



Somerset
Wildlife Trust



Somerset Nature Connections National Lottery Community Fund Report Period Covered: July 2020 - March 2024



**Blackdown
Hills**
National
Landscape



Mendip Hills
National
Landscape



**Quantock
Hills**
National
Landscape

Somerset Nature Connections was a Partnership Project Between Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Blackdown, Mendip and Quantock Hills National Landscapes. The work was funded by; The National Lottery, Somerset Community Foundation – Discovery Fund, Hinkley Point Community Fund, Somerset Council, Public Health (Somerset), Devon County Council, SPARK, Natural England, and the National Landscapes in Somerset.



1. The Team

1.1 Core Delivery Team

- Kristen Lambert (Project Manager July 20-March 24)
- Kelly Bray (Project Manager-Maternity Cover Jan 21- Jan22)
- Olivia Dullaghan (Quantock Officer July 20-Summer 21)
- Mhairi Cornish (Mendip Officer Jan 21-March 24)
- Hermione Toulson (Blackdown Officer Jan 21-March 23)
- Joanna Hicks (Quantock Officer October 22-March 24)
- Jen Witts (Blackdown Officer Nov 23-March 24)

1.2 Support Officers

- Jade Howell (Mendip Support Officer March 22-March 23)
- Jo Holdaway (Mendip Support Officer March 23-March 24)
- Amanda Turner (Quantock Support Officer Summer 23-March 24)

1.3 Additional managers and staff giving regular time to support Project Delivery/Management

- Jolyon Chesworth (Head of Engagement, Somerset Wildlife Trust, July 20-Mar 23)
- Mark Ward (Head of Engagement, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Mar 23-Mar 24)
- Hannah Paddison (Volunteer and Community Support Officer 21-24)
- Lisa Turner (Lead for Blackdown National Landscape, Jul 20-Mar24)
- Tim Haseldon (Lead for Mendip National Landscape, Jul 20-Mar 24)
- Iain Porter (Lead for Mendip National Landscape, Jul 20-Mar 24).
- Jon Barrett (Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Officer 21-24)
- Abby Wilkinson (Quantock and Blackdown Community Ranger 21-24)
- Nathan Orr (National Landscape Nature Recovery Ranger 22-24)
- Dr Kelly Davies (National Landscape Visitor Data Project Officer 21-24)



2. Team Reflections

2.1 Mhairi Cornish (Mendip Project Officer)

"It's hard to know where to start really because WOW, what an incredible 3+ years. The community that the project has built has been so strong, compassionate, authentic, and loving. A nature family* created by a shared desire for change in how we treat ourselves, each other, and all the other beautiful living things that we share the planet with.

Every session I've been struck by the wonderful insights and meaningful ways that we've all connected with what's around us, and it's been particularly special seeing how being in a wild space can help us to be who we are without having to pretend that we're ok. The Mendip Hills and being at A Patch Wilder has been perfect for this, as there has always been an absolute delight waiting to hold us in awe – an adder, an earthstar fungus, a peregrine or almost tripping over a tiny fawn in the long grass. Things that make us be present and build a personal sense of belonging in nature.

I'm really proud of what the project has achieved and super grateful to have worked alongside some very special and supportive colleagues and volunteers.

I'm also humbled to know that lots of participants and volunteers have gone on to do some amazing things to protect wildlife and to keep the message of the project alive. Things like re-training and changing career to work in the environment sector, volunteering for a whole host of nature recovery and community gardening projects, setting up their own nature and wellbeing projects, setting up nature connection walking groups, going into further education and choosing to study environmental sciences, setting up a campaign group to get the council to keep roundabouts wild and sharing their new or renewed love of nature with family and friends. The list could go on!

I'm hopeful that I'll be able to continue doing nature connections work with the Mendip Hills National Landscapes team, as I feel passionately that we all need to build stronger, more emotional and meaningful connections with nature, to inspire us to fight for it and to also keep us resilient."

**Nature family was coined by a participant who was fleeing his country of origin and could no longer have any contact with his biological family. Everyone felt the term was so fitting that it stuck long beyond the participant leaving the course."*

2.2 Joanna Hicks (Quantock Project Officer)

“It has been an absolute honour, joy and delight to work with such fantastic people in such exceptionally beautiful landscapes. The project has been a huge success, improving the lives of the many who have joined us, many of whom would otherwise not have been able to access the incredible nature we are so fortunate to have in Somerset. This has benefitted not only the wellbeing of those participating but has also enabled reciprocal relationships with nature to be developed and encouraged participants to take the all-important actions needed to help in nature's recovery – from growing bee-friendly plants to weaving willow bird feeders, our creative range of activities has inspired, uplifted and given confidence and skills.

