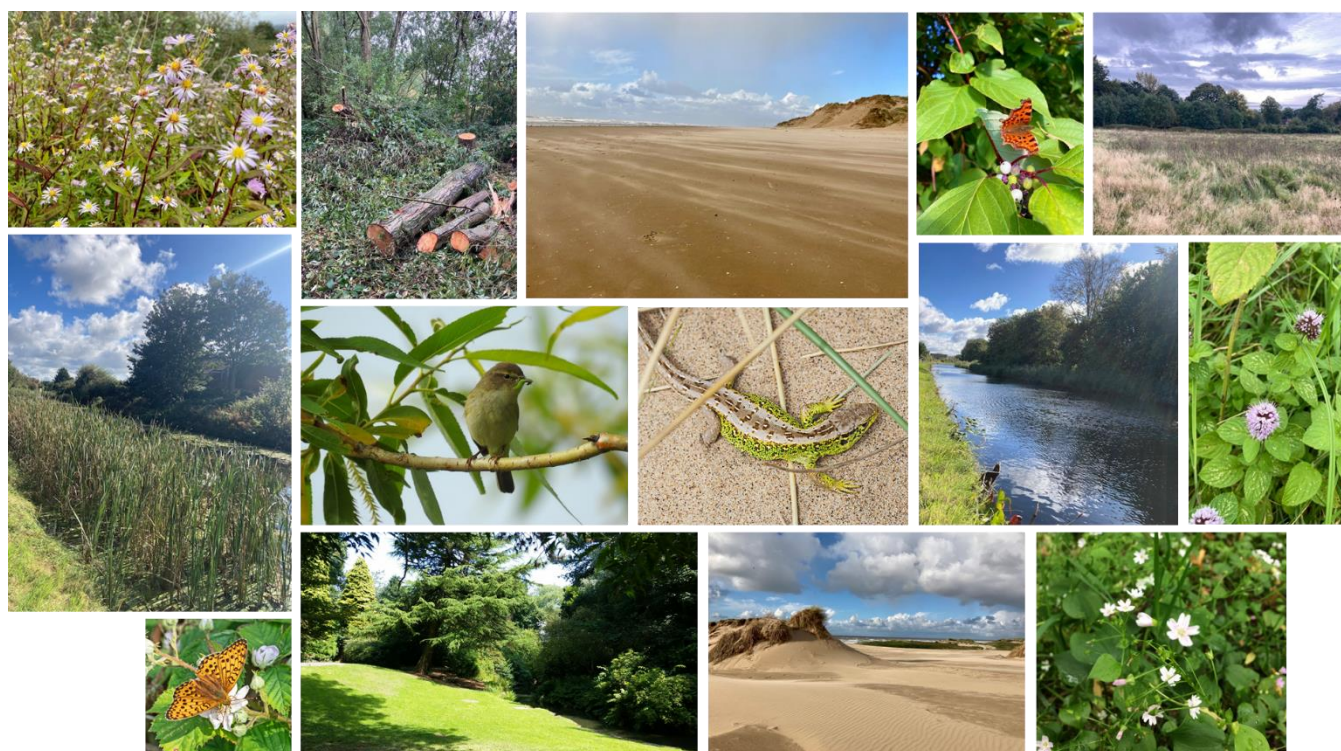


Local Wildlife Sites

Annual Monitoring Report 2020-21

North Merseyside Local Sites Partnership



An Assessment of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside

April 2021

Report by

Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service



Document Control

Project: The status of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside. Local Sites Annual Monitoring Report 2020-21

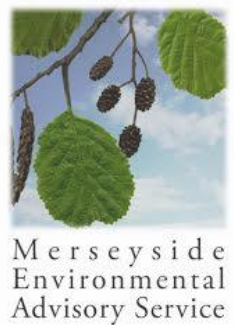
Prepared for: Merseyside Local Sites Partnership

Document Checking:

Prepared by: Anya Coffey and Sarah Nicholson ACIEEM
Assistant Ecologists

Checked by: Rachael Rhodes MCIEEM and Andrew Clark ACIEEM
Principal Ecologists

Verified by: Alan Jemmet MCIEEM
Director



Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	7
2. Methods	12
3. Results	15
4. Conclusions	25
Bibliography	27

Appendices

Appendix 1. Local Wildlife Sites monitored during 2020-21	28
--	-----------

Appendix 2. District summaries:	29
▪ Knowsley	
▪ Liverpool	
▪ Sefton	
▪ St. Helens	



Executive Summary

This Annual Monitoring Report gives an overview of monitoring of Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) in North Merseyside for the survey period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. The report includes methods used to survey each site, results and discussion on any trends observed.

Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) are non-statutory designated sites which aim to protect the conservation of species and habitats. They act as important assets at a local, regional and national level for their nature conservation value and are selected for being the most valuable areas for wildlife. Whilst there are some significant variations between districts e.g. the heavily designated Sefton Coast and estuarine environments, almost a quarter of North Merseyside's land area is protected through LWS designation and local planning policy. Therefore, LWSs are extremely important assets for our local nature recovery and form the backbone of the Liverpool City Region's Ecological Network.

In 2019, a climate emergency was declared in the Liverpool City Region, and our biodiversity continues to be in a general state of decline. Therefore, opportunities for increasing and buffering our Local Wildlife Sites LWSs network should be explored, to ensure our most valuable assets are protected for future generations.

The North Merseyside Local Sites Partnership (LSP) is the mechanism to designate Local Sites and was established following publication of Defra's 2006 Guidelines. The partnership was in a state of abeyance; however, we are pleased to announce the relaunch of the Partnership in Summer 2021. The Partnership will comprise representatives from local authorities (Knowsley, Liverpool, St. Helens and Sefton), Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS), nature conservation charities, statutory agencies, consultant ecologists and local nature experts. We look forward to working with partners to improve our natural environment and will be in touch shortly about how you can get involved.

Inevitably, the LSP has been impacted by public sector cuts over the last 10 years. Subsequently there has been less resource available to maintain the Local Sites Partnership work programme and this has resulted in a decline and cessation of LWS monitoring. However, following successful recruitment in early 2020, MEAS were able to complete a programme of LWS monitoring during 2020-21.

This could not be timelier. Against a backdrop of global ecological emergency, MEAS is committed to maximising the opportunities presented by biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery through enactment of the Environment Bill. We feel there could not be a better time to revive the Local Sites Partnership.

The main aims of LWS monitoring and this report are to:

- Maintain an overview of the condition of the site (i.e. are the features of importance still present and in good condition);
- Identify management actions required so that landowners can be informed accordingly;
- Provide information on sites that are at risk from development, inadequate land management and invasive species; and
- To provide data to help the Local Authorities report on the Defra Single Data List requirement;
- To inform the evidence base for the emerging Liverpool City Region Nature Recovery Network and Local Nature Recovery Strategies as required by the forthcoming Environment Bill.

The 2020-21 survey period was unfortunately shortened and restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant many surveys were carried out at a sub-optimal time. In addition, only publicly accessible sites were surveyed, and there were sadly no opportunities for volunteer surveyors. Whilst this is a limitation, the information we collected during surveys is valuable for assessing site condition and influencing appropriate management decisions.

Overall MEAS are pleased to have surveyed a total of 24 sites, over 10% of Local Wildlife Sites across all four districts in North Merseyside (Figure A).

District specific results can be found in the Results section (page 21).

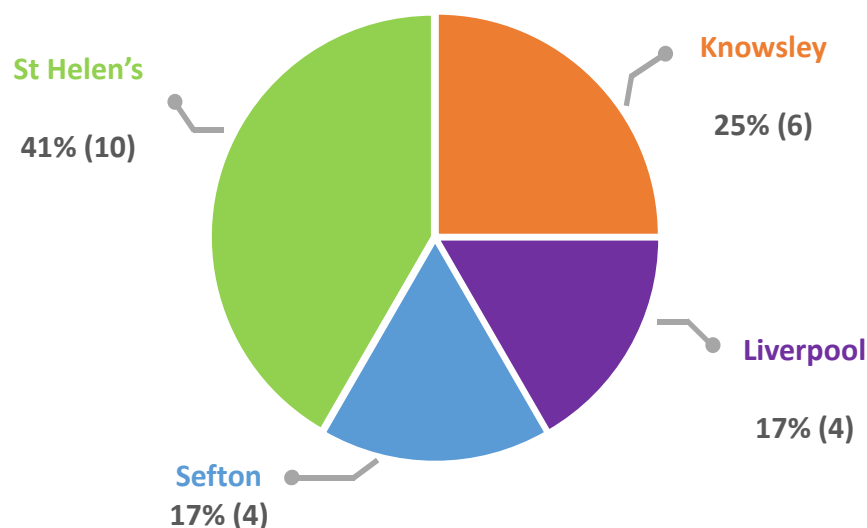


Figure A. The proportion of Local Wildlife Sites monitored within each district in North Merseyside in 2020-21.

