

# Using evidence to drive strategic approaches to protecting species and habitats

*A case study from the South Downs*



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*Record Centre Manager*

@SxBRC





# Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre

- We are an impartial provider of environmental information services encompassing biodiversity, geodiversity and other aspects of Sussex's natural capital
- We work in partnership with data users and data providers, for public benefit
- We are not for profit and hosted by Sussex Wildlife Trust
- We are one of many local environmental record centres situated around the UK

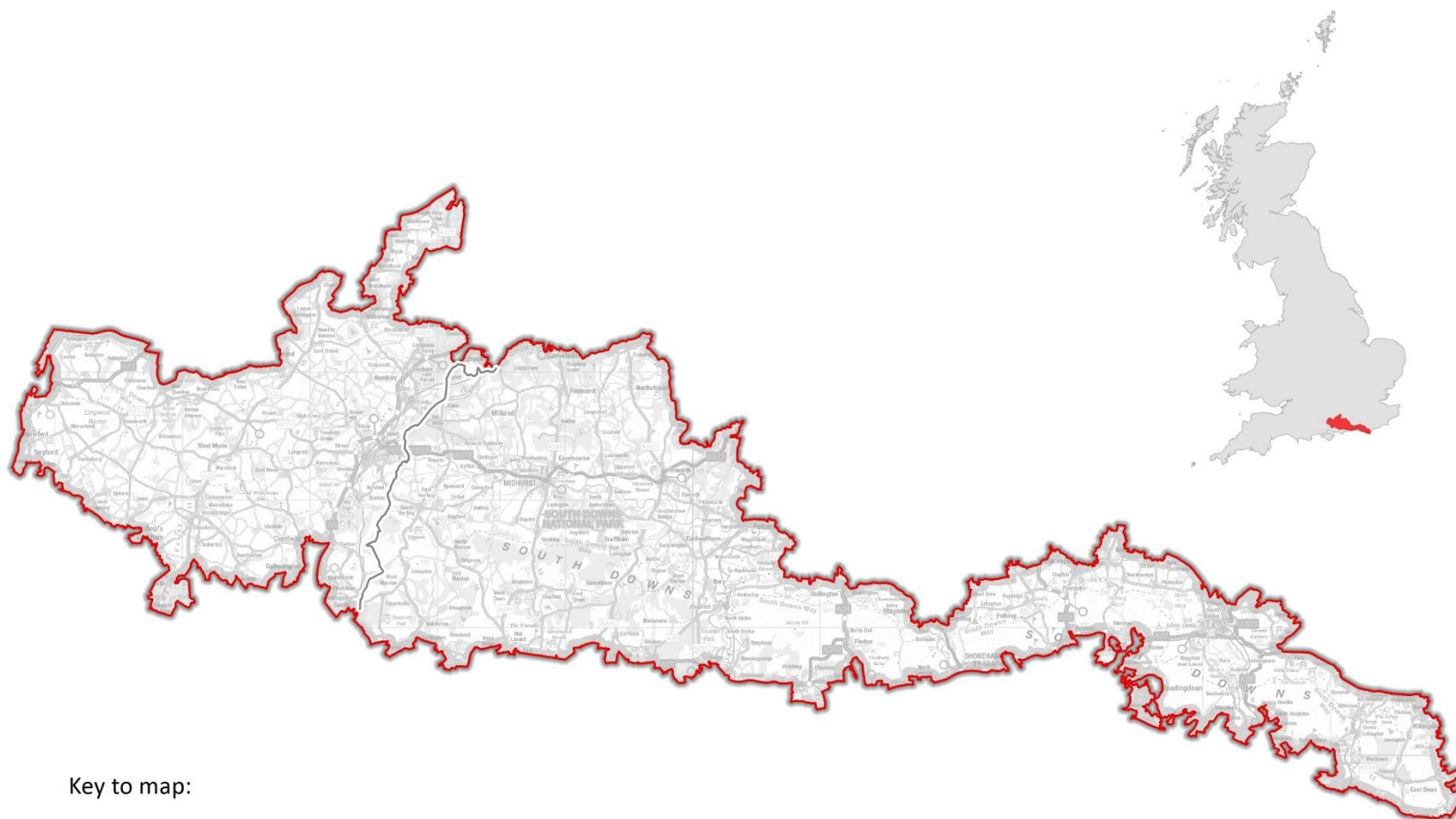
an **ALERC**  accredited LERC  
Association of Local Environmental Records Centres

