4 RIVERS RESTORATION PROJECT

Executive Summary

River Deben Workshop Report

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

SITUATION ASSESSMENT

The River Deben is in a more degraded state than official EA data reports, with ecological condition and flood resilience rated as moderate to poor. Water quality suffers from nutrient and pesticide pollution. Twenty-three physical structures block fish migration along the river's length. Water abstraction is also a critical threat, compounded by a permitting system unable to capture high-flow water for redistribution during drought. Climate resilience across the catchment is also poor: eighty properties flooded in Debenham during Storm Babet. However, significant work is already underway such as citizen science monitoring over 70 sites, phosphate strippers at Debenham and Charsfield and many other farmer and community-led projects including natural flood management initiatives.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY PROPOSES

40 initiatives span nature-based flood management (high-flow storage, farm ponds, buffer strips, tree planting, leaky dams, attenuation ponds), habitat restoration (riparian corridors, floodplain reconnection, re-meandering, ghost pond reinstatement, beaver introduction), water quality intervention (phosphate stripper upgrades, sewage outfall monitoring, bathing water classification) and community infrastructure (a hub for groups, funding mapping, agency collaboration). The community's appetite is to scale what already works rather than design from scratch (for example, the replication of Deben methods across the Fynn and Lark tributaries).

KEY PRIORITIES

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

- **Practical intervention –** high-flow abstraction storage, habitat and riparian corridor improvement, farm ponds, vegetated buffer strips and tree planting in the upper catchment.
- **Community infrastructure –** a hub for community groups, improved agency collaboration, replication of Deben initiatives across tributaries, engagement with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and mapping of available funding.
- **Water Quality Monitoring – regarded as essential,** underpinning most initiatives.

A clear message consistently emerged that the extra capacity and more suitable tools that support on-ground action matter as much as physical initiatives. Also that funding processes need simplifying for landowners and farmers with more accessible information and longer-term commitment.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

The Deben's central challenge revolves around long-term maintenance of both infrastructure and projects. Leaky dams wash out, silt traps fill and farm ponds need clearing. Without resolving who owns, funds and maintains initiatives after the grant cycle ends, every initiative risks becoming temporary infrastructure in a river that needs permanent recovery. Other barriers include fragmented short-term funding that deters landowners; permitting complexity that creates a tension between 'just do it' and regulatory risk; data gaps on invasive species and uncertainty introduced by the shift to unitary councils. However, the scale of community willingness is evident and a force for change. The involvement of District Councillors will be essential to the success of this next phase. With local action and improved infrastructure, much can be achieved towards long-lasting river restoration.