

# Annual Monitoring and Maintenance Report

# 2025/26

## Liverpool City Region Farmland Species Recovery Project

## Species Recovery Programme Capital Grant Scheme

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## Purpose of report

The Farmland Species Recovery Project capital works phase ended in March 2025. Species Recovery Programme Capital Grant Scheme includes an embedded obligation for projects to monitor succeed over a five-year period. The monitoring period is therefore April 2025 to March 2030.

This Annual Monitoring and Maintenance Report is for 2025/26 and sets out the approach to long-term ecological monitoring and habitat establishment for the Liverpool City Region (LCR) Farmland Species Recovery Project. This project sought to recover 10 farmland species (Figure 1) working regeneratively with 5 farms across the LCR.

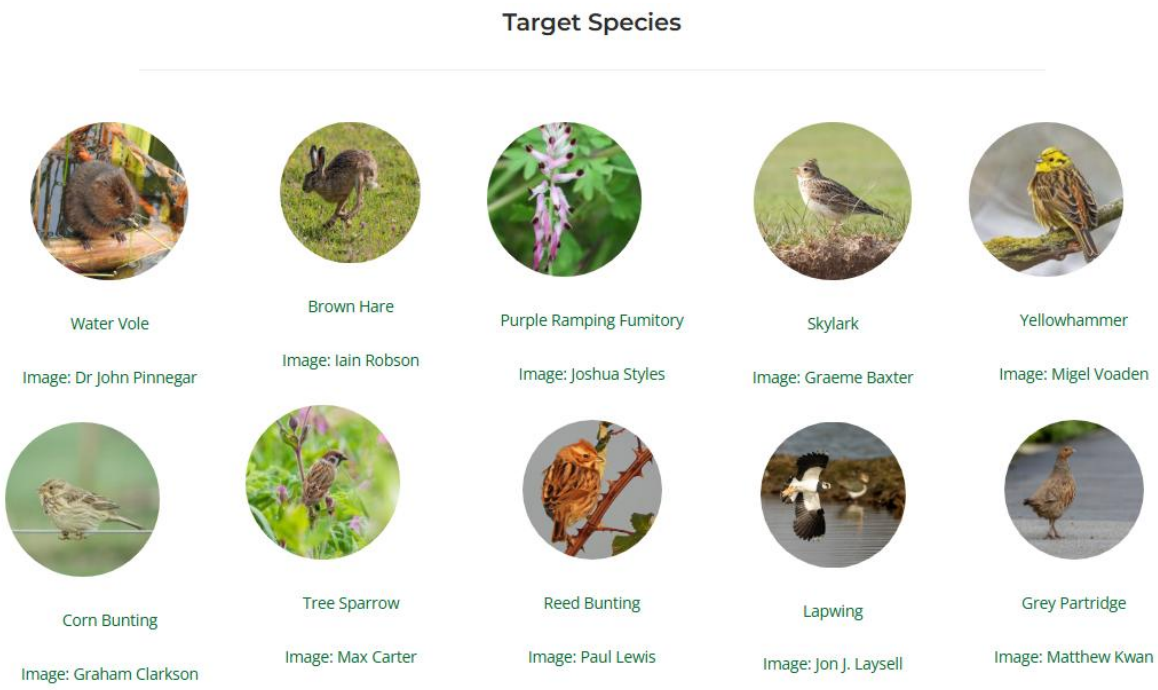



*Figure 1: Target Species*

Funded by Natural England's Species Recovery Programme Capital Grant Scheme, the project delivered habitat improvements (Figure 2) for the target species and was successfully completed in Spring 2025. More information can be found on the project website here: https://investinginnaturelcr.com/resources-reports/fsrp/

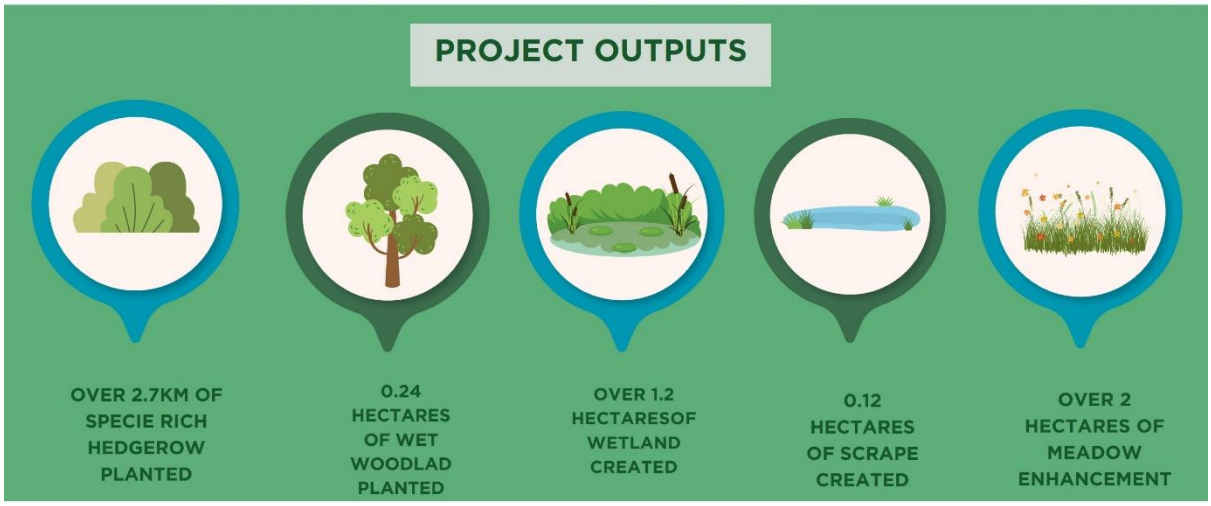



*Figure 2: Project habitat outputs*

The report describes how the five-year monitoring phase will be carried out across the participating farms and summarises the maintenance activities required to support the habitat creation and enhancement delivered through the project. The report aligns with the individual Species Recovery Plans prepared for each farm and provides a working framework that can be updated as survey data are collected over this period.

The methods and monitoring focus remains consistent, repeatable and grounded in the ecological evidence established during the baseline studies for the project.

This is the inaugural Annual Monitoring and Maintenance Report which outlines results from the monitoring and maintenance period 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026.

## Farm Bio's

**Kiln Farm**

Kiln Farm lies within the River Alt corridor near Ince Blundell, Sefton, with Ince Blundell Hall estate to the west. The area forms part of a Nature Improvement Area and is characterised by naturally wet, clay-rich soils under arable production.

The farm is crossed by a network of drainage ditches supporting tall-herb fen vegetation and providing habitat for water voles. Soils range from sandy loams to heavier alluvial clays with areas of shallow peat linked to former fen habitat. Existing wildlife measures include long grass margins for brown hare and barn owl boxes.



*Figure 3: Kiln Farm*

**Kindling Farm**

Kindling Farm is a 32-hectare site near Tarbock, Knowsley, formerly under arable production and acquired by the Kindling Farm Trust in 2023. It comprises four large fields separated by native hedgerows, treelines, drainage ditches and several field ponds.

Soils are mainly deep, base-poor clays over sandstone, with localised enrichment along a western stream. The farm is being developed as an organic agroforestry system producing fruit, vegetables and pulses, with a focus on biodiversity, soil health, climate resilience and community engagement through training, volunteering and education.



*Figure 4: Kindling Farm*

**Oldfield Farm**

Oldfield Farm covers approximately 50 hectares near Heswall on a sandstone ridge overlooking the Dee Estuary and lies within the West Wirral Heathland Nature Improvement Area. Soils are seasonally wet deep loams and the farm is primarily managed as cattle-grazed pasture.

The site is bounded by The Dungeon SSSI to the north and Heswall Dales SSSI to the south. Fields slope gently towards the estuary and are enclosed by important hedgerows with notable and veteran trees. The western boundary adjoins the Wirral Way and National Trust land used for seasonal grazing.



*Figure 5: Oldfield Farm*

**Water Lane Farm**

Water Lane Farm is a 486-hectare arable farm in Knowsley, predominantly producing cereal crops with rotational winter bird mixes. Soils are seasonally wet deep red loams and clays.

The farm lies within a predominantly arable landscape between the Mersey Estuary and the M62 motorway, with parts of the holding falling within the Netherley Brook and Ditton Brook Corridor Nature Improvement Area.



*Figure 6: Water Lane Farm*

**Heswall Fields**

Heswall Fields is a National Trust site acquired in 1978, with later additions bringing the total area to around 20 hectares. It comprises permanent grassland, including unimproved and lowland meadow, seasonally grazed by cattle and divided by old hedgerows with mature trees.

The site is important for wintering and roosting wading birds and supports one of the largest little egret roosts on the Wirral. It is monitored as a Wetland Bird Survey Core Count Area and lies within the West Wirral Heathland Nature Improvement Area, adjacent to the Dee Estuary and Dee Estuary Cliffs SSSI. It is also a well-used local access and recreation site.



*Figure 7: Heswall Fields*

## Farmland Species Recovery Plans

A detailed Species Recovery Plan has been prepared for each farm. These plans outline the ecological baseline collected during the 2023–2024 surveys, the capital habitat works delivered on each farm, and tailored monitoring and maintenance requirements for the subsequent five years. Each plan provides practical guidance on how to manage and maintain newly created hedgerows, meadows, ponds, scrapes, wet woodland and arable margins so that these habitats continue to develop in a way that supports the project's ten target farmland species.

