

Liverpool City Region Ecological Network

Nature Improvement Area focus area

NIA Focus Area 14: Dee Estuary

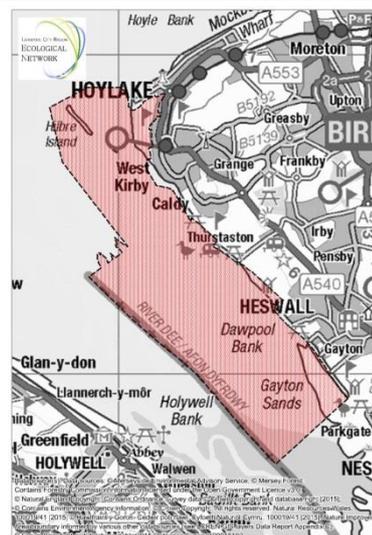
District(s): Wirral

Area 3,911 hectares

Ecological priorities are:

Habitat creation

- There are limited opportunities for habitat creation. Habitats are subject to natural change.



Habitat management

The biggest priority for the Focus Area is management of the designated sites, especially where it will ensure the resilience of the sites to natural and climate change.

Existing ecological features:

1. There are 3,893ha of existing habitat.
2. Core Biodiversity Area: 3 International designated sites; 3 SSSIs; 1 LNR; 5 Local Sites; together with coastal and wetland Priority Habitats
3. Linear features: River; and disused railway.
4. Species: The Focus Area contains a large number of important species, mainly breeding, passage and over-wintering birds, also including natterjack toad and lamprey.



Hilbre Island www.cheshirelife.co.uk

Focus area description:

The Focus Area is drawn around the designated sites and includes the mud- and sand-flats of the outer estuary, the salt marshes of the west Wirral coast, the sand dunes at Red Rocks, Hilbre Island and clay boulder cliffs. The area is already heavily protected through legislation and provides a significant contribution towards the City Region's natural assets and green infrastructure. It is one of the largest areas of continuous wildlife habitat and public recreational space in the City Region.

Through coastal processes, accretion is taking place and saltmarsh is developing on the Wirral shoreline. The estuary also contains the only natural hard rock coastal habitat (Hilbre Island) in a stretch between Llandudno and St Bees, Cumbria. Several wading bird species also make extensive use of the coastal grazing marshes and fields adjoining the estuary for feeding, roosting and breeding.

The area is popular with recreational craft and there are a number of mooring points along the coastline. The Estuary is also an important cockle fishery. This is regulated by the Natural Resources Wales.

There are limited opportunities for habitat creation given the site's tight boundary with the urban areas. There are some areas of arable land along the coast, including at Thurstaston, which have functional links with the Estuary due to feeding waders.

Ecological opportunities**Habitat creation:**

Due to the nature of the Estuary and the development along the foreshore, there are limited opportunities to create additional habitat. The Estuary has naturally had an increase in the area of saltmarsh primarily along the Wirral shoreline.

Habitat management priorities:

- Nearly all of the Focus Area is covered by site designations that include nature conservation objectives i.e. SAC, SPA, Ramsar. Management of the internationally designated sites is carried out with from Natural England in line with advice provided under Regulation 35 of the Habitats Regulations.
- There is limited work that can be done to enhance the intertidal sand- and mud-flats apart from ensuring they are protected and damaging practises are limited. Management effort should be focused in the dune areas around Red Rocks, which is in poor condition (Natural England, 2011/12). The habitats are migrating seawards and management should enable the natural progression of this. Management is also required to control the invasive species, Japanese rose.
- The saltmarshes are split into two parts. The old established saltmarsh has had traditional management of grazing by sheep and cattle. This is essential to maintain the existing agri-business as well as the vegetation structure. The new saltmarshes that have established have not been subject to grazing and are a different type of saltmarsh. These areas should be encouraged to develop naturally and accommodate existing recreational activities.
- Improvements in visitor facilities, including access routes, would benefit habitats and species by reducing trampling and disturbance. Economic aspirations and the ageing population have the potential to increase the pressure on the Dee Estuary visitor facilities.

Increased management of the Visitor Economy in the Dee Estuary would provide opportunities to ensure the environment of the Estuary is resilient to increases in recreational activity.

