

BLACKWATER VALLEY COUNTRYSIDE PARTNERSHIP (BVCP)

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.

1. The year in brief (2021/2022)

The reporting year for the Partnership runs from October to September.

Storm Eunice created mayhem in February 2022 with many trees down which required a lot of post storm tree work. This was followed by clearance for the Esso pipeline that crosses three BVCP sites. Much restoration and replanting will be required once pipeline completed.

On the positive side partners joined together to help Surrey County Council (SCC) purchase Tice's Meadow securing the future of this greenspace vital for flood prevention and with high biodiversity and community value.

A new area of public green space at Peaked Hill was opened for public use and Wellesley Woodland gained Green Flag accreditation in July 2022.

Minerals site restoration continued apace, and new footpaths and bridleways were created with the completed restoration at Fleet Hill Farm. BVCP had an advisory role at Runfold Landfill site where restoration progressed rapidly during the year.

Throughout the year discussions continued with partners on increasing involvement at existing sites.

2. Improving access

- Blackwater Valley Path

Usage of the Blackwater Valley and the green spaces fell slightly as life returned to normality after the pandemic, but use remained well above pre-Covid levels along the riverside path and at all Valley sites.

Staff shortage did cause some issues for vegetation clearance along the path which missed out on its normal spring cut, but the work was caught up with later before too many problems arose.

Determination by Rushmoor BC of the planning application at North Camp, which includes reinstating the riverside path, continues to be deferred. Revised plans have recently been received to address concerns over flooding

- Developing the Green Network

The final small area of Wellesley Woodland SANG at Peaked Hill, not previously open to the public due to security concerns, was opened after clearance of military debris and removal of security fencing. This will provide a wooded footpath linking the Wellesley development with Aldershot once adjacent building work completed.

BVCP advised on the design for Waters Edge SANG which is now open for public use providing a walk around Mytchett Mere. Funds to provide a link into the Blackwater Path are awaited.

The Partnership has continued to help refine design details for Blandford Woods, a SANG due for opening in 2023. This will provide a 14ha extension to Wellesley Woodlands and it is expected to be opened in 2023.

The restoration of Fleet Hill Farm is complete with 49ha mostly restored to wildlife habitat together with 16 waterbodies and 7ha of newly planted woodland. The 1.5km of new and surfaced bridleway is available for public use, as is another 1km of footpath.

BVCP is regularly involved with the technical sub-group at Runfold Quarry helping refine the landscape and ecological details of restoration which is progressing rapidly. During 2022 a further 1.7 ha were filled, capped and seeded to grassland.

3. Maintaining the Valley's Green Spaces

Staff shortage at the beginning of the year 2021/2022 meant that BVCP was unable to continue work on Southwood Country Park but left it involved with management of 24 sites totalling 420 ha. The Partnership is currently in discussion with Rushmoor BC to provide a ranger service to the Park and Rowhill on a more formal agreement.

Work varies from site to site but typically involves carrying out site inspections, tree safety work, repairs of infrastructure such as fences and boardwalks, vegetation clearance from footpaths, litter and fly tip clearance and biodiversity targeted work such as meadow mowing and ecological surveys. Most of the work is done by BVCP but for larger projects contractors are employed.

In winter vegetation clearance dominates, with coppicing, invasive species removal and tree safety work. In summer and autumn tractor based mowing equipment and robo-mowers are hired for management of the many meadows. Twelve of the 24 sites are small, under ten hectares, and with their urban locations introduce many boundary issues to be solved, from over-hanging trees, "over the garden fence fly-tipping" and encroachment.

As well as the sites BVCP is responsible for it also regularly helps out when requested on sites owned by partners; this has included mowing grasslands and heathland fire breaks for Surrey Heath and woodland work for Hart.

A major piece of work in 2022 was the clear up after storm Eunice in February; inspections the following day found 111 trees in dangerous positions or blocking footpaths that required removal. Other work had to be put on hold to concentrate on the clear up. Contractors were quickly engaged to tackle the ones too large for BVCP to deal with and by the end of March all was cleared.

4. Nature Recovery

Improvements to the biodiversity of the Valley has always been an aim of the Partnership.

