



**Wilder
Horsham
District**



Annual Report 2025-26

Delivering a
Nature Recovery Network
for Horsham District

A partnership between



**Horsham
District
Council**



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Acknowledgements

Front cover image: WHD staff and volunteers at a particularly muddy work party, building at dead hedge at Peacocks Farm, Thakeham.

Introduction



Wilder Horsham District (WHD) is a partnership between Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Horsham District Council (HDC), working to deliver the Horsham District Nature Recovery Network (HDNRN).

WHD commenced in September 2020 and was initially funded for five years. Following a review, and an impact report produced by engagement consultants, Wayforward, HDC agreed to extend the project for a further two-and-a-half years until the end of March 2028.

The project works closely with local communities and landowners to help reverse species and habitat decline and enrich the natural environment for all residents and visitors. This report summarises WHD's achievements for the financial year dated 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026.

A tribute to Helen

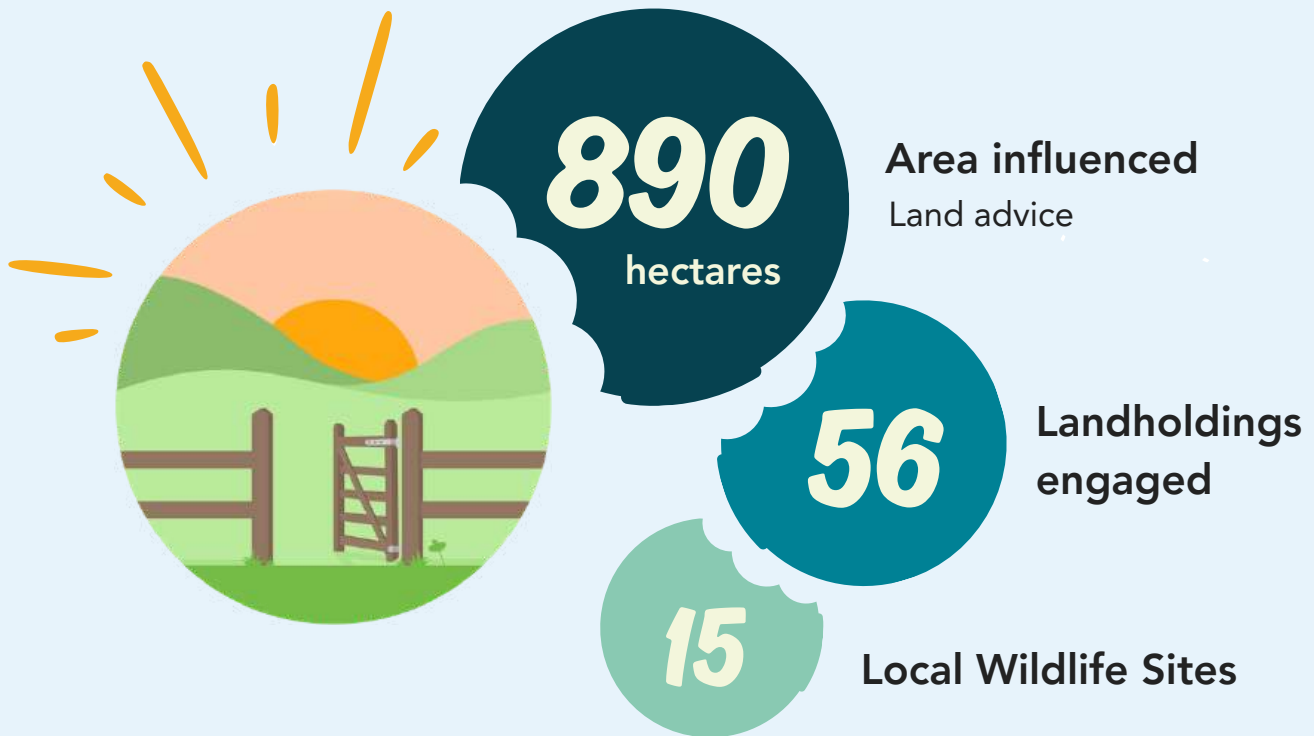
In October 2025, we received a devastating blow with the unexpected death of Helen Peacock. Helen had been WHD's main link with HDC and played a huge part in founding, framing and guiding the project. The strong links between the project and the Council, its success and even its extension beyond the initial five-year term are all due to Helen.

Helen was a force for and of Nature. Her enthusiasm and drive were extraordinary and she was unfailingly cheerful and positive. Her input and guidance are much missed.

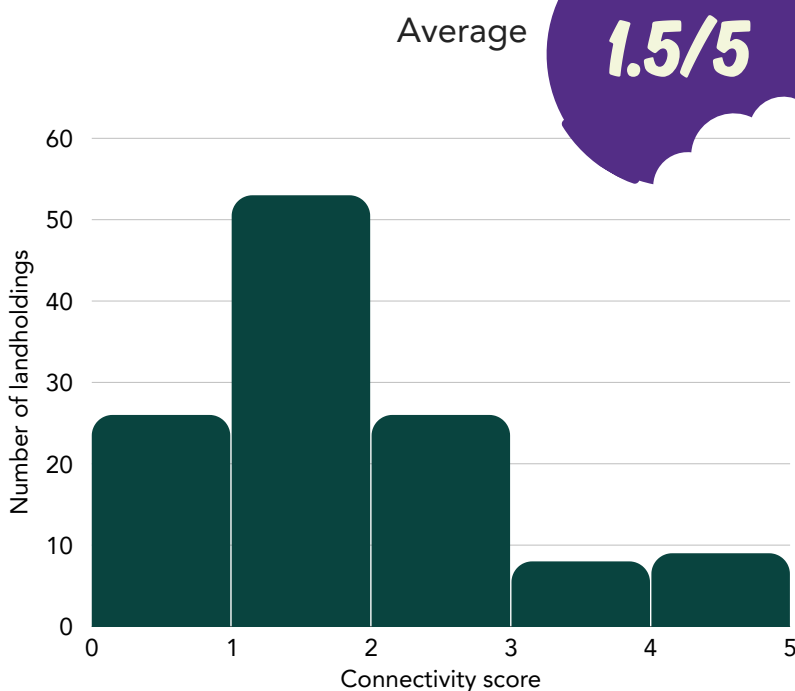


2025/26 in figures

Landscape connections



Connectivity scoring



Most sites engaged have been identified as important for nature connectivity by multiple organisations.

