

# Actions for Nature

in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough



**Natural**  
Cambridgeshire  
putting nature at the heart

NOVEMBER 2024

# 1. Introduction

The preparation of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) has exercised many of the organisations in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, with Natural Cambridgeshire helping the County Council in taking a lead. This has included working with farmer representatives, among them the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG East), and other key landowners and farm cluster facilitators, to seek their input and make them aware of the benefits of LNRS to agriculture.

Another main provision of the 2021 Environment Act, that most developments should provide at least 10% Biodiversity Net Gain, has also been getting under way. LNRS and BNG have been the main discussion items in the quarterly Natural Environment Policy and Planning Forum, which Natural Cambridgeshire organises in partnership with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) and the County Council, and which exposes officers of our local authority to experts in nature and in climate change.

Various strategic projects are under way across the county, including the Fenland Water Partnership that is developing the new Fens Reservoir National Infrastructure project, Fens 2100+, the University of Cambridge's Centre for Landscape Regeneration and Fenland SOIL.

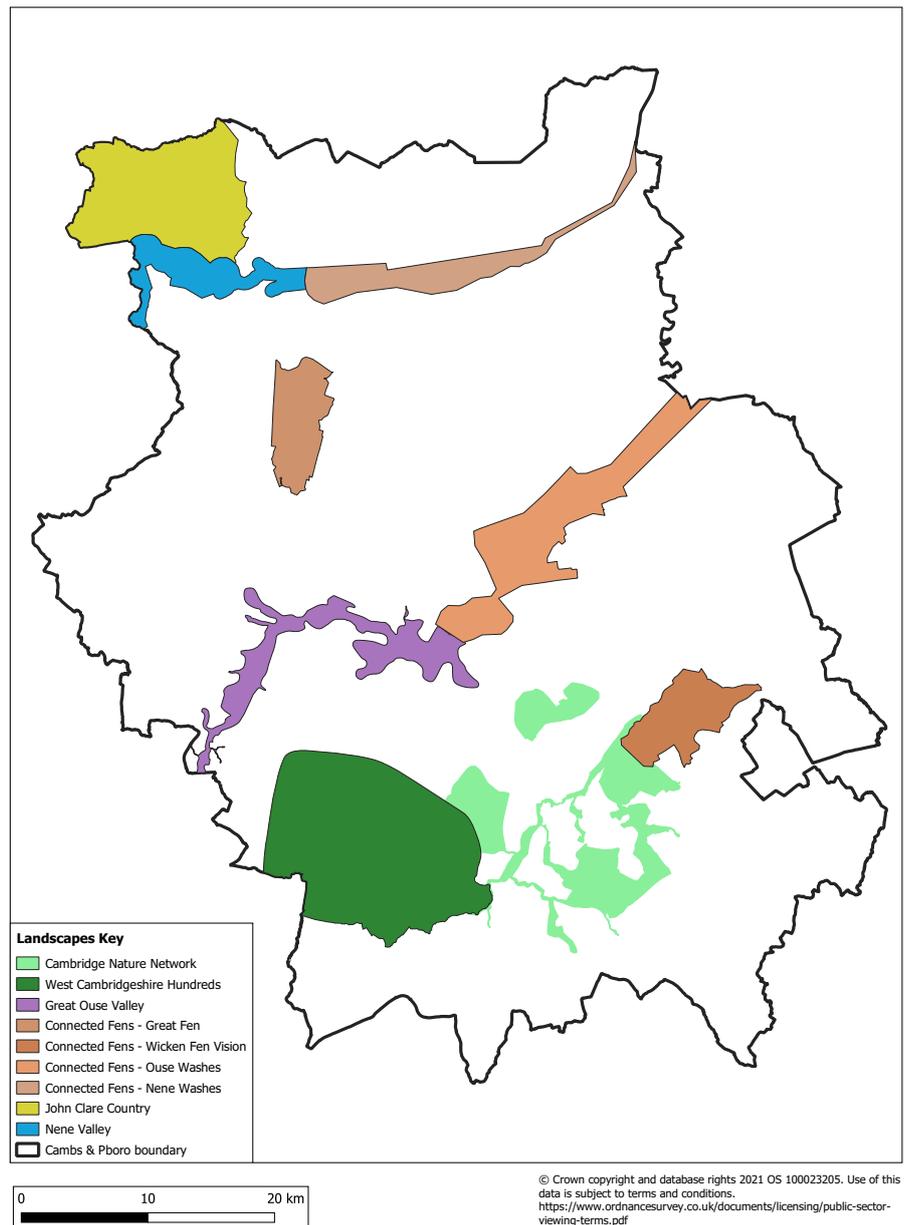
There have been discussions with the water sector and Defra, to assist in resolving the water scarcity issues faced by our county. This included making the case for agricultural supply, and ensuring the future of the Fenland peat soils.

The quarterly Natural Cambridgeshire Partnership Forum has continued to brief the community on specialist subject areas relating to nature, biodiversity and landscape improvements. And a weekly news digest of the latest international, national and local research, news and events relating the state of nature and the pressures of climate change is emailed to some 700 contacts across the county.

Six priority landscape areas have been identified to give a focus to the strategy to double nature in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and Section 2 of this report describes recent activities in these areas.

# 2. The Priority Landscapes

The following six landscapes areas were chosen because of their unique ecological and geographic features, and their intrinsic value to the identity and natural heritage of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough landscape.



The **Cambridge Nature Network**: The partnership continues to meet to co-ordinate actions, projects and to share information and knowledge.

The East Cambridge Farmer Cluster has grown and linked up with the Granta Farmers group to form a group with 20-30 members. A successful application to the Defra Facilitation Fund will

support training and knowledge sharing activities for the farmers over the next three years. The cluster has allowed landowners to reconnect or to meet new farmers and to share knowledge. Additional funding has been sought for specialist equipment to better support regenerative farming across multiple farms. In addition to the above, Natural England's Nature Recovery programme has supported a project to identify those species priorities for the cluster area that the farmers could best support, along with the actions required at landscape-scale and across farm boundaries.

A new project to help nature and climate in Cambridge started in autumn 2024 thanks to a £495,000 grant award from The National Lottery Community Fund's Climate Action Fund. The River Cam CAN (Climate Action through Nature) Project will support communities near the river to work on initiatives that will benefit them and the environment. The two and a half year project aims to raise awareness of the challenges faced by the River Cam and inspire and support people to take action to help. The project will be delivered by a partnership of local organisations including Abbey People, Cambridge City Council, Cambridge Past, Present & Future, CoFarm and Water Sensitive Cambridge. They will be supported by the national charity Climate Outreach. Cambridge Past, Present & Future are the lead partner and have employed a new River Cam CAN Officer, who is also supporting the wider nature network. The Nature Network partnership organised a successful Cambridge Nature Festival in June, with over 120 events taking place.

The **Connected Fens**: the Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery project has commenced bringing together a group of farmers and landowners adjacent to the Ouse Washes, including the conservation partners that own the majority of the Ouse Washes, namely the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) and the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire (WT BCN). The RSPB is co-ordinating delivery of the project over two years, with the main focus on what the participating farmers might do to restore nature and farm more sustainably on their land. Baseline surveys have been undertaken and opportunities for nature recovery across all participating farms are being refined. These will then be subject to business planning to

identify those best suited to public and private funding and thus able to support landscape-scale nature recovery and the farm businesses.

The **John Clare Countryside** partnership continues to meet regularly to co-ordinate action whether on landscape nature recovery, parish nature recovery or access enhancements. The Parish Clusters are active and are undertaking small-scale nature projects in and around the villages, involving active groups of local volunteers, in line with their Parish Nature Recovery Plans.

Three major Estates (Milton, Burghley and Walcot) have come together with the Langdyke Countryside Trust, Nene Park Trust and the Wildlife Trust BCN to start to put together a Landscape Recovery project. This will include both the John Clare Countryside and the Nene Valley upstream of Peterborough, due to the overlap in landowners and conservation partners across both priority landscapes. A high-level vision for nature has been created and this has been presented with partners across Peterborough. The landowners are waiting for publication of the details of Round 3 of the national Landscape Recovery Scheme which will help determine the next steps.

**Great Ouse Valley:** The Wildlife Trust BCN is working with landowners at Houghton and Holywell to plan and implement species-rich floodplain meadow restoration projects. At Houghton a suitable wildflower seed mix will be added to parts of a large meadow, following ground preparation. It is hoped the wildflower seed will successfully germinate and become established over the next year or two with appropriate management. The site will be monitored to record progress. A detailed plan has also been prepared for meadow restoration at Holywell, and this farm is one of the participating farms in the Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery project.

FWAG East has been working with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust drawing up plans for wetland creation in the Ouse valley in the hopes of obtaining suitable funding.

**Nene Valley:** The Nene Park Trust land within the Nene Valley will also form part of the emerging landscape recovery plans for the countryside west of Peterborough (see *John Clare Countryside* page 5). Further details of some of the current actions are set out below under the Nene Park Trust section.

The **West Cambridgeshire Hundreds** farmers got together several times through the year to attend workshops, a walk and the AGM, at which five partners were present in addition to landowners. Workshops covered the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) grey partridge project, the LNRS for Cambridgeshire, results from the collaboration with the universities of Cambridge and Sheffield on the Healthy Soils, Healthy Food, Healthy People project (with interesting comparisons of biodiversity on the four farms following regenerative agriculture techniques with that on conventional farms), and applying for the Sustainable Farming Incentive. The summer walk took place on a member's farm with a difference: free range hens (and truly free range) and a biodigester.

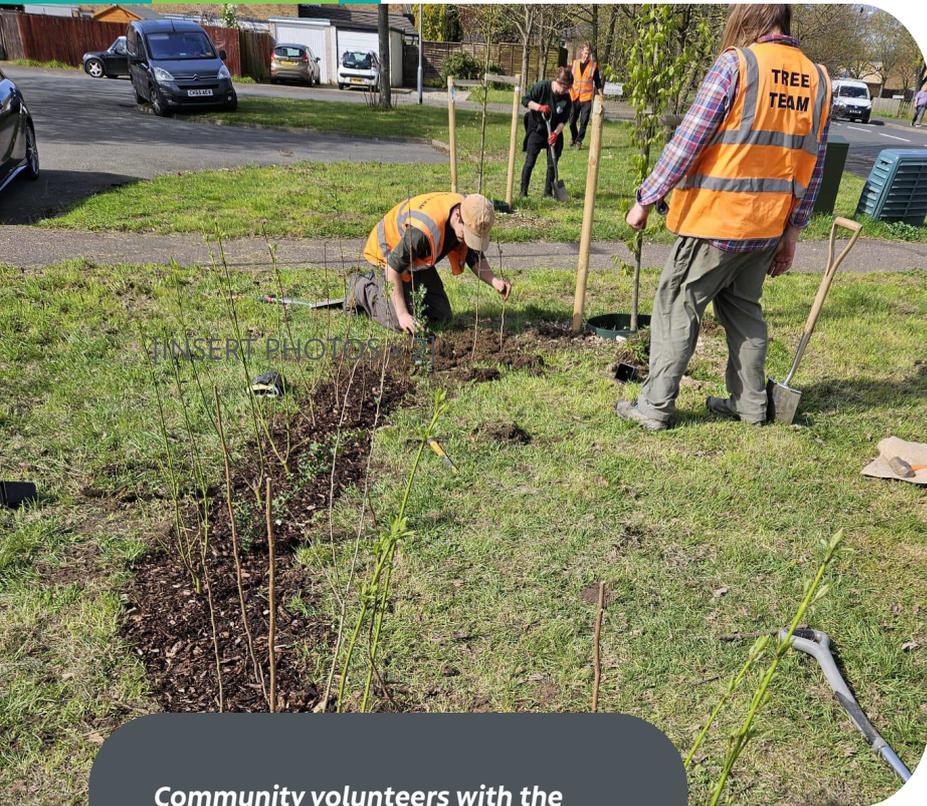
## 3. Local Authorities

**Cambridge City Council** continues to deliver its Biodiversity Strategy and commitment to the Cambridge Nature Network through the planning process, site habitat management, project delivery and community engagement.

