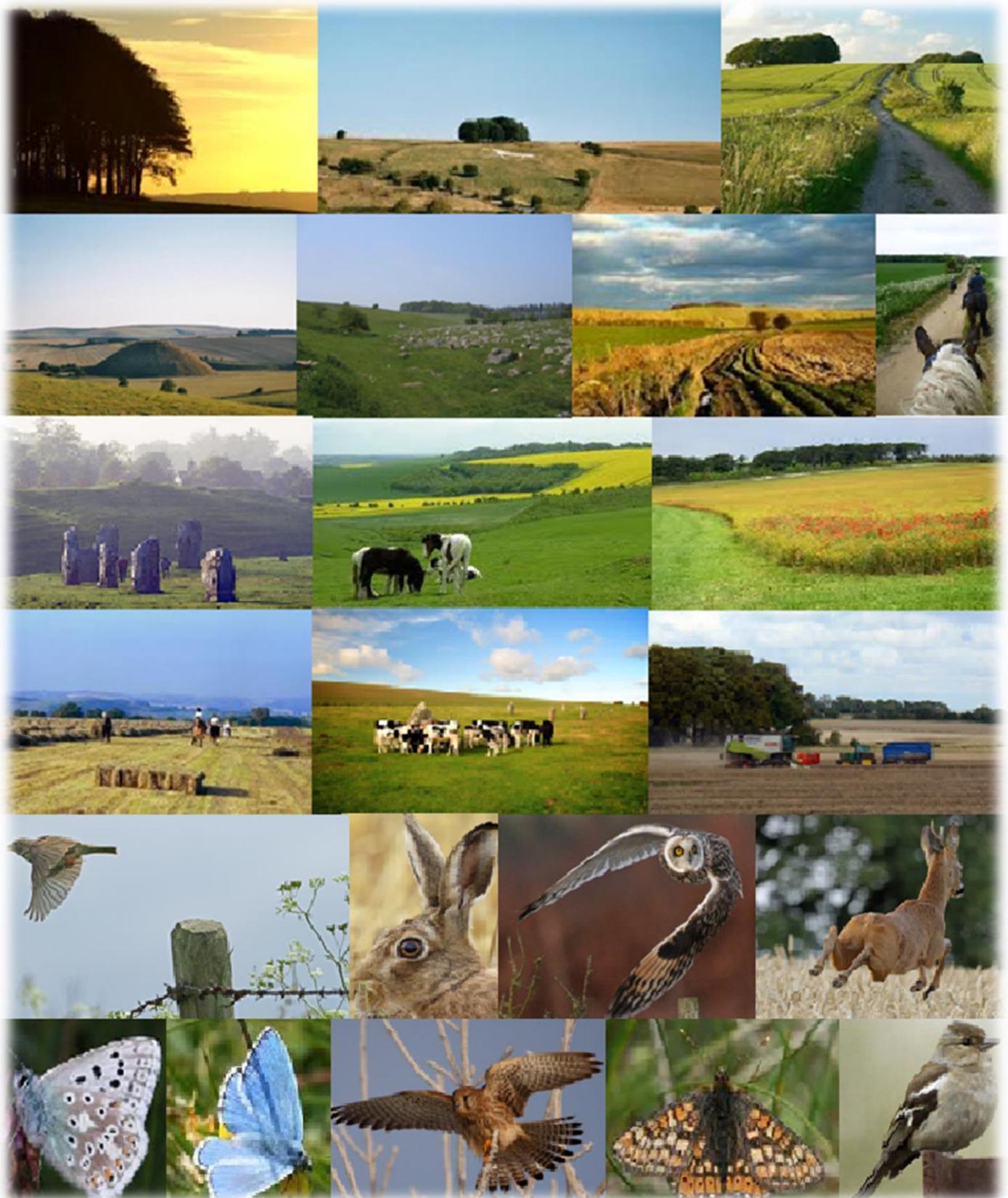


# Marlborough Downs Nature Enhancement Partnership

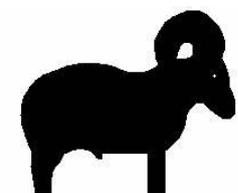


## 4th Annual Report

Dr Jemma Batten

Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area Project Manager

Black Sheep Countryside Management  
Jindabyne – Great Hinton – Wiltshire BA14 6BT



