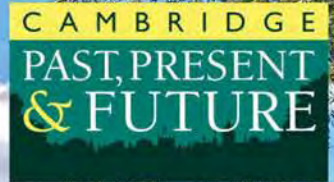




**Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire**



# The Cambridge Nature Network

*A Nature Recovery Network for  
Cambridge and its Surrounds*

## Summary Report

Prepared by  
The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire,  
Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire  
May 2021

Image: Robert Enderby



Image: Henry Stanier



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*“This report, building on the ambition to double nature in Cambridgeshire, tells us precisely how and where we can do it. Working from the ground up, looking at real places and the actual state of nature, it offers for the first time a tangible plan for the revitalisation of nature in the 10km around the city of Cambridge, based on what is already there and how it can be brought back to life. And there’s more. Fully integrated with the vision for nature recovery is one for the enhancement and creation of green spaces for public recreation and refreshment – vital needs, as we have come to understand fully during the covid-19 crisis.”*

*Dame Fiona Reynolds*



## Introduction

In response to the global biodiversity crisis, Cambridgeshire has made a commitment to double the amount of nature rich habitats by 2050. To help achieve this target, a nature recovery network for the Cambridge area has been mapped, which identifies opportunities to double nature and increase access to natural greenspace for one of the UK's fastest growing populations. It covers 9,203 hectares, contains 13 SSSIs and 84 Local Wildlife Sites as well as providing accessible greenspace for 200,000 residents. It is essential to the well-being of all those who live, work, study and visit the Cambridge area and for its future economic prospects.

## What is a Cambridge Nature Network?

The Nature Network consists of a systematic mosaic of individual nature parks, nature reserves and farm habitats, linked together by nature-friendly farmland and wildlife-rich towns and villages. This network is of sufficient scale to allow wildlife to circulate around the city and to find the best seasonal habitats to breed and thrive.

It is also good for people: it will allow our growing population to gain significant health benefits from access to nature and the outdoors; it will make us more resilient to flooding and droughts; it will help improve air quality; and it will store carbon to help tackle climate change. It will also help our prosperity by making our area an attractive place to live, learn or do business.

The Cambridge Nature Network is a spatial plan for the future of nature, not a new designation. It is about prioritising the best areas to take action because they have an existing biodiversity value for nature and have the potential to contribute to a functioning ecological network.

## Why do we need a Cambridge Nature Network?

Efforts to halt the decline of nature have been underway for decades but have not been wholly effective, due to taking place at a relatively small-scale and often in isolation. The UK is one of the most nature deprived places in the world and Cambridgeshire is one of the most nature deprived counties in the UK. It also has a rapidly growing population and one of the lowest levels of natural green space available for public access. There is evidence that shows our area lacks large areas of habitat with public access and the rate of providing more of it has fallen behind the rate of population growth and demand. This is putting pressure on existing sites, some of which are already at capacity.

New approaches are needed, which are bigger in ambition and scale, which set out a long-term vision, but which are realistic and achievable. The Cambridge Nature Network vision is for the Cambridge area to have significant areas of downland, fens, meadows and woodlands, where nature can recover and thrive and where people can experience a wilder countryside and nature on their doorstep.

## Where is it?

It is focussed on the area within a 10km radius of Cambridge, including the city itself. Based on analysis of the different landscapes around the city, discussions with landowners and ground-truthing surveys, the Cambridge Nature Network is made up of five Nature Priority Areas, which are shown in figure 1. The boundaries of these areas are based on landscape features which impact on habitat quality, such as contour levels, floodplain and soil types.





### Gog Magog Hills

chalk grasslands and woodlands including Wandlebury Country Park, Cherry Hinton Chalk Pit, Roman Road, Beechwoods and Magog Downs.

### Cambridge Fens

wet fens and grasslands including Fulbourn Fen, Little Wilbraham Fen and Great Wilbraham Common.

### Wicken Fen Vision South

the National Trust's vision to expand Wicken Fen southwards to the edge of Cambridge, including Anglesey Abbey and Stow-cum-Quy Fen.

### River Cam Corridor

the river and its tributaries and the meadows, wetlands, parkland and woodlands that they connect, including Grantchester Meadows, Trumpington Meadows, the college Backs, Cambridge commons and Ditton Meadows.

### Boulder Clay Woodlands

woodlands, meadows and hedges on clay soils including Madingley Woods, Coton Countryside Reserve, Burwash Organic Farm and Lark Rise Farm.

