



Species Recovery Plan – National Trust Heswall Fields Spring 2025



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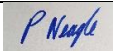


Document control

Disclaimer

The landowner reserves the right to manage their land as they see fit. This Plan sets out capital works undertaken and requirements for their monitoring and maintenance. There is no obligation on the farmer to undertake the additional works or access the funding outlined in this Species Recovery Plan. The Plan seeks to signpost the landowner to potential opportunities to recover the target farmland species, fund management of their natural assets, diversify their farm business and support the farms transition towards a more sustainable and regenerative future.

This report has been prepared for SRPCGS reporting purposes and sharing or wider circulation should only be done with the express permissions of MEAS project team and the landowner.

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Acknowledgements and thanks

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Project Intro

The Liverpool City Region Farmland Species Recovery Project began in August 2023 and completed in March 2025. Beyond this period up to 2030, Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS) with support of the landowner will carry out monitoring and essential maintenance of the capital habitat works undertaken.

Background

The Project is designed as a farmland demonstrator targeting recovery of 10 farmland species including a range of birds, brown hare, water vole and purple rampion fumitory (a plant of arable margins) which are species of principle importance and in a [state of local and nation decline](#). This Project was funded by Natural England's [Species Recovery Programme Capital Grant Scheme](#) and Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service. Mersey Rivers Trust and National Farmers Union also provided support on baseline surveys, capital works design, farmer liaison and agri-schemes.

				
Water Vole	Brown Hare	Purple Rampion Fumitory	Skylark	Yellowhammer
Dr John Pinnegar (CC-BY-NC)	Iain Robson	Joshua Styles (CC-BY-NC)	Graeme Baxter (CC-BY-NC)	Nigel Voaden (CC-BY)
				
Corn Bunting	Tree Sparrow	Reed Bunting	Lapwing	Grey Partridge
Graham Clarkson (CC-BY-NC)	Max Carter (CC-BY-NC)	Paul Lewis (CC-BY-NC)	desmodus60 (CC-BY-NC)	Matthew Kwan (CC-BY-NC)

An underlying theme of the project is to **work with nature through regenerative and sustainable farming**. Species recovery can go hand in hand with essential food

production and offers an important income stream to help supplement and diversify farm businesses.

The team has worked tirelessly with local farmers to realise opportunities for biodiversity gains through habitat creation and enhancement whilst also providing wider benefits to farmers such flood storage, soil management and stock-proof hedging.

This Species Recovery Plan aims to help signpost farmers to future funding opportunities through a regenerative farming approach working with nature.

Farm Bio

National Trust acquired Heswall Fields in 1978, funded by Enterprise Neptune. At the time Wirral was part of the old Mercia Region and was the only area with a Coast within that region. The original purchase was for an area of 16 hectares, and Moore's Meadow was acquired in the early 2000's from a local developer, adding approx. another 4 hectares.

Heswall Fields today is a valuable site for wading birds during high tide as well as being one of the largest little egret roosts on the Wirral with peak number over 180 birds including several great egrets. The site is monitored as Wetland Bird Survey Core Count Area recognising its importance and is within the [West Wirral Heathland Nature Improvement Area](#)

The farm is mainly pasture and grazed seasonally by a local herd of beef cattle. Soils are deep fine slightly acid loam and clay soils.

Locally there have been stories that the site was used as a World War II decoy site, where bonfires were lit and lights strung out during blackout to replicate street patterns hoping to confuse German bombers in to targeting the unpopulated fields thinking they had flown over the Mersey and were approaching Liverpool rather than over the Dee. There is evidence of brick roads across the site, but these may have been in relation to marl extraction.

The meadows are unimproved grassland flanked by Dee Estuary Cliffs SSSI and the wider estuary saltmarsh. This area is highly popular with local residents and visitors.



Location Plan



Figure 1: Heswall Fields location

Baseline Conditions

Target and Notable Species

During surveys of target species several notable species were recorded. This included curlew, teal, hen harrier, redwing, little egret, bullfinch and several notable plant species including black bryony and lesser pondweed. Previous botanical survey of the farm has also identified common cow-wheat and knotted clover which are scarce in Cheshire. Table 1 below indicates the likelihood of the project's target species being present on site.

