



A Vision for Landscape Recovery in the Upper Waveney and Little Ouse Valleys

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Summary

This study was funded by Natural England and commissioned by Suffolk Wildlife Trust to gather information on the natural assets of the landscape between Diss and Knettishall. It investigates the potential for restoring wildlife sites and reconnecting them through new habitat corridors and expansion of existing sites. It proposes a new Vision for nature-based land management which accommodates farming and promotes other benefits to society, such as management of water flows and loss of sediment, nutrient and carbon from the land, and better access to nature. The Vision is a landscape where human activity thrives in sympathy with recovered nature. No timescale is set for achieving this; the Vision provides the framework for long term nature recovery in the project area.

The outcomes of implementing the Vision are tested by modelling using the Environmental Benefits from Nature (EBN) tool. As this tool is not specifically designed for a catchment-scale exercise involving significant land use change, the results should be treated with caution.

The methods for translating the Vision into reality are described. The project area is divided into a Core Area – the floodplains of the headwaters of the Little Ouse and Waveney Rivers – and a Wider Area, which encompasses the valley flanks up to the watershed. No assumptions about landowner intent or current land use are made – all land is considered equally, reflecting only its potential for contributing to a new nature-based landscape.

Mapping and analysis have been conducted for two scenarios – current land use, and the future Vision. These maps are shown below and are available in A3 format at <https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/recovering-nature-headwaters-little-ouse-and-waveney-rivers>. The aim within the Vision is not wholesale rewilding; productive but much less intensive farming will remain across much of the project area.

The conservation history of the area is summarised, describing the original rich mosaic of valley habitats which characterised the two headwater areas and the role of nineteenth century land

enclosure in the fragmentation of wetlands and improvement of land for agriculture. The impacts of land drainage and nutrient enrichment, together with the further impact of twentieth century agricultural intensification, and the over-use of ground and surface water resources are described. Recent efforts to restore habitats and species and re-connect wildlife sites are documented. This review makes clear the need for a new landscape Vision to restore nature in the project area.

A section of the report focuses on the rivers, describing their critical importance to nature recovery. The relationship between changing land use and deterioration of river quality is outlined, particularly the increased siltation and nutrient loads. The direct impacts of over-engineering watercourses are highlighted. Current ecological condition of the rivers varies from Bad, to Poor, or at best, Moderate status. The benefits of land use change in reversing deterioration are summarised. Previous projects to restore the degraded river channels have been modest in scope and are now in need of renewal. Restoration of channel morphology and water quality are key to the Vision.

Additional maps present the data sets which were used to develop the Vision (these are also available at <https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/recovering-nature-headwaters-little-ouse-and-waveney-rivers>). These data sets are: designated conservation sites; soil type; agricultural land class; ponds; watercourses, and current habitats. Current habitat was based on published land cover types, supplemented by local knowledge and data supplied by the project partners. Together with the contextual information, this evidence base was used to indicate where the greatest benefits for nature recovery could be obtained with appropriate land use changes.

The majority of the suggested habitat modification is within the Core Area but there are three key elements which extend well into the Wider Area: hedgerows, sediment management and ponds.

The report describes how the Vision will be delivered through working with nature. A primary focus across the project area is the re-establishment of grassland mosaics with scrub and woodland. Reconnecting fens within the Core Area is a second key strategy. Expansion of these habitats will reduce the area of cropland and improved grassland, although both will remain significant in the project area.

In the coming uncertain decades of climate disruption, the Vision is as much about creating opportunities for wildlife to colonise, adapt and change, as it is about re-establishing or restoring pre-existing habitats. It is about building resilience to environmental adversity.

Delivery of the Vision will be a long-term undertaking involving significant commitment by individuals and organisations, requiring both guaranteed government support and private investment.

Any final scheme will include an array of landowners, each with differing preferences and constraints operating on their land. Implementation will therefore be through a series of options from which landowners can choose. The menu of habitats and options will deliver substantial nature recovery, going beyond Stewardship and ELMS, having a minimum standard which delivers some or all of:

- Substantive improvement in habitat condition.
- Habitat re-creation.
- Recovery of species populations or assemblages, such as pollinators.
- Transformative farm practice, where crops and grazing are sustained within a productive landscape but where farm nature has recovered.

Measures which can deliver on the following themes are outlined, and will also be needed to implement the Vision:

- Carbon release and carbon sequestration.
- Nutrient and silt management.
- Restoration and management of water resources.
- The role of woodland, scrub, wood-pasture and trees.

The benefits of a catchment-wide approach are described, linking land use change in the valleys, on the slopes and across the watershed with river channel restoration and reconnection to the floodplain. This will produce greatest benefits for water resource management, nutrient reduction and water quality, ensuring nature recovery is maximised. Catchment-wide improvements will bring economic benefits through tourism, recreation and access to nature.

