Local Wildlife Sites

Annual Monitoring Report 2022-23

North Merseyside Local Sites Partnership

An Assessment of Local Wildlife Sites in Merseyside

FINAL

July 2023

Report by
Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service on behalf of
North Merseyside Local Sites Partnership

North Merseyside LSP

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Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service

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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 2022 to 31 March 2023. 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 species and habitats of local conservation importance. 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 within each Local Authority area. 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 LSP had been in active for several years, however from Summer 2021 was relaunched. The Partnership comprises of 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.

Following successful recruitment in early 2020, MEAS was able to complete a programme of LWS monitoring during 2020-21 and launch the LSP website in 2021: https://northmerseysidelsp.org.uk This is a hub for all LSP and LWS monitoring information.

Against a continued backdrop of global ecological/climate emergency and a locally depleted ecological network, MEAS is committed to maximising the opportunities presented by biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery through the Environment Act (2021).

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 are 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;**
- **To provide data to help the Local Authorities report on the Defra Single Data List requirement; and**
- **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.**

For the first time since 2020-21 when Local Wildlife Site monitoring restarted, the survey season was relatively unaffected by Covid-19 restrictions therefore we were able to survey across the whole season including amphibian and water vole survey of relevant sites with parts such Mersey Rivers Trust.

However, due to staff changes the team collectively surveyed a total of 33 sites (12.4%) (Figure A). This is down from the 42 sites (16%) surveyed in 2021-22 but still betters our 10% target. ***District specific results can be found in the Results section.***

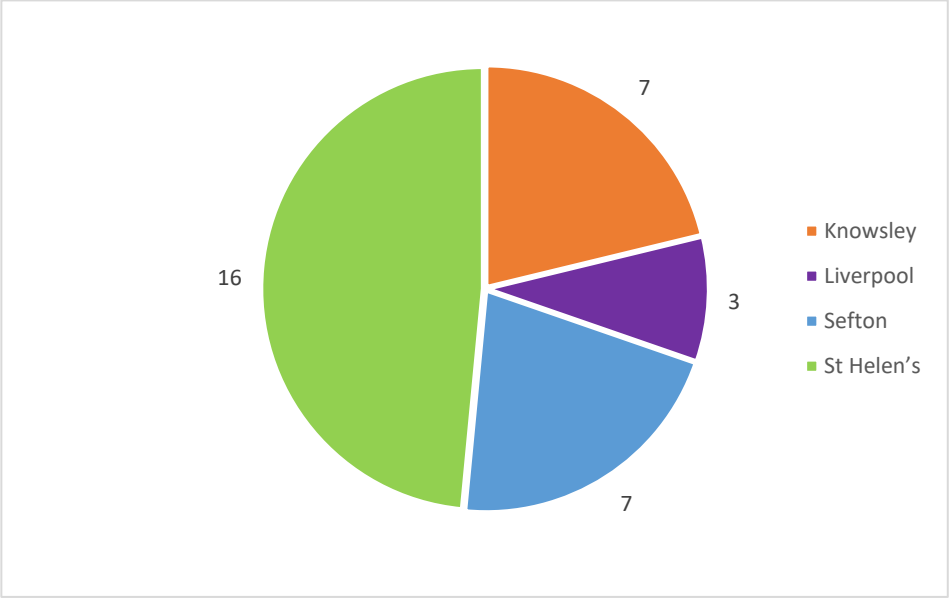


Figure A. The number of Local Wildlife Sites monitored within each district in North Merseyside in 2022-23.

The results of 2022-23 survey season continue to highlight long term trends showing **many LWSs in North Merseyside are not in positive conservation management, notably those sites away from more highly designated coastal areas.** This may be due to invasive species presence, fly-tipping and other factors (see Results section).

Survey this year focused on publicly owned and publicly accessible sites with access gained to some privately owned LWS where possible. **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 species control from resource stretched Councils and land managers, and of 33 sites surveyed in 2022-23 around 85% had invasive species present. We found that most sites with watercourses had invasive species present, notably Himalayan balsam. This species was present on 70% of sites surveyed.

Whilst many of these sites have management plans in place they were found to be primarily managed in terms of public access and amenity with the exception of the Sefton Coast LWSs where interventions e.g. for herptiles were evident. On many sites (away from the Coast) a common observation was a lack of tailored ecological management for the designation features of LWSs, such as water vole and standing water. **It is evident that the majority of Local Wildlife Sites require targeted management, to maintain, recover or improve designation features**.

Less than 10% of sites were found to be in good condition. Of those sites, 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.

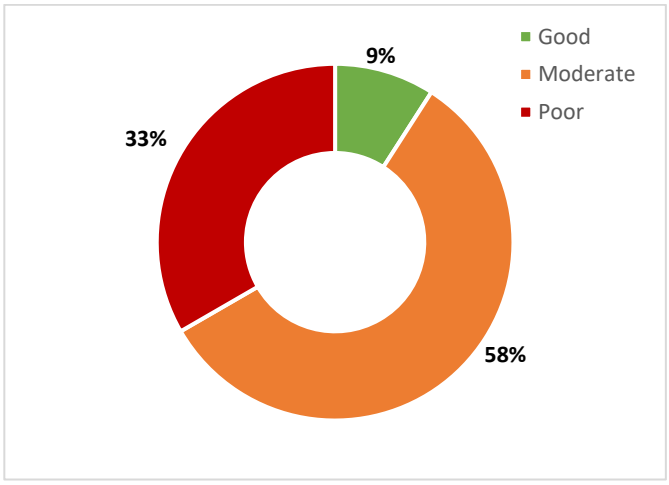


Figure B. The condition of designation features (habitats) at each Local Wildlife Site surveyed in 2022-23.

These results and observations reflect 2021-22 findings and provide an indication of the condition and status of our Local Wildlife Site network which is in a degraded state.

