

Annual Report

Lower Mole Countryside Trust



Report of the Board of the Lower Mole Countryside Trust for the year ended 31st August 2025

Introduction

This is the twenty-third annual report produced by the Lower Mole Countryside Trust and covers the period 1st September 2024 to 31st August 2025.

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust is a company limited by guarantee, company no 4454401 and is a registered charity, number 1095771.

The registered office is 2 West Park Farmhouse, Horton Country Park, Horton Lane, Epsom KT19 8PL.

Its charitable objects are:

- 1) To advance the education of the public on matters connected with countryside management within and around the Boroughs of Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Kingston upon Thames and the District of Mole Valley (north of Dorking) and such other areas as the charity may from time to time decide.
- (2) To promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment and promote the management of the countryside, wildlife habitats and characteristic landscapes by supporting, promoting and improving public access to the countryside, promoting the participation of the public in countryside management and supporting conservation projects and programmes within the area of benefit.

The Mission Statement is 'to support the provision of a high quality

countryside management service for north Surrey and Kingston upon Thames for the benefit of landscape, wildlife and people’.

Activities and Achievements

Board Meetings

Five board meetings have been held in the reporting period. These in the main have concentrated on the formal business normally associated with boards such as membership applications, considering grant applications, financial reports and forward planning.

Business Plan

At the last AGM, the objectives for the year were as follows:

- Keep under review and update as necessary the various governance documents to ensure the smooth running of the Trust and compliance with legislation;
- Design the Trust’s new website to make it more appealing to potential new funders, trustees and members;
- Increase the size of the Board by attracting new trustees with particular skills such as marketing and publicity;
- Increase the level of funding that can be offered for conservation projects and, in particular, to provide a greater level of long-term funding by exploring projects that could be attractive to commercial funding partners.
- Improve the Trust’s administration by ensuring compliance with legislation and Cloud access for trustees to governance documents.

Statement of Relationship

Relationships with organisations with which the Trust co-operates:

Lower Mole Partnership: The Lower Mole Partnership hosts the Trust by providing office space, meeting rooms and computing

facilities at 2 West Park Farmhouse, Horton Country Park, Horton Lane, Epsom KT19 8PL. The time the staff who are employed by the Partnership spend on work for the Trust is donated by the Partnership.

Bankers: CafBank Ltd, Kings Hill, West Malling, Kent, ME19 4TA;

This year the Trust celebrated the 23rd year since it was established as a charity.

Since then it has distributed nearly £250,000 to over 150 different projects.

Policies and Protocols

Ensuring that the work of the Trust is compliant with current legislation is an important part of the work of the Trustees. The following policy documents have been reviewed or updated: Grant Handling Policy, Recruitment Policy for trustees, Investment Policy and GDPR Policy. In addition, work is underway to ensure that the Trust is GDPR compliant with the rationalisation of our Membership list and review of historical records and paperwork. The Board is also adhering to the Charity Commission's new requirements for trustees from November 2025 to verify their identities.

The Trust continues to bank with CAF Bank. The Bank overhauled its web access for customers in the summer of 2025, a process that was not without its problems. Since then, issues of access for the Trust have been resolved and our distribution of grants was not unduly impacted. Further improvements are planned by the Bank that should further improve the interface with customers, including the Trust.

Publicity and Promotion

Publicly available information about the Trust and its work is important to maintain a positive public profile, but it needs to be kept updated. This is another aspect of the work of the Trustees. Modifications continue to be made to the content of the website in the wake of the updated printed material. However, a decision was made to overhaul the website completely. The Trustees have been working with a local designer to redesign the website to make it more

attractive, accessible and user-friendly.

The Trust's newsletter, '*Mole Matters*', continues to be produced twice a year. For ease of distribution, it is now available on the website and circulated electronically to our updated membership list. *Mole Matters* contains information on projects undertaken by partners and supported by the Trust. In the last year, features included conservation work on sites such as Epsom Common, Rye Meadows, Ashted and Ashted Common. Articles also highlight species and habitat protection and there have been articles on water voles and hedgerows.

Current and Future Funding

The Trustees are keen to increase our funding base. This has been a longstanding priority of the business plan, but the task of finding a suitable donor or donors that would provide us with a dependable source of funding for a period of 2 to 3 years or more and would be a suitable fit with our ethos continues.

