



South Down National Park and Community Transport Pilot Report

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SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

healthwatch
West Sussex

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About the National Park

The 'South Downs National Park is England's newest National Park, designated on 31 March 2010. The park, covers an area of 1,627 square kilometres in southern England, stretches from Winchester in the west to Eastbourne in the east. The South Downs Way runs through the middle of the National Park and the counties of Hampshire, West Sussex, and East Sussex.

The ²four main outcomes and priorities – landscape and beauty, increasing resilience, habitat and species and arts and heritage – are detailed on their webpage working with partners across the National Park together will deliver over the next five years and to achieve by 2050.

The National Park is an important natural asset offering green space with a range of mixed landscapes that can be accessed by individuals to support their emotional, mental, and physical health.

Research suggests ³there is a positive correlation between greenspace and physical activity, as people who use greenspaces for physical activity have stated improved mental health and feelings of wellbeing. Greenspaces can help reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety, and depression, and help to boost immune systems. Physical activity in greenspaces may also reduce the risk of long-term diseases such as asthma, and positively support feelings of loneliness, and isolation as well as bringing local people and communities together.

Introduction to the South Downs National Park and Community Transport Pilot Making Access Easier

The South Downs National Park is the National Park for all and has an ambition to be used by more diverse groups – those who do not currently access the National Park – to encourage the benefits of greenspaces as a way of supporting people's health and wellbeing.

The aim of this pilot was to capture the experiences and views of individuals who attended four taster events. The Taster Event had free transport funded by South Downs National Park and provided by **Community Transport Sussex** for attendees.



The flyer promoting the opportunity to attend one of the Taster Sessions in the National Park was promoted through e-bulletins and hard copies of the flyer to local voluntary and community groups, care homes, housing associations as examples.

Community Transport Sussex provided appropriate transport to and from each taster session.

This report contains information from providers of local charity and community groups who referred people to the taster events or responded to a specific online survey.

The aim being to better understand what barriers people have in accessing the National Park. What would encourage local groups to offer more activities in the National Park.

The Providers survey was live from the end January to end March 2023 and completed by 16 providers. The four taster sessions took place in Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 (two in September 2022, one in February and March 2023). There were some challenges in engaging with local charities and community groups to be part of this pilot and for their members joining a taster session. This did cause the pilot to be delayed slightly. The four sessions were attended by 45 people - individuals, their carers or supporters.



We would like to 'thank' all of the local residents who joined the taster sessions and local community groups who completed the survey, for their valuable feedback for this pilot.

Summary

This pilot has highlighted that social exclusion, isolation, poor access to community services and lack of appropriate transport is a key driver of inequalities and isolation. Indeed, Transport was the enabler and crucial for many people to be able to access and enjoy the National Park during this pilot.

It has been well reported that the pandemic decreased some people's confidence to go out and about, with more feeling isolated and alone. Many people felt ⁴detached from wider society; trapped at home, lonely and isolated during this time. Unfortunately, for some people their confidence remains low and are afraid to go out. Loneliness is a ⁵strong predictor of depression, poor health outcomes and increased rates of cognitive decline amongst older adults.

Academic evidence suggests that ⁶simple exposure to nature environments is psychologically restorative and has beneficial influences on an individuals' emotions and ability to reflect on life problems.

Whilst there are a number of barriers for some to accessing the National Park, such as transport, cost, especially at this difficult economic time. Other areas include the lack of suitable, safe road and path networks which are challenging for those using and supporting people using walking aids - sticks, canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. The infrastructure can also be a challenge due to the lack of facilities: toilets, seating benches, cafés; especially for those living with disabilities.

What was seen and heard during these Taster Sessions as people got off the bus they were looking around pointing at the sky, the trees, the birds, and generally taking in their new surroundings. There were excited conversations - maybe with people they had only just met- and an air of expectation. Thus, highlighting that with the right support people can enjoy the opportunity to attend and explore the National Park and gain real health and wellbeing benefit from this in a short timeframe.

Recommendations



- Promotion of opportunities of things to do and places to access in the **South Downs National Park** through the monthly newsletter.
- South Downs endorses the opportunity to establish a travel grant to support local communities to access the South Downs National Park.
- Explore with partners and others the insight contained in this report with regards to access.

Providers Survey Summary

The provider survey was completed by sixteen organisations working in the local community. Below is a Word Cloud of Services provided by the 16 responses.



The providers cover the geographical area of the South Downs National Park. West Sussex, Adur, Arun, Chichester, Horsham, Worthing, Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne, and Portsmouth.