The results of 2020-21 survey season highlight that **many LWSs in North Merseyside are not in positive conservation management**. This may be due to many designation features not recorded during time of survey, invasive species presence, fly-tipping and other factors (see Results section).

Survey this year focused on publicly owned and publicly accessible sites. **A major problem continues to be invasive species** this is particularly an issue within woodland and riparian habitats. The issue with invasive species at LWSs is undoubtedly due to lack of invasive control from resource stretched Councils and land managers.

Whilst many of these sites have management plans in place they were found to be primarily managed in terms of public access and amenity. However, a common observation was a lack of tailored ecological management for the designation features, such as water vole and standing water, of LWSs. **It is evident that the majority of Local Wildlife Sites require targeted management, to maintain, recover or improve designation features.**

A smaller number of sites were found to be in good condition and management was found to be maintaining and enhancing the designation features which is welcomed. Management of these sites could therefore help shape best practice for maintenance of other Local Wildlife Sites not in positive conservation management.

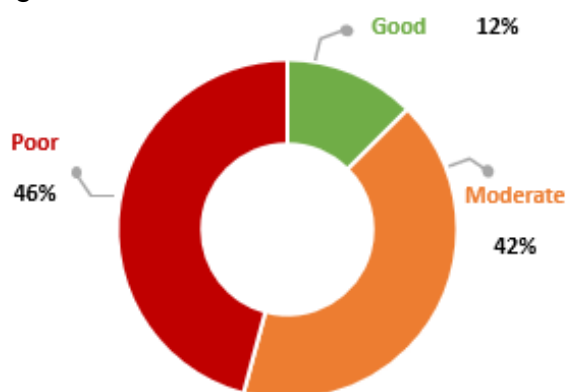


Figure B. The condition of designation features at each Local Wildlife Site surveyed in 2020-21.

These early results and observations provide an indication of the condition and status of our Local Wildlife Site network. However, continued monitoring is needed to establish trends which can then be used to inform LWS management and priorities. In addition, LWS monitoring informs understanding around the state of our natural environment and strategic decisions around recovery and habitat improvement across the Liverpool City Region. We need to be ambitious in terms of our survey programme but also mindful of resource limitations. Therefore, in 2021-22, **we are looking forward to the prospect of a full survey season and are optimistic we can survey at least 10% of LWSs in North Merseyside.**

As part of the wider Local Wildlife Site project, MEAS are **reviewing the guidelines for site selection, scoping potential new sites** for ground truthing and possible designation and identifying those sites where boundary extensions could be achieved. We plan to share the results of this work with the **Local Sites Partnership** in due course and explore opportunities to improve management.

1. Introduction

1.1 Local Wildlife Sites

Local Wildlife Sites are non-statutory designated sites which aim to protect the conservation of species and habitats. Local Wildlife Sites contain valuable natural assets that contribute to biodiversity through their exceptional diversity, by supporting rare or priority habitats and species and by providing a network of sites through which species can pass.



Michaelmas daisies,
Childwall Woods and Fields LWS

“The Local Wildlife Sites system should select all areas of substantive value, including both the most important and the most distinctive species, habitats, geological and geomorphological features within a national, regional and local context. Sites within the series may also have an important role in contributing to the public enjoyment of nature conservation.”

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), report April 2000.

In parts of the country, Local Wildlife Sites provide the largest area of nature conservation designation. In England, Local Wildlife Sites cover 5% of the total land area (*The Wildlife Trusts, 2018*). However, within North Merseyside, Local Wildlife Sites cover nearly 25% of the land area. Whilst there are some significant variations between districts e.g. the heavily designated Sefton Coast, almost a quarter of North Merseyside is protected by local planning policy. Therefore, Local Wildlife Sites are extremely important spaces for our local nature and wildlife.

Local Wildlife Sites within North Merseyside continue to be a valuable asset to wildlife and people. The importance of green spaces to the health and wellbeing of our local communities has been highlighted during the Covid-19 Pandemic and our monitoring shows high levels of public use of the LWS network. The protection Local Wildlife Site's receive from Local Plans and appropriate management is key to not only providing a refuge for important habitats and species, but also conserving green spaces that are fundamental in providing economic and social benefits to local people.

1.2 Defra Guideline

In 2006 Defra issued guidelines based around the principle that:

“whilst Local Sites may also provide other benefits, they contain features of substantive nature conservation value and that the purpose of selection is to provide recognition of this value and to help conserve those features by affording the sites an appropriate degree of protection.”

Defra advise that the general condition of each Local Wildlife Site is monitored to ensure the features for which the site was originally designated are still present. LWS monitoring is also needed to establish trends which can then be used to inform LWS management and future Local Sites Partnership priorities. The information gathered from monitoring is reported to The Single Data List - a collection of datasets through which Local Authorities report their data for a variety of services to central government. The ‘160-00 Improved Local Biodiversity Indicator’ requires reporting of condition data over a 5-year period. Monitoring a minimum of 10% of Local Wildlife Sites each year supports the reporting of this performance indicator.

Further, Local Authorities have a Biodiversity Duty (NERC Act 2006) and recommendation 12 of *Making Space for Nature* (Lawton *et al.* 2010) is that Local Authorities take responsibility for the identification and monitoring of Local Wildlife Sites. Within North Merseyside this is being undertaken through the Merseyside Local Sites Partnership and published through ‘The status of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside, Local Wildlife Sites Annual Monitoring Report’.

1.3 Local Sites Partnership

The North Merseyside Local Sites Partnership was established following Defra’s 2006 Guidelines and comprises representatives from local authorities (Knowsley, Liverpool, St. Helens and Sefton), Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS), nature conservation charities, statutory agencies, consultant ecologists and local nature experts. The Local Sites Partnership selects sites to be designated and can deselect sites as a last resort. For a site to be recommended for designation, it must meet selection guidelines using the North Merseyside Local Wildlife Sites Designation Guidelines, which are currently under review. This review process allows for conservation efforts to be focused on the sites which have the most value for designation.



