

Supporting Evidence G

ESBG NP Nature Recovery Report

Ecchinswell, Sydmonton & Bishops Green Neighbourhood Plan



Ecchinswell Stream, near the pumping station

Nature Recovery Overview Report

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1. Introduction

1.1. This report has been prepared to support the submission of the Ecchinswell, Sydmonton and Bishop's Green (ES & BG) Neighbourhood Plan. The report assesses the work needed to develop a viable Nature Recovery for the Parish. Furthermore, it goes on to look at some of the potential for nature recovery based on the natural resources and Green Infrastructure identified within ES&BG, including a brief review of the kind of projects that might be considered.

1.2. It should be emphasised that this report does not constitute a Nature Recovery Plan and should not be read as such. A detailed reading of the suggested architecture and scope for Nature Recovery Plans makes it plain that significant ground preparation up-front is essential for achieving a plan that is transformative, whilst remaining realistic and sustainable. In particular, it is necessary to energise a sufficiently broad base in the community to ensure effective levels both of commitment and resource to carry out the work. Such groundwork has not been carried out for ES&BG at this point and it is considered unrealistic to attempt it alongside the significant efforts being made to generate the Neighbourhood Plan itself. However, this report should provide a basis for launching the process to develop a Nature Recovery Plan at an appropriate time.

2. Nature Recovery Policies

2.1. National Legislation

2.1.1 The Nature Recovery Network (NRN) is a major element of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan ("A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment" (2018)). This recognises that in order for nature to truly thrive, it is not sufficient simply to protect wildlife-rich areas as nature reserves, but these must form the core of a wider interconnected national network stretching from the countryside into the cities. As well as improving opportunities for wildlife, it is expected that such a network will deliver additional benefits such as reducing flood risk, increasing carbon uptake, improving soil quality and providing cleaner water and air.

2.1.2. As part of the forthcoming Environment Bill, Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) will need to be established. Developed at county level, it is intended that LNRSs will collectively form the Nature Recovery Network. These new spatial strategies for nature will map existing and potential habitat for wildlife and will agree local priorities for enhancing biodiversity.

2.2. Nature Recovery in Hampshire/Basingstoke and Deane

2.2.1. Within Hampshire, Nature Recovery is being led by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Nature Partnership (HLNP). This is a broadly-based organisation, featuring partners from nature conservation, local government, government agencies, National Park Authorities and universities amongst others. Its goal is to facilitate Nature Recovery by:

- Promoting landscape-scale working, developing and implementing exemplar approaches with multiple benefits, such as nature-based solutions, and seeking to embed nature recovery in plans and strategies
- Providing scrutiny, support and challenge for developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies, to ensure that these are truly collaborative and reflect community aspirations, creating buy-in
- Championing adaptive land management to tackle key challenges such as climate change and environmental capacity

- Seeking to influence the use of new tools and levers (such as biodiversity net gain and Environmental Land Management) to deliver the Nature Recovery Network across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight
- Articulating how land use, land management and operational change can all contribute to nature recovery, and encouraging investment in nature
- Collaborating with other Local Nature Partnerships and the South East Nature Partnership to realise shared benefits across boundaries
- Collecting, collating and co-ordinating evidence to support and facilitate delivery of the Nature Recovery Network

One key role that HLNP has supported across the county is ecological network mapping, via the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC).

2.2.2. Basingstoke & Deane’s Green Infrastructure Strategy (2018) makes use of Ecological Network Mapping provided by HLNP to define priorities for Nature Recovery within the Borough. While the priority aim is to improve ecological connectivity within the Test and Loddon valleys, connectivity zones are identified more generally for woodland, grassland and heathland across the Borough, including within ES & BG Parish.

2.2.3. Pending government’s completion of the Environment Bill, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council has yet to issue a Local Nature Recovery Strategy, though many relevant elements are captured at high level in the Green Infrastructure Strategy.

