



OUGHTONHEAD COMMON

GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN

2022 – 2027

Produced by:



On behalf of:



OVERVIEW

Greenspace Action Plans

Greenspace Actions Plans (GAPs) are map-based management plans which specify activities that should take place on a site over a stated period of time; these activities will help to deliver the agreed aspirations which the site managers and stakeholders have identified for that site.

Public Engagement

Engagement with stakeholders is at the centre of effective management planning on any site. An initial engagement period was held for in November 2021, to establish core aims and objectives for the site; these are reflected in Section 3. A second stage of engagement was completed in June/July 2022 to enable stakeholders to comment on the proposed management actions for the site. An associated engagement response document is included as an appendix to this plan, summarising comments received and any amendments made to the plan as a result.

Version Control

Version	Issue Date	Details	Author	Reviewed	Approved

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1.0 SUMMARY

1.1 Site Summary

Site Name: Oughtonhead Common

Site Address: Swinburne Avenue, Hitchin (Car park)

Grid Reference: TL 16837 30378

Size: 16ha

Designations: Local Nature Reserve, Local Wildlife Site (reference number 11/001),
Common Land (reference number CL051)

Owner: North Herts Council

1.2 Vision Statement

A vibrant community-based open space, Oughtonhead Common will be maintained to a high standard, using the Green Flag Award as a quality benchmark.

Recognising the range of important habitats, management will focus on maintaining the diverse flora and fauna that can be found on the site.

2.0 SITE DESCRIPTION

2.1 Introduction

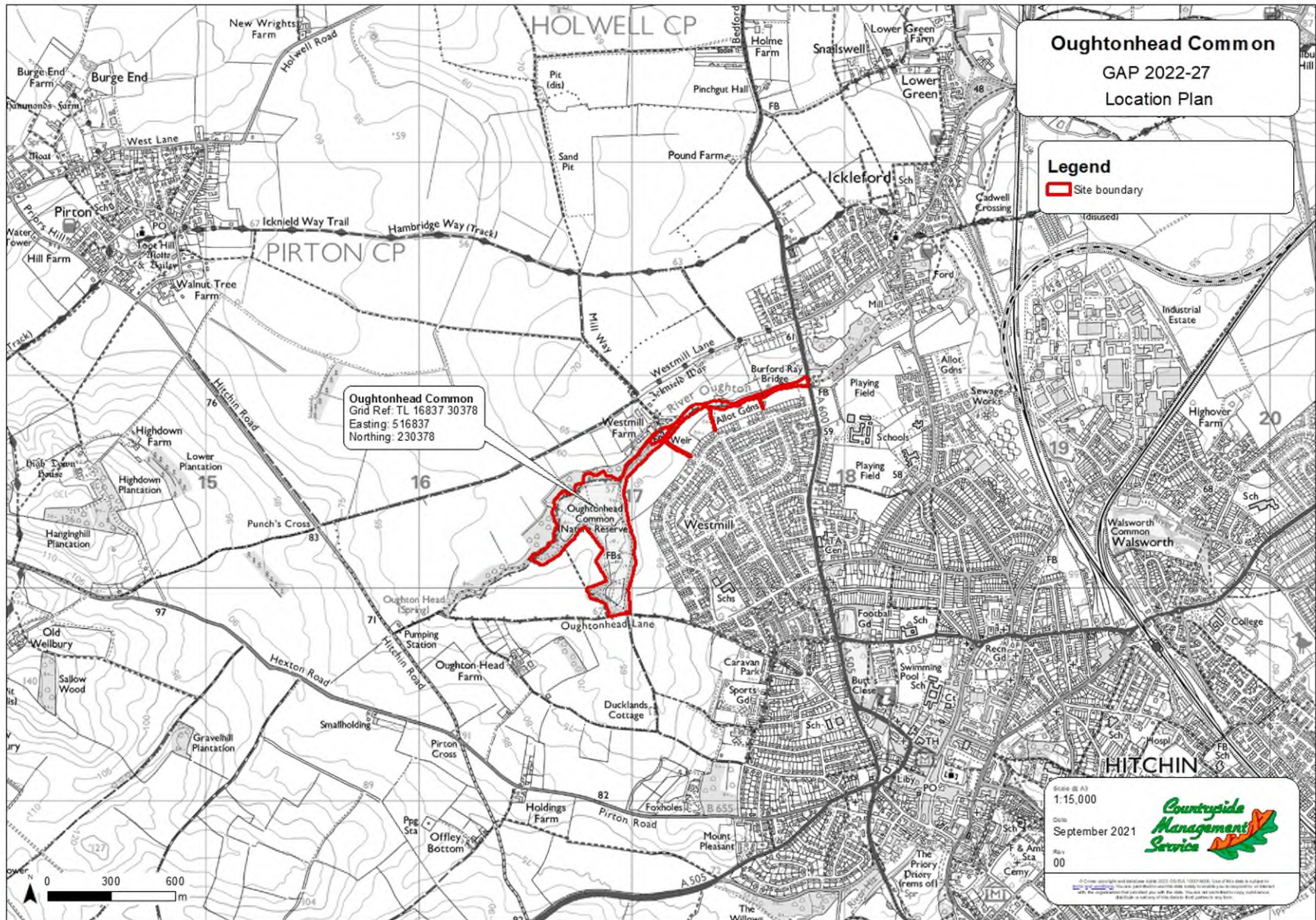
Oughtonhead Common is a 16-hectare site situated along the northwest edge of Hitchin. The site is comprised of a mosaic of important wildlife habitats, including wetland, grassland, woodland and scrub.

Owned by North Herts Council (NHC), the site is managed by the council in partnership with CMS and the Friends of Oughtonhead Common for informal public access and nature conservation. The site is registered common land (reference number CL051), a Local Wildlife Site and Local Nature Reserve.

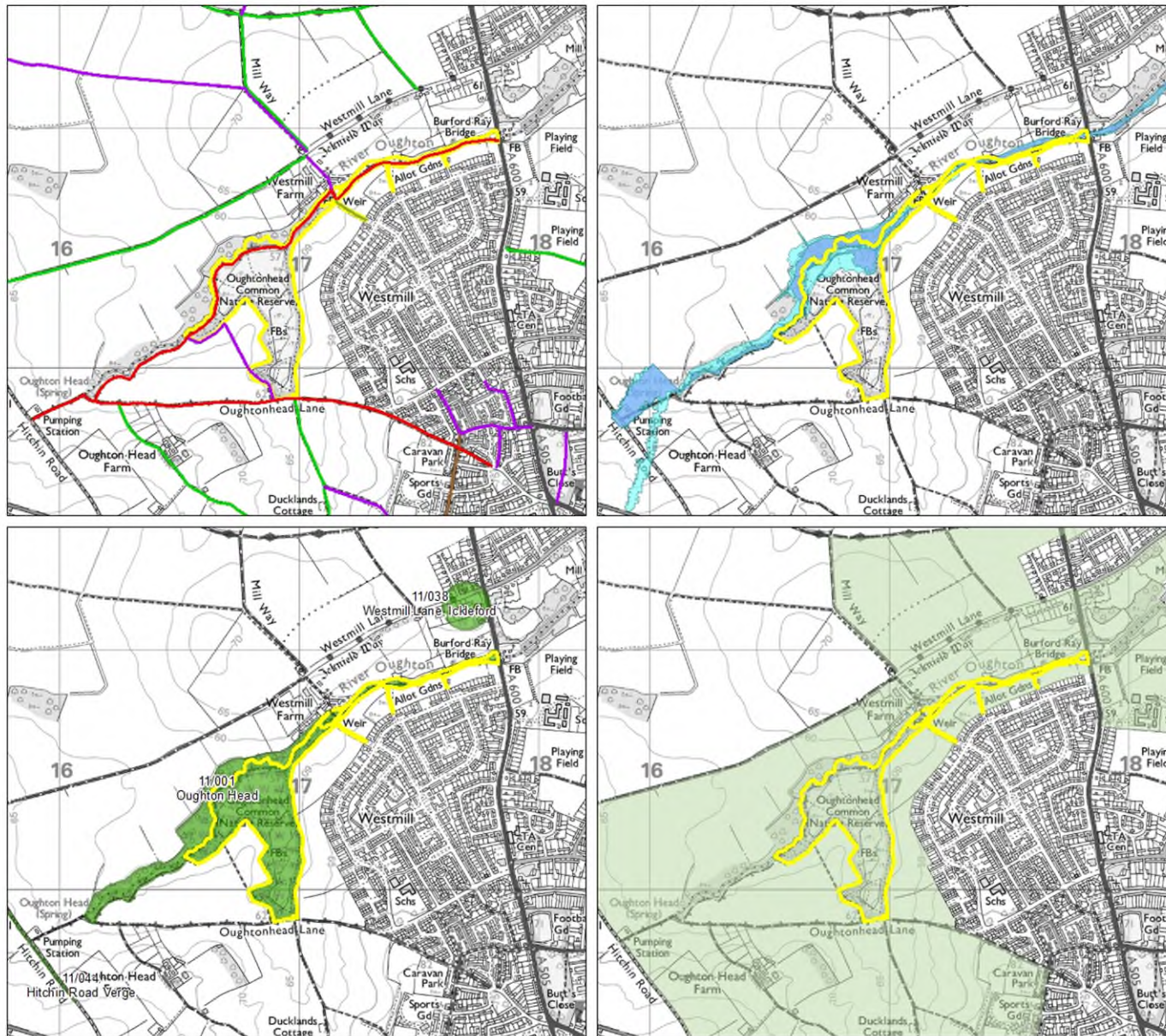
The River Oughton, a chalk river, forms the northern boundary, with agricultural land to the west and south-west, and residential areas and playing fields to the south-east. The site is well used for informal recreation including walking, dog-walking, jogging, horse riding, cycling, and picnicking. It has long been a magnet for naturalists, being the largest marsh on chalk in Hertfordshire.

