

The Changing Chalk partnership has a shared vision of a sustainable future for the South Downs, working together to reverse the decline of the fragile chalk grassland and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

The partnership comprises 10 core partners and is led by the National Trust. Each core partner is a project lead for one or more projects in Changing Chalk. There are eighteen projects in total. Partners will work collaboratively across projects and themes, as well as at cross-partnership and strategic levels.

Case Studies

Restoring Chalkland Biodiversity: Changing Chalk grazing project

Project lead: the South Downs National Park Authority (spokesperson: Chris Fairbrother, Landscape and Biodiversity Lead for Chalk at the South Downs National Park Authority)

Flocks of sheep dot the landscape of the South Downs. Love them or loathe them, they are for many a familiar sight. In fact, these fluffy farmhands hold the key to understanding the past and mapping the future of swathes of chalk grassland under great threat.

Grazing is vital to preserving and restoring chalk grassland. For centuries, sheep were hard at work nibbling life into this rare habitat. Up to 40 species of flowering plants can be found in one square metre of chalk grassland, including many rare orchids, wildflowers and butterflies such as the Adonis Blue and Duke of Burgundy. Sheep also donated wool to local families and put food on the table.

In recent times, though, this way of life has fallen into the shadows of these vast rolling hills. Areas of chalk grassland have become disparate and divided – there's been an 80% decline in this unique habitat since WWII. It simply hasn't been sustainable to continue this great tradition.

The Changing Chalk Grazing Project is working to reverse this trend, and bring back conservation grazing at scale. Led by the South Downs National Park Authority, a new generation of graziers are coming together to establish a system that is economically viable for the future. Putting their flock to work, they're looking to the past to provide a future for the landscape, and themselves.

Connecting Downs and Towns: Growing News Roots

Project lead: Brighton & Hove Food Partnership (spokesperson Jess Crocker, Brighton & Hove Food Partnership)

The world of today brings new challenges for urban communities. Time in nature and the countryside can help restore and regroup, but many – especially people with physical and mental ill health – lack the confidence and means of accessing the green space of the South Downs close by.

The Changing Chalk partnership is supporting those in need to overcome these barriers. With projects like Growing New Roots (led by Brighton & Hove Food Partnership), they're finding ways to take a break from daily life and reap the personal benefits of time outdoors.

Eileen, who has struggled with mental and physical health issues, a day in Stanmer Park with the team has "given me a fresh impetus to go out and about – so much further than I would have dared before". From path clearing to forming a confidence-boosting bike bus, she "loved learning more about what was really on my doorstep in Stanmer Park – especially now I know I can cycle there."

Amy, who also faces mental health challenges, draws on her 'experiences and feelings' from eco-therapy sessions on the Downs to "build resilience and coping strategies for wider life and the future". From calm activities to volunteering and the chance to learn about flora, fauna and cultural heritage, Amy tells us "the benefit of being away from current troubles and stresses, in nature, in a safe, held space, was massive."

Hearts and Histories of the Downs: The Big Dig – Defined by Nature (spokesperson Jo Seaman, Heritage Manager at Eastbourne Borough Council)

The Downs and Towns have a long, shared history. The rolling chalk grasslands have shaped the development of the urban areas at its fringes, with people through the centuries relying on the unique landscape for their existence and later for their wealth.

Yet many of today's communities are unaware of the unique story lying under the land they walk on every day. Now, the Changing Chalk partnership is taking steps to unearth this hidden history with the launch of the Big Dig led by Eastbourne Council.

Big Dig will show archaeology in action, with local volunteers digging small test pits in back gardens, allotments, school grounds and public spaces in carefully selected areas. With the support of a team of Flying Archaeologists and a live 'Incident Room', new discoveries made by the project will help map the story of Eastbourne and its surrounding areas.

They will also officially declare Heritage Eastbourne's first archaeology amnesty, as part of a wider initiative to delve deeper into the town's history and everyday life experience through time.

