

An Update from the Cambridge Nature Network

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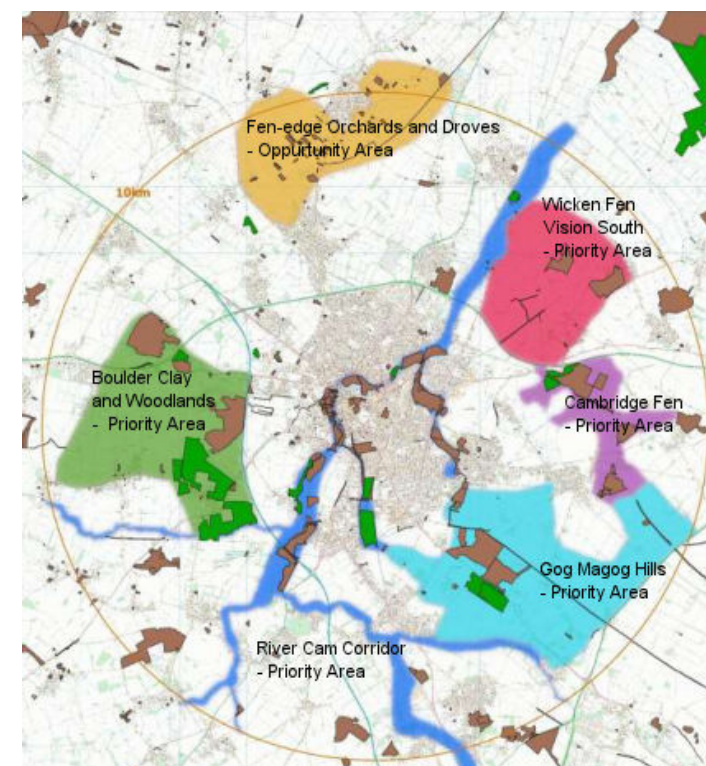
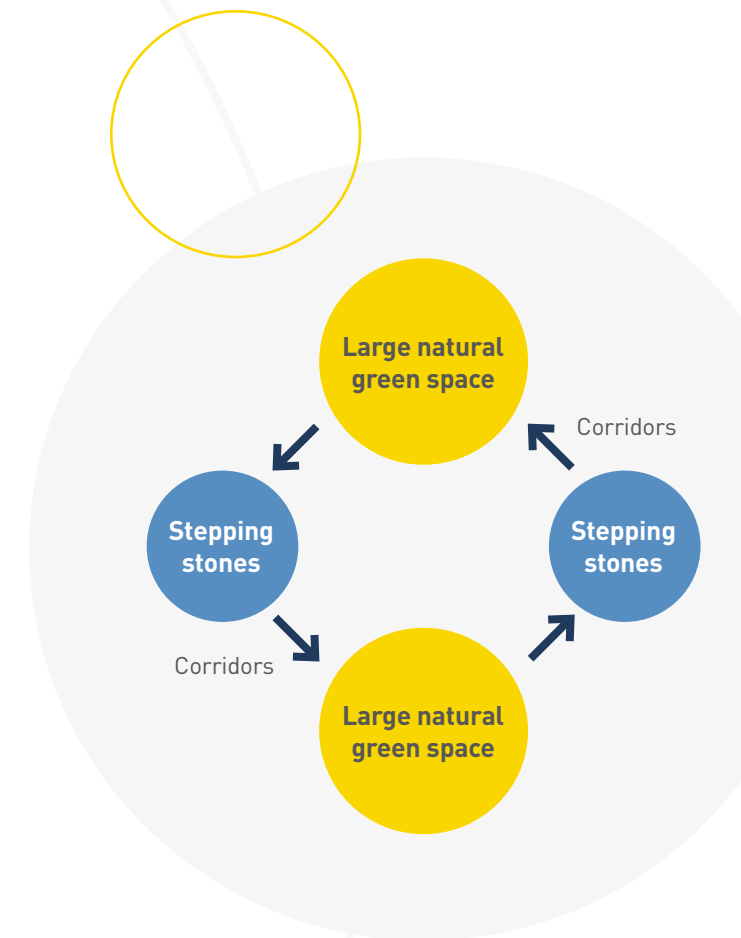


Jackie Sharpe

The Cambridge Nature Network has three main aims: to increase biodiversity, to enhance public access to public open space, and to tackle climate change.