Cabin Hill LWS
Photograph by Dr Phil Smith

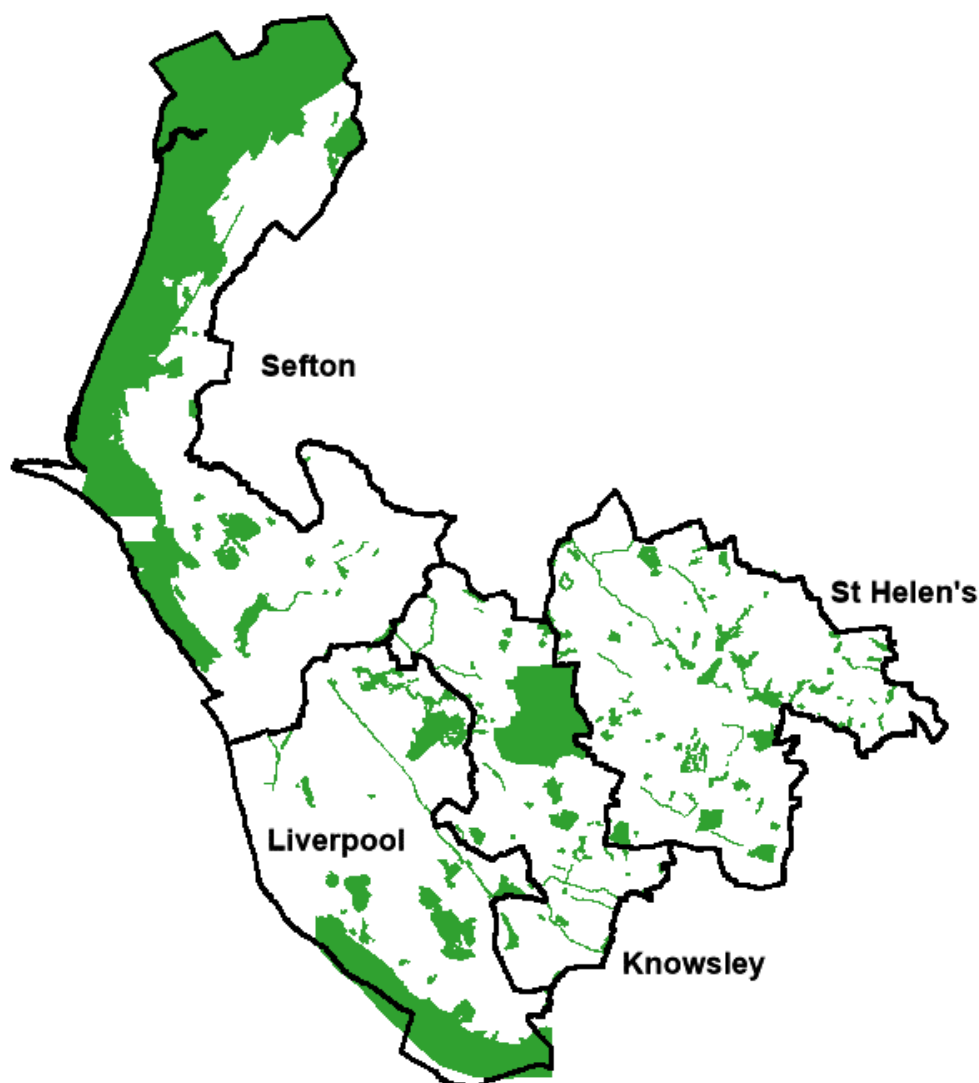


Figure 1. Local Wildlife Sites in North Merseyside.

This map can also be accessed online at:

<https://www.activenaturalist.org.uk/mbb/misc/ws/map.html>

The Local Nature Partnership is responsible for 268 Local Wildlife Sites in North Merseyside. MEAS, in association with Merseyside BioBank, are responsible for co-ordinating monitoring the condition of Local Wildlife Sites on behalf of the Local Sites Partnership and North Merseyside's Local Planning Authorities. Monitoring allows us to confirm the presence or absence of designation features on site so that we can inform and make recommendations to the landowner of the most appropriate management to benefit those designations features.

Whilst, sites are periodically lost or fragmented by development, this is generally rare and shows the strength of protection Local Wildlife Sites receive through local planning policy. Furthermore, this demonstrates the importance of up-to-date monitoring and the need for a proactive Local Wildlife Site designation system led by the Local Sites Partnership.

1.4 Aims

The aims of Local Wildlife Site monitoring are to:

- Maintain an overview of the condition of the site (i.e. are the features of importance still present and in good condition);
- Identify management actions required so that landowners can be informed accordingly;
- Provide information on sites that are at risk from development, inadequate land management and invasive species;
- Provide data to help the Local Authorities report on the Single Data List indicator - Local Wildlife Sites in Positive Conservation Management;
- To inform the evidence base for the emerging Liverpool City Region Nature Recovery Networks and Local Nature Recovery Strategies as required by the forthcoming Environment Bill;
- Recommend actions to help Local Authorities meet their Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) duties under Section 40;
- Provide information for Local Authorities to report the current status of Local Wildlife Sites in their Annual Monitoring Reports;
- Provide data that can be used to measure the effectiveness of Local Plan policy protection;
- Keep the Local Development Framework Evidence Base on Local Wildlife Sites up-to-date; and
- Meet Recommendation 12 as set out in Making Space for Nature (*Lawton et al*).

From 2021, the LSP has set a target to **survey at least 10% of Local Wildlife Sites** per year to help inform the Single Data List indicator. The Local Sites Partnership has been impacted by public sector cuts over the last 10 years. This has resulted in there being less resourcing available to sustain the Local Sites Partnership and a subsequent reduction in condition monitoring by MEAS. However, due to the importance of Local Wildlife Sites and their relevance to new and upcoming policies and strategies such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Environment Bill, the Local Site Partnership will be revived in Summer 2021. MEAS has begun undertaking Local Wildlife Site monitoring and is drafting a revised version of the Site Selection Guidelines.

Emerging Environment Bill & Biodiversity Net Gain



The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that planning policy “*should identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable gains for biodiversity*” and that “*Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity...*”.

In January 2018, the Government published A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment which sets out a broad strategy to leave the “*environment in a better state than we found it*”. One key approach is to strengthen the planning system so that biodiversity net gains become mandatory, effectively changing the NPPF’s “should” to a “must”.

As Biodiversity Net Gain is set to become mandatory through the Enactment of the Environment Bill¹, Local Authorities will play a key role in implementation. Amongst other environmental obligations, the Environment Bill will bring in a mandatory requirement for a minimum 10% Biodiversity Net Gain through the planning system and the need to establish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Nature Recovery Networks (NRN). The Local Nature Recovery Strategy will identify strategic locations for nature recovery and improvement. Local Wildlife Sites will play an important role in the delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain by providing sites for habitat improvements and creation and directing habitat gain to the most appropriate and deliverable locations.

In North Merseyside, MEAS have been liaising with strategic partners to identify options for implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain in our subregion. The Liverpool City Region (LCR) Natural Capital Baseline will play a key role.

The Local Wildlife Site condition monitoring has multiple uses including update of the LCR Natural Capital Baseline through provision of habitat and condition data. It also provides a baseline from which to measure biodiversity net gain. Furthermore, the Phase 1 Habitat Survey data collected from previous Local Wildlife Sites monitoring has been used to ensure the baseline is as accurate as possible. Therefore, it is crucial that we monitor our Local Wildlife Sites to inform natural capital work, strategic planning for nature and measure Biodiversity Net Gain in North Merseyside.

¹ Expected in Autumn 2021



2. Methodology

2.1 Site Selection

The annual sites survey programme is guided by a number of criteria, including:

- **Date of previous monitoring; and**
- **Condition.**

The aim of the LWS monitoring programme is to provide a rolling programme of survey so all sites are monitored at least once every 10 years.

In 2020-21 as Local Sites monitoring had not been undertaken for a number of years, we targeted those sites which had not been monitored for a long time and prioritised those which were known to be in poor condition. For some sites this was the first time they had been monitored in 20 years. This year due to Covid-19 restrictions only publicly owned or publicly accessible sites were surveyed.

The monitoring of Local Wildlife Sites has eight key stages as outlined below:

Desktop Analysis

Desktop analysis of sites is the initial stage of data collection:


- Species records from previous surveys of the site are obtained from the Local Environmental Record Centre - Merseyside BioBank;
- Previous survey proformas, maps and photographs are used to provide an initial baseline understanding of the site;
- Aerial imagery, online mapping resources (such as DEFRA's MAGIC) and historical Phase 1 Survey maps are used to further determine baseline conditions;
- Other information that has been carried out for a number of functions, such as planning applications or monitoring schemes, are also consulted to gather as much data as possible.

Contact Land Managers

Where sites are in private ownership, permission is sought for access to the land. For sites that are in public ownership, notice is sent to council departments informing them that surveys will be taking place during the monitoring period.


Risk Assessment

A site-specific risk assessment is produced for each site and each surveyor is required to read and sign a copy to state that they have read and understood the document before any monitoring commenced.




Site Visit

Walkover surveys are conducted for each site. Surveys are conducted between April and March the following year. Surveys include inspected site boundaries, habitat and species features, current activities and management practices, and suggest management and enhancement that would be of benefit to biodiversity. Photographs are taken of sites to provide an additional visual record.



Complete Monitoring Forms & Maps

The monitoring forms are completed on site visits as part of walkover surveys. Phase 1 Habitat Survey target note records are also completed on site. Target notes and maps and monitoring forms are digitised to ensure an electronic copy is created. Site and habitat condition are assessed using the Biodiversity Net Gain Metric 2.0 guidance.



Capture Species Data

Copies of the species list and target notes (where relevant) are passed to Merseyside BioBank for inclusion within their database.