I will shortly close my laptop for the last time with a warm heart and huge gratitude. And... I am very happy to say that in mid-April I shall be taking up a new role focussing on community engagement and volunteers with the Quantock Hills National Landscape and Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme. So I look forward to our paths crossing again in this wonderful landscape of beauty, inspiration and magic.”



2.3 Collaborative Project Officer Feedback

"The role of an SNC Project Officer (has been) exciting, fulfilling, challenging, varied, and never dull! Every day throws up a new adventure or challenge: trying to fit 8 bags of kit and 6 scythes in the back of a 3-door ford fiesta, a wasp's nest in the compost loo, a storm blown tree fallen on top of the compost loo, further gales or freezing temperatures forecast, and taxi drivers unable to find their way to a field gate. We have all enjoyed developing rich partnerships with the AONB's, site owners and wonderful guest facilitators. We have also enjoyed deepening our own nature connectedness and our relationships with the sites we have worked at, being part of those places and seeing them change over time and throughout the seasons – and, we're eternally grateful for all of the wonderful wildlife that comes out during the sessions to hold us in awe and wonder: an adder basking in the January sunshine, a roe deer fawn hidden in the grass, a ginormous oil beetle walking over the session plan.

It has at times been difficult witnessing and attempting to support participants when they are struggling, especially when we have limited capacity to support them as we would like and have to observe the limitations of an overstretched social care system. However, it has also been an incredible privilege to observe some of those participants transform, increasing in confidence and living rich and full lives where nature plays a fundamental role. We have been regularly inspired by the amazingly talented, creative and courageous people we have worked with. Many of them have gone on to do incredible things and to take action for wildlife: transformed their gardens into wildlife habitats; found meaningful nature-based work after long term health problems, homelessness or unemployment; influenced their work places to change practices and policy around the environment and mental health; volunteered with other charities; redirected their career path towards nature recovery; been employed by the project after participating and volunteering, and setting up their own projects! We all feel very fortunate and proud to be part of this amazing project that we wholeheartedly believe in – the power of the reciprocal relationship between people and wider nature to support and transform."

2.4 Kristen Lambert, Project Manager

“Mhairi, Joanna, Hermione, Jen, Amanda, Jade, Jo and all the amazing volunteers, partners and people attending courses made this project shine! Everyone worked incredibly hard to facilitate nature connection courses that engaged, enthused and excited people, working to bring people together to celebrate and connect with each other and the rest of nature in a way that welcomed and included all, giving space for everyone to be themselves and to thrive within a safe and nature focused community with many going on to take further action for nature too.

It has been an absolute pleasure to spend the last 3-4 years with such passionate, warm people who care so deeply about their work. I am so incredibly proud to have worked on the SNC project and for all that we, as a team achieved. I also feel really positive about the future of this work and the opportunities for people of Somerset - as the network of nature and wellbeing providers continues to grow and develop, with health, community and nature based partners working together.’

3 Performance Indicators

Performance Indicator	Groups	Total Number of People
To enable 108 people experiencing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety who live in deprived or isolated communities to access local natural environments to help them more effectively self-manage their mental health		127
To support 20 community group to access the natural environment beyond the life of the project	38	411
To recruit and train 30 volunteer as peer support or specialists to support individuals and local groups over the longer term.		36

*In addition to this we supported Watch to run Community Conservation Action Groups which included training and supporting individuals to take action for nature in their communities and support one another (and others) to do so too.

4 Project Partners

Alongside our National Landscape Project Partners on the Blackdown, Mendip and Quantock Hills, we worked with well over 50 inspirational local partners, many of which are listed below.

