

BIG CHALK – PARTNERING FOR SUCCESS

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF A REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARTNERSHIP INVOLVEMENT IN THE BIG CHALK PROGRAMME

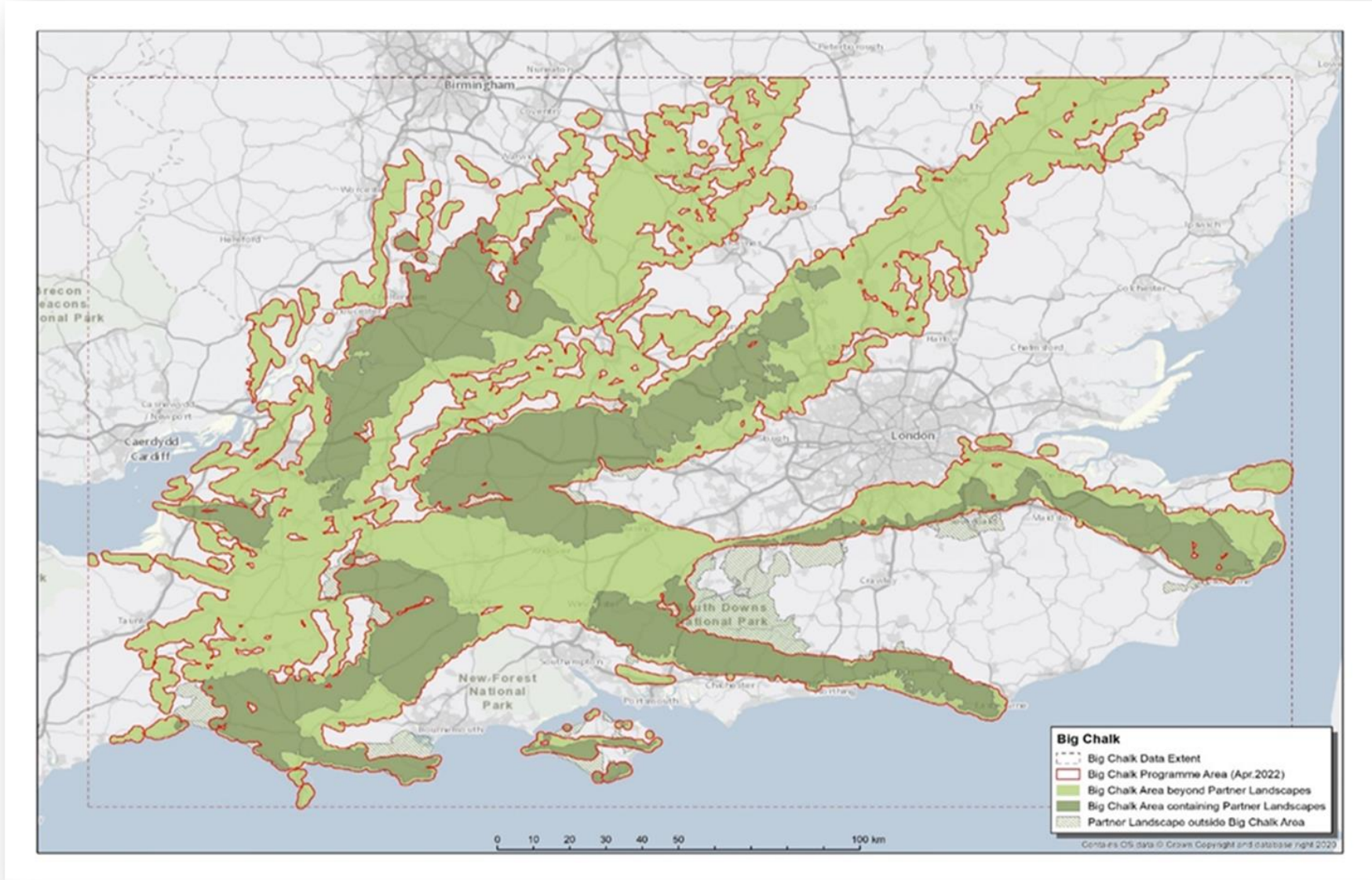
BIG CHALK – BIG CHALLENGES NEED BIG SOLUTIONS

Big Chalk is an ambitious programme that aims to secure and restore a calcareous (chalk and limestone) landscape mosaic of grassland, arable and woodland habitats on a hitherto unimagined scale. Initially powered by a partnership of Protected Landscapes supported by Natural England, Big Chalk's vision encompasses wildlife-rich, connected landscapes that honour heritage, enhance landscape and cultural identity, and help secure a future for people and nature in climate-challenged times. Enabling deep engagement for local communities and visitors alike, these will be places where both human and natural elements will be valued and mutually beneficial.