Nevertheless, the Trust does benefit from funding from a variety of organisations. The partnership with the City of London Corporation (CoLC) continues with a grant of £14,955 (spread over three years) for work undertaken by the Lower Mole Partnership on Ashted Common to carry out a Coppicing for Dormice project. The Trust received £2,857 of this towards the end of our financial year. We were also grateful for one-off funding from TK Maxx Homesense Foundation and the Manor Park Residents' Association.

The Trustees continue to work on sources of grant funding. A legacy leaflet has been drafted for those that might consider leaving a legacy to the Trust in their will. The Trustees continue to believe that funding for specific projects, with a defined timescale and clear set of outcomes, offers the most likely source of commercial sponsorship. Ideas mentioned have included: an apprenticeship scheme and community outreach officer to encourage greater involvement in countryside volunteering, particularly from groups that do not traditionally get involved.

The Trust is exploring a project with a private donor and Epsom and Ewell Borough Council to establish a long-term programme of

coppicing in Horton Country Park. It is intended that this will ultimately be self-sustaining. The funding model is a new one for the Trust and involves some careful planning. If it is successful it has the potential to benefit the biodiversity of the area and, in particular improve the habitat for the hazel dormouse.

The work currently underway to update the content and visual appearance to the Trust's website should assist in any fundraising work. As stated in last year's annual report, improvements to the Trust's website will provide a professional face to potential funders and the public and help to support our fundraising efforts. But it will also assist those who wish to make grant applications for conservation projects. The cost of employing a web designer to undertake this work is anticipated to be in the region of £2,000.

Organisation

A further priority for The Trust is to increase the number of Trustees. We are pleased to announce that David Page joined the Board in the summer. His knowledge of local sites and wildlife will be of great assistance to the Board. However, we would welcome additional trustees, particularly where they have experience in areas such as fundraising and social media for example. The Board is still seeking a Membership Secretary. The Board uses volunteer bureaux to advertise for new trustees, but personal approaches can be a more effective recruitment tool. Members of the Trust are encouraged to suggest people who might be suitable trustees.

Finance

The Trust had both reduced income and expenditure compared to 2023/24. The end result was a small income surplus of £871. The Trust received less income from large donors. Most of the expenditure related to the charitable funding provided for the work on Ashted Common.

The small surplus meant that we were able to slightly increase our reserves. Most reserves continue to be invested in a savings account with the CAF Bank, earning 2.5% interest at the year end.

Membership

The number of subscribing members at the end of this year was 44, including 34 individuals, 7 senior citizens, and 3 groups. Two newsletters, Mole Matters, were sent to members, one in November 2024 and one in May 2025.

Projects and Grants

The following projects were supported by the Board during the year:

Provision of tools

Grants were awarded to the Lower Mole Partnership for the provision of a range of tools; a new CAT (Cable Avoidance Tool) and Genny to allow the team to safely find underground cables when digging, silky pull saws for volunteers to use when cutting scrub, a splitting axe to allow an additional person to split firewood generated by the volunteer task teams woodland work, plus a router, battery circular saw and battery sander to help the volunteers produce signs and way markers for their partners.

Another grant for the Partnership funded knee pads and kneeling pads to protect the volunteers' knees whilst hedge laying.



CAT in use



Battery Circular saw in use

Climate Resilience on Ashtead Common NNR

In autumn 2024 the Lower Mole Partnership carried out the second years' work to create fire breaks on Ashtead Common National Nature Reserve, funded by a grant from the City of London Corporation to the Lower Mole Countryside Trust.



One of the firebreaks created on Ashtead Common

Hedge Planting

The Trust jointly funded with the London branch of CPRE work by volunteers to plant 350 metres of new hedge at Rushett Farm.



Lower Mole volunteers hedge planting on Rushett Farm

Brush cutter training

A grant was awarded to the Lower Mole Partnership for brush cutter training for volunteers, the course took place later in 2025.

Charity Trustees

Chairman Rodney Shaw

Company Secretary Sarah Clayton

Treasurer/Membership Secretary Martin Owen

Member of the Board Alan Sherren

Member of the Board Helen Cocker

Member of the Board Dawn Fielding

Member of the Board David Page