Table 1: Target species presence and likely absence at Heswall Fields		
Target species	Present?	Notes
Brown hare	P	Not recorded on surveys but habitat suitable
Grey partridge	P	Not recorded on surveys
Tree sparrow	P	Not recorded on surveys but habitat suitable
Reed bunting	P	Not recorded on surveys but habitat potentially suitable
Lapwing	C	Present in low numbers
Skylark	C	Present in low numbers
Corn bunting	P	Not recorded on surveys

yellowhammer	P	Not recorded on surveys but habitat potentially suitable
water vole	U	Not recorded on surveys and habitat not suitable
Purple rampion fumitory	U	Not recorded on surveys
C: confirmed; P: possible; U: unlikely		

Habitats

The project team undertook UKHab survey of habitats within the farm and a botanical walkover was carried out. See Figure 2 UKHab Map below. The surveys found the majority of the farm is other neutral grassland in use as grazing pasture. The northwest field closest to the estuary has been identified as lowland meadow (g3a, equivalent to MG5a in NVC) and is of SSSI status. Native hedgerow marks most field boundaries and ponds with willow scrub and/or mature and veteran trees are present. Recently created scrapes are also present in the southern part of the farm.

Areas of broadleaved and wet woodland are notable and support an important little egret roost. A stream flows through site downhill meeting the Dee Estuary off site to the west.