📞 01380 871012

📞 07855 506112

✉️ [jemma.bat@btinternet.com](mailto:jemma.bat@btinternet.com)



# **MARLBOROUGH DOWNS**

## **NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREA**

### **2015-16 SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The past year has been one of consolidation, whilst we review of the implications of the ending of the original three year Natural England Pilot Scheme as a Nature Improvement Area, and cement a formula under the Marlborough Downs NEP – Nature Enhancement Partnership – Space for Nature.

We are pleased that Black Sheep have now become part of that Partnership, along with the farmers, Wiltshire Council and the GWCT. Thanks to 28 farmers signing up, Black Sheep's application for a five-year Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund has been granted. However, this has been found to have limitations, and the Board has actively investigated opportunities to fund, amongst other things, some of our overheads and, more importantly to our vision, to continue our Outreach programme and reach a wider public. Slow progress has been made, since the Facilitation Fund, like the original Pilot, has been found wanting in clarity of purpose and reporting.

Whilst we seek this clarity, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have tirelessly given of their time to take us through the maze, as we have enjoyed the huge success of Open Farm Sunday, and welcomed many new faces to our Walks and Talks.

## **APRIL TO OCTOBER – Consolidation period**

The first half of 2015/16 was mainly a planning period, with only a skeleton programme of activities and events. The project management team spent the first quarter delivering actions required to complete the Nature Improvement Area pilot project, though funding for this finished the previous financial year. The charity then relied upon the small reserve carried over from 2013/14 and donations of goods, services and money to keep going while we identified and applied for future grant funding. Events held during the first six months of the year included:

April	Fyfield Down Heritage Walk (29 attended)
May	Dawn Chorus Walk (9 attended)
June	Open Farm Sunday (1000+ attended)
July	Summer Farm Walk and barbecue (78 attended)
August	Volunteer work day – installing information panels (4 attended) Pollinator workshop (18 attended) Defra volunteer work day – various conservation tasks (8 attended)
September	Bat Walk (15 attended) Avebury Heritage Walk (18 attended) AGM and Seasonal Supper – members only (21 attended)

## **OCTOBER TO MARCH – Space for Nature**

In October 2015 we started a new project – Space for Nature– which is part-funded by a Natural England Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund (CS FF) grant. As the name suggests, this pays for facilitation of activities that support Countryside Stewardship priorities which are, broadly speaking, biodiversity, landscape, historical environment, and natural resources (soil and water). The fund pays for project management and overheads and scheme rules are such that agreements are between Natural England (NE) and individual facilitators. Thus the Marlborough Downs Space for Nature CS FF agreement is between NE and Jemma Batten of Black Sheep, who has managed the project from its initial conception.

Activities eligible for CS FF funding include:

### **OBJECTIVE 1: To deliver evidence-based conservation activities on a landscape scale**

In the first six months the project has:

- Undertaken one full review and a number of partial reviews of existing Environmental Stewardship agreements in order to identify most appropriate options are being delivered
- Advised on selection and location of Ecological Focus Areas on five farms
- Disseminated best practice via a spring newsletter
- Acted as broker between farmers looking for grazing land, stock, machinery, contractors, suppliers and new customers

## **OBJECTIVE 2: To enable appropriate management of semi-natural wildlife habitat**

In the first six months the project has:

- Applied (unsuccessfully) for a 'Making Local Woods Work' grant from the Plunkett Foundation
- Identified volunteers who might be interested in joining a social forestry group
- Identified tracks and verges to be managed better as wildlife corridors

## **OBJECTIVE 3: To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance**

In the first six months the project has:

- Distributed 9 tonnes of grain across seven farms to feed farmland birds over the winter and early spring
- Held a bird ringing and feeding workshop for farmers
- Replaced ten tree sparrow nestboxes
- Sent four members on a rodent control workshop
- Identified two predator control demonstration sites
- Held a hedgehog workshop (29 attended)

