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Landscape Recovery Programmes in East Devon

Report summary:

This paper informs Members of the existence and value of three Landscape Recovery programmes in East Devon – Three Rivers (National Trust, Killerton), Luppitt Landscape Partnership (Luppitt Valley, Blackdown Hills), and Clinton Devon Estate's (Heaths to Sea, Lower Otter) which align with a number of Council plans and objectives.

This report provides details of the Heaths to Sea and Luppitt Projects and requests in principle support for their objectives and highlights the existence of dependencies between attaining permits/permissions, generating income for local businesses and the deliverability of nature recovery over the longer term. The Three Rivers Landscape Recovery program is already at an advanced stage, so this report focuses on the developing programs.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That Overview Committee note the report and supports the nature recovery ambitions of the Heaths to Sea and Luppitt Landscape Partnership (LLP) Landscape Recovery Projects (with the caveat that where required planning and other approvals will need to be secured)

Reason for recommendation:

The Landscape Recovery Projects align with a number of East Devon District Council's Strategies including our Council Plan, Climate Change Strategy, and emerging Local Plan.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Assets and Economy
- Communications and Democracy
- Council, Corporate and External Engagement
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism
- Environment - Nature and Climate
- Environment - Operational
- Finance
- Place, Infrastructure and Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change High Impact

Risk: Low Risk

Links to background information [Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery Project | Clinton Devon Estate - Heaths to Sea, Luppitt Landscape Partnership](#)

Link to Council Plan

Priorities (check which apply)

- A supported and engaged community
- Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
- Resilient economy that supports local business
- Financially secure and improving quality of services

Report in full

1. This paper informs Members of the existence and value of three Landscape Recovery programmes in East Devon – Three Rivers (National Trust Killerton), Luppitt Landscape Partnership (Luppitt Valley, Blackdown Hills), and Clinton Devon Estate's *Heaths to Sea* Landscape Recovery project in the Lower Otter, which align with a number of Council plans and objectives.
2. Landscape Recovery is one of DEFRA's environmental land management (ELM) schemes which aim to pay farmers, foresters, and land managers to deliver public environmental benefits. Landscape Recovery supports large-scale, long-term projects that restore nature, improve biodiversity and deliver environmental benefits across whole landscapes in England.
3. Projects bring together farmers, landowners, environmental organisations and local communities to create plans tailored to their local area.
4. By combining government funding with private investment, projects can be more ambitious, spread risk, and open new income streams for farmers and landowners through things like Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units and carbon credits.
5. This approach is still relatively new, but it shows how nature recovery can become an economically viable and sustainable use of land.
6. Projects are focused on ambitious environmental goals while at the same time aiming to strengthen rural communities and support local action to make space for nature alongside food production.
7. There are currently three Landscape Recovery projects in East Devon – Three Rivers (National Trust, Killerton), Luppitt Landscape Partnership's *Luppitt Landscape Recovery* in the Blackdown Hills, and Clinton Devon Estate's *Heaths to Sea* Landscape Recovery project in the Lower Otter Valley, which align with a number of Council plans and objectives.
8. The Three Rivers Landscape Recovery Project has completed its Project Development Phase and the National Trust is currently working with DEFRA to move into the Project Implementation Phase, which will secure funding to restore nature and the natural landscape across the 2,500 hectare Killerton estate, with a focus on improving habitats for the future. The National Trust have offered to present information on this project to Overview Committee at a future date, once they have secured agreement to move to the next phase.