3. Nature Recovery Plan Methodology

3.1. A Nature Recovery Plan is intended as a means for generating a sustainable improvement in the local natural environment by providing more opportunities for wildlife to thrive. A number of Local Nature Partnerships have been developing strategies to deliver nature improvements in their areas. A good example is provided by Natural Cambridgeshire, whose “Local Nature Recovery Toolkit” (2020) provides a comprehensive guide covering all aspects of the methodology for use by locally-based interested groups. The top-level principles are embodied in the figure below from the Toolkit and are reasonably self-explanatory.



3.2. In more practical terms, it is recommended that the following five-step approach is adopted: -

1. Make a **simple map of wildlife habitats** in your area, 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 area?
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 bitesize pieces over an extended (say ten-year) period.
5. Develop a **plan for maintaining and monitoring these habitats** and the wildlife that lives there.

In addition to the above, there are some important caveats to be taken into account

3.3. Firstly, it is vital that time and effort is allowed to publicise the development of the plan and to get as large a part of the local community on-board (and hopefully involved) as possible at the start. This will prepare the ground when it comes suggesting ideas for projects, so that people are not taken by surprise. At the same time, involving more people means greater opportunity for creative ideas and, hopefully, more resource willing to take part in implementing those plans that get approved. It should also help with ensuring that any work completed can be enduring.

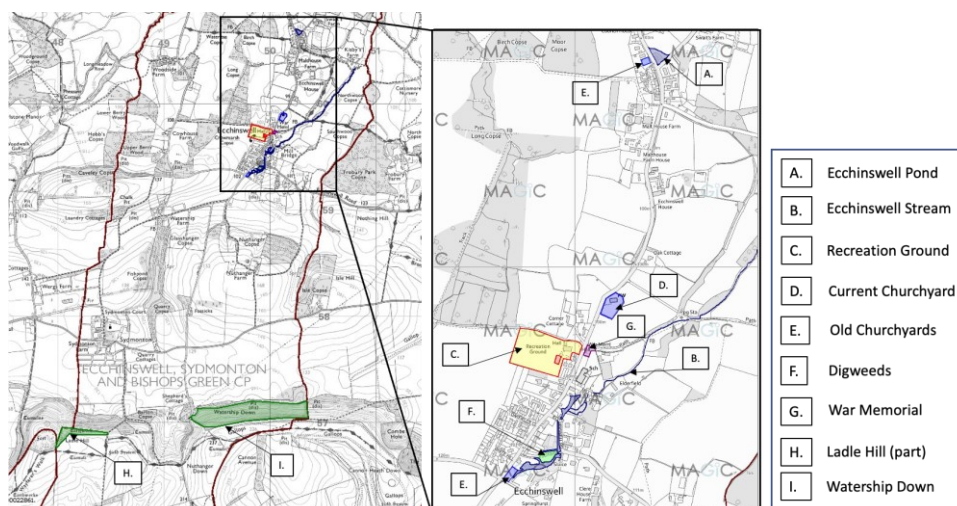
3.4. Secondly, all plans must respect the interests of landowners and must not suggest land management or land uses on specific areas of land that have not been previously discussed and agreed with the landowners. It will therefore be important to establish the ownership/management of any land being considered for a role in the plan, especially as odd neglected corners may well be prime candidates for nature recovery schemes.

3.5. Bearing these points in mind, it will probably be a good idea to develop and manage a robust communications plan for the duration.

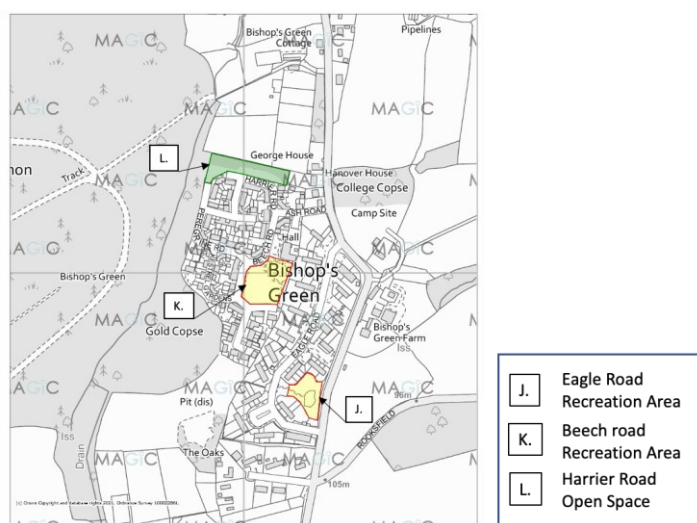
4. Ecchinswell, Sydmonton & Bishops Green – Opportunities for Nature Recovery

4.1. Without embarking on the formal development of a Nature Recovery Plan for Ecchinswell, Sydmonton & Bishop’s Green, it is still useful to consider, given the character of the parish and its existing Green Infrastructure Assets, what kind of opportunities for nature recovery might be applicable.

