



Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership



Volunteers sowing native meadow flower seed, Ash Green Meadows

Annual Report 2024

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Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership Annual Report, October 2023 to September 2024

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Picture:

Tice's Meadow Volunteers around a new reptile hibernaculum.

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1 The Year in Brief

Ranger Clare O'Reilly left us in November, and she was followed in June by Eddie Whalley. Posts were advertised externally but Assistant Rangers Raf Wane and Nathan Taylor filled these posts. Together with long term illness within the team, this left us short staffed throughout the year. Recent confirmation of long-term funding at Southwood and Wellesley Woodlands means we can now look to fill vacant posts.

It has been a wet year, keeping up with clearance of path side vegetation and fallen trees has been a challenge. Fortunately, volunteers from our weekly Tuesday group stepped forward and started a regular Thursday work party. Without their help we would not have coped.

We took on management of Blandford Woods SANG in April, the site being formally opened in June.

Nature recovery projects have included tree planting at Ash Green Meadows and Southwood, green hay seeding at Runfold Ridge and Rhododendron removal at Rowhill and Queen Elizabeth Park.

Wellesley Woodlands once again received Green Flag accreditation in July, and towards the end of the year path surfacing was completed just in time to be used by the Rushmoor Wellesley 10k run.

2 Improving Access

2.1 Blackwater Valley Path

The riverside path has been maintained through regular vegetation and litter clearance, including frequent removal of fallen pollarded willow on the Surrey owned sections. A contribution of £20k to Bracknell DC towards bridge replacement at Blackwater was agreed. They are still seeking EA approval to go ahead.

Progress to tackle the remaining “missing” sections is dependent on landowner actions. The diverted section at North Camp benefits from a condition in an approved planning application to be reinstated on its riverside line. No work has yet taken place, and an amended plan has been submitted, although this should not affect the condition.

West of Swan Lake, planning conditions require a riverside route but have not been enforced, although there is informal use. The current owner is still seeking

development on the site, and we remain in contact with him as he develops his proposals.

2.2 Developing the Green Network

An agreement to look after Blandford SANG was reached with Land Trust. We were pleased to be involved in an advisory capacity on the management plan and as site infrastructure was put in. Our management started in April and there was a lot of work required to remove historic debris prior to the site being opened to the public in June. This site provides a 14ha extension to Wellesley Woodlands and holds some very impressive trees and nationally rare plants.

A footbridge linking the BV path to Water's Edge SANG was installed in July. The SANG is still owned by the adjacent housing developer and we are aware that discussions are ongoing to ensure the site is adequately managed when they depart on completion of building.

We sit on the restoration sub-committee at Runfold Quarry, helping to sort details on such aspects as planting, drainage and footpaths. Soil placing is now all but complete with final detailing of contour and ditches etc. to ensure correct drainage being refined. Recent plantings and seedings are doing well.

At the north end of the Valley, infilling at Manor Farm Quarry, Finchampstead, is at a similar stage. The restoration aim at this site is for nature conservation with more public access, surfacing of the new path network is near completion. Arrangements on who will own and manage the site long-term need to be agreed.

The main setback this year was the halt to work on the public access paths and landscaping behind Tongham Services, a long outstanding condition of its planning approval. This started last year so it was very disappointing that work stopped when McDonalds submitted an application to build here. The application is yet to be determined.



Pictured clockwise, from top left:

- Green hay seeding, Runfold Ridge.
- Shifting aggregate ready for path improvement projects.
- Maintaining the BV Path, Gerry's Copse.
- Bridge installation, link to Water's Edge SANG.

3 Maintaining the Valley's Green Spaces

We were delighted to be able to finalise with Rushmoor BC a 10 year agreement to provide ranger support for Southwood Country Park SANG and Centre. Disruption by ESSO pipeline installation and currently EA improvements to flood defences has interrupted path and bridge construction on site. Even so it is proving heavily used with much ecological improvement potential.

We were equally pleased to hear we had been reappointed to look after Wellesley Woodlands by Land Trust for a further ten years after a competitive tender process.

