

Draft report for February and March 2025 – a summary of activities of Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife learning and community engagement programme

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Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife biodiversity engagement and learning manager

Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife (AGDW) strategy and funding

In December 2024 Bristol City Council (BCC) informed the Downs Committee (DC) that it would not be providing funding for the AGDW learning and community engagement project staffing in 2025. The loss of staff meant that the engagement side of the project on the Downs and Avon Gorge was due to close at the end of March 2025. This would clearly have had a huge impact on the children of the city, as children of primary school age, those involved in summer playschemes and those in 'groups of need' attend curriculum-linked engagement and well-being sessions free of charge on the Downs. It would also have impacted the opportunity for secondary school students and students in further/higher education to access the Downs for field studies and on-site learning. Finally, it would have removed the chance for the general public, including pre-school age children and families, to discover the rich heritage and wildlife value of the site through engagement. The engagement team also carry out wildlife surveys on the Downs and in the Avon Gorge to add to the body of evidence which helps to inform the AGDW Ten-year management plan and the Scrub management plan.

AGDW is extremely grateful to the Society of Merchant Venturers and The Nisbet Trust for stepping in to altruistically provide funding for the engagement staff for the remainder of 2025 until the end of March 2026. Bristol Zoological Society (BZS) will also kindly continue to fund and host the engagement side of the project. As such the engagement aspect of the project will continue through this year ahead.

Last year in 2024 the focus of Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife engagement team was to engage as many schools and other groups of young people as possible in the project; from as diverse a population as possible throughout Bristol and the surrounding area. The reason for this was to reconnect children and young people with the natural world right on their doorstep. Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife is a thriving conservation project in the middle of a city of over 500,000 people and is accessible to all people of that city.

In 2025 the funding model for AGDW engagement has changed leading to some changes in deliverables.

To ensure some funding is carried over into 2026, the Biodiversity engagement manager will be working for half a day less each week from April 2025-April 2026 and a Biodiversity engagement officer will work one day a week. At the same time, some resources this year will be allocated to fundraising, to improve the project's financial position in 2026.

Much of the beginning of this year has been spent planning strategy and budgets whilst waiting to hear if funding was forthcoming. The **2025 AGDW Engagement Plan** is attached as an appendix.

AGDW events

The first events of the year began in February and March and our native wildlife talk '**Dreamy dormice**' about the dormice population in Leigh Woods proved very popular with a Bristol audience. This was followed by our **half term family nature crafting** session and the beginning of our **pre-school nature club** 'Little kids on the Downs' at the beginning of March. In March we

ran our 'Amble with the Avon Gorge goat-keeper', which was fully booked and the next event is a **spring birdsong day workshop**. The most appreciated activity from our dormouse talk proved to be 'the nut nibbler identification challenge'!

"Plenty of interesting information given about the dormouse, varied photos & being able to look at the dormouses nest was good."

"I really enjoyed the interaction. Have the dormouse nests and nuts as well as images, text and videos and photo. Lots of information in different formats."

"The talk was brilliant - loved the video and photos - excellent speaker who was very good at dealing with the questions."

"New knowledge. Experienced and inspiring speak."

"We really enjoyed making the pom pom animals which was age appropriate for my 8 and 10 year old boys. The room was very well set out with the wildlife information and we enjoyed looking at the pictures of hedgehogs etc and being told owl facts etc as we did our craft."



Community engagement

A **talk** was given to Westbury Park WI group in February on the incredible wildlife of the Avon Gorge and the Downs, which was well received.

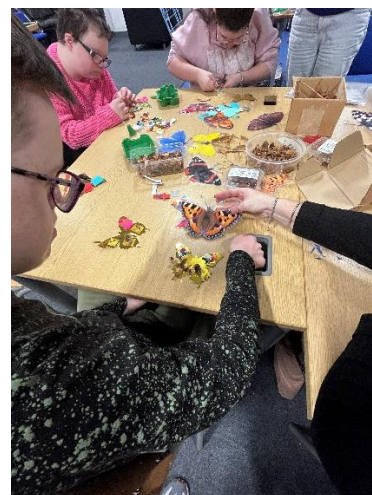
"A note of thanks to you for a most inspiring talk last night. You presented the project so well and everyone was impressed with your knowledge and enthusiasm. The Gorge and Downs are very precious and we are indeed privileged to have them here in Bristol on our doorstep!"