The plans also identify opportunities for future funding and complementary schemes, including Countryside Stewardship, the Sustainable Farming Incentive, woodland creation incentives and Biodiversity Net Gain markets. This ensures that habitat enhancements are not standalone interventions but part of a longer-term vision for species recovery and sustainable land management in the LCR.

## Monitoring and Maintenance Reports

Monitoring focuses primarily on the capital habitat works undertaken for the target species at each farm. Through monitoring surveys, we attempt to measure the impact of habitat interventions and ecological response in terms of local species populations. Monitoring has been undertaken through the season and tailored to species, to provide a more complete picture of species recovery.

A suite of monitoring surveys have been undertaken focussed on target species but also recording wider protected, priority and notable species presence. This gives a wider indication of the biodiversity value of each farm and success of capital works.

Maintenance activity will be carried out jointly between MEAS and the landowners, supporting the establishment of habitat features created through the project, including hedgerows, wildflower meadows, wetlands, ponds and cultivated arable margins. Regular visits ensure that new habitats are developing as intended and that any emerging management needs are addressed promptly. Activities are outlined in Appendix 1 and include tasks such as formative pruning, guard removal for hedgerow.

## Methods

The following sections describe how monitoring is undertaken and how maintenance supports the continued success of the project's habitats and species.

The scope of annual monitoring includes: brown hare, breeding and wintering farmland birds, and the targeted recording of Purple Ramping Fumitory within arable wildflower strips and cultivated margins. Broader botanical surveys and winter wader surveys contribute additional understanding of vegetation development and seasonal habitat use to establish the wider impact of capital works.

### Brown hare

Brown hare surveys have been carried out by student interns at Mersey Biobank (the Local Environmental Record Centre) during February and March in 2024, 2025 and 2026. Surveys were conducted along typically 1km transect routes across each of the farms. This approach follows methods of a previous NorthWest England brown hare study led by Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU). Counts started approximately half an hour after sunrise when hares are most active to maximise detection of individuals and focus on those areas where capital works have been undertaken.

### Botany

Botanical surveys were undertaken in the peak growing season for Purple Ramping Fumitory e.g. July within all fields at Kiln Farm where meadow enhancement works had been carried out. Survey areas were walked in a systematic zig-zag pattern to ensure efficient and uniform coverage, with all vascular plant species recorded throughout using wildflower keys e.g. Francis Rose, Collins. A similar zig-zag survey approach was employed at Kindling Farm, where areas had been deliberately disturbed to encourage the establishment of purple ramping-fumitory. This method ensured comprehensive coverage of the target areas and allowed for effective assessment of the botanical response to the management interventions.

### Breeding birds

Breeding bird surveys were undertaken across all farms in 2024 to establish a baseline. Surveys were carried out between March and late July, with three visits completed on each farm. While this is fewer than the six visits recommended by the Bird Survey Guidelines[1], the survey effort was considered sufficient to inform habitat creation and enhancement and improvement plans. Surveys commenced approximately 15 minutes after sunrise, with field boundaries walked on foot and all bird species and breeding behaviours (including singing, calling, carrying nesting material and nesting activity) recorded. All fields were sufficiently small to allow birds using the entire field to be detected from the perimeter. Following completion of the capital works, the same transects were repeated in 2025, with two 'snapshot' visits undertaken on each farm during the breeding season to assess early responses to the habitat creation and enhancement measures.

### Winter Birds

Winter bird surveys were undertaken in accordance with the Bird Survey Guidelines[2] to assess wintering bird use following the completion of capital works across the farms. Initial surveys were carried out shortly after the capital works, with three survey visits undertaken on each farm between October 2024 and January 2025. Following completion of the initial winter bird surveys, a single 'snapshot' survey was undertaken on each farm during January and February 2026 to provide an updated assessment of winter bird use of the sites.

No winter bird survey was carried out for Oldfield Farm as no capital works benefitting winter birds was carried out. Following the surveys, maps were created to identify areas which had the highest bird activity and create a baseline for monitoring of habitat interventions.

## Maintenance

MEAS is committed to supporting farmers with the establishment and ongoing management of their newly created habitats over the five-year monitoring period. This includes maintaining hedgerow growth, managing vegetation around young planting, ensuring wetland features remain functional and appropriately vegetated, and supporting the management of arable strips and meadows according to each farm's Species Recovery Plan.

Most of the capital works associated with the project were undertaken during winter 2024/25. Ongoing maintenance of the habitats created through the project will be carried out in partnership with participating farmers, with the first formal checks being undertaken post project through 2025

[1] Survey methodology | Bird Survey Guidelines
[2] Non-breeding Walkover Survey | Bird Survey Guidelines

and scheduled to take place again in spring 2026. These checks will be delivered through site walkovers to assess the condition and establishment of newly created and enhanced habitats.

Site walkovers will focus on identifying any planting failures within new hedgerows and woodland areas and determining whether restocking is required or whether support canes and guards need adjustment or replacement. Wetland features, including scrapes, will also be monitored to confirm that they are retaining water as intended and to assess whether marginal wetland vegetation is establishing successfully. Where issues are identified, appropriate remedial actions will be discussed and agreed with the farmers.

In addition to on-site inspections, farmers will be provided with ongoing advice on appropriate management practices to support the continued establishment and long-term improvement of these habitats. This will include guidance on cutting regimes, grazing pressure and the timing of management activities to minimise disturbance to wildlife. Through this collaborative approach, the project aims to secure the long-term viability and ecological value of the habitats created.

## Results

### Brown hare

Kiln Farm

Brown hare surveys at Kiln Farm recorded the highest number of individuals across all monitored sites in both 2024 and 2025. The 2025 surveys recorded a notable increase in sightings compared with the 2024 baseline, indicating continued and potentially increased use of the site by brown hares. The 2026 results therefore indicate sustained and relatively high levels of use suggesting Kiln Farm remains an important location for brown hares within the wider landscape.  Individuals were observed in open fields with short to medium vegetation Further hedgerow establishment with associated tussocky grass margins is expected to enhance habitat connectivity, providing additional shelter and movement corridors for brown hares. These features are likely to improve the suitability of the site for the species over time.




*Figure 3: Brown Hare caught on camera trap at Kiln Farm*

Kindling Farm

Brown hare surveys at Kindling Farm recorded low numbers of individuals in 2026, with three individuals recorded, consistent with results from both 2024 and 2025 and indicating continued use of the site. Continued monitoring will be required to determine whether habitat creation and enhancements at the farm leads to any sustained change in abundance.



*Figure 4: Brown Haare caught on camera trap at Kindling Farm*

Water Lane Farm

Brown hare surveys at Water Lane Farm recorded very low numbers of individuals in 2026, with a single individual recorded within newly planted hedgerow at Brookhouse. This represents a decrease compared to 2025, when four individuals were recorded, and is lower than baseline levels recorded in 2024, although it still indicates some continued use of the site. Continued monitoring will be important to determine whether this reduction reflects annual variation or a longer-term trend.

Oldfields Farm

Brown hare surveys at Oldfields Farm did not record any individuals during the 2025 survey period, consistent with the low or absent numbers recorded during the 2024 baseline surveys. Although suitable open farmland habitat is present, no regular use by brown hares was detected during survey visits. This may reflect local population distribution or temporary displacement rather than permanent absence from the wider landscape. Continued monitoring will be needed to determine whether brown hares begin to utilise the site and created hedgerow in future years.

Heswall Fields

No brown hares were recorded at Heswall Fields during either the 2024 or 2025 survey periods. This may reflect the site's smaller field size and the presence of woodland belts and taller vegetation, which are less favourable for brown hares compared with large, open arable or grassland fields. The absence of records does not necessarily indicate that brown hares are entirely absent from the wider area, as detectability can vary between survey years and visits. Ongoing monitoring would be required to confirm long-term patterns of site use.