*hosted by*



**Sussex**  
Wildlife Trust

# The South Downs National Park



Key to map:

— County boundary

▭ National Park boundary



# Beachy Head



Key to map:

— County boundary

□ National Park boundary

# The Lewes Downs





# Heyshott Escarpment



Key to map:

— County boundary

▭ National Park boundary

# Old Winchester Hill



Key to map:

— County boundary

▭ National Park boundary



# Chalk grassland

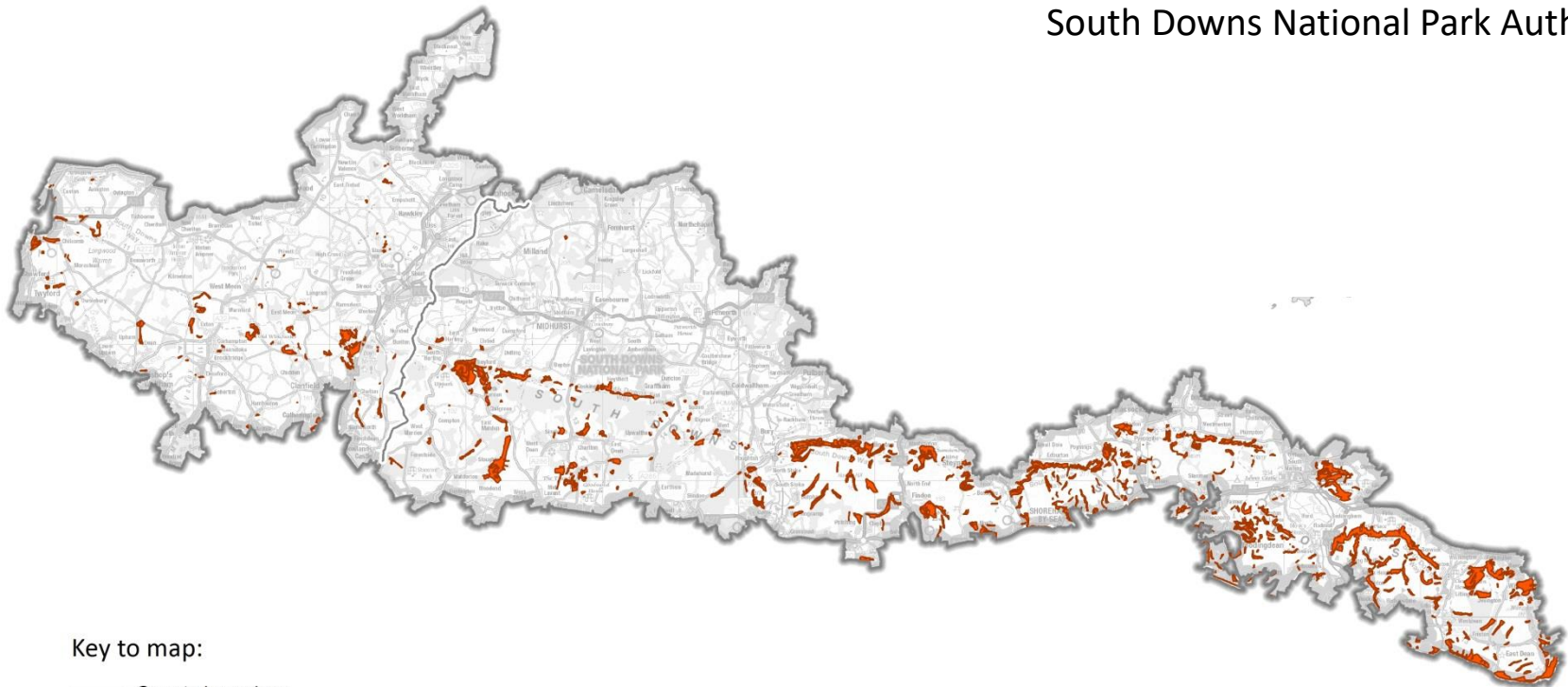




# Chalk grassland

Lowland Chalk Grassland is one of our most valued and endangered habitats. It is both rich in biodiversity and wholly characteristic of South Downs landscape. It is also under pressure from farming and other land-use change with a risk of becoming increasingly fragmented.