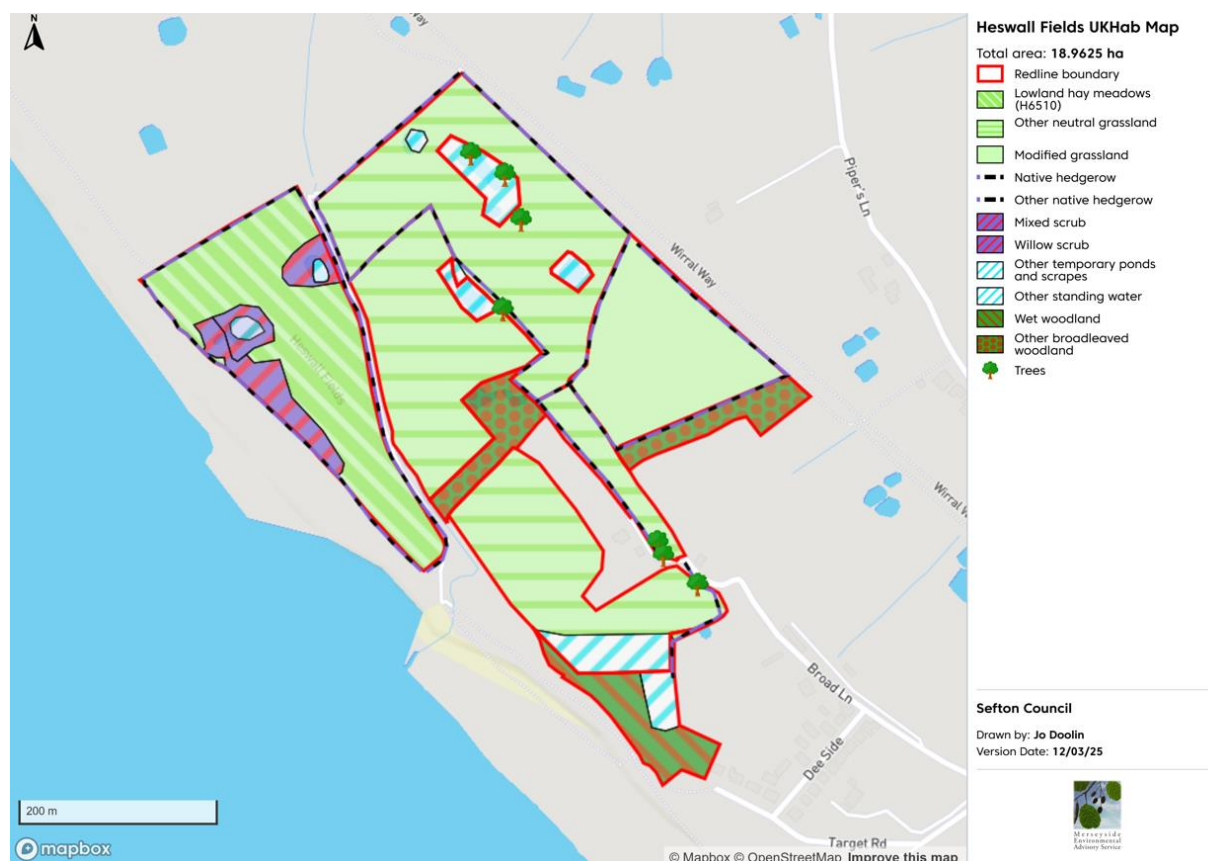


Figure 2: UKHab survey of Heswall Fields

Biodiversity Net Gain units

Based on the UKHab survey the farm comprises the following area and linear habitats and corresponding habitat/hedgerow units which has been calculated using the Statutory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Metric. Habitats of highest value (distinctiveness) include lowland meadow, other neutral grassland, broadleaved and wet woodland, native hedgerow and ponds. Veteran trees on site are also of high ecological value.

Table 2: Baseline BNG habitat units on-site

On-site baseline	
Habitat units	271.41
Hedgerow units	20.98
Watercourse units	0.00

Table 3: Habitat type, size and unit value within the BNG metric

Habitat type	Area (ha)/Length (km)	Habitat units
Other standing water (non-priority habitat pond)	1.32	13.42
Lowland meadow	3.19	88.15
Other neutral grassland	9.5	131.37
Modified grassland	2.32	16.02
Willow/mixed scrub	0.84	5.59
Other broadleaved woodland	1.77	16.86
Native hedgerow with trees	0.38	4.57
Native hedgerow associated with bank/ditch	0.43	1.97
Native hedgerow	2.09	13.60

Capital habitat works

Overall, capital works has achieved a BNG uplift of 0.55 hedgerow units which equates to a 2.62% net gain in hedgerow units¹. In total 1.59 habitat area units were achieved but as other neutral grassland was lost due to scrape creation, the BNG metric showed a decrease in the overall number of BNG units on the farm. The scrape creation did not satisfy trading rules as the scrapes were not a like-for-like replacement for the lost grassland.

¹ Biodiversity unit trading prices are currently in the range of £28,000 to £100,000 depending on the habitat type and seller



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As this was a large-scale wetland creation project and has beneficial consequences for target species and those species using the site (wildfowl and wading birds) this approach was considered acceptable and will likely increase biodiversity at the farm.

Habitat creation carried is set out in Table 4. This included hedgerow planting, tree planting, scrape and pond creation. Four native black poplars and crab apple trees were also planted on site within/near the woodland block. Additionally, as on all participating farms, tree sparrow boxes have been installed on suitably mature trees.

