

Marton Moss

Biodiversity Strategy

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Envision



delivering local planning solutions

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Introduction

1. This strategy aims to help protect the wildlife resources of Marton Moss and advise what appropriate measures should be sought from new building development and land use proposals to improve local biodiversity. The requirement for a strategy was mentioned in the text supporting Local Plan Part 1 (Core Strategy) Policy CS26 and has been produced now to inform the preparation and implementation of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Background

2. The government's nature conservation body - Natural England – made the following comments in response to the designation application for the Neighbourhood Forum [letter of 25 January 2019]:

“Neighbourhood plans ... present significant opportunities, but also potential risks, for the natural environment. Proposals should be in line with the National Planning Policy Framework [NPPF].”

3. The key principles set out in paragraph 170 of the NPPF that are relevant to this strategy are:

“Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);

b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;

...

d) minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures...”

4. The Environment Act 2021 was passed into law by Parliament in November of that year but its main provisions have yet to become operation at the time of writing this Strategy. A key aspect of the Act is a requirement for new development to deliver at least a 10 per cent improvement in “biodiversity value”. Another important initiative that the Act covers is that each local area will need to have a Local Nature Recovery Strategy to help delivery priorities for wildlife improvement.

5. In a small way this Biodiversity Strategy for Marton Moss can start the process of ensuring that when new development proposals come forward in the Neighbourhood Area, they can fulfill the requirements of national policy and emerging environmental legislation. In doing so the local wildlife assets can be safeguarded and the most made of opportunities to enhance these.

What is Biodiversity?

6. Biodiversity is simply the total variety of living organisms in any one place. At the neighbourhood scale it is the range of wildlife that exists in localised habitats. In areas of human settlement these habitats tend to be restricted in extent due to modern land management practices and pressures associated with urbanisation. The resultant fragmentation of habitats can limit biodiversity because many species, both animals and plants, thrive by being able to move or spread to other areas.

7. In such circumstances, natural connections between habitats such as watercourses, hedgerows and tree belts can serve as beneficial wildlife (movement) corridors. The whole system of habitats and the links between them is often referred to as an ecological network. Generally, the healthier the habitat the more diverse of species it will be. Also, typically the longer a habitat has existed and allowed to naturally develop the greater variety of flora and fauna it will contain.

Why is biodiversity important?

8. Again, Natural England succinctly points the way:

“England's natural environment matters to us all. The beauty of our landscapes and wildlife inspire and enrich our lives and are an important part of our national identity.

Although we may not readily appreciate it, biodiversity provides us with many of the things that sustain our lives. Protecting our species and their habitats also improves our quality of life and our standard of living.

Every living thing has a place in what we call the 'balance of nature' and upsetting that balance can have untold effects.

Biodiversity is the source of many ecosystem goods, such as food and genetic resources, and changes in biodiversity can influence the supply of ecosystem services.”¹

9. The term ‘ecosystem services’ means the many and varied benefits to humans provided by the natural environment and from healthy ecosystems – such as the pollination of crops, cleaner air, extreme weather mitigation, plus human mental and physical well-being.

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<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140712055944/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/protectandmanage/habsandspeciesimportance.aspx>

What are the threats to biodiversity?

10. These are many and varied but the ones most relevant to Marton Moss are:

- Habitat destruction and fragmentation by development.
- Intensification and changes in management practices relating to land cultivation and animal stocking.
- Changes in woodland and hedgerow management.
- Inappropriate watercourse management.
- Recreational pressure and human disturbance.

Who can protect and better manage biodiversity at the local level?

11. Everyone who lives, works in, or visits the Moss can play their part. The Neighbourhood Plan is concerned with managing new development and can ensure that when construction or land use proposals are made, provisions are put in place to deliver improvements to biodiversity. A good set of practices for developers to follow are set out in the 'Building with Nature' initiative². However, other people who use the Moss have a role in protecting and managing biodiversity as well – farmers and growers, equestrians, gardeners, and school pupils.

The Biodiversity of Marton Moss

12. The present-day local assemblage of wildlife habitats and species is, like everywhere else, partly a function of what has happened in the past and partly down to current land use practices. For a hundred years or more most of the Moss was used for intensive horticulture with many parts covered in glasshouses. However, some tracts of land were not devoted to market gardening and have long been open fields. The Marton Moss Major Open Land Study (2022) identifies four substantial tracts of open land; that at Midgeland Farm adjoins open countryside in Fylde Borough but the three other areas are more enclosed by buildings and roads.

13. Gradually over the last 60 years nearly all the horticultural operations have ceased, many holdings are now used for equestrian activities or serve as residential plots/gardens. Some former market garden sites have remained unused for many years.

14. Highly cultivated land is typically not very biodiverse; the opposite can be true of unused land - provided it is not contaminated, rendering the soil infertile. However, market gardening has left a useful legacy – a system of dykes and other watercourses as well as some remaining ponds that helped to drain and irrigate the cultivated plots but that today serve as rich, or potentially so, wildlife resources. These watercourses are typically lined with trees and hedgerows so enhancing their habitat value.

