



**North Wessex  
Downs**  
National  
Landscape



**Annual  
Review**  
2024-2025



### From the Chair

#### Welcome to the Annual Review of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership for the financial year 2024-25.

I was delighted to join as the new Chair of the Council of Partners towards the end of the year. I step into the role at an exciting and challenging time as the accelerating pace of change will materially influence NWDNL and all other National Landscapes.

I look forward to working with all the partners of the NWDNL. I would like to thank outgoing Chair Sarah Nichols for her contribution over the past four years.

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape team worked hard in a number of important areas over the year including:

- Delivering for nature recovery.
- Projects developed and funded through the Mend the Gap programme on the eastern border of the North Wessex Downs which are making great progress.
- Our Farming in Protected Landscapes programme which has supported numerous nature-friendly initiatives and activities.
- Progressing the Species Survival Fund Partnerships for Nature programme. Read on for more details about these programmes.
- Leading the 4th successful North Wessex Downs Walking Festival

The Partnership worked on the new Management Plan for 2025-30, and continued to make progress towards attaining the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Green List protected area status. Our aim is to become the first UK protected area to achieve this status.

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

**Gill Haggarty, Chair of the Council of Partners**

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## Development News

The new duty to “seek to further” the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty in the National Landscape was a hot topic throughout the year as everyone got to grips with what it entailed. Guidance for relevant Authorities was produced by Natural England in December 2024 following The National Landscape Association guidance for Local Planning Authorities. There were yet more changes proposed to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in September 2024. These included changes to housing need calculations, inclusion of design codes at local level and promoting net zero. There was good news that the protection of the landscape was not weakened, but the new calculations mean an increase in housing numbers within our Local Authority areas.

### Key planning achievements

- Responding to approximately 200 consultations
- Commenting on two local plans, three Neighbourhood Plans and four out of 10 planning appeals
- Updating our Planning protocol in March 2025. This sets out clear guidelines on what we should be consulted on, what we require from our Local Authority partners in considering the National Landscape, and our own role in responding to applications
- A review of our Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) was carried out. Input was sought via an online hub and from Local Authority officers and Parish Councils
- Working closely with Whitchurch Town Council and the Whitchurch Action Group to push back on two speculative developments on the northern edge of the settlement

Whitchurch



### IUCN workshop

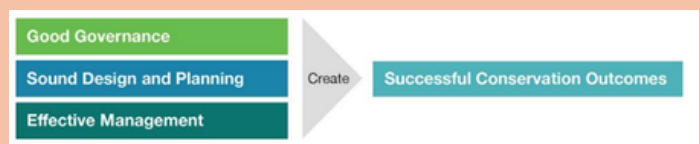
We are taking a major step towards international recognition for our conservation efforts by seeking

to become the UK's first protected area to gain accreditation under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas.

The Green List is the global standard for recognising and promoting effective and equitable management of protected and conserved areas. It is organised into four components of successful nature conservation. Each component has a set of criteria and each criterion has a set of generic indicators to measure achievement.

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan will play a central role in demonstrating the National Landscape's commitment to environmental excellence, biodiversity protection and community engagement.

Over the past three years we have reviewed and improved the NWDNL Partnership's governance and processes, supported by extensive internal consultation. In March 2025 we hosted a two-day NWDNL workshop in Hungerford with IUCN staff to assess our readiness to move forward with our application. Together, we made an informal assessment against the 17 Green List criteria and 50 indicators. The results indicated that the NWDNL is 80% aligned with the Green List Standard overall, allowing us to move ahead to the Applicant Stage.





Thames view towards Streatley

## Mend the Gap

In 2024-2025 Mend the Gap worked with over 100 delivery partners to instigate and complete 23 projects in the Thames Valley area either side of the Great Western Railway.



These included habitat enhancements to chalk and wetland, and water monitoring. A farm in Streatley has been equipped to harvest and re-sow their own wildflower seed, to restore chalk grassland. A citizen science water quality monitoring project along the River Thames collected data between Wallingford and Pangbourne, to inform an application for bathing water status at Pangbourne. A collaborative project enabled the creation of a two-hectare wetland on the Sulham Estate (see page 5).

Mend the Gap also continued the process of softening the impact of the railway gantries on the National Landscapes by planting over 4km of hedge and over 600 trees. These will grow and mature over time to have their full effect.

Other projects enabled people of all ages and mobility needs to have better access to the Thames valley in the Goring and Streatley area. These have included funding a new wheelchair-accessible boardwalk at Withymead nature reserve near Goring, and better pedestrian access in Streatley by the Bull pub, taking people away from a dangerous road junction.

