

# Liverpool City Region Ecological Network Nature Improvement Area focus area

## NIA Focus Area 06: Black Brook and Sankey Valley Corridor

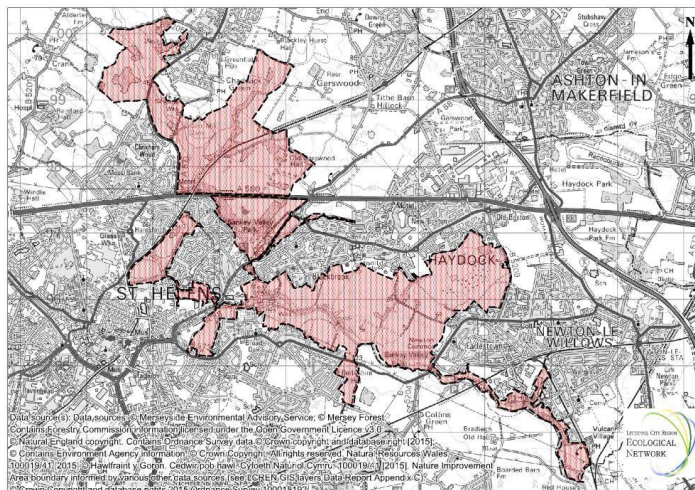
District(s): St. Helens

Area 1,023 hectares

### Ecological priorities are:

#### Habitat creation

- Grassland, especially around the existing grasslands sites;
- Woodland, specifically around the existing ancient woodlands; and
- Wetlands, supporting the existing habitats such as swamp, open water and ponds. Also, opportunities to re-naturalise the rivers and brooks.



#### Habitat management

- Maintaining Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI in favourable status;
- Maintaining and enhancing the existing ancient woodlands
- Enhancing the semi-natural woodlands;
- Enhancing the watercourses (Sankey Brook, Black Brook, Clipsley Brook, The Goyt and St. Helens Canal/Sankey Canal);
- Maintaining and enhancing the bird interest at Carr Mill Dam;
- Maintaining the extent and increasing the species diversity of the existing grasslands; and
- Maintaining and enhancing ponds.

#### Existing ecological features:

1. There are 514ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI; 2 LNRs; 34 Local Sites; together with 8 ancient woodlands, and grassland, woodland and wetland Priority Habitats.
3. Linear features: Rivers and brooks; canal; railway lines; roads; and hedges.
4. Species: Great crested newt; water vole; brown hare; willow tit; bats; farmland birds (e.g. grey partridge, tree sparrow and lapwing).



Stanley Bank Wood, St Helens Council website 2014

### **Focus Area description:**

The Focus Area is drawn around the existing ecological assets, such as the designated sites and rivers. The Sankey Valley is a significant corridor stretching from Spike Island, Widnes through Warrington, St. Helens and into the rural areas of north St. Helens, Knowsley and West Lancashire. The Sankey Valley has been identified as an important wildlife corridor by Warrington Council.

Large areas have been altered by industry. This has resulted in ecologically interesting sites, such as the Burgy Banks and Mucky Mountains. Other sites are currently under restoration such as Lyme and Wood Pits landfill. Existing land uses within the Focus Area, including agri-businesses have been active to restore the landscape to benefit the local residents, economy and environment. The opportunities identified within the Focus Area would build upon this existing work.

The Focus Area contains a significant collection of high quality grasslands, including Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI. The largest concentration of ancient woodland north of the Mersey is also present. Wet woodland is scattered along the rivers and streams. The Focus Area, drawn along the watercourses through the urban area, means the corridors are narrow in places. Just outside the Focus Area is Crank Caverns, which is one of the most significant bat roosting sites within the City Region. The roost is a winter hibernation roost and the bats use the Focus Area for summer roost and migration along the Sankey Valley. Improvements to habitats would benefit local bat populations.

