

Case Study

Education and engagement within the Wilding Waterhall project

Brighton & Hove City Council

The Vision

The Wilding Waterhall project intended to engage local pupils, students and the general public in hands-on learning in the “perfect living classroom”. Participants were inspired to learn about the diverse flora and fauna of the South Downs and the “wilding” approach to maximising biodiversity by working with natural processes.

Engagement and outreach activities specifically targeted schools in areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

Background

The restoration of chalk grassland and other diverse habitats on 60 hectares of former golf course at Waterhall, using a wilding approach, created a fantastic opportunity to connect local communities with the landscape and biodiversity of the South Downs.

Funding through Changing Chalk enabled Brighton & Hove City Council to provide free, accessible educational activities in a densely-populated, peri-urban region containing areas of high economic deprivation.



Privet hawkmoth on school visit to Waterhall. Credit: Brighton & Hove City Council

What we achieved

Over four years, 23 local schools were engaged, with 32 school visits hosted by the Waterhall rangers. Huge excitement and strong engagement were evident amongst the young participants, and overwhelmingly positive feedback was received from schoolteachers. Many participating schools have already made return visits and expressed their desire to visit again in the future.

Alongside this, 50 guided walks and safaris were delivered for community groups and the general public, including school holiday events for young families, all of which received extremely positive feedback.

The project also hosted 14 visits to Waterhall for local landowners and land managers involved in managing land for nature. Pulse grazing with GPS-linked virtual fencing technology was a particular point of interest for these visitors.

In addition, 49 students at the city's universities have completed projects inspired by Wilding Waterhall. The project has appealed to multiple disciplines including ecology and conservation, geography, art and design.

In total, over 3,000 people have attended these events, alongside school assemblies and other outreach activities in local communities.

How we did it

A strong focus on community engagement and educational delivery was made possible through the appointment of an Education Ranger, hosted by Brighton & Hove City Council and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), through the Changing Chalk Wilding Waterhall project.

The Education Ranger engaged with local schools and universities directly and leveraged existing relationships held by Council staff. New partnerships established through Changing Chalk (eg. with the Farm School project, Brighton & Hove Food Partnership, and the South Downs National Park Authority) were also instrumental in maximising engagement.

The existing 'Friends of Waterhall' community group provided an important platform. Project information was also shared on Brighton & Hove City Council and the Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere websites.

Waterhall Local Nature Reserve proved an ideal location for educational activities, offering a safe environment, off-road parking for up to 70 vehicles including coaches, an indoor space, and a beautiful landscape with diverse habitats only a short drive from the city.

The rangers had planned a range of fantastic engaging and exciting activities. The children have been buzzing about their trip and all the facts they learned about minibeasts, birds, plants and the wildlife around them.

Year 2 teacher, St Mary's Catholic Primary School



Further information

[Wilding Waterhall – Brighton & Hove City Council](#)

[Changing Chalk – Wilding Waterhall - The Living Coast](#)

Lessons learnt

Success factors included having at least two rangers with strong communication and education skills throughout the project, to organise and lead school visits, maximising hands-on pupil engagement.

Modular, pre-planned activities allowed adaptation for different ages and weather conditions. Converting the former golf locker room into an indoor education space provided essential shelter during poor weather.

Later funding for coach transport, supported by NLHF through a Change Request, enabled schools in deprived areas of Brighton & Hove to visit Waterhall. Strong partnerships further enhanced engagement.

Challenges included slow initial engagement with schools, which improved once transport funding became available and partnership working leveraged school relationships.

Limited funding to maintain the clubhouse building meant that indoor facilities remained basic, with only urgent health and safety repairs possible.

Recommendations include building in school transport funding from the outset, along with funding to access and maintain an indoor space for shelter during extreme weather.

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



Changing Chalk was made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. With thanks also to The Linbury Trust, players of People's Postcode Lottery, and other generous supporters.