



John Clare Countryside Parish Nature Recovery Plans

Introduction

As residents, businesses, parish councils, landowners, farmers and visitors we want the countryside around us to be an area where nature is at the heart of our lives: where swifts and swallows are a central feature of our summer evenings; where hares continue to enthral people as they play in the fields and meadows; where bees and other insects thrive, not decline, and where there are far more ponds, meadows, wild flowers, hedgerows and trees. We want people to be able to walk or cycle out in safety and tranquillity across this thriving countryside, enjoying the sights and sounds and even the silence of the natural world, enjoying dark skies and cherishing the heritage – both natural and man-made around them.

The John Clare Countryside project - launched in September 2019 - aims to deliver this vision through the creation of an extensive and accessible nature recovery area across the landscape west of Peterborough, designed, led and supported by residents, landowners, farmers, businesses and parish councils.

This nature recovery area would be supported by Natural England and other statutory agencies and in local policy documents including Local Plans. It would be distinguished from other nature recovery areas because it is community led, combines both natural and built heritage with links through John Clare, to literature and the arts. The overall agenda will promote the physical and mental health of its residents and the adjacent communities of Stamford and Peterborough.

Specifically, the project aims to

1. Deliver significant **increases in key wildlife habitats**, particularly those of limestone grassland, wetland and aspects of arable farmland, which are important to this geographical area
2. Raise levels of local pride, aspiration and community cohesion by helping communities to **understand, appreciate and enjoy their natural and built heritage**
3. Pilot and **champion best practice sustainable development** in all aspects of future development within the area including **sustainable techniques of land management** both on and off the existing nature reserves
4. Promote **public health and wellbeing**, providing opportunities for access to and understanding of nature-rich countryside
5. Create **new jobs and economic opportunities** allied to the delivery of these objectives, particularly in tourism, visitor attractions, farming and nature conservation.
6. Through this work create a more resilient countryside and communities, where nature is at the heart of our approach to tackling the climate emergency.



The achievement of these objectives will create a **better quality of life** for residents and visitors through a sustainable local environment with easy access to rich and inspiring nature and appreciation and engagement with its heritage and history.

At one level the delivery of significant increases in key wildlife habitats will be taken forward through the expansion of existing nature reserves and other wildlife-rich sites, and by creating new reserves through land purchase or management agreements with private landowners. The aims will be to establish a much larger area of land actively managed for nature and to create natural corridors and stepping-stones between reserves. This work will be largely taken forward by the key partners within the project, including Natural England, Langdyke Countryside Trust, the Wildlife Trust, Sacrewell Farm, PECT and Nene Park Trust, working with local landowners.

Just as important is the part local residents can play in the delivery of the nature recovery area – both as individuals in the way they manage their gardens and their own land-holdings (such as pony-paddocks, orchards or meadows) and as local communities through the creation and delivery of nature recovery plans for each of the parishes within the project area. John Clare Countryside contains beautiful, historic villages that provide homes for many species of mammal, bird, insect, plants and lichens.

This document (and this is a first draft, we will aim to keep improving it as we receive feedback from parishes) aims to be a starting point in taking local action, providing guidance, advice and support to help each parish create their own nature recovery plans and also identify the skills and resources needed to take forward their delivery and to manage both newly created and existing habitats. It also acts as a signpost for further guidance and support from local expert partners

A separate document looks at how individuals can manage their own gardens and landholdings to support the nature recovery plans¹.

Parish Nature Recovery Plans – What are they?

A parish nature recovery plan should set out a medium-term plan for the creation of more nature-rich habitat in the villages and the surrounding countryside. We suggest that each plan covers an initial ten-year period, although many of the projects that parishes will want to start – such as planting oak trees for example - will take much longer to come to maturity.

We also suggest that each plan sets out clear outcomes, so that local people can take interest and pride in the progress they are making in creating and maintaining habitats. These might include targets such as planting (say over ten years) 2km of hedgerow; creating a hectare of wild-flower meadow and 5 new ponds as well as monitoring and recording key species, such as the number of bats detected flying around the village, hedgehogs seen in gardens, or swifts and swallows nesting on buildings.

¹ To be published later this year.



Parish nature recovery plans should be developed by local people, to meet their local aspirations and reflect the nature that inspires them. Ideally, they will be agreed and formally endorsed by the parish council. The partners in the John Clare Countryside can offer advice and guidance.

Creating a Parish Nature Recovery Plan

We recommend the following steps to create your parish plan

1. Make a **simple map of wildlife habitats** in your parish, identifying where the most important places for nature are and why they matter
2. Based on this, decide the **objectives for your nature recovery plan**. What habitats do you want to improve or create and what species do you particularly want to see increase in your parish?
3. Develop a **nature recovery map** that illustrates where you want to create new habitats and the existing habitats that can be improved.
4. Develop a **timeline for habitat creation or improvement**, recognising that the plan is best delivered in bite-size pieces over the ten-year period.
5. Develop a plan for **maintaining and monitoring these habitats** and the wildlife that lives there

1. Make a map of wildlife habitats

Any plan needs to start with an appreciation of the current state of nature locally. This will involve creating a map of the current nature-rich sites in each parish and sites that can be improved to benefit nature.