9. The appendices to this report summarise the Luppitt Landscape Partnership and Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery projects, which are both nearing the end of their Project Development Phase and will be shortly submitted to DEFRA.
10. Both of these projects align with a number of National and East Devon District Council policies and objectives, including:
 - The **Environment Act 2021, Environment Improvement Plan 2025, Climate Change Act 2008 and 30x30 Commitment** – through habitat restoration and creation, woodland planting and increasing species populations and diversity
 - **East Devon's Council Plan and Climate Change Strategy** – through landscape scale ecological recovery, changing agricultural practices to reduce emissions associated with farming operations, manage soils sustainably and replenish soil carbon, and through increasing storage through tree planting and habitat creation.
 - **Objective 8 of East Devon's Emerging Local Plan** committing to safeguard and enhance biodiversity across the district. This is allied to **Objective 2** which focuses on tackling the climate emergency by moving towards net-zero carbon emissions by 2040.
 - By conserving the natural environment and promoting the integration of ecosystem services, the projects also help the delivery of a number of themes of **Strategy 5** of the Plan including: protecting, expanding and reconnecting of habitats through a network of green infrastructure (**Biodiversity and Green Networks**); recognising the environmental and climate value of natural carbon stores such as soils, woodlands and heathlands (**Natural Assets and Carbon Storage**); supporting natural flood management to increase resilience to extreme weather events driven by climate change (**Flooding and Surface Water**); creating a connected green infrastructure of river corridors, cycle paths and nature routes to integrate urban and rural spaces (**Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Services**).
 - The projects also have potential to support the **Economic Development and Tourism Strategies** which integrate tourism into wider economic growth, with tourism and the development of green businesses based on the promotion of the area's natural and cultural assets. Both projects also have ambitions relating to trees, hedges, and woodland which would support the delivery of the **East Devon Tree, Hedge, and Woodland Strategy (THaWS)**.
 - The projects can also deliver a number of key actions for Devon Special Species and Priority Habitats identified in the **Local Nature Recovery Strategy** and a significant proportion of the long-term targets of the revised **East Devon National Landscape Management Plan** (2025 to 2030) and **Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan** (2025-2030).

Financial implications:

There are no direct financial implications from the recommendations in this report.

Legal implications:

The schemes are being delivered by Clinton Devon Estates and Luppitt Landscape Partnership – direct input from EDDC will be in relation to our planning/regulatory functions (ALW/002512)

Appendix 1 – Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery Project Summary

This report summarises the Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery Project which is led by Clinton Devon Estates (one of a small number of private estates forming part of the Government's National Estate for Nature) with additional partners including the Devon Wildlife Trust and the RSPB.

East Devon, through the South-East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership, have worked closely with Clinton Devon Estates and the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust for the past 10 years – supporting the Conservation Trust's management of the Pebblebed Heaths and working together to mitigate the impact of development on the Special Protection Area/Special Area of Conservation (SPA/SAC).

The main body of the report has been prepared by Clinton Devon Estates, with input from Council Officers. Officers strongly support the project which will assist with the delivery of a number of East Devon District Council's Strategies including our Council Plan, Climate Change Strategy, and the emerging Local Plan, and request that Overview Committee note the content of the report and support the Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery Project.

Background

Located in the lower Otter catchment,

The scheme, located in the lower Otter catchment, is currently in a development phase (2024 to 2026) with a view to delivery over 20 years from 2027. Focusing on habitat restoration and climate adaptation across some 4,500 ha+, Heaths to Sea builds on the declaration of the Pebblebed Heaths as a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 2020 and the completion of the Lower Otter Restoration Project in 2022. Given its relationship to the EA's Exe Estuary Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy and success in restoring intertidal habitat and attracting associated species, the Lower Otter has potential to become an SPA or SAC in the future. If the Heaths to Sea project is successful, parts of the project area may also become a potential candidate for SAC/SPA status over the longer term.

The Landscape Recovery Scheme is one of three Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes. It aims to enable the delivery of ambitious, large-scale long-term environmental projects that bring positive environmental change and benefits to the local community. Two other Landscape Recovery Projects are being progressed in East Devon at the National Trust's Killerton estate and the Luppitt Landscape Partnership, within the Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

There is excellent potential for the Heaths to Sea project to help deliver a core part of EDDC's planning strategy to create a 'Greener East Devon' and to protect, enhance and restore the district's natural environment.

The Heaths to Sea vision is:

By 2046, the Heaths to Sea initiative will be nationally and internationally recognised as a leading example of how world-class nature recovery can be achieved within a thriving, productive, and populated lowland English landscape.

The Pebblebed Heaths National Nature Reserve (NNR) and its surrounding agricultural hinterlands will form a fully connected, climate-resilient ecological network; priority habitats will be restored to favourable condition and will support thriving populations of priority terrestrial, wetland, and riparian species. A new, landscape-scale wildlife reserve of international renown will provide habitat connectivity, excellent public access, and nature-rich experiences, acting as a model for conservation, sustainable land use and rural regeneration.

The landscape will be ecologically functional and deliver a full range of ecosystem services, including clean water, carbon storage, soil health, pollination, and natural flood management (NFM). Degraded ecological processes will be restored, and environmental risks associated with land use will be significantly reduced through regenerative, nature-friendly farming systems.