Each landholding is given a score out of five, with points awarded where it falls within:

1. One of WHD's three priority areas
2. A Local Wildlife Site (0.5 if within 200m)
3. Buglife's B-Lines
4. Lost Woods of the Low Weald area
5. Weald to Waves core corridor (0.5 if within engagement corridor)

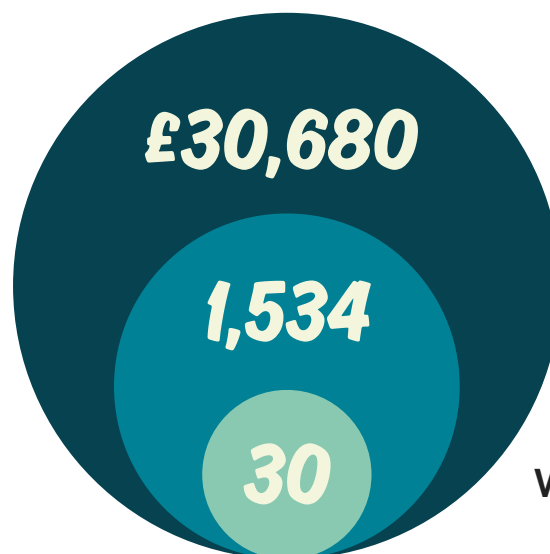
Nature Recovery Award

Up to £5,000 per applicant for practical works to improve natural habitats



WHD carries out on-the-ground nature recovery in two ways

Work parties



In-kind volunteer contribution

Volunteer hours contributed

Work parties

Natural succession

143

total hectares

Natural succession is the process of change in the structure and species composition of habitats over time.

An example is a field turning into scrub and then woodland. This creates opportunities for many different species, especially when there is a battle between vegetation trying to grow versus grazing and browsing animals suppressing it.



9

Grassland sites

5

Heathland sites



4



Scrubland sites



Woodland sites

3

Orchard

1



Trees planted

446



Hedgerows
planted/restored

1,459

metres



Dead-hedges
built/restored

286

metres

Wetland habitat improvement



9

Ponds & scrapes built

8



Leaky dams
built

Invasive species clearance

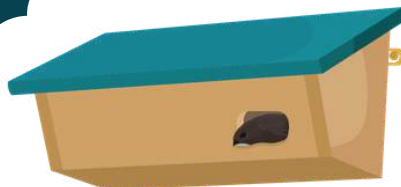


9

Sites cleared of:
Cherry Laurel
Himalayan Balsam
Rhododendron ponticum

Homes for nature

72



Bird boxes

Barn Owl, House Martin, Kestrel, Kingfisher,
Starling, Swallow, Swift, Tawny Owl



35

Other artificial
habitats

Bat boxes, bee bank, bug hotels

Land manager connections

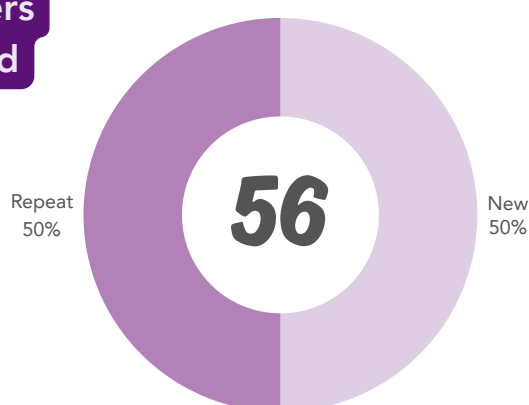
WHD's work to deliver a successful and long-lasting Nature Recovery Network for Horsham District is as dependent on linking up people as it is landscapes.

Since its inception, the project has been committed to developing ongoing relationships with land managers and community representatives, something that isn't captured by simply counting stakeholders.

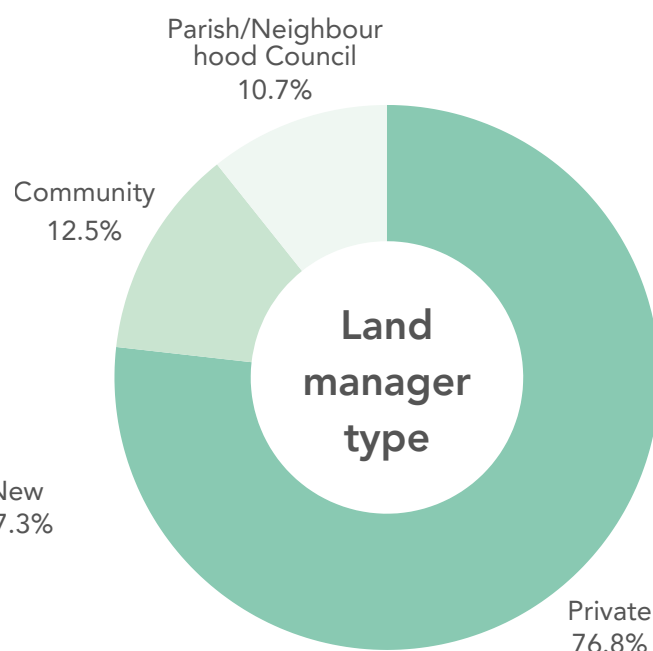
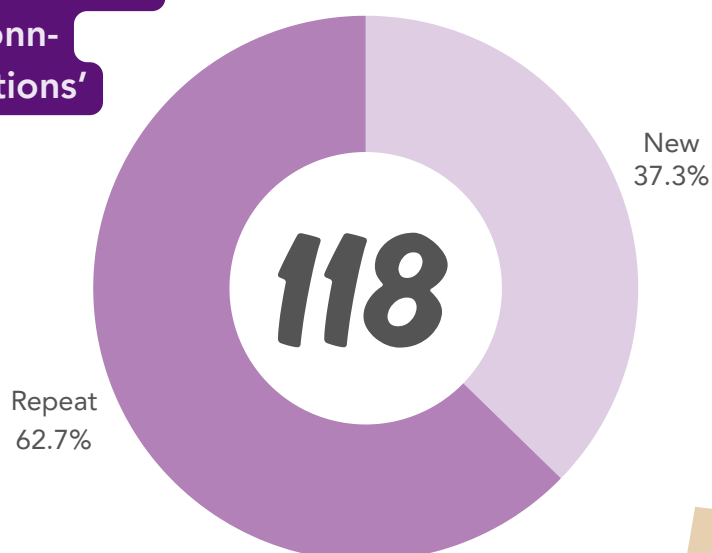
Therefore, this year, we have chosen to represent some of our project outputs in terms of 'connections'.