4.1 Day and Residential Support Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities

Project Partners	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
My Days Chilton Trinity	Nature Connection sessions
My Days Conquest Centre	Nature Connection sessions
Sweet Surprise	Nature Connection sessions
Ups and Downs (Children and Young People)	Nature Connection sessions
Green Days Day Care	Nature connection sessions
Discovery	Training for staff, nature connection events
Orchard Vale Trust	Various online and in person nature connection sessions

4.2 Mental Health Organisations

Project Partner	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
Mind - Bridgwater Art Group	Nature Connection training session for staff
Mind in Wellington Art Group	Nature Connection sessions with group
NHS (Various teams across the county)	Referrals
Health Connections Team Mendip	Referrals training for staff
Homes and Horizons (supporting young people)	Training for staff
Second Step	Referrer
Watch Project	Nature Connection sessions, training and referrals
Somerset Recovery College	Nature Connection Courses/Promotion through network
Open Mental Health	Locality Meetings, sharing learning helping to promote sessions
Rethink	

4.3 Other Health/Social Care Organisations

Project Partner	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
Diverse	Supported a volunteer to work when them to pilot nature connections sessions at Bishops Palace.
Somerset Sight	Nature connection sessions with group
Arc Inspire	General advice and support – linking up with existing community nature connection settings and projects
Yeovil for Families	Nature connection training for staff
Somerset Sports and Activities Partnership	Led training for them, referring partner, general link
Welcome Hub (CHARIS, Taunton)	Facilitated Sessions with those supporting

4.4 Local Nature/Wildlife Projects and/or Land Owners

Project Partner	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
Satori Retreat	Facilitated sessions from site
Neroche Woodlanders	Facilitated sessions from site, led summer sessions for us when we were without a Blackdown Hills Officer and received funding as part of our Discovery Grant for accessible facilities including an accessible compost loo
Woodland Play Centre	Facilitated sessions from site
A Patch Wilder	Facilitated sessions from site
Park Farm	Facilitated sessions from site
New Haven Coppice	Facilitated sessions from site
Earthlight Herbs	Facilitated sessions from site
Alfoxton Park	Facilitated sessions from site
Folly Farmyard	Facilitated sessions from site

Project Partner	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
Bishops Palace	Facilitated sessions from this site, engagement staff attended Nature Connections training with Natural Academy and continued with nature connection sessions throughout the project.
National Trust	Workshop leads and facilitated sessions from sites.
Paddington Farm	Facilitated sessions from this site, engagement staff attended Nature Connections training with Natural Academy and continued with nature connection sessions throughout the project.

4.5 Other Partners

Project Partner	Type of Engagement/ Relationship
Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme	Workshop leads, partnered lots of work on the Quantock Hills, we supported with running walks as part of their programme of events.
Natural England	Information sharing and support
The Arts Quarter/Ink Jam	Workshop Leads and Final Celebration Event Collaborators
Natural Academy	Provided us with training, support and guidance throughout the first 3 years of the project.
Somerset Art Works	Collaborated on Nature Connections Community Project
Osprey Outdoors	Collaborated on Nature Connections Community Sessions
Taunton and Bridgwater College	Nature Connection Community Sessions

5 Volunteering

We recorded;

- 3595 Volunteer hours
- This included a mixture skilled volunteers and professional volunteers. Equating to the approximate value of £46,364.20

In February 2024 the SNC team hosted two half day sessions for SWT Volunteers from different projects and sectors to come and hear about the project and promote nature connections more broadly. There were some practical elements to the day with people thinking about tree ID through the pathway 'Meaning' as well as a chance to experiencing a nature-based grounding. Over 25 people came in total and despite it being an extremely cold day – there was lots of positive feedback about nature connection and how elements could be brought into other volunteering opportunities at SWT.

6 Weekly Courses

We ran 46 courses, 280 sessions, over 1120 hours

Weekly Course Attendees:

- Blackdown Hills 39
- Mendip Hills 42
- Quantock Hills 46

7 Community Groups and Training

We worked with 38 community groups, over 113 sessions working with 411 people. These were either nature connection sessions for those attending the community group/setting or nature connection training/upskilling sessions for staff/volunteers of those community groups.



