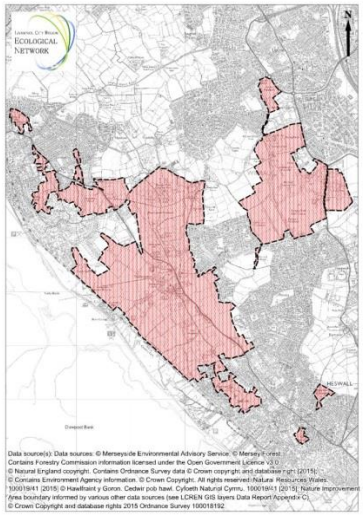
# Liverpool City Region Ecological Network
# Nature Improvement Area focus area

## NIA Focus Area 13: West Wirral Heathlands and Arrowe Park

District(s): Wirral Area 1,008 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 425 ha of existing habitat.

2. Core Biodiversity Area: 3 SSSI; 2 LNR; 26 Local Sites; together with traditional orchard, purple moor grass & rush pastures, deciduous woodland, lowland heath, lowland meadows, reedbed / marsh, ponds, fen and dry acid grassland Priority Habitats.

3. Linear features: River, hedgerow and dismantled railway.

4. Species: Farmland birds such as grasshopper warbler, great crested newt, house sparrow, common lizard, black poplar, bluebell, brown hare, bullfinch, dingy skipper, bats and song thrush.

**Focus area description:**

The Focus Area is drawn around the underlying geology of the sandstone ridge along the west of Wirral; it includes areas such as Thurstaston Hill, Heswall Dales, Caldy Hill and Arrowe Park. Land ownership is fragmented between Wirral Council and private land owners including the National Trust.

The Focus Area is important for the remnant lowland heathland present. 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 one of the largest areas of heathland in the City Region and naturally isolated from other heathland as the habitat is dependent upon geology and soil type. Heswall Dales SSSI is in 'unfavourable recovering' condition (Natural England 1 April 2014).

The Focus Area contains a mosaic of lowland heath, acid grassland, established woodland, regenerating woodland and scrub. Large gardens of some properties do have potential for heathland creation as a buffer to the open heathland.

**Ecological opportunities**

**Habitat creation:**

- **Heathland:** Where geology and soil conditions are favourable it may be possible to recreate small areas of heathland. The prime locations for this will be on Caldy Hill where the sandstone rock is closest to the surface. 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 could 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. Successful habitat creation would occur if the removal of the topsoil to remove excess nutrients on some sites was appropriate. The topsoil can then be used for landscaping elsewhere. 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 and would retain nesting habitat for birds. Management undertaken in rotation to maintain areas of suitable habitat would provide these benefits.

- **Grassland:** Horse grazing can be a useful tool to develop species rich grassland and manage scrub encroachment. For example, horses are the predominant grazing animals within the New Forest heathland and grasslands. If grazing is found to be inappropriate, a low intensity grassland cutting regime (e.g. once every two years) would be sufficient to benefit biodiversity. Species can be introduced and protected from grazing until they have established to create a wider diversity of 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. Woodland management to provide less shade on existing heath or acid grasslands would be a significant benefit, as part of rotational heathland management.

**Ecosystem Services Benefits**

The West Wirral Heathlands 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 the heathlands and the adjacent Arrowe Park. The sandstone exposures and heathland habitats provide a range of educational opportunities.

**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 'Statements of Environmental Opportunity' identified in the Wirral NCA 59. 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 will work towards the LCR LNP's Key Action D and will also support the delivery of its other Key Actions. They would also contribute to the 'living landscape' proposals of Cheshire LNP.

**LCR LEP** – the ecological opportunities could help to support the LEP's Priority for the Visitor Economy, such as at Arrowe Park and Thurstaston Hill. The Focus Area could also 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).