

Introduction

The Community Heritage Initiative (CHI) was a five-year programme to help Leicestershire and Rutland residents, of all ages, learn about, appreciate, explore and conserve the area's natural and wider heritage.

The programme, based in Leicestershire County Council's Environment and Heritage Service's Historic and Natural Environment Team, was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant in October 2003, with a programme team commencing at the start of February 2004, completing at the end of November 2008.

The HLF grant award was for £516,000 towards the predicted programme costs of £598,000. CHI also received financial support from Leicestershire County Council and Rutland County Council.

Project aims and outcomes for CHI

1. Encourage communities to record, document and archive records and then work to safeguard wildlife habitat and landscape features that have been identified as locally important.
2. Make heritage studies relevant at the local level and raise awareness of local countryside heritage by means of accessible literature, information and training.
3. Achieve community understanding and frameworks for active involvement.

To deliver the aims outlined above, the CHI required three key activity areas:

- *awareness raising and reaching new audiences*
- *skills development and recording natural history*
- *provision of information*

Awareness raising and reaching new audiences

Spotlight on CHI - Interest Generated: Locally and Nationally

Over the life of CHI, the team:

- issued nearly 350 media releases and 35 monthly articles to village newsletters. Over 20% of enquiries to CHI has been identified as being a result of this media coverage;
- distributed nearly 6,200 publications by post, plus a further 25,000 copies of the programme's quarterly newsletter, Branchline. All publications were also available online, increasing availability;
- assisted over 9,200 enquiries;
- gave 50 talks to community groups (including WIs, local history and natural history groups, students on the DMU Arts and Heritage degree, gardening clubs, University of the Third of Age) with a total audience of over 2,000 people;
- gave talks at 30 heritage/conservation based forum and Parish Council meetings;
- supported enquiries from national natural history, local government, heritage and professional journals, focussing on the work of the programme;
- was a finalist in two national awards in 2008, being Highly Commended in the Sustainable Communities Award for our level of community engagement.

Engaging Young People

Due to the declining membership of young people within natural history organisations, the CHI was established with a remit to deliver six broader heritage projects, working with, and attracting 400 young people.

The programme actually engaged 1,600 young people, through 13 free projects, literature and events. Some of these have been smaller scale and short term, whilst others like the Wild About pack (a family based themed activity publication) has a lasting legacy. The latter is available on the County Council website and has attracted 99,000 downloads of the 13 sections.

Supporting Local Activity

Heritage and wildlife interest is ultimately conserved or lost at the local level. CHI has therefore continued to support local projects run by Heritage Groups, Parish Council's, Parish Plan Groups and community groups. The team ran many community information events, such as the open days at Holly Hayes, exhibitions and attending local events.

CHI worked with the Leicestershire and Rutland Federation of Women's Institutes (WI) to submit an HLF and other applications (totalling £55,000) and develop the subsequent project for a new wild flower survey for 2007. This was developed with the support of local conservation agencies, and targeted 12 species that are used as good indicators of wildlife habitats. The data gathered is being added to records at Holly Hayes and fed into strategies such as the local Biodiversity Habitat Action Plans.

Heritage Wardens

Heritage Wardens are parish-based community volunteers, who help gather information about the natural and landscape heritage of their local area. Their role is supported by the local parish council. Heritage Wardens help monitor and conserve the heritage of Leicestershire and Rutland's countryside and biodiversity. CHI worked with Heritage Wardens in 67% parishes, leaving an active network in 53% of Leicestershire and Rutland parishes with 200 volunteers. (Two parishes support the scheme in writing, but have too few houses to have a Warden). Regular reviews of the network has uncovered a wealth of work at the parish level, with Wardens establishing new groups, helping with parish websites, promoting heritage news, undertaken studies and 24% of Wardens in 2006 were involved in raising funds directly for local projects.

Creative recording

CHI aimed to attract new people by highlighting the importance and relevance of natural heritage to our daily lives, not just through the science of natural history, but also by creative and informal recording.