"I too thoroughly enjoyed your interesting and informative talk on Tuesday".



We also visited the ‘Ups and Downs’ **youth club in Knowle** – providing for Downs syndrome children aged 11-16 – in a session where we explored the wildlife of the Avon Gorge in a ‘crafting’ way.

“Thank you so much for tonight, it was very successful. We all had a great time thank you.”



Formal education sessions

Due to the time of year we have very few formal school visits currently. We visited Whitehall primary school for a Living History session with the year 3s in January. We have also collaborated with the **Clifton Suspension Bridge Museum (CSBM)** to deliver a joint session to Mary Elton primary year 3s from Clevedon, focussing on different aspects of the Avon Gorge. A closer relationship between us and the CSBM is allowing for groups to visit both sites in one day very successfully. We are also improving our collaboration with **UoB Botanical Gardens** in the same way.

Secondary schools are a key target audience and marketed to with the aim of encouraging more year groups to visit for educational sessions and fieldwork in 2025. This brings in an income and the Downs is currently well suited to hosting secondary school children. **Primary schools** have also been marketed as a keystone of project engagement, although conditions for

hosting primary school children are still more challenging. Primary school enquiries come through regularly and we currently have eighteen primary sessions booked in for the spring and summer.

We do not get permission to take many photographs of school groups but we always receive excellent feedback.

"... thank you so much for a wonderful afternoon. The children really enjoyed the activities and had a great time. So a huge thank you and hopefully I will see you again next year!"

Pre-school age engagement

The late spring term begins in March where we'll enjoy introducing the Downs to **children aged 2-4** plus a parent or grandparent(s). We focus on 'mini' ecology through animals, trees, plants, spring, birds and dinosaurs among other things. These sessions allow us to bring the wonder of the natural world to young children as well as developing the older generations' knowledge.



Ecology focus

Winter management works

Winter management works have taken place in the Avon Gorge with rope access being used by contractors to access challenging slopes for scrub removal. This scrub removal is essential to the thriving of the rare botanical species in the Gorge as it reveals the unique habitat which the plants need. The proximity of the Downs to the Gorge, brings into close focus the ecological interconnectedness of the two sites and need for exemplary management of both.





Monthly bird surveys

Two bird surveys on the Downs have taken place so far this year, with two student volunteers joining us for the February survey. We have been pleased with the richness of species which have been recorded this year so far, and hope that this trend continues through the year. Of note, we have recorded both a male and female peregrine falcon, bullfinch, firecrest, a sparrowhawk and a kestrel. Birds are a key ecological indicator and this is encouraging, however it is important to note how the abundance of each species changes over time. Bird survey data is uploaded onto the British Trust for Ornithology Birdtrack site.



Bullfinch



Firecrest

Natural England (NE) report

The **landscape approach** was established as ‘the’ approach to wildlife conservation in England following the publication of a report in 2010 by Lawton *et al.* outlining the need for recognising interconnections between adjacent and nearby green habitats in terms of supporting processes. The approach is adhered to in NE Advice (2019) on restoring and conserving the Avon Gorge Woodlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) site features, as it highlights the importance of **functional connectivity**, such as genetic exchange and dispersal, with outside boundary off-site habitats. The Downs is cited as one **such adjacent off-site habitat** in the advice with pollination cited as a potential **critical supporting service to the qualifying**

features of the Avon Gorge SAC (NE, 2019). Elsewhere the same document cites the importance of adjacent calcareous grassland and the prevention and reduction of damaging land uses causing impacts. Attached as an **appendix** to this report is a note from Natural England outlining the ecological importance of the Downs as ecological fabric to the Avon Gorge.