4.2. Previous reports supporting the ES & BG Neighbourhood Plan have explored the overall character of the Parish and identified and described the Green Infrastructure Assets that currently exist. The map below shows the GI Assets in and around Ecchinswell Village.



The next map shows the GI Assets previously identified at Bishop's Green.



4.3. For the purposes of this report, focus will be on the sites in and around the built-up centres of Ecchinswell and Bishops Green as these are areas frequented most often by residents and where engagement of the community is likely to be most fruitful, as well as most necessary. This does not mean that nature recovery projects in more remote locations such as Ladle Hill (H.) and Watership Down (I.) (or beyond) are ruled out. However, it is more likely that projects in these open country areas could be delivered via agri-environmental or forestry schemes under the remit of the relevant landowner/manager. These can still be discussed with the relevant parties and publicised to the wider community along with the other projects.

4.4. A short review was conducted to consider each of the sites A. to L. and the kinds of projects that might be proposed. A summary can be found in Annex A below. In doing so, it became clear that some projects were equally applicable to many of the sites. We will therefore these widely-applicable projects in turn, noting where they might apply. In the following section we will consider some site-specific projects. These are generally more complex, and the scope has been consciously pushed to give some idea of what could be possible, whilst realising that there are good reasons why these might not come to fruition.

4.5 It should be reiterated, however, that when a formal Nature Recovery Plan process is launched, there would be no need to restrict considerations to the sites discussed here, but could indeed take advantage of opportunities that might only become known as a part of community engagement.

5. Generic Nature Recovery Projects

5.1. Species Monitoring

5.1.1. Species monitoring or surveying is not only widely applicable, but indeed is almost the essential precursor to any other project that might be proposed. Before you can decide on what action to take, you need to know what is already there and, ideally, whether it is thriving, doing OK, or just hanging on. Also, what should be there but is missing?

5.1.2. In order to carry out species monitoring a certain level of expertise is required. It is possible that this could be available amongst the residents; alternatively, expert advice, from such as Hampshire Wildlife Trust, could lead to some training days, provision of ID sheets or simply guidance on what to focus on. Some rare species are protected by legislation and should only be surveyed by individuals holding the appropriate licence (e.g. trapping Great Crested Newts, or handling bats or Dormice).

5.1.3. Any data collected needs to be formally captured in a way that allows it to be easily referred to and added to in the future. A number of on-line tools are available, such as iRecord or Living Record; it would probably be best to standardise on one system. As well as surveying before developing a project, monitoring needs to take place after the work is done to evaluate the impact.

5.1.4. On the whole, as long as the relevant expertise is available or can be accessed, setting up surveying is not particularly complex a task. It will however require at least one breeding season to generate useful results (depending on the species in question).

5.1.5. As suggested, Species Monitoring is applicable on all sites (A. – L.) shown above.

5.2. Installing Nest Boxes/Roosting Boxes/Insect “Hotels”

5.2.1. A simple way of providing help for specific species or groups is to provide dedicated accommodation for breeding (birds) or roosting (bats, Dormice). As stated, surveying will be required to indicate the types of wildlife that might be helped on a particular site.

5.2.2. Depending on the type of wildlife that is to be helped, different kinds of box (or other structure, e.g. for insects) will be needed. Once again, expert organisations can provide advice to make sure you procure the right structures for your needs, plus directions on the correct mode of installation. Many such organisations sell these items as a form of fund-raising, with the money going towards their good works.

5.2.3. Providing funding is available for purchase, this kind of project should not require large amounts of effort to achieve good results. Once boxes are installed, they should be viable for several years.

