

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **17 February 2022**
By **Heathlands Reunited Project Manager**
Title of Report **Heathlands Reunited End of Project Review**
Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- 1. Note the report and endorse the recommendations and actions arising from the evaluation set out at section 5 of the report.**
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of the Heathlands Reunited (HeRe) projects delivery and reports on its outcomes, highlighting its successes, lessons learnt and recommendations for the consideration of the Policy and Resources Committee.
- 1.2 This report draws on the HLF Project Evaluation report of HeRe completed by Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd and the HeRe Post Project Monitoring ecological review carried out by Johnathan Cox Associates.
- 1.3 Heathlands Reunited was a five-year landscape scale partnership project led by the SDNPA. The project aimed to improve the condition of threatened heathland habitats in the South Downs National Park, and enthuse and inspire people to visit them, learn more about them, and use them responsibly. The project was supported by 11 partner organisations working across 34 heathland sites within the National Park and Wealden Heath sites beyond its central northern boundary.
- 1.4 Partners contributed nearly £1 million in match funding (cash and in-kind) towards the total project cost of £2.37 million. This included a cash contribution from the SDNPA of £150,000. The remaining funding came from a grant of £1.44 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). The partnership worked together with a wide range of stakeholders to reverse heathland decline and to improve heathland heritage. The project delivery consisted of the following three main elements:
- **Governance and management.** Governance, structure, and project management, including the evaluation and monitoring.
 - **Heritage.** Maintenance and Management (M&M) Plan. This focused on a capital works programme of conservation work, which aimed to restore, recreate, and reconnect 660ha of heathland habitat.
 - **People & Communities.** Delivered through the Activity Plan. – A programme of events, activities and campaigns aimed to inform, engage, and involve people and local communities in heathland heritage.
- 1.5 The delivery of the project commenced in June 2016 and was completed after a five month extension in November 2021.

- 2. Policy Context.** The project contributed to the following PMP outcomes.
- Outcome 1: Landscape & Natural Beauty.**
1.2 Protect and enhance the natural beauty and character of the SDNP and seek environmental net-gain from any infrastructure projects.
- Outcome 2: Increased Resilience within the landscape.**
- Outcome 3: Habitat & Species.**
3.1 Create, restore and improve areas of priority habitat to be more, bigger, better, and joined up at a landscape scale.
3.2 Increase the genetic diversity and resilience of target species and implement a landscape scale strategy for tackling invasive, pest species and diseases.
- Outcome 4: Arts & Heritage.**
4.1 Increase conservation, awareness, access to and understanding of South Downs cultural heritage.
4.2 Promote creativity and understanding of the landscape and traditions of the South Downs through contemporary arts and crafts
- Outcome 5: Outstanding Experience.**
5.1 Encourage everyone to experience the National Park and widen participation for under-represented groups through targeted activities and promotion
- Outcome 6: Lifelong Learning.**
6.1 Provide high-quality outdoor learning opportunities as part of a locally relevant curriculum
- Outcome 7: Health & Wellbeing.**
7.1 Develop initiatives, which enable local communities and individuals to improve health and wellbeing.
- 3. Issues for consideration – Heathlands Reunited**
- 3.1 **National Heritage Lottery Fund.** The project delivered all the conditional NLHF Approved Purposes of the Lottery Grant. All progress reports and claims were submitted correctly and on time. The completion report and the attached external evaluation (Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd, 2021) has been accepted as successful completion of the project.
- 3.2 Final external project evaluation. Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd (Collingwood) provided the external evaluation and monitoring throughout the project. This included the attached final evaluation. The evaluation was completed as scheduled in June 2021. Collingwood’s report does not cover the extended period from June to November 2021. The report does not capture the work outputs completed during the extension. This has little impact on the report’s findings and recommendations.
- 3.3 **Governance & Management key findings.** The evaluation finds that the project was well governed and managed. The project partnership worked well and remained fully supported, resilient, and functional for the term of the project.
- 3.3.1 The HeRe team which consisted of 2.5 FTE staff was not always sufficient to deliver the project and had to be expanded at times. This was achieved either through additional staff or support from other teams. This had the benefit of bringing additional skills and experience.
- 3.3.2 Project team and partners were able to adapt effectively to the new conditions and limitations created by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was achieved by changing the delivery methods and extending the project.
- 3.3.3 The evaluation acknowledged that the project has been successful in raising the profile of heathlands both at higher levels within partner organisations and beyond the project area.
- 3.4 **Heritage Key Findings (Outputs and Outcomes).** Heritage will be – better managed, in better condition, identified/recorded.

