

Annex A



Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council Communities Advisory Board Progress Report on Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership Scheme

Summary overview of the Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership Scheme

The Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership Scheme covers an area of approximately 25 square miles in the section of the Medway Valley known as the Medway Gap and spans the local authority boundary between Medway and Tonbridge and Malling. It exists to conserve and enhance the area's heritage landscapes and biodiversity; to improve physical and intellectual access to them; and to engage local landowners, communities and visitors sustainably in their exploration, interpretation and long-term care. The concept originated from a landscape and access study undertaken by the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership in 2003. This was subsequently developed by the Kent Downs AONB Unit to achieve the AONB Management Plan target of developing "...strategic landscape action plans for Landscape Character Areas or Local Character Areas of the AONB which are most at threat or where greatest opportunity lie...".

This formed the basis for an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) through the Landscape Partnerships funding stream. The two stage application process was successful and attracted a grant of just over £1.8 million towards a total project cost of £2.5 million. The difference was made up of match funding from a number of different sources including £75,000 from Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. Delivery on the ground began in November 2007 with an original delivery period of three years.

Valley of Visions (VoV) achieves its objectives through the delivery of multiple integrated projects. These are either delivered directly by members of the VoV team via contractors, through delivery partners such as the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership and Kent Wildlife Trust, or through the area's communities by providing the skills, resources and funding.

The Current Position

The Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership Scheme was originally anticipated to operate over a period of three years. However, early issues in resolving legal liabilities for completed works set some of the scheme's early projects back and an extension to March 2011 was negotiated with HLF. Subsequently, VoV has been very successful in delivering a highly complex programme of projects and at the same time making significant cost savings. This resulted in VoV being commended in the UK Landscape Awards in 2010 for its achievements. In late 2010, HLF agreed a further extension of one year to undertake the continuation and enhancement of a number of key projects, and the delivery of a number of new ones achieving the original aims of the scheme. VoV will now continue running until the end of March 2012, but is investigating new sources of funding to maintain elements of the scheme's work beyond this time.

Current work of Valley of Visions

Landscape and Habitat Enhancements - the Medway Arc and Medway Marshes

VoV's landscape and habitat works focus on the Medway Gap's two most important and at risk habitats: chalk grassland and marshes. Rather than treating sites individually, VoV has taken a landscape-scale approach, looking at the resource as a whole and initiating management at this level.

The Medway Arc - chalk grassland restoration

Chalk grassland was once the dominant landscape feature along most of the scarp slope as it extends around the Medway Gap in a horseshoe shape. However, due to a lack of the traditional form of management (grazing), the habitat has been lost to encroaching scrub that has eventually formed what is known as secondary woodland. This not only forms loss of habitat but also results in the loss of connectivity between the remaining open areas.

VoV's work has focused on restoring or recreating key areas that once formed this landscape through a number of different means. As reported last year, the area of land at Ladd's Farm near Snodland (owned by Lafarge Cement) has been the flagship project for VoV's chalk grassland restoration. Ladd's Farm falls within the Halling to Trottiscliffe Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Following the clearance of scrub from some 30 hectares of former chalk grassland in the previous two winters, the eight cleared compartments have now been completely fenced. Appropriate and sustainable management of this area has now been assured with VoV facilitating and supporting an application to Defra's Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme. This will provide payments to the landowner to undertake the appropriate and vital management to maintain the habitat over the next ten years. VoV has established a grazing partnership between Lafarge Cement and a local farmer that enables a flock of hebridean sheep to manage the area and provide ideal conditions for chalk downland to thrive. This partnership will be supported by local volunteers who will undertake 'looking', a term to describe making visual checks on the animals. Training for this is currently being undertaken.

Adjacent to the site, careful negotiation with the landowner and Natural England (who provided additional funds) has enabled scrub clearance to be undertaken on the Birling Escarpment and expand the chalk grassland resource.

On the opposite side of the valley, Kent Wildlife Trust (with funding from VoV) has now completed intensive management of several sites within the Wouldham to Detling SSSI. These include Burham to Wouldham Down and Culand Pits where scrub clearance amounting to about 40 hectares, with fencing and subsequent grazing, has been undertaken. Management of these sites will now be maintained by Kent Wildlife Trust on behalf of the landowners. The reintroduction of the scarce Adonis Blue butterfly at Burham to Wouldham Downs appears to have been successful with adults appearing over the last two summers.

Connectivity between these sites has been enhanced by work in the northern section of the VoV area within Medway. Establishment work at a major project to recreate chalk grassland on 30 hectares of arable land at Nashenden Down has been completed. In addition, 12 hectares is now also managed as low intensity arable land to benefit rare arable plants. Near Cuxton, 24 hectares of chalk grassland has also been cleared and fenced by Plantlife with a contribution from VoV.

This has culminated in approximately 152 hectares of chalk grassland being created or brought back into active management.