## Key Mend the Gap achievements

- Over 4 kilometres of hedge and over 600 trees planted to soften the impact of the railway gantries
- 283 hectares of land being enhanced
- 103 landowners engaged
- 898 people attending events
- 362 people engaged in activities linked to health and wellbeing
- 6,000 children benefiting in their school grounds, enabling outdoor learning
- 171 partnerships from our projects



## Case study

### Partnership working at the Sulham Estate to create a new wetland

A new wetland has been created on the Sulham Estate, which will become the home for a huge diversity of wildlife in the North Wessex Downs and help to mitigate the visual impact of the electrification of the neighbouring railway line. The areas around the new ponds are being planted with wet-loving grasses and other plants to create an overall wetland that will change as water levels fluctuate throughout the seasons. This provides suitable habitat for a variety of species, from dragonflies to wading birds.

The surrounding area forms part of a wider Biodiversity Net Gain scheme. It has been seeded with species-rich grass and wildflower mix, taking care to enhance the landscape for existing species such as lapwing that have been nesting in the field. The use of Biodiversity Net Gain funding makes this one of the first projects of its type in England and ensures the whole area can be managed for 30 years.

This is a great example of partnership working. The two-hectare wetland has been created in a former arable field on the Sulham Estate. The wetland project is managed by ARK (Action for the River Kennet) and co-funded by Mend the Gap and Partnerships for Nature (see pages 4 and 6). BioCap leads the work on Biodiversity Net Gain funding in the surrounding area. This fruitful collaboration is maximising the benefits for nature.

Photo by Barry Stalker



Lapwings, with their tumbling display flights and distinctive 'peewit' call have been a welcome sign of spring in this part of the Thames Valley for centuries. Sadly, lapwings have suffered a steep decline in populations as the habitats they rely on, like wetlands, have been lost. The new wetland and wet grassland on the Railway Field will offer vital habitat for these birds, helping conserve this iconic species for future generations.



Newly created wetland on the Sulham Estate



Chalk grassland restoration at Tidcombe Down

## Partnership for Nature

Working with partners to create, restore and enhance habitats in the North Wessex Downs to benefit a range of species.



Following a successful application to Defra's Species Survival Fund in 2023 a huge amount was achieved by our partners during 2024-25 to deliver on the programme aims. This was achieved despite a challenging autumn and winter, when extremely wet weather and unexpected archaeological finds delayed work. Our partners are FWAG SE, Southern Streams Farmers Group, the Sulham Estate, Action for the River Kennet (ARK), the Benham Estate, the Bucklebury Estate, BBOWT, Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Earth Trust and Plantlife International.

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

## Achievements in 2024-25 with our partners:

- 20 hectares of chalk grassland at Tidcombe Down has been over-seeded and planted with plug plants to enrich and restore the habitat.
- 2 hectares of new wetland at the Sulham Estate has been created (see page 5)
- The first phase of chalk stream restoration has been completed on the River Kennet at the Benham Estate
- At Bucklebury Common a ranger was employed to support heathland restoration and wood pasture creation
- At Moor Copse volunteers received training ready for working on the woodland to improve the habitat and make the site safe
- Regenerative Farming at Earth Trust at Little Wittenham has started with the employment of a Regenerative Farming Officer.
- At Sheepdrove Organic Farm three dew ponds have been re-created and Plantlife International have been surveying the Farm (see page 7).



River restoration at the Benham Estate

## Case study

### Partnerships for Nature – helping to save rare arable wildflowers

Arable wildflowers were once a familiar sight on farms. They play a crucial role in supporting other wildlife and add colour and beauty to the landscape. But their numbers have drastically declined due to modern agricultural practices – and they are now the most critically threatened group of wild plants in the UK. Our Partnerships for Nature Programme (P4N) worked with Sheepdrove Organic Farm and Plantlife to create habitats for them to thrive on field margins.

Sheepdrove Organic Farm is already home to some nationally important and rare species. This project is increasing the number of arable plants by not planting crops in field margins. The field margins are cultivated to uncover seeds in the seed bed. These seeds are left to grow without being crowded out by the crop plant.

The project is drawing on expertise from arable plant expert Lizzie Cooke from Plantlife. She has been carefully monitoring species, helping to build up knowledge to help protect them.

Three dew ponds have also been restored as part of P4N at Sheepdrove, increasing biodiversity and providing important on-farm freshwater. The dew ponds retained some water during the exceptionally dry summer of 2025. Trail cameras were installed showing glimpses of wildlife using the ponds, including a tawny owl, a red kite, and two swirling flocks of corn buntings.