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 2023-24, we are looking forward to the prospect of another full survey season. With a growing survey team and continued support of partners we can again survey at least 10% of LWSs in North Merseyside**.

Monitoring of LWSs is already underway in April 2023 with water vole and Ancient Woodland being prioritised working collaboratively with our Local Sites Partnership including Mersey Rivers Trust and NorthWest Rare Plants Initiative.

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 prioritise this important work with the **Local Sites Partnership** later in 2023 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.

Jelly Ear fungi,
Mucky Mountains 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.

Ainsdale LWS

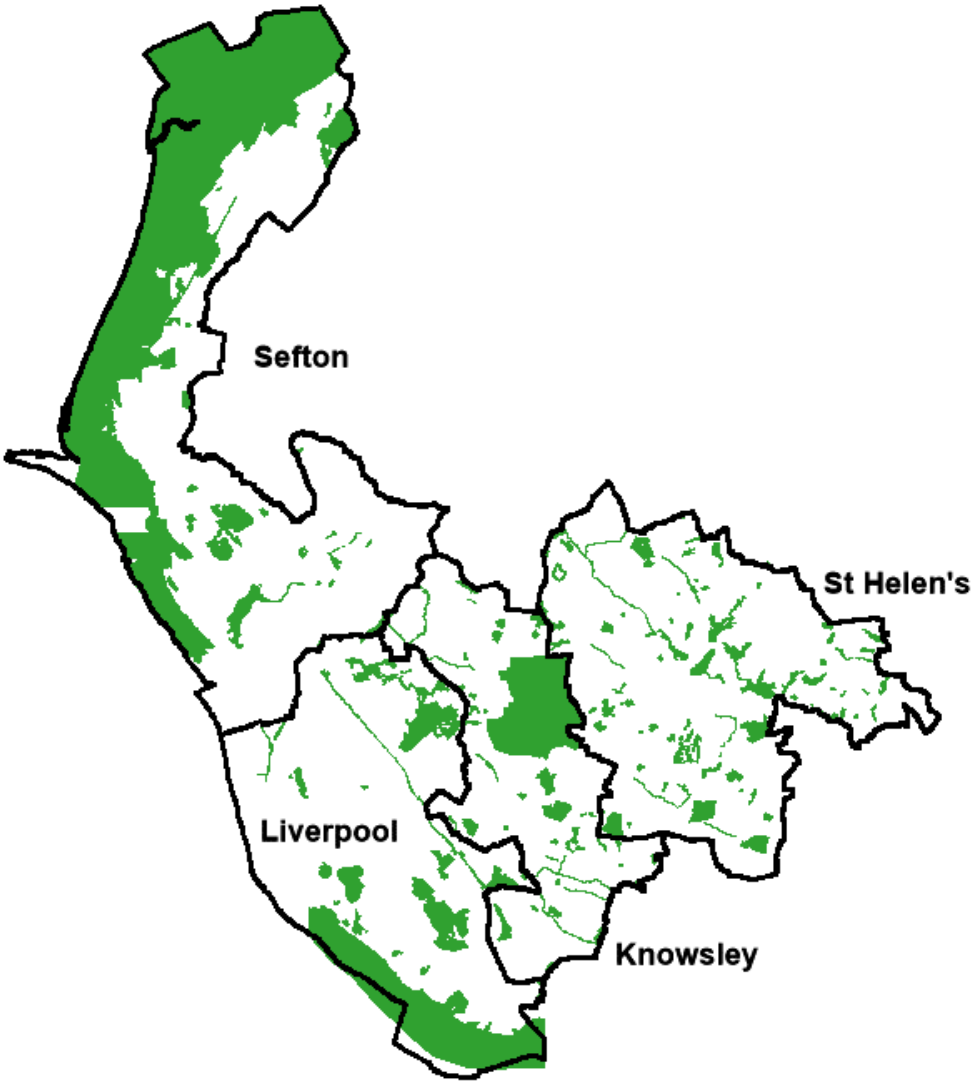


Figure 1. Local Wildlife Sites in North Merseyside.
This map can also be accessed online at:
North Merseyside Local Wildlife Sites (northmerseysidelsp.org.uk)

The Local Nature Partnership is responsible for 266 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 occasionally 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 and wider local nature recovery. 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 Act (2021) obligations, the Local Site Partnership was revived in Summer 2021. MEAS has begun undertaking Local Wildlife Site monitoring and is drafting a revised version of the Site Selection Guidelines.

Environment Act & Local Wildlife Sites

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 (BNG) is set to become mandatory in November 2023 and a new Biodiversity Duty on Local Authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity is in place (May 2023) the role of Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) and the Local Sites Partnership has never been more important.

In March 2023 Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) guidance was published effectively giving LWSs a heightened status. This guidance recognises LWSs as areas of particular importance for biodiversity being a mandatory and integral part of local nature recovery.

LWSs are already being identified through development management as recipient sites for biodiversity enhancement and this is likely to continue as we approach a new era of mandatory BNG and offsite solutions are sought.

In North Merseyside, MEAS have been liaising with strategic partners to identify options for implementation of BNG in our subregion and baselining opportunities on LWSs. The team has also been working closely with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority on early LNRS preparations.

The ongoing Local Wildlife Site monitoring programme provides an important habitat and species baseline to deliver on Environment Act obligations and wider environmental net gain.

2. Methods

2.1 Site Selection

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

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

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 but with an aspirational target of once every 5 years.

In 2020-21 as Local Sites monitoring had not been undertaken for several years, we targeted those sites which had not been monitored for a long time and those in poor condition. For some sites this was the first time they had been monitored in 20 years. In 2020-21 and 2021-22 due to Covid-19 restrictions mainly publicly owned or publicly accessible sites were surveyed. However, in this monitoring period (2022-23) and moving forward, we aim to access more privately owned sites.