The programme focuses on the calcareous landscapes running from the South coast to the Midlands. It's an enormous area, covering some 24,867 sq. km. Due to the history of these landscapes and the character of their underlying geology, they have a greater variety of species – including pollinators vital to our food system – than any other in the UK, and when combined could support wide ranging climate resilience, including enabling the most species to adapt to climate change. Failing to protect and restore these landscapes would result in an unprecedented loss of wildlife abundance, populations and even species. Big Chalk, therefore, offers one of the best opportunities for the English landscape to achieve nature recovery.

Big Chalk is also about people, place and climate. Thriving chalk landscapes can deliver an array of public goods including sustainable employment and products, carbon sequestration, water supply (to tens of millions of people) and quality, flood management and soil stabilisation. Restored species-rich landscapes can also support public health and wellbeing, giving access to beautiful open spaces and connections to our past, for example through chalk carvings, art works, writing and ancient monuments and byways.

The map on the following page shows the extent of the Big Chalk area, a geographical vision refined through extensive stakeholder engagement



BIG CHALK – INVESTING IN A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The new, broader Big Chalk Partnership – a consortium of Protected Landscapes, land owners and managers, environmental NGOs, government agencies and delivery partners – are working together to resolve some of the big problems that affect calcareous landscapes. Inspired by the mantra of “bigger, better and more joined up” (Sir John Lawton, 2010, *Making Space for Nature*), they seek to conserve and enhance this backbone of southern England through policy influence combined with practical delivery, engagement and collaboration.

With a primary objective of building a robust nature recovery network on a vast geographical scale beyond the usual local authority or even regional boundaries, partnership working is vital to Big Chalk’s success – maintaining momentum and unlocking potential, bringing the necessary ‘weight’ to access funds, supporting networks with lesson learning, delivering action, and creating real change. Additionally, as the programme seeks transformational change requiring new collaborations, both in terms of geography and partnerships, it is recognised that working within the Big Chalk Protected Landscapes alone will not be sufficient to achieve the ambition, and so Big Chalk aims to work across all of the calcareous land of southern England to ensure a continuous, robust nature recovery network. Moving beyond Protected Landscapes, Big Chalk will continue to engage new partners, for example, water companies, farmers, land managers, and NGOs working to protect our English heritage. It will also seek to engage with central government in new ways so that programmes such Environmental Land Management (ELMs) deliver Big Chalk, and involve more everyday people in this challenge.

SCOPING, BUILDING AND MANAGING THE PARTNERSHIP

Large, transformational partnerships come with challenges and require both commitment and ‘investment’ if they are to succeed. In Autumn 2021, the Big Chalk Partnership (with funding provided by Natural England) therefore commissioned Resources for Change (www.r4c.org) to undertake a series of concept development activities including desk research and stakeholder consultation.

The desk research was designed to source, analyse and present data to inform the development of the Big Chalk programme and understand previous relevant work in the Big Chalk area. Stakeholder engagement focused on facilitating discussion to understand and develop partnership involvement in the Big Chalk Programme and engage a wider range of potential partners. Key to the stakeholder engagement process was a series of interviews and online workshops, attended by 105 people and held in March 2022, to gauge stakeholder response to the Big Chalk idea and inform partnership approaches going forward.

Stakeholders were positive about the idea and excited about the opportunities it could create, as illustrated by the word cloud that was generated at the end of the engagement process when participants were asked to provide 3 words that summed up their view of Big Chalk



KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONSIDERABLE AND SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT

Stakeholders expressed considerable enthusiasm and support for Big Chalk, and there was an eagerness to get behind a programme of this nature and scale. Questions about funding did not drown out the general positive predisposition. Throughout, stakeholders looked for the Partnership programme to ‘embrace the new’ and to be brave.