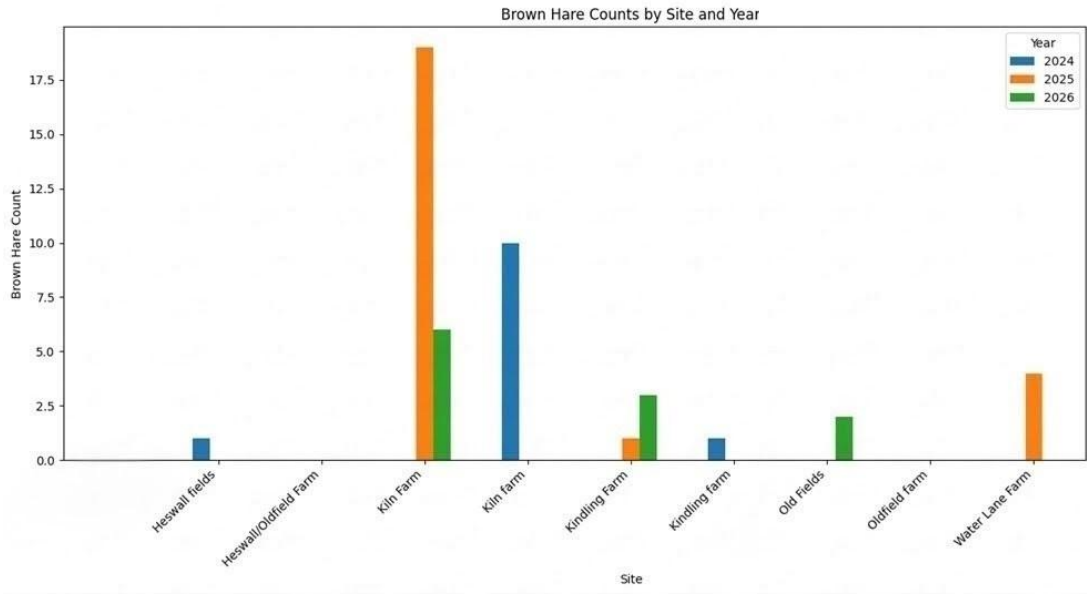



*Figure 8: Bar chart showing Brown Hare survey results 2024 -2026*

## Botany

Kiln Farm

Field 1 (see Map 1 below) supports a developing neutral grassland sward created through recent scarification and the application of brush-harvested local seed. The vegetation now contains a well-balanced mix of grasses and forbs, including crested dogstail, sweet vernal grass, salad burnet, yarrow and lady's bedstraw, alongside a notably rich legume component such as meadow vetchling, smooth tare, hop trefoil, red clover and white clover. Early successional species, including corn marigold and wild pansy, reflect the field's recent disturbance and ongoing establishment phase. Overall, the habitat is best described as g4c Other Neutral Grassland, with a clear trajectory toward g3c Species-rich Neutral Grassland under continued low-nutrient, cut-and-collect management.



*Figure 5: Ladies Bedstraw found in newly created species rich meadows at Kiln Farm*

Field 2 represents a grassland in the early stages of ecological recovery following a more intensive or arable-influenced management history. While perennial ryegrass and rough meadow grass remain prominent, the sward now includes an increasing suite of meadow forbs and legumes such as red clover, white clover, knapweed, chicory, common vetch and yellow rattle. The presence of cornfield annuals and disturbance-tolerant species reflects its transitional state, but these are gradually giving way to more stable meadow components. The field currently aligns with g4 Improved/Modified Grassland, but is steadily progressing toward g4c Other Neutral Grassland as nutrient levels decline and the restored seedbank continues to establish.




*Map 1. Kiln Farm - Species Rich Meadows*

Field 3 is developing into a diverse neutral grassland with a strong expression of the species introduced through brush-harvested seed. The sward supports a broad assemblage including wild pansy, yarrow, rough hawkbit, sweet vernal grass, trefoils, vetches and knapweed, all indicative of a maturing meadow community. Some ruderal species such as ragwort and black bindweed persist, reflecting the natural early-stage dynamics of a recently restored site, but these are expected to diminish as the sward stabilises. The field is best described as g4c Other Neutral Grassland, with a trajectory toward g3c Species-rich Neutral Grassland under ongoing low-input management.

Field 4 is the most advanced of the restored meadows and now closely resembles g3c Species-rich Neutral Grassland. The field supports an impressive range of characteristic meadow species including selfheal, black knapweed, rough hawkbit, hop trefoil, red bartsia, chicory and yellow rattle, all integrated within a well-structured and balanced sward. The successful establishment of local provenance seed is particularly evident here, and the vegetation now displays strong ecological

function and high botanical interest. Field 4 has effectively transitioned from g4c Other Neutral Grassland and is emerging as a high-quality neutral meadow.

The field known as 'Luby's Field' retains the clearest signature of its improved and wetter origins, currently corresponding to g4 Improved/Modified Grassland with localised dampness influencing species composition. Dominance by Yorkshire fog, creeping buttercup, rush and productive grasses remains evident, but the establishment of sweet vernal grass, smooth tare, white clover and rough hawkbit demonstrates that the restoration seed is integrating successfully. As nutrient levels continue to fall and the cut-and-collect regime opens the sward, the forb component is expected to strengthen, supporting a gradual transition toward g4c Other Neutral Grassland over time. This field holds potential for long-term ecological enhancement.



*Figure 6: Field Pansy found in newly created species*

## Purple ramping fumitory

Kindling Farm



A botanical walkover of the site was carried out for the newly created wetland, pond areas and ploughed section of field 4 in July 2025. The pond and wetland areas are still in early stages of developing, so mostly consisted of bare ground and young plants. No notable plants were seen in these areas.

The ploughed area of the field displayed a considerable diversity of arable plants including the target species purple ramping fumitory Fumaria purpurea that appeared as a result of the work carried out during the project. This species has likely been lying dormant within the seedbank and has reemerged following targeted ploughing.

## Breeding birds

Kiln Farm

The breeding bird species assemblage recorded in 2025 was broadly similar to that recorded during the 2024 surveys, with both years supporting a range of common farmland and boundary-associated species including Wren, Chaffinch, Robin, Dunnock, Blue Tit and Woodpigeon. Of the project's target species, Skylark was recorded during both the 2024 baseline surveys and the 2025 breeding bird surveys, indicating continued use of the site. Other target species: Grey Partridge, Corn Bunting and Reed Bunting were recorded during the 2024 surveys but were not recorded in 2025, while and Tree Sparrow were not recorded in either survey year. New hedgerows were planted during winter 2024,

and meadow enhancement works were completed in August 2025, following the 2025 breeding bird survey period; therefore, the 2025 results reflect an early stage of habitat establishment. The

