

Community Connections in Mend the Gap

Opportunity Report



Whitchurch Hill, Photo by Clare Hegarty



Background

The aim of this scoping project was to understand how local communities living and operating in the Mend the Gap area value nature and the local landscape. With this information we would then co-design a Community Connections project with communities with the aim of ensuring that local people and organisations are equipped with the right skills, knowledge and confidence to promote nature connection, (and the benefits that this provides) and lead activities for nature's recovery on a community scale in local spaces.

We have held community conversations with a variety of community stakeholders across the [Mend the Gap](#) (MtG) area. To ensure that the resulting Community Connections proposal is inclusive and accessible to all communities represented in the area, the purpose of this project was to have a particular focus on communities who may be more at risk of poor mental health, due to other health conditions or circumstances, and therefore with more to gain from accessible and nature rich local green space.

Community Conversations

Genuine community conversations happen with there is trust built. To ensure that we hear honest views of local people, we first seek out trusted intermediaries. These are the teams and groups within organisations and hubs currently who are collaborating with local people. What has become clear as part of this process, is that there are many organisations and hubs across the Mend the Gap project area. For example, the Hardwick Estate has many different activities, led by an extensive range of trusted intermediaries, who have built trust with the participants of their led activities. Anecdotally, the number of these groups in the area seems large, compared to other areas across BBOWT's three counties in which we work.

Groups including residents accessing community support activities, organisations leading activities for underserved communities and individuals with access or mental health issues have been consulted. A full list is included in Appendix 1. As part of our community organising approach to this project, we have connected with these organisations who function as 'trusted intermediaries' so that communities feel able to speak with our team honestly and openly. This report sets out our findings from these conversations and outlines objectives and activities that could form part of a Community Connections project.

Community Mapping

The map included at Appendix 2, illustrates the variety of communities spoken with and the geographical spread. Across the area there is a diverse range of community-based organisations delivering activities for people to feel more connected to nature and improve individual's wellbeing as well as those who are undertaking landscape improvements at various scales for nature's recovery. Many of these activities are already, or will be, supported by Mend the Gap.

Themes & conclusions from community conversations

Communities Value the Landscape

Place-based connection

There is a deep place-based connection with many of the individuals spoken with and the ambition of organisations spoken with is to enable more people to value the local landscape and benefit from a connection to nature.

Conversations have been had with individuals who have lived in the area for years, and unsurprisingly the subject turns to memories of the area and how the wildlife diversity and scale has changed over the years. For example, some residents of Abbeycrest Nursing Home in Sonning Common have lived in the area for 50 years. This is similarly reflected in conversation from the Cholsey and Moulsoford communities – the natural beauty of the area is something that has inspired many people to move to the area, and then not leave.

The appreciation for the landscape was echoed when speaking with children too. Hosted by the Treehouse School, we spoke with local children, 6-10 years, who all spoke fondly about nature: the way it inspired them and about the wonders of the local landscape around Cholsey. How too that this generation wants to act for nature's recovery, including making more space for nature locally, and inspiring others to take part. The children also spoke about the impact of people on the landscape, including local development, litter, and the need to change the opinion about and disconnection from nature.

Nature Connection

Organisations which offer activities for local people to connect with wildlife are popular, and this is seen in Cholesey at The Treehouse, Path Hill Outdoors at Hardwick and various activities run by the West Berkshire Countryside Society who formed in January 2012 to provide an umbrella group for four long-established environmental groups. These were The Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys, The Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group, The Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers and The Pang Valley Barn Owl Group.

Landscape Designation

What has not come out in conversation is the recognition of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty designation, no-one other than the environmental groups, like Goring Gap Environmental Organisation (GGEO,) have mentioned the AONB. It is very apparent through from speaking to individuals that they agree with the statement on the Chilterns AONB website, that the “Chilterns is an area of remarkable beauty and distinctive character.”

