

# An Interim Nature Recovery Network for Fenland

**FINAL Report**

Prepared by

**The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire &  
Northamptonshire**

July 2023



**Wildlife Trust for  
Beds, Cambs  
& Northants**

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#### Report Citation:

Baker, M.P. (2023). An Interim Nature Recovery Network for Fenland. *Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Urgent action is required to reverse biodiversity loss and climate change, which is increasingly being reflected in national, regional and local policies.

The UK Government has set ambitious targets related to climate change and through the Defra sponsored 25 Year Environment Plan has committed to reversing the loss of biodiversity. The Environment Act introduces a requirement to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies and to deliver mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) through the land-use planning system.

In terms of natural habitats, Cambridgeshire has one of the lowest proportions of priority habitats in England (less than 10%), with one of the lowest percentages of land designated for nature and the second lowest woodland cover at 4.8%. Natural assets in Cambridgeshire are coming under increasing pressure with conflicts and / or damage from recreational pressures being recorded at nationally important sites such as Wicken Fen, as well as local sites such as Lattersey LNR.

Better management, restoration and creation of natural habitats will not just play a part in reversing the loss of biodiversity, it will also contribute towards achieving net zero-carbon and help provide better access to the countryside for a growing population with the health and social benefits that this brings to the local economy. This is particularly the case in a county such as Cambridgeshire which does not benefit from large-scale open access downland, moorland, coast or common land.

Many Local Authorities have recognised the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis and are looking to take greater action to address these twin challenges, such as by formally supported the Natural Cambridgeshire<sup>1</sup> vision to double nature:

*“Our Vision is that by doubling the area of rich wildlife habitats and natural greenspace, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will become a world-class environment where nature and people thrive, and businesses prosper.”*

## 1.2 Strategic Land-use Planning

Fenland District Council are currently reviewing their Local Plan. As part of this they wish to identify priority areas for nature enhancement to support their biodiversity and green infrastructure policies

Further, once mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain is introduced from November 2023, there will be a need for off-site biodiversity net gain and enhancement measures for some developments. These would have most benefit where they are targeted to strategic locations, which contribute to the creation of a functioning nature recovery network. Such locations are also rewarded in terms of biodiversity units when using the Defra Biodiversity Metric, the official measure of biodiversity net gain. There is therefore a need to identify suitable strategic locations within Fenland for nature enhancement.

The Environment Act places a legal duty on Local Authorities to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies. In Cambridgeshire the Combined Authority is the responsible body with the work assigned to the County Council and Natural Cambridgeshire. This is likely to be completed in 2024. This document and associated mapping layers will therefore support the emerging Fenland District Council Local Plan in the interim period, as well as inform the county-wide statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Natural Cambridgeshire is the Local Nature Partnership covering Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. See <https://naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk/>

### 1.3 Study Aims & Objectives

This report has been commissioned by Fenland District Council and Natural England. The project aim is to identify a high-level Interim Nature Recovery Network for Fenland district (to act as a preliminary, but non-statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the area), to inform implementation of biodiversity net gain and green infrastructure planning policies. The work will also inform other green infrastructure and natural capital investments, as well as Parish Neighbourhood Plans and organisational nature recovery plans.

The project aims to:

1. Identify Priority Areas for landscape-scale action to support nature's recovery, from both desktop analysis and targeted fieldwork.
2. Undertake stakeholder engagement with key stakeholders to agree the boundaries of the priority landscape areas.
3. Identify the critical components of a Nature Recovery Network in each of the Priority Areas, based on the <sup>1</sup>Lawton principles of More, Bigger, Better, and More Joined Up.

The final products are this report and a series of GIS mapping layers.

The outputs from this project will be available to inform, influence and be fed into the statutory county-level Local Nature Recovery Strategy, but also provide a local context for securing biodiversity net gain and nature recovery across Fenland district.

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## 2. STUDY STAGES

### 2.1 Identification of Priority Areas

The study was undertaken between March 2023 and May 2023.

The first stage involved putting together the evidence base to identify **Priority Areas** for large-scale, strategic biodiversity and landscape enhancement across Fenland. There were two separate but related strands to the initial evidence gathering.

The first strand of this stage involved collation and analysis of high-level habitat and nature conservation sites data, to identify priority landscape areas as the core components of a potential Nature Recovery Network across Fenland. Information including data from Natural England's Open Data Portal, Natural Capital Solution's Opportunity Map of Cambridgeshire, Natural Cambridgeshire's Landscape Priority Areas and data held by the Wildlife Trust on County Wildlife Sites and nature reserves was collated using QGIS to produce a series of mapping layers that can be interrogated and analysed. We assessed this information against maps of underlying and surface geology, soils, topography and drainage to understand the wider landscape context of the habitat information.

The second strand involved site visits to each of the Priority Areas to understand better the local landscape and land-use, and to allow us to refine the area boundaries, which were further tested through engagement with key stakeholders.

### 2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

The draft Priority Areas boundaries were presented to key stakeholders, including Natural England, Fenland DC officers and large conservation organisations such as the RSPB and National Trust. The boundaries of the Priority Areas were further refined based on these discussions.

Once the boundaries of the Priority Areas were established, further discussions took place with key stakeholders to identify the critical components of a Nature Recovery Network and the best opportunities to create or enhance habitats in each Priority Area. At this stage, not all opportunities have been identified. More detailed engagement with landowners and stakeholders outside of this project will be required to identify the full range of opportunities for expanding the nature recovery network core areas and stepping stones.

Further discussions with landowners would also enable identification of the potential delivery mechanisms for each component of the nature recovery network, whether that be through agricultural policy (Environmental Land Management Schemes), Biodiversity Net Gain linked to development, provision of green infrastructure, or other policy drivers. It would also identify those opportunities deliverable in the short-term compared to those that will be longer-term ventures.

The Priority Area boundaries and the critical Nature Recovery Network components set out in this report are therefore a product of combined desktop and field assessment, coupled with testing through engagement with key stakeholders.

### 2.3 Identifying the Components of a Nature Recovery Network

It is possible to identify the best opportunities from an ecological perspective based on the Lawton Report principles of providing more and better habitats, expanding existing sites, and connecting existing sites or providing stepping stones between sites, using a mixture of desk analysis and field assessment.

This stage of developing a Nature Recovery Network is however best done working with the relevant landowners, because for opportunities to be accepted and ultimately taken forward they will need to fit with the landowners own aspirations and business. While some landowners may be immediately sympathetic to

the inclusion of their sites in environmental schemes, others may require convincing over time; and some may be wholly resistant.

The resources are not available through this project to undertake such detailed property by property assessment and engagement with the relevant landowners.

It is therefore proposed to undertake a high-level analysis to identify the key Lawton principles to apply to each **Priority Area**, and the best and most likely delivery mechanisms for achieving the nature network, whether agri-environment policy and schemes, biodiversity net gain, or provision of strategic natural greenspace from new development.

However, some specific opportunities have been identified where these are being actively taken forward by individual landowners or partnerships projects, and the landowners are willing for them to be shown on the maps. These were identified using the principles included in the <sup>2</sup>Natural England Research Report NERR081 Nature Networks Evidence Handbook (2020).

The information in this report will help inform land use planning decisions, including priority locations for delivery of biodiversity net gain, as well as other priorities for funding including agri-environment schemes.

The outputs from the project are this report and a series of GIS mapping layers showing an interim Nature Recovery Network for Fenland.

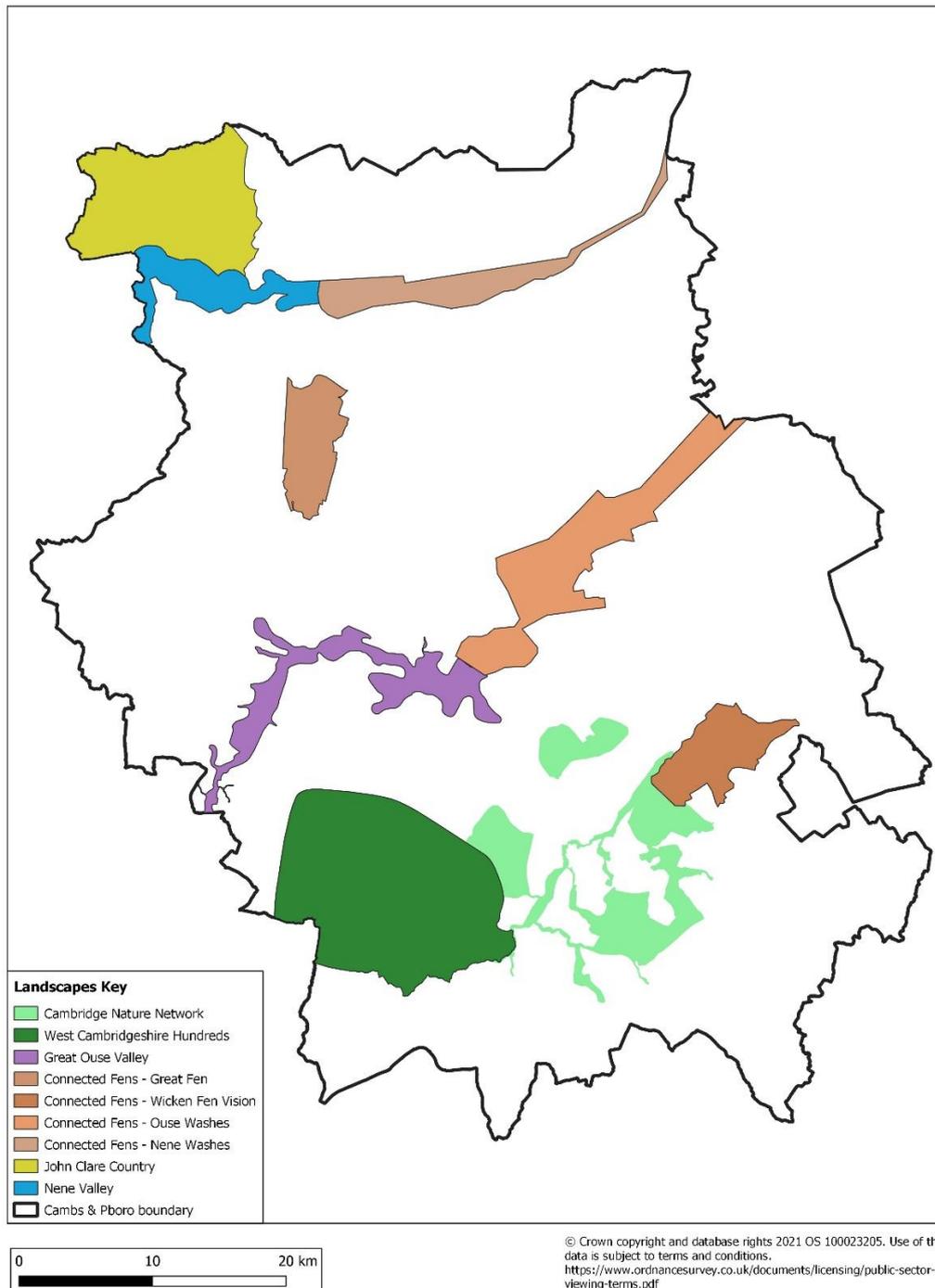
### 3. IDENTIFICATION OF PRIORITY AREAS

#### 3.1 Natural Cambridgeshire Priority Landscapes

Natural Cambridgeshire has previously identified six priority landscapes for nature enhancement across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. One of these, the Connected Fens includes the Ouse Washes and Nene Washes both partly within Fenland district, as well as the Great Fen which although within Huntingdonshire, is close to the Fenland district boundary. These are shown on Map 1 below:

Map 1: Natural Cambridgeshire Landscape Priority Areas

Natural Cambridgeshire Landscape Priority Areas



## 3.2 Sites of Highest Biodiversity Value

In order to establish areas on which to focus landscape-scale biodiversity opportunities, an evidence-based understanding of the current nature conservation sites and habitats across Fenland is required.