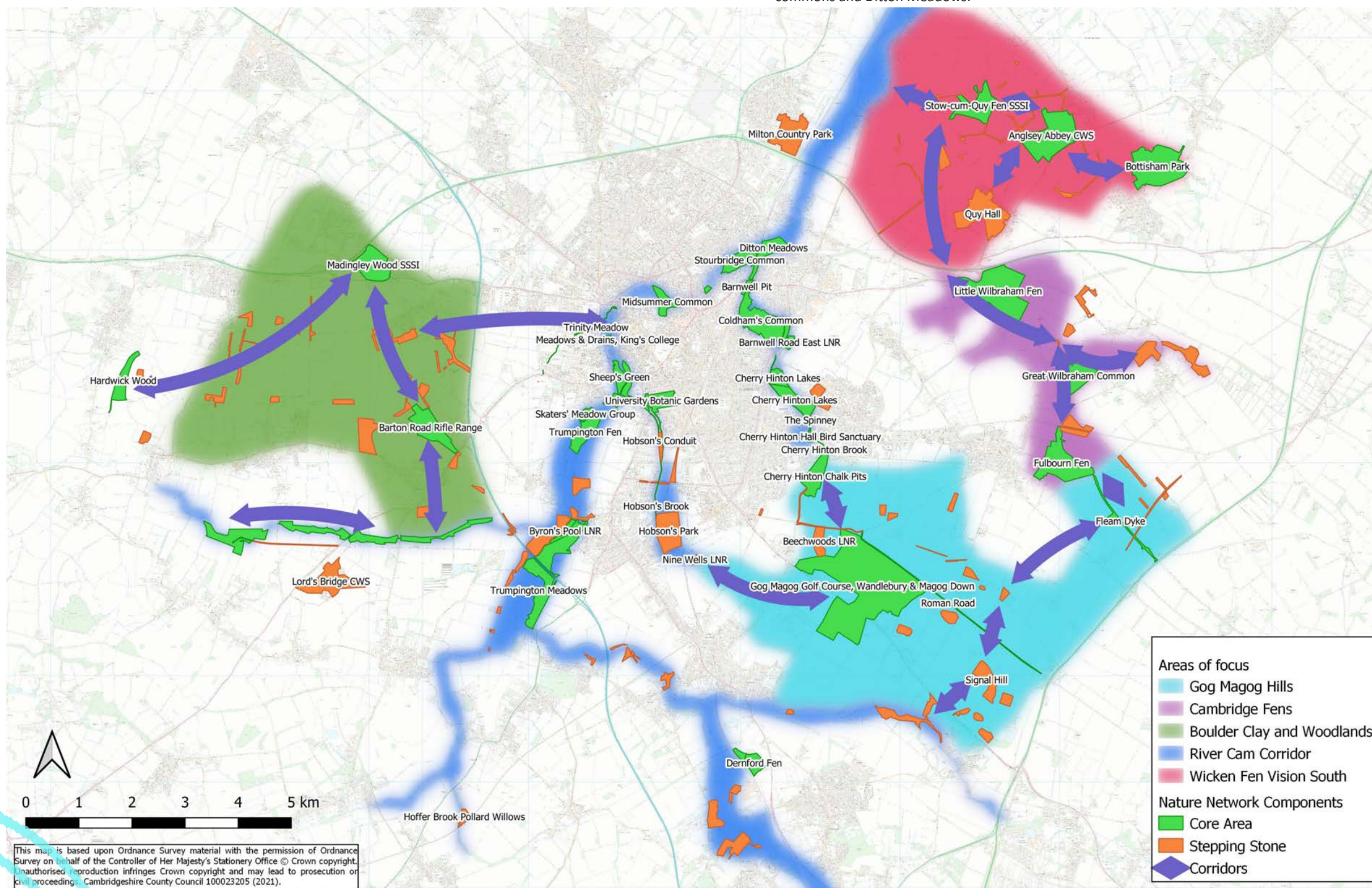


Figure 1: Cambridge Nature Network Priority Areas



A Fen-edge Orchards & Drove Opportunity Area has been identified to the north of Cambridge, based upon fragments of traditional orchards and fen ditches. This could be a further Priority Area and act as a stepping-stone to the nature sites in the Ouse Valley.

