Chairman’s Forward

In June 2013, the North Wessex Downs AONB, along with the other 32 English Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, received reconfirmation of Category V Protected Landscape status from the IUCN UK Committee (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

The category V status recognises the vital role that AONB partnerships play in safeguarding areas with distinct character that have been produced by the interaction between people and nature.

We take our role in safeguarding the North Wessex Downs very seriously. If we lose what makes it special, the hills, the rivers, the forests and the history, then we risk losing our identity as well as the places that inspire us.

However, this year we have had to face particularly dramatic challenges. In Wroughton, a proposal was made to site the largest photovoltaic (PV) solar power station in a UK protected landscape area. The solar panels would be particularly visible from the Ridgeway National Trail, the country’s oldest road, and Barbury Castle Iron Age hill fort. Together with Natural England and English Heritage we have objected strongly and a Public Inquiry is scheduled for autumn 2014.

Another development was the proposed allocation of 1,400 houses at East Harwell (with a reserve for an additional 2,000 houses) on green fields in open countryside within the AONB with no significant existing settlement, existing services or facilities. Again we voiced our objections and await the final decision.

In addition to tackling these major threats, this year we have made significant progress with many projects by working in partnership to achieve greater impact on a landscape scale.

In 2010, an independent review of England’s wildlife sites, led by Sir John Lawton, recommended a landscape-scale approach in order to tackle the challenges of climate change and loss of habitat. The clear message for nature conservation was “more, bigger, better, and joined up.” At the same time, the economic environment has continued to present challenges. The public purse is shrinking and funding streams are changing. Our partners and sponsors look to us to deliver ever greater value for money and effective results.

In response, our focus for nature conservation has been to work with projects where we can pull a broader community of interest together and consider the wider priorities in terms of landscape, geology and conservation rather than focusing only within our AONB boundaries. This review highlights many examples such as Winning Ways for Wildlife, Stepping Stones and our work with the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area.

Throughout the year we have been grateful for the support and commitment of our partners: our Council of Partners, the Management Working Group and many others through an increasing number of partnerships. We look forward to continuing this important work with them in the future.

Byron Carron, Chairman, Council of Partners

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North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2014-2018

The Management Plan for the North Wessex Downs AONB helps to guide the priorities for all of our partners. Producing an AONB Management Plan is a statutory requirement for local authorities under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Work on the new plan for 2014-2018 began in 2013 and was led by a project board formed by the Management Working Group. The purpose of the group was to manage the review and ensure it reflected the views of our partners. To gather input and feedback from the public and partners, roadshow events were held in each of the nine local authority areas within the North Wessex Downs and volunteer editors provided specialist oversight and information on each theme.

A key goal was to make the plan accessible to a wider audience by keeping it concise and using clearer language. For the first time, the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs and their contribution to society have been defined. These include the provision of food and fresh water, the regulation of air quality, pollination and flood management, supporting nutrient cycling and the formation of soil, and cultural influences of tourism, education and spiritual wellbeing.

Feedback to the new plan from partners has been very supportive, including Natural England with the Area Team Leader saying it was “the best I have had to sign off”. The new Management Plan was endorsed by the AONB Council of Partners in March.

Stepping Stones
The DEFRA-funded Stepping Stones project continued to deliver practical steps to ensure a more robust network of chalk grassland sites linking the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs and North Wessex Downs AONBs across Salisbury Plain.

Among work carried out were the construction of chalk scrapes, removal of scrub and measures to encourage grazing at the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust’s nature reserve at Morgan’s Hill. Morgan’s Hill is one of Wiltshire’s most outstanding grasslands and this work was vital to ensure the long term favourable condition of this important Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The project also worked with local groups such as Pewsey Primary School to plant ‘plugs’ of wildflower species which they had grown from seed at key sites.

In August, with our partners Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, we hosted a tour of chalk grassland restoration and enhancement work undertaken as part of the DEFRA-funded Stepping Stones project.