The broad nature of this study could not look at the details of the individual sites and so sites of high biodiversity were defined as those with some kind of designation (e.g. SSSIs, Local Nature Reserves, County Wildlife Sites, ancient woodlands, traditional orchards), or other protection, for instance a private nature reserve. Designated sites are already defined and well mapped and the GIS data for these was taken from the Natural England Open Data Geoportal. We supplemented this with local data available to the Wildlife Trust and through CPERC (the Local Records Centre) including County Wildlife Sites, Wildlife Trust nature reserves, and wildlife-rich countryside sites owned by other conservation stakeholders.

## 3.3 Identification of Priority Areas

Clusters of designated nature conservation sites were used as the initial basis for identifying potential **Priority Areas**. Although these designated sites cover the vast majority of priority habitats they do not represent all the wildlife habitats present in the area. We therefore supplemented this information with other data sources, to better define clusters of sites and habitats that were well connected.

<sup>3</sup>The Mapping Natural Capital and Opportunities for Habitat Creation in Cambridgeshire Report (Rouquette, 2019), provided a good basis for analysis of the full range of habitats, although not all of the data sets used in this were recent, for example the phase 1 habitat survey for the county dates from the 1990s. We therefore supplemented this high-level habitat opportunity mapping with local knowledge and additional field surveys to review the historical land use information where it is out-of-date.

The Natural England National Habitat Network data layers available on the MAGIC website were also downloaded and interrogated. These provided a coarse layer of information based on simple buffers around different types of priority habitat, which was helpful in identifying the initial areas of focus.

Using the above data, three potential **Priority Areas** were identified and then further refined by studying landscape features such as the topography, underlying geology (both solid and drift), current habitat and land use, and past habitat and land use. Published green infrastructure strategies and visions, such as the Ouse Washes landscape partnership work or Block Fen-Langwood Fen Minerals Plan, and land owned and managed by organisations with a predominantly conservation remit was also taken into account. The boundaries of the **Priority Areas** were refined using the updated habitat information, gathered from site visits.

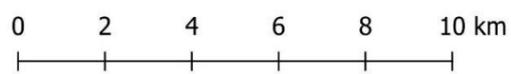
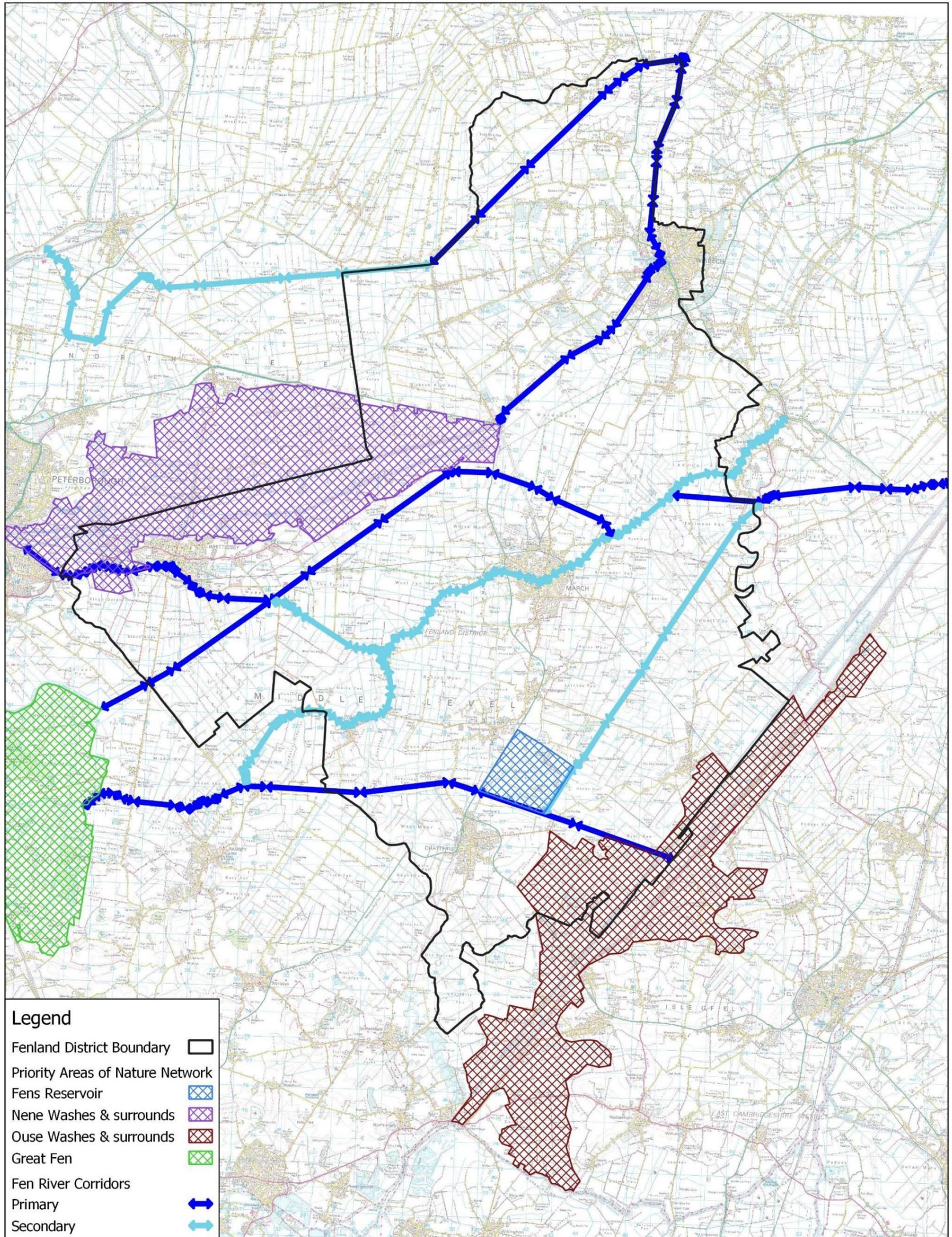
In defining the detailed boundaries of each **Priority Area**, the placement of the boundary has, where possible, followed land use and geographic features rather than the individual ownership of land, but inevitably these are sometimes one and the same. Where possible, **Priority Areas** have been connected to neighbouring areas to create a coherent network.

The above information formed the initial evidence base through which we defined areas of focus for a potential Nature Recovery Network within Fenland. Each area is different in character and may ultimately produce very different opportunities in terms of habitats and land uses.

Map 2: Fenland Interim Nature Recovery Network Priority Areas



Fenland Interim Nature Recovery Network  
July 2023



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The three **Priority Areas** are described below, and also shown on Map 2 above:

It is important to note, when reading the **Priority Area** descriptions below, that the areas identified in Map 2 are not intended to be converted in their entirety to the habitats described below. The areas mapped also do not have any new or amended statutory planning policy status arising from this Report (though future planning policy may take into account the contents of this Report). The purpose of the maps and this Report, is to indicate the nature recovery opportunities within each of the **Priority Areas**, and to help steer activities to achieve the best nature recovery solutions. Further details on each, including an individual vision and delivery options, can be found in section 4 of this Report.

### 3.4 Ouse Washes & Surrounds

The Ouse Washes Priority Area is broadly defined by the Washes themselves and a buffer either side. However, as part of this work, the original distance-based buffer has been refined to take account of areas of remnant surface peat soils with potential for wet grassland creation suitable for breeding waders. The area also includes the Block Fen-Langwood Fen minerals extraction area, where restoration will be to a mixture of wet grassland and open water. This is the best opportunity available within Fenland, though there is also an opportunity to extend the RSPB “pilot project” wet grassland creation scheme towards Manea and further along the Washes, where peat soils occur at the surface. Other significant opportunities for the creation of complementary buffering habitats to the Ouse Washes are at Sutton, Mepal, Coveney and Pymoor in East Cambridgeshire. The conservation priorities in the area are the creation of wet grassland habitats to support breeding and wintering bird species associated with the Ouse Washes. As well as providing suitable soils for wet grassland creation, conservation of the peat soils through alternative approaches to farming also has the potential to make a major contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture in this area. Beyond this Priority Area there are also the Natural England Goose and Swan Impact Risk Zones (IRZ) which covers a wider area either side of the Ouse and Nene Washes, and where farming practices can help provide an important winter food source for the internationally important wintering bird populations of the Washes.

### 3.5 Nene Washes & Surrounds

The Nene Washes Priority Area is broadly defined by the Washes themselves and a buffer either side. As with the Ouse Washes the simple distance based buffer has been refined to follow areas of remnant peat soils, and to include the major minerals extraction allocations west of Whittlesey, as well as incorporate the Thorney Bird Friendly Farming initiative north of the Washes. The conservation priorities in the area are the creation of wet grassland, particularly on peat soils, and other wetland habitats to support breeding and wintering bird species associated with the Nene Washes. The adoption of bird friendly farming south of the Washes would complement the Thorney Bird Friendly Farming area. Alternative approaches to farming on the peat soils also has the potential to make a major contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture in this area. Beyond this Priority Area there is also the Natural England Goose and Swan Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) which covers a wider area between the Ouse and Nene Washes, and where farming practices can help provide an important winter food source for the internationally important wintering bird populations of the Washes.

### 3.6 Fens Reservoir

The Fens Reservoir Priority Area is located in Benson’s Fen and Normoor within the Curf Fen Internal Drainage Board area north-east of Chatteris. The area is north of the Forty Foot Drain, west of the Sixteen Foot Drain and east of the A141 at Doddington. Detailed proposals are yet to be developed, but the stated intention is to create a strategic green infrastructure site with significant areas of habitat and public access. This will be a regionally significant destination but will also act as a much needed strategic natural greenspace and de-facto “Country Park” for March and Chatteris. A range of priority wetland habitats are likely to be created with open water, reedbed margins, and areas of wet grassland and wet woodland supporting wetland bird, invertebrate and plant assemblages, and providing an attractive environment for recreational visitors.

## 4. PRIORITY AREA NATURE NETWORK COMPONENTS

### 4.1 Nature Network Rules of Thumb

There are different approaches that can be adopted to develop a nature network, based on local conditions. However, there are some broad principles that influence the design of functional and robust ecological networks (<sup>2</sup>Natural England Research Report NERR081). The following represents a hierarchical approach based on the <sup>1</sup>Lawton principles (Lawton et al, 2010), listing the most important elements in order. The key elements are then each considered in turn.

### **Better site quality > Bigger sites > More sites > Stepping stones & permeable matrix (nature friendly farming) > Corridors**

**Better site quality:** Maintaining the quality of core sites within a network is the starting point, as these will represent the best quality areas of habitat supporting the largest range and number of key species. To achieve the best site quality, there needs to be sufficiently large habitat patches to allow for a complex mosaic of different habitats and micro-habitats, along with dynamic processes to allow the fullest range of species to flourish.

Core sites with long-term continuity of habitats, whether ancient woodland, or long-standing grassland and wetland habitats need to have strong protection as they will support more species and have more complete and carbon-rich soil structures than more recent examples of these habitats.

These core habitat patches should be buffered from adverse adjacent land uses by at least 50m, and ideally 100m of less intensive land uses. In some cases, e.g. where predation from urban cats would affect important species, a larger distance of up to 500m may be required.

The final critical element to achieving better quality core habitat patches is to ensure suitable management that allows key ecological processes such as grazing or natural regeneration to occur. Where this is not possible, for example on small sites, management interventions can attempt to replicate these processes, but this tends to be more costly with less natural results.

**Bigger sites:** Bigger sites with significant buffer zones have reduced edge effects, and provide larger core habitat patches that can support wider ranging species. They are also likely to have more habitat variation and better support those species with specialist habitat requirements. In the context of climate change, bigger sites are likely to provide more micro-climates and therefore be more resilient than smaller sites.