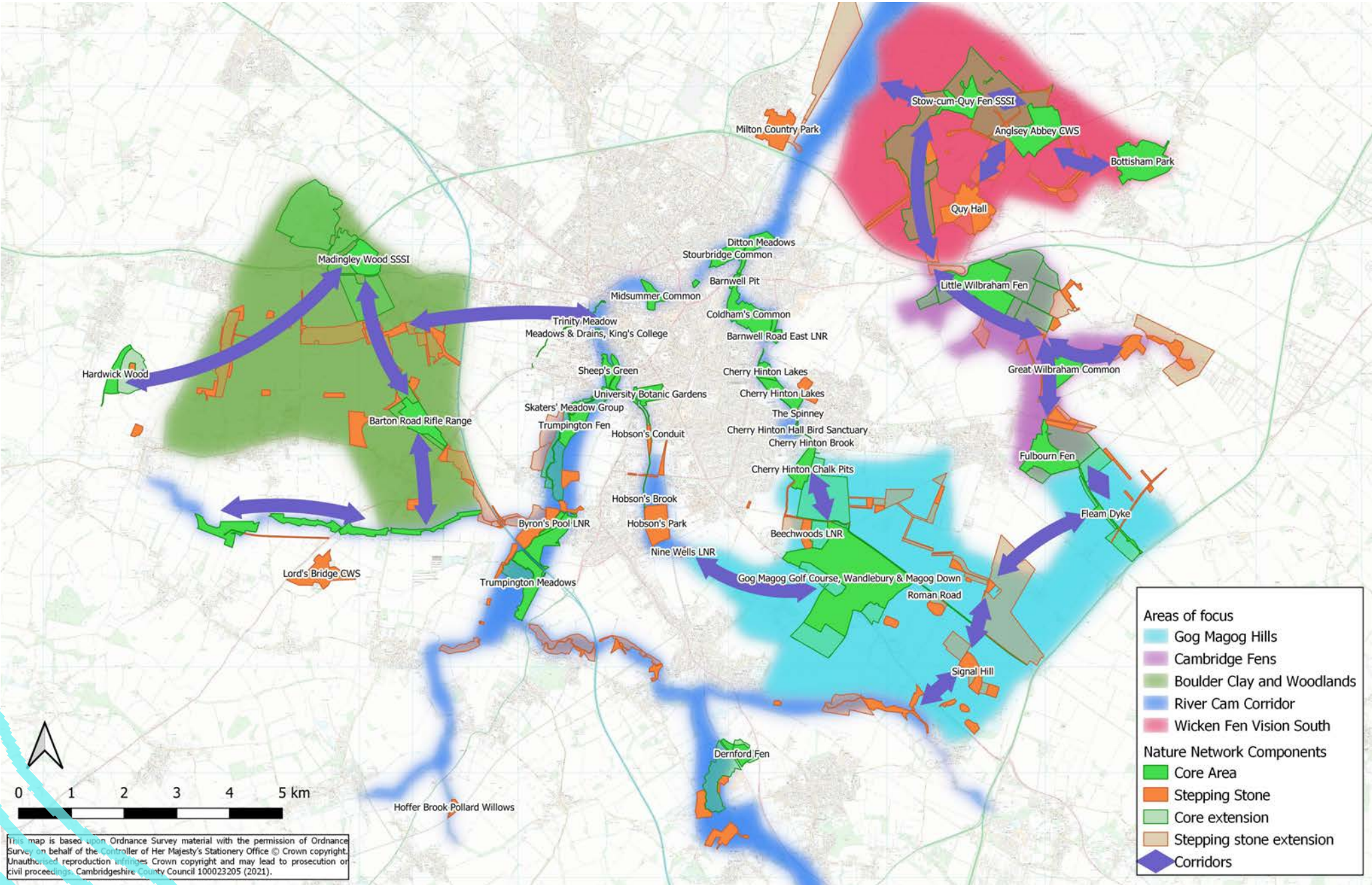


Figure 2: Opportunity areas for nature recovery

### Does it exist yet?

Within the Priority Areas there are already 7 nature parks: at Wandlebury, Mago Down, Trumpington Meadows, Coton, Milton, the Botanic Gardens and Anglesey Abbey. These, together with 84 Local Wildlife Sites and 13 SSSIs, make up the core of the network system – shown in Figure 1. In some areas there is already a network of habitats that link places for nature together, for example the cluster of sites on the top of the Gog Magog Hills. In addition, there are two clusters being formed of nature friendly farmers, with a further cluster to the west of the city.

