



March 2017

Partnership working review – Marlborough Downs ‘Space for Nature’ initiative

REPORT: Survey analysis and recommendations for the members and the facilitator

Eloise Fresnay, Masters Degree student from AgroParisTech, student placement in the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI).

Context: *The farmers of the Marlborough Downs originally got together as a group back in 2011 in response to a Defra challenge to come up with new ways to deliver wildlife conservation. The Marlborough Downs lies to the south of Swindon, within the North Wessex Downs AONB and is a special place for both wildlife and people. However, despite decades of conservation effort, when they looked at the facts and figures they discovered that many of the habitats and species found on the Downs were at best stable and at worst in decline.*

*Following a very successful three-year pilot (Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area), in 2015 the group was awarded a Facilitation Fund grant by Natural England to deliver elements of a new project - **Space for Nature**. This supports and supplements existing conservation initiatives by delivering more, on a bigger scale with better management of more joined up habitat, and involving a wide cross-section of society, from professionals to volunteers, special-interest groups to families, and everyone in between.*

The premise behind the Facilitation Fund is that it enables farmer groups to develop their own projects to deliver Countryside Stewardship priorities, i.e. the conservation of habitat and species, the historic environment, local landscape, and natural resources (such as soil and water). The Space for Nature project was therefore developed after a series of consultation events during which all farmers and other stakeholders were invited to contribute their ideas.

After one year of the project, the CCRI has been asked to evaluate the Space for Nature project in terms of achievement, members’ involvement and to help the facilitator to shape the project for the coming months.

This review was divided in three parts:

- Meeting with the Board, the “Downland Species” group and the “Habitats and Heritage” group, to understand the Marlborough Downs organisation and consult with involved members of the project in order to build the survey

- Creating an online survey addressed to all members of the Marlborough Downs.
- Analysing the results to provide some guidance for the project, giving recommendations to the facilitators and members and helping to shape the future of the Marlborough Downs Space for Nature project. The results were presented during the annual Spring Celebration, a gathering for all the members, and are detailed in this report.

1) Shaping the survey

The aims of the survey were threefold:

- to evaluate the progress already made by the Countryside Stewardship funded Space for Nature project in terms of biodiversity, landscape and environment since its launch in 2015
- to collect members' opinions and experiences about the past activities
- to collect members' aspirations for the future of the project, both for the style and the content (i.e. evaluating the best period for a meeting, the best way to communicate with members, but also find out which topics are the most relevant in the different areas, and what kind of actions should be undertaken)

The survey was built through an academic online survey provider by Eloise Fresnay (Masters Degree student at AgroParisTech and student placement at the CCRI), supported by Janet Dwyer and Chris Short from the CCRI and with advice from Jemma Batten. It is made of 24 questions divided in five parts:

- About you (general questions about the members to help in statistical analysis)
- You and the MDSFN project (to evaluate the involvement and perception of the project by the members)
- What has already been done in MDSFN project (to evaluate first year of the new project and achievements since 2012)
- What's next for the MDSFN project (to identify aspirations for the following months and years)
- Open questions (allowing members to express their opinions about the successes and failures of the project, and what they would like for the future – useful for quotes)

The survey ran from the 3rd to the 28th of March. Each member received a personal email with a link to the survey, which could only be completed by the invitee, ensuring both the accuracy of the data and the confidentiality of the respondent. Four reminders were sent at regular intervals to members who had not yet completed the survey. Jemma Batten also promoted the survey through monthly newsletters. At the end of the survey period, responses had been received from 27 out of the 46 members contacted.

2) Results analysis

a) Preliminary results

The first result of this survey is the number of respondents: we received 27 in response to the 46 e-mails sent (some farms have a single email address for all the members, whereas others have their own email address). This represents 59% participation, which is good for an online survey¹.

However, this analysis is then only based on the responses of 27 members. One role of the survey was to know if the communication inside the project was sufficient, and if internet and email were the best way to inform people. In this sense, using an online survey can be a disadvantage for those who are reluctant to use internet, and their opinions can be under-represented in the results.