Two great crested newt breeding ponds have been restored at Bar Hill crematorium, monitoring by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Amphibian and Reptile Group (CPARG) shows the population continues to thrive.

Local Nature Reserve volunteers undertook 500 metres of bank and in-channel habitat restoration along Coldham's Brook, including placement of brushwood bundles, flow deflectors and aquatic and marginal planting.

Working with Trees are Good, funding was secured from Trees for Cities to plant fruit trees and over 100 metres of native hedgerow as part of the Hedges for King's Hedges project, with further park planting planned in autumn 2024, funded via the Council's Environmental Improvement Program.



**Community volunteers with the support of the Council's Tree Team took part in a fruit grafting and maintenance workshop and native hedge-planting activities in autumn 2024 as part of the Hedges for King's Hedges Project.**

*Credit: Cambridge City Council*



700m<sup>2</sup> of perennial flower rich meadow turf has been installed around Parkside Pool as part of the Council's ambition to increase biodiversity on its more formal parks and open spaces and to provide pollinator 'stepping stones' through the urban environment.

The successful trial of creating Open Habitat Mosaics at Bramblefield's Local Nature Reserve (LNR) continues with three new mounds of differing substrates being monitored by undergraduates from the University of Cambridge.

Enabling cattle to graze the Newmarket Road section of

Coldham's Common for the first time in many years to improve grassland condition, the NoFence Collar trial continues. This technology has the potential to target conservation grazing on key commons sites and prevent damage to watercourses without the use of new fencing.

47 hectares of Hobson's Park have been designated as one of the largest new County Wildlife Sites within the City, primarily for breeding birds, with water rail confirmed breeding for the first time this year. This relatively new park has been secured through nearby development and the new designation recognises the importance of the diverse habitats that have been created and maintained on former farmland.

Woodland management plans have been consulted upon for Byron's Pool and Nine Wells LNRs with a view for phased delivery over the next few years to increase woodland habitat diversity.

Over 50 long-lasting woodcrete bird and bat boxes have been installed in parks across the City and at least 11 pairs of swifts are thought to have nested at Logan's Meadow Swift Tower this year.

Working with partners the Council hosted and delivered several community events in June 2023 as part of the Cambridge Nature Festival. A series of walks and workshops were also held as part of the DiversiTree Project, to identify and manage 'veteran' willow trees along the riverbanks. These projects also incorporate the Council's work to engage under-represented local people and communities, funded by the National Lottery River Cam CAN partnership grant.

Operations supervisors and operatives have attended training with the Wildlife Trust and University Head gardeners to increase their understanding and skills on grassland and watercourse management to enhance biodiversity across the Council's estate.

The **Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority** (CPCA) has protecting and enhancing nature and the natural environment as a core priority to be delivered through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Climate Action Plan.

Funding is provided across the region for locally driven projects that help add to biodiversity and mitigate the impact of climate change. Natural Cambridgeshire and Fenland SOIL continue to receive capacity funding from the Combined Authority to deliver on the priorities set out in the Climate Action Plan.

Core funding has also continued this year for Huntingdonshire District Council's Biodiversity for All programme and Natural Cambridgeshire's Fund for Nature. Funding has also been secured for projects that will be commencing over the next year including the Cambridge Chalk Streams and Logan Meadows projects along with funding for all seven authorities to enable them to meet the Biodiversity Net Gain obligations to carry out audits and to produce biodiversity management plans for their area. The culmination of these projects supports the area's Doubling Nature ambitions, and more details are described in other partners' updates.

The CPCA is the responsible authority for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and has commissioned Cambridgeshire County Council to lead the work with the support of Natural Cambridgeshire. A major programme of stakeholder engagement is taking place with consultants now undertaking work on mapping habitats as part of the evidence base. Work will continue on the preparation of the LNRS in 2025.

The CPCA has commissioned an area-wide Infrastructure Delivery Framework looking at barriers to sustainable growth, including natural infrastructure and water. This report sets out recommendations to tackle the biodiversity crisis, to enhance green infrastructure and to protect and to enhance the environment, which the Authority will consider.

A new Climate Opportunity Fund will be launched which will invite bids for schemes to protect against or ease the effects of climate change with funding to be awarded by March 2025. Local authorities, parish councils and community organisations amongst others will be encouraged to submit bids. Successful bids will be innovative, delivering on the priorities of the Climate Action Plan across individual communities by significantly cutting carbon emissions and offering other tangible benefits to the environment.



**Cambridgeshire County Council** is working to improve nature not only through actions on its own landholdings but across Cambridgeshire directly by working with partners. This is achieved through formal partnerships with Natural Cambridgeshire for joint working and a Service Level Agreement with Fenland District Council to provide biodiversity and ecology services to their planners, covering ecology advice on applications and the application of Biodiversity Net Gain.

The Council's Climate Change and Environment Strategy continues to evolve and drive actions to make best use of its available assets and resources. Two key commitments are to improve biodiversity across the Council's estate by 2030, and to understand and grow Natural Capital accounting to benefit people and nature by 2025 including integrating this into the delivery of Council functions by 2030.

The Council has committed to being net zero by 2030 for its fleet and utilities, and to halve emissions from everything else by 2030 (compared to 2018/19). This year resources were committed to improve understanding of the Council's carbon baseline and to identify where changes and improvements can be made to reach these targets. This includes nature-based solutions and the use of natural assets, whether that is to improve the amount of carbon assets sequester or to generally grow its natural capital.

A workstream for 'Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services' has been established to develop actions in this area and to ensure multiple outcomes are achieved where possible. This has brought the Council's work on natural flood risk management (NFM), parks and greenspaces, community nature, woodland creation and local heritage listing into a single programme. Activities under this workstream will form the basis of understanding the Council's natural capital account, drawing on work already done for the Future Parks Accelerator, with wider net-zero work, including the biodiversity and trees audit and that planned for the LNRS. It is aimed to have a baseline for this by 2025.

An audit of the council's non-agricultural lands and estates has been completed, assessing their current state of nature conservation against the Defra metric. This is now helping with the writing of a Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan that identifies opportunities for targeting key areas for improving biodiversity across the Council's estate by 2030.

A Tree and Woodland Strategy is nearing completion that includes a tree canopy mapping exercise that shows 10% canopy cover across the whole of the Council's landholdings. It has also helped with identifying opportunity areas for both improved management and new planting. The strategy will also enable an evidence-based target related to tree and hedgerow planting to be established. It is anticipated that the Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund will soon be underway. Mapping of trees and hedgerows on the Council's estates has been acquired and is being assessed to understand their current and possible future contributions to net zero ambitions.

Cambridgeshire County Council has committed to explore opportunities for nature-based solutions for natural flood risk management across Cambridgeshire. Further to the Environment Agency's Natural Flood Management (NFM) Pilot Study, work is ongoing to identify locations across the county where NFM could be incorporated into the landscape to manage flood risk, enhance biodiversity and contribute to research on a national scale as to the effectiveness of different measures. In addition, the Council is supporting local community groups to design and deliver their own NFM solutions. One example is Alconbury where the local flood group is building on the work already undertaken by the Environment Agency to further expand the network of NFM features upstream of the Alconbury Brook. In addition to rural NFM, we are also working with partners

(including Anglian Water) to deliver small scale urban NFM in market towns. In addition to reducing the risk of flooding, these features can provide localised recharge of aquifers, an amenity space for residents and a contribution towards a reduction in urban heating effects.

The Highways Maintenance Green Infrastructure Team is providing leadership to inform the ways in which highway grass verges, hedges, shrubs and trees are managed and maintained.

The new Team reflects the importance of our highways green infrastructure in achieving nature recovery as part of the climate crisis response.

Continued participation in 'No Mow May' supports biodiversity through not cutting grass verges on county nature reserves at this key time for the benefit of pollinating plants and insects. When cutting the grass during the rest of the year there are specific management plans for all sites with rare and protected species.

In collaboration with the CPCA as the 'Responsible Authority', Natural England and Natural Cambridgeshire, the County Council is in the process of developing our LNRS, which will be evidence-based, and is taking a locally-led and collaborative approach. The area has already adopted a 'Doubling Nature' ambition that responds to the existing deficit of rich wildlife areas across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and the national biodiversity decline.

The LNRS process officially started in June 2023 since when the Council has been working closely with Natural England, Natural Cambridgeshire, the CPCA and the District and City Councils (who are formally recognised as 'Supporting Authorities'), to create habitat maps that identify existing core areas, and then to identify areas where new habitat can be created. The LNRS draft document when it is prepared will go out for public consultation, with a view to the Strategy being adopted in late 2025.



**East Cambridgeshire District Council** (ECDC) has launched a broad campaign to Bring Back Nature. Whether on its own land or by supporting others, the Council wants to see nature returning across the district.

Over the past year, over 25 Pride of Place grants have been handed out to community groups for building ponds, planting hedgerows, installing bird and bat boxes, sowing wildflower seeds and much more.

*East Cambridgeshire's 'Bring Back Nature' campaign provides a local focus for the Council's commitment to nature recovery.*

*Credit: East Cambridgeshire District Council*



**Mepal Planting Day, March 2024**

*Credit: Fiona Wynn*

One such project, in Mepal, delivered a species-rich hedge and tree area, with 40 people volunteering from the community to attend the initial Planting Party in March 2024. This in turn has led to a new volunteer group being set up to help nature in Mepal, undertaking projects such as planting more trees and over 600 native bulbs.

The Council's long-term commitment to help hedgehogs has progressed, including a competition involving the free giveaway of ten hedgehog houses. The has also included what is believed to be a UK first Hedgehog Recovery Supplementary Planning Document (September 2024), meaning developers must now take extra steps to help protect hedgehogs and create new hedgehog friendly habitats as part of new development schemes.

This year the Council was delighted to announce its first registered Biodiversity Gain Site (or 'habitat bank') located near Pymoor and known as Oxwillow. They are also actively working with other landowners that are interested in establishing their own Biodiversity Gain Sites.

Coming up, the Council has committed to establishing biodiversity management plans for all its major land holdings by summer 2025, it is looking to install a butterfly bank in one of its public parks and is seeking to create a new public woodland in Bottisham. All of these activities, and more, will help turn the tide and Bring Back Nature to East Cambridgeshire.