The supporting Clifton Down landscape adjacent to the Avon Gorge has suffered considerable increase in **human impact** over the past four years. This has raised concerns in the Steering Group about potentially **negative impacts** on the **ecological integrity** of Clifton Down and consequently, the Avon Gorge.

Publicity

During the past month our **Facebook** posts were viewed by **12.2K** people, up 73% on the previous month, and our followers currently stand at **2,600** and on **Instagram** we had **537** views, up 195%. Our Facebook page can be found [here](#), our Instagram page [here](#) and our website can be found [here](#). Our **website** had **2597** page views during the past month, up 32% on the month preceding.

AGDW Steering group

A Steering Group meeting took place in **January** with partners to discuss the ongoing management of the Avon Gorge SAC and the connective Downs SNCI. There is still a need for a **Councillor to be present** at Steering Group meetings to understand the importance of the exemplary management of this **nationally** and **internationally designated site**. Councillor Goggins has kindly volunteered to take on this role, but was unfortunately not able to attend the January meeting. The pressing matter of **mapping the rare species** in the **Gorge** to retain knowledge of their whereabouts is now in hand, with members of the Steering Group pooling paper and online data, as well as sharing held knowledge. The University of Bristol (UoB) Botanic Gardens will lead on this project and it is hoped that a person will be found to review and collate the literature collection.

Other meetings

The Biodiversity engagement manager attended a meeting the Natural History Curator of the **Bristol Museum and Art Gallery** to discuss pollinators on the Downs and in the Avon Gorge. The manager also met with the Downs Ranger and the Chair of FoDAG in order to discuss a collaborative approach to provision of **engagement** on the Downs over **2025**. The manager met with the **Downs Advisory Panel** in February to discuss a range of topics pertinent to the running of the Downs for the people of Bristol, and those topics which will be brought to the DC. The manager met with the Master of the Merchant Venturers to discuss engagement and ecological aspects of the **Heritage Lottery Fund bid**, and with the Master and CEO of the Merchant Venturers to discuss the **engagement strategy** for 2025.

Volunteers

The Biodiversity engagement manager attended the Bristol Zoological Society **volunteer recruitment** morning and evenings in order to promote the project. A **volunteer induction** took place in February with 11 new volunteers becoming available to the project this year. It is planned this year that volunteers will help with ecological surveying of flowering plants, grasses, birds and pollinators, as well as with engagement activities.

Learning officer

The Committee should be aware that the current Learning officer has now left the project and that a new officer will be appointed in April for one day a week as per the new strategy.

Appendices

Avon Gorge Downs Public Engagement Project

Annual plan 2025

Author

Anna Stevens

Introduction

The focus of Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife was to engage as many schools and other groups of young people as possible; from as diverse a population as possible in Bristol and the surrounding area. The aim is to reconnect children and young people with the natural world right on their doorstep.

Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife is a thriving conservation project in the middle of a city of over 500,000 people. However, it is in a country which is by far the lowest scoring amongst G7 countries on the Biodiversity Intactness Index. The Biodiversity Intactness Index represents the average estimation of a region's remaining natural biodiversity, with a score of 90 required to maintain healthy functioning ecosystems (State of Nature Partnership, 2023). England scores just 42. Moreover, 91% of children and young people agree with the statement - 'Being in nature makes me very happy' – yet more than 13% of children and young people in 2024 reported to 'never go on a school trip to natural places' (Gov.uk, 2024). Hence, the need for children and young people to engage with the Downs and Avon Gorge is two-fold: to foster a love and value of the natural world to take into future adulthood; and to provide an opportunity to experience a natural space for wellbeing and development.

Scope

In 2025 the funding model for AGDW engagement changed. This year Bristol City Council removed all funding and alternative income was found. However, funding is not secured for 2026, leading to some changes in deliverables this year.

To ensure some funding is carried over into 2026, the Biodiversity engagement manager will be working for half a day less each week from April 2025-April 2026 and a Biodiversity engagement officer will work one day a week. At the same time, some resources this year will be allocated to fundraising, to improve the project's financial position in 2026.