The respondents are mainly owners, and the type of farm is very variable. It is mainly arable (50%) but 40% of the farms are described as “mixed”, meaning they carry out several activities on the farm (usually combining arable activity and livestock production). This can be seen as an asset for the farm and for the Marlborough Downs, increasing the type of landscapes, diversity in crops, using the manure for arable land etc. However, these different types of farming are harder to compare, the methods used in one farm are not necessarily suitable for the neighbours and the main interests can be different. The Marlborough Downs project has been successful in bringing these diverse farmers and associates together to identify common aims and adapt them to each farm. Now, because the new funding arrangement does not permit the facilitator to use her time to provide one-to-one advice, one of the issues is how to keep improving each farm whilst making it part of activities with a common interest to all members of the group.

a) Evaluation of what has been done so far

Members appreciate being part of a group and the social interactions the partnership provides (41.7% of respondents):

“[the best thing about my involvement in the MDSfN project is] the community involvement and sharing best practices with neighbours” respondent 23

“[the best thing is] the community that we are building within that never existed before, the learning that we are having together, the fun associated with all of this, and finally a bit of a feel good factor!” respondent 6

Gaining knowledge (29.2%) and contributing to improve the natural and farm environment (20.8%) are two really appreciated points of the project as well:

¹ According to www.surveygizmo.co.uk, internal surveys will generally receive a 30-40% response rate (or more) on average, compared to an average 10-15% response rate for external surveys.

"[the best thing about my involvement is] to be proactive on nature conservation, especially the dew pond on the farm", respondent 5

The majority of the respondents feel involved (54.2%) or really involved (37.5%) in the project, and they would like to keep being involved as much or even being more involved. The members appreciate seeing the results of actions directly on their farm (more wild birds for example) and think that being part of the project increased their knowledge about the farm environment, which is an incentive to continue with project activities. (See figure 1)

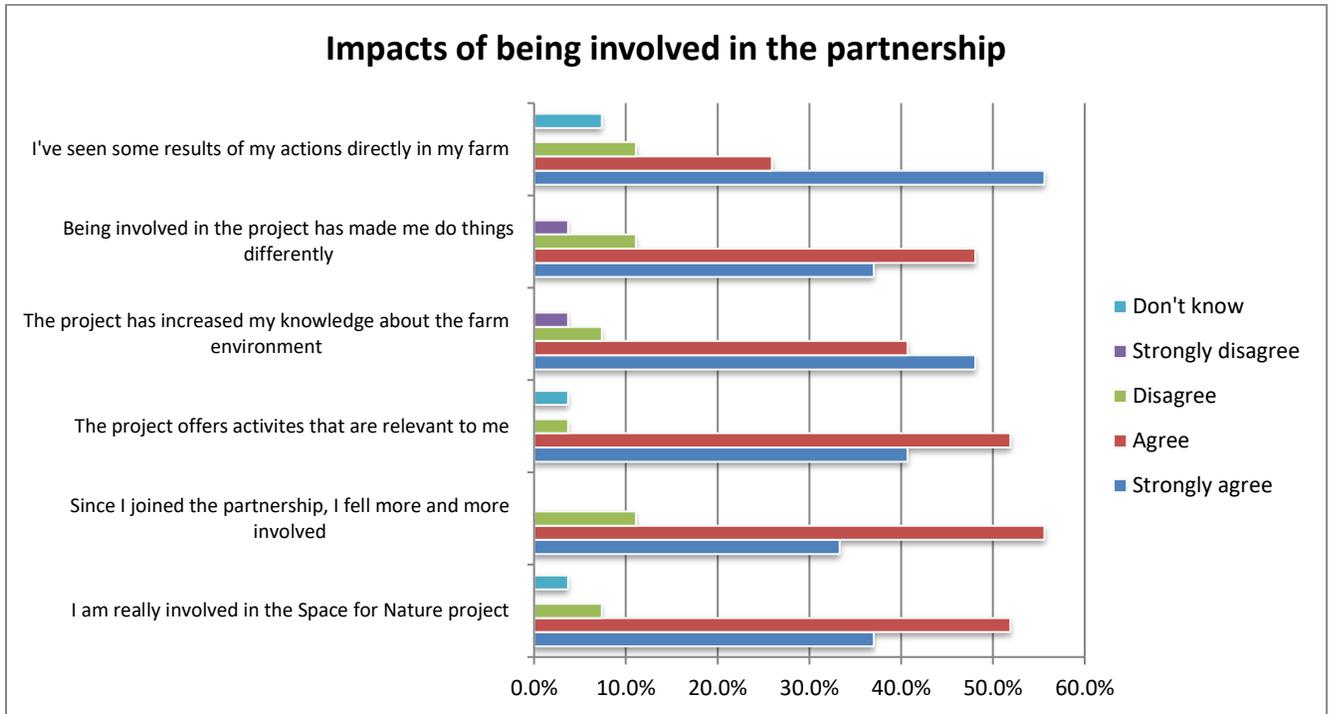


Figure 1 : Results from the question 5; "To what extent do you agree with the following statements?" showing the positive perception of the partnership for personal benefits and behaviours.