**Fenland District Council** (FDC) has continued to work with partners to encourage members of the community to get involved with nature recovery. It actively supports seventeen Street Pride groups and a number of In Bloom and Friends groups in the district, who work hard to improve the local street scene, open spaces and heritage sites, and to promote environmental education. Events included taking part in The Big Help Out with the National Trust, with litter picks to support nature and wildlife species identification.

In Whittlesey, the Town Council along with a local community group have transformed a featureless Council-owned area of open land in Yarwells Headland into an attractive pocket park and community woodland. Around 135 trees sponsored by local individuals and businesses have created a Platinum Jubilee Wood in memory of the late Queen Elizabeth. This includes fruit trees and a raised herb garden which can be harvested by local people, a wildflower meadow with mown pathways, as well as professionally managed beehives. It is run and maintained by 14 dedicated volunteers and continues to evolve with, for example, new bins, benches, information boards and dedicated tree plaques.



*QEII Jubilee Wood located at the end of Yarwells Headlands, Whittlesey is a peaceful area, where the public can walk, take their dogs and relax in a safe area.*



*While this community woodland and pocket park was opened in August 2022, work continues to engage the community and plant up the site with further additions.*

*Credit: Fenland District Council*

In Coates, both the local primary school and church have established nature improvement projects on sites within the village.

In October 2024, the Council appointed a new Environmental Projects officer to help deliver successful community engagement projects across the district.

Since the location of the proposed Fens Reservoir just north of Chatteris was announced by Anglian Water and Cambridge Water in 2022, FDC has continued to work with the proponents and other stakeholders on the master planning for the project. The Fens Reservoir is identified as a Priority Area within Fenland's Interim Nature Recovery Strategy (along with the Nene Washes and Ouse Washes). The proposal should provide an exciting opportunity with many potential benefits including for substantial biodiversity enhancements alongside the adjacent Forty Foot and Sixteen Foot Drains to assist in realising (in line with the Lawton Principles), better connections between the Priority Areas.

**Huntingdonshire District Council** (HDC) is committed to creating a sustainable and thriving environment, as reflected in its newly adopted Corporate Plan. Central to this plan is the key priority of "Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations," focusing on empowering communities to take action for biodiversity and fostering green skills development. In line with this, HDC is delivering a Huntingdonshire Plan for Nature and actively contributing to the area-wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Recognising the urgency of environmental challenges, HDC formally declared a Climate Crisis and Ecological Emergency in February 2023. Since then, the Council has intensified its efforts to protect and restore biodiversity through its flagship Biodiversity for All project. This initiative, developed in partnership with the CPCA, is pivotal in HDC's Climate Strategy. Through a combination of community engagement, strategic partnerships and volunteers, and guided by data and evidence, the project aims to enhance biodiversity across the district by conducting thorough ecological audits and identifying priority habitats.

One of the project's key achievements has been the commissioning of ecological audits for strategic parks and open spaces throughout the district. These audits have informed a comprehensive programme of works focusing on ecological restoration in areas of highest need. Major habitat enhancement projects will begin this winter in two key sites, Priory Park in St Neots and Hill Rise Park in St Ives, ensuring these areas become biodiversity-rich natural spaces for future generations.

***Training volunteers to undertake biodiversity surveys forms part of the Council's longer term objectives to support skills development for nature recovery activities within the community. Here volunteers are being trained by a graduate ecologist to conduct biodiversity surveys at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, Huntingdon.***

*Credit: Nicholas Massey-Vernon*



To further engage the community in this mission, HDC has launched the *Biodiversity Community Grant Scheme*, which supports local groups in improving biodiversity. Grant applicants receive ecological audits from the Council's newly appointed Graduate Ecologists, ensuring that all projects are rooted in sound scientific principles. In its first phase, eight sites have already been awarded funding to carry out the ecological improvements identified, with more projects following in the second round.

Beyond these initiatives, HDC has partnered with Groundwork UK to provide training and employment opportunities for job seekers, allowing participants to gain skills and qualifications while contributing to ecological enhancements on Council-

owned land. This program supports individual employability and strengthens the district's capacity to maintain and improve its natural habitats.



***In addition to other measures, the Council, through its Alternative Land Management (ALM) approach has increased the District's floral meadows (currently 1.4 hectares***

*Credit: Cllr Simone*

Community involvement is at the heart of HDC's approach to nature conservation. The Council is working with residents to develop a district-wide citizen science program, in partnership with iNaturalist. This platform is not just a tool for identifying and monitoring local species, but a means of empowering residents to be active participants in protecting and enhancing biodiversity in Huntingdonshire. By engaging the community in this way, HDC is fostering a collective effort to support nature recovery across the district and highlighting the crucial role each individual plays in this collective effort.

In October 2024, HDC took another significant step forward by formally recognising ten priority natural landscapes across the district. This designation follows extensive work by the Wildlife Trust BCN, commissioned by HDC, to identify key areas for biodiversity action. These landscapes will inform future planning policy and ensure that HDC's contribution to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is impactful and sustainable.

Complementing these efforts, HDC has continued to advance its *Alternative Land Management Approach* (ALM) throughout 2024. By collaborating with Town and Parish Councils, HDC has transformed areas of Council-owned land by allowing grass to grow to meadow grass and cutting once a year to promote biodiversity. The scheme also includes increasing the district's floral meadows (currently 1.4 hectares) and expanding the tree canopy through a four-year tree-planting program that aims to plant approximately 10,000 trees.

Huntingdonshire District Council is proud to lead by example in promoting biodiversity and restoring nature across the district. Through a combination of community engagement, strategic partnerships, and data-driven projects, the Council is creating a greener, more biodiverse future for all.



**Peterborough City Council** (PCC) is working with a moth specialist to secure the future of winged insects, paying particular attention to the nationally scarce Four-spotted Moth *Tyta luctuosa*. It was seen every year at Werrington Brook Drain from 2000 to 2019. Then, major earthworks during late 2019 and during 2020 saw vegetation cleared and the original channel of the drain filled in and re-aligned 100 meters west of the original channel. Although the moth had recolonised in 2021, their numbers then fell over subsequent years until the 2024 season reported no moth sightings. Field bindweed is the single favoured food plant of the moth larvae but most of this was removed during 2020. PCC are working on how to re-establish field bindweed and implement more suitable habitat management to improve Werrington Drain Brook before the chances of the moth recolonising are lost.

The Council is responsible for the management of 36km of County Wildlife Site roadside verge. These verges are cut in autumn and either spring or summer depending on the botanical communities present. The arisings are piled up and collected within a few days of being cut. While

it is increasingly difficult to find a contractor with the suitable machinery to cut and collect arisings, the 2024 season saw this

**Through habitat improvements, the Council is hoping to encourage the scarce Four-spotted Moth, *Tyta luctuosa*, to return.**

*Credit: Langdyke Countryside Trust*

positive conservation management continue. As a result, the condition of these roadside verges has changed from negative condition in 2023 to positive condition in 2024.

Great crested newts are an important species within the PCC area and as a European Protected Species they have to be considered as part of every planning application. Peterborough Conservation Volunteers carry out annual surveys for PCC on some of the ponds within the City, and although the newts are still present, numbers appear to be declining. It was noted that the condition of the ponds was becoming less suitable for the newts, with turbidity levels increasing and suitable vegetation becoming less abundant, therefore the Council has initiated a project to carry out improvements on some ponds within the City.

Biodiversity Net Gain is now a statutory requirement of all planning applications, with any exemptions having to be evidence based. PCC currently have three off-site unit providers that are actively going through the Section 106 process with a number of other sites interested.

Barn owl box monitoring within the PCC area continues to be carried out with the Applied Wildlife Partnership. Although the results from the 2024 breeding season are awaited, the aim is to replace some of the barn owl boxes through the season, with the hope of an improved kestrel box occupancy.

**South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC)** continues to take action for nature, in alignment with the Doubling Nature ambition and the Council's 'Green to Our Core' business plan priority.

While land within SCDC's ownership is limited, improvements are being made to green areas associated with social housing. This year three areas have been improved, including in Over, Swavesey and Orwell by installing bird nest boxes, planting new standard trees, plug-planting wildflower areas, and building habitat piles to encourage pollinators, invertebrates, amphibians and small mammals. An established reduced mowing regime has continued on a further five sites to support pollinators and other wildlife. For the upcoming planting season, a further five locations on the Council's estate have been scoped for tree planting.

Funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund, SCDC has embarked on improvements of four spaces on SCDC-owned housing estates in Little Wilbraham, Coton, Great Shelford and Orwell. As well as accessibility and seating improvements, these areas will benefit from over 40 new trees, wildflower planting and nest boxes. Also funded by the above funds, £60,000 was distributed across parish councils, to improve community green spaces in their areas. Barton, Little Shelford, Ickleton and Milton parish councils successfully applied to the grant, which has funded improvements including renovation of play equipment and fencing, and benefits for nature including semi-wild planting, garden planting, and bird and bat boxes.



Since the last State of Nature report SCDC have hosted a Local Climate Action Conference. This focused on nature, with three of the five speakers covering Local Nature Recovery Plans, Biodiversity Net Gain, and funding for grassroots nature projects. Approximately seventy people attended, including district and parish councillors, members of the public and local climate action groups. Following this success, the Climate and Environment team will host another conference and also a climate and nature action fair in Cambourne in November 2024.

The arrival of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) at the mandatory level of 10% above baseline from February 2024 has meant that the ecology team at Greater Cambridge Shared Planning have been very busy reviewing planning applications against the legislation (as set out in the Environment Act 2021) and trying hard to ensure that this new tool is leveraged to help us not only protect, but also to enhance our local biodiversity. To meet this new challenge, the team has grown to three full-time ecologists, reflecting the huge amount of work now being generated because of BNG and the importance that the Council places on resourcing this need.

For development sites where it has been difficult to provide BNG on-site, there are now four advance-creation habitat banks set up across Greater Cambridge providing Biodiversity Credits through the creation of new habitats on former agricultural land. As a result, South Cambridgeshire now has approximately 127 ha

of new habitats being created across four sites for which Section 106 agreements are in place to monitor and manage these places for nature for at least 30 years. With three more habitat banks in Section 106 negotiation, bringing the total to over 200 ha by spring 2025. The Natural Environment Team have also been busy facilitating other "green" projects, like the creation of new woodlands on the outskirts of Cambourne in collaboration with Cambourne Town Council and a new initiative to assess land holdings for biodiversity.

This year's Six Free Trees scheme, which gives parish councils the option of six free saplings or one free standard tree, saw good uptake, with 146 trees given out to 46 parishes. This brings the total of free trees given away to over 750 since the scheme started in 2019.

SCDC's Community Chest grant provides up to £2000 for community projects, including those with a nature focus. This year the grant has given £6,300 to initiatives that support nature, including restoration of the Hibbert-Ware Memorial Garden in Girton, a nature area at Hardwick pre-school, a Silver Jubilee Garden at Cambourne Church, and hedge laying in Willingham.

To share the learnings from these projects, we have included case studies on our website and started a project directory to encourage parish councils and local nature groups to contact and learn from one-another.

