

4 RIVERS RESTORATION PROJECT

Executive Summary - Waveney Workshop Report



The 4 Rivers Restoration Project aims to accelerate ecological restoration of the River Waveney: a large and complex river: 59 miles long with 339 square miles of catchment that straddles the Suffolk/Norfolk border. Workshops gathered regulatory, advisory and political bodies, landowners, farm clusters and community groups to assess the river's condition, identify threats and opportunities and develop workable initiatives to improve water quality, flood resilience and biodiversity.

SITUATION ASSESSMENT

Despite official 'good to moderate' EA assessments (2022), the Waveney was considered in poor ecological condition in many stretches: above Diss, at Fritton Decoy, and the Frenz Beck to Dove section. The river faces pollution from sewage, agriculture and industry; chronically low flows and oxygen levels that procure fish kills and weirs that block wildlife passage from Ellingham onwards. The river has been heavily straightened, its catchment suffering habitat loss and compacted clay soils, with aquifer recharge poor even during floods. Himalayan Balsam and pennywort blight stretches of the river and Diss Sewage Treatment Works is flagged as a significant concern. And yet, the Waveney holds significant amenity value to the community and supports much wildlife.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY PROPOSES

32 initiatives with over half designated as high impact, span farmer-led initiatives, volunteer coordination, community engagement, citizen science, native orchards, pond enhancement, soil management, NFM and biodiversity monitoring. This reflects a catchment where both human infrastructure and physical initiatives must be developed simultaneously. Notably practical initiatives cover weir removal, Diss Mere water quality, neonicotinoid monitoring, peat rewetting, groundwater attenuation, super buffers and rain harvesting. However, fragmented funding, exacerbated by the river's two-county position, plus institutional disconnection (through funding rules, data-sharing protocols, administrative boundaries & decision-making timescales) and cultural resistance are persistent challenges.

KEY PRIORITIES

Nine initiatives considered high impact and most achievable cluster around three themes:

- **Farmer and community-led action** – engagement with these sectors is rated as the single most important issue, as to date broader landowner take-up has been disappointing.
- **Habitat and biodiversity** – the most deliverable interventions include native orchards, ghost/zombie pond restoration, aquatic biodiversity monitoring, soil management and NFM at flood-risk communities. However, weir removal (HM) and peat rewetting (HM) would arguably deliver greater ecological transformation.
- **Evidence and monitoring** – water test the whole river via citizen science. Build on pesticide neonicotinoid monitoring from 2022.

Tellingly, whole-catchment thinking, which appears to underpin every other initiative, is not given top priority, perhaps because catchment-scale coordination is difficult for a two-county river.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

The Waveney's central challenge is that it is a two-county river with fragmented funding and no coordinated catchment plan. The River Waveney Trust is already delivering NFM, invasive species control, citizen science, river fly monitoring, farm cluster facilitation and river access work, but project-by-project funding makes this precarious. Broader landowner engagement is poor, despite offers of expertise sharing. Cultural resistance to changing land management practices persists. The EA does not share data. Funding streams spanning two counties have different criteria, timescales and administrative requirements; some cannot cross the border at all. Despite these significant challenges, the community's consistent message is that the knowledge, willingness and many resources already exist. What is missing is funded coordination and institutional responsiveness to match local ambition; input from District Councillors will be essential to implementation success.