Work in 2022 included:

- Two river improvement projects. In February Environment Agency funding allowed South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and BVCP to carry out tree works and create a berm in Aldershot. This project was completed in September. The Partnership also worked alongside Environment Agency (EA), SERT and SCC staff at Tice's Meadow.
- Reptile transect at Ash Green Meadow to monitor impact of a slow worm translocation project.

- Monitoring of the Floating Pennywort sites. This found little to remove, proving the success of timely manual removal over the last few years.
- Removal of Variegated Yellow Archangel from Rowhill and Southwood Woodland continued.
- Green hay was used to seed prepared ground at Ash Green Meadows and Runfold Ridge totalling 1ha. At the latter site, Kidney Vetch seed was also introduced as part of Butterfly Conservation's Small Blue Project.
- After two years suspension, monitoring of bat boxes was resumed. The opportunity was taken to check all the known boxes in the Valley (over 200). Comparison of the different box designs has doubled usage from 20 to 40% since the project started in 1990.
- Regular monitoring of the Noctule (a priority species) roosts in Wellesley Woods revealed one tree was shared with Water Bats, with about 100 of each species present.
- Known stands of Japanese Knotweed were checked and treated at Wellesley Woods, Royal Oak Valley and Rowhill.
- Barn Owl boxes in Wokingham were surveyed and maintained after a 2-year Covid break.

5. Community Engagement

- Volunteer Activity

Looking after the public green spaces in the Valley relies heavily on the many volunteers who give up their time. BVCP supports the eight site-based groups depending on needs from occasional tool loan, leading occasional or regular tasks, or carrying out work with Partnership equipment.

BVCP staff have organised and helped on 155 volunteer projects, involving 1,212 days work valued at £168,000. However, much volunteer work goes on when the Partnership is not present e.g. group administration, organising projects and open days, weekly litter picks and site work. Therefore, the quoted figures vastly underestimate the true value of volunteers in the Valley.

The Partnership is particularly grateful for those volunteers who take on responsibilities such as group administration, task leadership or as first aider and it is pleased to support these volunteers through attendance at meetings, advice, organising training courses and presence on tasks.

- Involving the Community

This has been the major area to suffer during and following Covid. In a normal year, Partnership staff and BVC Trust members work together to promote the Valley, with activities carried out under the Trust's banner to raise its profile and help recruit Trust members. Even when Covid restrictions on gatherings were relieved, staff vacancies and shortage of active Trust members reduced the ability to organise or publicise events. Despite this, ten events did take place, as well as attendance at Cove Brook, Lakeside, Rowhill and Hart Wildlife days which were all well patronised by the public.

The BVCP face book page was kept up to date with regular postings to keep the Partnership's profile reasonably current.

- The Wider Partnership

As well as Local Authority core funding partners, the Partnership has close links with many other bodies, not least the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust and the eight site-based volunteer groups.

Land Trust provides the funding for five SANGs the Partnership manages on its behalf, whilst it also receives smaller amounts from Cemex and Hanson to help support work at Moor Green Lakes and Tice's Meadow. Surrey CC have agreed to continue funding at Tice's Meadow now they own it.

BVCP is a member of the Loddon Catchment Partnership and the Loddon Fisheries and Conservation Consultative; both of these maintain links with the Environment Agency, angling clubs, and wildlife trusts coordinating work towards river improvement projects.

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

6. The Value of the Partnership

The total value of work undertaken in the Valley in 2021/22 due to the activities of the Partnership was £560k. This is slightly less than recent years due to the lasting impact of Covid on fee earning work for both partners and non-partners. However, volunteer activity started to recover.

The core contribution from partners made up just 16% of income.

Other income raised totalled £4k - most of this was contributed by the BVC Trust towards the woodland flora project - and in-kind value of £16k came from the time spent by South East Rivers Trust, Environment Agency and Surrey Countryside staff on two river improvement projects plus donations of bat boxes.

In Conclusion

As can be seen from the above the Partnership is incredibly active within the Blackwater Valley. Consequently Ash Parish Council is pleased to continue supporting its much valued work which contributes so much towards the maintenance of some of our beautiful local green areas.