SECTION 3

THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES
3.1 Introduction

The Ouse Washes LP landscape goes through spectacular seasonal changes. It requires a constant, highly complicated and delicate balancing act to ensure that this entire man-made landscape serves its many purposes, including flood prevention, drainage, food production, minerals extraction, wetland and wildlife creation and conservation and public green space provision. Few people realise that this landscape and its character are under serious threat: due to dramatic changes in weather patterns, changing communities and increasing demands on resources, it is an increasing challenge to maintain a healthy balance between the various competing interests.

This section sets out the range of threats the OWLP landscape, its heritage and communities are facing, their inherent vulnerabilities to change and what changes we might expect over coming decades. It covers a wide range of subjects, from the condition of the heritage through to the threats posed by climate change, flooding, land use, management, resources and access, as well as the resident populations’ socio-economic situation, identity and public knowledge and expectations. It also explores competing interests in the landscape such as those from conservation, agriculture and tourism.

A key part of this section is the identification of opportunities for addressing these threats and for safeguarding or enhancing the heritage. Section 4 will show how the OWLP scheme will link in the opportunities outlined here, and why these are the drivers behind the prioritisation of the scheme’s projects.

3.2 Threats & Vulnerabilities: General Issues

Climate Change

The Great Ouse River takes the water coming from a huge catchment extending across central England via the Ouse Washes system out into the North Sea to The Wash which is the largest estuarine system in the UK. After a very rapid rise in sea-level following the end of the last ice-age, there has been a fluctuating, but steadily increasing, trend of sea-level rise in the area, averaging at about 1.66 mm per year for the past 6,000 years. Part of this change has been due to the land sinking at an estimated average of 1 mm per year. In addition to this, actual sea-level is estimated to have risen between 1 and 1.5 mm per year over the last decades, giving an overall relative sea-level rise of 2 to 2.5 mm per year.

The latest climate change scenario models predict a wide array of potential impacts and general trends with both long-term changes and more extreme weather events predicted. Long-term changes are likely to include not just raised sea levels, but also changes in weather patterns. For the East of England, the latest predictions are that the climate will warm up by around 2.2 °C by 2050 (medium emission scenario, against 1961-1990 baseline climatic data; source: http://ukclimateprojections.defra.gov.uk/), with considerably increased precipitation during winters (c14%) and considerable decreased precipitation during summers (-%17%) by 2050.

The rate of sea-level rise is expected to increase substantially throughout the 21st century due to global climate change and the Government has asked flood defence authorities to plan for an average sea-level rise of 6 mm per year to 2030. It is therefore likely that sea-level will rise by about 75 cm in the coming century. The impact of sea level rises is a huge threat to the fragile environment of the Fens and could have significant implications for its future. There are particular threats to residential property, health, agriculture, fresh water supply and wildlife habitats. If river banks are breached there will be severe flooding and salinisation of the wetland system causing rapid changes
in vegetation, invertebrate and fish communities. For thousands of migrating birds, a network of Fen wetlands is vital for safe refuelling and wintering areas.

More frequent extreme patterns with heavy downpours, prolonged droughts and storms, will become more usual; this has already become obvious in the last few years with records broken on a regular basis. Climate change predictions suggest that in future rainfall will overall be heavier but less frequent, potentially resulting in more floods as well as more droughts. Increased flooding will impact on agricultural land, wildlife habitats and communities. More frequent and intense storms will lead to a greater flooding risk from tidal storm surges. An increasing number of storm surges also have a direct effect on the drainage capability and the rate of siltation of the rivers and canals, thereby exacerbating potential management of the land.

The implications of climate change mean this dynamic landscape continues to change causing threats to important habitats and heritage assets. The demand and control of water is accelerating the pace of change and more frequent severe drought conditions mean agricultural practices will need to change if the historic landscape is to be conserved. Such change will need to be managed as farming contributes significantly to the economy.

The OWLP’s work will explore the implications of climate change and bring these to people’s attention so that local communities are more aware of the potential effects this could have over time. Being a vast, man-made environment that lies predominantly below sea level, it is paramount that local residents understand these risks and the role they can play in helping to mitigate against impacts and what lifestyle practices are needed to adapt to climate change. The OWLP will help develop people’s awareness and understanding of climate change and its impacts and will invest in programmes that will support initiatives to generate debate and management decisions that protect the landscape and its valued natural and historic environment assets.

Climate Change - Opportunities

- Raise awareness amongst local communities of the threats climate change poses to the local landscape and heritage.
- Provide understanding within local communities of the need for climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- Promote greater cooperation and understanding between agencies and communities, to work together on climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.
- Expand the total habitat resource and increase connectivity to enable more species to adapt to climate change more easily, allowing species to migrate across the landscape.
- Promote practices with local communities, farmers and landowners to limit the emission of carbon and greenhouse gases, to protect carbon stores (e.g. deep peat soils) and achieve carbon sequestration through beneficial land management practices.
- Adopt and promote low-carbon ways of working across the partnership and communities in the area.

Lack of Identity and Tourism Industry

There is poor awareness of what the area has to offer which results in the OWLP area not being considered a tourism destination and having low visitor numbers. The area’s tourism industry is made up of many small and independent businesses which makes co-ordination of marketing activity difficult. The organisation ‘Fens Tourism’ set-up to co-ordinate tourism across the Fens no longer exists. This means the strategy for tourism across the Ouse Washes is currently fragmented and left
to each local authority to promote their own area’s tourism offer which, with recent budget cuts, becomes increasingly difficult. Without an overarching management structure such as nearby AONBs already have in place, there is also a lack of investment in the tourism industry.

Not only does the area not get many visitors, the Audience & Access Planning work has shown that people living in the many communities in and near the OWLP area often also do not realise what the area has to offer. People in these settlements also tend to be focused on their local surroundings and usually do not consider themselves to be part of a wider, coherent landscape. There is a clear need to provide the area with a strong identity. This is strongly linked to the lack of coherent management and the lack of an overarching tourism strategy and events offer.

The need for the OWLP scheme is heightened by the role the area plays in helping to achieve the ‘Wetland Vision for England’ which aims to enable wetland to adapt in the face of climate change by linking new and existing wetlands across the landscape. The recreation of wetland habitat around the Ouse Washes makes the case for giving the area a much stronger identity even more critical. The OWLP scheme is needed to facilitate the joining-up of the landscape’s unique characteristics from the recreated wetland sites to the ‘washlands’. It will also mean the area can be promoted as one of Britain’s largest, most important wetland habitats and historic landscapes, raising its prominence not just locally but also on a national scale and making possible better interpretation of ecclesiastical heritage, heritage sites and key interest sites such as Denver Sluice.

