

Case Study

Local Wildlife Sites – using condition assessment to inform chalk grassland management (Cockroost Hill West) Sussex Wildlife Trust (Sussex Local Wildlife Sites Initiative)

The Vision

We don't know enough about the condition of chalk grassland within Local Wildlife Sites on the South Downs, or what work might be needed to improve them for nature.

For 26 sites, including Cockroost Hill West, we applied an established methodology to assess the condition of the chalk grassland and shared the results with partners, so that they could put in place positive management actions on the ground where needed.

Key Facts

Cockroost Hill West Local Wildlife Site sits on the dip slope of the South Downs above Mile Oak, Portslade in Brighton and Hove. The site is a small, tenanted pasture of 2.3 hectares which is grazed by cattle. Like many Local Wildlife Sites on the Downs, it contains areas of chalk grassland, a nationally and internationally important habitat.



Chalk downland wildflowers on the South Downs. Credit: Laurence Perry

What we achieved

The assessment at Cockroost Hill West identified that the chalk grassland was in unfavourable condition because of the quite high cover of scrub on the site. This information was shared with our Changing Chalk partners, and both the National Park Authority and the National Trust were able to advise the farmer, who is fully supportive of restoring the chalk grassland on the site.

The National Trust was also able to commit their Local Wildlife Site volunteer group (established through Changing Chalk) to carrying out habitat management work. The volunteers began in winter 2024 and have completed several sessions, clearing scrub to expand the areas of chalk grassland available for grazing, and also removing fencing, to allow the cattle to move more freely around the site.

Clear results can already be seen thanks to the efforts of the volunteers, who have enjoyed working there, and the newly cleared areas will also hopefully allow the grazing intensity at the site to be increased a little, benefiting the chalk grassland further.

How we did it

The condition assessment methodology that we used was slightly adapted from an existing methodology used for the South Downs National Park's Nature Improvement Area project in 2014.

The methodology uses key habitat attributes to describe the condition of a given area of chalk grassland. These include:

- number and abundance of positive indicator species
- sward height
- proportion of herbs to grasses
- cover of negative indicator species
- cover of scrub within the sward
- cover of Tor-grass (negative indicator).

The data for each attribute is gathered through a structured walk with 10 stopping points, and the value for each one is compared against a target range. If any attributes are outside their target range, then the grassland is considered to be in unfavourable condition.

The benefit of using an established methodology means that results can be compared with historic assessment results, giving an indication of changes at a site over time.

“ The condition assessment definitely informed how and why to target management on this site. With continued work and continued grazing, the condition of this chalk grassland will improve significantly. ”

Thyone Outram, Chalklife Ranger, National Trust

Lessons learnt

The standardised nature of the condition assessment methodology means that it does have its limitations. For example, it does not take into account a site's individual features, and particularly any notable species that are present and that may have specific habitat requirements. Examples include certain insects that require grassland of varying heights, which may fall outside the assessment's target range.

Nonetheless, the methodology still provides a useful and rapid way of determining the general state of chalk grassland on a site, and we now carry out condition assessments as standard when reviewing any Local Wildlife Sites that contain chalk grassland.

In the future we plan to return to Cockroost Hill West, and the other sites that were assessed as part of Changing Chalk, to repeat the condition assessment. In this way, we will be able to see if the conservation efforts of volunteers, partners and farmers have been effective in improving the condition of the chalk grassland.

The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership



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