Challenges & Barriers to Access

During conversations, communities and organisations have been keen to discuss the challenges faced when they access the wider countryside, or challenges that they recognise that impact the ability for others to connect to the local countryside. Themes of the challenges are addressed below.

Physical access

Physical access plays a critical role in enabling people to experience and connect with local spaces. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, it is about getting to the location, and the barrier here is often the means to access the site safely. For example, without a vehicle, areas such as Sulham estate means that visitors would need to walk or cycle, often on narrow or steep roads. This is often prohibitive to visitors because of feelings of unsafety or of physically not being able to walk long distances. For example, Hardwick estate welcomes visitors who are travelling by train into Pangbourne station. The onward journey is impossible for those who are unable to walk far, or who are unable to pay for a taxi for example. The

issue is currently solved by a lift share between participants from the activity leader. However, there is no designated vehicle, connectivity is ad-hoc as often there is no transport available. Conversation in overcoming these barriers included supporting organisations in the delivery of their work, i.e., enabling people to access sites via active (cycle hubs/paths) & passive (enabling less mobile/vulnerable access from stations) travel.

Further access issues exist around sites that local communities would like to walk and use more, but poor infrastructure such as footpaths or stiles are preventing this. These are challenges that if overcome, will promote more visits by local people. For example, communities in Cholsey felt the state of the footpath to Aston Tirrold means that only those who are more mobile have the confidence to use the path. Similarly, in Moulsoford, along the Thames path, the path is muddy in places, contains broken paving in others, with extruding tree-roots and damaged stiles, all of which drives more challenges to those people who are less mobile. This path is inaccessible to wheelchairs and would present a challenge to people with mobility issues. These routes are known to local people as 'hot-spots' for wildlife watching – especially the Cholsey to Moulsoford path which is known for its owls, water voles and hares.

Capacity of Organisations and Local Champions

In some cases, when speaking with organisations collaborating with communities, the challenge to accessing and enjoying the local landscape is around providing enough capacity for people to join in on led activities. These activities are the perfect entry level to learning more about nature but to also help people recognise the benefit of nature on their own wellbeing.

Having spoken to many local champions in the area – doing something for nature and/or galvanising the community, nature and wildlife is a key theme for residents. There is a huge sense of pride of the area with regards to feeling surrounded by nature, albeit there are a lot of people who understand that more local action needs to be taken to help local wildlife thrive. There are several resident's groups set up across the area to deliver this local action. In the more populated areas of Cholsey and Pangbourne, the champions have identified that there is a need to gain more local support to enable more action to be taken. As is often the case in community work, the champions tend to be the people who are present in many

community groups and wanting to do more for the local community. These champions speak about the need for local effort and more volunteers being required to deliver action.

This was the case in Pangbourne, where there is a key group of people wanting to do more for the community but do not have the time to drive more without more local support: they are already at capacity. For example, in Pangbourne there are local patches and pockets of unloved land or planters that could be tended by local volunteers with the drive, knowledge and ability to do so.

A similar story reads in Cholsey, where the Trim Team has been set up. This is a management group of the Treehouse School, with aspirations to do more in the local area, for example, a community allotment and a focus on litter picking. Further ideas for Cholsey have come from other champions spoken with which include the support for the community orchard and the need for inspiring more people to get involved.

Opportunities

There are many community champions across the region, leading activity. Their aims may be around creating habitat or inspiring people to connect with nature. Regardless of aim, conversations were always centred around the fact that local people are connected to the local landscape and want to do more to protect it, which at its core, will involve local people taking action.

