

North Wessex Downs Area of
Outstanding Natural Beauty

Annual Review 2020-2021

northwessexdowns.org.uk 

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Chair's welcome

Welcome to the Annual Review of the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership, which summarises our work during 2020-2021 to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of this designated landscape for the benefit of those living, working or visiting in and around this special place.

2020 presented its challenges to us just as it did for the rest of the country - and indeed the globe - through the pandemic. However, despite the difficulties the business of the Partnership continued and the Council of Partners, as well as the Management Working Group, continued to meet, albeit virtually. We realigned our priorities to take account of the new circumstances. Sadly, some projects and events had to be cancelled or postponed due to the legal restrictions and uncertainties the health crisis presented, but in other areas the work of the Partnership has flourished.

We welcomed Corinna Woodall to our team as Senior Funding and Project Development Officer. We were delighted by the success of our funding bid to the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund for our partnership nature restoration project, Sparkling Streams.

As lockdown restrictions eased we saw a huge increase in traffic to our website, demonstrating just how important this landscape is for public health and wellbeing.

The necessity to take our Annual Forum to a virtual platform resulted in greater access to the event and we saw the highest attendance we had ever achieved. In many ways this move to virtual meetings and events has continued to provide greater opportunity to connect and develop partnerships across our community and networks. However, as we move away from rigid restrictions we strive to meet our partners and colleagues in person when we can as we are cognisant of the very real benefits of the personal connection.

As always, the only way we can hope to tackle the continuing challenges to the beauty, heritage and biodiversity of the North Wessex Downs landscape is through collaboration. Development pressures are relentless, and the impacts of climate change and environmental damage are becoming ever more acute. We are grateful to our funding partners, volunteers and like-minded organisations for their continued support. Thank you.



Sarah Nichols

Chair, Council of Partners

North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership
December 2021



About the North Wessex Downs

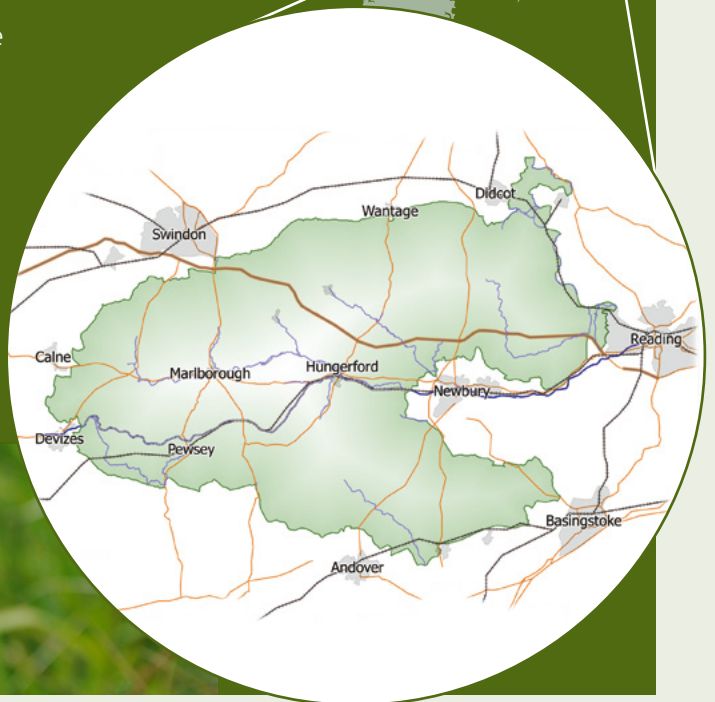
The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is the third largest of Britain's 46 AONBs and received its status as a protected landscape in 1972.

The AONB forms the cornerstone of the chalk band which stretches across England from Lincolnshire to Kent. **It covers 668 square miles (1,730 square km)**, 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.



© Pippa Palmer



About the 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, nature conservation, recreation, tourism and heritage representatives to make up the governing Council of Partners.