The main achievements of the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) and now the Space for Nature project are considered to be the social and environmental benefits (question 19: "The main achievement I see in MD Space for Nature project is...")

"Linking farmers, landowners and general public about a common interest" (respondent 6)

"Bringing the farmers and community together and improving the image of farming and showing what good we actually do" (respondent 17)

"Interface with neighbours" (respondent 15)

Biodiversity is seen as a success as well, especially through the Farmland Bird Programme, which has shown good results in terms of increasing bird populations in the area. This kind of result is appreciated by members because they see directly the results of their actions:

"[The main achievement is] seeing more grey partridge" (respondent 10)

"[The main achievement is] the improvement of habitats for fauna and flora" (respondent 12)

To structure the actions and continue to improve the Marlborough Downs, different types of events have been conducted. One aim of this survey was also to evaluate the opinions of members about previous events in order to improve them. Non-attendance is a particular concern. According to the respondents' answers, the non-attendance rate is on average around 33% per event (probably more if we take into account those who haven't completed the survey). However, the main reason is an issue of day or time. The subject of the event does not seem to be a reason for not coming, nor the lack of information, according to the respondents. (Table 1, results from question 8).

Reasons for not attending an event	
too long or lack of time	28.1%
too far or inconvenient place	6.3%
day or time not appropriate	43.8%
not interested by the subject	9.4%
lack of information	3.1%
don't feel involved	3.6%
other	7.1%

Table 1: Question 8 "What were, for you, the main reasons for not attending an event?" (Multi-choice question)

Respondents appreciated the events they attended, usually finding them very interesting (39.5%) or somewhat interesting (23.4%) against only 3.7% of respondents which found the events not very interesting and 0% not interesting at all. The bar chart (Figure 2) summarizes these results.

