



Statement of biodiversity priorities

Part one Area description



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Setting the scene

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Why nature matters

Nature is important for its own sake, the unique product of millions of years of evolution and natural processes. For many people, connecting with nature is a source of inspiration or renewal and reminds us that we are part of something bigger, that enriches our daily lives.

Everything we do, from the water we drink, the air we breathe and the food we eat is dependent on the natural world. Three-quarters of our food crops depend on insects and pollination, yet insect

numbers have crashed. Deteriorating soil health due to historic farming practices poses a major risk to farming and food security. An environment rich with plant life helps clean the air we breathe. Trees provide shade and slow the flow of flood waters. Natural spaces help make attractive places to live, work and play. They provide spaces for relaxation, leisure and tranquillity and boost our health and wellbeing. If nature is depleted through our actions, we are also harming ourselves.

Why do we need a local nature recovery strategy?

England is one of the most nature-depleted counties in the world², as demonstrated by the lack of nature-rich land and by historic and continued declines in species.

In terms of natural habitats, Cambridgeshire has one of the lowest proportions of land designated for nature in the UK (3.3%), the second lowest woodland cover at just 4.8%, and one of the lowest proportions of nature-rich habitats (approximately 8%) in England. The rapidly growing population of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough does not have national parks, national landscapes or large areas of open access downland, forest, moorland or coast on its doorsteps.

The national State of Nature Reports³ tell in stark terms of the declines in species populations, and the collapse in bio-abundance, in particular invertebrate populations.

64%
decline in
abundance of UK
Priority species

54%

45%
decline in
butterfly
distribution
SINCE 1976



25%

of UK fish stocks
are in a **CRITICAL**
condition

43% & 26%
of bird
species
of terrestrial
mammal species
...are threatened
with extinction

25%
DECLINE
in moth
numbers
SINCE 1970



Did you know?

State of nature reports uses data from biological monitoring and recording schemes to provide a benchmark for species populations throughout the UK



We are in a biodiversity crisis as well as a climate crisis. This mass depletion of biodiversity is now having harmful consequences for humans, both economic and social. Taking action to promote nature recovery has never been more important, which is why we need LNRS.

Causes of the decline in nature



Pesticides



Pollution



Increasing population



Habitat loss and degradation



Invasive species and disease



Habitat loss and degradation

The primary driver of wildlife decline in the UK and locally is the loss and degradation of habitats. Since the Second World War, the intensification and expansion of farming, coupled with urban development, has resulted in a significant loss of nature-rich land.



As well as the species losses described above, the UK lost over 97% of its lowland meadows between the 1930s and 1980s⁴. Further losses since the 1980s suggest the overall losses locally are likely to be 98-99%. We have lost over 75% of our wetlands since the 1700s⁵, largely through drainage for agriculture, and these losses have continued into the 20th and 21st centuries. The Fens was the largest wetland in western Europe prior to drainage from the 17th century onwards.

The removal of scrub and hedgerows and inadequate woodland management and protection (only 7% of the UK's woodland is in a good ecological condition⁶) have all contributed to nature's decline. While agricultural changes account for the majority of the habitat losses, urban expansion has also played a significant role locally, with a doubling of the urban area over the past century. This pressure is set to continue over the coming decades.



Pesticides

The use of pesticides has played a crucial role in significantly increasing farming yields and improving food security over the past 75 years. However, this has come at a substantial cost to wildlife. In the 1960s and 1970s, the widespread use of now banned pesticides led to alarming declines in birds of prey and songbirds.



More recent generations of **pesticides**, such as **neonicotinoids**, are highly toxic to insects and other **invertebrates** on land and in water⁷.

The widespread use of broad-spectrum **herbicides** has reduced the diversity of plants across the farmed landscape and with it those insects that depend on these plants to complete their life cycles.

While the total weight of active pesticide ingredients has decreased since the 1990s, the total application area and frequency of use have both increased. The toxicity of **pesticides** has also increased, offsetting the decline in weight applied, and a greater variety of **pesticides**

are now used on a single crop⁸. This is contributing to the widespread loss in abundance of many **invertebrate** and other species groups.



Pollution

As well as **pesticides**, many of our local waterways have elevated nutrient levels, both **phosphates** and **nitrates** and as a result are not reaching their full ecological potential. **Phosphates** come from both human wastewater and from runoff from farmland⁹. The poor water quality affects the composition of the aquatic plants and animals, with species of low nutrient conditions in decline.

Poor quality flood waters also impact adjacent floodplain wetland and flood meadow habitats, reducing the abundance of notable species dependent on low nutrient levels.





Air pollution from nitrogen used in agriculture and transport is contributing to the declining quality of many natural habitats, including grasslands and woodlands, as many notable species of these habitats require low nutrient conditions.

