



NEWSLETTER

April to June 2026

Open Country is a charitable organisation (1107331) which enables anyone with a disability to access and enjoy the countryside, through the provision of outdoor activities and information.

"Money doesn't talk. It swears". That's one of my favourite Bob Dylan lines. True, the pursuit of money can blind us to the things that really matter in life, but you don't half miss it when it's gone!

Regrettably, the last year has been extremely hard on Open Country's precious finances and sadly, to restore sustainability, we have been forced to reduce our staff team by over 40%. We thank Ellie Rawden, Fiona Richardson and Simon Pedley for their support whilst with us and wish them all the best for the future. Other staff members have changed their roles or are working on reduced hours.

The result of these measures is that:

- Face-to-face work on Teesside has stopped. Activities have ceased, the Teesside office is closed and we have no staff presence there.
- Our Wakefield Hub will be run by a part-time Project Officer, Ella Dixon.
- We have reduced our fundraising and communications staffing in the Harrogate Office and a full-time Countryside Activities staff post will be lost in Harrogate at the end of May, when Mark Kingston retires.

Wherever possible, we have tried to keep our much-loved services going. Sadly, we have had to say goodbye to *Selby Tandems* and *Wakefield Trailblazers*. From the end of May, some of our Harrogate weekday services will merge. *Nature and Natterers* will join with *Harrogate Trailblazers* and *Explorers* will work alongside our *Allotment Group*. We'll also be slightly reducing our weekend offer in both Harrogate and Wakefield. Finally, some charges to members will be increasing with this programme.

It will undoubtedly be a simpler, sleeker Open Country for a while at least, but we hope that these firm measures will right the ship, and that Open Country returns to economic viability. Jonathan Swift wrote "A wise person should have money in their head, but not in their heart." Well, Open Country has always been built on the essential pillars of kindness, compassion and generosity. If we can rediscover that heady blend of head and heart, we will negotiate this difficult hurdle in our charity's history.



David Shaftoe,
Chief Officer

Fundraising News

Goodbye to Fiona and Netty

Thank you and goodbye to Netty Newell and Fiona Richardson, our intrepid fundraisers, who will both leave Open Country in April. We really appreciate your hard work over the last three years.

Vera Pavlova has changed her role to 'Finance & Fundraising Manager'.



'Country' meets Open Country!

Open Country is delighted that, the 'Country Music and Dance Festival' has chosen us as their 'Charity of the Year' for 2026. The 3rd Annual Festival will take place from 2nd - 5th July in Newthorpe, Leeds. If you're heading there to enjoy some great country music, do come and say hello to Open Country - we're planning to have a stall at the festival and would love to meet you and tell you more about our work.

Interested in attending? Please check their website for more information:

<https://www.purecountrymdf.co.uk/>

Glorious Gift Aid

Gift Aid is a government scheme that lets charities like Open Country claim tax relief on the donations that you make to them. How does it work? When you donate to charity, it's usually from your post-tax income. But if you agree to Gift Aid, we can claim back your basic-rate (20%) tax back from HM Revenue & Customs. Essentially, your donation gets a little boost!

To claim Gift Aid on your donation, Open Country will need:

- Your name and address
- You to declare that you pay tax in the UK of an amount at least equal to the amount the charity will claim in Gift Aid on your donation (those who pay no tax shouldn't use the Gift Aid scheme)
- Your signature (or a box ticked if it's online) and the date.

Thank you for donating and thank you even more for gift aiding it!



Spring Flower Show

Open Country is once again taking part in the famous *Harrogate Spring Flower Show*, with a decorative border. Trying to build on last year's success, where our first ever effort earned us three stars, we're creating a border with the theme 'Scents and Sense-ability'.

The aim is to demonstrate how even a small border can be made universally welcoming and engaging, particularly for people with disabilities.

The flowers and plants chosen will be interesting to touch and smell; the colours selected to be more visible to people with visual impairments, and some other elements will bring sound into the design.

We'll also be asking members of our allotment group to help us by painting some rocks as part of the display.

This year, the show organisers have invited us to have an information stand near our border, so it's a brilliant chance to spread the word, and give away some of our leaflets and publications.

With around 40,000 people visiting the show, which takes place at the Showground from April 23rd to 26th, it's blooming wild to think that a few of them will go away knowing a little bit more about Open Country!

Audio walks on demand

If you have a Spotify account, you can now listen to Open Country Audio Walks as a regular podcast. We'll be uploading new walks each month, so do find us and give us a follow!

The first offering gives listeners a chance to accompany Tom as spring comes to the beautiful Yorkshire Valley of Farndale, and encounters a host of golden daffodils.

Audio walks are great for transporting you into the heart of the countryside, if weather, geography or ability means you can't be there in person.

Look for Open Country Yorkshire's Audio Walks on Spotify. We're aiming to make these podcasts available on other streaming services very soon.



Nidderdale Walk 2026

Fancy a great day out whilst also supporting a cause you care about?

The popular Nidderdale Walk, organised by *The Rotary Club of Harrogate*, returns on **Sunday 17th May 2026**, during 'National Walking Month'!