In recent years the council's Awarded Watercourses has been assisting the Wild Trout Trust and the River Mel Restoration Group in a long-running project to restore this precious chalk stream. Watercourses colleagues had provided equipment, machinery and staff to place gravel and chalk on the riverbed. This work culminated in May 2024 with the translocation of 27 wild brown trout to the river following the restoration of the river habitat.

## 4. The work of our partner organisations

**Anglian Water's** Biodiversity team reported last year that it was working to enhance biodiversity on at its intake on the River Great Ouse at Offord. The site is being improved through targeted tree planting, pollarding, coppicing and wildlife, and encouraging the creation of dead and dying features in trees to help wildlife, as well as pond creation. Work continued and this year, and due to the woodland being opened up has seen an explosion in stinging nettles for which a plan has been put together to tackle it. The felling of 18 trees will be carried out over the winter months and around 1,600 trees and shrubs will be planted.

In the river itself, work to eradicate Floating Pennywort in collaboration with the Environment Agency has been successful. This work will protect Grafham Water and the Ouse Washes. We're happy to say that there were no patches of Floating Pennywort found this year. In the coming years we will continue to monitor the river, taking swift action should more be found.

Elsewhere Anglian Water has installed additional phosphate removal at Brampton Water Recycling Centre, which will improve the ecological health of the river downstream. Additional storm water storage capacity was added to water recycling centres at Catworth, Doddington, Ely, March, Melbourn, Sawtry, Waterbeach, Soham, Uttons Drove, St Neots, and Cambridge.



**Anglian Water and Cambridge Water are proposing a new reservoir in the Fens to help meet the growing demands on water supply in the East of England. The design for the proposed reservoir site, between Chatteris and March, near to Doddington, Wimblington and Manea includes ideas for the features. Areas of land to the north and south of the reservoir site that could be needed for environmental mitigation measures and/or construction have also been identified.**

*Credit: LDA Design, Fereday Pollard and Anglian Water*

**Cambridge Past, Present & Future** (CambridgePPF) is the local charity that cares about the beauty of Cambridge and its environment. The charity owns and cares for several green spaces in and around Cambridge including Wandlebury Country Park, Coton Countryside Reserve and Barnwell Meadows, and it is working hard to improve their ecological value, increase the amount of habitat and better connect them to other habitats in the area. CambridgePPF also provides opportunities for local communities to visit and enjoy these places and to benefit from free access to nature, including a schools outdoor education programme.

*As part of their corporate membership of CPPF, staff from Illumina contribute valued volunteering hours including helping to maintain meadows at Wandlebury County Park.*

*Credit: ?????*

The population of the Cambridge area is planned to grow by 30% over a 20-year period, at the same time as nature is in significant decline. To respond, there is a need to increase the amount of green space available for nature and people. CambridgePPF is doing this through projects on its land, as well as working in partnership with other like-minded organisations and also by advocating for policy changes.

During the year CambridgePPF carried out a range of nature conservation tasks including hedge laying, woodland restoration, scrub control, pond management, meadow management and litter picking. Volunteers kindly gave over 4,727 hours of their time.



A new ambitious vision for 200 acres of arable farmland was agreed for the charity's Coton Countryside Reserve. The vision includes the creation of a large area of "wild-belt" on the western side of Cambridge which is rich in nature, helps to mitigate climate change and improves community

wellbeing. The aspiration is for this "wild-belt" to be larger than the charity's own land and to involve neighbouring landowners so as to help to deliver the vision of the Cambridge Nature Network. Work began to set out what this vision could look like with input from the local community and stakeholders.

Plans for two new projects have been progressed that can immediately help to deliver the Coton vision by transforming 26 acres of farmland into a mixture of meadows, scrub, wetland and woodland. Fundraising is underway to pay for the works and to

sustain them financially over the long term, including through the sale of Biodiversity Net Gain credits.

Following the purchase of 25 acres of farmland next to Wandlebury Country Park in 2021, CambridgePPF has continued to transform it to benefit nature and people. A new dog exercise area was opened with a 'Wandlebury Woofs' event and the exercise area proved immediately popular with dog walkers. The newly seeded meadows got off to such a good start that they were able to support grazing with cattle, and the efforts of volunteers who hand pulled some of the undesirable plants that can invade new meadows, such as creeping thistle, were much appreciated. During the winter some of the young trees that had succumbed to the drought of 2022 were replaced. A new pollinator garden which had been planted the previous autumn was also formally opened.

CambridgePPF is one of the lead partners for the Cambridge Nature Network and has helped to secure and manage significant grants on behalf of the partnership, including from the National Lottery Community Fund.

**Cambridge Water Company** continues to deliver biodiversity improvements as part of its environmental commitments. This includes investing in a chalk stream restoration programme in addition to the development of two funding schemes: SPRING and PEBBLE, both of which support environmental change in the wider catchment and in the communities that Cambridge Water supplies.

SPRING supports landowners to make small changes on their land that have the potential to make significant improvements to water quality within the catchment. The scheme includes options that enhance biodiversity, improve soil structure, reduce runoff and protect water quality to improve the overall catchment resilience.

Specifically, options include cover crops, wild bird seed mixes, buffer strips and collaboration on further innovative trials. Cover crops provide a wide range of benefits as a variety of species to grow on otherwise bare soil, which helps to reduce soil erosion in the event of high rainfall. Another benefit is they improve soil health and structure which increases nutrient holding capacity. Wild bird seed mixes and buffer strips can provide habitats for

many pollinator species increasing biodiversity on the farm. Buffer strips around field boundaries provide protection for non-target organisms that may be impacted from spray drift and field run-off into watercourses. Each option strengthens resilience in the catchment by supporting the creation of healthy, adaptable landscapes better able to respond to environmental pressures.

That the SPRING scheme is flexible to the farmer and their business means it has proven popular with the farming community. Through the scheme it is hoped to identify further research and projects that help to improve water quality in the catchment.

The PEBBLE Fund provides support for biodiversity projects within the community in collaboration with environmental stakeholders and is open to applications each year. Highlights for 2024 included a wildflower project in Little Shelford, tree planting in an ancient woodland and several chalk stream restoration projects, in addition to Cambridge Water's own chalk stream restoration programme. Little Shelford Community Orchard received funding to lay a traditional hedge and transform a degraded patch of grass into a beautiful wildflower meadow that can now be enjoyed by the whole community. Wistow Wood, an ancient woodland and SSSI site received a grant to remove and pollard diseased ash trees as well as a veteran oak. This left space to plant 1,000 new saplings of various species including Common Oak, Small Leaved Lime, Aspen, Silver Birch, Common Alder, Wild Cherry, Grey Willow, Hazel, Spindle, Crab Apple, Wild Privet, Wayfaring Tree and Wild Service Tree. An experimental sheep-fat deer repellent was also used on some of the saplings.

During 2023-24 £70,000 of support was provided to catchment schemes improving over 420 ha of land, whilst the PEBBLE fund has awarded over £220,000 of support since 2019, improving around 70 hectares of habitat.



***A grant from the PEBBLE Fund enabled Little Shelford to transform degraded grassland into a wildflower meadow. Here a local farmer can be seen seeding the field with a wildflower seed mix.***

*Credit: Shelford Community Orchard and Woodland Project Committee*

Several chalk stream restoration projects were funded including on the River Shep at Angle Lane, which builds on previous restoration funded upstream, and on the Rivers Granta, Mel, Shep and for the headwaters at Bassingbourn. This has included wetland creation, bankside planting, habitat creation for water voles, channel narrowing, sediment removal and the addition of more gravel and chalk for spawning fish. These measures provide the diverse habitat that support chalk stream aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, and sinuous fast flowing channels and banks for priority species such as water voles and brown trout. Community volunteers worked incredibly hard over the summer on the River Shep to re-instate the gravel bed and install hazel faggot bundles using material cleared from the banks which should not only provide additional habitat, but also trap sediment as it comes down the river.



***With the help of the Wild Trout Trust, ForShep community volunteers learned how to install posts to secure brash bundles on the River Shep at Angle Lane, Shepreth.***

*Credit: Cambridge Water*

Given the pressures on the water environment in the wider Cambridge area, specifically on chalk streams, Cambridge Water have proposed £10 million be invested in restoration projects including on: Cherry Hinton Brook, Vicars Brook, Hoffer Brook, the River Shep, the River Mel and Mill River). While it is recognised that each waterbody will have a different set of pressures to be addressed, overarching aims include: to improve longitudinal connectivity, which will look at removing or modifying barriers to fish passage such as weirs; to increase water quantity, which will happen through abstraction reductions and nature based solutions to direct water back into the aquifer; to improve water quality, which will require catchment scale thinking involving farmers and citizen science monitoring; to understand and manage invasive non-native species through studies and removal; to improve surface water management through increasing water storage upstream and catching run-off; and finally to maintain the good-quality habitat that is already present and improve the habitat where it is not.

The **Centre for Landscape Regeneration** (CLR), led by the University of Cambridge with the RSPB, the National Institute for Agricultural Botany (NIAB) and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, has now completed two years of research including two field seasons across the Cambridgeshire Fens. The research team includes scholars of many subjects from across the University and partners, including from the disciplines of archaeology, ecology, zoology, computer science and the social sciences.

This project, funded by the UK's Natural Environment Research Council is taking a whole-systems approach and is putting together information on a wide range of topics to determine what works - and what might not work in the future - in this very special landscape. Topics range from water management, farmland and ditch biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions under different conditions, to businesses that depend on the land, such as farming, food processing and nature conservation. It is recognised that all factors influence each other.

This summer, CLR researchers continued fieldwork on key fen land-use types, including on arable fields, wet grasslands, nature reserves, ditches and solar arrays. This has only been possible with permissions of all the landowners and managers who have enabled access to their and sites for the teams to carry out their work, and with whom the team look forward to sharing the 2024 data gathered in the coming months.

A key achievement of this year has been the Fen Farm Survey, where in-depth interviews were conducted with 70 land managers across the research area. The outputs of the survey will inform what future land-use might look like in the Fens under different scenarios of climate change and water availability. It is hoped that some of the survey data might influence policies about farming incentives and peatland management. The research team are grateful to all those who participated in the survey for being willing to share their knowledge and expertise.



**CLR Researchers from the Dept of Zoology conducted fieldwork across Fen farms during the summer, 2024.**

*Credit: Victor Gillett*



Other progress includes: proof-of-concept field trials of a low-cost CO<sub>2</sub> sensor network; flux towers measuring greenhouse gas emissions on wet grassland sites; measured methane and soil microbial activity; eDNA sampling; and surveyed pollinator, beetle, dragonfly, bird, plant and ditch communities. Multiple Conservation Evidence workshops in the field were also held to share knowledge and insights amongst the community.

Researchers continue to work closely with stakeholder groups including NGOs, farmers, community groups, local and national government, and industry. A community outreach and education programme, which includes a partnership with the Cambridge Science Centre to bring an interactive workshop on the future of the Fens to primary and secondary schools across the region as part of their 'STEM in the Fens' initiative, and a collaboration with the Museum of Zoology is inspiring children with the biodiversity around them.

It is anticipated that outputs and data from the project will become available to the stakeholder community during 2025, when the research team look forward to sharing their findings with all involved.

