

4 RIVERS RESTORATION PROJECT

Executive Summary – Blyth River Workshop Report



The 4 Rivers Restoration Project aims to accelerate ecological restoration of the River Blyth. Workshops gathered regulatory, advisory and political bodies, landowners, farm clusters and community groups to assess the Blyth River's condition, identify threats and opportunities and develop workable initiatives to improve water quality, flood resilience and biodiversity.

SITUATION ASSESSMENT

The Blyth is in considerably worse condition than official data suggests. A two-year citizen science survey by Wilder Wenhaston disputed the EA's 'moderate' rating, establishing that the river is in poor ecological health. Contrary to the national picture, sewage — not agriculture — is the dominant pollutant: nitrate levels nearly triple downstream of Halesworth treatment works; treated effluent contributes 13% of total river volume, and combined sewer overflows exceeded 273,000 spill hours in 2023. The Blyth's small size and low flow mean every discharge is disproportionately damaging. Flow rates are a concern with the upper river reported to run dry even after a wet winter. Biodiversity is impoverished and Himalayan Balsam dominates virtually every stretch. Downstream, the estuary's international designations make the consequences of inaction significant.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY PROPOSES

21 initiatives span nature-based interventions (stream de-canalisation, water meadow restoration, riverside tree planting, Himalayan Balsam eradication) and capacity-building (data infrastructure, public awareness, farmer support). The community identified substantial untapped resources: over a dozen funding streams; an active farm cluster and 14-church network with land and community reach; willing landowners; growing volunteer capacity; and political support from parish to parliamentary level. Funding exists but is fragmented across many pots with access hindered by lack of coordination.

KEY PRIORITIES

Three initiatives were rated both high-impact and highly achievable:

- **Sewage infrastructure campaign** — a coordinated push to compel treatment upgrades at Halesworth and address septic tank failures across the catchment. Rated the single most impactful action.
- **Blythburgh–Halesworth footpath** — a riverside route connecting communities, habitats and encouraging long-term stewardship along the river corridor.
- **Open-access data hub** — consolidating citizen science evidence to support decision-making and hold agencies accountable and making it easier for community groups to take action.

Further priorities address soil management improvement, water meadow restoration for flood alleviation, and a public awareness campaign on impermeable surfaces and domestic water management, coordinated Balsam control, natural flood management through habitat restoration and tree planting, wildlife corridors, and helping farmers navigate funding schemes. Water quality monitoring underpins almost every initiative.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

The central challenge is structural: the intervention that matters most – upgrading Halesworth sewage works and resolving chronic overflow failures – requires capital investment from Anglian Water and regulatory action from the EA, neither of which the community controls. Most restoration activity on the river works around this failure rather than addressing it. Beyond this, barriers include fragmented short-term funding that is difficult to navigate; costly EA permitting for river restoration; a 5–10 year commitment for Balsam eradication with no guaranteed coordination; farm equipment investment under uncertain DEFRA policy; and no sustainable funding model for local facilitators. The community energy, evidence and resources are present. What is missing is the coordination capacity to enable sustained, whole-catchment action. Input at local level from District Councillors will be essential for this next phase.