Starting and finishing in Pateley Bridge, you can walk or run through the stunning Nidderdale scenery and raise money for Open Country with every step!

If you'd like to walk for Open Country, we'd love to have you on our team. Just select Open Country as your chosen charity at sign up, and if we can attract 10 or more walkers, a percentage of your entry fee will support our work helping people with disabilities access the countryside.

There are six routes to choose, from 4 miles to 26, or you can join some of our members on the 8-mile route to Bouthwaite and back.

Please note: dogs are not allowed and sadly, none of the routes are suitable for wheelchairs or pushchairs.

Want to raise extra sponsorship for Open Country? Let us know - we can help with tips and advice to boost your fundraising, provide a paper sponsorship form, and tell you how you can pay in any funds you raise! You can enter online via:

<https://www.nidderdalewalk.com/>

Member Survey

"Since I've been coming out with Open Country, my life has changed for the better!"

Believe it or not, we didn't pay someone to write this - it was just one of the many lovely things you told us in our recent members' survey!

We're pleased that the results were mostly very positive.

- 100% of people who responded said they had have fun with Open Country, and felt safe, supported and respected by our charity.
- 97% of people agreed they have spent more time outdoors and have a real sense of belonging.

This is very encouraging for us - but no organisation can ever get everything right. However, we can't do anything about the Great British weather...

We have taken on board every single suggestion and comment and we will try and improve where we can.

In the meantime, thank you to all who took the time to take part.





OPEN COUNTRY MEMBERS' SURVEY 2025 - A SNAPSHOT



100%
of members
agree!

- I have fun with Open Country
- I get to visit new places
- I enjoy making new friends
- I enjoy visiting the countryside
- I feel like part of a team
- I feel safe and supported with Open Country
- I feel I am respected by Open Country

97%
of members
agree



- I have spent more time outdoors
- I have a real sense of belonging at Open Country

95%

of members
agree!

- I feel less alone
- I feel better about myself after a day with Open Country
- have learned something new about nature and wildlife



94%

of members
agree!

- I can share feedback and my voice is listened to



92%

of members
agree!

- I can learn new skills
- I feel happier and more positive



91%

of members
agree!

- I feel fitter and more healthy
- I feel more confident and it improves my self esteem



“HOW IMPORTANT IS OPEN COUNTRY TO YOU?”

“Since I've been coming out with Open Country, my life has changed for the better.”

“It gives me the chance to be part of a group - it is so cool to have lunch out in a forest!”

“It's important to me to get out and meet people and get out for the day.”

“I am very happy with everything that Open Country does. They make me happy!”

“The activities are always uplifting.”

“We help look after the countryside - that makes me feel good! ”

“Without Open Country I wouldn't have any friends.”

“I like visiting new places and doing new things.”

Volunteer News

Welcome Aboard!

A warm welcome to our new Harrogate volunteers, Glenda and Paul Yeomans and Darryn Almeida, who are helping out with our weekend activities - we are delighted you have joined us.

Our Survey Says...

We have had a great response from our annual volunteer questionnaire - with 67 volunteers completing the survey.

Comments were positive overall, with people mentioning they felt 'appreciated', 'valued', 'supported' and 'welcome', and describing their volunteer experience as 'flexible', 'fun' and 'enjoyable'.

One volunteer highlighted the very essence of Open Country being 'Out There Together' saying:

"I particularly like it when the walks are a bit challenging - I love the feeling that we've all helped each other and achieved something together."

Some suggestions for included:

- Bikes could be better maintained
- Communication could be improved
- Share feedback from the Advisory Group Meetings (see next issue!)

The survey also highlighted how volunteer experiences can differ between locations and activities. We are working to address this by creating a *Volunteer Coordinator's Handbook* for staff to refer to, ensuring that a positive volunteer experience is consistent throughout the organisation. Thanks for your feedback!

Volunteer Picnic

Our annual Volunteer Picnic with the Wakefield gang is on **Monday 8th June** at RSPB Fairburn Ings. This is your time to relax and enjoy good food and company in a beautiful countryside setting. Join us!



Meet Chris...

Congratulations to Chris Newport, who is celebrating 5 years of volunteering with Open Country! We thought Chris deserved a special mention, as he beavers away in the cellar in Harrogate keeping our fleet of tandems on the road. We let Chris have five minutes off to ask him about his love of cycling and his favourite cycling destination...

"I have been involved in cycling since childhood, at about 10 years old I got my first bike. My primary school ran the National Cycling Proficiency scheme and most of my class went along. The local Police, with some parents, did the training, and one of the key things that was stressed was making sure the bike was safe before you used it; do the brakes work, are the tyres pumped up, and if not, how to fix it.

Those basic skills have stayed with me ever since (for more than 50 years). I got a newer second hand bike when I went to secondary school, I still have that bike and have ridden it quite recently. In addition to my 2 year old bike I also have another old bike which I recently restored again, over 40 years since I last did so.