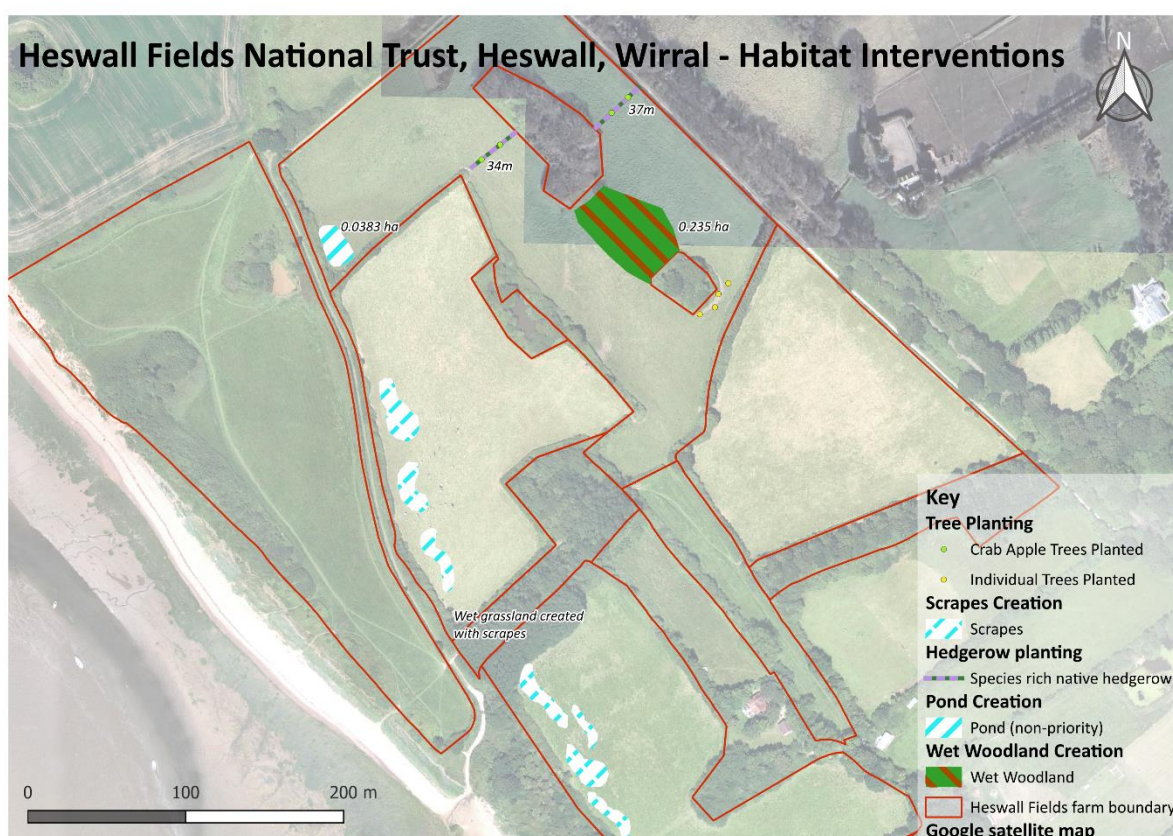


Figure 3: Habitat Interventions at Heswall Fields

Table 4 shows detail of the habitats created, and the BNG habitat units delivered. As stated, due to the trading rules within the metric scrape habitats created on other neutral grassland do not attract BNG units² so are not shown below.

Table 4: Created habitat type, area and BNG habitat units		
Habitat type	Area (ha)/Length (km)	Habitat units
Native species-rich hedgerow creation	0.07	0.55
Tree planting	0.02	0.06
Wet woodland creation	0.24	1.27
Scrape creation	0.12	Rule 4 applies

² Rule 4 of BNG guidance declared. Site has optimal conditions with low risk of failure. Reason being for large-scale restoration of natural processes

Pond creation	0.04	0.32
Sparrow boxes	n/a	n/a

Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan

The project team and landowner have a 5-year obligation period to monitor and maintain capital works to support the recovery of target species.

During this period to maximise the benefit of these on farm assets for agriculture and nature, the following 5-year management plan is proposed (see Table 5 and 6). This would be delivered by MEAS and the landowner.

Table 5: Proposed maintenance of habitat interventions

Habitat	Management activity	Frequency	Links to SFI options
Hedgerow	Remove guards	Year 2-3	n/a
Hedgerow	Formative pruning	Winter of year 1 (2026)	CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK
Hedgerow	Regular cutting	Every 2 -3 years, starting in year 3 (2027)	CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK

Table 6: Proposed monitoring of habitat interventions

Habitat	Management activity	Frequency	Links to SFI options
All habitats	Breeding and winter bird “snapshots”	Annual	n/a
Hedgerow and woodland	Annual inspection for failures and condition	Annual	CHRW1: Assess and record hedgerow condition - GOV.UK
Sparrow boxes	Bird box checks	Annual (March to June)	n/a
All habitats	Brown hare survey	Annual (February/March)	n/a

Future opportunities

There is no obligation on the farm to undertake the works or access the funding outlined below. This section seeks to signpost the landowner to potential opportunities to recover the target farmland species, manage their assets and support the farm become more sustainable and regenerative in the future.

Habitat opportunities

The site presents many potential habitat creation and enhancement opportunities that would benefit local wildlife. The Northwest field was identified as a SSSI level lowland meadow grassland (NVC MG5a *Cynosurus cristatus* – *Centaurea nigra* grassland *Lathyrus pratensis* sub-community). This has potential to be enhanced by carrying out twice-annual meadow cuts and removing the hay and provide a source of green hay that could be used to enhance the other fields within the farm.

