

Species Survival Fund Case Study Appendix

Within the Species Survival Fund (SSF) evaluation, Wavehill undertook two site visits to each of the 20 projects, with one scheduled in year one of delivery and the second in year two. The aim of the site visits was to better understand the delivery of each project and to observe progress made across the lifetime of the programme, from early implementation through to legacy and sustainability.

A case study was developed for each project as a result of these visits. The focus of each case study was agreed between the project and the researcher, with some projects choosing to showcase all delivery activity and others opting to highlight specific areas of work. This appendix contains all case studies available for dissemination at the end of the evaluation.

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Building long term capacity to reconnect landscapes: Mid-Cornwall Moors

Cornwall Wildlife Trust – Mid Cornwall Moors recovery

Grant awarded: £647,655

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust's (CWT) Mid-Cornwall Moors Recovery Project has sought to create, restore and connect fragmented Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) habitats across the Mid-Cornwall Moors and surrounding farmland.

Funding from the Species Survival Fund (SSF) has enabled a wide range of capital works, habitat management interventions, staff training, and community engagement activities. With very little of the SSSI previously in favourable condition, the project has focused on improving habitat connectivity, enabling sustainable land management and supporting species recovery, while also engaging local landowners, schools and volunteers to strengthen long-term stewardship of the landscape.



Capital Works and Long-term Management

Capital investment through the SSF has enabled the CWT to deliver a coordinated programme of habitat management works across its reserves, including extensive scrub clearance, fencing and targeted planting. These interventions have not only improved habitat condition in the short term, but have laid the foundations for more sustainable, long-term management of priority sites. In particular, the installation of fencing across key reserves has enabled the reintroduction of conservation grazing. The clearance of dense

scrub and invasive species has created the conditions needed for grazing to be effective, making previously degraded areas available for grazing, and supporting the recovery of heathland and grassland habitats. These capital works have enabled a transition towards integrated reserve management, combining infrastructure, ecological restoration and ongoing stewardship.

This shift in management approach is expected to deliver long-term benefits beyond the initial works. By enabling grazing regimes and undertaking restoration works on newly acquired land near their older reserves in partnership with local landowners, the project is supporting landscape-scale recovery and improving the resilience of the wider ecological network. Capital investment has therefore not only enhanced individual reserves, but has also strengthened the Trust's capacity to manage sites more effectively in the future through their grazing partnerships with local landowners, contributing to broader nature recovery ambitions. The images below illustrate habitat management work undertaken by volunteers near Helman Tor showing coppicing activity.



Landowner Engagement

A portion of CWT's SSF funding went towards recruiting a new Farm Advisor to support habitat creation and restoration on farm sites adjacent to nature reserves. Over the course of SSF, CWT worked with four farms to undertake a variety of works including scrub clearance, fencing to protect areas from livestock, tree planting and grassland enhancement. The aim of these works was to increase the connectivity between reserves and the wider environment, creating wildlife corridors.

The Farm Advisor worked with farmers to agree the scope of the works and secure relevant permissions with Natural England where required, arrange and supervise contractors, and support the development of ongoing management plans. The farmers working in partnership with CWT noted that inflationary pressures meant they did not have the time or capital to undertake these initial works themselves, making input from CWT essential.

Working with farmers, the advisor has drafted long term management plans for each site, which set out specific habitat management actions and timeframes to ensure the positive impacts of the initial capital works can be sustained and that the farms continue to function as effective nature corridors between CWT's reserves.

Community Engagement

In the project's first year, CWT continued with traditional engagement events, for example using community events to successfully recruit new volunteers, while also introducing new engagement avenues through their work with schools and social prescribing. While school engagement and social prescribing are not new approaches in themselves, they were relatively new for CWT and the Trust therefore established good practice guidelines to ensure that lessons learned could be carried into the second year of delivery and beyond the project's lifetime.

For schools and youth engagement, transport costs were identified as a substantial barrier for many, limiting their ability to visit sites managed by CWT. Rather than continuing to rely on site-based activities, the team adapted their approach by taking nature engagement directly into schools. Community engagement staff (funded through SSF) undertook safeguarding training and provided nature connection sessions for children in their schools, enabling participation from children who might otherwise have been unable to access the activities. This in turn led to increased interest and engagement from families who were subsequently able to attend the sites. Staff were also provided with additional training to engage with Red Moor School, a specialist education provider for 5 to 18 year olds with additional learning needs.

CWT also worked in partnership with local social prescribers to improve community nature connection, delivering two bespoke nature connection courses for cohorts of adults and young people. These courses covered a variety of nature-based activities over their six-week duration, including bushcraft, forestry, cooking outdoors and tracking. Participants reported enjoying the opportunity to spend time outdoors and develop practical skills in a supportive environment, with some forming social connections that continued beyond the programme. Staff observed increased participant confidence and connection to nature, while many participants also reported positive impacts on wellbeing.

“Watching people come out of their shells has helped me feel more at ease in group sessions now.” Adult Nature Connection Course Attendee

The community engagement activities undertaken by CWT over the course of SSF have generated valuable lessons on how best to engage different parts of the community. Staff at CWT have condensed many of these lessons into a set of guides and lesson plans which will be disseminated to future community engagement staff, supporting continued capacity building through increased local awareness and a growing volunteer base.

Legacy and Next Steps

The SSF project has left a legacy for both Cornwall Wildlife Trust and the landscapes in which it worked. Habitat restoration and creation activities have contributed to a larger and more connected network of wildlife-rich sites, helping to create the conditions needed for nature recovery and increased species abundance over the longer term. Alongside these ecological outcomes, the project has strengthened the Trust's capacity to engage communities in conservation, building new relationships with schools, volunteers, community groups and landowners that will continue beyond the life of the funding.

Reflecting on what SSF has made possible at programme scale, staff noted that the project had gone beyond what they had originally expected.

"In short, we've gone beyond what we expected. We delivered more on the land, including two projects that were added in from the original application." **Staff Interview**

Staff also identified the project's combination of capital works, embedded staff and flexibility as key to its success, noting that early engagement at the application stage meant they had a strong pipeline of shovel-ready projects, particularly with farmers, and that the diversity of skills across the nine SSF-funded staff enabled cross-working across delivery strands.

The project has also generated valuable learning about effective community engagement and habitat management, captured through guidance materials, lesson plans and embedded staff experience. This will inform future delivery and support the continued development of conservation skills and volunteering capacity across Cornwall.

Building on the partnerships, evidence and delivery experience developed through SSF, Cornwall Wildlife Trust has secured funding for [Tor to Shore](#), a programme funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, focused on linking land, river and marine conservation across the Par River catchment. This provides an opportunity to extend the foundations established through SSF and apply lessons learned to support landscape-scale nature recovery into the future.

Building capacity for a nature-positive economy in Derbyshire

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust – Restoration of lost habitats for a Wild Peak

Grant awarded: £1,697,036

Alongside large-scale habitat restoration and community engagement across the Peak District, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust's Restoration of lost habitats for a Wild Peak Wild Peak project invested in developing capacity for green finance to ensure nature recovery is not only delivered but sustained. The Nature Economy team was established to explore innovative approaches to financing nature recovery and embedding nature-positive practices into local economies. The Species Survival Fund (SSF) provided critical funding that enabled the team to pilot new models, build organisational capacity, and develop specialist roles.



The Nature Economy team delivered several strands of work under the SSF project:

- Business for Nature, a research partnership with the University of Derby, assessing the key themes and barriers with the current level of engagement with Nature based solutions amongst businesses, farmers and policy makers in Derbyshire
- Piloting green finance innovations such as an aggregated private funding model and natural capital accounting tool.
- Capacity building and organisational change, including the nature economy traineeship and working across the Trust to embed the learning across all programmes.

Nature Markets, Nature-Based Solutions and Green Finance

One of the most significant insights from the project was the challenge of developing nature markets. While businesses increasingly expressed a willingness to invest in nature, the demand side remained the biggest barrier in practice. This uncertainty was compounded by a language gap between stakeholders, evident through in-person workshops in the first year

of delivery. Landowners and corporates often shared similar goals but used different terminology, which created confusion and slowed progress.

“You have landowners and farmers on one side of the room, utilities and corporates on the other, quite often talking about the same thing but in completely different language.” **Nature Economy Trainee**



Engagement with farmers and landowners also revealed that motivations extend far beyond financial incentives; cultural identity and a strong sense of place are often key drivers. For example, at a farm in Chelmorton, the project supported nature-based solutions to improve grassland and adjust livestock grazing within an SSSI.

These changes delivered practical benefits, where tree cover reduced heat stress on livestock, diverse herbal lays supported animal health, and improved soil structure enhanced water management, marking a shift from a conventional system reliant on external inputs to one that harnesses the natural assets of the farm. This highlighted significant common ground between ecological goals and farming priorities, even when language and framing differ. This example also reinforced that lasting change cannot be imposed externally but must be built through trust, partnership, and peer influence within farming communities. Crucially, it demonstrated how financial mechanisms can complement these motivations by reducing risk and enabling farmers to invest in practices that align ecological outcomes with business resilience.

To turn some of these principles into practice and create clearer pathways for investment, the team piloted innovative tools, including a natural capital accounting framework and an aggregated private funding model. These tools provided a way to quantify ecological and socio-economic benefits and demonstrate trade-offs in land management decisions. For example, the team produced a rewilding and natural capital report for Haddon Estate, using innovative ecological modelling and baseline survey data to predict outcomes and quantify benefits such as carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, and public health improvements. This work also included a high-level assessment of funding options, exploring agri-environment schemes, biodiversity net gain, and carbon markets to support future nature recovery on the estate.

“Rather than just saying ‘do this because it’s good for nature,’ the report shows the trade-offs and wider benefits of management changes.” **Nature Economy Trainee**

Finally, the project reinforced the importance of strong, strategic partnerships. Success depended on building trust and tailoring engagement, rather than making assumptions about stakeholder priorities.

Traineeships as a Catalyst for Innovation

The project enabled the creation of a Nature Economy Traineeship, attracting individuals from diverse backgrounds and supporting career-changers. The traineeship was not a shadowing role but a research and development position, which supported independence and problem-solving skills. As part of this, trainees were encouraged to explore their interests, resulting in unique contributions such as the natural capital accounting tool. One trainee transitioned into a permanent officer role, illustrating the success of this model in building expertise in an emerging field where research and innovation is key for success.

“That’s the other benefit of traineeships: we don’t set specific tasks for trainees; we want them to find their niche and strengths. So, you end up with a team of people that are just working to their strengths.” **Nature Economy Manager**

Legacy and Next Steps

The Wild Peak project has acted as a catalyst for transformation within Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, embedding green finance and nature economy principles into its ‘Wilder 2030’ strategy. The SSF funding gave the organisation the freedom to innovate, test ideas, and learn from failures, something that would not have been possible without dedicated resources.

“This project has wholly changed Derbyshire Wildlife Trust’s view on the nature economy and green finance.” **Nature Economy Manager**

The project enabled the creation of specialist roles, including a Nature Economy traineeship, which has progressed into a permanent officer position and built expertise in an emerging field. Beyond individual roles, the project fostered cross-team integration, allowing learning from SSF activities to inform other projects across landscapes and green finance markets. This has positioned the Trust to develop future landscape-scale recovery initiatives and has already contributed to the development of the [Business4Nature toolkit](#), a nature-based solutions resource for businesses, ensuring that the benefits of this work extend well beyond the life of the project.

Introducing new sites to landscape-level restoration in Dorset

Dorset Wildlife Trust – Making Space for Nature in Dorset

Grant awarded: £1,120,791

Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT) delivered a nature recovery project across 18 sites in Dorset, combining work on newly acquired land with restoration on longer-held reserves. The project brought together habitat restoration, capacity building and catchment-scale water recovery, with a strong focus on connecting separate landholdings into a single landscape-scale approach.



The Species Survival Fund (SSF) enabled DWT to bring degraded new sites into active conservation, build the staff, trainee and volunteer capacity needed to sustain landscape-scale recovery, and reconnect water and habitats across the Poole Harbour catchment.

Conservation on Newly Acquired Sites

Rewilding and nature recovery sat at the core of DWT's work on newly acquired sites, where significant intervention was needed to re-establish natural processes. At Lyscombe, the project replaced a series of internal fences that had previously divided the site into smaller compartments with a single perimeter fence. Working with farmers, conservation grazing has been introduced across the whole site, using longhorn cattle and ponies alongside volunteer-led gorse removal to clear invasive plant species.

As part of DWT's wider rewilding ambitions, continuous extensive grazing across the site will help nature take the lead, making a shift from fragmented, intensively grazed land towards a large-scale mosaic of species-rich grassland, scrub and natural regeneration. The work on

Lyscombe has been strategically important for DWT, enabling them to engage with many nearby landowners through a local farm cluster and educate local people on the benefits and work involved in rewilding landscapes, including commercial benefits for the farmers using Lyscombe for grazing. Lyscombe will become a National Nature Reserve in September 2026 in recognition of the existing wildlife interest in the downland as well as the work already done to restore nature in adjacent degraded land

Trainees, Volunteers and Community Engagement

Volunteers have registered a total of nearly 6000 hours of work on the project, primarily across Lyscombe and Kingcombe. The scale of the work has attracted volunteers from previous projects as well as inspiring new volunteers (several of which were new to nature) into the groups, improving the Trust's ability to manage their sites moving forward.

All volunteers surveyed reported a strong sense of fulfilment through the work, feeling that they were making a significant positive contribution to biodiversity and nature restoration in the area.

“For volunteers, they love doing the practical work, especially removing scrub to improve the quality of a heath and a chalk downland.” Staff Interview

All those surveyed indicated they intended to continue volunteering with DWT beyond the SSF, and the Trust reported strong retention of volunteers into the post-SSF period. Training delivered through the project, including health and safety, hedge laying, drystone walling, and bird and insect surveying, has further strengthened the volunteer base and the Trust's ability to monitor sites over time.

Much of this volunteer activity was made possible by the three new trainees recruited through SSF. Trainees gained machinery licences for diggers and chainsaws, developed project management skills, and worked alongside site rangers to coordinate volunteer activity while building their own conservation skills.

Trainee capacity also enabled DWT to extend its work with schools. Six new school partnerships were established in the final year of delivery, with activities including tree planting visits, forest schools and nature walks now embedded into DWT's wider engagement offer beyond the close of SSF.

“Kids love being somewhere where there are less rules and more freedom to explore those surroundings. We see that it has had a good impact on mindfulness.” Staff Interview

Water Restoration



SSF investment enabled DWT to expand their wetland and water restoration activity across several sites, including new pond creation, floodplain restoration and the development of new nesting habitat. At Brownsea Lagoon, the project created 200m² of nesting areas for Common and Sandwich Terns, species that depend on specific wetland and intertidal conditions of the kind found at Brownsea Island.

Further capital works have also been undertaken on the site to simultaneously improve local peoples' connection to nature while protecting the integrity of the designated special protected area. New boardwalks and wooden screens have been installed across Brownsea Lagoon to protect the natural landscape beneath and reduce the disturbance to local bird populations, ensuring their populations can continue to grow safely.



More broadly, the DWT's water restoration activities across several of their sites is aimed at generating a positive impact for Poole Harbour. Historical agricultural runoff from several of the DWT's newly acquired sites has led to a high concentration of nitrates in Poole Harbour, negatively impacting aquatic life and water quality. Their work on sites across the Poole Harbour catchment ensures that the land is able to better hold onto water upstream, locking in sediments and nitrates to work as a carbon sink and reduce the nitrate runoff into the Harbour.