This is the latest in a series of management plans for Oughtonhead Common since the first plan was produced in 1974 and replaces the Greenspace Action Plan 2017-22. Under successive plans the site has seen a range of enhancements, including improved access and information through the hard surfacing of paths, installation of interpretation panels and production of a site leaflet.

Over the period of the last plan, completed projects have included installation of in-channel structures in the River Oughton to increase flows and improve chalk stream habitats, tree and vegetation removal along the river and ditches on site to reduce shading, coppicing of hazel stools, riverbank protection works, improvements to path surfacing, and the replacement of interpretation structures.







Oughtonhead Common Greenspace Action Plan Constraints Plan

- Legend**
- Site boundary
 - Byway Open to All
 - Restricted Byway
 - Bridleway
 - Footpath
 - Temp Closed Footpath
 - Temp Footpath
 - Unmetalled UCR
 - Main River
 - Flood Zone 3
 - Flood Zone 2
 - Wildlife Site
 - Greenbelt



Scale @ A3
1:15,000
Date
March 2022
Rev
00



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2.2 Geography and Landscape

Oughtonhead Common (TL168304 centre) lies to the northwest of Hitchin in the county of Hertfordshire, approximately 60m above sea level. The main site covers approximately 16 hectares, and contains a variety of habitats including a chalk river, ditches, springs, swamp, tall herb fen, fen meadow, dry grassland, dry and wet woodland and scrub. The geology of the site is quite unusual and varied, resulting in the very diverse flora and fauna that it supports.

At its northern boundary the site abuts the River Oughton, which rises at Oughtonhead Springs around 1km to the west of the site. The Common is bounded to the east by a mixture of arable land and playing fields that adjoin the Westmill estate of Hitchin, and to the west by arable farmland. Further to the west (2-3km) lies the beginning of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

To the north of the river, running the length of the main body of the Common, is a densely wooded, thin strip of marshy ground (~6.4ha) that is currently managed as a nature reserve by the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Beyond this is arable land. Adjoining the south-western tip of the site is a small beech copse, known as the Beech Spinney, which is continuous with the site but not part of the LNR. Other sections of land that form part of this Greenspace Action Plan but are not part of the LNR include 3 paths connecting Burford Ray and the Riverside Path with Burford Way.

2.2.1 Visual amenity

With its close proximity to the town of Hitchin, Oughtonhead Common provides an attractive area of green space to nearby residents. Particularly significant are access to views of the river and the main grassland area as a large, natural open space.

2.3 History and Archaeology

Oughtonhead Common has a long history of human use. In size, the site remains very much as it was in the 1800s. The Common itself has escaped any significant cultivation or development, most likely a consequence of the inherent wetness of the soils. Since medieval times it was primarily used for the grazing of livestock, once being an important part of the Common field system of Hitchin. In addition to grazing,

the economic importance of the river and Common lay in the grain mill built in the late 16th century at Westmill, and the harvesting of reed and sedges for thatching and willow to provide “withies” for basket making.

Under the Commons Act of 1899 the Common was declared available for public recreation and in likelihood this, coupled with changes in farming practice, led in c.1914 to the end of grazing on the site. In the 1920s the growing of willow on the north bank of the river was also abandoned and the trees were allowed to encroach to improve shooting. By 1922, increasing recreational use of the Common prompted the local authority to issue a set of byelaws.

The expansion of Hitchin saw urban development move ever closer to the eastern boundary of the site. In 1953 the Common, springs, river and associated woods were listed by the then Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of its wildlife richness and diversity. In 1967 under the new Commons Act the site was re-registered under Hitchin Urban District Council and, since no Commoner registered Common rights at that time, all rights except those pertaining to public rights of way, were rescinded. The SSSI was de-designated in 1970 because of the deterioration of the site due to drying out of the peat marsh and lack of water flow from the springs.

Although the botanical diversity of the site had undoubtedly diminished, positive steps since 1974 have, to some extent, helped reverse the decline. These improvements include the installation of a sluice gate to increase water levels on the site and the re-introduction of grazing. The area is recorded as a grade A site by the Herts Biological Records Centre.

In 1996, part of the common was fenced and cattle grazing reintroduced to enable conservation management of the main part of the grassland. In 2016, the fencing was renewed and extended so that today the vast majority of the grassland on the site is under conservation grazing.

In 2001, in conjunction with English Nature the site was registered as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). Local Nature Reserves are sites that are important for wildlife, geology, education or public enjoyment. Oughtonhead Common was declared in

recognition of its wildlife value and the dedication of the local community to its continued positive management.

2.4 Context within wider strategies

2.4.1 North Hertfordshire Local Plan

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan sets policies and proposals to guide future development within the district. Oughtonhead Common and the immediately surrounding land is identified as Green Belt, with much of the surrounding land to the north and west identified as Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt.

2.4.2 North Hertfordshire District Green Infrastructure Plan

Using Natural England's Access to Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) criteria, Oughtonhead Common is identified as one of only four sites of 'District scale' within North Herts, as well as a 'Key Biodiversity Area'. The plan also identifies the potential to create wetland habitats to act as floodwater storage along the River Oughton, whilst this is a long-term strategy aim, there are currently no plans to develop this further during the period of this GAP.

2.4.3 Great Ouse Catchment Flood Management Plan

Under this catchment level plan, Hitchin is identified as falling under 'Policy 3', an area of low to moderate flood risk where existing flood risk is generally being managed effectively. The plan identifies three specific actions for Hitchin, namely to:

- Consider developing a surface water management plan for Hitchin.
- Ensure any policies within the Local Development Framework, or any revisions, are in line with the CFMP policy.
- Develop an environmental enhancement project to improve the natural state of the rivers and their habitats.

2.5 Habitats and Wildlife

A summary of the different habitats and features of interest follows. This is informed by a survey of the Local Wildlife Site (including the Wildlife Trust nature reserve) undertaken in 2016 by surveyors on behalf of the Hertfordshire Wildlife Sites Partnership.

2.5.1 Grassland

The varied underlying geology has led to the development of a range of grassland habitats at the Common. Areas of marshy grassland support species including southern marsh orchid, rush and sedge species, watermint, hemp agrimony and meadowsweet. Areas of drier, neutral grassland support species including silverweed, ribwort plantain, St John's wort, agrimony, glaucous sedge, lady's bedstraw, vetch species, meadow vetchling, hard rush, watermint, hairy sedge, creeping buttercup, lesser catstail, creeping cinquefoil, red fescue, cocksfoot, Yorkshire fog and fleabane.



Wet grassland



Dry grassland

Ant hills, of the yellow meadow ant, are scattered across the site and are evidence of the ancient nature of the grassland. They often support a variety of herbs and also provide a food-source for green woodpeckers.



Ant hills

The grassland is largely managed by grazing small numbers of Longhorn cattle, which were reintroduced in 1996 and are present all year round. In 2016 the grazing area was extended to incorporate the majority of the grassland on site as well as the area of restored fen. This was undertaken following significant public consultation and after gaining consent from the Secretary of State for the Environment. This consent will need to be reviewed in 2031. The grazing area is split into two compartments, a larger, main compartment grazed from May to July and October to February, and a smaller compartment grazed from March to April and August to September.



Grazing longhorn cow

The main problem weeds and invasive species in the grassland areas are thistles (mainly creeping thistle) and ragwort. Both need controlling; in the case of thistles, to prevent them encroaching on the species rich grassland and, in the case of ragwort, because it is poisonous to livestock. Removal is currently undertaken by hand-pulling/digging.

