

Executive Summary

FENS FOR THE FUTURE - A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR FENLAND: A PROPOSAL FOR AN ENHANCED ECOLOGICAL NETWORK

This Strategic Plan is intended to help the *Fens for the Future Partnership* identify the top priorities for biodiversity action and assist with subsequent funding bids across the 'Inland Fens' of the Fens National Character Area.

The Need For Change: Analysis and Way Forward

The rationale for intervention: Only eight main wetland sites extending to 4,792 ha (1.4%) remain in the Fens. Although action is being taken by conservation organisations and some of the fen habitats are still remarkably diverse (Wicken Fen has 8,459 recorded species) these habitats remain vulnerable and are still losing species. Urgent measures are needed to address this situation.

The recent national policy documents relating to biodiversity such as the Lawton Report, *Making Space for Nature: A review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network* and the subsequent White Paper *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* provide the strategic steer for this Plan's approach. Lawton sets out the actions needed to enhance the resilience and coherence of England's ecological network in four words: more, bigger, better and joined. *Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services* aims to halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.

The need for urgent biodiversity action is only part of the picture as **other ecosystem services** such as the increase of carbon loss from peat wastage; water quality and availability are issues that have both medium and long term implications for local communities.

Vision

The Fens was England's largest wetland. Now less than 1% of the original wetland habitat remains. The Fens for the Future Vision is to see sustainable wetlands restored, re-created and reconnected across the Fens for the benefit of people, our natural and historic heritage and the rural economy. Sustainable wetlands will help reduce storm effects, make available clean water and retain peatland soils so helping mitigate the effects of climate change, while at the same time offering a haven for wildlife, protecting our historic heritage and providing exciting areas for people to visit. Recreational access and tourism increases with more people taking exercise in the countryside. The diversity of the local economy widens and opportunities for employment in local communities are created.

The Fens remain nationally important for modern productive farming. The provision for wildlife in the farmed landscape increases significantly with the uptake of environmentally friendly farming practices; sensitive ditch and drain management, thus creating a network of wildlife habitats extending throughout Fenland. The variety and abundance of farmland wildlife increases and iconic Fenland species thrive.

Mission Statement

*The Fens for the Future Partnership **Mission Statement** is to make the Fens one of the main UK landscape scale wetland complexes by 2020, within a matrix of sustainable agriculture.*

Aims

1. Key wetland sites, such as Wicken, Woodwalton and Holme Fen, remnants of the original Fen, together with the great Washlands, will form the **Core Areas** of our Vision for Fenland. This partnership will support the enhancement, enlargement and buffering of these core areas, increasing the connectivity between them and ensuring that their natural processes are able to function effectively.
2. **In addition to the existing Core Areas**, extensions at Baston Fen, Great Fen and the Wicken Vision, as well as entirely new areas such as Lakenheath Fen, Needingworth and the Wissey Wetland will be developed to provide sufficient areas of wetland habitats to improve sustainability. Increasing capacity in Lincolnshire will be a focus as it has such a small area of Fenland at present. These new wetlands will also need to be buffered and connected to support their natural processes.
3. We will **increase connectivity** by enhancing the main rivers, waterways and riverside habitats to create a web of habitats that help species disperse and increase resilience. The Fens Waterways Link project and the Water Framework Directive offer exciting ways to help achieve this aim. This work will build on existing work by the Environment Agency and the Drainage Boards.
4. We will further **increase the network of habitats** by enhancing water courses, ditches and the wider countryside helping species disperse. Farmers are already joining agri-environment schemes providing habitat for farmland wildlife and helping farmland birds, while enhancing the wider environment through resource protection, aided by targeted conservation advice from key partners. This Partnership will seek to extend this by working to deliver the Water Framework Directive objectives for Fenland waterbodies, encouraging more farmers to adopt *environmentally friendly farming*¹ and Drainage Boards to further develop their management practices. Water Framework Directive funding will be utilised to help achieve this work.
5. We will draw on the expertise of academic partners to continue research into the role of different types of **connections and buffers** in enabling species dispersal and increasing resilience as the climate changes. The results will inform our strategy for enhancing the network. Monitoring is required to establish the effectiveness of the ecological network in Fenland.

¹ Environmentally friendly farming can be described as Environmental Stewardship Plus. In other words, taking actions for the environment that go beyond the requirements of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme.

6. **We will work with farmers, Drainage Boards, local communities, developers, mineral companies, academics, Local Authorities and relevant organisations** to understand and establish multifunctional wetlands that support biodiversity, maintain our historic heritage, reduce flood risk and improve water resource availability. We will also work to reduce barriers to the establishment of these multifunctional wetlands and in particular explore new options to improve water storage.
7. We will work to **promote climate change adaptation** both through the implementation of our strategy to create a coherent and resilient ecological network in Fenland and by our encouragement of environmentally friendly farming and the delivery of Water Framework Directive measures for Fenland waterbodies.
8. We will **encourage and enable people to sustainably enjoy the natural and cultural heritage of the Fens**. The establishment of wetland networks will enable people to engage in a wide variety of outdoor activities, both formal and informal, contributing to their health and wellbeing. This will also promote the Fens as a unique landscape to both live in and visit.
9. **The Fens for the Future Partnership, together with the Fens Waterways Link Project, will work to increase and diversify the Fenland economy through the recreation and tourism sectors**. This will be achieved by the further development of large connected wetlands, each of which is capable of attracting tens of thousands of visitors a year²
10. We will **raise the profile of the Fens for the Future Partnership** to obtain wider recognition for its work. We will work to encourage greater inward investment to Fenland and will develop and promote the Strategy to keep all Partners and Stakeholders informed of progress and so that they have regular opportunities to influence its future development and direction.
11. We will **monitor and evaluate the implementation of our Strategy** to ensure that it is meeting its aims and objectives and is proceeding in an effective manner that meets the requirements of the Partners.