Annual plan for AGDP in 2025

Current situation – SWOT

Strengths (internal)	Weaknesses (internal)
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established project brand, over 25 years • Good community relationships with local groups • Established relationships with Bristol primary schools • Recent introduction of secondary and pre-school age young people to expand reach • Public programme of walks, talks, courses and family & children’s activities for Bristol and beyond • Experienced manager with extensive engagement and ecological experience • Surveying, monitoring and habitat management provides compelling ‘stories’ for social media engagement, talks and activities • Loyal following by interested local groups and individuals • Iconic location, top 3 English botanical sites • Good working relationship with local and interested bodies MVs, FoDAG, UoB, Suspension Bridge Museum • Strong stakeholder support MVs, NE, BZS, UoB, BCC • Strong loyal volunteer support • Home secured for project in the future Conservation Hub 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty of funding – BCC funding removed. Only BZS income secured for 2026. • Temporary reduction in facilities at BZG • Lack of funded staff time for development such as social media, marketing, IT, outreach, volunteer management • While the project can move from its home in BZS CEC to the BZS Conservation Hub, there is an expectation of desks and storage, but a period where no classroom is available • Uncertainty over the timeline for the development of Bristol Zoo Gardens, creates uncertainty for the project’s working environment • Inefficient ticketing experience for public • Public events on occasion don’t break even
<p>Opportunities (external)</p>	<p>Threats (external)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New commercial officer for the Downs provides funds for Downs Committee • New BCC funding received from WECA could provide funding for 2026 as project meets criteria • Focus on events which generate profit • Growing secondary school market for project provides funds • Income generation from public through 3x3 • Potential income generation from audio guide • Expand site usage and strengthen partnerships with UoB Botanic Gardens and Suspension Bridge Museum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in antisocial behaviour on Downs causes health and safety issues, particularly for younger age groups • Increase in antisocial behaviour causes poor image of Downs as destination to school/uni staff booking visits • Increase in antisocial behaviour on Downs causes health and safety issues for project staff and public attending sessions • Lack of infrastructure on the Downs ie suitable toilets or classroom • Insufficient budget from externals limits achievement of KPIs and expectations

Priorities

After analysing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats detailed in the SWOT, the project has identified 5 main priorities, which will form the basis of our annual plan for 2025:

1. Financial security

Following the cancellation of BCC funding, stop gap funding in 2025 has been very kindly provided by The Society of Merchant Venturers and The Nisbet Trust. This will permit the ongoing provision of engagement, most notably with school groups from age 4-18, pre-school groups, playschemes and other groups of need in the city. However, there is an urgent need to provide financial stability for the engagement side of the project – into 2026 and beyond. There will be considerable efforts by the Biodiversity engagement manager and Bristol Zoological Society to fundraise - initially for 2026, but also with a view to the longer term.

KPI

- Secure the funding needed to deliver project engagement in 2026
- Submit approximately 40 trust funding applications
- Realise sponsorship opportunity.

2. Secondary school engagement

Secondary schools have been targeted to take part in paid for learning sessions on the Downs, and this will remain the case, catering for Years 8 to 13. Ongoing development of content and provision for these sessions is planned. The site now lends itself better to secondary school engagement over primary school engagement. Any Engagement officer employed will need to have tested capability of delivery to secondary school students up to A level.

KPI

- 6 secondary school sessions (increased from 2 in 2024).

3. Reduce investment in other education sessions and events

To ensure sufficient staff capacity on priorities one and two, a proposed reduction in staff time spent providing primary school and playscheme sessions, festivals and community events, and potentially some other sessions will be necessary in 2025. It is important to note that primary school provision will still be made, as this is a keystone of the engagement aspect of the project, but it will be reduced. These measures are expected to be a short term measure in 2025 to secure the long term sustainability of the engagement aspect of Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife through focussing on fundraising.