Photo by Lizzie Cooke, Plantlife

For millennia, plants such as this *Fumaria densiflora*, cornflowers, corn marigolds, and corncockles flourished under traditional practices like crop rotation and fallowing. As annual plants they also rely on regular soil disturbance from cultivation to trigger germination from the soil seed bank. Modern farming, however, has led to steep declines through herbicide use, artificial fertilizers, and more vigorous crop varieties that overshadow smaller plants.



Lizzie Cooke from Plantlife inspecting arable plants



Restored dew pond at Sheepdrove

## Year four of Farming in Protected Landscapes 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 grants under four themes of Nature, Climate, People and Place, for activities which also contribute to the delivery of the objectives of the North Wessex Downs Management Plan. The Programme has been extremely well regarded at a national level and we are pleased to be part of that success.

In the financial year 2024-25 we awarded grants of over £1.2 million – our largest ever spend and number of projects. The broad remit of the programme has resulted in a huge variety of projects.



James Allen, of Great Cotmarsh Farm, a mixed organic farm in North Wiltshire. FiPL supported the creation of a new organic vegetable-based tannery and classroom

Environmental projects funded included grassland enhancements, scrub management, hedge planting and pond restorations as well as equipment to support more nature friendly farming. We have provided grants to enable farmers to host schools and educate children about farming and nature. We also support farms to diversify, adding new income streams to improve their resilience. We partnered with other organisations on biodiversity projects, including wildlife trusts, ornithological charities and Natural England, helping endangered species such as dormice, tree sparrows and butterflies.

We continue to support Farmer Groups (clusters), across the area, bringing together farms in similar landscapes to work together on environmental projects across boundaries.

### Case study

#### Large blue butterfly introduction success

FiPL funding enabled an experimental reintroduction of the Large blue butterfly (*Phengaris arion*) onto a site in Wiltshire, where they hadn't been seen for over 150 years.

This was an intensive project, led by Natural England, with multiple agencies involved. This was needed to gain appropriate permissions for collection and release, and provide the necessary expertise.

The Large blue has a highly specific lifecycle requiring both thyme and marjoram plants at different stages of its larval development, as well as a final stage which involves adoption by the red ant (*Myrmica sabuleti*). This stage was released in Summer 2024. The project was a success with eggs being found the following summer.



## Annual Forum

### Farmers discuss innovation at the 2024 North Wessex Downs Annual Forum

The NWDNL held a Farming themed annual forum at Sheepdrove Organic Farm. This was led by the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) team, with speakers and exhibitors chosen to best reflect the FiPL programme.

The keynote speaker was Julian Gold, an award-winning local farm manager who farms regeneratively along the Ridgeway. He took a look back at farming systems and the changes that have happened over the years and compared them to what is happening now.



“For all our technology it still takes personal care and attention to grow food productively, environmentally and even beautifully – and doing this must surely be one of the most inherently positive ways that a person can spend time on the Planet.”

Julian Gold

Peter Wilson talked about his FiPL-funded project using new technologies to reduce ammonia and effluent levels in his chicken manure. This system has the potential of massively reducing agricultural pollutants entering the atmosphere and leeching into water systems.

Jimmy Woodrow, from FiPL-funded project Pasture for Life, discussed the environmental, health and economic benefits of pasture-fed livestock. The project gives farmers a unique mentoring opportunity with other farmers in the landscape already using pasture based systems. Jimmy spoke about the importance of pasture based systems for nature and climate as well as for future profits for farmers. Our final speaker was Dr Richard Gantlett, a Biodynamic farmer. He created a video especially for the forum, explaining his system and how FiPL had supporting his objectives.

After a delicious lunch the delegates were then invited to an afternoon exhibition of FiPL funded projects. The entire event was filmed and is available to watch via the North Wessex Downs National Landscape YouTube channel.



Graham Herriot (r) discusses his Bokashi compost



Geoff Homer (r) shows his Tow & Fert machine.