Legacy and Next Steps

SSF has enabled DWT to deliver work that had been long anticipated but previously unfunded at this scale, while building the capacity of its ranger teams through new trainees. Following the close of SSF, two trainees have continued to work in nature conservation, and the third has progressed to a further traineeship with DWT through alternative funding.

The clearest legacy lies in the interventions that have kick-started natural processes on sites previously degraded under prior ownership, particularly through the shift to landscape-scale grazing and the rewetting of key catchment areas. Alongside this, the growth in volunteer involvement and the strengthening of school partnerships have left DWT better placed to monitor the longer-term ecological impacts of SSF and to sustain restoration and maintenance work into the future.

The project's influence has also extended beyond DWT's own sites. Learning from the work is informing Natural England's planning for red-backed shrike reintroduction and shaping National Trust grassland management approaches in Purbeck, demonstrating that the project has begun to shape sector practice as well as deliver on the ground.

Coastal Grasslands Reconnected: Creating Tina's Haven Nature Reserve

Durham Heritage Coast Partnership – Coastal Grasslands Reconnected

Grant awarded: £975,150

Coastal Grasslands Reconnected was a large-scale habitat restoration and community engagement project delivered along the Durham Heritage Coast by the Heritage Coast Partnership, hosted by Durham County Council and in partnership with the National Trust and Durham Wildlife Trust. The project spanned a series of interconnected sites between Nose's Point, Blackhall, Horden, Easington, and Seaham, restoring and improving species-rich coastal grasslands, hedgerows, scrub, and ponds within a nationally and internationally designated landscape.



The Durham coast supports magnesian limestone grasslands and a range of priority species, including rare moths, butterflies, and wintering birds. Decades of industrial activity, followed by unsuitable grassland management, had left many sites in declining or unfavourable condition, with fragmented habitats limiting the ability of species to move across the landscape. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the partnership to take a strategic, landscape-scale approach. Rather than delivering small, isolated improvements, the project created a more continuous coastal corridor for wildlife while placing community involvement and wellbeing at the centre of its work. Central to this was the creation of Tina's Haven, a new nature reserve on the edge of Horden that served both as a significant piece of habitat restoration and as a focal point for community engagement along the coast.

Tina's Haven: Nature Recovery and Community Wellbeing

Tina's Haven, located at Warren House on the edge of Horden, is named in memory of Tina Robson, who lost her life to trauma-based addiction. The 34-hectare site, formerly intensively farmed arable land, was developed in close collaboration with Tina's mother, Dr Sue Robson, and a wide network of local organisations supporting women affected by addiction, trauma, and social isolation. From the outset, it was designed to be a safe, welcoming green space where people can come together, connect with nature and with each other, and contribute to something positive within their community.



The site has been transformed into a new nature reserve with woodland, wood pasture, grassland, hedgerows, ponds, and wetlands. Around 21,000 trees have been planted, filling a significant gap in the landscape and completing a continuous stretch of connected habitat between Seaham and Horden.

Local residents, recovery groups, community organisations, and schools all took part in tree planting and site creation activities. Participants planted trees alongside messages of hope, embedding personal meaning and shared purpose into the landscape. For many involved, particularly women in recovery, the site has offered a non-clinical, supportive environment where being outdoors and working collectively supported wellbeing, confidence, and social connection.

“Bringing the [people we support] to Tina's Haven has been incredibly powerful. I think tree planting and activities outdoors like this gives them a simple way to be outdoors, work together and also feel part of something positive. For many of them, this is the first time they had felt welcomed into a public space like this. [Tina's Haven] feels safe and full of hope - and that makes a real difference to wellbeing and recovery.” **Local Organisation**

“I’ve not really spent time in places like this. Planting trees and doing things [like this] definitely makes me feel part of something good. Not really about what we’ve been through, it’s just about being outside and doing something good together.” **Community Member**

The project found that straightforward, practical activities were particularly effective with people who had experienced trauma or long periods of disengagement from public life. Planting, walking, using tools, and spending time on the sites helped people reconnect, not only with nature but with themselves and others. Activities were designed to feel safe and welcoming rather than assuming prior confidence outdoors. Participants described feeling calmer, more purposeful, and more socially connected as a result of time spent at the site.

Filling the Gap in the Coastal Corridor

Tina’s Haven also plays a significant ecological role, acting as a critical link between National Trust land at White Lea Farm and the restored coastal grasslands to the north and south. Its creation added an important piece to the habitat corridor running between Nose’s Point, Blackhall, Horden, and Easington, supporting priority species including chalk carpet moth, cistus forester moth, and glow worm, as well as wintering birds that depend on coastal grasslands and high-tide roosts.



“Tina’s Haven has added an important missing piece of the jigsaw, allowing different types of flora and fauna to move more easily between sites. The creation of new woodland and new ponds has been especially significant in increasing habitat quality and diversity.” **Project Manager**

Across the wider project, habitat restoration focused on improving both the quality of coastal grasslands and the connections between sites. Work included baseline ecological surveys, installation of fencing and grazing infrastructure, hedgerow planting, pond restoration, scrub management, and the use of green hay to re-establish species-rich grasslands.

Drone surveys and UKHab assessments provided detailed habitat mapping across sites, enabling the team to prioritise work strategically and track change over time. Cliff edge management, including cutting back to allow for natural rollback, opened up a new approach to habitat management that the team had not previously had the skilled staff or resources to deliver.

Partnership Working

The partnership model was central to the ecological delivery. When staff left or capacity gaps emerged, partner organisations stepped in to maintain momentum. When a site was not suitable for a particular activity, work was transferred to another partner's site. This flexibility, staff suggested, built on a long history of shared working and a common goal, meant the project remained on track despite the challenges of a compressed delivery timeline.

Legacy and Next Steps

The legacy of Coastal Grasslands Reconnected is both environmental and social. Ecologically, the project leaves a network of better-connected, better-managed coastal habitats supporting higher species abundance and greater resilience to future pressures. The purchase of 34 hectares of land at Tina's Haven, and the planting of around 21,000 trees, created lasting change in the landscape that will continue to develop as woodland and grassland mature. Staff and rangers trained in botanical surveying, drone operation, GIS, and citizen science will carry that capacity forward, continuing to monitor and manage sites beyond the life of the project.



At Tina's Haven, the legacy is a nature reserve that brings together nature recovery and wellbeing. The partnerships formed with recovery organisations and local groups have established new ways of using the green space to support people affected by addiction, trauma and isolation. Improved access, including new circular paths linked to the coast path, means the site remains open and welcoming to the wider community. The site shows how SSF investment can deliver lasting benefits for both nature and people when habitat restoration is shaped by strong partnerships and genuine local need.

Next steps focus on building long term care for the site, keeping local communities involved, and using Tina's Haven as an example of how nature recovery can also support people's wellbeing and connection to place.

Rivers, Habitats and People: a Whole-Valley Approach

Groundwork Greater Manchester – Species and Habitat Recovery in the Medlock Valley

Grant awarded: £1,129,516

The Medlock Valley project demonstrates how ambitious river restoration can be successfully delivered when technical interventions, community engagement and workforce development are combined within a single coordinated project.

The Medlock Valley is a multi-site valley landscape embedded within Greater Manchester's urban fringe, where woodlands, wetlands and river corridors sit alongside densely populated neighbourhoods and public green spaces. The area is also affected by issues such as antisocial behaviour and the impact of stormy weather, all of which shaped how restoration work could be delivered. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled Groundwork Greater Manchester and its partners to undertake restoration work at a scale and pace that would not otherwise have been possible, unlocking progress on longstanding barriers, enhancing access to nature and investing in the next generation of environmental practitioners.

Delivering Complex River Restoration: The Weir Removal

One of the most significant achievements of the project was the successful removal of a weir on the River Medlock. This intervention was both technically challenging and heavily dependent on multi-agency cooperation. Delivery was initially delayed by substantial changes to the Environment Agency's Flood Risk Activity Permit (FRAP) process, resulting in a six-month setback before permissions were secured. Contractor delays during the feasibility stage further compressed the delivery window, while a period of intense storms altered riverbank conditions and demanded continual adjustments to the works. Despite these challenges, the team maintained momentum through flexible sequencing and close communication with partners, ultimately completing the restoration within the revised timeframe.



Removing the weir has created long-term ecological benefits for the river system. Improved fish passage and greater hydrological connectivity will support natural re-establishment of the river, with the most significant changes expected to become visible over the next five to ten years. The process also strengthened Groundwork's relationship with the Environment Agency and expanded organisational expertise in working with specialised contractors on river restoration projects.

Enhancing Access and Habitat Resilience

In addition to river restoration, the project delivered extensive access and habitat improvements across the Medlock Valley. Footpath reprofiling, drainage works and bridge repairs transformed sections of the valley that had long suffered from poor maintenance and storm damage. Rangers frequently received thanks from site users who noticed the enhanced accessibility and safety of the paths.

The project also incorporated natural flood management measures, including leaky dams and bank stabilisation. Storm events during the project period dramatically altered priorities on some sites, requiring emergency clearance of fallen or hazardous trees before planned restoration could continue. By addressing both environmental quality and physical access, the project has created landscapes better equipped to withstand climate impacts while supporting year-round community engagement. SSF funding provided the necessary capacity to invest in areas that local authorities had struggled to resource on sites that otherwise would have continued to decline.

Learning from Partnership-Based Volunteer Engagement

The success of volunteer engagement across the Medlock Valley project was driven by the way different partners brought their own established engagement models into a shared delivery framework. Rather than relying on a single approach, the project drew strength from the diversity of these models, each of which reached different audiences and created distinct entry points into nature-based activity:

- Groundwork Greater Manchester and the Conservation Volunteers focused on hyper-local, relationship-based recruitment, bringing in people who lived nearby and who often had little or no prior experience of environmental volunteering.

- Canal & Rivers Trust attracted experienced, roaming volunteers through its national membership system, bringing skilled participants from across the region.
- City of Trees delivered open-access events where anyone could sign up easily, appealing to flexible and occasional volunteers, and providing an effective model for corporate groups participating through one-off team volunteering days.

Together, these complementary models created a volunteer base that was broader, more diverse and more inclusive than any single organisation could have achieved alone. This diversity not only increased numbers but also deepened the social impact of the project. Many volunteers formed lasting relationships with each other and with the sites they worked on, with several describing a sense of ownership and emotional connection to places like Clayton Vale. This connection has been reinforced by the commissioning of a mural at Clayton Vale, installed on a well-used building at the site (see image below), which has received significant positive feedback from the local community and has become a valued feature of the site.



Developing the Future Workforce: Pre-Recruitment Traineeships

A further significant legacy of the project was the introduction of a pre-recruitment traineeship model that provided a structured pathway into green employment. This approach began with a two-week introductory period during which potential trainees could experience practical work and assess their interest in pursuing the role. Successful candidates then entered a two-week induction and went on to become full members of the delivery team, contributing directly to restoration work across the valley. Trainees gained practical experience in woodland, wetland and river restoration, as well as invasive species management and habitat maintenance. Additional training delivered by partners, such as pond management with The Conservation Volunteers and tree planting with City of Trees, provided a well-rounded ecological skill set.



The model proved transformative as trainees developed strong confidence in their abilities and a clear sense of belonging within the team. They expressed a desire to continue working in the environmental sector and became a highly valued part of the project workforce. Two of the trainees have since become permanent members of the Groundwork delivery team. Of the wider group of attendees at the pre-recruitment course, five gained further support through Groundwork's employment team, of which two moved into employment, including one role in the green retrofit sector. Groundwork has since identified the model as one it would seek to replicate in future projects, although it acknowledges that such a resource-intensive approach is only feasible with appropriate funding. SSF support was critical in enabling the organisation to pilot this high-quality, structured entry pathway, which is now considered a major legacy of the project.

Legacy and Next Steps

Through the combined efforts of its partners, the Medlock Valley project has delivered substantial ecological restoration, improved public access to green spaces and strengthened community involvement in nature stewardship. It has also demonstrated a powerful model for developing the environmental workforce of the future. The achievements of the project were made possible by SSF funding, which allowed Groundwork Greater Manchester to overcome longstanding barriers, coordinate multi-agency interventions and deliver integrated environmental and social outcomes at a landscape scale. The project serves as a compelling example of how investment in both people and place can advance nature recovery in a way that is resilient, inclusive and enduring.

Rare Waters: Restoring Hertfordshire's Chalk Rivers

Hertfordshire & Middlesex Wildlife Trust – Species Survival in Hertfordshire's Chalk Rivers

Grant awarded: £1,723,840



Hertfordshire's chalk rivers are among the rarest freshwater habitats on earth. There are fewer than 260 chalk streams in the entire world, and around 10% of them flow through Hertfordshire. These rivers support a unique ecology, providing habitat for iconic and threatened species such as the water vole, brown trout and a rich diversity of aquatic plants and invertebrates. Yet they are in serious decline with 77% of England's chalk streams failing to meet the required 'Good Status' under the Water Framework Directive, and nearly half are considered unlikely to meet conservation targets without significant intervention.

Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) has worked to restore and protect these rivers for over fourteen years through its Living Rivers Programme. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled HMWT to accelerate that work, delivering an ambitious programme of capital river restoration across five key sites within the River Lea catchment, which covers a 1,000 km² area. Three additional smaller sites were added in the final months using project underspend, further extending the reach of the programme.

Restoring the River Corridor

HMWT's capital restoration programme addressed a problem common to most of Hertfordshire's chalk rivers: decades of dredging had left channels over-widened, heavily silted and disconnected from their surrounding floodplains. Without the natural variation in flow, depth and bank structure that chalk streams require, the conditions essential for priority species had been degraded or lost entirely across most of the sites. Restoration

works were delivered over 11km across five main sites on the River Lea, River Quin, River Ash and River Stort.

Bank regrading, meander planform restoration, barrier removal (for fish passage), re-gravelling and large woody habitat installation were among the most significant capital works delivered through the programme. Where rivers had been dredged into steep, uniform channels, banks were reprofiled to gentler gradients, creating two-stage channels that allow the river to spread naturally into a floodplain shelf during high flows while improving safe access to the water's edge. Gravel was reinstated at multiple sites to restore the chalk riverbed lost through dredging, with 3,000 tonnes added at one site alone, directly creating wild brown trout spawning habitat and restoring the hydraulic connection to the chalk aquifer that underpins water quality and temperature stability. Large woody habitat features (hinged whole trees, felled limbs and brash berms) were introduced to add flow variability and complexity, with one 1.5km stretch augmented with large woody habitat to significantly increase refuge and diversity for fish and invertebrates.



Alongside in-channel works, a range of floodplain habitat features were created or restored. Offline ponds, online backwaters, wet grassland, reedbeds and ditches were created or enhanced at multiple sites, providing habitat for water voles, invertebrates, wetland birds and amphibians, and improving hydrological connectivity across the landscape. A dedicated Kingfisher nest bank was constructed at the River Stort, providing the steep earthen face that this species requires for nesting. Over 20ha of previously disconnected floodplain was re-wet at one site, by diverting stormwater drains, blocking ditches and creating an interconnected mosaic of wetland habitat features, not only benefitting wildlife but providing natural flood management benefits to communities downstream.

Adapting to Challenges

Delivering capital river restoration within a fixed two-year grant period presented significant practical challenges. River conditions are inherently dynamic, with seasonal restrictions on works to protect spawning fish and bird nesting compressing the available delivery windows

into a relatively short period each year. Autumn flooding slowed works at some sites, and the strong winter currents at times washed out recently placed bank materials and plantings, requiring additional remediation.

