

Key points from the Natural Cambridgeshire Partnership Forum, 15 December 2020

Richard Astle: Brief review of progress with the various aims of the Partnership

We have a Natural Cambridgeshire shadow board, which will become the board of trustees when we have Charity Commission approval for our becoming a charitable interest organisation, and this quarterly Forum for anybody who shares our passion for nature.

Our main ambition is to double nature across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, which has the support of all the local authorities and the Combined Authority. This comes with other benefits such as nature recovery, helping with climate change, health and wellbeing, clean air, clean water, better quality of life, and indeed to the economy.

Some of the local authorities have provided a small amount of funding. This has enabled us to appoint a coordinator, Helen Dye.

We have identified two routes to doubling nature. One is doubling nature across five priority landscapes in partnership with landowners. The other is community-led nature recovery for which we have launched a toolkit and have launched a pilot. The contribution from any one parishes is only small, but if we can engage with all the parishes it will be significant.

We are also looking at how to measure doubling nature, and how to get significant funding, including from business, philanthropy and biodiversity gain.

Answers to some of the questions

On water, we cannot solve the problems but are working with partners such as Water Resources East. Tree planting is an important part of what we want to do; it is not appropriate everywhere though agroforestry seems appealing. We do not rule out setting up a trust for our natural environment, as Oxfordshire has done. We aim to provide resources for community groups: supply of materials, advice and support (including health and safety) and maybe insurance.

Anthony Browne: All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Environment

APPGs have no statutory powers, but they have convening powers, to discuss and promote environmental issues. Most of the main environment groups in the UK are associate members, such as the Green Alliance. Recent events include one with Mark Carney, who is now financial adviser to COP26, one on electric vehicles, a couple with the Environment Secretary on the environment bill, and soon one on the national tree strategy.

I have been having meetings with Water Resources East and the Cam Valley Forum on chalk streams. When they dry up, as they did last year, the fish die. There is now an APPG on the issue, and a Defra officer in charge of chalk streams. We are now likely to be declared a Water Stressed Area, allowing the water companies to make meters compulsory, so reducing usage. More reservoirs are the long-term solution and the government is about to institute a process to promote them. It is important to ensure that the new Environmental Land Management Scheme really does help the environment, including agricultural practices that conserve water.

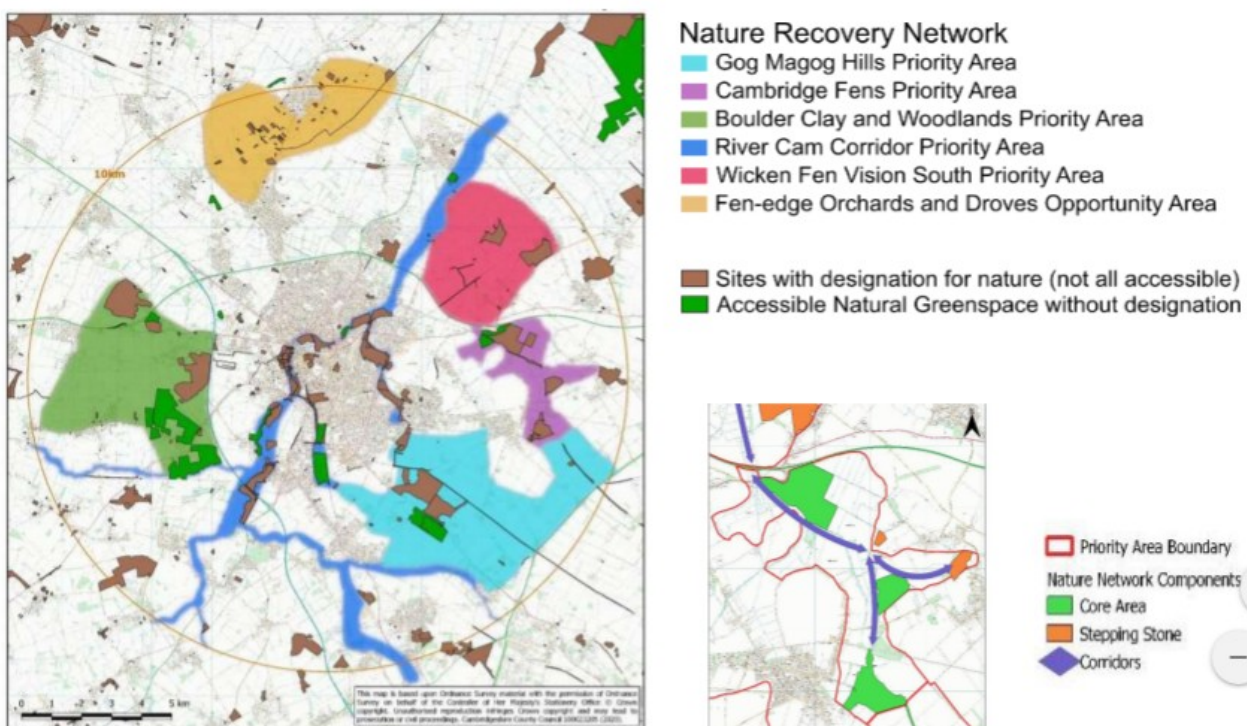
Answers to some of the questions

South Cambs has had a huge amount of new housing in recent decades. The country needs more houses, but we have played our part – the aquifer is an issue. Saying no to growth is not an option, so we must ensure it is done well. Housing numbers are set by

central government and its emphasis should be on housing in cities. There needs to be a national framework spanning the natural environment and the planning system. Local effort for carbon sequestration through habitat enhancement, for example through tree planting (we are the county with the smallest amount of tree cover in the UK and trees have other benefits) or increasing organic matter in soils, will help with our national target to become carbon neutral. Offsetting is good in principle, but it must be robust and only when essential because the amount possible is limited and doing it overseas is not acceptable. Carbon capture and storage is important where emission cannot be avoided, though it is controversial. Rewilding should be considered, for example on roadside verges within the limits of road safety.