A strong evidence-based monitoring programme, co-developed with local communities and underpinned by science, will demonstrate the ecological, economic, and social benefits of nature recovery. Land managers, communities, and policymakers will share a renewed social contract rooted in trust, collaboration, and transparency—where land use decisions, trade-offs, and benefits are clearly understood by all.

Optimism will replace past pessimism around biodiversity loss, with vibrant opportunities for people to connect with, care for, and benefit from the natural environment. The restored landscape will contribute to reversing climate change through carbon sequestration and will underpin sustainable green growth, improved health and wellbeing, and regional economic prosperity.

A plan showing the project area and concept images showing the potential landscape change are provided at Appendix 1.

What land use change is proposed under Heaths to Sea?

The primary ambition of Heaths to Sea is to create a new great wildlife reserve in East Devon that also supports wider economic and societal needs. The primary project foci are the restoration of the main river, tributaries and floodplain in the lower Otter catchment, the restoring of natural processes and habitat and species diversity across the wider landscape to develop a ‘super NNR’ in East Devon, and the reduction of environmental risk from farming activities. The project is compatible with, and indeed supports, continued sustainable food production in the valley.

Specifically key objectives include:

- 1) creating 100+ hectares of multi-purpose woodland providing a future timber resource, wildlife habitats and additional access,
- 2) the restoration and creation of 155 ha of coastal and floodplain grazing marsh adjacent to the Otter Estuary to build upon East Devon’s exceptional wetland wildlife offer,
- 3) the transitioning of 185 ha of low productivity pasture into a dynamic mosaic of wildlife-rich wood pasture, scrub and species rich grasslands,
- 4) expansion of permanent conservation grazing from 200 ha to 600+ ha across the Pebblebed Heath,
- 5) enhancing access opportunities to the countryside, potentially also including the opening up of an old railway line for public access between Newton Poppleford and Otterton,
- 6) developing integrated farm plans across 4,500 ha that collectively deliver the priorities of East Devon society, including food production, flood risk reduction, water quality improvement, carbon storage and wildlife support.

Project alignment with local policies and plans

The Heaths to Sea project aligns with the objectives in East Devon District Council’s **Council Plan** and **Climate Change Strategy** – through landscape scale ecological recovery, changing agricultural practices to reduce emissions associated with farming operations, manage soils sustainably and replenish soil carbon, and through increasing storage through tree planting and habitat creation.

Heaths to Sea helps deliver **Objective 8** of **East Devon’s Emerging Local Plan** committing to safeguard and enhance biodiversity across the district. This is allied to **Objective 2** which focuses on tackling the climate emergency by moving towards net-zero carbon emissions by 2040. By conserving the natural environment and promoting the integration of ecosystem services, the project also helps the delivery of a number of themes of **Strategy 5** of the Plan including: protecting, expanding and reconnecting of habitats through a network of green infrastructure (**Biodiversity and Green Networks**); recognising the environmental and climate value of natural carbon stores such as soils, woodlands and heathlands (**Natural Assets and Carbon Storage**); supporting natural flood management to increase resilience to extreme weather events driven by climate change (**Flooding and Surface Water**); creating a connected green infrastructure of river corridors, cycle paths and nature routes to integrate urban and rural spaces (**Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Services**).

Heaths to Sea also support EDDC's **Economic Development and Tourism Strategies** which integrate tourism into wider economic growth, with tourism and the development of green businesses based on the promotion of the area's natural and cultural assets.

The project can also deliver a number of key actions for Devon Special Species and Priority Habitats identified in the **Local Nature Recovery Strategy** and a significant proportion of the long-term targets of the revised **East Devon National Landscape Management Plan** (2025 to 2030). These targets include restoring 2,691 ha of new habitat outside of protected sites, bringing 80% of SSSIs into favourable condition, increasing tree canopy cover by 807ha by 2050 and improving water quality.