In the southern part of the Ouse Washes the tourism industry is based around Cambridge and links need to be made to attract visitors out from the City as a way of generating income across local communities and developing better engagement with the heritage of the area. The restored wetland landscapes at RSPB Fen Drayton and Ouse Fen reserves give opportunities for increasing access and learning for those that live and visit the southern part of the OWLP area. The success of the Guided Busway and associated designated cycle route show that these have the potential to draw in visitors from Cambridge and St Ives to these nature reserves. There are similar opportunities for further strengthening important access points in the north of the OWLP area, including WWT Welney and the Denver Sluices Complex.

The Fenland countryside is not a traditional tourism destination and there are currently limited facilities for visitors. However recent programmes of farm diversification and EU investment have resulted in the provision of some very good places for camping, Bed & Breakfasts and afternoon teas. These businesses could benefit if more people were encouraged to use the Ouse Washes LP area for recreation. At the moment, many small pubs, B&Bs and local shops are struggling to survive due to the general weak economy and changing retail habits, exacerbated on occasion by access problems created by prolonged flooding. A stronger, coordinated tourism offer, making the Ouse Washes a better known destination for visitors, would bring in new opportunities for local businesses and could provide new jobs.
Lack of Identity and Tourism Industry - Opportunities

- Improve local knowledge of the Ouse Washes LP area and what it has to offer.
- Provide more and better information about existing events and activities in the OWLP area to attract visitors.
- Create coherent and attractive tourism packages in the area, in order to promote the area as a tourism destination.
- Develop a website and local branding for the area.
- Promote all tourism hubs in the area across the organisations involved.
- Promote different types of heritage – natural environment, historic environment and cultural heritage – across the organisations and access hubs in the area.
- Develop a focus around the waterways and nature reserves, combining heritage promotion with increased public access.
- Increase visits to museums, reserves and other key interest sites through co-ordinated heritage and arts programmes and themed attractions and events.
- Join up the visitor economy, linking different attractions of a similar kind as a ‘heritage trail’, for instance the wildlife reserves, the drainage story. The OWLP themes, in particular ‘Water Everywhere’, ‘Hidden Heritage’ and ‘Migration Stories’ could play a key focus in this.
- Work closely with the regional tourism boards and Fen-wide tourism initiatives such as that promoted by the Fens for the Future partnership and the Fenland Waterways Link.
- Bring together tourism sector across the OWLP area, in order to jointly promote themselves and what the area has to offer visitors.
- Encourage better cooperation across businesses and organisations in the area.
- Support and train up local tourism providers to get them to become the frontline ‘ambassadors’ for the OWLP area and its heritage.
- Encourage investment in local economy, to strengthen local economy and provide a sense of pride in people’s heritage.

Lack of Cohesive Management

The OWLP area has no formal landscape designated (i.e. an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Park) and therefore has not benefitted from the partnership structures, investment and overseeing of the strategic needs of the landscape that such designations normally bring. Consistency in the management approach has been made more difficult because the Ouse Washes is located within two county councils, five district councils and numerous Parishes and Internal Drainage Board Authorities. As a result, there is no overarching, cohesive planning framework; as is evident, for instance, in the different approaches to tourism promotion carried out by the district authorities.

The OWLP area is currently managed through a fragmented approach with organisations and landowners often working independently to support their own strategies. On the Ouse Washes, any strategic approach has, so far, been established largely through goodwill between different conservation organisations and other landowners. Often this way of working misses opportunities to share skills and resources making delivery less cost effective. It also leads to a lack of cohesion when planning public access, recreation, community engagement and promotional strategies. Coupled with this, the OWLP area faces significant change and many conflicting land use pressures that are impossible to debate and tackle without all stakeholders entering into more formalised partnership arrangements. The OWLP is needed to strengthen partnership working between organisations, landowners and communities as well as providing dedicated resources to achieve the overarching aims.
The partnerships that currently exist are mainly concentrated around biodiversity and conservation issues and generally work on their own sites. There are currently two major initiatives covering the OWLP area that complement this scheme. The Fens for the Future Partnership - which followed from the Integrated Biodiversity Delivery Area (IBDA) - was formed to increase partnership working across the Fens as a whole, and focuses on developing and establishing an enhanced and sustainable ecological network through a landscape-scale conservation approach, whilst increasing community involvement and visitor numbers. The ‘Great Ouse Wetland Vision’ is a partnership approach to significantly increase the wetland habitats in the OWLP area and linking these to create a major wetland area, complimentary to the nearby Wicken Fen and Great Fen initiatives. A third initiative, the Fens waterways Link, focuses on the development of an integrated water network across the fens. All above partnerships have strong synergies with the aims of the OWLP and give the partners the opportunity to work together at a landscape level through a more focused approach.

As a largely man-made and controlled environment which is likely to face significant and unpredictable change in the future, it is essential that landowners, communities and recreational users work together better. The OWLP scheme will bring together those dealing with the complex and often competing issues of future agricultural practices, habitat management, recreational usage, community engagement, climate change and flood prevention, to identify ways to ensure these competing interests can operate together for a joint outcome in future.

Given the Ouse Washes’ multi-faceted character and significance, there can be no doubt that a broad partnership-approach is the only valid way to manage and interpret its landscape, enabling an area that has seen under-investment and which is under-promoted and misunderstood, to bring to life its fascinating history and fully realise its diverse community potential.

### Lack of Cohesive Management - Opportunities

- Strengthen partnership working, creating a strong strategic framework to tackle landscape management issues.
- Work across administrative and organisational boundaries, to create a clear structure within which partners can work to the common good.
- Improve the standing of partners with local communities by engaging in closer and better two-way communications.
- Work closely with all related strategic partnership initiatives, including the Fens for the Future, Great Ouse Wetland Vision, Fens Waterways Link, and Green Infrastructure Strategies, to ensure mutual benefits and a sustainable future for the OWLP area.
- Define clear management aims for the landscape, its heritage and communities, working towards a sustainable legacy for the OWLP landscape.
- Instigate new partnership-led projects (‘spin-offs’).
- Search for new funding sources, to strengthen long-term management of the landscape.

### 3.3 Threats & Vulnerabilities: Land Management

**Increasing Competition in Land Use Interests**

The demands on the OWLP area are high, with increasing competing demands on its rich resources. The OWLP area is of prime importance for agricultural purposes, for growing food on the fertile arable soils and for raising cattle and other livestock on the washland pastures. The Ouse Washes and the waterways system are crucial for flood prevention purposes and the management of
drainage, water quality and to allow water abstraction for irrigation. The OWLP area contains some of the country’s most extensive and important wetland sites. In addition, the area is of importance for the provision of countryside and waterways access for the local populations and a growing visitor market, with its positive economic spin offs.

Although there are some good examples (e.g. Ouse Fen) where various land use interests are met at the same time, it is clear that not all demands can be met at all times and in all locations; priorities will sometimes need to be made. Across the OWLP area the main opposing interests are between:

- flood prevention and conservation work;
- agriculture and conservation work;
- conservation work and recreational access; and
- land ownership and public access.