With the addition of Blandford Woods, we now look after 26 sites totalling 490 ha. Work varies from site to site but annually will involve carrying out regular litter and fly tip clearance, vegetation clearance from footpaths, inspections and repairs of infrastructure such as fences and boardwalks, tree safety work, answering questions from the public and sorting access for utilities. Twelve of the sites are small, under ten hectares, and with their urban locations introduce many boundary issues to be tackled, with encroachment, and “over the garden fence fly-tipping” introducing invasive species being constant issues.

Larger projects this year included

- Removal of diseased Ash at Bin Wood.
- Surfacing of a footpath at Puckridge in Wellesley.
- Extensive repairs to the boardwalk at Ash Green Meadows.
- Construction of a vehicle bridge at Ash Green Meadows.
- Construction of gabions at Rowhill to prevent erosion of the main track.

The Green Flag status of Wellesley was again renewed in July.

3.1 Use of the Valley

People counters are located at Southwood, Wellesley Woodlands, Rowhill and Ash Green Meadows, allowing us to track trends and estimate actual use. For the calendar year 2023 the more established sites of Wellesley and Rowhill have seen similar use to 2022. Use of the newer sites increased at about 10%. It is estimated that both Wellesley Woodlands and Southwood had over 400,000 visits.

Hampshire CC is working with a company that is developing a method of monitoring visitor numbers based on mobile phone data. This is potentially a more cost effective and reliable method. The figures we are providing from the counters is helping improve the algorithms of the system but there are still a few teething problems to resolve. Even so it is helping give confidence to our estimate that use of the BV footpath and greenspaces we look after must be close to 2,000,000 visits p.a.



Pictured above:

- Installing a new bridge at Ash Green Meadows.
- The Grand Opening!
- Clearing access with the robo-mower, Wellesley Woodlands.
- Installing visitor counters, Southwood Country Park.

4 Nature Recovery

Improvements to the biodiversity of the Valley has always been one of our aims. This year specific projects to meet this aim included:

- Continuation of chalk grassland restoration at Runfold Ridge with further seeding of scrapes and locally sourced green hay. The rare and protected Greater Yellow-rattle made an appearance.
- At Ash Green Meadows, tree planting and seeding with native meadow species aims to increase the value of this ex arable site. Management for reptiles is working; a survey showed populations of Slow-worm and Grass Snake to be slowly increasing.
- Together with Ash Green, over 2,600 whips were planted at Southwood, Tice's Meadow and Runfold Ridge, including a number of disease resistant elms.
- At Rowhill and Queen Elizabeth Park, contractors started to remove the Rhododendron and Cherry Laurel that is covering large areas of both sites.
- At Rowhill removal of scrub and Holly to rescue the Bog, the source of the River Blackwater.
- Other woodland invasive species were tackled; Variegated Yellow Archangel and Three-cornered Leek at Rowhill, and at Southwood Woodland more Variegated Yellow Archangel.
- Monitoring and treatment of Japanese Knotweed in Wellesley continued; of the 46 known stands, just four showed growth, but another two were found.
- A detailed botanical survey at Hawley Meadows was completed by Surrey Wildlife Trust with BNG scoring.
- The ongoing project for bat conservation included maintenance and monitoring of 170 bat boxes. This year maternity groups of both Natterers and Brown Long-eared were present. Monitoring of the four known large tree roosts of Noctule and Water Bats continued and found another two used trees. With funding from the BVC Trust and Hampshire Bat Group, 12 boxes were erected close to one of these trees that may not last long.



Pictured clockwise, from top left:

- Before & after. Restoring a bat box that had been taken over by bees.
- Clearing invasive Cherry Laurel from Rowhill Nature Reserve.
- Spreading native seed on chalk scrapes at Runfold Ridge.
- Tree planting, Southwood Country Park.



Pictured clockwise, from top left:

- Mowing, using the cut and collect method, Rowan Field.
- Covering gabions created to protect the source of the River Blackwater, Rowhill.
- Dealing with Ash dieback, Bin Wood.
- Building reptile hibernacula at Ash Green Meadows.

5 Community Engagement

5.1 Volunteer Activity

Looking after the public green spaces in the Valley relies heavily on the many volunteers who give up their time. We are pleased to support the 11 site-based groups however we can, depending on their needs from occasional tool loan, leading occasional (or regular tasks), or carrying out heavier work with larger equipment.

