

North Wessex Downs Area of
Outstanding Natural Beauty

Annual Review 2022-2023



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↑ Segsbury Castle ©Ann Shepley

CHAIR'S WELCOME

Welcome to the Annual Review of the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership for the financial year 2022-2023.

Last year – 2022 - marked the fiftieth anniversary of the North Wessex Downs' designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This important milestone has been a good time to take stock of where the AONB Partnership is as an organisation and how much has been achieved. It has also presented an ideal opportunity to look to the future and consider our resilience in the face of the economic, political and environmental challenges ahead. In light of this, I have initiated work to consider how our organisation performs against the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Green List certification for protected areas and what steps are needed to achieve it. This is the first global standard of best practice for area-based conservation and, with the support of the Council of Partners, the AONB team and other partners, we have developed a set of business objectives to focus and guide the work of the Partnership over the next five years. See pages 4-5 for more about this.

Over the course of those five decades the pressure on this stunning and precious landscape, and the need to actively protect it, has only increased; furthermore, those fifty years have been witness to a dramatic loss of species here, as it has globally. During the last 12 months we have been working hard to put in place systems and networks to rise to the challenge of nature recovery. Through our work with farmers and other partners we have also facilitated projects that are starting to address this worrying biodiversity loss.

I am delighted that the team has been able to take advantage of extra funding opportunities when they have presented themselves at short notice. These have included DEFRA's substantial Access for All grant programme. Our second North Wessex Downs Walking Festival, celebrating our 50th Anniversary, took place in June 2022; the Festival was highly successful with more walkers and more events than previously. We have continued to work collaboratively across the area to facilitate activities and projects which support the aims of our Management Plan.

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



Sarah Nichols,
Chair of the Council of Partners





↑ Wildflowers at Segsbury Castle ©Ann Shepley

IUCN GREEN LIST PILOT

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. The IUCN Green List is described as a global campaign for successful nature conservation. At its heart is the Green List Sustainability Standard that provides a global benchmark for how to meet the environmental challenges of the 21st century.

A protected and conserved area that gains Green List status demonstrates:

- **Respect:** for the local community through fair and meaningful engagement of rights-holders and stakeholders.
- **Design:** planning that identifies the needs to secure the important values of the area.
- **Effective management:** monitoring of the status of these important values.
- **Successful conservation results:** for nature and for people.
- **Clear contribution:** to climate change responses, health and well-being and other challenges.

In early 2022, the AONB Partnership began to explore the possibility of Green List accreditation for the North Wessex Downs. AONB staff worked with the Chair and representatives of the Partnership to assess to what extent we already met the standard. From this assessment we developed an action plan to address areas identified for improvement and began to put it into practice. This process has been ably facilitated by Howard Davies, independent environmental advisor, member of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas and former CEO of the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The IUCN has now formally recognised the North Wessex Downs AONB as a pilot candidate for Green List status and we look forward to working with them to achieve that ambition.



PARTNERSHIP GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Green List process we are pursuing has proved helpful in clarifying management, resource and operational challenges.

It has also shone a light on AONB governance arrangements - a subject largely avoided by the Glover Landscapes Review (2019) and official responses to it. The [AONB Management Plan](#) belongs to the local authorities whose areas it covers. It is a document for the whole landscape and everyone whose activities affect it; the AONB Partnership cannot deliver it all on its own. There is therefore a need to focus on a smaller range of priority goals and objectives for the Partnership and the Team working on its behalf. The Council of Partners has agreed a set of Goals and Strategic Objectives to focus the efforts of the AONB Partnership. They are set out below. These form the centrepiece of the new Partnership Plan, which replaces the Corporate Strategy agreed in 2017. They also provide the focus for the Partnership's new Business Plan.

Goal 1. Support the rural economy

Partnership strategic objective 1.1

Develop our position as a trusted convenor supporting decision-making and collaboration among farmers and land managers.

Partnership strategic objective 1.2

Support projects that underpin the viability of agricultural/forestry businesses and themselves further the purpose of AONB designation.

Goal 2. Deliver for nature & climate

Partnership strategic objective 2.1

Identify priorities and opportunities for nature recovery and climate change mitigation/adaptation across the AONB, and support their delivery.

Goal 3. Improve communications and advocacy

Partnership strategic objective 3.1

Increase the level of understanding of the AONB designation, and the value of the Council of Partners and AONB team, amongst Local Authority councillors and other key stakeholders.

Goal 4. Provide opportunities to improve health & wellbeing

Partnership strategic objective 4.1

Improve access to the AONB, optimising its impact on health and wellbeing and the local economy.

Goal 5. Improve spatial planning

Partnership strategic objective 5.1

Develop a shared understanding of landscape character, condition and opportunities across the AONB and facilitate decision-making.

Goal 6. Align AONB policy across relevant authorities

Partnership strategic objective 6.1

Secure strong commitment to, and the consistent application of, policy to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB across all Local Authority partners and other relevant bodies.



MEND THE GAP

Mend the Gap is a collaborative programme between the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership, the Chilterns Conservation Board and the Railway Action Group.

