

Liverpool City Region Ecological Network

Nature Improvement Area focus area

NIA Focus Area 10: Mersey Estuary

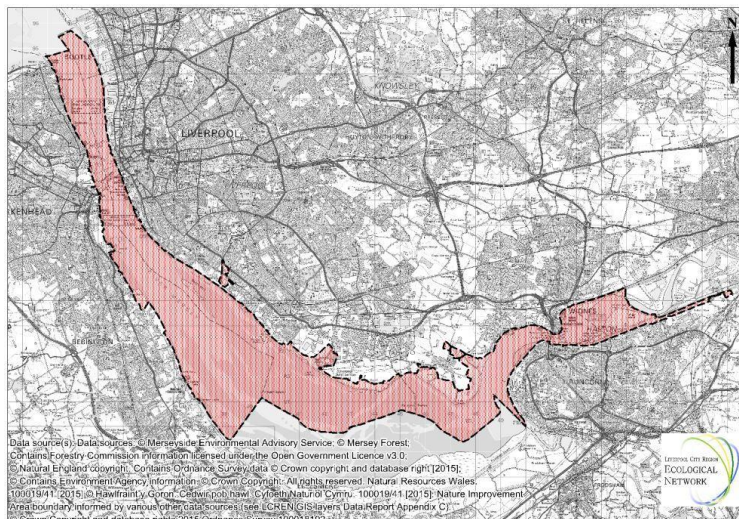
District(s): Halton, Liverpool, Sefton and Wirral

Area 6,438 hectares

Ecological priorities are:

Habitat creation

- there are limited opportunities for habitat creation. Habitats are establishing naturally;
- grassland, especially around the existing grasslands sites; and
- woodland, specifically around the existing ancient woodlands.



Habitat management

- The biggest priority for the Focus Area is management of the designated sites, especially where it will ensure the resilience of the sites to natural and climate change;
- maintaining and enhancing the existing ancient woodlands;
- enhancing the semi-natural woodlands; and
- maintaining the extent and increasing the species diversity of the existing grasslands, particularly to support breeding birds, passage birds and overwintering birds.

Existing ecological features:

1. There are 6,085ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: 4 internationally designated sites; 3 SSSIs; 3 LNR; 19 Local Sites; together with ancient woodland, grassland, wetland, woodland and coastal Priority Habitats.
3. Linear features: river; canal; hedgerows; railway line; and roads.
4. Species: The Focus Area contains a large number of important species, mainly breeding farmland birds, particularly yellow wagtail, passage and overwintering birds but also including fish and aquatic mammals.



Focus area description:

The Focus Area is drawn around the numerous designated sites and includes the entire Estuary within the City Region, including areas upstream of the Runcorn Gap. The Focus Area also includes the Mersey Narrows to high tide mark because it forms a link with Liverpool Bay. It complements the 'Living Landscapes' area which Cheshire Wildlife Trust is proposing. The Estuary is of major importance for ducks and waders. The site is also important during the spring and autumn migration periods, particularly for wader populations moving along the west coast of Britain. Grasslands and fields have been included in the Focus Area as they are important sites for roosting and feeding for birds.

The City Region has a very limited resource of ancient woodland and any opportunity to protect, enhance and expand the woodlands is vital. Due to their importance, the adjacent ancient woodlands in Halton and Liverpool have been included in this Focus Area.

The area is already heavily protected through legislation and provides a significant contribution towards the City Region's natural assets and green infrastructure. It is one of the largest areas of continuous wildlife habitat in the City Region. Compared to the other 'coastal' areas of the City Region the Focus Area is used less for recreation but this is offset by the presence of economically significant industry along substantial lengths of the banks.

There has been continuous investment along the River Mersey catchment to improve water quality after the industrial revolution resulted in the estuary becoming one of the most polluted sites in Europe. Further investment would build upon the existing investment and further enhance the Estuary for the local residents and businesses.

Ecological opportunities

Habitat creation:

Due to the nature of the Estuary and the development along the foreshore, there are limited opportunities to create additional habitat. Habitats within the Estuary naturally fluctuate as the main channel(s) migrate.

- **Grasslands:** The north bank contains important grasslands particularly along the cliffs and around Speke Hall. New grassland adjacent to the existing would act as a buffer as well as increase the size of the habitat. The grasslands and farmland are important for breeding birds, including Yellow Wagtail and as a high tide roost for passage and overwintering birds. Additional grasslands would provide the opportunity for more breeding, roosting and feeding sites for birds.
- **Woodland:** The existing ancient woodlands are isolated and relatively small. Planting native woodland around the existing ancient woodland would buffer the important sites and allow species populations to be more resilient and expand into the new woodland.