Report to Landowners

Upon completion of the desk study and survey visit, the completed monitoring forms and maps will be collated and sent to the appropriate landowners. This ensures that the management recommendations are provided as quickly as possible so that any updates to management regimes can be made accordingly.

2.2 Survey Limitation

The 2020-21 survey period was unfortunately shortened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This limited the number of surveys that could be undertaken and resulted in surveys predominantly being undertaken at the tail-end of the optimal survey season (August-September). Although, habitats were readily identifiable at the time of survey, some designated features of Local Wildlife Sites, such as several early flowering plants and fauna e.g. native bluebell and water vole, are less likely to have been observed. As a result, further surveys will be required to provide confidence in results. Although this is a minor limitation, the information collected during surveys was still valuable for assessing site condition.

Where surveys were undertaken, they were done in a Covid-safe manner, following up-to-date government guidance and the use of appropriate risk assessments.



Sefton Park LWS

3. Results



3.1 Sites Monitored

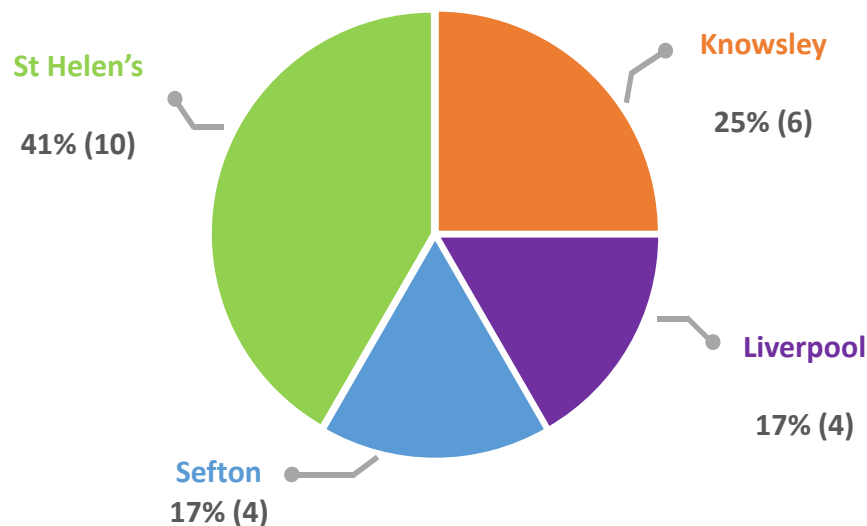


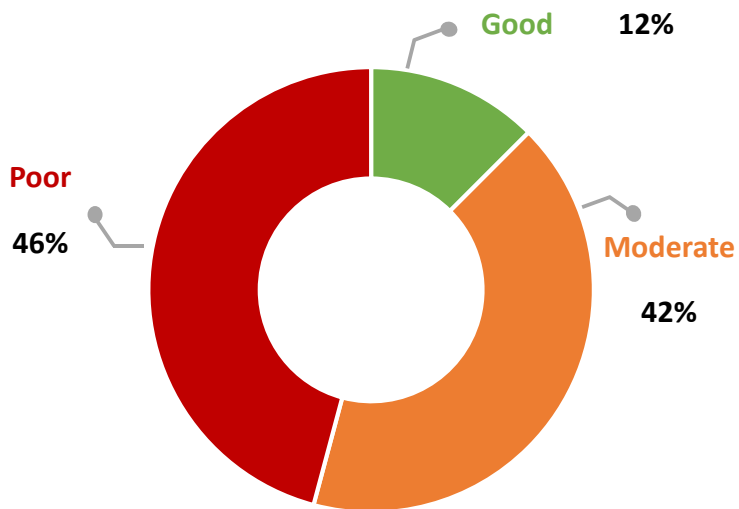
Figure 2. The proportion of Local Wildlife Sites monitored within each district in North Merseyside in 2020-21.

The largest proportion of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed in 2020-21 were located in St Helen's, which can be seen clearly in Figure 2. Knowsley had 6 sites surveyed by MEAS during this survey period, followed closely by Sefton and Liverpool. St Helen's have the most Local Wildlife Sites in North Merseyside with over 100, in comparison to Liverpool which only has 30 sites, many of which were surveyed recently as part of the Biodiverse Society Project (2015-16). This uneven spread of LWS across North Merseyside was taken into consideration when programming sites to survey.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously this year due to Covid-19 restrictions only publicly owned or publicly accessible sites were surveyed.

You can find summaries of each site MEAS surveyed during 2020 in Appendix 2.

3.2 Site Condition



Nearly half of LWSs surveyed this year were found to be in poor condition in relation to their habitat designation features (Figure 3). With only 12% of sites found to be in in good condition.

This result isn't all bad news or unexpected as during this survey period (2020-21), we prioritised sites known to be in poor condition. The results show that many LWSs therefore remain in poor condition.

Figure 3. The condition of designation features at each Local Wildlife Site surveyed in 2020-21.

In 2020-21 survey period, over 50% of LWSs surveyed were identified as being in poor conservation management. Furthermore, almost 30% of sites were recognised as being in positive conservation management (Figure 4).

Results seen in Figure 3 and 4 highlight the need for more targeted management of publicly owned LWSs. Whilst monitoring we noted that many LWSs are being managed for amenity purposes. However, a common observation was that the designation features e.g. water vole, standing water, unimproved grassland, etc were not being actively managed.

3.3 Positive Conservation Management

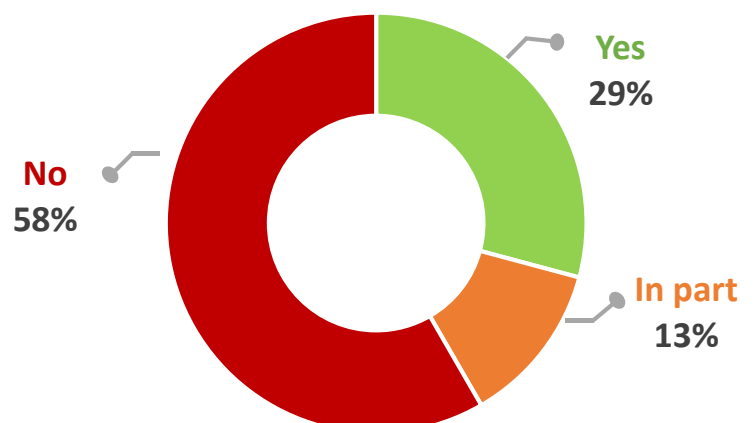


Figure 4. The proportion of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed that are in positive conservation management in 2020-21.

3.4 Designated Features

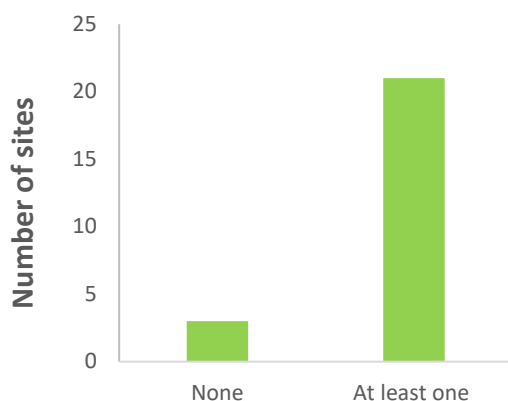


Figure 5. The number of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed with none or at least one designation feature present.

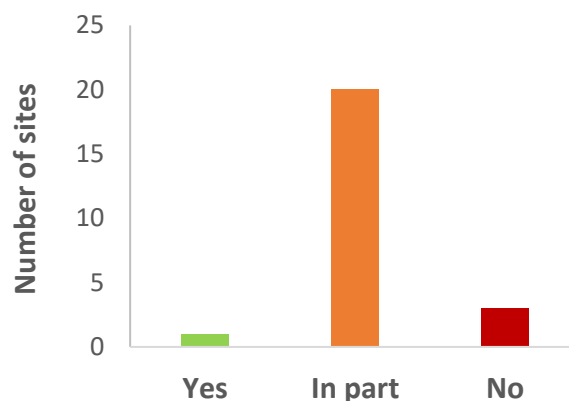


Figure 6. The number of Local Wildlife Sites where designation features were recorded in full, in part and not at all, at the time of survey.