**Chris Fairbrother** – Landscape & Biodiversity Strategy Lead,  
South Downs National Park Authority



Key to map:

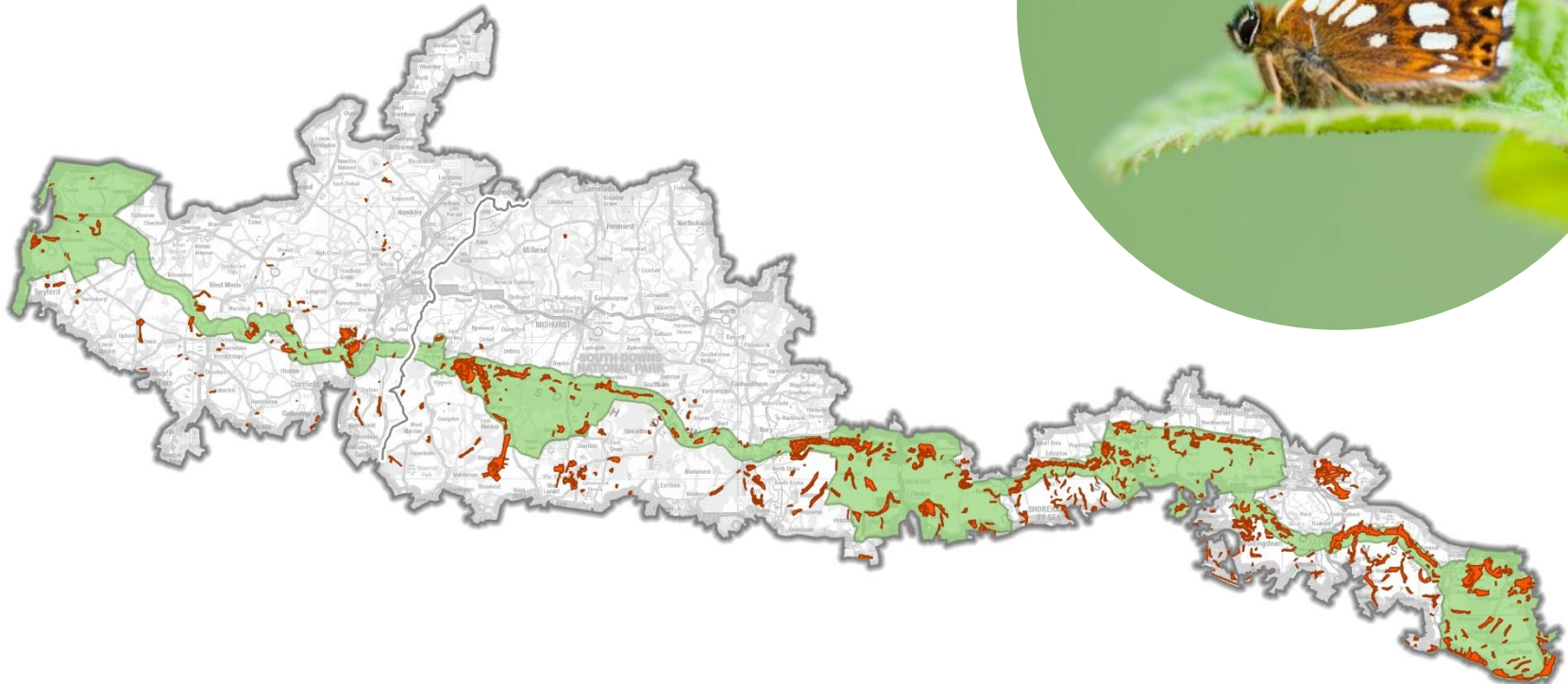
- County boundary
- National Park boundary
- Lowland Calcareous Grassland

# Chalk grassland – what do we know about it?

1987	<b>A botanical survey and assessment of the chalk grasslands of Hampshire,</b> Pardon, B. J.
1992	<b>A botanical survey of unimproved grassland of the South Downs in West Sussex,</b> Steven, G.
1992	<b>A botanical survey of unimproved grassland on the South Downs in East Sussex,</b> Steven, G. and Muggeridge, N.
2005	<b>Sussex calcareous grassland dataset</b> created using contributions from the South Downs Conservation Board and Natural England
2010	<i>South Downs National Park established</i>
2012	<i>South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area (NIA) funded for three years as a Defra pilot</i>
2012 – 2014	<b>South Downs NIA Local Wildlife Site Surveys,</b> Forbes, N.