*Main land use interests in the OWLP area.*
The Ouse Washes has, since its creation in the 17th century, maintained its main function as a reservoir to store excess water to prevent valuable land and settlements from flooding. Water management still is the core function of the Ouse Washes, the system helping to protect a large percentage of the nation’s Grade 1 agricultural land and numerous settlements along the entire Great Ouse catchment. In the second half of the twentieth century, the nature value of the Ouse Washes has also been recognised through various international and national wildlife designations. However, unseasonal flooding, when water is diverted onto the Ouse Washes in spring and summer, results in catastrophic and long-term consequences for the wildlife, particularly for breeding waders.

Farming and the OWLP area are inextricably linked. It was the prize of the Fen’s nutrient rich soils which led to drainage and today farming contributes significantly to the economy of the area. There has been a significant growth in farmland prices over the last decade - with much good quality land making around £8000 an acre and little coming on to the market. The Grade 1 and 2 farmland in the OWLP area is a precious resource for food production which has been intensively farmed for decades. Intensification of farming has led to increased field sizes, peat and soil fertility loss and increased levels of chemical inputs including fertiliser and pesticides. To optimise crop yields, such as potatoes, extensive irrigation from ditches and rivers, licensed by the Environment Agency, supplements water from winter fill reservoirs. The use of fertilisers can change the water quality leading to oxygen depletion and weed growth/algae blooms in ditches. Both processes are detrimental to the conservation work going on in the area.

Agricultural intensification is linked to farmers’ efforts to optimise yields. EU subsidies are now calculated on areas farmed with land set-aside for conservation and wildlife often being established through ten year agreements. The next round of the ‘Common Agricultural Policy’ is moving towards more ‘green’ approaches to balance the economic demands of farming against the need to conserve and enhance the wetland habitats. The OWLP will, through strengthening partnership working between conservationists, communities and farmers, recognise and develop the critical role of farmers in conserving farmland wildlife and features of historic interest.

Poor global harvests and a growing world population, combined with an increase in the costs of food production and UK imports, have raised future food security as an issue. This has led to some questioning of initiatives to restore agricultural land to wetland habitats, as evidenced by the new Coveney habitat scheme and the Wicken Fen and Great Fen initiatives. However, new wetland areas created could provide new opportunities for local farmers through the provision of pasture for grazing cattle and other livestock.

New wildlife habitats could also bring in new tourism opportunities and therefore help support struggling local businesses and communities. However, there is a need to manage an increase in visitors to ensure they do not have any detrimental effects on habitat conservation work and this demands a sensitive approach to tourism promotion. At the same time, there is also a need to strengthen the local economy and to diversify the offer for local people and visitors, to help increase job prospects locally.

A related issue is the clear need voiced by all local communities in the OWLP area to gain more access to their surrounding countryside. Targeted population growth in parts of the area means that there is an increasing need for green space in proximity to urban and new development areas surrounding the OWLP landscape. Public access is currently limited in the majority of the OWLP area and improving the situation remains a challenge that needs community engagement and the partnership structure of the OWLP to overcome. There are very few access points to the Ouse Washes and other important waterways, public footpaths and cycle routes are sparse in the area, with landowners in the area often not keen to allow public access to their land. The access
opportunities at the nature reserves in the area are also relatively limited, with notable exceptions at the southern end of the area with relatively good community access to the Fen Drayton Lakes and Ouse Fen reserves.

There is a general perception within local communities, in particular by those who are directly affected by flooding events and new habitat creation schemes such as at Coveney and Sutton, that communication is not sufficient and that local communities’ needs and concerns are not always taken into account, despite actual consultations taking place. There can also be conflicting views from a wide range of organisations and landowners about the management and recreational use of the OWLP Landscape. The OWLP scheme will give opportunities to open up the area’s potential through a managed public access approach, safeguarding sensitive sites but at the same time developing new opportunities for people to experience the landscape through investment in events, heritage walks, heritage geocaching, ‘hands-on’ family and school initiatives, volunteering opportunities, walking and bird watching.

Throughout the delivery of the OWLP scheme the focus will be on opening the debate between the various organisations and individuals with different land use interests, to ensure a better understanding of each other’s viewpoints. Through this, the partnership should be able to create new opportunities for co-operation and mutually beneficial solutions.

**Increasing Competition in Land Use Interests - Opportunities**

- Create greater awareness of the complex and often competing demands on the landscape and its resources.
- Challenge people’s perceptions by providing accurate and well-balanced information, for instance on the subjects of food security, wildlife habitat creation and public access.
- Open up debates about the future of the OWLP landscape and the role each ‘interest’ has to play in safeguarding the landscape character.
- Strengthen partnership working between organisations dealing with flood prevention, water management, conservation, communities, farming and recreation, to develop more balanced approaches to managing the historic landscape and to identify ways to ensure these competing interests can operate together for joint outcomes in future.
- Promote greater co-operation between agencies and communities, to ensure better understanding of management and user-end needs.
- Define clear management aims for the landscape, its heritage and communities, thereby working towards a legacy for the OWLP landscape.
- Use key visitor attractions and the range of local access hubs to promote the responsible use of sites and their heritage.
- Encourage partner organisations, landowners and farmers to allow greater and more diverse public access on land and water by creating new low-impact access and new community engagement opportunities, in active cooperation with local communities.
- Incorporate carefully planned and ecologically sensitive public access opportunities within new habitat creation schemes. In sensitive areas, provide signed or guided routes to minimise the impact of visitors on sites.
- Promote and provide new green tourism opportunities and new business opportunities to local communities in close cooperation with agricultural and conservation developments, to allow for multiple benefits.
Changes in Flooding, Water Management and Water Quality

An increase in the frequency and severity of storm surges as a result of climate change, combined with sea level rise, could result in devastating flooding. Although the great fen floods of 1915, 1947 and 1953 are engrained in the communities’ collective memory, today’s communities are little prepared for such events assuming that, as drainage is controlled by man, flooding can be overcome. There are also some significant challenges to overcome in terms of attitudes, not least enduring resistance to accepting that the climate is changing and the understandable expectation that land and property should automatically be protected from flooding.

There is a general lack of understanding of the difficulties the Environment Agency and other organisations face to ensure a well-balanced, year-round water abstraction and delivery regime, while preventing devastating flood events. The management of water drainage, water level and quality are extremely complicated yet fundamental to the landscape character of the OWLP area. The Environment Agency works alongside Internal Drainage Boards and other partners to manage water throughout the fenland river system and the Ouse Washes is an integral part of the regional water management regime. Much of the land is below sea-level, relying on pumped drainage and the control of sluices at high and low tides to maintain its agricultural viability and human occupation.

Reduction in public spending is affecting flood prevention measures and there is an emphasis on asking local people to take social action to maintain their local environment. For example, maintaining smaller dykes will fall to landowners, residents and Parish Councils, with volunteers taking up roles of river bailiffs and lock keepers; there will thus be a need for them to have a greater understanding of the landscape in order to build local flood resilience plans in each Parish.