The majority of sites surveyed in 2020-21 had at least one designation feature present at the time of survey (**Figure 5**). Three sites were identified as having none of their designation features present. Of the 21 sites with at least one feature found, only 1 site met all the designation features for which the site had been cited (**Figure 6**). The majority of sites surveyed had more than one feature present but not all.

A number of limitations prevented full survey of designation features during site visits this year, such as access issues and sub-optimal survey timing. For example, this year water voles were the most common species designation feature of sites surveyed, but they were found to be absent at a large number of these sites in 2020-21. This could be explained by a number of factors, including lack of access to brook, sub-optimal survey time.

3.5 Current Management

During the 2020-21 survey season 19 Local Wildlife Sites had evidence of current management taking place (**Figure 7**) and most sites surveyed have management plans in place which is welcomed. Many sites are being managed but not in relation to their designation features. This could be due to limited resources but also due to a lack of awareness of designation features and appropriate management strategies.

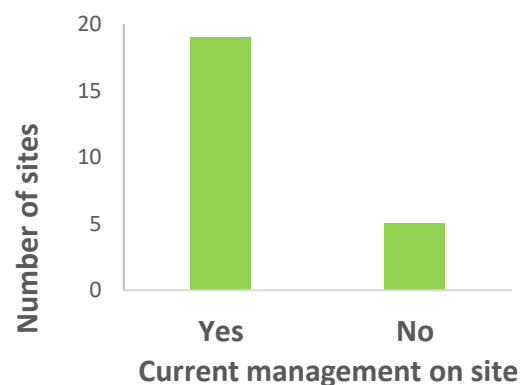


Figure 7. The number of Local Wildlife Sites where management was observed.

3.6 On-site activities

Walking and dog walking continue to be the most recorded activities within LWSs (Figure 8). This is a behaviour seen across the country as over 50% of people use public green spaces to walk their dogs (*Land Trust, 2016*). This again highlights the importance and value of Local Wildlife Sites to local communities. However, evidence of dog fouling and anti-social behaviour such as, fires and fly-tipping were observed on nearly 20% site visited in 2020-21.

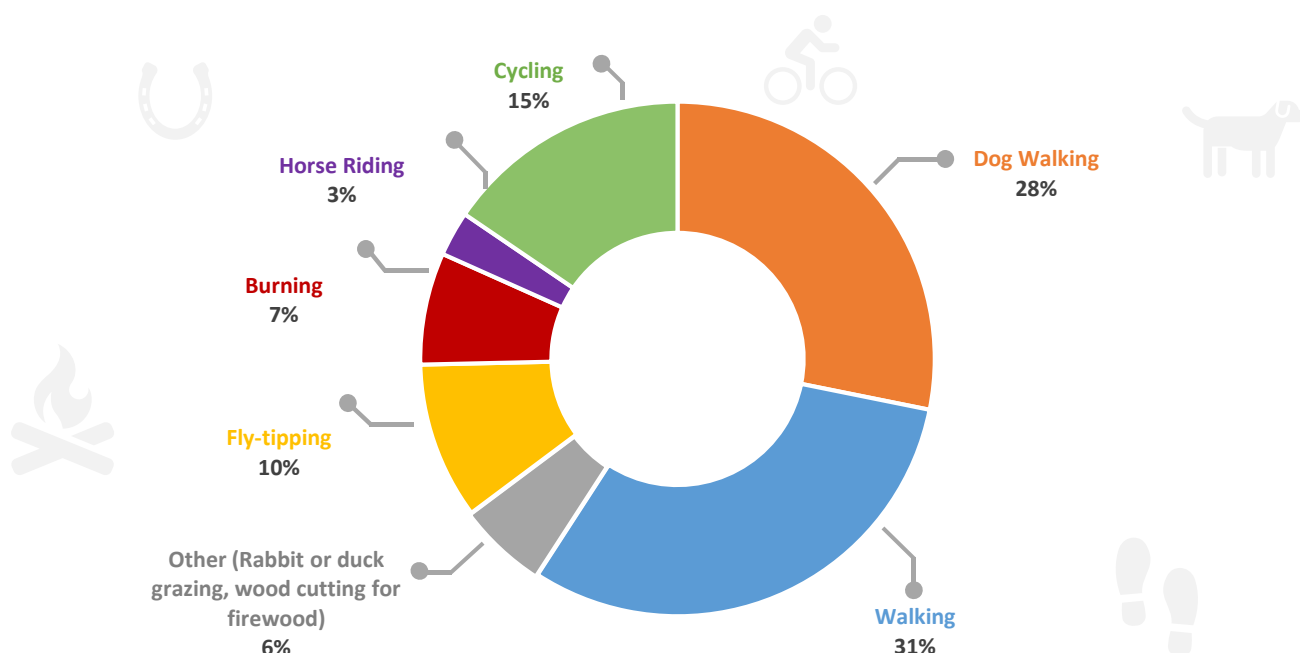


Figure 8. The different activities observed on-site during surveying.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the number of people visiting the greenspaces has increased in the last year and this has shown how valued the natural environment is by the general public. This is welcomed. However, as ever there were a number of incidences across the country of irresponsible activities taking place, which caused damage, within North Merseyside there have been fires reported at Crosby Coastal Park (March 2021) and illegal raves in Formby Woods. Natural England (*Countryside Code Survey, 2021*) believe that these incidents came about as the result of a lack of understanding of how to engage positively with the natural environment, rather than by deliberate acts of damage. As a result, Natural England have recently reviewed and published an updated Countryside Code with a hope to better engage with a wider range of people (Natural England, 2021).

3.7 Threats and pressures

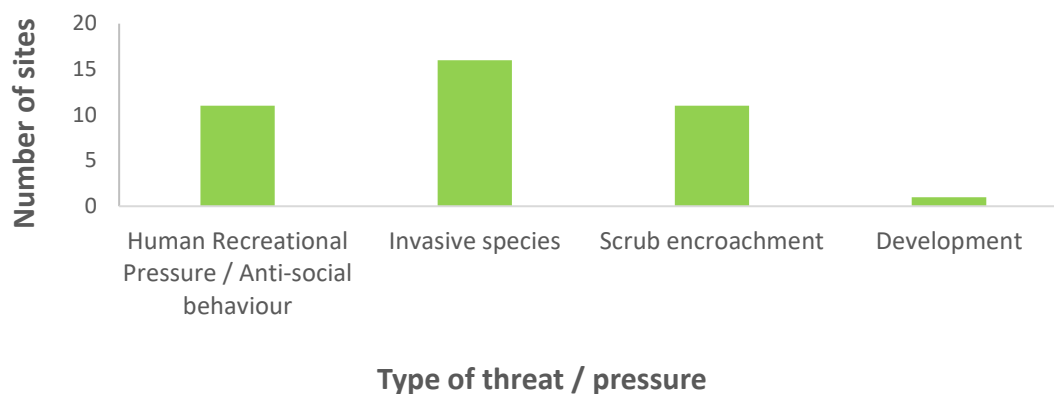


Figure 8. The types of threats and pressures faced by each site surveyed in 2020-21.

Invasive species were identified as being the most common threat to Local Wildlife Sites during surveying in 2020-21 (Figure 8). Scrub encroachment was the second most common, followed closely by human recreational pressure or anti-social behaviour. Kirkby Brook, Northwood LWS was the only site to be affected by approved development. The site has recently undergone planned construction works where by the brook's banks have been reinforced with concrete, which has removed any potential water vole habitat for which the site is designated.