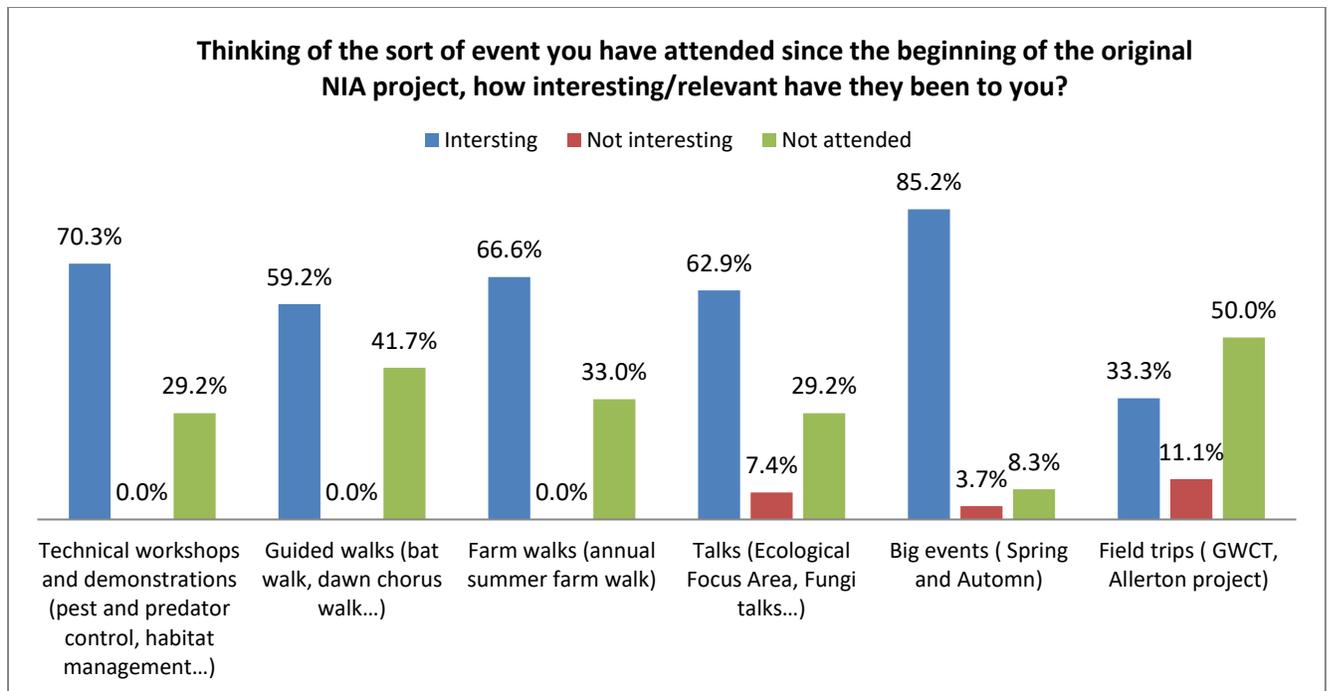


Figure 2 - Results adapted from question 7; "Thinking of the sort of event you have attended since the beginning of the original NIA project, how interesting/relevant have they been to you?"

"interesting" is an aggregation of the answers "very" and "somewhat"; "not interesting" is an aggregation of the answers "not very" and "not at all"

These initial results indicate a positive response to the first part of the project, since October 2015. It is important to underline these good results to encourage people to keep going and continue their actions. Absenteeism is a key issue in the event organization, even if the subjects are appreciated. The next part of the survey tries to establish the best options for event organization and communication to ensure the highest number of participants, as well as the best subjects and events for future months and years.

b) Evaluation of members expectations for the next steps of Space for Nature project

Format of the events

As we can see from the first part of the survey, the period and time of the day determine the number of participants. New formats of events are currently tried, like lunchtime talks for example. The results show that the best periods to organize events such as workshops, walks and talks seem to be (question 15):

- Lunchtime (82.6% yes or maybe)
- Evening after 7pm (78.3% yes or maybe)
- Early evening (69.5% yes or maybe)

Breakfast is not a good option with almost 70% of respondents saying they would (probably) not attend an event at the beginning of the day. However, morning and afternoon are possible options, depending on the workload and the time of the year. Indeed, a meeting in the middle of the morning or afternoon breaks up the day too much, which is quite an issue during harvesting for example. However, some respondents would like more meetings during the day time:

Question 22 - I think the project could be improved by ...:

“more afternoon meetings” (respondent 10); “morning and afternoon meetings” (respondent 11)

The day of the week might also be a determining factor for participation. The survey results show that members would be more likely to attend an event mid-week than on a Monday, Friday or at the weekend, as shown in figure3.