Unfortunately, the CS FF grant does not cover any activities related to our community and outreach objectives and we are still seeking funding for these elements of the project. However, during the second half of the year we held the following events:

November	Planning workshop I (25 attended)
December	Willow wreath workshop (40 attended)
February	Planning workshop II (10 attended)

## Marlborough Downs Nature Enhancement Partnership

### Space for Nature Project 2015-2020:

#### Ecological objectives, outputs and activities

### Aim 1: To improve the condition and connectivity of the ecological network of the Marlborough Downs

Objective 1: To deliver evidence-based conservation activities on a landscape scale

Outputs	Background	Actions
Biodiversity tailoring	The pilot has shown how detailed knowledge of what's happening beyond individual farm boundaries has enabled us to deliver on a landscape scale.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review every agri-environment agreement in the Marlborough Downs to ensure<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Most appropriate habitat management in a landscape context</li><li>- Optimum combination and location of options that support widespread species</li></ul></li><li>• Deliver best possible environmental benefits via Ecological Focus Areas</li><li>• Dissemination of best practice for farmers, advisers, special interest groups</li></ul>
Support for local businesses involved in conservation management	While the project area is too small to support a full scale local grazing scheme we have been involved in brokering grazing agreements between landowners and graziers and will continue to develop this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Web-based service<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Matching graziers with grazing land</li><li>- Machinery ring</li><li>- Bulk purchasing, eg seed</li></ul></li><li>• Supply chain, eg local butchers, markets, pubs, etc</li></ul>

Objective 2: To enable appropriate management of semi-natural wildlife habitat

Outputs	Background	Actions
Better woodland management	The pilot focussed on chalk grassland and while this will continue to be a priority habitat on the Downs going forward, it would be good to bring neglected woodland back into management, and to enhance the wildlife value of woodland planted for shooting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify markets for e.g. biomass and firewood, and consider collective projects – most farms don't have enough woodland for management to be economically viable, but if we consider the Marlborough Downs woodland resource as a whole it looks more feasible</li> <li>• Social forestry group:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management by volunteers</li> <li>- Demonstrations/training – coppicing, charcoal, woodcraft, etc.</li> <li>- National Association of AONBs toolkit</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Management statement for individual woodlands/whole resource</li> </ul>
Better pond management	By the end of the pilot we will doubled the number of ponds on the Downs and surveyed the vegetation of most of the more established ones.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best practice guide to cover pond and surrounding area</li> <li>• Recommendations (supply?) re seed/plants</li> </ul>
Improved connectivity between habitats	We have started to establish wildlife corridors and stepping stones re chalk grassland and tree sparrow habitat.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tracks and verges               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved management</li> <li>- Enhance species diversity by introducing seed where appropriate</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Grassland/grass margins               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Share experience/ experiment to find best management options</li> <li>- Restoration – stepping stones</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Corridors – strips</li> </ul>

Objective 3: To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance

Outputs	Background	Actions
Marlborough Downs farmland bird package	We have had great success with tree sparrows and corn buntings and while we want to continue supporting our original flagship species we'd like to add others to the list.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Winter feeding – 3 tonnes per year</li> <li>• Monitoring               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PIT tagging</li> <li>- House martin tagging</li> <li>- Ringing demos</li> <li>- Webcam: nest boxes in summer (kestrel, barn owl); feeders in winter</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Nest boxes for swifts and little owls</li> <li>• Reed beds along the edge of the project area</li> <li>• Tree sparrows               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rolling programme of new nest boxes (20 per year) to replace old ones</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Long term nest sites</li> </ul>
Systematic approach to predator control	We are aware that ground nesting birds are vulnerable to predators and that to reverse the decline in these species we must make a co-ordinated effort to control these where the law permits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish predator control demonstration pilots</li> <li>• Best practice workshops</li> <li>• One or two 'champions' – farmers/gamekeepers – to give advice to others, visit, etc.</li> </ul>
Extensive uptake of measures to support widespread species	We have adopted various mechanisms to enable farmers to provide habitat for widespread species such as invertebrates and arable plants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nectar plots and bird mixes via agri-environment schemes, ecological focus areas, CSS</li> <li>• Deadwood habitat, especially as hibernation sites for bees</li> <li>• Hedgehog boxes, bee boxes, bat boxes</li> <li>• Garden ponds</li> </ul>

