



Members of the Chilterns Conservation Board for the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty are hereby invited to a “Board briefing” on

23rd June 2021 at 10.00 am to be held remotely
The remote meeting will be open from 09.30 am

Agenda

1. Apologies
2. Notice of AOB
3. Chairman’s update
4. Chief Executive’s Review – including Report from Executive and Planning Committees and update on Landscapes Review
5. Meeting Dates 2021-22
6. Any other business

Future Meetings:

<u>Full Board</u>	7 September 2021 7 December 2021 1 March 2022 7 June 2022
<u>Executive Committee</u>	2 August 2021 2 November 2021 1 February 2022 3 May 2022
<u>Planning Committee</u>	14 July 2021 13 October 2021 12 January 2022 13 April 2022

Item 4

Board Review (June 2021)

Author: Elaine King, Chief Executive Officer

Summary: This paper provides an overview of the team's activities and achievements since the last Board meeting in February 2021.

Purpose of Report: To update the Board of the organisation's ongoing work and to invite feedback.

Background

The Coronavirus outbreak began to impact our day-to-day work in early March 2020. In the early stages, our work largely centred on making key decisions in line with emerging Government guidance. This included arranging for the staff team to work and be connected remotely, liaising with colleagues and partners to pause project work and suspend meetings and other events, and responding to requests for information, eg from Defra, the National Association of AONBs and the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The second phase involved still reacting but also planning ahead, with a key focus being to explore how we can best deliver the AONB Management Plan and the Business Plan.

The third phase began in mid-Summer 2020, when lockdown restrictions started to be eased and we moved to activities which included providing guidance for visitors to the Chilterns, sign-posting local businesses that were starting to open, developing a suite of socially distanced walks and liaising with partners and others in tackling the more negative consequences of more people using the countryside.

When lockdown restrictions were tightened again over the winter, we continued to provide information and advice for people wanting to enjoy the Chilterns.

The past three months or so have seen the team expand and roll out site visits and survey work, alongside the Chilterns Walking Festival and other outdoor events, including a team walk, which was a great opportunity for the team to get together, especially those who had been recruited during lockdown and not met their colleagues face to face!

Despite the continued disruption to day-to-day life, the staff team has achieved a great deal in recent months. This paper highlights some of these achievements and provides a strategic overview of the impact, risks and opportunities of the current situation, while also looking ahead to the post-coronavirus recovery phase.

Recommendation

- 1. To note the paper and provide feedback.**

Item 4

Board Review (June 2021)

1.0 Summary

The CCB team has continued to work effectively at home since mid-March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As lockdown measures ease, we are exploring a phased return to the office, once various renovation works have been completed by the landlord.

During this period of reporting, we have dealt with the impacts of increased use of the countryside by the public during lockdown. While more people enjoying the Chilterns is to be welcomed, we – as with other protected landscapes – have needed to issue guidance and engage the media in urging people to behave responsibly.

A key part of the team's focus is to work with a wide range of partners and stakeholders, including NGOs, businesses, MPs and government agencies – both locally and nationally. We are collaborating with other AONBs and National Parks on a range of subjects - including the Glover Review, sustainable tourism, land management and planning reform - in large part through the National Association of AONBs. We are also contributing our time and expertise to a number of government-led initiatives and consultations which will, hopefully, lead to benefits for both the Chilterns and protected landscapes overall.

As ever, the team adapts to what remains an uncertain and fast-moving situation and - where possible - plan ahead and horizon scan for upcoming challenges and opportunities. With the spring and early summer, many in the team have been delivering and planning outdoor activities, including surveys and monitoring, practical habitat restoration work, festivals and community engagement.

2.0 Over-arching and core work

Administration and IT

- The admin team continues to be extremely busy in providing a diverse range of services to support the staff team. Due to staff numbers steadily increasing, we are currently recruiting for a Business Support Officer to provide additional capacity for our busy team. **Board members are encouraged to share the job [advert](#) with their networks** (closing date is 30 June).
- The CCB's switch from Sage Payroll to Brightpay has now been completed. All payroll information has been inputted and payroll run successfully for the three months of this financial year. This software will enable streamlining of payroll/HR procedures, giving more financial control and timely information.
- The switch from Sage to Xero is now complete, with all transactions for the financial year to end of March 2021 now inputted. The implementation of ApprovalMax for approval of invoices is helping to consolidate the financial procedures for purchasing goods/services, giving tighter financial control especially now that Covid restrictions are beginning to ease and project activities are increasing.
- Hubspot training has been delayed but remains a priority and underpins our ambitions to undertake more proactive stakeholder engagement and data management.
- Building improvements, including repairs and redecoration, are being carried out by the landlord to the office in Chinnor. Work is due to start towards the end of June and expected to complete at the end of August.
- Covid Risk Assessments continue to be reviewed and updated in line with Government guidance, with a view to a phased return to the office once renovation work is complete.