The **Country Land and Business Association** (CLA) represents approximately 600 members across Cambridgeshire, covering a diverse range of rural businesses and land management interests. Farming and food production sit at the core of CLA membership and as the agricultural transition period advances, the organisation continues to work with the Rural Payments Agency to ensure agri-environment schemes are fit for purpose and able to deliver for farmers and land managers, as well as nature and biodiversity.

Responsible access to the countryside, and the value of green social prescribing to mental and physical health is an emerging policy area that the CLA is eager to support and the Association has met with partner organisations and stakeholders to share ideas and explore the role that landowners can play in this important initiative.

Ahead of the general election, the CLA proactively engaged with prospective MPs to outline the importance of the rural sector and the contributions it can make to the national economy, with environmental sustainability a common thread throughout those discussions.

As the county's Local Nature Recovery Strategy continues to develop, the CLA has liaised with the responsible authority charged with delivering this body of work, and endeavoured to raise the profile of the Strategy among CLA members to ensure their views and opinions are heard and able to inform the final document.

The **Environment Agency** (EA): In July 2024, both the Anglian (Great Ouse) and Anglian (Eastern) Regional Flood & Coastal Committee's awarded £1 million of Local Levy funding each towards the delivery of Natural Flood Management (NFM) projects. The East Anglia NFM Local Levy approach focuses on small scale projects with a total value of less than £500k and a maximum Local Levy contribution of £75k per project. The East Anglia NFM approach uses a streamlined funding application and approval process that is proportionate to inherently small-scale low-cost schemes where the flood reduction benefits are not easily quantified. All Risk Management Authorities (RMA) can apply for this funding, which will be available over three financial years (starting this year) enabling several bidding opportunities, rather than concentrating RMA resources to one single deadline.

EA engagement with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Climate Programme Board provides the opportunity to influence some allocation of devolved funding to the Combined Authority for climate response. The Cambridge Climate Plan is due to be reviewed by the end of July 2025.

It is anticipated that infographics and data for the Fens Climate Change Risk Assessment project report, produced together with Fens 2100+, will be available from Autumn 2024.

It has been another busy year for the **Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group East** (FWAG East). Their work with farmers increasingly encompasses advising on farming techniques as well as habitat creation and restoration and the protection of soil and water. Applications for agri-environment schemes have increased with the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI 23), and the 2024 version looks to be attracting equally large application numbers. The new approach of being able to stack schemes on top of each other, and the fact that schemes are non-competitive and can be applied for at any time of year, is proving popular; and even the temperamental application software isn't getting in the way!

With a view to the opening of the revised Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier next year FWAG East are pleased to have won the contract to deliver Higher Tier advice on behalf of Natural England. They will also once again be visiting farms on behalf of Natural England to approve the application of options on priority habitats such as species-rich and wet grassland, traditional orchards and parkland.

One of the wetland creation projects in the Fens for which Higher Tier funding was secured last year, on arable land close to the Ouse Washes, is now completed and drawing in birds. A smaller scheme for fen creation is anticipated in the 2025 round of Higher Tier. A fenland wetland site of one hectare was created through Mid Tier, as was a cluster of ponds in South Cambridgeshire. Elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, several Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) applications were made (replacing CS Mid Tier), initially in the simpler scheme including flower-rich areas, buffer strips and winter bird food plots on arable land, and latterly more complex agreements including no-till farming and actions for precision farming in addition to the habitat creation, restoration and management options.



***On-farm ponds provide valuable water storage, for flood attenuation as well as cattle watering, in addition to providing biodiversity boosting habitats.***

*Credit: FWAG East*



Throughout the year FWAG East presented at several workshops for farmers and once more took part in the regional Farm Business Updates, including speaking about agri-environment schemes in January, and holding SFI workshops on both for FWAG members (shortly to be repeated this year) and to Cambridgeshire County Farms tenants. Involvement in the development of the Local Nature Recover Strategy (LNRS), has included collaborating with partners to feed into the habitat and species prioritisation processes, and arranging for an LNRS speaker to be present at two farmer cluster meetings, one in the West Cambs 100s area and one in the Ouse Valley. Also in the Ouse, a partnership is being developed with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust with whom the team hope to work with on a wetland restoration project.

The West Cambs 100s farmer cluster continues to contribute to the national Healthy Soil, Healthy Food and Healthy People research project ([www.h3.ac.uk](http://www.h3.ac.uk)), and the team are involved in a research bid for a new project to follow on from this. The result

of a funding bid which would support taking part in the Grey Partridge Recovery Project is awaited. Other projects continuing from last year include workshops for the suppliers of vegetables, fruit and salads to a major supermarket, and looking at the carbon footprints of the suppliers to a major retailer. The Cam Washes SSSI nature recovery project is due to start soon.

FWAG East continues to deliver the District Level Licensing scheme on behalf of Natural England, creating and restoring ponds to provide habitat for great crested newts. This year 85 new or restored Cambridgeshire ponds were surveyed for great crested newts. Of these, 29% tested positive, 49% absent, and 14% inconclusive. 8% of ponds were unable to be tested due to low water levels. The Cambridgeshire results compare well to a national occupancy rate of 20% and a national occupancy rate (i.e. new or restored ponds) of 28%.

Farm surveys are taking an increasing amount of the team's time, which this year included the completion of a comprehensive Biodiversity Assessment of a large estate in the Ouse valley, as well as a bird count on land near Cambridge. Baseline biodiversity surveys for several of the farms in the West Cambs 100s farm cluster have also been completed.

The management of hedgerows across the counties has been given a boost by a new action in the Sustainable Farming Assessment, "Assess and record hedgerow condition". Simple in itself, it encourages farmers to look at their hedgerows and think about management and restoration including new planting and gapping up, coppicing and laying. Payments for these are available in the Countryside Stewardship capital grant scheme, so it is hoped further hedgerow improvement will be seen following on from previous hedgerow planting initiatives.

FWAG East has been closely involved in the revitalisation of the Cam Catchment Partnership, and has been attending meetings about the Granta catchment and the Rhee catchment, helping to create a vision for both catchments. They have also increasingly been involved in woodland creation, and will be working with the County Council to encourage more woodland planting across the county.

Once again, a Cambridgeshire farmer has performed well in the FWAG East Conservation Award; Bedlam Farms Organic, a fenland vegetable farm, was the runner up in the 2024 award (over five counties).

**Fenland SOIL** has two major projects running until January 2025 through funding from Natural England's Paludiculture Exploration Fund (PEF) and the Environment Agency's Lowland Agricultural Peat Water Discovery Pilot. Soil mapping using local knowledge to create updated soil maps of the Fens, including identifying where the remaining areas of peat are continues to be rolled out. Soil surveying to ensure accurate soils data and peat depths are also being carried out. The soils data is combined with productivity and water management metrics to produce 'opportunity' maps, identifying areas that could have potential for sustainable lowland peat management.

Over the summer of 2024, with funding through the PEF grant, a trial took place to explore the feasibility of growing commercial salad crops under paludiculture conditions. Paludiculture involves growing on peat soils with a high water table, ideally at 10 to 30cm from the surface, with the aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the soil. Many of the crops identified for growing under these conditions such as reeds, typha and sphagnum are being trialled elsewhere in the UK. Due to the productive nature of the Fens, there was an interest in trialling food crops to ensure food production would not be displaced elsewhere. In order to maintain these conditions, a consistent water supply needs to be available. A three hectare plot was chosen due to proximity to a reservoir to ensure the water table could be held at between 20 to 30cm below surface throughout the summer months in the event of dry conditions. The field also had excellent drainage infrastructure with land drains spaced at 10 metres, and a dam was installed to hold water in the ditch at the required level. There was mixed success with the resulting crops of celery and Chinese leaf. The crops had been growing well initially but started to slow down and show signs of stress as they approached harvest, which provides valuable learning on the agronomic challenges of growing crops under these conditions. Subject to funding being secured, a further year of trials will provide an opportunity for some of the agronomic challenges faced in 2024 to be addressed.

Further workstreams exist across the Lowland Agricultural Peat Water Discovery Pilot project and which explore a range of questions surrounding sustainable management of the Fens. One such workstream is assessing the impact of ditch reprofiling on biodiversity, which it is hoped will help to highlight the important role ditches play in maintaining biodiversity across the

fenland landscape. Another is investigating how water moves through peat soils at varying degrees of degradation to better understand the feasibility of holding higher water tables.

The second Fenland SOIL Conference will take place in January 2025, 'Exploring the Future of Lowland Agricultural Peat'. The key themes address the move towards finding solutions for the challenges we know we face with lowland agricultural peat. This is a valuable opportunity for farmers, academics, policy makers and other key stakeholders to discuss themes including water management, governance challenges, and the economics and finance of implementing change.

The **Fens East Peat Partnership** consists of Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Northampton and Cambridgeshire, RSPB, National Trust and Natural England and is part of the long-standing Fens for the Future Partnership. The Partnership was formed in 2021 to start addressing the barriers to lowland peat restoration in the Fens through a Nature for Climate Change Peatland Grant Scheme 'Discovery' grant, and has expanded to include private land owners who have sites where peat restoration will take place. In September 2023 the Partnership was successful in its application for a restoration grant to begin the delivery work. This funding, delivered by Natural England, is supporting peat restoration that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions from sites with degraded peat.

Of the fourteen peat restoration site projects the Partnership has across the Fens, work has started on four sites within Cambridgeshire. All the preparation and development work to get to this point has paid off and we are seeing these sites being restored now. This work will protect the peat from degrading further and keeping the peat wet will reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Restoration work on the other sites will continue through the rest of the year and into 2025. This means these areas of lowland peat will be more resilient in the face of climate change and help us to adapt and deal with the changes. Another key benefit from the work will be to help to store water in the event of extreme weather events. Habitat and biodiversity will also develop and strengthen.



The Cambridgeshire sites include areas of the Great Fen and Wicken Fen Vision together with other private sites. All the restoration work follows the Lawton principles to make space for nature, 'more, bigger and better', creating a strong ecological network as part of the Cambridgeshire Nature Recovery Network strategy.

**The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC)** completed its action research trial of a local Land Use Framework in 2023, to promote the case for Land Use Frameworks for England and at a larger-than-local level. The Cambridgeshire pilot aimed to enable better, more joined-up decision making about land use to achieve and, where possible, reconcile the many demands on the county: development pressures, nature recovery, sustainable farming, the sustainable supply and use of water and energy, and meeting the needs of local communities. Over the course of the last year, the story and insights of the Cambridgeshire pilot – particularly the Vizzuality-created prototype spatial data visualisation tool – have been received with great interest from other organisations interested in the development of a Land Use Framework, including local authorities, universities and Defra.

Since publishing the report on the trials in Cambridgeshire and Devon, FFCC continues to work with partners in Cambridgeshire and across the country to understand the larger-than-local challenges of land use governance. Insights from the trials have been taken to a wider audience across the country, in particular sharing the various messages with Defra and other government departments who are developing policy for various land uses. These have been well received by the new government and it is understood that the trials have been a significant source of information for the upcoming Defra Land Use Framework, which is now confidently expected before the end of the year. Separately, FFCC also worked with partners in Cambridgeshire on the 'Food Conversation', a 'citizens assembly' approach to hearing what citizens in Cambridgeshire think about food. This sought to highlight the relationships across the food system, including the links between food, farming and nature. Through this work and FFCC's land use advocacy, strong relationships have been built with both Daniel Zeichner (MP for Cambridge and Minister of State, Defra) and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Mayor Nik Johnson, to feed into policy. The FFCC team are feeling positive

about the impacts of both their Land Use and Food Conversation work on local and national policymaking, and hope to continue their relationship with Cambridgeshire to further this thinking.