- 3.4.1 The project aimed to complete 660ha of conservation work. The final area completed was 966ha which exceeded the original aim. *Table I. Capital Works Achievements* shows the original aims and the area completed achievements of the capital works programme by approved purpose.

Table I. Capital Works Achievements

Approved Purpose	Area Aim	Area Complete
Reconnect (Link)	18.0ha	19.1ha
Re-create (Increase)	66.0ha	69.4ha
Restore (Conserve)	582.0ha	877.9ha
Total	666.0ha	966.3ha

- 3.4.2 Collingwood evaluation concluded that the project has exceeded most of its capital works targets; with the result, that heathland heritage is bigger and better.
- 3.4.3 Field surveys were undertaken of a selection of twelve heathland sites. Surveys were focussed on areas of the site where capital works projects have been undertaken with funding by the HeRe project. Information on each survey site was collected in the same format as the 2014 survey undertaken as a baseline prior to the start of the project. Not all sites included in this evaluation were surveyed in 2014.
- 3.4.4 The final ecological evaluation concluded the project had been significant in restoring the ecological condition and nature conservation value of heathland within the National Park. Most sites visited were assessed as being in either in Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering condition. Only one site was considered to be still in Unfavourable condition with no change.
- 3.4.5 Both reports identified the increase of conservation grazing across heathlands as a significant achievement of the project contributing directly to the maintenance of site condition in the future. Providing a common approach and synergies such as the sharing of expertise and experience as well as opportunities for practical collaboration, like the community Cow Club.
- 3.5 The Activities Plan outputs involved the delivery of 47 activity lines with over 339 events and activities aimed at *informing, involving* and *engaging* people and communities in heathlands heritage. The project delivered 345 events and activities exceeding the target. It also exceeded the participation targets which include the following;
- A total of 15,764 people attended 209 in-person events and a further 105,755 attended/viewed 30 virtual events.
 - 114 volunteers were recruited directly to Heathlands Reunited. In addition, there were volunteers with partner organisations. Volunteer time amounted to 6,212 days, exceeding the target of 5,700 volunteer days.
 - Over the course of the project, 698 participants attended 60 training sessions. These figures surpassed the anticipated 678 attendees and 58 training sessions.
- 3.6 **People: findings and outcomes).** People will have – developed skills, learnt about heritage, volunteered time.
- 3.6.1 Across the project activities, participants (including participants in training events, volunteers and members of the community) have reported an increase in their awareness and understanding of the importance of heathlands. It is likely that many different elements of the project contributed to this deepening of understanding, e.g. the Secrets of the Heath events.

- 3.6.2 The appointment of a full-time Outreach Officer in Year 4 and the development of a Diversity Programme resulted in significant steps to make learning and participation opportunities available to all and facilitating the involvement of under-represented groups.
- 3.6.3 Despite the positive feedback on project communications from people who participated in activities, the majority of people living in the National Park were not aware of the project. The National Park's Citizens Panel Spring 2021 Survey data showed that 64% of respondents had not heard about Heathlands Reunited, indicating that further promotion of heathlands might be appropriate to help raise awareness of issues.
- 3.7 **Communities: findings and outcomes.** For communities, environmental impacts will be reduced; more people and a wider range of people will have engaged with heritage, the local area/community will be a better place to live, work or visit.
- 3.7.1 The Heathlands Reunited programme did not clearly address the objective of developing better and more sustainable relationships developed between communities, their Heathland and those who have responsibility for managing it. The project did not define or establish criteria for a good and sustainable relationship between partners and communities.
- 3.7.2 Targets for the numbers of people involved in most community activities and events were exceeded, with positive feedback from participants on the information and understanding of heathland heritage. Online events added to the information available. Developing the capacity of volunteers to communicate their knowledge and appreciation of the heathlands, for example through storytelling and leading walks focusing on the sculpture trail, has created a resource.