Each **'connection'** counts a single interaction through which we've influenced or collaborated with a project stakeholder.

Number of managers engaged

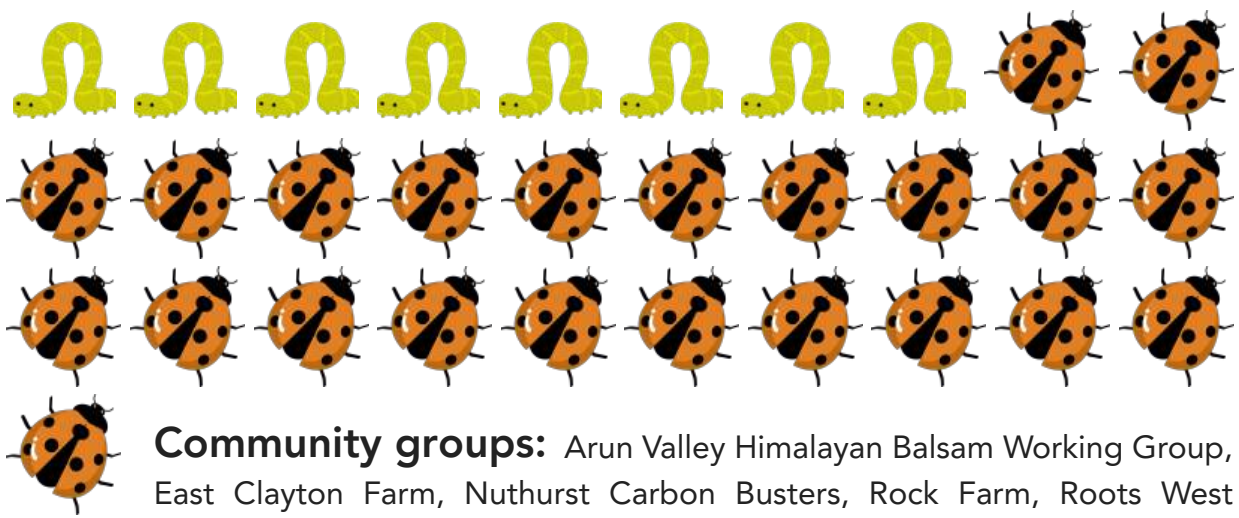


Number of land advice 'connections'



Community connections

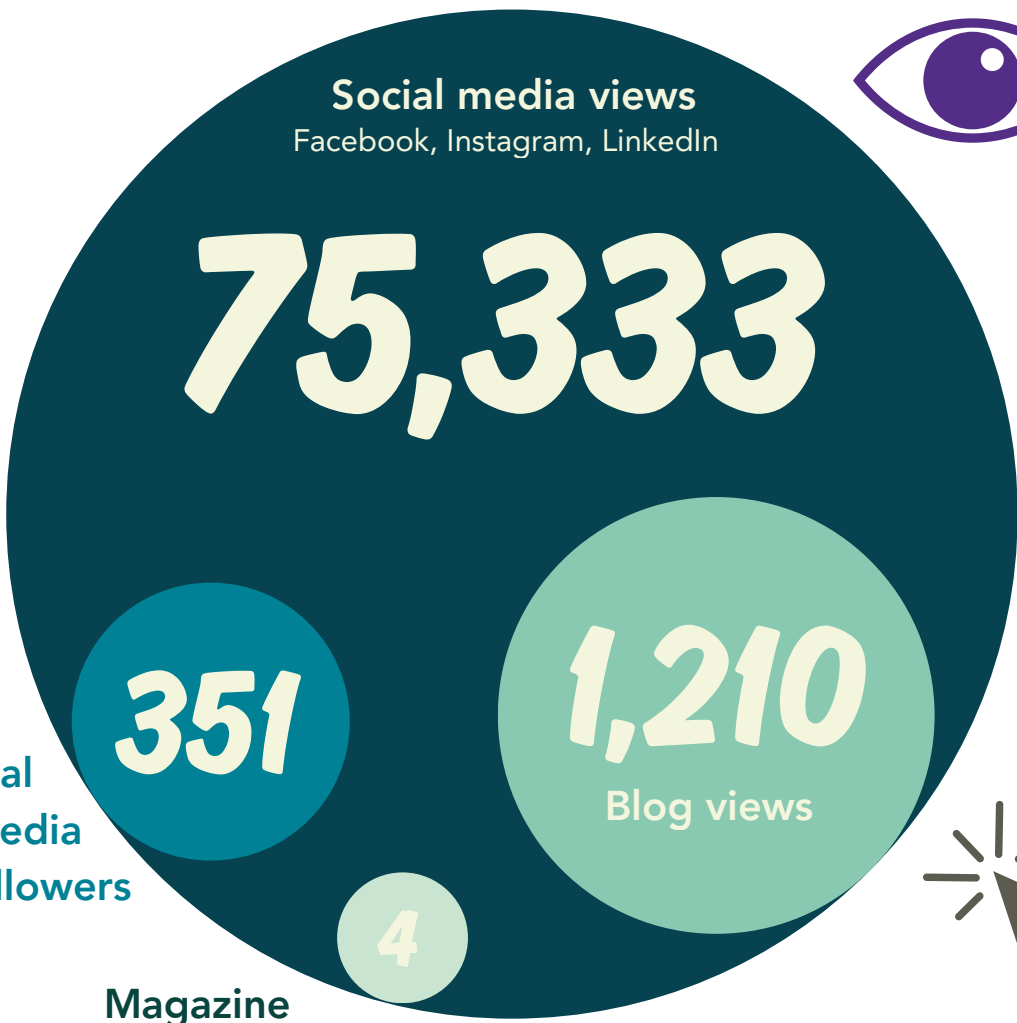
Parish Councils: Ashurst, Ashington, Cowfold, Shipley, Slinfold, Steyning