2.5.2 Grassland scrub

Following the cessation of grazing on the common in the early 20th century, scrub gradually established across the site, and now scattered scrub can be found throughout much of the grassland, as individuals or groups. Species include hawthorn, blackthorn and privet, with occasional fruit trees, hazel and, in the wetter areas, willow.



Grassland scrub

Although it provides an important habitat on the common, this scrub requires controlling to ensure the valuable grassland is conserved. The HLS agreement for the site has a target for a maximum of 5% scrub coverage in the main grassland, and much of the management activities on site in recent years has been to work towards meeting this aim.

For the period of the last GAP, the site was divided in to five areas, with one area being the focus for scrub reduction in each year of the plan.

Scrub management is largely undertaken by volunteers and has involved cutting followed by controlled burning. The number and location of fire sites is strictly limited and agreed in advance before each autumn/winter by CMS in conjunction with NHC and the Friends. The conversion of areas previously covered by scrub back to grassland has largely been successful, no doubt aided by cattle browsing young scrub regrowth.



Recovering grassland



Scrub regrowth browsed by cattle

2.5.3 Trees, woodland and mature scrub

Mature scrub and small areas of woodland are generally found in areas around the perimeter of the site, outside the main grazing area.

Forming the south-western tip of the site is a small beech copse, known as the Beech Spinney, which adds variety to the range of habitats.



Beech Spinney

A thick band of scrub with some mature trees, predominantly of ash and oak, marks the eastern and western boundaries, with thickets of blackthorn and hawthorn. In places there are areas of hazel coppice, which are under active rotational management by volunteers. To prevent deer browsing of regrowth, protective baskets are constructed around coppice stools where possible.



Hazel coppice



Hazel coppice with protective 'deer basket'

A strip of trees and scrub border both sides of the river as it runs eastwards to the far edge of the common at Bedford Road. The northern bank is in various, private ownership. A programme of selective felling, pollarding and scrub removal has been undertaken along the southern bank to reduce shading and allow increased levels of light to reach the river.



Pollarded willow

Along the north bank of the river, where it borders the main part of the common, runs a belt of wet woodland of varying width. This site is a nature reserve managed by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Although not part of the Common and not forming part of this plan, the area is an important habitat in the Oughtonhead complex. It is one of the larger fen woodlands in Hertfordshire and has a long history

of being managed as a fen. The western sections are dominated by mature alder carr, which is an unusual habitat in Hertfordshire.

Chalara Ash Dieback, which arrived in the UK in 2012, has been observed in a number of trees, mainly along the riverbank. The diversity of the genetic stock and age of ash in any location may mean that some trees will be more resilient than others, with older trees often surviving for years with the infection. The effect of ash dieback on the site is likely to be minimal as ash makes up only a small component of the woodland and hedgerow trees, and there are a variety of other species present across the common.

2.5.4 River

The River Oughton rises from a series of springs in the chalk aquifer, approximately 1km to the west of the common. The river flows northeast, past the main common and the adjacent Westmill Farm, site of a 17th century grain mill. It then runs through Burford Ray, a thin strip of woodland, to eventually join the River Hiz at Ickleford, and further downstream, the River Ivel.

Chalk rivers like the River Oughton are a characteristic and attractive feature of the Hertfordshire landscape, but are rare in global terms. There are less than 200 such rivers in the world, most of them occurring in southeast England. Emanating from aquifers that lie deep in the chalk, their waters are alkaline with an even temperature and, typically, a lively flow. A special community of flora and fauna has evolved to take advantage of these conditions. Areas of bare gravel in the river bed provide spawning grounds for trout and other fish species; overhanging or fallen trees provide refuges for young fish and invertebrates; and vegetated river banks, allow shelter for insects, amphibians and small mammals. Fallen trees provide natural dams and barriers, altering flows which further increase the diversity of habitats.



Exposed gravels



Fallen limb in river channel

Like many of Hertfordshire's rivers, the Oughton has been extensively modified in the past and is still affected by human activities. Low flows brought about by water abstraction have been a problem, although the river is now augmented by direct pumping from the aquifer during times of low flow. In recent years, abstraction from the aquifer feeding the Oughton has been suspended due to excess nitrates. Affinity Water have recently submitted planning applications to upgrade the Oughton Head Pumping Station to include nitrate removal equipment which would allow for a resumption in abstraction.

A bypass channel feeds off the main river upstream of the mill via a tall weir, known locally as the 'Hitchin Waterfall'. In March 2021, this weir collapsed, and water began to undermine the structure, leading to lower water levels directly upstream and causing water to cease flowing along the river past the mill.



Collapsed weir



Dry channel above weir

Above the mill, the river was historically realigned to provide a head of water to power the mill. Prior to the collapse of the weir, the channel here was wide and straight, and the flow very slow. This led to a build-up of silt across the bottom of the river, smothering the gravel bed. Dense stands of reed also built up along the river, further slowing the water. In 2014 some of the reed was removed from the channel in a trial to enhance the flow. This delivered some short-term gain but over time silt began to build up and vegetation encroached.

The effect of the weir collapse has been to increase the speed of flow, and lower the level of the river, greatly improving habitat conditions in the channel. The increased speed has allowed a vegetation free channel to form and gravels to be exposed. A feasibility study has been commissioned to look at options for how best to deal with the collapsed weir, whilst aiming to maintain the improved habitat conditions created.



Exposed gravels in channel upstream of the mill

The stream below the weir provides good quality river habitat, with a small pool formed by the waterfall, a clear gravel bed and aquatic vegetation including watercress. It is a favoured location for kingfishers.

Downstream of the mill, although straightened, the river channel is more natural, with the water faster flowing and areas of gravel found amongst the silt. Over the period of the last plan, river restoration work has included the continuation of willow pollarding and tree and scrub removal to allow more light into the river. This de-shading has allowed aquatic plants to establish and thrive. With consent from HCC, the local flood authority, in-channel deflectors and brash buildouts have continued to

be constructed in the channel, pinned to the riverbed at various points. This work has successfully narrowed the channel and diverted the flow, creating more speed and variety, and leading to further scouring of silt and exposure of gravels.



In-channel structures

The riverside path allows easy access to the river at numerous points. Combined with the popularity of the site for dog walking, this has resulted in a number of areas where deep channels are formed in the banks of the river where dogs enter and exit the river. Remedial work to repair damage to banks ranges from small-scale interventions such as filling channels with brash and logs, to large-scale bank stabilisation by contractors.



Stabilised bank

In an effort to prevent further channels forming, willow and hazel hurdles are constructed at vulnerable locations to minimise access for dogs. In addition, a

number of 'dog steps' have been installed to provide controlled access points along the river.



Hazel hurdle



Dog steps

2.5.5 Wetland habitats

In addition to the river, a range of wetland habitats are found at Oughtonhead Common.

2.5.5.1 Ditches

Springs feed several ditches across the site, and these are ecologically rich. Species include rush and sedge species, water mint, angelica, pond sedge, watercress, brooklime, field horsetail, water figwort and fen bedstraw. Ditches are managed through a careful conservation management regime to ensure they do not become silted up and overgrown.



Selection of ditches on the common

Cutting of ditch vegetation is rarely required as grazing generally keeps marginal vegetation under control. Regular management includes removal of scrub and overhanging vegetation along ditch banks to increase light levels and encourage aquatic vegetation, with the aim of providing potential habitat for water vole and other aquatic species. Occasionally, ditches have been de-silted if deemed necessary to keep channels open and water flowing.

A number of ditches within the main grazing area are choked with patches of scrub, which require removal to maintain a clear channel.



Patches of scrub within ditches

In addition to wet ditches, a number of dry ditches are found on site, most notably in the Beech Spinney at the south-western corner of the site.



Dry ditch through the Beech Spinney

2.5.5.2 Reed and sedge beds

The numerous ditches feed into an area of open water, with thick fringing of sedge and reed at the north-eastern corner of the main common. Water is held back by a small sluice and a timber revetment prevents erosion of the main path to the north. Historically this area has been good for amphibians, with large numbers of frogs spawning in the shallows. Periodic sedge and reed removal in this area retains an area of open water.



Sedge bed following clearance



Sluice

In addition to the sedge and reeds mentioned above, a small reed bed is located nearby, to the north of the path. Although small, it provides a valuable addition to the habitats on site and is particularly good for migrant birds such as reed warbler. Reedbeds such as these are at risk of invasion by scrub and drying out through build-up of dead vegetation if not managed. Therefore, a rotational cutting regime

has been implemented with half the reedbed cut every other year. In addition, willow and adjacent scrub are managed through a coppice cycle to prevent drying out and encroachment in to the reedbed.