7.1 Year 1 Community Groups

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/Partners
Orchard Vale Trust - Online Group	3	20	10
Orchard Vale Trust Group 1	3	5	3
Orchard Vale Trust Group 2	3	2	1
Orchard Vale Trust Group 3	3	5	2
Orchard Vale Trust Group 4	3	3	2
Community Garden	4	4	0
Somerset Recovery College	4	5	1
Totals	23	44	19

7.2 Year 2 Community Groups

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/Partners
Somerset Sight Taunton	3	6	2
Bishops Palace Winter Wellbeing Group, Wells	3	6	1
Thriving Communities – Somerset Art Works and Mind, Wellington	10	14	3
Mind in Somerset, Bridgwater Art Group	3	7	2
Osprey Outdoors, Burnham/Highbridge	6	7	2
Sweet Surprise, Ilminster	3	5	4
My Days, Chilton Trinity	6	6	3
Earthlight Herbs	3	14	2

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/Partners
ArcInspire (not direct delivery)	2	2	2
Totals	39	67	21

7.3 Year 3 Community Groups

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/Partners
CHARIS Welcome Hub Art Group	3	14	3
Ups and Downs	3	6	2
CHARIS Bridgwater Group	2	18	2
Homes and Horizons (TRAINING)	1	5	1
Taunton and Bridgwater College (wellbeing group)	3	2	2
Greendays Day Care	3	5	2
Wellbeing Walks – Mendip	1	6	1

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/Partners
WATCH Project – Community Conservation Action Groups (Yeovil, Taunton, Chard)	3	14	3
Wellbeing Walks –Quantock	3	6	2
Discovery Training/Wellbeing Day (TRAINING)	2	18	2
Mendip Farmers Group Training	1	5	1
The Space Allotment Summer sessions	3	2	2
Ark at Egwood and Yeovil for families	3	5	2
My Days Conquest Group	3	9	1
Totals	37	198	44

7.4 Year 4 Community Groups

Group	No. of sessions	No. of Participants	No. External Staff/ Partners
Independent Carers Online Nature Connection Session	1	12	1
School Staff Nature Connections Training	3	15	1
Diverse Nature Connection Course	6	10	2
Wellbeing Walks (on the Mendip)	7	14	1
Wellbeing Walks (on the Quantocks)	2	12	1

Wellbeing Walks (on the Blackdown Hills)	2	10	2
EFSOOL Groups from Somerset College	7	15	1
Neroche Woodlanders (led summer Nature Connection Courses on Blackdown Hills)	6	14	1
TOTALS	34	102	10

**See Appendix One for Neroche Woodlanders Report.*

7.5 Community Project Totals

Groups	Number of Sessions	Number of People	Number of Partners
38	133	411	94 (some repeats)

8 Project Legacy

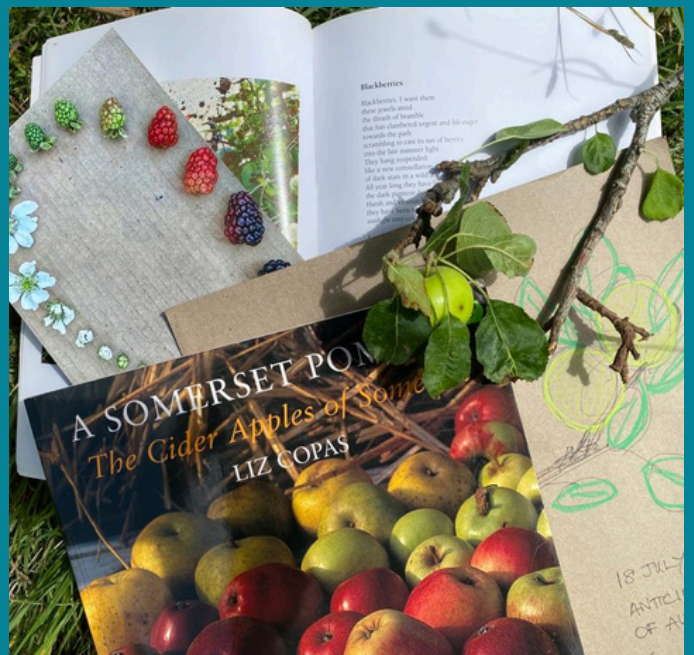
8.1 National Landscapes

'The team have convinced us of the need to build this into our core work and hopefully provide a true legacy'

'Looking forward to continued partnership working and delivering a great legacy from SNC in Mendip'

8.1.1 Blackdown National Landscapes

Blackdown Hills National Landscape are currently in the process of securing a contractor to deliver on a year long piece of Nature Connection Work which includes working with Farmers/Landowners to develop sites for Nature Connection Activity, as well as working with other community partners to engage people/groups into nature connection opportunities on and around the Blackdown Hills. The Contract will run between 2024-2025 with hopes for future Nature Connection/Nature and Wellbeing work to continue beyond the project.