2.1 Planning

- Strong [submissions](#) have been made to the Central Bedfordshire Local Plan main modifications consultation, with regard to the 'North of Luton' expansion and M1-A6 link road, both of which have direct impacts on the AONB and its setting. These proposals are among the worst in any local plan in the Chilterns area, but most of the LPAs in the region, supported by the Planning Inspectorate, are guilty to some extent of being too eager to set aside the 'highest level of protection' status that is meant to be afforded by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to the AONB in short-term interests.
- We have engaged with workshops and similar events on key strategic and infrastructure proposals, including the Hemel Garden Communities Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, further design proposals for the HS2 vent shaft headhouses at Amersham and Chesham Road, and the area studies for the Transport for the South East transport strategy.
- Our analysis of council decisions and our responses on planning applications is showing a close alignment between CCB objections and applications subsequently being refused or withdrawn. More detailed analysis will be presented to Planning Committee.
- There have been ups and downs on applications for major development in the AONB's setting, with the 3,500-home Chalgrove Airfield application withdrawn to permit detailed revisions, and the submission of a 3,850-home new community between Barton-le-Clay and Wrest Park. STOP PRESS: the latest is a forthcoming proposal for a [major film studio](#) – on a similar scale to Pinewood – adjacent to the AONB just east of Marlow; application expected in the Autumn.
- Outdoor lighting has been an issue, with a planning condition controversy at Misbourne School, Missenden, causing local headaches as part of a campus improvement programme. The recent dismissal of a planning appeal for sports pitch lighting in the North Wessex Downs AONB due to the intrusive impact on a dark sky environment could be helpful to us, but schools and other public bodies are proving difficult to persuade on impacts on the AONB.
- We continue to engage with LPAs on what constitutes major development within the AONB, as the test is judged case-by-case. For example, a proposal for 12 dwellings at Hampden Farm Barn in Prestwood is, we have submitted, major development due to the severity of its impact in a sensitive part of the AONB, and outside any Local Plan allocation. At the Caddington Golf Club we have argued the dramatic remodelling of the course, with 4.3 ha of tree removal, renders the scheme major development, and a key question is how much would need to change to reduce the proposal's impact to 'less than' major development? We have also been in discussion with colleagues working in other nationally protected landscapes to gauge how they deal with these issues, which appear to be increasingly vexed.
- We submitted comments on the Shiplake Neighbourhood Plan, a small area of which is in the AONB, but includes a significant area of valued landscape that falls within the setting of the Chilterns. CCB supported the policy evidence and policy wording to protect the setting of the AONB. The landscape evidence gathered in support of this plan demonstrates the potential value of local landscape characterisation to more strategic landscape considerations, which could be pertinent in the coming months.

2.2 Nature and Landscape

Farming in Protected Landscapes

- Work is underway in preparation for the imminent launch of this three-year Defra funded programme to be led by AONB and National Park teams. The funding will support our work with farmers and other land managers across four themes:

Climate – supporting delivery of nature-based solutions

Nature – supporting delivery of the Nature Recovery Network

People – improving health and wellbeing through increased access to nature

Place – supporting protected landscapes as flourishing places to live and work, with strong identity, cultural heritage and high recognition as visitor destinations.

- Immediate priorities are establishment of a panel, recruitment of a Farming Engagement Officer, preparation of the comms plan and promotional materials, and preparation of briefings and materials for potential applicants and key stakeholders.
- Timelines are extremely challenging - funding must be spent in-year, effectively giving just nine months for year one allocation to be spent and work completed. The programme will be open for applications from 1 July, so will initially need to be managed from existing staff resources.
- Additional admin support is currently being provided by Lynne and advisory support will be provided by several members of the team including Neil Jackson (Conservation and Landscape Officer) and Luke Burgess (Chalkscapes Development Officer) . We will aim to support the development and delivery of high-quality projects which meet the outcomes set by Defra.
- This is an opportunity for the Board to demonstrate and build its capacity to engage positively with and support farmers and their work for the Chilterns during this period of agricultural transition. As well as meeting programme outcomes, we have an opportunity through this funding to continue to strengthen relationships with the farming community, to leverage other investment, and to build on the principles and learning developed through the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster led by Ian Waller and Nick Marriner (see [Case Study](#)).