The last few decades have seen a steady increase in the number and duration of flooding events on the Ouse Washes. This is combined with an increase in unseasonal floods, with spring and summer of 2012 seeing a devastating loss of an entire year’s worth of nesting sites for a range of wader bird species on the Ouse Washes. The recent frequent flooding of the Ouse Washes during spring and summer has been to the significant detriment of breeding birds, water quality, fish stocks, the traditional grazing and hay cutting regime and the diversity of the flora.

While the increase in flooding is partially related to a more extreme and more condensed rainfall pattern, resulting in higher amounts of water to be transported through the system in a short space of time, there has also been an increase in siltation problems, most notably in the Tidal River Ouse. Siltation has meant that discharge of the water, once stored on the Ouse Washes, takes considerably longer than it took even a decade ago, leading to prolonged periods of stagnant waters on the Ouse Washes.

Prolonged flooding during spring and summer also increases the risk of fish kills due to depletion of dissolved oxygen levels in the water, such as happened dramatically in the summer of 2012. Low dissolved oxygen levels also occur in periods of droughts and which results in poor water quality. Hot, humid, low pressure weather conditions are usually the primary factor which can be exacerbated by over-fast pumping, low water levels and disturbance of sediments.

Flooding of the Ouse Washes also affects local communities with the few crossing points often blocked for prolonged periods: when the causeways at Welney, Sutton Gault and Earith are flooded, people have to carry out long detours to get to the other side of the Ouse Washes, with local businesses such as pubs, B&Bs and transport companies suffering economically due to increased expenses and lost trade. Increased flooding on the Ouse Washes also has an impact on visitation to WWT Welney and other wildlife reserves in the area, which has a direct economic impact with regards to their viability and potential for tourism development.
With rainfall likely to become more condensed as a result of climate change, there will be a detrimental impact on farming, especially after droughts. With an increase in the number and duration of droughts expected as a result of climate change, ground water levels can also become exceptionally low: when rain follows a drought, heavy bursts will lead to run-off over compacted land, washing valuable soils straight into the rivers and out to sea. Droughts could also lead to an increase in fen blows, blowing away the remaining peat in huge dust clouds thereby accelerating the loss of fertile soils in the area. At WWT Welney changing rainfall patterns have led to difficulties in keeping the washlands water levels which has reduced the amount of marshland available for waders, including redshanks to feed on.

The quality of the water in the OWLP area varies and is influenced primarily by agricultural practices. In the Old Bedford River (including the Middle Level Catchment) nutrient enrichment in the main waterways due to raised levels of phosphates and nitrates has on occasion resulted in algal blooms and reduced aquatic plant diversity. High phosphate and sediment levels have particularly impacted upon the condition of the Ouse Washes SSSI. Diffuse pollution (from agricultural run-off) and point source pollution (from sewage treatment works and septic tanks) have both contributed to this. Much of this pollution is unintentional and improving farming practices can help address the problem.

The management of water is becoming increasingly complex. There is a need to improve the understanding of the importance of water management throughout the OWLP area, between organisations as well as with the local communities. Only by creating this better understanding will the tensions and issues that often arise out of the management of water quality and levels stand a better chance of reaching agreement. The many uses of water as a resource, for abstraction, for pumping to reduce flooding, for wildlife and their habitats and for recreation and boating can often conflict, some of which could also have a negative effect for such measures as the Water Framework Directive.

The OWLP sets out to rise to the challenge of developing understanding of the range of important but complex and interlinked issues, and will share information for all types of water use leading to greater understanding and identification of areas of mutual interest, thus protecting this historically important landscape.

### Changes in Flooding, Water Management and Water Quality - Opportunities

- Enhance understanding amongst communities about the way the water is managed in the OWLP area.
- Raise awareness of the difficulties and various inter-related issues involved in balancing the needs of farmers, communities and wildlife.
- Develop stronger partnership working across organisations in the area, to create better understanding of the impacts on each other’s work and to find common ground.
- Build greater cooperation and understanding between agencies and local communities, in order to alleviate growing tensions on the ground and to improve overall management.
- Promote a better understanding of the need for wetland habitat creation and its potential added role for water storage & flood prevention.
- Support local farmers and landowners to address causes of water pollution and promote good agricultural practices, e.g. precision farming which optimises inputs.
- Help farmers with opportunities to create buffer zones around field drains to reduce agricultural run-off, by exploring options under stewardship schemes.
Changes in Land Management & Loss of Traditional Skills

There are significant pressures on modern-day farming. In the Fens, there has been a continuous trend towards intensification of farming practices which has often resulted in specialising on a smaller range of crops being grown, with increased risks in crop failures and fluctuating global market prices. Despite the particularly high percentage of high quality, Grade 1 and 2, agricultural soils in the area, some farmers in the area struggle to survive as the economies of scale work against them. The trend continues towards fewer and larger farms, with fewer men managing the land using more sophisticated and larger machines.

The change to a more extreme weather pattern may mean a reduction in crop yields overall. In 2012, the UK suffered the wettest autumn on record, followed by the coldest spring for more than 50 years, reducing wheat yields by around one third and forcing food manufacturers to import 2.5 million tons of wheat — transforming Britain from a wheat exporter to importer. The Fens is dominated by cereal growing, with fluctuations in crop prices often resulting in farmers growing some different crops, with oil seed rape acreages being quite variable as a consequence. Many of the crops grown in this, driest part of the UK are heavily reliant on water, with sugar beet, potatoes, onions and salad crops being particularly dependent. The UK’s Committee on Climate Change warns that drier summers over the next few years could expose farmers to water shortages of up to 50 percent by 2020, increasing Britain’s reliance on global food imports even further. With periods of drought becoming more frequent and longer, many farmers are now building their own winter filled reservoirs to help them manage their irrigation in the drier months and reducing their reliance on ever-more expensive water supply from elsewhere. The demands on water for agricultural purposes are growing across the OWLP area, and increasingly farmers are planning to ensure their practices are sustainable.

It is predicted that many fen soils will have reduced fertility by 2050, with increased dependency upon artificial nutrients to ensure cropping is still viable. In many areas it is already clear that winter ploughing is bringing up more infertile clay, sand or gravel, with most peat shrinking, often reduced to just a few decimetres. More frequent droughts resulting from climate change will have a negative impact on the largely peaty soils, accelerating the shrinkage and viability. It is important that farmers optimise their use of water and manage the ‘agronomy’ of their precious soils as best they can to reduce peat loss and soil deterioration. By growing less water-dependent crops or converting land to pasture (e.g. through agricultural environment scheme payments), landowners have helped improve the biodiversity value of the farmland.