The Council of Partners meets three times a year and the smaller Management Working Group, which guides the work for the AONB staff unit, four times a year.



Welcome...

Our new Chair of the Council of Partners: **Sarah Nichols**.

At the very close of the financial year in 2021, we were delighted to announce the appointment of Sarah Nichols as the new Chair of the AONB's governing Council of Partners. Sarah succeeds Ted Hiscocks, who led the AONB Partnership with great dedication and commitment for the previous six years.



Sarah brings with her a wide breadth of business skills gained during her successful career in the defence and aerospace industry. Her primary roles were developing business strategy and building relationships with key stakeholders, from local MPs to senior figures in industry and government. She successfully secured many millions of funding over the years, managed press relations and hosted official events welcoming dignitaries from many countries. In 2011 she set up her own business consultancy advising local organisations on strategic business development, giving her the opportunity to forge relationships with local organisations before retiring in 2017.

In 2016 she was elected as a councillor for Fyfield and West Overton Parish with responsibilities for Lockeridge planning matters and representing her parish on the Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS) Steering Committee. Her memberships of the WHS group gave her an insight into the demands of managing such a landscape and heritage as the North Wessex Downs for the communities living and working in it. On becoming Chair of the parish council she successfully engaged with local MPs, local authority councillors and officers, drawing on the skills developed during her career in industry.

We all look forward to working with Sarah over the coming years as we chart a path through the post-Covid world and rise to the challenges presented by climate change, development pressures and threats to the natural world here in the North Wessex Downs.

During the summer of 2020 we welcomed **Corinna Woodall** to the AONB team.

Corinna succeeded Ewa Prokop in the role of Senior Project Development and Funding Officer on 1st July but, due to Covid restrictions, it wasn't until 5th October that we all met as a team when we spent a morning surveying the Shalbourne prior to our Sparkling Streams bid submission.

Corinna brings with her a wealth of experience having had an extensive career in the environment sector working for the precursor bodies to Natural England, the Heritage Lottery Fund where she developed the Landscape Partnership Schemes and more recently as Manager of the Tamar Valley AONB.

Corinna is no stranger to the North Wessex Downs either: she was also part of the team in 2010 as the Programme Manager for LEADER and she is very happy to be near family and friends in this AONB once more.



Barbury Castle
© greatwestway.co.uk



Making Connections

Annual Forum

Our Annual Forum 2020 was delayed to January 2021... and, inevitably, moved online.

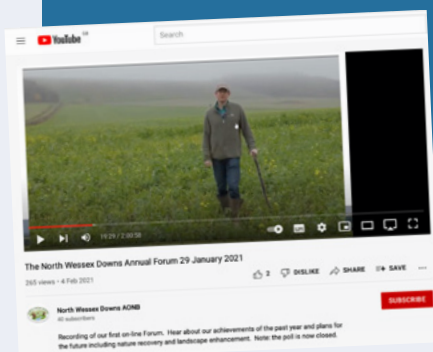
This presented us with lots of challenges and a steep learning curve as we grappled with how to best engage and inform in this new format as well as work out the technicalities of how to run such an event.

However, it also gave us lots of opportunities and meant that the Forum was accessible to those who are unable to travel or attend a physical location – and, as a result, we had a record number of participants with 153 people joining us online.

We packed a huge amount into two hours and showcased what we had been up to over the previous year as well as looking ahead to what 2021 would bring. Highlights included a film about our Sparkling Streams vision, a live demonstration of the interactive portal from the National Grid showing the landscape impact of removing the pylons from Roundway Down, an introduction to our joint Mend the Gap programme with the Chilterns Conservation Board and the Railway Action Group, and a closing address from Marion Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England.

We were very grateful to everybody who contributed to the event, including Ted Hiscocks, the then Chairman of the Council of Partners, and to all those who attended and gave us feedback on the event.