Funded by Network Rail, it aims to heal and soften the scars left by the electrification of the Great Western main line between Reading and Didcot. The route passes along the Thames Valley through the famous Goring Gap; this corridor is a shared landscape between the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns and landscape harm (or enhancement) on one side can have as much, and sometimes more, impact on natural beauty on the other.

Following specialist tree planting guidance commissioned last year from Jonathan Spencer, mitigation planting was undertaken in the South Stoke area of the Chilterns AONB comprising nearly 1,000 metres of hedgerow. Working with landowners, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South-East (FWAG) facilitated the work with local contractors. In 2023- 24 we hope to continue this work with FWAG in the Goring to Purley area. The mitigation work is proving to be an important vehicle through which we build relationships with landowners.

Planting at South Stoke ↓



MEND the GAP



In February this year **Ruth Staples-Rolfe** joined us as the new Programme Manager. Ruth, who has a background in education and project management, is keen to make contact with landowners in the Mend the Gap area. Her focus is designing the programme objectives which will primarily aim to enhance both the wetland and chalk habitats in the most eastern end of the North Wessex Downs AONB.



NATURE RECOVERY

THE COLCHESTER DECLARATION

The Government's Environmental Improvement Plan places great emphasis on nature recovery. The Glover Review of designated landscapes supported a central role for AONBs and National Parks in driving the necessary action. A Government targets and outcomes framework to guide nature recovery in protected landscapes is expected soon.

In the Colchester Declaration of 2019, AONBs committed to producing Nature Recovery Plans for our areas. Work on ours was interrupted by the pandemic and our successful bid to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund in 2020. With the completion of our Sparkling Streams project, this year work has resumed in earnest. We have convened a nature recovery working group and the year saw detailed consultation with conservation sector partners on the emerging drafts of the North Wessex Downs Nature Recovery Plan. This is intended to set a strategic framework of ambition for nature in the North Wessex Downs which we hope the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategies covering the AONB will recognise, reflect and help deliver. In parallel, we have continued to engage with preliminary LNRS processes with our partners in Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.

THE BIG CHALK

Our conservation collaboration across the calcareous landscape of southern England continued to grow and develop during the year.

The Big Chalk partnership has benefitted from Natural England funding to develop its ambitions and reach a much wider range of supporters than just the AONBs and National Parks. Our geographical position makes the North Wessex Downs critical to achieving the Big Chalk vision. Momentum is building to restore chalk landscapes and broken ecosystems at a scale that has not been seen before. We have interesting times ahead.



LOCAL NATURE PARTNERSHIPS

We supported the establishment of a new Local Nature Partnership (LNP) for Oxfordshire, working with partners in the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Advisory Group, Wild Oxfordshire, the Oxfordshire Environment Board and the Chilterns and Cotswolds Conservation Boards.

Similarly, we have been involved in reinstating the LNP for Berkshire. The Berks, Bucks and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has led the process and supported a working group and stakeholder engagement, resulting in a new LNP Board being established that includes representation from the North Wessex Downs AONB.

WEST BERKSHIRE NATURAL SOLUTIONS DELIVERY PARTNERSHIP

This year we stepped up our engagement in this partnership that seeks to establish how to best manage the use of nature to ensure a balance between:

- climate change resilience
- carbon capture
- biodiversity
- food production
- water quality
- soil quality

West Berkshire Council awarded the tender to develop a proof of concept, create a spatial strategy and deliver a couple of projects to BioCap Ltd and Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. The North Wessex Downs AONB has contributed knowledge and information and has been engaged with this developing and evolving process.

NATURE RECOVERY PROJECTS

The focus on strategy has not prevented us from delivering action for nature recovery across the AONB. The Farming in Protected Landscapes programme has provided an unprecedented boost to realising our land management and biodiversity ambitions as set out in the current AONB Management Plan 2019-24. We have also enabled other projects through direct AONB funding.



WIXEN BUSH

Last year we funded a habitat survey of grassland within the corridor of the Ridgeway National Trail along its entire length within the North Wessex Downs. This was carried out by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre for the Ridgeway Partnership. One of the key sites identified for action was at Wixen Bush, near Wantage. This year we have supported the Ridgeway Partnership and Natural England on a project that uses Wixen Bush Local Wildlife Site as a demonstration site for conservation management of the Ridgeway's verges and equips volunteers to carry out conservation management and monitoring. Elements we have funded include a management plan, scything equipment, volunteer training, survey and monitoring work, a public bioblitz day, a bench, signage and interpretation. We look forward to continuing to work with the Ridgeway Partnership, local farmers and others to improve management of the Ridgeway grassland corridor for nature.





Walkers on Calstone Down ©Henry Oliver ↑

CALSTONE DOWN

Some of the most exciting, pioneering projects are not eligible for other sources of funding. When this happens, the AONB Partnership has a crucial role in exploring innovative ideas and enabling them to take root.