The **Forestry Commission** continues to dedicate significant resource to supporting the development and implementation of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's LNRS, with provision of a dedicated Nature Recovery Advisor and considerable input from area team staff to further progress towards a landscape that is more wooded, richer in wildlife and delivering a wide range of other environmental and social benefits for people. Trees and woodland play a vital role in helping to address the twin challenges of biodiversity and climate change, and the Commission works hard to support and promote this critical role for all types of woodland. The Commission works with Cambridgeshire landowners and tenants to help design and create new woodlands, with the aim of increasing biodiversity, increasing carbon sequestration and improving the wellbeing of communities across the county. Our ancient woodlands are irreplaceable, and so a priority for the Forestry Commission is to help support their enhancement and sustainable management for both the recovery of biodiversity and climate and disease resilience, and seek opportunities to expand or reconnect them by natural regeneration or appropriate new planting.

Working with partners and stakeholders, the Commission will continue efforts to increase overall canopy cover and sustainable management, not just of woodlands, but also historic orchards and trees outside woodland in urban and rural areas. Well-managed woodland or forestry provides structure and composition in which species can thrive, complementing our semi-natural habitats, and hence the Commission see a key role for appropriately managed productive woodland in supporting nature recovery. Woodland and forestry can also provide wider environmental benefits such as flood amelioration, water quality improvements and climate change mitigation. The provision of home-grown timber also helps support rural economies, sustainable development practices and to offset our carbon footprint overseas.

The **Great Ouse Rivers Trust** is very much the new kid on the block in Cambridgeshire's array of environmental bodies. Registered as a charity in 2023 it is dedicated to protecting the Great Ouse and its tributaries, lakes, wetlands and wider catchment for the benefit of people and nature. Perhaps surprisingly for England's fifth largest catchment the River Great Ouse had not to date been part of the nationwide Rivers Trust movement and was the last gap in the Trust map of over 65 local river trusts across the UK to be filled.



*Early morning by the Great Ouse,  
Hemingford Great Meadow.*

*Credit: Roger Mitchell*

The Trust seeks to work with communities, landowners, businesses and environmental organisations to achieve its vision for the Great Ouse: A natural and healthy river enjoyed and valued by all. The Trust is about to employ its first member of staff and has funding applications in the pipeline to further increase its capacity to work with its fellow organisations across the catchment.

It is already active in citizen science projects and river fly monitoring, has recently been part of a consortium seeking funds from the EA for natural flood management and is currently pursuing further opportunities in this vein. The Trust welcomes very much its partnerships and cooperates with the many organisations active in the catchment, and whilst keen to develop its own programme of river habitat management projects is also very happy to assist others with efforts in the same vein.

The **Great Ouse Valley Trust** (GOVT) continues its work to promote, protect and enhance the unique landscape of the Great Ouse Valley within the county. 2024 saw the third full day Community Engagement Workshop, with this event covering the stretch of the valley from Huntingdon to St Neots. Parish and town councillors, local business people, representatives of national conservation groups, Rotary club members and active groups took time out to study the landscape in detail, note the challenges and identify practical projects to be tackled. The workshop follows two previous workshops which each covered a

sections of the valley between Huntingdon and Earith, and which also identified priorities and projects which have formed the basis of action plans which are being implemented.



*The first in a series of three community engagement workshops took place in Brampton in October 2024, where participants reviewed the stretch of river from Huntingdon to St Neots to identify areas with potential for nature recovery and develop projects for action.*

Credit: GOVT

Current projects include a tree planting programme across the area with community woodland, extensive planting on land reclamation sites and, most notably, riverside black poplar and willow planting as part of the “cooling the rivers” initiative supported by Woodland Trust, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency.

*Volunteers and trustees continue with tree planting endeavours, where here they can be seen having planted trees in Noble’s Field, St Ives to both improve biodiversity and prevent further river bank erosion.*

Credit: GOVT



The Trust partners with Suez in planting new woodland on reclamation sites and monitors a wetland nature reserve within the site that now has a bird hide and Sand Martin hotel.

Thanks to the efforts of many volunteers supporting a new green management structure at the County Council, and working with all users of the Ouse Valley Way Long Distance Footpath, the path has been properly maintained for the first time in many years. The Ouse Valley Way management group meets three times a year to plan and monitor the path maintenance and the Trust continues to work towards full recognition of the path as a National Trail.

The Trust's water quality monitoring project is expanding and feeding in results to the national data base and they have brought together expertise on flood management and water quality. The Trust is represented on the stakeholder group of the new Fen Reservoir project.

The Trust's long running campaign to gain National Landscape designation for the Great Ouse and Washes has gained full support from the Mayor and the Board of the Combined Authority and recently gained financial support from Huntingdonshire District Council to work with the Council to achieve self designation as a Regional Park as a stepping stone to full National Landscape recognition.

The Trust is a registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation and has a partner member structure representing a broad span of stakeholders including parish and town councils, landowners, farmers, national conservation bodies, fishermen, runners, Rotary clubs, individual supporters and many more.

It has been a hectic year for **Langdyke Countryside Trust** with a number of projects aimed at improving and enhancing nature coming to fruition.

Following the acquisition of Christ's College nature reserve early in the year, after a successful public appeal, Langdyke, run entirely by volunteers, now manages nine nature reserves across the area totalling more than 230 acres. While membership has risen to 220 households their flock of sheep has stayed steady at 74!

The most recent developments include: the introduction of viewing points at Maxey and Etton giving walkers wonderful

views of the wildlife from already established footpaths; the building of three new wildlife ponds and a new area to encourage turtle doves and butterflies at Etton High Meadow; major work to remove an invasive and damaging weed from the water areas at Etton Maxey nature reserve, which has been affecting bird life; clearance work to restore the ancient M'Lady's Pond near Ailsworth; and the finalisation of a management plan for the recently acquired Christ's College reserve between Helpston and Maxey.



*In June 2024, work was carried out to create a viewing platform over the wet area of the Verdette Wood Meadow in Green Lane, Etton. Also included below is the view over the Verdette Pit from the platform.*

*Credit: Richard Astle, Langdyke Countryside Trust*





***As with many conservation organisations, volunteers make up an important part of the Langdyke Countryside Trust's workforce. Here a volunteer is helping to clearing debris from a pond at a Langdyke Reserve.***

*Credit: Langdyke Countryside Trust.*

And while this has been going on Langdyke has also relaunched its website making it easier to navigate and with a cleaner design.

Walkers using the banks and footpaths near to the Maxey Cut have already welcomed the opening up of three viewing areas on to the Christ's College nature reserve. Working with the Environment Agency, the Trust is creating an information trail along the Cut and South Drain, with boards explaining about the heritage and nature of the area.

Three other viewing areas, all with disabled access, have been created along the Green Lane Bridleway at Etton providing lovely views of the Vergette Wood Meadow water areas. Across the road at Etton High Meadow three new ponds have been dug out and a bank established which has been sown with seed that will attract butterflies and hopefully provide feed for Turtle Doves during their summer visits.

Tackling problems affecting nature is also an important part of Langdyke's volunteer workforce. The main pond at Swaddywell which had leaked is currently being rescued by volunteers who are saving plants and creatures, clearing out debris and installing a new lining to restore it to its former glory. Likewise, the ancient M'Lady's Pond near Ailsworth, which has been in a sorry state in recent years, has undergone similar restoration work.

And major work has been undertaken at the Etton Maxey reserve with a digger being used to scrape away invasive crassula, also known as New Zealand Pygmy weed, which takes over the muddy margins of water areas which is usually a home for wading birds. Since the completion of the work, two Glossy Ibis have regularly visited the reserve.

The **Magog Trust** is a charity based in Stapleford that cares for Magog Down, 163 acres of former arable land, much of which has been restored to chalk downland. Six woods were also planted with native trees and shrubs. The site is now a County Wildlife Site, managed to promote biodiversity with species-rich chalk grassland, woodland and hedgerows. Two part-time rangers coordinate management by engaging local farmers and contractors to cut and collect the meadow areas, provide sheep grazing, fencing maintenance, dog waste collection, some scrub control and hedgerow cutting. They are assisted by a small band of volunteers. The Trust plans to obtain a small tractor and associated equipment in the near future. They are also investigating the sharing of resources between groups that manage grasslands for nature. Future plans include creating a pond to add to the site's biodiversity.

At Magog Down in 2023 chalk hill blue butterflies were recorded for the first time since the reserve was started over 30 years ago, but they have not been sighted in 2024, probably due to adverse weather. On the positive side a short-eared owl was seen regularly in January and February last winter, quartering over the sheep paddocks hunting for voles. In October 2024 the Trust will become the owner of an additional 37 acres of nearby

arable land. This hilltop, now named Chalk Hill Down, has been sown with a wild flower seed mix (Emorsgate M6) and there are plans to leave a permanent fallow strip to encourage rare agricultural weeds from the seed bank to act as part of a wildlife corridor.



***The Short-eared Owl, while largely nocturnal and crepuscular (dusk and dawn), is still one of the most active British owls during daylight and was seen regularly flying over the Down last winter.***

*Credit: Magog Trust*

The **National Farmers Union** (NFU) represents the majority of farmers and growers in Cambridgeshire. The county is a powerhouse of British agricultural production while also being host to much biodiversity and natural beauty. It produces over £0.5bn worth of agricultural production, which is over 3.0% of England's total production and includes over 10% of the country's vegetable, horticultural and sugar beet production.

The NFU has promoted sustainable intensification of agricultural production whereby farmers can deliver the dual goals of a safe and reliable food supply for the nation while also protecting and enhancing wildlife, biodiversity and landscapes.

Cambridgeshire's 2000 or so farm holdings have been at the heart of nature conservation both through voluntary initiatives and through participation in government schemes. The NFU has led industry-wide initiatives including Championing the Farmed Environment, Tried & Tested, the Greenhouse Gas Action Plan, the Voluntary Initiative and Open Farm Sunday, all of which have played, and will continue to play, a role in promoting good environmental practice on farms and sharing that with the wider public.

The NFU has embraced the government's vision of providing 'public money for public goods' and has led the co-design process of the new ELM scheme with Defra adopting much of our proposed 'Sustainable Food and Farming Scheme' in their 'Sustainable Farming Incentive' scheme. The 2024 expanded offer is proving to be of interest to many farmers, and while it is encouraging to see the inclusion of further lowland peat and ditch options for Cambridgeshire's farmers, it is recognised there is more to be done.

The development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and the opportunities this presents, alongside the further roll-out of the Landscape Recovery Schemes, will make it possible for the burgeoning number of farm cluster groups in the county to deliver in a bigger and better joined-up way.

The NFU is an active partner in the Combined Authority's work on peatland issues through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Climate Programme Board and the Fenland SOIL committee, spearheading farmer engagement to tackle the combined goals of peatland preservation and enhancement and reducing carbon emissions. Fenland SOIL has delivered farmer mapping and commissioned research into the economics

of raising water tables and will use the outputs of both to encourage Defra to go further with the development of grant options that will enable farmers to pursue a mosaic approach to delivering environmental outcomes.