# The Nature Improvement Area



Key to map:

- County boundary
- National Park boundary
- Nature Improvement Area (NIA)
- Lowland Calcareous Grassland

93 Local Wildlife Sites containing lowland calcareous grassland were surveyed between 2012 and 2014.  
Less than 30 % were found to be in favourable condition.



# The state of lowland calcareous grassland within the South Downs National Park

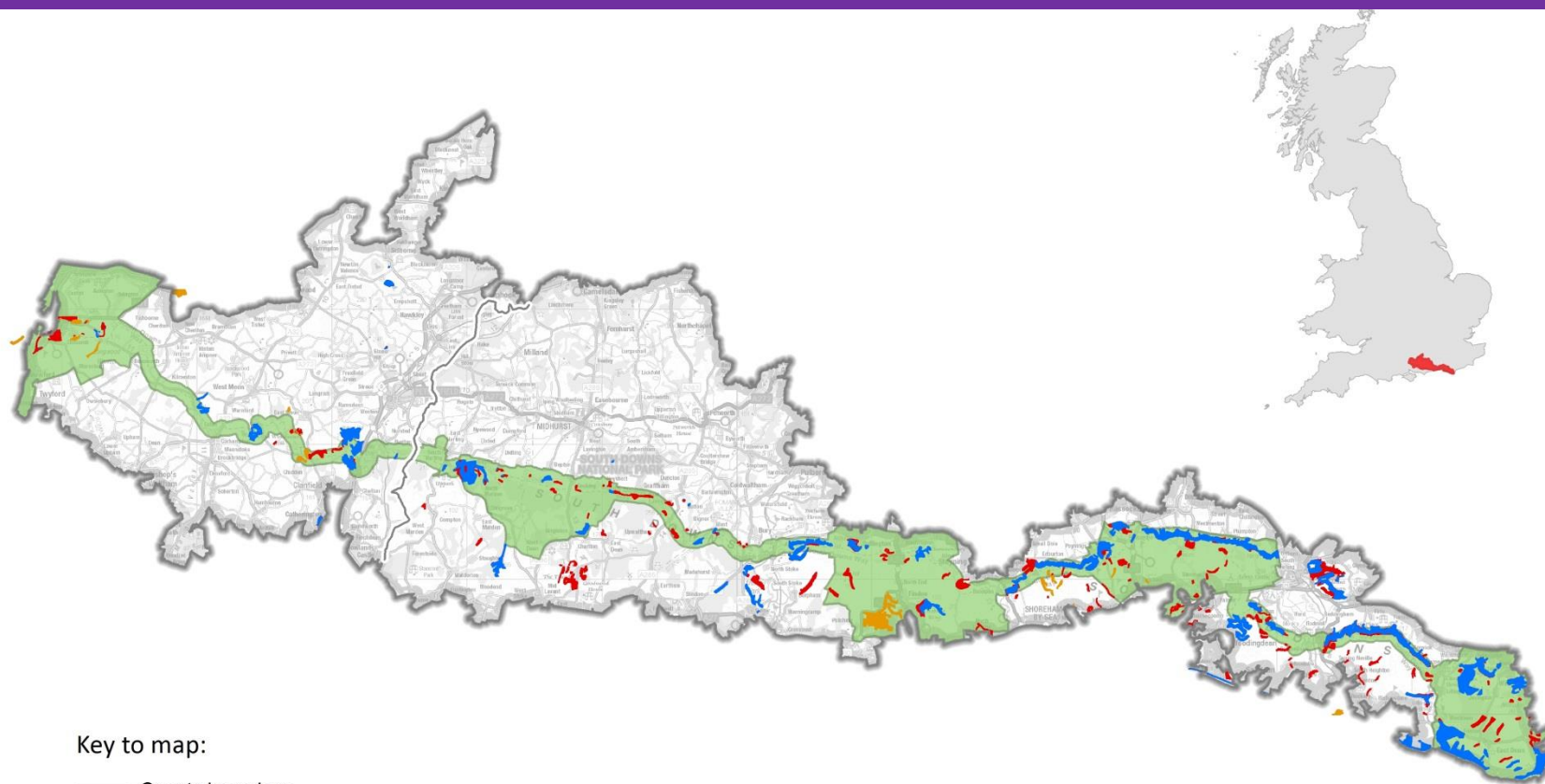
Key partners came together to create a baseline condition assessment of all the calcareous grassland within the South Downs National Park.