The current shift towards the growing of more biofuel crops and other, ‘exotic’ crops can, however, have a detrimental effect on the landscape character and its biodiversity when grown on a large scale. Drastic changes in crops may also affect the biodiversity value of the nearby Ouse Washes designated sites: the land around the Ouse Washes currently provides a crucial supply of food for migrating birds such as Bewick’s swans, which feed on sugar beet tops and small potatoes left in fields after harvest. With the need for the UK to secure its energy supplies, there is pressure for power suppliers to exploit the Fens’ strong and consistent winds and an increasing number of wind farms, as well as solar farms, are cropping up all over the Fens. Although no big schemes are yet proposed for within the OWLP area, it is likely to be just a matter of time. In the wrong place, these can have a highly detrimental impact on the landscape character and on the perception of tranquillity and remoteness.

The next round of EU’s Structural Funds to support Agriculture, Conservation and Rural Development will introduce some changes for the next period of 2014 – 2020 which will influence the way farming is conducted in the OWLP landscape. It is expected that this will involve a ‘greener’ approach involving changes in the levels of farm subsidies and payment through agri-environment schemes. Currently a high proportion of fen land is managed under environmental stewardship schemes which
are vital to secure the biodiversity value of the fen farmland in the OWLP area. Details are yet to emerge but there will be greater emphasis on farm viability, food chain organisation, preserving and enhancing ecosystems and resource efficiency.

The increase in scale of farming has resulted in a continuing loss of the traditional small family-owned farmsteads in the landscape. Small farms are often at the margins of viability and consequently many young people have to move away from the area to find work and housing in other parts of the country. With this move, there is a significant loss of the hand-over of traditional skills between generations. However, one of the key areas for investment under the new Rural Development Programme will be ‘knowledge transfer and innovation’; much of this links to ‘succession planning’ in family owned businesses with know-how and understanding the finances.

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<tr>
<th>Changes in Land Management &amp; Loss of Traditional Skills - Opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Promote close cooperation between farmers, landowners, Natural England and relevant conservation partners to target and protect biodiversity and local heritage. Promote wildlife-friendly farming agreements on farmland.</td>
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<td>• Maintain and restore the existing soil resource and reduce loss of peat and help deliver Water Framework Directive objectives regarding reducing diffuse pollution, keeping land under grass systems or by rewetting.</td>
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<td>• Provide resources to landowners to assist with the sensitive management of their holdings and assist in adaptation and mitigation against climate change impacts.</td>
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<td>• Provide training opportunities for local people to learn traditional land management and heritage skills.</td>
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<td>• Provide employment opportunities for those practicing traditional skills.</td>
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<td>• Focus on green economy opportunities to create new jobs in the area and support local businesses including farm shops, small-scale tourism initiatives and the like.</td>
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3.4 Threats & Vulnerabilities: Threats to heritage

Threats to biodiversity assets: loss of valuable habitats and species
Within the whole of the Fens, only eight main wetland sites extending to 4,792 ha (1.4%) remain. Action is being taken by conservation organisations and some of the fen habitats are still remarkably diverse (e.g. nearby Wicken Fen); although these habitats remain vulnerable and some are still losing species. Urgent measures are needed to address this situation.

The recent national policy documents relating to biodiversity such as the Lawton Report and the subsequent White Paper provide the strategic steer for the landscape-scale approach to habitat restoration and creation in the area. Lawton sets out the actions needed to enhance the resilience and coherence of England’s ecological network in four words: more, bigger, better and joined. The Biodiversity 2020 Strategy aims to halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.

There is an extremely strong seasonal variation in habits and appearance of the Ouse Washes with grazing on the washland pastures in summer and flooding/water storage and open water bodies in winter. This seasonal variation is one of the most distinctive features about the Ouse Washes and of crucial importance to the significant habitats and species inhabiting this area. However, the Ouse
Washes have become a progressively worsening habitat site for birds since the 1970s; an increase in late spring floods has impacted on the breeding grounds available for wading birds leading to a steady decline in their numbers. Waterfowl numbers are also declining due to longer, deeper floods in winter. The decline in bird numbers - which has specifically affected breeding blacktailed godwit, snipe and ruff, and wintering wigeon - is largely due to flooding of the Ouse Washes during the bird nesting season destroying nests, with a devastating loss of an entire year’s nesting sites for a range of species as a result of the unseasonal floods in spring and summer of 2012. In addition, there have been changes in the vegetation of the Ouse Washes, allowing for a reduction in suitable ground cover and food for certain bird species.

As a result of the problems outlined above, the significant washland habitat, with its priority biodiversity habitat of low wetland grassland habitat within the internationally designated Ouse Washes site, is in a poor condition and showing signs of further deterioration: 83% of the SSSI of the Ouse Washes is currently deemed ‘unfavourable’. This deterioration was recognised by the Government in 2000 when the Ouse Washes were added to the Montreux Record of RAMSAR sites undergoing ecological change.
Due to the prohibitive cost of an engineering solution to maintain wildlife interest alongside the flood storage function, new replacement meadowland grasslands are being created for the affected bird populations. The WWT have developed over 100 ha of new habitats at Welney to mitigate for habitat and wildlife losses on the Ouse Washes. In addition, new areas adjacent to the washlands near Coveney and Sutton are planned. These will aid the UK Government’s legal obligations under the European Union Birds and Habitats Directives while continuing to optimise the use of the Ouse Washes for flood storage. This Ouse Washes Habitat Creation Project aims to create at least 500 hectares of new wet grassland habitat (with water levels held near ground level in spring and summer) within the fens for a range of birds that use the Ouse Washes internationally protected site. The first stage at Coveney will be constructed in 2014, with the first stage at Sutton Gault expected to start within two to three years.

Nationwide, there has been a significant decline in species numbers, as the 2013 State of Nature report has shown dramatically, with wetland areas affected particularly strong. Invasive non-native species are thought to be the second largest threat to global biodiversity after habitat loss. They reduce the biodiversity of a river by outcompeting native species and taking over. In the Old Bedford including Middle Level Catchment, non-native invasive species include the American mink, mitten crabs and water fern *Azolla filiculoides*. These and other potential arrivals present threats of varying degrees to the ecology and diversity of the catchment.

Another major impact on a range of species is global warming due to climate change. Lack of habitat connectivity in the Fens area means that if certain species cannot disperse over the landscape in response to temperature and other climatic changes they may be lost from the area or become extinct. Several landscape-scale conservation initiatives across the Fens, including the Great Ouse Wetland Vision within the OWLP area are aimed at addressing this issue directly. Crucial in the delivery of the fen-wide habitat connectivity scheme, as proposed by the Fens for the Future Partnership is also the establishment of landscape corridors and wildlife friendly buffer zones (‘Sustainable Use Areas’) in the surrounding agricultural lands.