² <https://www.buildingwithnature.org.uk/about>

15. There are two main sources of biodiversity information covering the Neighbourhood Area. A Phase 1 ecological survey and the national system of recording and mapping priority habitats and species; supplemented by some local studies. Each of these sources focus on the rarer species rather than those that are common. Also, unfortunately, some of this information is a little out of date.

M55 Hub Phase 1 Survey³

16. This work dates from 2009, from a time when major development was being considered for a wide area of land at the western end of the M55 motorway in both Blackpool and Fylde Boroughs. The Marton Moss Neighbourhood Area comprises about a quarter of the survey study area but comprises most of what was referred to as 'Area 5'. The relevant part of which described Marton Moss as follows:

“the remaining area along the western boundary of the study area is predominately residential interspersed by small holdings. Areas of interest include an area of marshy grassland in the north eastern corner which is also designated in part as a Biological Heritage Site. There are a number of ponds in this area that could support great crested newts and the dyke system in the south is known to have supported water voles. The network of gardens, hedgerow and pasture will provide a number of suitable nesting sites for birds...” [p1]

17. The Biological Heritage Site (an ecological asset of County level importance) is defined as a small strip of land associated with the hedged frontage of a marshy unused field at Chapel Road which supports the Common Meadow-rue plant species; this is scarce in Lancashire and the only extant population in Blackpool.

18. As far as legally protected animal species mentioned by the Phase 1 survey; although several ponds were considered suitable for great crested newts, but no actual specimens were then recorded and have not been since. Similarly, the presence of water voles was not confirmed by sightings then, or more recently. Otters were not mentioned in the Phase 1 survey but are a protected species that has been seen in recent years on the Moss.

19. Nevertheless, it remains undoubtedly true that *“an important habitat that extends through the study area is the network of ditches and dykes”* and these *“potentially would provide an important habitat for a number of species”* [p6]. The Survey also noted that such watercourses could also suit the common lizard and although only one nearby (outside the study area) record existed at the time:

“It is considered that the waterway network could provide a route by which reptiles could move into the area and there are a number of locations where there is a mix of grassland and open ground that would provide suitable habitat”. [p9]

³ Bowland Ecology (2009) M55 Hub Ecology – Extended Phase 1 Report. July 2009.

20. The Phase 1 Survey also referred to:

- the plantation woodland belt of ‘semi-mature’ trees around the southern margins of the Midgeland Farm site and more generally the incidence of hedgerows. Although the latter were typically recorded as ‘species poor’ containing only hawthorn and elder.
- Skylarks were observed on the grassland at Midgeland Farm
- Bats roosts were considered likely to exist given the good foraging available along the hedgerows and watercourses linking with areas of long grassland, although the roosts would be more likely be associated with buildings due to the limited number of mature trees.

Priority Habitats and Species

21. The spatial distribution of significant local habitats and species is shown on the MAGIC mapping resource⁴ maintained by Natural England. The system of priority habitats and species was set up by the first UK Biodiversity Action Plan (1994) and updated through to 2012. By then the notion of priority habitats and species had been given legal status by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The first national Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) led to a series of local BAPS. The Lancashire BAP dates from 2001 and identifies the Priority Habitats and Species significant at the County scale, this information is also recorded on the MAGIC mapping.

22. For the Marton Moss Neighbourhood Area a total of 14 sites are recorded covering the following types of Priority Habitat:

- Deciduous Woodland
- Traditional Orchard
- No Main Habitat but additional habitats present

23. It should be noted that the Coastal Floodplain and Grazing Marsh Priority Habitat is not present. This is significant because that habitat is functionally related to the marine-based habitats of the nearby Ribble and Alt Estuaries and the wider areas of Liverpool and Morecambe Bays which are all internationally important, especially for seabirds. This potential inter-relationship between Marton Moss and these sites of European significance was investigated in the Habitats Regulations Assessment screening work carried out for the Neighbourhood Plan.

24. In respect of the Priority Habitats that were recorded (at the turn of the present century) as present across the Moss it is particularly noteworthy to refer to the three sites of Deciduous Woodland that remain extant today. One is the quite extensive plantation tree belt at Midgeland Farm that extends into Fylde Borough and cited by the Phase 1 Survey. The other two sites are only about a hectare (2 ½ acres) each in area and are part of residential/commercial property grounds. This limited occurrence underlines there is no extensive tree cover present on the Moss.

25. A small part of the land associated with Midgeland Farm – at its north west corner close to the junction of Midgeland Road and School Road - is however recorded as an area of ‘assumed woodland’. Again, this extends to no more than a hectare and represents some sapling tree planting, intended as part of a wider landscaping scheme that was planned as part of the site’s restoration as a former landfill, but which was not fully implemented.

⁴ <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/>

26. Seven of the Priority Habitat sites originally identified fall into the Traditional Orchard category although aerial photography suggests that few of these exist today in that form. Similarly, for the 'No Main Habitat but additional habitats present' category of site most of these now appear to be part of 'well maintained' residential gardens so are unlikely to biodiverse.