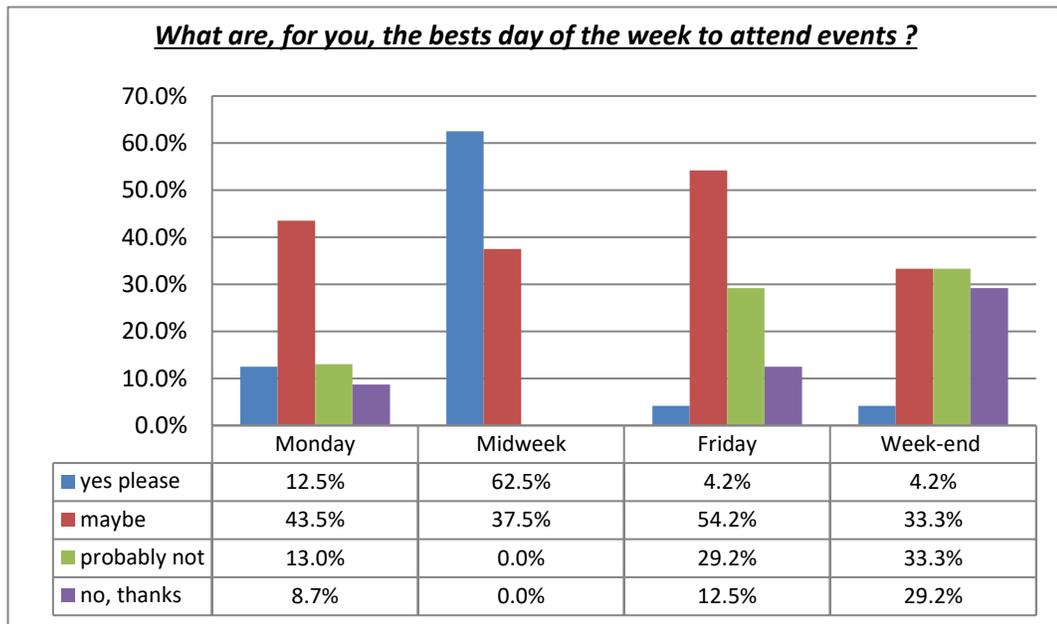


Figure 3 : Results from question 16, showing the preference for meetings days. Midweek results seem to be the best option.

Subject and type of events

One challenge for the next steps of the project is to find relevant themes that interest members and are eligible within the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund. The grant pays for the project manager’s time spent working with farmer members on habitat and species management, conservation of landscape and historic environment, and natural resource protection. However, educational access and the community access elements of the project are not covered by the grant and neither are capital works or one-to-one advice. This is a new issue

for members and the project manager, especially because actions cannot be done directly by the project manager, but the funding is only available to organize events such as talks, workshops, or field trips, which respondents are the keenest to attend. (Table 2)

	yes please	maybe	probably not/ no thanks	no, thanks
<i>Technical workshops and demonstrations</i>	74.4%	29.6%	0.0%	0.0%
<i>Guided walks on particular subjects</i>	59.3%	29.6%	11.1%	3.7%
<i>Field visits (e.g.: to other farms)</i>	70.4%	22.2%	7.4%	0.0%
<i>Talks</i>	40.7%	59.3%	0.0%	0.0%
<i>Big event (Spring and Seasonal supper)</i>	55.6%	37.0%	3.7%	3.7%
<i>Multimedia material (video, on-line article and factsheets, on-line advice)</i>	37.0%	40.7%	14.8%	7.4%

Table 2: Question 13- What kind of activities would interest you?

During the group meetings in February, the opinion was expressed that there is a lack of link between the Marlborough Downs and other British (and even international) farming organizations. Technical workshops could be the opportunity to invite external speakers who would share their experiences in their area, and bring new ideas and example of success. It has also been suggested during the “Habitats and Heritage” group that scientists or agronomists should be invited to lead workshops on farming practices related to environment (for example: how better soil management improves both productivity and biodiversity). Best Farming Practices is a topic respondents would like to learn more about (55.6% “yes please” and “40.7% maybe”), but the favorite topics are Habitat Management and Downland Species (figure 4).

As a respondent remarked in the comments, these results are approximate because *“it is difficult to identify what we would or would not support without knowledge of the topics to be chosen”* (respondent 5, question 25)