Community led activity

There are already several groups working with local communities to enable more people to be inspired by the local landscape. This inevitably leads to people wanting to do more to protect it.¹

Groups across the region leading nature-based activities with their users and/or interested in starting to do this in public and privately-owned areas, where communities can access, include:

¹ Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis. Mackay & Schmitt. 2019. Journal of Environmental Psychology.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494418308557>

- The Treehouse, Cholsey, have spoken about wanting to do more to enable more people to join in, either via expanding the school or delivering more school holiday activity. A bursary scheme will enable more people to join in.
- Withymead nature reserve is replacing a boardwalk on site to enable better access.
- Care for Creation in Goring organises an annual Great Big Green Day.
- GGEO is leading on a variety of projects in the Goring and Streatley area to create habitat and promote a nature connection in local people, for example an education centre.
- Parish Councils in Cholsey and in Pangbourne are keen to deliver more for local people. In Cholsey for example, they are looking at the community orchard.
- 'Hardwick Hands' at the Hardwick estate, initiated by an Estate tenant, invite people to join in on the land management such as pulling ragwort, watering newly planted trees and orchard restoration.
- Path Hill at Hardwick lead several outdoor education courses, which caters for all ages, and have ideas to lead new activities aimed at management in and around the Thames, which could include a water quality monitoring programme with students.
- Greenbroom, a community cooperative at Hardwick, supply locally grown, organic food, income from which is then reinvested back into the cooperative. Links have been made with local uniformed groups who visit the site to learn more about food growing and the local landscape.
- The Hardwick Estate has evolved several different enterprises, (some mentioned above,) with farming and education at its heart. This diversification, and contribution to the rural economy, is enabled by the local landscape and provides an opportunity for people to learn about and from the heritage of the area, but also for organisations to remain viable to deliver this.
- Sulham Estate has organised activities to ensure that groups that may not see the landscape as welcoming have taken part in activities to make it more relevant to them, for example the Muslim women's group, Salaam Seekers, from Reading.

Most of the examples above also want to do more for the benefit of the local communities, e.g., Path Hill, Tree House. There are also other members of the local community who are inspired to start something new, for example:

- Papist Way home to ten residents with acute mental health needs, a supported housing project led by Response. Previously involved in BBOWT's Engaging with Nature project, the manager stated that the activity went a long way to connect residents to nature, and would be keen to get involved with wider community activities
- Fairmile Social Club would like to be a community hub for activities but would need guidance as to how to do this.

The opportunity is that organisation want to do more. The challenges faced by these organisations is the capacity to do more.

Organisations supporting local activity

Local social housing providers, including Sovereign Network Group in Pangbourne, (111 homes) and South Oxfordshire Housing Association, (SOHA) in Cholsey manage homes in the region. Both providers cited here, recognise the benefits to local people of creating space for nature within the estate and would be interested to support an activity that helped to 'green' the local area, but also enable local people to connect with nature.

Appendix 1

Organisations and individuals consulted	
Centre for Reflection, Aston Upthorpe	The Treehouse, Cholsey
Response	Moulsford coffee morning
Dementia Oxfordshire	Sulham Estate
Cleeve Lodge Residential Home	Abbeycrest Nursing Home
Berkshire NHS Trust	Salam Seekers
Mobility Issues Group Wallingford (MIGWAL)	Hardwick Estate
Goring & Streatley and South Stoke Churches	Englefield
The Old Vicarage care home	Reading Food4Families
Mobility Issues Group Goring & Streatley (MIGGS)	Goring Free Church
Wallingford Green Gym	Goring u3a
Withymead Nature Reserve	Greenbroom
Fairmile social club	Path Hill Outdoors
South Oxfordshire Housing Association (SOHA)	Purley Park Trust
Mary Mead estate	Sovereign Housing
Age UK Oxford	Pangbourne Valley Flood Forum
Anna Dillon	The Swan
North Moreton Greenshoots	The Hub, Goring
Home Start South Oxfordshire	Drop in Café for Ukrainian Hosts
South and Vale Carers Centre	Friends in Sickness & Health
Countywide Caring Ltd	Streatley Youth Hostel
Busy Bees Didcot	Care for Creation
Disabled Ramblers	West Berks Countryside Society
Cholsey Day centre, Sunday Teas	

Appendix 2 – Organisations & Individuals consulted