In addition to date of survey and condition, the survey programme will increasingly be driven by seasonality of designation features e.g. Ancient Woodland indicators and expanded to include those larger sites in private ownership.

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 inspection of ed 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. From 2021-22 we aim to complete a UKHab / BNG baseline survey of each site. 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 4.0 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 2022-23 survey period was again predominantly undertaken early in the survey season (April-June). This was beneficial for some designation features e.g. vernal plant species, amphibian, breeding birds and water vole but not optimal for grassland, reptile or invertebrate survey. As a result, further surveys will be required to provide confidence in results and a complete assessment of condition on some LWSs.

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.

Northwood Forest Hills LWS

3. Results

3.1 Sites Monitored

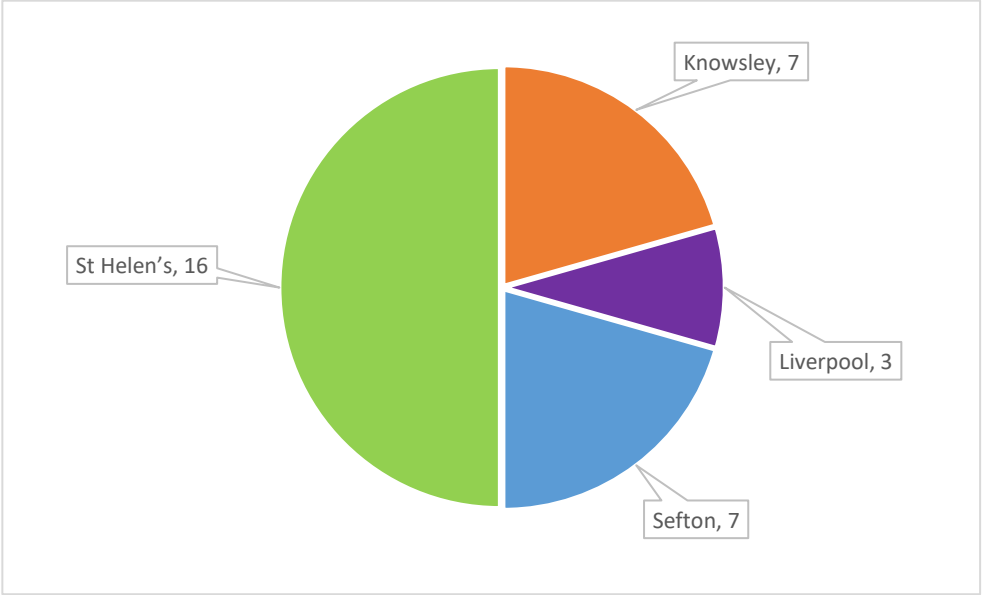


Figure 2. The number of Local Wildlife Sites monitored across the districts in North Merseyside in 2022-23.

The largest proportion of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed in 2022-23 were located in St Helen's, see Figure 2. Knowsley and Sefton had 7 sites surveyed during this survey period, and Liverpool had 3 sites surveyed. 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 continues to be taken into consideration when programming sites to survey.

You can find a list of LWSs surveyed during 202-23 in Appendix 1.

Additionally, from 2022 and in collaboration with MEAS, Merseyside and West Lancashire Bat Group (MWLBG) has begun structured bat monitoring on several LWSs in North Merseyside and Wirral. These bat surveys are not included in the results of LWS monitoring as a full assessment of

designation features and condition was not undertaken. See Appendix 2 for more information.

3.2 Site Condition

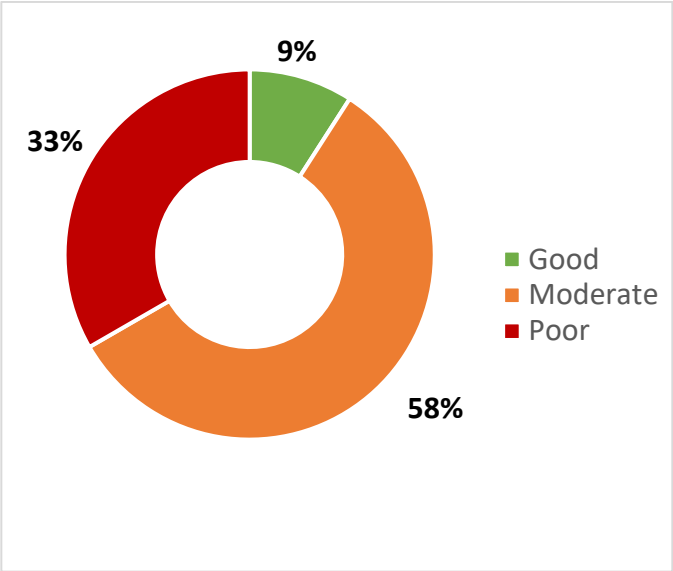


Figure 3. The condition of designation features at each Local Wildlife Site surveyed in 2022-23.

Over half of LWSs surveyed this year were found to be in moderate condition in relation to their habitat designation features (Figure 3). With only 9% of sites found to be in good condition. 33% were in poor condition – which is down a further 24% on 2021-22 levels.

The number of sites in good condition has decreased by over 50% from 2021-22, reflecting the lack of concerted nature conservation management and increasingly degraded state of our LWS network.

In the 2022-23 survey period, of the 33 LWSs visited 33% of sites were recognised as being in positive conservation management (Figure 4). As in previous years, nearly two thirds of sites were not in positive conservation management.