Eight (50%) providers currently use the National Park occasionally as exemplified by providing occasional walks, piloted mindfulness walks -targeting those feeling isolated and anxious and connecting people, women's woodland wellbeing group and hiking trips and family group activities.

Currently **eight (50%)** providers do not use the National Park because many users do not have their own transport and as money is very tight would not be able to afford public transport.



Don't use the National Park as much as we would like to due to lack of transport and toilets. Lack of accessible paths, knowledge, and confidence.

Younger people living with dementia would love to be able to access the National Park, if it was easier for them.

One provider stated they used community transport to access the National Park. Other providers use the following organisations for community transport when required:

Community Transport Sussex, **Royal Voluntary Service**, Dial-a-Ride used for the first time by one group to join one of the taster sessions. Eleven providers shared they do not organise transport.

Community transport is not convenient, or family members provide transport.

In answer to what currently prevents members from joining activities sixteen responses were received.

Transport to and from an activity (n11) – transport is essential for people with sight loss and access to rural areas is difficult, support is needed to get there.

Health Issues (n11) – individuals’ health needs, mobility issues and access to facilities.

Location and confidence (n9) – knowing what to bring; food, dress appropriately, religious requirements etc., what to do if they got lost if accessing unsupported.

Having to go alone (n8) – students would feel safer in a group.

Help to/from transport (n6) – accessing UK transport challenges, cancelled transport and strikes.

Cost of an activity(n6) – members, families, and students are under huge financial pressures due to the current cost-of-living crisis.

Help during an activity (n6) – need to balance activity with teams’ availability.

Paths are difficult to impossible for people with mobility issues. However, the lack of purpose made areas and paths presents a physical barrier to the health benefits of time engaged in activities in nature to community members that perhaps have the greatest need.

Not aware [of the National Park] by a majority of the community.

The activities can be vague with little description. The purpose needs to be clear.

All of our support groups are grant funded.

We’re neurodivergent, we may not be accepted.

Many of our clients have mobility issues and need assistance to attend.

Be mindful of religious needs, for example lunchtime prayers.

Walks need to cater for all abilities or different walks.

Transport and how to contact.

Transport to and from walks.



In answer to the types of activities members would like to join this question was completed by 14 providers.

The main activities were:

Having someone to talk about an area (n13)

Taster mindfulness walks (n12)

Short mindfulness walks (n10)

Looking at wildlife (n10)

Creating art from natural materials (n100),

Social walk with coffee stop (n9)

Looking at a view (n9).



New skills and experiences are one of our core pillars.

Ten providers confirmed they provide similar activities to those suggested for their members, such as, walks, Pilates, mindfulness sessions, beach walks, walk and talk, art, and crafts. All except the coffee stop walk and poetry sessions, and drama workshops.

In answer to the support provided by providers to their members to join an activity included accessibility and transport at low cost or free of charge (n12). Support, encouragement, and motivation to engage in an activity. Information about activities on offer. Invitation to significant others. Dementia friendly facilitators.



Transport and how to contact.

Transport to and from walks. Maybe through regular monthly emails with a few walks of the month, downloadable routes, and descriptions of what is interesting on the walk or what are the seasonal features of the walk, for example poppy field, bluebells on the route, etc.

Taster Sessions Summary

The four taster sessions took place in Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 (two in September 2022, one in February and March 2023). The four sessions were attended by 45 people - individuals, their carers or supporters. The majority of the 45 people who joined were aged over 50 years with the eldest being 92 years.

This was an opportunity to visit Pulborough Brooks visitor Centre and café a few more independent people did take the opportunity to walk round the **RSPB Pulborough Brooks**.

Each event was supported by **Community Transport Sussex**, who recruited and promoted to these events. Each session had a short walk and a tea and chat element. These sessions were also an opportunity to capture views and thoughts on what the barriers to accessing the National Park are and what could enable them and others to join activities in the National Park.

Below is a visual of the comments attendees made.