If you couldn't make it back in January the recording of the Annual Forum is still available on our [YouTube channel](#). ➡



Land of the White Horses – Impact of Covid 19

As reported in last year's Annual Review, we had submitted a Stage 1 bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) in February 2020 for a project based on the theme of The Land of the White Horses. However, following the first lockdown for Covid 19 in March we were disappointed – if unsurprising – to be informed by the NLHF that all recently submitted applications including ours would no longer be processed and would need to be re-submitted at a later date. The fund re-opened for applications in February 2021 but NLHF had reviewed the emphasis of the projects they would support in the medium term in order to help the heritage sector consolidate its recovery. Projects are now being prioritised that demonstrate a focus on inclusion by reaching a wider audience, build long-term environmental sustainability into their plans and that:

- boost the local economy
- provide job creation and encourage skills development
- support local health and wellbeing and
- encourage rebuilding community cohesion.

As any resubmitted applications need to reflect this change in emphasis, our Land of the White Horses bid must be reviewed and further developed if it is to be considered for support. Furthermore, as significant time has moved on since the Partnership and the proposals were put together, the ability of individuals and organisations to deliver their original commitments will need to be revisited and the feasibility of resubmitting assessed.



Making Connections

Farming News

Prior to April 2020 we had made substantial progress in expanding our engagement with the farming community having provided resources to support the establishment and development of a number of farmer groups, or 'clusters', to help deliver environment-friendly farming at a landscape scale. The impact of Covid 19 compromised the delivery of some of the agreed outcomes because much of the cluster work evolves through on-site farm visits and peer-to-peer learning, which came to an abrupt halt.

The AONB Partnership was then given some funds via Defra to assist with developing contact and relationships with the farming community in advance of the transition to the future Environmental Land Management Scheme. This was a challenge given the strange circumstances we found ourselves in.

After consultation with the farming community, we decided to develop a Spring webinar programme and invited a number of national and local experts to share their knowledge on a range of current topics. Our webinar programme included:

- **Behind the scenes of a farmer cluster** - Ian Waller
- **Assessing natural capital on your farm** - Paul Silcock
- **Getting to know your soils Part 1** - Professor Jenny Dungait
- **Future role of hedges** - Dr Rob Wolton
- **Digging deeper into your soils Part 2** - Professor Jenny Dungait

There were 227 registrations for the webinars from across the country, with good attendance and 183 viewings of the subsequent webinar recordings by 1/4/21. We were pleased to have the consistent engagement of farmers within the North Wessex Downs AONB, many of whom we had had no involvement with prior to this initiative.

We continued to support existing farmer clusters, some of which had been established with our involvement and others that had developed independently. The Southern Streams Farmers Group developed with support from the AONB initially and has now become a valued partner in the Sparkling Streams Green Recovery Challenge Fund project, putting forward sites for natural flood management and river restoration works.

We also facilitated expert help for one embryonic farmer cluster centred on a chalk stream catchment that is not reaching Water Framework Directive standards (the Lower Pang). This support helped the group coalesce, identify landscape-scale conservation priorities and agree on an action plan.

By the end of March 2021, there were seven known farm clusters within the AONB, all at different stages, from the long-established Making Space for Nature Group to clusters just getting started such as the Wessex Downlands Group.

The Agricultural Transition Announcement made in December 2020 included news of a new grant programme that would be run by the Protected Landscapes. The increased focus on working and collaborating with the farming community was valuable preparation ahead of the Farming in Protected Landscapes Grant Programme - which was delayed until the launch in July 2021.



View towards Ladle Hill & Watership Down
© Lord Carnarvon

Enhancing and Sustaining

£400K funding to help restore our chalk streams



In December 2020 we were absolutely thrilled to hear that our application to the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund, for our partnership project Sparkling Streams, had been successful. After coordinating a number of ideas from our partners in the Middle Kennet Catchment and writing a bid proposal at record speed to submit in the narrow application window provided, we were awarded just over £400,000 for the project which will run to March 2022.

