and arable farming, forestry, heritage, the racing and equine sector, leisure, health and creative businesses as well as in rural services.

They include:

- **Ridgeway Racing Ltd** – a new flat gallop at Upper Herdswick, Barbury
- **F Wells and Sons** – a new pod camping development at Littleworth, Pewsey
- **Uffington Parish Council** – restoration work to the Old School Room
- **David Harber Ltd**, Ashton Upthorpe – a workshop extension
- **Crown Forestry**, Ogbourne St Andrew – a mobile sawmill
- **April's Farm**, Upper Enham, Andover – a new animal therapy centre for disadvantaged people
- **Biddesden House Farm Partnership**, Ludgershall – slurry separation and rainwater management
- **Stowell Farms**, Pewsey – CowManager ear tag monitoring
- **C J Stokes at Coate**, Devizes – a Claydon Hybrid 3m drill
- **Redcrest Events Ltd**, Leckhampstead – a new pole tent and facilities development.



© Sharyn Ladds

The Designated Landscapes Review

As part of DEFRA's 25-Year Environment Plan there is a commitment to review the nation's protected landscapes and this review started last year, led by a panel chaired by Julian Glover.

We have fully-engaged with this process and, following a call for evidence, we submitted responses to the review on our own behalf, at a regional level as part of SEEPL (South East and East Protected Landscapes) and nationally as part of the National Association for AONBs (NAAONB) response.

The NAAONB is advocating that AONBs provide an excellent and ready framework in their management plans for prioritising and targeting 'public money for public goods' under the new land management procedures that will replace the Common Agricultural Policy upon leaving the EU.

In January 2019 we hosted a visit from Dame Fiona Reynolds, a member of the Designated Landscapes Review panel. Accompanied by key AONB partners she visited a major development site, a LEADER-funded farm enterprise and the Ridgeway National Trail. We highlighted four main issues and opportunities for the Review:

- the failure of national and local planning policy to adequately safeguard protected landscapes against the threat to their integrity from built development and the need for consistent AONB-wide planning
- the scope to improve the governance of AONB partnerships to accentuate the national status of the designation
- the potential of AONBs and their statutory Management Plans as a pre-existing framework for directing public investment in land management in their areas to secure public goods
- the benefits AONBs bring in convening collaborative partnerships to pursue multiple objectives at a landscape scale.



Dame Fiona Reynolds (R) at Bury Down, Oxfordshire with Sarah Wright, Ridgeway National Trail Project Officer



© David Hall

Management Plan Review

Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the local authorities in whose area an AONB lies to produce a single Management Plan for it.

The Plan must be reviewed every five years. The current North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan runs to 2019. With our partners we have been busy reviewing it and producing a new Management Plan for 2019-24. The process was guided by a small Management Plan Review Group made up of volunteers with a range of expertise and experience, advised by the AONB's Management Working Group and overseen by the governing Council of Partners. We are grateful to these volunteers and Natural England staff for their guidance and support.

We held a public consultation on the draft Plan from August to November 2018. Publicity for the consultation included emails to Parish Councils and those on our mailing list, information on our website and invitations to respond targeted at our key partners and Government agencies.

All responses received were recorded, carefully assessed against agreed criteria and commented on, leading to numerous amendments and improvements to the draft Plan. The resulting adoption draft Plan was approved by the Council of Partners in March 2019, at which point the process of adoption by individual local authority partners began.

The new Plan is due to be published in the autumn.



© David Hall

Corporate Strategy Review

In 2016 the AONB's Management Working Group initiated a Corporate Strategy Review to examine options for the future shape and role of the Partnership in its widest sense.

It identified resources, especially unrestricted funding, and farming as priorities for focussed work. It also identified a need for a brief written Corporate Strategy document: a framework summarising the AONB Partnership's vision for governance, resources and collaboration with the wider 'Community of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'.

The Corporate Strategy was developed and refined with input from members of the Corporate Strategy Review group and approved by the Council of Partners in July 2018. In summary it:

- Sets out the statutory basis, purpose and responsibilities of the AONB designation and Partnership.
- Describes the community of the North Wessex Downs AONB: not only the Partnership but "everyone – from farmers and businesses to local residents and visitors from afar – who has an interest in ensuring that this special landscape has a sustainable future".
- Lists the main pressures for change that could prove harmful to the landscape's natural beauty and tranquillity.
- Highlights the critical issue of resources: "to fulfil our potential we need to harness energy and resources well beyond the statutory obligations and public funds of our partners. Instead we need to become a 'mixed economy' of public, voluntary, commercial and community forces."
- Identifies priority areas for organisational development, including funding and resources; farming and land management; and collaboration with the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust.

