

**CONNECTING ALTON RESIDENTS CREATIVELY WITH THE SOUTH DOWNS:
A GATEWAY PROJECT**



Nature's Neighbours - Discover,
Learn, Connect: A Gateway Project
FINAL REPORT OCTOBER 2026

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I Executive Summary

This project report presents the design, delivery, and outcomes of **Nature's Neighbours**, a community engagement initiative led by the Alton Climate Action Network (ACAN) and funded by the South Downs National Park Authority in 2025/26 with the aim to connect residents of Alton, particularly at the western edge of town, with the adjacent South Downs National Park (SDNP). The project combined free guided ecology walks with creative workshops, led by qualified environmental scientist, educator and artist Scott Gudrich.

Objective

The project's objective was to foster a deeper connection with the SDNP among community members and to enhance the emotional connection to the nature on their doorstep. It aimed to help people get to know their local environment, enhance understanding of how the climate crisis impacts it, and ultimately inspire positive action.

Local residents — especially on the newly built estates — are often unaware of the nature on their doorstep and of the SDNP, despite Alton referring to itself as the “Gateway to the South Downs National Park”. Through guided walks and creative interactions, the project transferred knowledge, cultivated understanding of the unique ecosystems that make up the SDNP, and created a culture of positive (inter)action; the ultimate aim being to build resilient communities that are informed, engaged and committed to making sustainable choices.

II Solution

The solution focused on the western edge of Alton, which lies closest to the village of Chawton. Chawton can easily be reached on foot or by bike and presents the closest entry point to the SDNP. The guided walks and creative workshops were designed to provide a unique, emotive and accessible way of connecting to the natural world.

Guided walks use local wildlife and ecology as an accessible gateway into the wider conversation around the climate crisis.

Creative workshops build emotional involvement, which evidence shows is often the missing link between awareness and action.

Thanks to the funding from the SDNP Authority, sessions were free at the point of access to remove financial barriers to participation.

All delivery was led by Scott Gudrich, a qualified environmental scientist, educator, and artist.

III Project Outline

Promotion

Leaflets were distributed to households throughout the newly build Ackender Hill estate and the estate opposite the new “Gateway to Alton” at Selborne Road - two recently developed areas close to the SDNP border.

ACAN's newsletter was used to reach existing supporters and subscribers.

Existing social media platforms were used for broader awareness and event reminders.

Regular Guided Walks

Regular guided walks into the SDNP area were conducted, encouraging participants to expand their radius into the SDNP, helping them understand the SDNP's unique features through the direct sensory experience of the landscape.

Creative Workshops

The plan was to host four creative workshops (one every quarter) to encourage creative expression and a deeper connection with the nature of the SDNP. These formats were designed to provide emotive access to environmental themes that facts alone cannot deliver.

Proven Success

These activities have been tried and proven successful in comparable community outreach projects in the area, especially drawing from learning from the two “Eco Streets” projects ACAN ran between 2022 and 2024.

Key Beliefs

Continuity and regularity are essential to building trust and participation. A continuous presence is necessary to foster a lasting connection with nature and to inspire sustained environmental action.

One-to-one conversations with residents are more effective than addressing large groups in a blanket-approach.

Creative formats have more transformative power than purely factual information dissemination.

IV Background

The project built on ACAN's two “Eco Streets” projects whose focal areas were nature and creativity. Involving people in creative approaches — for example writing poetry — provides

more emotive access to the climate crisis, while nature-centred topics (ecology walks and talks on local wildlife) provide good entry points to engage people with the wider climate crisis. An improved knowledge of local green spaces and wildlife also creates a sense of place and belonging which in turn can inspire stewardship.

This is commensurate with Winchester's WeCAN initiative's recent findings that hands-on nature experiences are the most effective form of outreach. Data collected during ACAN's Eco Streets project showed that lack of action is not due to lack of knowledge or unawareness of urgency but rather a lack of emotional involvement (See: <https://altonclimatenetwork.org.uk/eco-streets-survey-shows-understanding-of-the-need-for-radical-changes/>). A large-scale emotional reconnection with the natural world is necessary for transformative behavior change. This project intended to initiate this reconnection.

V Detailed Description of the Offers

Walks: “Nature’s Neighbours - Discover, Learn, and Protect

The guided walks programme comprised ten themed walks, each run on a fixed date and designed to build layered ecological understanding over the year while also working as one-off experiences — recurring participation was encouraged but not obligatory.

