

Watercress and Winterbournes Landscape Partnership Scheme

Summary

Watercress and Winterbournes is a new Heritage Lottery funded project aimed at protecting and celebrating the seven headwaters of the Test and Itchen rivers:

- the Pilhill Brook,
- Upper Anton,
- Bourne Rivulet,
- Upper Test,
- Candover Brook,
- River Arle and
- Cheriton Stream

The landscape partnership scheme is being co-ordinated by Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust on behalf of a partnership of organisations including: Cheriton Parish Council, Country Landowners Association, Environment Agency, Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust and Whitchurch Silk Mill, Hampshire County Council, NFU Watercress Growers Association, Natural England, Portsmouth Water, Salmon and Trout Conservation UK, South Downs National Park Authority, Southern Water, Test and Itchen Association, Watercress Growers Association / Vitacress, Wessex Chalk Streams and River Trust and Wild Trout Trust.

Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has approved the first stage application for the scheme and has given a grant of £269,400 to allow the partnership to progress with and develop its plans over the next 18 months. The detailed stage 2 application will be submitted in October 2019, following which HLF will make a final decision on the remaining £1.9 million grant requested.

Why the Headwaters?

The Test and Itchen rivers rise from the chalk of the Hampshire Downs, and define a unique landscape with distinctive chalk stream habitats and winterbournes (streams which dry up in the summer and reappear during wetter winter months). These are internationally important and home to a rich diversity of wildlife, including otter, water vole, kingfisher, water shrew and white-clawed crayfish.

The headwaters are the lifeblood of our rivers, supplying essential organic matter to our rivers and helping to keep the sediment and pollutants out of the lower reaches. Any pollution, water quantity or invasive species issues within the headwaters carries into the downstream ecosystem.

In addition, the headwaters support a range of heritage industries, villages and their communities. The area is renowned for its fly-fishing, is central to the UK's watercress industry and its water mills have supported industries such as the production of paper, corn, silk, and even gin.

However the landscape is at risk from pollution, drought and flooding, invasive species, and our built heritage is falling into disrepair.

Watercress & Winterbournes aims to address these issues by bringing together communities, organisations, businesses and individuals to work together to protect and improve the headwater streams that are the lifeblood of our chalk rivers.

Community Catchment Plans

Our two Watercress and Winterbournes staff members will work with the communities on the seven headwater streams to develop and put in place plans to protect each headwater. Early plans include:

- Restoring wildlife habitats along and adjacent to the headwaters including vegetation management and new planting
- Restoring historic structures along the headwaters
- Improving water quality and quantity in the headwater streams including reducing sediment build-up
- Implementing a conservation programme for our native crayfish
- Showing how people can take individual action to improve the headwaters, including improving water efficiency, switching to eco-friendly products, and raising awareness of the problem of non-native species
- Advice for landowners within the catchment
- Training and skills development for communities, landowners, and people who volunteer as 'River Keepers' to manage their stretches of the river better.
- Development of a Headwater Community Forum which will provide opportunities for the headwater communities to come together, discuss progress, learn from each other and raise issues with the regulatory and statutory bodies involved.

Celebrating our Headwaters

The Scheme will also deliver a range of projects aimed at improving people's access and information about the headwater streams and initiatives which will celebrate the local headwater heritage. Ideas include:

- Opportunities for young people to learn more about the local fly-fishing heritage
- Development of an 'Open Rivers' Scheme – where landowners with a stretch of the riverbank allow local people to access their land on specific weekends.
- Celebrating local heritage through an education programme for schools
- Improving access and interpretation and sharing walking routes
- Literary Connections – workshops, competitions and exhibitions which explore how the rivers have inspired generations of writers, poets and song-writers.

Timescales

- End Jan / Early Feb 2018:** The two Watercress and Winterbournes members of staff start work.
- Jan 2018 to October 2019:** Scheme Development Phase – partners and local communities work together to plan projects and work up detailed proposals.
- October 2019:** Second stage application submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- Early 2020:** Heritage Lottery Fund committee assessment – Partnership is informed whether successful or not.
- Spring 2020 - 2025:** If successful, the Landscape Partnership Delivery Phase will run for 5 years from 2020-2025.

Ways to get involved:

We hope that a wide range of organisations, landowners and individuals will want to get involved in the project so please contact us if you would like to register your organisation or suggest others.

As the scheme progresses, there will be numerous ways for local people to get involved in the Development Stage of the scheme including:

- Involvement in local catchment planning for your headwater stream – putting forward and developing ideas, prioritising projects for your area
- Volunteering opportunities including water quality monitoring and access audits
- Encouraging landowners and other local people to get involved; please do tell your contacts about the scheme.

If you are interested in being involved, contact Maggie Shelton on Maggie.Shelton@hiwwt.org.uk