

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE**Monday, 27 January 2025**

REPORT TITLE:	NATURAL FLOOD MANAGEMENT SCHEME, HOYLAKE CARRS
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents a proposal to deliver a Natural Flood Management (NFM) scheme on Council owned land known as Hoylake Carrs. The scheme is principally designed to provide flood mitigation benefits to the 'Meols Community at Risk' as defined by the Environment Agency. Funding objectives also provide additional co-benefits including ecological enhancements and ecosystem service outputs.

The scheme comprises the development of wetland features across approximately 24.7Ha of existing Coastal Floodplain Grazing Marsh, which is largely a flat expanse of improved grassland. The proposed interventions are detailed in the accompanying Design Statement (Appendix 1) and Hydrological Modelling Report (Appendix 2). The proposal is underpinned by £430,000 funding from the Environment Agency. Cheshire Wildlife Trust will deliver the scheme in partnership with the Council whilst developing a long-term sustainable strategy for ongoing management.

This report seeks approval from the Committee to progress with the scheme, subject to the necessary permits, permissions, and consultation processes.

This is a non-key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Environment, Climate Emergency, and Transport Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the acceptance by the Director of Finance of £430,000 in funding from the Environment Agency for the Natural Flood Management scheme at Hoylake Carrs (the scheme); and
2. Authorise the Director of Neighbourhood Services to negotiate and progress with all necessary legal agreements, permits and permissions to implement the scheme.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The grant funding will enable the Council to implement effective NFM measures, reducing flood risk to the identified 'Meols Community at Risk' while delivering significant ecological and biodiversity benefits.
- 1.2 The scheme aligns with national and local policy objectives, including the Council's Environment and Climate Emergency Action Plan, Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy (2023-2028), the government's Environmental Improvement Plan (2023), and the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The Council could do nothing. This option was rejected as the site would remain as tenanted agricultural land of poor quality (Agricultural Land Classification 4). The site is also a Coastal Floodplain Grazing Marsh (priority habitat) of relatively poor condition owing to the 'improved' grassland present resulting from agricultural inputs. A do-nothing scenario does not capitalise on the available funding to enhance the sites function as a floodplain, significantly increasing its capacity to provide flood mitigation benefits downstream, and to increase its ecological and biodiversity value.
- 2.2 The Council receives a nominal fixed rent under the existing farm business tenancy, adjusted to reflect the annual rolling nature of the agreement. Although the existing arrangement provides management and maintenance assurances, the Council would not be making optimal use of its green assets when considered against the option to deliver the NFM scheme. The site is also earmarked for wider environmental schemes including Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) habitat bank delivery. The NFM scheme is a key pillar in the vision for the site long-term.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The NFM programme, funded by the Environment Agency, is part of a broader strategy to use nature-based solutions to reduce flood risks to 'Communities at Risk' and deliver environmental and community benefits. The programme is informed by the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England and the Environmental Improvement Plan (2023). It supports government goals of climate adaptation, biodiversity recovery, and water quality improvement.
- 3.2 The programme builds on the successful pilot phase (2017-2021), which invested £15 million across 60 projects in England. These pilot projects collectively created 1.6 million cubic metres of water storage, enhanced 4,000Ha of habitat and 610 kilometres of river. NFM measures aim to slow water flow, improve floodplain connectivity, and deliver carbon sequestration benefits. The lessons learnt from these pilots are now shaping the current programme of projects, including the £25 million funding allocation under round two.

- 3.3 The Council and Cheshire Wildlife Trust submitted an expression of interest for NFM funding for Hoylake Carrs in November 2023 and were invited to progress to a 'development phase' (January 2024 – September 2024). A final business case and hydrological modelling report was submitted in September 2024, including outline designs and calculated flood benefits. The Environment Agency has subsequently awarded the scheme the full £430,000 for delivery, to be completed by March 2027.