Obtaining permits presented another, more significant challenge, after the Environment Agency restructured its permitting system during the project's second year. The resulting delays in permits threatened to prevent completion of works at two major sites. HMWT was only able to resolve this by drawing on its long-standing relationship with the local Environment Agency team, whose support was critical in ensuring permits were ultimately secured from the national Environment Agency team in time for delivery.

A further complication arose at some sites where water vole burrows were discovered in areas that had been earmarked for restoration regrading. The animals had to be carefully relocated before works. In line with the mitigation hierarchy, HMWT flexed delivery around these burrows, applying avoidance as the first principle and adapting the location or sequencing of works where needed. This did not alter the project's overall delivery: HMWT still completed the works it had committed to and maintained the intended ambition, while taking a species-sensitive approach throughout.

Despite these challenges, HMWT met or exceeded its original capital targets. The project manager reflected that whilst the compressed timeline was demanding, their long-term relationships with landowners, contractors and statutory partners were critical in enabling it to move quickly and maintain momentum.

Working with Contractors and Landowners

Effective delivery depended on HMWT's ability to work flexibly with specialist contractors and maintain trusted relationships with the landowners on whose land restoration took place.

For most sites, years of relationship-building prior to the SSF project meant HMWT could move quickly once funding was confirmed. Design specifications were ready for three of the five main sites at the point of application, and agreements in principle were in place with all relevant landowners. In the final stages of the programme, HMWT brought forward three additional capital sites using underspend, working "right up till the end" to deliver them within the funding period. The ability to bring these additional sites forward was underpinned by the trust and credibility established through other programmes of HMWT's Living Rivers work. Having successfully delivered multiple projects during the programme, the Trust was able to engage additional landowners and progress new schemes at pace. The scale and visibility of delivery enabled by SSF has itself become a resource for further engagement. Completed restoration sites are now being used as demonstrator locations for prospective landowners and partners.

"Those sites... can be used as sort of show and tell case study sites and to get other new landowners on board... which has already happened."

Project Staff

The specialist contractors engaged across the programme demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt to the dynamic and often unpredictable conditions that river restoration involves. Working on chalk streams requires a particular sensitivity. The natural materials available on and around the site, including gravels, woody material, and bankside vegetation, could be used to enhance habitat features in ways far more ecologically valuable than imported or standardised solutions. The contractors brought to the project an understanding of how to respond to what the river was doing rather than simply following a fixed script. This flexibility proved especially important at sites where flooding, high flows, or unexpected ecological finds required plans to be adjusted on the ground.

The project team also highlighted the value of building strong relationships with contractors and local partners early on, as existing relationships and local knowledge helped the team navigate delays on the permitting system and maintain momentum on major restoration sites.

Early Signs of Recovery

The restored sites have already shown encouraging signs of ecological recovery, though the rivers will take years to fully evolve. A range of species were recorded on and around the project sites during and after the works through systematic pre- and post-works baseline surveys of key species groups, including water vole and otter, breeding birds, invertebrates and aquatic plants, with several sightings directly linked to newly created habitat features. This reflects both the quality of habitat being created and the broader ecological value of the river corridor. Sightings included Kingfisher, snipe, water vole, bullhead, lamprey, great crested newt grass snake, Notably, pre and post surveys have shown aquatic invertebrate populations to increase by 30-177% at some monitored sites and brown trout were recorded spawning on new gravel just months after installation through the project.

SSF supported the continuation of long-running water vole recovery work in this catchment, a priority since 1998, funding the Water Vole Officer post and habitat restoration works including management of invasive species. Extensive surveying undertaken as part of the SSF programme found that reintroduced populations have continued to spread, with populations at most key sites showing good distribution and abundance, and water voles returning to areas they had been absent from for approximately 20 years.

All major capital sites were also assessed using the MORPH Pro River Condition Assessment methodology, providing a baseline against which improvement can be tracked at years one, three, and five, post-restoration. Monitoring data across all species and habitats has been submitted to the Herts Environmental Records Centre, enriching the county's long-term biodiversity dataset and feeding into the emerging Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Species monitoring will continue through the post-works five-year management period.

“Some things are built and they [species] come instantly. Other things will take a bit of time to settle and green up. For the rivers, we’re expecting it will take up to six years for them to become what they will finally be.”

Project Staff

Legacy and Next Steps

The SSF programme significantly advanced HMWT's ambition for chalk river recovery across Hertfordshire, delivering more restoration in a two-year period than the Trust could have achieved over a longer timeframe through its regular funding streams. The scale and pace of delivery have also strengthened the Trust's organisational confidence and capacity to manage large, complex capital programmes.

The ecological legacy is secured through five-year management and maintenance plans, written to be practical and accessible for landowners and volunteers, and supported by a budget for ongoing monitoring and, where necessary, contractor input. The Trust expects restored chalk rivers to be largely self-sustaining once established, though some early management of bankside vegetation and pernicious weeds is anticipated in the first couple of years as new channels bed in.

"Delivering so much river restoration work in one hit over two years – that's a massive legacy. And the things it will inspire for what happens next." **Project Staff**

The project has also built a strong foundation for future restoration on and beyond the SSF sites. Completed restoration sites are being used as demonstration sites to bring new landowners into conversation with the Trust, with early interest already translating into new projects. At the time of the final interview, the Trust had confirmed funding from a range of sources to continue river restoration, water vole conservation and community engagement work. The profile and credibility of this work was also recognised nationally. HMWT put forward its work on the River Ash Restoration for the UK River Prize, which it won in April 2026. At 7km, the River Ash scheme was the largest restoration project delivered within HMWT's SSF project.

The project also leaves a lasting institutional legacy. The reformed contract management and tendering processes developed through the programme, with the support of the Heritage Fund, will inform how HMWT manages all future capital delivery.

"It's amazing what can be achieved with a sizeable investment in nature."
Project Staff

Citizen Science and Connectivity to support Willow Tit across the Mersey Valley

Lancashire Wildlife Trust – Wet Willow Wildlife

Grant awarded: £524,177

The Wet Willow Wildlife project worked to restore and reconnect wet willow habitat across the Mersey Valley to support the recovery of the Willow Tit. The Willow Tit is one of England's most rapidly declining bird species, entirely dependent on wet willow scrub for nesting and feeding. Survey data from 2023 recorded only seven pairs across twenty-one square kilometres of the project area, a dramatic decline from the eighty-eight pairs recorded in earlier years. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the partnership to move from piecemeal, site-by-site interventions to a coordinated, landscape-scale programme of habitat restoration informed by citizen science.

The project operated across a wide geography spanning parts of Greater Manchester, Lancashire, and Merseyside. Lancashire Wildlife Trust and The Conservation Volunteers each took responsibility for their own sites while maintaining a shared vision for connectivity across the wider landscape, drawing on a long-standing working relationship and shared methods that meant separate workstreams still contributed to a single coherent programme.

Site Selection Led by Citizen Science

The origins of the project lay in earlier partnership work across Greater Manchester, where detailed habitat assessments and species surveys had repeatedly highlighted how fragmented wet willow habitat had become. Those earlier findings created both the rationale and the method for choosing sites. Rather than starting with organisational boundaries or land availability, the team began with ecological data. Historical and current species records were analysed across the region, particularly those relating to Willow Tits, which helped pinpoint where the strongest overlaps lay between past abundance and present-day remnants of suitable habitat. The project partners then examined woodland corridors and mapped surrounding habitat types to understand the wider conditions that would enable movement and breeding success.

Although new members of staff needed time to become familiar with the complexities of these landscapes, the evidence base helped minimise uncertainty during that early phase. It also allowed partners to have informed conversations with contractors and landowners. Where statutory consents or felling licences introduced delays, the existing data ensured that the team could prioritise areas where early activity would deliver the strongest ecological return. As a result, the emerging programme of work was not only spatially coherent but tailored to the ecological pressures identified on each site.

Strengthening Connectivity Across a Fragmented Landscape

From the beginning, connectivity was treated as a practical requirement for species survival. Four habitat corridors were identified as priorities, each chosen because they bridged gaps in a region where wet willow stands had become increasingly isolated. Citizen science surveying then added another layer of insight. By gathering data at a broad scale, volunteers helped confirm which corridors still had enough structural potential for restoration, and which needed more significant intervention. Negative survey records proved as useful as positive ones: knowing where Willow Tits were absent helped the team focus and prioritise sites to fit project timescale and avoid investing in sites that just looked ecologically promising. Not in vain, the survey activity could be useful in identifying sites for future projects looking to extend connectivity across the landscape.

Working across a large geography also required careful coordination between partners, contractors, and volunteers. Because SSF funding encouraged collaboration across organisational boundaries, partners were able to focus on connectivity rather than individual parcels of land. This led to the identification and enhancement of four major habitat corridors that would otherwise have remained isolated efforts.

The Willow Tit as a Marker of Urgency and Motivation

The Willow Tit served as both target species and motivating force throughout the project. Its decline is rooted in long-term changes in land management, including the loss of traditional coppicing practices that once maintained the scrubby, structurally complex woodland it depends on. The scale of that loss was emotionally powerful for staff and volunteers who had worked on earlier phases of wetland restoration in the area.

This urgency reinforced the need for rapid habitat restoration work despite the project experiencing challenges with delayed project start dates and narrow survey windows. Staff began preparatory work and volunteer training before the formal start of the project so that they could secure baseline data needed to track changes. The motivation was rooted in both ecological evidence and a practical understanding that missing a single breeding season could set back the species' recovery substantially. Through this lens, the Willow Tit served not just as a target species but as the project's emotional and scientific compass. Its vulnerability helped galvanise cross-organisational buy-in, strengthened the case for investment in connectivity, and brought clarity to where the project could secure the greatest conservation gain.

Volunteer Training, New Techniques, and Staff Learning

Volunteers became a foundational element of the project's ability to deliver large-scale restoration within tight timescales. Citizen science volunteers produced the early survey data that shaped the initial programme of works. Without their involvement, the project area would have been too large for professional surveyors to cover in the necessary timeframe and budget. That data gave planners confidence about where to intervene and provided an evidence base for monitoring outcomes.



Volunteer involvement in habitat works also generated practical insights. The team found that pairing contractors with volunteer groups created a more efficient model than relying on either alone. Contractors handled large or skilled tasks, including felling, while volunteers carried out high-volume work that benefited from many hands. Contractors were asked to fell and leave rather than tidy sites, saving significant time and allowing the budget to stretch to additional sites.

This not only stretched the budget but built a sense of shared ownership that supported long-term maintenance. Working with established groups such as Bolton Conservation Volunteers also strengthened local networks and created continuity between different phases of the project.



One of the most instructive technical decisions was the choice in many areas to lay, rather than fell, willow. By cutting the trees and leaving them attached rather than removing them entirely, the team stimulated coppice regrowth and willow regeneration from the laid stems.

Early results showed new growth within the first season, and the team expected meaningful habitat improvement within three to five years as regrowth matures into the scrubby, multi-stemmed structure that Willow Tits need for nesting.

“The combination of citizen science and habitat work side-by-side is essential. It is no good doing habitat work just because it looks right if there are no records in or nearby, while a site with Willow Tit records might have slightly different conditions but offer better connectivity.”

Project Manager

Legacy and Next Steps

The project leaves a network of restored wet willow sites across the Mersey Valley, with baseline UKHab surveys now in place across all sites where none previously existed. The habitat work has reduced invasive species and opened up the canopy, creating the conditions for willow regeneration over the next three to five years. Ongoing light-touch management, including balsam control and removal of ash and sycamore saplings, will continue through a small budget and the involvement of volunteer groups who developed ownership and familiarity with the sites during the project. The Trust has also received a Heritage Fund grant to support this work for another year. Meaningful change for the Willow Tit will take many years and sustained effort across the landscape. However, the restored sites, trained volunteers, and richer evidence base mean the conditions for recovery are stronger than they were, and the partnership is actively pursuing further funding to build on what SSF made possible.

Saving species, Restoring Communities

The New Forest National Park Authority – Re:New Nature in the New Forest

Grant awarded: £1,042,297

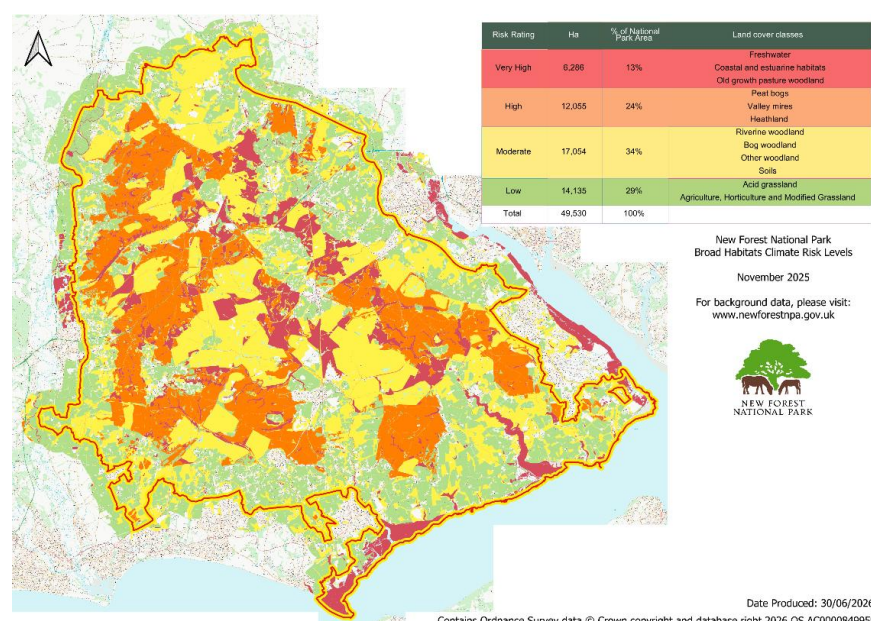
The New Forest National Park in the south of England is one of Europe's most biodiverse landscapes, home to around 20,000 animal and plant species, all six of the UK's native reptile species, more freshwater species of conservation concern per square kilometre than anywhere else in the country and internationally important populations of breeding birds including Nightjar, Woodlark, and Dartford Warbler.

At its core is the unique and iconic grazed mosaic of heathlands, woodlands and wetlands. This is surrounded by a mixture of pasture and arable farmland, improved grassland for recreational use and a mix of native woodlands and conifer plantations, with 26 miles of coastline to the south.

Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the New Forest National Park Authority and five specialist partner organisations to target this fringe surrounding the Open Forest, restoring and connecting habitats outwards from the core so that species and the landscape as a whole could become more resilient to climate change. Work spanned four habitat types: wetland, heathland, grassland, and woodland, across 31 sites.

Restoring the Fringe to Strengthen the Whole: A Landscape-Scale Strategy

Restoring and reconnecting habitats on the fringe of the New Forest's species-rich core aimed to improve ecological conditions across the wider landscape, allowing species abundance and diversity in adjacent and newly restored areas to increase without the need to actively manage individual species. The approach also had a climate resilience dimension.



Climate risk mapping of the national park (illustrated in the image on the previous page) identified many parts of the Open Forest core as being at 'high to very high' risk from climate change, while the farmland fringe showed relatively higher adaptive capacity. A restored and connected fringe therefore served not only as habitat in its own right but as space into which species could move as the core comes under increasing climate stress.