Action for the River Kennet (ARK), the **Southern Streams Farmer Group** and the **Town and Manor of Hungerford** all had proposals and projects at various stages of preparation and development focussing on improving the water quality and chalk river habitats of the Shalbourne, the Dun and the River Kennet Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). We drew these together in a proposal for a project which aims to improve the condition of the River Kennet and its tributaries, increase wildlife and connect people with nature.

Chalk streams are globally rare and the River Kennet, running through the North Wessex Downs AONB, is one of England's premier chalk streams but is in far from good condition. For centuries the Kennet has been affected by human activities which have degraded the river, the water quality and the wildlife. This project will help to reverse some of these negative effects and you can read more about the nature-based solutions we are putting in place to help to do this on our **website**. ←

In the first few months of the year, along with our partners, we established the project and recruited Rupert Kelton as Sparkling Streams Project Manager and James Lawrence-King as our Project Officer. Rupert and James are both hosted by the ARK team on behalf of the project partners.

We will be able to report more details of the project after completion in March 2022.

This project is funded by the government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The fund is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency.

Green Recovery Challenge Fund



Rupert and James discuss the options with Nick from the Trout Trust



Enhancing and Sustaining



Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) Programme



Now in its fourth year, our partnership with the North Wessex Downs Landscape

Trust supported another clutch of local projects, each of which helped to deliver the objectives of the AONB Management Plan.

The Trust manages the SDF programme on behalf of the AONB partnership, with support from an independent SDF Panel of expert volunteers. Despite a very limited budget, this year we supported five projects across Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire with grants ranging from £600 to £2,500. Grants totalling £6,175 attracted matching contributions of £74,902 in cash and £6,285 in kind. The total value of SDF projects came to £87,362.76, or £14.15 of benefit for each £1 of grant funding. In addition, the projects contributed more than 125 volunteer days.

Avebury Community Sports & Social

Club: toilets and kitchen. Since lockdown the membership of this club has trebled. The project added much-needed accessible toilets, refurbished the existing ones, and installed a kitchen adjoining the function room, enhancing the breadth and variety of activities that can take place at the venue, as well as the age range of those who can use it.

Hampshire Bat Group: the North Hampshire Bat Box Project installed 26 bat-boxes within the Hampshire part of the AONB at five different sites in and around Crux Easton, Binley, Egbury and St Mary Bourne.

Letcombe Basset Parish Meeting: footpath repairs and improvement. Two sections of footpath had become extremely difficult to cross during winter. The project levelled and restored the path and included replanting to replace cleared trees and shrubs.

Crown & Anchor pub in Ham: walks booklet. This pub, which also offers accommodation, published a booklet of 25 circular walks from Ham devised by the Crown & Anchor team. The walks encourage visitors to explore the beautiful surrounding landscape and range from a gentle stroll of less than a mile to more challenging routes up to 20+ miles.

Pewsey Downs Farmer Group (PDFG): Bats in The Vale. One of the priorities of the PDFG, which involves 25 farmers managing over 10,000 ha on the chalk downland and vale north of Devizes and Pewsey, is to enhance the Pewsey Vale landscape for bats. A previous SDF grant enabled the Group to convert two pillboxes for bat hibernacula and farmers have since converted three additional pillboxes subsequently at their own expense. PDFG members are now keen to use the latest bat-recording technology to expand knowledge of bat species using the Vale, to identify key commuting routes and foraging areas for species such as Barbastelle and Lesser Horseshoe. This information will then be used to target land management changes and habitat enhancements by improving foraging and roosting opportunities. This year we have helped fund a passive acoustic static detector and a hand-held detector which will be used by supportive farmers and local communities, across the Pewsey Vale. Data collected will be processed on the BTO's Acoustic Pipeline and the data shared with the Wiltshire Bat Group, South Wiltshire Greater Horseshoe Project and the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre.