KPI

- Circa 30 primary school, playscheme, uniformed and other group sessions (reduced from 47 in 2024)
- 20 pre-school sessions (reduced from 24 in 2024)
- 3 festivals and community events (reduced from 6 in 2024)

4. Produce ecological data

To provide support to the body of evidence which guides the development of the overall Ten-year management plan, as well as the renewal of the scrub management plan within the AGDW Steering Group, 'monitoring and surveying' is required. This will keep the engagement provision up to date and relevant to the conservation project, and reduce costs and maximise profit as outside experts are needed far less for public sessions. In addition, with the use of a student body of volunteers, it provides engagement for the further and higher education demographic. Finally, scientific data is also able to inform the Downs Committee as to their management of the Downs site.

KPI

- Provide pollinator data through surveys on tussocky grassland, unimproved grassland and scrub.
- Contribute to summer silky wave moth and butterfly surveys
- Survey grasses and flowering plants in meadow with secondary and higher education students

- Carry out monthly bird surveys on Downs and in Gully.

5. Provide community engagement through campaign and trails

Wider communication continues to be needed with the general public to drive positive behaviour change on the Downs site, for ecological purposes and the wellbeing of those who use the site. It is hoped this year to advise and work with a BCC councillor to create a communications campaign. It is also hoped to launch the 3x3 in spring, and if feasible a 'paid for' audio guide. Finally, several trails need updating through QR codes and the use of the project's website.

KPI

- Develop a Comms campaign with Councillor and working group
- Launch the 3x3
- Update one trail which is outdated, to be decided which is most effective.

2025 Plan (Note: Expected monthly resource available in 2025 is 18 days Manager time and 4 days Officer time)

2025	Activity / Tactic	Time allocation per week	Interdependency
Feb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft template for trust fundraising application Marketing and promotion Deliver pre-school sessions Launch 3x3 and admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 days – manager 1 days – manager 1 day – manager 1 day manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support from BZS and BZS Fundraising Support from BZS marketing Support from BZS marketing
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit 4 fundraising applications a month Recruit new officer Delivery and planning pre-school Comms campaign and 3x3 Delivery and planning schools/events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts Support from BZS People team Support from BCC councillor and working group
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onboard new officer Submit 4 fundraising applications a month Onboarding Comms campaign and admin Delivery and planning schools/events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 days – manager 1 day – manager 1 day – officer 1/2 day – manager 1 day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts Support from BCC councillor and working group
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit 4 fundraising applications a month Delivery and planning schools/pre-school/events Delivery and planning schools/pre-school Comms campaign and admin Marketing playschemes/events Survey and admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day – officer 1/2 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts Support from BCC councillor and working group Survey requires volunteer and potential BCC wildlife officer support
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit 4 fundraising applications a month Delivery and planning schools/events Delivery and planning schools Comms campaign Survey and admin Admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day – manager 1 day – manager 1 day – officer 1 day – manager 1 day – manager ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts Support from BCC councillor and working group Survey requires volunteer and potential BCC wildlife officer support
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit 4 fundraising applications a month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day – manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery and planning playschemes/schools • Delivery and planning playschemes/schools/events • Marketing schools/events for autumn • Survey and admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – officer • 2 days – manager • 1 day – manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey requires volunteer and potential BCC wildlife officer support
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit 4 fundraising applications a month • Delivery and planning playschemes • Delivery and planning playschemes • Survey and admin • Trail focus • Marketing events for autumn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • 1 day – officer • 1 day – manager • 1 day - manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts • Survey requires volunteer and potential BCC wildlife officer support • Potential species expert support required
Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit 4 fundraising applications a month • Delivery and planning schools/pre-school/events • Delivery and planning schools/pre-school • Marketing schools/events for autumn • Trail focus • Admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • 1 day – officer • 1 day – manager • 1 day - manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts • Potential species expert support required
Oct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit 4 fundraising applications a month • Delivery and planning schools/pre-school • Delivery and planning schools/pre-school/events • Events planning for 2026 • Budget planning • Trail focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – manager • 1 day – officer • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts • Potential species expert support required
Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit 4 fundraising applications a month • Delivery and planning pre-school • Events planning for 2026 • Budget planning • Move to new site • Admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – manager • 1 day – officer • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • 1 day – manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research support from BZS fundraising to identify trusts • Support from BZS required
Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events planning for 2026 • Yearly reporting • Move to new site • Admin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 day – officer • 1 day – manager • 3 days – manager • ½ day - manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from BZS required

Note on the Avon Gorge SAC/SSSI and the role of Clifton Downs as ecological fabric.