My favourite cycling destination - *that's a difficult question. I have cycled in a range of countries over many years. In Vietnam the traffic is crazy, but because so many people use bicycles or little motorbikes it was not a problem. Much of Europe is similar to the UK in terms of the range of cycling available, but I think that cycling in Morocco was my favourite, the roads were pretty good, not too much traffic, but best of all was the variety, cycling through the desert on long straight roads, then through oases, with dates growing on the trees, and then cycling through the Atlas mountains.*

The best thing about volunteering at Open Country is, despite spending several hours tucked in the cellar at Community House, there is still a lot of interaction with a range of people on a regular basis. Even though I don't go out on the road with you, you all make me feel included."

Thanks to Rich & Jo from the Wetherby Tandem Club, and Phil from the Ripon Tandem Club, who also help out with bike maintenance.



We all love a good GAS!

We are asking for nominations for our 2026 'Good Access Scheme' award. Nominations for improved access could perhaps include sites, routes or groups and organisations that have:

- Created a new circular route.
- Installed benches along paths.
- Encouraged the installation of gaps or more accessible gates to replace stiles.
- Produced accessible literature.

Or can you think of other best practice in providing great access for all?

The deadline for nominations is **31st October 2026** and the award will be presented at this year's GAS Conference, which is to be held in Burley-in-Wharfedale on **Friday 13th November**.



Nidderdale Project, Phase II

The second phase of our access for all project is complete. Working as project managers for *Nidderdale Natural Landscape*, we achieved the following using a generous grant from DEFRA:

- Created an access path at Druid's Temple, on the Swinton Estate.
- Resurfaced the path alongside Toft Gate lime kiln (finished by May).
- Created a new circular walk in Beecroft Plantation, which is situated next to Fewston Reservoir.
- Had various other barriers replaced by gaps or more accessible gates.
- Updated the Nidderdale Breakfree pack, adding two brand new routes.
- Produced a leaflet showing the all-terrain chair hubs in Nidderdale.
- Created five access videos, covering places like Brimham Rocks and Scar House Reservoir.
- Ran a training course for land managers on countryside access.
- Funded an all-terrain chair, benches and an accessible picnic table.

We have now been informed the project will continue for the next three years. Good news for access for all in our



Nidderdale
National
Landscape

Protected
Landscapes.
Contact us if you
have a good idea
for an access
project In
Nidderdale!



Gaps are ideal, but this RADAR kissing gate replaced a very rickety stone stile at Fewston

Farewell to Sandra

We were sorry to learn that Sandra Clarke died recently, following a short illness. An unfailingly cheerful person, Sandra had enjoyed our weekend trips for many years and was something of a poster girl for Open Country. We will miss her and her assistance dog Millie.



Sandra loved the seaside!

Wakefield Hub News

Staff Changes

Simon Pedley has moved on to pastures new and we wish him all the best. We are delighted that Ella Dixon has agreed to rejoin us in a part-time capacity until the end of August. Welcome back, Ella!

Help us plant a football pitch of wild flowers!

This year our Wild Things members have grown some lovely annual, native wild flowers to sell, including corncockle, chamomile, yellow rattle and ox-eye daisy. All plants have been grown in peat-free soil, using locally sourced seed.

We sell them at 50p a plug plant, and can sometimes help landowners plant them out too. We are taking orders now for May collections.



Zika and John, hard at work

New Wakefield Volunteers

A huge thanks to everyone who joined as Open Country volunteers recently - Louise Morgan and her daughter Elizabeth Morgan, Sharon Burgin, Clare Hobson and Mandy Popplewell.

Sensory Storytelling project

Our Wild Things group is proud to have been part of setting up the Sensory Storytelling project at the *National Coal Mining Museum* over the winter.

You can now discover history through stories you can see, touch, hear and smell! Step back in time and experience the life and stories of mining communities through our Sensory Storytelling sessions - all designed especially for adults with learning disabilities and people living with Dementia.

Each story lets explore the sights, sounds, smells and textures of life in the pits. You'll even handle real objects from our collection!

These immersive sessions are fun, inclusive, and accessible, offering a new way to connect with your local heritage, share stories, and spark reminiscence.

Sessions are available at the Museum on Wednesdays and Thursdays during term-time (subject to volunteer availability).

To book a session, contact imogen.walsh@ncm.org.uk

Want to explore accessible places in West Yorkshire?

At Open Country, we understand how difficult it can be for people with disabilities and their carers to find reliable information about visiting the countryside. That's why we produce a series of Countryside Directories to help you discover accessible places!

Our newest updated countryside directory covers West Yorkshire and is full of inspiration for opportunities to get stuck into the great outdoors.

You'll find information on:

- Walking clubs
- Wheelchair-friendly walks and outings
- Wildlife clubs and organisations
- Sports and outdoor pursuits

All our directories are available online now at www.opencountry.org.uk and

some hard copies are also available. A huge thank you to *West Yorkshire Combined Authority* and *CityConnect* for funding the printing and auditing costs!

We'd also love feedback on our videos, directories, leaflets and Breakfree packs.



Kerry showcases our newest directory

Please email info@opencountry.org.uk if you would prefer to receive our newsletter electronically or if you want to be taken off our mailing list.

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