A Multi-Taxa Partnership Built Around the Landscape

The project brought together five specialist partners: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Freshwater Habitats Trust, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, the New Forest Commoners Defence Association, and Wild New Forest CIC. Each partner led on the sites and species relevant to their specialism, but the model went beyond a conventional division of labour. From the outset, every partner reviewed every site plan, so that opportunities identified by a freshwater specialist could be incorporated alongside work a reptile specialist was already planning on the same site. Rather than spreading effort across a larger number of landowners and delivering a single intervention on each, the partnership prioritised stacking actions on sites where the relationship and landowner commitment were already established.

At an estate in the north of the National Park, scarification and acid wildflower seeding were combined with hedgelaying, fencing, and hedge gapping to improve conditions for pollinators, nesting birds, and reptiles through a single engagement.

Whilst on another estate in the south, scrub and gorse removal combined with litter scraping and the creation of sand patches as well as the restoration of a pond complex, established heathland habitat for sand lizard, smooth snake, adder, Nightjar, and tiger beetle. Within months of work completing, tiger beetles and black adders were recorded in the newly created areas.

The National Park Authority's role as lead organisation was central to making this model work. With a statutory responsibility to work with partners to achieve outcomes for nature, people and place across the National Park, it was well placed to convene and support the partnership and ensure that the project delivered coherently across the landscape rather than as a collection of separate conservation actions.

"The New Forest National Park landscape is a mosaic landscape. It is made up of these different types of habitats, which are in really close interaction with each other - there's less point in us doing that habitat unless we're doing the whole, because they all interact with each other." **Project Team**

Landowner engagement was sustained through cluster groups and peer-to-peer learning networks already established in the New Forest. For many participants, involvement in the project connected them to a conservation effort that extended well beyond their individual landholding.

As one member of the project team observed, the SSF provided an opportunity for landowners to have a sense of shared purpose and feel part of the New Forest as a place, community and landscape, which was important in securing long-term commitment to habitat management.

"The key strength of our delivery model is the partnership and the way that that works in the New Forest and is continually growing and developing and flexing." **Project Team**

Legacy and Next Steps

Reflecting on the project's legacy, the team identified three distinct strands. The ways of working developed through the project, including shared site planning and collective decision-making across organisations, represent a model the National Park Authority intends to carry forward into future programmes, alongside the sustained landowner networks supported through cluster groups and peer engagement. The capital works delivered restored and connected habitat, secured through ten-year landowner management agreements that will keep those sites in active conservation management well beyond the funding period. Many of the sites had not previously been surveyed systematically, and the baseline monitoring established through this project substantially extended knowledge of what the New Forest's peripheral landscape holds, with three years of post-project monitoring planned to track how species respond to the interventions over time.

A Journey to a Wilder Druridge

Northumberland Wildlife Trust – Biodiversity Boost

Grant awarded: £735,395

The Biodiversity Boost project, delivered by Northumberland Wildlife Trust, worked to restore and reconnect priority habitats across three sites at Druridge Bay: Hauxley, West Chevington, and East Chevington, covering around 500 hectares in total. Much of the land originated from opencast mining restoration, leaving behind nutrient-rich soils, poor-quality arable fields, and dense conifer plantations with limited biodiversity value. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding made it possible to tackle long-planned restoration work at scale and at pace, delivering habitat creation, woodland connections, reed bed improvements, and burn rewiggling across all three sites within two years, accelerating work that would otherwise have taken much longer.



The project was delivered alongside a team of two project officers, two trainees, and a ranger, supported by partnerships with Flexigraze, EcoNorth, Silvermoor, and Northumberland Zoo. A dedicated engagement and monitoring officer oversaw volunteer and community programmes, while a land management and biodiversity officer managed contractors, consents, and ecological surveys. This division of responsibilities was identified as one of the key factors in keeping delivery on track.

Woodland Restructuring and Statutory Consents

The most technically complex element of the project was the restructuring of dense conifer plantations at West Chevington. A felling licence covering a 30% thin across approximately 20 hectares was secured from the Forestry Commission. The process required careful management given the sensitivity of the red squirrel habitat on and around the site.

Securing statutory consents proved one of the project's most significant challenges, as applications took considerably longer than anticipated, pushing planned woodland work back by a full winter season. The team's key learning was that consent applications should be submitted in the first winter of a project of this kind, before contractors are engaged, to avoid losing delivery windows to seasonal restrictions.

Once consents were in place, thinning opened up the canopy and allowed light to reach the woodland floor, promoting natural regeneration of native species and creating new ecological corridors through the plantation. Storm damage and windblow created additional complexity, requiring the team to think carefully about how to manage fallen timber in ways that maintained rather than disrupted wildlife corridors. Some of the felled timber was used within watercourses to create leaky dams, slowing water flow, filtering out sediment and chemicals, and creating wetland habitat as a secondary benefit of the woodland works.

Working with contractors for the thinning programme required persistence. Securing competitive quotes proved difficult, as the project area is relatively small compared to the large commercial sites that major contractors typically prioritise. The team responded by sharing contractor contacts with other SSF projects and compiling a list for future reference across the Druridge Bay reserves, a practical contribution to a wider challenge that several projects in the programme encountered. Staff completing chainsaw training through the project was a significant gain from this experience, building in-house capacity for ongoing woodland management that will remain with the trust long term.

"I did chainsaw training, quadbike, brushcutter, and biodiversity qualifications, and I've been able to use so much of it on the project. It feels like an investment in me that will now be an investment in the sites long term." **Project Officer**

Protecting the coastal red squirrel population at Druridge Bay was a priority running through all woodland decisions. Expanded camera trap monitoring enabled the ranger to target grey squirrel and American mink control more strategically across a large geographical area, strengthening the protection of a red squirrel population that is nationally significant. Opening up habitat corridors presented a risk as well as an opportunity, since the same routes that benefited red squirrels could also create new pathways for grey squirrels. The team managed this carefully through spatial planning and ongoing monitoring throughout the project.

Reedbed, Grassland, and Watercourse Restoration

Alongside the woodland works, the project tackled a range of other habitat challenges across the three sites. At East Chevington, reedbeds were restructured and translocated to improve conditions for Bittern, Marsh Harrier, and Bearded Tit. The results were visible quickly. Staff observed an immediate increase in wildlife activity in the restored reedbeds, where previously the density of vegetation had left insufficient open water and edge habitat for these species to thrive.

At West Chevington, the priority was creating species-rich grassland from nutrient-rich arable land. The team developed an innovative partnership with local farming contractor Silvermoor, in which Silvermoor undertook cut and collect hay cuts across the fields as a form of nutrient stripping, in exchange for retaining the harvested material. The model aligned conservation goals with farming economics in a way that suited both parties and that the trust intends to build on. At Hauxley, wild meadows that had previously been ordinary grassy fields became a sea of wildflowers by the end of the project, demonstrating the visible ecological changes that can emerge through longer term habitat restoration. To support this, the project partnered with Flexigraze, a local grazing partner using GPS collar technology to manage cattle movement without fixed fencing. This approach provided a way of maintaining the species rich grassland while helping to sustain the ecological gains achieved through the restoration.



The rewiggling of the burn at East Chevington (realigning watercourses to restore a more natural channel form), had been identified as a priority for at least ten years before SSF funding made it possible. It improved water quality, slowed sediment movement, and created new wetland habitat along the length of the realigned channel. The team noted that the reedbed and rewiggling works were more effective together than either would have been in isolation; improving the reedbed without addressing upstream sediment would have created a bottleneck, whilst rewiggling without improving the reedbed would have left restored water quality with nowhere to support new wetland habitat.

Monitoring, Engagement, and Opening Up the Reserve

The project significantly expanded the monitoring capacity of the sites, investing in approaches that will continue generating data long after the project period. eDNA testing was extended to include soil as well as watercourses, breaking new ground for the trust. Acoustic monitoring equipment and pollinator counters were installed to collect data continuously without requiring staff time, and UKHab surveys provided a comprehensive habitat baseline across all three sites where none had previously existed. This baseline data has been submitted as part of the evidence base for the North of Tyne Local Nature Recovery Strategy and will inform habitat management decisions across the reserves for years to come.

An accessible hide at Hauxley, with a ramp and wide door for wheelchair access, averaged over 1,000 visitors per month, with interpretation boards inside explaining the restoration work taking place across the reserve. Wildlife cameras streamed live footage into the visitor centre café, allowing people to experience the reserve without needing to physically be on the sites. New bridleways were opened and drainage works carried out to make previously inaccessible routes walkable. Films made throughout the project created a visual record of change over time that the trust plan to build on.



Volunteer engagement went well beyond expectations. A committed group of regular volunteers attended sessions in all weathers, with many coming almost every week. Some had volunteered with the trust elsewhere but had not previously worked on these sites. Others were entirely new, drawn in by walks and talks before going on to take up practical volunteering. Volunteers described gaining new skills, forming social connections, and developing a sense of ownership and pride in the sites. Several took what they had learned back to their own gardens and local communities.

*“An atmosphere of learning.” **Volunteer**, describing the sessions*

Legacy and Next Steps

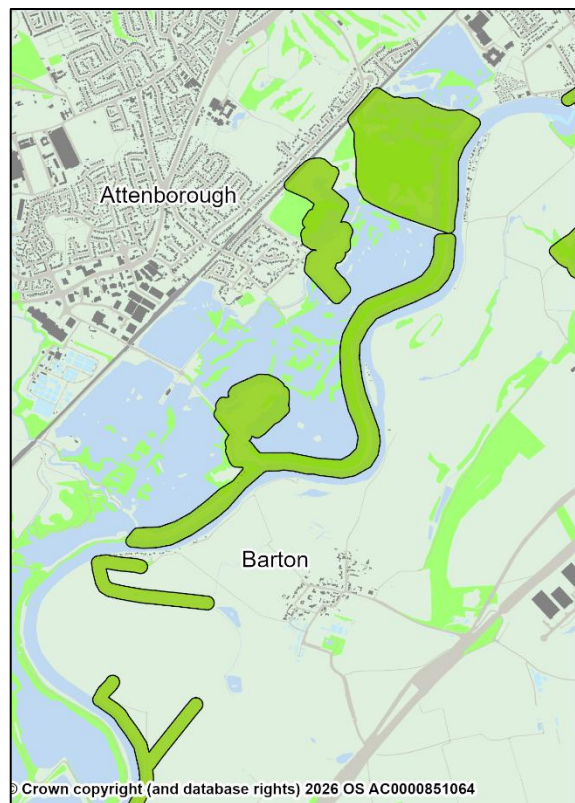
The project leaves all three sites better connected and better monitored than they were at the outset. Woodland thinning, reedbed restructuring, grassland creation, and watercourse realignment have together improved habitat continuity across Low Hauxley, West Chevington, and East Chevington, allowing species to move more freely between areas that were previously fragmented. Volunteers trained in survey techniques through the project can now carry out monitoring without staff support, and all three project roles have now been made permanent, providing continued professional oversight of the wider reserve network. Ecological improvements are expected to develop further over a five to twenty year timeframe depending on habitat type. At Hauxley and East Chevington, the project built on established conservation work, while at West Chevington, a more recently acquired site, it marks the beginning of a longer restoration ambition that will require continued investment to realise.

Attenborough Nature Reserve: Advancing Wetland Restoration, Innovation, and Community Engagement

Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust – Thriving in a Wilder Trent

Grant awarded: £875,602

The Thriving in a Wilder Trent project, delivered by Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (NWT) worked to restore and reconnect priority floodplain and riparian habitats across the Trent Valley catchment, from Willington in Derbyshire to West Burton in Nottinghamshire. Operating across NWT reserves, partner-owned sites, and privately owned land, the project addressed the long-term fragmentation of wetland habitats caused by intensive agriculture, development, and mineral extraction, aiming to build a more resilient ecological network through habitat creation, stepping-stone sites, and improved connectivity along the river corridor.



Attenborough Nature Reserve, nationally important for its lowland open waters, emergent vegetation, wet floodplain woodland, and breeding and wintering bird populations, served as the project's flagship site. It is also one of the most visited nature reserves in the East Midlands, which meant restoration work had to be designed and managed alongside significant public use. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding gave NWT the resources to trial

new habitat management approaches at scale and to develop an engagement programme that made productive use of that public presence.

Innovation in Habitat Management

A central feature of the project was the opportunity to trial habitat management approaches that NWT had not previously been able to resource. Three innovations at Attenborough generated learning that is now being embedded across the Trust's wider reserve network and is expected to strengthen future funding applications.

The first was reedbed propagation from seed. SSF funding enabled the construction of a polytunnel at Langford Lowfields, an RSPB site and key project partner, to germinate reed from seed and grow on plants for transplanting. The polytunnel produced around 20,000 plants in its first season. The key learning was about the value of partnership-based self-sufficiency: rather than procuring planting stock externally each season, the partnership now has a sustainable supply that reduces costs and allows the pace of reedbed expansion to continue independently of procurement budgets.

“This project has helped us use nature-based solutions to manage water and carbon better. We’ve closed most of the gaps along the river, which creates much better joined-up habitat for wildlife.” **Project Staff**



The second was adaptive grazing using NoFence GPS collar technology. Conventional stock fencing is difficult to maintain in flood-prone wetland environments, and as a result some areas had not been incorporated into the grazing management regime. The NoFence system uses virtual boundaries, managed through a smartphone app, to guide cattle without physical infrastructure, opening up new areas at Attenborough and Besthorpe and allowing grazing patterns to be adjusted in response to seasonal conditions. The trial confirmed the

technology is viable in these field conditions, and the collars are now integrated into NWT's long-term grazing management plans. Grazing stimulates greater variety in plant life, which in turn supports invertebrate diversity, and the collars are also enabling NWT to meet its obligations under Higher Level Stewardship on a number of sites.

The third innovative trial was the use of a roboflail for invasive species and scrub management. Himalayan balsam had been a persistent challenge across the project area, and the roboflail made it possible to tackle dense or difficult-to-access stands more quickly and with less physical demand on staff and volunteers. The practical effect was significant, as scrub clearance that had previously required large volunteer teams over extended periods could be completed far more efficiently, freeing capacity for other work. NWT also developed a balsam removal toolkit designed to support self-led community groups beyond the immediate project area, extending the reach of the programme.

“What we were able to do over this two-year project, we might have done over ten years under normal circumstances.” **Project Staff**

Community Engagement and Volunteering

Attenborough's high visitor numbers meant there was an existing public audience to build on, and NWT used the project to test which engagement formats worked best for different groups. A key learning emerged from drop-in balsam removal sessions run during the school summer holidays. These sessions, which required no prior booking, attracted over 30 participants per session, with many saying the flexible format suited them better than a regular volunteering commitment. This learning has since informed NWT's broader volunteering approach, with the People and Nature Team taking the model forward. Other activities included family days, guided walks, beaver watch evenings, and community events that combined engagement with practical conservation work.

Across the project, 101 new volunteers were engaged, exceeding the ambitions for the project. Four new volunteer leads were trained, and three new volunteer groups were established on NWT sites.

Partnership Working

The project was delivered across a partnership of six organisations, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Canal and River Trust (CRT), Trent Rivers Trust (TRT), Gedling Conservation Trust, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust and Nottingham City Council. Each responsible for their own workstream, with monthly catch-ups used to maintain accountability and shared progress. When several partners faced internal disruption mid-project, the ability to redistribute responsibility without losing momentum across the wider project proved important.

The experience pointed to two learnings for future projects of this kind. Firstly, a clear accountability structure across partners matters, but flexibility to adapt when circumstances change matters equally. Secondly, partnership agreements also need to be in place early

enough to allow relationship-building with landowners before delivery begins. In this project, agreements were not finalised until autumn 2024, compressing active delivery into approximately twelve months and limiting the time available to deepen connectivity work along the Trent.