27. In terms of Priority Species, the MAGIC mapping reveals the following bird species (all falling in the Farmland Birds category) and their extent across the Moss:

- snipe – north east and south east
- redshank – south east
- lapwing – all parts
- grey partridge – all
- corn bunting - all

Ecological Networks

28. As with priority habitats and species there has been national and local work carried out to identify ecological networks. In Lancashire this has been done for the following habitats:

- Woodland & Scrub;
- Grassland;
- Wetland & Heath.

29. Detailed maps have been produced for the wider Fylde area of Lancashire which includes the Marton Moss part of Blackpool. These maps show that for Grassland and Wetland & Heath habitats the Neighbourhood Area is crossed by major wildlife corridors coinciding with the substantial tracts of open land of the Moss that connect with a much wider network of links beyond in Fylde Borough. Not surprisingly given the lack of tree cover on the Moss the Area is less well connected in terms of Woodland & Scrub but the plantation tree belt at Midgeland Farm is recognised as a 'stepping-stone' (less continuous) link to the wider woodland network.

30. Perhaps of greater relevance to improving biodiversity at Marton Moss is that large parts of the Neighbourhood Area are denoted as suitable for 'Network Enhancement', falling into two identified zones. Land at Midgeland Farm and around the Midgeland Road/School Road crossroads, plus land in the north of the Area in the vicinity of Chapel Road are included in Network Enhancement Zone 1. Much of the remainder of the Moss is shown in Network Enhancement Zone 2. The meaning of the two zones as set out by Natural England is:

- Network Enhancement Zone 1 – land connecting existing patches of primary and associated habitats which is likely to be suitable for creation of the primary habitat. *Action* – *to expand and join up existing patches and improve connections between them.*
- Network Enhancement Zone 2 – land connecting existing patches of primary and associated habitats which is *less* likely to be suitable for creation of the primary habitat. *Action* – *improvement of biodiversity value through land management changes and/or green infrastructure provision to be targeted here.*

Opportunities for Delivering Biodiversity Gains at Marton Moss

32. There is a wide range of measures that can be carried out as part of new developments, often at low cost and minimal effort, to improve opportunities for wildlife to thrive and enable the variety of species to increase. Within each building plot there is likely to be a part, no matter how small, that can be given over to nature. Such land following some simple ground works along with appropriate planting, can then be largely left alone to ‘mature’ and become home to many species of wildlife.

33. The prospects of doing this within residential gardens at Marton Moss will be significant given the low-density of dwelling construction required by the Design Code. The on-going maintenance of gardens is not something that the planning system can control but specific initial requirements can be set at the planning application stage. The designs of all new housing schemes should take full account of existing natural features and incorporate these as much as is feasible as well as propose appropriate supplementary planting and ecological measures.

34. Similarly, the universal requirement for new development on the Moss to provide Sustainable Drainage Systems represents a major opportunity to improve existing ponds and watercourses as well as create new ones in ways that are appropriate for wildlife.

35. Probably the largest individual prospect to create an extensive area incorporating a full range of local nature recovery measures is the land at Midgeland Farm. This area has already been identified as part of a Network Enhancement Zone likely to be suitable for habitat creation. The site is being proposed in the Neighbourhood Plan as a community park with paths for walking, jogging, cycling and horse riding. However, this will still leave large areas that can be devoted to a wide range of wildlife-friendly features, capitalising on the existing woodland and hedgerows. The range of biodiversity improvement measures across the Moss and the types of species that could benefit are set out in in the table below.

Biodiversity Improvement Measures	Types of species benefitting
Protecting existing ponds, reedbeds and watercourses along with restoring/creating these as part of Sustainable Drainage Systems.	Insects and other invertebrates, newts, frogs, and toads, water voles.
Retaining existing hedgerows and trees as well as adding new planting to these features.	Insects and other invertebrates, birds, bats, hedgehogs, and other small mammals.
Setting aside parts of sites and gardens for scrub, tall herb and/or long grass.	Insects and other invertebrates, birds and bats, amphibians.
Providing log piles of rotting wood.	Fungi, insects and other invertebrates, birds, bats, amphibians, and hedgehogs
Installing bird and bat boxes on buildings.	High nesting small birds and bats.
Building grassed-over low mounds of brick/stone rubble, branches, and old pipes as hibernacula.	Insects, other invertebrates, newts, and reptiles.
Creating extensive areas of wildlife meadow.	Flowering plants and grasses, butterflies, bees, other insects and invertebrates, farmland birds, bats, and other small mammals.

Conclusion

36. At present Marton Moss is not particularly biodiverse. However, it has water-based, grassland and hedgerow habitats, along with some tree cover, that together can form the basis of a more varied local ecological network. In part the area has naturally recovered from the days of intensive market gardening but some other features, such as traditional orchards, have been lost. Nevertheless, the enabling of limited development, controlled by Neighbourhood Plan Policies to be in character with the local area, represents a significant opportunity to help achieve biodiversity improvements.