

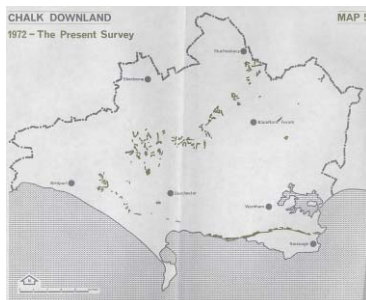
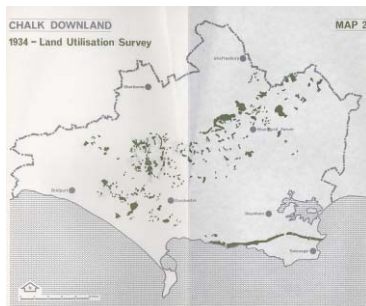
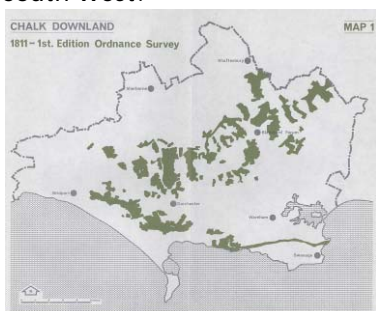
Restoring Dorset's Grasslands

Reward target within Dorset's Local Area Agreement.

Aim: To restore and reconnect Dorset's wildlife and heritage-rich grassland landscapes by increasing the area of suitable land in positive management for grassland creation, enhancement and conservation.

Background

This target breaks new ground in the Local Area Agreement reward system, and is the first landscape and biodiversity target within this process in Dorset. It will initiate a new approach to grassland conservation and restoration, acting as a pilot for landscape-scale delivery using DEFRA's new Environmental Stewardship Scheme combined with volunteer effort, additional capital work and development of a grazing project. The target should help identify how agri-environment support can be improved, enabling us to influence future policy. The target has been endorsed by English Nature and the Rural Development Service who will act as arbiters on behalf of Government Office for the South West.



Maps showing the decline and fragmentation of Dorset's grasslands 1811 - 1972

Outline of target:

Measure 1 focuses on a specific list of grassland sites that are designated as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs - county level wildlife sites) which are currently classed as 'poor'. This means that they are either known to be in poor or declining condition or their condition is unknown due to lack of survey in the last 10 years. The aim is to get these sites in positive management. These sites are the next level down from SSSIs (sites of national significance) and include most remaining areas of semi-natural grasslands in Dorset. Target: 1000 ha

Measure 2 focuses on increasing the amount of grassland in 'good' management. The intention here is to increase the uptake of grassland options within DEFRA's Entry Level Stewardship scheme or to put in place equivalent measures. Target: 1500 ha stretch.

Measure 3 focuses on increasing the amount of grassland in 'excellent' management. The intention here is to increase the uptake of DEFRA's Higher Level Stewardship scheme or to put in place equivalent measures. This will include schemes to keep our best sites in top condition and to recreate new areas of downland. Target: 300 ha stretch.

Measures 2 and 3 will not include sites listed under Measure 1 to avoid double counting. It is intended that these three areas of activity should combine to deliver a landscape scale approach to 'rebuild' Dorset's grasslands.

As the maps show, there has been a massive decline in grasslands within the county - an estimated 80% loss. Remaining patches of grassland are small and fragmented - reducing their capacity to sustain viable wildlife populations and limiting their contribution to landscape character and public enjoyment.

A new approach

The target will provide an incentive to develop new approaches to grassland restoration delivery and as such links strongly to the DEFRA Rural Pathfinder. Currently, there are a number of different bodies involved in grassland conservation. A lot of the work tends to be reactive and opportunistic, working with landowners that express an interest. The intention now is to develop a more co-ordinated, targeted and proactive approach, through the creation of a 'delivery team' of existing and new staff. This will involve input and guidance from the Dorset AONB Team, Cranborne Chase & West

Wiltshire Downs AONB Team, Dorset Biodiversity Partnership, Dorset Wildlife Trust, English Nature, Rural Development Service, DCC Natural Environment Team and the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group. The work will bring together agri-environment schemes and other management methods to test new approaches and inform future policy on how to achieve landscape-scale delivery. It ties strongly with the Wildlife Trust's 'Rebuilding Biodiversity' initiative, which will form part of the delivery, and will help achieve some of the aspirations of the SW Regional Nature Map.

How the target will be delivered:

Co-ordination and steering

Delivery of the target will be overseen by a steering group of officers from the Dorset AONB, Cranborne Chase & West Wiltshire Downs AONB, Dorset Biodiversity Partnership, Dorset Wildlife Trust, English Nature, Rural Development Service and DCC Natural Environment Team. £165,400 has been secured through the LAA to deliver the target. The final programme is yet to be confirmed but is likely to include:

Phase 1. Mapping and targeting

Dorset's remaining grasslands are already mapped. Historical data from previous surveys and aerial photographs will be used to create an 'opportunities map' and accompanying images showing how the landscape once looked. Detailed maps will flag those existing sites in need of survey and management advice and highlight target areas where recreation of grassland could be undertaken to reconnect fragmented blocks of habitat and buffer / expand existing priority sites. This will inform the targeting of survey and management efforts, with priorities to be identified by the steering group. Critically, this exercise will also be translated into material to help develop a collective 'vision' to enable landowners and local communities to see the potential of their land / local area.

Phase 2. Creation of Delivery Team

A delivery team will be created of both existing and new staff to implement the target. The steering group will need to decide on the final requirements, but this is likely to include the appointment of a part time Grassland Officer to co-ordinate the programme and negotiate larger agreements with landowners, and a number of short term contracts to undertake surveys, management advice and agreements. This will be augmented by volunteer effort for surveys and for capital works.

Phase 3. Consultation and Promotion

It will be important to involve local people in the development of this initiative. By explaining the full picture, people can see the contribution that their landholding or local area can make and the benefits this will bring. Display and promotional materials will be required, and a number of events for landowners and communities.

Phase 4. Survey, Advice and Agreements

Site survey and assessment will be required, followed up by advice to the landowner and development of management agreements. Where possible, additional species monitoring will be undertaken where specialist volunteers are able to assist.

Phase 5. Practical Management & Grazing Animals Project

In order to achieve the ambitious targets set and to test new approaches, management will be developed beyond and outside of Environmental Stewardship. This will include providing grants for scrub clearance and infrastructure to support grazing, such as fencing and water troughs. A seed collection scheme will be explored to gather seed from good local sites for use in downland creation, and other techniques such as over-sowing with hay rattle will also be explored. To support management, a grazing project will be developed to co-ordinate grazing need and stock availability and to link with existing local produce schemes to create a 'conservation-friendly' meat marketing scheme.

In practice, the work will be multi-stranded, with different areas of work progressing concurrently. Monitoring will take place both through RDS and by the project group.