The aim should be to have core habitat patches of at least 100 Ha with a minimum habitat patch size of 40 Ha. If there are choices to be made, when expanding the size of sites, it will usually be better to choose the smallest core site to increase first (for example increase a site of 30 Ha to 40 Ha before increasing a site of 70 Ha to 100 Ha).

In the context of recreational pressure, bigger sites are usually able to cope with larger numbers of people because of the greater scope to use zonation to provide areas with no / low disturbance to act as refuges for sensitive species.

**More sites:** When selecting locations for creating new sites, it will often be better to choose areas with greater variation of topography and aspect. Larger sites are better than smaller sites, but if the former is not possible, larger numbers of smaller sites can work so long as they are well connected to the core sites and each other.

**Stepping stones & permeable matrix:** Across a defined habitat network the aim should be for there to be at least 30% semi-natural habitat. For specialist species, habitat patches should be less than 200m apart, but for more generalist species less than 1 Km apart is acceptable.

Landscape-scale habitat mosaics help improve the stability of populations and may be important for wide-ranging species. In agricultural landscapes a more heterogeneous landscape can help counter the impacts of intensive farming practices. A landscape with a good variety of different types of habitats can often support a greater variety of species than would be predicted by just considering the number and type of habitats present (i.e. a Nature Network as a whole is potentially more valuable than each individual Priority Area).

Nature-friendly farming, with a variety of farm habitat features and some high-quality habitat stepping stones will support a habitat network by providing a more permeable matrix through which some species can move. Work at RSPB Hope Farm at Knapwell and the work of the Nature Friendly Farming Network (Georgina Bray & Martin Lines, *pers. comm.*) has shown that giving 10% of farms over to wildlife features is the level required to allow nature to recover. This is also achievable through using the least productive / unproductive parts of fields along with retaining existing farm wildlife features. This approach increases the area of breeding, foraging or sheltering habitats for some species. It is also likely that different landowners will take different approaches based on their own interests, so will increase the variety of the landscape in between habitat patches and help support a wider diversity of species.

**Habitat corridors:** For most habitat specialist species, corridors are of little value unless they are a minimum 100m wide, due to edge effects reducing the habitat quality along a linear corridor. Natural corridors, such as rivers function better than man-made corridors. Most species will “see” corridors differently to humans. For example, hedgerow corridors are a landscape feature that are of little value to wildlife unless they are thick and at a high density (i.e. they act as good scrub edge habitat) and they form part of a permeable landscape or part of a woodland habitat network.

**Extent of nature-rich habitats:** As well as the individual site size, the other critical aspect for the development of a coherent and functioning ecological network is the extent of nature-rich habitats. A minimum land cover of 30% is ideally required to allow species to thrive and respond to naturally fluctuating conditions across a landscape. While in some instances a lower % cover might suffice, this will inevitably require a significantly larger proportion of wildlife-friendly farmland habitats or extensive nature-friendly farming practices.

The following sections consider each of the **Priority Areas** in terms of these principles and identify the components of the habitat network and opportunities for enhancing it. The opportunities identified have been discussed with key stakeholders, but detailed discussions have not taken place with most landowners. Further landowner engagement would be a valuable subsequent task once the Interim Nature Recovery Network has been published. Land use and land management opportunities will evolve over time, so the Nature Recovery Network should be seen as identifying the best opportunities and indicative of what could be achieved.

## 4.2 Ouse Washes & Surrounds Priority Area

### 4.2.1 Key Facts

**Core sites:** Ouse Washes Ramsar / SPA / SSSI / SAC; Block Fen CWS; Old Bedford Low Bank Drains CWS, Sutton & Mepal Pumping Station Drains CWS, Mepal Gravel Pits CWS, Haddenham Engine / Adventurer's Head Drainage System CWS, Byall Fen Pumping Station Drains CWS.

**Important habitats:** Floodplain wet grassland mosaics, swamp, wet woodland, open water: lakes & drainage ditches, and arable farmland (as winter feeding grounds for swans).

#### **Important species:**

**Fauna:** Internationally and nationally important numbers of waders & wintering waterfowl. Key species include breeding black-tailed godwit, snipe, redshank & lapwing, and wintering Bewick's swan, Whooper swan, mute swan and wigeon, amongst many other wetland birds. The washes, and in particular the drainage ditch systems support a range of notable fen relic wetland invertebrate species. Drainage ditches also support healthy populations of water vole. Fish include spined loach and European eel.

**Flora:** The drainage ditches of the washes and beyond support a range of fen relic aquatic flora including various rare stoneworts.

### 4.2.2 Network Approach:

#### Better Management

Approximately 80% of the Ouse Washes is owned by nature conservation organisations committed to managing it primarily for nature. However, due to factors beyond the control of land managers, relating to flooding and sea level rise, the Ouse Washes supports lower numbers of breeding waders in particular and some wintering water birds than when it was first designated. Climate change may exacerbate these trends. Management of flood events and water across the wider catchment is required to help alleviate late spring floods which are detrimental to breeding waders, and excess winter flooding which is detrimental to species such as wigeon, which can't feed at the site during large flood events. Various areas of work are underway to explore solutions, but none will be easy or quickly achieved.

The conservation NGOs working with government agencies have brought forward an alternative approach of creating suitable wet grassland habitats either side of the Washes to build up populations of breeding waders, and to provide breeding and foraging sites safe from unseasonal flooding. Approximately 150 Ha have been created at Coveney with plans for another 150-200 Ha at Sutton. However, this falls significantly short of the 1,000 Ha of habitat creation calculated as necessary to return the breeding wader populations to their historic levels.

#### Buffering & Extending Core Areas

Within Cambridgeshire, three key areas have been identified for expanding wet grassland habitat for breeding waders, two in East Cambridgeshire and one mainly in Fenland. The Fenland site is centred on the <sup>4</sup>Block Fen-Langwood Fen mineral masterplan, where the plan is to create a mosaic of wetland habitats, including significant areas of floodplain grazing marsh post sand and gravel extraction over the next few decades. Mineral extraction is still at the early stages and as yet no significant areas of wet grassland habitat have been created. This should however change over the next 5 to 10 years as the first phases of mineral extraction are completed.

The two areas in East Cambridgeshire are centred on areas with deeper deposits of surface peat soils, as these provide the best conditions for creation of suitable wet grassland priority habitat for breeding waders. These are located at Coveney / Pymoor and Sutton where there are additional areas of peat soils which could provide further potential for increasing the area of wet grassland created and managed for breeding waders. At Sutton, habitat creation has not commenced. The Environment Agency will be bringing forward the habitat creation scheme working with a partner such as the RSPB, but the available funding will only create wet grassland across 40-50% of the suitable area of peat soils. There is significant potential to create a larger area of wet grassland habitat.

There is also a smaller area between the Washes and Manea in Fenland district where a similar approach to wet grassland creation could be undertaken, expanding the RSPB “pilot project”, the first and a highly successful wet grassland creation scheme next to the Washes.

### Stepping Stones

There are a range of smaller nature sites either side of the Ouse Washes that provide stepping stones for wildlife, whether former sand and gravel pits, or some of the Internal Drainage Board ditch networks selected as County Wildlife Sites. The best of these usually have clean water sources coming out of gravel seams or through peat deposits. There are also pockets of woodland and some farm reservoirs that provide habitats. There is further scope for the creation of small stepping stone habitats of various types on farmland within the Priority Area.

### Nature Friendly Farming

Outside of the priority locations for the creation of wet grassland habitats, the adoption of nature-friendly farming approaches can help support many of the species that use the Washes as well as other farmland bird species, or species associated with the ditch networks. Cropping patterns and rotations influence the location of winter foraging grounds for swans. However, the use of various agri-environment options can support greater provision of nesting, sheltering and foraging opportunities for various declining farmland bird species. Buffering and sensitive management of the ditch networks can also support water vole, specialist fen relic invertebrates and aquatic flora.

The adoption of nature-friendly farming, regenerative farming techniques or innovative wet farming techniques could also make a major contribution to reducing the loss of peat soils and reducing carbon emissions from agriculture, as significant areas of peat soils or organic-rich former peat soils remain across this area.

### **4.2.3 Priority Area Vision:**

Four significant areas of wet grassland creation, totalling at least 1,000 Ha will be created in the Block Fen-Langwood Fen, Coveney / Pymoor, Sutton, and Manea areas, to create an expanded core habitat area in the heart of the Cambridgeshire fens. Either side of the Washes, nature-friendly and regenerative farming practices will provide complementary habitats for wildlife, while also reducing carbon emissions from farming. IDB ditch systems will support greater abundance of relic fen species alongside providing flood management or water for irrigation.

### **4.2.4 Delivery Mechanisms:**

The current phase of the Ouse Washes habitat creation project at Coveney and Sutton is being taken forward by the Environment Agency. Further expansion of this is likely to be reliant on blended funding solutions. There may be some additional finance from government as a result of statutory habitat compensation requirements, however this will likely need to be supplemented by private finance such as the use of biodiversity offsetting and the creation of habitat banks, or other payments for soil carbon or nutrient neutrality.

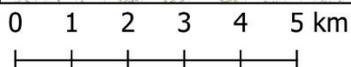
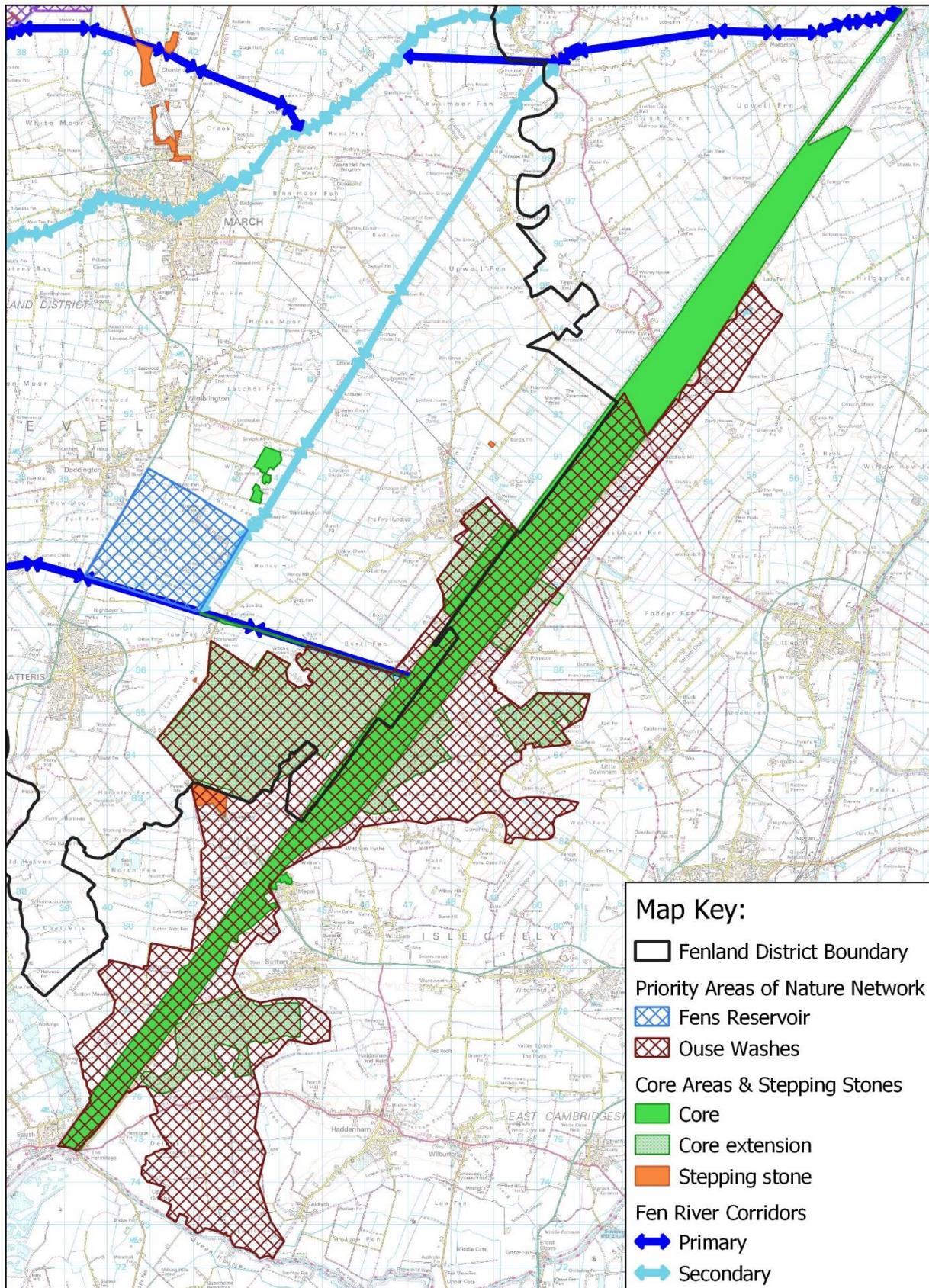
The habitat creation from restoration of minerals sites in the Block Fen-Langwood Fen area will be delivered through the minerals planning process and restoration of minerals sites.