A Landscape Scale Approach

Our focus this year for conservation projects has been to work in partnership so we can contribute to projects that are bigger, better, and more joined up, as recommended in the Lawton report of 2010.

Winning Ways For Wildlife
North west Hampshire is home to some of the country’s most threatened wildlife.

Winning Ways for Wildlife aims to work with local people to make the area even better for wildlife through restoring and reconnecting important wildlife habitat. The project focuses on two rare species found locally: the Duke of Burgundy butterfly and the Willow Tit.

Through this project, over 50 sites in North west Hampshire have been surveyed and advice given to land owners regarding their management. The survey highlighted sites that would benefit from habitat enhancement, and so two hectares of woodland glades and 16 hectares of chalk grassland have been restored by clearing scrub and introducing grazing.

The North Wessex Downs AONB is represented on the Steering Group for Winning Ways for Wildlife and contributed to events that raise awareness and encourage local engagement.
Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area (MDNIA)
The Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area (MDNIA) is a farmer-led initiative which aims to support and supplement existing conservation projects by delivering more, with better management and on a larger scale than has been possible in the past. During the year they have been involved with establishing new wildlife sites by improving grassland habitats, introducing dew ponds and building tree sparrow villages.

The NIA team are keen to get everyone involved in and about the Downs through events and activities, workshops and work parties. We have been working with the MDNIA outreach group to help them develop a programme of events for the public and technical workshops for land managers and conservationists. Twelve events were organised including Open Farm Sunday in June 2013.

Jointly with Flora Locale and the MDNIA, we hosted a Chalk Grassland Workshop at North Farm near West Overton. The day was well attended and included talks by grassland expert Sue Everett and a demonstration of scything by Clive Leake of SWEAT (Scything Without Effort and Tears), a company which was set up with a grant from our own Sustainable Development Fund. We have also contributed to MDNIA events at Burderop (Woodland Management) and Barbury Castle (Butterfly Identification).

For more information about the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area, please see: www.mdnia.org.uk

3 Working With Partners
Working with partners to deliver Management Plan objectives

The AONB Director became the Chairman of the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails Management Group, leading the development of proposals for new partnerships for both long-distance paths to meet Natural England’s requirements under the New Deal for National Trails announced last year.

Our acting Assistant Director chaired the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership (LNP) steering group, in addition to contributing to LNP’s in Wiltshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire. The LNP has developed a strategy for Berkshire’s biodiversity and sought to engage members of the conservation, health, education and business communities.

Our Planning Advisor took over chairmanship of the South East and East Protected Landscapes Planning Officers Group. He has been chairing the regular meetings of the Group together with Natural England in their London offices. We invited the Countryside Access Forums for Wiltshire, Mid and West Berkshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire to help us identify opportunities for developing Rights of Way and access in the North Wessex Downs. A meeting took place at the AONB office in October and was very useful in determining priorities for the Management Plan and potential areas of collaboration.

We met the Director of the Wiltshire Community Land Trust, to help develop a mutual understanding of affordable housing and other opportunities in the AONB.

Flora Locale seeks to restore wild plants and wild-plant communities. A registered charity, it organizes a training programme for people involved in the design, management and restoration of landscapes for biodiversity. The charity is hosted at the AONB office.

Working in a national context
Richard Benyon MP visited the AONB office in September 2013. Mr Benyon, who stepped down as the Minister responsible for protected landscapes soon after, lives in the North Wessex Downs. As Minister he was an enthusiastic and effective advocate for AONBs at the heart of Government. We wish to
thank him for his valuable support and hope we can continue to work with him as Member of Parliament for Newbury.

In March, the new Defra Minister, Lord de Mauley joined the new Chairman of Natural England, Andrew Sells on a visit to Kings Farm Wood in Wroughton and the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area. Support from our Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) helped the local community to purchase Kings Farm Wood and provide interpretation for visitors.

