

Cuttle Brook Local Nature Reserve

Management Plan
2025 - 2029



Preface

Since its formal designation as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) in 1993, Cuttle Brook LNR ('the Reserve') has developed as: a local biodiversity hotspot, home to a number of emblematic species as diverse as orchids and otters; a recognised and appreciated green resource for an expanding Thames; and – problematically - a Mecca for dog-walkers.

While some development has been more welcome than others, this on-going evolution is set against a backdrop of increasing threats: plant diseases; climate change; people pressure, with and without dogs; and pollution from a number of sources.

With the continued growth of the town, it is likely that the threats and pressures facing the Reserve will only increase. It is especially important, therefore, that it is kept in mind at all times that the primary aim of the Reserve's management must remain to protect and enhance its biodiversity and conservation interest. Designation as a Local Nature Reserve was made under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The Act lays down that recreation is a legitimate adjunct to conservation but only, "*if the management of the land for the recreational purpose does not compromise its management for the conservation purpose*" (S.15(1)(b)). The legal status of the Reserve places an onus on its managers to always put conservation first and provides the powers, if needed, to create byelaws to restrict potentially damaging activities.

During the period of the previous management plan, the reserve has been extended to the north of the Oxford Road by the addition of land known as Rycote Meadow (Fig. 1a).

Main Aims

- A. To protect, maintain and, wherever possible, enhance the conservation and biodiversity interests of the Reserve and its local environment.
- B. To manage public access to the Reserve consistent with biodiversity and conservation.
- C. To foster understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the Reserve.
- D. To enhance community involvement in the Reserve.
- E. To take opportunities to enlarge the Reserve, recognising its importance as a wildlife corridor.

An overview of the compartments of the Reserve and the habitats they contain is shown in Figure 1, below:

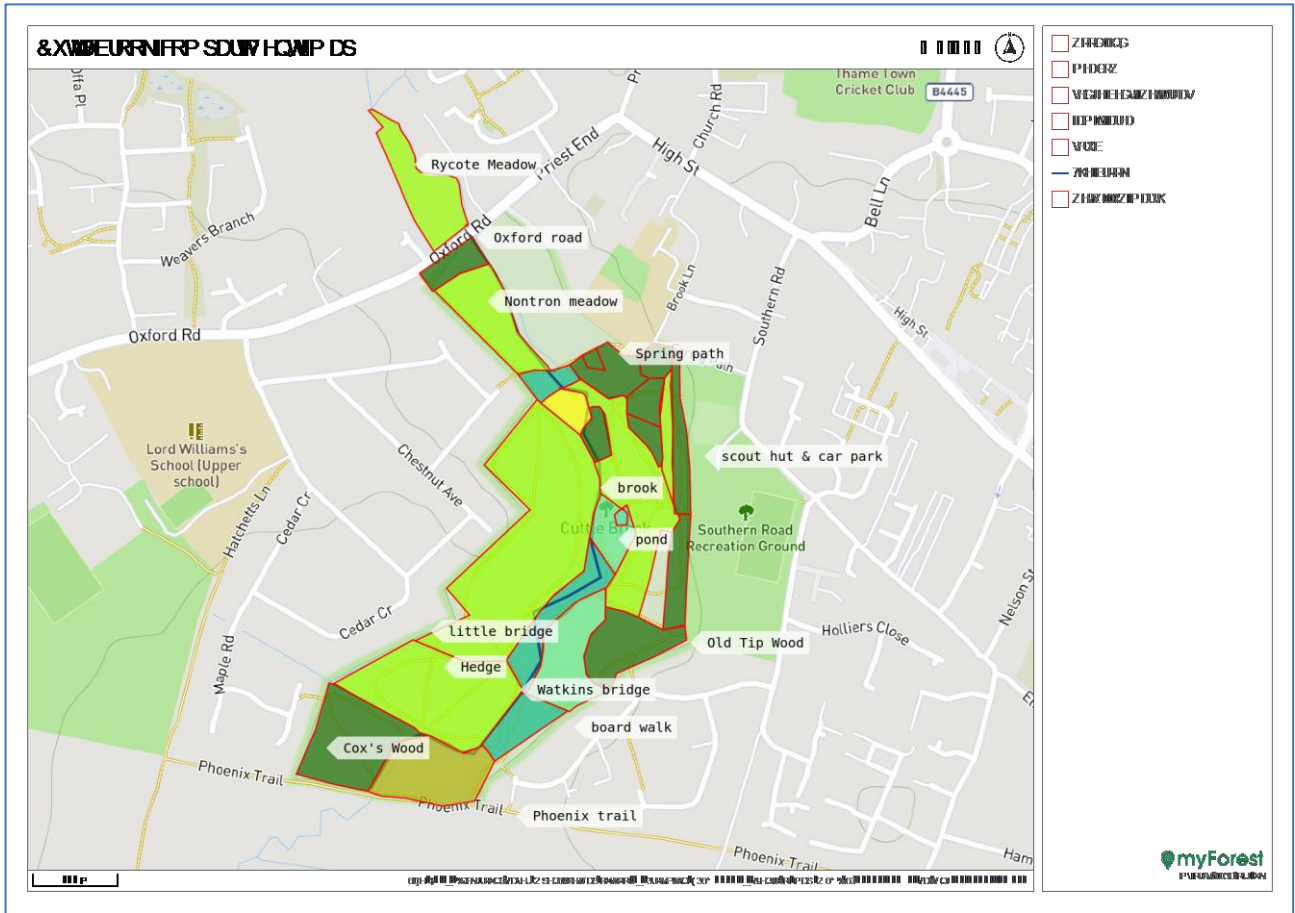


Fig. 1: Compartments and habitats

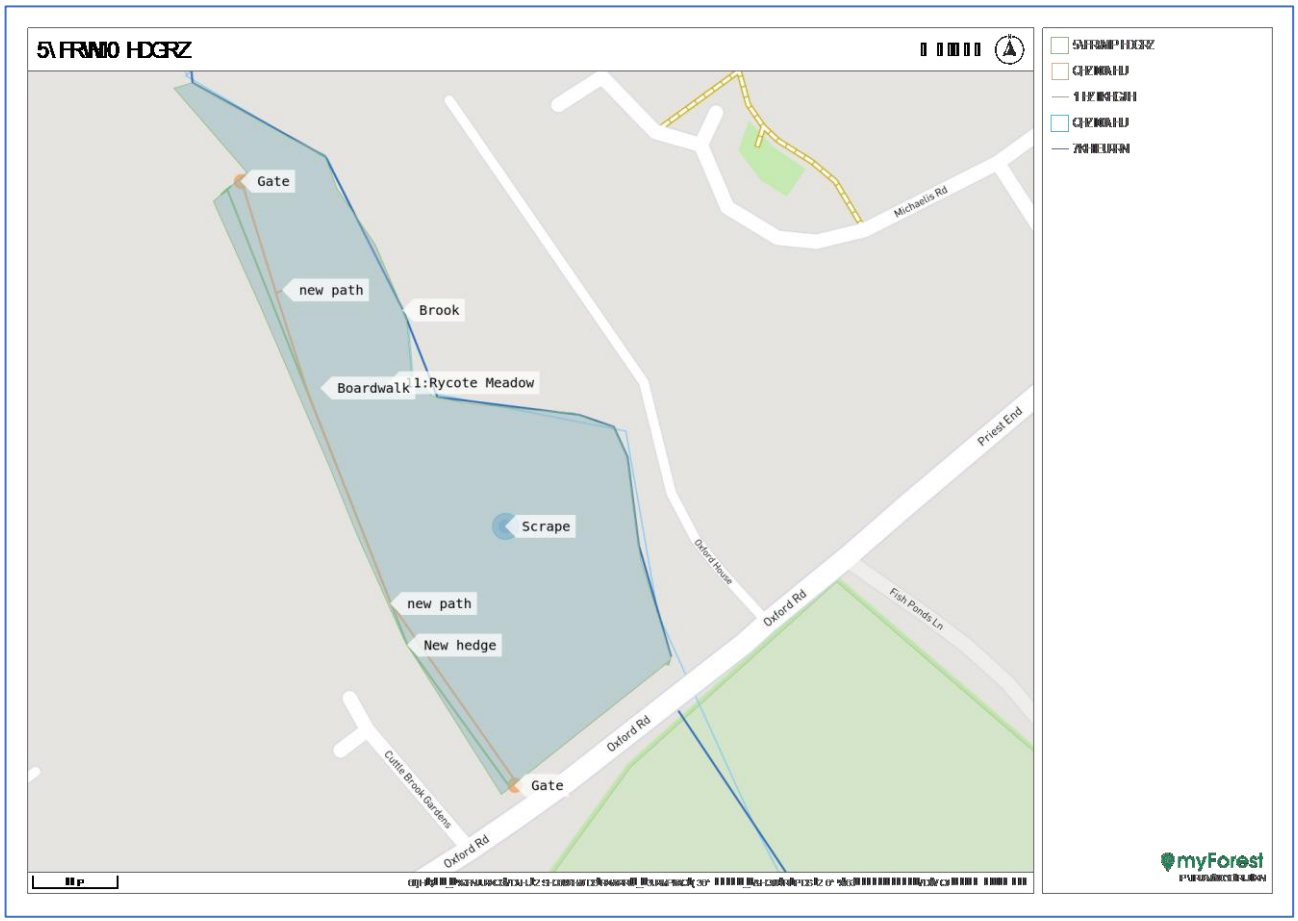


Fig. 1a: Rycote Meadow

A. Protecting and Enhancing Conservation Interest

The Meadows (see Fig.1 & 1a)

The simple practice of annual meadow cuts and removal of the arisings has been a great success, reflected in an ever-increasing floristic diversity and almost annual recording of new species – including four species of orchids to date (2025). The priority action has to be continuation of the annual meadows cut and removal, including on the recently added Rycote Meadow.

With increasing levels of visitors, especially dog-walkers, there has been a loss of quiet areas, including grassland. Nontron meadow offers an opportunity to go some way to re-dressing this loss by re-defining the meadow as a 'Nature-First' area where it is recognised that recreational access, especially dog-walking, is incompatible with its biodiversity interest.

1. Cut the western, town-side and Rycote meadows for hay each July or August and remove hay from site.
2. Investigate and, if feasible, introduce aftermath grazing of the meadows.
3. Spring cut the wildflower seeded parts of the Family Area and cut and rake off the 'hay crop' in late July/August.
4. Work towards establishing Nontron and Rycote meadows as quiet, 'Nature-First' areas by:
 - Allowing the mown paths to grow out;
 - Encouraging walkers to use the lane adjacent to Nontron rather than the meadow, including the erection of a field gate to control access to Nontron at the Oxford Road end;
 - Reconnecting the fenceline alongside Spring Path, preventing direct access to or from Spring Path;
 - The footpath across Rycote Meadow, when constructed (expected spring 2025), will be fenced on its river-side to prevent dog access to the bulk of the meadow and manage disturbance to this Nature-First area;
 - Continuing management, including as necessary 'Beating up' of the meadow-side hedgerow adjacent to Nontron and the western boundary hedge at Rycote;
 - Putting up notices to explain to regular visitors the reasons for the change in management.
5. Given the success of the management regime to date, any introduction of new species should only be undertaken where there is a specific conservation need. Any introductions should be of local provenance seed, or plants grown on from locally sourced seed of a species suitable to the location.
6. The bramble patches on the western meadows will be encouraged as cover and food sources for wildlife. However, they will be cut back as required to prevent their uncontrolled expansion and to keep their height to acceptable limits. Continuity of the patch will be encouraged in recognition of its important function providing connectivity across the meadows and through the reserve. This message of the importance of this wildlife corridor will be communicated to adjacent residents along with discouragement for the practice of mowing alongside their frontages.
7. Recognising their relatively low species richness, the biodiversity of the lower western meadows, upstream of Watkins' Bridge, will be enhanced by the creation of scrapes, ponds and ditches as agreed with the Environment Agency, River Thame Conservation Trust, the Freshwater Habitats Trust or other appropriate expert body.