Results seen in **Figures 3 and 4** reflect findings since 2020-21 and 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

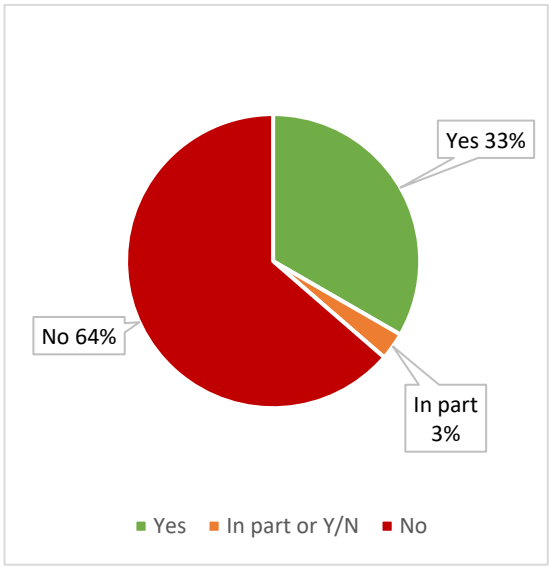


Figure 4. The proportion of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed that are in positive conservation management in 2022-23.

3.4 Designated Features

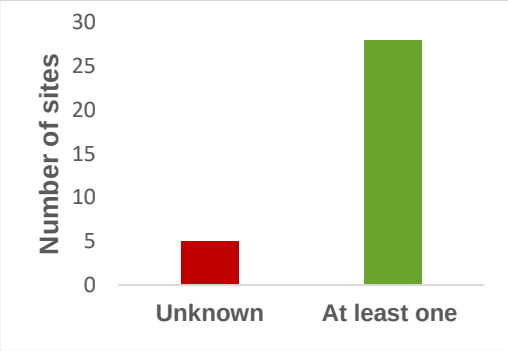


Figure 5. The number of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed with none or at least one designation feature present.

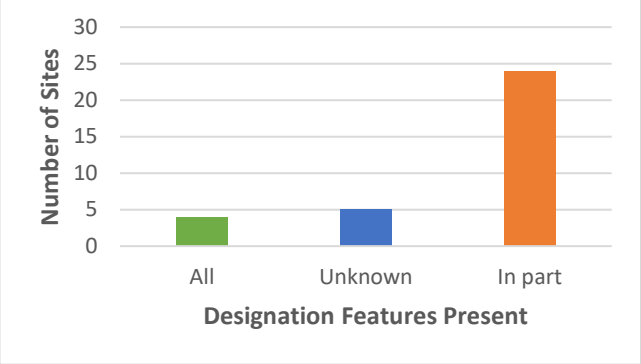


Figure 6. The number of Local Wildlife Sites where individual designation features were recorded fully, in part or the designation for which they were selected were absent or inconclusive (unknown).

The majority of sites surveyed in 2022-23 had at least one designation feature present at the time of survey **(Figure 5)**. Those sites categorised as 'unknown' require further survey and their presence or absence of the their features e.g. water vole could not be ruled out in a single visit. Of the 28 sites with at least one feature found, just 4 sites were found to have all their designation features present **(Figure 6)**. Most sites surveyed had more than one feature e.g. plants present. Those sites with multiple and varied taxonomic features would require several survey visits to confirm presence which was not possible due to staff time and resource.

Other limitations prevented full survey of designation features during site visits which included: access issues and sub-optimal survey timing. For example, 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 2022-23. This could be explained by a number of factors, including lack of access to brook, sub-optimal survey time, habitat condition or may reflect a genuine absence of this species.

3.5 Current Management

During the 202-23 survey season 19 Local Wildlife Sites had evidence of current management taking place **(Figure 7)** and several sites surveyed have management plans in place which is welcomed. Many sites are being managed but not always 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.

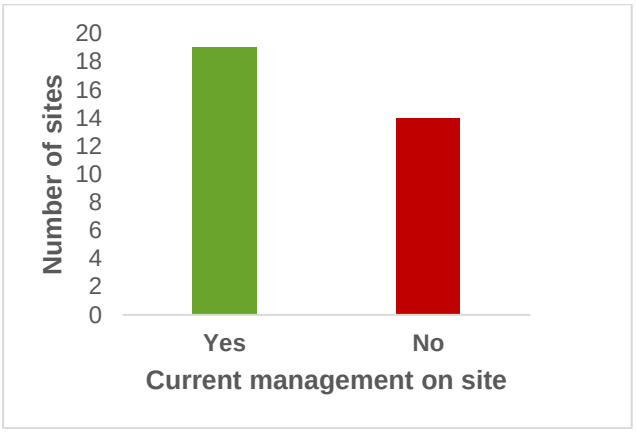


Figure 7. The number of Local Wildlife Sites where management was observed.

3.6 On-site activities

Walking and dog walking continue to be the most recorded activities within LWSs (Figure 8). This popular recreational activity is recorded 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, use of scrambler bikes and fly-tipping were observed on several sites visited in 2022-23.