Big Chalk Initiative

- We are supporting the development of this initiative alongside eight other AONBs, and the South Downs National Park. The aims are to work with landowners, farmers, and local communities to build resilience in calcareous landscapes (chalk and limestone) on an unprecedented scale.
- Current focus is on preparatory work for an EOI for a funding bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund. We have made specific contributions around landowner / farmer engagement and support, environmental monitoring, liaison with NHLF and advisor networks.

Chilterns Partnership and Nature Recovery Plan

- Work continues on the partnership delivery plan however progress has been delayed due to other operational pressures/ priorities and lack of capacity. The aim is to accelerate both areas of work over the coming quarter including next steps of setting up partnership task groups to progress identified partnership priorities.

Buckinghamshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy pilot (LNRS)

- Local Nature Recovery Strategies are a key measure in the Environment Bill and intended to drive more coordinated, focussed action and green investment to help nature and people flourish together, whilst delivering wider nature-based environmental benefits. They will consist of:
 - A Statement of Biodiversity Priorities, reflecting stakeholder priorities for environmental outcomes and actions.
 - A Local Habitat Map, identifying the existing distribution of habitats and target locations for delivering the outcomes identified.

The strategies will be a statutory requirement of the upcoming Environment Bill, to be developed by local councils when the Bill becomes law.

- Following a further stakeholder session in May and the drafting of the final report / deliverables the Bucks pilot has now been completed and submitted to Defra. A

reflection and evaluation session is scheduled which Kath will feed into on behalf of the Board. The pilot raises several issues requiring greater consideration, including

- how Local Nature Recovery Strategies will take account of AONB Management Plans
 - clarity around how the LNRS will underpin decision making and investment in the environment.
 - effective engagement with farmers and other land managers in the process
 - the relationship between LNRSs and our own Nature Recovery Plan to be developed this year.
- Bucks Council took a very positive approach to inclusion of CCB in this pilot. However, at times our capacity to fully engage was limited due to the amount of involvement required on a very tight timeline. This issue of capacity will be significant for CCB once the process gets underway for read across the whole of the Chilterns simultaneously.

Chalk Streams and the Aquifer

- The first of the two giant tunnel boring machines ('Florence') has started its journey through the Chilterns' chalk. However, very real concerns raised by experienced geologists and hydrologists remain and the CCB issued a [joint statement](#) with Buckinghamshire Council on 5 May setting out our concerns over potential impacts.
- HS2 Ltd continues to claim that there is no risk to the aquifer and chalk streams despite:
 - Affinity Water having successfully applied for a [licence](#) to increase abstraction from sources unlikely to be affected by pollution and turbidity caused by HS2 tunnelling
 - HS2 Ltd has served temporary possession notice on land adjacent to the River Misbourne "*... if the aforementioned tunnelling works have a detrimental effect on the flow of the River Misbourne to the extent that corrective works are then required.*"
 - In an [article](#) for 'Building' (7 June 2021), HS2 Ltd admit that there are serious concerns and nervousness about the tunnelling operations among stakeholders including the water companies.

Amersham Vent Shaft

- The CCB issued a statement in September 2020 with its concerns regarding the design of the vent shaft. At a meeting of the Independent Design Panel (25 May 2021), HS2 designers moved some way to acting on our concerns by confirming that: the vent shaft structure will now not be lit at night; the metal fins derided as the 'Crown of thorns' by local people will be reduced by 1 m in height; the corten steel security wall will be pre-weathered to be nearer the final rust colour, rather than bright orange; they will implement a modest increase in tree cover.
- However, designers are still wedded to the vent shaft being visible as an iconic structure in the landscape, while it could easily be hidden. Matt Thompson, our Planner, has made clear that the CCB does not see the design as acceptable. In addition, Saeed Mahmood at Buckinghamshire Council, has confirmed that, in its current form, the Council would not grant planning approval.

