

South Downs Way Ahead

Report on progress against objectives

March 2013

1. Walk the Chalk: To broaden the South Downs Way National Trail as a semi-natural corridor and improve the natural qualities of the route.

AND

2. Linking the Fragments: To achieve real improvements to the conservation and management of chalk grassland at the heart of the matrix of downland habitats.

Development of the chalk grassland ecological network work programmes for our five NIA Focal Areas and South Downs Way Corridor is progressing well. Over £175,000 has been secured in match funding from landfill trusts to help deliver these two objectives.

Extensive habitat management and restoration work started in Autumn 2012, including:

- Scrub and tree clearance work has started in the five focal areas (Winchester, Harting & Midhurst, Worthing, Brighton & Hove and Lewes and Eastbourne), and along the South Downs Way Corridor. This work has been undertaken in close collaboration with farmers, landowners and contractors.
- NIA procurement framework developed and implemented.
- Plans finalised and contractors engaged for clearance work.

Monitoring and evaluation indicators have been selected for the South Downs Way Ahead project.

There has been extensive collaboration between NIA partners, including Focal Area sub-group meetings to plan habitat management work.

Data

A detailed analysis of the current state of chalk grassland in the project area has been completed and shared with project partners. The local Records Centres carried out a detailed survey programme for selected project sites, and are currently collating and analysing the data. These data will be supplied to rangers and will form part of the complete suite of site surveys that will be available by the end of the NIA project period. The Records Centres have also started analysing chalk grassland butterfly and plant data as well as mapping arable plant hotspots.

Chalk grassland restoration

The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew) provided advice on harvesting single species seed collections to Brighton & Hove City Council Rangers and South East Water Pipeline Project. Other activity carried out by RBG Kew included: 28 high quality, genetically diverse South Downs origin founder collections were harvested for use in the project; cultivation of six chalk downland plant species which are currently either unavailable or unaffordable; delivery of a training workshop on grassland restoration techniques for the South Downs National Park Ranger Team; research into seed priming protocols; and harvesting of high quality, genetically diverse South Downs seed origin founder collections

A series of site visits have been made across the five focal areas to assess potential restoration sites to set up demonstration plots and a number of sites have been

shortlisted. Site selection has been based on suitability to achieve good results and the potential for public engagement.

Volunteers

Several volunteer tasks were held at project sites (for example Landport Bottom) to cut and clear scrub, ash saplings and other self seeded tree saplings on marginal chalk grassland vegetation. In July 2012 the Winchester Volunteer Coordinator started work on the Winchester Conservation Skills Project. The Coordinator has been working with four volunteer groups training and hosting approximately 30 local volunteers engaged in practical habitat management, heritage restoration and livestock looking.

Livestock

In August project partners in the Winchester Focal Area acquired seven Shetland ewes to help establish a breeding flock. The Shetland flock was used to graze Butterfly Conservation's Magdalen Hill Down Nature Reserve and a new chalk grassland restoration project at Hockley Golf Course.

In September one of the project partners acquired 18 British White cattle which have since multiplied to a herd of 20 grazing four sites; the project continues to deploy graziers' herds of 27 Dexters and 12 British Whites at project locations within the NIA.

3. Surface to Groundwater: To demonstrate the viability and benefits of an input based approach to the improvement of groundwater quality.

Development of plans for Objective 3 are well underway. £25,000 in match funding has been secured from the Environment Agency (EA) to help develop a groundwater model for the NIA.

A Technical Steering Group (comprised of the SDNPA, EA, Portsmouth Water and the Downs & Harbours Clean Water Partnership) has been set up to help develop the model and oversee its application. The first meeting of this group took place in September 2012 to assess potential modelling tools and estimate costings. In October 2012 the Technical Steering Group approved the scope of work produced by the SDNPA. This was subsequently sent to consultants to obtain proposals and costings for the delivery of the modelling work.

We have developed synergies between the NIA surface-groundwater project and two other relevant landscape project groups; the Adur & Ouse Catchment Partnership Groundwater Group and the Brighton Biosphere Land Management Group – the SDNPA is chairing the 'combined group'. This is maximising outcomes and delivering efficiencies (e.g. in terms of representatives' time).

4. Town to Down: To assess and demonstrate the benefits of ecosystem services to urban populations.

Development of project plans and work programmes for all project outcomes for Objective 4 are progressing well. Outputs to date include:

- Lewes 'Big Benefits' Game developed and 'Naturegain poems' piloted as public engagement tools. Four public events attended: TTL 5th Anniversary

(±50 people); Lewes Railway Lands Summer Festival (± 1500 people attended event); 2 x 'Naturegain walks' (15 + 20 people participated respectively).

- Partnership between SWT and L&Ove established; first steering committee meeting held;
- Criteria development for local Ecosystem Services (ES) valuation well under way – Key parts of local environment providing ES identified and ES described. Broad valuation criteria for each identified; detail developed for Lewes Downs.
- Process underway of identifying and listing enterprises in Lewes benefiting from local ES (35 enterprises identified to date). Identification of stakeholders in Lewes already working with ES started (17 stakeholders identified to date), and work begun to engage them over land management issues.

5. Valuing the Chalk: To attribute environmental, economic and social values to the benefits and services provided by chalk downland.

A project working group has been convened and project timetable established for the South Downs Way Visitor Payback Scheme. Desk based research exercise started for this project, and a list of stakeholder contacts created.

A Partnership event for national and regional leads on ecosystem services, climate change vulnerability and habitat mapping was successfully held.