Sedge beds, reed beds and fen communities (see Fig. 1)

There are on-going changes to the distribution and floristic make-up of the reed, sedge and fen communities, probably reflecting the changing hydrological conditions on the Reserve and CBCV's attempts to address these. The fen area around the main pond is largely a result of the 1994 work to construct the pond itself and the more recent need to artificially enhance the water supply to the pond following changes to the springs that have previously kept the pond topped up. The pond is now augmented by water piped underground from the inspection chamber near to the tip site. The water is discharged onto the fen so that its heavy nutrient load can be absorbed and the soil water level raised – in turn raising the level of water in the pond.

There has been a notable loss of bird life using the reed beds in recent years. One reason for this is thought to be an increase in the number of dogs running through the area and flushing out sensitive species such as snipe. There has been some recent success in excluding dogs from this area but this disturbance needs to be addressed as a matter of concern.

1. Sedge beds and associated tall herb communities to be cut on a six-year cycle, with approximately one third being cut every other autumn. Arisings to be collected for reptile hibernation and brooding sites.
2. Reed areas to be allowed to develop further and managed on a 10-year cutting cycle.
3. Reed development to be monitored.
4. Water level to be managed to maintain water-logging. Water level to be close to soil surface at the board walk and 30-45cm deep at the downstream end.
5. The reed and sedge beds should be made less accessible to dogs by continuing to develop a 'dead hedge' alongside the perimeter adjacent to the footpath.
6. Dog-walkers to be encouraged to keep their dogs out of the reed and sedge beds.

The Brook, ponds, scrapes and ditches (see Fig. 2)

For the first twenty years or so of the Reserve's designation, the focus of attention was predominantly land-based. More recently there has been a deliberate shift towards enhancement of the aquatic environment. A recent project saw the creation of two back-waters as fry refuges off the main river, along with spawning bed enhancement and vegetation management to allow more light onto the brook. This work will be continued and during the life of this plan it is expected that there will be at least two new scrapes – connecting to the fish refuges and complementing that created in Rycote Meadow. There will also be continued improvements to the flow regime of the brook to better manage silt deposition and improve the river bed quality for fish and invertebrates.

Visitors' dogs are damaging the river water quality and riverside habitats, including through: bank erosion – from scrabbling in and out, siltation - from disturbance of the bed and banks, pollution – from flea and tick treatments, and disturbance of wildlife.

The brook is regularly used by otters; a European Protected Species. We must be mindful of the needs of this species in our management of the brook. There is also the potential to reintroduce other protected species such as the water vole – particularly in Rycote and Nontron Meadows where we can recreate suitable, undisturbed habitat, as is implicit in the designation of Nature First areas.

The other great threat to the aquatic environment is from inappropriate responses to flooding. The Reserve lies in a flood plain and inundation has always been a natural feature, doing no harm at all to the conservation interest of the site. However, occasional severe floods, have,

unfortunately, impacted upon some neighbouring houses, resulting in calls for damaging engineering works which do nothing to address the causes or alleviate the symptoms. As the town expands, the brook's peak flows can be expected to increase, potentially leading to more extensive flooding. Natural flood alleviation techniques offer a win-win solution but would require appropriate management of land upstream of the current Reserve boundary.

The main aquatic habitats are shown in Fig. 2, below:

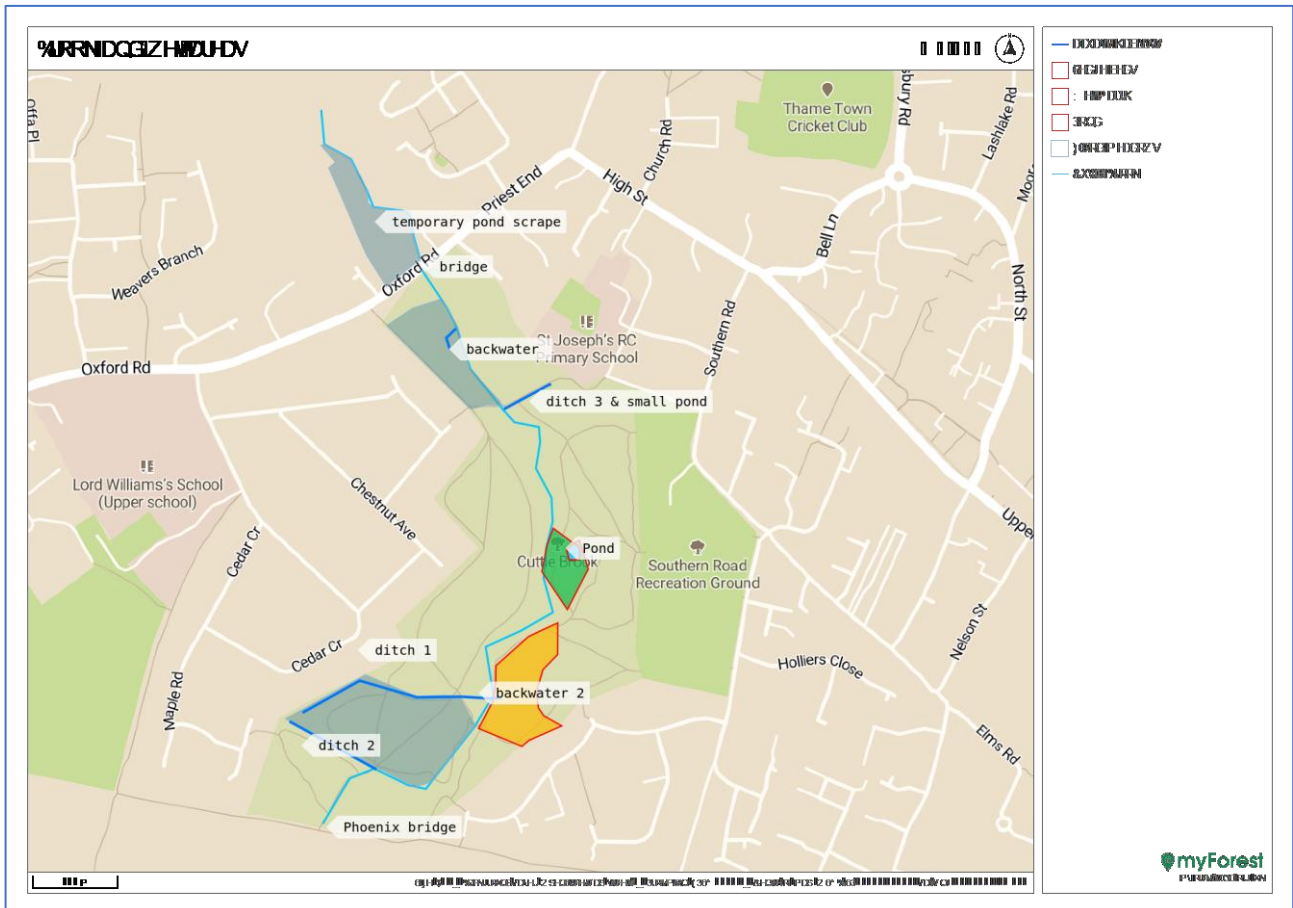


Fig. 2: Aquatic habitats (draft map)

1. Maintain close links with the Environment Agency and other regulatory bodies to ensure sympathetic future management of the Cuttle Brook and its banks.
2. Continue the programme of aquatic habitat improvement and look for further opportunities to enhance the aquatic environment of the Reserve and the river generally.
3. Practice minimal vegetation management in the brook in accordance with EA guidance. In particular; aim to keep about 25-30% of the channel clear of vegetation in order to concentrate low flows and reduce siltation.
4. Maintain a fringe of coarse, bankside vegetation alongside most of the length of the Brook to provide cover and a relatively undisturbed 'corridor'.
5. Keep the pond litter free.
6. Keep a clear, typha-free area of water for pond-dipping in front of the dipping platform on the main pond.
7. Ditches are important linear habitats for amphibians and for aquatic flora and should be recognised as such and managed sensitively, ensuring that they are only 'cleaned' sufficiently to drain water as is strictly necessary.

8. Where ditch realignment is deemed necessary for flood prevention purposes, we will work with the relevant authorities to ensure that , as far as possible, any works have a positive biodiversity impact.
9. Opportunities should be taken to create new ponds, backwaters, scrapes and ditches (or extend existing ones).
10. Maintain an active involvement in the Thames Catchment Partnership and cooperative links to the River Thames Conservation Trust and Freshwater Habitats Trust.
11. Consideration to be given to innovative, physical flood control, such as by means of an inverted weir, subject to expert endorsement and all necessary approvals.
12. Encourage the adoption of Natural Flood Management practices upstream of the Reserve, working to support the landowners concerned or, if appropriate, acquiring control of flood plain land.

Trees, woodland, hedgerows and scrub (see Figs. 3&4)

Most of the Reserve's stock of trees is now in a semi-mature state and successfully established, with little space for additional large-scale planting. The focus of our tree work will therefore be on management of the existing tree stock.

The trees face a number of threats, including: new tree-diseases, pests, and climate change. These require us to be mindful of the current stresses and to plan for resilience in the near-future.

In 2023 a major thinning was carried out in Cox's Wood in response to Ash Dieback. Further felling may be required throughout the reserve, including of diseased alders. Where significant felling takes place, lost trees will be replaced with suitable alternatives, with the presumption being that these will be native trees unless climate change or disease resilience dictate otherwise.

There regular requests for commemorative plantings. These will be accommodated where possible, however, the absence of a policy for responding to such requests has occasionally created difficulties and should be rectified.

The Reserve's woodland blocks are shown in Fig. 3, below and the Ash Woodlands shown in Fig. 3a:

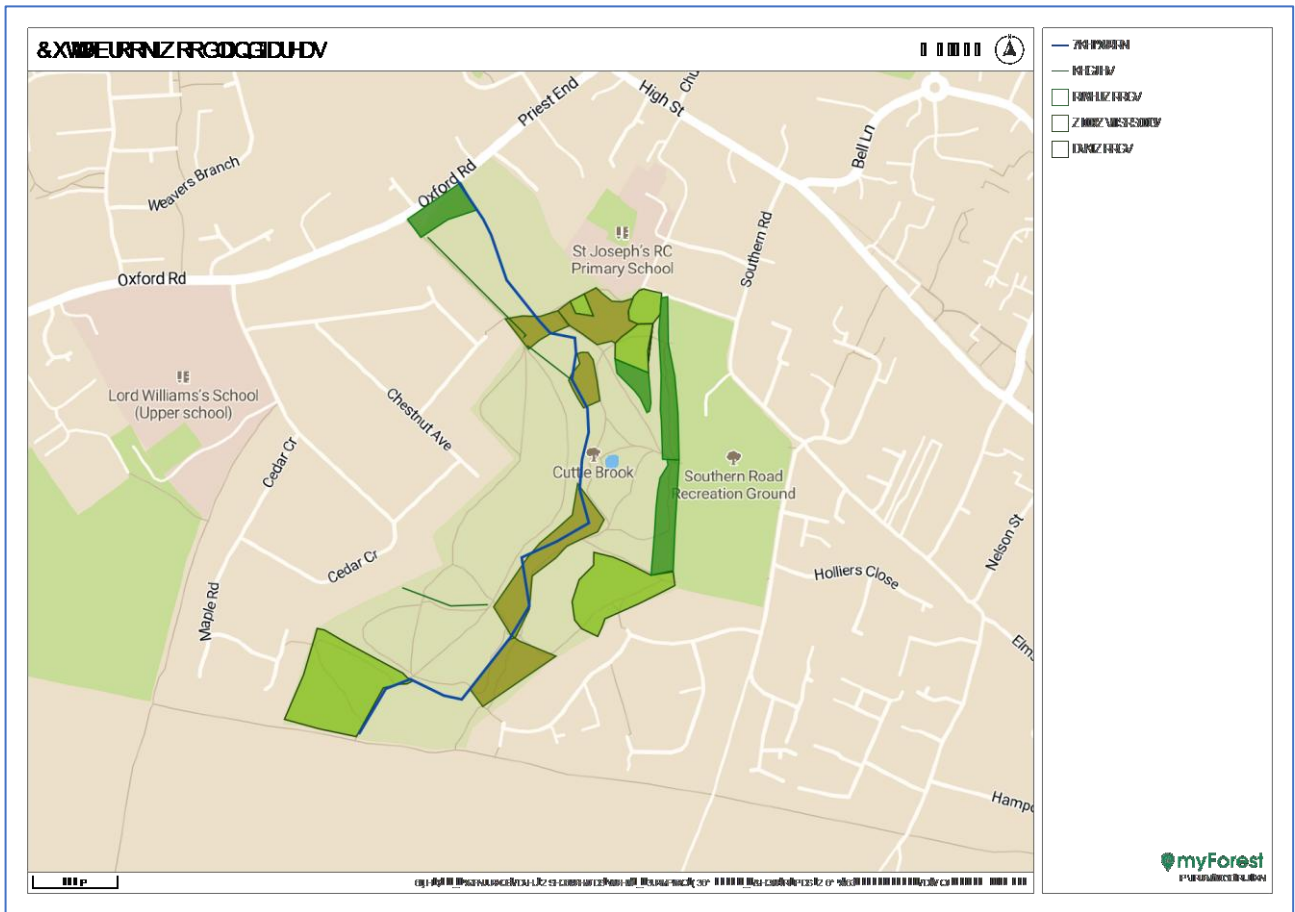


Fig. 3 Woodland areas

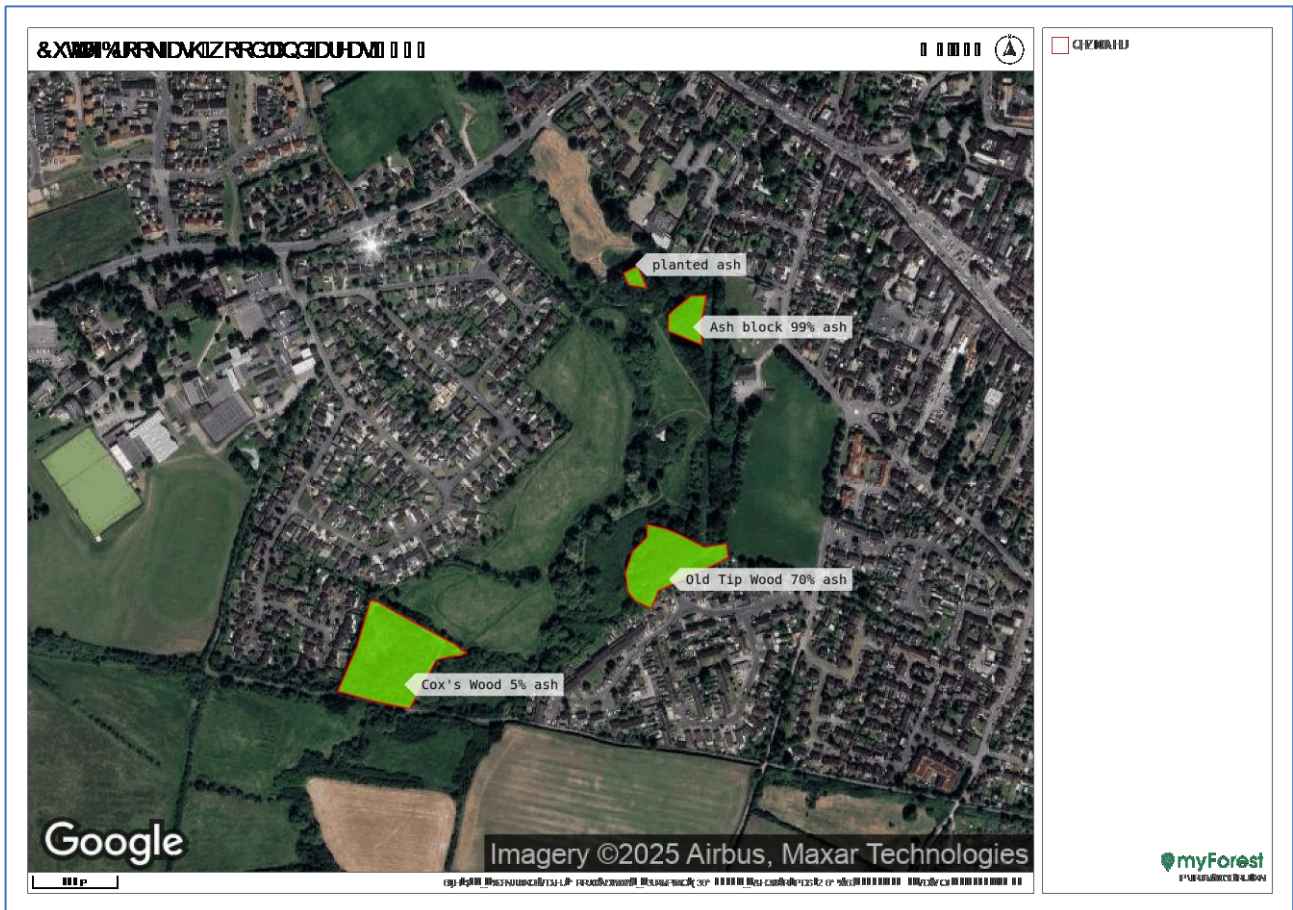


Fig. 3a: Cuttle Brook Ash Woodland

1. The Town Council will, as necessary, apply for Felling Licences from the Forestry Commission to enable the staged removal of diseased ash and alder, and also to allow for selective thinning, in accordance with good practice.
2. Grant aid may be sought for re-planting following the felling of diseased trees. Re-planting will be with trees expected to be suitable for the site and its wildlife, and which offer a degree of resilience to pests, disease and climate change. Tree planting will be done by volunteers except in exceptional circumstances.
3. All trees will be monitored for disease and other safety considerations on an annual basis.
4. Where it will not be a hazard, felled timber may be left as habitat piles to increase the amount of valuable deadwood on the Reserve.
5. Where the opportunity presents itself and it is safe to do so, deadwood will be left standing as it can be an important habitat supporting different flora and fauna to stacked deadwood.
6. Where trees are to be removed, an assessment will be made as to whether this can safely be done by volunteers or needs a contractor. If a contractor is required, consideration will be given to reducing costs by parcelling up sufficient timber for sale.
7. Where wooded areas are traversed by wayleaves (electricity cables – see Fig. 4), no felling or thinning will be carried out under the wayleaves as this is the responsibility of the power company.
8. Rides to be mown on a two-year rotation in Cox's Wood, with the northern and eastern rides being mown in alternate years.
9. Hedgerows (see Fig. 4) will be encouraged to thicken by laying as and when necessary. There will be no routine cutting of hedges, apart from alongside the track in from Oxford Road to