Habitat management priorities:

- Nearly all of the Focus Area is covered by site designations that include management prescriptions, e.g. SSSI. Management should be in line with established management objectives.
- There is limited scope to enhance the intertidal sand- and mud-flats apart from ensuring they are protected and damaging practices are limited.

- The majority of the saltmarsh resource is on the south bank of the estuary within Cheshire; saltmarsh is naturally eroding east of Hale on the north bank. Management to improve the condition of the saltmarsh at Hale would help support the habitat to adapt to natural change. Upstream of the Runcorn Gap, additional saltmarsh is present at Wigg Island and Widnes Warth; management is being put in place at these locations as part of the Mersey Gateway project and further investment would strengthen the existing management.
- The Mersey Estuary is used less extensively for recreation than the other coastal sites within the City Region and there is limited access onto the mud/sandflats. The Estuary is important for sailing and other water sports and there are a number of important walking routes especially along the north bank. Wigg Island, Otterspool Promenade, Eastham Country Park, Port Sunlight River Park and Speke Hall are important recreation facilities. Further investment in access along the north bank would ensure the protection of the cliffs at Speke and the important habitats present. Improvements to the visitor facilities across the whole Estuary would support the local visitor economy. This could help to broaden the coastal access available for the population of the City Region and reduce the pressure on other areas such as the Sefton Coast or North Wirral Foreshore.
- The Estuary is heavily urbanised with a large amount of industry located on both banks. This means the species and habitats within the estuary need to be resilient to pressures such as noise, water and air quality. Management that could enhance coastal habitats by increasing plant diversity would enable the estuary to be more resilient to pressures and maintain support for important animal species.
- **Grasslands/Agricultural Land:** Many of the grasslands close to the estuary provide supporting habitat for passage and overwintering birds. Adding to the plant diversity of the grasslands would improve the potential for breeding farmland bird species to use the area. The alteration of arable practices could act as a mechanism to ensure supporting habitat, such as feeding areas, are maintained for birds that are qualifying species of the Mersey Estuary. This management would help retain existing farmland.
- **Woodland:** The existing ancient woodlands are subject to management which ranges from amenity to some habitat works. Further targeting of habitat management would improve the ecological value of the woodlands. Additional investment in management would ensure the ecology and recreation value of the sites is maintained into the future.

Ecosystem Services Benefits

The Mersey Estuary is an iconic feature of the City Region. Further enhancement to the ecology, social and economic aspects of the Estuary would build upon existing work undertaken by the Mersey Basin Campaign and the River Mersey Task Force. The biggest potential benefit from the identified ecological opportunities is through managing, maintaining and enhancing the existing designated sites. This should ensure that the area continues to provide the ecological benefits and enhances them where needed. The future management of the habitats within the Focus Area should therefore continue to provide the benefits of climate change mitigation, tourism, recreation and leisure, quality of place and health and wellbeing to the local/wider population.

Some management activities which benefit ecological features could also expand the benefits this area provides to economic growth and resilience. Supporting the ecological aspects of the

site ensures that the adjacent industry and employment is maintained. The provision or improvement of appropriate visitor facilities would enhance the Estuary as a recreation resource and help the visitor economy. These could include the provision of facilities such as paths, toilets and cafes in areas where they are currently lacking and which are compatible with nature conservation objectives. This could reduce visitor pressure in other locations more sensitive to visitor pressure and would strengthen the City Region coastal attraction for visitors.

The Mersey Estuary's potential as a resource for the Low Carbon Economy is the subject of ongoing assessment and investigation.

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.

Flood Catchment Management Plans/Shoreline Management Plans – the flooding and coastal erosion measures vary along the north and south banks of the Estuary. The ecological opportunities are in line with the identified measures and could help deliver coastal protection through enhanced saltmarsh that reduced coastal erosion and flooding.

River Basin Management Plans (Water Framework Directive) – The designated sites are impacted by water quality from the River Mersey and some management practices. The ecological opportunities of managing the sites will support them to be more resilient, to remove some of the limiting factors and to work towards achieving good ecological potential.

National Character Areas –the ecological opportunities are in line with the four 'Statements of Environmental Opportunity' identified in the Merseyside Conurbation NCA 58 profile. Delivery of the Focus Area ecological opportunities would strengthen landscape resilience and adaptation to climate change. This will 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 through wetland and forestry proposals. The scheme could also contribute towards the delivery 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 and the Visitor Economy such as at Speke Hall. The Focus Area could also support the LEP priorities 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.