During his visit, Lord De Mauley kindly unveiled new interpretation boards which had also been provided with help from the SDF. The event was jointly hosted with partners including Swindon Borough Council and Link2Nature, the Wiltshire Local Nature Partnership.

National consultations

We attended a DEFRA workshop about the Biodiversity Offsetting White Paper. We have serious concerns about whether biodiversity offsetting would really make dealing with wildlife in the planning system easier, cheaper and quicker for developers whilst also delivering significant extra benefits for wildlife, as is claimed. We contributed to the NAAONB and Berkshire LNP responses as well as submitting our own.

We responded to consultations by Thames Water on its draft Five-Year Plan 2015-2020 and draft Water Resources Management Plan 2015-2040 and the New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMS).

We responded to the National Grid on its draft policy for Mitigating the Visual Impact of Electricity Lines and to the Department for Communities and Local Government on the Greater Flexibilities for Change of Use consultation. In both cases comments were fed back both directly and through the NAAONB so that a single national perspective from the AONB family could be offered. We have also contributed to NAAONB position papers as requested, specifically on The Economic Value of AONBs.

We attended the Landscapes for Life Conference 2013 in July. The theme of the conference was Water and it brought together delegates to discuss the part that the UK’s Protected Landscape Family has in ensuring that water systems are well managed and the environment is safeguarded for future generations.

Following further workshops for Lead Officers, the NAAONB Future Landscapes work has now moved on to a more practical stage, with small groups of AONB Lead Officers collaborating in task-and-finish groups to address some of the principal challenges facing the family of protected landscapes. This has increasingly involved more members of staff and others from AONB partnerships as the work has progressed.

Getting out and about and working locally

Our Annual Forum, open to all, is the biggest single event we regularly hold. The 2013 Forum was a resounding success, with 115 people attending at Rockley in the north west of the North Wessex Downs AONB. We are grateful to Temple Farms and the Marlborough Downs NIA for hosting and supporting the event.

This year’s forum offered something rather different from recent years. The theme was conservation on a truly landscape scale, and we focused on three current strategic projects across the North Wessex Downs and beyond: Stepping Stones, Winning Ways for Wildlife and the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area, followed by a presentation by Dr Dan Hoare from Butterfly Conservation.

The afternoon activity was a tractor/trailer tour to see highlights of the NIA. Many of those attending remarked how the forum offered a valuable chance to meet other AONB partners “particularly of like-minded folk, of which there were many!”

Throughout the year, staff, partners and volunteers have been busy at numerous events to raise awareness and build stronger links with our partners. The North Wessex Downs has been represented at local events such as the Wiltshire Show, the Royal Berkshire Show and the Hungerford Food Festival. This has often been in collaboration with other local groups: we supported CPRE at their Wiltshire Open day and attended the CPRE West Berkshire AGM. Whenever possible at these events we provided activities for the public, particularly young people. We ran a competition to win signed copies of Steve Davison’s new book The North Wessex Downs and our “find the sheep” game continues to be popular.
Woodland

Woodland forum
This year’s Woodland Forum was held on 27 March at the Organic Research Centre (ORC) based at Elm Farm in Berkshire. The forum was a practical workshop on “Managing Hedges for Fuel” a project that the ORC is running with support from the North Wessex Downs AONB.

The day included presentations on The Hedge Management Cycle and Hedge Fuel Assessment by Nigel Adams and Rob Wolton respectively, who then led a walk around the farm and there were interesting discussions on the appropriate management for the hedges ( Coppice, lay or leave) at each point.

In the afternoon, there was a demonstration of a branch logging machine. The discussion then moved onto the options for processing, with information and debate on chips, logs and boilers. It would seem that, with the right management, hedges can be a profitable resource.

5 Planning

Conserving and enhancing the North Wessex Downs often means working together with developers and the planning authority to ensure that any new development does not have a significant impact on the special qualities of the AONB.