### **Ecological opportunities**

#### **Habitat creation:**

- **Grasslands:** The Focus Area is significant for a range of grassland types. Designated sites contain valuable wet grasslands and further creation adjacent would act as a buffer. One possible site is the Council owned farmland adjacent to Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI to help support the SSSI. Additional grassland creation along the Sankey Brook would increase the habitat connectivity. 'Dry' grassland creation would complement existing grasslands and could be created where ground conditions are drier; choice of grassland type would reflect local site conditions. Opportunities exist where there are existing green spaces, such as at Parr.
- **Woodland:** Planting woodland around the existing ancient woodlands would buffer the important sites and allow species populations to be more resilient and expand into the new woodland. Woodland or hedgerow planting that links the ancient woodlands would also enable species to move between the currently isolated sites. The planting could fill in gaps, such as at Crock Hey Wood, or create woodland belts to connect woodlands across longer distances. Expanding woodlands and strengthening hedgerows around Carr Mill Dam would buffer the existing woods and make them more resilient.
- **Wet woodland:** This is a separate opportunity from other woodlands because the Focus Area and parts of Greater Manchester and Lancashire hold around 6% of the British population of Willow Tit, which has seen over 50% drop in population since the 1960s. Opportunities exist along the watercourses to plant new wet woodlands or to wet existing woodlands by managing surface water. Creation of wet woodland is vital to ensure willow tit population can be retained. It is also a Priority Habitat in its own right and vulnerable to changes in water flow and condition.
- **Rivers and brooks:** The brooks, except Sankey Brook, are classed as heavily modified

under the Water Framework Directive and there is limited potential to alter this. Priorities in the heavily modified areas are to introduce in-channel habitat variation and remove artificial banks. This would encourage more species in the watercourses and improve the ability for species to move along the habitat corridors. Where space allows there is potential to create new natural channels or significantly alter existing channels.

- **Wetland:** Opportunities to expand these areas out from the watercourses are key to increasing the habitat area. Naturalisation of the watercourses provides one opportunity to create this habitat. Larger swamp areas could be created in discrete sites in fields where water could be stored as part of water management through the Focus Area.
- **Ponds:** Additional ponds would support the existing and improve habitat for important species such as dragonflies and amphibians. A small population of great crested newt is present at Newton Common and more ponds would support the population at a wider scale. The Focus Area is narrow in places and ponds provide opportunities to create habitat in small discrete spaces.

#### **Habitat management priorities:**

- **Grassland:** Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI is currently managed by St. Helens Council and this should continue. A large concentration of grassland types exist at Lyme and Wood Pit Country Park and management to maintain the extent and species diversity will be needed after the site restoration is finished and the Country Park opens. There is also a collection of grasslands along the Sankey Valley, including Ashton's Green and Mucky Mountains. The two Burgy Banks (Islands Brow and Haresfinch Bank) contain an interesting mosaic of grasslands due to the industrial history of the sites. Island's Brown has a significant woodland component and management to maintain the extent and improve the species diversity, must take management of the woodland management into account.
- **Woodland:** The existing ancient woodlands are under management. This ranges from amenity to some habitat works. Further targeting the habitat works would improve the ecological value of the woodlands. Sites such as Red Brow Wood would benefit from works to improve the structure, i.e. improve the shrub layer. Himalayan balsam, an invasive species, is a significant issue within many woods and affects the diversity of ground flora.
- **Wet woodland:** Existing habitat includes parts of Glasshouse Close Wood, Stanley Bank Wood and Goyt Hey Wood. Maintaining the habitat extent by tree thinning and water level management is important. Tree thinning will also encourage ground flora and provide improved habitat for willow tits.
- **Wetland:** The largest areas of swamp are at Islands Brow Burgy and Havannah Flash, while Carr Mill Dam is the largest lake in the City Region. Scattered patches of swamp also exist along the rivers and canal. Management of existing swamp should maintain the extent and prevent too much scrub growth, but maintain some scrub as wet woodland. Some areas may require cutting to prevent drying out. Any cutting should be undertaken on a rotational basis. Management of the open water at Carr Mill Dam should be aimed at managing the uses of the lake sustainably. The area around the confluence of The Goyt is an important area for wetland birds. This should continue to be protected and the wetland habitats enhanced to allow them to expand.
- **Rivers and brooks:** The river corridors are narrow in places and are managed for flood

defence. A maintenance programme that is sensitive to ecology, such as rotational bankside cutting, is important to maintain flood defence and deliver improvements. Maintaining the diversity of habitats, including trees, grassed banks and emergent vegetation is vital to support important species, such as water vole and feeding bats. Dense vegetation is present in areas and this limits the species diversity on the banks and within the watercourse. Removing small areas of dense vegetation would allow more species to establish.