The OWLP area is located in one of the top ‘farmland bird hotspots’ in England, supporting all six declining species of the ‘arable assemblage’ (corn bunting, turtle dove, grey partridge, tree sparrow, lapwing, yellow wagtail). It also supports other avian BAP species such as yellowhammer, linnet, reed bunting, skylark and barn owl. In addition, there is an abundance of other farm wildlife including Brown hares, and the area still provides habitat for a wide range of insect species such as scarce chaser dragonfly and large garden bumble bee. Additionally, water voles and rare aquatic plants occur widely along the network of drainage ditches. As a result of changes in farming practices, these species have suffered drastic declines in recent years. However, the area surrounding the Great Ouse Wetland remains an important area to find these species. The RSPB has been delivering on-farm advice and securing Environmental Stewardship schemes through the Fenland Farmland Bird Recovery Project since 2008. The OWLP scheme aims to promote and extend this work in close cooperation with the local farmers, landowners and communities, recognising and developing the critical role of farmers in conserving farmland wildlife.
Threats to biodiversity assets: loss of valuable habitats and species – Opportunities

- Create awareness of the problems faced by habitats and species in the modern world and as a result of expected climatic changes.
- Deliver habitat creation/enhancement schemes to create more and better connected wetland areas.
- Encourage greater cooperation between agencies and communities to increase understanding of the need for habitat creation schemes, while incorporating local needs into the design of new initiatives.
- Open up informative and meaningful debates about the need for habitat creation against other land use needs such as those related to food, energy and water security and public access provision.
- Develop new relationships between partner organisations, farmers and local communities to increase the viability and sustainability of the OWLP area and its sensitive habitats.
- Liaise closely with other strategic projects – including the Fens for the Future Partnership and Great Ouse Wetland Vision - to optimise environmental and socio-economic benefits.
- Work with land owners to provide resources and training to assist with the sensitive management of their holdings.
- Promote an increase in the wildlife friendly management of ditches, banks and adjoining land.
- Train up future custodians of the land, getting people from local communities involved in particular in new habitat creation and new farming opportunities such as marshland grazing.
- Lever in more funding through stronger partnership working in order to facilitate greater habitat connectivity.

Threats to historic environment assets

In the OWLP area, the primary threats to historic environment assets are to the area’s significant archaeological deposits. The Scheduled Monuments and the many other significant archaeological sites in the area are under constant threat from agricultural cultivation, in particular the combined effects of deep ploughing, levelling of land, peat shrinkage, over-drainage and fluctuating water levels. This is exemplified by the disproportionally high number of Scheduled Monuments in the area which are classified as at either ‘High’ or ‘Medium’ Risk, most of which are prehistoric barrows which are very vulnerable to ploughing, or the Earith Bulwark, threatened by frequent flooding.

The OWLP area is of national importance for the deep and often well-preserved palaeoenvironmental deposits, capable of providing us with detailed understanding of past environments: plants, animals and climatic information. This is evident from the archaeological work which has been done in advance of the aggregates extraction at the Needingworth Quarry with well-preserved archaeological deposits providing us with a unique insight into the daily lives of our ancestors. For instance, bones from tens of different bird species have been found at quarry sites, providing us with a clear understanding of the types of wetland habitats there were in the Bronze and Iron Age periods, in return influencing modern habitat management decisions.

Despite large areas of the Fens having been extensively surveyed for archaeological sites, we know that many sites still remain unrecognised. It is important that the OWLP scheme makes landowners and communities aware of the significance and value of the local archaeological resource and works closely with organisations and land owners to encourage them to follow management practices to conserve and protect the remaining sites and deposits. For instance, in some cases arable land could be successfully converted to grassland, thereby protecting archaeological sites from surface deterioration.
Climate change will also impact on built and buried heritage within the area. More extreme weather conditions, droughts and flooding will affect heritage: peat shrinkage and droughts threaten archaeological sites and valuable palaeo-environmental deposits, with increased flooding events threatening buildings, as well as the commercial viability of historic pubs and other historic buildings in the area used for similar small-scale touristic commercial businesses.


### Threats to historic environment assets - Opportunities

- Raise awareness of the significance of the historic environment assets in the area with local communities, farmers and landowners.
- Work with land owners to provide resources and training to assist with the sensitive management of heritage sites on their holdings.
- Provide better protection to archaeological sites assessed as being at risk from agricultural land use practises.
- Promote the inclusion of threatened buried and built heritage in agri-environmental schemes.
- Ensure all habitat creation/enhancement projects are sympathetic to the historical environment in both their design and methodology. Where opportunities exist support the investigation of new sites and finds as part of new projects.
- Work with partners and local planning authorities to ensure landscape, archaeological sites and built heritage are conserved and enhanced as part of development schemes in the area.
3.5 Threats & Vulnerabilities: Communities

Lack of awareness and understanding of local heritage
The open and predominantly empty OWLP landscape means different things to different people. Some can find it featureless and intimidating, whereas others find it exhilarating and value its quietness. The Audience & Access work has highlighted that there is a general lack of understanding of the origins, significance and function of the landscape and its heritage assets. The majority of replies from all communities indicated an awareness of the role of the Washes in water management although some were not aware that they were manmade or that the flooding was controlled. Very few people are also aware of the extensive area the Ouse Washes system prevents from flooding. It was found that communities close to the Washes (Sutton, Welney) could talk more knowledgeably about these issues than those at a distance away. These closer communities are more affected by the flooding which they generally considered to be more frequent than occurred in the past. Communities further afield (e.g., March) show a definite decrease in awareness of the existence or function of the Washes.

Awareness also seems to be age related with younger people being less likely to identify the Ouse Washes or understand its function. This may be linked to changes in school curriculum and lost education opportunities as many older residents who mentioned that they were taught about land drainage and the local landscape at school.

There is a general lack of understanding with local communities about the difficulties organisations face in balancing the often competing interests in the landscape, including flood prevention, water navigation and agricultural water abstraction. Following community discussions, it became apparent that many local people are very vocal about issues which have changed or threaten to change the landscape, most particular when it comes to turning farmland out of food production for wetland habitat creation and imposed or perceived limitations on traditional countryside pursuits such as wildfowling and fishing.

The Audience & Access Planning work has shown that a large part of the resident population in the OWLP area and in the surrounding villages and market towns are unaware of the importance of the heritage the landscape contains (Appendix 2). Although local communities value the landscape for its wildlife, especially the birds, many people are pleasantly surprised if you point out the nationally significant historic sites such as the Earith Bulwark, and the important role the Ouse Washes LP area has played in the drainage story of the Fens.
Lack of awareness and understanding of local heritage – Opportunities

- Raise awareness of the significance of the historic and natural environment assets in the area with local communities and landowners.
- Use a variety of communication means to underline the importance of the landscape and its importance to people.
- Help broaden the understanding amongst communities about the way the water is managed in the OWLP area.
- Raise awareness of the difficulties and various inter-related issues in balancing the needs of farmers, communities and wildlife.
- Provide new ways to interpret the landscape heritage and provide new, fun and engaging ways for people to experience the landscape and its unique heritage.
- Promote the recording of local stories, through oral history projects, local research projects and the organisation of local heritage events.
- Undertake outreach work to engage with hard-to-reach groups and communicate the importance of the landscape.
- Enable farmers to become more involved with education of local people about farming, food and wildlife.
- Work with schools to increase the role of local landscape heritage in learning programmes.