Community groups: Arun Valley Himalayan Balsam Working Group, East Clayton Farm, Nuthurst Carbon Busters, Rock Farm, Roots West Sussex CIC, Storrington Conservation Society, Sussex & Surrey Coppice Group, SWT Fledgling Rangers, Warren Grove Residents Association, Wild About Warnham



New social media followers



Magazine articles Our District, Wild Sussex

Organisational connections

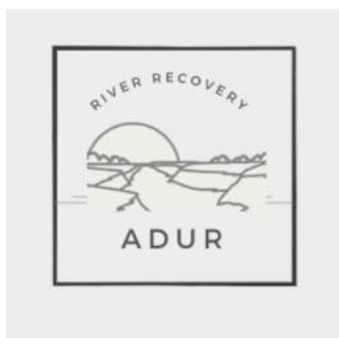
for strategy and delivery

17

**Partner
connections**

34

**Non-partner
connections**



Gatwick Greenspaces Project

High Weald

Land Advisors' Group

Knepp Wildland Foundation

National Trust

Natural England

Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

RSPB Operation Turtle Dove

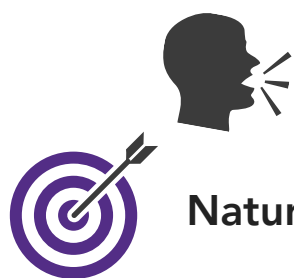
**South Downs National
Park Authority**

Butterfly Conservation

**Sussex Land Advisors'
Network**

Woodland Trust

At Horsham District Council



1 Council member briefing

Nature Conservation Policy completed

28,020

Volunteer
hours

contributed on the
HDC estate

including by Horsham
Green Gym, Friends of
Horsham Park, Friends of
Warnham Nature Reserve
& Gatwick Greenspace
Partnership