3.7.1 Invasive Species

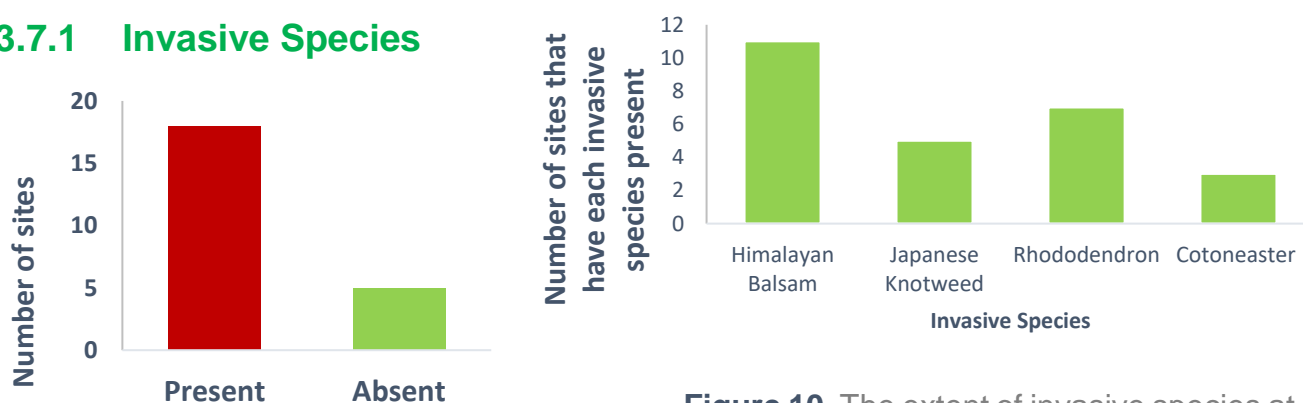


Figure 9. The number of Local Wildlife Sites with invasive species present or absent at time of survey.

Figure 10. The extent of invasive species at Local Wildlife Sites surveyed.

(*Rhododendron ponticum* and any species of *cotoneaster* under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act).

Invasive species are prevalent at **over 75%** of LWSs surveyed in 2020-21. The extent of each different invasive species at each site surveyed can be seen in **Figure 10** above. Himalayan balsam was recorded at over half of the sites surveyed this year. This reflects the number of brooks included within monitoring in 2020-21 and tendency of this species to follow linear corridors. Rhododendron was the second most common invasive species, followed by Japanese Knotweed and cotoneaster. Our surveys found the majority of LWSs had **between 5 and 10% of the total site covered by invasive species**. Evidence of extensive invasive species control was observed during our visit to Childwall Woods and Fields. Friends of Childwall Woods and Fields had treated 2000m² of Japanese Knotweed on site several months before our survey. This kind of positive conservation management is welcomed and will improve biodiversity on site.

3.8 Adjacent land use

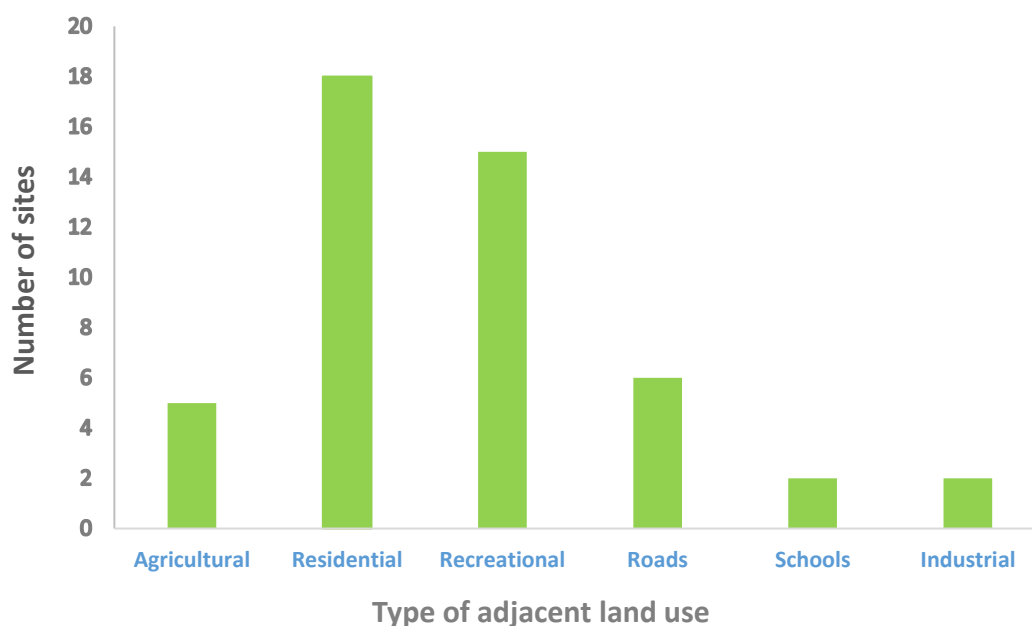


Figure 11. The different type of land use found adjacent to each site surveyed.

The most common land use adjacent to Local Wildlife Sites surveyed this year was residential, closely followed by recreation. You can also see from **Figure 11** that we surveyed 5 sites adjacent to agricultural land in 2020-21.

The sites surveyed were mainly publicly owned / accessible sites typically located in urban areas and therefore it is unsurprising that in these urban areas, residential housing was the most common type of adjacent land use.



Parks and green spaces are vital assets in urban landscapes. Green spaces provide an economic value to the local community. This can be seen in Port Sunlight River Park, Wirral, where a recent study found that the redevelopment of the former landfill site, has resulted in a £7.8 million increase in property value within a 500m radius of the park (*The Land Trust, 2017*). Not only do these green spaces have an economic benefit, they also play an important role in people's physical and mental health, a study found that 90% of people feel that our green spaces play a positive part in their happiness and wellbeing (*Land Trust, 2016*). The same study also found that 9 out of 10 people feel that our green spaces encourage them to keep fit and healthy. The value of green spaces to the health and wellbeing of our local communities has been highlighted during this pandemic. The protection Local Wildlife Sites receive from Local Plans is key to not only providing a refuge for the habitats and species, but also conserving green spaces that are fundamental in providing economic and social benefits to local people.

3.9 District summary results

Knowsley

Was evidence of management observed on site?



■ Yes ■ No

Where sites in positive conservation management?



■ Yes ■ No

Where invasive species observed on site?



■ Present ■ Absent

Condition of Knowsley LWSs surveyed



■ Moderate ■ Poor

Liverpool

Was evidence of management observed on site?



■ Yes ■ No

Where sites in positive conservation management?



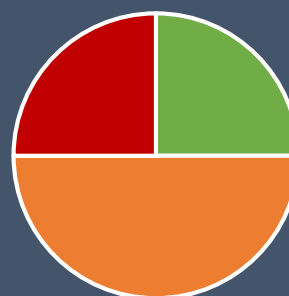
■ Yes ■ In Part

Where invasive species observed on site?



■ Present ■ Absent

Condition of Liverpool LWSs surveyed



■ Good ■ Moderate ■ Poor

Sefton

Was evidence of management observed on site?



■ Yes ■ No

Where sites in positive conservation management?



■ Yes ■ No

Where invasive species observed on site?



■ Present ■ Absent

Condition of Liverpool LWSs surveyed



■ Good ■ Moderate ■ Poor

St Helen's

Was evidence of management observed on site?



■ Yes ■ No

Where sites in positive conservation management?



■ Yes ■ No

Where invasive species observed on site?



■ Present ■ Absent

Condition of St Helens LWSs surveyed



■ Good ■ Moderate ■ Poor

4. Conclusions

Given the unprecedented circumstances during the 2020-21 survey season, MEAS are delighted to have surveyed **24 Local Wildlife Sites** across all four districts in North Merseyside. The information gathered during each site visit, in particular habitat condition data, is extremely valuable and will help target habitat improvements.

The results of the 2020-21 survey season highlight that many LWSs in North Merseyside are in **poor ecological condition in relation to their designation features**. Many of these sites have management plans in place and are being managed for amenity purposes. However, these sites lack tailored management which is specific for the designation features of each site. This finding is supported by the majority of sites surveyed not being in positive conservation management. This trend is not new, the Annual Monitoring Report in 2011 noted similar concerns. It is evident that the majority of sites require targeted management, to maintain, reinstate or improve the designated features to a greater or lesser extent. This issue and potential solutions will be discussed further through the Local Sites Partnership.

A major problem continues to be **invasive species** this is particularly an issue within woodland and riparian habitats. Prevalence of invasive species at LWSs is undoubtedly due to a lack of invasive control from resource stretched land managers and Councils. It can be shown that those sites that are managed for conservation have retained habitat features. If some resources which are currently focused upon management of public amenity, were redirected to target conservation improvement there could be a significant increase in the condition and ecological value of many LWSs. The relaxation of some management strategies could also result in a reduction in costs for site managers and land owners. This is particularly relevant for council owned parks, verges and greenspaces.