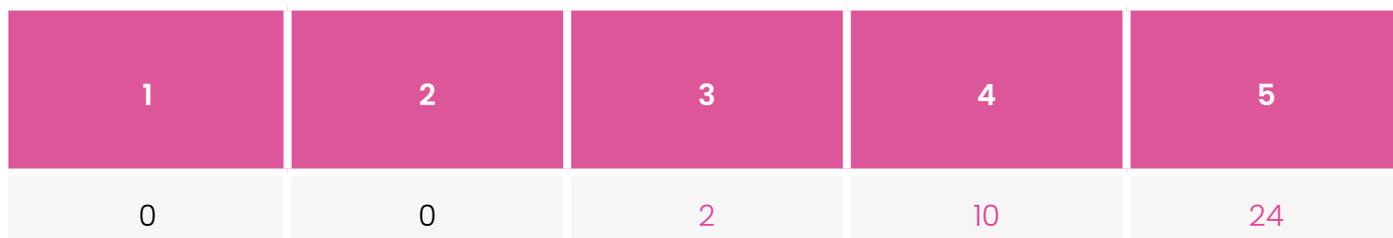
quiet time **conversation**
spending time with other people
connection café time

In all 45 people joined these activities and for 51% (n23) stated they had not done anything like this before individually. This type of group activity was new for 29% (n13) people. First time I have visited here. **Never been in a group session**. With 24% (n11), sharing they had never been to Pulborough Brooks (RSPB) before or walked around this part of West Sussex.



People shared that they would not have been able to join today if transport had not been provided.

Attendees were asked to rate the taster session using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 not being enjoyable and 5 fully enjoyable. 94% (n34) responded as enjoyable.



Attendees' comments during the taster sessions of what has been helpful and beneficial; very enjoyable, **this was not a circular route**, this is beautiful, **lack of birds**, uneven paths – especially for walkers and wheelchairs, **I cannot get out and this is lovely**, just being with people.

When asked what would have improved their experience; **a circular route**, maybe binoculars, **the facilitation has been very good**, a nice group of people, **I would like to come again on another trip**, more even paths, **better weather**.



Would have liked to have entered further into the bird reserve.

I would have been happy to wander around on my own.

A number of attendees engage with other organisations such as the **National Trust**, Church, Interim Group, **Parkinson's UK**, **Age UK**, **Lovejoy Centre Worthing**, **Carers Support West Sussex**, **Macular Society**, theatre, and cinema in Worthing, visit family in Chichester and **Women's Institute**.

Some people stated they already use the National Park for dance and exercise classes, the local pub and tea and chat.

Other places people visit include the National Trust, sometimes with family, seeing houses and gardens. Visiting Garden Centres.



I have never driven and think that if there are more things like this it would be helpful for people's emotional, mental, and physical health.

All who joined the taster sessions were provided with free transport funded by South Downs National Park and provided by Community Transport Sussex. People stated they felt fully supported: the accessibility was fantastic, **a lovely driver**, clean bus, **option of lift and handles** and a good steady driver.



The driver was a real gentleman and very helpful. He made sure we were all ok.

Community Transport Sussex have enabled everyone to join in.

In answer to the question if Community Transport Sussex could have made the experience better. 22% (n10) stated no. Other comments were, **they came earlier than expected**, excellent, **arrived on time**, more legroom needed.



Perfect even the weather!

Things that prevented attendees joining activities in the National Park and other green spaces include:

Transport (n27) – I have no transport of my own, use buses but sometimes they do not run

Location (n21) – non driver, live in Worthing, not too much walking.

Confidence (n15) – would not come on my own as my sense of direction is not good. My mobility is not too good, my hearing is not good.

Health issues (n14) – sight, mobility, and hearing issues.

Frequency of the activity (n14) – weekly, fortnightly, monthly, occasionally.

Help during an activity (n13) – use a walker.

Help to and from transport to activity (n13) – it is better to come in a group, nice to have support.

Time of day for the activity (n13) – mornings are better, daytime, anytime.

Days of week (n11) – weekdays, depends on volunteer availability.

Having to go alone (n12) – nice being with others.

Not knowing what is available (n9) – I have no idea what is available.

Cost of the activity (n7) – happy to pay, needs to be reasonable.

Not sure I am ready to join any outside activities (n7)



Been lovely to make new friends.

Like to be independent.

The activities people would like to join:

Social walking with a coffee shop (n27) – just like today, definitely.

Looking at wildlife (n27) – enjoyable seeing the birds.

Having someone speak about an area they are visiting (n18) – need to be hearing accessible.

Looking at a view (n16) – seen some wonderful views.

Gentle exercise (n15) – used to use the village hall but need support with hearing.

Short mindful walks (n15) – needs to be a circular walk and accessible.

Taster Mindfulness walks (n10) – I have not tried this.



Circular walks and wheelchair access. Need support with hearing.

The support people would need to be able to join an activity included:

Transport (n11)

Better paths (n6)

Informal trips (n6)

Good signage (n6)

Introduction to site visiting and café area (n6)

Have information about what is going on (n2)

Support with wheelchairs, and someone to support during the activity.