5.2.4. Again, this project is one that is likely to be applicable in some form or other on most of the sites A. - L. Indeed, as a means of helping wildlife, there is no reason to restrict it to specific sites, as residents could be encouraged to install such items in their own gardens.

5.3. Installing/updating Information Boards

5.3.1. Providing information is an effective way of increasing engagement with the community. Indeed, many of the sites listed above already play host to information boards. However, the information provided may be incomplete, focusing on some topics to the exclusion of others, may have become out of date, or the board simply may be showing its age.

5.3.2. Once again, it will be necessary to gather the correct information for use on the board and this may come from surveying. Then it will be necessary to design a board that delivers the content in an effective manner. This may require engaging a specialist organisation, unless relevant expertise can be found in the village.

5.3.3. Funding would need to be available to procure the new boards, and contractors engaged to install them.

5.3.4. Although almost any of the sites being considered could host a new/updated board, it may be wise to take a strategic approach. Not every site may merit its own sign, especially if close to another site. Also, the content of each board could (and probably should) have a different focus, with the full picture being given across all the boards. A good example would be having a board with a focus on footpaths at the recreation ground (C.), as its car park is known as a popular starting point for walks. The boards at Ecchinswell Pond (A.) and Digweeds (F.) could be updated. Similarly, the potential for updated or new boards could be considered for the recreation grounds in Bishop's Green.

5.3.5. Consideration could also be given make information available via digital media (e.g. phone apps, Google maps tags etc). This would be more complex and reliant on appropriate skills/know-how being available.

5.4. Planting Schemes

5.4.1. Planting species that have benefits for wildlife, such as native plants, those with nectar-bearing flowers in spring/summer, or fruits/nuts in autumn, can be an effective means of enhancing a site. Once again, surveying will provide direction as to what would be most useful.

5.4.2. Planting could involve a wildflower meadow, native shrubs, a community orchard or full-scale tree planting. Expert organisations again can provide direction on what to plant, how to make sure you get natively-grown plants and what aftercare will be required. As mentioned before, they may also have plants for sale.

5.4.3. Depending on the scale of planting, it may be necessary to encourage residents' involvement, which would also generate a sense of ownership. Having more people involved could also help with organising aftercare.

5.4.4. The cost involved depends on the scale of planting envisaged, but need not be overly expensive, and could be tailored appropriately.

5.4.5. As well as aiding wildlife in the short-term, planting can also help in locking up reserves of carbon, depending on the scale of the project.

5.4.6. Sites where planting might be of benefit include the Recreation areas in Ecchinswell & Bishop's Green (C., J., K.), Digweeds (F.), and the War Memorial (G.).

5.5. School(s) Engagement

5.5.1. A key means of improving nature is to get people to care more about it. One possible way to involve more of the community is through engagement with the school. Simply showing children some of the nature on their doorstep could make a big difference.

5.5.2. Possible ideas include pond-dipping (or bringing some pond-life into the school), conducting a "bio-blitz" (find and identify as many species as possible in the time available) on a local area or organising a nature garden in the school grounds.

5.5.3. Any such event would naturally have to have the full backing of the school and take appropriate notice of health and safety constraints. Appropriate local expertise would need to be available to support the activities. However, if successful such events could be run every year.

5.5.4. The suitability of a site for this project would depend on safety concerns, ability to host the numbers involved, and the likely range of species that could be viewed at a sensible time of year. Most of the sites listed would require careful consideration with respect to one or more of these issues.

6. Site-specific Nature Improvement Ideas

6.1. Demonstration Allotment

6.1.1. One site not shown on the maps above is the allotment plot in Ecchinswell Village. This lies to the west of the residential housing just south of the recreation ground. Gardens cover an increasing area of the landscape and the way in which they are managed can have a large impact on the wildlife they can support.

6.1.2. Subject to the availability of a plot in the allotments, it may be possible to set up a demonstration allotment that shows how vegetables and fruits can be grown while still providing a nature-friendly environment. This would involve avoiding use of pesticides and herbicides, using companion planting to deter pests and encourage their predators, and including things like bug-hotels, log piles for hedgehogs and planting to draw in insect predators/pollinators.