The intention is that over time, and with the cooperation of landowners, more linked sites will be added to double the size of the network. From our surveys, the dappled green and orange areas shown in Figure 2, have been identified as the best locations for new habitats and strategic natural greenspaces around Cambridge, including south-east (Gog Magog Hills), north-east (southern end of Wicken Fen vision area) and west of Cambridge (Coton Countryside Reserve). Cambridge Sports Lake Trust proposals for a sports lake and country park north of Milton provide another major opportunity. Opportunities to improve the network of paths linking settlements to nature sites have also been considered for each Priority Area. There is considerable overlap between the best locations for habitat creation and those for new public access.

These opportunities have been discussed with landowners wherever possible, through conversations and preparation of individual landowner reports. However, the opportunities shown in figure 2 do not imply agreement or commitment by the landowners at this stage. Land ownership and use will change over time, so these opportunities are indicative of what might be achieved in the long-term. It is also clear that providing new public access must be done in partnership with landowners, because without their support Cambridge will not be able to deliver the strategic natural greenspace that the growing city needs.



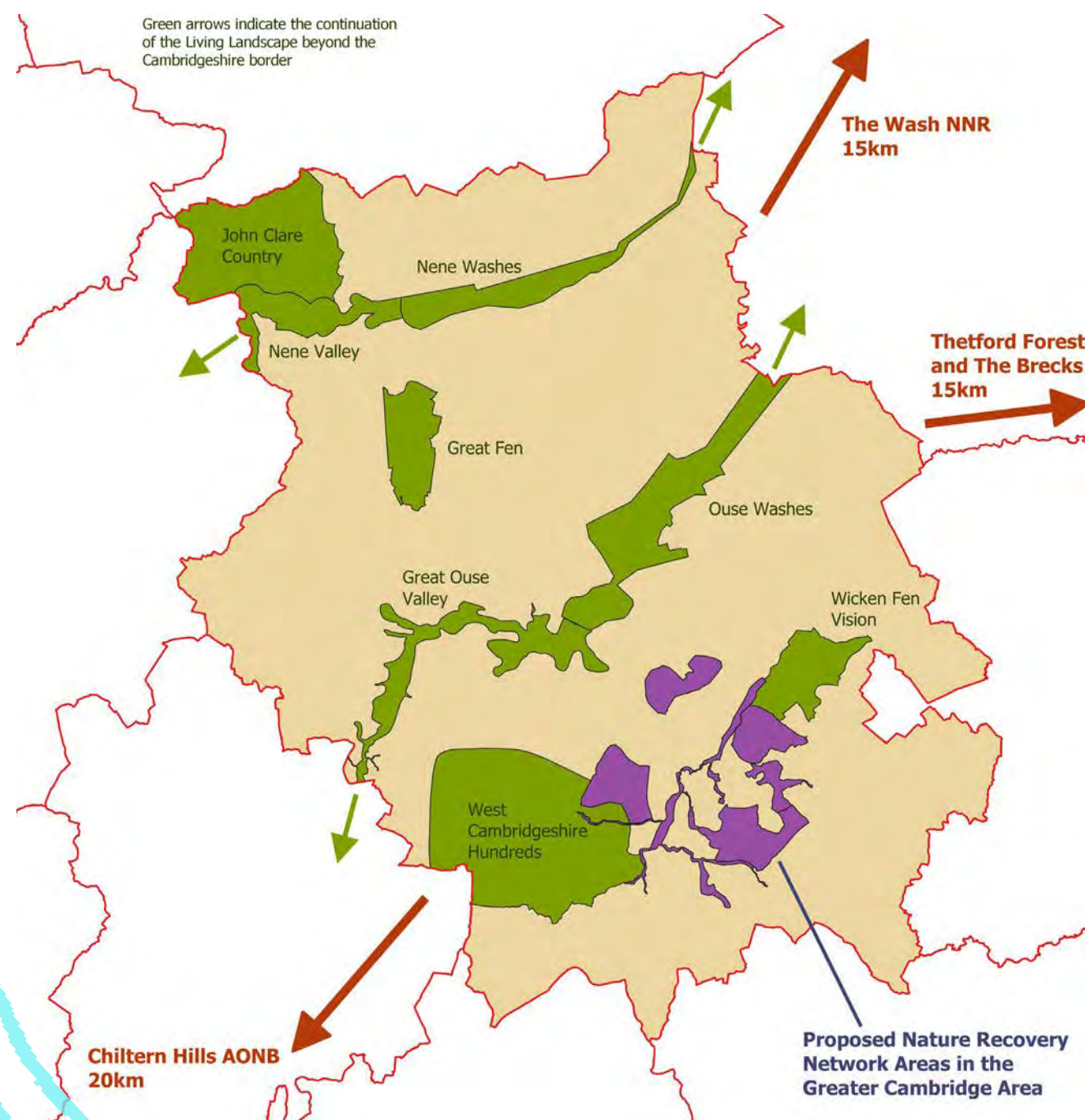


Figure 3: Cambridge Nature Network in the Wider Context

## What about nature beyond the five priority areas?

The Nature Network is the beginnings of a local spatial plan for nature. Outside of the Priority Areas there are important nature conservation sites and areas of semi-natural habitat, but these are fewer and more isolated from others and it will be more difficult to achieve the agglomeration benefits of landscape scale conservation.

However, the Network should not be seen as precluding landowners, individuals or community groups from outside of the five Priority Areas from taking action: nature friendly farming can occur anywhere and wildlife friendly management of open spaces, gardens and buildings can occur throughout the city and villages.

The Cambridge Nature Network also connects to the surrounding landscapes, as part of a county nature network, shown in Figure 3.

## How can it happen and can it be sustained?

To deliver the Nature Network, there needs to be a move beyond the traditional avenues of public funding and charitable grant giving. And as resources for this work will be limited, targeting investment where it will have the biggest benefit for nature and people is also crucial.

We have found some evidence that rapid growth in visits to countryside sites over the past 20 years could provide the basis for a new approach to generating revenue surpluses from the management of nature sites for people. To do this, such sites need to be designed with revenue generating visitor facilities and supporting

infrastructure. The surge in people visiting nature sites during the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an insight into the potential of this underlying demand. It was also an indication of the impact that visitors will have on nature sites if the population increases without a corresponding increase in natural green spaces.