Changing Chalk project summary

Name	Lead Partner	Summary of activity
Monument Mentors	National Trust	Building a network of community monitoring and management of nationally important scheduled ancient monuments in the South Downs. The project will work closely with residents to engage and inspire them about the heritage on their doorstep with an aim for them to 'adopt-a-monument'.
Downs from Above	National Trust (with Historic England)	A community-led landscape scale archaeology survey focused on the South Downs north of Brighton. Heritage mapped from over 100 years of aerial photos & lidar will provide a platform for a citizen science survey. By engaging audiences with heritage on their doorstep, we will help build knowledge, inspire research, inform future management and protection of our Downland heritage.
Gateway to the Downs	National Trust	Making the Downs more accessible to urban fringe communities and disabled people. The Travelling Hub – an engagement van designed for facilitating outreach – will move between 8 gateway sites across the Downs, towing off-road mobility vehicles; and a series of capital works will directly improve access.
Creating Connections	National Trust and Railway Land Wildlife Trust	This project will recruit two Chalk Life Rangers to engage new urban fringe audiences with the wonders of the chalk downland on their doorstep, enabling them to take action to protect it and enjoy the wellbeing

		benefits it provides. A range of habitat management projects will provide opportunities for local communities and young people to actively engage in looking after the rare chalk grassland habitat.
Cultural Heritage	National Trust (with support from Friends, Families, Travellers)	Recognising and celebrating Gypsy, Roma & Traveller heritage as part of the Downs story.
Find Your Future	National Trust (with support from the Hangleton & Knoll Project)	Engaging young people who live on the urban fringe of the Downs through activity days to facilitate wellbeing, education and career opportunities.
Writing Our Legacy @ Changing Chalk	National Trust (with support from Writing our Legacy)	Provision of safe and welcoming spaces for Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people to respond creatively to their experience and connection with the Downs, in partnership with Writing our Legacy, including seasonal programmes for the general public.
Reconnecting Dew Ponds	South Downs National Park Authority	This project will restore five dewponds that contribute ecological connectivity, support wider habitats but also have potential for community involvement, wider interpretation and education. The focus will be on ponds close to the South Downs Way national trail.
Sustainable Chalklands (incorporating Grazing project and Scrub Clearance Research)	Grazing project – South Downs National Park Authority Scrub Clearance Research – Natural England with RBG Kew	Helping farmers and landowners to better manage the chalk grassland, a rare and species-rich habitat, for its long-term sustainability. The Grazing project seeks to address the core risk to its future: the lack of appropriate grazing. We will work with farmers to develop a conservation grazing system at a landscape scale and restore and reconnect this iconic Downland habitat. Scrub Clearance Research will investigate, demonstrate and share evidence-based protocols for scrub management and the use of seed in chalk grassland restoration in the South Downs.
The Big Dig	Lewes & Eastbourne Councils, with the National Trust	Engaging Eastbourne residents with the origins of their town and how the Downland environment has moulded everyday life for centuries. The project will inspire and empower volunteers to help reveal the story through research and archaeology. The community-led activities in Eastbourne will become a platform for other locales to explore their place within the South Downs.
Growing New Roots	Brighton & Hove Food Partnership	Therapeutic outdoor activities at beautiful chalk grassland sites for vulnerable people in the project area. Participants will improve wellbeing whilst learning about the heritage & conservation of chalk grassland, and build up confidence to visit independently.

Sheep Share	Brighton & Hove Food Partnership	Sheep Share aims to get sheep that are grazing nearby back into the local food system. By sharing the meat between interested residents the project will reconnect them with local food production, support local farmers and raise awareness of the importance of grazing in managing chalk grassland.
Wilding Waterhall	Brighton & Hove City Council	Golf course on the outskirts of Brighton reverted to species rich Downland, providing habitat connectivity and new public access with an Education Ranger and community programme to raise awareness of the biodiversity crisis.
Farm School	Brighton & Hove City Council	Engaging Primary School children in their local environment via an events programme taking place on the council's farms, linked to the school curriculum. Content will support nature conservation, protection of the chalk grassland and understanding about farming and food production.
Greening the Cities	The Living Coast Biosphere	Bringing the Downs into the Towns by creating new areas of urban wildflower planting, with local communities and using plants of Downland species propagated locally by volunteers.
Landscapes for wild pollinators (incorporating Sustainable Vines)	Buglife	Engaging farmers, landowners and communities to take positive actions to help our wild pollinators throughout the landscape, including work with the wine-making industry to identify ways vineyards can make sustainable and positive contributions to invertebrate conservation and nature conservation more widely.
Wart-biter bush-cricket Species Recovery Programme	Buglife	A species recovery programme for the endangered Wart-biter bush-cricket, an iconic species of the chalk grassland of the project area.
Changing Chalk Local Wildlife Sites	Sussex Wildlife Trust	Working with landowners and land managers to improve the condition of chalk grassland mosaic habitat on Local Wildlife Sites through provision of up-to-date survey information and access to specialist advice & support, including from Chalk Life volunteers and the Community Grants Scheme.