Key wildlife sites might include

- Nature reserves
- Woodlands
- Orchards
- Avenues or isolated groups of trees
- Well-developed hedgerows
- Fields surrounded by well-developed hedgerows
- Grasslands or wild-flower meadows
- Ponds
- Wild-flower rich road-side verges
- Water bodies such as rivers, streams, reservoirs, pits, fisheries
- Ditches
- Churchyards and church walls
- School fields with wildlife areas
- And don't forget features within the village – these can be some of the most wildlife rich areas of the parish!

These can then be plotted on to a map.

Some parishes may already have a lot of evidence about the wildlife and natural habitats in their area from previous surveys. Others may want to do some surveys as part of this work. Creating a database of photos at the start of the project will also be important so visible progress can be recorded over time!

2. Decide your objectives

The next step is to agree what habitats the parish wants to create or improve.



Examples might include

- Plant 100 individual trees across the parish
- Restore 3 and create 5 new ponds
- Create two small wildflower rich areas of grassland
- Increase the number of swifts that can be seen flying over the village by putting up 20 swift nest boxes
- Increase the number of hedgehogs that are reported in village gardens by encouraging more nature friendly gardening and the creation of hedgehog routes through gardens
- Reduce the amount of roadkill by provision of green lanes
- Increase the quality and signage of footpaths/cycleways across the parish

Again, the project partners can assist with this decision making by advising on particular habitats that might be encouraged in each parish based on the existing habitats and what could be most realistically created or improved.

The partners in the John Clare Countryside project have already identified some habitats that parishes might create or enhance

1. **Hedgerows and scrub** are key habitats for many species of insect, mammal and bird and create vital wildlife friendly links through the countryside. Where existing hedgerows have become gappy, it would be desirable to restore them by planting, native, locally sourced trees and shrubs. Overgrown hedges might be regenerated by laying. Encouraging patches of naturally developing scrub is also valuable and can provide greater structural diversity in the landscape, though this option should not be considered where there is already species-rich grassland present. Most woody species, particularly bramble, rose and hawthorn, will rapidly colonise unmanaged land, and in the long-term small areas of woodland will develop, which are structurally much more interesting than planted woodland. Hedges should not be created in historically open landscapes.
2. **Tree planting** can be beneficial for biodiversity although it is particularly important to plant the right trees in the right places. Parishes including Castor, Ailsworth, Upton, Marholm and Helpston support many ancient oaks. Planting locally sourced oaks within villages would ensure the long-term continuity of this resource. Parishes such as Etton, Maxey, Helpston and Bainton also have valuable ancient willows, and creation of new willow pollards in and around villages would be appropriate. There are many different types of elm in the area and gathering seed to grow these would ensure local strains are conserved.
3. **Creating community orchards** provides an opportunity to conserve both local varieties of fruit tree and to establish new areas of wildflower grassland. Other habitat features can be incorporated, including ponds and boundary hedges, or it might be possible to include land to be used for wildlife-friendly allotments. A well-designed community orchard provides an interface between wildlife and people and can be a valuable educational resource.
4. **Pond restoration and creation.** Parishes may have field ponds that have become overgrown by trees and scrub, and no longer support a wide range of aquatic wildlife such as water beetles, frogs and toads. Restoration of such ponds is valuable, but a survey should be



undertaken before any work starts, to identify existing interest. Restoration should be phased over time, with a proportion of any aquatic or marginal vegetation retained at all times. New ponds should only be created on sites where there is currently very limited wildlife potential; damp corners of fields and meadows often support interesting plant and invertebrate species and change of land use should not be undertaken without prior ecological survey.

5. **Wildflower-rich grassland** has declined more than any other habitat in lowland Britain. Where soils are thin and poor (especially on limestone) wildflower grassland may colonise naturally without any outside intervention and this always produces the most interesting and valuable grassland habitat. Small areas of moderately species-rich grassland within parishes can often be improved by changing the current management, whether this is re-instating cutting of abandoned sites or reducing the number of cuts made in amenity areas. It is always worth surveying a site before changing the management, however, since there are some rare species which thrive in a very short sward or are very intolerant of cutting. Areas of existing amenity grassland can often be improved by plug-planting suitable native wildflowers. In this case, seed of appropriate species could be gathered from local sites by parishioners or schoolchildren and then grown on. These areas should subsequently be managed by a hay-cutting regime. Larger areas of wildflower grassland can be created or enhanced by spreading green hay. Use of bought wildflower seed to create grassland should be a last resort, as many firms sell mixes with non-native forms of plants.
6. **Nest-box schemes** for bats, bees and key bird species, including swifts and owls. Again, the partners can advise on what sort of boxes and where to put them and help with applying for a grant for buying in bulk.
7. **Drainage ditches** with wide margins that can act as linear wildlife corridors as well as important habitats in their own right. This is likely to be habitat that will require close partnership with landowners and the drainage board, so do seek advice about this before committing to do something on somebody else's land!
8. Leaving small areas of land and field corners to **regenerate naturally** could also be a very simple and easily achieved method of creating wildlife habitats, with all the excitement of not knowing what will appear!
9. **Road verges** – are often wonderful places for wildflowers and insects. They are also largely in the control of public bodies, so we should be able to make sure they maintain their wildlife friendly features and act as corridors along which nature can spread.