From May 2007 through to July 2008, 60 sessions were run, with just under 400 attendees. Events included partnerships with the Adult Learning Service and Library Services for training sessions, which encourage people to record and celebrate nature in different creative ways. Topics have included digital photography, writing poetry, themed heritage trails, botanical drawing, sketching, landscape/tree drawing, creating inspired artworks from the natural environment (abstract and

printing), map making, paper and book making, as well as use of ICT. Sessions were run by Heritage Wardens, beginner tutors, lecturers and creative practitioners.

Skills Development and Recording Natural History Training

Over the five years CHI has run 162 courses/lectures on heritage and natural history topics, with nearly 2,200 attendees. (This excludes the additional Creative Nature courses and attendees.) This free training was promoted through a CHI tailored publication/programme, departmental events guide and the local media and was held across the two counties, at various times of the day and week to allow maximum opportunities for uptake. Topics were often developed following feedback, which always asked people to identify new skills they would like to develop, or ideas of topics that could be cascaded throughout communities.

Links to Collections

Over five years, CHI has promoted and supported the development of museum collections for use by members of the public, young people, and natural history groups. The natural history collections, managed by the Environment and Heritage Service, are a valuable resource that remains underused by community and recorder groups at present. CHI used them for inspiration, identification training and practical training in collection care.

CHI invested in redisplaying specimens, creating new collections (such as an osteological collection), new educational trays, and travelling cases to promote the collections in library and tourist venues.

Supporting Societies and Naturalists

The CHI team worked with 8 natural history groups to recruit new recorders, develop skills and generate data of relevance to the local Biodiversity Action Plan and LERC data users. This was done through supporting training in identification or habitat recording, publications, assisting the creation of websites and developing new surveys such as Butterfly Bounty and Spawnsport.

CHI also assisted the County Recording networking by developing new networking opportunities, such as a County Recorders' conference, training in recording packages, co-ordinating the Nature Conservation Forum and undertaking detailed needs analysis for these volunteers.

Finally, CHI celebrated this work through the production of a display on the work of local naturalists and in developing a new archive of oral histories of over 30 county naturalists about their work and inspiration from the natural world.

Provision of Information

Spreading the conservation and heritage message

CHI has maintained a quarterly newsletter, annual reports and developed an extensive website at www.leics.gov.uk/celebratingwildlife. This has received just under 77,000 page visits between February 2004 and November 2008 (this does not include downloads). All project summaries and publications are available online.

In addition to Wild About pack, there were downloads totalling:

- just under 2,500 for the butterfly identification sheet,

- just under 4,500 hedgerow survey forms,
- Just over 3,300 for the ladybird fact sheets,
- Just under 2,500 ladybird identification keys,
- just over 3,000 for the leaflet on how to age trees.

CHI also developed an interface on the website where people can access information on wildlife records held locally about wildlife sites. This led to developments within the National Biodiversity Network and was a first for working with a local authority in this way.

Networking and sharing by example

Each year, the team has organised a successful Countryside Heritage Conference with attendance from a range of conservation and heritage groups, individuals, Wardens and representatives of community museums. Every year many of those attending have brought along community displays and publications. Many of the presentations are from Wardens, and local groups sharing experiences and ideas. It also brings many elements of Environment and Heritage together to share opportunities with the wider public.

Heritage Recording and Surveys, and data returned

- Over 900 participants or literature requests for natural history society projects and over 1,700 requests for literature relating to key Biodiversity Action Plan habitat and species surveys have been dealt with by the team,
- CHI has assisted communities in identifying new possible County Wildlife Sites including over 100 ancient trees,
- CHI has collated over 30,000 wildlife records through the life of the programme. These have all been fed into the planning processes. This includes over 3,000 records for the new ladybird survey and nearly 15,500 records for the Butterfly Bounty survey.

As well as meeting or exceeding all of the original aims and outcomes of CHI, all of this work has:

..... developed new community champions, new partnerships and met new community agendas.

The work of the programme will continue being supported across County Council services, leaving a lasting legacy of community supported action within the environment and heritage field.



All packs and surveys are free to download and the programme has also developed a comprehensive web resource at www.leics.gov.uk/celebratingwildlife