One such case is a proposal to use fenceless grazing technology to allow targeted grazing of SSSI chalk grassland on tenanted farmland owned by the National Trust at Calstone Down in Wiltshire. One of the most beautiful and secluded stretches of downland in the entire AONB, Calstone Down boasts a large area of unimproved chalk grassland close to the Avebury World Heritage Site and the Cherhill white horse. Normal grazing practices within permanent fencing allow preferential grazing by animals, which in turn can allow less palatable species to begin to dominate the sward at the expense of less competitive wild plants. The Nofence system uses collars which discourage cattle from straying beyond limits that can be set and adjusted using a simple app – a virtual fence. Grazing can therefore be focussed precisely on areas where it is most needed to support conservation of rare species. Eventually, the system should enable the removal of fencing from much of the site, which is also Access Land. Alerted to this proposal by the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group, we were able to provide the necessary funding to enable the tenant farmer to realise his ambition. The project was also supported with a grant from the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust. There is growing interest in fenceless grazing as a response to a range of land management challenges in the North Wessex Downs and we hope this project will form a valuable demonstration site for others to learn about it.

ACCESS FOR ALL

We delivered the first year of DEFRA's new Access for All programme. Access for All funding is for physical and digital infrastructure improvements to make protected landscapes more accessible for people of all ages and abilities and from all socio-economic backgrounds, to make them what the Glover Review called "places for everyone."



Bedwyn Footpaths Group ↑

The AONB Partnership distributed £189,391 in capital grants to deliver 10 projects across all four counties of the North Wessex Downs. Our partner organisations have used the grants to:

- deliver physical improvements to infrastructure to improve accessibility to sites and routes;
- allow more people to understand the AONB and improve their experience of it; and
- make that experience more accessible to all through signage and interpretation including audio, virtual and online access.

PROJECTS SUPPORTED:

Bedwyn Footpaths Group: footpath accessibility improvements.

Bucklebury Estate: Bucklebury Common access enhancements.

Earth Trust: infrastructure for visitors to green spaces.

Happiness Horsebox CIC: the Special Access Service, for people with disabilities who have a love of horses or the wider countryside to have dignity in being able to access the landscape.

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust: boardwalk at Inkpen Common to provide safe access for all to a heathland nature reserve.

Whitchurch Conservation Group: signage to improve visitor access from the railway station in Whitchurch, gateway to the North Wessex Downs.

Wiltshire Council:

- improved surfacing on the Ridgeway National Trail.
- replacement gates and minor surfacing in gateways to bring them up to latest standards on Ridgeway National Trail at Smeathe's Ridge and Barbury Castle.
- replacement of stiles with pedestrian and kissing gates along the White Horse Way to improve accessibility to the landscape for walkers.

Wiltshire Wildlife Trust: enhancing Access to Nature through soundscapes, virtual tours, audio interpretation and interactive species recording on wildlife reserves in the North Wessex Downs.



Bucklebury Common ↑

Access improvements delivered this year through the fund include:

- 11.2 km of new or improved accessible path
- 5 new publicly available toilets, one of which has disabled access
- 40 new gates
- 3,300 visits per year facilitated or enabled by new equipment
- 305 volunteer days enabled per year
- At least four accessible or easy access routes on which wayfinding has been created or improved.

A further round of Access for All funding is expected in 2024-25.

THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FUND

Due to a review of the application process it has been another quiet year for the SDF programme with one project funded. However, the residual grant monies have been rolled over to the next financial year. There are applications currently in the pipeline and we hope to see an increase in activity in the coming year.



↓ Ramsbury from Spring Hill ©Rowan Whimster

We are very grateful to volunteers at the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust for managing the SDF on our behalf and also to the volunteers on the SDF panel for their work.



SOLAR POWER FOR WILD CAMPING, DARK LANE

The owners of Wild Camping Dark Lane, winners of a Green Tourism Bronze Award, provide sustainable, low impact, low-cost camping to encourage visitors to keep their impact on the environment to a minimum. Their vision is to keep the land wild - no trimmed hedges, delineated pitches and bright lights - just the freedom to pitch a tent where you choose.

Water comes from a borehole and, with support from the Sustainable Development Fund, it is treated by a solar-powered off-grid system to ensure it is safe to drink.

Grant awarded: £959.76 representing 41% of total project value.





↑ ©Ann Shepley

YEAR TWO IN THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

Over the last year we have continued to run the hugely successful DEFRA-funded programme, Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL). The programme provides support to farmers and land managers and, uniquely, is being managed locally by AONBs and National Parks. It provides grants under four themes of Nature, Climate, People and Place for activities which help deliver the objectives of the AONB Management Plan and support the purpose of designation, i.e. to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

FiPL was originally a three-year programme to run from 2021 to 2024. As a result of the national success of the first year, DEFRA announced the extension of the Programme for an additional year, to March 2025. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership has been given an uplift for the third year and a generous budget of over £1.3M for the final year. Crucially this includes funding for administration, advice and guidance. An underspend on the FiPL programme nationally enabled us to use additional funding to support some extra projects at the end of the financial year. The Programme has been very well regarded at a national level and we are pleased to be part of that success.