Reedbed following rotational cut



Coppiced willow

2.5.5.3 Fen

An area of restored fen is found towards the western end of the site, to the south of the riverside path. New ditches and a pond were created here in 2014 to provide an increased range of wetland habitats in an area of degraded fen and responding to the decreased water table levels on site. The area has established well, with vegetation well-maintained by grazing.



Restored fen

2.5.5.4 Ponds

In addition to the pond created as part of fen creation works, ponds are found at the heads of a number of the ditches on the main common, as well as a large standalone pond, known as the 'cattle pond' as it has historically been used by the cattle for drinking water. This pond has variable water levels and has been known to dry out during dry summers.



The 'cattle pond'

2.5.6 Important species

The River Oughton provides an important habitat for iconic species like brown trout, kingfisher and water crowfoot. Water voles have also historically been recorded along the river.

Oughtonhead Common is an important site for glow worms, mainly found in vegetation along the edges of the riverside path and perimeter path.

The mosaic of habitats across the site also supports a variety of bird species, either for breeding, overwintering or migration. These include a number of species listed in the latest Birds of Conservation Concern, including Red List species swift, cuckoo, house martin, starling, mistle thrush, fieldfare, house sparrow, greenfinch, linnet and yellowhammer, and Amber List species mallard, stock dove, woodpigeon, moorhen, sparrowhawk, kestrel, wren, song thrush, redwing, dunnock, grey wagtail, bullfinch and reed bunting.

2.5.7 Invasive species

Invasive species in the wetland areas include *Azolla filiculoides*, commonly known as fairy fern or floating water fern, which has been a problem both along one of the ditches and along the river. Attempts have previously been made to control this highly invasive non-native plant with biological control agents in the form of a weevil. This was successful along the ditch but less so along the river. Advice from specialists suggested that this is because the Azolla on the river was too dispersed and that weevil application would be more effective once it has formed a thicker mat. The river is therefore closely monitored to assess when further control may be necessary.

Himalayan balsam is also found along the river and in adjacent marshy areas. Annual hand-pulling by volunteers is successfully reducing the presence of this invasive species, helping to protect the site and reduce the risk of spread downstream.

Signal crayfish are present along the river and in wetland habitats across the site. No action is currently taken to control this species.

Mink are known to be present in local river systems, a monitoring raft is located on site as part of a wider HMWT project in Hertfordshire to monitor and control mink.

Snowberry is occasionally found, mainly in areas of scrub adjacent to paths. This is cut back by volunteers when necessary.

2.6 Access, Facilities and Infrastructure

Oughtonhead Common is a Public Open Space with open access on foot. Easily accessed from the Westmill estate and other parts of Hitchin, the site is well used by the general public for a range of leisure activities, including dog walking, jogging, mountain bike riding, walking, picnicking and horse riding.

2.6.1 Paths

A Restricted Byway (Hitchin Restricted Byway 001) runs from the A600 at Burford Ray in the east, along the southern bank of the river to the springs at Oughton Head to the west. Known as the 'Riverside Path', this provides access for walkers, horse

riders and cyclists. The rest of the site is open to walkers only. Motorcycle and motor vehicle access are prohibited from the whole site including this path.

The Riverside Path is surfaced from Bedford Road in the east, to the site access gate on the western boundary near the Chalky. Three other surfaced paths link onto this from Burford Way and the Westmill estate and offer easy access routes onto the common. All these paths have easy-access kissing gates to allow wheelchair and buggy access whilst preventing motorcycle access. One entrance, from Westmill Lane, has RADAR key access to allow access with a motorised mobility vehicle. At the Bedford Road entrance, the pavement has been extended from the bus stop to the gateway to allow safe access at this point, also allowing walkers to complete a series of circular walks at the Burford Ray end of the site. Over the period of the last plan, sections of the riverside path were topped up with material to level out undulations. A section of the perimeter path from the entrance at Oughtonhead Lane along the western side of the grazing compartment has also been surfaced, along with a short section of path leading from Swimburne playing fields behind the pavilion.



Surfaced riverside path



Surfaced perimeter path

Surfaced paths are generally in good condition, although vegetation has started to encroach along much of the riverside path, and organic matter accumulated across areas of the surface.



Organic matter on surfaced path

The remainder of the perimeter path is unsurfaced and can get very muddy in wet weather.



Unsurfaced perimeter path



Unsurfaced perimeter path

Public access into the grazing compartments is provided for people on foot via kissing gates (two of which have RADAR access), and a series of informal paths crisscross the site with sections of boardwalk through the wetter areas and a number of bridges crossing ditches. Sections of boardwalk, whilst still in useable condition, are likely to require attention in the next few years.



Boardwalk in centre of the site



Boardwalk through restored fen

Sections of path between the boardwalks in the centre of the site can also get muddy in wet weather, particularly over winter. It may therefore be worth extending boardwalks to cover these areas when renovation work is undertaken.



Wet sections between boardwalks



Bridges have recently been renovated and so should not require any work over the period of this plan.



Bridges across ditches on the common

2.6.2 Vehicle access

Vehicle access for management purposes is possible from Bedford Road, Westmill Lane, Swinburne Playing Fields and Oughtonhead Lane.

2.6.3 Access for horses

Access for horses is provided at either end of the riverside path, along with each end of Westmill Lane, via either a 'horse hop' structure or horse-friendly barrier gate.



Site entrance on riverside path



Site entrance on Westmill Lane

Two barriers prevent access for horses along the perimeter path.



Horse barrier at entrance to perimeter path

2.6.4 Grazing infrastructure

In 2016, the grazing area of the common was extended and new stock fencing installed. This is in good condition and should not require any replacement during this plan, beyond minor repairs. Three water troughs are also found on site.



Stock fencing around grazing area



Water trough

2.6.5 Perimeter fencing

The majority of the site perimeter away from the river is fenced with post and rail fencing. This has collapsed in a number of places, however dense scrub along the edge of much of the site prevents access, and so these sections have not been replaced.



Perimeter fence

2.6.6 Benches

Timber benches are located around the site, particularly along the riverside path. These are of a standard design used across many NHC sites.



Example bench

2.6.7 Bins

No bins are found within the site, although a number are located at site entrances, emptied as part of the NHC grounds maintenance contract.

2.6.8 The Chalky

The Chalky is a pool in the river at the north-western corner of the site where the public come to enjoy a paddle. It is also well used by dogs and as a consequence suffers from significant erosion. This has previously been tackled through a range of

measures including the installation of pre-planted coir rolls to retain and stabilise the banks, fencing to keep the dogs off banks and provision of a stone-filled mesh access ramp. This ramp has required significant ongoing maintenance, with regular fencing repairs and topping up of the stone.



The Chalky



Ramp surface

2.6.9 Car Park

A car park at the adjacent Swinburne Avenue playing fields is used by visitors to the Common.

2.6.10 Interpretation, signage and leaflets

Five map-based interpretation panels and noticeboards are found at main site entrances. In addition, a further interpretation panel is found on the viewing platform and boardwalk installed as part of the fenland restoration plan, funded by HCC, the Environment Agency and a legacy from the estate of the late volunteer warden Phil Lumley.



Interpretation panel/noticeboard

A site information leaflet provides educative material and promotes two walks, one of which – the River Walk – is suitable for all users.



Information marker post



Entrance sign

2.6.11 Rights of Way

The Common is well connected to the wider countryside through the Public Rights of Way network, this includes the Icknield Way, an ancient green lane which runs just to the north of the site and parallel to the Riverside Path.



RoW waymarker

2.7 Links to wider area

The site is well placed to explore the wider area around Hitchin and beyond. The Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP) passes through the site which also provides links along the River Purwell through Hitchin and other promoted routes further afield including the Letchworth Greenway and Icknield Way walking route.

2.8 Accessibility

The nature of Oughtonhead Common as a natural environment poses limitations to accessibility around the site, particularly through the main grassland area where the terrain and natural features such as ant hills and vegetation will limit accessibility. These limitations mean it is not possible to provide access for all across the whole site, however a number of features are already in place to cater for those with reduced mobility:

- Surfacing along the main riverside path, along with sections of the perimeter path.
- Bridges and boardwalks across ditches and wet areas
- RADAR gates at several entrances.

The plan will aim to improve accessibility across the site by focussing on a number of priorities:

- Improving the surface along existing surfaced sections.

- New path surfacing to link with existing surfaced routes, increasing connectivity.
- Improved directional signage.