With increased urbanisation, there is also more light pollution, which has been shown to affect the natural behavioural patterns of bats, birds and moths and is also now thought to be contributing to insect declines¹⁰.

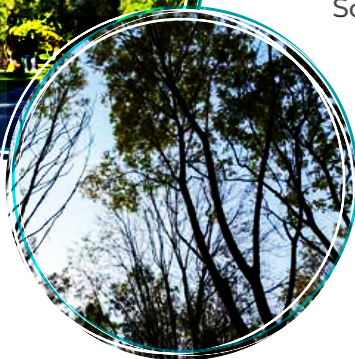
The increasing concentrations of pharmaceutical chemicals and microplastics within freshwater

environments are also becoming an increasing concern. However, we do not yet understand the impacts these substances have on wildlife.

Public survey feedback

'We need public engagement, but also areas which are protected from human impact.'

Public survey respondent



Invasive species and disease

Some non-native species become **invasive** and adversely impact local ecosystems. The species with the most impacts locally are Muntjac Deer, American Mink, Signal Crayfish, Himalayan Balsam, Floating Pennywort, Azolla and increasingly a range of **invertebrates** in the Fens waterways.

Tree diseases have had significant impacts on Cambridgeshire's landscapes. The loss of Elms in the 1970s to Dutch Elm Disease altered the landscape dramatically. Ash dieback is now having a similarly large-scale impact on our local woodlands where Ash is the dominant species.

Public opinion

'I am concerned about the loss of wildlife we are accustomed to seeing in our gardens'

Cambridge City Resident



Increasing population

The human population of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has grown by over 20% since 2000. As well as the loss of habitat to urban development, natural assets in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are also coming under increasing pressure with conflicts and damage from recreational activity being recorded at sites including Wicken Fen and many Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and nature reserves.

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.

As outlined by the UK government 'sustained economic growth is the number one mission of this government, but this cannot come at the expense of our natural environment. A healthy natural environment is essential both in its own right and for sustained and resilient growth' ([Nature Restoration Fund, 2025](#)).

Nature and development can coexist through sustainable planning that integrates green spaces, protects biodiversity, and enhances ecosystems while meeting growth aspirations. An example of how nature can be integrated into development is Trumpington Meadows. Further information can be found in supporting document 6.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough land use changes over the past century

Land use in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has changed significantly over the last century.

Between 1930 and 2018 there has been large-scale habitat loss, with the remaining areas of habitat becoming smaller in size and more fragmented.

A summary of the key changes is as follows...¹¹



Expansion of intensive land uses and / or those unfavourable to biodiversity:

Arable land increased by 31,200ha (15% increase from 61% to 70%)

Built-up areas and gardens increased by 16,500ha (84% increase from 6% to 11%)

Natural and semi-natural habitat LOSS



Marsh habitat loss of 2,900ha (88% decline)

Semi-natural grassland has declined by at least 84% (more likely to be 97-99% with a better definition of semi-natural grassland)



Natural and semi-natural habitat GAIN



Woodland increased by 7,000ha (85% expansion from 2% to 5%)

Waterbodies increased in number and total area

Due to the sand and gravel mineral extraction and construction of Grafham Water

Current land uses



Farmed landscape



Urban landscape



Natural landscapes

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are dominated by arable agriculture and urban settlements. Estimates put the cover of high-value habitats for nature at around 8% of the land area.



Farmed landscape

Around 80% of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is agricultural land. A high proportion is highly fertile **grade 1 and 2 land** which makes a significant contribution to the nation's food production (over one-third of England's fresh vegetables are produced in the Fens). Much of the highest quality agricultural land is on peat soils in the Fens. Cambridgeshire has around 27% of England's total peatland, but due to intensive use accounts for 70% of the damaged peatland in the country¹². Beyond the Fens, arable farming remains the predominant land use across the chalk landscapes in the south of the county and the claylands in the west.



Urban landscape

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is a largely rural area. It is formed of five districts and one unitary authority which include historic cities such as Cambridge, Peterborough and Ely, smaller market towns such

as Huntingdon, March and Wisbech, and numerous villages. Over the past twenty years the area has seen one of the UK's biggest population increases. Overall, the number of people living in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has risen by 20% since 2000 and 9.2% since 2015 which is higher than the East of England average¹³.

Peterborough is one of the top ten fastest growing cities in the UK¹⁴ and this rapid population growth has led to significant urban expansion and increased demands on resources.



Natural landscapes

Approximately 8% of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough¹⁵ is high-value natural habitats. This is one of the lowest proportions in England. Most of these nature sites are small and fragmented.

The remaining habitats are therefore under intense pressure for the reasons set out previously. Although starting from a low base, there are significant opportunities for nature recovery.



Did you know?

Grade 1 and 2 land is an agricultural land classification that determines the quality of existing farmland or undeveloped land. Grade 1 and Grade 2 land is considered 'excellent' and 'very good' respectively.