The groups are:

- Cove Brook Greenaway Group
- Friends of Brickfields
- Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park
- Frimley Fuel Allotments Group
- Rowhill Nature Reserve Society
- Snaky Lane Community Wildlife Group
- Southwood Improvement Group
- Surrey Heath Tree Wardens
- Tice's Meadow Bird Group
- Tongham Wood Improvement Group
- Moor Green Lakes Group

We also organise a regular volunteer group who carried out 148 projects throughout the Valley on Tuesdays, and this year many Thursdays. The six groups we are more closely involved with, and have supplied data, show a further 97 projects, in total equivalent to 2,582 days work. Tice's Meadow Bird Group are particularly active and self-reliant, organising 44 work parties, in addition to ecological monitoring, and fundraising.

We have valued the work of volunteers we are aware of at £410,000, but much volunteer effort is undertaken without our presence; not just practical work but group administration, organising projects and open days, or individuals doing litter picks.

The figures above clearly underestimate the true value of volunteers in the Valley. We are particularly grateful for those volunteers who take on responsibilities such as group administration, task leadership or first aider, that are essential for all this work to take place. Finding replacements for such dedicated people is not easy so we were pleased to support the new team at Brickfields so that the good work can continue at this site.



Pictured clockwise, from top left:

- SEN students on work experience at Southwood Country Park.
- Collecting wreath making materials for TBHP Wardens.
- Litter picking the BV Path with staff from McDonalds.
- Staff and volunteers on an outdoor first aid course.

5.2 Public Contact

We were able to put on 18 public site events this year, attended by 379 people. These included, and family events at Southwood and bat walks at Rowhill and Shepherd Meadows. Talks included presentations of video clips to Surrey and Hants Bat Groups.

Five work parties were arranged for corporate and community groups attend by 190 people including McDonalds and local MOD units. In addition, seven training

courses on hedge laying, pond construction and chalk grasslands were arranged in conjunction with Land Trust, attended by 51 people.

We also attended open days at Cove Brook, and Fleet, as well as leading a reptile walk during Tice's Meadow Bioblitz.

We greatly value the help of Surrey Choices who help at Weyburn Meadows and Tice's Meadow. The organisation provides opportunities to those who need extra support to volunteer or gain employment skills.

The role at Southwood Field Centre is developing, work so far has concentrated on facilitating use of the centre by community groups.

The BVCP Facebook page had regular postings to keep followers up to date with our activities and to promote our and partners' events.

5.3 The Wider Partnership

As well as our local authority core funding partners, we have close links with many other bodies, not least the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust and the ten site-based volunteer groups.

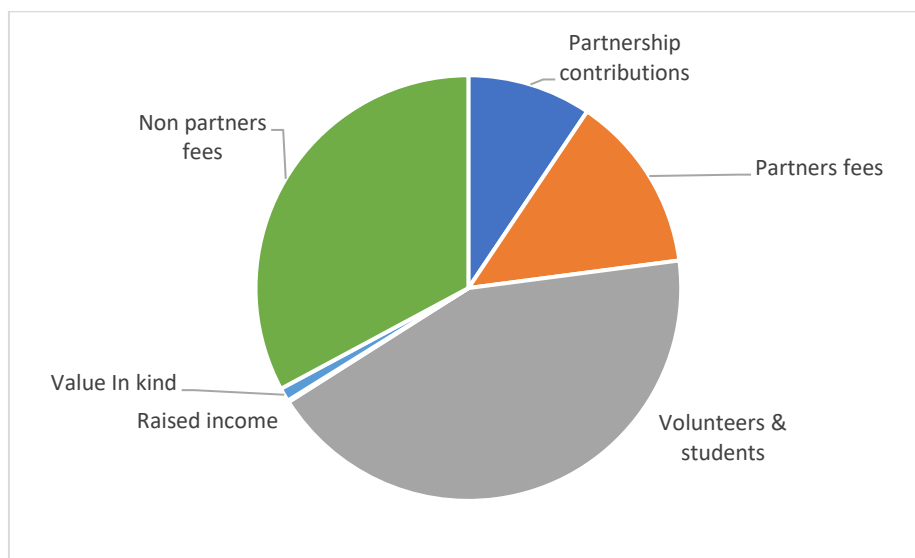
Land Trust provide the funding for six SANGs we manage on their behalf, whilst we also received smaller amounts from Cemex to help us support work at Moor Green Lakes. Surrey CC contribute funds to us to help at Tice’s Meadow and keep highway balancing ponds in good order, and so help protect the river.