The Medway Marshes – wetland conservation

Several separate freshwater and tidal marsh sites are found beside the River Medway in the VoV area. Previously, these have generally been managed as discreet sites, but together form an interconnected and significant landscape and biodiversity feature. Home to one of the most densely populated nightingale populations in Kent, as well as important plant assemblages including important orchid populations, there is considerable value in treating them on a landscape scale.

Work at both Holborough and Burham Marshes has been undertaken by Kent Wildlife Trust, and has seen the implementation of important physical works that allow the control of water levels to ensure maximum benefit to the plant and animal populations found there. Vegetation control on a scale that would not have been possible without VoV's funding has enabled the sites to be brought into an improved condition. So far a total of 76.5 hectares of marshland is in positive management as a result of VoV's work.

To compliment this, VoV has worked directly with landowners at Halling Marsh (Medway) and Wouldham Marsh to undertake habitat enhancements. Site improvement plans have been produced, and the landowners have signed up to the ongoing management of the sites after the works have been undertaken. The works at these two sites are programmed to be undertaken before December 2011. The result will be a largely continuous strip of marsh from north of Wouldham to Snodland in positive management and good condition.

Other Landscape and Habitat Works

A hedgerow condition survey was commissioned in 2010 to provide a baseline from which enhancements for landscape and biodiversity could be identified. This was undertaken by Kent Wildlife Trust, and is currently being used to target works for the forthcoming winter. Landowners are currently being approached for hedgerow planting or management that will be 100% funded provided they agree to maintain the hedgerow for a ten year period.

An Enhanced Farm Environment Plan service has resulted in three landowners submitting successful applications to the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme with additional payments over the next ten years. This service has recognised the heritage assets on the farms and encouraged better management to ensure their conservation.

Improving Access to the Medway Gap

Securing the Landscape

The Securing the Landscape project underpins much of the work that has been undertaken through the rest of the scheme. It has addressed the highly anti-social issue of illegal motorised offroading, flytipping and other environmental crimes. The rural areas of the Medway Gap have suffered from a negative perception due to this persistent and pernicious problem. An innovative and integrated solution has been used to bring the problem under control and consequently improve the countryside experience for legitimate visitors, and build confidence with landowners where habitat conservation works are being undertaken.

VoV has established a successful Securing the Landscape Partnership consisting of TMBC, Medway Council, Kent County Council, Kent Wildlife Trust, Kent Fire and Rescue, Clean Kent, Lafarge Cement, Trenport Investments, local user groups and headed up by Kent Police. The partnership meets every two months, and utilising information gathered by Kent Police's analyst team is able to share and deploy resources in the most effective way possible. This has led to better intelligence gathering, raising the profile of the problem, improved enforcement and better education. In addition, with VoV's financial resources, robust physical barriers have been installed where they provide the best solution to the issue.

Extensive barrier works have been completed at Holly Hill, Wrangling Lane, Ranscombe Farm and the Island Site near Aylesford. These have resulted in significant reductions in activity at these locations. The integrated approach has also led to KCC reviewing the management of the byways at Holly Hill (from where most illegal access is made) and a temporary closure is anticipated in the near future that will further enhance the project's success.

VoV will also shortly be funding a Securing the Landscape PCSO who will be dedicated to the Medway Gap area and preventing the problems associated with the project. This individual will have enforcement powers and will be able to patrol the valley and reach remote rural locations using an offroad vehicle. This is anticipated to be particularly effective in highly permeable sites such as the Bushey Wood area between Aylesford and Eccles.

A national conference is being held on 20 July 2011 at the East Malling Conference Centre communicating and sharing the approach VoV has taken and the successes it has had.

Along the Water's Edge – riverside cycling in the Medway Gap

It was reported last year that a project planning study had been completed investigating the potential for creating riverside cycling access on both banks of the River Medway between Maidstone and Rochester. VoV remains committed to achieving the delivery of this and supporting investment into it in the future.

VoV is in the final stages of the completion of a commissioned project planning report for delivering a shared use path between Allington Lock and Aylesford. This section, with long-standing problems of erosion and poor surface, remains the greatest barrier to riverside access into the Medway Gap from the south.

In addition, VoV is currently working with KCC Highways with secured Section 106 funding from the Holborough Lakes development to deliver a shared use path beside Holborough Marsh connecting to Snodland Station. Further enhancements are anticipated at Mill Hall, Aylesford and Cuxton Marina.

New access opportunities

Working with the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership and Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership, a new quality pack of thirteen 'Rail Trails' has been produced. Covering circular routes from stations as well as linear routes between stations, there is a leaflet for each stop between Strood and Paddock Wood. These leaflets are designed for both residents within the Medway Gap and visitors further afield, and encouraging them to explore the valley using sustainable transport. The routes are endorsed by Explore Kent.