Legacy and Next Steps

The innovative approaches trialled have left NWT better equipped for long-term habitat management across its reserve network. The NoFence collars are now used across the reserve network, enabling grazing on areas that had previously been unmanageable. The reedbed polytunnel at Langford Lowfields, an RSPB site and key project partner, is already producing plants for the 2026 season. Through the partnership, NWT has access to a sustainable supply of planting stock that removes a recurring procurement cost and allows habitat creation to continue at pace.

The roboflail has considerably reduced the time and resource required for scrub and invasive species management, freeing ranger and volunteer time for other work. Key infrastructure including tern rafts, floating habitats, metal fencing, and the Green Climber are similarly now built into routine site management plans at Attenborough and across the reserve network.



New volunteer groups and trained volunteer leads will also help maintain Attenborough over the long term. Baseline surveys and monitoring equipment mean habitat condition and species recovery can now be tracked and used to guide future management. The project leaves NWT better equipped, better informed, and better connected to continue nature recovery and engagement work both at Attenborough and across the Trent Valley.

“This project hasn't just delivered outputs; it's changed how we work long-term.” **Project Manager**

Ribble Revival: Room for Rivers - Youth Engagement Through Nature Recovery

Ribble Rivers Trust – Ribble Revival: Room for Rivers

Grant awarded: £1,650,051



Ribble Rivers Trust (formally the Ribble Catchment Conservation Trust) is an environmental charity established over 25 years ago by volunteers to conserve, protect, rehabilitate and improve the rivers, riparian habitats and wider landscapes of the Ribble catchment.

The Room for Rivers programme was developed in response to evidence of long-term declines in key aquatic species across the Ribble catchment, including smelt, eels, salmon and trout. Analysis undertaken by the Trust identified that these declines were being driven by a combination of pressures affecting the four key areas of catchment health: water quality, water quantity, habitat quality and habitat connectivity. Many of the rivers and streams within the catchment had been historically modified, straightened, culverted or disconnected from their floodplains, reducing the quality and resilience of habitats for wildlife and increasing flood risk for local communities.

Species Survival Fund (SSF) investment enabled the Trust to deliver a series of targeted nature-based interventions at strategic locations across the catchment. Building on previous investment and restoration work, the project focused on restoring and reconnecting wildlife-rich habitats, including rivers and streams, wetlands and open standing waters.

Jamie's Farm: Nature Recovery and Youth Engagement

Haugh Field Farm, near Coniston Cold in North Yorkshire, became a key delivery site within the Room for Rivers programme through a partnership between Ribble Rivers Trust and Jamie's Farm. Jamie's Farm works with young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) or at risk of becoming NEET, alongside Looked After Children,

refugees, and asylum seekers, providing opportunities to engage in farming, nature, and outdoor learning in a supportive environment. Working with small groups of young people, the charity uses practical activities and time spent outdoors to build confidence, resilience, teamwork, and connection.

The project created an opportunity to combine nature recovery with youth engagement. The site, which spans around 250 acres, is owned by a supportive private landowner committed to regenerative farming and habitat restoration. Together, Jamie's Farm and Ribble Rivers Trust used the funding to transform previously underused and unproductive areas of land into wildlife-rich habitat, creating a demonstration site showing how nature restoration can work alongside farming rather than competing with it.

Historically, much of the land had been managed intensively for livestock grazing, reflecting wider agricultural practices that prioritised maximising productive land use. Over time, this had contributed to habitat loss, degraded soils, culverted watercourses, and declining biodiversity. Through the project, formerly culverted streams were opened up to create more natural watercourses and ponds, while native tree planting, hedgerow restoration, wetland creation, and access improvements helped establish a more diverse and connected landscape for wildlife.

Young people involved through Jamie's Farm played an active role in this work. Activities included tree planting, wetland plug planting, habitat creation, fencing, monitoring, and learning about biodiversity, regenerative farming, and river restoration. Staff reflected that practical, outdoor activities were particularly effective at engaging young people who had often experienced disruption, exclusion, or limited access to nature previously. Working alongside staff, volunteers, and conservation specialists gave participants opportunities to learn new skills, contribute to visible environmental change, and spend time in a calm and supportive setting.

The project also created opportunities for young people from urban areas to connect with farming and environmental management in ways they may not otherwise have experienced. Staff described how the site enabled discussions around food systems, farming practices, biodiversity, and climate resilience, helping participants better understand the relationship between people, land, and nature.

Alongside the social outcomes, the site contributes to wider ecological restoration across the Ribble catchment. The restored stream and wetland habitats are designed to improve water quality, create habitat for invertebrates and eels, slow water flow, and support broader ecosystem recovery. Hedgerow planting and natural flood management measures help reconnect habitats across the farmed landscape while also demonstrating approaches that could be replicated elsewhere.

Demonstrating Regenerative Farming in Practice

A significant theme emerging from the project was the role of demonstration sites in influencing wider land management practices. Staff described how some neighbouring farms were initially sceptical about using land for habitat restoration, viewing it as a loss of productive agricultural space. However, the project showed how relatively small and less productive areas of land could be repurposed for wildlife and natural flood management without negatively affecting the farm's overall viability.



Ribble Rivers Trust highlighted the importance of trusted relationships with farmers in encouraging wider adoption of these approaches. Through its Farm Advisor Network and practical demonstration projects such as Jamie's Farm, the Trust is helping to build confidence within the farming community around regenerative practices and nature-based solutions.

The project also demonstrated the value of combining different funding sources and partnerships. Additional investment in fencing infrastructure alongside the Species Survival Fund work helped protect newly created habitats from livestock and strengthened the long-term sustainability of the restoration work.

Challenges and Learning

As with many SSF projects, delivery took place within compressed timescales, creating challenges around procurement, contractor availability, and seasonal working windows. Wet weather also delayed some works, particularly where ground conditions risked damaging the site.

The project team reflected that habitat restoration is inherently long term, with many of the ecological benefits likely to emerge gradually over several years as vegetation establishes and habitats mature. Monitoring and maintenance will therefore remain important beyond

the formal project period. Staff also identified the importance of ongoing funding for maintenance, replacement planting, monitoring, and continued community engagement to ensure the long-term success of the site.

A further learning point related to the value of shared evidence and monitoring. Regular water quality sampling and ecological monitoring undertaken through the project are helping build an evidence base around the effectiveness of nature-based solutions within farmed landscapes. Staff suggested that sharing learning and data across projects could help encourage wider adoption of similar approaches nationally.

Legacy and Next Steps

The legacy of the Room for Rivers work at Jamie's Farm is both ecological and social. The project has created new wetland, hedgerow, and stream habitats that will continue to develop over time, contributing to improved biodiversity, water quality, and habitat connectivity within the wider Ribble catchment. As the site matures, it is expected to provide increasing value for wildlife while also acting as a practical demonstration of regenerative farming and nature-based flood management.

The project also leaves a lasting legacy through the young people involved in delivery activities. By connecting participants with farming, conservation, and environmental restoration, the project helped build confidence, practical skills, and stronger relationships with nature. Staff described how the work created opportunities for young people to experience nature in a positive and accessible way, while contributing to something tangible and lasting within the landscape.

Looking ahead, Ribble Rivers Trust and Jamie's Farm hope to continue using the site as a learning and demonstration space for schools, volunteers, community groups, and farmers. There is also potential to expand ecological monitoring and use the evidence gathered through the project to support wider adoption of regenerative farming and river restoration approaches across the catchment. Continued partnership working, community involvement, and long-term investment will be important in ensuring the site continues to deliver benefits for both wildlife and people beyond the lifetime of the SSF programme.

More, Bigger, Better, Joined Up

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – Species Coastal and Wetlands

Grant awarded: £2,487,752.00

Coastal and wetland habitats across southern and eastern England have faced sustained pressure from habitat loss, poor water management, and the impacts of climate change. Breeding wader populations have declined sharply as a result, with Lapwing numbers down by around 80% since 1960 and Redshank by over 25% in 25 years. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the RSPB to address these pressures at landscape scale, working across ten reserves and third-party sites on the Hoo Peninsula, at Dungeness, Otmoor, Wallasea, and Medmerry.



The project aimed to make coastal and wetland habitats bigger, better connected, and richer in species, following the [Lawton principles of 'more, bigger, better, and joined up'](#). Alongside capital works, the project developed partnerships with the Kings Trust, the Church Commissioners for England, landowners, farmers, and community organisations to connect a wider range of people with nature and support a shift towards nature-friendly land management beyond the RSPB's own reserve network.

Habitat Restoration and Species Recovery

The project restored coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, creating new islands for breeding birds, installing predator exclusion fencing, and delivering hydrological improvements including foot drains, bunds, sluices, and pumps across multiple sites. Careful budget tracking enabled the team to identify underspend and direct it to a new site at Higham Marshes, adding habitat that also strengthened connectivity across the wider Hoo Peninsula landscape.

“Higham Marshes has always been near the top of the list [of important activity] but always got pushed down by activity that was more urgent. A lot of that the Higham Marshes bit is really great because it's connected to the Hoo Peninsula so there's a great bit of connectivity there. Parts of it would have happened over time but it would have taken a lot longer and would have been nowhere near as connected as it now is.” **Project Staff**

Staff frequently reported that species have responded quickly to project activity. At Medmerry, terns and other bird species moved straight onto newly installed rafts within the same breeding season, and Lapwing at Wallasea responded rapidly to the creation of new islands. Lapwing and Redshank breeding pairs across the project sites are projected to increase substantially, with strong results anticipated as habitats continue to establish.

Habitat connectivity was central to the design of the work throughout. Restoration across multiple marshes in South Essex created a network of sites whose water levels can now be managed flexibly, allowing areas to be rested and given time to recover, making the wider landscape more resilient to the increasingly dry summers the region has experienced in recent years.

Partnerships with Landowners and Farmers

A well-established farm cluster network within the Hoo Peninsula gave the project a strong starting point, and working relationships developed to the point where farmers were coming to the project team with their own ideas about where fencing should go. Those relationships will continue through '[Whose Hoo](#)', another Heritage Fund supported project in the same landscape. The project also established a new partnership between the RSPB and the Church Commissioners for England, one of the largest landowners in the country, restoring floodplain grazing marsh on their land for the first time. The project team saw this as among the most significant outcomes of the project, with a realistic prospect of further collaboration across a landholding large enough to make a meaningful difference to nature at scale. Securing legal agreements with third-party landowners was the most time-consuming element of this work, consistently taking longer than expected, and the project team highlighted the need for better planning support internally to navigate this process more efficiently in future.

The project also funded a Wet Grassland Adviser who worked with farmers and landowners in the Norfolk Broads and Suffolk Coast, providing them with free advice on managing wet grassland for breeding Waders. Staff reported that a government restriction on agri-environment schemes during the project period meant fewer landowners could commit to formal management changes. However, supported by the Wet Grassland Adviser, two landowners chose to install wetland features on their land using their own funding within the project timeline, improving water retention on sites facing increasingly dry conditions. The adviser role has been extended, and further landowners are expected to follow as agri-environment schemes reopen.

Reaching New Audiences

Engagement activity exceeded its targets considerably, reaching many more members of the public on reserves than planned. The most effective activity took place where the project worked through community organisations with existing relationships with the groups it wanted to reach, rather than relying on open invitations.

At RSPB Dungeness, a funded Community Engagement Officer worked with refugees, asylum seekers, young carers, adults with additional needs, and local families, many of whom had not previously been aware the reserve existed. All activities were free to attend and transport to the site was provided, removing the practical barriers that would otherwise have prevented access.



A partnership with a local group that advocates for and supports disabled people in accessing the outdoors proved particularly valuable. Members visited the reserve, assessed its accessibility, and provided practical recommendations that directly shaped lasting improvements, including adaptations to the boardwalk, new accessible signage, grid-lock surfacing to make the shingle easier to cross, and the acquisition of an all-terrain mobility scooter available to hire for free.

The experience changed how staff and volunteers thought about who the reserve was for, and other RSPB reserves have since asked about running a similar process.

Nature Prescriptions activity at Dungeness, delivered through health and social care professionals trained to incorporate nature into conversations with patients and clients, brought further groups to the site. The project also produced an Arabic translation of the Nature Prescription resources, informed by direct engagement with refugee and asylum seeker groups at Dungeness. Producing the translation required significant time and resource, but the materials are now available for ongoing use.



At Rainham Marshes, a partnership with The King's Trust brought young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) onto the reserve through a week-long Get Started in Conservation course, with two participants going on to apprenticeships within the project. A Youth Nature Network for 18 to 24-year-olds attracted members during the project period, and the RSPB is exploring how to sustain the network going forward, including through a volunteer facilitator or youth ranger model.

Volunteers and Storytelling at Otmoor

At Otmoor, the project developed an initiative that sought to strengthen the connection between the reserve's existing volunteers and the visitors they talk to on the site. Volunteers researched significant events in Otmoor's history, then took part in story-telling workshops exploring how to bring those stories to life with visitors. The stories were gathered into booklets that volunteers now draw on in their conversations at the reserve. The approach has generated interest from volunteers at several other RSPB reserves, and work is underway to share it more widely within the organisation.

“It’s been nice for local people to hear more about our history; we’ve had a lot more people coming to the reserve.” **Ranger**

Legacy and Next Steps

Consistent budget tracking and shared recording across all sites gave the team the information to identify and act on opportunities quickly, including adding Higham Marshes and running a series of engagement pilots that would not otherwise have been possible. All restored habitats will be maintained through management plans and third-party sites now have plans in place.

The Church Commissioners partnership, the accessibility improvements at Dungeness, the Otmoor storytelling approach, the Arabic-translated Nature Prescription resources, and the expanded Nature Prescriptions offer more broadly all continue beyond the funded period. The project has also generated practical learning about managing planning consents, the value of working through community organisations with established relationships with underrepresented groups, and the impact of having a dedicated communications role, all of which is being shared internally across the RSPB to inform future work.

Community-Led Habitat Restoration in the Shire Brook Valley

Sheffield City Council – Species Stacking the Shire Brook Valley

Grant awarded: £1,112,155.00

The Species Stacking the Shire Brook Valley project, led by Sheffield City Council alongside a number of vital partners and supporting groups, was focused on the 100-acre Shire Brook Valley Nature Reserve and its surrounding green and blue spaces in south-east Sheffield. The area is home to around 69,000 residents, with multiple pockets of deprivation, and the reserve had historically suffered from underinvestment. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled a programme of considerable habitat restoration and capital works, supported by weekly volunteer sessions and a dedicated project team, transforming both the ecological condition of the reserve and the relationship between local communities and the land.



The project was delivered in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, the South Yorkshire Sustainability Centre, Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT), and Woodhouse and District Community Forum.

The core project team included a full-time equivalent Project Officer post which was divided into two roles, a full-time Ranger, a part-time Activity & Engagement Officer and a Grazing Co-ordinator hosted by SRWT to work on SCC and SRWT land. Meanwhile, an apprentice role was recruited to, on a horticultural apprenticeship which enabled a number of different people to develop relevant skills. Within SRWT, additional hours were enabled for two staff members to co-ordinate improvements at the Woodhouse Washlands site which neighbours Shire Brook Valley. .

Project staff were clear that dedicated staffing and strong team work across the project was such an important enabler of project co-ordination and management, however the project itself could not have been achieved without the support of a large number of volunteers and supporting groups. For a local authority delivering a project of this complexity, the co-ordination, specialist knowledge, and capacity required across procurement, contractor management, consenting, and ecological delivery was considerable, and the project team gained much experience through the process of delivery itself. For other local authorities considering projects of this kind, the experience points to the value of building in dedicated specialist support and building the right staff team from the outset.

