

## Case Study

# Wilding Waterhall and Greening the Cities – volunteers enabling the conservation of chalk grassland and wildflowers

**Brighton & Hove City Council and The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere**

### The Vision

Providing opportunities for a diverse range of volunteers to learn new skills and contribute to enhancing the biodiversity of the city and surrounding downland was central to both projects.

Wilding Waterhall engaged a wider range of people with the Downs, boosting wellbeing and connection with the downland landscape. While Greening the Cities brought the 'Downs into the Town', by creating new areas of urban wildflower planting with volunteers from the local community.



*Friends of Waterhall working to restore chalk grassland. Credit: Brighton & Hove City Council*

### Background

Wilding Waterhall and Greening the Cities took place in Brighton & Hove, a city with a population of 280,000 people within The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere Region.

Wilding Waterhall began restoration of a former golf course on the urban fringe to create a mosaic of valuable downland habitats.

Greening the Cities created and enhanced areas of chalk wildflower planting in urban green spaces.

### What we achieved

Almost 600 people have signed up to join the Friends of Waterhall mailing list. They receive regular updates about the Wilding Waterhall project and over 330 have actively participated as volunteers, contributing over 5,000 hours of volunteer time to restoring chalk grassland and optimising habitats to maximise biodiversity at Waterhall Local Nature Reserve.

Thanks to partnership working between different Changing Chalk projects, and to the many educational events hosted at Waterhall (including with local schools and colleges), the volunteers who regularly work at Waterhall are a diverse, multi-generational group.

130 people have joined the "Wildflower Guardians", a new volunteer group established to support the Greening the Cities project. The Wildflower Guardians are a specialist group of volunteers who work and learn together, developing a deep collective expertise covering everything related to the conservation of chalk grassland – from planting and maintaining chalk wildflower banks to botanical surveying, identifying and recording pollinating insects, and collecting and propagating local wildflower seed. Unusually for a conservation volunteering team, most of the Wildflower Guardians are women.

## How we did it

Both projects recruited volunteers through a combination of methods:

- Direct advertisement on Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) and The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere websites.
- Social media platforms eg. Facebook pages of “Friends of Waterhall”, “Brighton & Hove Rangers” and “Wildflower Conservation Society”.
- Signposting via BHCC colleagues, Changing Chalk partners, and the Brighton & Hove Green Spaces Forum.
- Promoting volunteer opportunities at events. Guided walks, talks and educational activities for schools,

universities, families (during school holidays) and community groups were held at Waterhall throughout the project.

- Word-of-mouth. It was very rewarding to hear participants enthusing about our projects and bringing friends and families along to experience what we were achieving together.

The Wildflower Guardians worked on planting and maintaining chalk wildflower banks in parks, gardens and nature reserves across the city. Where possible, they worked with existing local volunteer groups to share knowledge and experience, leading to several new Guardians being recruited from these groups.

“It’s been fabulous to meet such a lovely set of really kind, inclusive, friendly and impressively knowledgeable volunteers and staff. I’ve learned so much about wildflowers, the local environment, and local places I haven’t been before.”

Wildflower Guardian volunteer



## Further information

[Get involved with Wilding Waterhall](#)

[Changing Chalk – Greening the Cities - The Living Coast](#)

[Wildflower Guardians restore local habitats in Brighton & Hove - The Living Coast](#)

## Lessons learnt

Key success factors for volunteer recruitment include Waterhall’s “wilding” ethos, the urban or peri-urban locality of our projects (with info on how to reach sessions via car/bike or public transport), and our focus on providing continuous opportunities for training and learning.

We also hosted corporate volunteering days, with many participants going on to become Friends of Waterhall, Wildflower Guardians, or both. At Waterhall, sessions became so popular a booking system had to be introduced.

Factors contributing to the diversity of our volunteers included reaching young people via educational events and the Changing Chalk project, and partnership working with Brighton & Hove Food Partnership and the charity, Grow. This has brought people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds to Waterhall.

The flexibility of the opportunities (monthly weekend sessions / fortnightly Thursdays) has also helped attract wider audiences. We didn’t require a minimum or regular commitment, so people could attend as many sessions as they liked depending on availability. It was hard to turn people away who were keen to attend, but occasionally we had to.

## 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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