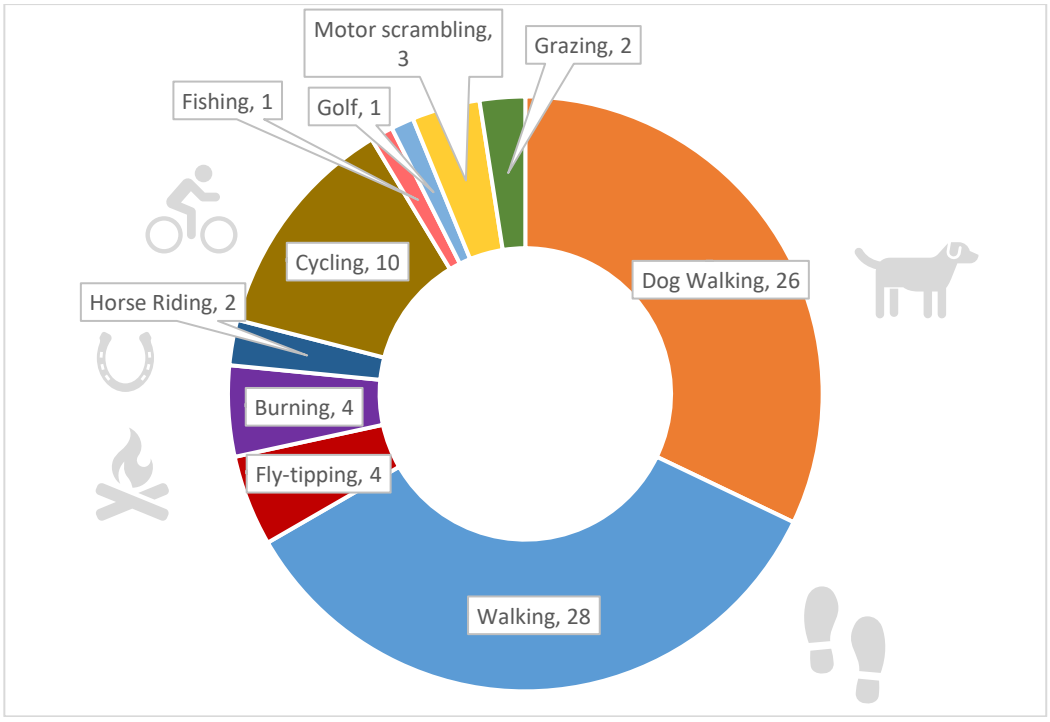


Figure 8. The different activities observed on-site during surveying.

3.7 Threats and pressures

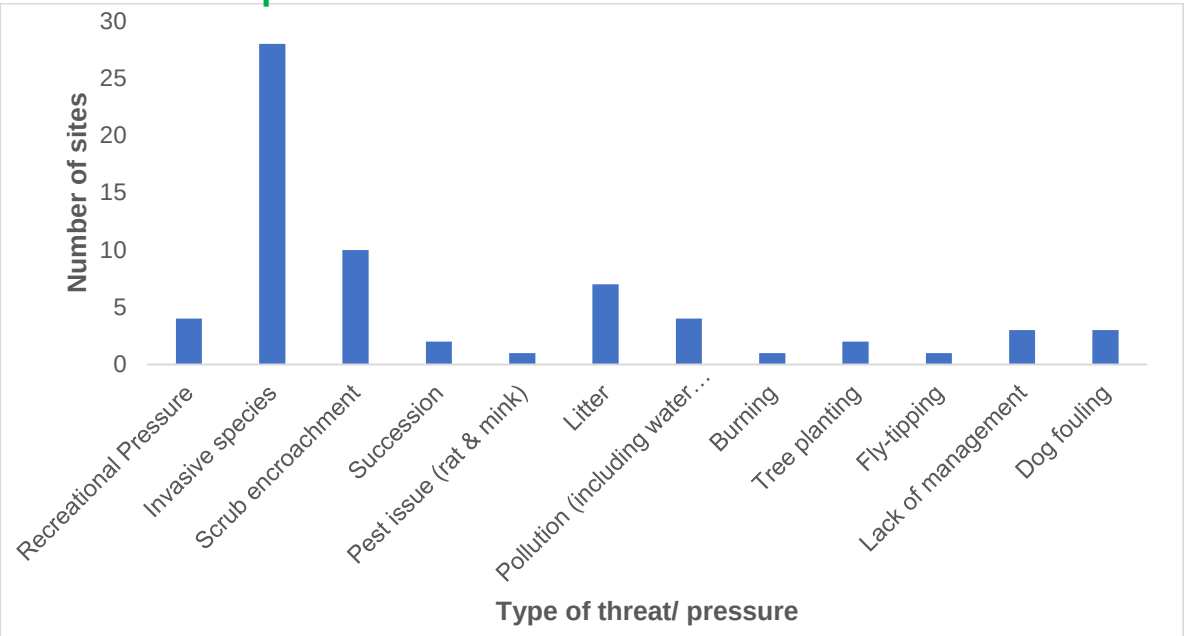


Figure 8. The types of threats and pressures faced by each site surveyed in 2022-23.

Invasive species were identified as being the most common threat to Local Wildlife Sites during surveying in 2022-23 (Figure 8). Scrub encroachment was the second most common, followed closely by litter, pollution and human disturbance / recreational pressure. Compared to previous year's LWS monitoring results the number and type of threats remain largely unchanged.

3.7.1 Invasive Species

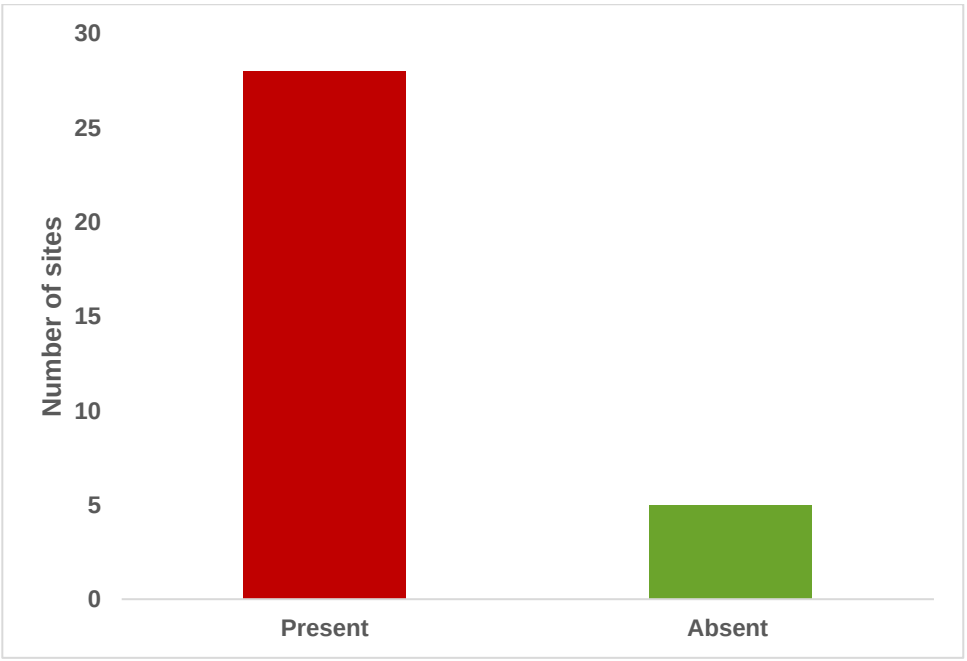


Figure 9. The number of Local Wildlife Sites with invasive species present or absent at time of survey.