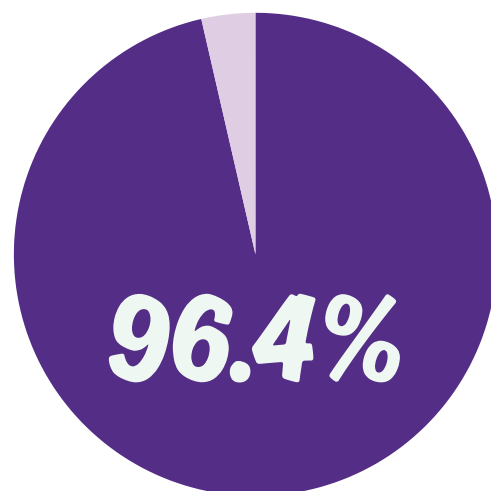


Joint land advice
visits with WHD
staff

34,931

Wildlife records
submitted

to Sussex
Biodiversity Record
Centre from HDC-
owned sites during
2025

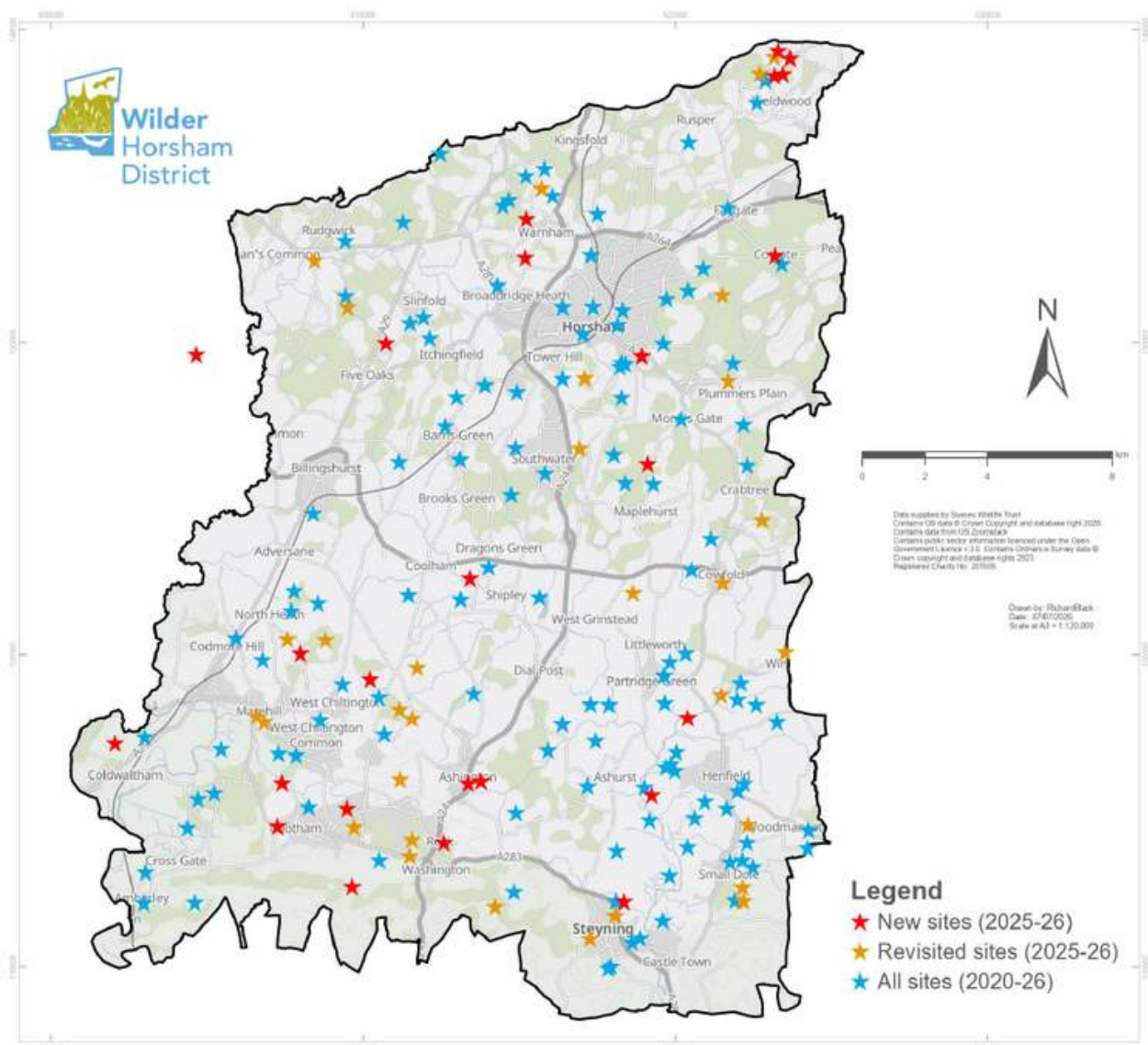


Land in positive
management

2025/26 in detail

Landscape Resilience

As in previous years, we have to pay tribute to all the land managers and community groups that have worked with us to improve land for nature. It really gives hope that so many people in the District understand not only the urgency of the nature and climate crisis but, crucially, that there is something that each of us can do about it. The cumulative effect of the good work across all the landholdings that we and our partner organisations work with is really making a difference.



Horsham District landholdings engaged during 2025-26 and over the duration of the project.

Wet habitat creation

Following the Government announcement that catchment-scale Beaver releases would be permitted, SWT produced feasibility reports for the Arun and Adur catchments. There is a strong likelihood that the Adur will be the first Sussex location for catchment releases.

In the meantime, our team has continued to replicate some of the work that Beavers do, despite changes in the process of applying for Ordinary Watercourse Consents that have limited leaky dam work compared to previous years.



Instead, our wet habitat work focused on the delivery of projects funded by the previous year's Nature Recovery Award. At **Well Cottage**, Wineham, two scrapes joined by a rill have provided valuable habitat. At **The Pools**, Henfield, a scrape and a restored woodland pond will create habitat and support flood management by slowing water flow. Both sites, through our advice, are also enhancing their meadows and hedgerows to add to their mix of habitats.

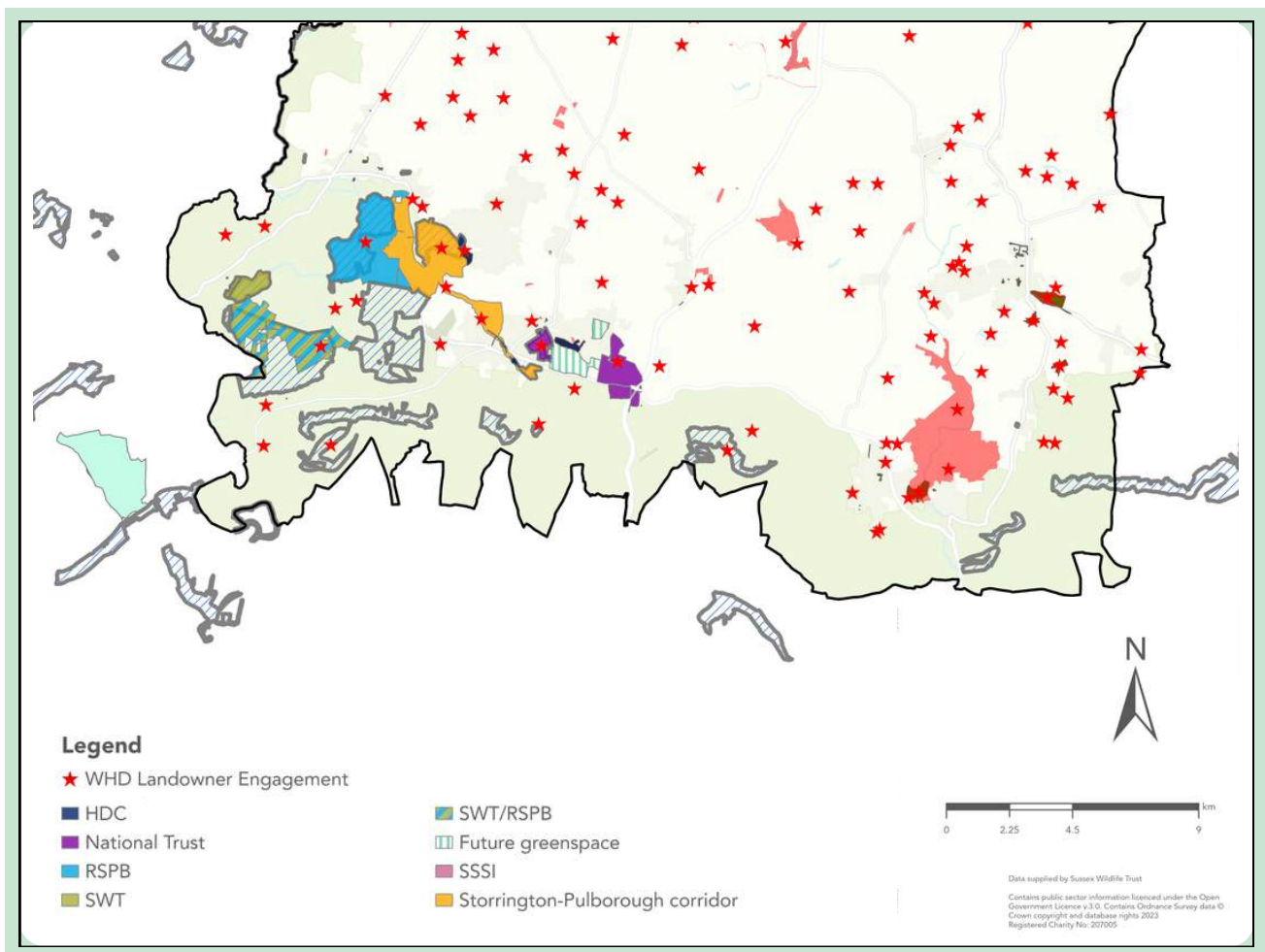


The landholding at Well Cottage during scrape excavation work (above) and one year after (below), showing how the new features are already interacting with and enhancing the existing pond.