At Manea, there is potential to create a habitat bank with biodiversity net gain & offsetting payments, as well as use soil carbon payments and traditional agri-environment scheme options to support delivery.

Across the majority of the area, the creation of smaller stepping stone habitats or adoption of nature-friendly farming approaches will be mainly delivered through commercial farming and / or the use of agri-environment schemes.

**Map 3: Ouse Washes & Surrounds Habitat Network**

Ouse Washes & surrounds  
Habitat Network May 2023



**Map Key:**

- Fenland District Boundary
- Priority Areas of Nature Network**
- Fens Reservoir
- Ouse Washes
- Core Areas & Stepping Stones**
- Core
- Core extension
- Stepping stone
- Fen River Corridors**
- Primary
- Secondary

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## 4.3 Nene Washes & Surrounds Priority Area

### 4.3.1 Key Facts

**Core sites:** Nene Washes Ramsar / SPA / SSSI / SAC; Bassenhally Pit SSSI; Nene Washes Counter Drain East & West CWS, King's Dyke Nature Reserve CWS, Common Wash CWS, Wash Road Pollard Willows CWS, Pit South-east of Bassenhally Pit CWS, Eldernall Gravel Pits CWS, Goosetree Heronry CWS, Northey Gravel Pits CWS, Dog-in-a-Doublet Drain CWS, Thorney Dike CWS; Eyebury Road Pits CWS; Cat's Water Drain CWS.

**Important habitats:** Floodplain grazing marsh, swamp, wet woodland, open water: lakes & drainage ditches, and arable farmland (as winter feeding grounds for swans and habitat supporting farmland bird assemblages).

#### **Important species:**

**Fauna:** Internationally and nationally important numbers of waders & wintering waterfowl. Key species include breeding black-tailed godwit, snipe, redshank, lapwing & common crane and wintering Bewick's swan, Whooper swan, wigeon and a range of ducks and other wetland birds. The Nene Washes also support a breeding population of corncrake a species of meadows. The washes, and in particular the drainage ditch systems support a range of notable fen relic wetland invertebrate species. Drainage ditches also support healthy populations of water vole. Fish include spined loach and European eel.

**Flora:** The drainage ditches of the washes and beyond support a range of fen relic aquatic flora including various rare stoneworts.

### 4.3.2 Network Approach:

#### Better Management

The Nene Washes is 1,520 Ha in size of which 280 Ha (18%) is managed as a nature reserve by the RSPB. In the past significant areas of the Washes were used to grow arable crops, though, the vast majority of the washes are now managed as grassland with summer grazing with cattle. The Nene Washes hasn't suffered the same degree of unseasonal late spring flooding as the Ouse Washes and consequently breeding waders such as black-tailed godwits have fared much better. However, there are still incidents of spring flooding in some years that can adversely affect breeding waders. There are also concerns regarding water quality, with nutrient levels too high, which can adversely affect aquatic plants, invertebrates and fish, but also contribute to a decline in quality of the wet grassland habitats for wading birds. Natural England consider that only 20% of the Washes are in a favourable condition, with 80% unfavourable. There is therefore considerable scope to improve the condition of the washes through better management and the RSPB also works with and advises other owners of the Washes to encourage high quality management for breeding and wintering water birds. However, addressing adverse impacts from external factors such as water quality and flooding needs input from a wider range of statutory agencies including Environment Agency and Middle Level Commissioners. Land use planning decisions regarding development within the Nene catchment also need to avoid causing further adverse impacts.

#### Stepping Stones

There are a range of smaller nature sites either side of the Nene Washes that provide stepping stones for wildlife, whether former sand and gravel pits, or some of the Internal Drainage Board ditch networks selected as County Wildlife Sites. The best of these usually have clean water sources coming out of gravel seams or through peat deposits. There are also pockets of woodland and some farm reservoirs that provide habitats. There is further scope for the creation of small stepping stone habitats of various types anywhere across the Priority Area.

The restoration of the major brick clay and sand & gravel minerals sites west of Whittlesey as set out in the <sup>5</sup>Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Minerals & Waste Plan (2021) provide a major opportunity for the creation of significant areas of wetland habitats to support the populations of wetland birds for which the Nene Washes are noted. Restoration plans, although still many years away, do include the creation of significant areas of new wetland habitats which will complement the Nene Washes.

### Nature Friendly Farming

Outside of the priority locations for the creation of wetland habitats, the adoption of nature-friendly farming approaches can help support many of the species that use the Washes as well as other farmland bird species, or species associated with the ditch networks. Cropping patterns and rotations influence the location of winter foraging grounds for swans. However, the use of various agri-environment options can support greater provision of nesting, sheltering and foraging opportunities for various declining farmland bird species. Buffering and sensitive management of the ditch networks can also support water vole, specialist fen relic invertebrates and aquatic flora.

The Thorney Bird Friendly Farming Area, established by local landowners working with the RSPB in 2012 has led the way in demonstrating what is possible alongside continuation of productive farming. Nature friendly farming has included not just uncropped farm margin options, but also small-scale creation of floodplain wetland mosaics for waders and waterfowl. This approach could be extended further north of the Washes and replicated in the area south of the Washes.

The adoption of nature-friendly farming, regenerative farming techniques or innovative wet farming techniques could also make a major contribution to reducing the loss of peat soils and reducing carbon emissions from agriculture, as significant areas of peat soils or organic-rich former peat soils remain across this area.

#### **4.3.3 Priority Area Vision:**

Significant areas of wetland creation will be achieved through the restoration of the minerals sites (clay and sand / gravel pits) west of Whittlesey. Either side of the Washes, nature-friendly and regenerative farming practices will provide complementary habitats for wildlife, while also reducing carbon emissions from farming. IDB ditch systems will support greater abundance of relic fen species alongside providing flood management or water for irrigation.

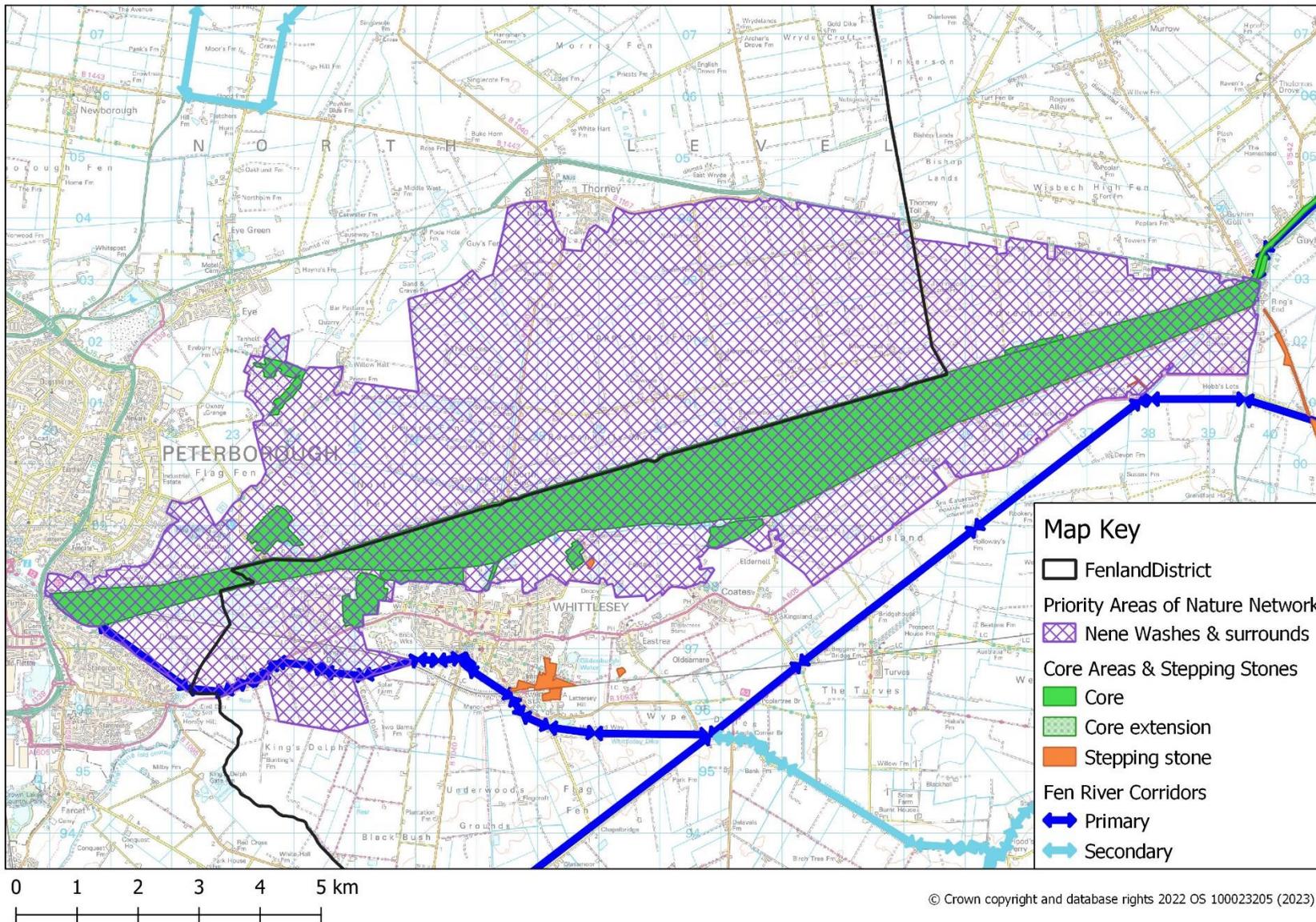
#### **4.3.4 Delivery Mechanisms:**

The habitat creation from restoration of minerals sites west of Whittlesey will be delivered through the minerals planning process and restoration of minerals sites.

Across the majority of the area, the creation of smaller stepping stone habitats or adoption of nature-friendly farming approaches will be mainly delivered through commercial farming and / or the use of agri-environment schemes. However, there is also scope to create one or more habitat banks to provide local options for the delivery of biodiversity net gain and offsetting through the land use planning system.

Map 4: Nene Washes & Surrounds Habitat Network

Nene Washes & surrounds Habitat Network May 2023



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## 4.4 Fens Reservoir

Planning for the new Fens Reservoir is still at the very early stages, therefore it is not possible to describe in detail what it might include or look like.