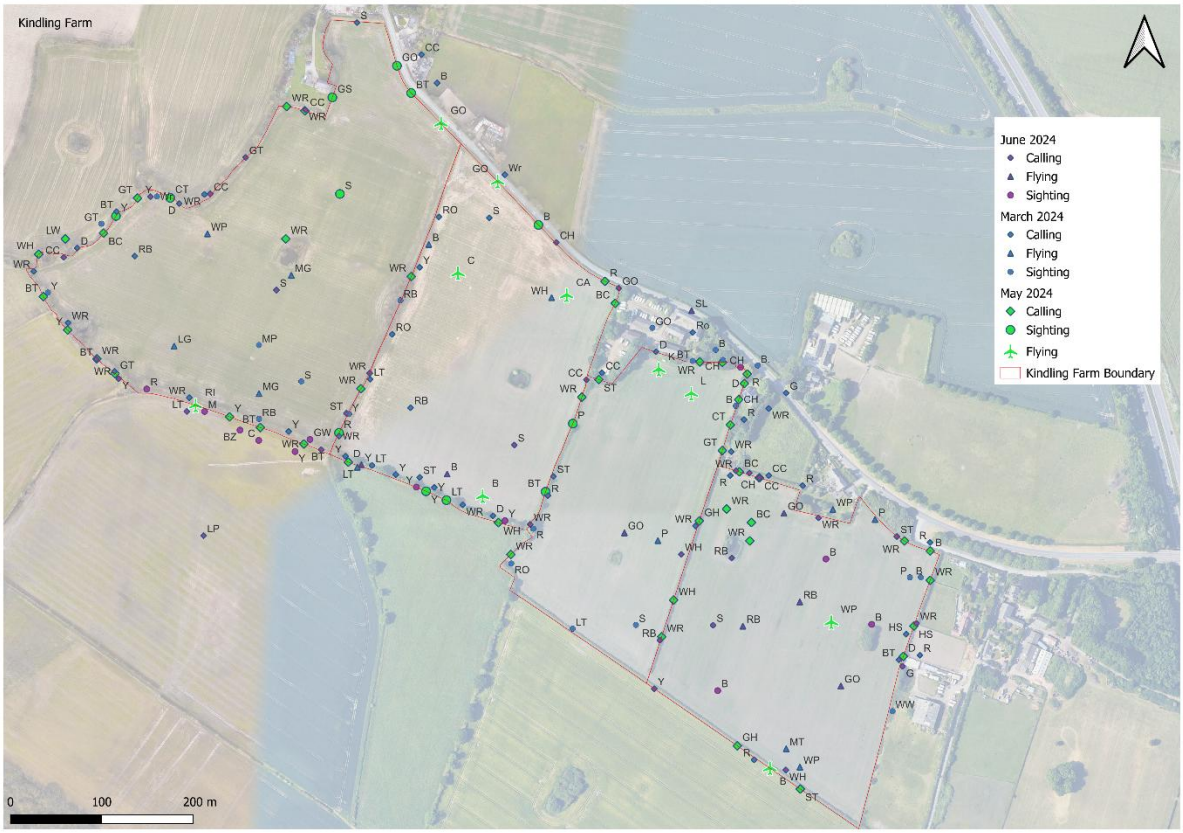



*Map 2. Kiln Farm - Breeding Bird Survey 2024*

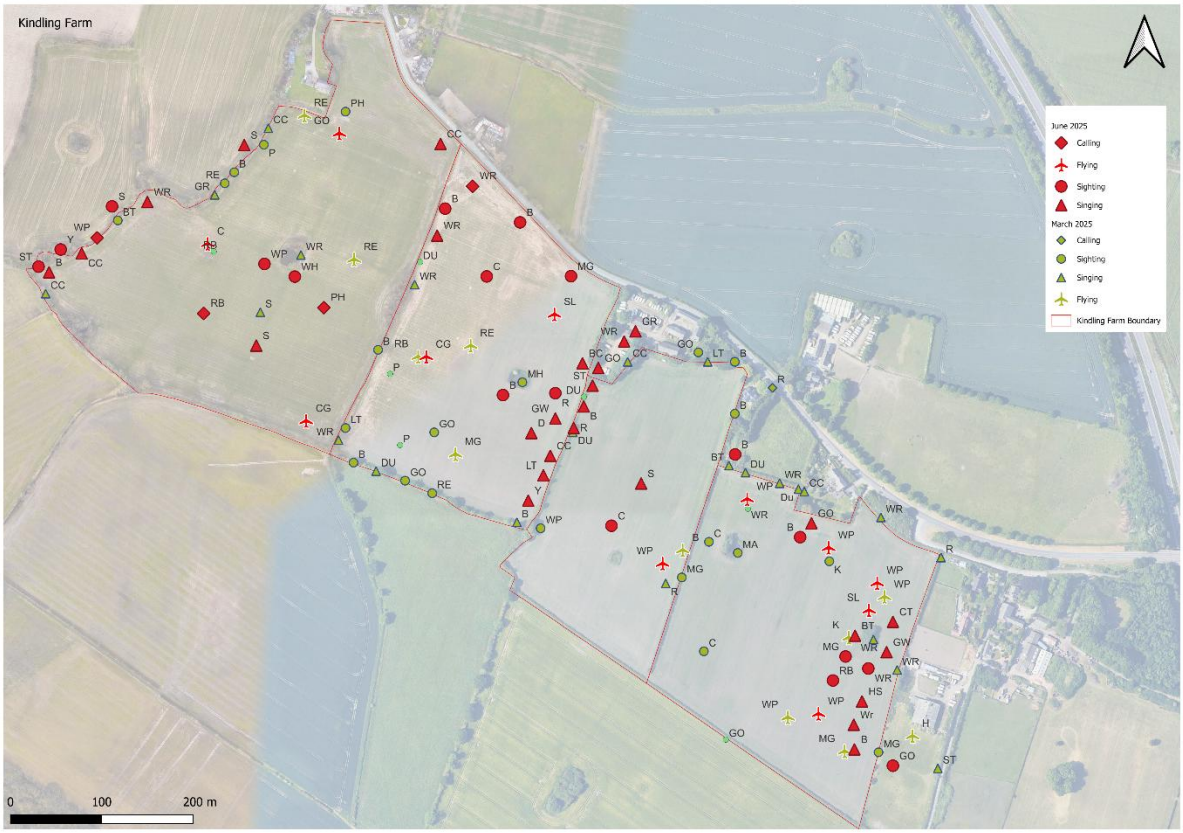
absence of some target species in 2025 does not necessarily indicate a decline or loss of habitat suitability, as annual variation in bird distribution, detectability and breeding behaviour, together with the early establishment stage of newly created habitats, can influence survey results. The ecological benefits of the habitat creation works are expected to become more apparent through continued monitoring as habitats mature.

Kindling Farm

Breeding bird surveys at Kindling Farm recorded a diverse assemblage of bird species in both 2024 and 2025. During the 2024 baseline surveys, several target species were recorded, including Skylark, Reed Bunting, Grey Partridge and Lapwing, alongside good numbers of Yellowhammer. The 2025 surveys recorded continued presence of key target species, with Grey Partridge, Reed Bunting, Skylark and Yellowhammer all recorded, while Lapwing was not recorded during the 2025 survey period. Hedgerow planting was undertaken in 2024, with wetland habitat creation and arable wildflower area created in 2025. Although these habitats are at an early stage of establishment, they are expected to provide increased foraging resources over time. As the hedgerows mature, they are likely to support farmland passerines while the arable wildflower area is expected to benefit seed- and invertebrate-feeding species. The wetland area has the potential to support wetland and marginal species such as Snipe, Lapwing, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and wintering wildfowl, subject to ongoing management and hydrological conditions. Continued monitoring will be required to assess bird responses as these habitats become fully established.




*Map 4: Kindling Farm - Breeding Bird Survey 2024*

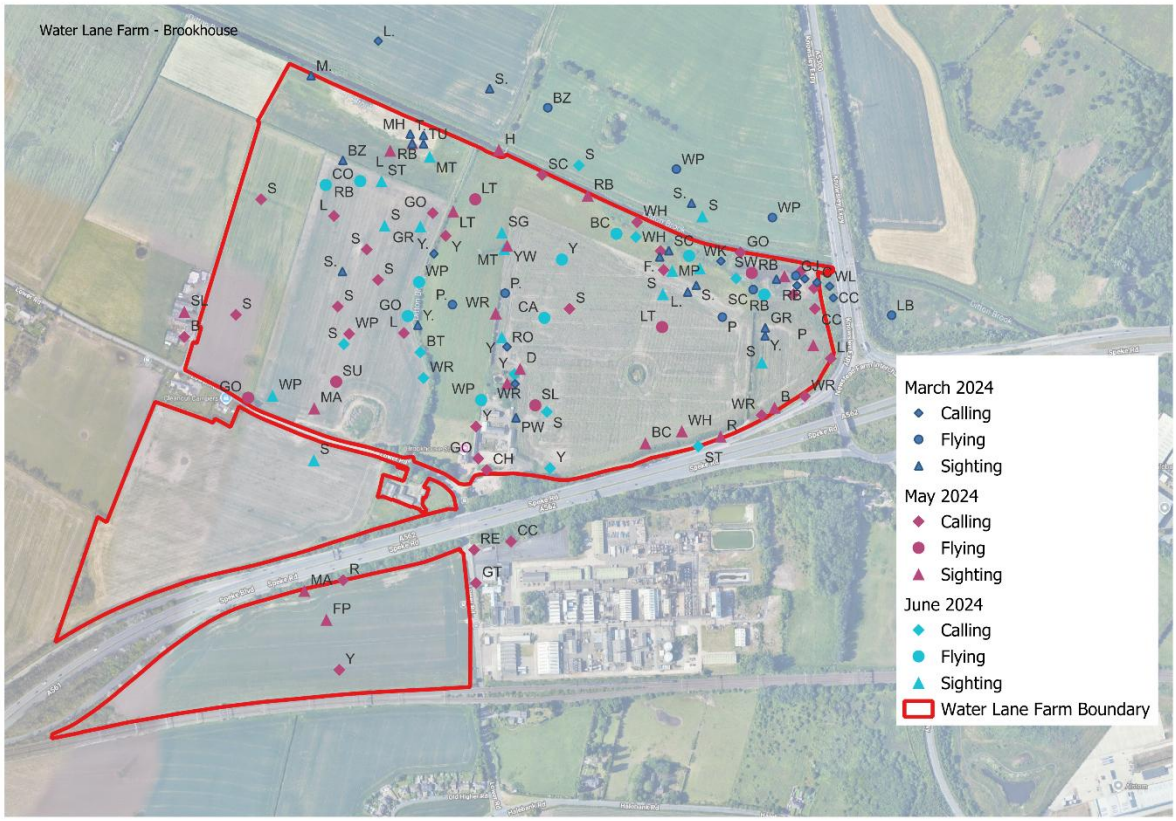



*Map 5: Kindling Farm - Breeding Bird Survey 2025*

Water Lane Farm

Breeding bird surveys at Water Lane Farm recorded a broad range of farmland bird species during both the 2024 and 2025 survey periods. During the 2024 surveys, target species including Skylark, Lapwing, Grey Partridge, Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer were recorded. Notably, a pair of Grey Partridge with chicks was observed, providing evidence of successful breeding at the site. The 2025 surveys recorded continued presence of key target species, with Skylark, Lapwing, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Corn Bunting all recorded. During 2026 brown hare survey, a pair of yellow hammer were also observed perched within trees adjacent the enhanced pond at Brookhouse.