**Everyone had a role to play.** Rangers, reserve managers, conservation advisers and independent consultants worked together as one big team.

Surveys were coordinated by Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre.

# A mosaic of different sites



## Key to map:

- County boundary
- National Park boundary
- Nature Improvement Area (NIA)

## Surveyed Chalk Grassland Sites

- Local Wildlife Site
- SSSI
- Undesignated site

Different survey approaches for SSSIs, LWSs and undesignated sites






© Graeme Lyons

Sussex Wildlife Trust delivered multi-agency training on chalk grassland NVC communities to help establish a common or similar surveying culture



**Sussex**  
Wildlife Trust



The background of the image is a lush field of green bushes and low-lying plants. In the foreground, there are numerous small yellow and purple flowers scattered across the grass. Two hand-drawn speech bubbles with thick black outlines are overlaid on the image. The first speech bubble is on the left, and the second is on the right, lower down. Both contain text in a simple, black, sans-serif font.

It was good to see  
such a cross section of  
people from different  
organisations

It was interesting to  
see so many NVC  
communities in one  
area



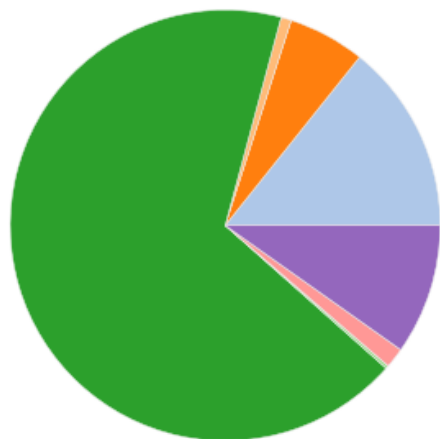
The ambitious survey programme led to challenges for partners in finding capacity.

But late surveys offered their own delights such as Autumn Lady's Tresses.

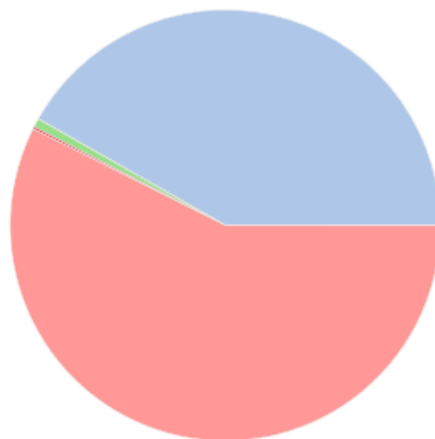


# The results: condition of habitat by site designation (in hectares)

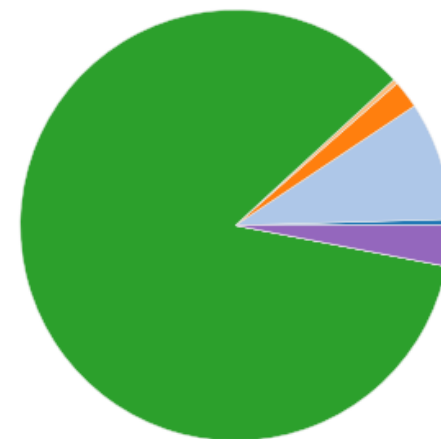
## Local Wildlife Sites



## SSSIs



## Undesignated



41% of SSSIs were in favourable condition, with 99% favourable or recovering.

21% of the LWS surveyed were favourable with a total of 31% LWS favourable, part favourable or recovering. 58% of sites were unfavourable or destroyed.

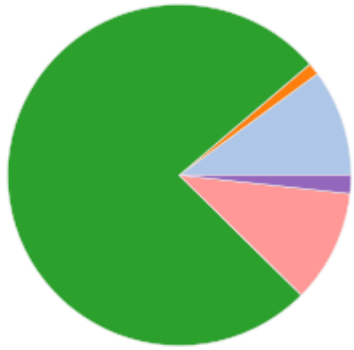
10% of undesignated chalk grassland sites were in favourable condition with 13% classed as favourable, part favourable or recovering. 84% of sites were unfavourable or destroyed.