6.1.3. As stated above, it would be necessary to ensure that an allotment plot is available without depriving another individual of access. Those managing the allotments would need to support the idea. There would also need to be sufficient like-minded people to plant up and look after the plot throughout the season.

6.1.4. If the project is successful, the produce could be made available to local residents.

6.2. Reduce Shading over the Ecchinswell Stream

6.2.1. It is noticeable that once the stream goes to the north of the old mill the channel is narrow, steep-sided and largely shaded by trees. At the same time, there is almost no aquatic vegetation to be seen. These two factors could be linked and together result in a lower level of biodiversity in the stream than might otherwise be the case.

6.2.2. Any plan to remove some of the tree -cover would not be a trivial undertaking. First, some careful surveying, along with expert advice, would be needed, first to ensure that sufficient benefit would be likely (and to assess whether other factors need to be accounted for, e.g., regularity of flow, oxygen levels), and then, to select a suitable location(s) for the work. There would of course need to be a constructive engagement with any landowners likely to be affected by the work as without their buy-in this would be a non-starter.

6.2.3. In the event that significant tree surgery is envisaged, such work would probably also need approval from relevant authorities at BDBC. A suitably expert contractor would need to be engaged and the requisite funds made available.

6.2.4. As the work takes place, public engagement would be needed to inform people of the purpose/benefit of what might seem very invasive work. This engagement would need to continue following completion, as would surveying and monitoring to check on how the stream environment adapts to the change.

6.2.5. As an aside, it is worth pointing out that some work of the scale contemplated was carried out on behalf of Thames Water adjacent to their pumping station during 2021. This has reduced shading of the stream in one area and the effects on aquatic vegetation could be monitored as a test case for further work.

6.2.6. Given all of the above, it is evident that this would be a project at the upper end of complexity cost and public engagement that might be contemplated for a nature recovery plan. As a result, the initial stages of expert advice and public consultation would be essential to get sufficient buy-in across the community to be able to proceed. However, the potential pay-off for nature could also be on a greater scale than smaller projects.

6.3. Remodel Ecchinswell Stream Channel

6.3.1. On a similar scale, or possibly even larger than the previous project, one could consider taking measures to remodel part of the channel of the Ecchinswell Stream to introduce more variety. As noted above, the channel to the north of the village is generally quite narrow, steep-sided and fairly straight. In order to produce more variety, it is necessary to regrade the stream bed in places to create a series of deep and shallow areas. At the same time, diverting the channel into a series of curves would also provide variations in topography, with variable flow across the channel, different degrees of lighting onto the banks, and more variation in longitudinal flow. All of these should provide more opportunities for more different types of plants and animals.

6.3.2. As for the previous project, this is a major undertaking that would require full local consultation and buy-in, especially from any landowners likely to be affected. There would also need to be and an even greater level of expert input to come up with a practical scheme with benefits that would justify the degree of intervention.

6.3.3. It is unlikely this would be possible without the support of all the relevant statutory bodies, in this case probably including the Environment Agency. Specialist contractors would be required to carry out the work, and providing access would be a major consideration.

6.3.4. As a result, this would be a scheme requiring significant funding, substantial planning and consultation and a prolonged timescale for implementation. Therefore, it would be at the very top end of projects that might be considered for a nature recovery plan. However, for the purposes of this report, it is an instructive example to illustrate the full range of what might be considered and what would then be involved to implement it.

6.4. Create a bio-diverse damp habitat next to Ecchinswell Stream

6.4.1. On a somewhat smaller and more manageable scale, it might be possible, with some modest re-landscaping and diversion of water flow, to create a damp/seasonally wet area adjacent to the stream that could support a variety of specialised plants and also the creatures that depend on them. This could include bees, butterflies, birds, amphibians and small mammals.

6.4.2. There already one or two areas close to the stream that partly match the desired criteria, being seasonally flood and damp (though heavily shaded). These might be assessed by surveying (again), to see whether they might be easily modified (reducing the work required), or if they are better left as they are. Modifying an existing location might introduce more constraints than starting from scratch in another location.

6.4.3. Once again, community buy-in is essential, though the amount of invasive work would probably be less than the above projects. Landowner buy-in for permission to carry out the work and for access would be essential.