## Community and outreach objectives, outputs and activities

### Aim 2: To connect people to the landscape of the Marlborough Downs

Objective 4: To offer a range of opportunities for people to engage with the landscape of the Marlborough Downs

Outputs	Background	Actions
Marlborough Downs SfN events programme	We have developed a well-supported programme offering public and best practice events which will be continued and expanded to include farm visits, talks and other activities targeted at specific groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compile and promote annual events programme</li> <li>• Use calendar of country sports meetings, rural interest groups (eg beekeepers), Marlborough Summer School, etc. to offer additional talks, walks, practical activities</li> <li>• Continue to develop links with other organisations active within and around the Downs to co-ordinate and collaborate on an integrated events programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Broader subject matter</li> <li>- Benefits of resource sharing</li> <li>- Access additional expertise/information</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Resource packs/buddy system to encourage more people to lead walks, educational visits, give talks, etc.</li> </ul>
Share the health and wellbeing benefits of the Marlborough Downs with all sectors of the local community	While the pilot very much focussed on events aimed at the general public (particularly families) and best practice workshops we have become very aware of the value of access to green space and outdoor activities for improved health and wellbeing for all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish links with organisations offering specialist care and support in our local communities</li> <li>• Offer tailored activities for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adults and young people with physical or mental impairments/learning difficulties</li> <li>- Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Older people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Talks in residential/care homes/day centres</li> <li>- Minibus tours</li> <li>- Virtual farm visits</li> <li>- Reminiscence therapy</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Outputs	Background	Actions
<p>Greater understanding of Marlborough Downs landscape, wildlife and land use</p>	<p>We believe that, if we are to protect our wildlife, landscape, rural businesses and communities from changing Government policy we need widespread support from the general population and the best way to achieve this is to raise awareness of the value of our countryside and the ways in which our landscapes are shaped by current and past management.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools (mainly primary?) and youth groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom visits to stimulate interest ideally leading to farm visits</li> <li>- Downloadable resource packs, linked to curriculum</li> <li>- Activities for inset days</li> <li>- Programme of events tailored to individual schools/classes that support curriculum delivery</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Virtual learning resources via website</li> </ul>
<p>Volunteer group to undertake practical work (see Annex 3)</p>	<p>With the exception of the project management team the whole pilot has relied on volunteer and in-kind input. However, we have not been able to capture the full potential of practical conservation volunteers, largely due to the lack of resource to support a co-ordinator, equipment, tools, transport, qualified task leaders, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project management team to employ part time volunteer co-ordinator (potential funding through Area Boards)</li> <li>• Volunteer tasks to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conservation management of specific sites</li> <li>- Access improvements</li> <li>- Surveys of flora and fauna</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Collaborate with National Trust/Wiltshire Wildlife Trust/Natural England NNR (Fyfield Down) to share resources</li> <li>• Link with volunteer agencies (Swindon Volunteer Centre, Volunteer Centre Wiltshire, Community Service Volunteers, BTCV etc.) to identify individual and corporate volunteers</li> </ul>

Objective 5: To provide high quality access for all

Outputs	Background	Actions
<p>More people out walking, cycling and riding horses on the Downs</p>	<p>During the pilot we began to identify our favourite walks and rides in order to improve and promote them to encourage others to explore the downland landscape. We would like to continue this and also to look at new ways to convince people of the joys and physical and mental benefits of being up on the Downs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to identify, upgrade and promote favourite walks and rides</li> <li>• Consult local groups to identify favourite routes for cyclists and horse riders and Parish Councils to establish community routes</li> <li>• Compilation of favourite walks, each graded according to ease, accessibility, distance, time</li> <li>• Offer guided walks               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Led by Community Access Forum, Ramblers, volunteers, landowners</li> <li>- Educational – relaxed but informative</li> <li>- Dog walks – opportunity to educate owners about responsibilities</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Set up a Marlborough Downs Walking for Health group</li> <li>• Collaborate with local groups, eg U3A Walking Group, Friends of the Railway Path, etc.</li> </ul>
<p>Better quality access</p>	<p>We are keen to ensure that people have a safe experience on the Downs and that they are able to get around without difficulty and have begun a programme of improvements which we would like to continue.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain Public Rights of Way and permissive access in good condition               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problem areas beyond local Authority remit</li> <li>- Work undertaken by volunteer group/students supervised by Rights of Way officer</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Upgrade all stiles to kissing gates</li> <li>• Identify parking areas for each favourite route with horsebox space where needed</li> </ul>