Project Site and Design

- 3.4 Hoylake Carrs is a Council-owned site currently leased under a farm business tenancy. Under the scheme, the NFM-designated area will revert to Council management in September 2025 (in line with the annual rolling arrangement). The remainder of the site will continue under tenancy. The site has been identified as highly suitable for NFM interventions based on hydrological modelling and feasibility assessment. The proposed measures include:
- Construction of a series of leaky barriers or in-channel deflectors to slow water flow and redirect it onto the floodplain,
 - Excavation of 15 inter-connected scrapes (shallow channels) designed to retain water at different flow events and enhance habitat diversity,
 - Creation of a low-level bund on the south-east extent of the site to interrupt surface flow paths and retain water on-site. This bund will also use excavated material from the scrapes, and
 - Enhancements to riparian and in-stream habitats.
- 3.5 Hydrological modelling indicates that the measures will significantly reduce peak flow volumes during high rainfall events, mitigating flood risks for downstream communities, including the 'Meols Community at Risk' (see Appendix 2 – NFM Hydrological Modelling Report, pg. 47). The interventions are designed to integrate water retention, floodplain connectivity, and biodiversity enhancements.
- 3.6 Long-term maintenance will be minimal and met by enrolling the site in an agri-environment scheme, implementing environmentally beneficial management and good environmental practice on the land. The entire project area is situated within GS09 and GS10 eligibility areas covering the management of wet grasslands for breeding and wintering waders (Appendix 2 – NFM Hydrological Modelling Report, pg. 18). These are sites with eligible management options under Countryside Stewardship that can be applied to either Higher Tier or Mid-Tier payment schemes with approval from Natural England. It is anticipated that a grazier could also be appointed to manage the land through traditional means. Cheshire Wildlife Trust has significant experience in developing sustainable long-term management plans and will utilise in-house farm advisors and experts to recommend the most appropriate funding and management arrangement for this site.
- 3.7 The remaining area of Hoylake Carrs under Council ownership is undergoing a programme of surveys to determine feasibility for BNG habitat bank delivery. This will support objectives within the Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy, and delivery of high-quality and high-priority habitats. It will also provide an additional stream of funding via surplus BNG unit sales to maintain the wider site.

3.8 Proposed designs are subject to iterative refinement based on technical consultation, stakeholder engagement, and environmental permitting.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Project delivery will be funded entirely by the £430,000 grant from the Environment Agency. No additional Council funds are required. The grant will cover planning, consultation, implementation and initial maintenance costs.

4.2 A key priority for the scheme is to ensure that the scheme does not create unsustainable long-term liabilities for the Council, including ongoing maintenance and management requirements. Mitigating this has been done by requiring as little physical infrastructure as practicable and designing a scheme that requires minimal manual intervention. The site will be managed akin to traditional agricultural management, requiring no material change of use. As a minimum, the Council and/or Cheshire Wildlife Trust could appoint a grazier to seasonably graze the land, ideally with cattle. This could generate an income.

4.3 The plan is for the site to be funded through an external agricultural environment scheme. As previously detailed, the site has high eligibility for such payments. Additional funding streams include BNG unit sales, open space development contributions, and similar contributions secured for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG). SANG payments can contribute to the creation of new or enhancement of existing greenspaces that can reduce recreational pressure on designated and protected sites.

4.4 The existing tenancy fee is nominal. A proportionate reduction due to the removal of the NFM scheme boundary from the tenancy agreement will have a limited impact when considered against the significant benefits the scheme will deliver.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The site under Council ownership (c. 60Ha) is currently tenanted under a farm business tenancy, renewed on an annual rolling basis. The area subject to NFM (c. 27.4Ha) will be removed from the existing tenancy red line boundary and brought back in house in September 2025. The existing tenants have been consulted.

5.2 Prior to completion (March 2027), the Council will arrange with Cheshire Wildlife Trust an appropriate agreement for the long-term management of the site that will allow access to agri-environment schemes or other similar funding. The Council's contracts legal team have supported the scheme with draft heads of terms, NFM delivery agreement, and will continue to work with the Trusts senior leadership team and legal representatives towards a long-term agreement.