6.4.4. Any proposed scheme would require expert assessment to ensure the aims are realistic and on the right site. Once again statutory approval is likely to be required and specialist contractors engaged.

6.4.5. The funding requirements, consultation, planning and implementation timescales would probably be less than the previous project, but still substantial. Monitoring post-construction would be essential to check how the site develops, and consideration given to planting to encourage an appropriate mix of vegetation.

6.4.6. As a result, this is once again at the upper end of the projects that might be attempted; however, the potential pay-off in terms of bio-diversity could be substantial. Some intervention would probably be needed in subsequent years, particularly if the site is in danger of being shaded.

6.5 Ecchinswell Pond – Notes on Current Management

6.5.1. The Ecchinswell Pond is an example of a site where management has been successfully carried out for a number of years with the view of enhancing both its wildlife and amenity value. It is worth listing the activities involved as examples of the kind of measures that could be undertaken elsewhere.

6.5.2. There is a collaborative activity every year in October to manage the emergent vegetation within the pond to ensure that the more dominant species do not take over. This work is carried out in line with advice provided by Hampshire Wildlife Trust to minimise impact on the newts. The work is carried out by people from the village, supported by members of Basingstoke Conservation Volunteers, who provide extra tools and expertise.

6.5.3. The south margin of the pond has a number of willow trees and these are regularly pollarded, in part to keep them clear from overhead cables, but also to control the degree of shading of the south end of the pond. Ideally, not all the trees would be pollarded in the same year, but instead on a rotation so that there is always some more mature leaf cover for the use of wildlife. This policy was used for the most recent cut.

6.5.4. The surrounds of the pond undergo a mowing regime during the spring and summer. In recent years, a staged approach has been adopted, allowing selected areas to be left uncut during the key periods of the summer, providing cover and habitat for wildlife and promoting diversity of plants on the pond margins. At the same time some areas are mowed more regularly to aid public access to the bench and to maintain the view of the pond from the road.

6.5.5. As part of a Nature Recovery Plan, it would be useful to ask what more can be done to improve the wildlife potential of the pond and its surroundings. Given the work already in hand, this would require careful thought. One should be wary of anything that would conflict with the measures already in place, however, some of the simpler measures listed above could well be adopted. While additional planting in the pond may not be appropriate, it may be possible to improve diversity in the areas surrounding the pond, particularly identifying and targeting areas that are species-poor. One useful measure would be to clear the vegetation piles created by the pond management activity as this has led to extensive nutrient-rich mounds likely to be colonised by dominant weeds such as nettles or brambles. As with other sites, seeking expert advice before settling on specific outcomes would be beneficial.

7. Summary and Conclusions (Key Messages)

7.1. The following comprise the key outcomes of the evidence gathering exercise conducted with regard to Nature Recovery within Ecchinswell, Sydmonton & Bishop's Green Parish.

- **Section 1. - Introduction:** - This report reviews what is required/recommended for an effective Nature Recovery Plan for ES & BG Parish. However, it does not in itself constitute the plan, which should be developed as an independent entity.
- **Section 2. – Nature Recovery Policies:** - Government policy is promoting local Nature Recovery. Basingstoke and Deane have yet to produce a local Nature Recovery Plan, but alludes to aspects of this in its Green Infrastructure Strategy.
- **Section 3. – Nature Recovery Plan Methodology:** - There is a practical 5-step approach that can be adopted in producing a Nature Recovery Plan. Engagement within the community at all stages is essential for success.
- **Section 4. – Opportunities for Nature Recovery:** - Most of the Green Infrastructure Assets within ES & BG provide opportunities for nature recovery.
- **Section 5. – Generic Nature Recovery Projects:** - Good generic examples include, installing nest/roosting boxes, targeted planting, improving signage, all underpinned by species monitoring and community engagement.
- **Section 6. – Site-specific Improvement Ideas:** - Some major site-specific projects could be envisaged, mostly concerned with improving the Ecchinswell Stream, by reducing tree-cover, remodelling the channel, or creating a seasonally damp “meadow” habitat. A more modest suggestion is to have a demonstration eco-friendly plot in the Ecchinswell allotments.