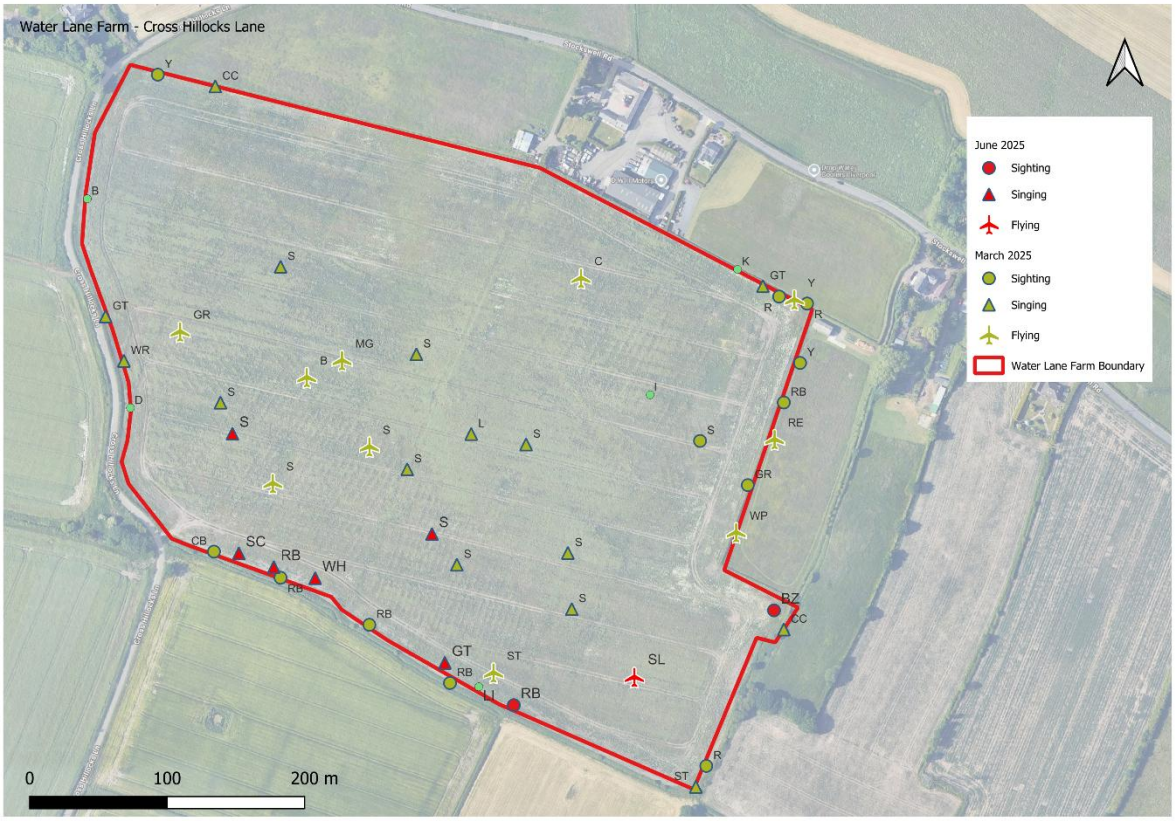
In addition, Sedge Warbler and Stonechat were recorded in 2025. Hedgerow planting was undertaken in 2025 and, while these features are at an early stage of establishment, they are expected to provide increased nesting opportunities, shelter and food resources for a range of farmland bird species as they mature. Continued monitoring will help to assess changes in species composition and habitat use as the newly planted hedgerows become established.




*Map 6: Water Lane Farm, Brookhouse - Breeding Birds Survey 2024*



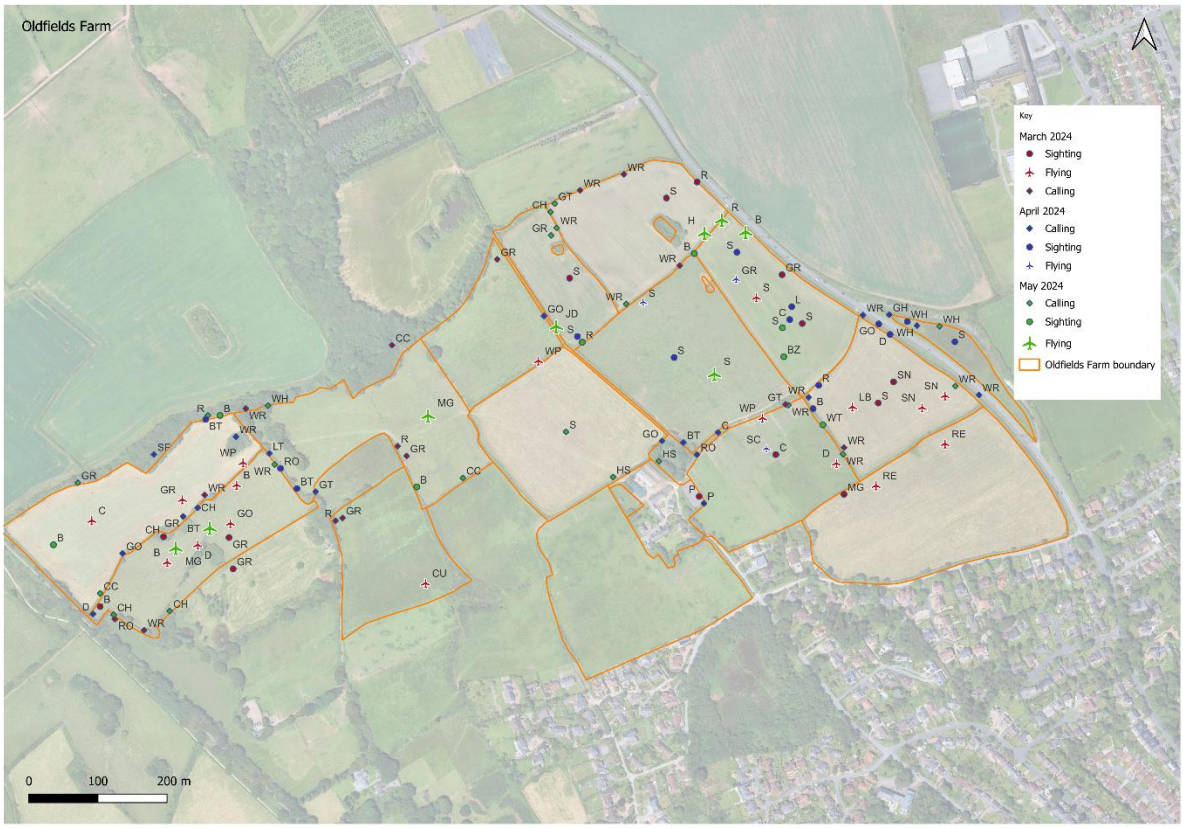

*Map 7: Water Lane Farm, Brookhouse - Breeding Bird Survey 2025*



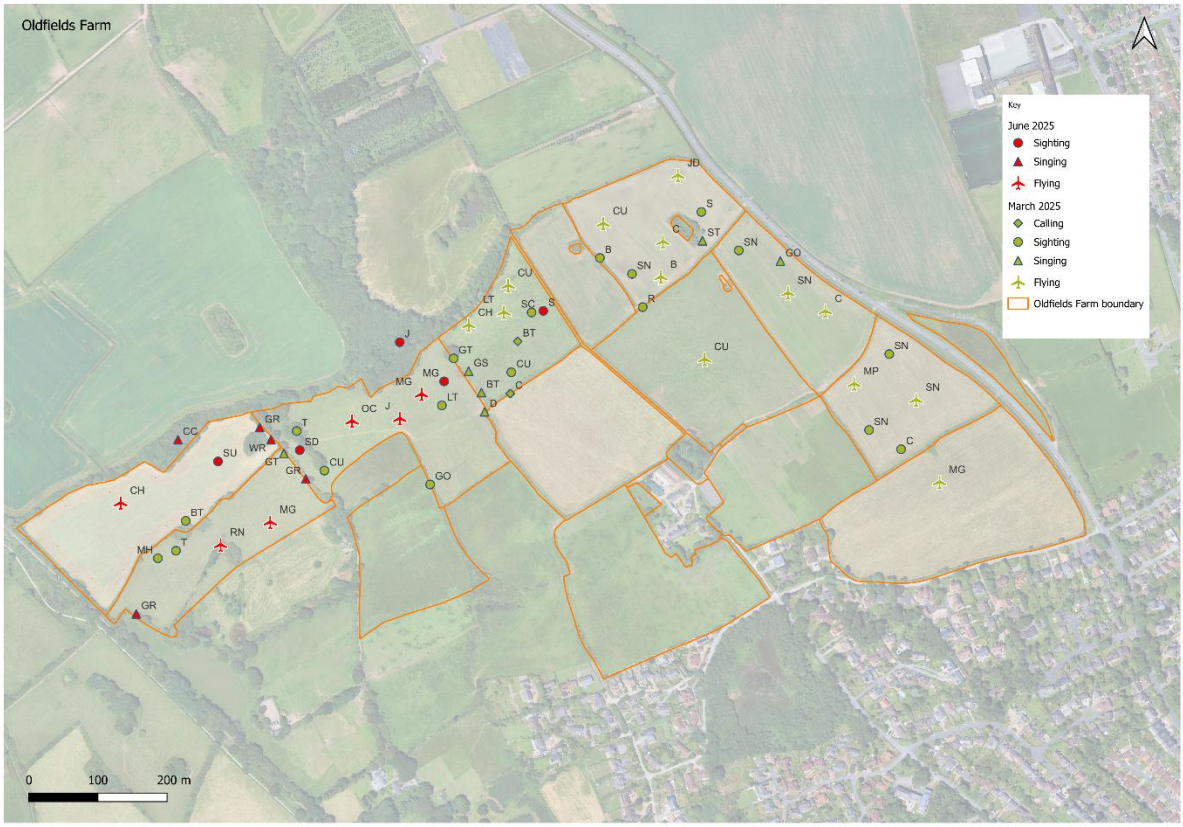

*Map 8: Water Lane Farm, Cross Hillocks - Breeding Bird Survey 2025*

Oldfields Farm

Breeding bird surveys at Oldfields Farm recorded a range of farmland and wetland-associated bird species during the 2024 and 2025 survey periods. During the 2024 baseline surveys, target species including Grey Partridge, Lapwing and Skylark were recorded across the farm. In the 2025 surveys, Skylark continued to be recorded, while Lapwing and Grey Partridge were not recorded during the survey visits; however, this does not necessarily indicate that these species no longer use the farm, as their detectability can vary between survey years and visits. In addition to the target species, wetland-associated species including Teal and Snipe were recorded, along with a number of finch species such as Goldfinch, Chaffinch and Greenfinch, indicating use of a variety of habitats across the site. A new hedgerow was planted during winter 2025, linking the existing hedgerow network on the farm with adjacent woodland habitat. Once established, this hedgerow is expected to enhance habitat connectivity and provide additional nesting, shelter and foraging opportunities for farmland and woodland-edge bird species. Continued monitoring will help to assess changes in bird use of the site as the new hedgerow matures.




