

Ock and Thame Farmers: Freshwaters and Floodplains Restoration Project

Terms of Reference – Steering Group

1. Project Remit and Status:

1. The Ock and Thame Farmers project is two-year development project working in partnership between Joint Project Leads, Freshwater Habitats Trust and River Thame Conservation Trust, local farmers and key partners to established clear plans and procedures to move forward into subsequent a long-term delivery project phase that delivers landscape recovery through the establishment of a freshwater network. These deliverable plans have been identified by the funder DEFRA and include: land management plan, project governance and management plan, monitoring and evaluation plan, stakeholder engagement plan, access plan, business plan.
2. The project forms part of DEFRA's Landscape Recovery Phase II and builds upon The Freshwater Network approach developed by Freshwater Habitats Trust.
3. The project's primary aims are habitat creation to support biodiversity, wildlife rich habitats, carbon storage and climate resilience for the region.
4. On 20 March 2024 funding for the project development phase was approved by Natural England on behalf of DEFRA. Funding will run from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2026.
5. The project development phase will run for two years. During this phase the project team will work with the steering group and project partners to develop six core strategies to guide the implementation of a subsequent long-term delivery phase. This delivery phase is to be confirmed, following review and approval of the strategies by DEFRA.
6. The development phase of the project will be co-led by the 'Joint Project Leads' who are Freshwater Habitats Trust and The River Thame Conservation Trust.

2. Ock & Thame Project Area

1. The Ock and Thame catchments are located in Oxford and Buckinghamshire respectively. The project incorporates 70+ landholdings across over 9,0000 Ha of land.
2. Whilst the project covers a mosaic of individual landholdings, the project will influence and impact the wider landscape across the Ock and Thame catchments. Opportunities located outside of the project's landholdings will be considered, subject to funding limitations and staff resourcing.

3. The Project will take an interest all types of freshwater habitats, and in the land, land use, and human activity within the catchment in terms of how affects the water environment.

3. Project Objectives

1. The team will develop six planning documents over the two-year development phase. The plans will cover:

- Stakeholder engagement
- Finances & business
- Land management
- Monitoring & evaluation
- Project management & governance
- Site access

4. Steering Group Membership, Structure and Meetings

1. The project will require a Steering Group to oversee strategic goals and support the project in overcoming challenges.

2. The Steering Group will be chaired by Freshwater Habitats Trust who will be responsible for organising meetings, preparing meeting agendas and issuing meeting minutes following meetings.

3. Steering Group members will be made up of individuals and organisation that can contribute leadership and guidance on technical matters for the project. Steering Group members may or may not be a key stakeholder within the project.

4. The Steering Group member expertise should ideally include one or more of the following:

- Funders and partners who have an excellent understanding of the project deliverables under the project.
- Key subject matter experts. This could include freshwater, trees, birds, fauna, agriculture and land management.
- Experienced partners who have previously delivered landscape recovery projects or freshwater habitat restoration at a landscape scale, within or close to the Ock and Thame catchments.
- Research interests and scientific/ academic research developments with long term monitoring interests. These parties would have detailed understanding of local habitats, species as well as opportunities.
- NGO's and charities working within the region to support nature and habitat restoration. It is important to ensure interconnectivity within the landscape so knowledge of the catchments outside of the project landholdings is key.
- Farmers, landowners and/or representatives from within the catchments, ideally directly involved in the project. This could be farmer cluster representatives, tapping into already established groups.
- Green Finance and carbon guidance, particularly around baselining and priority habitats.

- Legal Advice, mechanisms and governance with particular focus on delivering land management plans and business plans for
- Partners with stakeholder engagement expertise.
- Partners with technical expertise in measuring and evaluating success that can contribute towards monthly reporting.

5. The Steering Group will be open to organisations, groups or individuals that meet the expertise outlined above, either across the whole of the project area or part of it.

6. At the start of the project, suitable parties will be invited to join the Steering Group by the Joint Project Leads. Farmers and landowners will be invited to comment on the Steering Group members.

7. Once the initial Steering Group is formed at the start of the project, the addition of any new members will be assessed on a case-by-case basis by the Steering Group ensuring new members meet the criteria outlined in paragraph 4.4 and that there are no detrimental reasons against admission to the group.

8. Any parties wishing to join should contact Freshwater Habitats Trust and this will be tabled at the next Steering Group meeting.

9. The Steering Group size shall remain proportionate to the scale of the project. If expertise outlined in Section 4.4. is already covered by the Steering Group members, then new members are unlikely to be accepted in order to expedite quick and effective decisions.