The results of the Environmental Benefits from Nature (EBN) analysis are described. The tool is likely to underestimate the natural capital uplift produced by the Vision, as it is designed for small sites not landscapes, leading to several issues described in the report. Hence the outputs are interpreted with caution. Even so, the results show:

- Overall, substantial biodiversity net gains and an increase in ecosystem services.
- Significant improvements in erosion protection, water quality regulation, pollination, pest control, aesthetic value, education, interaction with nature and sense of place.
- Moderate improvements in flood protection and carbon storage.
- A small decrease in agricultural production.

The full report is available at www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/recovering-nature-headwaters-little-ouse-and-waveney-rivers.

Figure 1: Current broad habitat types within the project area

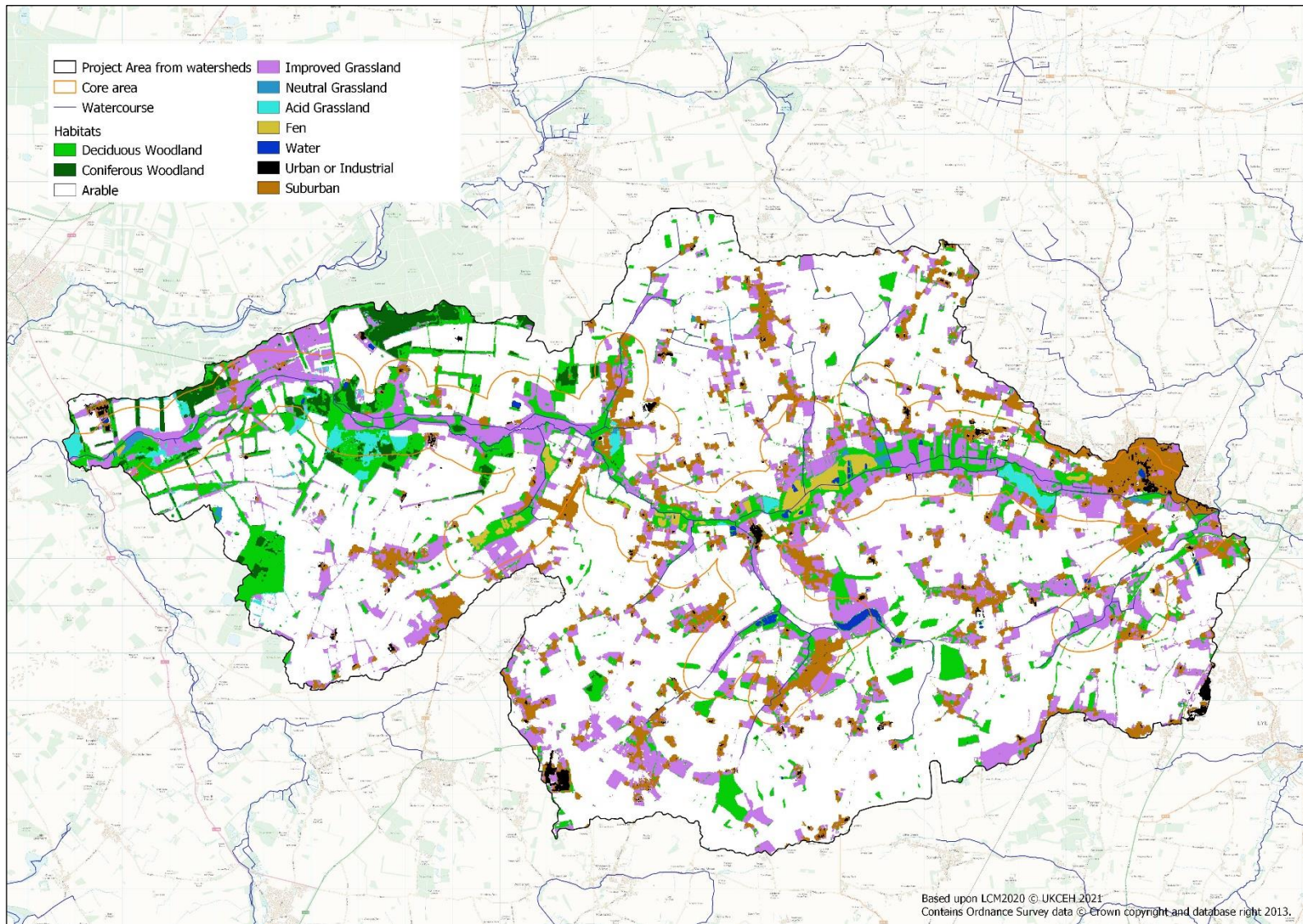


Figure 2: Vision Map for future habitat recovery within the project area