Other fields on site have been identified as good quality “other neutral grassland” (UKHab code g3a) and where scrape creation has exposed less fertile soil, indicators of lowland meadow grassland are colonising these areas. The current grazing regime will help maintain the grassland nutrient levels, but the seed bank could be further enhanced by scarifying these fields and adding green hay from either the higher quality grassland, or from external sites such as Wirral Country Park.

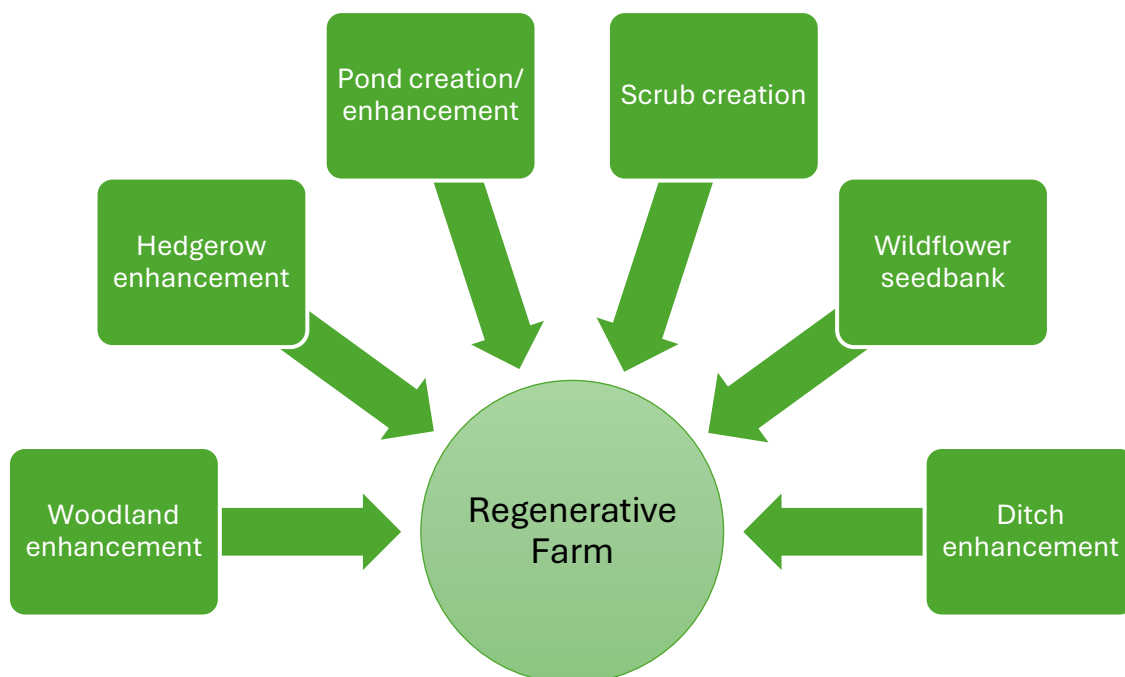


Figure 4: Future opportunities for species recovery

Following the establishment of the woodland planting, this area should be allowed to naturally succeed into woodland and scrub. Should the poplars successfully produce new plants, these will be new genetic variants of native black poplar and could be

transplanted to new sites (being sure to move male and female plants to ensure ongoing reproduction).

Should newly planted hedgerows on site become gappy or 'leggy', they can be laid to re-establish their function. Hedge laying requires around 2-5m of growth, and hedges should not be cut the year before laying to ensure there is enough material.

Further creation of scrapes and ponds will help manage water resources on the land and provide natural flood management of the site, as well as provide habitats for wildlife.

Funding options

To support medium to long term maintenance of habitat interventions and realise those opportunities shown in Figure 4 the landowner is encouraged to consider the following funding options. The project team at MEAS would be happy to support the landowner should they wish to take up any of the opportunities for regenerative farming.



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Figure 5: Summary of funding options

Further information

Project website: [Investing in Nature LCR – Investing in nature recovery in the Liverpool City Region](#)

Contact Us

Liverpool City Region Farmland Species Recovery Project team

[Contact Us – Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service](#)



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Habitat creation and enhancement at Heswall Fields



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