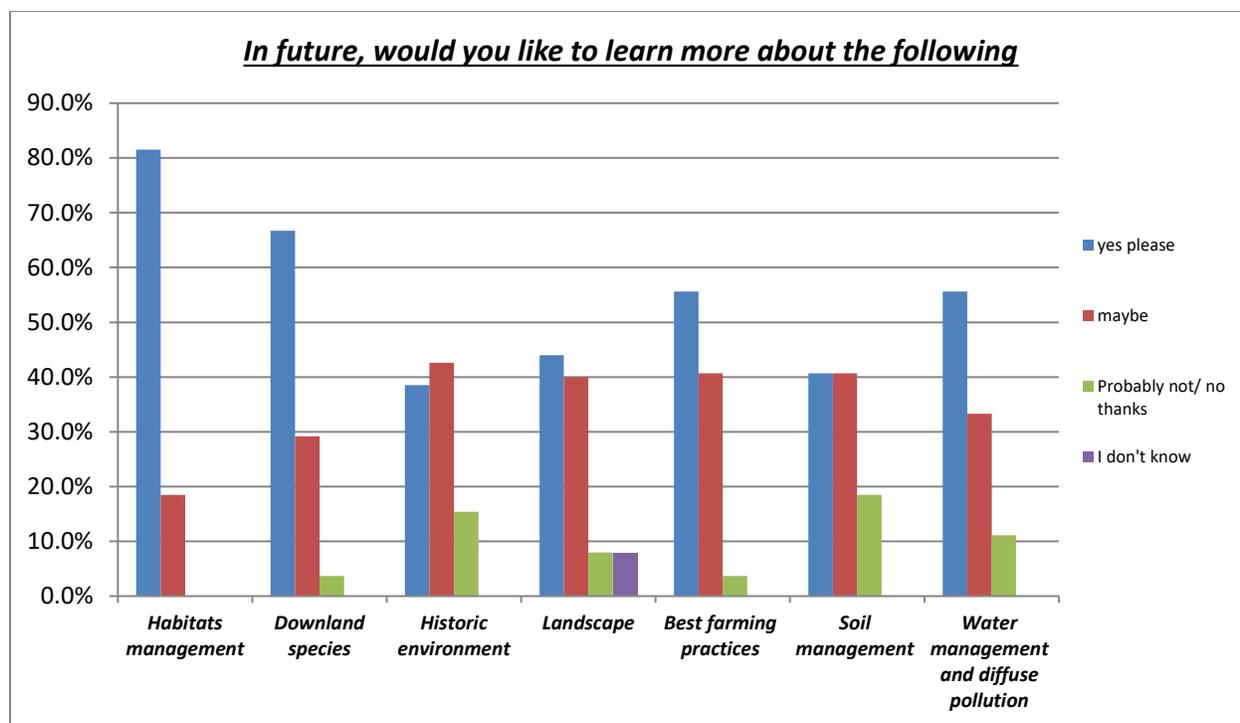


Figure 4 : Results from the question 17, showing the preferred topics respondents would like to discuss or learn more about in the next steps of the project. Topics with “yes please” answers higher than 50% could be considered as the priority topics for future events.

Successful activities have already been undertaken on these topics. The work already done about biodiversity and habitats was well structured, with clear targets and results, and so encourages people to continue to improve their practices in these fields. Some ideas from the Downland Species group would encourage the improvement of biodiversity and people’s awareness. For example, increasing the number of places where people could observe birds whenever they want: observatories with feeder, nest boxes, and photography spots. A similar idea was suggested in the Habitats and Heritage group, with the creation of an “micro nature reserve”, creating on a small scale every feature that could be done on the farm scale (bird sanctuary, wildlife spot, ponds etc.). It would be a place only for members/invited groups for education, demonstration, promotion and research. It could host field trips, and also present results and ideas through a web page (Facebook or blog), encouraging people to share their suggestions and comments.

One of the aims of Countryside Stewardship is to link environmental and economic activities but this does not seem to be a priority for members in the Marlborough Downs. However, according to the responses “yes please” and “maybe” from the figure 4, we can observe interest for subjects like “best farming practices”, “soil management” or even “water management”, which were less explored subjects in the past and could be interesting fields to develop, for example, through

farm visits and evaluations, or through inviting external guests to discuss the topics and present potential actions.

Interesting ideas were raised during the Habitats and Heritage groups about the historic environment. For example, using landscape history could be helpful to understand what has been done on each farm, and could provide ideas for re-building hedges for example. Usually people are really proud of positive actions and landscape improvements made on their farm, and emphasizing it would ensure good motivation for the next steps in landscape improvement. The historic aspect is also related to heritage and how we keep the Marlborough Downs' history alive. It creates stronger social links, as farmers in the area knew each other in the past, were related etc. It plays a role in people's integration in the network. Knowledge and stories from the past could be saved (suggestions included keeping records of old stories, producing books, interviewing people, photographs, landscape family tree...), and presented as an exhibition, to improve social relations, and also to emphasise the farming methods used in the past and improvements made, or, on the contrary, the good things which have been lost through the decades.

So according to these questions, people are enthusiastic about continuing the work already done and the responses to question 23 ("looking for the future of the project, I would like...") confirm this idea:

"[I would like] more of the same" (respondent 2; respondent 18),

"Continuation "(respondent 3)

Respondents also would like more involvement of the entire group and the local community:

"[I would like] all the farmers to be involved" (respondent 1)

"[I would like]to see more involvement by the interested parties" (respondent 7)

"Involve the Community around the Downs more" (respondent 6).

