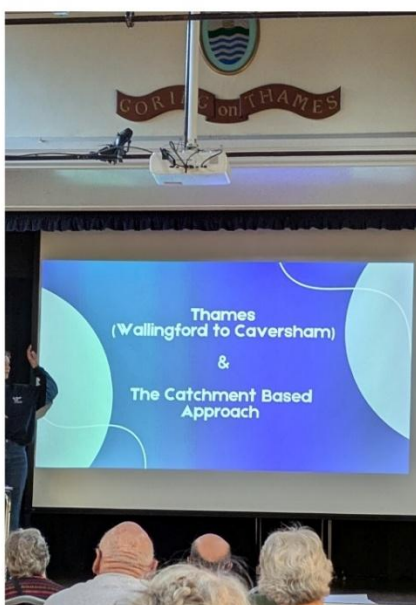


Thames Connections: People, Land and River



Overview

Mend the Gap funded an evening at Goring Village Hall on 22nd April 2026, organised with Thames21. This event brought together local residents, landowners, community groups and environmental organisations to explore how different habitats across the Wallingford–Caversham sub-catchment contribute to a healthier, more resilient River Thames. Through discussions on farmland, urban gardens, wet woodland and fen, floodplain meadows, and rivers and streams, participants shared local projects, identified opportunities for restoration, and highlighted barriers such as land use pressures, knowledge gaps and pollution. The aim was to build shared understanding, strengthen connections, and gather ideas that can drive coordinated action for nature recovery and improved river health across the whole catchment.

Agenda

- Welcome & Housekeeping – *Sarah Thornley, Thames21*
- Introduction to Mend the Gap – *Ruth Staples-Rolfe, Mend the Gap*
- Introduction to the Catchment Based Approach – *Sarah Thornley, Thames21*
- Successes: Long Mead Farm & Nature Recovery Network – *Catriona Bass, Longmead Foundation*
- Facilitated Discussions - *Sarah Thornley, Thames21*
- Feedback, Round Up & Next Steps - *Sarah Thornley, Thames21*

For more details on the presentations given at this event, please see the presentation slides sent alongside this document.

Collated information from facilitated discussions

1. Wet Woodland & Lowland Fen

Examples of Local Work & “Thames Neighbours” Activity

- Wet woodland and fen restoration opportunities on disused floodplain farmland, especially between Little Meadow and Hartslock.
- Mill Stream at North Stoke and South Stoke Marsh as key wetland features with restoration potential.
- Cleeve Water Meadow, Cleeve Court, and the Goring islands and Cleeve Lock area providing natural wetland and backwater habitats.
- Hardwick wet woodland and meadow, Sulham Estate wet woodland, and Beale Park tree planting contributing to riparian habitat networks.
- Bishops’ back channels supporting natural hydrology and floodplain reconnection.
- Gatehampton Manor woodland, Mongewell, and Friars Court offering examples of wet woodland or fen-adjacent land.
- Little Meadow and Withymead: living examples of fen, marsh and carr habitat succession.
- Moulsoford School and other local institutions engaging with riverside land management.
- Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and BBOWT-identified sites highlighting priority wetland habitats and data gaps.

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- Wet woodland and fen habitats act as carbon sinks, helping mitigate climate impacts.
- Floodplain fens and wet woodland provide natural flood management, slowing and storing water during peak flows.
- Restoring riparian fen/marsh on unviable or disused arable land could create effective buffer zones along the river.
- Tree planting and BBOWT support help stabilise soils, reduce erosion and enhance biodiversity.
- Public engagement at sites like Withymead, with boardwalk access, helps people understand habitats they rarely experience.
- Explaining natural succession (fen → carr → wet woodland) helps people understand why management is needed.
- Highlighting the difference between anthropocentric hay meadows and natural riparian climax communities helps shift expectations.

Opportunities & Barriers

Opportunities

- Restoring fen/marsh on riparian land not suitable for wet meadow projects, especially where nutrients are high.
- Using wet woodland and fen as low-intensity management options where capacity, time and funding are limited.
- Leveraging LWS, BBOWT and TVERC data to identify priority sites and gaps.
- Increasing public education about the ecological importance and priority status of these habitats.
- Using Withymead's accessible boardwalks as a teaching tool to help people visualise wet woodland and fen.
- Promoting the role of wetlands in carbon capture, nutrient absorption, and cleaner rivers.
- Encouraging landowners to consider floodplain reconnection and back-channel restoration.
- Targeting disused arable land for primary fen/marsh restoration to reduce fragmentation of wetland species.