Experience has shown that getting early engagement is crucial to making the best use of scarce resources and achieving a helpful compromise. For example, among the proposals we have given advice on this year have been two sets of housing schemes close to the AONB border near Devizes. Our Planning Advisor met developers early on and in each case successfully sought improvements and amendments to the plans to reduce the impact on the setting of the AONB.

However, sometimes compromises are not possible. This is the case in Wroughton where there is a proposal to create what is believed to be the UK’s largest photovoltaic (PV) solar farm in a nationally protected landscape. The site is larger than the nearby village of Chiseldon (population 2,600) and would cover an area of more than 90 football pitches with around 150,000 ground-mounted PV arrays on 67 hectares of land. The solar farm would be particularly visible from the Ridgeway National Trail, the country’s oldest road and Barbury Castle Iron Age hill fort.

Good woods project
Sponsored by B&Q and in partnership with the My Forest website, the Good Woods project was set up in 2013 to breathe new life into under managed woodlands.

On behalf of the North Wessex Downs AONB, Meg Chambers arranged 20 free Good Woods visits to woodland owners within the eastern half of the North Wessex Downs in the period up to Jan 2014. These visits provided woodland management advice and introduced two free on-line woodland management tools, Myforest and the Woodland Star Rating Scheme.

Those benefitting included community groups, farmers, estates, councils and even a couple of local schools who were keen to develop their woods for educational purposes. Initial response to the Good Woods visits has been positive and it is hoped that the woodland owners will now go on to produce their own woodland management plans.

Swindon Borough Council approved the proposal and we, along with Natural England and English Heritage, requested that the decision be called in and the issue will now be the subject of a Public Inquiry. Hugh Beamish, Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments at English Heritage, said: “We have been concerned about this proposal from the outset. This is, in our view, entirely the wrong site for this development.”

The close involvement of these national agencies underlines the national importance of setting out the case for the future of all our National Parks and AONBs.

Another development is the proposed allocation of 1,400 houses to a site at East Harwell Campus (with a reserve for an additional 2000 houses). This proposed housing allocation is on a greenfield countryside site within the AONB with no significant existing settlement, existing services or facilities. We consider this to be a departure
from normal planning practice within an AONB or National Park.

We have written to Lord de Mauley, Ed Vaizey and to the leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council to object to these damaging proposals and the Council’s disregard for its statutory responsibility to conserve and enhance the landscape.

6 Water

Catchment Partnerships in the North Wessex Downs

Under the Water Framework Directive, all EU member states must bring the quality of water in rivers to good standards by 2015. A large number of UK watercourses do not currently meet this standard. The Government’s approach is to involve local communities more in decision-making and have formed Catchment Partnerships across the country. Each Catchment Partnership is hosted by an organisation that co-ordinates its activities.

A catchment-based approach to managing the water environment looks at activities and issues in the catchment as a whole, rather than considering different aspects separately in different locations. We have engaged with existing and new partners in helping to develop the Catchment Partnerships across the North Wessex Downs covering the following rivers:

- the River Kennet, with its tributaries including the Ogbourne, Shalbourne and Lambourn
- the Hampshire Avon
- the Test and Itchen, including the Bourne Rivulet
- the Upper Thames, including the Letcombe Brook,
- the Pang sub-catchment, part of the larger South Chilterns Catchment Partnership.

Pollution spill devastates the Kennet

There was a spill in the Kennet of chlorpyrifos, which devastated a 15km stretch of the River Kennet between Marlborough and Hungerford in the North Wessex Downs.

The River Kennet is a chalk stream, usually known for water purity and lack of sediment. The spring-fed, fast flowing streams and rivers which cut through the chalk also support a diversity of plant and animal life. “Freshwater shrimp, mayfly and caddis fly in the river appeared to have been wiped out by the pesticide, leaving birds and fish with nothing to eat”, an Action for the River Kennet (ARK) spokesman said at the time.

7 Tourism

We held workshops with North Wessex Downs tourism businesses to determine content for the LEADER-funded Love Your Landscape tourism project.