PROJECTS AND GRANTS

For 2022-2023 we awarded grants to 53 projects; grant amounts ranged from under £3,000 to over £80,000.

The broad remit of the programme has resulted in a wide variety of projects receiving grants under our four themes. Under Nature and Climate we have supported ponds, hedges and wetland creation and biodiversity projects such as meadow restoration and juniper regeneration. Under our Access theme we have supported projects such as the Happiness Horse Box (which enables people with disabilities to meet horses safely), signage, easy access gates and a lambing festival, among others. Within the Place theme we have supported the restoration of a medieval barn and provided support for local food businesses.

PROJECT ASSESSMENT

The 12-strong Local Assessment Panel continues to play an important role, making decisions on applications over £10,000. The Panel provides expert advice and strategic guidance to the programme staff, supporting project identification and development. Panel members include farmers and experts in wildlife, agriculture and the historic environment.

In April 2023 the Panel defined their priorities and objectives for the remaining two years of the programme, ensuring they aligned with the AONB Management Plan. These include creation and restoration of habitats to help deliver on the objectives of the North Wessex Downs Nature Recovery Plan, and community connection with food systems and countryside. The Panel want to see applications which have multiple benefits and conserve, enhance and restore the landscape of the AONB. They want to fund ambitious, innovative and regenerative projects and, in particular, they are interested in proposals that bring farmers together and have impacts on a landscape scale.

The impacts of the first year of the programme include:

FOR CLIMATE

- 14 projects to reduce flood risk, including substantial wetland creation, improved river conditions, and pond creation.
- One beaver release project, to improve a water-course.
- River and canal improvement projects in conjunction with Action for the River Kennet, including creation of a fish pass, improved canal overspill and wetland creation.
- Carbon audits to enable farms to monitor the impact of their farming methods on soil carbon.

FOR NATURE

- Over 1,100 metres of new hedgerow.
- Five ponds restored or created, providing new habitats and water sources for wildlife.
- 1300 ha of habitat improved for biodiversity.
- One heathland management plan to restore rare heathland habitat in the AONB. Large juniper regeneration projects on two sites.

FOR PEOPLE

- Five new permissive paths created on a wildlife friendly farm, with interpretation signage.
- Four projects delivering facilities for educational visits.
- Four volunteer projects, engaging the public with the area and nature.
- Seven farmer groups supported to engage and inform farmers and help them understand their land better with surveys and audits, and promote collaboration between farms.
- Two workshops for horse owners on paddock management and horse health.
- One hedge-laying course for young farmers

FOR PLACE

- One historic barn restoration project.
- One cheese-making facility on a sheep farm.
- Supporting nature-friendly farms to be more sustainable whilst working for nature. Improvement to the Wayfarer's Walk near Watership Down, by removing an unsightly line of conifers and providing a toilet for walkers



CASE STUDY:

Pond Creation and wildlife enhancement at Westhill Farm, Collingbourne Ducis.

Dan and Catherine Mercer have transformed an old dried-up pond and rough area of grassland into a wonderful haven for wildlife. FiPL funding provided support for the creation of a large wildlife pond, native hedging and a new wildflower meadow – enhancing biodiversity on the farm. The area has already attracted lapwings – a red-listed species. The couple have also installed an information sign and picnic benches and have plans to welcome the local school to this 'mini nature reserve'.



After construction – waiting for Spring!



CASE STUDY:

Processing and Education Facilities: Shellswood Sheep Dairy, Aldbourne, Wiltshire

The Browns have been farming at Manor Farm in Aldbourne for generations and there was a need to diversify and increase income. Two sons, who have taken over farming responsibility from their parents, are leading the evolution of their farming systems towards more regenerative practices and traditional products. This includes grazing sheep in a way which supports biodiversity and soil health and reduces inputs such as fertilizers, and milking them to high welfare standards. We have supported their venture through FIPL by funding the installation of cheese-making facilities for local artisan cheese makers and an education room over-looking the dairy so school groups and others can learn about their farming practices.

Further details about this project are on our website.



*"Thank you for putting on a horse-based event.
So often we are seen negatively (or are even
invisible) but there are a lot of us."*

CASE STUDY:

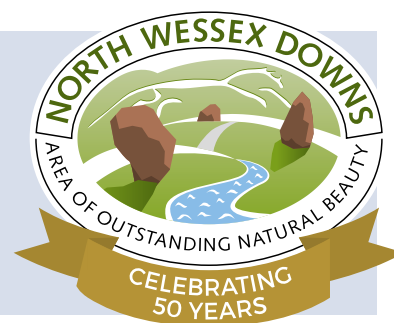
Healthy Horse, Healthy Paddocks: Workshops in the AONB

In conjunction with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and Catchment Sensitive Farming, we ran two workshops for horse owners, looking at ways to improve biodiversity and soil health in paddocks. Invited speakers talked about grazing regimes which could help increase species diversity and improve soils whilst at the same time benefiting horse health. Horse ownership is high in the AONB and a significant amount of land is given over to paddocks and livery yards. The talks were well attended and appreciated by the equine community. A further workshop followed in May 2023.



THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AONB

2022 was the year we celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the designation of the North Wessex Downs as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We marked the occasion through a number of activities.

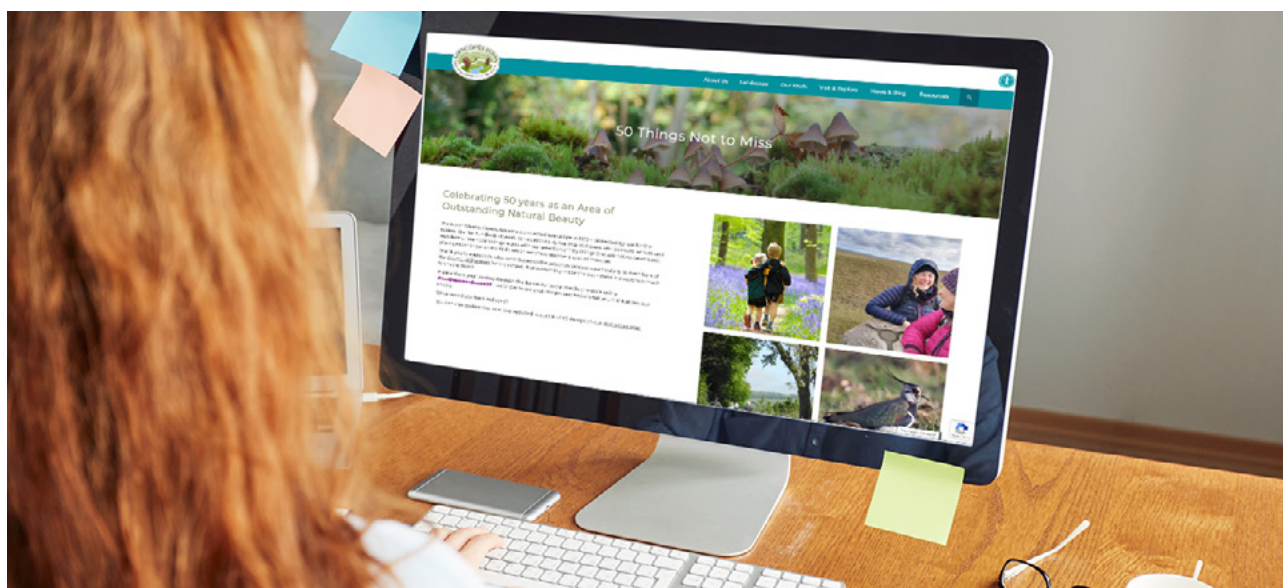


FIFTY THINGS NOT TO MISS

For hundreds of years the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs has inspired poets and painters, writers and wanderers; to mark the 50th Anniversary we wanted to inspire residents and visitors with a selection of Fifty Things that are not-to-be-missed: places, experiences and wildlife which we felt deserved a special mention.

To develop the list, we asked for suggestions from across the team and from the Council of Partners - and of course, it was impossible to include everybody's suggestions as there is simply too much to choose from!

Website pages were created for the Fifty Things which include links to further information, location on a map and suggestions for other places nearby. This exciting new content was promoted through social media and our newsletter. [You can find Fifty Things on our website.](#)



THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY ANNUAL FORUM

We celebrated our anniversary in style at our Annual Forum in November 2022 which took place at the Marlborough Golf Club.

At the event we looked forward to the challenges of the next 50 years with a range of speakers, including: Professor Tom Oliver, Professor of Applied Ecology at the University of Reading; Roger Kerr, Trustee of the Organic Research Centre & CEO of Organic Farmers & Growers CICT; Nicola Chester, award-winning author of *On Gallows Down*; and Natalie Ganpatsingh, Founding Director of Nature Nurture CIC.

After a thought-provoking afternoon, Danny Kruger MP for Devizes proposed a toast to the North Wessex Downs followed by Chair of the Partnership, Sarah Nichols, cutting the cake. Many delegates then took the opportunity to take part in a stargazing session with local astronomer, Gavin James.



50TH ANNIVERSARY WALKING FESTIVAL

Our 2022 walking festival was a great opportunity to celebrate the anniversary and invite people to join us and our partners on some fantastic walks exploring this fascinating and beautiful landscape.

We aimed to encourage people to enjoy the outdoors and to learn about the North Wessex Downs and we wanted to continue to build working relationships with partners, organisations and individuals.

Building on the successes of 2019, we offered 28 walks over 15 days with a range of themes, distances and accessibility. Twenty-two partner organisations delivered the walks and 341 walkers took part - double the number of walks and nearly triple the number of walkers in comparison to 2019! We received excellent feedback on the quality of the events with 96% of walkers who responded to our survey saying they enjoyed their walks 'a lot' and that the walk leaders were 'excellent'.