River Misbourne at Bottom House Farm Lane

- We have reported previously on the damage to the bank of the River Misbourne by the construction of the temporary road bridge. The river here has suffered a double blow of damage by HS2 Ltd and sewage discharges by Thames Water. Now that water levels have subsided (though an unpleasant smell remains), Allen Beechey and Neil Jackson met representatives from Fusion (the 'enabling' contractors), the Environment Agency and landowners on 23 June to agree action to repair the bank and measures to restore the damaged meadows.

2.4 People and Society

- **The 8th Chilterns Walking Festival** took place 22 May to 6 June, featuring 75 walks and attracting 650 participants. It generated substantial media coverage and included several new businesses, walk leaders and organisations keen to promote themselves through the Festival. [See HERE](#) for a summary report on the Festival.
- Looking ahead, the challenge will be to provide a more inclusive programme (additional walks in the northern Chilterns, Access for All walks, family-friendly activities), to attract more diverse audiences and to increase the numbers of businesses benefitting. We are now planning the October 2021 Walking Festival with these aspirations in mind. In the meantime we are using the [CWF web page](#) to promote the many on-going walking opportunities in the Chilterns to encourage greater participation.
- **Countryside Access and Visitor Management** - We have continued to disseminate government guidance regarding Covid-19 and countryside visits in line with the phased roadmap out of lockdown, [see here](#). This includes on-going promotion of the new Countryside Code and 'respect the countryside' campaigns.
Sustainable Tourism and promoting the rural Economy
- We have shared our thoughts and ideas on the opportunities for rural tourism recovery with Defra, highlighting the role of AONBs. This included meeting with the Rural Economy lead in Defra's Environment Strategy Directorate. We also submitted a joint AONB response to the DCMS review of Destination Management Organisations.
- The **Chilterns Pass** is still on hold following a review of market conditions. It is likely to be many more months before things have settled down sufficiently for us to re-assess and plan next steps. In the meantime we are scoping opportunities to market and promote **Chilterns Countryside Experiences**, which we see as an opportunity for the Chilterns, in line with wider market trends.
- **'Open for Business'**: we have started planning a two-week **Chilterns Food & Drink Festival** in October, jointly with the Chalk, Cherries and Chairs project. We have lots of exciting plans for events, walks and activities linking food, farming and the Chilterns landscape, eg Bodgers Pub Tour, Harvest celebrations, Cherry Pie bake-off event, local produce tours and tastings. We have also been planning some Chilterns Local Produce/Sense of Place workshops in mid-July aimed at walk leaders and those in the visitor sector.

Communications

- We promoted the [Great British Spring Clean](#) and Volunteer Week, signposting people to the many opportunities in the Chilterns to do litter picking and other outdoor activities which help care for the Chilterns.
- We have also been featuring a series of blogs by one of our youth volunteers, [see here](#). Looking ahead, we have a series of blogs planned focusing on leisure and tourism, helping to promote the sector over the summer months, especially if some covid restrictions continue to present challenges for our local businesses.

3.0 Communications

- The Communications Officer has been preparing for the launch of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme by creating assets to help promote the programme and inform and encourage farmers to apply.
- On 7 June, the Prime Minister visited Chesham to campaign with Peter Fleet, the Conservative candidate in the Chesham and Amersham by-election. During the visit, he gave an [interview](#) to the Bucks Free Press, where he spoke about his support for a Chilterns National Park. We issued a [statement](#) in response to his comments and shared it on our social channels.
- The communications team has been supporting the People and Society Officer with promotion and awareness of the Chilterns Walking Festival which received a lot of positive interest from local media including [The Countryman Magazine](#), [Henley](#)

[Standard, Bucks Free Press](#) and radio interviews with Wycombe Sound and Marlow FM among others.