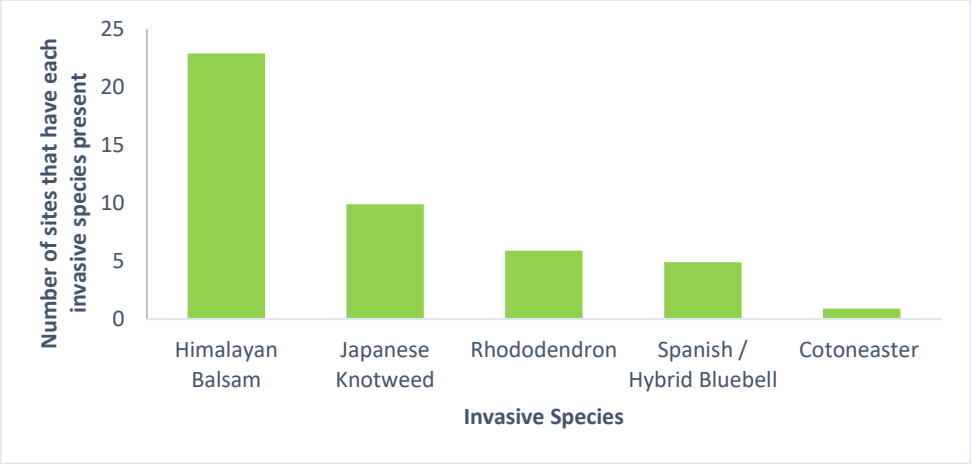


Figure 10. The extent of invasive species at Local Wildlife Sites surveyed. (*Rhododendron ponticum and any species of cotoneaster under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act).*

Invasive species are prevalent at **85%** of LWSs surveyed in 2022-23. The extent of each different invasive species at each site surveyed can be seen in **Figure 10** above. Rhododendron sp. was recorded at fewer sites surveyed this year being a particular problem species at woodland and parkland LWS. Himalayan balsam was the most notable invasive species being present on 70% of sites including several of our LWSs comprising brooks and rivers. Japanese knotweed was also prevalent. Fewer coastal sites were surveyed in 2022-23 meaning problem species e.g. Japanese rose and sea buckthorn were not reported. The majority of LWSs had **<5% of the total site covered by invasive species**.

3.8 Adjacent land use

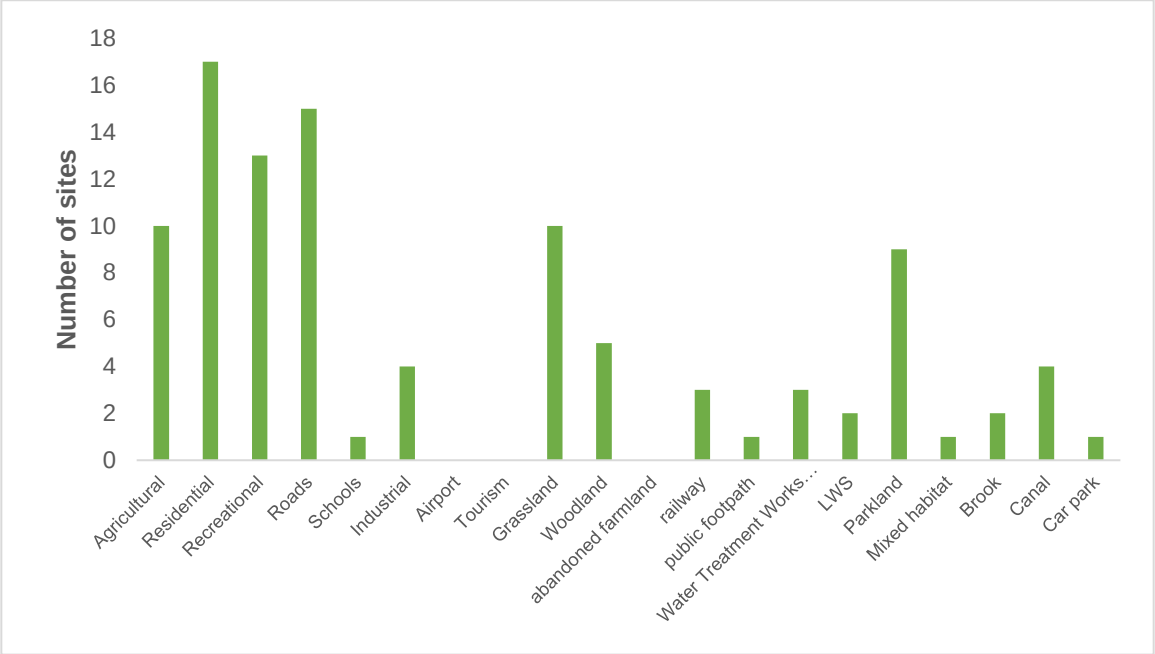


Figure 11. The different type of lane use found adjacent to each site surveyed.

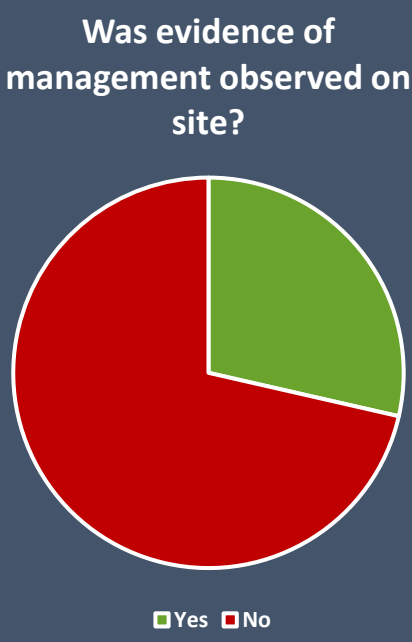
The most common land use adjacent to Local Wildlife Sites surveyed this year was residential, closely followed by roads. Residential and agricultural were also notable adjacent land uses in 2022-23 as in previous years.