3. Develop a nature recovery map

Your nature recovery map should show where you want to create or improve habitats and how they link up with what is already in place. Each parish nature recovery plan will be different, reflecting the geography and geology of each parish and the different objectives identified.

Examples of what you might put on a map include



1. Hedgerows that could be restored (gapped up) or opportunities to plant new hedges
2. Road-side verges that could become wild-flower rich
3. The locations of old ponds that could be restored or new ones created
4. Areas that could be sown as wild-flower rich grassland
5. Places for tree planting – either groups of trees or individual, ‘standard’ trees that could make landscape features
6. Land in public ownership or that landowners have volunteered that might be used to create community orchards
7. Locations for nest box schemes
8. Community gardens/allotments to promote first-hand active engagement of the community with nature. (*as they say "Gardens and gardening are our doorway to the natural environment"*)

Parish nature recovery plans should respect the interests of private landowners and not suggest new land-uses or habitat creation on private property unless the landowner has already been consulted and approves these plans.

With that in mind, it may be best for nature recovery plans to focus habitat creation schemes on land that is in public ownership such as school fields, churchyards, land owned by the parish council and road-verges; or to consider habitat creation schemes that involve the renovation of existing features on private land such as ponds that have overgrown, neglected public footpaths and bridleways, or existing hedge lines that have become gappy.

Clearly, we hope that private landowners will want to be involved in the nature recovery plans and if they have been properly consulted and have given their explicit consent nature recovery plans can, of course, include habitat creation on private land. But they should not include aspirations for habitat creation on private land where the landowner has not given that consent.

4. Develop an annual timeline for habitat creation

A parish nature recovery plan shouldn't be a long document. It should include the objectives of the plan, a map of current wildlife interest, the nature recovery map and an annual timeline which sets out what the parish aims to achieve each year.

This should also include an indicative budget and any training requirements, so that the parish understands the resources, skills and knowledge it will need to deliver the plan.

The John Clare Countryside partners can help as follows

- Co-ordinating grant applications and introductions
- Helping source equipment
- Providing training
- Providing professional advice and examples of best practice
- Establishing links to other organisations that may be willing to support your projects
- Links to other projects such as PECT Forest for Peterborough
- Links to national event such as 30 days wild by the wildlife trust



5. Develop a plan for maintaining the habitats present in the parish and monitoring the wildlife

It's going to be just as important to think about how you manage the new habitats for the long-term. Your plan needs to think about what work will be required to keep the habitats in good condition and what that will mean in terms of resources – both human and financial.

Again the partners can help advise on this.

In addition to engaging with the local community in the creation or initial improvement of habitats the plan should develop ideas for how the habitats within the parish will be maintained. This might include links to external organisations or groups who will benefit from the opportunities of working and visiting the parishes.

How this all comes together

We hope that every parish in John Clare Countryside will develop its own nature recovery plan and that this process can be completed by late summer 2020. This would allow the Partnership time to make grant applications for habitat creation and to develop a programme of work across the parishes for the 2020-21 season (subject to any remaining Coronavirus restrictions of course).

The John Clare Countryside Partnership would then review all the plans and consider whether additional projects might help link up these local efforts across the project area. It will then create a single nature recovery map for the whole area.

The Partners are also in the process of developing more information to support the creation of the nature recovery plans, including blank maps, examples of other projects and links to more detailed guidance on habitat maintenance and creation. We hope to have this ready by July at the latest.

The John Clare Countryside Partnership

The John Clare Countryside Partnership is an unofficial partnership of local people and organisations who are committed to helping nature recover across our countryside – not only because nature deserves our support and needs our help, but also because it enriches our lives, making us healthier and often happier. It is also a vital part of our agricultural and social systems. It is this point an entirely voluntary 'coming together' of like-minded interests. It has the support of the local MP, Peterborough City Council and the parish councils.

This initial document has been put together with input from

- Langdyke Countryside Trust
- Natural England
- Nene Park Trust
- PECT
- Sacrewell Farm
- The Wildlife Trust

For further information contact chair@langdyke.org.uk