8.1.2 Mendip Hills National Landscape

Mendip Hills National Landscape team have worked hard to secure external funding for a year long piece of work with Integrated Care Board in North Somerset and Farming In Protected Landscapes Panel (FiPL) and will combine a focus on work engaging communities in Weston-super-Mare in Nature Connection activity with working with farmers and land owners to share their spaces with others who can benefit from nature connection activities. The interviews for this post have taken place with Mhairi Cornish (formerly Mendip SNC Officer) successfully securing this role (0.6 Project Officer). The Mendip team continue to work in partnership with the Quantock Team to secure funding for continued Nature Connection work beyond the year. One of our match funders, Hinkley Point Community Fund are still in conversation with us about this, as potential ongoing funders for work along the Somerset Coast (Sedgemoor, West Somerset, North Somerset).

8.1.3 Quantock Hills National Landscape

Quantock Hills National Landscape team still have the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme running until Spring 2025. There was a position available within the team for this final year of the project. Because of the partnership work with SNC the team wanted this role to include a continued Nature Connection focus to ensure partnerships with health, social care and community partners are still nurtured. Former SNC Quantock officer Joanna Hicks successfully secured this role (0.8 Project Officer Role) and started work mid-April 2024.

8.2 Somerset Wildlife Trust

Somerset Wildlife Trust have made a commitment to continuing with 'Nature and Wellbeing' work but want to ensure that future work fits with the 'Team Wilder' approach of the rest of our engagement team. This focus is on Community Organising – supporting communities to connect and take action for nature in a way that's right for and led by them. After working on a bid at the end of the project it has just been confirmed that we have 3 years of funding for a part time (0.8) Wellbeing Officer who will form part of our engagement/Team Wilder team focusing on supporting communities and groups to bring nature connection activity into their day to day work/lives.

8.3 Nature Connection and previously Under-Represented Groups

The way the SNC team worked with individuals and community groups with a focus on Nature Connection rather than knowledge/education based engagement has influenced how many engagement colleagues at SWT and National Landscape partners work – with a focus on using the 5 pathways to establish these connections. There was also a recognition that in order to reach those we previously haven't been reaching – we need to understand the different entry points people have in terms of taking action for nature/nature connection. This influence has also extended beyond the engagement team – with the SNC team inspiring colleagues across the organisation to do more in terms of Equality/Diversity and reach. Our Visitor Experience Officer on the Somerset Levels for example, now has a very specific remit to ensure underrepresented groups are supported and encouraged to find spaces of connection on and around our reserves in this area of the county. Similarly SWTs Volunteering offer has already started to work on ensuring volunteering opportunities around Nature Connection continue to be available.

8.4 Mental Health

Mental Health is also something that has become more of a focus internally across all partners, in terms of supporting colleagues and those we are working with. This is something that continues to develop with support from the Wilder Lives and Engagement Team at SWT as well as the People, Culture and Resources team. In the last 6 months of the project we ran a final Mental Health First Aid Training course with Staff and Volunteers from SNC and other teams attending. Our hope is that this will support the continued Nature Wellbeing/Nature Connection work beyond the project, internally and within communities (via Volunteers).

8.5 Volunteer Pathways

There have been some wonderful stories of successful volunteer pathways throughout the project including:

- Project attendees going on to register as SWT (and sometimes National Landscape) Volunteers as a direct result of being part of the Nature Connections Course
 - 2 volunteers became paid members of SWT staff.
 - Many volunteers went on to facilitate sessions/parts of sessions with a key skill they have (for example, crafts, ID knowledge, games, physical activity)
 - Volunteers have gone on to study Nature/climate/ecology focussed subjects at college/university/other further education opportunities such a 'Ambios' training.
 - Volunteers have set up their own nature connections projects (some with a specific focus like Mental Health or Neurodiversity or Forest Schools for children/young people– **(See Case Study at Appendix Two)**).
 - Since the Project ended some volunteers (and previous participants) have continued to get involved in SWT and National Landscape volunteering for nature, wildlife and community including:
 - Nature Based Community Carve Evenings at The Arts Quarter (to finish a collaborative lino cut that will be printed on folk banners as part of a wider Arts Project
 - Supporting with the Apex Park Eco Festival
 - Volunteering on Somerset's Coast as part of SWT Brilliant Coast Project
 - Urban Nature Connection Gardening and Wellbeing Volunteer Lead in Taunton
 - Joining SWT Youth Forum as a young volunteer.
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8.7 Green Social Prescribing Somerset