- The sandflats, especially around West Kirby, are heavily used for recreational purposes. This is an important facility for the local population and visitors from outside the City Region. The majority of this area is under the ownership and management of Wirral Council. Zoning is in place to balance and maintain recreational and ecological interest. Resources could be used to establish a Beach Management Plan.
- The Dee Estuary Voluntary Wardens, a voluntary group supported by Wirral Council, monitor and help to manage bird disturbance at West Kirby during the winter months.

Ecosystem Services Benefits

The Dee Estuary is a prime draw for ecotourism within the City Region, a significant recreational facility and provides a distinctive sense of place for residents within the wider area. The biggest benefit from the identified ecological opportunities is through managing, maintaining and enhancing the existing designated sites. This should ensure that the Area continues to provide the ecological benefits and enhances them where needed. The maintenance of the Focus Area should continue to provide benefits for climate change mitigation, tourism, recreation and leisure, quality of place and health and wellbeing to the local and wider population.

Management activities would benefit ecological features but could also extend the benefits this area provides to economic growth and resilience. The Wirral Coastal Path allows visitors to circumnavigate the Wirral Peninsular. The improvement of visitor facilities would enhance the Coastal Path as a recreation facility and help the visitor economy. These could include the provision of facilities such as paths, toilets and cafes in areas where they are currently lacking. This could reduce visitor pressure in certain locations and would strengthen the whole coast's attraction for visitors. Wirral Council's coastal ranger service, with bases at Thurstaston and Hilbre, increases the educational attraction of the Estuary and provides a beneficial resource for schools, colleges and universities.

Focus Area support to wider priorities and strategies

Local Plans – The local authorities in the City Region have worked together to prepare the LCR Ecological Network as a joint evidence base and to help plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale in line with the National Planning Policy Framework. Discussions with neighbouring areas through Nature Connected, the Government-recognised Local Nature Partnership, have enabled wider connections beyond the city region to be made. In line with paragraph 117 of the National Planning Policy Framework, the LCR Ecological Network includes a Core Biodiversity Area of designated nature and geological sites and Priority Habitats, linking networks and strategic priorities for habitat creation or enhancement. This is one of seventeen Nature Improvement Area Focus Areas which together make up the LCR Nature Improvement Area. Although not a Proposals Map designation, further refinement of NIA boundaries and land uses may occur as part of each district's Local Plan processes.

Flood Catchment Management Plans/Wirral Coastal Strategy – the flooding and coastal erosion measures vary along the Wirral coastline. The ecological opportunities are in line with the identified measures and could help deliver coastal protection by working with natural processes to enable development of saltmarsh that reduces coastal erosion and flooding and spend on hard coastal defences (construction and maintenance).

River Basin Management Plans (Water Framework Directive) – The designated sites are impacted by water quality from the River Dee and some management practices. The ecological opportunities of managing the sites would support them to be more resilient and to remove some of the limiting factors.

National Character Areas –the ecological opportunities are in line with the five ‘Statements of Environmental Opportunity’ identified in the Wirral NCA 59 profile. Delivery of the Focus Area ecological opportunities could strengthen landscape resilience and adaptation to climate change. This would help the Character Area achieve sustainable growth and a more secure environmental future.

Countryside Stewardship scheme – The scheme could support land managers in the delivery of multiple public benefits. Overall, biodiversity should be the priority for the scheme but synergies also exist to maximise opportunities to deliver biodiversity, water quality and flooding benefits. The scheme could also contribute towards the delivery of our water quality objectives.

Nature Connected and Cheshire LNP – implementation the Focus Area’s ecological opportunities will work towards the LCR LNP’s Key Action D and will also support the delivery of its other Key Actions. They would also contribute to the ‘living landscape’ proposals of Cheshire LNP.

LCR LEP – the ecological opportunities could help support the LEP’s Priorities for Visitor Economy, such as at Hilbre Island. The Focus Area could also help to support the LEP’s priority for the Knowledge Economy and Skills by enhancing and inspiring learning for school and higher education students, including work placements/training in the natural environment.

Atlantic Gateway – the NIA ecological opportunities fit with the investment opportunities of infrastructure through flood control and sustainability.