Leonore Williams, Senior officer for Bristol & Bath nature recovery, Natural England member of the Avon Gorge and Downs partnership.

Background

The Avon Gorge was notified as a [Site of Special Scientific Interest](#) in 1988 due to its abundance of nationally rare plants, including some endemic species only found on this site in the whole of the UK.

The habitats and species notified (which we call features) are as follows:

- Dinantian geology
- Lowland calcareous grassland
- Lowland mixed deciduous woodland
- Wet woodland
- Population of *Sorbus bristoliensis* or Bristol whitebeam
- Population of *Sorbus eminens*
- Population of *Sorbus wilmottiana*
- Population of *Allium sphaerocephalon* or Bristol onion
- Vascular plant assemblage (including Bristol rock-cress, spiked speedwell, hutchinsia, honewort, autumn squill)

The Avon Gorge was also designated as a [Special Area of Conservation](#) in 2005 to protect its rare woodland habitat with so many endemic whitebeam species and its dry calcareous grasslands with rare plants. This is a European level designation which signifies its importance.

Natural England's formal advice

Following these designations, Natural England produced some [Supplementary Advice](#) on how to maintain the Avon Gorge quality.

Within this advice there are direct guidelines on how to manage and support off-site habitat, namely the Clifton Downs and Ashton Court – see below:

Attribute Group	SubAttribute	Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Supporting off-site habitat	Maintain or if necessary restore the extent, quality and spatial configuration of land or habitat surrounding or adjacent to the site which is known to support the feature.	<p>The structure and function of the qualifying habitat, including its typical species, may rely upon the continued presence of areas which surround and are outside of the designated site boundary. Changes in surrounding land-use may adversely (directly/indirectly) affect the functioning of the feature and its component species.</p> <p>This supporting habitat may be critical to the typical species of the feature to support their feeding, breeding, roosting, population dynamics ('metapopulations'), pollination or to prevent/reduce/absorb damaging impacts from adjacent land uses e.g. pesticide drift, nutrient enrichment.</p> <p>There are important areas of species rich grassland found within the direct vicinity of the SAC. The Downs and Ashton Court hold significant areas of calcareous grassland influenced habitat. These neighbouring sites are important for rare insects (especially butterflies and deadwood invertebrates) and there is likely to be links with them and the SAC.</p> <p>Mobile species like Horseshoe bats (lesser and greater) which are present on SAC (and on adjacent / neighbouring sites) are also likely to forage and roost within the SAC.</p>	Natural England. 2015a. Natural England. 2009a. Natural England. 2009b. Lawrence and Higgins. 2003. C Westcott pers. com. 2018.

Please note the mention of the Downs as ‘important area of species grassland within the direct vicinity of the SAC. These neighbouring sites are important for rare insects (especially butterflies and deadwood invertebrates) and **there is likely to be links with them and the SAC**’.

Supporting evidence and context

The 2013 State of Nature report states the following: *‘The report makes especially sobering reading with regard to invertebrates. The small things that run the world are suffering the greatest declines, particularly moths, butterflies, ladybirds and ground beetles: these groups of insects have all declined between 65-70% over recent decades’.*

We now know that Sir John Lawton’s [principle](#) of ‘bigger, better, more joined up’ is the answer when it comes to tackling England’s biodiversity loss. It has been tested in several wilding projects across the country and has shown staggering increases in wildlife.