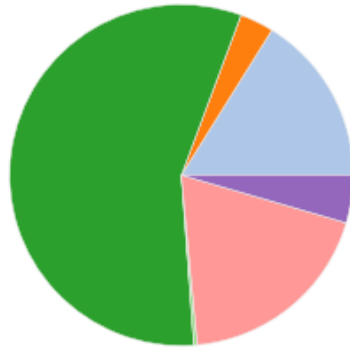


# The results: condition of habitat by county (in hectares)

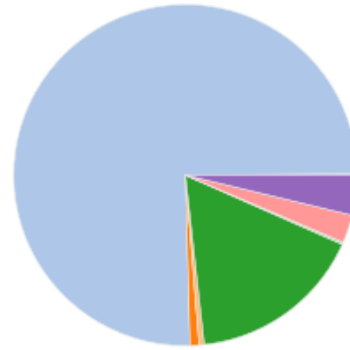
Brighton & Hove



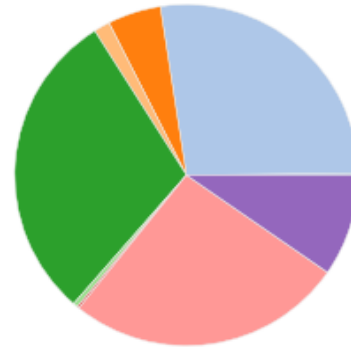
East Sussex



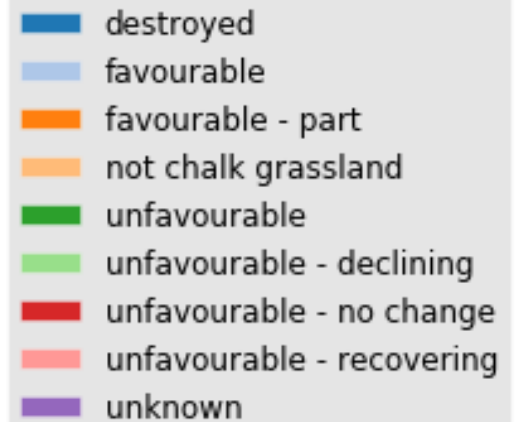
Hampshire



West Sussex



It's complicated



# The challenges

Scrub encroachment



Issues with grazing



Invasive species



Human disturbance



# The impact



We had been relying on anecdotal evidence on the state of chalk grassland for so long that it had ceased to have any impact. The evidence generated by this report is powerful and shocking and has catalysed several strands of immediate action by a range of organisations.

**Henri Brocklebank**, Director Conservation Policy & Evidence



The report has galvanised work in key areas along the South Downs.

**Kristoffer Hewitt** – Terrestrial Biodiversity Senior Adviser for Sussex & Kent



The survey project couldn't have come at a better time. Though the results indicated that condition on many chalk grassland sites has continued to decline, it has proved to be an impetus to more co-ordinated action from nature conservation partners and land managers.

**Chris Fairbrother** – Landscape & Biodiversity Strategy Lead



# Driving strategic approaches to protecting species and habitats in the South Downs

- ➔ Data already being used to re-evaluate and monitor ~~Local Wildlife Sites~~ **Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in Hampshire**, and inform their management
- ➔ In Sussex we have used this evidence to explain to stakeholders the importance and relevance of a funded Local Wildlife Site system. A new **Sussex Local Wildlife Sites Initiative** will deliver a rolling survey programme and facilitate access to management advice
- ➔ Data is being used to underpin and target work with **cluster farms**
- ➔ **South Downs National Park Authority Rangers** are providing targeted management advice and support, aimed at improving the condition of these chalk grassland sites
- ➔ The results have provided **Natural England** with a clear basis for deciding where to focus efforts on habitat restoration
- ➔ Putting the **local environmental record centres** at the heart of the project ensures the survey data and information remain accessible – always.

