

Big Chalk Vision – Initial Long Version

(Updated with revised introduction and map November 2022)

1. Introduction

This version of the Big Chalk vision was developed by the first Big Chalk partners throughout 2020 and 2021. Although it describes what we initially felt Big Chalk could and should do we recognise that it is overlong and needs more work. We look forward to further refining it with a much wider group of partners.

Big Chalk offers significant progress against the delivery of government policies concerning nature recovery, including the creation or restoration of 500,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat and protecting 30% of UK land to support nature recovery by 2030.

Big Chalk will deliver much more than nature recovery. It is a holistic approach that also addresses climate change adaptation and mitigation and the delivery of ecosystem services through nature based solutions. It is reaching towards a new economic model that does all of these things whilst creating and sustaining livelihoods.

The purpose of this note is to describe the Big Chalk idea and vision. It does not however, describe how Big Chalk will be made a reality. There are already several proposals that start to outline Big Chalk projects and activities and the intention is that there will be many more, all part of a wider Big Chalk programme and working towards this common vision. Making this vision a reality will entail working in partnership with a wide array of stakeholders at regional, landscape, local, and farm and field levels. We are now seeking partners that share this vision to join us

2. The Vision

Big Chalk is a big idea aiming to realise one of the best opportunities to achieve nature recovery and help wildlife adapt to climate change offered by the English landscape. It will also deliver an array of public goods including; sustainable employment and products, carbon sequestration, water quality, flood management, soil stabilisation and public health and wellbeing.

Big Chalk is a visionary scheme focussed on the calcareous landscapes (chalk and limestone) running from the south coast to the midlands. Due to their history and the character of the underlying geology these landscapes have a greater variety of species than any other in the UK. Their species rich habitats, when combined, will enable the most species to recover and adapt to climate change. These are woodland edge, scrub and grassland in a mosaic combined at a landscape scale with arable, woodland, chalk streams and rivers.

Big Chalk has the primary objective of building a robust nature recovery network on a geographical scale greater than the usual local authority or even regional boundaries. It will be achieved through transforming these landscapes by the application of the Lawton principles at a hitherto unimagined scale. This is also about securing our valued characteristic calcareous species and assemblages and increasing their abundance. If we fail in this task there will be an unprecedented loss of wildlife abundance, populations and even species.

The Big Chalk vision is one of a wildlife rich landscape where grassland, arable and woodland areas are knitted together in a landscape scale mosaic. New and restored wildflower grasslands, scrub, small naturally regenerating woodland and marginal habitats, all link existing habitats that are well managed, extended and in good condition.

Arable areas will be managed to enhance permeability for wildlife, and incorporate measures for farmland birds and arable plants, reduce environmental impacts, support ecosystem services and adopt climate-resilient, regenerative techniques.

Grassland areas will be sustainably managed through extensive and collaborate grazing systems including some areas where natural processes are allowed to play a greater role. Such grazing will deliver financially viable employment and livelihoods, opportunities for enterprise diversification through green tourism, outstanding animal welfare standards and products and other public goods including carbon sequestration, water quality, flood management and stabilised soils.

In places, the current binary land management choice of woods and trees or grassland and shrubs will be replaced with an extensively grazed complex mosaic. As a result these areas will look, feel and function in a very different way. Not quite the restoration of the sheep walks that created and maintained them for millennia but new modern dynamic multipurpose landscapes where in some places, the echo of the ancient sheepwalks can still be recognised.

Big Chalk landscapes will be places where the human and natural elements are both valued and mutually beneficial. In addition to creating a robust nature recovery network their management will protect and enhance their landscape character and historical and cultural heritage. Aspects of the landscape which are critically important for both the local economy and their delivery of health and wellbeing benefits.

Collaboration with and between actively engaged and inspired farmers and landowners is a key underpinning ingredient. People managing the land will be listened to and supported. Farm businesses will find new ways of working together and sustaining themselves following the phasing out of basic payments and the opportunities offered by ELM will be maximised to the benefit of wildlife, the environment and land based businesses.

These landscapes will be places where there is a deep engagement with local people and visitors. People will find that these places offer the best opportunities for accessing the mental and physical health benefits of a natural environment and they will in turn support these landscapes through a myriad of ways including purchasing products, volunteering and novel ways of engaging with businesses. Engagement through volunteering will also involve citizen science linked to amongst other things the recording of habitats and key species.

3. Project Area

The Big Chalk programme area is enormous covering some 24,867 sq. km with a north south reach of 215 km. It was derived following extensive stakeholder consultation by adding a 1km buffer to areas with calcareous soils. (Defined as soils rated as high or variable high for carbonate content within the British Geological Survey, UK Soil Observatory Soil Parent Material Model).