- In May we published a case study sharing the achievements of the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster. This included publishing a [news item](#) on our website and also via our social channels, and has resulted in a lot of positive feedback and support for the cluster's work.
- In May we supported Affinity Water with the launch of their SOS (Save Our Streams) campaign. Our CEO and Chalk Streams Project Officer were VIP guests at the [launch](#) involving comedians, including Sandy Toksvig, performing in the River Chess. The campaign and event will also be featured in Outstanding Chilterns magazine.
- The new website development project continues. Helen Valvona, Communications Assistant, has been busy creating pages on the new site and flowing content on to the pages. The copy writer continues to work with the project leads and we are progressing well.
- As part of the new website project, the Comms Officer has commissioned a professional photographer, [Dave Olinski](#) to take a portfolio of new imagery including landscape, flora, fauna, and lifestyle images including people enjoying the countryside. We also commissioned an aerial photographer, [Hedley Thorne](#), who has taken drone videos of the Chilterns for us to use on our website and in social media posts.
- Our comms volunteers have been going above and beyond to help recently. Matt Writtle, professional photographer and writer for the Guardian, has agreed to write a monthly blog series for our website as he walks parts of the Chiltern Way. He also interviews people he meets along the way and photographs what he sees. The [first instalment](#) was published in May.
- Similarly, nature enthusiast and Duke of Edinburgh participant Amy Shayler has been sharing her experiences of the Chilterns with [her own blog contributions](#), too. Finally, we have also taken on a new regular volunteer, Robert Hunter, who has been supporting the comms team by writing [blog content](#), updating webpages, researching and checking information for quality on our interactive map and more! Robert is supporting the team for six hours per week.
- Interviews for the new Communications Assistant were held on Tuesday 15 June. We will advise the results shortly.
- Outstanding Chilterns 2020/21 magazine is underway and is due for publication in September. We have a wide range of contributors and articles including themes such as: a celebration of Chilterns Food and Drinks producers; Chilterns arts and crafts, the benefits of grazing; a focus on Marlow; water saving initiatives; project news and updates; an introduction to fungus, and more!
- The Communications team continues to work hard to raise the profile of the AONB and the CCB's work, and regularly posts content on its social channels to support this. We are increasingly also supporting national awareness days and making relevant connections to the Chilterns to help amplify national messages. We are seeing a steady increase in followers with 7,300 Twitter followers and over 3,000 Facebook followers.

4.0 Development & Funding

- The development stage of Chalkscapes runs until late 2022, at which point we will submit a full application for funding to the National Heritage Lottery Fund. The development work is now in its fifth month.
- Development of the new CCB website continues, and extra capacity being secured recently to help support the Communications Officer in the final stages.
- The CCB comms team has been very busy as usual, with particular focus during this period on supporting the farmer cluster engagement work and media work on HS2.

- The Development and Funding Manager continues to ensure the CCB is represented at a national level with the development of collaborative projects with other AONBs and National Parks through the National Association of AONBs.
- We are currently working collaboratively with The Conservation Volunteers, Surrey Hills AONB, Kent Downs AONB and High Weald AONB on the development of a 'Rail to Trail' project proposal to be submitted to the second tranche of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF). The outcome of this application should be known by the summer.

5.0 Projects

Chalk, Cherries & Chairs

- Multiple events mobilised within a week of the restriction easing in the UK Government's routemap phase one, for a Spring Festival celebrating the Chilterns including outdoor participatory events.
- We are now organising a summer festival on the Rye in High Wycombe, with farming demonstrations, food, local heritage crafts and outdoor events, all to be promoted by "Get On Your Boots" a new music video of the Chilterns encouraging people to get out into the landscape around them, which we commissioned from a local young artist from High Wycombe.
- We also commissioned another music video to add to our Chilterns soundscape, from the Ivinghoe Beacon Choir, using original music from renowned local composer, John Cameron, to promote a landscape art themed festival in 2022
- We currently hope to add a third, from a Wycombe steel band, around which we may centre the summer 2022 music Festival we are planning to deliver.
- Meanwhile, our autumn festival this year is to be food themed, with events from field to fork, including foraging, farm tours, traditional recipes and cookery classes with a focus on local ingredients. We also hosted a Dawn Chorus Walk in Bradenham as part of the Chilterns Walking Festival 2021.
- We are currently resuming project activities across the scheme, corresponding to the relaxation of Coronavirus restrictions on outdoor activities and, working with Chiltern Rangers, we have established a programme of intermediate wildlife and conservation volunteer training for young people through the launch of our '[Chilterns New Shoots](#)' programme:
 - 16 young people aged 15-18 have been offered places. Initial meet/greet session held and first session of 10 monthly sessions on 26th June
 - Programme to develop skills/experience of species identification, surveying and practical conservation
 - Delivered in partnership with BBOWT, Chiltern Society, National Trust and Chiltern Rangers
 - Opticron provided 50% discount funding for 16 pairs of binoculars and hand lenses for loan scheme