### 4.4.1 Priority Area Vision:

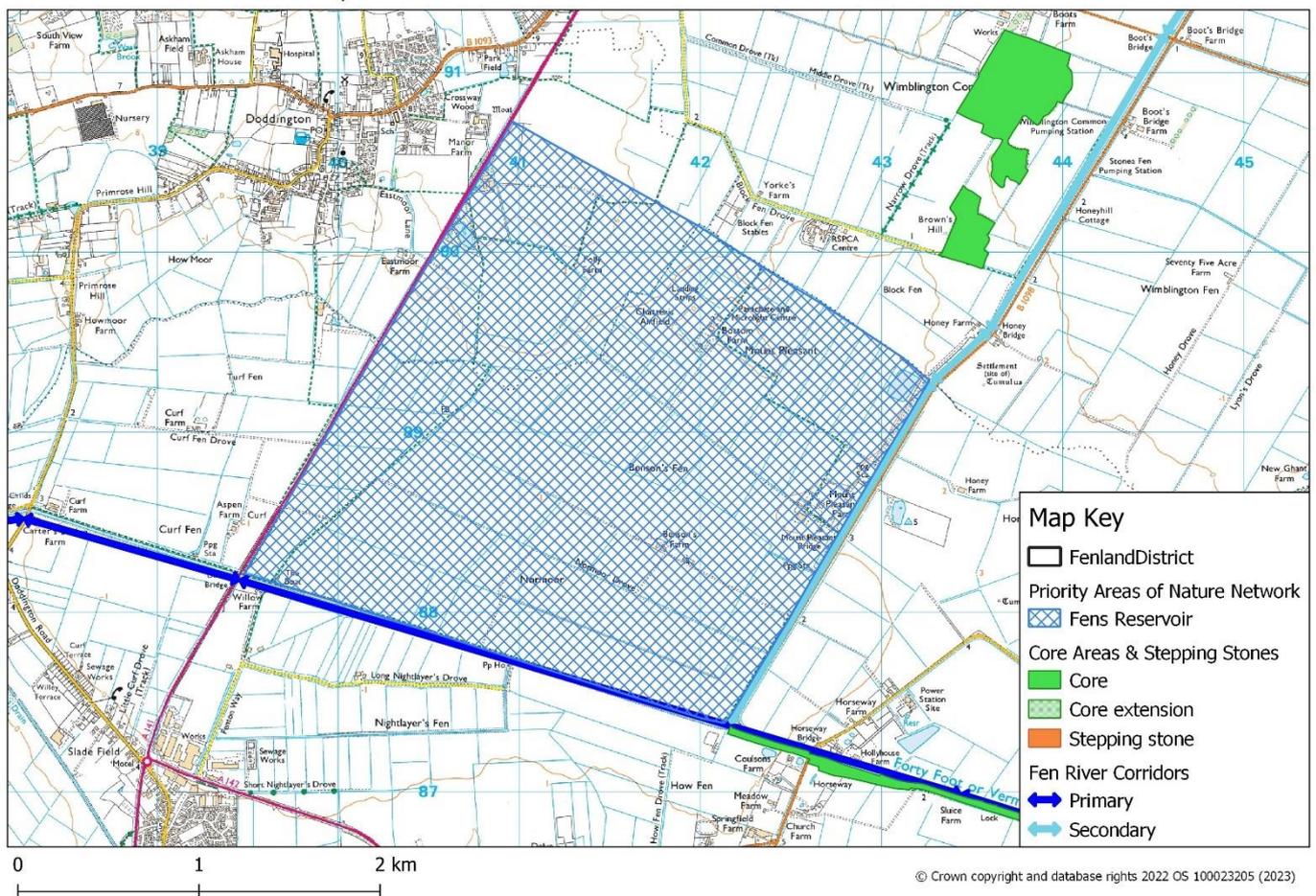
A strategic green infrastructure site will be created of regional significance, providing strategic natural greenspace for March, Chatteris and beyond. In addition to its primary purpose of water supply, the reservoir will be a major destination for countryside recreation and contribute to the local economy and improved health outcomes within Fenland. The reservoir will include significant areas of wetland creation as part of the scheme design, providing open water, reedbeds, wet grassland and wet woodland habitats, which could help re-wet peat soils and provide for flood storage / mitigation. Water supply for the reservoir should help to address the adverse impacts of spring and summer flooding on the Ouse Washes.

### 4.4.2 Delivery Mechanisms:

The reservoir will be delivered as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project jointly by Anglian Water and Cambridge Water.

### Map 5: Fens Reservoir Broad Location

Fens Reservoir Broad Location May 2023



## 5. FENLAND INTERIM NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY SUMMARY

### 5.1 A Coherent Nature Recovery Network

The two internationally important washlands of the Ouse Washes and Nene Washes, and neighbouring land with deep peat soils are the strategic landscape-scale nature recovery priorities for Fenland. They form part of the wider Connected Fens landscape, one of six such landscape priority areas identified by Natural Cambridgeshire across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The Great Fen located to the west of Fenland and within Huntingdonshire District also has an important role as another of the core sites within the Connected Fens landscape. With the two Priority Areas of the Nene Washes and Ouse Washes this forms the third point of a 'triangle' of major designated nature sites important for specialist Fen habitats and species and other wetland flora and fauna.

In turn the Cambridgeshire Connected Fens link to large-scale wetlands planned in Lincolnshire and Norfolk forming a wetland network across the whole of the Fens, and connecting to the Wash. This wider network is shown in the <sup>6</sup>Fens for the Future Strategy (2012).

The Fens Reservoir will complement and add to this strategic wetland network across the Fens and is the third Priority Area within the district.

Outside of the three **Priority Areas** there are important nature conservation sites and areas of semi-natural habitat but these are fewer and more isolated. While their continued sustainable management is a conservation priority (the "Better" in the Lawton principles), at the present time it will be very difficult to achieve the agglomeration benefits of landscape-scale conservation around these isolated sites. Nature-friendly farming can however occur anywhere. Likewise, wildlife friendly management of open spaces, gardens and buildings can occur throughout our towns and villages. A coherent Nature Recovery Network and nature's recovery will also depend on action being taken across the countryside and within urban areas if we are to restore a truly connected landscape for nature and people.

#### Connecting Priority Areas

The three **Priority Areas** identified (as well as the Great Fen) are connected to each other and beyond by the network of Fen rivers / major drains. These are shown as primary corridors on the maps.

Secondary corridors are also indicated on the maps. These are also significant Fen rivers / drains, but mainly provide linkages between the primary corridors. Both the primary and secondary corridors provide opportunities to develop additional stepping stones through adjacent habitat creation in a similar way to a charm bracelet.

The main drains themselves form linear habitats, but due to their primary land drainage and sometimes secondary navigation function, the extent of wetland habitat for associated species is often limited to narrow fringes of vegetation.

Provision of farm-scale habitats along these corridors would further support key fen species, whether in the form of irrigation reservoirs with shallow margins, or specific areas of new wetland habitats. The creation of habitat stepping stones every couple of kilometres would enhance these corridors for fen species.

Beyond the main fen rivers there is an extensive network of over 1,700 Km of Internal Drainage Board drains across the Fens. These support a regionally, if not nationally important population of water voles. Where the water is clean, perhaps as a result of percolation through underlying gravels or peat, the ditch network has been shown to support good populations of relic fen species, whether invertebrates or flora. The wider farmed environment, although intensively cropped therefore still supports populations of relic fen species, but these are highly localised and dependent on clean water. Without the provision of farm-scale wetland habitats with clean water across the whole fen landscape, there is little prospect for recovery of many of these relic fen populations, beyond the strategic priority areas of the Ouse and Nene Washes.

### 5.1.1 **Nature-friendly Farming**

While the creation of priority habitats might be focussed with the **Priority Areas**, there is scope for all farmers to adopt nature-friendly farming or regenerative farming methods, wherever they farm. Farmers can provide more space around field margins and headlands, optimise and limit use of agricultural chemicals and manage the ditch network better.

The vast majority of the farmland within the fens will continue to grow food (within the Fens 7% of UK food is produced from 4% of the land). However, there is scope for the adoption of nature friendly farming practices and small-scale provision of habitats as part of productive farming. Elsewhere it has been shown that 10% of farmland needs to be allocated to non-crop land to maximise the abundance of farmland birds and other wildlife. However, even a smaller percentage (5 to 7%) across large numbers of fen farms will make a contribution to the recovery of declining farmland birds. The work of the farmers within the Thorney Bird Friendly Farming group have shown how recovery is possible, alongside continued productive agriculture and food production. Choosing the least productive or the wettest lying parts of farms, where peat is still present, will provide the best locations for provision of farm wildlife habitats.

All farms can make a contribution, but the best initial locations will be along the corridors either side of the Forty Foot, Bevill's Leam, Twenty Foot, Whittlesey Dyke, Old Course of the Nene, Sixteen Foot and Popham's Eau, where peat deposits are still present.

It is estimated that 45% of Cambridgeshire's carbon emissions arise from farmland on peat and other organic rich soils in the fens. The wider need to reduce carbon emissions from agriculture across the fens, could provide further opportunities for the creation of habitats, or adoption of more nature and carbon friendly farming practices. The work of Fenland Soils and others to develop a future farming strategy with less climate impact is still at the very early stages but is expected to help direct changes to more sustainable farming practices.

North of the River Nene and Nene Washes, and West of Wisbech, the northern part of the district is dominated by the silt fen. This has a high percentage of grade 1 agricultural land and there are very few habitats, so agriculture and food production is the priority for this area. However, there is still potential to create some farm-scale habitats, focussing initially on the corridor of the North Level Main Drain, New South Eau and River Nene. The other priority in this area is the continued stewardship of the few remaining Traditional Orchards, a priority habitat. Most of the orchards are fully commercial and of limited value for nature. Where traditional orchards survive continued management of the trees to prolong their life, replanting with local varieties of fruit tree, coupled with enhancement of the wildflower component of the grasslands underneath the orchard trees would provide small wildlife oases within the wider intensively farmed environment.

## 5.2 **Green Infrastructure**

Beyond the two landscape priority areas of the Ouse Washes and Nene Washes and surrounds, and the Fens Reservoir, the priority for nature enhancement in Fenland district is the provision of high-quality strategic natural greenspaces for each of the four market towns. None of the towns, with the potential exception of Whittlesey, has significant areas of accessible natural greenspace. The provision of one or more areas of new public open space or accessible countryside with a high proportion of natural greenspace in each of the market towns, would help attract inward investment, enhance quality of life for residents and contribute towards improved health outcomes for the local population.

The evidence for the benefits of Green Infrastructure has been set out in many reports including <sup>7</sup>Land Use Consultants (2008). Understanding the relevance and application of the Access to Natural Greenspace Standard. *Report to Natural England*; <sup>8</sup>Public Health England (2020). Improving Access to Greenspace - a new review for 2020 [Improving access to greenspace: 2020 review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/101444/improving-access-to-greenspace-2020-review.pdf); and <sup>9</sup>Natural England Green Infrastructure Framework and Design Guide (2023)

A high quality strategic accessible natural greenspace has the following attributes:

- Of sufficient size to accommodate the numbers of visitors without feeling over-crowded and to provide a variety of different length access routes (which may or may not be surfaced).
- Of sufficient size to allow zoning of uses and provide some undisturbed areas for wildlife.
- A responsible management body with sufficient expertise and resources to manage the path network and habitats to the required standards.
- Easily accessible to the local population by walking or cycling without the need to drive, though some parking provision can increase access for those less able to walk or cycle.

Ideally, the new natural greenspaces would be between 20-40 Ha in size. A minimum size threshold of 20 Ha allows sufficient space to provide a variety of habitats and a varied environment, to include more managed and “wilder” areas, and to provide a path network including different length routes. Visitors to natural greenspaces or countryside whether walkers, dog walkers or runners have been shown to like routes of 2.5 Km or 5 Km. A larger 40 Ha site can provide these. While a smaller 20 Ha site can provide the 2.5 Km circular route, a longer route will only be achieved by connecting to the public rights of way network or a permissive path network that extends beyond the site.