5.3 The scheme will require adherence to relevant environmental legislation, planning considerations, and land use agreements.

5.4 The Council and Cheshire Wildlife Trust must comply with the funding conditions as set by the Environment Agency.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The scheme will be delivered in full by Cheshire Wildlife Trust under a delivery agreement (covering delivery until March 2027). Council officers from the Climate Change & Environment teams will support the scheme, acting as points of contact and conduit between the Trust and relevant Council services and governance processes.
- 6.2 There is also a commitment to establish a local group of volunteers and environmental stewards who will contribute towards the long-term success of the scheme through volunteering, maintaining the site, engagement, fundraising, and data collection.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Key risks include potential delays due to issues obtaining permits and relevant permissions, adverse stakeholder feedback, and unforeseen technical challenges during implementation. There is also a small window of opportunity for delivery between optimal ecological periods which creates a constraint to delivery.
- 7.2 Mitigation measures include early stakeholder engagement, robust project planning, and flexible designs to address technical constraints. The current design and methodology allow for straight forward modification if required.
- 7.3 Failure to deliver the scheme could result in reputational damage and loss of funding opportunities.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 Early engagement has commenced with key stakeholders, including tenant representatives, and environmental groups.
- 8.2 Committee Members, group leaders, and ward Councillors were briefed on 21st March 2024 following an announcement from the Environment Agency outlining schemes that had progressed to the 'development phase'. A subsequent workshop was held on 2nd September 2024 following scheme design and technical assessments with follow up clarifications and information provided.
- 8.3 Cheshire Wildlife Trust is planning stakeholder engagement sessions for local communities, environmental groups, technical bodies, and the Councils planning teams early in 2025. The timeframe for this is expected to be announced post-Committee decision.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 An equalities impact assessment has not been completed for this phase of the scheme.
- 9.2 The scheme comprises a wetland creation scheme on tenanted agricultural land currently inaccessible to the public. On completion, the site will remain inaccessible to the public to reduce any potential recreational pressure or disturbance, so accessibility considerations have not been included. The scheme will not impact or require any alterations to the nearby public right of way.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The NFM scheme contributes significantly to the Council's climate adaptation goals by reducing flood risks through sustainable, nature-based solutions. It enhances local biodiversity, supports carbon sequestration, and promotes ecological resilience in the face of climate change. The proposed wetland floodplain may improve water quality, and all associated riparian enhancements will contribute to the ecological status of the River Birkett catchment. This aligns with the Councils Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, the Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy, and the emerging regional Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- 10.2 Any potential environmental impacts deemed significant will be scoped via engagement with the Councils development management teams where necessary. Although it is not anticipated, if planning permission is required, any technical considerations will be dealt with via the planning process in accordance with prevailing environmental planning law.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The scheme will promote community wealth by creating an enhanced and attractive local green space. There may also be opportunities for local contractors and community involvement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – NFM Design Statement
Appendix 2 – NFM Hydrological Modelling Report

The PDF files may not be suitable to view for people with disabilities, users of assistive technology or mobile phone devices. Please contact biodiversity@wirral.gov.uk if you would like this document in an accessible format.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy (2023-2028)
Wirral Council Local Plan (2021-2037)
Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy (2021)
Environmental Improvement Plan (2023)
National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Environment, Climate Emergency, and Transport Committee in accordance with section (a), (e), (h), and (i) of its Terms of Reference:

- (a) in co-ordinating the response to cross-cutting sustainability issues such as reducing carbon emissions, air quality issues, climate change response, improving resource efficiency and developing sustainable energy;
- (e) in respect of parks, open spaces, countryside management, allotments, playgrounds and cemeteries, including arboricultural, gardening and warden services;
- (h) as coast protection authority and lead local flood authority;
- (i) in respect of Section 9JB of the Local Government Act 2000, the functions to review and scrutinise the exercise by risk management authorities of flood risk management and of coastal erosion management functions which may affect the local authority's area.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
N/A	N/A