*Map 99: Oldfields Farm - Breeding Bird Survey 2024*

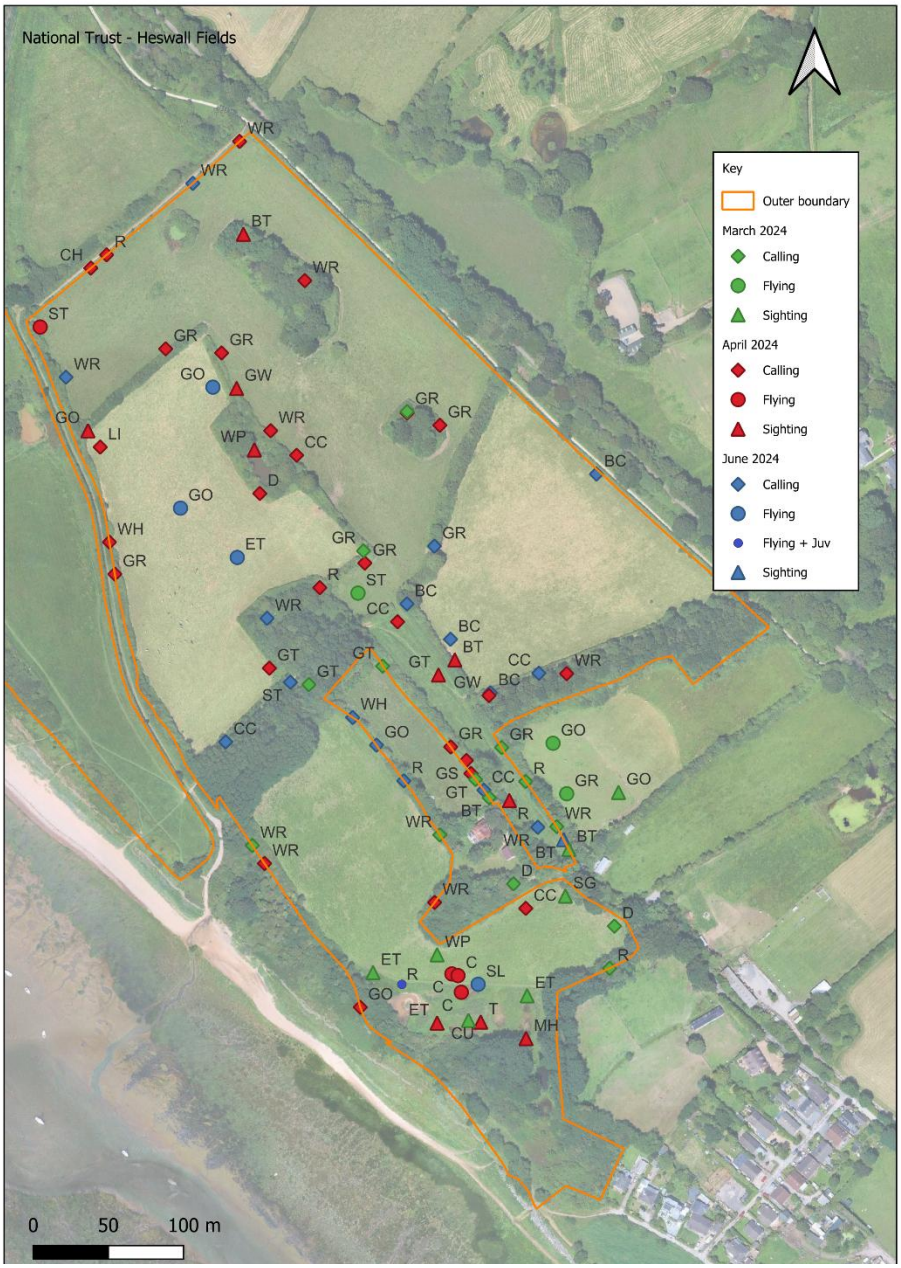



*Map 10: Oldfields Farm - Breeding Bird Survey 2025*

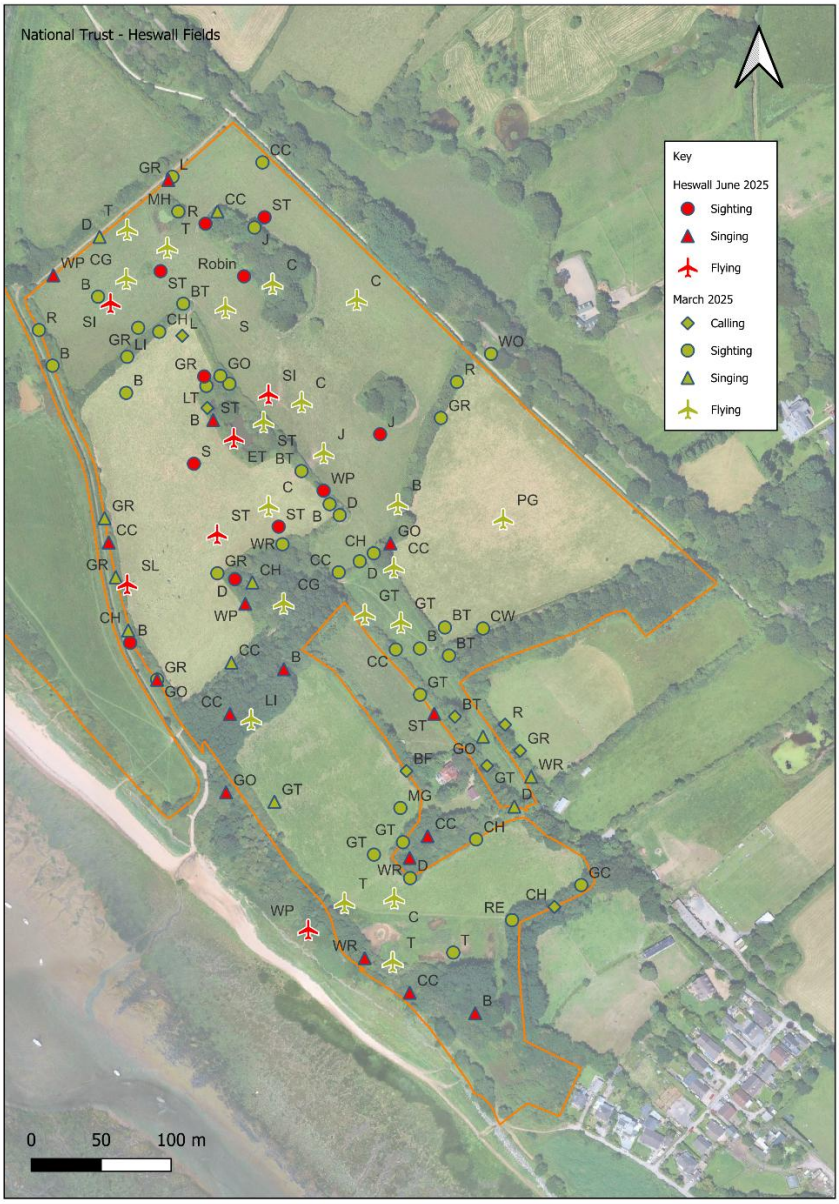
Heswall Fields National Trust

Breeding bird surveys at Heswall Fields NT recorded differences in the presence of target species between the 2024 and 2025 survey periods. No project target species were recorded during the 2024 baseline surveys, although the habitats present were considered suitable for some target species, including Tree Sparrow. Given the site's proximity to the Dee Estuary, the area is likely to be of greater importance for overwintering birds than for breeding species.

In the 2025 breeding bird surveys, Lapwing and Skylark were recorded; however, their presence is considered likely to reflect annual variation in bird distribution rather than a clear change in site usage. In addition, Teal and Little Egret were recorded, with Teal observed using the newly created wet slacks. These findings indicate use of the site by wetland-associated species and highlight the value of the newly created wet habitats. Continued monitoring will be required to determine longer-term trends in bird use of the site.




*Map 10: Heswall Fields - Breeding Birds 2024*




*Map 11: Heswall Fields - Breeding Birds Survey 2025*

## Winter Bird Surveys

Kiln Farm

Winter bird surveys at Kiln Farm recorded use of the site by a range of overwintering bird species, including several of conservation interest. During the 2024/25 winter period, a single pair of Reed Bunting, a project target species, was recorded, and Snipe, an Amber-listed species, were recorded roosting on wet grassland in the western field, with a peak count of 36 individuals in December 2024. A mixed flock of approximately 150 Goldfinch and Chaffinch was also recorded foraging in a field adjacent to the site in October 2024.

