

Best Practice in the South Downs National Park (SDNP) Co-pilot

This is the SDNP-aligned approach used across chalk grassland sites, commons, and village greens – fill hazardous holes, leave rabbit habitat untouched, do not eradicate rabbits.

Why filling is the correct option

SDNP guidance, ranger practice, and conservation principles all point to the same conclusion:

1. Public safety is a statutory duty

Land managers (including parish councils) must act where there is a clear risk of injury.

Trip hazards on public greens fall under this duty.

2. Rabbits are part of chalk grassland ecology

The South Downs is one of the UK's most important chalk landscapes.

Rabbits play a role in:

- maintaining short swards
- soil aeration
- supporting invertebrates
- creating micro-habitats

Removing or killing rabbits disrupts this ecology.

3. Eradication is discouraged and usually ineffective

SDNP ranger teams and Natural England guidance both note:

- rabbit populations rebound quickly
- lethal control rarely works long-term
- it can cause ecological imbalance
- it is not appropriate for village greens or public recreation areas

4. Filling is a low-impact, wildlife-friendly intervention

Surface-level filling of hazardous holes:

- prevents trips and falls
- does not disturb deeper burrows
- does not harm rabbits
- maintains ecological integrity
- complies with SDNP conservation principles

5. Only fill holes that meet a hazard threshold

This is consistent with SDNP ranger practice:

- located in high-footfall areas
- near event routes (e.g., Sheep Fair)
- on desire lines / dog-walking paths

All other burrows are left untouched.

End Co-pilot

For consideration by FPC:

1. Volunteers to access a large container behind the Wattle House that would be filled with a mixture of top soil/sand and grass seed. If volunteers see holes (in excess of 15cm and deeper than 10cm ??) they can use the bucket in the container to fill the rabbit holes. This could be carried out as a publicised pilot prior to the Sheep Fair to gain commitment and understanding of the ecology impacts.
2. Consider using the grass cutting contractors or employing a groundsman to do the filling on a regular basis (incur ongoing costs to FPC).
3. Consider obtaining professional help to remove or eradicate the rabbits (not recommended).