Enhancing and Sustaining

Taking the pylons underground on Roundway Hill

The landscape north and east of Devizes, which includes the Civil War site of the Battle of Roundway Hill, an SSSI and the Millennium White Horse on Roundway Hill, has been chosen for one of National Grid's four live projects which aim to transform the landscape in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks in England and Wales. We continued to work closely with National Grid and other local stakeholders to finalise plans to put 4.5km of overhead electricity line underground, removing up to 13 pylons.

Throughout the year, the National Grid project team have been working closely with local landowners to conduct preliminary investigations. Field surveys have collected numerous battlefield artefacts. Further assessment has included a series of ground investigation surveys comprising environmental and ecological surveys, arboricultural surveys, topographical / ground penetrating radar and others, including archaeological trial trenching.

The archaeological trial trenches found evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British settlement activity, with pitches, pits, and small linear features. There was also evidence of a neonate burial, and a pit dated to the Neolithic era. We look forward to further finds (the equivalent project in Dorset found over 40,000 artefacts) once the construction works enabling this project get underway, subject to planning consent.

Working with the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group, we are developing a package of nature conservation and restoration proposals that can be facilitated by this project. The information gathered throughout this year will feed into the planning application for the project, which is due to be submitted to Wiltshire Council early in 2022.

National Grid has produced an excellent 360° virtual tour of the site that you can use to explore and learn about what's planned – you can even switch the pylons on and off to see how it will look when finished.

Visit northwessexdowns.nationalgrid.co.uk ➡



Protecting


Dark Skies of the North Wessex Downs

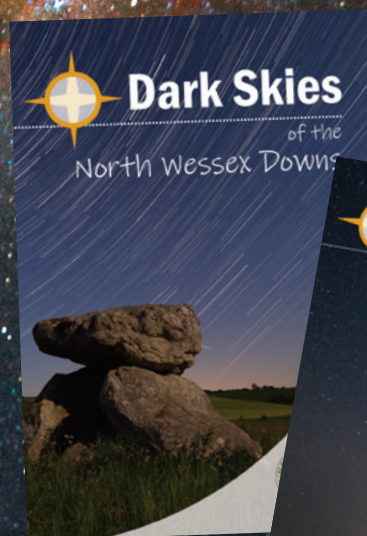
Our efforts to reduce light pollution, to protect and celebrate our dark skies continued throughout the year.

To complement our webpages, we produced an informative leaflet promoting the dark skies of the AONB and highlighting how important it is that they remain dark. The leaflet includes a map of good stargazing locations.

Continuing to work with our local authority representatives, lighting specialists and other protected landscapes, we developed a Guide to Good External Lighting for the AONB which was subsequently published online in June 2021. The guide is to help anyone planning, installing or operating lighting both within and near the AONB.

Plans with Marlborough Town Council for the Marlborough Dark Skies Festival October 2020 continued, and Marlborough College came on board as partners to host the impressive Museum of the Moon art piece by Luke Jerram, as well as other key events. When the festival had to be postponed to 2021, we supported Marlborough Town Council to deliver a mini 'Dark Skies at Home' festival in October 2020. This included videos published on YouTube and a wider audience received information about dark skies and the 2021 festival to come via social media.


The leaflet and lighting guide are available to download from our [dark skies webpage](#). 



15%
of the North
Wessex Downs skies
are as dark as any in
the country and an
additional **58%**
are 'significantly'
dark