The NFU sees farmers as part of the solution to climate change and nature recovery and Cambridgeshire farmers are playing their part in locking up carbon through effective soil management, hedgerow and tree planting, and ditch management, amongst other things. We have a stated an achievable ambition to reach net zero by 2040 whilst continuing to produce food and protect the environment.

**National Trust:** The UK now has less than half of its biodiversity remaining because of human activity. The evidence from the last 50 years, presented in the State of Nature report, shows that intensive farming and the continuing effects of climate change are the two biggest drivers of nature loss. At sea, unsustainable fishing and climate change are the major contributing factors. The UK is currently classified as one of the world's most nature-depleted countries.

Hilary McGrady, Director-General for the National Trust, said: "The report is yet another urgent warning that we need to accelerate efforts to tackle the nature and climate crisis. Nature needs us, and we need nature. We've all seen how important access to nature is for our health and quality of life, which makes stopping its decline even more important. With report after report documenting the critical state of UK nature we can no longer fiddle around the edges in the hope that will be enough to make everything ok. It's not too late to act. But we need to do it now."



**Peatland restoration on Burwell Fen forms part of the Trust's lowland peat restoration programme.**

*Credit: Mike Selby*

The National Trust in Cambridgeshire are working on projects to reverse nature's decline. The Trust's largest lowland peatland restoration project is underway at Wicken Fen NNR which will restore 590 acres (239 hectares) to protect peat and the carbon trapped within as well as the biodiversity dependent upon this vital habitat.



**The scarce Chaser dragonfly, *lubellula fulva*, which is considered a species of special concern in the UK due to loss of its specific ideal habitat, can be spotted at Wicken Fen.**

*Credit: Rob Coleman*

Building on Wicken Fen's status as one of the most biodiverse places in England and thanks to a grant from Natural England via its Species Recovery Programme, a project is underway to create habitat for the benefit of turtle dove and other species near the village of Reach. In addition, Wicken Fen was designated as one of only twenty-three 'Dragonfly Hotspots' in UK by the British Dragonfly Society, in recognition of its exemplary variety of dragonfly and damselfly species as well as providing opportunities for visitors to view and understand more about

these fabulous species. Excitingly, in its 125th year in the care of the Trust, Wicken Fen also recorded its first crane chick to fully fledge on the reserve.

***Cranes flying over Wicken Fen are becoming a more frequent sight.***

***In 2024 the Wicken team recorded its first crane chick to fully fledge on the reserve.***

*Credit: Richard Nicoll*



Underpinning the above, the Wilder Wicken Vision remains a vital mechanism through which the Trust will deliver for nature, climate and local communities.

This Vision is a 100-year ambition, now twenty-five years old, through which the Trust works in partnership to restore habitats on a landscape-scale, creating connectivity for wildlife and local communities from Wicken Fen to the edge of Cambridge.



***Highland cows and Konik ponies are a regular feature of the wild Wicken landscape.***

*Credits: Jim Woolf and Mike Selby*



**Natural England** (NE) has worked with partners towards building a 'Nature Recovery Network', creating more wildlife-rich places that are bigger, better and joined-up. This Network will help address the challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, and public health and well-being.

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are at the core of nature conservation and central to nature recovery and connecting people with nature. NE directly manage five NNRs in Cambridgeshire, and seek to develop their role in supporting nature recovery across their wider ecological landscapes, in particular the Great Fen and John Clare Country.

As one of six partners on the Fens East Peat Partnership, NE are leading projects to restore peatland on Holme Fen NNR, Darlows Farm and Chippenham Fen NNR, where advice has been provided to a number of landowners on options for wetland creation and peat restoration. NE are also active partners in several other Fens initiatives.

NE farmland advisers are supporting existing and developing new farm clusters across the County, including the East Cambridge Farm Cluster (which has recently joined with the Granta Farm Cluster) and the Ely Nature-Friendly Farming Zone. Whilst awaiting details of the future Environmental Land Management schemes, advice has been provided to land managers with expiring agreements and those looking to enter new schemes.

NE is a partner in the Cambridge Nature Network, which is included in its Nature Recovery Projects programme, and continues to support the Network through the grant aiding of projects, with recent examples involving the restoration of wetland habitats, research into species recovery opportunities and the purchase of equipment for the East Cambridge Farm Cluster to support conservation grazing and regenerative farming principles.

Protected Sites Officers continue to carry out a monitoring programme and provide bespoke advice to owners and occupiers of SSSIs across the County, contributing to securing favourable condition status.

Advice continues to be provided on major development and infrastructure schemes to ensure these embed and support nature recovery. Working with partners an East Anglian Joint Protocol on water efficiency has been developed, to help address

increasing demands for water. Input into the design of the Fens Reservoir to ensure it maximises gains for the natural environment is ongoing, as is work with partners on cross-boundary strategic projects such as the Oxford to Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership and East West Rail to help ensure that growth is both sustainable and underpins our shared nature recovery aims.

NE continues to work closely with the Combined Authority, who are the Responsible Authority (RA) for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and with Natural Cambridgeshire, to support the development of the Strategy and to ensure alignment with government policy. Working alongside the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission, technical input has been provided to inform the development of priorities and measures, and advice on the overall process and approach. In addition, as the only 'Supporting Authority' with national oversight, NE are able to share experience and learning from other RAs to inform the Strategy's development.

**The Nene Park Trust** has been working on some key projects within the Nene Valley over the past 12 months, many of which have focussed on wetland habitat restoration and creation.

At Ferry Meadows work to create a new reed bed area in the margins of Gunwade Lake was completed in September. This involved repurposing 6,000 cubic metres of soil left over from a new car park construction project to create 3,000 square metres



*The new area of reed bed in the southern margins of Gunwade Lake can be seen from this aerial shot taken earlier this year.*

*Credit: Chris Park*

of potential new reed bed and inter-dividing channels in the south east corner of the lake. In addition, 2,500 square metres of new wildflower meadow were created on Poppy Meadow where the soil had been stockpiled, along with a 50 square metre area of new bee bank using some of the residual soil. Once settled and graded to a level below average water depths the new soil bed was transplanted with around 60 clumps of phragmites reed. As this populates the area it will provide refuge and spawning habitat for different species of freshwater fish, nesting and feeding habitat for bird species such as reed warbler, sedge warbler, bearded tit and potentially even bittern, as well as benefitting a whole range of invertebrates and mammals including otters.



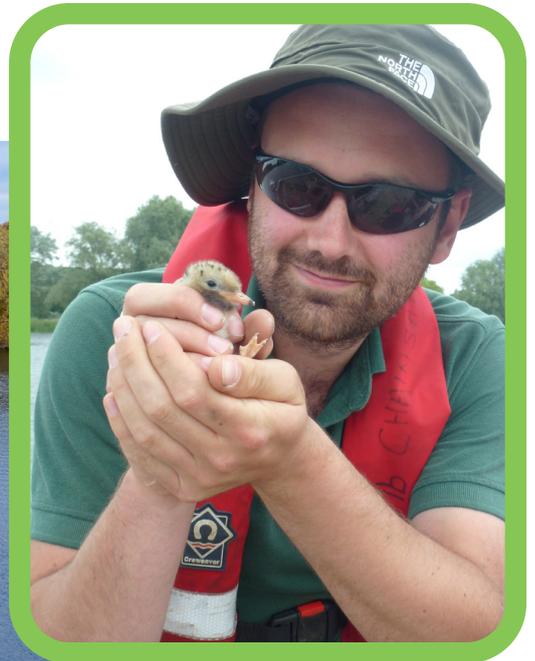
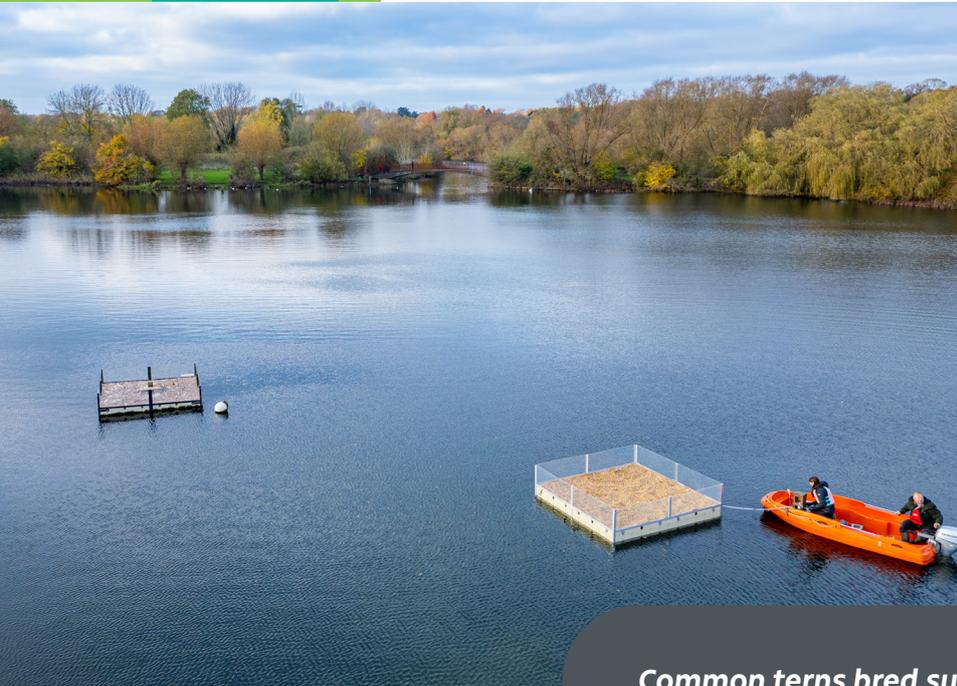
***The new spillway and accompanying boardwalk at West Holmes.***

*Credit: Chris Rollason*

Elsewhere, work has started on floodplain meadow restoration on the island called West Holmes (north of Water Newton). Work, including the creation of the foot drains, has already been completed and the appropriate licences have now been

received from the Environment Agency to move on to the next stage of the project, which includes the construction of a new spillway to make the meadow wetter and improve the area for wildlife. The Trust aims to maintain access as much as possible through the installation of a boardwalk spanning the spillway enabling access under low flooding as well as normal conditions. These works which commenced at the end of October and due to be completed before the end of the year.

Two new tern rafts have recently been constructed and are due to be launched in November. Common terns bred for the first time in several years on an existing single tern raft this year and it is hoped that the two new additional rafts will build on this success next year.



***Common terns bred successfully for the first time in several years at Nene Park, and two new tern rafts have been launched on Overton Lake in time for the next breeding season. These rafts provide an important floating habitat and help breeding programmes by providing terns and other birds with a safe space free from disturbance, predation and flooding.***

*Credit: Felicity Lyons*

At a number of locations around the Park there have been small scale fish-habitat improvements made to the margins of the lake using hinging-and-pinning techniques – a process of part felling selected bankside willows so that they continue to grow along the bank edges and margins of the open water to provide sheltered habitat for fry and young fish as well as invertebrates.