Geographical focus areas

Pulborough to Storrington

Engagement across this area developed steadily through the year, with site visits and follow-up discussions helping to identify opportunities for habitat connectivity, wetland restoration, invasive species control and larger-scale nature recovery.



Landholdings building nature connectivity in the Pulborough-to-Storrington corridor. Rough locations of private landholdings working with WHD are indicated by stars.

For example, the landowners at **Gaywood Farm** are already using mob grazing to improve their land, and recently added a 33-hectare woodland to their landholding with the aim of managing it for biodiversity and habitat connectivity.



Left: A member of the small herd of heritage Longhorn cattle currently grazing at Gaywood Farm.

Right: Newly acquired wet woodland with plenty of potential.

Work also began to strengthen connectivity from Storrington through to the Knepp Estate, and so to the River Adur, our second focus area. Key sites here included **Peacocks Farm**, which is developing a habitat mosaic, and **Badgers Hollow**, whose owners have created a wetland complex with funding from our Nature Recovery Award. We also visited the latter site with Tilly Corcoran, the Weald to Waves Land Advisor, resulting in the planting of new hedgerows. Hedgerows were a big discussion point at **Apsley Farm** as well.



Left: Part of the wet habitat creation work WHD funded at Badgers Hollow.

Right: Building a dead hedge to protect willow coppice from deer at Peacocks Farm.

River Adur

The River Adur area became a major focus for larger project development, particularly around wet habitats, natural flood management and potential catchment-scale work. After discussions with South Lodge Estate earlier in the year, we visited in December to develop ideas for wet habitat restoration and natural flood management.

Right: The WHD team mull the possibilities at South Lodge Estate, near Cowfold, with HDC's Countryside and Ecology Manager, Jacob Everitt.



The River Adur at Shermanbury Place (above) and a meandering stream course at Danefold Farm (below).

Two further large, high-impact projects are being explored at **Danefold Farm** and **Shermanbury Place**, and are currently at an early discussion stage.

Engagement continued with **Ashurst Parish Council**, the **Society of St. Columba** and **Perretts Farm**, with the latter identified as a potential useful route into wider landowner engagement in Shipley Parish.

The Adur River Recovery Project proposals were submitted to DEFRA in May 2025. DEFRA reviewed the proposals and made an offer of funding but required some additional detail before approving the next stage. This detail has been provided and the project partners hope to receive DEFRA's decision in summer 2026.

Around Horsham Town

The Horsham priority area has sites that are rich in wildlife (such as HDC's Warnham Nature Reserve and Chesworth Farm) but better habitat connectivity is needed. This year, we have concentrated on community-facing opportunities, parish engagement and collaborations.



We helped **Wild about Warnham** to manage their Butterfly Fields for a suite of native butterfly species, and discussed some larger-scale work to maintain the open habitats that they favour in this biodiversity hotspot.

We took District Councillors to visit **Mayes Park**, where naturalistic grazing by White Park cows battles with natural succession to create a mosaic of habitats, while ponds, scrapes and leaky dams provide natural flood management.



At the woodland called **Ups and Downs**, near Denne Park, we have been helping the landowners and local community group to tackle *Rhododendron* and non-native Cherry Laurel. These plants can be very persistent but it was great to see that large areas had remained clear from previous years, with evidence of the woodland flora returning.



Young people are, of course, the future of conservation and we were delighted to engage with **Colgate Primary School** through a collaboration with Sussex Wildlife Trust's Communities team.

Top to bottom: Coppicing and dead-hedging at Warnham Butterfly Fields; a Facebook post celebrating cross-party councillor attendance at our Mayes Park farm walk; Rhododendron clearance is an ongoing task at Ups & Downs, only achieved with volunteer support.

Behind the scenes

Alongside geographically focused engagement, the team strengthened partnerships, reviewed strategic mapping, revisited previous Nature Recovery Award projects and planned monitoring activity for the coming season.

The team reviewed the **Horsham District Nature Recovery Network (HDNRN)** with SWT's Nature Recovery Manager, Fran Southgate, and worked with the Sussex Nature Recovery Partnership to input certain elements, including maps, into the **West Sussex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)**.



WHD attending an LNRS workshop.

🌲 What do you see when you look at a forest? 🐿



If you own, manage or volunteer in Sussex woodland, you can take some simple steps to support all the life within it, not just a timber crop.

We delivered a Wilder Woodland workshop with [The Woodland Trust](#), [Action in rural Sussex](#) and the environmental award-winning [Wiston Estate](#) to help local enthusiasts understand the huge natural habitat potential of woodlands and give them some tips and techniques to start managing their areas with biodiversity in mind.



In November, we co-delivered a **woodland management training** event with the Lost Woods project, drawing on the expertise of **Wiston Estate's** forestry team as well as staff from all partner organisations. Although open to the public, several WHD landowners attended.

We continued to help build the **Sussex Land Advisors' Network** and **High Weald Land Advisors' Group**, and met with partners, **Lost Woods of the Low Weald and Downs** and **Knepp Wildland Foundation**, about improving communication between all our projects and the landowners we serve. SWT's Head of Nature Recovery, Laura Brook, used WHD as an example of delivery nature recovery at scale at SWT's AGM.



Laura Brook presenting about WHD.

At Horsham District Council



The Environment Agency's habitat creation work at **Bramber Brooks** was completed in the early Summer of 2025, after rain stopped play the previous Autumn. A series of ponds and scrapes now provide seasonal standing water on site as a different wetland habitat from the ditches and main channel of the River Adur.