Some sites were found to be in good condition and management was observed to be maintaining and enhancing the designation features. Local Authorities should be commended that sites in their ownership are providing important areas for locally rare habitats and species.

The continued monitoring of LWSs is needed across North Merseyside to inform Local Authorities, land managers and owners of the requirements of the sites. **We are looking forward to the 2021-22 survey season and are optimistic we can survey at least 10% of LWSs in North Merseyside.** This target will help gather condition data to inform the work of the Local Sites Partnership. This data will help to inform the Single Data List for reporting back to DEFRA and provide baseline information for future Biodiversity Net Gain contributions

MEAS are also currently reviewing the guidelines for site selection, scoping out potential new sites for designation and those sites that need boundary extensions. We welcome input from the wider LSP in this process. We hope that these proactive steps will ensure that the selection and de-selection process regarding LWSs remains dynamic and the LSP will be fundamental to this process.

Finally, in Summer of 2021, we aim to relaunch the Local Sites Partnership to ensure that representatives from local authorities, nature conservation charities, statutory agencies, consultant ecologists and local naturalists have their say in LWSs in North Merseyside. We look forward to working with you all to improve our LWS network.



Glasshouse Close Wood LWS

Bibliography

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2006) "Local Sites Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management." Available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/local-sites/localsites.pdf>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2018) "A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment".

Entec Uk Ltd (2010) "Review of the Biodiversity Duty contained in Section 40 of the NERC Act 2006"

Hartley, A (2008) "The status of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside 2008". Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service.

Hartley, A (2009) "The status of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside 2009". Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service

King, T (2011) "Local Wildlife Site Annual Monitoring Report". Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service

Lawton et al (2010). *Making Space for Nature: A review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network*.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) "National Planning Policy Framework".

Natural England (2021). Countryside Code Survey.

Rhodes, R (2007) "The status of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside 2007". Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service.

Rhodes, R (2008) "North Merseyside Local Wildlife Sites Selection Guidelines". Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service.

The Land Trust (2016) "The value of our greenspaces".

The Land Trust (2017) "Evidence of Economic Impact of Port Sunlight River Park"

The Wildlife Trusts (2008) "Status of English Local Wildlife Sites systems"

Appendix 1

A list of sites monitored during 2020-2021:

Knowsley

1. Akers Pits
2. Kirkby Brook
3. Kirkby Brook, includes Mill Brook
4. Kirkby Brook, Northwood
5. Mill Brook, Westvale
6. Simonswood Brook

Liverpool

1. Childwall Woods and Fields and Black Wood Local Nature Reserve
2. Woolton Manor, Woolton Woods and Camp Hill
3. Otterspool Park and Gorge
4. Speke Hall National Trust Estate & adjacent land

Sefton

1. Leeds-Liverpool Canal
2. Pond and Open Space Copy Lane Netherton
3. Westcliffe Road Verge
4. Whinny Brook, Maghull

St Helens

1. Billinge Beacon
2. Clinkham Wood
3. Downham Walk, pond and marsh
4. Clock Face Country Park Pond
5. Land west of Gerrard's Lane
6. Rough grassland around Sutton Dam stream
7. Sherdley Park & Golf Course
8. Sutton Mill Dam
9. Glasshouse Close Wood
10. Stanley Bank Meadows, Woodland and Pond

Note: *Full monitoring reports will be provided to landowners and managers and can also be provided on request.*

Appendix 2

Detailed District information

Knowsley

Six sites were monitored within Knowsley during 2020-21 and the results are summarised below.

Akers Pits

- The privately-owned woodland is dominated by a mixture of mature tree species. A series of ponds is highlighted as important on this site and were recorded as present.
- Usage of the site was recorded as very limited. The current management seemed limited and is not focused upon maintaining the features of conservation interest.
- The ponds were all shaded by trees growing around them. They were also very shallow and full of leaf litter. Very limited aquatic and marginal vegetation were recorded. Some clearance of these trees around the ponds was recommended.
- There is some regeneration of trees, but this was recorded as limited to sycamores. The scrub/shrub layer is reasonably diverse but limited in distribution. Clearance of the sycamore trees and samplings would encourage more ground flora to develop and the scrub/shrub layer to expand.

Kirky Brook

- An open water course designated for its suitability for water voles.
- Water vole habitat remains present with some stretches of the bank containing more suitable grassland habitats than others.
- Himalayan balsam was present and encroaching further along the brook.
- There were some willow trees shading sections of the brook.
- Littering was an issue in some sections of the brook.
- Management of Himalayan balsam and scrub control would benefit water vole and native species of plant.

Kirkby Brook, including Mill Brook

- Stream course and banks rich in plants with exposures of sandstone in places and wet flushes.
- Abundant Himalayan balsam and scrub encroachment along the banks.
- Management of amenity grassland was taking place.
- A pontoon for ducks was present within the pond. The pond was being used for fishing.
- Kirby Brook would benefit from invasive species and scrub control and tree cutting to remove shading.

Kirkby Brook, Northwood

- An open water course designated for its suitability for water voles.
- No invasive species were present. The recent neighbouring development has possibly resulted in the removal of invasive species.
- Grassland and tall ruderal vegetation occupy the banks. One section has been reinforced with concrete making it less ideal for water voles.
- Creation of species rich meadow along the banks would enhance water vole habitat and increased species diversity.

Mill Brook, Westvale

- An open water course designated for its suitability for water voles.
- Himalayan balsam and scrub dominate the brook banks limiting the presence of native grassland species.
- The surrounding park is managed for amenity purposes with frequent mowing.
- The riparian habitats are not being managed at present.
- Invasive species and scrub control is needed as well as the removal of rubbish from the brook.

Simonswood Brook

- A long stretch of brook, which forms another part of the water vole hotspot within Liverpool and Knowsley.
- The brook is slow flowing with steep banks. These were covered in grass and tall herb species providing suitable conditions for water voles, although Himalayan balsam is dominant in some areas.
- A number of water vole signs were recorded, including feeding remains, holes and latrines.
- The habitat is suitable for water voles and the only management recommendation is to remove the invasive species.

Liverpool

Four sites were surveyed in Liverpool during 2020-21 and the results are summarised below.

Childwall Woods and Fields and Black Wood Local Nature Reserve

- Childwall Woods originate from the Earl of Salisbury's formal gardens and hall and are over 300 years old.
- Designated habitats include broadleaved plantation woodland, unimproved acidic and neutral grassland and a sandstone rock exposure.
- Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, Rhododendron and Cotoneaster were all present on site,
- The Japanese knotweed covered around 2000m and was being treated.
- Unimproved acid grassland appears to have been lost and the unimproved neutral grassland has become overgrown with tall ruderals and scrub and required management.
- Scrub encroachment has resulted in the loss of marshy grassland.

- Management recommendations include invasive species control, tree removal, litter picking, scrub removal and cutting of the grassland to prevent tall ruderal domination.

Woolton Manor, Woolton Woods and Camp Hill

- Woolton Wood and Camp Hill form a large park, comprising of mature woodland and trees, semi-improved grassland, amenity grassland and a number of small ponds.
- Recreational activities include walking and dog walking.
- Japanese knotweed, rhododendron and giant knotweed were all present on site.
- The broadleaved woodland was in good condition with deadwood, however, the pond had completely silted up and was heavily shaded by trees.
- Invasive species control is required as well as scrub management, meadow re-creation through cutting regimes and dredging of the pond.

Otterspool Park and Gorge

- Otterspool Gorge supports a relatively high diversity of habitats centred upon a deep sandstone gorge. Its woodlands are classified as ancient but are currently dominated by secondary and plantation Beech and Sycamore with a variety of other canopy species including several exotics.
- Within the woodland there was a range of standing and fallen deadwood, some ancient woodland indicators were showing during the survey (i.e. bluebell). However, there was an abundance of cherry laurel and rhododendron in the understorey, these species need to be controlled.
- The URBAN GreenUP project has planted a collection of fruit trees on some semi-improved grassland to provide a community orchard. Furthermore, two water retention ponds have been created to hold excess water during period of heavy rainfall. Bird and bat boxes have also been installed.