Throughout the project we have continued to work with delivery partners through the Somerset Nature and Wellbeing Practitioner Group and strategic partners through the Local Nature Partnership Nature and Wellbeing Sub Group (led by Sophie Burns). We work closely with NHS partners as well as Somerset's Integrated Care Board (ICB) and continue to be in conversation with Somerset's Social Prescribing Working group at the ICB. As well as this we have developed links with a group of NHS staff in Taunton/West Somerset and Sedgemoor who are very keen to further embed Nature Connection in their mental health and wellbeing practices at Foundation House and other settings. We are planning to continue to support their work in different ways including possibly training/providing locations for sessions/meetings and 121s etc.

The Nature and Wellbeing film that the SNC team worked on with Sophie Burns and Public Health in Somerset has had 1.1k views on the Somerset Wildlife Trust You Tube Channel and the events that launched it sparked a great deal of interest and discussion around next steps to ensure the importance of this work is recognised and supported to continue in Somerset. We hope that film continues to inspire and be used to support Green Social Prescribing to become embedded in Somerset's health and wellbeing offers.

9 Evaluation

9.1 Meaningful Measures

In order to bring the evaluation of this project together we commissioned external Monitoring and Evaluation organisation Meaningful Measures to support us. Using a range of evaluation methods, including Nature Connections Index (NCI), Wellbeing Wheel, Focus Groups and Creative Evaluation methods we collected data throughout the project to support this. **(See Meaningful Measures Report at Appendix Three)**

9.2 Assessment of Evaluation Tools

The team had the opportunity to try out and reflect on different evaluation tools throughout the project. It wasn't easy to capture the real success stories of the project and Creative Evaluation techniques were used to do this including photographs, case studies, stories, art work, videos and audios. These methods were preferred as a team and contributed to Meaningful Measures data analysis. In terms of the more formal data collection tools here are the teams reflections;

- Practically, it was often tricky to ask questions in outdoor settings especially using paper. I think if we were to do this again, we may also try to have a tablet available to use for those who prefer this method (to writing). This way this could link up directly to a spreadsheet/database to capture data as it comes in.
 - Time consuming as we often sat and did Wellbeing Wheels/NCI on a 121 basis with people. People were generally OK about completing these forms and recognised that this was necessary due to the funding etc/this being a free course.
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- Concerns about NCI when we started to use it as often people would score highly initially and have nowhere to go – despite telling us that they had found deeper connections to nature on the course.
 - We had the opportunity to use Meaningful Measures MYCaW (MYCaW® - Meaningful Measures - The home of MYCaW® and MYMOP®), in addition to the other methods used. After much discussion as a team we decided not too. This was largely because it was felt unnecessary to ask those attending courses any further questions about their wellbeing and possibly that it wasn't quite right for the type of project we were running (largely focused on nature connection/taking action for nature).

10 Budget

(See Final Expenditure Spreadsheet 2023-24 at Appendix Four)

Total Project Spend was **£555,346** – with a small underspend of approximately £2202. We have agreed that this will be returned to the National Landscapes Teams (split between the 3 teams) who financially supported the extension between November 2023-March 2024 on top of the National Lottery carry forward.

11 Celebration Event

In March 2024 we organised a celebration event for people who had attended, volunteered on or provided workshops for our weekly course groups. We held the event at Fyne Court on the Quantock Hills and over 45 people attended. We were supported on the day by project partners Quantock Hills National Landscape and the Landscape Partnership Scheme as well as the National Trust. We celebrated the project's successes together with lots of tea and cake, beautiful walks, creative workshops led by partners at Ink Jam in Cheddar as well as plenty of time for reflections and talk to those we hadn't seen for some time. A collaborative Lino Cut was designed prior to the event but one cohort in Mendip and everyone had the chance to contribute to the final Lino Cut which will produce a SNC print when complete (community carve nights continue as it's a large piece with lots of detail). It was an extremely joyous celebration with many making people also taking the time to share feedback on camera or via audio to our colleagues in the Communications team at SWT **(Appendix Five for Dropbox video/audio files)**