- **Hedgerows:** Traditional management of the hedgerows, such as laying, would strengthen the structure. Measures such as filling gaps in existing hedges and cutting every 3 years would improve the function of the hedgerow. Planting and allowing large tree species to grow tall would provide a diversity of height and expand the tree cover of the area. Hedgerow management allows existing agricultural uses of fields to be maintained while providing significant improvements to important habitats.
- **Ponds:** Ponds at Stanley Bank, Newton Common and Cambourne Road pond are designated sites for the pond habitats and species they support. Fish management is a priority at Newton Common to increase the breeding success of great crested newt. Other ponds require management to prevent complete shading by trees and drying out. A mixture of ponds in different conditions, such as completely open - some shading – complete shading, provides a range of habitat diversity. Protection of ponds from pollution inputs such as nutrient enrichment is important to ensure the habitat can support important species.

### **Ecosystem Services Benefits**

The Focus Area covers the Sankey Valley Park. This has been identified as an important green transport route through St. Helens and into Warrington. Improvements to the environment, especially in areas that have been affected by previous industries, will help deliver a vibrant corridor that is well used and valued by the local residents. Well designed new and improved access would help to support healthy active communities by providing space for outdoor exercise and activities. Improving the ecology of sites affected by industry could also help to remediate sites and possibly reduce environmental risks. This could help to ensure sites do not pose a significant threat to human health.

The Focus Area's watercourses, wetlands and floodplain areas act to store water. Improvement in the function of the habitats will help to store more water, while further habitat creation will add to the storage capacity. This is important as there are significant flooding issues in St. Helens and it has been identified as a priority by the Environment Agency in the Catchment Flood Management Plan. This helps to make properties and land more secure outside the Focus Area and is linked to property values. The watercourses are also in poor condition under the Water Framework Directive. Some stretches such as the Sankey Brook and Black Brook are Environment Agency priorities for action. Improvements and expansion to habitats, such as swamps, would help to filter water, improve quality and help manage water flow across the catchment. Initiatives, such as the Water Framework Directive, could help support landowners to deliver wetland habitat creation and management.

Management of the woodlands, in particular, could provide economic opportunities in relation to renewable energy and microgeneration. Existing woodlands act as a carbon store and any new woodlands would also help store carbon. Many woodlands are managed by the Council and any opportunities to recoup resources would strengthen management. For example, woodland was planted and is developing around the Black Brook bypass and could be put into short rotation

coppice for fuel production as biomass. Expansion of woodlands could over time provide further economic opportunities and could be used to offset agricultural incomes in line with The Mersey Forest Plan.

There is a mixture of arable and grazing land in the Focus Area. Many of the existing important grasslands are managed as hay meadows and are supported by environmental management schemes. The potential ecological opportunities could result in changes from arable to more grazing land/hay meadows. This could provide opportunities for expanded grazing which could support expansion of local dairy and meat production. There is a need for good quality hay resources for sale to stables and farmers in the wider area. Grassland creation or management could be supported financially by schemes such as environmental management schemes.

Existing sites at Stanley Bank and Carr Mill Dam provide attractions to a range of visitors, while Lyme and Wood Pit will once it is complete and fully open. Enhancement of the visitor facilities can increase revenue for local businesses and support the identified opportunities for habitat creation and management.

### **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.

**Catchment Flood Management Plans** – the ecological opportunities could be used to help store flood waters and release them slowly. This is in line with the approach the Environment Agency is taking to deal with flooding along the Sankey Valley.

**River Basin Management Plans (Water Framework Directive)** - the ecological opportunities would help deliver improvements to water quality and morphology. This would help to improve the ecological condition of the watercourses.

**Mersey Forest Plan** – woodland and hedgerow creation is in line with Policies for this area in the Plan. The protection, expansion and management of other habitats is a Plan wide policy which the ecological opportunities would help to deliver.

**National Character Areas** –the ecological opportunities are in line with the four 'Statements of Environmental Opportunity' identified in the Lancashire Coal Measures NCA 56 profile. Delivery of the Focus Area ecological opportunities would strengthen landscape resilience and adaptation to climate change. This would help the Character Area achieve sustainable growth 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, water quality and flooding

benefits. The scheme could also contribute towards the delivery of our water quality objectives.

**Nature Connected** – implementation of the Focus Area’s ecological opportunities would work towards the LCR LNP’s Key Action D and would also support the delivery of its other Key Actions.

**LCR LEP** – the identified ecological opportunities could help to support the LEP’s Priorities for Low Carbon Economy; and Visitor Economy, such as at Carr Mill Dam, and sustainable transport. The Focus Area could also support the LEP’s 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 Nature Improvement Area ecological opportunities fit with the investment opportunities of infrastructure through flood control and sustainability.