10. Steering Group members must disclose any known conflicts of interest prior to Steering Group participation.

11. The Steering Group is likely to be privy to commercially confidential data and insights throughout the lifespan of the project. All members will be expected to be respectful of this, acting with integrity and in the best interest of the project.

12. Steering Group members must be respectful of intellectual property on the project and any data or information held relating to the project must be stored in line with GDPR.

13. An organisation may terminate its membership with immediate effect by applying in writing to the Joint Project Leads (Freshwater Habitats Trust and The River Thame Conservation Trust).

14. The Steering Group will review its membership annually and may co-opt new Steering Group Members.

15. Steering Group Members or Joint Project Leads may propose other organisations or individuals to join the Steering Group; or to attend specific meetings in response to a specific item or technical need. Proposals will be progressed or otherwise based on the absence of any material objections.

5. Objectives of The Steering Group

1. To work collaboratively on the production and delivery of the deliverable planning documents listed in Section 3.

2. Steering Group Activities will include:

- Steering the strategic vision of the project to ensure targets are met and long-term objectives are realised.
- Contributing to project governance.
- Reviewing project plans and advising on any changes.
- Providing suitable recommendations for consultants and third-party advisors.
- Providing independent and impartial advice towards the project.
- Supporting dialogue with relevant advisory, regulatory and funding bodies.
- Overseeing project progress and resolving conflicts amongst teams and/or the project.
- Identifying opportunities for grants, collaborative working and delivery consistent with the project objectives.
- Problem solving to overcome any project challenges.

3. The activities of the Steering Group will be overseen by the Joint Project Leads - Freshwater Habitats Trust and the River Thame Conservation Trust. Other working groups or sub-groups, with fixed or open timescales, may be set up at the discretion of the Joint Project Leads.

4. The Joint Project Leads will:

- Act as 'Accountable Body' regarding any funds received or distributed.
- Organise Steering Group meetings, distribute papers, take minutes.
- Co-ordinate reporting activities to Natural England (the representative of the funder, DEFRA).
- Oversee business between meetings.
- Consider options, develop ideas and proposals and make recommendations on the work of the Steering Group.
- Report back to the steering group on project activities and deliverables.

5. The Joint Project Leads will have the ability to meet and drive activity forward outside of Steering Group meetings.

6. Recommendations from the Joint Project Leads and key issues that deviate from the project plan will be put to Steering Group Members preferably at Steering Group meetings, but also remotely, where timescales dictate. Consensus will be sought on all key issues, but where consensus cannot be obtained, Decisions will be determined based on a majority of Steering Group Members agreeing.

7. The Joint Project Leads have the power to make decisions on behalf of the Steering Group. Normal practice will be for the Joint Project Leads to propose such decisions at Steering Group meetings for ratification. In instances where timescales do not allow discussion with / agreement by the Steering Group, a record of the decision and the process by which it was reached will be provided to the Steering Group.

8. The Joint Project Leads will oversee publicity and communications for the project. Significant communication activities will be brought to the Steering Group for decision. In instances where timescales do not allow discussion with / agreement by the Steering Group, a record of the decision and the process by which it was reached will be provided to the Steering Group. All communications activities will be handled in compliance with GDPR legislation.

9. Steering Group meetings will be undertaken on a quarterly basis throughout the two-year development phase.

6. Evaluation

1. As the project develops throughout the two-year development phase, research and knowledge for landscape recovery projects will evolve. This may necessitate extra expertise and skills. The Steering Group will identify any knowledge gaps in the team where strategic support is required.

2. The Steering Group will undertake an annual evaluation exercise to ensure the Steering Group is running effectively. The evaluation is to be undertaken during the last Steering Group meeting of the financial year. These exercises are to include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Steering Group Member feedback questionnaire (option to remain anonymous) to gather feedback on Steering Group working, strategy and communications.
- Stakeholder analysis
- Opportunities/ risks analysis

7. Conflict resolution

1. If a conflict arises between Steering Group Members, conflict mediation will be overseen by the Joint Project Leads.

2. Any Steering Group Member complaints regarding the Joint Project Leads should first be brought to the Joint Project Leads to see if there is a simple resolution.

3. If a complaint or conflict involving either of the Joint Project Leads needs to be elevated further, or a Steering Group Member feels there is suitable cause, complaints should be elevated to Natural England's project liaison officer, Anne Cotton (Anne.Cotton@naturalengland.org.uk), for conflict mediation.

Last updated: 17/05/24

Next review due by: Last steering group meeting of the financial year.