

Case Study

Creating Connections – community engagement at an urban-fringe Local Wildlife Site (Southwick Hill)

National Trust

The Vision

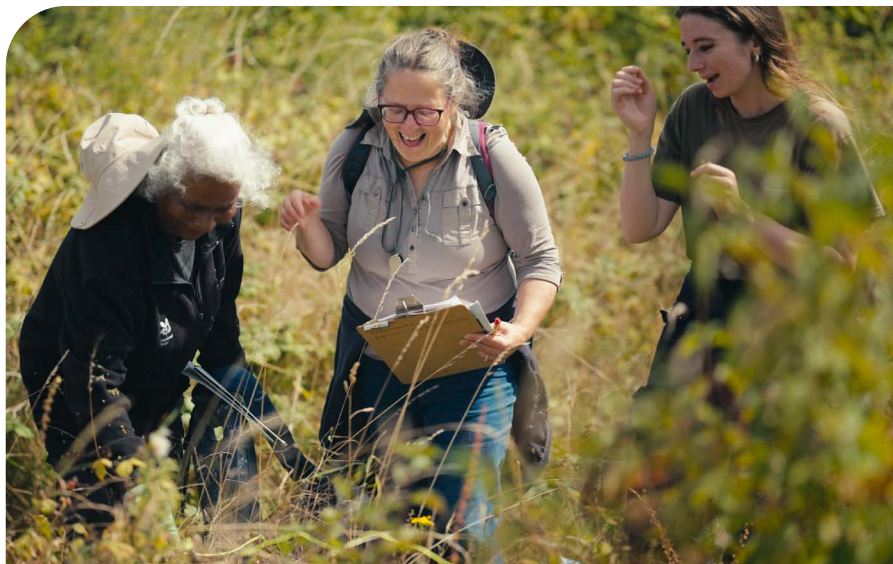
The project set out to strengthen local communities' connection with Southwick Hill, an urban-fringe Local Wildlife Site, by creating new opportunities to explore, learn about, and care for the hill.

Through volunteering and events such as 'Hairy Not Scary' walks on safe practices around cattle (replicated from Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust), participants learned about the importance of chalk grassland and conservation grazing. By deepening people-place connections, the aim was to inspire curiosity and enhance biodiversity, while promoting community health and wellbeing.

Key Facts

Southwick Hill is a Local Wildlife Site on the Brighton Downs, located on the urban fringe between Brighton and Shoreham.

Popular with the local community, it features species-rich chalk grassland and rare pockets of chalk heath. Reduced grazing in recent years due to antisocial behaviour on site has put pressure on these delicate habitats, making their management and engaging the local community a core focus.



Volunteers surveying plants at Southwick Hill. Credit: Caleb Yule

What we achieved

Nature: The key achievements and outcomes for nature at Southwick Hill have been driven by the success of the Southwick Hill Conservation Volunteer Group. Meeting fortnightly, the group have helped to deliver extensive practical habitat management. This work has had an immediate impact and will continue to do so by guiding future management.

People: Community engagement has been central to this project. A regular conservation volunteer group was combined with walks, events and activities exploring nature, wildlife, farming, health, wellbeing, and conservation. For example, four 'Hairy Not Scary' walks with the local farmer began and ended at Mile Oak Farm Shop - encouraging participation, learning, and connection with the farm.

Heritage: Southwick Hill is a quintessential downland site, so supporting traditional grazing practices and protecting the rare chalk grassland has been a real priority for preserving the cultural and ecological heritage. This has been done through a variety of targeted fencing and infrastructure works by rangers, volunteers and contractors – particularly in priority areas such as *The Triangle* and *Hazel Holt*.

How we did it

This project brought together community engagement with practical conservation and ecological surveying. Local participation was central to the methodology, with fortnightly sessions alongside the Southwick Hill Conservation Volunteer Group focused on physical and mental wellbeing.

Large-scale tasks, such as extensive areas of fencing and countryside furniture improvements, were delivered by contractors to enable conservation grazing – supporting chalk grassland management and the downland heritage of the site.

Ecological surveys and condition assessments, carried out by experts, volunteers and rangers, continue to guide management decisions and ensure targeted action.

Public engagement included family activities, wellbeing sessions, school visits, guided walks, and community events – all promoted through a combination of posters, local social media groups, and word of mouth.

Collaborations with partners and other charities including Brighton Conservation Volunteers, Growing New Roots, Sussex Bat Group, local farmers and National Trust rangers provided additional resource, expertise and support.

A wide variety of tools and equipment, everything from bow saws to wildflower guides, were integral to delivering effective conservation, learning and engagement opportunities – so it was important to budget this in.

“What was once a place for recreational walking has become so much more.”

Southwick Hill volunteer

“We had the best time! So fun and informative. Who knew such magic was on our doorstep!”

Event participant

Lessons learnt

A key success factor of this project was the time invested in and spent with the Southwick Hill Conservation Volunteers – a dedicated group from the local community who have contributed to every aspect of the work.

Volunteer tasks ranged from practical habitat management, such as scrub clearance and tree-popping, to wildlife surveys and helping deliver public engagement activities like family bug hunts and nature trails. Regular, fortnightly sessions were well attended and allowed us to plan a programme of work in advance.

Free events were a great way of engaging with the local community, with a Dark Skies Wildlife Walk attracting over 60 participants – the majority arriving on foot from the surrounding area.

Overall, one of the main challenges was time. Limited ranger time inevitably led to restrictions around outreach, which is essential for building connections, but can take a lot of time to establish.

Key lessons learnt: Building relationships and understanding a site's ecological priorities is a slow process and often takes longer than expected.

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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