

## Case Study

# Creating Connections – community engagement on urban fringe downland (Landport Bottom, Lewes)

Railway Land Wildlife Trust (RLWT)

### The Vision

Landport Bottom is a much-loved, heavily-used downland site facing multiple pressures. Changes in ownership from District to Town Council, combined with local authority restructures, resulted in reduced community engagement to promote understanding, protection and improvement of its chalk grassland.

The role of RLWT's Chalk Life Ranger was to re-invigorate the activity of volunteer groups on the site, both in undertaking practical conservation tasks and in promoting engagement through informal surveying, a guardianship scheme and community events.

### Background

Landport Bottom is a 44-hectare arable reversion chalk grassland site backing onto residential estates: it combines stunning views over Lewes with ancient archaeology and adjacent habitats (woodland, hedgerows, quarry, dewpond) to form a rich habitat mosaic.

Pressures on the site include human footfall and dog walking, and the use of the site by a nearby stables for horse riding. This was sometimes further compounded by a lack of understanding of the purpose of grazing on the site.



*Volunteer task day at Landport Bottom. Credit: RLWT*

### What we achieved

The Chalk Life Rangers ran over 100 engagement sessions and facilitated the input of over a thousand volunteer hours at Landport Bottom. People of all ages and backgrounds engaged with the site directly and virtually via a range of activities, events and communication networks.

A combination of strong community network links and a good working relationship with the Lewes Town Ranger and councillors (as landowners) enabled us to significantly boost the Council's capacity for managing the site, while also engaging a wider audience demographic to increase local understanding of the site's ecology, management needs and how to help take care of it.

We also provided strategic support, including links to professional advice and contractors, which helped the Town Ranger secure new Sustainable Farming Incentive funding and implement changes in the site's grazing management.

This, along with practical volunteer help, has led to demonstrable improvements in the chalk grassland habitat, as noted by land management professionals with prior experience of managing the site.

## How we did it

A variety of engagement offerings (physical and virtual), alongside good accessibility, regular communications, and clear benefits to being involved were all essential.

In addition to monthly practical conservation sessions, a 'Downland Guardians' scheme was developed to encourage regular site users to report wildlife sightings, as well as any issues on the site. Seasonal events were also organised, including species identification workshops, guided walks, surveying and public activity days... there was even a poop scoop party!

The RLWT's Green Volunteering Lead and Digital Communications Lead supported the Chalk Life Ranger with volunteer recruitment

and wider community reach.

Linking with RLWT's NatureLinks Youth Action Project Manager (who designs work experience schedules), along with strengthening relationships with Plumpton College, and Brighton and Sussex Universities, resulted in a significant increase in young people attending sessions.

Changing Chalk partner organisations as well as RLWT's own extensive networks also helped to promote activities, access skilled experts, and engage a wide range of potential volunteers. Funding through Changing Chalk enabled us to provide free activities, maximising accessibility.



**Dedicated volunteer efforts and engagement have significantly contributed to the maintenance and improvement of the site's biodiversity. Surveys and events have enriched local knowledge and made a meaningful contribution to both ecological enhancement and community wellbeing.**



Brian Courage, Lewes Town Ranger



## Further information

[Landport Bottom Nature Reserve | Lewes Town Council](#)

## Lessons learnt

Maximising internal and external organisational links and cross-pollinating with other projects greatly supported all aspects of delivery – for example, NatureLinks signposting young people to our practical sessions for work experience, and Changing Chalk partners helping deliver wildlife ecology workshops.

Volunteer recruitment and retention requires substantial time and effort to build strong participant relationships. Groups or schemes often work best when there's a sense of regularity to activities and communication. The 'Downland Guardian' site checkers, for example, needed regular communication, support and engagement via in-person meet-ups, and regular emails to maintain engagement. Their efforts provided rich information about the site, which then needed to be shared with the public.

During the period of this project, the Management Plan for the site was being updated, and the Chalk Life Ranger was able to make valuable contributions to this process. The new Management Plan is now an excellent foundation from which to continue and build on the community engagement created through Changing Chalk.

## 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](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership)



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