Protecting

Environmental Colour Assessment

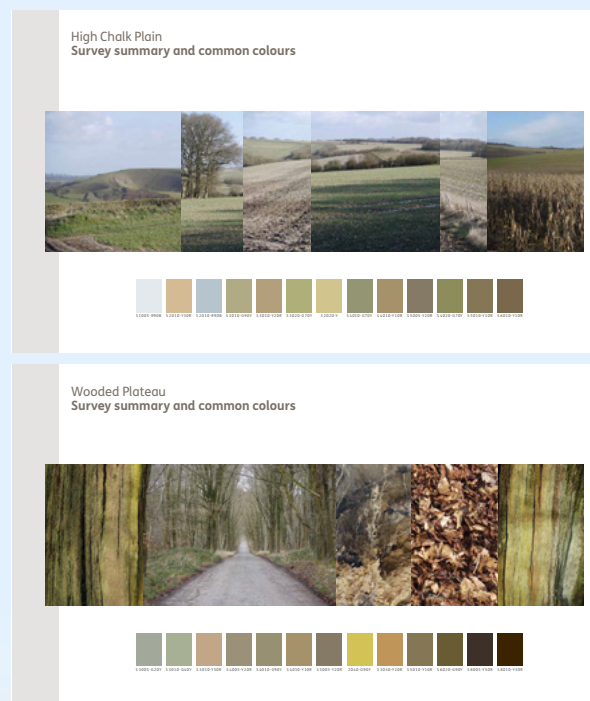
Towards the end of 2020 we published our Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development - or Colour Guide - which is available to everybody to download or view on our **website**. 

The colours of building materials such as brick, timber and render can have a major impact on the special landscapes of the AONB, either helping a development to blend into the background or making it stand out from it. We commissioned an Environmental Colour Assessment or 'Colour Study' which would document existing tones and hues in the different landscape character areas and provide advice on colour selection and material use to help integrate development into the protected landscape.

Jem Waygood of Waygood Colour carried out the Environmental Colour Assessment over the course of 2020. He visited all landscape types in person to identify colours as perceived by the human eye and produced two documents: **the Survey** and **the Guidance**. The Survey illustrates the collection of colours from each Landscape Character Type (including existing buildings) using the Natural Colour System (NCS); the Guidance includes development palettes of colour appropriate to a range of building materials and finishes which will help integrate new development into the local landscape type, and identifies commercial sources of the specified building materials. The Guidance also includes a series of colourways - examples of how colours selected from the developed palette can be combined to harmonious and interesting effect.



The aim of the Colour Guide is to minimise potential negative impacts of development on the character of the AONB by providing information and support to those involved in any aspect of the planning and development process.



Ramsbury from Spring Hill
© RowanWhimster





Development News

The pressures on the landscape continued throughout 2020 and 2021. The start of the pandemic saw applications drop off as the country settled into new ways of working, however a sharp increase during the summer of 2020 saw application numbers return to near normal.

During 2020/21 we received nearly 950 planning application consultations. We responded to over 350 of these and we were able to respond to eight of the nine planning policy consultation requests we received. Furthermore, we commented on 13 of the 18 pre-application consultations we received. We assisted with five Neighbourhood Plans (including attending pre-submission meetings and advising) and commented on the corresponding Regulation 16 consultations. In addition, we received eight appeal notifications and made five representations to the Planning Inspectorate in response.

Our Achievements

- An application for new floodlighting of hockey pitches at Cranford House School in Moulsoford was refused by South Oxfordshire District Council on grounds of impact on the dark sky environment of the AONB. The local planning authority (LPA) made a strong case to the Planning Inspectorate and the appeal was dismissed.
- Collaborative working with Natural England and West Berkshire Council which resulted in a landscape-led Local Plan review and the formulation of a strong AONB policy contained within it. We have referenced this as a good example for other LPAs to follow. Furthermore, it was the first of our LPAs to consider dark skies within an AONB policy.
- A longstanding application within the setting of the AONB for a science park was recommended for refusal and was dismissed by the planning committee on multiple grounds including harm to the setting of the AONB.
- We were invited to a working group with Harwell campus to discuss existing and future changes, which gave us the opportunity to discuss landscape character and the importance of using native plant and tree species within the campus and the potential for working together on future schemes.
- The North Wessex Downs and Chilterns AONBs worked together to oppose a 280-berth marina development on the fringes of Cholsey which would have seen 80% proposed as permanent moorings. Oxford County Council Councillors agreed with the officer recommendation and it was refused.
- Wiltshire Council refused new floodlights at St Johns School in Marlborough on AONB grounds and harm to protected species. This was a particularly sensitive application given the elevated position of the school and its location on the edge of the settlement bordering open countryside.



