

The River Wensum Restoration Strategy

Introduction

The River Wensum is a chalk river of great value for its angling and wildlife, as well as being an important landscape feature of rural Norfolk.

The nature conservation interest of the river is recognised nationally through its notification as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and internationally through its designation as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). In addition, chalk rivers such as the Wensum are a priority habitat of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) classifies the river as bad (due to diatom failures) and the SSSI is in unfavourable ecological condition. The reasons for unfavourable condition include inappropriate water levels, water pollution – agriculture/run-off, water abstraction, inappropriate weirs, dams and other structures, invasive freshwater species, and physical modifications to the channel (deepening, widening and straightening) that impede the river's hydrological functioning.

Highly modified river channel.



A number of projects/initiatives are in place to remedy these pressures. The water quality problems are being addressed by phosphate removal at sewage treatment works. Plans have been put in place to reduce the impacts of water abstraction on the river. The issue of agricultural run-off is being tackled by a Catchment Sensitive Farming project (lead by Natural England) and a Demonstration Test Catchment project lead by the University of East Anglia. The Norfolk non-native Species Initiative is taking steps to control invasive freshwater species. This just leaves the physical modifications of the river, which are being addressed by the River Wensum Restoration Strategy.

Objective of the restoration strategy

The River Wensum Restoration Strategy has been developed by Natural England, in partnership with the Environment Agency and the Water Management Alliance, to facilitate restoring the physical functioning of the river in order that it can sustain the wildlife and fisheries characteristic of a Norfolk chalk river.

In essence parts of the river are too wide, too deep and too straightened, as well as being heavily impounded by mill structures. The Wensum is also disconnected from its floodplain by spoil banks resulting from historical dredging for land drainage and industrial (milling) activities. For the first time we have looked at a whole river scale to see what action needs to be taken to restore each section of the channel. The main recommendations of the strategy include narrowing the channel, restoring the gravel bed, reductions in impoundment, re-connecting the floodplain, improving channel sinuosity and increasing the amount of large woody material in the channel. There is no intention to return the river to some former “natural” condition that it might have had at a specified time in the past.

Restored river reach.



Taking the River Wensum Restoration Strategy forward

The project will seek to involve landowners, fishing clubs and other interested groups in carrying out river restoration projects. We have completed feasibility assessments on all the designated sections of the river. These provide an objective evaluation of the restoration measures possible on each section of the river and also ensure consistency on a catchment basis.

The feasibility assessments should not be considered as “tablets of stone”. They are science based documents which point the way to the most appropriate options for river restoration on given reaches of river. As such they should not be viewed as a definitive blue-print for restoration, but as a starting point for discussion with local people.

It is intended that implementation of the Strategy will be through collaborative working with key stakeholders, including land owners and fisheries managers, to develop detailed restoration schemes for particular reaches of the river. To this end, Natural England and the Environment Agency have implemented a number of demonstration river restoration projects that will seek to integrate the requirements of different interests.

A good stretch of existing channel.



The Strategy gives a degree of certainty and clarity over what may or may not be appropriate on a given river reach. As such it provides guidance to any land owner, fisheries manager or organisation wishing to develop their own river restoration proposals. The existence of an over-arching strategy may also act as a tool to help secure funding for river restoration projects.

It is hoped that the Strategy will give a steer in terms of the long term sustainable management of the river for many years to come. Solutions must be found in the short term to resolve issues associated with mill structures, and intervention will be required to restore the gravel bed of the river (it will not replenish itself through natural processes). However, many of the other objectives, including river narrowing and silt management can be delivered in the most cost effective way through working with natural processes over extended timescales.

If you would like more information on the River Wensum Restoration Strategy, please contact us either by:

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