Walk	Theme	Date	Focus	Nr of participants
Seasonal Changes - Spring	How the seasons affect the South Downs	April 6 2025	Observing changes throughout the year by walking the same route in different seasons	9
Wildlife Wonders	Fauna of the South Downs	April 24 2025	Animals people are likely to see around Chawton (grey squirrels, roe deer, bats, barn owls, various insects...); discussed their roles in the ecosystem and how climate change might impact them	7

Walk	Theme	Date	Focus	Nr of participants
Fascinating Flora	Flora of the South Downs	May 3 2025	Common plants and “weeds” and their functions in the ecosystem; sharpening participants’ perception of common, overlooked, and underrated plants.	3
Conservation in Action	Local conservation efforts	May 17	Visited Shortheath Pond, discussed importance of heathlands and heathlands conservation projects within the SDNP	8
Pollinators and Plants	Crucial role of pollinators	June 14	Understand the role of pollinators and observe different kinds of pollinators	5
Climate Change Impact	Observe climate change impacts	July 6	Understand how climate change is affecting the South Downs	0
Seasonal Changes - Summer	How the seasons affect the South Downs	August 10	Observing changes throughout the year by walking the same route in different seasons	4
Nighttime Nature	Nocturnal Wildlife	September 6	Experience the local environment after dark	3
Seasonal Changes - Autumn	How the seasons affect the South Downs	October 26	Observing changes throughout the year by walking the same route in different seasons	4
Seasonal Changes - Winter	How the seasons affect the South Downs	December 13	Observing changes throughout the year by walking the same route in different seasons	5

Participants were encouraged to fill in a short feedback slip after the walks. Feedback included:

“Lovely informative talk”

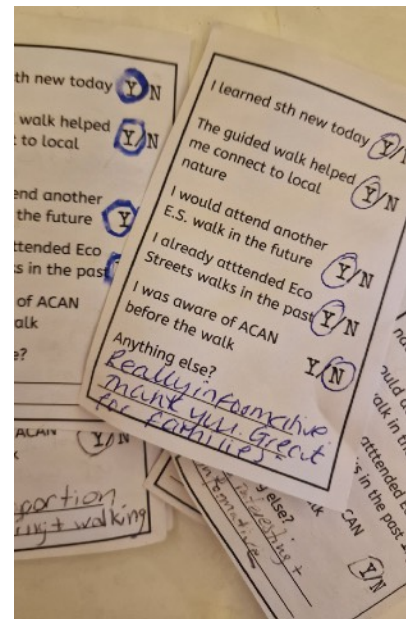
“Really beautiful and interesting walk”

Great to get out in nature on such a beautiful day”

“I feel more connected to nature”

“Loved it. Very informative - will do more!”

100% of participants reported learning something new and feeling more connected to nature.



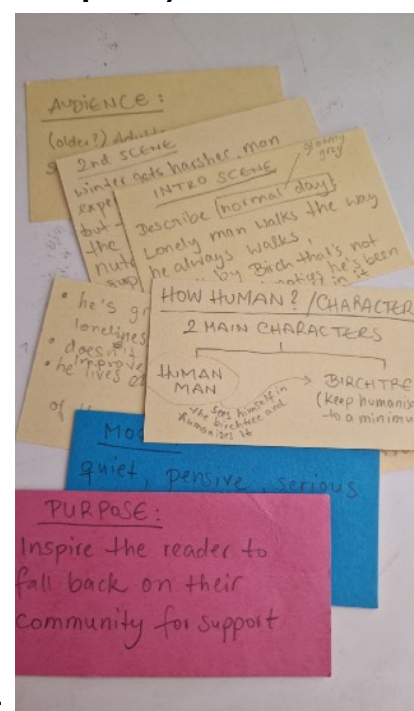
Workshops: Nature's Heartbeat - Artistic Impressions and Emotional Connections

1. Poetry Writing Workshop (en plain aire): “Whispers of the Wild” (4 participants)

Explore the beauty of nature through poetic expression and enhance connectedness to surrounding nature. This was achieved by a 30 minute silent walk preceeded by the prompt to hold on to six words or feelings that come to you during this walk. After the silent walk, the group settled down in nature and crafted poems out of these six impressions. The poems were afterwards shared (if the writer wanted to share) and discussed in the group.