Roundway Down
© Andrew Perrott



Protecting

Disappointments

- An application for a new farm shop/café/flowerist/ gift shop in the hamlet of East End was permitted at Planning Committee. The AONB and residents strongly opposed the major development which will significantly alter the tranquil character of this hamlet by the addition of a commercial enterprise, generating a significant increase in traffic on narrow country lanes. The committee did not consider this major development and considered the well-designed building would be an enhancement on the 1960s farmhouse and of benefit to the local economy, which outweighed any harm to the AONB.
- West Berkshire Council approved an industrial development at Walker Logistics on the edge of Lambourn Woodlands outside the defined protected employment land allocation. This will see the loss of a greenfield site and the introduction of large industrial warehouse style building at the southern end of the former Membury airfield. The application was met with a significant amount of local opposition due to concerns of landscape impact on the AONB and increased haulage traffic on the rural lane that connects the site.

- A number of Local Plan reviews have fallen short on landscape policies and propose housing allocations within the AONB without first considering a sensitivity study. We have issued advice and encouraged the local authorities to include a lighting policy and consider the AONB within design and highway policies.

At National Level

- The Government produced the Planning for the Future white paper. This was met by opposition from the AONB family due to the potential impact caused by changes in the calculation of housing need which would have seen a significant increase in development within the south of the country and put further pressure on our nationally protected landscapes. We contributed to the response from the National Association for AONBs and also submitted our own response.



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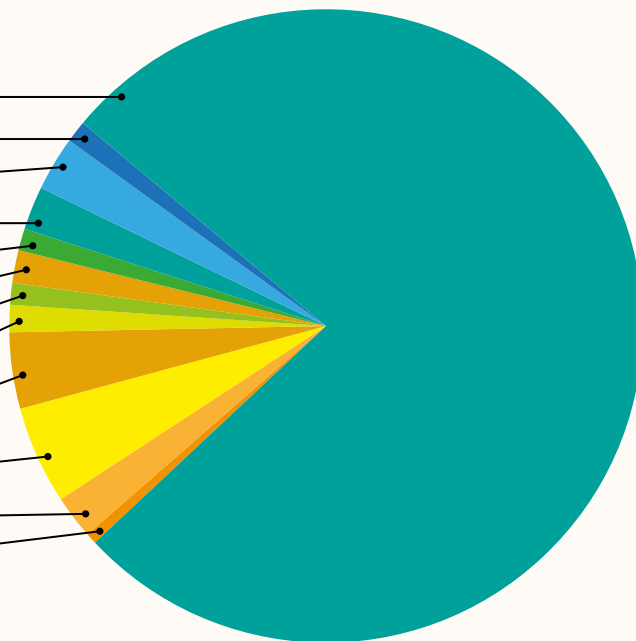
Financial Report