Thirty participants contributed ideas and content, facilitated by tourism consultant Alison Caffyn, which were then developed by Dave Crosby of design company Kaboodle Creative.

The result is the North Wessex Downs Tourism Toolkit, a set of resources, images and ideas for the tourism sector to use to celebrate the value of the North Wessex Downs in its marketing. Local PR consultant and AONB supporter Penny Locke was commissioned to promote the Toolkit to businesses.
New online resources hosted at:  
www.visitnorthwessexdowns.org.uk
now provide a host of information and resources including direct and free access to the North Wessex Downs tourism toolkit for members of our growing Tourism Network.

We have also been working to develop relationships with associated Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and other tourism bodies. After attending the launch of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils’ OXtrack project, we met the tourism officers and representatives of Visit Oxford to discuss common objectives for developing tourism. This also included tourism officers from the Cotswolds and Chilterns AONBs.

For the first five months of the year the project officer, Diane White, was based at the AONB office and worked on Environmental Stewardship agreements for farmland birds and other priority arable wildlife, as well as providing advice regarding habitat for stone-curlews in the North Wessex Downs.

In June, Diane held a farm event in partnership with the Winning Ways for Wildlife project, Plantlife and Bumblebee Conservation Trust for farmers to discuss summer habitats for a whole host of farm wildlife and took part in our joint training on chalk grassland with Flora Locale and Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area, to highlight the importance of this habitat for farmland birds including the stone-curlew.

The stone-curlew is one of the UK’s rarest breeding birds. It is a bird of dry, open places with bare, stony ground or very short vegetation. The North Wessex Downs is one of its strongholds. The numbers of stone-curlews in Wessex have increased from 30 to 150 breeding pairs over the last 30 years largely due to the nesting plots put in by farmers, management by the RSPB and assistance from volunteers. Diane left in August 2013 and we would like to thank her for all her hard work. The post was subsequently filled by Charlotte Bruce White who is based at the RSPB offices in Salisbury and covers a wider area with a particular focus on the stone-curlew project.

We continued to be part of the Our Land collaborative project for responsible tourism in protected landscapes. Twenty-five National Parks and AONBs are now engaged in Our Land. We exceeded our target to recruit businesses to Our Land, and 100 are now listed on the North Wessex Downs pages, offering 115 different holidays. The publicly funded phase of Our Land came to an end in March but as envisaged, the initiative continues, and we are working with our private sector partner ResponsibleTravel.com and others in the project steering group to develop a business model that will ensure its future.

With the Our Land team, we presented to a sustainable tourism conference in London on the theme of “Tourism in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty”. The conference provided a useful reminder of how much information and advice is generated by researchers, consultants and others, and how we could provide a useful service to our emerging tourism network by filtering and presenting this information in a concise way.

The “Visit” pages provide information on things to do and places to explore within the AONB. There is an interactive map with access to routes for walkers and cyclists as well as information on relevant businesses such as B and Bs and local producers.

The South West Farmland Birds Initiative
The North Wessex Farmland Bird Project works with farmers and landowners across the North Wessex Downs to provide habitats for our most threatened farmland birds.
The visitor content was added at the end of 2013 and it was encouraging to see that in the year to March 2014 it was the second most popular section of the website after the Management Plan.

New Visitor Guide
The North Wessex Downs Visitor Guide has been a key component in our publicity armoury. This year it has been reprinted with a new contemporary typeface, bolder front cover and a new, much improved map with clearer contours, landmarks, through routes and place names. We have printed two year’s supply and have organised new distributors to ensure better coverage through the area and beyond.

The travelling Icons Exhibition
The celebrated original collection of ten paintings in watercolour and gouache of “Icons of the North Wessex Downs” by Oxfordshire artist Anna Dillon have been on display throughout the year.

We originally commissioned them to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the AONB’s designation. They have been displayed at the Wiltshire Heritage Museum in Devizes, Shaw House in Newbury, Swindon Central library, Chippenham Museum and Heritage Centre, Audley Inglewood Retirement Village near Kintbury and the Vale and Downland Museum in Wantage.