Limited Public Access

Despite extensive new public access provisions created in recent years at the southern end of the OWLP area – in and around the Ouse Fen and Fen Drayton lakes reserves –, recreational access to the countryside is limited in most of the OWLP area and improving this situation is a challenge. The washlands are flooded in winter and conservation requirements need to retain areas of undisturbed habitats. Compared with other areas there are very limited opportunities to explore the open countryside with few public rights of way or other managed countryside sites, such as National Trust or Forestry Commission can provide elsewhere. There are conflicting views from a wide range of organisations and landowners about the management and recreational use of the Ouse Washes landscape.

The nature of landownership and the infrastructure is such that there are limited access points into the landscape and onto the area’s waterways. There are also limited linkages between the various wetland sites by way of public rights of way and promotion. The various sites are managed separately and promotion of access and events is not undertaken across the OWLP area due to the fragmented ownership.

The OWLP area has very limited public transport facilities, with cuts in government spending threatening the few remaining bus services servicing its rural communities. Except for the recently created long-distance cycle route along the Guided Busway at the southern end of the OWLP landscape, the cycle infrastructure is also almost non-existent.

Access to the countryside is focused on a relatively limited number of user groups (long-distance walkers and bird watchers), with the Hereward Way and Fen River Way providing important long distance links between, larger towns, rural communities and key sites of interest. There is a notable absence of circular walking and cycling routes, something which has frequently been commented upon during our consultation work. People have also commented on the relative lack of interpretation of the local heritage along the existing public access routes or at main access hubs such as Denver Sluices.
There is an increasing need for green space in proximity to urban and new housing developments. Cambridgeshire has a fast growing population with a new town being planned at Northstowe and growth in the nearby market towns of Ely, St Ives, Huntingdon and Downham Market. The East Cambridgeshire District is experiencing the highest rates of population growth in the UK. The OWLP scheme provides opportunities for partnership working to deliver a more co-ordinated approach to local countryside access. The OWLP scheme will build on the existing Green Infrastructure Strategies for Norfolk and Cambridgeshire and Fen-wide access development programmes such as the Fens Waterways Link.

The OWLP will ensure the safeguarding of sensitive sites but at the same time allow the development of new opportunities for people to enjoy low-key recreation, learning and understanding. Investment in new heritage trails, heritage geocaching, ‘hands-on’ family and school-based educational initiatives, walking, bird watching and fishing will provide new opportunities. Another, more long-term ambition which has been voiced is the creation of an off-road cycle path along the length of the Ouse Washes, which would open up the area for recreational use and connect with public transport hubs on either end of the OWLP area.

Limited Public Access – Opportunities

- Provide more and better information about existing access opportunities.
- Promote and improve major and minor access hubs across the area.
- Create and promote new minor access points/hubs to the waterways and associated green spaces for all local communities.
- Promote greater cooperation between agencies and communities, in order to provide improvements to public access, while addressing the needs of local communities.
- Develop and promote an integrated network of river corridors, green routes and public rights of way between key visitor attractions and around settlements.
- Widen partnership working, leading to additional funding bids for improvements to public access and infrastructure provision.
- Actively promote non-motorised transport options and investment in these.

Low community engagement with heritage

Except for a range of small but active local heritage and user groups, the majority of the local communities show relatively little engagement with their surrounding heritage. The percentage of people volunteering on a regular basis is, for instance, particularly low for the OWLP area. Part of the problem is related to limited public access opportunities, in turn limiting meaningful engagement opportunities. The tourism offer is rather dispersed which together with a fragmented management of the area means that people are often not aware of what’s going on and therefore miss out on engagement opportunities. In some of the more deprived parts of the OWLP area, there is also a general apathy towards heritage, making it more difficult to get people interested in new initiatives.

The OWLP scheme will support the start of an integrated multi-agency partnership that will not only seek to tackle the challenges but will also seek to involve local communities at all stages and levels of the area’s management. Community empowerment is vital. The Localism Bill (2011) and National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy (2011) give new powers to local communities/parish councils to manage local assets and create local solutions to manage flood risk. There is a need for communities to develop local partnerships and understand how the landscape
could change in the future. The OWLP scheme provides opportunities to give support to rural communities that have limited capacity to tackle these complex agendas alone.

The parish councils in the area have a leadership role in protecting and enhancing local heritage assets and ensuring community resilience. The OWLP scheme wishes to support key organisations to make important links into each community so that they can work alongside residents to kick-start new ‘ground-up’ initiatives. When coming from local community groups, it is much more likely that others in the same communities will join in and by continuous encouragement, empowerment and involvement the OWLP can be successful at harnessing community enthusiasm. Communities will be given new opportunities to engage in conservation and improve their skills which could lead to better employment prospects and improved understanding of future management issues.

**Low community engagement with heritage - Opportunities**

- Provide good quality and easily accessible information about the local heritage and organise a range of events.
- Widen the audience through targeted information and events programmes which address the needs of the local communities.
- Promote pride in local heritage.
- Create new access points and engagement opportunities on people’s doorstep.
- Stimulate community participation; encourage community groups to seek additional funding.
- Empower communities; provide opportunities for volunteering and create a bigger and strongly-skilled volunteer-base.
- Provide varied and interesting volunteering opportunities to get new audiences interested in engaging with the landscape.
- Link local heritage with people’s living, working and wellbeing needs.
- Increase ability to participate for hard-to-reach groups in the community.

**Socio-Economic Deprivation**

When considering the social and economic issues across the area, there is a significant difference between areas to the North (which relate to the Fenland and King’s Lynn and West Norfolk Districts) and the areas to the South which are more influenced by the buoyant economy of Cambridge.

The Parishes in the north of the OWLP area (including Downham Market, Denver, Ten Mile Bank and Welney in the King’s Lynn & West Norfolk district and Manea, in Fenland district) show higher levels of deprivation as measured by such indicators as income levels, economic activity, educational attainment and fuel poverty than Parishes in the south of the area (Mepal and Sutton in East Cambridgeshire district and Earith, Bluntisham, Colne and Holywell-cum-Needingworth in Huntingdonshire district). More detailed deprivation information has been provided in Section 1 (‘Context’). In addition, a full set of parish profiles is included in Appendix 2 and which gives key statistics for each parish included in the LP area.

**Social Isolation**

The Ouse Washes LP area covers five districts and all are classified under the DEFRA local authority classification as being in the ‘most rural’ and Rural 80 Group. The characteristics of a dispersed population mean that programmes and services face a challenge to ensure they are sufficiently accessible for all. Isolation factors are intensified by the Ouse Washes landscape itself with rivers and ditches cutting off rural settlements from each other. For example, the Bedford Rivers can only be crossed by bridge or causeway at three points along its 20 mile length. In winter flooding of the
washland means that communities, such as Welney when the A1101 Wash Road floods, are forced to make detours of up to 20 miles to get to their destinations.

