

# Liverpool City Region Ecological Network

## Nature Improvement Area focus area

### NIA Focus Area 16: River Birket Corridor

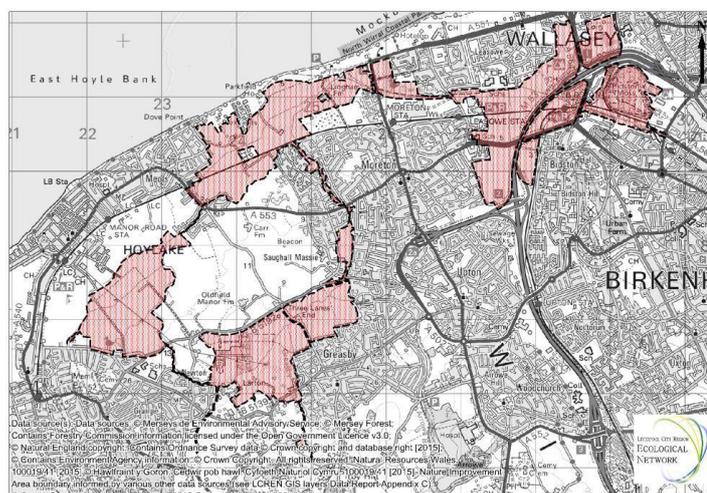
District(s): Wirral

Area 758 hectares

#### Ecological priorities are:

##### Habitat creation

- Wetlands including rivers, supporting the existing habitats such as swamp, open water and ponds.
- New hedgerows and tree lines that connect to the existing will create a landscape that woodland species can move across.



##### Habitat management

- Enhancing the watercourses such as the River Birket, including sustainable storage of surface water;
- Maintaining the value of the supporting habitat for overwintering, passage and breeding birds at Hoylake, Saughall Massie and Leasowe;
- Maintaining the extent and increasing the species diversity of the existing wetlands and grasslands; and
- Maintaining and strengthening the habitat links through the rural and urban landscape while retaining open views which are important for birds.

##### Existing ecological features:

1. There are 185 ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: 1 SSSI, 1 LNR; 8 Local Sites; together with reedbed, ponds, deciduous woodland and grassland Priority Habitats.
3. Linear features: River, motorway and primary route (verges), railway line, dismantled railway, hedgerow.
4. Species: includes Bats; barn owl; otter; water vole; farmland birds, passage and overwintering birds; Great crested newt; ivy-leaved crowfoot; and brown hare.



**Focus area description:**

The Focus Area includes the rivers Birket and Fender and some tributaries such as Arrowe Brook. It extends from Bidston Moss through Moreton, Leasowe and behind Hoylake. This forms the larger part of a self-contained river catchment that flows into the Mersey Estuary.

The inland wetland areas south of Hoylake and Saughall Massie provide supporting feeding and roosting habitat for overwintering, passage and breeding birds that are part of the internationally important sites along the Wirral coast and beyond.

There is also a string of important wetland and grassland sites along both the Birket and Fender which connects the Mersey Estuary with rural Wirral.

The Focus Area west of Birkenhead is predominantly agricultural land and is Green Belt. The area is characterised by having a number of different wetlands, brooks, streams, drainage ditches and ponds with hedgerows and tree lines. The area south of Hoylake is being considered for a major golf resort; it is a key project for the City Region. The area east of Bidston Moss is part of Wirral Waters, a strategic priority for the City Region in terms of housing and employment.

**Ecological opportunities****Habitat creation:**

- **Rivers and Brooks:** Priorities include introducing in-channel habitat variation and removing artificial banks, which can be replaced by green engineering solutions to maintain the function of the watercourse. This would encourage more species in the watercourses and improve the ability for species to move along the habitat corridors.
- **Wetland:** The river corridors are narrow and wetland creation, possibly as part of flood defence works, could be undertaken along both the Birket and Fender. Opportunities to expand these areas out from the watercourses are limited but would provide multiple benefits including surface water storage and water filtering.
- **Ponds:** A network of ponds is present in the Focus Area. Creating more would support the existing and improve habitat for important species such as dragonflies and amphibians. Ponds provide the opportunity to create wetland habitats within the rural and urban landscape in small discrete spaces, especially where the Focus Area is narrow and to maintain the existing land use.
- **Hedgerows:** Creating new hedgerows and tree lines that connect the existing woodlands will create a landscape that woodland species can move across while retaining open views and provides additional links to the watercourses.

**Habitat management priorities:**

- **Rivers:** 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, could maintain flood defence and deliver ecology improvements. Maintaining the diversity of habitats, including trees, grassed banks and emergent vegetation would support important species such as water vole, otter and feeding bats. Dense vegetation is present in some areas and limits the species diversity on the banks and within the watercourse. Removing small areas of dense vegetation could allow more species to establish.

- **Wetland:** Patches of swamp habitats of varying size exist along the rivers. Management of the existing swamp could prevent too much scrub growth, while maintaining some scrub as wet woodland. Some areas may require cutting to prevent drying out. Any cutting should be undertaken on a rotational basis.
- **Ponds:** The ponds within the Focus Area are important for invertebrate and amphibian populations. Management to prevent complete shading by trees and drying out is required. 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 continue to support important species.
- **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 would allow the use of fields to be maintained while providing significant improvements to important habitats. Open views should be maintained where necessary for the benefit of breeding, passage and overwintering birds.
- **Woodland:** Management of the Bidston Moss woodlands to improve structure and quality would be required in the near future as the plantation woodland has established well. Management could be targeted to introduce glades, ground flora and woodland rides along the paths, and has the potential to generate an economic output.

### **Ecosystem Services Benefits**

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 could add to the storage capacity. This helps to make properties and land more secure inside and outside the Focus Area and could benefit property values. The rivers Birket and Fender are in poor condition under the Water Framework Directive. Wider opportunities at a catchment scale such as beneficial land management change and upstream flood storage could also play a part in ensuring there is no increase in the level of flood risk in Birket and Fender areas.

Management of the woodlands, in particular as a source of biomass, could provide economic opportunities in relation to renewable energy and microgeneration. Existing woodlands act as a carbon store. In line with The Wirral Waters MasterPlan, the creation and management of appropriate habitats, such as woodland including wet woodland and grasslands, could provide a quality landscape setting for new development.

### **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** - the ecological opportunities identified could be used to store flood waters and release them slowly. This is in line with the approach the Environment Agency is taking to deal with flood risk management along the rivers Birket and Fender.

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

**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 profile. 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** - 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.

**LCR LEP** – The Focus Area could help support the delivery of the Wirral Waters Masterplan and inform the design and delivery of the proposed golf resort at Hoylake by contributing towards sustainable development creating a more productive working environment. The ecological opportunities could also help 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 Focus Area supports the delivery of 3 of the 4 priorities: Sustainability (landscape park, grey to green), Infrastructure (flooding) and Growth.