The walking festival was promoted through local press and digital news outlets as well as through social media. During the promotional campaign and festival we increased our Facebook followers by nearly a third and website sessions increased by 45% compared to a similar period the year before - real proof of just how much interest there is in the festival.

"I had a fantastic time and will definitely look out for a future festival. I will be returning to Savernake Forest in the autumn to explore some more."



Walkers at Combe Gibbet ©Corinna Woodall ↑



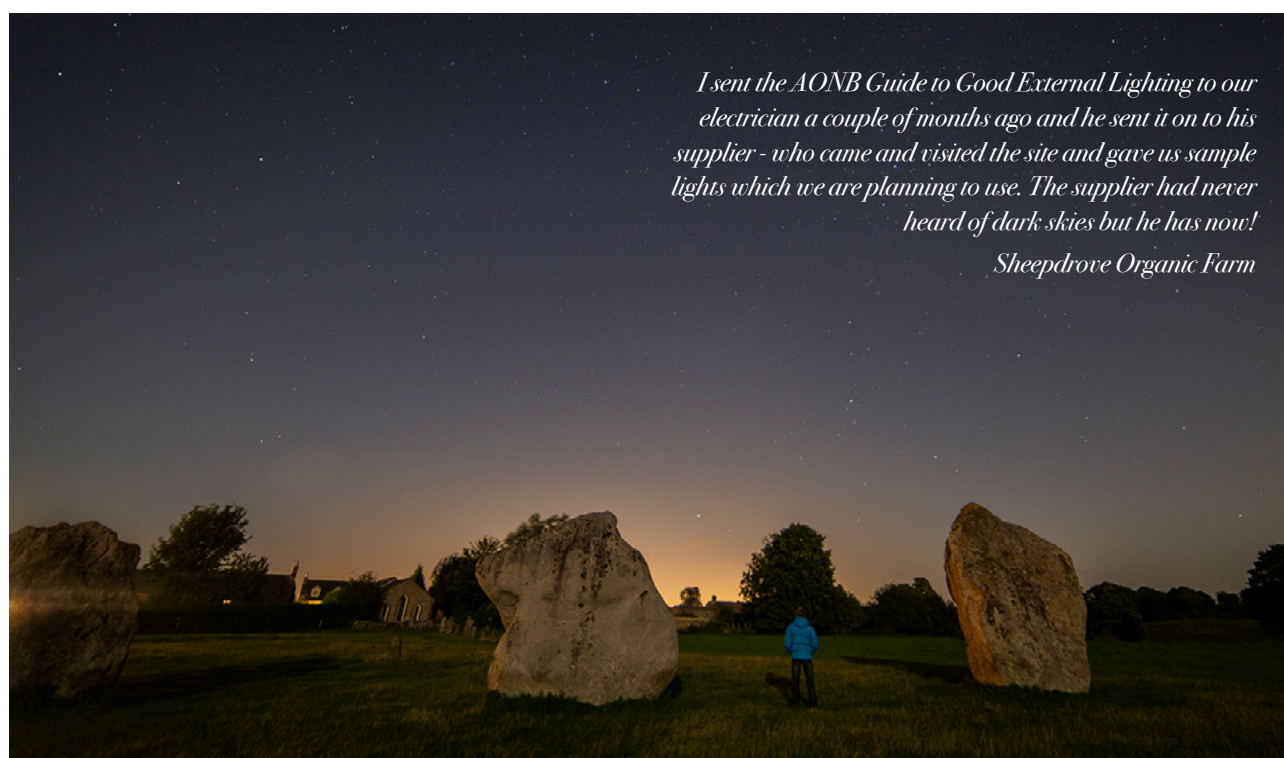
↑ Walking along the holloway ©Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership

"It gave me more confidence to go out on my own and explore the area."



↑ Walkers at Beckhampton near Avebury ©Jacky Akam

"Thank you for organising it! A lovely way to meet people, learn and find out more about our local area. I hope there'll be another one next year."



I sent the AONB Guide to Good External Lighting to our electrician a couple of months ago and he sent it on to his supplier - who came and visited the site and gave us sample lights which we are planning to use. The supplier had never heard of dark skies but he has now!
Sheepdrove Organic Farm

↑ Avebury ©Paul Howell

DARK SKIES

After the success of the Marlborough Dark Skies Festival in 2021, and the interest it generated in the preservation of dark skies, we have continued our partnership with Marlborough Town Council and the astronomers at Marlborough College and established an 'expert group' to deliver small-scale dark skies outreach activities.

As a result, in January 2023 a talk, 'How to enjoy the Night Sky', was given by Gavin Jones and Nick Howes at Marlborough Town Hall to a sell-out audience of 175 people. On the same weekend 60 people enjoyed observing the night sky at the Blackett Observatory, Marlborough College.