# Building a broader partnership

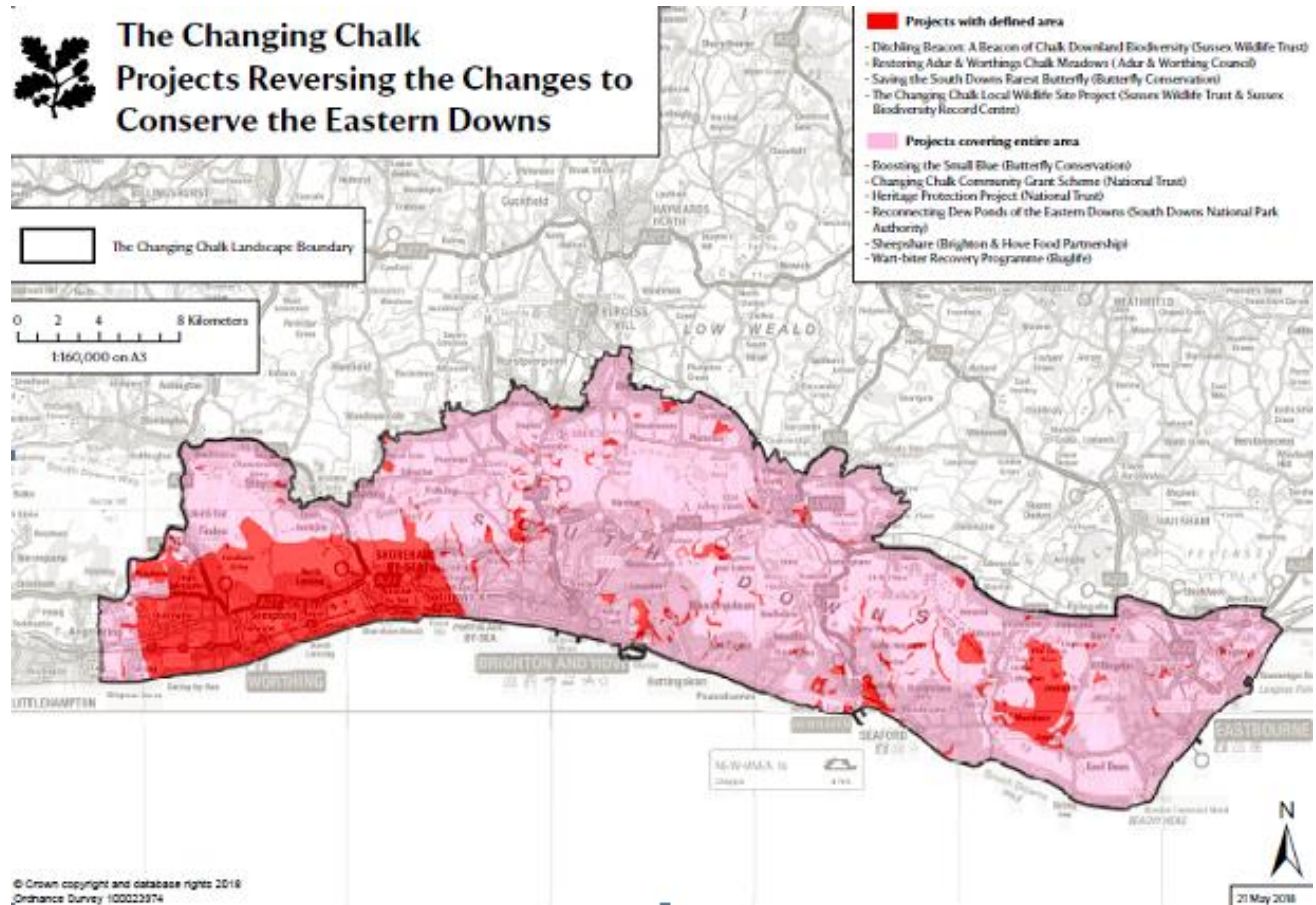


The study has been central to the development of the partnership that has convened to deliver the ‘Changing Chalk’ programme – which we hope will go forward as an HLF landscape partnership bid. The thinking behind the project has been entirely driven by the need to address the management issues that were identified through the study. We hope that it will help us deliver a more robust, larger and resilient network of chalk grassland sites that are fit for the future.



**Chris Fairbrother** – Landscape & Biodiversity Strategy Lead,  
South Downs National Park

# Building a broader partnership







Thank you for listening



# Thank you to...

## Our project partners.



... with particular thanks to Kristoffer Hewitt, Chris Fairbrother, Henri Brocklebank and Nicky Court for their assistance in putting this talk together.

The Natural England officers, South Downs National Park rangers and independent contractors who carried out the surveys: Naomi Forbes, Jackie Thompson and Phil Wilson.

Sussex Wildlife Trust and their ecologist, Graeme Lyons, for their support with this project.

Henri Brocklebank and the rest of the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre team who were involved in coordinating the project and our contractor, Victoria Benstead-Hume, who pulled it all together.

**And thank you to everyone who's using this evidence  
to make a difference.**