In the past there have been proposals for Country Parks for each of the market towns, either in Green Infrastructure Strategies or Local Plan policies. Most recently the Whittlesey Neighbourhood Plan (May 2023), allocates a 25 Ha site for a “Country Park” to the east of the town and south of the A605.

[Whittlesey Neighbourhood Plan - Made Version - May 2023.pdf \(fenland.gov.uk\)](#) However, no options have been successfully brought forward. A Country Park has much high standards of service provision and thus is much more costly to create and run. **Focussing on the establishment of natural greenspaces as opposed to formal Country Parks, would provide a more achievable solution to enhancing the natural environment of each market town, and providing quality accessible greenspaces.** There is also the potential to provide more than one location for the larger market towns, thereby further improving accessibility for residents.

The strategic natural greenspace options for each of the market towns are considered in turn below. Consideration is also given to more local natural greenspace provision within the towns and villages.

### 5.2.1 Chatteris

Chatteris has few areas of natural greenspace within the town, and the public footpath network to the surrounding countryside is limited. Circular walks using the rights of way network are limited to areas south-west and south-east of the town.

The most significant area of natural greenspace is located at Wenny Meadows in the eastern part of the town. It comprises a ridge and furrow meadow, along with a number of other fields with a range of hedgerows, parkland trees and small areas of woodland. Surveys have demonstrated the importance of this habitat network for invertebrates and bats in particular.

However, the adopted Local Plan allocates a significant part of this area for housing development, with only the ridge and furrow meadow and some hedgerows and trees retained as greenspace. More recently the emerging draft Local Plan (August 2022) de-allocated the site for housing with the main ridge and furrow meadow proposed as Local Green Space. Nonetheless there is also a current full planning application for 93 dwellings on part of the site, which Fenlands planning committee recently resolved to approve, subject to a satisfactory S106 agreement. Wenny Meadows provides by far the best potential location for additional natural greenspace that would be of great benefit to the town. A new natural greenspace could be between 20-40 Ha and connect to the local public rights of way network. With one or two permissive paths, a longer 5 Km access route could also be created.

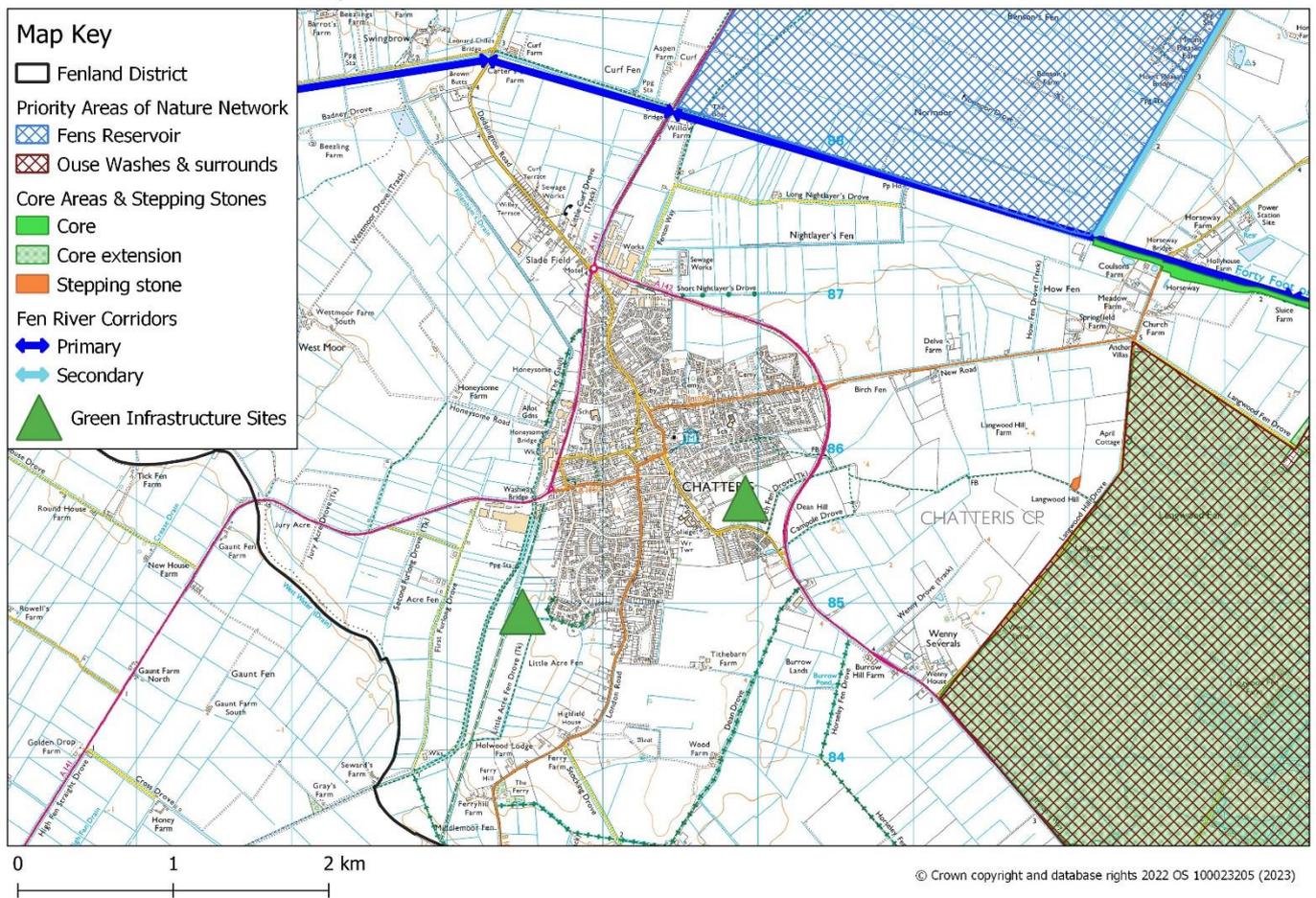
While the new Fens Reservoir will provide a regionally significant strategic natural greenspace for Fenland as a whole, and will be closest to Chatteris, this won't be available until after 2035 and there is still a need for more local natural greenspace provision within walking distance of the town residents. Should the housing development at Wenny Meadows not be brought forward, the opportunity to create a more

significant publicly accessible natural greenspace should be explored. The current revision to the Fenland Local Plan (2021-2040) may provide a suitable opportunity to revise the development allocations around Chatteris and to provide for the creation of a larger area of natural greenspace and accessible countryside around Wenny Meadows.

In addition to whatever natural greenspace may or may not be provided at Wenny Meadows, land either side of the disused railway line to Somersham to the south-west of the town provides an opportunity for natural green space provision. The elongated area of around 27 Ha already contains a new pocket park and is well connected by a Public Rights of Way network with easy access to the town. It is low lying and falls within Flood Zone 3 making development potential unlikely. It could provide a suitable complement to Wenny Meadows and be of particular value to residents living in the southern part of the town.

**Map 6: Chatteris Potential Natural Greenspace Locations**

Chatteris Potential Natural Greenspaces



**5.2.2 March**

March also has limited natural greenspace though is a little better off than Chatteris. The old course of the River Nene passes through the centre of the town. A long-distance footpath follows the river, but there are no other public rights of way providing options for circular routes. There are some open spaces associated with the river corridor, especially on its southern side including a recent addition to West End Park following developments to the west of the town centre. There is scope to further extend this area to provide natural greenspace which would complement the more formal nature of the existing park and be easily accessible to a large number of residents.

The small Norwood Road nature reserve occurs within the north of the town. This forms the southern end of a green corridor of semi-natural spaces heading north through Whitemoor Marshalling Yards, the Whitemoor Prison nature area, Graysmoor Pit and Rings End Local Nature Reserve (LNR), all the way up

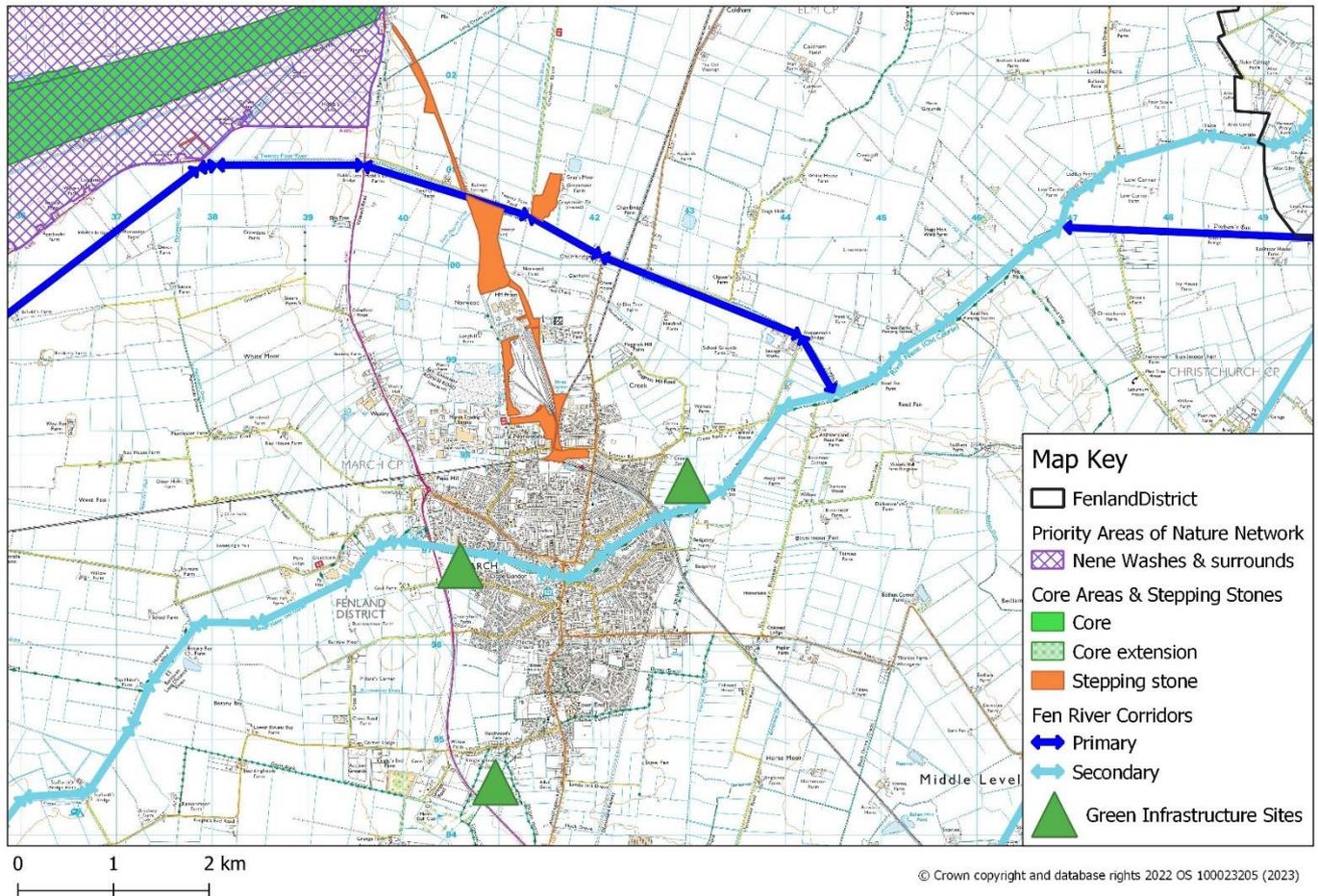
to the Nene Washes. Norwood Road nature reserve, Rings End LNR and Graysmoor Pit are publicly accessible, but the large sites at Whitemoor Marshalling Yards and the prison are not accessible.