We are members of the Loddon Catchment Partnership and the Loddon Fisheries and Conservation Consultative; with both maintaining regular links with the Environment Agency, angling clubs, and wildlife trusts coordinating work towards river improvement projects.

Links with Natural England are maintained by membership of their Access Management and Monitoring Partnership that deals with SPA and SANG issues.

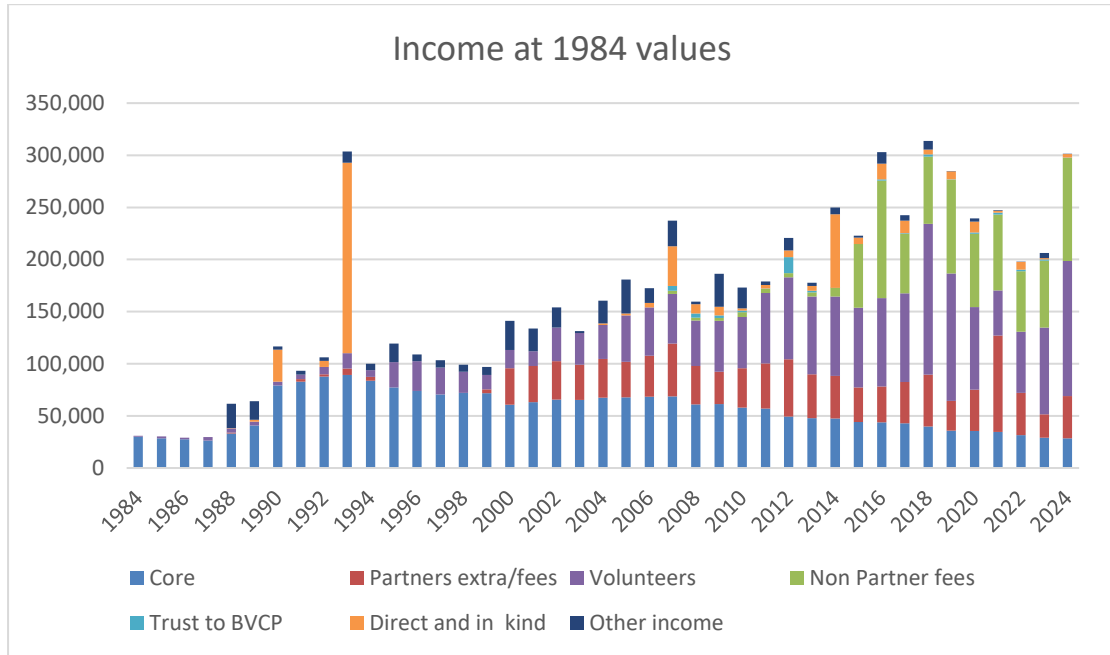
6 The Value of Partnership

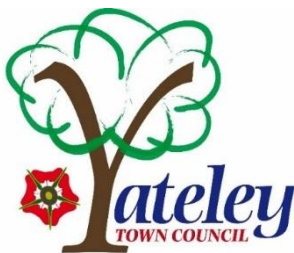
The total value of work undertaken in the Valley this year due to the activities of the Partnership was worth a minimum of £950,000, up on last year’s figure. Income from partner and non-partner both increase but by far the biggest increase was in the value of volunteer activity.



This year core contributions from partners made up less than 10% of income. The impact of inflation obscures the actual picture of changes in partnership funding. The diagram below has been adjusted to show figures at 1984 values. It illustrates how the Partnership has been steadily increasing true value of work achieved whilst reducing the amount required from core funds.

The very high peak in 1993 being the construction of the bridge over the railway at Blackwater Reach





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