## Farming in Protected Landscapes Impact

The impacts of the fourth year of the FiPL programme include:

### For Climate

- 8 projects reducing flood risk
- 7 new or restored ponds and dew ponds
- Over 100 trees planted
- Farmer Group supported to understand their on-farm energy use

### For Nature

- Over 1,000 metres of new hedgerow planted
- Over 1,200 hectares of habitat created or managed for biodiversity
- Species supported include tree sparrows, bats, house martins and swifts, dormice, large blue butterfly and great bustards
- 20 hectares of meadow creation and restoration
- 4 No-fence collar projects for cattle, to allow conservation grazing on chalk grasslands

### For People

- 3 classrooms and 1 people carrier to support farm school visits, community outreach and farmer-led groups
- 200 metres of new permissive path created
- 'Bodging' shelter for community group
- Educational resource grants to farmers

### For Place

- Continued support for venison production in the area
- 1 converted shepherds hut to support farm diversification
- New organic tanning facility in the North Wessex Downs with associated educational facilities
- Survey of Grims Ditch to understand the archaeology and improve habitats





Walkers at Facombe

## North Wessex Downs Walking Festival 2024

Our fourth North Wessex Downs Walking Festival ran from 31st May to 9th June 2024. Almost 400 walkers took part in twenty-seven walks across the National Landscape.

The programme included opportunities to visit farms, meet farmers and land managers and learn about what they were doing to help wildlife and conserve the beauty of the landscape. These included a walk near Streatley to learn about work taking place to restore valuable chalk grassland; a walk through Bucklebury Common with a local ecologist and hearing from farmers in Wilton to learn about the creation of new wetland there. Walks also included two in Savernake Forest led by community ranger Sian and a walk exploring the lesser-known areas around Avebury in the company of two staff from Wiltshire Council's Archaeology Service.

The walking festival is the perfect opportunity for residents and visitors to explore more of the beautiful and fascinating North Wessex Downs landscape, in the company of welcoming and knowledgeable guides.

### Walking festival in numbers

- 92% of walkers said they enjoyed their walks a lot in our survey
- 378 walking places were booked
- 53% of walkers said this was the first time they had attended
- 64% of walkers told us they visited local businesses or attractions before or after their walk
- At least 49 volunteers and members of staff from 24 partner organisations delivered the walks
- 6 new partners were involved this year



## Access for All

Improved access across the North Wessex Downs has been made possible through DEFRA's Access For All fund. Twelve projects, across nine local authorities, were supported with £225,000 of funding. Projects funded included:

- Creating a new and durable boardwalk to improve a popular route in East Woodhay. The boardwalk was installed with the help of volunteers.
- Improvements at Bucklebury Common, including footpaths, noticeboards, and parking improvements.
- Creating an all season wheelchair accessible path at Little Hidden Farm near Hungerford. An accessible toilet was also installed at the farm, and new signs. The farm is used for riding for the disabled, community groups, local residents and visitors to the North Wessex Downs.

These projects have significantly improved public access and amenities across the North Wessex Downs, making it easier for people to enjoy the natural beauty and recreational opportunities of the area.

### Access grants in numbers

- Access increased with 1,724 metres of accessible path and 670 metres of new permissive paths
- 3 disabled toilets constructed
- 47 accessible gates installed
- 28 volunteer days held
- 217 wayfinders installed
- 33 information boards installed
- 3 car parks enhanced





## Financial Summary

Income	£	Expenditure	£
DEFRA core grant	289,125	Salaries (core)	249,980
Unrestricted income	7,045	Other staff costs	15,411
Wiltshire Council	17,432	Governance	10,000
Hampshire County Council	9,457	Office costs	46,396
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council	4,207	IT and website	4,215
Test Valley Borough Council	4,207	Partnership and national working	10,862
Swindon Borough Council	5,469	Events, publications and promotion	64,138
Vale of White Horse District Council	4,207	Landscape Character Assessment	25,054
Oxfordshire County Council	7,796	Management Plan review	18,324
West Berkshire Council	14,110	Heritage projects	23,150
South Oxfordshire District Council	4,207	Nature recovery projects	109,920
Farming in Protected Landscapes grant	1,371,802	FiPL: Advice guidance and admin	125,164
DEFRA revenue uplift	127,711	FiPL: Projects	1,223,300
DEFRA capital uplift	127,711	Access projects	224,887
DEFRA Access for All Fund	225,031	Partnerships for Nature	513,685
Species Survival Fund Partnerships for Nature	451,967		
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>2,671,484</b>	<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>2,664,487</b>

### Adding value

In 2024-2025 every £1 contributed by our local authority partners generated £32.78 in other funding benefiting the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

Finance notes: Our income and expenditure have almost doubled compared to 2023-2024 due to an increase in FiPL funding, one-off revenue and capital uplift income from DEFRA, the start of the Partnerships for Nature Programme and Access funding. Underspend is carried forward to the following year. Partnerships for Nature expenditure was higher than income because funds claimed were received after the end of the financial year.



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