The new Fens Reservoir will provide a regionally significant strategic natural greenspace for Fenland as a whole, and will be only a few miles south of March, but this won't be available until after 2035 and there is still a need for more local natural greenspace provision within walking distance of the town residents.

March would benefit from the creation of a couple of locally significant accessible natural greenspaces, one north of the town and one to the south-west, but east of the A141 bypass.

### Map 7: March Potential Natural Greenspace Locations

March Potential Natural Greenspaces



North-east of March, there is an area of land at Creek Road adjacent to the Old Course of the River Nene that is a very good location for a new natural greenspace. It is close to housing in the north and east of the town and is connected to the town centre by the long-distance footpath along the river. There is space to create a site of 40 Ha and to provide access routes of varying lengths.

There is likely to be further development to the west and south of March. While the Fens Reservoir will be to the south of March, this will not be within walking distance of the local population. In order to provide local accessible natural greenspace, provision should be planned to the south-west of March as part of any future housing allocations. There is around 15 Ha of land to the east of Linwood Lane and west of Mill Hill Drive which contains prominent ridge and furrow features and a number of mature trees and hedgerows which would lend itself to natural greenspace provision as well as complementing the rights of way network in the vicinity.

There is also an area to the north of March, either side of the Chase, which connects Rings End LNR, Graysmoor Pit, Whitemoor Prison nature reserve and Whitemoor Marshalling Yards and is also adjacent to

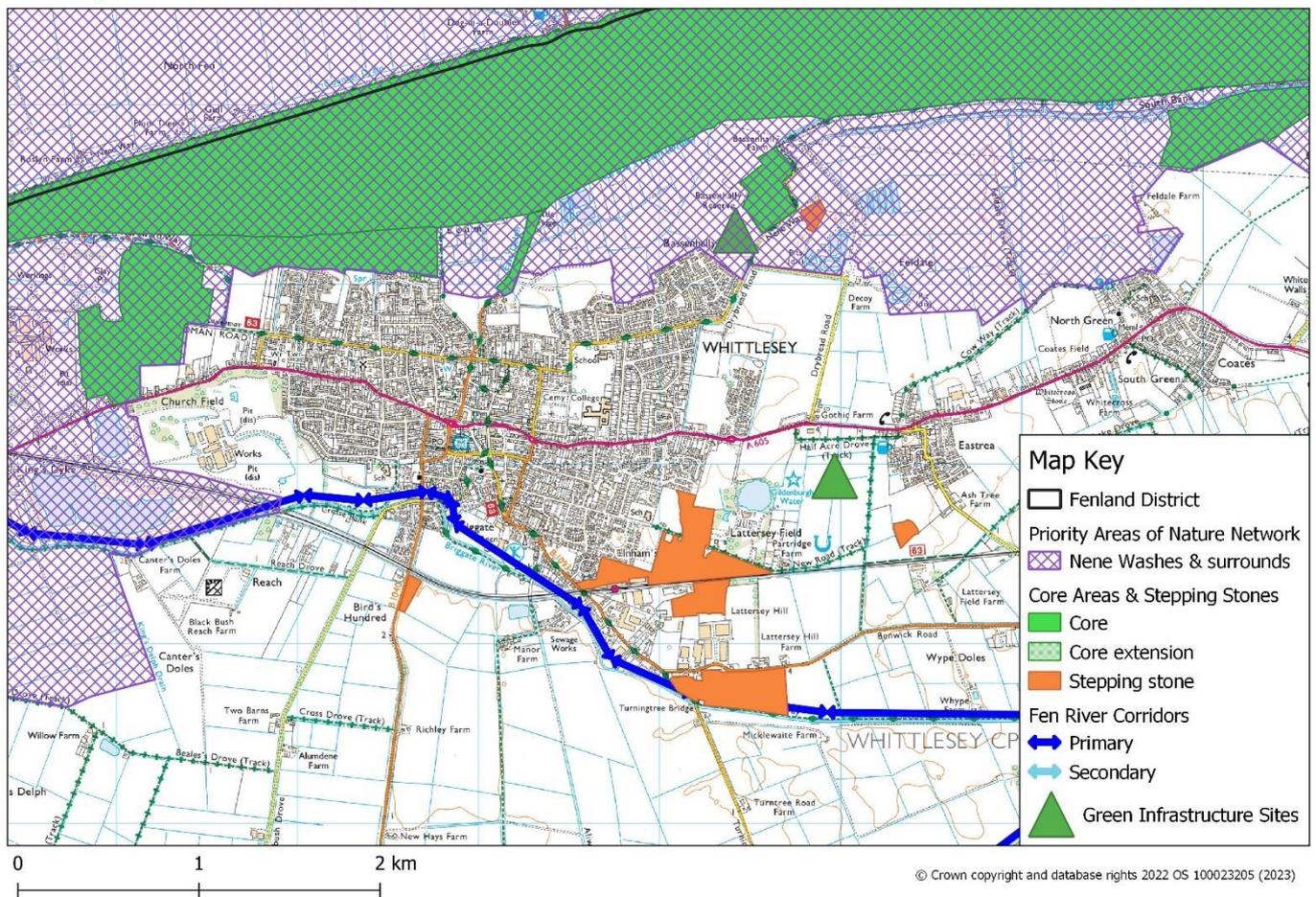
the Twenty Foot River one of the strategic river corridors through Fenland. This area is unlikely to be suitable for housing development but is too far removed from the main residential areas to be an accessible natural greenspace unless it was developed as more of a formal Country Park to include sports pitches, car parking and cycleway access. National Cycle Route 63 already runs along the disused railway line to the west. This area would be a good location for Biodiversity Net Gain / offsetting site.

### 5.2.3 Whittlesey

Whittlesey has the best provision of natural greenspace of any of the market towns. Lattersey LNR is located south-east of the town and is part of a larger County Wildlife Site. Bassenhally Pit SSSI is to the north-east of the town and King’s Dyke nature reserve at the western edge of the town are currently only accessible by appointment and have a no dogs policy. Once minerals extraction is completed, restoration plans may provide opportunities for more access or for new natural greenspaces, though these are not likely to arise for 10 to 20 years.

Map 8: Whittlesey Potential Natural Greenspace Locations

Whittlesey Potential Natural Greenspaces



Compared to the other market towns there is also a better network of public rights of way with a range of options to the east, south-west and north of the town. The Nene Washes lie north of the town and are visible from footpaths along the barrier banks, though are largely inaccessible on foot due to their function as a washland with regular flooding, and the need to prevent disturbance to breeding and wintering waterbirds.

Overall there is less need to provide accessible natural greenspace in Whittlesey, but as the town continues to expand the recreational pressures already emerging on sites such as Lattersey LNR will only intensify. If Whittlesey continues to grow, it will be essential to provide an additional natural greenspace to cater for increased recreational demand.

A suitable location for this would be to extend Lattersey LNR, beyond Gildenburgh Water in the direction of Eastrea. The Whittlesey Neighbourhood Plan – May 2023 allocates a site of some 25 Ha for a new Country Park in this area, though there may be scope for a larger area, but the challenge now will be its delivery.

The policy in the neighbourhood plan does allow for other sites to be considered. An alternative option would be to create a new natural greenspace linked to Bassenhally Pit, north-east of the town. There is potential for a new 20 Ha site in this location, though together with Bassenhally Pit the site would be bigger.

#### **5.2.4 Wisbech**

The Fenland reservoir is much further removed from Wisbech, and while it will provide a regional green infrastructure resource for the whole of Fenland, it will not meet the need for local natural greenspaces to help contribute towards the environmental, social, health and economic needs of Wisbech residents.

Wisbech has a very poor network of public footpaths. The long-distance Nene Valley way follows the river through the town, but elsewhere public rights of way are few and far between and not well connected.

A large “country park” has been previously proposed through the Local Plan process and Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy (2011), but no definitive proposals have been brought forward. This idea could be revisited depending on how much and where Wisbech grows in the future. Peckover House and associated open spaces including playing fields and some small areas of woodland are located on the western edge of the town. These could form a focal point for providing a “country park” for Wisbech. However, a significant number of new homes, probably in the region of 1,500 to 5,000 would be required for such a proposal to be funded through a commercial development.

In the absence of a single large “country park” an alternative approach would be to identify a series of smaller local natural greenspace options to the north, south, east and west of the town, situated so that all residents have easy and local access to a suitable site. Expansion of the Peckover House option in the west is the first option to consider as it already links to a popular destination. There is potentially space to create a larger 40 Ha site in this location on fields to the west. The area is predominantly in Flood Zone 3 (High risk) and the adopted Fenland Local Plan highlights the need for a flood risk strategy for the area which is likely to involve the provision of significant areas of open space in addition to any new dwellings. Development in the area is subject to the production of a Broad Concept Plan but there has been little interest in taking this forward and, subject to land ownership and funding, there are no reasons in principle why a “country park” should not be provided in this location.

To the east of the town it could be possible to create an area next to Stow Lane, Meadowgate Lane and to the south of Sandy Lane. This area includes a relic orchard that is now an area of dense scrub, another area of mixed scrub and grassland, a woodland and some arable land. This location links to several public rights of way and there is potential for a 20-40 Ha site in this location. The existing environment provides an excellent starting point for creating a new natural greenspace with a network of paths.

To the south of Wisbech, there is an area of land between New Drove and the A47 at Swillingham Field and Little Boleness Field with significant potential as a new natural greenspace. Little Boleness Field has areas of grassland with some meadow species, a relic orchard, which is now mainly dense scrub and other areas of scattered and dense scrub. The eastern area at Swillingham Field is currently arable but offers the opportunity for creation of scrub and woodland closer to the A47 to provide a visual and noise barrier, with grassland, scrub and parkland closer to the housing. This area could form the focus of a new natural greenspace of 20-40 Ha, with a series of new paths, but is further from the town’s residential areas.