Spring Path, so that the hedges can become wildlife corridors with good cover and supplies of fruit and berries.

10. Blackthorn and hawthorn scrub in 'The Triangle' to be managed to maintain a variety of ages and a high edge to area ratio.
11. Scrub and small trees alongside the brook will be managed so that there is an overall level of shading of not more than 40% of the length of the brook through the Reserve.
12. Requests from the public to plant memorial trees will be accommodated wherever possible. However, this will not be where there may be detriment to other valuable habitats or where the species requested are non-native or have no benefit to biodiversity. Any memorial tree, or bench/seat, requests will need to fit with the corresponding Town Council policies.
13. Special care will be taken to promote the well-being of trees important for biodiversity, including the site's nationally scarce black poplars.
14. Coppicing hazels will be done as appropriate to shoot development and with the aim of encouraging stool longevity. Generally, this will be on a 5 to 7 year rotation, however, material may be harvested at other times for hedge-laying or other purposes as long as this is not to the overall detriment of the stools.
15. Willows alongside the brook will be pollarded where possible to create veteran tree habitat.

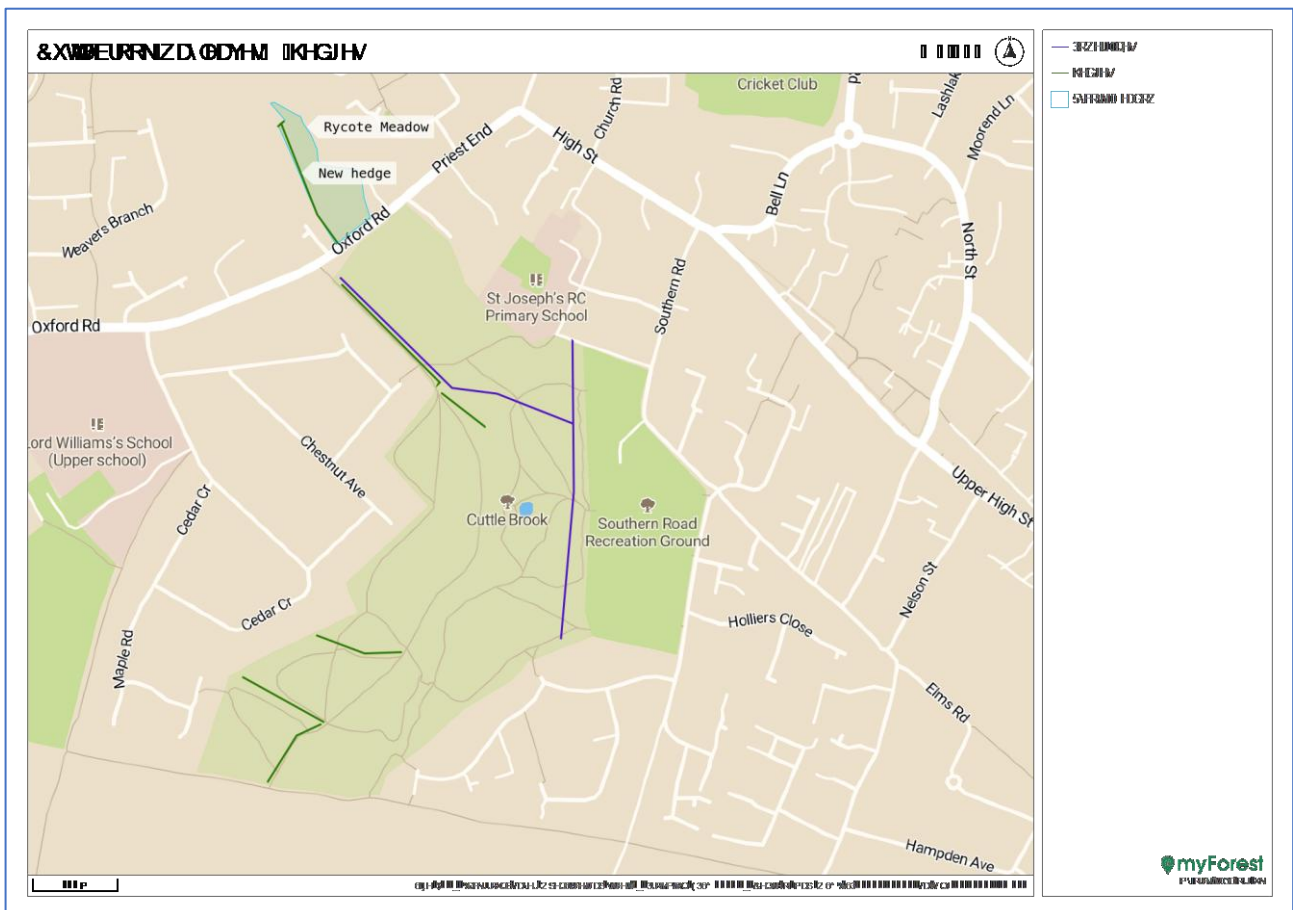


Fig. 4: Wayleaves and hedgerows

Flagship species

The Reserve now boasts a number of important and flagship species, including otter, four species of orchid, and black poplar. These species are all important in their own right and their well-being must be the top priority for management. However, they are also very important as totems for the

general importance of biodiversity and conservation and should be promoted as such where this will not jeopardise the species concerned.