The popularity of the 'Get Out in the Gap' series of events walks and talks has continued to grow. These events promote the landscape, heritage and biodiversity of the valley through several exciting and engaging presentations. In 2010/11, thirty-three events were organised and run by VoV with 540

attendees in total. A further sixty-seven events run by local partners were also promoted. In 2011/12, the programme has grown even further with a total of 140 events being promoted.

Six new trails were created through the Community Trails and Engaging Landscapes project (see below). These trails are very focused on encouraging the communities within the valley to explore the local landscapes immediately around them. Each leaflet has been designed in an engaging manner, and their development and design has been led by the community that it falls within.

Involving Communities in their Landscapes

River Wardens

The Medway Valley Countryside Partnership has led on the development of an extension of their successful River Warden Scheme into the Medway Gap. A total of fifty-two river wardens have now been recruited. VoV has funded this scheme for an additional year in recognition of its success, and to build its sustainability for when VoV funding comes to an end.

Community Trails and Engaging Landscapes

Community Trail projects have been completed within six of the parishes in the valley: Strood and Cuxton (both in Medway), Wouldham, Snodland, Aylesford and Burham, to create routes linking settlements with the adjacent landscape. Each of the routes has been researched, developed and implemented by the communities with support from VoV, and undertaken work such as trail improvements, biodiversity and landscape enhancements and on-site interpretation along the route. Each community has received a budget of approximately £20,000 and this approach has enabled them to not only understand the landscape around them better, but also undertake research to communicate this to others.

These same communities have also worked with community artists to develop a gateway sculpture that interprets the heritage and countryside around them. These have all been completed and celebrated with an 'animated event' in each community. The project has proven to be an excellent method for engaging with communities, and a method for revealing the pride that communities already have for the landscape of the Medway Gap. This has been further enhanced but the piloting of a neighbourhood planning project in Eccles.

Neighbourhood planning and working with the Medway Gap's schools

VoV has worked with each primary school in the Medway Gap delivering a range of different projects depending on the focus of the school's curriculum, or the interests and skills of the teachers and pupils. This has ranged from enhancements to school grounds to indoor archaeology. However, an impressive outcome was achieved by the pupils of St Mark's School in Eccles. Working with a community planning consultant commissioned by VoV, the community warden and Action with Communities in Rural Kent, one class from the school embraced the whole concept of neighbourhood planning with great enthusiasm. By exploring the past and the heritage of the local area, the pupils developed an in-depth understanding of how their village and its surroundings had come to be how it was today. Using this information they then expressed how they would like to see their village develop in the future. This culminated in a formal presentation to parents and local dignitaries which was extremely well received and filmed for BBC Television. A similar approach is currently being taken with Cuxton School, and VoV intends to introduce it to two further communities in 2011/12.

Profile raising and Interpretation

As Valley of Visions reaches its final stages, greater emphasis is being made on promoting its special landscapes to those that have yet to recognise it. New interpretation panels have either been installed or are about to be installed at key sites such as Leybourne Lakes, Holly Hill Open Space, Kit's Coty, Coldrum Stones etc. A new magazine style publication is currently in production and should be available for the summer. This will set the Medway Gap in a different light, challenging the sometimes negative perception that has developed around it, and encouraging visitors and residents to take advantage of opportunities VoV has created.

In the final year, further developments will include the use of electronic media to support greater exploration and understanding of the landscape. This will include electronic trail guides and smart phone applications, bringing to life the Medway Gap's heritage.

Heritage Conservation

Medway Mosaics – creation of a Heritage Warden Scheme

After a slow start, Medway Mosaics is now building momentum. A recently commissioned LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) survey of the entire valley will provide an exciting new tool for discovering archaeology within the area. The use of lasers enables images to be produced with the vegetation effectively stripped from the land surface and reveal the underlying ground form. The final results for the survey will be produced in June, and it is intended that this will provide a tool for heritage volunteers and wardens to utilise.

Bishops Palace

Although just to the north of the local authority boundary and into Medway, the Bishop's Palace at Halling is a significant heritage restoration project and of interest to the whole Medway Gap. The medieval site has been cleared of trees and structural works undertaken on the remaining wall and the late 19th century cement railway embankment that runs through the centre of the site. Extensive landscaping of the site will take place in the late summer, with it becoming a significant local community green space in the long term.

Looking Ahead

The next year will be focused on completing the projects highlighted above and ensuring that their legacy is secured and are left in a sustainable form. A number of smaller projects have been identified including the creation of a Megalith Trail and a Medway Gap Landscape Design Handbook. However, considerable emphasis is also being placed on securing additional funding to continue and develop the work undertaken so far. The Kent Downs AONB is preparing a new application to the European Union's Interreg funding stream, and Valley of Visions will be part of this. In addition, HLF have indicated that they would not be averse to a new bid to a different funding stream. A number of other opportunities are also being examined.

Rick Bayne, Valley of Visions Project Manager – 23 May 2011