

WESSEX WATER SUPPLY GRID – GRID COMMUNITY AWARDS AND AONB FARM ADVISOR DORSET AND WILTSHIRE, UK

Wessex Water Engineering and Construction Services Ltd.

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Community Engagement

Project overview

The Wessex Water Supply Grid is an ambitious water supply infrastructure project, aiming to reduce abstractions from areas of low flow and redistribute water from areas of surplus to areas of deficit. Delivery of more than 50 individual engineering schemes are involved, over a 8 year period. At the centre of the Grid is a new 70km long trunk main through rural Dorset and Wiltshire, together with 10 new covered reservoirs and pumping stations.

Our Grid Community Award scheme runs alongside the ongoing construction works, and makes small grants available to community groups in areas local to the water main project. During the last 2 years, over £11K has been awarded to 16 different groups from Scouts to Local Parish Councils. Meanwhile our Farm Conservation Advisor, sponsored through the local AONB has been engaging local farmers to identify further small-scale biodiversity projects.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

The trunk main passes through beautiful rural landscapes including the Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) with its associated down lands, rare farmland flora, and populations of dormice, and also runs along the Wylde Valley.

Were there any specific conditions that led you carrying out this work?

The project was subject to an EIA, and various planning conditions. However, as well as just reinstating the land after construction, we wanted to provide significant biodiversity gain, which would be spread as widely as possible amongst local communities and farmers, and provide seed funding to generate widespread environmental gains.



Part of the Pipeline Easement during Construction

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

During the 2 years that the innovative Grid Community Fund has been running, a total of 16 individual awards have been made. Here is a selection of them:

- Restoration of Ashfield Water, a chalk stream in Mere
- An Environmental Garden at Blackbrook Community School
- A new woodland information board in Market Lavington
- Improvement of Seavington Community Orchard
- **New equipment for Wiltshire Bat Group's Bechstein bat project**
- Surveys and Action plans for 6 County Wildlife Sites in Dorset
- A grazing project to introduce goats to un-improved grassland in Chard
- A Wildlife-Friendly Veranda at an after-school club in Codford.

The advantage of offering grants of this kind, in addition to simply restoring habitats after construction, is the sense of good will that is generated in communities that have been affected. It also taps into local biodiversity knowledge, and levers further funding. A variety of Wessex Water staff throughout the business, including site managers, project managers and engineers have been involved in presenting the awards.

Another innovative way in which we have achieved wider biodiversity gain, is through a 4 year sponsorship of the Cranborne Chase AONB Farmland Bird Project Officer (now the Farm Conservation Project). This novel Partnership Project, focuses on encouraging farmers to adopt conservation measures for the rare farmland birds that are present within the region. Over 100 farm visits have been made, to provide free advice on stewardship options such as bird-friendly seed mixes, skylark and stone curlew plots, and species-rich hedges, and Wessex Water part-funds the capital costs of some works involved.



A clutch of 7 barn owls chicks ringed in 2015:

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

There have been significant biodiversity gains including creation of approximately 160ha of new bird options, 26 new barn owl and kestrel boxes, and planting of 350m of new hedges. In part, these help Wessex Water fulfil their planning obligations, such as replacing twice as many hedges than have been removed. There is an overall contribution for local and national BAP targets for barn owl, numerous farmland birds and unimproved grassland.

How would you best describe the project?

A community engagement project aimed at delivering biodiversity gain.

Further information

The Grid Community Award invites applications on a 6 monthly , and uses a 3rd party (the Conservation Foundation) to judge applications. Leaflets were distributed to all parishes, and other wildlife groups in the area, local to the water supply project, and the response was fantastic. All schemes have been visit to present a cheque and inspect the work. We are currently considering how the success of the scheme could be more widely replicated in other parts of our business, and elsewhere.

Because the AONB advisor is impartial and trusted by farmers, this provides a effective route to persuade them to complete conservation works. Tracy has completed over 100 farm visits, attended farming events, local fairs, NFU events, and arranged local farm walks. Many of the options adopted leave long-term benefits lasting well beyond the temporary impacts caused by construction. Publicity resulting from the AONB project has also resulted in 4 published articles, 2 radio interviews, 1 TV appearance, 2 You Tube videos, and the project has 355 twitter followers. In many cases long term monitoring will be continued by local groups (e.g. barn owl checking and ringing) meaning that the benefits of the scheme will run long into the future.

Similar schemes could easily be replicated elsewhere and we see it as a perfect way of providing the developer with a way to deliver biodiversity gain, while also supporting **partnership projects that increasingly don't have funding from traditional funding sources**, like the EA and Natural England.



Beavers from Sturminster Marshall with their completed bat boxes.

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Personally, I have enjoyed working with a range of different stakeholders to generate diverse and **interesting opportunities for wildlife**. It wouldn't be nearly as interesting if we were just replanting hedge gaps, which is the case with so many projects.