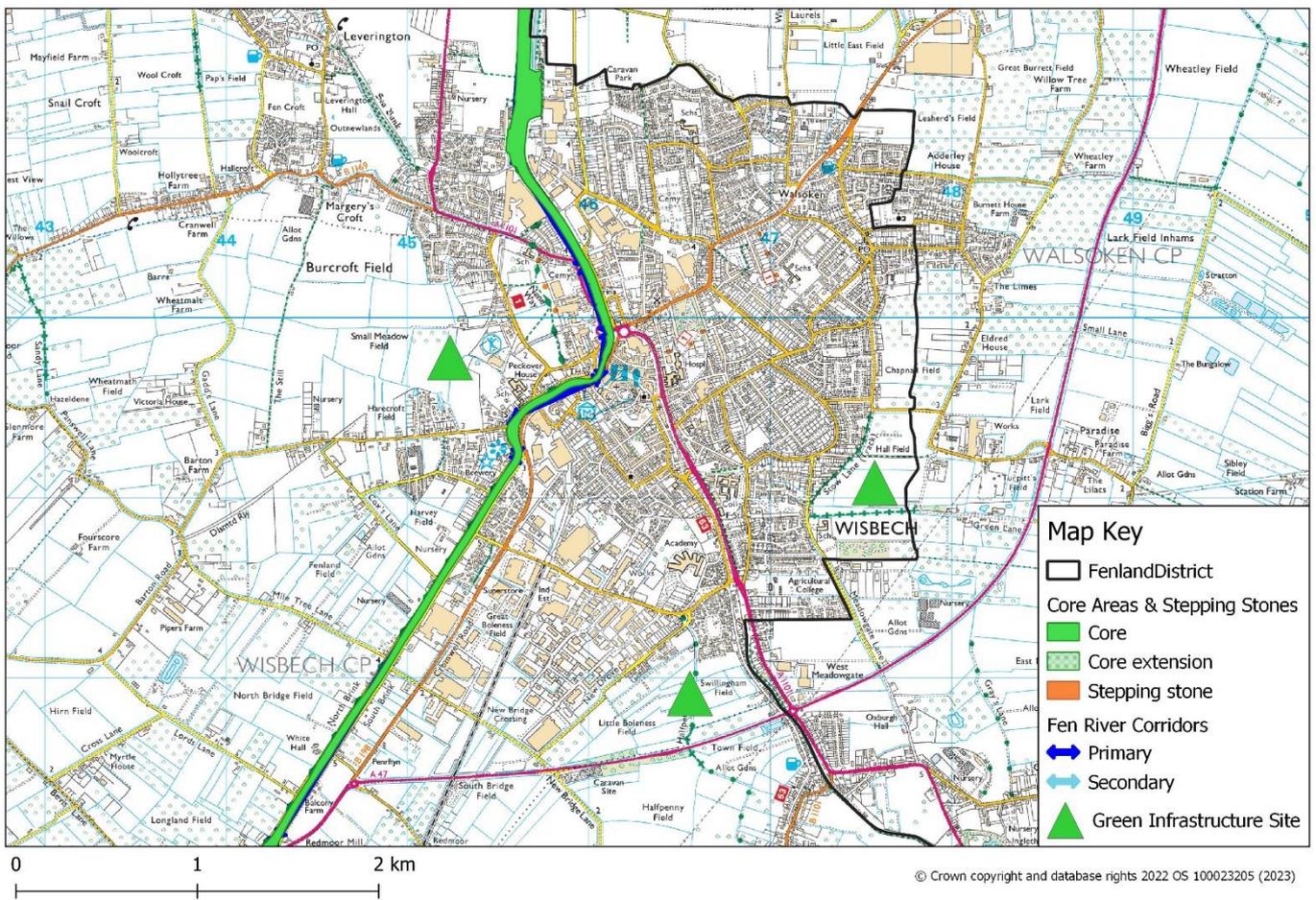
While the latter two options already provide a degree of access, this is not formally managed and the areas are not designed to be attractive or easily accessible to visitors. Provision of a network of formal paths together with landscaping and habitat enhancement and other features such as benches or seating could make each of them more attractive and safer places to visit.

The two areas to the east and south fall within proposed urban extensions for Wisbech in the adopted Fenland Local Plan which provides for a range of Green Infrastructure types and the retention of high quality woodland including some mature orchards for amenity, biodiversity and community food value. Despite the submission of a number of planning applications, developer interest in these areas in recent years has not been strong and the opportunity therefore exists for alternative uses such as significant areas of natural greenspace provision to be considered.

It is likely that all of the above options would need to be linked to new developments in order to secure at least partial funding and be brought forward, although development viability in Fenland is marginal and other funding sources are more likely to be successful. Where viability allows, other funding sources could potentially be matched to developer contributions whether from Fenland East DC, from traditional grant sources such as lottery or landfill tax credits, or from private nature finance such as biodiversity net gain contributions. All three sites have the potential to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain. However, it is imperative that provision of new natural greenspaces of significant size (at least 20 Ha) is included as part of any future housing allocations.

**Map 9: Wisbech Potential Natural Greenspace Locations**

Wisbech Potential Natural Greenspaces



The table below summarises the new natural greenspace options for each of the Market Towns. Sites C1, M1, M2, Wh1, Wi1 and Wi2 provide the best opportunities to deliver accessible natural greenspace. All have the potential to deliver an element of Biodiversity Net Gain.

**Table 1: Market Town Accessible Natural Greenspace Options**

Market Town	Option No.	Location	Potential Size
Chatteris	C1	Wenny Meadows	20 Ha
Chatteris	C2	Little Acre Fen, disused railway corridor	20 Ha

March	M1	Creek Road, north-east of March	40 Ha
March	M2	West End Park extension	10 Ha
March	M3	Linwood Lane / Mill Hill Drove	20 Ha
Whittlesey	Wh1	Lattersey LNR eastern extension	40 Ha
Whittlesey	Wh2	Bassenhally Pit extension	20 Ha
Wisbech	Wi1	Peckover extension western park	40 Ha
Wisbech	Wi2	Stow Lane / Meadowgate Lane eastern park	20-40 Ha
Wisbech	Wi3	South of New Drove southern park	20-40 Ha

### 5.2.5 Other public open space and gardens

Within the towns and villages there is a network of public open spaces. Although these mainly lie beyond the Priority Area boundaries, they still provide space for people to interact with nature. In some towns and villages they provide the only accessible greenspace within walking distance for residents.

Fenland has recognised the environmental importance of their open spaces with some specifically managed for their environmental value, often by community groups. However, there is the potential to include a wider range of wildlife features in formal parks across the district.

There is a wealth of private gardens across the Fenland settlements which can provide a potential haven for urban wildlife from foxes and hedgehogs to garden birds, frogs and insect pollinators such as bees. Everyone can garden for wildlife, whether it is a detached house with large garden, a typical modern estate small garden or window boxes in flats.

These public open spaces and gardens provide the basis for the “urban forest” and are supplemented by street trees and road verges. As temperatures continue to rise there is a need for much greater “urban greening” with increased tree and vegetation cover, including greener buildings with green roofs and green walls to help provide urban cooling in towns, as well as the benefits of cleaner air and recreation.

### 5.2.6 Villages

Parish Councils often manage small open spaces in or close to villages. However, most villages and rural communities in Fenland do not have significant areas of open space, and none have open access common land. Some have village greens or recreation grounds, but the rural communities are generally as impoverished as the market towns when it comes to access to the countryside.

Where a village has an open space or recreation ground there will often be opportunities to work with local residents and community groups to achieve even more for nature. In a similar vein to the public open spaces and gardens within towns, the parish and village open spaces and rural gardens can also support wildlife, whether through introduction of wildflowers, pond restoration and creation, or more wildlife friendly mowing and hedge cutting regimes.

However, for many Fenland rural communities there isn't a suitable public open space to enhance for nature. A potential solution is for one or more individual communities to work together with their local farming and landowning community to identify a suitable area for new village greens.

Each parish or group of parishes could prepare their own Parish Nature Recovery Plan, to guide actions on parish land, within gardens, where necessary identify a location for a new village green and identify actions that the farming and landowning community of their parish could take.

Across town and countryside communities working together can make a significant contribution to a Nature Recovery Network within and beyond the Priority Areas.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

### 6.1 Informing the Statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Over the next 18 months, local partners and stakeholders will be preparing a statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This interim Nature Recovery Network provides an evidence base to help inform the county-wide strategy.

### 6.2 Informing local land-use policy

This Interim Nature Recovery Network supports the forthcoming <sup>10</sup>Fenland Local Plan (2021-2040) by identifying priorities for landscape-scale action for nature and informing locations for delivery of biodiversity net gain, including biodiversity offsetting. It has also identified potential locations for natural greenspaces in each of the market towns.

#### 6.2.1 Delivery of BNG

Biodiversity Net Gain through the planning system is measured using the <sup>11</sup>Defra Biodiversity Metric (latest version 4.0 as at May 2023). In calculating the biodiversity units allocated to each habitat, a strategic significance score is applied, depending on a site's location in terms of local strategies, which if high or medium will increase the number of biodiversity units. There are three strategic significance scores:

- High Strategic Significance - Within area formally identified in local strategy
- Medium Strategic Significance - Location ecologically desirable but not in local strategy
- Low Strategic Significance - Area / compensation not in local strategy

This strategy provides evidence to support apportionment of the strategic significance scores when undertaking Biodiversity Assessments in Fenland district, by formally identifying three Priority Areas within Fenland district where the High Strategic Scores can be used for calculating biodiversity units

Strategic provision of Biodiversity Net Gain and offsetting sites would be best focussed in the Ouse Washes and surrounds and Nene Washes and surrounds priority areas. Schemes in these locations should qualify for the high strategic significance multiplier in the Defra Biodiversity Metric. The Fenland Reservoir is the third location which can be considered strategically significant for biodiversity enhancement.

As noted in chapter 5, the Fenland market towns have a lack of strategic natural greenspace, so provision of new natural greenspaces of sufficient size and quality in each of the market towns would be highly desirable. If new natural greenspace sites in or adjacent to Chatteris, March, Whittlesey or Wisbech meet the size and quality thresholds they should qualify for the medium strategic significance score in the Defra Biodiversity Metric. To qualify these natural greenspace sites should be at least 20 Ha in extent, (though ideally 40 Ha) to meet Natural England minimum recommended sizes for habitat banks and should include good condition habitats of at least medium distinctiveness.

Proposals to buffer and extend SSSIs and County Wildlife Sites outside of the **Priority Areas** should also qualify for the medium strategic significance score, where the additional habitat creation supports the better management of the SSSI / CWS and a long-term viable and sustainable land management unit is created.

Smaller areas of greenspace within new housing or commercial developments should not benefit from the strategic significance score within the Defra Biodiversity Metric.

The Priority Areas should be used to inform future locations for development or provision of strategic green infrastructure and provide a framework within which sustainable development across Fenland can occur. They can also be used to inform and target action by landowners through the prioritisation of agri-environment schemes or private environmental finance initiatives, and they provide a basis for individual landowners and managers to take action to address the biodiversity crisis locally.

### 6.3 Landowner / stakeholder engagement

Creating a Nature Recovery Network has to involve local stakeholders and particularly landowners, especially where there is a desire to initiate changes to their land and provide space for public access.

During this work we have had high level discussions with a number of key public and nature conservation organisations to identify potential issues and opinions relating to delivery of the Nature Recovery Network, whether that be creation of high-quality habitats, nature-friendly farming approaches, the provision of new public access in the form of permissive routes across farmland, or through the creation of accessible natural greenspaces. However, this project did not have the resources to undertake significant engagement with the farming and landowning community. Further work to understand landowner aspirations and their views of the opportunities available and potential constraints in the areas surrounding the Ouse and Nene Washes is required to identify more detailed opportunities that could be taken forward in the Priority Areas. Landowner and stakeholder engagement will be critical to successful delivery of a Nature Recovery Network in Fenland.

### 6.4 Other Natural Capital & Ecosystem Services

This study only looked at the habitat component of a Nature Recovery Network and has not considered natural capital. However, the Priority Areas identified will also provide a strong focus for delivering wider natural capital benefits.

For example, the Fens Reservoir will help to provide strategic natural greenspace for the growing populations of Fenland. Delivery of smaller natural greenspaces local to each of the market towns would also provide enhanced recreational opportunities, access to nature and consequent health benefits, as well as help to attract inward investment.

Elsewhere, the creation of habitats on the peat soils close to the Ouse Washes and Nene Washes will help to reduce carbon emissions from farming and could in time also help to build soil carbon.

The forthcoming county-wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy is likely to explore these natural capital benefits in greater detail.

### 6.5 Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring of outcomes is essential in order to demonstrate success to stakeholders, funders and the public alike. Ultimately success of a Nature Recovery Network will be judged by a number of measures, including:

- The quantity of high value and priority habitats;
- The quality of priority habitats and designated nature conservation sites;
- Landscape connectivity; and
- Increasing or stable populations of key species.

Natural Cambridgeshire is developing a series of indicators of success to measure the “Doubling Nature” initiative, as well as methods and projects to address each of the above measures, in priority landscape areas as well as across the county as a whole. There are a number of sources of help including Local Records Centre and volunteer species groups.

It is hoped that as part of this initiative a citizen science monitoring framework and programme could be developed. This would enable the conservation NGOs and others to involve their volunteers and supporters in citizen science programmes as well as providing opportunities to involve the wider public in measuring change and success of the Nature Recovery Network. However, further work is needed to bring together relevant experts and develop these measures into a coherent programme.

## 7. References

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