Barriers

- Low public awareness: many people struggle to visualise wet woodland and fen or distinguish them from other habitats.
- Limited access: waterlogged land means most people rarely experience these habitats firsthand.
- High land demand near water makes wetland restoration challenging where land values are high.
- Financial sustainability concerns for long-term management.
- Perception gaps: people often value "dry", tidy landscapes over naturally messy wetland systems.
- Succession misunderstandings: without intervention, fen becomes carr, which becomes woodland, and this can confuse expectations.
- Fragmented riparian land ownership complicates large-scale restoration.
- Bias toward meadows: people are more familiar with hay meadows than fen or wet woodland.

2. Floodplain Meadows

Examples of Local Work & “Thames Neighbours” Activity

- River of Life I & II (Earth Trust) at Shillingford Meadow demonstrating large-scale floodplain restoration.
- Wallingford–Cholsey Marsh identified as a potential floodplain meadow site, depending on the Whitecross Farm gravel planning enquiry outcome.
- Cleeve Court and Moultsford Meadow in good condition, with two landowners and a stream running through - strong examples of functioning floodplain meadow systems.
- Hardwick House and Mapledurham highlighted as potential future restoration sites.
- Streatley Meadow (18 acres owned by the Swan Hotel): divided into 5-acre blocks, with riverside meadows rich in wildlife and a landowner open to meadow management.
- Beale Park meadows contributing to a mosaic of floodplain habitats.
- Pangbourne Meadows identified as a possible opportunity area.
- Goring to Gatehampton meadows forming a continuous stretch of floodplain grassland.
- Arable land behind Little Meadow flagged as a potential conversion site.
- Hardwick Meadows cited as a strong local example of good floodplain meadow management.
- Thames Water grazing land (groundwater site) offering potential for nature-friendly grazing.
- Little Stoke to South Stoke meadows: possible restoration area.
- Wallingford Castle Meadows beginning restoration work.
- Little Stoke Meadows also noted as part of the wider floodplain network.

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- Floodplain meadows store floodwater, slow flows and reduce downstream flood risk.
- They trap sediment, nutrients and pollutants before they reach the Thames, improving water quality.
- Restoring arable land in the floodplain to meadow reduces runoff and enhances soil structure.
- Linking meadows from Goring to Gatehampton, Little Stoke to South Stoke, and Cleeve to Moultsford strengthens habitat connectivity across the sub catchment.
- Projects like River of Life show how floodplain reconnection can deliver biodiversity, carbon storage and natural flood management.
- Engaging amenable landowners (e.g., Swan Hotel at Streatley) can unlock new restoration sites.
- Volunteer days for scything and vegetation management help maintain species rich meadows and build community ownership.
- Analysing the floodplain to determine where wet grazing marsh, wet woodland, or species rich meadow is most appropriate supports evidence-based action.

Opportunities & Barriers

Opportunities

- Converting arable land in the floodplain (e.g., behind Little Meadow) into species-rich meadow.
- Working with landowners at Streatley, Hardwick, Mapledurham, and Cleeve/Moultsford to expand restoration.
- Using BBOWT grazing networks (e.g., Cholsey) to manage restored meadows.

- Building on existing successes like Hardwick Meadows and River of Life as demonstration sites.
- Increasing volunteer involvement to manage vegetation and maintain meadow structure.
- Assessing the entire floodplain to identify where meadow, marsh or wet woodland would deliver the greatest ecological benefit.
- Strengthening local knowledge of arable land use in the floodplain to guide future restoration.

Barriers

- Land availability and competing interests (e.g., gravel extraction at Whitecross Farm).
- Multiple landowners (e.g., Cleeve/Moulsford) complicating coordinated management.
- High maintenance needs: scything, scrub control, and invasive species management require time and volunteers.
- Some floodplain areas may be better suited to wet grazing marsh or wet woodland, requiring careful assessment.
- Limited public understanding of what makes a floodplain meadow different from a standard grass field.
- Financial sustainability for long-term management and grazing infrastructure.
- Fragmentation of meadow sites reducing ecological connectivity.