Habitat Restoration and Capital Works

The ecological activity centred on creating and restoring wetland habitats, connecting fragmented areas of heathland and meadow, and improving water quality along the Shire Brook and its tributaries. Volunteers, working alongside contractors, built 35 leaky dams across the sites, slowing water flow, increasing wetland extent, and creating conditions that benefit amphibians, dragonflies, and other wetland species. Ponds were cleared and new scrapes created, improving habitat and water quality. The flow of the river was redirected in places to create wetter areas, and canopy thinning along watercourses increased light reaching the water.

The flagship capital project was the desilting of Carr Forge Dam, a high-profile and technically demanding piece of work which was perhaps the biggest risk to the project in terms of development and delivery within the timescales. Completing it successfully improved the quality of this former extensive mill pond, the work created better conditions for aquatic habitats and species such as Daubenton Bat and Kingfisher who enjoy feeding over open water.

The 370m Hedge laying created wildlife-rich hedgerow that transformed the feel of the reserve, making it more open, more connected, and more visibly cared for. Almost 1.5km hedges were planted to create better wildlife corridors and connections across the site which will be laid at a later date. Alongside these larger interventions, two previously separate areas of heathland were connected through targeted clearance, pollinator plots and bilberry planting extended the range of habitats across the sites, and tree planting added to the woodland cover.

Grazing was introduced as a core management tool, with cattle managing vegetation on meadows and heathland and controlling invasive species. The Grazing Co-ordinator worked closely with consultant Ecologists to establish the programme and put fencing and water infrastructure in place to sustain it beyond the project period. The cattle on site enhanced the visitor experience for people exploring the reserve, who enjoyed seeing the cattle on site.

Project staff reported that visitors regularly stopped to ask volunteers what they were doing or to thank them, and the visible presence of cattle on the reserve added to that sense of a site being actively looked after.

Volunteer-Led Delivery

Volunteers were central to the project's achievements, and the scale of their contribution would not have been possible without SSF funding. The appointment of a full-time Ranger made it possible to run more weekly conservation sessions consistently across all project sites throughout the year, with sessions on a Wednesday alongside Saturday conservation sessions led by the Grazing Co-ordinator. Sessions drew a committed group of long-term and new volunteers, who described the project as bringing new energy, new sites, and new tasks to their involvement.



Practical tasks included leaky dam building, coppicing, scrub management, dead hedging, invasive species removal, pond clearance, wildflower planting, Himalayan balsam removal and litter picking. Volunteers also took on tree and habitat surveys, contributed to species monitoring, and acted as stewards at community events. Training delivered through the project included first aid, scything, hedge laying, tool sharpening, and wildlife identification. Two volunteers went on to secure paid employment in the conservation sector as a direct result of experience and qualifications gained through the project.

“It gives you a chance to be productive and do something useful for the area, and I’ve learnt new skills.” **Volunteer**

The personal impact on volunteers was consistently positive. Participants described sessions as a form of escapism and a positive routine that encouraged regular time outdoors. For older volunteers and those in retirement, involvement restored a sense of purpose and identity, while younger participants valued the opportunity to gain experience relevant to future employment. The intergenerational nature of the group, with different age groups learning from one another, was frequently cited as one of the things that made the sessions rewarding.

Many volunteers began spending time on the reserve independently and took greater care to protect it, a shift in stewardship that the team regarded as one of the project's most important outcomes.

"I've never had this opportunity before, but it is something I'd consider staying involved in in future." **Volunteer**

"Volunteers are engaged and getting mental health benefits. They really help the site and see the value of what they're doing. The public will stop and ask what they're doing or thank them." **Project Staff**

The project found that variety was key to sustaining long-term volunteer engagement. A programme of activity that moved across different sites and tasks, including pond improvement work, creating pollinator plots, and dam building, kept involvement fresh and ensured that volunteers could see a direct connection between their work and the wider ecological goals of the project.

Volunteers built on contractor-led activity, continued work beyond funded interventions, and took ownership of tasks such as monitoring the site and reporting issues in their own time. The project team noted that the SSF ranger-led coordination and the presence of the project team was essential to maintaining this. Without dedicated support, the breadth and consistency of the volunteer programme would not have been possible. Subsequently, SCC has been able to keep some dedicated ranger support in the Shire Brook Valley beyond the Species Survival project, to continue supporting volunteer engagement and maintain momentum built through the project.

"It's good to understand why we do things and be able to understand what benefit it has. It helps us to look after the areas." **Volunteer**

Connecting Communities with the Reserve

Alongside the conservation volunteering programme, the project developed a broader community engagement offer aimed at reaching people who had not previously engaged with the reserve. A lantern festival attended by over 700 people, community picnics, bird and bat walks, and woodland wellbeing sessions all drew different audiences to the sites.

The woodland wellbeing programme, initially targeted at men with mental health support needs through referral partnerships, was subsequently opened to a wider range of groups including alternative provision settings. A community grants fund set up through the project enabled local groups to access funds for nature-based projects, which helped to widen the reach and engagement in the project to a wider area including local allotments, resident gardens and other local green spaces.

The project worked to reach more marginalised communities throughout, including people with learning difficulties and groups with limited prior access to green space. A young person who is partially sighted, contributed to the development of interpretative sculptures, alongside her carer; informing the team's approach to accessible design. The Activity & Engagement Officer's work in building an events programme, newsletter, and online presence gave the project visibility in the local area and helped draw in people who had no previous awareness that the reserve existed. Several attendees at community events described visiting for the first time despite living nearby for years. Meanwhile, the events sparked the arrival of new provision on site, a coffee kart which now frequents the site on a weekly basis, adding another positive element to visit.

A large-scale Bioblitz event enabled local families, wildlife enthusiasts and community groups to come together to learn about wildlife, all helping to collect valuable data. This project's real strength was in bringing groups together, building in this vital element from bid application to delivery, to create a sense of community, which enabled complex events like this to happen.

Legacy and Next Steps

The project established a foundation for the long-term management of the reserve and its surrounding sites. UKHab surveys and a comprehensive programme of species surveys, covering harvest mice, bats, birds, reptiles, badgers, water voles, otters, and amphibians, produced baseline data that had not previously existed for many of the sites. This data has been submitted to the Biological Records Centre and will form part of the evidence base for the South Yorkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy to guide future habitat management decisions. Further, one volunteer has committed to carrying out a monthly survey, with another carrying out a reptile survey eight times a year.

The 35 leaky dams, restored ponds, connected heathland, and established grazing programme will continue to develop ecologically, with the team expecting meaningful improvements in species abundance and habitat quality to become apparent within three to five years.

The reserve had historically also been associated with antisocial behaviour, and the project team observed that increased activity and positive community presence began to shift that perception. Improved footpaths, new interpretation, and a sculpture trail made the sites feel more open and welcoming, and the visible presence of volunteers working on the land contributed to a sense that the reserve was valued and looked after.

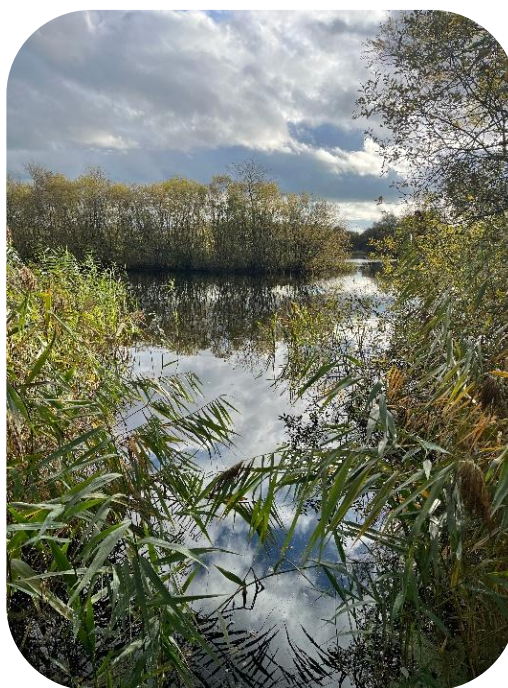
Enhancing the corridor between the Avalon Marshes and Somerset Levels

Somerset Wildlife Trust – Bogs and Bittern: Somerset Wetland Restoration

Grant awarded: £602,568

The Somerset Wildlife Trust's (SWT) Bogs and Bittern project has sought to create and restore lowland wetland habitats at seven 'stepping-stone' locations between Westhay Village and Glastonbury.

Funding from the Species Survival Fund (SSF) enabled SWT to deliver a range of capital works, staff training, and volunteer and community engagement, all with the objective of improving the management of water levels and wet grassland habitats across the corridor between the Avalon Marshes and Somerset Levels.



Improving 'Stepping-Stone' Habitats

Capital works across all seven sites focused primarily on better managing water levels, reducing seasonal variation to mitigate flood and drought risk. The work included the repair and replacement of culverts, gateways and bunding, reedbed management, wildflower reseeding, tree and hedgerow planting, and the installation of a water chamber with a fish and eel pass. In the medium term, these works are expected to strengthen the connectivity between large habitat areas across the Avalon Marshes and Somerset Levels by creating the conditions needed to support healthier soil and a wider range of invertebrates, amphibians, mammals and birds across the sites.

Staff noted that some of the most impactful works on these sites included ditching and reed clearing on SWT's reserves, which created long viewing channels across the sites. These channels provide nesting birds with a sense of security in their environment and allow visitors to get a better view and clearer sense of scale of the reserve areas.

The trainee hired to support and coordinate many of the capital works has since secured a permanent position with SWT's reserves team. For SWT, this means the knowledge and expertise developed through SSF is retained within the organisation, with the trainee continuing to steward sites such as Westhay Moor that they oversaw during their traineeship.

Acquiring New Sites for Water Retention and Research

Shortly before receiving SSF funding, SWT acquired Honeygar Farm, an abandoned site of lowland peat sitting between several other sites managed by the Trust. Honeygar had previously been connected to the local agricultural water network, which drained water away from the site and contributed to its poor condition on acquisition.

One of the main ways the work at Honeygar has been improved by SSF is through expanded species monitoring. Funding has supported new equipment, higher-capacity batteries and improved data storage for the sensors and camera traps across the site (see image below). These sensors are monitored and maintained by a group of around 15 voluntary rangers, who have received additional training and recruited new volunteers to support the expanded monitoring work. The rangers have also established a small orchard near the old farmhouse, contributing to greater plant diversity onsite.



Hydrological monitoring has also been central to the work at Honeygar. SSF funding has enabled SWT to acquire a network of dipwells to monitor the water table over time, providing the evidence base needed to track recovery and inform future management.

The monitoring equipment at Honeygar has strengthened SWT's research partnerships. Students from the University of Bristol, including postgraduates, have been trained to use the network of dipwells, sensors and camera traps. The relationship is mutually beneficial, with students providing valuable analysis of the data collected on site. Two PhD students from the University have also used the site for their research.

SWT have produced a prospectus for Honeygar, setting out research questions and potential fields of study to encourage further engagement from university students working with the data collected on site.

“Our ambition is to make Honeygar a centre of education. We can train students and learn more ourselves about the lowland peat that makes the site distinct.” **Engagement Manager**

Inducing Activity Beyond the SWT

Partnership work has been central to the Bogs and Bittern project, particularly with organisations managing land that contributes to the wider stepping stones network. One example is SWT's work with the Friends of Bride's Mound group in Glastonbury. Through SSF, SWT has supported the group to build the capacity needed to manage Bride's Field as a long-term part of the stepping stones network around the Avalon Marshes and Somerset Levels.

The partnership has combined practical site improvements with community capacity building. Capital works on Bride's Field have included new ditches to increase the water retention of the clay layer of soil, planting of new species, and the construction of a leaky dam to help maintain water levels through the year.

Engaging local volunteers and the wider community has been a central pillar of the partnership. Many of the lighter capital works, including building the leaky dam, tree and orchard planting, and the spread of yellow rattle to compete with grass and create conditions for wildflower meadows, were completed with the support of local volunteers.

SWT has also supported the site to host a variety of family and community events, including nature connection sessions, bird ringing, holiday activities for families and a climate adaptation summit. SSF funding was used to develop a land management plan to support the long-term sustainability of the site as it moved into the stewardship of two new volunteer activity coordinators from the Friends of Bride's Mound to continue the work started in partnership with the SWT.

Legacy and Next Steps

The Bogs and Bittern project has left a clearer corridor of stepping stone habitats between the Avalon Marshes and Somerset Levels. While monitoring at many of the sites has only recently begun, the works delivered through SSF have produced more hospitable landscapes for local wildlife, improved water retention across the sites, and built the local awareness and capacity needed to sustain this work into the future.

The growth in volunteer knowledge and engagement has strengthened SWT's capacity to continue managing both its own sites and those of partner organisations, as well as to monitor progress on hydrology and species abundance across the corridor. Staff and volunteer training is expected to support both the retention and continued growth of volunteer capacity now that SSF has come to an end.

The data collection enabled by volunteers will also help to sustain SWT's partnership with local universities, with the growing dataset providing ongoing research value to students and academic partners. At Honeygar in particular, the relationship with the University of Bristol is expected to continue beyond SSF, supporting the site's longer-term ambition to become a centre of education and research on lowland peat restoration.

For Bride's Mound, SWT will take a step back to allow the community to take greater ownership of the work. Friends of Bride's Mound have recruited two volunteer leads to take on site maintenance and community engagement after SSF, ensuring that the new land management plan is effectively implemented.

Nature-Based Solutions for Water and Wildlife

The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty – Freshwater Renaissance

Grant awarded: £2,978,449

The Freshwater Renaissance project, delivered by the National Trust, worked to restore freshwater and wetland habitats across a wide range of sites in Somerset, Cumbria, the river Bollin catchment on the Cheshire plain, North Devon, and the river Bure catchment in Norfolk. This spanned larger features such as rivers, floodplains and valleys, through to smaller features such as ponds.

The project built on earlier investment through the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and the National Trust's [Riverlands project](#) to continue and expand nature-based solutions to flooding, improve water quality, remove barriers to fish passage, and tackle invasive species. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the National Trust to accelerate that work, bridging the gap to longer-term [Landscape Recovery](#) ambitions at several sites and delivering at a scale and pace not possible through core funding alone.



The project was delivered through five workstreams, each led by experienced staff with long-standing knowledge of their sites and established relationships with local communities, farmers, and landowners. The embedded expertise was identified as one of the factors most crucial to the project's achievements, allowing teams to move quickly, work through consenting processes efficiently, and build on existing trust rather than starting from scratch.

“[The project manager] has been this project’s super power.” **Volunteer**

“Having experts within the Trust has really, really helped [...] They know their locations, they know what they need to do and they can get going quite quickly.” **Project Staff**

Restoring Rivers and Floodplains

At Holnicote Estate in Somerset, the project contributed to a longer-running vision for naturally functioning river corridors across the estate and neighbouring land. Capital works focused on slowing the flow of water through the landscape to alleviate flooding and create new wetland habitat, using low-tech interventions including leaky dams.

At Holt Ball, former arable land that had been extensively drained through multiple layers of buried pipe was rewetted by closing off the drainage network. Large areas responded quickly, with further rewetting expected as the resident beaver population pushes water from higher ground down into the floodplain. The ambition for the site is that grazing and beaver management will largely sustain the habitat without intensive ongoing intervention.