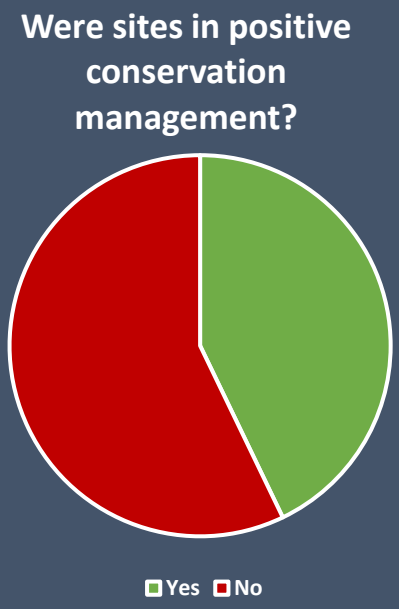
The sites surveyed were mainly located in urban areas and therefore it is unsurprising that in these urban areas, residential, roads and recreational amenity space was the most common type of adjacent land use. Other sites located in the agricultural hinterlands of North Merseyside reflect the rural character of the area.

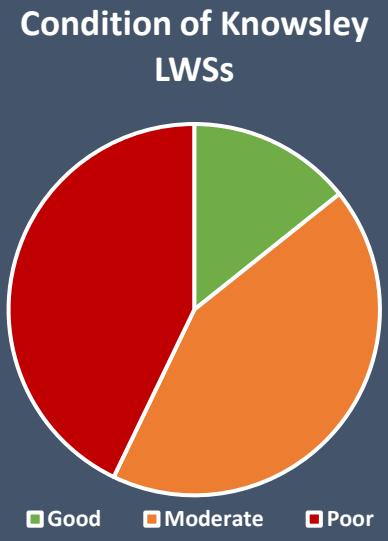
Parks and green spaces are vital assets in urban landscapes. Green spaces provide an economic value to the local community. This can be seen in Port Sunlight River Park, Wirral, where a recent study found that the redevelopment of the former landfill site, has resulted in a £7.8 million increase in property 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 the Covid 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







Liverpool

Was evidence of management observed on site?

Were sites in positive conservation management?

Were invasive species present on site?

Condition of Liverpool LWSs

Sefton

Was evidence of management observed on site?

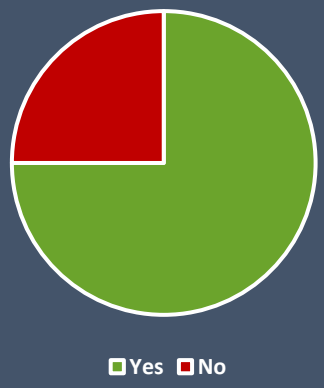
Were sites in positive conservation management?

Were invasive species present on site?

Conditions of Sefton LWSs

St Helen's

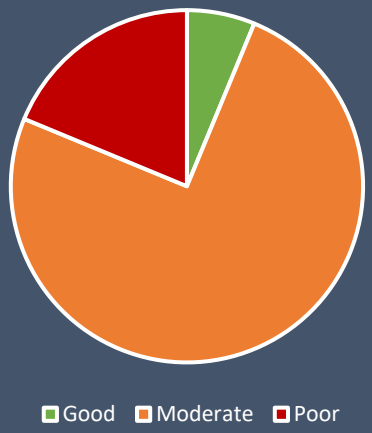
Was evidence of management observed on site?



Were sites in positive conservation management?

Were invasive species present on site?

Condition of St Helens LWSs



4. Conclusions

In 2022-23, for the first time since monitoring was restarted in 2020-21, the season was relatively undisrupted by Covid-19 restrictions. However, staff changes, reduced capacity and other work demands meant that collectively we surveyed **33 Local Wildlife Sites** across all four districts in North Merseyside equating to12.4% of LWS. **This a 23% decrease on the 2021-22 survey season** when the MEAS team had a full complement of ecologists.

Nonetheless, the 10% monitoring target was met and bettered again for the third year running which is a welcome achievement given the heightened importance of LWSs in recently published Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) guidance[1] and need for baseline data. The information gathered during each of these site visits, in particular habitat condition data, is extremely valuable and will help target local nature recovery and delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain.

The results of the 2022-23 survey season highlight that many LWSs in North Merseyside continue to be in suboptimal condition **91% being either in moderate (58%) or poor (33%) ecological condition in relation to the status of their designation features.**

Survey in 2022-23 found that approximately two thirds of LWSs are not in positive conservation management. This reflects the previous monitoring season. Whilst many of these sites have management plans in place, away from the Sefton Coast, and areas of higher designation, management continues to be largely limited to amenity purposes. These sites typically lack tailored management which is specific for the designation features of a site. This finding is supported by the majority of sites surveyed (67%) not being in positive conservation management. This trend is not new, the monitoring between 2020-22 and previously in 2011 noted similar issues.

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. To meet national targets to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 this issue needs to be urgently addressed. Potential solutions will be discussed with site managers through the Local Sites Partnership.

As found since monitoring restarted in 2020-21, a major problem continues to be **invasive species** this is particularly an issue within woodland, coastal 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 but also due to illegal activities such as fly-tipping and a lack of a co-ordinated strategy for treatment and control. This also reflects finding of the Liverpool City Region State of Nature Report[2].