Outside of the nature parks, most of the land within the network is farmed or urban and this will continue. However, opportunities from the government's new agricultural subsidies - the Environmental Land Management Scheme - will also provide a new source of income for farmers willing to create areas of habitat on farmland to buffer and connect nature, particularly for areas prioritised in nature recovery networks. Carbon offsetting, water quality and flood management may also offer new income streams.

The capital required for new nature sites and green spaces will continue to rely on philanthropy and charitable fund-raising, but a new source of capital may flow from biodiversity net gain and other developer contributions as the city continues to grow. Developers may themselves realise the additional value that ready access to green spaces can create in housing and workspace developments, where more people are conscious of the wellbeing benefits that access to nature brings. The development process through the Local Plan will play an important role in underpinning this potential new capital flow. Understanding the new revenue-generating needs of nature parks will also have planning implications.

Overall, there appears to be potential to blend these new revenue and capital income streams with traditional charitable support and philanthropy to address the running and capital costs of an expanding Nature Network.



## Who is responsible? What Can I do?

The Nature Network will take time to create and it can only be sustained through a collective approach. Specifically, the landowning charities and the City Council responsible for most of the accessible nature sites in the Cambridge area have come together to explore collaborative working to nurture the Nature Network and this work will continue. A number of farmers are also interested in becoming involved in Nature Friendly Farmer Clusters, that will be associated with the Network.

Individual landowners will continue to be responsible for what happens on their land; some will want to help nature but may not wish to provide public access and some may decide not to be involved at all. However, through this study, individual reports have been prepared for many interested landowners to refine the opportunities for increasing biodiversity on their land and to identify potential delivery mechanisms.

The Nature Network should be recognised in relevant Local Plan and other public policy and strategy documents. It provides the framework within which sustainable development in and around Cambridge must occur. It provides evidence and the basis for the Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire biodiversity and green infrastructure strategies currently in preparation. It also provides the basis for a broader City and South Cambridgeshire District-wide local Nature Recovery Strategy, likely to become a legal requirement once the Environment Bill is passed into law.

Finally, the city and villages in the area also have a wealth of private gardens. They provide a potential haven for urban wildlife and everyone can garden

for nature, even if they only have a window box. To connect these to the wider Nature Network, each parish or group of parishes could prepare their own Parish Nature Recovery Plan, to guide actions on parish land, within gardens and by the farming and landowning community of their parish.