At Acorn Bank in Cumbria, the project removed a weir on the Crowdundle Brook that had been blocking the movement of fish upstream for many years. The removal opened up a significant stretch of headwaters to species including salmon, eels, lampreys, and white-clawed crayfish, allowing some to reach spawning grounds for the first time in generations. The project team identified this as one of the clearest examples of habitat connectivity achieved through the programme, with the restored passage benefiting species across a stretch of river that would otherwise have remained inaccessible.

Connecting People with Nature and Water

Engaging people with freshwater habitats and the work taking place on the ground was an important strand of the project across all sites. Teams found that using water as a lens for engagement, linking activities directly to rivers, ponds, and wetlands, resonated strongly with volunteers and gave the project a ‘distinctive character’. One-off events and activities that did not require an ongoing commitment proved an effective way of reaching people who would not typically volunteer or engage with conservation, and the project found that using the language of events rather than volunteering removed a barrier for some participants.

Citizen science played a significant role in this, with members of the public and community groups taking part in water quality testing through initiatives including the Big River Watch and UK River BioBlitz. The project purchased water quality testing kits and supported community groups to go out and use them, creating a practical and accessible entry point for people with no prior experience of conservation work. The project also supported community grant recipients working on invasive species removal in the same catchments, extending the reach of its water quality work and beginning to tackle Himalayan balsam at a more meaningful scale.

At Holnicote, the project built on a pre-existing partnership with a local farm school, expanding activity with cohorts of children with special educational needs through gardening, animal care and outdoor learning. Two new ponds were created on the farm school site, providing new habitat and opportunities for the children to explore pond life as part of their learning. A boardwalk on the estate was improved with anti-slip strips through a volunteer event, and young people contributed poems about nature that were engraved into a viewing platform (as illustrated in the image below). Digital tools, including virtual reality (VR) headsets, drone footage of works before and after, and a mobile interactive information board were used effectively with children, young people, and families, and a VR experience was also made available through the estate's website.



At Acorn Bank, trees felled as part of the weir removal works were carved into sculptures rather than removed from the site (see image above), and an audio trail of listening posts was installed along the river. Drawing on 22 oral history interviews recorded by trained community volunteers, the recordings share local reflections on Crowdundle Beck, including its role as a primary spawning catchment for Atlantic salmon and personal accounts of life alongside the watercourse, linking the site's industrial heritage to its ongoing nature recovery work.

Partnerships and Learning

The project demonstrated the value of working through trusted local partners. Across the Oldswater Valley, the project worked in partnership with the Oldswater Catchment Management CIC, a community interest company led by a local farmer. This peer relationship proved particularly effective during the project's lifespan in building trust with other farmers and landowners in the valley, where the National Trust's profile as a large conservation organisation can sometimes create barriers to engagement.

Working through a farmer-led organisation with influence in the community helped the team bring more landowners into conversations about nature-friendly land management and make progress on habitat improvements across private landholdings as well as National

Trust land. At Acorn Bank, close work with an adjacent landowner enabled the weir removal project to proceed smoothly.

Consenting processes across the programme presented challenges throughout, with planning permissions, freshwater works consents, and the introduction of biodiversity net gain requirements all causing delays at various points. At one North Devon site, overlapping seasonal restrictions on in-channel working and bird nesting meant there was effectively only one month in the year when the works could be delivered, illustrating the pressure that consenting complexity places on short-term funded projects.

Legacy and Next Steps

Overall, staff were positive about what they have been able to achieve as a result of SSF funding.

“[The SSF funding] has been incredibly important and valuable and transformational. [It's] not just the funding [...] having a programme with a programme wrapper and a team and a set of outputs and goals and that drive to deliver it has accelerated what we would be able to achieve.”

Project Staff

The project leaves restored habitats and strengthened community relationships across sites in Somerset, Cumbria, the Cheshire plain, North Devon, and the Chilterns. Management plans are being developed for each site to ensure the work is sustained, and several of the interventions, particularly the rewetting at Holt Ball and the weir removal at Acorn Bank, are designed to become self-sustaining over time with minimal ongoing management. Several sites are now progressing through Defra's Landscape Recovery Scheme to secure longer-term funding for continued habitat improvement, with Holnicote in the first round of awards and Arlington in the second, both currently in the Project Development phase. Reflecting on their lessons learnt, the team identified local expertise as critical to delivery within a short programme, alongside the flexibility to respond when consents or weather caused delays.

Restoring Britain's Temperate Rainforests through Innovation, Partnership and Community

The Woodland Trust and Plantlife – Northwest and Southwest Rainforest Restoration

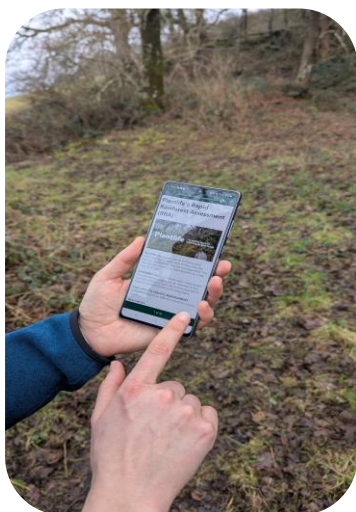
Grant awarded: £2,696,680.00

The remaining fragments of England's temperate rainforests in the northwest and southwest of the UK are often small, isolated and in poor condition, with regeneration limited by overgrazing, invasive species and the slow-colonising organisms that rely on long-term ecological stability, such as bryophytes and lichens. Despite their importance for climate and biodiversity resilience, public awareness remains low, with limited opportunities to restore them at scale.

The Species Survival Fund (SSF) enabled the Woodland Trust and Plantlife to tackle this challenge through a coordinated programme across more than 580 hectares. The funding supported specialist surveys, innovative habitat creation trials, long-term engagement with landowners and communities, and new skills development for volunteers and young people. It also created a platform to raise national awareness of England's rainforests and demonstrate how targeted interventions can improve habitat condition while inspiring future environmental stewards.

Innovating New Tools and Techniques for Restoration

Plantlife's Rapid Rainforest Assessment (RRA), developed prior to SSF, was applied by the Woodland Trust and Plantlife to establish baseline monitoring across the project sites. The RRA provides a practical, repeatable system for assessing woodland condition in ways that reflect the needs of lichens, bryophytes and moisture-loving species, and by equipping volunteers and landowners to carry out surveys themselves, its use through the project laid the groundwork for future locally-led monitoring.



In the southwest, the Woodland Trust advanced the UK's most ambitious drone seeding trials to date, scattering over two million native tree seeds across three sites on Bodmin Moor. As the pilot progressed and the team developed the skills and methods needed to operate at scale, the pace of delivery increased substantially, enabling large upland areas to be seeded in just a few hours at very high seed densities. This progress has informed new trials now expanding into the Midlands and North, showing how creation at scale may be made more feasible in hard to access landscapes.

“Innovative work such as the drone trials... have built interest externally to develop effective ways of scaling up habitat connection.” **Staff Interview**

In the northwest, the project also piloted the translocation of rare and sensitive lichens, including a species that had never previously been moved. The process involved carefully relocating specimens to assess whether they could establish successfully in new locations, contributing to an evidence base that had previously been very limited for this type of intervention. Though the trials were experimental and findings are still emerging, the work gave volunteers trained in lichen and bryophyte identification a direct role in genuinely novel conservation science. The image below shows lichen being surveyed.



The Power of Partnership and Local Networks

Partnership working was consistently identified as one of the strongest elements of the programme. Close collaboration between Woodland Trust and Plantlife enabled aligned delivery, shared learning and efficient problem-solving across regions.

“Real sense of pride, passion for Rainforest and recognition of each other's strengths and knowledge is delivering a great sense of collaboration, openness and a supportive and productive environment.” **Staff Survey Response**

Local networks amplified this success. In the Northwest, longstanding volunteer groups supported by dedicated coordinators played an essential role in Rapid Rainforest Assessments, monitoring and habitat works.

The scale and collaborative nature of the SSF project, alongside other rainforest projects in the region, acted as a catalyst for the formation of the Northwest Rainforest Alliance, a new regional partnership focused on sustaining momentum in the Northwest. The alliance aims to share restoration techniques and research across a wider network of practitioners, extending its reach to new partners in the Yorkshire Dales, Lancashire, and beyond, and exploring formal links with the Southwest Rainforest Alliance to enable a national exchange of learning about this globally rare habitat.

Public engagement, particularly in the Southwest, played a central role in raising awareness of Britain's rainforests. Immersive cinema events, VR headsets, festivals and panel discussions drew in broad audiences, including families in urban areas, groups with limited prior access to nature and people from global majority backgrounds. Landowners and farmers were invited to join demonstration days to enable them to better understand and begin the process of rainforest restoration. These activities not only increased visibility of temperate rainforest as a UK habitat but also created lasting momentum for continued community involvement.

Legacy and Next Steps

Through SSF investment, the project leaves behind a strong foundation for continued work, including sustained volunteer networks, extended youth roles, new public engagement pathways, and emerging regional alliances that will carry the conservation and restoration of England's temperate rainforests forward.

The project also generated important learning about what future rainforest restoration requires. A central lesson concerned funding structures. Ancient woodland habitats depend on continuity and gradual change, and short delivery windows risk encouraging intensive interventions that can be ecologically damaging.

“One of the real challenges with funding like this in such a short space of time is that it’s often only the beginning of a longer term management prescription that over time will help to restore these sensitive ancient habitats. Continuity of funding over a more extended period would help to ensure long term management and restoration efforts.” **Staff Interview**

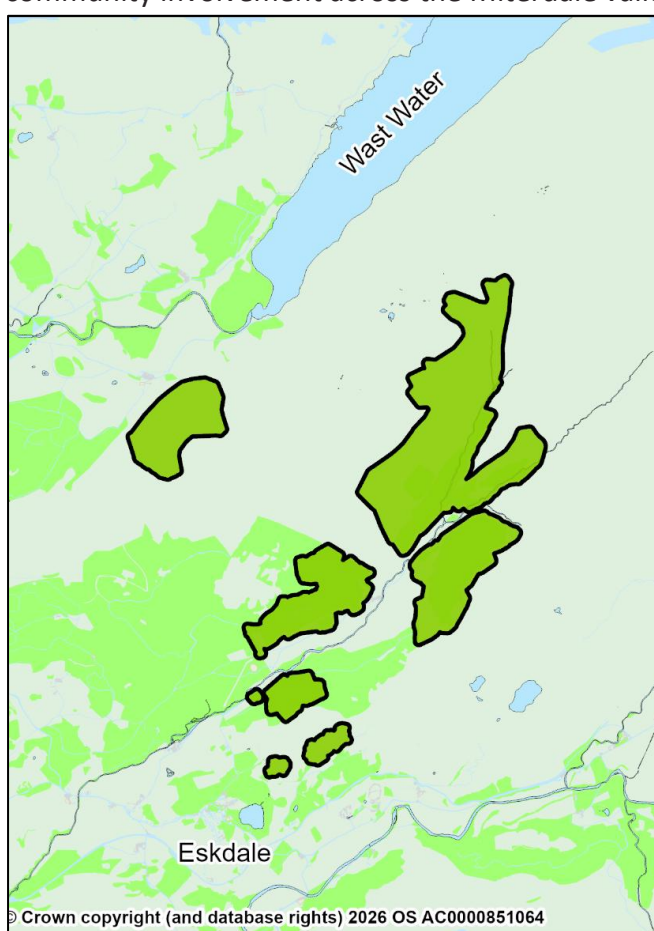
A related challenge was the combined impact of specialist shortages and delays in securing early baseline data. With only a small number of lichenologists and bryologists available nationally, surveys were sometimes completed later than planned, limiting their ability to inform early decisions. This points to a wider sector need for investment in specialist training pipelines, and to the importance of allowing sufficient time for baseline gathering before capital works begin.

Landscape Restoration and Community Engagement in the Miterdale Valley

University of Leeds – Nature Rich Miterdale

Grant awarded: £299,476.00

The Nature Rich Miterdale project demonstrated how a coordinated, valley-wide restoration approach could overcome fragmented landownership, long-term habitat decline, and limited community engagement in a remote landscape. Species Survival Fund (SSF) support enabled the partnership to work at a scale not previously possible, using shared data, joint planning, and collaborative delivery to restore habitats and strengthen community involvement across the Miterdale valley.



Miterdale is a nationally important landscape within the Lake District National Park and World Heritage Site, containing one Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and priority habitats including Atlantic temperate rainforest, upland oak and birch woodland, and species-rich grasslands. Decades of overgrazing, conifer planting, drainage and invasive species spread had left many habitats fragmented and in poor condition. SSF funding allowed the University of Leeds, Forestry England and the National Trust to move beyond piecemeal, site-by-site work and deliver joined-up restoration across the whole valley for the first time.

Through sharing knowledge and resources between the project partners and landowners, as well as initial site surveys, the opportunities and vision for the project was identified. Building on this, and working from a shared [UKHab](#) survey baseline, the partnership identified priority areas for habitat improvement and planned interventions that strengthened ecological connectivity between woodland, grassland and scrub. This landscape-scale approach was supported by a structured community engagement programme, designed to reach local people in West Cumbria.

Joined-up Habitat Restoration at Valley Scale

The central ambition of the project was to restore a connected mosaic of habitats across the valley. SSF funding was critical in making this possible, covering staff costs, contract work, and capital infrastructure that would not have been achievable through smaller, shorter-term grants. A project officer already familiar with the area and its landowners helped the team move quickly once delivery began in January 2025, following a period of relationship-building and planning in the preceding months.

Surveying habitats across the whole valley using UKHab assessments provided the most comprehensive baseline the area had received in many years and was foundational to the project approach. By mapping habitats across the whole valley rather than site by site, it allowed the team to identify priority areas, target interventions strategically, and plan connectivity between existing woodland, grassland, and scrub. This data-led approach shaped the delivery programme, directing effort where it would have most impact.

Sitka spruce removal was prioritised to address regeneration outside of active forestry areas, where they were competing with native tree and shrub species and drying out species-rich wet flushes. These habitats support rare and specialist species and are particularly sensitive to the shading and water uptake caused by dense conifer cover. Fencing was installed at locations where overgrazing pressure was greatest and where protecting habitats would have the most ecological benefit. Planting focused on linking existing woodlands and creating scrub and berry corridors up the valley, building connections between habitats rather than creating isolated new areas.



Partnership Working

Achieving restoration at the valley scale required working across land owned and managed by different organisations, and the team worked hard to build a shared vision and collaborative relationship over the first year. Where multiple land uses needed to be balanced, this required careful and sustained engagement between landowners and partners. By the end of the project, partners and landowners had come to see the work as part of a long-term strategy on their land, a shift in perspective that the team regarded as one of the project's most significant achievements.

“Connectivity occurs at both macro and micro levels, across the whole valley and between individual sites. The UKHab survey gave us the data to prioritise the right areas and plan how habitats connect, rather than just planting in isolation.” **Project Officer**

Engaging Local Communities in a Remote Landscape

Engaging volunteers in a remote rural landscape presents practical challenges, but the project has taken a locally grounded approach. The majority of volunteers had been recruited through word of mouth and local Facebook groups, reflecting the importance of trusted networks in rural communities.

A large proportion of volunteers were retired and spoke openly about the personal value of being involved. For many, volunteering provided structure and routine, meaningful outdoor activity, and regular social contact in an area where opportunities to meet others can be limited.



Volunteers also consistently described the impact on their mental health and wellbeing, highlighting the benefits of being active outdoors, learning new skills, and feeling part of a shared effort to improve the local environment. Several spoke about a renewed sense of purpose and pride in contributing to the future of Miterdale, particularly given its importance as a place they live near or care about.