These will develop into habitat for dragonflies, aquatic plants, as well as birds such as Snipe and warblers. The site has been extensively surveyed for breeding birds, reptiles and butterflies. Staff also carried out a hay cut to remove years of built up thatch and reduce scrubbing up.

Above: New ponds at Bramber Brooks. Below: Cutting hay on the floodplain.

HDC's Countryside team restored the heritage orchard at **Chesworth Farm** and planted three new heritage apple trees. This involved a site visit to Steyning, where the town's Orchard Group recommended local varieties. The Friends of Chesworth Farm have agreed to assist with practical management of this asset.

Following on from last year's Ash Die Back works, the Countryside team replanted 50 Alder Buckthorn trees and 500 Common Dog Violet plugs at **Warnham Nature Reserve**.

These are the food plants for Brimstone butterfly caterpillars and the Silver-washed Fritillary butterfly, respectively, the latter of which is a species of importance for the Reserve. With assistance from the Friends, a new platform has been installed for Common Terns, tripling the available nesting space.

Above: Dog Violets in bloom.

Below: The Tern nesting platform.

(Credit: Bett Atherton)



Volunteering

It has been another busy season for work parties. As always, we would like to extend huge thanks to all our volunteers. Their gift of time and passion allows us to support landowners with tasks they would not normally be able to undertake on their own.

Sometimes this has been conservation by subtraction, as we have continued to tackle invasive species, *Rhododendron ponticum* and Himalayan Balsam, both of which can turn large areas into ecological deserts with little value for British fauna.

Another recurring theme has been healthy hedgerows, which offer a crucial haven for wildlife and help connect varied habitats across a wider landscape. This year we collaborated closely with local organisations to enhance and restore these critical linear features, undertaking challenging tasks such as laying an overgrown hedge at **East Clayton Farm**, part of **National Trust's Warren Hill** nature reserve near Storrington. Our volunteers also supported Weald to Waves with the restoration of disconnected hedge lines on nearby **Sullington Manor Farm**, filling in gaps with new hedge plants to create perfect future wildlife corridors.



Left: Learning the art of hedgelaying at East Clayton Farm.

Right, top to bottom: Staff from Mannings Heath Golf Club join WHD volunteers for some Rhody bashing; tackling Himalayan Balsam at South Lodge; installing cardboard tree guards over hedging whips at Sullington Manor Farm.

Nature Recovery Award

The NRA is our flagship grant to support citizen-led nature recovery. This year, it has funded nine practical schemes to create, improve and connect wildlife habitats, with a total value of £25,977.

Successful projects continue to vary in scale, type of applicant, location within the District and habitat & species impact: all contribute towards the creation of the HDNRN. Most are also taking advantage of our pre-application advice service, which improves the quality of applications.



Click [here](#) to read about the NRA's impact on community Swift action over several years.

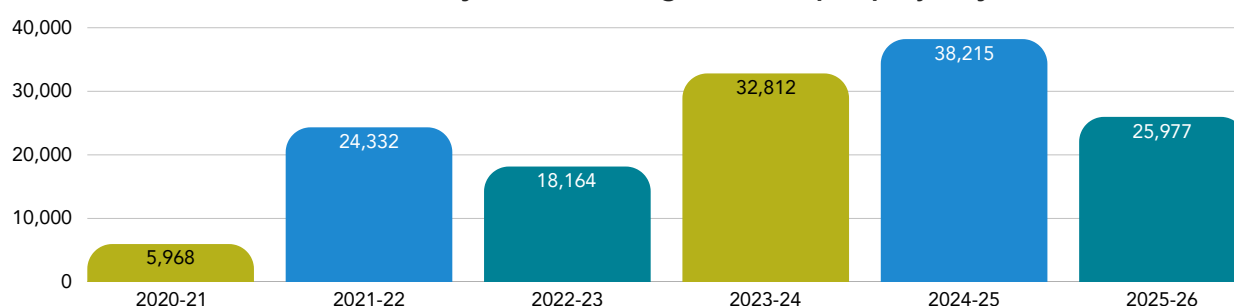


Swiftly does it! Wilder Horsham District brings back the sound of summer



Property or organisation name	Parish	Project description	Funding approved
Beedings Farm 1	Pulborough	Ancient woodland improvement through selective thinning of Oak, Sycamore and Poplar.	£5,000
Hayes Grange Farm	Slinfold	Digging of a large wildlife pond and planting up of a surrounding wet woodland area.	£5,000
Wild About Warnham	Warnham	Grassland restoration for butterflies: low-grade woodland thinning, wildflower seed & tool purchase.	£4,463
Storrington Conservation Society	Storrington	Restoration of a historic pond, including dredging and vegetation clearance.	£4,000
Irelands	Warnham	Digging of a large wildlife pond and scrape.	£2,900
Ashington Parish Council	Ashington	Increasing biodiversity on amenity land: hedgerow & wildflower planting, bird & bug habitat installation.	£1,615
National Trust Warren Hill	Washington	Creation of a mosaic of habitats including orchard, scrub and hedgerow.	£1,091
Well Cottage	Shermanbury	Meadow and hedgerow improvement, purchase of scythe to control invasive species.	£1,008
Beedings Farm 2	Pulborough	Installation of boxes for Barn Owl, Tawny Owl, Kestrel, House Martin & Swift (latter with caller).	£900

Total Nature Recovery Grant funding awarded per project year (£)



Community Resilience

Horsham District is home to many groups that own land or manage it on the owner's behalf. Whether local councils, traditional 'green groups' or more socially oriented projects, supporting these community-led initiatives is fundamental to ensuring WHD's principles persist and spread beyond the project's lifetime.

Parish Councils

One of WHD's objectives is to work with Parish Councils. To date, we have engaged with 30 (covering 86% of the District).

This year, we advised **Ashurst** Parish councillors on creating a parish Nature Recovery Network and **Ashington** Parish Council on improving the habitat along their Green Way Path. With **Cowfold** Parish Council, we discussed steps for restoring the pond on Acorn Avenue. We kept in touch with **Slinfold** Parish Council about their habitat proposals at Cherry Tree Farm. We also provided **Steyning** Parish councillors with advice on Chandlers Way Pocket Park, which has received Nature Recovery Award funding, and Abbey Road Nature Reserve.



