

Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme Evaluation Report Executive Summary

Scheme Context and Aims

The 328km² Weald Forest Ridge lies in the north and west of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), in South-East England. It is the highest ridge of the AONB and its landscape character is defined by the remnants of four medieval hunting forests spread along its length: the most well-known being Ashdown Forest. 325,000 people live within the Ridge and its eight neighbouring towns: Horsham, Crawley, Haywards Heath, East Grinstead, Crowborough, Uckfield, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge.

Under the Heritage Lottery Fund's Landscape Partnership Scheme programme, the £2.7million Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme (WFR LPS) commenced delivery in early 2009 and was completed in late 2012. The Scheme aimed to enable its audiences – both within the Ridge and in the eight neighbouring towns – to reconnect with their local landscape; more easily access and enjoy the Ridge; understand its unique natural, cultural and built heritage; take part in caring for it; and leave a legacy for future generations. The High Weald AONB Unit was the Scheme's Lead Partner and the Unit led a broad partnership of delivery organisations and wider stakeholders to deliver the Scheme.

This Evaluation Report considers the outcomes, challenges and successes of the Scheme, and should be read in conjunction with its sister Monitoring Report, which details the actual delivery work undertaken.

Evaluative Approach

This Report evaluates the Scheme as a whole – rather than at a detailed individual project level – and uses illustrations and views from Delivery Partners, key stakeholders, projects and the Scheme Management Team.

The broad objectives of the WFR LPS evaluative approach were:

- To construct a narrative for the WFR LP Scheme.
- To test the oft quoted value of the landscape partnership approach – “that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”.
- To evaluate successes, legacies, impacts and benefits.
- To identify challenges and lessons learnt from the Scheme's delivery.

These objectives were met by a largely self-led approach to evaluation by the Scheme Management Team: with objectivity provided by consultant input at key stages and in Report production. Evaluation feedback was obtained primarily through:

- 20 semi-structured interviews conducted by the consultant with key individuals, or groups of individuals, central to the WFR LP Scheme.
- Discussion and analysis amongst partners at annual Partnership Forums.
- Combined monitoring and evaluation questionnaires to Scheme beneficiaries at numerous activities and events.

Scheme Synthesis and Delivery

The High Weald AONB Unit was perfectly placed to be the Scheme's Lead Partner: with its strategic focus on research, information dissemination and a partnership approach to achieving landscape conservation and change. The Scheme's 20 Delivery Partners ranged from environmental charities – such as the RSPB and Woodland Trust; through public bodies like the Forestry Commission and local authorities; to community organisations. Individual projects varied widely in financial value: from under £500 to almost £500,000.

Partner organisations saw the great potential of the Scheme's landscape scale approach in terms of the benefits it offered: including the delivery of landscape improvements; obtaining funding for priority projects; widening geographic focus or target audiences; and partnership working. There were, however, perhaps inevitable differences between organisations in their subsequent approach to the Scheme and to delivery.

Two main themes provided the focus for landscape collaboration across the WFR LP Scheme. These were, firstly, the four medieval forests of the Ridge; and, secondly, a Scheme-wide approach to archaeology and the wider historic environment. Both themes provided a rich source of inspiration for heritage engagement.

A Partnership Board oversaw Scheme delivery. Its membership centred on representation from four Government agencies, alongside that from the High Weald AONB Unit. This core membership worked very well; shaping the Board's dynamic, and allowing good discussion and decision making. Other Board members were a Delivery Partner, a community representative, a local authority economic development officer and a representative from the Accountable Body. Each of these positions raised its own particular issues during delivery.

A Scheme Management Team based within the High Weald AONB Unit had the essential role of fostering and engendering good partnership working, particularly across the Delivery Partners. To try to achieve this, the Team focused on event organisation, partner support and communication: as part of an underlying philosophy to support and serve the partnership. The Scheme Management Team also acted as the conduit for Scheme communication with the HLF. Despite this intermediary role of the Team, the HLF Monitor still met well over half the 20 Delivery Partners in the course of monitoring visits.

A further key role for the Scheme Management Team was to deliver strong, high quality, adaptable management that met the needs of both the HLF and the Scheme stakeholders. It was largely felt these needs were fulfilled, and contributed greatly to the Scheme's undoubted success.