Transport, Seats [to sit on during the activity] and Company.

Connection - conversation - spending time with other people.

Not a set activity - quiet time and café space.

Would like to do this again in the Spring.



Other comments made during the sessions.

I had to give up my car and it is difficult to get to some places. The Burgess Hill bus does stop at the front of Pulborough Brookes (RSPB), but I would find it difficult to walk along the pathway and road as it is around ½ mile. - *Attendee*

When my husband was alive, I would have someone to talk to about my day. Now when I go home there is no-one to talk with. - *Attendee*

I would prefer to go on my own. - *Attendee*

Very happy and love to be in nature. - *Attendee*

Used to walk a lot with her husband when he retired. - *Attendee*

Enjoyed all of it and would love to do this again in the future. - *Attendee*

If the project could target Care Homes that would be great as many do not have budget for going out. Maybe part of planned activities. - *Carer*

The walk has helped her recall memories from her past. - *Carer*

Really enjoyable and brought back memories from childhood and war time. - *Attendee*

Comments receive about the Taster Session:

Good drive from Chichester

Looked after like a King or Queen.

This is lovely.

Feel energised.

Would love to do this again.

Transport to get out makes lives better for people.

Had a really wonderful time.



Acknowledgements

We would like to 'thank' all providers who completed the survey, and local residents who joined the four taster sessions for sharing their thoughts, comments, and ideas.

South Downs National Park would like to thank Community Transport Sussex for all their support with this pilot.

Community Transport Sussex

Community Transport Sussex is the leading provider of community transport services in West Sussex, working to relieve social isolation and loneliness across the county through the provision of safe, accessible, supported, door to door transport for those who have difficulty accessing the mainstream transport network.

These services have until now been entirely based on the provision of vehicles and drivers to take people to where they want or need to go.

List of references

1	South Down National Park website - link
2	South Down National Park - Our ambitions for the next five years - link
3	Public Health England Improving Access to Green Spaces (2020), p.10 - link
4	Yates et.al. (2008) as cited by Ageing and Society 32 (2012) 307-308 Cambridge University Press (2011) doi:10.1027/so141686x11000332 - link
5	Luanaigh CO, Lawlor BA. Loneliness and the health of older people. Int J Geriatr Psychiatry. 2008 Dec;23(12):1213-21. doi: 10.1002/gps.2054. PMID: 18537197 - link
6	Dame Sue Bailey, Guest Editorial Looking back to the future the re-emergence of green care. BJSYCH International, volume 14, number 4, November 2017.

Appendix A

Information about attendees

What is your postcode? (First part only, example RH12)

Worthing (n6)	BN13 (n3)	Chichester (n6)
BN14 (n10)	BN12 (n3)	

How old are you?

Aged 20 to 25	1	Aged 26-34	
Aged 35 to 49	1	Aged 50 +	31

To which gender identity do you most identify?		Is your gender different to the sex that was assigned to you at birth?	
Male	8	Yes	2
Female	26	No	18
		Prefer not to answer	2

Please identify if any of the following apply to you?

Working full time	1	Retired	28
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**Do you consider yourself to be a carer, have a disability or a long-term health condition?
Please tick all that apply.**

Yes, I consider myself to be a carer	5	Yes, I consider myself to have a long-term condition	6
Yes, I consider myself to have a disability	3	None of the above	15
I'd prefer not to say	2		

How would you describe your ethnic background?

White British, Irish, other?	40
Prefer not to say	3

How would you describe your religion or beliefs?

Christian (all denominations)	19
Prefer not to say	6

Please tell us which sexual orientation you identify with:

Heterosexual	10
Prefer not to say	13

Do you consider yourself disabled, as set out in the Equality Act 2010?

Yes	2
No	2
Prefer not to answer	3



Talk to us

If you have questions about the content of this report, please either call 0300 012 0122 or email cheryl.berry@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

How this insight will be used?

We recognise that all health and care services are under pressure at this time and have had to adapt their ways of working. We will share this report with the local NHS, Local Government, and other providers to help them understand where things are working well and services are adapting to meet peoples' needs, and to help them identify any gaps. We see this as a continuation of discussions taking place and will continue to use this fresh insight and the solutions presented to challenge for a better future.

For help, advice, and information or to share your experience

We also help people find the information they need about health, care and community and voluntary health and care support services in West Sussex.

Here to help you on the next step of your health and social care journey



You can review how we performed and how we report on what we have done by visiting our website www.healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

Healthwatch West Sussex works with **Help & Care** to provide its statutory activities.



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