2. Storytelling Workshop: “Tales of the Natural World” (6 participants)

Craft stories that bring the natural world to life, weaving narratives highlighting the interconnectedness of all living things and the impact of climate change. The topic of this workshop was “Tree Communication”. Participants were given information about how trees communicate with each other (based on [Dr Suzanne Simard's research](#)) and were then led through different stages of crafting a story based on this information.



Participant's notes from the storytelling workshop.

The other two planned workshops, songwriting and theatre, had to be cancelled due to lack of interest.

Planned workshop cadence: one creative workshop per quarter across the year

Unmet demand: two workshops could not be delivered due to lack of participants

Delivered formats: poetry and storytelling both ran successfully and received excellent feedback

Implication: thematic framing and timing coupled with promotional intensity drive workshop sign-ups. There is a higher threshold as prospective participants might be shy about their perceived artistic capabilities.

VI Timeline and Milestones

Phase	Period	Key Activities	Milestone
Mobilisation	March 2025	Leaflet design, print, and distribution	Leaflets delivered to target estates, project announced on social media and through ACAN newsletter
Spring	April	Seasonal Changes Walk, Wildlife Wonders Walk	First two walks delivered
Late Spring	May	Fascinating Flora Walk Conservation in Action Walk	Heathland conservation messaging delivered
Early Summer	June	Pollinators and Plants Walk Poetry Workshop	First creative workshop delivered
Summer	July - August	Climate Change Impact Walk, Seasonal Changes Walk	Climate change impact narrative embedded
Early Autumn	September	Nighttime Nature Walk, Storytelling Workshop	Nocturnal ecology explored, second creative workshop delivered
Autumn	October	Seasonal Changes Walk	Third seasonal walk delivered
Winter	December	Seasonal Changes Walk	Full seasonal cycle completed

NB: Due to lack of participants, the Summer Milestone was technically not reached, it was, however, achieved over all as the climate change narrative was embedded in all other guided

walks. It is important to note that many people do not respond to direct discussion about climate change without making the emotional connection first.

VII Key Performance Indicators

KPI	Target	Achieved	Measurement Method
Guided walks delivered	10	9	Delivery log
Creative workshops delivered	4	2	Delivery log
Total unique participants	80	58	Attendance register
Average participants per walk	8-10	5	Attendance register
Feedback on walks	collect feedback after each walk	yes	Feedback slips
Leaflets distributed to target estates	300	300	record of number of copies distributed

VIII Outcomes: Successes and Challenges

Successes

Great feedback received on the guided walks across all delivered themes.

Positive feedback on the two delivered creative workshops — poetry and storytelling.

Walks established as an accessible and well-received entry point to the SDNP among residents.

Creative formats demonstrated clear potential for creating transformative experiences and deepening emotional connection to nature.

Challenges

The number of participants remained continuously low across the programme.

Two planned workshops could not be delivered due to lack of interest.

Sustained attendance rather than one-off participation remains a central challenge.

Low awareness of the programme despite social media announcements, leafletting, and inclusion in ACAN's newsletter.

Lessons Carried Forward

Regular leafletting remains a critical outreach method to boost awareness of projects.

Small groups can have the positive effect that they enable one-to-one conversations which are an effective way of communicating and can lead to these people amplifying the messages within their social circles. This ripple effect, while almost impossible to measure, is one of the most powerful outcomes of any outreach project. Anecdotal evidence from participants has confirmed that these conversations have indeed taken place and hopefully will continue to do so.

Continuity and regularity are essential, a continuous presence builds lasting connections and enhances the possibility of repeat engagement.

Creativity and the arts are vital to increasing emotional involvement but harder to implement as prospective participants need to overcome inhibitions.

Interest in nature and climate change is fairly high among residents but engagement remains low — bridging this gap remains the central challenge.

IX Closing Note

Both the guided walks and the creative workshops aimed to inspire a deeper connection to the SDNP, promoting a sense of stewardship and belonging among participants. By pairing accessible nature experiences with creative expression, the Gateway Project offered residents of Alton a route into the climate conversation that begins with what they already love and know — the landscape on their doorstep — and built toward informed and sustained engagement with local nature, hopefully leading to mindful and sustainable life choices. Though participation remained below expectations, the over 50 people who did participate all reported enhanced knowledge and connection. We are optimistic that this project planted a seed that will continue to grow.