3. Rivers & Streams

Examples of Local Work & “Thames Neighbours” Activity

- Expanding chemical sampling to include Riverfly monitoring.
- Water vole surveys and mink-control projects supporting species recovery.
- Fish and invertebrate surveys providing insight into ecological health.
- GGEO (Goring Gap Environmental Organisation) running strong citizen-science water-quality monitoring.
- Riverfly monitoring on the Ewelme Brook by Benson Area Nature Group.
- Phosphate & nitrate testing at multiple community-led sites.
- Bathing water status efforts at Pangbourne and Wallingford.
- Benson fish and eel passage and the fish pass at Reading Community Hydro (View Island) improving river connectivity.
- Monitoring farm runoff at Withymead Nature Reserve.
- Engagement with angling groups, boating communities, and wider river users to improve stewardship.
- Local knowledge of ephemeral chalk streams that do not appear on official maps.

Driving Action for a Healthier River Thames

- Expanding water-quality testing (phosphates, nitrates, E. coli, microplastics, forever chemicals) helps identify pollution hotspots.
- Citizen science strengthens the evidence base for the Environment Agency and catchment partnerships.
- Bathing water designation campaigns raise public awareness and drive improvements in sewage management.
- Engaging anglers, rowers, paddleboarders and boaters builds a broader coalition for river health.

- Addressing boat wash, fuel spills, and sewage discharge from vessels reduces bank erosion and pollution.
- Mapping and recognising ephemeral chalk streams helps protect vulnerable headwaters.
- Mink eradication supports water vole recovery, a key indicator of healthy riparian systems.
- Exploring beaver introduction could create stepping-stone wetland habitats and natural flood management benefits.
- Improved information sharing helps residents understand where it is safe to swim and how water quality changes over time.
- Training courses and advocacy programmes e.g. “Advocating for your river” build local capacity to champion a healthier Thames.

Opportunities & Barriers

Opportunities

- Strengthening and expanding the existing citizen-science network.
- Increasing biological monitoring (Riverfly, invertebrates, fish) alongside chemical testing.
- Developing constant monitoring at swimming hotspots to support safe recreation.
- Working with boating and angling communities to reduce pollution and improve habitat.
- Installing more floating reed beds, softened banks, and fish/eel passes.
- Using local knowledge to map missing chalk streams and ephemeral tributaries.
- Tackling farm runoff through collaborative monitoring and landowner engagement.
- Raising awareness of forever chemicals, road runoff and microplastics.
- Promoting beaver-related habitat creation where appropriate.

Barriers

- Sewage pollution and storm overflows undermining water quality.
- Limited public understanding of how to interpret water-quality data or find safe swimming information.
- Boat dumping and poor waste management from some river users.
- Emotional barriers around mink control - reluctance to harm animals despite their impact on water voles.
- Fragmented data sharing between groups and agencies.
- Lack of official recognition for ephemeral chalk streams, leaving them unprotected.
- Resource constraints for continuous monitoring and equipment.
- Complex river-rights issues and reactive rather than proactive management approaches.

4. Urban Areas & Gardens

Examples of Local Work & “Thames Neighbours” Activity

- “No Mow May” participation shows how small communities can support pollinators.
- Households stopping pesticide use and switching to native planting, including orchids and wildflower seed mixes.
- Creation of log piles, small ponds and micro habitats in gardens to support amphibians, invertebrates and hedgehogs.
- Heart of Streatley (charitable trust) demonstrating community led meadow management.
- Cholsey Wildlife Garden Network exploring how to map garden habitats, potentially via an interactive map.
- Goring Green Fingers, Streatley Allotment groups and other gardening clubs promoting wildlife friendly practices.

- “Wild About Wallingford” and Benson Area Nature Group encouraging neighbourhood scale conservation.
- Hedgehog highways connecting back gardens and encouraging neighbour to neighbour collaboration.
- Goring Primary School’s pond and wildlife garden showing how schools can act as local biodiversity hubs.
- GREN (Greater Reading Environmental Network) supporting urban environmental action.
- Butterfly Conservation and walking groups helping monitor species and raise awareness.
- SOHA (South Oxon Housing Association) exploring how sustainability and pollinator friendly planting can intersect.
- Universities (e.g., Oxford) as major landowners with potential for large scale habitat improvements.