The 2026 survey recorded continued use of the site by farmland and hedgerow-associated species, with target species Reed Bunting and Grey Partridge recorded. Additional species included Redwing,

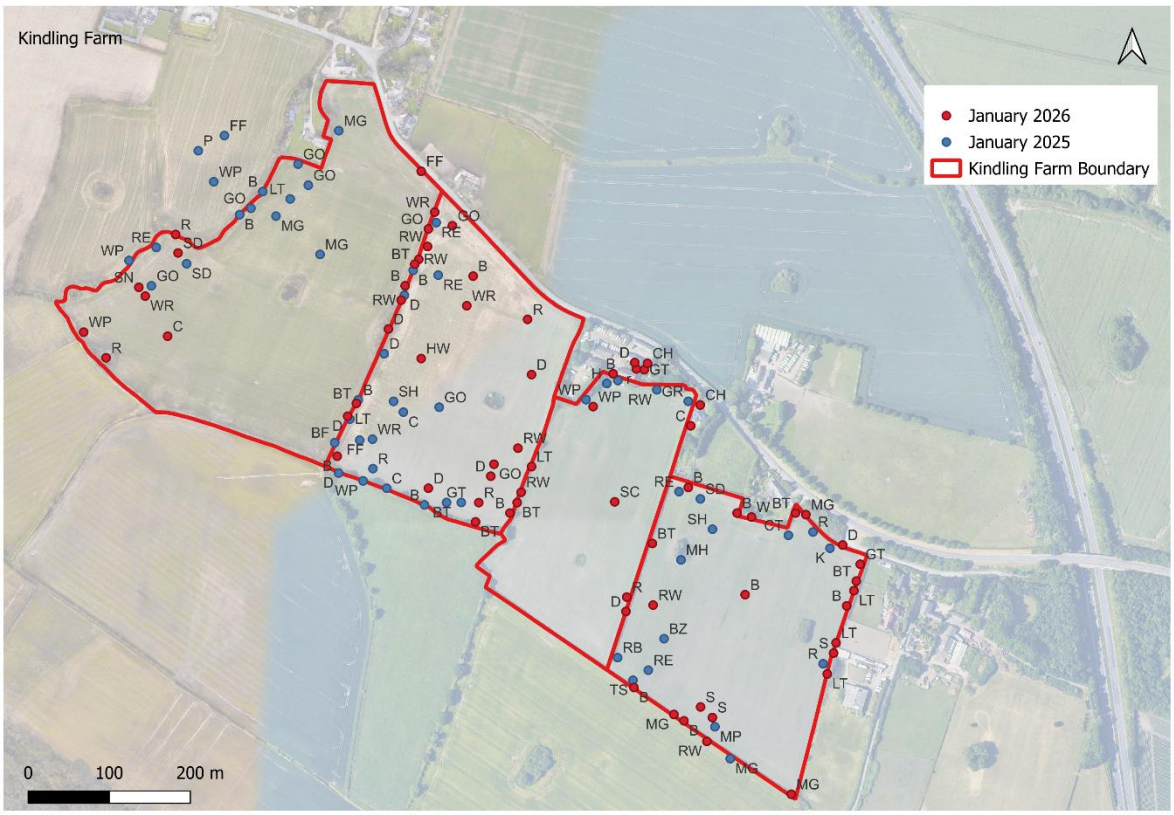
Long-tailed Tit, Goldfinch and several House Sparrows within established hedgerows, highlight the importance of these features for winter shelter and foraging. Snipe were not recorded in the western field during the 2026 survey, coinciding with recent mowing of this area; it is also possible that individuals had moved to nearby suitable habitats, including Lunt Meadows, a Lancashire Wildlife Trust site located in close proximity to the farm.




*Map 12: Kiln Farm - Winter Bird Surveys*

Kindling Farm

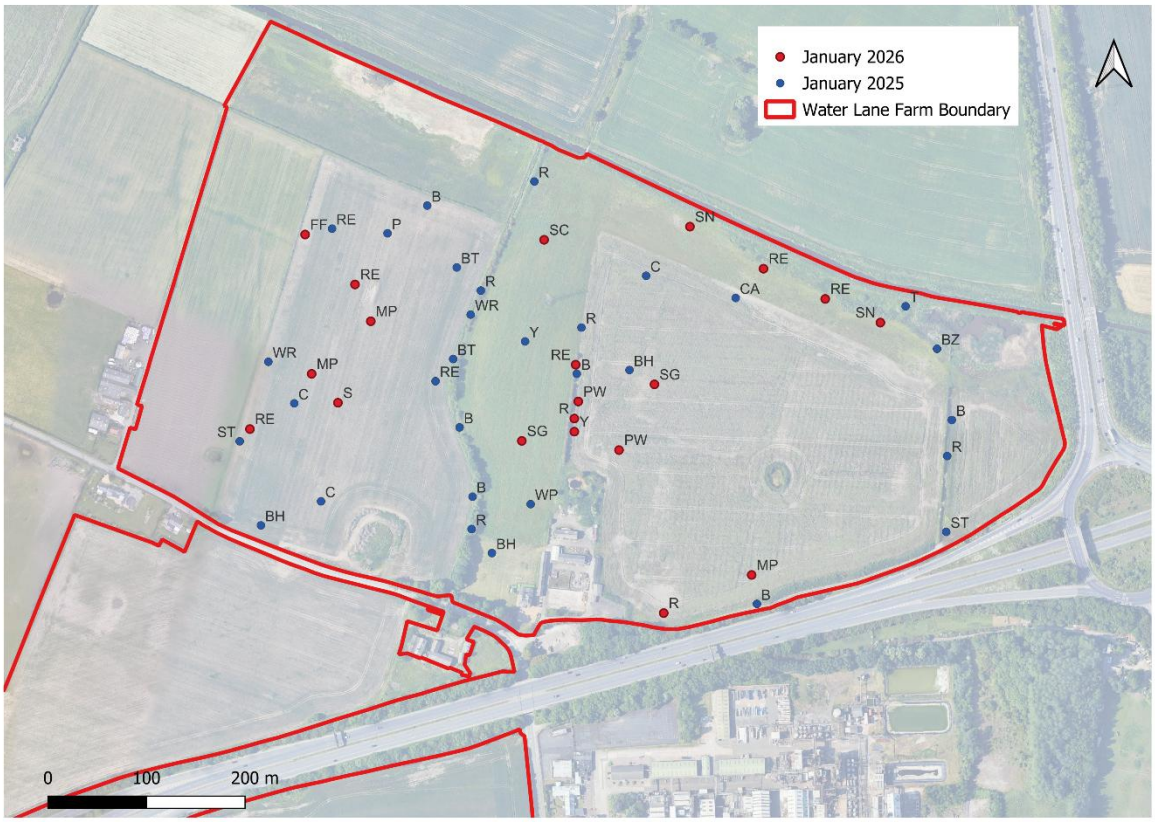
Winter bird surveys at Kindling recorded a diverse assemblage of bird species across the survey area. Species recorded included Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus), a UK Amber-listed species, along with Redwing (Turdus iliacus) and Fieldfare (Turdus pilaris), both Amber-listed winter migrants. Reed Warbler (Acrocephalus scirpaceus), a species associated with wetland and marginal vegetation, and Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis) were also recorded. During the January 2026 survey, Snipe (Gallinago gallinago), an Amber-listed species, were recorded using the newly created wetland area, indicating use of the habitat by wetland birds following its creation.