Working with land owners in key locations we have:

- enabled grassland in Prestwood to be reclassified and entered into a niche Countryside Stewardship agreement (Aldridge Bank)
- resurrected fencing at a Local Wildlife Site scrub to reinstate sheep grazing to create optimum butterfly habitat (Upper Wardrobes)
- planted 150 cowslip plugs at key sites that have the potential for the Duke of Burgundy butterfly to recolonise (Promised Land & Lodge Hill)
- provided a habitat management plan to enable 9ha of improved grassland to be converted into species rich grassland (Old Tythe Barn, Speen)

To support the landmark work of the successful Farm Cluster we have:

- written and published a Farmer Cluster [case study](#) document
- enabled a training visit to a regenerative demonstration farm (FarmEd in Burford)
- hosted a cluster-meeting on 'Farm Carbon' to explore mechanisms for carbon sequestration as part of Rothschild Foundation funded project
- put out a tender for botanic surveyors to support applications for reclassification of species rich grassland on farms (potentially valuable areas were identified in the Whole Farm Plans)
- completed series of handover briefing with consultants and farmers on their Whole Farm Plans
- engaged consultants to support farmers with new Countryside Stewardship (and new ELM Sustainable Farming Initiative) applications
- with Bucks Owl and Raptor Group (3 volunteers) completed initial monitoring checks on 55 Owl boxes across 18 farms
- set up a new small mammal survey project (4 volunteers) across 3 cluster farms and completed the first round of visits
- with Bucks and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre set up a new amphibian and reptile survey project (30 volunteers) across 17 cluster farms first round of visits 50% complete
- delivered year 3 of our spring farm bird surveys (11 volunteers) across 18 farms

Working with volunteers we have:

- recruited 112 volunteers to the Tracking the Impact project:
 - Allocated 75% of the Tracking the Impact surveys squares for this spring (birds, butterflies and plants)
 - Completed 3 surveys methodology volunteer training sessions
 - Set up and are delivering in-field species ID training courses (24 sessions in total over spring/summer)

Beacons of the Past

- Registered Portal users are now over 8000, with steady daily work carried out both in initial recording and reviewer portal quality checking. 6000+ verified records, 15000+ features identified.
- Erosion mitigation and path re-siting are taking place on Ivinghoe Beacon.
- Our new Landscape Heritage Officer Giles Carey has hit the ground running and has already held a Mapathon session with the volunteers and is liaising with our four county Historic Environment Record offices (and the National Trust HER) to ensure a smooth transfer of high-priority feature records. These records are an important legacy of the project and foundation for future protection and planning.
- Wendy continues to respond to requests to offer consultations to farmers, forestry, and local authorities on the archaeological resources and implications of activities in the AONB. Comments continue to come in from partners suggesting a desire to be able to count on this kind of expert heritage advice from the CCB going forward,; some initial thoughts have been drawn together as to how to make this a sustainable option post-project.
- Partnerships are strengthened by BotP participating in heritage events hosted by some of our partners. Wendy will be guiding a walk on the archaeology of the Ver Valley for the Ver Valley Society in July, and teaming up with CCSP to deliver two chalk stream archaeology walks for the Chiltern Society in Sep/Oct for their Heritage Festival.
- Capital works planned at the Tier One hillfort sites are now in line with projected Covid restriction changes. However, we are also planning contingencies in case of third waves, and will not be conducting any large public events until Oct at the earliest, when an outdoor event is planned in Letchworth/Hitchin (23 Oct).
- An Expression of Interest was submitted to NLHF in May, exploring potential for a major new chalk streams/archaeology collaborative project scheme (*Not Bourne Yesterday*).

This aims to build upon the legacy of Beacons of the Past and strengths of the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project. On 28 May, we were given the green light to draw up a Development Phase application over the next 12 months.

Mend the Gap – joint venture between the CCB and North Wessex Downs AONB Enhancement Projects

- The first Enhancement Projects to be supported through Mend the Gap have been agreed by the Steering Group. These are: establishment of a new environmental organisation within the Goring and Streatley area; small-scale works to a floodplain meadow in Streatley.
- A further, larger project in the south of the Mend the Gap area has also received 'support in principle' subject to a review when costs have been finalised post-tender.
- The projects highlighted above will effectively be supported as 'grants' rather than as partnership projects or delivered by Mend the Gap/AONB staff.
- Discussions are ongoing with a number of other organisations within the programme area and further projects are in the pipeline. However, progress remains slow. A review of opportunities, gaps and need in relation to Mend the Gap's areas of interest will help to identify priorities for interventions that could be led by Mend the Gap. This work is now a priority for the coming weeks.