The management to date has been successful in allowing the natural recolonization of the Reserve by a variety of species. However, it is recognised that not all important species will be able to make their own way here and that there may be a role for careful re-introductions, such as for the water vole, with specific Nature First areas devoted to this purpose.

1. Suitable species appropriate to the site which are nationally threatened or scarce may be introduced onto the Reserve, due regard being taken to any licence arrangements pertaining to those species.
2. Where locally or nationally important species or habitats are known to be present on the Reserve, management should be directed at maintaining and enhancing that feature, with advice being sought from the relevant experts.

Monitoring

Having good information about what is on the Reserve is important for understanding how our management is doing and also potentially for informing the management or development of related land. For the latter purpose, it is useful that the data collected is publicly available, especially through the Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre.

1. The LNR Management Committee, administered by Thame Town Council, should convene twice yearly to oversee the implementation of the management plan.
2. The Management Committee to visit the Reserve at least once per annum.
3. Regularly survey the aquatic invertebrates in the brook.
4. Develop further survey techniques, such as camera traps, mink rafts, hedgehog tunnels, bat detection and the like.
5. Organise botanical surveys of the meadows and the sedge and reed bed areas.
6. Continue annual monitoring of 'common' birds each May, replicating the established method.
7. Set up a species recording system compatible with the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre and encourage members of the public to record and report sightings.
8. The management plan is to be kept under continuous review in the light of ongoing monitoring. However, any proposed changes must be with due regard to any contractual and legal obligations.
9. Encourage recording on the Reserve by experts and specialist societies. Relevant bodies or individuals should be sought to help with recording of 'difficult' taxonomic groups.
10. A photographic survey to be carried out each year.

B. Managing public access to the Reserve

A lot of work has been done to provide the paths, bridges and boardwalks that now facilitate comprehensive access around the Reserve. Not all areas are fully accessible all of the time but the emphasis now is on maintenance of the existing infrastructure rather than further creation.

There is an apparently insatiable desire for new routes with newly-walked paths frequently appearing, often into previously less-disturbed areas. These will be resisted where their establishment is inconsistent with maintaining the biodiversity of the site.

A factor arising from the increased dog-walking on the Reserve is a damaging all-year determination to use the site apparently irrespective of ground conditions. Recent wet winters have seen increased trampling damage caused by high numbers continuing to use the Reserve despite soft, wet conditions resulting in a spreading of paths as the worst spots are avoided.

Appeals to reduce usage during the very wet winter of 2023-24 met with only limited compliance.

Maintaining routes through the Reserve (see Fig. 5)

1. When necessary, seek grant aid through an appropriate source.
2. Implement works to maintain the surfaced, but unsealed, route along the Townside meadows to the wooden bridge and on to the Phoenix Trail.
3. Maintain a mown grass path along the western meadows.
4. Carry out an annual inspection of all built structures and plan and carry out timely repairs as necessary.
5. Replace bridges and other structures as required for public safety and convenience.
6. Carry out litter-picking exercises as necessary.
7. Work with the Town Council's maintenance team to ensure that bins are regularly emptied and any safety issues are addressed promptly.
8. Block off or otherwise discourage the formation of new routes that are incompatible with the Reserve's biodiversity functions.
9. Work with the redevelopers of current scouts' hut and sports changing rooms to ensure that access to the Reserve from the development is compatible with its LNR status, including careful consideration of access points and vehicle parking.