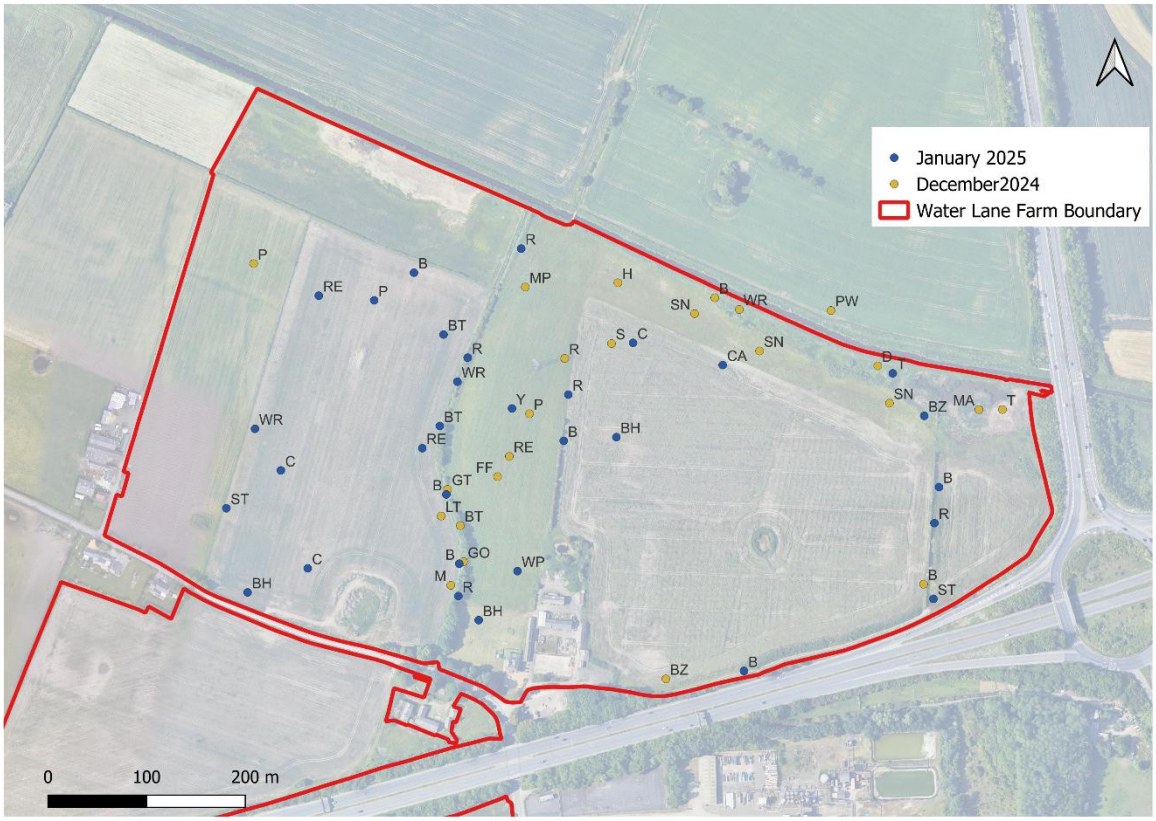

*Map 13: Kindling Farm- Winter Bird Surveys*

Water Lane Farm

The January 2025 survey recorded Teal (Anas crecca), an Amber-listed species in the UK, within the reed bed area at Brookhouse, while the December 2025 survey noted several Snipe (Gallinago gallinago), also Amber-listed, using the same area. Snipe were again recorded during the January 2026 survey, indicating ongoing use of the habitat across survey years. In both survey periods, Redwing (Turdus iliacus) and Fieldfare (Turdus pilaris), both Amber-listed winter migrants, were recorded, along with Yellowhammer (Emberiza citrinella), a Red-listed farmland bird species of high conservation concern and a target species for the project. No specific wetland enhancement works were undertaken at this location, and it is noted that the area has also begun to be used intermittently as a temporary paddock for horses, representing a change in land use since the initial surveys. New species-rich hedgerows were planted as part of the project; while these remain at an early stage of establishment, they are expected to provide increasing foraging and nesting opportunities over time, particularly for Yellowhammer.




*Map 15: Water Lane arm, Brookhouse - Winter Bird Surveys*




*Map 14: Water Lane Farm, Cross Hillocks - Winter Bird Surveys*

Heswall Fields

A winter bird survey undertaken in January 2025 recorded 2 Curlew (Numenius arquata) and a Hen Harrier (Circus cyaneus) in proximity to the newly created scrapes. Both species are of high conservation importance, with Curlew listed as Red-listed in the UK due to significant population declines, and Hen Harrier also Red-listed and included on Annex I of the Birds Directive. A subsequent winter survey in January 2026 indicated increased use of the wet scrapes by wetland birds, with 13 Teal (Anas crecca), an Amber-listed species in the UK, recorded in or immediately adjacent to the scrapes. Little Egret (Egretta garzetta) was also recorded using the wet scrape area which is not unexpected as a known roost site lies within woodland on the farm. These findings suggest that, within a relatively short period following creation, the wet scrapes are providing suitable habitat for a range of wintering and foraging bird species, including those of elevated conservation concern.




*Map 16: Heswall Fields - Winter Bird Surveys*

## Discussion and Conclusions

The first year of monitoring shows that the habitats created and enhanced through the project are establishing as expected, with early signs of use by several target species. These results represent the initial habitat establishment phase of the species recovery curve, where ecological improvements begin to influence species presence and behaviour, but population-level change is not yet anticipated.

Brown hare activity remained stable or increased at Kiln, Water Lane and Kindling Farms, reflecting early benefits of hedgerow creation and the development of tussocky margins. Farmland bird surveys recorded continued presence of key target species, including skylark, yellowhammer, grey partridge and reed bunting, indicating that habitat suitability is at least being maintained as new features mature. Wintering birds showed particularly positive responses to wetland creation and scrape establishment, with species such as teal, snipe and little egret making early use of these new resources. Meadow restoration at Kiln Farm is progressing well, with increasing forb diversity showing a clear trajectory towards species-rich neutral grassland. The appearance of purple ramping fumitory at Kindling Farm demonstrates that the cultivated strip is supporting its intended arable plant community.

Water vole presence at Kiln Farm remains confirmed, and mink raft monitoring indicates no evidence of American mink, supporting stable conditions for this species. Volunteer-supported camera trap monitoring continues to provide valuable data on species use across habitats.

The patterns observed this year align closely with the expected early stages of the species recovery curve, which describes the typical progression from habitat establishment to measurable improvements in species abundance and resilience. During the first 1–2 years, most ecological change is driven by habitat development such as, vegetation structure, hydrology, shelter and food resources begin to stabilise and improve, but species responses are generally behavioural or distributional rather than demographic.

The results from all farms reflect this pattern. Target species continue to use enhanced areas, with some showing increased activity or new use of habitats.

For brown hare, stable or increased activity at Kiln, Water Lane and Kindling Farms indicates that new hedgerows and associated grass margins are already providing the additional cover and connectivity these animals rely on.

For farmland birds, key target species such as skylark, yellowhammer, grey partridge and reed bunting remained present across farms, suggesting that habitat suitability has been maintained as new features bed in. Early use of new wet features by wintering species including teal, snipe and little egret shows that scrapes and wetlands are providing immediate functional benefit.

For purple ramping fumitory, the appearance of the species at Kindling Farm demonstrates that the cultivated margin is supporting the intended arable plant assemblage, continuous disturbance of the area by ploughing will allow the fumitory to flourish.

For water vole, continued presence at Kiln Farm and the absence of mink activity provide a stable foundation for long-term recovery, with habitat enhancements at Kindling Farm expected to strengthen future connectivity.

Taken together, these results show that the project is on an upward trajectory through the species recovery curve: habitats are performing as intended, and target species are already using them. Over

the next four years, maturing vegetation and stabilised hydrology should support more measurable changes in abundance, territory formation and breeding success.

Overall, the first year of monitoring demonstrates encouraging early outcomes. Habitats delivered through the project are functioning ecologically, target species are present and responding, and no declines in habitat suitability have been detected. These findings indicate that the project has successfully laid the foundations for long-term species recovery. Continued annual monitoring will be essential to track progress along the species recovery curve and assess whether these early positive signals translate into measurable population-level gains.

## Appendix 1

Kiln Farm - Botanical survey results

| Common Name | Scientific Name | DAFOR |
|---|---|---|
| **Yorkshire Fog** | Holcus lanatus | A |
| **Common Vetch** | Vicia sativa | F |
| **Perneial Rye Grass** | | |
| **Creeping Thistle** | | R |
| **Sweet Vernal Grass** | Anthoxanthum odoratum | F |
| **Ribwort Plantain** | | A |
| **Crested Dogs tail** | | O |
| **Smooth Tare** | Vicia tetrasperma | F |
| **Creeping Buttercup** | | A |
| **Rough Meadw Grass** | | F |
| **Timothy Grass** | Phleum pratense | A |
| **White Clover** | Trifolium repens | F |
| **Rough Hawkbit** | Leontodon hispidus | O |
| **Scentd Mayweed** | | O |
| **Hoary Willowherb** | Epilobium sp. | R |
| **Mouse Ear** | Cerastium sp. | O |
| **Compact Rush** | | O |
| **Lesser Hop Trefoill** | | O |

## Appendix 2

Kiln Farm maintenance plan

| Table 6: Proposed maintenance of habitat interventions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Habitat | Management activity | Frequency | Links to SFI options |
| Hedgerow | Remove guards | Year 2-3 | |
| Hedgerow | Formative pruning | Winter of year 1 (2025) | CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK |
| Hedgerow | Regular cutting | Every 2 -3 years, starting in year 3 (2027) | CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK |
| Enhanced grassland | Twice annual meadow cuts with clippings removed | Twice annual, once in March – April, once in late summer after flowers have set seed) | GRH6: Manage priority habitat species-rich grassland |

Kindling Farm maintenance plan

| Table 6: Proposed maintenance of habitat interventions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Habitat** | **Management activity** | **Frequency** | **Links to SFI options** |
| **Hedgerow** | Remove guards | Year 2-3 | |
| **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 |
| **Hedgerow (hazel)** | Coppicing | Beyond year 5 | CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK |
| **Arable field margins and wetland** | Twice annual meadow cuts with clippings removed | Twice annually, once in March – April, once in late summer after flowers have set seed) | CLIG3: Manage grassland with very low nutrient inputs - GOV.UK |
| **Brook** | Cutting back bramble and willow | Every 2 years | n/a |
| **Wetland** | Cut collect | Twice annually, once in March – April, once in late summer after flowers have set seed) | CLIG3: Manage grassland with very low nutrient inputs - GOV.UK |

Water Lane Farm maintenance plan

| Table 6: Proposed maintenance of habitat interventions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Habitat** | **Management activity** | **Frequency** | **Links to SFI options** |
| **Hedgerow** | Remove guards | Year 2-3 | |
| **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 |

Oldfields Farm maintenance plan

| Table 5: Proposed maintenance of habitat interventions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Habitat** | **Management activity** | **Frequency** | **Links to SFI options** |
| **Hedgerow** | Remove guards | Year 2-3 | |
| **Hedgerow** | Formative pruning | Winter of year 1 (2025) | CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK |
| **Hedgerow** | Regular cutting | Every 2 -3 years, starting in year 3 (2027) | CHRW2: Manage hedgerows - GOV.UK |

Heswall Fields National Trust maintenance plan

| 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 |