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- Reducing pesticide use and promoting native planting helps cut chemical runoff into the Thames.
- Garden ponds, log piles and wildflower patches create stepping-stone habitats that link urban areas to the wider catchment.
- Community groups (horticulture societies, open gardens, allotment associations) can mobilise residents and share good practice.
- Schools (Years 4–6 and 7–9 especially) act as powerful engagement points, influencing both pupils and parents.
- Seasonal fetes, horticulture shows and local radio offer platforms to spread simple, positive messages about river-friendly gardening.
- Private-sector property managers (e.g., Lucy’s in Oxford) could inspire similar approaches in places like Goring.
- “Show not tell” approaches e.g., demonstration gardens, open days, wildlife-friendly verges help overcome safety concerns and scepticism.
- Better communication between parish councils (e.g., Goring and Cholsey) can align management of shared green spaces.
- Encouraging sustainable drainage (SuDS) in gardens helps reduce surface runoff and pollution entering the river.

Opportunities & Barriers

Opportunities

- Knowledge sharing through community groups, garden networks and open-garden events.
- Mapping garden habitats (e.g., Cholsey Wildlife Garden Network) to identify connectivity gaps.
- Engaging schools and using curriculum-linked gardening (e.g., Treehouse Trust) to build long-term stewardship.
- Working with housing associations (SOHA) and property managers to embed pollinator-friendly planting.
- Using local radio, fetes and horticulture shows to reach wider audiences.
- Encouraging SuDS features in front gardens to counter paving and extensions.
- Strengthening communication between local councils to coordinate verge cutting and green-space management.

Barriers

- Council cutting regimes, including residents requesting cuts via FixMyStreet, reducing habitat value.
- Over-tidy expectations leading to removal of log piles, long grass and “messy” wildlife features.
- Safety concerns and the need for clear, simple messaging to reassure residents.
- New housing developments: unclear long-term management of open spaces once developers leave.
- Management companies controlling green spaces with limited ecological expertise.
- University estates and large landowners requiring engagement through bursars or estate managers.
- Paving over front gardens and planning rules enabling extensions that reduce green space.
- Difficulty connecting fragmented back gardens into wildlife corridors.

5. Farmland

Examples of Local Work & “Thames Neighbours” Activity

- Farm clusters such as Wittenham Clumps and Christmas Common collaborating on landscape-scale nature recovery.
- Benson Area Nature Group supporting community-led conservation and habitat improvements.
- Rectory Farm wildflower restoration contributing to pollinator corridors.
- Springline Project linking chalk streams and farmland habitats.
- Owl monitoring across the Upper Goring Heath area showing how species data can guide habitat action.
- Bishops’ riparian grazing buffer improving bank stability and water quality.
- Sulham Wetland demonstrating natural flood management and biodiversity gains.
- Hardwick Organic and other regenerative farms modelling soil-first approaches.
- Riparian meadows - Pangbourne Meadows and wider floodplain health.
- Beale Park Estate volunteers helping maintain wetland and riverside habitats.
- Fish pass projects improving river connectivity for migratory species.

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- Thames Water grants for regenerative farming could unlock more soil-friendly practices.
- Farmer support networks and cluster groups promote the use of nature-positive methods.
- Identifying areas suitable for new wetlands, riparian buffers or tree planting could guide future investment.
- Parish-level conservation groups (e.g., Pangbourne Parish Council)

Opportunities & Barriers

Opportunities

- Expanding wetland creation on suitable farmland.
- Increasing hedgerow and tree planting to connect habitats.
- Building a shared farm-cluster directory of produce and conservation actions.
- Strengthening collaboration between estates, farmers, and community groups.

Barriers

- Land ownership and tenancy arrangements limiting long-term planning.
- Costs, time and resource constraints for farmers.
- Limited public understanding of soil health, nitrates, pesticides and their impacts.
- Need for better communication and PR with councillors and parish councils.
- Knowledge gaps around GMOs, regenerative methods and habitat benefits.