The Dark Skies Festival, and our continued work in this area, have generated further interest and activity including:

- An article provided by the AONB about stargazing and how to minimise light pollution, appearing in the October edition of Upstream, the newsletter of the West Berkshire Countryside Society.
- A sold-out Dark Skies Stone Circle walk run by the National Trust at Avebury in October last year - a direct result of the success of their event at the Dark Skies Festival.
- The stargazing session at our Annual Forum (see above). The clouds parted just in time for people to get some great views of the night sky. Conversations following the forum have led to plans for further outreach activities.
- continuing work to inform and influence planners and developers to use the AONB Guide to Good External Lighting to minimise light pollution and its impacts.

In September 2022 we supported the first Great Green Festival in Marlborough with funds of £500 and linked them with The Friends of the Marlborough Telescope who provided stargazing activities at the Blackett Observatory. Early in 2023 we provided funds to the Friends of the Telescope in Marlborough to buy a telescope suitable for all the outreach they are doing to promote the dark skies of the North Wessex Downs.



DEVELOPMENT NEWS

During 2022/23 there was a further decline in planning applications and this was reflected in the number of consultations we received.

Out of the 902 consultations received we responded to just under 400 of these. We responded to eight of the nine planning policy consultations received. Furthermore, we commented on six of the seven pre-application consultations, as well as five Neighbourhood Plan (Regulation 14 and 16) consultations. We received 16 appeal notifications and made 13 representations to the Planning Inspectorate, which also included attending a Public Inquiry.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Appeal at **Andover Road, Highclere** for 26 dwellings, dismissed.
We objected to the appeal in principle due to its location outside a settlement boundary. We drew on the landscape importance of the greenfield site and its role in the character of the local area. We argued that the addition of 26 dwellings densely set would suburbanise and unbalance the character of Highclere and that the proposed wildflower meadow as green open space did not accurately reflect the landscape character type of the area. The Inspectorate agreed with our assessment and dismissed the appeal on harm to landscape character, finding that although the council did not have a 5-year land supply, the balancing exercise in presumption of sustainable development was not triggered because of Footnote 7 in Para 11 of the National Planning Policy Framework, as there was a clear reason to refuse.
- Enforcement appeal at **Wroughton airfield**.
We worked closely with Swindon Borough Council at the inquiry to defend the position of the Council. We opposed the application and the subsequent appeal due to its impact on landscape character, loss of semi-permanent grassland and impact on dark skies. The Inspectorate agreed with the LPA and us and as a result the appeals were dismissed and the enforcement notices upheld.

Wroughton airfield ↓



DISAPPOINTMENTS

- Although an appeal for retrospective lighting at a stable was dismissed we were disappointed that the Planning Inspectorate did not believe that the harm to the AONB was significant enough to be a reason for refusal and only dismissed the appeal on amenity grounds. The Inspector gave little weight to the AONB's Good Lighting Guide.
- A development was approved at Harwell Campus which resulted in more than a 60% loss of biodiversity.

AT NATIONAL LEVEL

- The national 'family' of AONBs submitted a response to the proposed National Planning Policy Framework changes. The changes focused on housing and improving the deliverability of this as well as improvements in design by way of design codes, and some exceptions in altering housing numbers (increase as well as decrease). However, it still falls short on improving deliverability and is open to interpretation due to the use of subjective language.
- We raised concerns over the Water Resources South East Plan which includes details of the potential South East Strategic Reservoir Options and new transfers/connections. These proposals were brought forward to ensure an adequate water supply to the SE region. Options include a new pipeline parallel to the A34 or transferring water from the Midlands to the SE via existing water ways including the River Test. We highlighted the potential impacts of using chalk streams, of which the Test is a SSSI, known for having a rich and diverse ecosystem and one which would be unbalanced by the proposals.
- The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill went out to consultation in 2022. A revised approach was proposed, including plans for 'a genuinely plan-led system' and a focus on speeding up the plan-making process for local authorities, with tools such as National Development Management Policies and voluntary spatial development strategies.



↑ Brook lamprey

COLOUR GUIDE TRAINING

We ran a training workshop with our Local Planning Authority partners on the AONB Colour Guide - Guidance on the selection and use of colour in development.