- **Recommendation 1:** View the outreach undertaken to date as the start of an ongoing programme of communication and engagement. Maintaining momentum is critical, for example through regular communications and a gathering within the next three months.

THE TIME IS RIGHT

The willingness of multiple stakeholders to work collaboratively is a clear indication that the time is right for Big Chalk, and many external factors suggest this approach.

- **Recommendation 2:** Grasp the opportunities offered by the new Environmental Land Management Scheme to establish the Big Chalk principles by urgently making Defra aware of what Big Chalk is seeking to achieve.
- **Recommendation 3:** Share Big Chalk with the Defra team working on the Nature Recovery Green Paper to highlight Big Chalk as an opportunity to test the Green Paper's thinking.

VISION AND BRAND

A consolidated Big Chalk vision would ensure an equal understanding of and commitment to Big Chalk among the initiating partners. It would also inform the development of operating principles and criteria around what constitutes a Big Chalk activity going forwards – what’s in and what’s out, and culturally how it is delivered.

- **Recommendation 4:** Invest in a collaborative process to further define and articulate the vision, ensuring that the partners taking Big Chalk forward are fully aligned.
- **Recommendation 5:** Agree on partnership values and principles, and criteria for operational investment.
- **Recommendation 6:** Develop a Big Chalk brand that offers people something to identify with and a way of explaining Big Chalk to others. Engaging external brand experts in the early stages of Big Chalk development would be a good way to achieve this.
- **Recommendation 7:** Identify at least one potential launch project that models the Big Chalk vision and brand. Several stakeholders have already put forward ideas.

DEFINING THE SCOPE OF BIG CHALK

The Big Chalk initiating partners have shown that Protected Landscapes can look and operate beyond their boundaries, and stakeholder discussions endorsed the need to take a landscape-scale conservation approach. Stakeholders saw real opportunity to build upon and link with projects already underway and identified a need to be more holistic and inclusive.

However, while all stakeholders are in common agreement about the need for nature recovery in the Big Chalk area, there are divergent opinions as to how this could be achieved. Some thought the initial focus should be on nature/biodiversity interventions and building complexity slowly. Others felt there should be a wider systems-based approach that is more inclusive and comprehensive from the outset, and that seeks to engage more widely and comprehensively with other partners and the wider community.

- **Recommendation 8:** Use the newly defined and articulated Big Chalk vision, principles and criteria to identify potentially missing elements to Big Chalk (for example, key sectors such as farming/water, public engagement, the historic environment, health and well-being, rivers and aquifers), and agree and prioritise key areas of action.
- **Recommendation 9:** Recognising that there are already multiple connections and networks across the Big Chalk area that need to be understood and worked with, map organisations and not just the projects.

GOVERNANCE AND WAYS OF WORKING

The Big Chalk programme and Partnership is evolving. To support this process and achieve maximum effectiveness and efficiency, there is a need for agreed governance and ways of working.

Most of the participants identified the need for a community of interest. This would address feelings of isolation and inefficiency, and support sharing, learning, monitoring, innovation and delivery. It would create a sense of community, something to which people feel they belong. This community should embrace an ‘emergent’ or developmental approach, with confidence that **if you get the right people together and get them working together through facilitated conversation then ‘Big Chalk happens’**.

However, for some of the people and organisations involved, working in this way may present challenges relating to tensions between a collaborative culture and individual organisational needs and ambition. This needs to be addressed at the outset so that effective collaboration can thrive.

To work effectively, an emergent or developmental approach needs structure and guidance to ensure that it is always orientated towards delivering the Big Chalk vision. It also needs a robust evidence base on which to draw when making strategic and resourcing decisions. From the multiplicity of projects within the Big Chalk area, knowing what works, what doesn't work and why is fundamental to future interventions and activities, including fundraising and advocacy.

- **Recommendation 10:** Adopt a Collaborative Community approach applicable to a landscape of this scale and complexity. External support should be sourced to advise on collaborative culture development and partnership dynamics.
- **Recommendation 11:** An interim Chalk Board is set up to provide governance of the community and oversee the development and delivery of strategy.
- **Recommendation 12:** Create and resource a Chalk Hub to provide virtual and practical support to the community, and a platform for learning and sharing.
- **Recommendation 13:** Continue to develop the evidence base building on the opportunities GIS specialists have already identified and the GIS and mapped/tabular outputs already produced.