Mitigation Projects

- Valuable input has been received from Jonathan Spencer (formerly Head of Environment and Planning at the Forestry Commission) to develop a list of species for tree and hedgerow restoration schemes, including identifying 'signature' Mend the Gap species (black poplar) for incorporation into all schemes to contribute towards creating a legacy for the programme. Black poplar is a good fit for the scheme and it offers the potential for Mend the Gap to make a positive contribution towards this rare species' conservation. There are potential challenges with sourcing black poplars but we will be talking to contacts working on black poplar conservation schemes elsewhere in the country.
- Discussions are underway with the agents of landowners in the South Stoke and South Moreton areas where priority locations for mitigation projects have been identified. Progress is slow, however, since our hoped-for schemes are small relative to their overall land holdings. An approach to the landowners from a more strategic, organisational level might help to oil the wheels. Also, if Board members have senior contacts within either Christ Church or Oxford Diocese, their input would be very much welcomed.
- The need for resourcing of the detailed work of the mitigation projects is now a key priority and the Programme Manager will focus strongly on this in the next couple of weeks.

Chalkscapes

- The Chalkscapes development stage is now six months into its 23 month timetable, led by Development Manager, Jenny Ponsford. Luke Burgess, Development Officer, has been in post for two months and will be leading on the conservation and ecological aspects of the delivery proposals. Luke is an experienced ecologist and is already making great progress, working with landowners and NGOs in the North Chilterns area, and benefitting from learning from the CCC Farmer Cluster work being led by Nick Marriner.
- Inga Garriock started in post on 11 June, working one day per week covering part of Jenny's Development Manager post, as Jenny is part time. Inga has recently started working as Project Manager for BCN Wildlife Trust managing their Bradgers Hill Project.
- A key aspect of the Chalkscapes proposal is community engagement with non-traditional audiences for the conservation sector. We identified three such audiences, including

black and minority ethnic people, young people and those who live in socio-economically deprived, urban areas in Luton and Dunstable.

- Jenny is leading on developing relationships with community organisations and NGOs in both Luton and Dunstable, with the aim to encourage a range of community groups from our priority audiences to help shape the Delivery proposals. **Board members with links to community groups in Central Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Luton are encouraged to contact Jenny** (email below).
- The Chalkscapes Team met with the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) for the second time on 18 May at Dunstable Downs. NLHF officers were excited about the project and the benefits it could bring to the North Chilterns. An extension to the bid submission deadline was discussed, however, NLHF felt we should continue to aim for an Autumn 2022 bid submission date as originally agreed.
- As a result of the above, timescales for the Development Stage of the project remain challenging. Partner organisations are starting to become operational post Covid, but some have gone through significant change, whilst community groups are only just starting to slowly reconvene. Consequently the bulk of pilot activity will need to be pushed back to Autumn 2021 and spring 2022.
- Chalkscapes Advisory group met for the second time on 10 June. Despite the challenges of the past year, members all remained enthusiastic about the project and were pleased with the progress made to date. Working groups are now being set up to undertake the more detailed project tasks.
- Having failed to initially recruit a consultant for the community development and engagement brief, we extended the tender deadline and advertised more widely, which resulted in five consultants bidding for this important piece of work. Three consultants will be taken forward to interview. We hope to start the commission early next month.
- We are now out to tender for the Routeways and Waysides Brief, which closes on 25 June (see [consultancy contracts](#)). This is the third and final brief that will be managed by the CCB. The fourth is a community artist brief which will be managed by the Culture Trust in early 2022. This quite intensive period of commissioning has enabled the team to make contact with a range of consultants and develop templates and tools that can be used in the delivery stage and by other CCB projects. **Board Members are encouraged and invited to share the various tenders.**
- The introduction of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes present a wonderful opportunity for Chalkscapes, something which is recognised by NLHF. This period of uncertainty provides a good opportunity for the formation of a farmer cluster in the North Chilterns area, through which Chalkscapes can support farmers through the transitional period, helping them to access ELM, and other new funding opportunities, at the appropriate level.
- Luke Burgess is developing good relationships with several landowners who are keen to work with Chalkscapes including Dunstable Downs Golf Club, South Bedfordshire Golf Club and Cemex.
- Input from project partners will need to be managed carefully. Some organisations have gone through significant change as a result of Covid and are running different operational models to what they were previously.
- The Chalkscapes development period ends in November 2022 with a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a five year delivery project, commencing summer 2023. If successful, Chalkscapes will represent over £3m investment in the North Chilterns landscape and the communities which surround it.
- We must secure approximately £190,000 in match funding before the Delivery Bid is submitted in November 2022. Project partners have been made aware of the need for jointly funded projects and the Advisory Group has been asked to consider opportunities for match funding. Board Members are invited to suggest funding opportunities and contacts to help us achieve this goal. Please contact Claire Readey, Development and Funding Manager: creadey@chilternsaonb.org.