These are long term strategic aims but they are higher now in terms of people's priorities and in the public consciousness than ever before.

Nature networks have a very specific criteria as outlined in by eminent ecologist Sir John Lawton. They consist of several different areas to make up a landscape in which nature can thrive. First, large natural spaces; areas high in biodiversity which in time need to be bigger and more plentiful. Second, stepping stones; smaller dedicated natural spaces which allow different spaces to shelter or forage. Third, corridors; the intervening landscape which is primarily made up of farmland.



We are lucky to live in a place which is close to nature, but it needs to be more connected and integrated into the city, richer in its diversity, and more plentiful. The proposed network focusses on a 10km radius around Cambridge. Five priority areas have been identified and one 'opportunity area', which is not particularly rich with wildlife habitats but could be considered as a 'stepping stone'.

Within the priority areas there are lots of different types of landowners. Some allow access to existing natural green spaces, including Wandlebury and Magog Trust, Milton Country Park, the City Council, Botanical Gardens, the Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust. There are nature reserves which prioritise conservation and are not generally promoted to visitors. And finally, much of the network and the intervening corridors are made up of farmland.

There are lots of work strands in train to help make the network a reality:

- Farming clusters - we have engaged with local nature friendly farmers to better understand the arguments for nature friendly farming, rather than intensive farming. It is hoped that in time 'farming clusters' will be formed, where farmers are encouraged to work together and learn from one another on these issues and develop the network in a way that works for them as landowners.

- Encouraging collaboration – Cambridgeshire Past Present and Future recently held an extremely positive meeting which brought together all those who allow public access to natural green space locally. The objectives of the network align well with the objectives of these organisations and there are further meetings planned next year to take this forward.

- Feeding into council led projects, including current Local Plan discussions, and using the Nature Network Vision in conversations with developers.

- Identifying sustainable financial models – visitor footfall across natural spaces has been increasing at around 7-10% per annum for the last 10 years – a highly sustainable level of growth. High levels of income are seen on sites that charge for access or parking or which offer other facilities such as cafés. This generates income to sustain the parks and is something that might be used to further develop existing or new sites.

- Membership - the network could be established as a brand which people and companies could support. The details of this are still being developed.

At the event we asked those attending whether in principle they would support the network by paying for access membership for employees. It was fantastic to see so many that would consider this – either partially or in full.

Attendees of the November event said:

Would your organisation consider supporting the Network, by paying for access membership for employees?



12 PEOPLE SAID

Yes - we would consider paying for membership in full



19 PEOPLE SAID

Yes - we would consider subsidising / partially paying for membership

0 PEOPLE SAID

No - we would not consider making any contribution

Breakout session on the Cambridge Nature Network – key points

- The County Council discussed their corporate trees and woodland strategy covering the full woodland estate, plus nature reserves. This would look at biodiversity, carbon capture and storage, and flood risk management. These plans could feed into the Nature Network project.

- A hurdle in involvement of farmers revolves around the need to ensure profitability of land, any change requires a big capital investment at the beginning for equipment and to implement new practices. Post-2024, with changes in government policy and environmental subsidies, the benefits of nature friendly farming should become clearer to farmers.

- The importance of accessibility was discussed as being key, since a major point of the Nature Network is not just that outdoor places exist but that they are accessible and able to be used. Thus needs to be balanced against the need to ensure that access is not damaging to the environment or overly disruptive to local landowners, tenants or communities

- Car parks and facilities can be an important part of the business model for running natural areas for visitors. These can raise planning issues but ultimately can ensure sustainability. But how does this juxtapose against our desire to discourage travel by car? Alternative solutions would be in ensuring the spaces are connected to the community, accessible by bike or electric bus.

“It was fantastic to see your survey results show the importance people associate with living close to nature. Society has had a tendency in the past to think about distinct ‘areas’, for housing, work and nature. But we are now moving toward a position where people see these as much more integrated, recognising the importance of nature close to where people live, in and around our everyday environments so that we don’t have to travel to nature – it’s just outside our front door”

Craig Bennett, CEO The Wildlife Trusts, speaking at the ‘city we want to inherit’ event