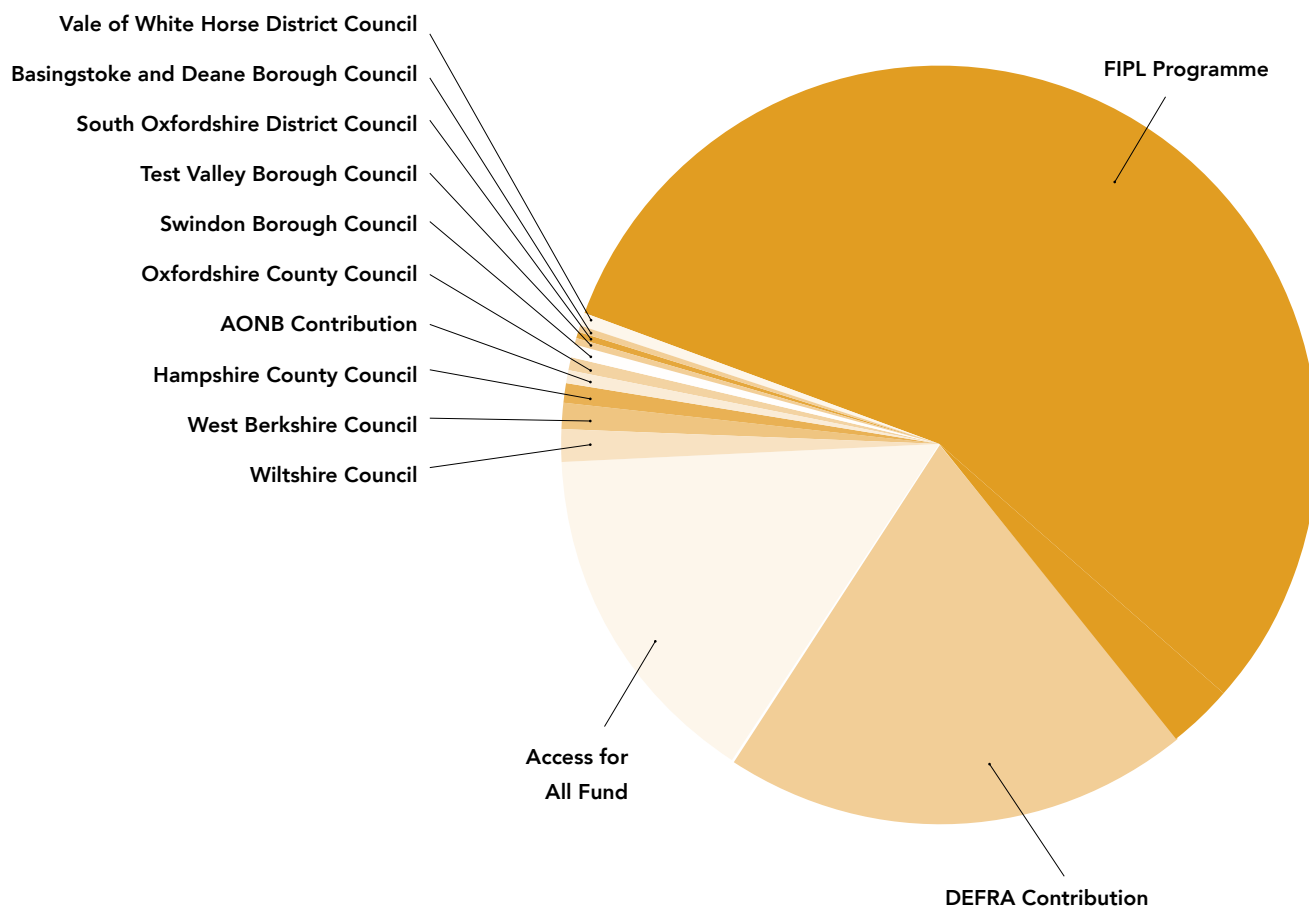
Its author, Jem Waygood ran the session and demonstrated how to use the survey and guidance when assessing colour in the landscape and the materials of a proposed development. The session was met positively, and we have seen an increase in the referencing of the guide in application responses.



[Click here to view the Colour Guidance](#)



FINANCIAL SUMMARY



Income

DEFRA Contribution.....	289,126
AONB Contribution.....	7,885
Wiltshire Council.....	17,432
Hampshire County Council.....	9,457
Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council	4,207
Test Valley Borough Council	4,207
Swindon Borough Council	5,469
Vale of White Horse District Council.....	4,207
Oxfordshire County Council	7,796
West Berkshire Council	14,110
South Oxfordshire District Council	4,207
FIPL Programme	708,384
Access for All Fund.....	189,391
Total Income	1,265,879

Adding Value

In 2022-2023 every £1 contributed by our local authority partners delivered £19.82 in benefits to the AONB.

For every £1 awarded by the SDF, a further £1.45 has been contributed by partner organisations towards projects in the AONB during 2022-23.



Expenditure

Total AONB Salaries (incl Benefits)	247,385
Travel & subsistence	678
Staff training & development	1,924
Recruitment.....	1,898
Accommodation: Office lease	17,966
Accommodation: Rates	7,610
Accommodation: Utilities & Ancillary	8,814
IT	3,459
Partnership and national working	4,959
Events and publicity	7,878
Other general office costs	697
Forum	2,506
Annual Review.....	1,175
Web site hosting & maintenance	715
DEFRA Projects.....	60,440
FiPL: Advice and guidance (incl salaries).....	56,995
FiPL: Admin	32,704
FiPL: Projects.....	618,685
Access for All.....	189,391
Total Expenditure.....	1,265,879

Footnote: FiPL projects is a projected figure.

Fungi ©Ann Shepley ↓



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.

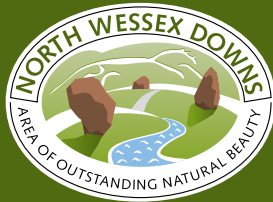


ABOUT THE COUNCIL OF PARTNERS

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 of the AONB staff unit, four times a year.

↑ King Alfred Way Uffington Hillfort ©Robert Spanning





Landscapes
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DOWNS
One of the
AONB Family



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