2.9 Community and Events

2.9.1 Volunteer activity

2.9.1.1 CMS midweek volunteers

The CMS midweek volunteer group working in North Herts regularly works at Oughtonhead Common as part of their regular programme of work.

2.9.1.2 Friends of Oughtonhead Common

The CMS ‘Friends Group’ model has been independently assessed and accredited to nationally recognised “Investing in Volunteers” standard. Regular meetings are convened between the Friends, CMS and NHC, to ensure the group development needs are established and ongoing training provided. An annual task list is drawn up, in line with the objectives of the plan, and delivery by FoOHC supported by CMS and NHC as required.

2.9.1.3 Volunteer stock checkers

A group of volunteer stock checkers visit site on a rota to assist with welfare checks on cattle.

2.9.1.4 Volunteer mink raft checkers

A group of volunteers monitor the mink raft on site as part of a Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust led monitoring project.

2.9.2 Publicity

NHC and CMS produce regular e-Newsletters which promote planned management activities and achievements across greenspaces, including work at Oughtonhead Common. In addition, the CMS Facebook page regularly includes updates on volunteer activity on the site. The FoOHC also have a Facebook page which gives updates on the work of the Friends. The site has a dedicated page on the NHC

website and is also promoted through the Park Herts website. Opportunities to engage with the development of new management plans are promoted online and through site notices.

3.0 AIM & OBJECTIVES

The aim and objectives of the GAP will be as follows:

Aim

To maintain Oughtonhead Common as one of the premier wetland sites in Hertfordshire. Through the management and creation of wildlife-rich habitats, the long-term future of the site will be secured for the community as a welcoming and well-maintained place for the enjoyment of nature.

Objectives

A. A welcoming place – *To provide a welcoming green space for the enjoyment of the local community*

A1 Improve access to, from and around the site where possible – linking to residential areas, local greenspaces, businesses and schools, public transport, shops and local amenities

A2 Ensure waymarking of Rights of Way is maintained around the site, updating where necessary

B. Healthy, safe and secure – *To provide and maintain clear and safe public access onto, and around Oughtonhead Common*

B1 Carry out planned and reactive tree works to address safety issues

B2 Respond promptly to reports of misuse of the site

C. Well-maintained and clean – *To ensure that all aspects of Oughtonhead Common are kept clean and well maintained*

C1 Manage and maintain paths, boardwalks, bridges, benches, access infrastructure and signage

C2 Remove fly-tipping, undertake regular litter picking, empty litter bins, and carry out small scale vegetation management along access routes

D. Environmental management – *To ensure all aspects of site management are undertaken with sustainability as a guiding principle*

- D1 Ensure all site activities adhere to relevant NHC policies and strategies, including all work undertaken by contractors
- D2 Ensure ongoing maintenance costs are financially sustainable
- D3 Secure external funding to ensure the viability of capital works
- D4 Ensure impacts of climate change are considered in management decisions
- D5 Carry out management according to environmental best practice, including a presumption against the use of herbicide
- D6 Monitor results of delivery to evaluate the success of management activities

E. Biodiversity, landscape and heritage – *To conserve and enhance the important wildlife, landscape and heritage features of Oughtonhead Common*

- E1 Continue to improve the quality of the unimproved grassland and increase its overall area whilst diversifying scrub habitat
- E2 Maintain and improve river, ditch and bank-side habitat, to encourage water vole, brown trout and kingfisher, supporting the key features they require to survive
- E3 Address collapsed weir on the River Oughton through delivery of recommended option from feasibility study
- E4 Continue to manage other wetland habitats to increase biodiversity
- E5 Continue to manage scrub and woodland habitats to increase biodiversity
- E6 Control invasive species

F. Community involvement – *To ensure engagement and involvement of local communities*

- F1 Support volunteer activity at Oughtonhead Common and ensure all involved operate towards achievement of the GAP
- F2 Continue to support the Friends of Oughtonhead Common and encourage the local community to become further involved in site management in a structured and supported way

G. Marketing and communication – *To promote awareness and interest in Oughtonhead Common*

- G1 Widely promote volunteer and community events at Oughtonhead Common, using both traditional and electronic media
- G2 Utilise newly installed noticeboards to update site users of developments on site
- G3 Update and re-print the Oughtonhead Common site leaflet

4.0 MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTIONS

4.1 A welcoming place

A1 Improve access

The surface of the riverside path will be improved through scraping of organic matter and re-grading of the surface. In addition, funding will be sought to surface the remainder of the perimeter path around the common, creating an accessible circular route linking to the riverside path.

Boardwalks will be renovated and extended where appropriate to improve access across wet areas of the common.

The current crushed-stone surface of the ramp at the chalky becomes eroded quickly and requires regular topping up with material. Investigations will look for a more permanent solution which avoids the need for this regular maintenance and the undesirable situation of eroded material entering the channel.

New directional signage will be installed at main entrances and path junctions to help visitors navigate around site.

A2 Rights of Way waymarking

Waymark posts and directional signage for RoW across the site will be monitored and repaired/replaced as necessary.

4.2 Healthy, safe and secure

B1 Tree safety

Tree risk surveys are undertaken in line with NHC's Greenspace and Tree Strategies. A programme of planned and reactive tree risk management is carried out by specialist contractors and managed by the NHC Tree Officer.

Oak processionary moth (OPM) was introduced into England in 2005 and has since become established in London, gradually spreading into surrounding counties including southern areas of Hertfordshire. While the moth is harmless, caterpillars pose a risk to public health through microscopic hairs which cover its body. Contact

with hairs typically causes skin rashes, although symptoms can include eye irritation, sore throats and in extreme cases breathing difficulties and allergic reactions. If OPM is identified at Oughtonhead Common, NHC and CMS will follow the latest Forestry Commission guidance regarding control requirements.

B2 Antisocial behaviour

Targeted signage on-site will address reported anti-social behaviour, for example fishing, fires started on grassland areas and metal detecting, which have been issues in the past on NHC sites.

4.3 Well-maintained and clean

C1 Maintain site infrastructure

Benches, bridges, cattle infrastructure, fences, gates, steps and signage will be monitored, and repaired and replaced as necessary. Additional new signage will be installed at entrances to the grazing compartment to inform further about grazing activities on site.

Graffiti and vandalism will be addressed by repairing damage and communicating expectations of responsible site use.

C2 Site cleanliness

Bins at site entrances will continue to be emptied as part of the Grounds Maintenance contract. Litter picking around the site will also continue to be a part of FoOHC and CMS volunteer task days. Graffiti and fly-tipping reports will be dealt with promptly.

4.4 Environmental management

D1 Policies and strategies

Management of Oughtonhead Common should be guided by all relevant NHC policies and strategies, including the North Hertfordshire Council Plan 2022-27 (<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/council-plan>), Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and Green Space Management Strategy (GSMS). The GSMS is currently under review, with an updated strategy due to take effect from 2022.

D2 Management costs

The Grounds Maintenance (GM) contract is reviewed and tendered periodically to ensure the service remains effective and provides value for money.

D3 External funding

The Rural Payments Agency administers the Environmental and Countryside Stewardship payment schemes which support landowners in delivering management practices which are beneficial for biodiversity. From 2024, applications will open for a new payment scheme called the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) which will replace other stewardship schemes. At Oughtonhead Common, a ten-year HLS (Environmental Stewardship) agreement which supports grazing and scrub management will expire in 2022. Annual extension to the HLS agreement will be sought to support grazing up to 2024 when an ELMS agreement will be applied for to support the continuation of positive grassland management.

D4 Climate change

Future effects of climate change on the site will need to be considered in all management decisions, particularly in relation to the effects of changing rainfall patterns on wetland habitats.

D5 Environmental best practice and herbicide use

Exercising good practice biosecurity measures in habitat management will reduce the risk of spreading pests and diseases and increase the resilience of the site. Simple measures such as cleaning footwear, machines, and tools between sites can reduce the risk of spreading plant material or soil containing plant seeds or pathogens.

Where non-native or invasive species are present, hand and mechanical methods of control will be applied to reduce spread or eradicate wherever possible. Herbicide will only be applied when other control methods have been unsuccessful and there is a clear beneficial outcome for biodiversity in eradicating the target species.

D6 Monitoring

A programme of monitoring will be implemented to monitor the success of management activities, including:

- Rapid Grassland Assessment (RGA) of grassland habitats
- Fixed-point photography to monitor habitat changes

Volunteers will be provided with training to deliver these surveys as part of regular volunteer activities. Members of the FoOHC have also recently undertaken training in the Upper and Bedford Ouse Volunteer River Warden scheme, which will increase knowledge and monitoring of the River Oughton running through the site.

