

Blakeney Harbour Coastal Restoration Feasibility Study Results Summary

Overview

Blakeney Harbour is home to a rich variety of coastal habitats, including saltmarshes, seagrass meadows, and oyster beds. These ecosystems play a vital role in supporting wildlife, protecting the coastline, and providing benefits for local communities and businesses. However, many of these habitats have been lost or degraded over time.

To address this, WWF commissioned the Norfolk Coast Protected Landscape team to work with consultants and local partners to explore opportunities for restoring and creating these valuable habitats in and around the harbour.

This study marks the first step towards understanding the potential for habitat restoration in the area. It is important to note that no new habitats will be created or altered in the harbour as part of this initial phase.

Partners within this project include the National Trust, Norfolk Seaweed, Natural England, Norfolk Rivers Trust, Cefas and the Crown Estate. The local community and wider members of the public have been consulted via a series of online and in-person workshops and meetings.

What do we mean by restoration and creation?

Habitat restoration is the process of repairing and revitalising natural environments that have been damaged or lost. This allows them to once again support native species and natural processes, providing benefits for local wildlife, the environment, and the community.

Habitat creation involves designing and establishing entirely new natural spaces in suitable locations, giving them the best chance to thrive and support biodiversity.

What are we trying to achieve?

This feasibility study was guided by three priorities to ensure any actions in the future will benefit both people and nature:

- i. Support healthy ecosystems that provide benefits for wildlife, the environment, and local communities.
- ii. Help the harbour adapt to the challenges of climate change and rising sea levels.
- iii. Protect local livelihoods that depend on the coast, including fishing, recreation, and tourism.

Focus areas

The project concentrated on five key habitats and species that are essential for the ecology and resilience of Blakeney Harbour. These are summarised in the following table.

Habitat	Why it's important
Seagrass meadows	An underwater plant that stores carbon and provides vital nursery grounds for fish and other marine life.
Native oysters and blue mussels	Filter-feeding shellfish that naturally purify water, improving its quality while forming intricate habitat beds that support a wide range of marine life.
Saltmarsh	Tidal wetlands that are a powerful tool for carbon storage, coastal erosion protection and water purification.
Vegetated shingle	Stony shorelines that provide shelter for invertebrates and essential nesting sites for birds.

Our work so far

This study combined robust scientific analysis with local knowledge to understand the harbour's potential for habitat restoration and creation.

- 1. Scientific modelling.** A detailed geomorphological model was used to examine how the coast, seabed, and sediment flow have changed over time and how they are likely to evolve in the future, particularly in response to climate change and sea level rise. This analysis was essential for identifying stable areas where restoration efforts have the highest chance of long-term success.
- 2. Workshops with local people.** Local knowledge played a vital role in this study. Two workshops - one online and one in-person - gathered insights on local pressures such as water quality and siltation, shared existing habitat data and provided a space for community members to raise concerns and highlight opportunities. Engagement and outreach will continue as the project progresses, helping to guide potential restoration decisions.
- 3. Site visits and further local input.** Site visits were carried out during August 2025 to meet with local groups including the National Trust, Blakeney Harbour Association, Cley Harbour Committee, local mussel fishermen, Norfolk Rivers Trust and Natural England. These discussions helped build a comprehensive picture of the harbour's current conditions and pressures.

Key findings and recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered, this study highlights significant potential for habitat restoration and creation across several areas within Blakeney Harbour. The recommendations are grouped into three main categories, summarised in the table below.

Recommended action	Habitats involved	What does this mean for Blakeney harbour?
Restoration and creation	Seagrass, blue mussels, and native oysters	Restore or create these key habitats to help boost wildlife populations and improve water quality naturally.
Active management	Saltmarsh and freshwater marshes	Care for and maintain these existing areas using light-touch management approaches that help keep them healthy and resilient.

Natural progression	Saltmarsh and vegetated shingle	Allow natural processes to take the lead, enabling these habitats to grow and evolve without human intervention where conditions are suitable.
New habitat features	Lagoons and islands	Create new/small areas of shallow water specifically designed to provide safe nesting and resting sites for birds.

Overall, this study recommends a multi-habitat approach. This means working to restore different types of habitats at the same time to enhance ecological benefits, strengthen coastal protection and create more resilient, connected ecosystems.

Ecosystem services: how nature can help us

Ecosystem services describe the many ways that healthy natural habitats can provide benefits for people, communities and the wider environment. In Blakeney Harbour, restoring and creating habitats can provide multiple benefits:

- Cleaner water: mussels and oysters filter pollutants from the water, keeping it clear and healthy for wildlife and people.
- Carbon storage: seagrass and saltmarsh capture and store large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere (often called blue carbon) helping to slow climate change.
- Coastal protection: Saltmarshes and mussel beds act as natural barriers, absorbing wave energy and reducing erosion and flooding along the coast.
- Thriving wildlife: restored and new habitats provide safe nursery grounds for fish and secure nesting sites for birds and invertebrates, supporting a rich and diverse ecosystem.

What happens next?

Completing this feasibility study has given us a much clearer picture of what is possible for Blakeney Harbour and the benefits that could be achieved. However, before any physical restoration work can start, further studies, investigations and continued community engagement are required:

- i. In-depth surveys of existing habitats, water quality, and sediment composition.
- ii. Full flood risk assessments
- iii. Risk assessments for potential threats like invasive non-native species.
- iv. Evaluation of how activities like fishing, boating and walking will interact with new habitats to ensure long-term success.
- v. In-person Workshop 10 December 2025 to collaboratively understand the options presented in this report and discuss next steps.
- vi. Community design workshops to co-design and develop a restoration project that brings benefits for nature, climate and local people.

The long-term vision of this project is to create a resilient, thriving harbour that supports diverse wildlife, protects the coastline and continues to benefit the people and communities who depend on it.