

Liverpool City Region Ecological Network

Nature Improvement Area focus area

NIA Focus Area 17: North Widnes Corridor

District(s): Halton

Area 25 hectares

Ecological priorities are:

Habitat creation

- There are limited opportunities for habitat creation in sections 01 and 02. Section 03 offers opportunity for linear woodland and grassland habitats;
- Grassland, especially around the existing grassland areas; and
- Regeneration of Sunnybank Woodland Park;



Habitat management

- The biggest priority for the Focus Area is to improve management of the designated site in section 03, especially where it would ensure the resilience of the site to natural and climate change and deliver sustainable transport improvements to link with St Helens' Bold Forest Park to the north;
- Maintaining, enhancing and increase areas of grassland (calcareous and neutral) in sections 01 and 02;
- Enhancing the planted broadleaf woodland through woodland management to provide woodland structure; and
- Maintaining the extent and increasing the species diversity of the existing grasslands and woodlands and linear features, particularly to support breeding birds; and
- Improve the river corridor along Bower's Brook.

Existing ecological features:

1. There are 10ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: 1 Local Sites; together with grassland, wetland and woodland Priority Habitats.
3. Linear features: river, hedgerows; disused and active railway lines; and roads.
4. Species: The Focus Area contains a number of important species, including yellowhammer,



Focus area description:

The Focus Area is drawn around three linked sites alongside linear features which include 2 major transport routes, Watkinson Way and an active railway. The Focus Area is split into three sections to reflect this which are: 01) Land east of Watkinson Way, 02) Sunnybank Woodland Park and 03) disused Runcorn Gap mineral line which links to St. Helens Bold Forest Park.

The three sections have been identified as priorities for action by Halton in terms of improving landscape character and providing an improved ecological link between St. Helens and Halton. The three sections are distinct from each other:

Section 01 – located east of Watkinson Way which was previously part of the disused Runcorn Gap mineral line, the area provides a significant buffer between Watkinson Way and the residential area of Crow Wood. Bower's Brook flows north to south through the area and is considered to be main river by the Environment Agency. Tree planting along the road corridor has been undertaken which would benefit from restructuring and potentially restocking with appropriate trees and shrubs. The lowland mixed deciduous woodland is considered to be Priority Habitat.

Section 02 – Sunnybank Woodland Park has examples of two Priority Habitats, lowland calcareous grassland and lowland mixed deciduous woodland. The park currently does not meet Green Flag criteria and there are significant opportunities to improve this asset and contribute to improving quality ecological links along the transport corridor.

Section 03 – This is the remaining part of the former Runcorn Gap mineral line that linked St. Helens to Runcorn and it lies within a relatively flat agricultural landscape characterised by hedgerows, ditches and ponds. This part of the Focus Area is a designated Local Wildlife Site because it is an important refuge for wildlife in an arable area. There is a mix of wetland and drier habitats of scrub, bare ground, ponds, hedgerow and broadleaved woodland. These provide habitats for a range of birds and invertebrates. Recently, work has been undertaken to improve the bed of the disused railway to form a cycle path. These works were informed by ecological surveys and undertaken sensitively to improve the ecological function of the linear feature.

Ecological opportunities

Habitat creation:

- **Grasslands:** The examples of calcareous and neutral grasslands that are present could be extended in Section 02 Sunnybank Woodland Park. This could provide additional habitat for invertebrates such as bees and butterflies. It could also help in delivery of a small part of the National Pollinator Strategy. Grasslands in sections 01 could be improved in terms of species diversity by the creation of wildflower grasslands.
- **Woodland:** The existing woodland areas in all sections could be extended and tree and shrub species diversity improved through appropriate planting.

Habitat management priorities:

- Management in all sections to retain larger areas of open ground for wildflower grassland and early stages of vegetation establishment could significantly improve the biodiversity contribution of the Focus Area;
- **Bower's Brook** provides opportunities to enhance wetland area within section 01 and provide stepping stone habitats linking with section 03 and north into St. Helens;

- Woodland structure and diversity can be enhanced in all sections to provide improved habitat for breeding birds, bats, woodland plants and invertebrates;
- **Agricultural Land:** Many of the grasslands close to the section 03 provide supporting habitat for breeding farmland bird species and farmland mammals such as brown hare, providing a buffer to the disused railway by altering arable practices could act as a mechanism to ensure supporting habitat. This management would help retain existing farmland.

Ecosystem Services Benefits

The creation and management activities which benefit ecological features could also expand the benefits this area provides to economic growth and resilience through providing sustainable transport and movement between residential and economic areas. Supporting the ecological aspects of the site ensures that the adjacent industry and employment is maintained. The Focus Area links directly to the Bold Forest Park in St. Helens and strengthening the ecological linkage along this sustainable transport corridor could help to reduce visitor pressure in other locations that are more sensitive to visitor pressure and would strengthen the City Region's attraction for visitors. This could also assist in delivering the City Region's Low Carbon Economy and sustainable transport aspirations.

Focus Area support to wider priorities and strategies

Local Plans – The local authorities in the City Region have worked together to prepare the LCR Ecological Network as a joint evidence base and to help plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale in line with the National Planning Policy Framework. Discussions with neighbouring areas through Nature Connected, the Government-recognised Local Nature Partnership, have enabled wider connections beyond the City Region to be made. In line with paragraph 117 of the National Planning Policy Framework, the LCR Ecological Network includes a Core Biodiversity Area of designated nature and geological sites and priority habitats, linking networks and strategic priorities for habitat creation or enhancement. This is one of seventeen Nature Improvement Area Focus Areas which together make up the LCR Nature Improvement Area. Although not a Proposals Map designation, further refinement of NIA boundaries and land uses may occur as part of each district's Local Plan processes.

River Basin Management Plans (Water Framework Directive) –The ecological opportunities of creating additional habitat and managing the Focus Area would support the wetlands and brook to be more resilient, to remove some of the limiting factors and to work towards achieving good ecological potential. These also could help in regulating water quality.

National Character Areas –the ecological opportunities are in line with the four 'Statements of Environmental Opportunity' identified in the Mersey Valley NCA 60 profile. Delivery of the Focus Area ecological opportunities will strengthen landscape resilience and adaptation to climate change. This will help the Character Area achieve sustainable growth and transport and a more secure environmental future.

Countryside Stewardship scheme – The scheme could support land managers in the delivery of multiple public benefits. Overall, biodiversity should be the priority for the scheme but synergies also exist to maximise opportunities to deliver biodiversity through wetland and forestry proposals. The scheme could also contribute towards the delivery of a proportion of our water quality and forestry objectives.

Nature Connected and Cheshire LNP – implementation of the Focus Area's ecological

opportunities could work towards the LCR LNP's Key Action D and would also support the delivery of its other agreed Key Actions. They would also contribute to the 'living landscape' proposals of Cheshire LNP.

LCR LEP – the ecological opportunities could help support the LEP's Priorities for the Low Carbon Economy, particularly wind and tidal energy and sustainable transport; and the Visitor Economy such as at Speke Hall. The Focus Area could also support the LEP priority for the Knowledge Economy and Skills by enhancing and inspiring learning for school and higher education students, including work placements/training in the natural environment.

Atlantic Gateway – the NIA ecological opportunities fit with the investment opportunities of infrastructure through flood control and sustainability. The ecological opportunities could also support the investment priority in the Low Carbon Economy, particularly wind and tidal energy.