Public transport infrastructure is very poor in the North with public services largely confined to main arterial routes. Communities are served by ‘Dial-a-ride’ and community car schemes that rely on volunteers to organise and act as drivers. There is a railway line that runs between Cambridge and Peterborough which crosses the Ouse Washes area but trains only stop twice a day (by prior request) at Manea. Downham Market has a station (London to King’s Lynn line) that links to the top of the Ouse Washes by a walking/cycling route and public facilities will be improved at Denver Sluice as part of the OWLP scheme so that public access is enhanced.

**Economic Issues**

In the South, the recently opened Guided Busway between St Ives and Cambridge has greatly improved access and has a stop at the Fen Drayton Reserve. The OWLP scheme aims to encourage sustainable access and will promote the use of public transport wherever possible. The new Guided Busway will give opportunities for people in the South to experience the Ouse Washes for recreation whilst leaving their car at home and this will help to reduce the impact on the environment.

In the south, Cambridge is an economic success story based around the knowledge economy and this has an impact on the OWLP area. The growth in the economy has already brought new jobs and people to Cambridgeshire and there is a 9% projected population growth by 2021. However, the length of commuter journeys in the area is double the national average placing increasing pressure on transport networks and the Ouse Washes environment.

The economy in the northern part of the Ouse Washes area is less strong and issues such as poor educational attainment, lack of services and poor access to major centres of employment hinder economic growth. Nearly one in four children is considered to live in a low income household, often with linked implications for their health and educational achievement. Average full-time wages in Fenland are low compared to the rest of Cambridgeshire (£421.90 per week compared to Cambridgeshire’s average of £493.00).

**Broadband**

Broadband and easy access to the internet is now considered to be an essential requirement for modern day living. However, Broadband connections across the Ouse Washes LP area remain poor. Manea receives speeds of less than 500 kbps and all the other communities are not receiving speeds above 2 mbps. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have secured £6.75 m by the Government through Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) to boost their £23 million to invest in improving superfast broadband coverage. The ‘Connecting Cambridge’ contract with BT was signed in March 2013 with the aim to ensure 98% of homes and businesses have access to fibre based broadband by the end of 2015. The target is that 90% of homes and businesses will secure 24 Mbps with a minimum of 2 Mbps for all premises. When considering programme communications, the OWLP scheme will take broadband connectivity into account and ensure minimal downloads.

**The OWLP’s focus**

Deprived areas often have low levels of social capital and educational attainment, often resulting in a lack of aspiration and low self-esteem. Such circumstances often prevent people taking part in community activities or stepping forward as community leaders. These areas are predominantly rural and sparsely populated with services and facilities mostly found within market towns. Rural services are in decline through the loss of shops, post offices, churches and pubs. Reliance on the private car is high (an average of 90% of the households in the parishes within the OWLP area have at least one car) and those without transport face the prospect of not being able to access employment centres, secondary schools, GP surgeries and other vital services.
Although these rural communities face some significant issues they also demonstrate a culture of self-reliance and are proud of living in the Fens. Often they plan their own futures and own and run their assets such as village halls, community shops and play facilities. Volunteers play a vital role in rural communities: services are maintained which in other areas would normally be thought of as public services. The level of adults who participate in regular volunteering (at least monthly throughout the year) is, nevertheless, higher in the more affluent south of the LP area (31% in Huntingdonshire) than in the less affluent north (21% in Fenland and 23% in King’s Lynn and West Norfolk).

The OWLP scheme has been devised so it responds to the needs of these rural communities and to the deprivation issues they face. We will build on the area’s culture of self-reliance and voluntary effort. We will offer opportunities to those disadvantaged by isolation, especially young and unemployed people. The OWLP scheme is needed to open up new opportunities for learning and volunteering that will help raise skill levels and enhance employability.

**Socio-Economic Deprivation - Opportunities**

- Offer wide range of attractive volunteering opportunities across the whole of the OWLP landscape.
- Provide training to increase the skills level and increase employability.
- Promote partners to work together better to co-ordinate efforts to address local concerns.
- Link local heritage with people’s living, working and wellbeing needs.
- Provide pride in local heritage; show people what’s at their doorstep.
- Create new access points and engagement opportunities at people’s doorstep.
- Stimulate community participation; encourage local groups to seek additional funding.

**Changing Communities**

The Cambridge – Peterborough growth corridor has resulted in a steady increase of people moving into the local communities, in particular those in the southern part of the OWLP area. In Cambridge, the average house price is nine times the average salary and as a result, many people who work in the City cannot afford to live there. This has resulted in people having to move further and further afield and as a consequence there is continued population growth in the Ouse Washes LP area. As a direct result of this, the house prices in South Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, and to a lesser extent East Cambridgeshire have risen considerably. There is also a lack of affordable houses being built for local people. Both factors make it increasingly hard for local people to get on the property ladder. Another consequence of the steep population growth in the area is the increasing need for green space provision which is already poorly catered for in most of the OWLP area.

Fenlanders can often be resistant to change, adhering to a way of life that had its beginnings many centuries ago. Over the last decade changing social and economic circumstances have forced change upon them with young people having to leave the area to seek better employment prospects and economic migrants moving in to undertake work on the land or in food processing factories. This has led to issues of community cohesion particularly in the small settlements in the OWLP area. The success of the UKIP party in the recent (2013) elections show the underlying tensions clearly: Chatteris, Littleport and Wisbech all gained UKIP seats in the last elections, with anti-immigration rhetoric voiced regularly.
Through its proposed activities and events, the OWLP scheme aims to help communities develop a better understanding of the important role economic migrants have played throughout the history of the Ouse Washes and how they are involved in shaping the future of the landscape. The OWLP scheme will also focus on other newcomers in the communities, by making people aware of the local heritage and providing numerous opportunities for engagement with the ‘undiscovered’ OWLP landscape.

**Changing Communities – Opportunities**

- Provide people with pride in where they live and work.
- Create job opportunities to reduce the need for people to have to move out of the area for work or leisure purposes.
- Create stronger links with recent migrant communities, creating community cohesion through joint working with ‘resident’ population.
- Create a range of events and volunteering opportunities to get newcomers engaged with the landscape and its heritage.
- Help create new active community groups to invest and look after the local heritage.

**Threats and Opportunities: Summary**

The OWLP landscape is under serious threat from various pressures. Threats include those posed by climate change, flooding, management, land use, ownership, access, as well as the local communities’ socio-economic situation, knowledge and expectations, and a lack of identity. It also suffers from competing land use interests, with diverse pressures from conservation, flood prevention, water management, agriculture and tourism.

Opportunities to safeguard or enhance the landscape heritage and to address the needs of the landscape and its communities are provided and are the key drivers behind the OWLP scheme and its range of projects.