James Littlewood: Cambridge Nature Network

Cambridge Past, Present & Future, the Wildlife Trust and other organisations have been working with a grant from the Gatsby Foundation to identify a nature network for the Cambridge area. It will be a connected network of habitats, of sufficient scale to make a difference and helping make the area an attractive place in which to live, learn and do business. A Cambridge Nature Network is not a giant park or nature reserve, instead it would consist of clusters of individual parks, nature reserves and natural habitats that are linked together. The land between these places is mostly farmed or urban and is likely to mostly stay that way; however, there are opportunities for nature friendly farming that can buffer, connect or provide stepping-stones between high quality nature sites. It is not a new designation, it aims to prioritise areas for action which will achieve most benefit. Individual landowners will be responsible for what happens on their land.



Five nature priority areas have been identified and one opportunity area, which are shown on the map.

An aim is to target investment where it will give the most benefit, and work is under way to identify funding models with the help of Cambridge Ahead.

Answers to some of the questions

Some of the money might come from biodiversity net gain, but we hope that many organisations in the area will come up with initiatives. The River Cam is part of the network. The governance for the network remains to be worked out, though we hope the local authorities will play a role.

Justin Tilley and John Torlesse: Local nature recovery strategies

The government's 25-year environment plan, plus the environment bill and the agricultural bill, should provide mechanisms to achieve some of the ambitions we have been discussing. The local nature recovery network will cover the whole of England and each county will contribute to planning and mapping the agenda to join together existing habitats, to adapt to climate change, and to provide important ecosystem services. Connecting people to the environment is also key, and accessing it close to homes.

Public bodies will be required to make regular progress reports. There will be a strong emphasis on collaboration and action. Opportunity mapping is not new, but will need to be developed so as to include biodiversity priorities. The priority areas we have identified go a substantial way towards this. ELMS will provide huge new opportunities, for example towards water management. The biodiversity net gain requirement, where it cannot be discharged within a development site, will allow large-scale nature recovery.

Five pilots are under way, with results by the end of March. They should bring in a much wider range of people than in the past. The nearest is Buckinghamshire; as it is an area of extensive proposed development its lessons will be particularly appropriate for us.

Answers to some of the questions

Our landowning and farming community is key and we must work with them. The mapping being done for the OxCam arc will be very useful. Health and wellbeing will be important benefits, as well as bringing wildness to urban areas. Discovering how much landowners are willing to cooperate will be a challenge; we will have to engage with them collectively to help and persuade them.

Baroness Brown: Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority Climate Change Commission

The slides for this talk are appended

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) last week published its 6th carbon budget, with the message that over the next 10 years we will have to move very fast, as is shown in the first slide. In particular, the targets for peat restoration have severe implications for the Fens.

The second slide shows key roles for local authorities, particularly for buildings and travel. Natural Cambridgeshire is an example of the partnerships they will need to promote. The third slide shows advice the CCC is giving, which includes examples of green finance initiatives, a subject on which our Commission will offer strong recommendations to the Combined Authority.

The Commission will take a systems-based holistic approach, both on reducing emissions and on adaptation to changing climate, particularly in relation to water stress and peat. Making changes can produce great benefits, making use of learning from innovations derived from our businesses and universities. There needs to be an emphasis on education and skills, particularly taking advantage of Peterborough's communication with the rest of the country.

We will have to produce a short interim report in February to avoid the purdah constraints from the May elections. Cambridge University, in collaboration with the adaptation committee of the CCC and the Environment Agency, is assessing the climate risk to the region, to identify the need to adapt and what measures need accelerating locally. We will also report on our call for evidence, which is about to close. Transport is a significant issue for us, as large parts of our area have no public transport. Nature is important to give people pleasant places to walk and cycle – I am a strong supporter of trees on verges because they make a huge difference to the temperature. And green spaces in the cities will help avoid the increasing risk of surface water flooding. We will have an initial chapter on peat, as potentially the emissions from it in the region are as much as from everything else. Finally, an important chapter will outline what our citizens can do.

The full report will add chapters on business and industry, waste, agriculture and land use, with examples of good practice from around the region. It will also look at water availability, and research and infrastructure.

Answers to some of the questions

It is difficult to judge the impact on the County's growth aspirations on the climate change agenda; there are bigger questions around the levelling up agenda and the government's intention to spread growth around the country and where additional housing is needed so that maybe we do not need so much. There should be more power in local hands to recognise additional problems from climate change, such as water availability. On the issue of how to fund the maintenance of the trees, there needs to be a natural capital approach to highlight their value – but we must make sure they are the right trees to thrive in 30 years time. Natural Cambridgeshire has done a lot to frame the agenda; it now needs to focus on delivery and to identify the specifics of what needs doing.