“There is compelling evidence that England’s collection of wildlife sites are generally too small and too isolated, leading to declines in many of England’s characteristic species. With climate change, the situation is likely to get worse. This is bad news for wildlife but also bad news for us,

because the damage to nature also means our natural environment is less able to provide the many services upon which we depend. We need more space for nature. Our 24 recommendations in this report call for action which will benefit wildlife and people. They provide a repair manual to help rebuild nature.”

The report makes the following key points for establishing a strong and connected natural environment:

- That we better protect and manage our designated wildlife sites;
- That we establish new Ecological Restoration Zones;
- **That we better protect our non-designated wildlife sites.**

The last point is applicable to the Downs, as the large green space makes a perfect candidate to be managed sensitively for nature and people, in order to provide a ‘buffer’ or ‘site fabric’ for the Avon Gorge, and for itself to become a wildlife rich, resilient site.

Bristol declared an ecological emergency in February 2020. The ecological emergency declaration was part of a coordinated effort to address the decline in nature. The strategy's goals include:

- Managing 30% of Bristol's land for the benefit of wildlife;
- Reducing the use of pesticides by at least 50%;
- Stopping the destruction of wildlife habitats;
- Managing land sustainably to preserve wildlife;
- Stopping the loss of species like swifts, starlings, hedgehogs, and butterflies.

We are all responsible for tackling the ecological crisis in Bristol and all organisations managing land have the privilege to contribute towards the city’s goal.

Recently launched Local Nature Recovery Strategy

As of November the 7th, the Local Nature Recovery strategy for the West of England was published and now live on [WECA's website](#). Natural England has worked very closely with the local authorities to produce this new statutory **strategy which aims to help people and organisations take the**

most effective action for nature. This strategy is now live and endorsed by Defra. There are several measures included for the large green spaces found in Bristol & Bath – see screenshot below of the toolkit:

The screenshot displays a digital toolkit interface. On the left, there are three filter panels: 'Measure Type' (with 'Larger green spaces' selected), 'Status' (with 'Core (BNG)' selected), and 'Stakeholder' (with 'Local government' selected). Below these is a 'Clear filters' button. The main content area is titled 'Measure: Action to implement the priority' and lists five measures with external links. A 'Grants' column on the right of the list shows 'CGS' and 'UTCF'. On the right side of the interface, a 'Sub Area: Greater Bristol' section is visible, containing a 'Description' of nature-based solutions and a 'Resources' section with a link to 'Other relevant guidance'. Below the resources are two buttons: 'Priorities and Measures' and 'Priority Species'. A vertical map strip is visible between the main list and the sub-area details.

Included in this list are the following measures to benefit nature recovery in green space, which are relevant to the Downs:

- [Increase the area of parks and public spaces managed for nature, including establishing more wildflower meadows or areas of unmown grass.](#)
- [Reduce recreational pressure on woodlands and other habitat in urban areas through maintaining clear paths, keeping dogs on leads, and setting aside non-accessible areas for wildlife where practical.](#)

- [Minimise the use of lighting where safe to do so, including on the road network, and turn off public lighting for a time overnight.](#)

For each of these above there is a hyperlink with specific advice if you click on them.

Health & social benefits

Not only does increasing the wildlife of the Downs benefit nature, but it also is proven to benefit people's health and wellbeing. This [report](#) from the Wildlife Trusts highlights it, *'Environments rich in wildlife are also associated with improved wellbeing, through emotional, social and psychological benefits. A recent systematic review (Lovell et al., 2014) also found evidence to suggest that biodiverse natural environments may be associated with good health and well-being with improvements ranging from better mental health outcomes, to associations with increased healthy behaviours.'*

Notable species

It is important to note that the Avon Gorge is home to the incredibly rare silky wave moth, only found on 3 sites in the UK (Avon Gorge, Gower peninsula and Great Orme). This moth's food plant is the common rock rose which grows on calcareous rocky patches of grassland. Its typical habitat is sparse vegetation usually with some scrub (for shelter), on limestone slopes. The sensitive management of the Avon Gorge fringes (outside of the designated site but on the Downs) can support this rare moth by providing it with more suitable habitat.