The survey analysis, the comments and the meetings with different groups in February allow us to build a kind of SWOT analysis of the Marlborough Downs Space for Nature project. The titles ("what is working, what is not working etc.) were first introduced during the Downland Species meeting, and allow us to easily see the strengths and key issues of the project:

What is working?	What is not working?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of successful activities (<i>Farmland bird programme, Open Farm Sunday, flagship species</i>) - Common aims with a diversity of members - Knowledge provision - Good involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty to attract wider engagement – new members - Lack of time to attend events or join some activities - Difficulty to make a clear link of the actions with Countryside Stewardship priorities
What are the opportunities?	What is missing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building on the good results for biodiversity and environment <i>“To do what we do well is better than to spread too thin” (quote from the Downland species meeting)</i> - Improving what has already been achieved - New funding for 5 years (2015-2020 – Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund) can be an opportunity for something new + build a plan for these 4 years, with specific steps and targets - More events evenings or lunchtimes in mid-week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of a new strategic plan with clear and quantified targets - Solutions to fit the new grant and how the grant can be used (What the facilitator can do, no funding for community aspect) - Loss of impetus after the success of the previous project - Involving the other people working on the farms - Connection with other British or international groups - Too much talk and not enough action

It is important to emphasize the strengths of the project. A lot of good work has already been achieved and the positive dynamic continues. However, after one year of the launching of the Space for Nature project, an assessment of the project is a great opportunity to prevent potential threats. Some issues are limiting, like the lack of funding, or the frame set by the grant. Nonetheless, some constraints can be overcome - for example, farm visits can be used as group advice, as one-to-one advice is impossible : every month, the group could visit in one farm with few (assigned) members to evaluate what the farmer has already done, what he could do in the months ahead, with comments and advice of other farmers. Because every month the group changes and goes to a new farm, everyone can be peer-reviewed and peer-review others so it encourages people to do the best they can and also share their experience or compliment each other. The facilitator can provide specific advice for the farm they visit that day, but as they are a group it is not one-to-one advice because it can benefit everyone. It seems there is a demand for these kinds of things, for example:

"[The main opportunity I see in MD projects is] hearing how other farms are managed" (respondent 13, question 21)

""[I think the project could be improved by] more monitoring of individual farms and improvement at low cost" (respondent 5, question 22).

Many comments underline the lack of a new plan for the months and years ahead, with specific targets and objectives. In the NIA projects, numerical targets were fixed and achieved (example: 11 ponds created, more owls and raptors...) and it seems now there is a lack of new targets to achieve. Setting quantitative targets, even for small actions, helps people to see rapid results of what they've done and avoid the loss of impetus. Having long term goals helps to see where the project is now and where members want it to be in one, two,... five years. A respondent said:

"It's a unique and wonderful group who have done incredibly well to date, but who need to re base and move on again" (respondent 5, question 24).

To conclude the results analysis, and the recommendations for the project, it is important to make an assessment of what has been done until now. Identifying the key points with the SWOT is a good way to tackle the potential threats before they arrive. What we can observe from the different group meetings and the survey is that there is a good dynamic in the project and enthusiastic people. The involvement in the project seems to be good, some respondents in the survey saying they would like to be more involved or continue to be involved as much as now. We can wonder if it is the case for the other members who did not reply, however a core motivated group can definitely enhance the motivation of the others, especially through social events. For example, Open Farm Sunday (even though it does not fit within the grant framework) is a collaborative event where everyone is involved, as some point out. Increasing the number of social and educational events for the members can help the ones who are less involved to participate more.

According to the results, the approach to information provision seems to work well - at least for the respondents who all read their emails and like to be informed by email (newsletters and reminders) about upcoming events. Only a few (12.5% of the respondents) would prefer receive it by post. Informing people as early as possible about the venue for events is a good thing to ensure everyone puts it in his/her diary, and reminders sent out days beforehand will complete the communication. The public advertising is working well with public events like Open Farm Sunday, and also through the Facebook and webpage. Some respondents would like even "*more advertising of the good work it [the MD project] does*". (Respondent 4, question 22) or "*Media, campaigns, parish magazines: getting the public to care for the countryside and understand the hard work we are putting into this project*" (respondent 17, question 23). Indeed, with larger scale recognition of their actions, members would gain more motivation.

In conclusion, the survey has endorsed the current actions and achievements of the project and has generated many suggestions for enhanced participation in future. As such, the author hopes it can be useful in supporting greater resilience within the group, and maintaining its commitment and ambition to achieve.