Partnership working is the best way to achieve the *Fens for the Future* Vision and its eleven aims and associated objectives. It is critical that the Partnership quickly embeds the appropriate **governance** for *Fens for the Future*, develops effective means of communication and employs staff to progress this strategy with stakeholders. Sources of possible **funding** to achieve the Projects vision are identified.

Background, Biodiversity and Integrated Approach

The origins of the Fenland partnership began with *Wet Fens for the Future project* in the 1990s which looked at opportunities for large scale wet fenland creation. This was followed by the EU Life+ *Wise Use of Floodplains project* (1999 to 2002). Thereafter there was a step change in the approach

² Welney WWT on the Ouse Washes already receives 45,000 visitors a year and Wicken Fen 50,000. The Fenland Waterways Link Project estimates that the additional recreation and tourism encouraged by this Project alone could result in an additional £14 million a year revenue generation from one million visitors.

adopted and the emphasis shifted from strategic approaches across the Fens to actual individual large scale habitat restoration projects such as The Great Fen, the Wicken Fen Vision and Lakenheath project.

This Strategic Plan endeavours to put the new biodiversity policies such the Lawton 'more, bigger, better managed and more inter-connected sites' into practice in one of the best suited places in England. The Plan also provides an overview to the added benefits that improved ecological networks or ecosystem approach can offer society.

By reviewing all four fenland county **Biodiversity Action Plans** this plan suggests that a wetland restoration target of 20,000 ha by 2062 is needed and considers the contribution that 'nature maps', 'strategic river corridors' and 'green infrastructure networks' have made to the development of **ecological networks**.

Peat soils in 1987 covered 24,000 ha of Fenland, but are still being eroded through drainage and cultivation at a rate of 2.0 cm a year and releasing CO₂ into the atmosphere. Only 10,500 ha are estimated to have peat deeper than one metre and roughly a quarter of this area is located in nature reserves or under grass in flood relief washlands.

The majority of the Fens soils (89%) are **Grade 1 or 2** and are responsible for growing 1/3 of England's vegetables and 1/3 of the country's bulbs and flowers as well as providing approximately 7% of Fenland employment. The food and drink manufacturing sector in the Fens is worth approx. £1.7 billion and with associated packing and distribution businesses employs around 17,500 people (7% of fenland employment). Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) is the main scheme supporting **environmentally friendly farming**. 2011 figures indicate that only 6.3% of the area is currently in ESS although 16% of the Plan's area is important for arable birds.

Much of the fens are below sea level and the high agricultural productivity relies on the **pumped drainage system** that is jointly managed by the Internal Drainage Boards and the Environment Agency (EA). The area has two Catchment Sensitive Farming Priority Catchments where **water quality** has been identified as a concern. There are opportunities for the Environment Agency to be more ambitious when developing their Catchment Flood Management Plans (CFMPs) and local Catchment Abstraction Management Strategies (CAMS) and look at options that integrate the design of the proposed ecological networks and allow more winter and storm runoff to be stored and made available to users at a later period. These new 'wetlands' could contribute significantly to the creation of an enhanced fenland ecological network, meet *Biodiversity 2020* and ecosystem services objectives and Water Framework Directive (WFD) targets.

Recreation and tourism are major sectors of Fenland's economy. In 2010 Cambridgeshire's and Peterborough's tourism supported 18,131 FTE jobs with a value of almost £1.9 billion. The *Fens Waterways Link* Project which aims to create a new navigation ring through the cathedral cities of Lincoln, Peterborough and Ely has the potential to boost recreation, tourism, leisure and the local economy in the Fens. It will also help create the enhanced ecological network which will enhance access to greenspace and improve communities and visitors **Health and quality of life**.

Local Enterprise Partnerships that cover the Fens and their priorities are captured and any links between natural resources and services and GDP and job creation are emphasized. The UK

Government push to stimulate green growth combined with its existing agendas aimed at promoting rural growth, and halting the loss of biodiversity in the UK, makes a powerful case for local investment in conservation.

The Fens have a distinct **landscape character** as well as being **archaeologically and palaeoenvironmentally** important. Re-wetting areas to encourage the formation of peat, reducing peat erosion and contaminants will benefit the underlying archaeological remains and help manage the area's character. The Fens **geological sites** help demonstrate the cyclic succession of peats, estuarine and marine clays deposited in past terrestrial and marine environments from which we can learn today.