The paintings have been well received and the local venues have made revenue selling the prints and notelets that accompany the exhibition. We are keen to hear from other venues that would like to host them.

Honeybee Nectar
During the year, a specially blended brew called Honeybee Nectar went on sale with the North Wessex Downs logo proudly displayed on its label. The beer is produced by Ramsbury Brewery which has agreed to donate 20p for each pint or bottle sold to projects aimed at conserving bees and other pollinators.

The honey was donated by local beekeepers the Wiltshire Bee Centre and the idea behind the beer was to increase awareness of the North Wessex Downs, celebrate the landscape and raise funds to support our conservation work.

The beer was officially launched by the Mayor of Marlborough, Councillor Guy Loosmore at a party hosted by the Bell Inn at Ramsbury in July.

New Signs

With thanks to the Town Council, Town Team and Chamber of Commerce in Hungerford and First Great Western, we now have new signs at Hungerford station which clearly announce to passengers that they have arrived in the “Heart of the North Wessex Downs.”
Grant Funding

LEADER Programme

The North Wessex Downs LEADER Programme ran between 2009 and December 2013. Responsibility for the LEADER programme sits with the Local Action Group but it is hosted and supported by the AONB office and staff liaise closely on a daily basis. It delivered funding under the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) with a project grant budget of £1.419 million.

Grants were awarded to 65 projects, including farms, small businesses and rural communities across the North Wessex Downs AONB. Combined with match funding, the Local Action Group facilitated a total investment of more than £3 million. Grants ranged from £3.5k to £57k and have averaged £21.8k.

It focussed on four themes:

- **Farming, food and forestry** – £598k was awarded to 25 farming and forestry related businesses for farm modernisation, farm diversification and woodland management projects.

- **Business Transformation and Community Development** – £376k was awarded to create and develop businesses. At least 59 existing small rural enterprises benefitted either directly or indirectly and we helped start five new ones. We granted £192k to projects to help develop and improve community services and facilities.

- **Challenges and Opportunities for Climate Change** – 13 projects involved sustainable woodland management or renewable energy. All our projects were encouraged to be as sustainable as possible via waste management and energy use.

- **Enjoying the North Wessex Downs** – £162k was awarded to 12 tourism related projects either by developing attractions or creating holiday accommodation. Another six projects involved conservation and improvement of our cultural heritage (£90k).

Examples of the grants awarded during the year:

- **Moulson PCC** for internal works to improve the facilities and usage of the St John the Baptist Church.

- **Letcombe Bassett Village Hall Committee** for the replacement and upgrade of the village hall drive to make the village hall more accessible for all members of the community throughout the year.

- **John Hawkins Forestry** to purchase additional items of kit, a stroke de-limber and forestry crane to allow him to expand his business. The stroke de-limber clears a previously felled tree of its branches. Currently this work is done by hand and is not cost effective.

LEADER Transition

During 2013, the Local Action Group secured funding from DEFRA, Wiltshire Council and the AONB Partnership to develop a new Local Development Strategy (LDS) and to put forward a bid to DEFRA for LEADER funding for the period 2015-2020.

A small group of LAG members is leading the work on the LDS and this Transition Group will be recommending the Strategy to the full LAG ready for submission to DEFRA later in 2014.

Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)

The North Wessex Downs SDF is funded by DEFRA to support a wide variety of organisations, businesses, community groups and individuals. Grants are provided to develop practical projects that conserve and enhance the local environment, develop local economic activity or promote local produce and products. Through the fund we have helped to inject £1.4 million of benefits into our local communities.

During the year, we were able to maintain a similar level of funding to previous years. We awarded a total of £46.3k to 18 projects, which attracting match contributions of £103.2k. This included 295 volunteer days. Each pound of grant delivered £3.23 worth of benefits to communities in the North Wessex Downs.