[1] Local nature recovery strategy: what to include - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[2] SDS_SoN_Report_P1_FinalDraft.pdf (liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk)

It can be shown that those sites that are managed for conservation including active invasive species control, have retained habitat and species features. As noted previously, if resources which are currently focused upon management of public amenity, were redirected and/or shared 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, grass verges and greenspaces. **Through adjustments of management practice e.g. relaxation of mowing regimes significant biodiversity and environmental gains could be achieved.**

9% of LWSs were found to be in good condition and management was observed to be maintaining and enhancing the designation features. Landowners and managers should be commended that sites in their ownership are providing important areas for locally rare habitats and species.

The continued monitoring of LWSs remains vital across North Merseyside to inform Local Authorities, landowners and managers of the most appropriate management of LWSs under their control**. We are looking forward to the 2023-24 survey season which is already underway. With new ecologists joining the team and your continued support we are confident we can once again better our 10% survey target of LWSs in North Merseyside.** This target will help gather condition data to inform the work of the Local Sites Partnership. This data is also used to inform Defra's mandatory Single Data List indicator 'Local Sites in Positive Conservation Management' and provide baseline information for future Biodiversity Net Gain contributions.

MEAS review of LWS guidelines for site selection, potential new sites for designation and those sites that need boundary extensions remains ongoing. 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 a fundamental part of this process.

At the time of writing this report, Birkdale Common potential LWS has gained officer level support and is moving closer to designation as our latest non-statutory designated site. We welcome this and hope to make progress with further LWS designations during 2023-24.

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Appendix 1

A list of sites monitored during 2022-2023:

Knowsley

1. Halewood Triangle
2. Kirkby Brook
3. Kirkby Brook, including Mill Brook
4. Millbrook, Westvale
5. Ox Lane Wood, Tarbock
6. River Alt, Kirkby
7. Simonswood Brook

Liverpool

1. Calderstones Park
2. Lee Park Golf Course
3. River Alt & adjacent sites through Gilmoss including Fazackerley WwTw

Sefton

1. Fazakerley Sidings, Aintree
2. Land e of canal, n of Wango Lane, Waddicar
3. Open space and brook, w of A59, Maghull
4. Orrell Hill Wood
5. Switch Island, se section, Maghull
6. Birkdale Hills Local Nature Reserve, Weld Road to Shore Road including green beach
7. Hesketh Golf Links

St Helens

1. Red Brow Wood
2. Ashton's Green Tip (openspace)
3. Goyt Hey Wood
4. Grassland s of towpath, Sankey Valley Park
5. Grassland, west of Wagon Lane
6. Havannah Flash
7. Hollins Hey Wood
8. Islands Brow Burgy
9. Lyme Pit Tip
10. Parr Hall Millenium Green and Canal
11. Sankey Brook, Sankey Valley
12. St Helens Canal, Broad Oak Basin and Frog Hall
13. Mucky Mountains
14. Ravenhead Ponds
15. Cambourne Road Pond
16. Glasshouse Close Wood

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

Appendix 2

A list of the North Merseyside LWSs where bat monitoring was undertaken during 2022-2023:

Merseyside and West Lancashire Bat Group (MWLBG) led a series of bat transect and roost count surveys at the below sites in summer 2022. This is the inaugural baseline year and it is intended monitoring will be repeated annually at these sites to gather structured data on the health of our local bat populations. This will help track local population trends, tailor LWS management for bats; and support species recovery projects in North Merseyside and the wider City Region.

1. Lunt Meadows (potential LWS)
2. Car Mill Dam
3. Ince Blundell
4. Speke Hall
5. Croxteth Hall
6. Knowsley Park
7. Tarbock Estate (potential LWS)
8. Dibbinsdale

MWLBG has recently published a bat monitoring report (June 2023). This is available for download via the LSP website: LWS-2022-Monitoring-Results.pdf (northmerseysidelsp.org.uk) A summary of results (section 4 of the report) is reproduced below.

Bat monitoring results 2022-23

Generally the surveys were undertaken without any significant problems and as such the initial monitoring surveys can be considered as being successful in achieving the objectives. As anticipated the highest number of bat recordings was attributed to the Common Pipistrelle (Pipistrellus pipistrellus) which is the most frequently encountered species in rural and urban connotations.

Two of the sites; namely Lunt Meadows and Ince Blundell recorded the most variation of species; not surprisingly the habitat at both sites provides a range of suitable features with regards to the presence of invertebrates; the sole prey of UK bats. It was surprising that at Dibbinsdale species diversity and bat passes were low, despite the fact that it exhibits what can be considered as being high value foraging/commuting habitat. It should be noted however that two survey nights at any given site, in context with the number of nights that bats are active, is significantly low. Carr Mill Dam appears to have the highest concentration of bats but limited species; Soprano pipistrelle was most frequently encountered which ties in with this species tendency to prefer riparian habitat.

At three sites i.e. Knowsley Safari Park, Croxteth Hall Old Stables and Ince Blundell Old Hall, Brown long eared roosts were recorded in buildings where they have previously been located; at Croxteth numbers appear to be stable, at Knowsley Safari Park numbers have fluctuated over the years e.g. 10-39. Pipistrelle bats frequently change roosts and typically at one KSP roost bats were absent over the two survey dates. Ince Blundell survey revealed similar BLE numbers to that from previous years. Within the Ince Blundell estate four buildings are used by this species including a maternity colony, clearly the estate provides not only high value roost opportunities but also high value woodland foraging habitat; the presence of these two factors is clearly productive for the Brown long eared bat. The probable presence of Natterers bat is of value as this species is rare in Merseyside. Whilst during the Carr Mill Dam survey bat passes were not specifically recorded at all stopping points the level of bat activity was considered to be constant with several species recorded.

Between survey teams there were some minor recording differentials in the survey methodology, however it is feasible that this can be adequately addressed for the 2023 survey season to ensure more consistency. The current methodology i.e. transects, recording bat passes and roost counts probably represents the most consistent way to