4.5 Biodiversity, landscape and heritage

E1 Grassland habitats

Grazing will continue to be the main management of grassland habitats. The current timetable of grazing the main compartment from May to July and October to February, and the smaller compartment from March to April and August to September, will continue. Grazing pressure will be monitored and adjusted as necessary, particularly as management of scrub moves from scrub reduction to rotational management.

Three areas for scrub reduction have been identified, with one area to be the focus for each of the first three years of the plan. In these areas, management will target a 50% reduction in scrub levels across age ranges. This will be undertaken primarily by volunteers, supported by contractors to remove larger trees where necessary. Visual amenity will be considered when removing scrub so that sightlines and views across the site will be enhanced where possible.

Following scrub reduction, a programme of rotational scrub management will be introduced across the site, with an annual planning meeting identifying areas to target. The aim will be to maintain scrub with a range of ages and structure to provide habitat for as wide range of species as possible.

E2 River Oughton

Opportunities to work collaboratively with stakeholders at a wider catchment level will be investigated through participation in the Upper Bedford and Ouse Catchment Partnership (UBoCP). We will also work with other interested parties to identify opportunities for improvements to the river, particularly HMWT both through their wider river catchment work and as landowners of the Oughtonhead Nature Reserve on the opposite side of the river to ensure a joined-up approach to management.

Officers from NHC and CMS will engage with Affinity Water regarding any resumption of abstraction from the aquifer supplying the River Oughton to ensure effects on both the river and the adjacent nature reserve are considered and solutions found to mitigate against negative effects.

Brash buildouts and in-channel structures will be monitored. If required, consent will be sought to top-up existing structures and install additional buildouts as necessary.

Riverbanks will also continue to be monitored for erosion, and stabilisation works undertaken reactively where required.

E3 Collapsed weir

Following completion of the commissioned feasibility study, stakeholders will be engaged with, and a preferred option implemented.

E4 Wetland habitats

Reedbed cutting will continue, however, the cutting regime will be adjusted slightly to cutting a quarter every year, rather than half every two years. This will create a greater diversity of structure within the reedbed, whilst maintaining the same overall period for completing each cutting rotation.

Reed and sedge near the sluice will be cut back in year 3 to maintain an area of open water near the sluice.

The pond created as part of fen creation works will have reed cut back once every three years to maintain open water.

Ditch vegetation will continue to be managed predominantly through grazing. Areas of mature scrub along ditches in the main grazing compartment will be removed to maintain a clear channel.

The fen will also be managed through grazing. Scrub encroachment will be monitored and removed if necessary.

E5 Trees, woodland and mature scrub

Scrub and woodland habitats around the perimeter of the site and outside of the main grazing area of the common will largely be left as non-intervention, with a few exceptions.

Along the riverside path, selective felling will remove overhanging limbs and encroaching scrub to ensure the path is kept open, particularly to maintain access for horse riders, and vehicles for management works. A small number of trees will be felled along the river to continue with works to de-shade the river, targeting ash showing signs of ash dieback. Where desirable, trees/limbs will be felled into the channel to increase natural deflectors, subject to Ordinary Watercourse consent.

Hazel will continue to be coppiced on rotation, with the material created utilised on site where possible to build hurdles and dead hedges.

Willow will also continue to be coppiced adjacent to the reedbed to prevent encroachment into wetland habitats.

Laid hedgerows along Westmill Lane will be managed with annual cutting back of facing material. They will, however, have their height allowed to grow to allow re-laying in the future, potentially towards the end of this plan.

E6 Invasive species

Himalayan balsam will continue to be pulled annually by volunteers.

Azolla monitoring will continue along the river and ditches within the site. When the weed reaches a suitable stage for possible treatment, current guidance and best practice will be investigated to identify the most appropriate course of action. This is important, not only to protect the habitat on the common but also the river habitat downstream.

The mink raft on site will continue to be monitored and results fed back to HMWT.

Snowberry will be cut back by volunteers as necessary.

4.6 Community involvement

F1 Volunteer activity

The CMS midweek volunteer group will continue to regularly work on site, working towards delivering plan objectives. The programme of volunteer stock checkers will also continue, assisting with welfare checks.

F2 Friends of Oughtonhead Common

The Friends of Oughtonhead Common will continue to be supported in delivering management activities, supplemented by regular task days from the CRoW Thursday volunteer group. Meetings will be held between NHC, CRoW and representatives from the Friends every six months to discuss and plan work programmes.

4.7 Marketing and communication

G1 Promote and celebrate

Activities at Oughtonhead Common will continue to be covered in stories in both the NHC and CMS eNewsletters and CMS Facebook page. Significant projects to improve the site and engage the community will be shared with local Councillors and celebrated through press releases.

G2 Noticeboards

New noticeboards will be regularly updated to raise awareness and inform visitors of works undertaken at Oughtonhead Common and any issues that arise. Additional signage will advertise Health Walks and any events on site, and also include behaviour signage to advise on restricted activities such as fishing, camping etc.

G3 Site leaflet

The site leaflet will be updated to reflect changes to site mapping and the recent NHC re-branding. Following these updates, the new leaflet will be printed and distributed.

5.0 ACTION PLANS AND MAPS

5.1 ANNUAL AND REGULAR ACTIONS

Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
0.1	Submit claim to Rural Payment Agency for HLS (AG00396538) and continue to arrange for extensions until subsequent ELMS is introduced. Apply for ELMS scheme when available.	D2	May	NHC	CMS	Officer time			
0.2	Arrange grazing contract to meet HLS requirements	E1	Feb to March	NHC	CMS	Officer time			
0.3	Maintain grazing infrastructure (fencing and water supply)	E1	April	CMS	Grazier	External (RPA)			
0.4	Carry out daily animal welfare checks for livestock	E1	June to Sept	CMS	Vols	Vol time			
0.5	Operate emergency protocol for livestock grazing	E1	June to Sept	NHC	NHC	Officer & vol time			

0.6	Carry out rotational reedbed cutting	E4	Sept to Oct	CMS	CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
0.7	Carry out rotational hazel/willow coppicing	E5	Sept to March	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
0.8	Maintain laid hedges along Westmill Lane	E5	Jan to March	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
0.9	Control of invasive species (Himalayan balsam, ragwort)	E6	May to July	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
0.10	Monitor mink raft	E6	All year	CMS	Vols	Officer & vol time			
0.11	Monitor brash buildouts	E2	All year	CMS	CMS	Officer time			
0.12	Monitor riverbanks for erosion	E2	All year	CMS	CMS	Officer time			
0.13	Work with stakeholders in wider catchment to identify opportunities for river improvements	E2	All year	CMS	CMS	Officer time			

0.14	Promote volunteer and community events	G1	June	CMS	CMS	Officer time			
0.15	Tree survey and proportionate risk management	B1	Winter	NHC	GM contract	GM budget			
0.16	Vegetation management along main access routes into site	C1	May to Sept	NHC	GM contract	GM budget			
0.17	Maintain site furniture, signs and interpretation	C1	All Year	NHC/ CMS	GM contract/ FoOHC/ CMS vols	GM budget			
0.18	Prompt removal of graffiti and fly-tipping	C2	All Year	NHC	GM contract	GM budget			
0.19	Ensure site visitors are informed of prohibited activities (such as fishing, metal detecting & burning) that damage biodiversity and heritage	C2	All Year	NHC	NHC	Officer time			

0.20	Rapid Grassland Assessments of grassland habitats	D6	Jun/Jul	CMS	FoBGS/ Vols	Officer time			
0.21	Fixed point photography monitoring	D6	Jan/Apr Jul/Oct	CMS	FoBGS/ Vols	Officer time			
0.22	Develop and promote Friends of Oughtonhead Common	F2	All year	CMS	NHC/ CMS	Officer time			



5.2 Year 1

Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
1.1	Renovate boardwalks	A1	Summer	CMS	CMS vols	NHC	£5k	6.1	
1.2	Investigate options for improving ramp at The Chalky	A1	All year	CMS	CMS	Officer time			
1.3	Deliver preferred option for collapsed weir	E3	All year	CMS	Contractor				
1.4	Carry out year 1 scrub reduction	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
1.5	Selective removal of larger trees within the grazing area	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	Contractor	NHC	£2k		
1.6	Remove patches of scrub from ditches in grazing area	E2/ E3	Sept to Feb	CMS	CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
1.7	Carry out tree works along riverside path	E3	Sept to Feb	CMS	Contractor	NHC	£5k	6.4	
		A1							

1.8	Clear reed from fen pond	E4	Sept/ Oct	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
1.9	Update leaflet and reprint	G3	All year	CMS	Contractor	NHC			