Project alignment with national policies and plans

- The project will help deliver priority targets under the **Environment Act 2021**. These include:
- halt the decline in species populations by 2030 and increase species populations by at least 10% by 2042 over 2022 levels;
- restore and improve habitats both within protected areas and outside; restore water bodies to a 'natural state';
- cut exposure to small, air borne pollution particles that are harmful to health (PM2.5) by over a third compared to 2018 levels;

Key **Environment Improvement Plan 2023** targets that are supported by Heaths to Sea are:

- halting species decline by 2030, and increasing species abundance by at least 10% by 2042 (relative to 2022);
- restore/create >500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2042;
- 50% of SSSIs have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by 2028;
- increase tree canopy & woodland cover to 16.5% of land by 2050;
- restore 400 miles of river and create 3,000 hectares of new woodland along rivers; improve resilience to climate change droughts, wildfires

Heaths to Sea can also deliver 30%+ of the project area being wildlife-rich habitat meeting the **30x30 Commitment** for this part of East Devon.

Key targets of the **Climate Change Act 2008** supported by the project include:

- to increase afforestation and reforestation efforts to enhance carbon sinks;
- adopt sustainable land management practices to boost biodiversity and carbon storage.

Heaths to Sea & dependencies with the planning process

Should some central funding of the delivery of Heaths to Sea be approved by Defra, the project will proceed into the delivery phase from early 2027. To proceed, a number of permissions will be required from a variety of organisations, including water resource permits, flood risk activity permits, land drainage consents, species licensing etc.

In addition, the project may be seeking planning permissions to help diversify the income streams which will enable certain aspects of the project to proceed. An example may be the opening of the Newton Poppleford to Otterton railway line for public access. To manage this asset over the long-term and to a safe standard it will require funding and planning permission for the establishment of income generating infrastructure. Likewise, farms that are changing their management model away from environmentally damaging to more regenerative farming practices may look to capture income lost through alternative activities e.g. ecotourism and farm shops.

The project team understands that EDDC is not able to pre-judge any future planning applications. However, we hope that the dependencies between attaining permits/permissions, generating income for local businesses and the deliverability of nature recovery are recognised.

Funding & timescales

The Heaths to Sea project team will be submitting landscape recovery proposals for funding in March 2026. Should these be met with approval by Defra then a grant offer will be issued by government for a minimum period of 20 years, likely by autumn 2026. Grant funding will only pay for a proportion of delivery costs and Defra expects all LR projects to blend green finance and business diversification opportunities into the project Business Case. This must be supported by a Natural Capital Account demonstrating value for money.

Appendix 1A – Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery Project Plans and Conceptual Images

Appendix 2 – Luppitt Landscape Partnership Project Summary

The Luppitt Landscape Partnership (LLP) is a Community Interest Company (CIC) which was formed in 2023 to enable a group of Blackdown Hills landowners to undertake the development phase of Landscape Recovery (LR), following a successful bid to Defra.

The LLP is entirely landowner-led, with a board of directors drawn from a membership of 40 land holdings covering 1427 hectares in the parishes of Luppitt and Combe Raleigh, including the extensive Luppitt Commons, within the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. The project area contains the River Love, a sub-catchment of the Otter, and also includes some holdings on the main River Otter. It complements the Heaths to Sea LR project which lies at the southern end of the same catchment.

The LLP has employed a small staff team led by Gavin Saunders which is drawing together a 20-year set of implementation plans for submission to Defra in March 2026.

Vision

The LLP is setting out to create a resilient community, both natural and human, fit for the future, built on the diversity and qualities of the land, its people and its history. Participating landowners will collaborate to restore an ecologically coherent landscape, while also building its capacity for sustainable agriculture. This work will enable the land to hold more water, support more biodiversity and store more carbon, while producing the same amount of food on healthier soils. The project will build a learning culture amongst all stakeholders to enable the community to continue to farm with nature for the common good.

Key targets

- Restoration of 52 ha in the springline zone to mire vegetation through re-wetting.
- 102 ha of existing open habitat in secured, and 267 ha of improved pasture restored to species-rich neutral grassland/lowland meadow.
- 94 ha of valley mire on Hense Moor SSSI and lowland meadow on Hense Moor Meadows SSSI brought into Favourable Condition.
- All 170 ha of existing woodland brought into moderate or good condition, 17 ha of new woodland created, and 41 ha of new parkland trees established.
- 21 ha of riparian habitat created along 11.8 km of the Rivers Love and River Otter, and 1370m made more stable with more natural channel forms.
- 312 ha of Grade 3 land brought into herbal ley-based rotations, with 457 ha managed with low-input or legume-rich swards.
- A rich learning culture established, generating annual farm educational visits and training events, supporting the practical needs of land managers, together with a traineeship programme, and dedicated learning facilities.
- New entrants to farming and land management supported.
- Land management and data gathering being actively supported by volunteers from the wider community.
- Residents and visitors are better able to access and enjoy the permissive and public rights of way on the Luppitt Commons, and access information about the LLP and the Luppitt landscape.