It is estimated that the grants have helped create 36 new jobs and safeguarded 82. The aim is that 86% of the grant money awarded should help grow the economy – develop business, create jobs, improve competitiveness and encourage tourism.
Summaries of the projects funded during the year are on our website:

A diverse range of projects were supported, with three key themes (see one example of each below):
- landscape-scale conservation;
- supporting enterprise and traditional skills; and
- celebrating the landscape and access to the countryside.

Community Stepping Stones (Landscape-Scale conservation)
This project supplied materials for local volunteers to grow grassland plant species as plugs which are being used for planting at conservation sites identified through the Stepping Stones project in collaboration with the North Wessex Downs and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONBs. These children from Pewsey primary school have grown grassland species from seed with the help of a SDF grant and are planting them out on a local farm.

McAlister Hood in the Community (Supporting enterprise and traditional skills)
SDF funding helped local stone sculptor Andrew Hood set up a business training people in traditional skills. The funding also provided a new bicycle trailer to enable him to bring stone sculpture to schools, colleges and community open days locally.

Walking Wiltshire’s White Horses (Celebrating the landscape and access to the countryside).
Working with Creative Wiltshire, this project concerns development of resources to encourage people to explore the chalk white horses on the North Wessex Downs. It will renew interest in the White Horse Way trail, providing a guide to the walk and a new free listing for all leisure, tourism and heritage businesses connected to the Ridgeway and the White Horses on the North Wessex Downs.

Financial Summary

We are, as ever, most grateful for the continuing support of DEFRA and our local authority partners in ever-more-straitened financial circumstances.

Their engagement, commitment and support as members of the Partnership are vital to the successful fulfilment of our responsibilities as stewards of this unique and beautiful landscape.

The AONB team works on behalf of nine local authority partners and seeks to deliver maximum value with limited resources. The contributions from the partners amounted to £69.5k over the year.

In addition to the contribution from DEFRA (£208.7k) we have also secured additional project funding (LEADER, SDF and Our Land) and attracted match funding for projects to a total value of £163.2k. We secured additional £50k in external funding for three projects benefitting the North Wessex Downs. These funds were allocated directly to our partners with responsibility for delivering the projects rather than passing through AONB accounts:

- B&Q Good Woods Project (£3.75k)
- Our Land Landscape Awareness Training (£1k/£1,000
- Stepping Stones Project (£45k)

Income 2013 - 2014
In total, this additional funding plus the DEFRA contribution amounted to £421.9k. Thus, for each pound contributed by the partners we were able to invest £5.35S on their behalf through the work of the AONB unit.

We agreed a new lease on our offices in time for the beginning of April. The intervening quarters’ rent between the expiry of the old lease and the new one were paid at the old rate as budgeted.

We have continued to increase efficiency of the AONB Unit. Following renegotiation, our rent has been reduced and with careful management we have made savings in various areas against budget.

The North Wessex Downs Fund
The North Wessex Downs Fund was established as a Donor Advised Fund (i.e., we retain control over who benefits from grants disbursed) with the Wiltshire and Swindon Community Foundation at the end of March. We are grateful for their support in this process. An initial endowment of £15,000 has attracted endowment match funding from Community First of £7,500, giving a total fund of £22,500.

The formal purpose of the Fund is to support activity that conserves and enhances the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs AONB. Ultimately, the wider aim is to maintain a source of small grants for projects that help to secure the aims of AONB designation in future, should the financial climate continues to reduce our ability to support our own Sustainable Development Fund; to form a nucleus for attracting and managing further funds from other sources (e.g. Community Infrastructure Levy payments or corporate supporters); and, potentially, to form a ‘dowry’ for a future supporting organisation.

Expenditure 2013 - 2014

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Social Media:  
Facebook: Search for ‘North Wessex Downs AONB’
Twitter: @NorthWessexAONB
Flickr photo gallery: Search for ‘North Wessex Downs AONB’