“Living in a rural area, it can be easy to feel cut off, especially once you retire. Coming out to Miterdale gives me a reason to get outside and feel useful. You can see the difference the work is making, and it feels good to be part of something that’s improving the place where we live.” **Volunteer**

The project distinguished between one-off and sustained engagement, recognising that each served a different purpose. One-off activities such as planting days and wildlife surveys raised awareness and gave people a positive first experience of conservation. Sustained participation, through repeat volunteer days and ongoing monitoring, built skills, confidence, and a deeper sense of responsibility for the valley. Project staff found that both approaches have value but require different planning. One-off activities need to be well-publicised and accessible, while sustained engagement works best when people feel genuinely useful and can see the results of their work over time.

Legacy and Next Steps

The approaches developed through the project established a foundation for long-term restoration and engagement in Miterdale. UKHab assessments and associated habitat and species monitoring, continued by two project assistants, whose contracts were extended beyond the SSF funding period, have provided a baseline against which habitat recovery can be tracked over time. Ecological recovery in upland landscapes is gradual, and the team expected to see measurable habitat improvements within three to five years and high-quality outcomes within five to ten, as scrub, woodland, and grassland mature and species diversity increases. Infrastructure put in place through the project, including fencing, bird boxes, and the removal of over 10,000 plastic items from the fells, supports ongoing management by partners and volunteers.

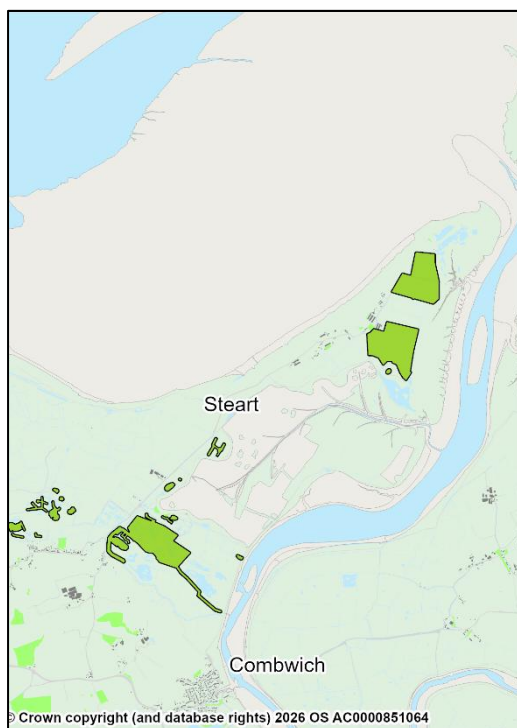
Community engagement will continue through established volunteer networks and the relationships built with schools and local groups, with funding secured from Copeland Community Fund and Garfield Weston until 2027 covering staff costs. The project also generated learning that partners intend to carry into future work across West Cumbria, particularly around how a whole-valley survey approach and a flexible partnership model can accelerate restoration on complex, multi-landowner sites.

Wetter for Waders: Boosting Biodiversity at Steart Marshes and Bridgewater Bay

WWT: The Wetland Charity – Wetter for Waders

Grant awarded: £810,857

WWT: The Wetland Charity's 'Wetter for Waders' project worked to create, restore, and enhance wetland habitats at WWT Steart Marshes and Bridgewater Bay in Somerset. Steart Marshes and Bridgewater are both key elements of the Somerset Wetlands, a nationally important site for wading birds, wildfowl, and specialist wetland species, and the project focused on improving habitat heterogeneity to support wader chicks and breeding birds. Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled a combination of capital works, new staff roles, volunteer development, and a distinctive farming partnership that together delivered habitat improvements at a scale and pace that would not otherwise have been possible.



Improving Habitat for Wading Birds

Capital works across both sites focused on improving the conditions that wading birds, Great-Crested Newts and water voles need to breed and feed successfully. Work included enlarging saline lagoons, creating new scrapes, ditches, and gries, and restoring ponds. A new vegetation management approach aimed to increase flora diversity and water quality, attracting a greater variety of wetland bird, amphibian, mammal and invertebrate species.



The project team noted that great crested newts were found at Bridgewater Bay following the works for the first time in ten years, and that the large scrape created through the project was quickly colonised by a wide variety of bird species.

Central to the new vegetation management approach was the acquisition of a Softrak, a specialist low-ground-pressure machine that enabled the removal of dominant grasses on the saltmarsh without causing the compaction that heavier machinery would create. The Softrak significantly extended what the team could manage on site, and training on the machine was provided to wardens, staff, and their partners from the Blue Carbon Farming group, ensuring the capability would remain on site beyond the project period.

Partnering with Blue Carbon Farming

One of the most distinctive elements of the project was the partnership with Blue Carbon Farming (BCF), a group of small-scale local farmers who graze their beef cattle on Steart Marshes and Bridgewater Bay saltmarsh during spring and summer. The partnership, which was formalised as a direct result of SSF funding, became an integral part of the vegetation management approach.

SSF funding enabled the purchase of GPS collars for the cattle, allowing farmers and WWT staff to designate specific sections of saltmarsh for grazing while leaving sensitive areas, such as ponds supporting great crested newts, untouched without needing to install fencing. The successful trial encouraged other farmers in the area to adopt the technology.

Beyond the technology pilot, the partnership generated a range of learning and experience. Both wardens dedicated approximately a day a week to supporting BCF with activities including feeding, health checks, and moving cattle between sections of the marsh. This kind of 'hands-on' animal husbandry experience is difficult to access through formal education for those without a farming background, and the team regarded it as a genuinely valuable addition to the wardens' professional development. The BCF farmers, in turn, attended the conservation grazing training course run through the project and were trained to use the

Softtrak, giving them the capability to continue vegetation management work independently once the SSF-funded wardens were no longer on site.

Onsite demonstration days extended the reach of project learning beyond the formal partnership. Several landowners made contact after attending, expressing interest in adding scrapes and ditches to their own land. As one of the named management partners of the [Somerset Wetlands National Nature Reserve](#), WWT's work at Steart Marshes and Bridgwater Bay directly contributes to its landscape-scale ambitions and the Somerset Local Nature Recovery Scheme, and the habitat improvements and strengthened landowner relationships delivered through the project support that shared vision.

“There is a lot more interest from farmers about the collar technology. We can demonstrate how farmers can continue to make a living when their land is changed by the sea.” **Project Manager**

New Roles, Volunteer Development, and Community Engagement

SSF funding supported two new assistant warden roles and a part-time engagement officer, enabling WWT to create new entry-level conservation sector roles and significantly increase what the site could deliver. With more staff available to oversee and support volunteers, the scale of practical habitat management work increased considerably. Volunteers contributed to repairing and installing predator fencing, deep-water reed and scrub clearance, invasive species removal, and bench installation. The majority of the practical volunteer team received brush cutter training, substantially expanding the site's maintenance capacity.

The project also developed the site's monitoring capability. SSF funding supported the recruitment of new specialist volunteers with prior bird ringing experience, allowing Steart Marshes and Bridgwater Bay to contribute meaningfully to the study of bird population change and migration for the first time. Volunteer-led bird and invertebrate surveys were expanded, and a dragonfly expert was engaged, adding a new dimension to ecological monitoring at the site.

Community engagement took a range of forms. Willow workshops, nature walks, dragonfly days, and school visits connected local people with the conservation work taking place on the reserves. The willow workshops proved particularly successful in generating repeat engagement, with additional sessions added in response to demand. A dragonfly trail and associated murals in the bird hides (see image on next page), created with public involvement during dragonfly days, gave visitors a tangible connection to the site. WWT also worked to reach groups not typically engaged in conservation, including people with learning difficulties, asylum seekers, and refugees, providing weekly volunteering opportunities and tailoring activities to be accessible and welcoming.



Legacy and Next Steps

The approaches developed through the project have established a strong foundation for long-term habitat management at Steart Marshes and Bridgwater Bay. The Softrak, e GPS collars, and monitoring equipment are all in continued use, and the BCF partnership has been strengthened to the point where farmers can carry out elements of vegetation management independently. Baseline monitoring established during the project, including soil surveys, otter surveys, and bird ringing, will continue through existing volunteer and staff capacity, providing data against which habitat recovery can be tracked. Ecological improvements are expected to become more pronounced as re-wetting, scrape creation, and vegetation management take effect.

‘We would not have achieved the water levels and water security that we have without SSF.’ **Project Staff**

Bringing Back the Heath: Restoration at Bucklebury Estate

North Wessex Downs National Landscape/ Wiltshire Council – Partnerships for Nature

Grant awarded: £1,559,636

Partnerships for Nature (P4N) was a large-scale habitat restoration project led by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NWDNL) and delivered in partnership with Action for the River Kennet (ARK), Bucklebury Estate, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), the Earth Trust, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) South East, Sulham Estate, Sheepdrove Organic Farm, and Plantlife, with Wiltshire Council acting as the accountable body.

The project worked across seven sites spanning the breadth of the National Landscape, from the chalk streams of the Kennet Valley to heathland in West Berkshire, chalk grassland in Wiltshire and arable farmland in Oxfordshire.

Species Survival Fund (SSF) funding enabled the partnership to address some of the most significant habitat gaps and restoration priorities identified in the North Wessex Downs Nature Recovery Plan, restoring and creating priority habitats across all seven sites simultaneously. A defining feature of the project was its work with private landowners, enabling habitat restoration across a range of landholdings that would not otherwise have been accessible through conservation funding alone. This case study focuses on that work at Bucklebury Estate, one of the project's most significant sites.

Bucklebury Estate

Bucklebury Estate is one of the oldest in Berkshire, with a continuous history spanning more than 900 years, and manages Bucklebury Common. The common is a 350-hectare Local Wildlife Site with full public access and is one of the most historically and ecologically significant open spaces in the National Landscape. Over time, as fewer commoners exercised their grazing rights, the grazing that had previously kept vegetation in check declined, allowing birch scrub to gradually spread across what had once been open heathland. This process accelerated during the Second World War, when the common was requisitioned as a military transport depot.

The common's current condition also reflects a range of wider landscape pressures. A major road was later constructed through the site, bisecting what had once been a continuous open landscape. At the same time, ribbon development along the Kennet Valley and the outward expansion of Reading and Thatcham have gradually reduced the surrounding buffer of open countryside, bringing the common into increasingly close proximity with the suburban fringe.

Against this backdrop, Bucklebury Estate has made a deliberate commitment to protecting and restoring the common as a space for nature. This work is guided by an ecological roadmap and has grown in ambition in recent years, building momentum through projects supported by Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) and Access grant funding. The trust and relationship built with the NWDNL through collaborating and delivering on these projects resulted in Bucklebury Estate receiving a large share of the project's SSF funding. A significant investment from a number of sources, over several years is required to restore, large and complex multifaceted sites, but the Management Plan has enabled the vision to stay on track.

Heathland Restoration

Work on the common focused on opening up the landscape to allow heathland and wood pasture to re-establish. This included removing birch trees from areas identified for heathland creation (see image below), installing hibernacula on the heath, restoring and creating ponds, creating leaky dams removing dense holly and creating new pollards in the woodland pasture edges.



The project has built a vibrant community of people invested in the future of Bucklebury Common. West Berkshire Conservation Volunteers provided regular practical support throughout the project. And an active Friends of Bucklebury Common group has now been established by the Bucklebury Estate ranger, whose post was funded through the SSF programme, providing an ongoing community of engaged supporters who will play a role in the long-term stewardship and monitoring of the site.

Project staff have said that early ecological signs from Bucklebury are encouraging. Heather is already beginning to re-emerge naturally across areas cleared of birch scrub (see photo on next page), a strong indication that the seed bank in the soil remained viable and that the landscape is responding well to the restoration works. This natural regeneration, evident within a year of the initial clearance, is the first visible marker of the heathland recovering.



As the heathland matures, the site is expected to support a range of priority heathland species including Nightjar, Dartford Warbler and Woodlark. reptiles including adder and common lizard, which depend on the warm, open, structurally varied habitats that heathland provides, are also expected to benefit as the site develops.

Introducing Grazing

A key element of the restoration of heathland and wood pasture was the reintroduction of grazing, essential for maintaining heathland in the long term. A non-breeding herd of Belted Galloway cattle was introduced to rotate between the heathland and woodland pasture areas. The herd is managed using NoFence virtual fencing technology,(enabling stock to graze without physical barriers) with the ranger bringing prior experience of the system. At Bucklebury, this approach has proven effective, enabling the team to rotate the herd across heathland and wood pasture efficiently, without the cost or impact of permanent fencing on a well-used public site.

The cattle also had an unexpectedly powerful effect on public perception of the project. The initial phase of heathland creation (involving the large-scale removal of birch trees) drew criticism from some local people who valued the woodland and did not immediately understand what was being done or why. The arrival of the Belted Galloways proved a popular and highly visible sign that the common was being actively cared for, and helped local people connect with the purpose and ambition of the project.

The project manager described this as a real turnaround:

"The cattle - that was unexpected. Maybe it shouldn't have been. But it's proved to be a really positive thing, connecting the community with the place. Given how it all started off, with quite negative responses from quite a lot of locals, that's a good turnaround." **Project Officer**

A distinctive volunteer contribution has come from a dedicated cattle watcher group of around ten people who monitor the Belted Galloway herd (pictured in the image below).



The initiative has been highly successful, allowing volunteers (many of whom were dog walkers from the local area) to receive training, explore new parts of the common, and form a supportive community, while also freeing up the Ranger's capacity.

"Being a cattle watcher has taken me to areas of the common I never would have discovered on my own." **Cattle Watcher Volunteer**

Building Capacity in Private Landowners

One of the less visible but significant outcomes of the project has been what it has demonstrated about the potential of publicly funded nature restoration programmes to build capacity within private landholdings. Bucklebury Estate had a clear commitment to the common but had only recently started building momentum in working with publicly funded nature restoration programmes.

Engaging as a partner in an SSF-funded project required the estate to operate in ways that were new and, at times, demanding alongside the practical work of delivering large-scale habitat restoration. The procurement process, including the need for competitive quotes, and the need to evidence public expenditure and measure outputs was additional work for the estate.

Having now completed a project of this scale and complexity, Bucklebury Estate is in a really good position to pursue future funding opportunities in its own right, with a strong evidence base, the capacity and proven ability to deliver.

Legacy and Next Steps

The project has achieved lasting impacts for nature at Bucklebury Common, most notably doubling the area of lowland heathland created and to be maintained, especially through the introduction of the grazing. The Estate's commitment to retain the Ranger post is another key legacy of the SSF investment, ensuring the restored habitat and grazing herd are managed in the long-term. For the estate, the experience has generated a genuine appetite to deliver more on environmental plans, with the track record, relationships, and capacity now in place to pursue further funding and extend the work begun under P4N.

The partnership itself is also one of the project's key legacies. Partners have expressed a strong desire to continue meeting and sharing learning beyond the formal life of the project, with a summer site visit already being discussed. Several are already looking to extend the work begun under P4N, including further chalk stream restoration, expansion of arable wildflower habitats, and exploring biodiversity net gain credits to support wetland restoration.

For the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, P4N represents a step change in what landscape-scale nature recovery looks like in practice. The project has fed directly into the National Landscape's five-year management plan and its nature recovery strategy. It has also contributed to the National Landscape's pursuit of International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List status, by helping to test the data protocols, monitoring frameworks, and partner relationships needed to build the evidence base necessary to achieve Green List status. The experience of working at this scale, across this range of habitats and partners, has set a new benchmark for what the National Landscape can achieve.