Scheme Impacts and Benefits

There were a huge range of benefits and impacts for heritage, for people and for organisations from the Scheme's delivery. These were achieved at a landscape scale, a project scale and from bringing different organisations together under a landscape and heritage umbrella. Headline impacts and benefits included:

- There was considerable public learning benefit within the Scheme. This primarily focused on activities and events – often with numerous partners involved – to enable communities to celebrate, engage with, and learn about the unique heritage and management of the Weald Forest Ridge. Site-based theatrical trails proved especially successful at delivering learning within a fun-focused activity.
- There was overwhelmingly positive feedback about the schools' projects undertaken within the WFR LPS. The Forest School approach employed in one project was particularly successful, especially in engaging children from challenging backgrounds.
- There was an important interface with two other HLF-supported projects that geographically overlapped with the Weald Forest Ridge. A key reason for the overall success of the Scheme's schools' work was the joint working with one of these: the High Weald Heroes programme.
- LiDAR (an aerial laser survey technique that accurately maps ground surfaces beneath vegetation canopies) proved a fantastic tool to engage local communities with their local landscape heritage, as well as delivering a much wider understanding of the archaeology and the historic landscape of the Weald Forest Ridge.
- The WFR LPS delivered considerable biodiversity benefits, focused on improving heathland and ancient woodland habitats on key publicly accessible sites.
- The majority of sites undergoing biodiversity or access enhancements also developed some form of heritage interpretation: including art, drama, film, leaflets and site panels. Many Delivery Partners, as well as the general public, learnt a considerable amount about the area's natural and cultural heritage through this interpretive focus.
- Almost without exception, engagement with volunteers exceeded Scheme and project targets, and there were considerable benefits accrued from and for the volunteers. Key achievements included the establishment of four self-sustaining conservation volunteer groups, and the strengthening of a regional woodland archaeology legacy organisation.
- Public, volunteer and partner training helped deliver physical outputs and had other clear and lasting benefits, both to the people taking part and also to the landscapes that they worked in.
- The Scheme Management Team's proactive approach to partnerships enabled many organisations to grow and develop, with many recognising that future projects and joint working will evolve from the new relationships built through the Scheme.
- The Team's proactive management role also enabled the targeting of some outputs, at the project level, to areas and communities that might not otherwise have had the same opportunities to fully engage with the WFR LPS.

Scheme Challenges

Inevitably for something so large and complex, there were many challenges faced within the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme. These included:

- For a variety of reasons, the Scheme had a long Development Phase, with some inevitable organisational and personnel changes amongst the Delivery Partners. This meant there was some lack of continuity of thought between development and implementation, as well as poor intra-organisation communication.
- There were a range of financial and monitoring challenges. For example, some Partners found the claim procedures or match funding requirements onerous.
- The majority of volunteers who engaged with the Scheme engaged with individual projects and sites, rather than the wider Scheme. Additionally, broader community engagement was stronger at a project level, compared to a Scheme level.
- The geographic area that the Scheme covered was larger than the average LPS. This presented some problems in terms of promotion and community engagement at Scheme and Partnership Board levels.
- The need for grant-aided support to enable suitably skilled and knowledgeable existing staff to work on project delivery was an issue for several Delivery Partners and, in some cases, affected their ability to fully engage with the Scheme.

Scheme Legacies and Lessons Learnt

There are numerous quantifiable legacies from the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme: including biodiversity and access improvements and the delivery of interpretation resources on many sites. The Scheme also enabled enhanced access to heritage for the public, for community groups, for volunteers and for organisations: through a range of mechanisms such as events, activities, theatre, volunteering and training. Local people, site visitors, school children, site managers, and residents of the Ridge and its eight neighbouring towns all learnt more about the Weald Forest Ridge's natural and cultural heritage.

Two specific historic environment legacies of note are:

- The three archaeological toolkits produced within the Historic Environment Awareness Project. These are already being recognised at regional and national levels as exemplars of best practice.
- The strengthening of the South East Woodland Archaeology Forum, which is providing a focus for discussion, research and information sharing to continue into this central theme of the WFR LPS.

A key finding of this Evaluation Report is that a strong partnership existed at the heart of the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme, and this became noticeably stronger through the Scheme delivery process. The High Weald AONB Unit played a pivotal role in leading the partnership, whilst the Partners delivered a range of positive outcomes and demonstrated high levels of skill and commitment.

The enduring achievements of the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme include the numerous connections that have been created or strengthened between organisations, communities and individuals; and between people, heritage and landscape. There is very real proof that the Weald Forest Ridge LPS has contributed significantly to the heritage, people and organisations of the Scheme area, as well as the wider High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.