Map of Parish Councils engaged by WHD in 2025-26.



Presenting to Parish councillors.

To engage more effectively with councillors (among whom there is frequent turnover), this year we started working more closely with HDC's community climate action coordinator, Victoria Wyllie de Echeverria. As well as developing joint systems for logging Parish Council activity (including using HDC's OnePlanet mapping software), we presented an update on the project at her annual in-person councillor meeting in November, allowing us to catch up with familiar faces and introduce ourselves to new ones.

Community groups

This year, we've supported local community groups through:

- **Land advice and networking.** We've made initial connections with two social-impact projects based on the Wiston Estate: therapeutic horticulture site, Rock Farm, and community coppicing enterprise, Roots West Sussex CIC, as well as the Sussex & Surrey Coppice Group and East Clayton Farm. While they've benefited from our staff's expertise, these projects also serve to remind us that connecting people is just as important as connecting habitats, and that the two should ideally go hand in hand.
- **Nature Recovery Awards.** The panel was delighted to grant awards to Storrington Conservation Society (£4,000) and Wild About Warnham (£4,463). These will support ongoing efforts to restore local habitats – a village pond and butterfly-friendly meadow grassland, respectively.
- **Mentoring.** We've formed a close relationship with Nuthurst Carbon Busters, who were keen to provide a workforce to maintain natural areas of Mannings Heath Golf Club but didn't have the experience. In the autumn, we co-hosted two joint work parties to clear *Rhododendron ponticum*, bringing both the tools and our seasoned volunteer team for the group to learn from. One was our largest work party yet, with 29 participants! Two further winter work parties were cancelled due to on-site flooding.
- **Wider collaborations.** We've contributed knowledge and volunteer labour to a community initiative to rid the mid-Arun Valley catchment of Himalayan Balsam, coordinated by local volunteer, Vivianne Doussy.



Above: A large volunteer group at Mannings Heath Golf Club. (Credit: Nuthurst Carbon Busters). Below: A visit to the Sussex & Surrey Coppice Group.

Inclusive opportunities

The barriers to participating in nature recovery are many, whether volunteering for pleasure or preparing for a new career. This year, we have been working to make WHD more inclusive through the following actions:

- **Clearer accessibility information given in advance of work parties.** We let volunteers know what physical tasks will be involved (such as dragging brash or swinging a mattock), whether there is a toilet onsite or nearby and how to reach the site by public transport. We also offer to coordinate lift-sharing for those without their own transport.
- **Advertising volunteering through new channels,** such as HDC's online volunteering portal.
- **Communications that appeal to different motivations and benefits of volunteering,** including for young people and those in full-time employment.
- **Occasional sessions tailored for young people,** such as SWT's Fledgling Rangers (12- to 14-year-olds working towards their Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award). We've been working with SWT's Youth Action Officer and Storrington & Arun Valley Regional Group to plan a work party and species monitoring offer for a new youth group starting in the area later this year.
- **Exploratory work to identify local underserved audiences** who would not otherwise connect with nature. This year, the team shadowed a Gatwick Greenspaces Project session working with young ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students from Crawley College. We have also begun a dialogue with HDC's Voluntary Sector Support department, who have offered to connect us with local non-environmental community groups.



Click [here](#) for the full article on accessible volunteering in Our District magazine



wilderhorshamdistrict 🌿 The joy of the tree popper needs no translation! Great morning removing Bracken and Birch from heathland with English for Speakers of Other Languages students from Crawley College. [@gatwickgreenspacepartnership](#) [@crawleycollege](#) [@sussexwildlifetrust](#) [@horshamdc](#)

Click the 'play' button to watch on Instagram.

Organisational Resilience

With HDC's Countryside team, we organised a **joint work party** at Bramber Brooks in the autumn, with WHD volunteers joining local residents to clear Bramble from the historic salterns. Hopefully, this is the start of a specific taskforce that can be called on to help maintain this important site.

Our two Land Advisors continued to **work in tandem** with HDC's Ecology and Countryside Manager, Jacob Everitt, to provide pre- and post-application advice to Nature Recovery Awardees and identify larger-scale interventions that could be actioned with project funds in future years. Parks & Countryside and Sustainability team staff also teamed up for their own practical task on Horsham's Riverside Walk.



Bramble-geddon at Bramber Brooks

We are nearing the project goal of 100% of HDC designated land being in positive management, with **96.4% either under a Management Plan or Stewardship scheme**. (The remaining 3.6% relates to Highwood Hill, which is not technically designated land but is likely to be in the future due to the extension of a Local Wildlife Site boundary.)

Livestock is currently used as a management tool on 54% of HDC's landholding acreage, with an aspiration to add Bramber Brooks, Tanyard Field and Highwood Hill in the near future, which would take the total to 64%. This has been informed in part by the WHD's and SWT's extensive experience with conservation grazing.



Two members of the Countryside team undertook Dormouse handling licence **training** and an HDC intern was trained in-house to carry out small mammal trapping surveys and reptile and amphibian surveys.

Left: The Wall is a Red-Listed butterfly now making an appearance at Bramber Brooks due to improved management.

Acknowledgements



Richard Black (Senior Land Advisor)

Steve Tillman (Land Advisor)

Louisa Jones (Project Support Officer)

Fran Southgate (Nature Recovery Manager)

Laura Brook (Head of Nature Recovery)

Henri Brocklebank (Director, Conservation)



www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/get-involved/community-projects/wilder-horsham



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With thanks to our counterparts at Horsham District Council:

Helen Peacock (Head of Sustainability and Green Spaces)

Catherine Howe (Head of Strategic Planning)

Pete Crawford (Parks and Countryside Manager)

Jacob Everitt (Ecology and Countryside Manager)

George Colven (Sustainability Assistant)



www.horsham.gov.uk/climate-and-environment/climate-action-across-the-district/wilder-horsham-district