4. Options & cost implications

- 4.1 The original project budget was £1,984,408 and the final expenditure was £1,886,946 leaving an underspend of £97,446. As a result, £96,514 of the Heritage Lottery grant was not claimed and £3,631 of the SDNPA £150,000 cash contribution remains unspent. The underspend of £97,446 represents a 71% under use of the £137,446 contingency funding.
- 4.2 Most cost areas came in under budget due in part to the reductions in expenditure during Covid. Several cost areas came in over budget, the most significant of which were staff costs. These were increased by £89,930k to cover additional staff and the increased staff costs relating to the project extension. Underspend and contingency budgets were transferred to increase the capital works budget.
- 4.3 The partners financial commitment to the project was exceeded by £1,128. All non-cash partner commitments were fully met.

5. Recommendations and actions. The external evaluation recommended the following points. SDNPA actions have been added.

- 5.1 **Governance Structures**, *Focus on creating governance structures and processes that worked for all partners early on in the project, including opportunities for review and revision, paid dividends during the Covid-19 pandemic when the partnership was able to continue working, adapt quickly and develop creative responses. Governance: mechanisms which worked well to support partnership communications and working included:*

- *partnership web portal which enabled partners to access all project resources*
- *visiting other partners' sites*
- *presentations at partnership meetings*
- *working groups and sub-groups to look at different aspects of the project*

Recommendation: *all partners should take forward these lessons about collaborative governance to future partnership projects.*

Action: Share as best practice. Add to research and evidence library

- 5.2 **Outcomes & Outputs.** NLHF emphasis on outputs at the stage of project design created rigid requirements for the investment in improving the condition of heathlands. It was felt that output-focused works specifications are more appropriate for projects to improve built heritage than for landscape scale projects. While there was some flexibility to make changes, using an outcomes focus would have allowed partners to take advantage of emerging opportunities and get more out of the funding.
- Recommendation:** NLHF should take an outcome rather than an output focus in developing requirements for landscape-scale projects.
- Action:** SDNPA HeRe PM. This point relates to delivery focused on outputs as defined in the grant application and is how progress was reported to NHLF. This point was highlighted on the completion report submitted to NHLF...
- 5.3 **Procurement Planning.** Having shared capital works planning and procurement mechanisms at the partnership level would have facilitated collaboration and allowed more efficient use of the funding available. This should have been set up at the start of the project as by the time partners identified this need, it was too late to set up a call-off contract or a similar contractual mechanism.
- Recommendation:** future partnership projects involving significant contract-based expenditure should consider, as part of project set up, the creation of a call-off contract or a similar mechanism that all partners can use.
- Action:** SDNPA officers (P&P) to include guidance on project procurement planning in project guidance documentation.
- 5.4 **Resource Planning.** The project included a very large number of activities. This meant that much of the project's focus was on the delivery of the programme of works and the activities. This limited the capacity for taking stock and building on the project's outcomes such as the sculpture trail and the education pack. Some partners were not able to deliver the activities allocated to them and these had to be picked up by the project team, further adding to their activities-related workload.
- Recommendation:** when designing project proposals, all partners should check the programme of activities offered for feasibility and coherence in terms of achieving the projects objectives. Each partner should be realistic about their own capacity to deliver the activities for which they will be responsible.
- Action:** P&P Officers to include guidance on project resource planning in project guidance documentation.
- 5.5 **Heritage Guidance.** Five years' practical experience of improving heathlands has generated important learning about effective approaches (e.g. conservation grazing) and challenges (such as getting the support of private land managers for the creation of corridors). This information would be valuable for those managing heathlands – and other vulnerable habitats.
- Recommendation:** partners to seek support – possibly from NLHF – to systematise the lessons from the project for the improvement of heathland heritage.
- Action:** SDNPA HeRe Team. Capture and publish guidance on Managing Heathland Heritage. Complete Jan2022.
- 5.6 **EDI Outreach.** The time needed to develop approaches to ensure diversity and inclusion in project activities should not be underestimated. The work done to promote diversity and inclusion in by the Community Outreach Officer in Year 4 was extremely valuable but was not supported by systems and capacities within the project, such as effective data gathering to understand the diversity of participants in the project and training for staff and volunteers in inclusive practices.
- Recommendation:** include the development or review of systems and processes for diversity and inclusion at the start of all projects and develop tools for effectively monitoring the diversity characteristics of participants.
- Action: Equality Diversity & Inclusion within** the authority has developed considerably since the HeRe projects conception in 2015.

