

# Liverpool City Region Ecological Network Nature Improvement Area focus area

## NIA Focus Area 12: East Wirral Heathlands

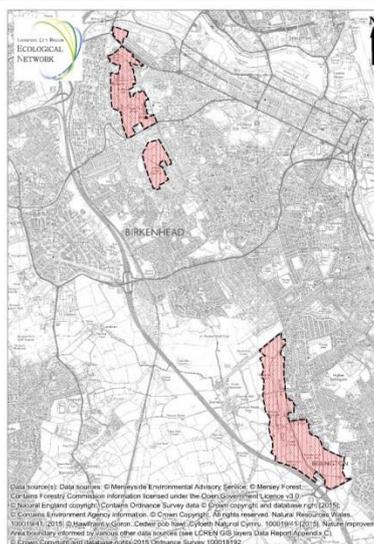
District(s): Wirral

Area 223 hectares

### Ecological priorities are:

#### Habitat creation

- Heathland, where the geology allows especially around the existing habitat area; and
- Grassland, to support the heathland where heathland restoration would be difficult.



#### Habitat management

- Restoring, maintaining and enhancing the heathland habitats;
- Maintaining the extent and increasing the species diversity of the existing grasslands to support the heathland; and
- Enhancing the existing woodland to support the heathland.

#### Existing ecological features:

1. There are 114 ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: 6 Local Sites; together with lowland heath, ponds, deciduous woodland, dry acid grassland, reedbed and marsh Priority Habitats.
3. Linear features: Hedgerow and motorway verge.
4. Species: Great crested newt; house sparrow; brown long-eared bat; bluebell; bullfinch; lapwing; linnet; skylark; reed bunting; pipistrelle; song thrush; and heather.



### Focus area description:

The Focus Area is drawn tightly to the sandstone ridge along east Wirral. Heathland in the UK has experienced over 80% habitat loss across the country, while retaining 20% of the world's heathland habitat. The Focus Area is small and naturally isolated from other heathland as the habitat is dependent upon geology and soil type. The heathland within the Focus Area is highly fragmented.

The northern section (Bidston Hill) is owned by Wirral Council and has an active "Friends of" group. The middle section is privately owned (Wirral Ladies Golf Club). The southern section is in private ownership while the northern section is partly owned by The Woodland Trust (Storeton Woods) and has an active "Friends of" group.

### Ecological opportunities

#### Habitat creation:

- **Heathland:** Where geology and soil conditions are favourable it may be possible to recreate small areas of heathland. Prime locations for this will be within Bidston Hill and Wirral Ladies Golf Club where the sandstone rock is closest to the surface. Within the golf course, heathland can also function as rough of differing heights and structure. Clearance and control of small areas of trees and scrub adjacent to existing heathland habitat can allow the habitat to expand naturally. In other areas, such as grasslands, planting heathland species and altering management will create new habitat.
- **Grasslands:** Acid grasslands are a natural part of a heathland and expansion of this habitat will support and buffer the heather dominated areas. In the longer term, intensive grassland cutting and removal of the arisings results in a lowering of the nutrients, which allows acid grassland species to establish.

#### Habitat management priorities:

- **Heathland:** Historic management of heathland would have involved the removal of some trees and large heather and gorse shrubs for firewood and other uses. The removal of trees within the heathland will reduce shading and allow the heather and other species to grow. Removing old growth of heather and gorse is also important as the new grow is important for many invertebrates and helps in reducing risks of fire. Maintaining discrete blocks of old growth is important to retain nesting habitat for birds. Management undertaken in rotation to maintain areas of suitable habitat would provide these benefits.
- **Grassland:** A low intensity grassland cutting regime (e.g. once every two years) would be sufficient to manage acid grasslands to benefit biodiversity. Plants species can be introduced and protected from cutting until they have established to create a wider diversity of grassland species and structure.
- **Woodland:** Trees are an important part of the heathland habitat and form a mosaic with heath and grassland. Woodland growing on sandstone based soils can provide an opportunity to increase species diversity using more acid-loving plants into the ground flora and shrub layer. The woodland is important for birds and woodland management that benefits plants and birds would be appropriate.

### **Ecosystem Services Benefits**

The heath, grasslands and woodland along the sandstone ridge provide significant biodiversity benefits in terms of quality and quantity of lowland heath, a declining priority habitat type. Other benefits are based on the recreational use of Bidston Hill and adjacent public spaces. The sandstone exposures and heathland habitats provide a range of educational opportunities. Storeton Woods is also open to the public.

Views of the wider landscape are afforded from Bidston Hill due to the open nature of the heathland habitat.

### **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.

**National Character Areas** - the ecological opportunities are in line with two of the four 'Statements of Environmental Opportunity' identified in the Merseyside Conurbation NCA 58. Delivery of the Focus Area ecological opportunities could 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, water quality and flooding benefits. The scheme could also contribute towards the delivery of our water quality 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 Key Actions. They would also contribute to the 'living landscape' proposals of Cheshire LNP.

**LCR LEP** – The Focus Area could help to 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 NIA ecological opportunities fit with the investment opportunities of the Sustainability priority (landscape park, grey to green).