5.3 Year 2

Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
2.1	Perimeter path surfacing	A1	Sept/ Oct	CMS	Contractor		£40k	6.2	
2.2	Riverside path scraping and regrading	A1	Sept/ Oct	CMS	Contractor		£20k	6.3	
2.3	Deliver improvements to the ramp at The Chalky	A1	Sept/ Oct	CMS	Contractor	NHC			
2.4	Produce and install directional signage	A1	All year	CMS	Contractor	NHC	£3k	6.5	
2.5	Produce and install signage for grazing compartment entrances	C1	All year	CMS	Contractor	NHC	£1k	6.6	
2.6	Carry out year 2 scrub reduction	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			



5.4 Year 3

Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
3.1	Carry out year 3 scrub reduction	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
3.2	Cut back sedge bed vegetation	E4	Sept/ Oct	CMS	CMS vols	Officer & vol time			



5.5 Year 4

Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
4.1	Implement rotational scrub management in grazing area	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
4.2	Clear reed from fen pond	E4	Sept/ Oct	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			



5.6 Year 5

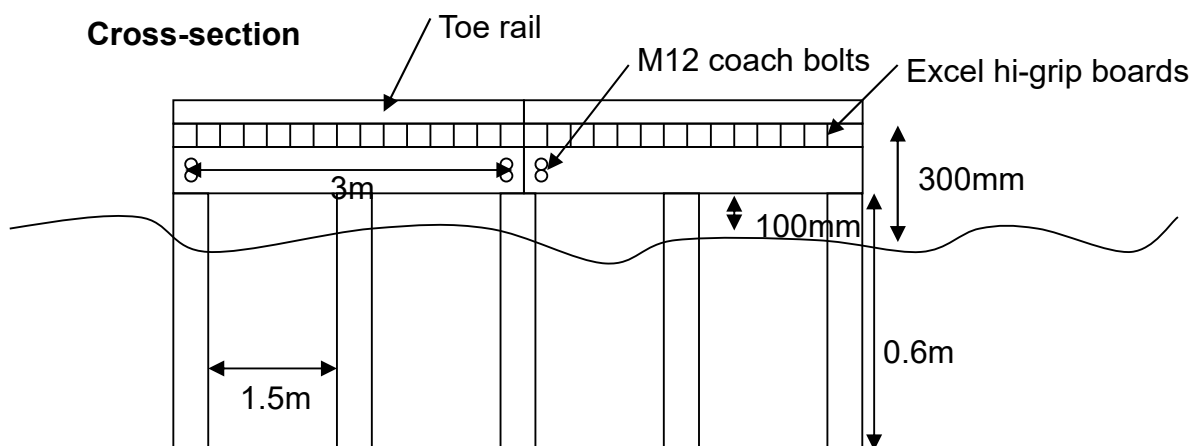
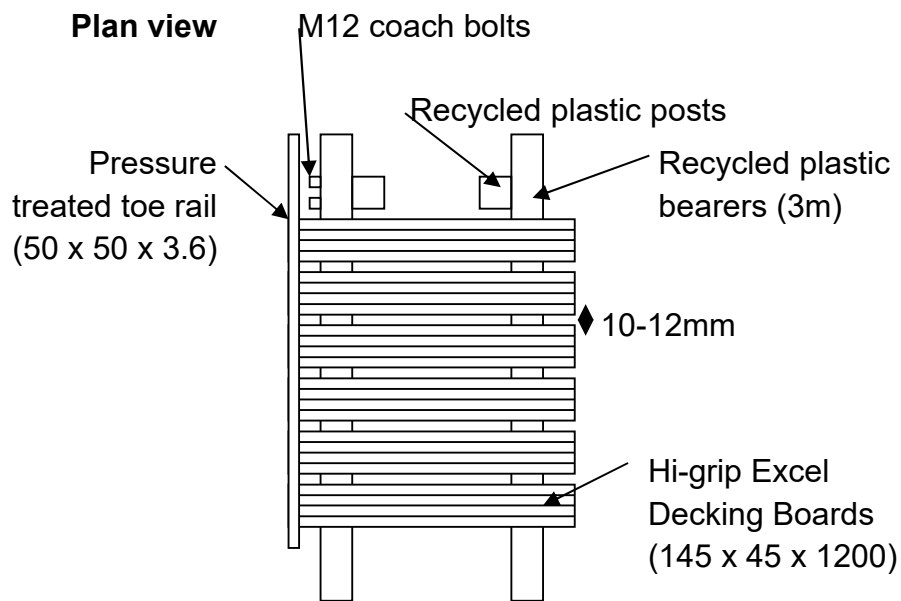
Ref no.	Action	Obj. Ref	When	Lead	Delivery	Funding	Est. Cost	Spec . Ref.	Status
5.1	Carry out rotational scrub management in grazing area	E1	Sept to Feb	CMS	FoOHC / CMS vols	Officer & vol time			
5.2	Assess laid hedges for re-laying	E5	Sept to Feb	CMS	CMS	Officer time			



6.0 SPECIFICATIONS

6.1 Boardwalk renovation

New and replacement sections of boardwalk will follow the same design as existing boardwalks on site, except for replacing treated softwood bearers with recycled plastic to increase longevity.



6.2 Path surfacing

1. Surfacing will have a total length of approximately 1,065 metres, split in to two lengths of 660 metres and 405 metres.
2. Excavate the marked-out path to a minimum depth of 150mm and at least 3m width, with all soft spots excavated back to firm ground with the purpose of achieving best surface drainage of the finished route, with hollows filled and compacted with sub-base to ensure an even, firm base layer.
3. Excavated soil is to be removed from the site.
4. The safe width of the surfaced area should be 3m.
5. Supply and lay a permeable non-woven geotextile membrane, such as Terram 1500 or similar, to completely cover the formation level of the path.
6. Supply, spread, grade and thoroughly compact a dense, tight, even base course, recycled aggregate 50mm to dust. Compact base course to refusal using a vibrating roller. The finished compacted depth is to be not less than 150mm. Ensure that the geotextile membrane is covered at this stage.
7. Supply, spread, grade and thoroughly compact to a dense, tight, even surface, a layer of well graded recycled aggregate (6mm to dust) as surface dressing. Compact to refusal using a vibrating roller as above. The finished, compacted depth to be not less than 50mm. Edges to be lost in adjoining ground and base course to be completely covered. Material must be completely free from deleterious materials.
8. Path to have a final minimum camber of 1:50 to allow surface water to drain either side.
9. Create grips along the route where the surrounding banks are particularly high to allow the water to run off the path/away from the path edge.
10. Any protruding objects to be removed by the contractor.

6.3 Path re-grading

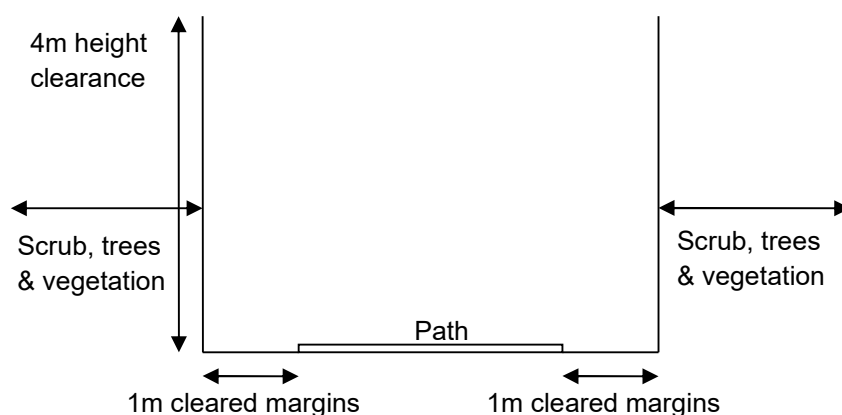
1. Scrape off grass and organic material to finished path width. Paths have a varying amount of organic material and encroachment by vegetation, and so

there will be a varying amount of effort required. Total length path requiring work is approximately 1,725 metres.

2. Scarify surface of existing path, with hollows filled and compacted with sub-base to ensure an even, firm base layer.
3. Supply, spread, grade and thoroughly compact to a dense, tight, even surface, a layer of well graded recycled aggregate (concrete dust/reject sand) 6 mm to dust as surface dressing. Compact to refusal using a vibrating roller. Finished, compacted depth to be not less than 50mm. Edges to be lost in adjoining ground and base course to be completely covered. Ensure existing low spots are built up to prevent water collecting. Material must be completely free from deleterious materials.
4. Path to have a final minimum camber of 1:50 to allow surface water to drain either side.
5. Any protruding objects to be removed by the contractor.

6.4 Tree clearance along riverside path

Clear encroaching and overhanging vegetation to create a minimum of 4m height and 1m margins on either side of the surfaced path free from encroaching vegetation.