Outputs	Background	Actions
<p>Access for individuals and groups with specific requirements</p>	<p>During the pilot we have worked with the local carriage driving for the disabled group and would like to share the Downs with others who may experience barriers to access because of physical or mental issues or because they have specific requirements that can only be met by a large-scale approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to support Kennet Valley Driving Group (disabled carriage drivers) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Permissive access on wider network of private farm tracks and field margins</li> <li>- Create links between land holdings</li> <li>- Track upgrades where these open up significant routes</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Develop better access opportunities for the local Riding for the Disabled Group</li> <li>• Collaborate with local Pets As Therapy group to offer short walks with PAT dogs</li> <li>• Link with other specialist groups, eg geocaching, orienteering, endurance riders, to develop specific access strategies for the Downs</li> </ul>

Objective 6: To increase local and national awareness of the work, achievements and impact of the Marlborough Downs Space for Nature Project

Outputs	Background	Actions
<p>Better PR and publicity for the project</p>	<p>The results of an annual survey indicate that local people feel they are not sufficiently informed about the Marlborough Downs Partnership or our work. Our objective is therefore to increase awareness and tell the story of the project and its achievements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcase the work of the project by focusing on specific good news stories and achievements of the group</li> <li>• Develop and agree a news story time table of events across the calendar year in order to dovetail news stories with other calendar events and riding the current news agenda</li> <li>• Focus should be targeted not a scatter gun approach in order to achieve maximum impact</li> <li>• Engage with media – local and national, conservation and country with regard to these stories either by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Press Release</li> <li>- Press Event</li> <li>- Invitations to Marlborough Downs projects to individual journalists</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Promotion of events programme</li> <li>• Information boards</li> <li>• Contractors, farm workers, country sports people               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Farmers to get employees involved – put NIA leaflet in payslips, display events programme in farm office/workshop, etc.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Outputs	Background	Actions
Hard-working and innovative marketing plan	There appears to be a strong appetite from the general public to support conservation and rural and agricultural initiatives and feedback indicates that most would welcome the opportunity to get involved or at least be better educated on the subject.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further development of mdnep.org.uk <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Incentivise re-visits to website via new engaging content</li> <li>- Additional data capture options (eg regular competitions)</li> <li>- Interacts with social media</li> <li>- Access to fast fact on what the project has achieved (short concise snappy downloads facts)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• More regular Marlborough Downs e-newsletter</li> <li>• Social media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encourage sharing of content from followers</li> <li>- Dovetail snappy facts by releasing these on social media</li> <li>- Run social media competition in conjunction with website</li> <li>- Digital video, eg YouTube, encourage people to submit their own videos from the Marlborough Downs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Offline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leafleting –general leaflet and favourite walks and rides – placement in relevant public areas/shops/cafes/B&amp;Bs etc.</li> <li>- Leaflet drop to coincide with events</li> <li>- Posters – in local pubs, cafes, notice boards</li> <li>- Information panels/interpretation boards</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Cemented relationships with key decision makers, business contacts, partners and sponsors	It is important that the Marlborough Downs Project continues to receive and gain new support from local communities, businesses and decision makers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage with key decision makers via meetings and invitations to visit the Downs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local MPs, local business networks, nature networks, young farmers</li> <li>- Westminster – go and talk to Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs</li> <li>- High Profile conservationists and country/wildlife experts</li> <li>- Local dignitaries and personalities</li> <li>- Develop partnerships and sponsorship opportunities with businesses</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