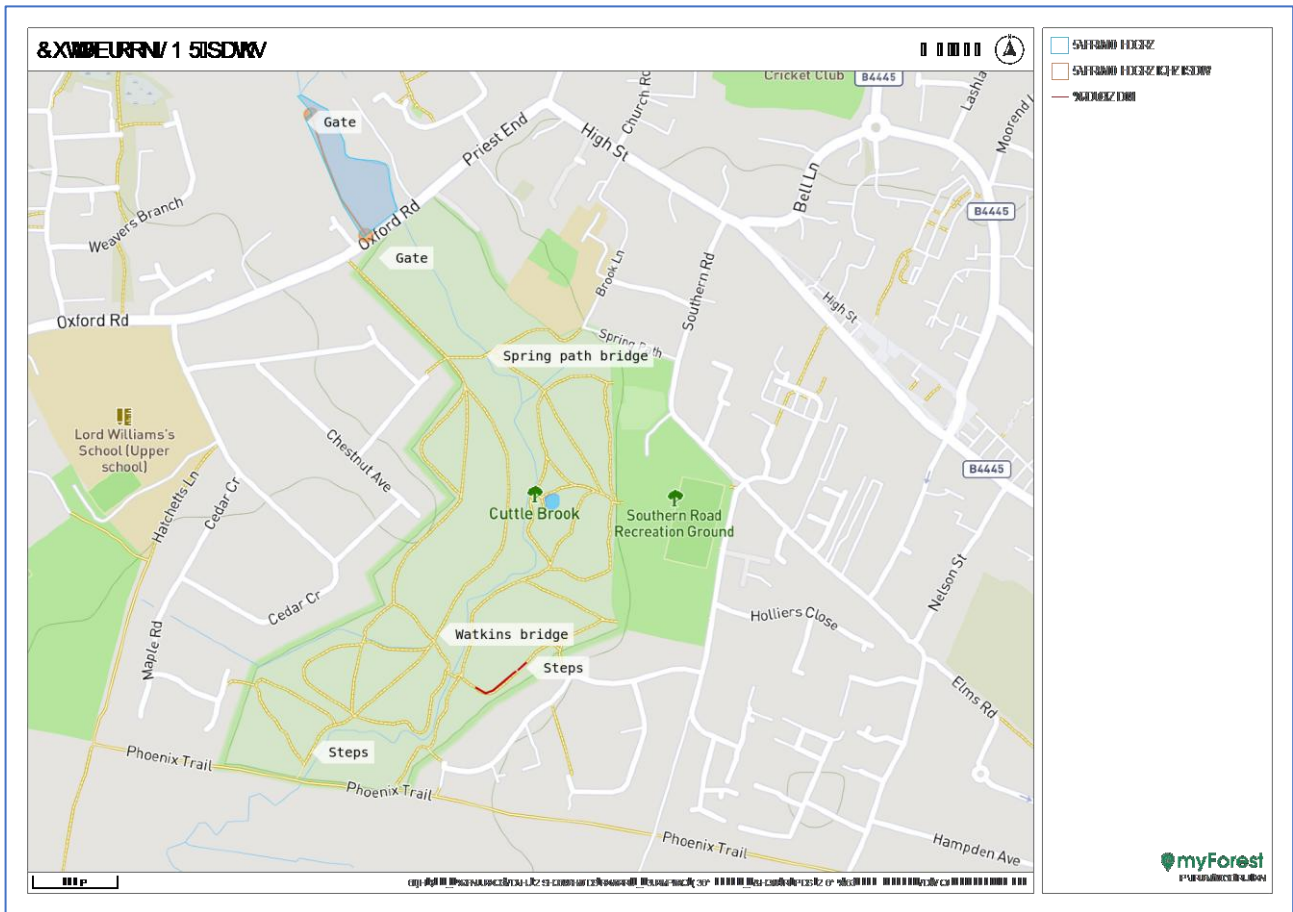


Fig. 5: Paths on Cuttle Brook LNR

Improve access for special needs

1. Respond to requests from representatives of local special needs groups for required access improvements.
2. Work up schemes and bid for grant aid to achieve improvements identified by special needs group representatives.
3. Ensure that grab rails are installed and maintained at all flights of steps.
4. Seek removal of chicane-style, bicycle-barrier on Spring Path to enable easier passage by mobility scooter users.
5. Work with Oxfordshire County Council to widen the Spring Path footbridge to facilitate easier machinery access to both sides of the Reserve.

Information

1. As necessary, update the Reserve leaflet and ensure that it is available in a DIY printer-ready format via the Cuttle Brook website.
2. Maintain and regularly refresh the content of the Reserve's website and Facebook pages.
3. Maintain and update notice-boards and the information displayed
4. Publish current items as appropriate on the Reserve notice-boards and/or website.
5. Publish regular media releases to maintain the Reserve profile locally.
6. Seek to develop an 'App' based leaflet or site guide.

C. Fostering understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the Reserve

Multi-purpose usage

1. Maintain links with the local schools to encourage usage of the Reserve as an educational facility and as a resource for Duke of Edinburgh Award students (see Education below).
2. Foster links with arts, drama and photography groups.
3. Maintain links with scouting and youth groups.
4. Work with the Town Council to ensure that any sporting or commercial events held on the Reserve are compatible with its primary purpose for conservation.

Dog-walking

The Reserve has become a Mecca for dog-walkers, including commercial dog-walkers, to the extent that this is having serious implications for the continued success of the Reserve for conservation. As the population of the town increases, it is expected that the number of dogs being brought to the site will continue to increase. This growing problem must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

1. Carry out a survey of dog-walking on the Reserve to fully understand numbers, patterns of use, and the attributes of the Reserve from the owners' perspective.
2. Develop and implement a strategy for the management of dog-walking.
3. Talk to local vets about information concerning flea and tick treatment, and dissemination of information about dogs on the Reserve.
4. Consider creating byelaws to:
 - restrict commercial activity on the Reserve that damages the biodiversity interest, including commercial dog-walking;
 - restrict dogs entering the brook, ponds or scrapes; and
 - require dogs to be on a short lead in certain areas and/or at certain times of year.
5. Use noticeboards to disseminate information to dog-walkers about the various impacts that their dogs have on the Reserve and how they can reduce this.

D. To increase community involvement in the Reserve

Volunteering

1. All Reserve literature is to encourage volunteer involvement with the Reserve and to include contact details for the Town Council or CBCV.
2. Tasks to be designed for volunteer action wherever possible and appropriate.
3. Opportunities should be sought for publicity for volunteer working through the local and social media.
4. Organise specific skills and tool training as necessary.

Education

1. Develop and maintain links with all local schools.
2. Maintain and improve facilities for education, such as the pond dipping platform.
3. Encourage schools to take part in long-term monitoring of Cuttle Brook.
4. Assist students at all levels with special studies undertaken on the Reserve.
5. Continue to welcome and support Duke of Edinburgh Award students.

Anti-social behaviour

Unfortunately, the Reserve is subject to a variety of anti-social behaviour including: litter, graffiti, damage, fly tipping, drug taking and arson. There is also a problem with people introducing garden plants etc. to the site, including into ponds & ditches. Volunteers will assist with monitoring such activities, however, enforcement action must fall to the relevant local authorities or the police.

E. Reserve enlargement

With the continuing expansion of the town there is generally a corresponding loss of green space and biodiversity resources; there is potentially an increase in run-off from hard surfaces, notwithstanding the requirements for 'sustainable drainage' systems, leading to an increased likelihood of flooding. As noted in the Brook, Ponds and Ditches section above, natural flood management (NFM) techniques offer viable mitigation while also providing biodiversity opportunities. However, to achieve this would require land upstream of the Reserve to be brought into suitable management.

An overall ambition for enhancing biodiversity potential is to provide as continuous a protected habitat as possible along the Cuttle Brook from its confluence with the River Thames to its re-emergence into countryside south and east of the enlarged town.

1. With Thames TC, seek opportunities to expand the Reserve alongside the Cuttle Brook both downstream to the River Thames and upstream towards Moreton.
2. Resist development on land where this may adversely affect the conservation or amenity value of the Reserve.
3. Work with upstream land-managers to implement suitable NFM projects.
4. Work with downstream land-managers to

Further information:

For enquiries about Cuttle Brook Local Nature Reserve, please visit www.cuttlebrook.org.uk or email info@cuttlebrook.org.uk.