RECOVERING THE DEBEN FROM SOURCE TO SEA

An action plan to recover the Deben for people to love and wildlife to thrive

East Suffolk Catchment Partnership

Produced 2024 by the Essex and Suffolk Rivers Trust on behalf of the East Suffolk Catchment Partnership.
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Recovering the Deben from Source to Sea

The River Deben in Suffolk flows through open countryside for nearly 25 miles from its source near Debenham to the North Sea at Felixstowe Ferry. For about 13 miles, from Bromeswell (just upstream from Woodbridge) to Felixstowe Ferry, it becomes a tidal estuary. The river and estuary are much loved by local communities and those who live and work in the river catchment. The future of the estuary which is internationally designated for its nature conservation interest and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), is threatened by poor water quality, climate change and impacts from modification of the river, causing real concern for human use. The habitat features within the estuary SSSI are classified as unfavourable condition - declining. Only 11% of the river length is in good ecological condition, and the estuary is suffering from the impacts of pollution and saltmarsh loss.

In recognition of the problems on the Deben, partners from the East Suffolk Catchment Partnership have come together to develop a plan supported by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A vision has been agreed between partners to give direction, understanding, and a shared aspiration for the plan:

"Recovering the Deben for people to love and wildlife to thrive"

The project team and all our partners wish to achieve ambitious change to recover the Deben by 2030.

Five steps to action

Five key steps have been identified to deliver the project:

Step 1	Establish governance	By end of 2023
Step 2	Gather and evaluate evidence against objectives	By mid-2025
Step 3	Engage landowners, industry, and communities	Throughout duration of project
Step 4	Action planning	By mid-2026
Step 5	Deliver the plan	By end of 2030

Step 1: Establish governance

The plan will be delivered by key partners who have committed to its delivery through a terms of reference. Consultation and engagement with the wider East Suffolk Catchment Partnership – including key partner groups focused on the Deben will be essential to guiding the activities of the working group.

Development and delivery of the plan will be supported by a steering group comprising the Essex and Suffolk Rivers Trust and other partners.

The steering group will help provide the baseline information and supporting guidance on the development of the action planning.

Step 2: Gather and evaluate evidence against objectives

Various activities and issues have been identified as reasons for not achieving good status under the Water Framework Directive (a legislative driver for the state of our rivers) and reasons for the SSSI being in unfavourable condition. Five objectives have been set, for the plan, to address the problems caused by different activities.

During step 2, a detailed assessment of evidence related to each of these issues will help identify where action could be taken. Early work to develop this action plan has identified that further monitoring of the rivers and estuary is needed to address current data gaps and enable outcomes from the project to be measured. As evidence is assembled and assessed, the interaction between the freshwater (river system) and saltwater (estuary) will be better understood. The project will use the existing Ecosystem Assessment, which was undertaken by the Rivers Trust and University of Exeter, as well as a wide range of other data and information sources. It will also link into the CaSTCo (Catchment Systems Thinking Cooperative) which provides a framework for improved and integrated water environment data, integrated modelling capabilities, openly shared collaborative platforms, and decision support tools. This will enable ongoing local monitoring, such that reported on the Deben Climate Centre website and the work of Save the Deben, to be included in decision making.

Objectives	The action plan will aim to meet its objective by:
1. To work with farmers to improve livestock management by reducing its impact on the river catchment.	•Improving livestock management •Reducing nutrient pollution •Improving soil management •Improving riparian and in-river activities and habitats
2. To promote better nutrient management in agricultural and wastewater discharge	•Improving nutrient management •Improving soil management •Promoting better effluent management •Working with partners for better water quality
3. To engage with farmers, industry, and communities to help educate and understand where improved soil and water management is needed	•Improving Soil management •Improving nutrient management •Increasing low flow resilience •Promoting nature-based solutions for flood risk management •Working with partners for better water quality
4. To improve river resilience to low and high flows.	•Increasing low flow resilience •Recognising sea level rise and raising awareness •Promoting nature-based solutions for flood risk management •Educating on riparian responsibilities
5. To enhance wildlife habitat quality and connectivity across the Deben landscape.	•Improving riparian and in-river activities and habitats •Reducing barriers to sediment transportation and fish migration •Recognising sea level rise (saltmarsh loss) •Reducing loss of habitat and species •Managing the presence of invasive species •Working with partners for better water quality

Step 3: Engage with farmers, industry, and communities

Step 3 will be taken in parallel with Step 2 to help with assembling the evidence and understanding the environment and will underpin development of the project. Step 3 will involve a range of engagement methods, including 1:1 visits, citizen science, and community/parish workshops. We will work closely with the Upper Deben Farm cluster and other farming clusters being established within the catchment, as well as established groups such as ESWAG (East Suffolk Water Abstractors Group), River Deben Association, Save the Deben and the Deben Climate Centre who are active members of the East Suffolk Catchment partnership. The project will also work with the Suffolk Coast SSSI working group who are investigating the Suffolk Coast SSSIs and reasons for failure.

Step 4: Action planning

A detailed 5-year plan for improving the Deben will be developed as a result of steps 1-3. It will make the link between the wider catchment and the estuary itself (source to sea), building on emerging knowledge on the issues facing estuarine waters and critical habitats such as saltmarsh. The plan will consider climate change projections and the evidence of drought, flooding, and sea level rise already evidenced in the catchment.

The actions will be grouped into three key areas which link land and water:

- Land and water management practise changes.
- Small scale measures on farms and in communities.
- Habitat restoration and creation projects (medium to large-scale measures).

The actions will be developed with landowners and communities to ensure the plan is practicable and deliverable.

Outcomes by 2030

By 2030, the following outcomes are expected as a result of following this plan:

- The ecological condition of our rivers (Water Framework Directive) has improved throughout the Deben to support the Government commitment to improve water body conditions to be as close to natural condition as possible.
- The condition of the Deben estuary, Site of the Special Scientific Interest, is significantly improving.
- Communities have come together to look after the Deben for the long term.
- The land, water and habitats within the catchment are better quality, connected and more resilient to climate change.