Funding & timescales

The LLP's 20-year implementation proposals are based on majority of funding being secured from Defra, with an ongoing ambition to seek blended finance funding through future sale of carbon credits, BNG, other private investment and grant support. If plans are approved the LLP hopes to begin implementation in early 2027 and run to 2047.

Alignment with local and national policy

30x30

The LLP's plans align with the UK Government's commitment to protect 30% of UK land and seas for nature by 2030 to support the global 30by30 target agreed at UN Biodiversity Summit (COP15) in 2022.

By securing the management of all existing priority habitat in the project area, and achieving its targets for enhancement or restoration of degraded or lost habitat, the LLP will deliver **665 hectares** of land managed primarily for nature. This represents **47%** of the LLP project area. The LLP therefore exceeds the 30by30 target and demonstrates that the project punches above its weight in terms of its contribution to UK Nature Recovery policy.

Devon Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The LLP's habitat and species proposals will contribute to a number of key actions for Devon Special Species and Priority Habitats identified in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (Devon LNRS). In particular this project supports the following Headline Priorities from the LNRS:

- *Mire, wet heath, wet woodland and flower-rich wet meadows form extensive mosaics across Devon's wet, acid lowland soils. March Fritillaries, sundews, Lesser Butterfly Orchids and dragonflies abound. Carbon and water are stored.*
- *Flower-rich grasslands are common across Devon's rural, urban and coastal areas. They are full of colour and structure and buzz with insects. Bats and birds feed overhead and harvest mice nest in tussocks.*
- *Farmland has healthy soils, bushy hedges with thriving Dorice and Hedgehogs, broad flower-rich field margins, trees and ponds. Yellowhammers, Barn Owls, Kestrels and Red Kites are common.*
- *Clean rivers and streams provide the wildlife-rich veins of Devon, full of leaping Atlantic Salmon, Eels, Water Voles and Otters. Beavers create new wetlands helping to store water and reduce flooding.*

East Devon local policies

The LLP project supports objectives in East Devon District Council's Local Plan and Climate Change Strategy, through landscape scale ecological recovery, changing agricultural practices to reduce emissions associated with farming operations, managing soils sustainably and building soil carbon, and through increasing storage through habitat creation.

The LLP project will help deliver Objectives 2 and 8 of the emerging Local Plan (safeguarding and enhancement of biodiversity, and tackling the climate emergency by moving towards net-zero carbon emissions by 2040). The project also contributes to several themes of Strategy 5 of the Plan including:

- protecting, expanding and reconnecting of habitats through a network of green infrastructure (Biodiversity and Green Networks);
- recognising the environmental and climate value of natural carbon stores such as soils, woodlands and heathlands (Natural Assets and Carbon Storage);
- supporting natural flood management to increase resilience to extreme weather events driven by climate change (Flooding and Surface Water).

Blackdown Hills National Landscape

The Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF, 2024) sets the ambition for how Protected Landscapes are expected to achieve three outcomes from the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23) which relate to these goals:

- Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife.

- Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change.
- Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment.

The Nature targets within the PLTOF, and their apportionment within the Blackdown Hills National Landscape, are set out in the BHNL Management Plan 2025-2030. The LLP project contributes to a number of these targets including:

Target 1:

Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline). The apportioned target for the BHNL is to restore or create more than 2,919 ha of a range of wildlife-rich habitats by 2042. The LLP project plans in total will deliver **369 ha** of restored or recreated habitat, representing **13%** of the BHNL target.

Target 2

Bring 80% of Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs) within Protected Landscapes into favourable condition by 2042. Hense Moor and Hense Moor Meadows SSSIs together cover 94 ha, representing 15% of the 639 ha of SSSI across the BHNL as a whole. The LLP's plans will bring these SSSIs into Favourable Condition within the lifetime of LR implementation, thereby achieving **18%** of the BHNL target.

Appendix 2A – Luppitt Landscape Partnership Summary of Interventions