The Corporate Strategy is intended to stand alongside the AONB Management Plan and the AONB Unit Work Programme. It will be subject to future review and revision as required.

Defending Natural Beauty



Great Western Electrification Project

Following extensive and intensive collaboration between North Wessex Downs AONB, Chilterns Conservation Board and the local Railway Action Group, over £3M has been secured to compensate for the damage done to the natural beauty of the landscape by rail electrification through the Goring Gap.

When Network Rail (NR) started installing gantries without consultation in 2015 as part of a major electrification project on the Great Western main line the North Wessex Downs AONB, the Chilterns Conservation Board and local residents in the Railway Action Group raised the alarm and reminded NR of its statutory duty to have regard for conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of our AONB landscapes. We called for the gantries to be replaced with a more sensitively designed set of structures which would be less visually intrusive in these nationally-protected landscapes.

NR in response convened an Overhead Line Electrification Design Review Panel which included representatives of both AONBs. The main purpose was to provide specialist technical advice to help with the review of

alternative design options for the gantries. This work came to an end in early 2019 when the latest report demonstrated that it would not be economically viable to replace or alter the gantries. This came as a huge disappointment to us as we continued to remind NR of their Duty of Regard. In March, we were however able to negotiate and secure a compensation fund of £3.75 million towards mitigation and landscape enhancement projects.

Funded by NR, the project will seek to restore and enhance natural beauty in this landscape and address the impact on local communities and the visitor economy. £750,000 is earmarked for line-side tree planting and vegetation where appropriate to help soften the impact of the steel gantries. A further £3 million will be spent on landscape enhancement projects within the wider corridor of the electrification works.

Even though replacement was not feasible for the Great Western electrification project here, the lessons learned have already resulted in better designs being installed through the Cotswolds AONB and encouraged NR to develop new guidelines to ensure that protected landscapes are considered carefully in future rail electrification projects.

Vale of White Horse Local Plan Part 2 – Harwell Campus

Having raised our concerns over the principle of major development in the AONB and the loss of land designated for employment at the hearings for this Plan, it came as a welcome surprise when in December 2018 the Planning Inspector requested that the 1000 dwelling allocation be removed as 'unsound'.

We attended hearings of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan (Part 2) examination in the summer of 2018 in response to the Council's proposals to allocated 1000 dwellings at Harwell Campus as an Innovation Village thus providing affordable housing for employees of the campus. However, 30% of these were to be sold on the open market to fund the development.

The AONB along with CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England) raised significant concerns and we reminded the Inspector of the previous decision to remove a 1400 home allocation at Harwell Campus in the Part 1 examination. Furthermore, we raised the inability of the Council and landowner to demonstrate a need for, and the retention of, affordable dwellings for employees only. We were very pleased when, in December 2018, the Planning Inspector requested that the 1000 dwelling allocation be removed as part of the main modifications report because he found the Council were unable to demonstrate a local need.

The Local Authority has accepted the modifications and the Inspector issued his final report in June 2019 concluding that the Plan is now 'Sound'.

South Oxfordshire Local Plan

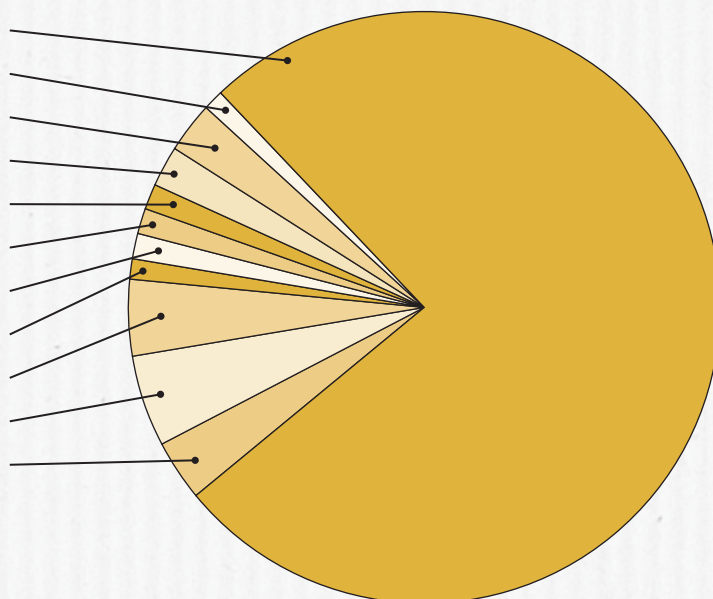
Final comments were submitted in February 2019 to the Council in response to their latest draft of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan. We liaised with the Chilterns AONB on shared concerns over housing numbers, division of allocations between AONB and non-AONB land and the lack of understanding of the importance of the AONBs. Ideas were also provided on ways to improve landscape policies ensuring that AONBs are conserved and enhanced in addition to promoting green infrastructure.

