4 RIVERS RESTORATION PROJECT

Executive Summary : Alde & Ore Workshop Report

The 4 Rivers Restoration Project aims to accelerate ecological restoration of the Alde & Ore river. Workshops brought together regulatory, advisory and political bodies, landowners, farm clusters and community groups to assess the River Alde/Ore's condition, identify threats and opportunities and develop workable initiatives to improve water quality, flood resilience and biodiversity. The Alde/Ore is distinctive: its estuary holds 36% of England's saltmarsh, farm clusters already cover 75% of the freshwater catchment and four separate groups are testing water quality – but independently, without shared data. There is no coordinated whole-catchment plan.

SITUATION ASSESSMENT

Official EA assessments (Catchment Explorer 2019/2021) rating the catchment's overall ecological status as moderate were dismissed as out of date. Both rivers now show poor climate resilience, moderate-to-poor water quality and ecological health ranging from good to poor. The catchment faces pressure from multiple directions simultaneously: sewage pollution on the Fromus at Benhall and from Framlingham treatment works; E. coli contamination and pesticide pollution in groundwater; flood risk at ten specific locations from Orford to Framlingham; drought in low-flow conditions; housing development increasing sewage system pressure; and bureaucratic barriers preventing essential estuary defence repairs. Multiple energy projects, including Sizewell C, are reshaping the wider landscape. Invasive species, particularly Himalayan balsam, threaten biodiversity.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY PROPOSES

29 initiatives were generated, with a striking emphasis on information infrastructure over physical intervention. Of the top ten rated initiatives, eight focus on evidence and coordination: networking water testing groups, standardising citizen science reporting, a communications database, public education and myth-busting, a whole-catchment scoping document, saltmarsh research and baseline monitoring. Only two initiatives are physical: NFM projects upstream of Framlingham/Parham and on the Fromus at Dorleys Corner. Resources include Sizewell funds and farm clusters. The Mere at Framlingham was also highlighted as a key NFM asset.

KEY PRIORITIES

Ten initiatives were rated high-impact and highly achievable, grouped into two themes:

- **Evidence and coordination –** standardised water testing across four groups with a shared dashboard, a whole-catchment scoping document, a centralised communications database, public education on dredging vs slowing the flow, and saltmarsh research.
- **Practical intervention –** NFM upstream of Framlingham/Parham and on the Fromus at Dorleys Corner, ranked as the top practical interventions for the catchment.

A second tier of initiatives were considered high impact, but only moderately achievable including a new sewage treatment plant at Benhall Marsh, flood risk reduction through habitat restoration, slowing upper-catchment flow, securing long-term maintenance funding, and a beaver feasibility study. Changing soil management practices and reconnecting floodplains are rated high impact but hard to achieve, facing cost, regulatory and behavioural barriers. The community's consistent message: getting the coordination infrastructure right matters more than any single physical intervention.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

The central challenge for the Alde/Ore is a coordination plan: four water testing groups operate independently; funding exists across Anglian Water, Sizewell, DEFRA and local councils but there is no map showing how to access it; landowners are willing but deterred by paperwork and DEFRA's funding uncertainty; a farm cluster gap in the mid-catchment around Snape shows six farms ready but no one to lead. The pattern is clear. There is capacity; what is now needed is coordination, standardisation and centralisation so that initiatives have maximum impact. The involvement of District Councillors will be pivotal at this stage to maximise impacts of local action.