5.7 **Communication Outcomes.** *Communications are an essential element in creating awareness and understanding of the heathland heritage. More in-depth assessment is needed of what communications are working well and less well, which audiences are being reached and with which results. This should be done at points in time when changes can be made to re-focus messages or develop new communications channels as required.*

Recommendation: *include in the design of future projects regular assessments of communications, including the success of communications in achieving targets for attendance at events.*

Action: Incorporate into future major project planning.

5.8 **Campaigns Legacy.** *Changing behaviours such as how dogs are managed during walks in heathland habitats takes time.*

Recommendation: *monitoring and messaging about responsible dog walking behaviours on heathlands is likely to be needed for some time to come to allow changed behaviours to become embedded.*

Action: Take the lead campaign will continue to be central to public engagement initiative on Heathlands.

5.9 **Communities.** *The context in which heathlands management organisations engage with communities has changed because of several factors such as the increased use of heathlands for recreation and exercise, restrictions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, and loss of staff working on the ground by some project partners. There is a need for heathland management organisations and communities to agree realistic criteria for good and sustainable relationships.*

Recommendation: *draw on examples from the project to understand opportunities and practical challenges for engagement as the basis for establishing shared criteria for engagement with communities.*

Action: Share as best practice. Case studies included in the Heathlands Guidance.

(Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd, 2021)

6. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	No
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	N/A
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	<p>Outcome 1: Landscaper & Natural Beauty.</p> <p>Outcome 2: Increased Resilience within the landscape.</p> <p>Outcome 3: Habitat & Species.</p> <p>Outcome 4: Arts & Heritage.</p> <p>Outcome 5: Outstanding Experience.</p> <p>Outcome 6: Lifelong Learning</p> <p>Outcome 7: Health & Wellbeing.</p>
Links to other projects or partner organisations	<p>Partner Organisations:</p> <p>I. Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARCT)</p>

Implication	Yes*/No
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) MOD. 3. Forestry Commission (FC) Later Forestry England (FE) 4. Hampshire County Council 5. (HCC) - Countryside Services 6. Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HloWWT) 7. The Lynchmere Society LS 8. Natural England NE 9. National Trust (NT) 10. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) 11. Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT)
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	<p>Maintaining and promoting the management of Lowland Heath as a carbon sink.</p> <p>Promoting responsible and sustainable use of Lowland Heath.</p>
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	N/A
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Recommendations raised in the evaluation include diversity and inclusion – to ensure the Authority can take lessons learnt from this work in relation to Equalities forward into future work.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None.
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	None.
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	None.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	All personal data collected the Authority during the project was managed in line with GDPR policy.
<p>Are there any Sustainability implications based on the 5 principles set out in the SDNPA Sustainability Strategy?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Living within environmental limits 2. Ensuring a strong healthy and just society 3. Achieving a sustainable economy 	N/A

Implication	Yes*/No
4. Promoting good governance	
5. Using sound science responsibly	

7. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Heathlands Conditional improvement achieved by HeRe not maintained.	Medium	Medium	<p>Increases in conservation grazing schemes provide improvements in the sustainable management of sites.</p> <p>Best practice has been shared and a partnership networks has been reinforced. This network will benefit from continual co-ordination (Heathlands Forum).</p> <p>A significant number of heathland sites are now in stewardship scheme providing income for maintaining a level of condition.</p> <p>Sustainable income still need to be identified to ensure long-term progress on conditional improvements.</p>
Public and community awareness of the vulnerability of heathland sites reduces over time	Low	Low	<p>Continued engagement will be maintained in the delivery of the legacy HeRe SAMM project 2022 – 2025.</p> <p>Take the Lead campaign to continue to inform responsible dog owner behaviour.</p>

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Appendices None

SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management

External Consultees None

Background Documents (AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST)

1. Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd. (2021). - HLF Project Evaluation of Heathlands
2. Johnathan Cox Associates. (2021). HeRe Post Project Monitoring.