- We have not yet secured an independent chair for the Chalkscapes Advisory Group. **Board members are invited to make suggestions as to who may be suitable for this role.**
- Board members with links to Local Authorities, Parish Councils, community groups or health service contacts in the North Chilterns area (Hertfordshire, Luton, Central Bedfordshire), are also invited to get in touch with Jenny Ponsford jponsford@chilternsaonb.org and Claire Readey creadey@chilternsaonb.org

6.0 National focus

- Liaising with a range of organisations and individuals, including our partners - both nationally and locally – continues to be a key feature of much of our work. This has included conversations with our local authorities over responding to the Covid-19 emergency, for example the CEO is a member of Buckinghamshire Council's Strategic Partners Board.
- We are also working with the National Association of AONBs (NAAONB), AONB Lead Officers, National Parks and others on a range of operational and strategic matters, including responding to the Landscapes Review, Climate Adaptation and Mitigation, Nature Recovery Plans and securing funding.
- Strong links have also been maintained and developed with Defra, Natural England and the Environment Agency on a range of matters including

Defra

- The CCB staff team continues to communicate and share information on our work with Defra. We are liaising with Defra, Natural England and others on the Landscapes Review, the Government's Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme, Nature Recovery Networks, sustainable tourism, the rural economy, HS2 and developing measures to improve the protection of chalk streams.
- Elaine continues to represent the AONB network with a number of other AONB colleagues on Defra's Contact Group for AONBs and National Parks, exploring implementation of the Review's recommendations. The group is currently meeting every 2-4 weeks in the lead up to the Government responding to the Landscapes Review.

NAAONB

- Members of the team continue to work closely with Lead Officers and their teams in other AONBs and the National Association of AONBs on a range of strategic and operational matters, including comms, nature recovery, visitor management and farming. This includes regular meetings with the South East and East Protected Landscapes group (SEEPL).
- Elaine continues in her role as a member of the NAAONB's Colchester Declaration Steering Group - along with Kath and Claire. The Declaration was agreed by all AONBs in July 2019 and aims to increase the scale and pace of conservation activity in AONBs, along with increasing our engagement with people and local communities.
- Work includes developing an ambitious plan for nature recovery across all AONBs in England and has resulted in securing Natural England funding for a national Nature Recovery Officer to work across all AONBs in England.
- Claire is leading the development of a proposal as part of the Colchester Declaration, work. The Urban Hinterland Cluster (Kent, High Weald and Surrey Hills AONBs) seeks to engage with young, black people aged 16 - 24 in central London.
- Elaine meets with other AONB Lead Officers and National Parks to discuss collaborative working on Nature Recovery Networks and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy pilots (of which Buckinghamshire is one).

Other

- [The Landscapes for Everyone](#) national conference was held online on 13 October. The proceedings are now available online ([morning](#) and [afternoon](#) sessions). Elaine chaired the morning session, which included a keynote speech from Julian Glover and a series of expert presentations.
- More recently, Elaine was invited to chair a second conference in the series, this time on [Farming with Nature](#) on 25/26 May. Almost 200 people attended the online conference and recording of the proceedings are expected to be available online shortly.
- The Chesham and Amersham by-election was held on 18 June. The CCB's CEO was invited to meet with a number of the candidates and took the opportunity to share our thinking on a range of issues, including HS2, a Chilterns National Park, sustainable tourism and the need for a strategic transport strategy for. The Chilterns.