Further fish habitat works are planned for the coming winter months.

Further to the east of the Trust's land holding, work has continued in willow succession removal from a wetland area at Ham Mere. Hand cutting and pulling of invasive young willow with teams of staff and volunteers has been ongoing, while staff have also been clearing the perimeter bund around the edge of Heron Scrape at Ham Mere in order to make way for contractors to install a new stock proof fence.

This work, funded through the National Heritage Lottery Fund Your Community Greenspace project, will allow the area to be grazed with appropriate livestock breeds enabling better management of the wetland habitat, which is otherwise difficult to manage with machinery due to poor access and wet ground conditions.

However, unseasonably heavy rainfall experienced in September and October this year created earlier than normal flooding along the Nene Valley. As a result, many of these projects had to be paused until water levels receded and the ground dried sufficiently to allow works to continue safely.

**PECT** is a Peterborough-based charity with a mission to protect and enhance the natural environment. It manages and improves green spaces in and around the city for the benefit of wildlife and people. Over the past 12 months, PECT's ongoing initiatives have supported nature-recovery and engaged with diverse communities across Cambridgeshire. Exciting new projects are in development, too.

The Forest for Peterborough project, launched in 2010, which has a goal of planting more than 230,000 trees by 2030, has now planted over 131,000 trees. Since 2019, PECT has also created 700 linear meters of micro meadows as part of its Pollinating Peterborough campaign, which promotes the planting of flowers and the creation of habitats for bees and other pollinators.

In July, the lease was secured of a four-acre site, Tweentowns, on the outskirts of Castor, where a tree nursery and wildflower 'bank' will be developed. The site will initially function as a 'holding area' for native tree species, where whips are kept in readiness for the planting season and grown on to a larger size (1- 3 years) to establish their root systems, increase resilience, and reduce

failure rates upon planting. The nursery will support PECT's tree-planting goals.

At Castor, PECT is also working with John Clare Countryside partners and volunteers to create a pond and wildflower meadow and enhance existing hedgerows. In the longer term, Tweentowns will eventually become a place for teaching traditional rural skills, such as hedge laying and scything, and demonstrating nature-friendly land management. PECT has ambitions to establish a small apple orchard too, grafting heritage varieties from local stocks.

Education and outreach programmes continue to be delivered to children and adults, including the Royal Forestry Society's Junior Forester Award, which educates students about the value of trees and woodland. To date, 51 young people have gained the award. PECT's Climate Education team is also working with schools to



***Children and young people in and around Peterborough are learning to value trees and woodland through taking part in the Royal Forestry Society's Junior Forester Award.***

*Credit: PECT*

create School Ground Development plans, zoning outdoor space for nature, play, teaching and learning.

Working in partnership with Nene Valley Hodgson Medical Practice, PECT recently launched Healthy Green Orton. This new initiative refers individuals living with frailty and chronic health conditions to a Green Social Prescriber for tailored, community-based support. Green social prescribing complements conventional medical treatments, boosting physical and mental wellbeing through outdoor activities such as gardening and nature conservation.

To celebrate the organisation's 30th anniversary last year, the '30 for 30' funding scheme was launched with a stated goal of awarding 30 grants of between £250 to £1000 to 30 community-led projects within 30 miles of Peterborough. To date, funding has been approved for 47 projects, which are already bearing fruit across the area.

A '30 for 30' grant of £950 supported the purchase of a mulch-making shredder for Yaxley Community Orchard, while in Ramsey, £250 has made possible a community open day showcasing the biodiversity of Ramsey Quiet Garden. In Werrington, the



*30 for 30 grants are making a difference where communities want to do more for nature. Here the ground is being prepared for nature recovery at Werrington.*

*Credit: PECT*

local environment group has put £356 towards planting a new hedgerow and sowing wildflower seeds.

Other initiatives benefitting from '30 for 30' funding include the proposed installation of a wildlife-friendly totem-pole planter in Ely, youth-led litter picks in Waterbeach, and health and wellbeing walks around Cambridge and Peterborough.



*Natural Environment lead, Tony Cook, can regularly be seen providing briefings and leading community activities about environmental stewardship. Here Tony is giving a tree-planting briefing and providing woodland management training to volunteers from Perkins.*

*Credit: PECT*

The **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** (RSPB) is a significant nature conservation landowner in Cambridgeshire and manages 4,200 ha of land for nature in the county, including substantial reserves at the Ouse Washes, Nene Washes, Fen Drayton Lakes, an expanding area at Ouse Fen (the Hanson/ RSPB Wetland Project) and mixed wetland and woodland at Fowlmere. The former four reserves sit at the core of the Natural Cambridgeshire Connected Fens priority landscape and form the backbone of the RSPB Fens Priority Landscape work up to 2030.

This year has been a busy year with work outside of reserves. Through external funding from The Linder Foundation, the RSPB and the Ely Nature-Friendly Farming Zone were able to develop a bottom-up ten-year strategy that was signed off in Spring 2024. This provides a clear direction for the cluster over the next ten years, focussing actions on elements like ditch management, increasing membership within the group to create a more connected landscape, and public engagement to showcase nature-friendly farming practices. The hope is to baseline all farms within the cluster group in 2025 for breeding birds, pollinators, and water voles, through citizen science and with support from the RSPB's Volunteer Monitoring of Farm Wildlife (VMFW) Project, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, and the People's Trust for Endangered Species.

Engagement work to support farmers, land managers and landowners to provide the three key habitat requirements for turtle doves (nesting habitat, foraging habitat, and accessible water) continues to increase through 'Operation Turtle Dove'. The RSPB team in Cambridgeshire now engage with 48 stakeholders, covering 51 sites, where there is supplementary feeding and/ or habitat maintenance and enhancement being carried out to support these critically endangered birds. There is now also support from a team of volunteers providing coordination support, deploying and analysing images from trail cameras, and providing habitat creation through the 'Small Plots Project'. This project, which aims to trial different foraging habitat creation and management techniques on a small-scale for Turtle Doves, has completed its first active year, with six sites now involved going into 2025.

The RSPB's Volunteer Monitoring for Farm Wildlife Project ran for its fourth year in Cambridgeshire, with 19 volunteers providing breeding bird surveys to 21 farms. All farms recorded species of conservation concern and a total of 1,418 species records were

added to databases for 94 different species. The data gathered is provided to the farmers via reports and maps to show them the nature they have on their farms with links to species advice to encourage them to implement additional measures to enhance habitats for these species. Going in to 2025, the focus will be to provide bird surveys to members of the Ely nature-friendly farming cluster and to offer this service to other farmers within Cambridgeshire and any other target areas of the county.



***The Ouse Washes is the largest washland in the UK, and home to thousands of wintering ducks and breeding waders. In early 2024 the feasibility stage of the ambitious Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery Project got underway.***

*Credit: RSPB*

Following the successful enrolment of the Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery Project with Defra, a two-year feasibility stage started in April 2024. Working across the 4,000 ha landscape, including 2,500 ha of agricultural land, this project aims to secure the management of existing habitat and create at least 1,000 ha of new wetland to support key wetland species. Work is underway to plan habitat creation works, measurement of the benefits that can be delivered for biodiversity, carbon, and water management and to prepare business plans to show how public funding can unlock the private finance necessary to bring the projects to fruition.

On RSPB reserves, hydrology improvements are already showing results at Fowlmere, as the new sluice allowed water levels to be managed despite an exceedingly wet year. More ditch works will follow this Autumn. Water flow in the River Shep was improved by the removal of silt and for the benefit of brown trout. Marsh harriers bred successfully, together with many of the usual species (except, sadly, turtle dove, which was once a speciality of Fowlmere). The decline of ash trees continues, due to Chalarid disease, and more tree surgery will be needed in the coming winter.

The Nene Washes were deeply flooded in the winter 2023/24, the counts of 773 Pochard and 831 Tufted Duck were the highest for ten years but still attracted good numbers of Dabbling Duck - the 1062 Pintail was the highest count for 13 years. The Washes remained flooded into the spring and early April. Wetland Bird Survey counts produced a new record of 1267 Shoveler but the area available for nesting waders was greatly reduced and numbers of all species were down. However, the few Godwit pairs that were present fledged 9 young, the highest since 2018. The Nene Washes flooded again at the end of September, before the season's grassland management could be finished, that is three of the last six years grazing seasons requiring an emergency evacuation.



The Ouse Washes once again suffered from spring flooding lasting into June, highlighting the crucial role that flood-free habitat creation plays outside of the Ouse Washes in providing safe nesting areas for Snipe and Black-tailed Godwits. Spoonbills returning to breed in Cambridgeshire was the big news story when three pairs nested, successfully rearing eight chicks alongside 24 Great Egret nests!

***While Spoonbills are rare breeding birds in the UK, they have returned and are breeding in Cambridgeshire, it is thought for the first time since the 17th Century.***

*Credit: RSPB*

A solar pumping project successfully brought improved water levels back to wetland scrapes at Fen Drayton Lakes, which it is hoped could draw Lapwing and Redshank back to breed in small numbers.

At Ouse Fen the very successful relationship with Hanson UK/Heidelberg Materials came to an end in May with Brice Aggregates taking over quarry operations and the development of the growing nature reserve. The reserve holds a growing population of Bitterns with 12 males booming this year. With a summering Great Reed Warbler also present, the RSPB's Ouse Valley reserves are regularly attracting new wetland species to breed.

**The Wildlife Trust** BCN continues to take a landscape approach to nature conservation work and is actively involved in all six priority landscapes, with some of this work described in the previous sections. This approach spans all aspects of the Trust's work, including managing and acquiring nature reserves, providing land advice to farmers, landowners and businesses, engaging with communities through family events, education activities and supporting local communities and individuals to take action for wildlife on their own patch. A nature recovery network requires that the best, core nature sites that support many of our iconic and rarest or declining species continue to be well-managed. The Wildlife Trust therefore continues to invest in the management of its nature reserves including restoration of habitats where required.

The acquisition of Speechleys Farm at the Great Fen will allow the Wildlife Trust and Natural England to raise water levels in the sub-catchment to the west of Woodwalton Fen with the Trust creating a variety of new wetland habitats. Restoration will begin in earnest in 2025. The visitor hub at New Decoy Farm has been designed and has received planning permission with construction planned to start in 2025.

In the *Cambridge Nature Network* the Wildlife Trust has commenced habitat creation on land purchased adjacent to Fleam Dyke. The successful application for a loan from the Natural Cambridgeshire Fund for Nature will help to meet habitat creation and infrastructure costs, with the aim of paying the loan back through future Biodiversity Unit sales.

In *John Clare Countryside* the Wildlife Trust has completed the initial nature network opportunity mapping for the project area and also drafted high-level nature recovery objectives.

Restoration management continues in the Trust's ancient woodland nature reserves within the *West Cambridgeshire Hundreds*. At Waresely and Gransden Woods the restoration of the main ride has continued creating a less shaded and better drained surface which will hopefully re-vegetate as well as provide a better surface for visitors.

The Wildlife Trust has prepared an interim Nature Network report for Huntingdonshire District Council. This together with previous reports for East Cambridgeshire and Fenland will help inform the statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy as well as support local action by the council, landowners, businesses and communities.

# 5. Acknowledgments

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