The Draft Local Plan has now been submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for examination which is likely to be towards the end of the year.

Income 2018-2019

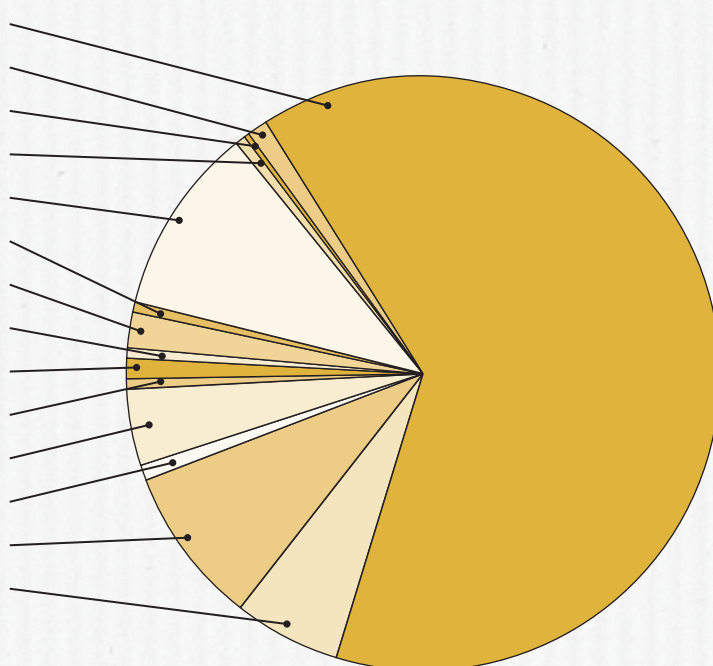
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|--|----------------|
| DEFRA | 244,479 |
| Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council..... | 3,939 |
| Hampshire County Council..... | 8,855 |
| Oxfordshire County Council..... | 7,299 |
| South Oxfordshire District Council | 3,939 |
| Swindon Borough Council..... | 5,121 |
| Test Valley Borough Council..... | 3,939 |
| Vale of White Horse District Council | 3,939 |
| West Berkshire District Council..... | 13,211 |
| Wiltshire Council | 16,322 |
| AONB unrestricted income..... | 9,937* |
| Total Income | 316,900 |

*£4,080.15 was transferred to reserves.



Expenditure 2018-2019

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Salaries | 202,296 |
| Travel & subsistence | 3,352 |
| Staff Development..... | 743 |
| Recruitment & relocation | 2,081 |
| Accommodation | 31,851 |
| IT..... | 2,262 |
| Partnership and national working..... | 5,769 |
| Events and publicity | 2,298 |
| Forum..... | 3,409 |
| Other general office costs | 1,523 |
| Landscape & Planning Support..... | 12,927 |
| Sustainable Development Fund..... | 3,300 |
| Projects | 26,828 |
| Management Plan Review | 18,260 |
| Total Expenditure..... | 316,899 |



Adding Value

Local Authority Contributions

During 2018 – 2019 **every £1 contributed by the Local Authorities** delivered **£8.56** in benefits to the AONB.

| LA Contribution | Benefit brought into AONB |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| £66,562 | £570,021 |



SDF Contributions

For every **£1 SDF awarded**, a further **£9.37** has been contributed by partner organisations towards projects in the AONB during 2018-2019.

| SDF grants | Community contribution |
|------------|------------------------|
| £15,655 | £146,736 |

Produced on behalf of the Council of Partners



info@northwessexdowns.org.uk



01488 685440



@northwessexAONB



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North Wessex Downs AONB

www.northwessexdowns.org.uk

North Wessex Downs AONB

Units 3-4 Denford Manor

Lower Denford

Hungerford

Berkshire

RG17 0UN