Image: Matthew Roberts

## The report

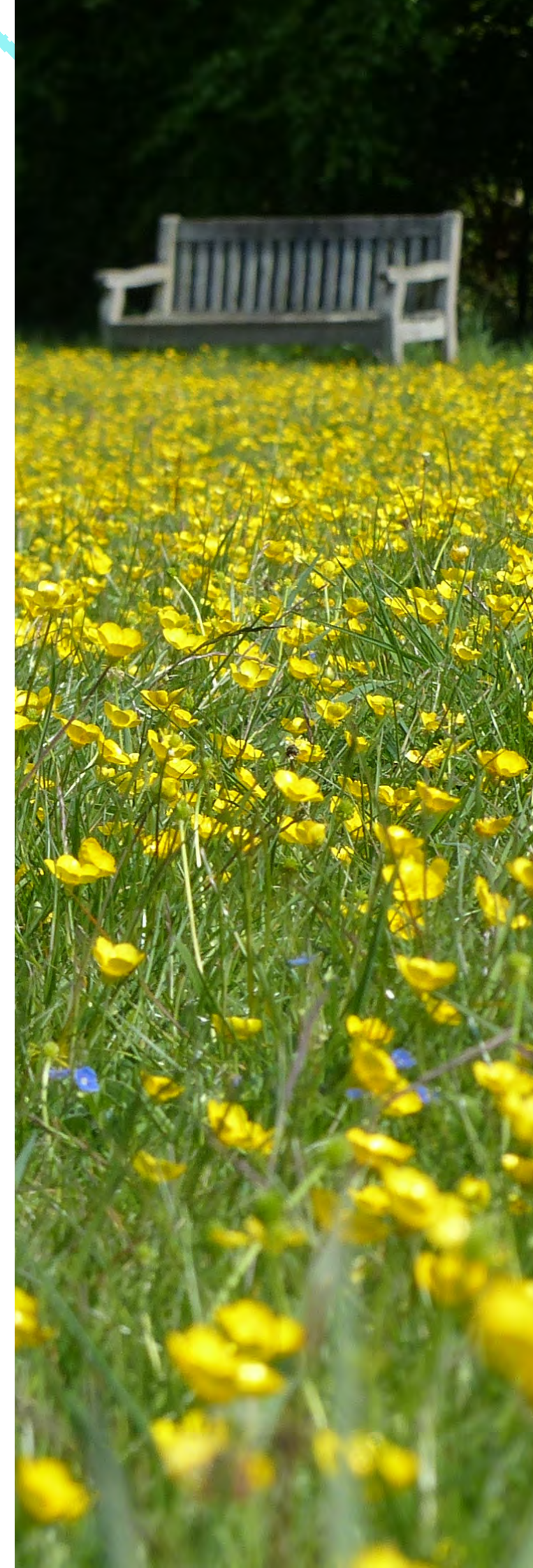
A 137-page Cambridge Nature Network report has been produced. The study has four strands, though the primary objective is the definition of the Nature Network:

1. To identify the components of a Nature Network for Cambridge and its hinterland.
2. To identify a range of strategic green infrastructure opportunities to enhance access to nature across the Nature Network for the growing population.
3. To undertake a high-level analysis of the climate change impacts of a Cambridge Nature Network.
4. To assess the sustainability of a Nature Network in terms of policy and information; finances; and organisation.

The work to identify and progress a Cambridge Nature Network has been carried out largely by Cambridge Past, Present & Future and the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire. It has been funded through a grant from the Gatsby Foundation. Matthew Bullock and Cambridge Ahead's Young Advisory Group led on the research to understand how a nature network could be sustained and they also provided secretarial support to the project team. The work also relied upon the co-operation of other organisations including the National Trust, RSPB, Magog Trust, Cambridge Sports Lake Trust, Cambridge Botanic Gardens (Cambridge University) and Cambridge City Council.

We have been granted permission to carry out surveys on much private land and we have held discussions with individual landowners: we are very grateful for their co-operation.

A small advisory group helped to inform the project, chaired by Dame Fiona Reynolds and including John Torlesse, Kim Wilkie, Robert Myers and Sir Nicholas Bacon.





### How can I find out more or get involved?

Copies of the full report and the maps can be downloaded from  
[www.cambridgenaturenetwork.org](http://www.cambridgenaturenetwork.org)

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