Speke Hall National Trust Estate & adjacent land

- The National Trust site comprises of a high diversity of habitats ranging from the Ancient Woodland of Stockton's Wood, semi-improved grassland and ex-arable land to ponds and wet ditches.
- One pond is located in the centre of the arable field. Other ponds support a wide range of aquatic and marginal plant species, including Bogbean, Broad-leaved Pondweed, Gipsywort, Water-plantain and Yellow Water-lily as well as great crested newt. However, GCN surveys in 2019/2020 found no GCN in ponds on site.
- Some vegetation has been cleared or thinned by the rangers that are active on site. An area of heathland had been left in-situ within the main lawn of the property.
- Following the closure of the site in 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions, mowing of the grassland in the car park was lessened. Subsequently, a population of orchids was observed by rangers on site. This has now been fenced off so that it won't form part of the mowing regime to benefit the orchids.

Sefton

Five sites were monitored within Sefton during 2020-21 and the results are summarised below.

Leeds-Liverpool Canal

- The canal has good aquatic and marsh communities. This site continues on from the canal in Rimrose Valley. Water voles have been present previously and suitable habitat is still present.
- The Canal is used for a range of recreational activities such as dog walking, walking and cycling and evidence of burning and fly-tipping were also present.
- The unimproved grassland appears to have transitioned into semi-improved grassland.
- Reedbeds and bulrush are present along the canal indicating that the swamp tall fen and single species dominant swamp remain present.
- The grassland management regime could include mowing access areas but leaving other areas to grow into taller grassland stands. This would allow a more diverse range of species to develop, including wildflowers.

Pond and Open Space Copy Lane, Netherton

- An area of regenerated arable land now surrounded by housing. Dominated by scrub and neutral grassland with high plant diversity
- A small stand of cotoneaster and grey squirrel was present on site.
- The unimproved acid and neutral grassland appear to have been lost either through conversion to amenity grassland or it has transitioned to the semi-improved grassland.
- The pond was in poor condition as it was highly shaded by trees and had a high density of pondweed.
- Management recommendations include hawthorn coppicing, reducing mowing regime to allow for more diverse species to develop and reducing tree and scrub cover around the pond.

Westcliffe Road Verge

- A road verge of relict sand dune grassland which is in poor condition.
- Several sand dune/ calcareous species present but majority of site appears to have been enriched with common species which are out-competing sand dune plants.
- Smooth Rupture-wort, a nationally scarce plant has been recorded on site previously but was not recorded during this year's site visit. A follow-up is planned for 2021-22 survey season.
- Evidence of gravel/substrate previously added to areas around access*. Residential vehicle / parking leading to bare patches and ruts in verges.
- Management recommendations include a more regular mowing regime and avoid use of fertilisers.

Whinney Brook

- A stretch of brook which has a mix of habitats, including grassland, and is designated habitat for water voles but habitat now looks unsuitable or the site was previously misidentified.
- Himalayan balsam was present in three sections.
- Neutral grassland is present along Bailey way, however there isn't a species rich flora and the brook is becoming heavily shaded by trees and scrub.
- The management recommended for this site was to control the invasive species which are dominating some areas. Rubbish was also accumulating which would be useful to be removed.
- The thinning of some of the scrub and trees may extend the water vole habitat and reinstate the grassland.
- Ground flora planting would help to diversify the site's species list.

St. Helens

Ten sites were monitored in St Helens during 2020-21 and the results are summarised below.

Billinge Beacon

- Billinge Beacon comprises of the summit of the beacon and the restored landfill site.
- The summit of the beacon supports the only example of upland acid grassland in St. Helens and contains a habitat which is both nationally and regionally important.
- Oil Beetle has also recently been recorded on the beacon previously.
- The restored landfill is large neutral grassland site. Control of invasive species, such as Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed, which has been recorded adjacent to the site would prevent colonisation onto the grassland habitat.

Clinkham Wood LNR

- A Community Woodland which contains a variety of habitats, including grassland and wetland. The grasslands were recorded as present during the surveying but were in need of management to ensure they are retained.
- Rhododendron, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam are all present within the woodland.
- The woodland is maintained for recreation but there seems to be management for biodiversity, with fallen deadwood and trees left in situ. The understory is dominated by bramble and clearance of this would diversify the ground flora. Tree recruitment is good with a number of species saplings present.
- The grasslands in this site have been lost to scrub and bracken encroachment and invasive species. A further section of grassland is heavily mown.
- The woodland would also benefit from some sycamore removal to encourage more native species and allow more diversity in the ground flora.

Downham Walk, pond and marsh

- A large pond surrounded by willow and alder scrub on the boundary of the borough.
- There is limited access to this site as the pond and associated habitats are fenced off.
- The marsh habitats could not be found during the survey.
- The woodland was heavily shading the pond. Scrub and invasive species (Himalayan balsam), variegated yellow archangel and montbretia are encroaching onto the woodland.
- This site no longer meets designation.

Clock Face Country Park Pond

- A pond within the country park which contains a population of great crested newts. Habitats within the country park will also provide important terrestrial habitat for this population.
- The pond was in good condition with a range of aquatic plant species.
- No invasive species were present
- Young birch trees are encroaching on the pond and are in need of management to prevent the pond drying up.

Land west of Gerrard's Lane

- A millennium park with woodland, grassland and a brook present. The site is designated for the grassland habitats.
- It is likely that the grasslands are progressively being lost from this site, which seems to be dominated by woodland and scrub. Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam were also recorded on site.
- The current management of the site is unknown, but to ensure the important conservation features are not lost, it was recommended that scrub and tree removal/clearance were undertaken. The knotweed and balsam would also need eradication.

Rough Grassland around Sutton Dam Stream

- This site contains a mosaic of habitats including neutral grassland, scrub, broadleaf woodland and Sutton Dam Stream
- Marsh and swamp areas around Sutton Mill Brook that runs through the centre of the site were not apparent.
- The site contains a number of nationally and regionally important species including common comfrey which was present along the stream.
- Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed were growing along the stream and need removal before they spread downstream.

Sherdley Park

- A large council owned park and golf course, with a wide variety of habitats and species present. Great crested newts have been recorded breeding on site previously. The golf course section of the local wildlife site could not be monitored due to access.
- The grassland habitats were not recorded during the monitoring. However, these habitats may be present within the golf course. English bluebells were

recorded on site, but other plant species were not recorded. This may be because the habitats they grow in were not recorded.

- Great crested newts have been recorded breeding within the main lake in recent years. However, it was observed in monitoring that the population would be isolated due to the site being surrounded by roads and urban development.
- The park is managed for amenity purposes, with little habitat management undertaken. There was evidence of rhododendron removal and tree planting. The park would benefit from additional pond creation to encourage GCN and to improve connectivity to breeding ponds.

Sutton Mill Dam

- A water body created by the damming of Sutton Mill Brook.
- The dominant habitats on site are standing water and broadleaved woodland which are used recreationally for walking and fishing.
- The designated habitats, including single species dominant swamp and marshy grassland, are likely to have been significantly reduced or lost due to scrub, bracken and invasive species encroachment along the stream.
- Himalayan balsam was present on site.
- The site is managed as a Dam and for recreational purposes.

Glasshouse Close Wood

- The site comprises of ancient semi natural woodland on the banks of the Black Brook and St Helens Canal.
- The woodland is dominated by acidic oak woodland with alder and willow carr in the lower wetter areas. The woodland was found to be in good condition with regeneration and deadwood present. The woodland supports a diverse flora including English Bluebell as well as a number of regionally and locally important species. In addition, the woodland is a known breeding site for Purple hairstreak butterfly.
- Previous site surveys have found a significant amount of Himalayan balsam on site. During this survey no balsam was recorded, however this is probably due to time of survey.

Stanley Bank Meadows, Woodland and Pond

- The site comprises Stanley Bank Meadow SSSI, the largest area of lowland damp neutral grassland in Merseyside, and Stanley Bank Wood ancient semi-natural woodland. This is a diverse range of habitats and over 200 plant species are supported, a number of which are nationally, regionally and locally important.
- The site includes an area of dense young trees. These trees need coppicing.
- There is a small clump of Rhododendron within the woodland, this should be removed to prevent spread.