In addition, occasional riverside trees will be felled to increase light levels reaching the river channel. Trees to be removed will target those with poor form and ash showing signs of ash dieback.

6.5 Directional signage

Signage to consist of:

1. Rustic fingerposts in green oak, 100mm x 100mm x 2400mm, with 4-way weathered top. Sanded only with no preservative.
2. Double sided single line finger arms in semi-seasoned oak, 700mm x 125mm. Text in Helvetica font, routed and painted with white infill. Sanded only with no preservative.

6.6 Grazing compartment entrance signs

1. Design and produce A3 size entrance sign for grazing compartments using NHC house style.
2. Finished signage produced in 3mm aluminium with radius corners.
3. Fixings to allow fixing of signage to existing kissing gates.

7.0 APPENDICES

7.1 Protocol for animal health and welfare incidents involving livestock at Oughtonhead Common

This protocol is for animal health and welfare incidents involving the grazing livestock at Oughtonhead Common, Hitchin. It is for use by North Hertfordshire District Council and partners.

The specified livestock grazing regime for the site consists of:

- Six English Longhorn cattle grazing the site all year, split between two compartments. The cattle graze the main large compartment between October and February, and between May and July. They graze the smaller compartment in March and April, and in August and September.

Grazing timings may be altered slightly depending on habitat conditions and availability of livestock.

English Longhorns are a very docile breed of cattle and are tolerant of dogs. Nevertheless they should not be handled by anyone except the grazier or their appointed representative.

The graziers are responsible for the welfare of livestock and will carry out regular checks on the animals (i.e. several times a week) with the support of local volunteer stock checkers.

However, they are not present on site. This document therefore provides guidelines to NHC and other partners, such as the police, dealing with a response to emergency and non-emergency situations affecting the health and welfare of the livestock. It includes contact details for all relevant parties (see table).

In all situations, the person taking the initial report should gain as much information as possible about the incident, including the name and contact details of the caller, location and condition of the animal and details of the incident / injury.

Important note. These animals are not inherently dangerous or aggressive. In the event that they escape the best course of action is to contact the grazier who can organise rounding them up and returning them to their field.

There should be no reason for the police or other party to take a more drastic approach (such as shooting the animals) and such an approach should be avoided at all costs.

7.1.1 Guidelines for the Public

Contact telephone numbers to be displayed on site in all four notice boards and gateways whilst livestock are present on site.

Two numbers to be displayed:

- Grazier's number for animals
- NHC for site-related calls

7.1.2 Internal procedure

To be followed on receipt of a report of an incident affecting the health and welfare of the livestock.

Non-emergency situations

e.g. stray livestock (except if on road), a lame animal, damaged fencing

During working hours:

- Contact the site manager. If they or a colleague cannot be contacted please follow the next steps.
- Site manager to contact grazier if necessary
- If grazier cannot be contacted, site manager to monitor / deal with situation appropriately (which may mean escalating to emergency procedure)
- Outside working hours:
- Contact NHC out-of-hours service
- NHC out-of-hours service to contact grazier if necessary
- If grazier cannot be contacted, NHC out-of-hours service to monitor and deal with situation appropriately (which may mean escalating to emergency situation procedure)

Emergency situations

e.g. a dog attack, broken leg, traumatic wound, livestock on road, fire on site

During working hours

- Contact the site manager. If they or a colleague cannot be contacted please follow the next steps.
- Site manager to contact grazier who can contact their vet as appropriate
- Site manager to contact the relevant emergency service (police, fire service) if appropriate and not already done
- If grazier cannot be contacted and animal is badly injured, site manager to contact the grazier's vet
- If grazier and vet cannot be contacted and animal is badly injured / distressed, site manager to contact the RSPCA
- Site manager to attend site

Outside working hours

- NHC out-of-hours service to contact the relevant emergency service (police, fire service) if not already done
- NHC out-of-hours service to contact the grazier and grazier to contact their vet as appropriate
- If grazier cannot be contacted and animal is badly injured, NHC out-of-hours service to contact the grazier's vet
- If grazier and vet cannot be contacted and animal is badly injured / distressed, NHC out-of-hours service to contact the RSPCA

7.1.3 Contacts

Role	Name	Contact details	Comments
Cattle grazier	Maydencroft – Chris Oakley	chris.oakley@maydencroft. co.uk 07821111653	Contract reviewed on annual basis
Site manager		Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth, SG6 3JF	Office hours only
NHC Out-of-hours service	Carelina	01462 420600	Outside office hours

Vet	The Woolpack Veterinary Practice	01763 273707	Only if grazier cannot be contacted
Police		999	
Fire service		999	
RSPCA		0300 1234 999	Only if grazier or vet cannot be contacted

7.2 Engagement response

Below is a summary of comments received from the second stage engagement process on the Oughtonhead Common Greenspace Action Plan 2022-27, carried out in summer 2022.

Theme of comments	Engagement response	Outcome
Access	Surfacing welcomed.	No action required.
	Some paths are narrow to accommodate social distancing, may be putting some users off. Anecdotal reports of conflict between site users, e.g., cyclists, dog walkers.	No action taken. In many instances, path width is restricted by surrounding features, e.g. the river, hedgerows. Path widening therefore generally not possible. Works to regrade riverside path will restore original width of the surfaced path.
	Needs of disabled users/ pushchairs should be addressed specifically.	Specific accessibility section added.
	Make more mention of link to local green infrastructure.	Section added on links to wider area.

Anti-social behaviour	More signage, barbecues, camping, dog mess etc.	Action included to produce behaviour signage to go in noticeboards.
	Increase number of dog bins to reduce instances of dog poo being left.	Not currently planned, a number of dog bins already found at reserve entrances.
Signage	Install directional signage to help guide people around site.	Action added to update directional signage.
	Improve grazing signage at access points.	Action added to produce new signage for entrances to grazing compartments.
General habitat management	Move to rotational scrub cutting welcomed.	No action required.
	More species-specific information, take advice from specialist groups such as RSPB on species present/management.	No action taken. Although not space within the plan to include all species records, previous surveys of bird species (along with other wildlife records) found on the Common are used to inform new GAP.
	More collaboration with HMWT to ensure management with their adjacent reserve is complimentary.	Although specific details not available to include within the plan, discussions are ongoing with HMWT around further collaboration to ensure joined-up approach to management, including at a wider catchment scale.

Management of riverbanks	Fell some trees into the river to act as natural deflectors.	Plan amended to include potential for flow deflectors to be installed as part of any tree felling works along the river, subject to relevant consents.
	Erosion issues from dog access. Dead hedging working but requires maintenance. Improved access at Chalky.	Dead hedging, although labour intensive, is the most effective method currently found for protecting banks. Plan includes action to improve infrastructure at the Chalky, this work is ongoing.
	Ash dieback affecting bank stability.	Plan contains action to regularly monitor bank erosion, issues will be dealt with on a reactionary basis, including those due to ash dieback.
Re-starting abstraction	Include details on dealing with possible effects.	Limited information currently available. Action added to actively engage with Affinity Water and other stakeholders to limit effects of future abstraction and look for opportunities to improve river and wetland habitats.
Volunteer river monitors	Opportunity for increased knowledge of river habitats through inclusion in volunteer monitoring schemes.	Action included to assist interested members of FoOHC to join schemes.

Promotion	Increase awareness/understanding of work, particularly scrub clearance.	Action added to update noticeboards with updates on work being carried out on site.
	Promote Health Walks on site.	Action added to advertise health walks in site noticeboards.
	Reference Parks Herts.	Reference to Park Herts added.
FoG	Are there projects the FoOHC can lead on?	Six-monthly meetings are held between FoG and CMS/NHC staff, these will be used to identify potential projects in addition to regular work programme, dependant on capacity/workload.
Local Plan	Link to Local Plan, Green Infrastructure Plan. Meets Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) criteria, use this to access S106/CIL/BNG monies.	Plan amended to include more information on links to wider strategies. All sources of funding investigated when seeking funding for projects.
Flood management	Possible use of site for floodwater storage.	Identified as a potential location in Green Infrastructure Plan, but not currently being investigated for the period of this GAP.
Increase knowledge of visitor use	Potential to use visitor counters, surveys,	Comment fed back to NHC to discuss potential for all sites at a wider, district

	analysing anonymised Google data.	level, rather than for this individual site.
Visual amenity	Referenced in NHC GI Plan, increase mention of visual amenity in GAP.	Plan amended to include more information on links to wider strategies, including visual amenity.
Green Flag	Link actions to Green Flag criteria.	No action required, plan uses Green Flag headings as template for GAP, ensuring compliance with judging criteria.