

BLACKWATER VALLEY COUNTRYSIDE PARTNERSHIP (BVCP)

MARCH 2021

The aim of the Partnership is to provide a continuous green space alongside the Blackwater River as an attractive, safe, sustainable and wildlife rich environment for informal countryside recreation.

The year in brief

The reporting year for the Partnership runs from October to September and like so many it found the period up to September 2020 very challenging due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The autumn and winter of 2019/20 was very wet with a lot of flooding nationwide. Fortunately, the River Blackwater and its floodplain coped well so few properties were affected.

The arrival of the first Covid lockdown coincided with a period of exceptionally warm, dry weather. Consequently use of sites managed by BVCP soared.

The restrictions caused by Covid affected both the Partnership's staff and volunteers delaying many planned projects. The wet winter of 2019/20 seemed to affect trees adversely causing a lot of them to fall requiring clearance work through the year.

Tice's Meadow was put back on the market having failed to sell in the Spring.

Improving access

The value of the Blackwater Valley paths and green spaces was dramatically illustrated with a surge of use during the Spring lockdown. Where sites are monitored the increase in visits increased substantially being estimated at well over 1 million during the period.

Blackwater Valley Path

Unfortunately SCC funding to the Partnership for the Blackwater Valley road has now ceased but this does not completely stop its work in this area as it contains 6 miles of Blackwater Valley footpath. However the cost of this work must now be supported from central partnership funds.

During the period BVCP staff surfaced paths in Tices's Meadow and Ash Green Meadows and installed a replacement boardwalk in Rowhill.

Developing the Green Network

The network of SANGs in the Valley continues to grow. There are sites currently in development at Hawley, Runfold, Mychett and Yateley. Also 3 further sites have received

planning permission – Bin Wood, a small extension to Ash Green Meadows; Blandford House, an extension to Wellesley Woods and a further site in Ash bounded by White Lane, Ash Green Lane East, and the dismantled railway. BVCP are hoping to take on management of 4 of these sites with a view to opening 3 to public use in 2021.

Maintaining the Valley's Green Spaces

The team at BVCP are currently heavily involved in the management of 20 sites covering a total of 394 ha. Work varies from site to site but typically this involves agreeing work programmes, carrying out site inspections, tree safety work, repairs to infrastructure, vegetation clearance from footpaths and biodiversity targeted work such as meadow mowing, removal of invasive species and wildlife monitoring.

As well as the sites the Partnership is responsible for it also regularly helps when requested on sites owned by partners. This has included mowing footpaths and fire breaks for Surrey Heath, litter removal for Guildford Borough Council at Lakeside Nature Reserve, tree thinning for Rushmoor and woodland work for Hart.

The restrictions imposed by Covid reduced and delayed projects such as the frequency of path clearance but by September 2020 the backlog of planned work had been largely cleared.

Increasing Biodiversity

The annual programme of hay cutting and mowing across most of the sites to improve meadow flora and manage the grasslands was completed with plants introduced to Rowhill Copse and at Tice's and Hawley Meadows.

Introduction of woodland ground flora through seeding funded by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust (BVCT) was carried out at 5 sites.

The condition of the woodlands the BVCP look after was assessed revealing a widespread problem of invasive species resulting in the stepping up of the removal programme.

Volunteer Activity

Unfortunately owing to Covid there was a decrease in volunteer activity during the period. In March 2020 all volunteer projects were suspended and when restarted groups were restricted to 5 participants only. Even so 5,305 hours (equivalent to 1,061 days) were put in by volunteers during the year with an estimated value of £161,655 for this community involvement.

Informing the Community

Unfortunately during the year the Partnership lost both the services of, and the funding for, the Community Engagement Officer. Added to this its capability was significantly impacted by the Covid restrictions. However both the BVCT and the Partnership have maintained their

presence on social media and a web site was launched giving details of Valley nature walks. The link is:

<https://www.blackwatervalleynaturewalks.co.uk/>

Wider Partnership

In addition to Local Authority core funding partners (including Ash Parish Council) the BVCP has close links to other bodies not least the BVCT and the 7 site-based volunteer groups.

Land Trust provides significant funding for the 3 SANGs managed by the Partnership on its behalf whilst smaller sums are received from Cemex and Hanson to help support the dedicated volunteer groups who look after Moor Green Lakes and Tice's Meadow.

BVCP is a member of the Loddon Catchment Partnership and Loddon Enterprise and Conservation Consultative both of which maintain links with the Environment Agency, angling clubs and wildlife trusts co-ordinating work towards river improvement projects.

Links with Natural England are maintained by membership of its Access Management and Monitoring Partnership which deals with SPA (Special Protection Area) and SANG issues.

The Value of the Partnership

The total value of the BVCP's work in the Valley to September 2020 was £567,520, a decrease from the previous year due to the reduction in the value of volunteer activity although this continued to be the greatest contribution to the Partnership's work with a value of £161,665.

The core contribution from partners also dropped slightly to £90,866 making up 16% of income.

Fee earning work from partners (£101,461) and non-partners (£180,362) formed the bulk of income. There was also other income of £11,468 raised of which BVCT contributed £3,110.

The work of the Partnership continues to be a valued and important resource which Ash Parish Council is very happy to support.

Councillor Jo Randall
Ash Parish Council