Income 2020-2021

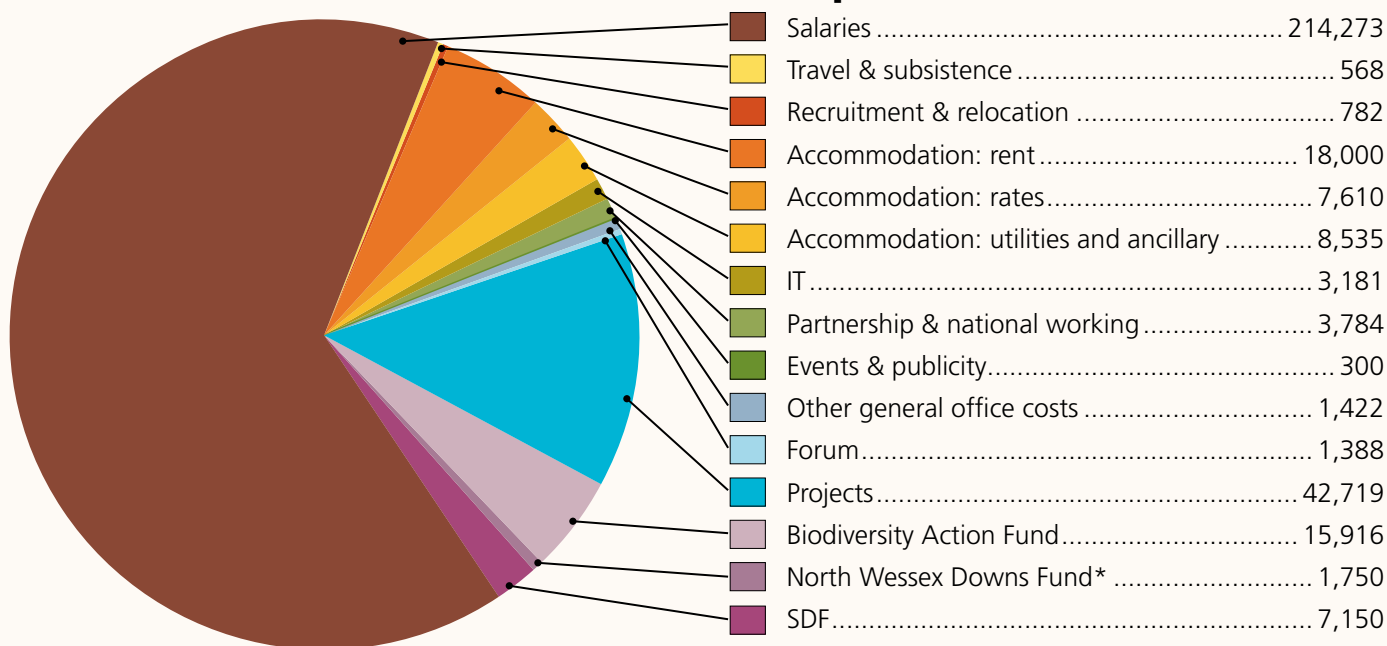
DEFRA	252,166
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council	3,939
Hampshire County Council	8,855
Oxfordshire County Council	7,299
South Oxfordshire District Council.....	3,939
Swindon Borough Council	5,121
Test Valley Borough Council	3,939
Vale of White Horse District Council.....	3,939
West Berkshire District Council.....	13,211
Wiltshire Council.....	16,322
AONB core contribution.....	6,848
North Wessex Downs Fund*	1,750

Total Income327,328

**A direct payment from the North Wessex Downs Fund at Wiltshire Community Foundation to the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust*



Expenditure 2020-2021



Total Expenditure327,328

**A direct payment from the North Wessex Downs Fund at Wiltshire Community Foundation to the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust*

Adding Value

During 2020 – 2021 every £1 contributed by the Local Authorities delivered £6.41 in benefits to the AONB.

LA Contribution	Benefit brought into AONB
£66,562	£426,881

For every £1 SDF awarded a further £14.15 has been contributed by partner organisations towards projects in the AONB during 2020-2021.

SDF grants	Community contribution
£6,175	£87,363



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@northwessexAONB



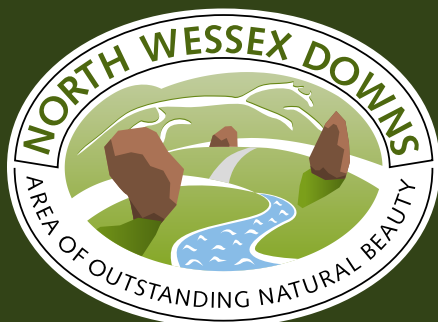
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North Wessex Downs AONB

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