

Welcome



The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas

River of Life II: creating natural riverside wetlands

Earth Trust is embarking on an exciting large scale wetland creation project called River of Life II. We will create a series of backwater channels, wet woodland, ponds, and scrapes at three locations on the banks of the Thames and Thame that will help increase biodiversity and slow down and filter water as it reaches the river. Several ponds are also proposed in Little Wittenham Wood. The wood is home to the second largest population of great crested newts in the country, and these new ponds will provide vital habitat for this nationally rare amphibian. The project is being funded by a Water Environment Grant through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

River of Life II is a collaboration between three local organisations: Earth Trust, Church Farm Partnership and Hurst Water Meadow Trust. The project is being managed and delivered by Earth Trust.



CHURCH FARM
PARTNERSHIP

We want to know what you think...

Before submitting planning applications to carry out the work we want to know what **you** think.

The project team have already consulted with a wide range of stakeholders such as Parish Councils, the planning authority (South Oxfordshire District Council), Oxfordshire County Council and statutory and non-statutory consultees, and now it's your turn. Please leave your comments on the final board or fill in a feedback form.

If you have any questions, just ask.



Background: River of Life I

River of Life II will build on the success of a previous Earth Trust project: River of Life I. In 2013-2014 we re-wilded a section of Thames riverbank, in partnership with the Environment Agency. Backwater channels, wet woodland, reedbeds, ponds and scrapes were all created on the Earth Trust Farm near Shillingford. Just a few years on and the successfully established new habitats already support an array of wetland wildlife, from fish fry to dragonflies, as well as adding to the tranquil riverside green space that visitors can enjoy.

About the planning applications

Two separate planning applications will be submitted for River of Life II: one for the riverside work and one for the new great crested newt ponds in Little Wittenham Wood. We aim to submit planning applications in autumn 2019 with work starting in summer 2020. This type of work needs to be carried out when the river levels are at their lowest and the funding agreement specifies that works need to be completed by early 2021.

Wetland ecosystems

River of Life II demonstrates the huge positive impact that specific land management techniques can have on riverside ecosystems. We are demonstrating at a local level, what can be achieved at a national level.

Land alongside rivers and streams can provide a wide range of benefits. In addition to helping to store floodwater these freshwater ecosystems are a haven for wildlife, including spawning fish, dragonflies, kingfishers and otters. River of Life I and II demonstrate how successful management of the land can provide for wildlife, food production and vital access to green space for the community.

The proximity of River of Life II to the Thames Path, the Wittenham Clumps, towns and villages, and the river itself, means there are plenty of opportunities for people to discover more about wildlife, farming, water, wetlands and our impact on these environments.

What are we trying to achieve?

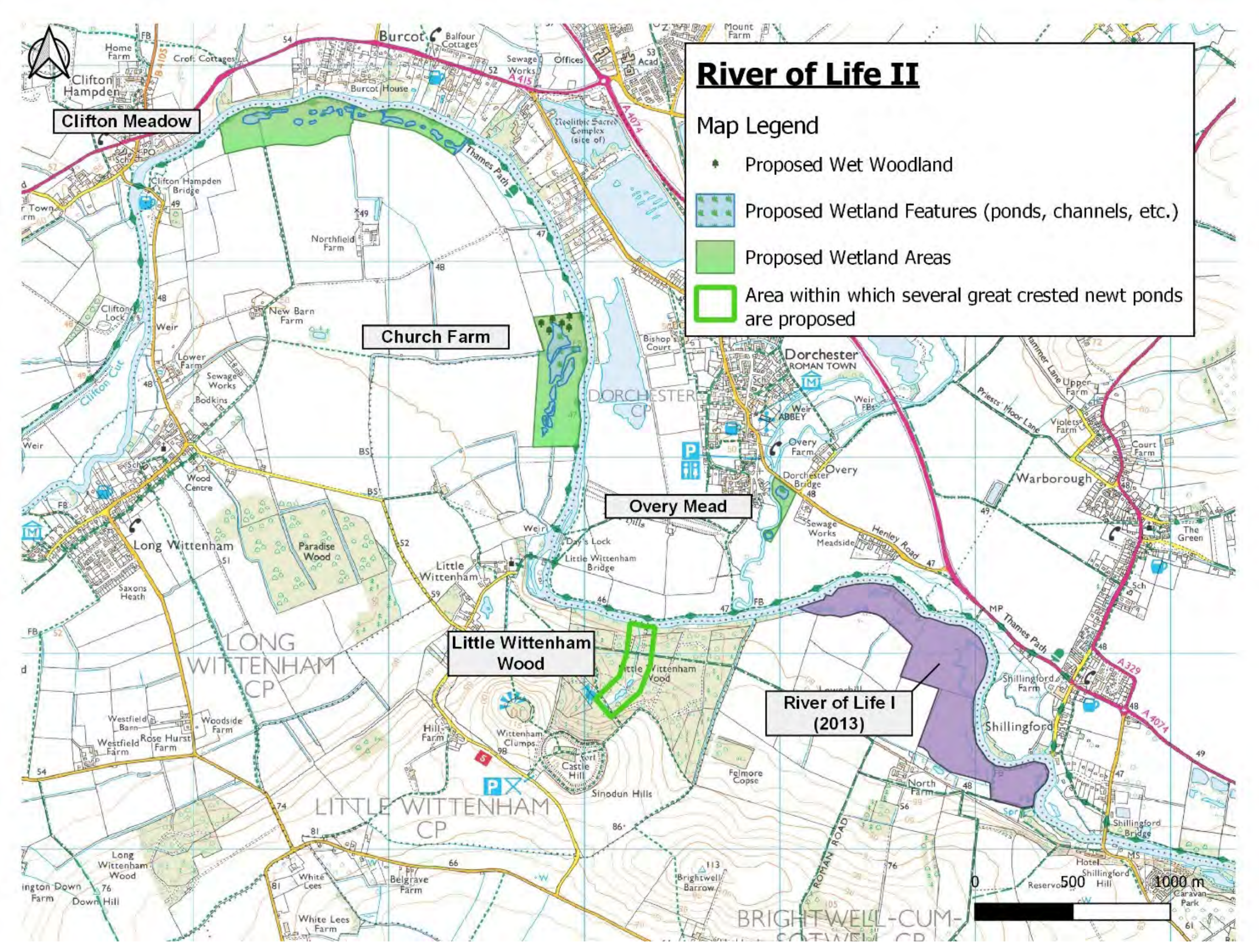
River of Life II has three objectives:

At the riverside locations (Clifton Meadow, Church Farm and Overy Mead):

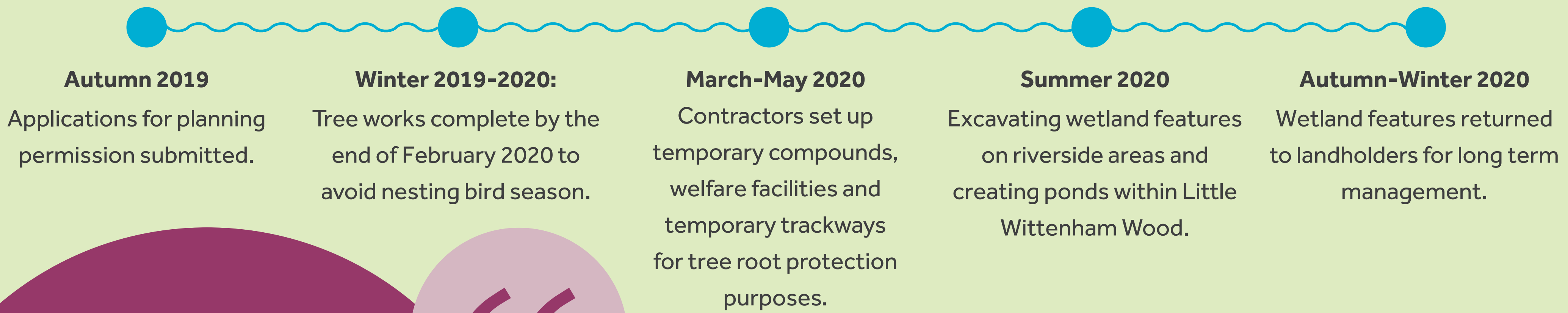
- 1 To create 16 ponds and 7 **backwater channels**. The backwaters will connect to the main river to provide refuge habitat for breeding fish within the floodplain of the River Thames and River Thame.
- 2 To enable people to easily access wetland **ecosystems**, both within the original River of Life I project area and in some of the newly created wetland features of River of Life II, by putting in place structures such as boardwalks and directional way markers. Some of the wetland habitats will be left as havens for wildlife but there will be many areas to explore.

In Little Wittenham Wood:

- 3 To create additional breeding ponds for **great crested newts** in the wood, which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Conservation Area (SAC). These will be close to existing ponds and will help to increase amphibian numbers, making the population more robust and less susceptible to local extinctions. This is in line with the Site Improvement Plan for Little Wittenham Wood, written by Natural England.



River of Life II project timeline:



River of Life has significant impact beyond the project, namely exploring what re-wilding means for wetlands. We're demonstrating the creative thinking and action needed as we face up to the climate change challenges ahead. We need to radically rethink our approach to managing the Earth's resources, such as water and soil, and accelerate projects that are going to sustain life on Earth.

Jayne Manley, Earth Trust CEO

The term ecosystem services refers to the range of benefits that people get from the resources and processes that are supplied by ecosystems. The River of Life II project is providing many ecosystem services such as increased biodiversity and recreational access.

There are also less obvious services such as flood amelioration (through providing additional flood capacity), carbon sequestration, flow regulation, improvements in water and soil quality (including nitrogen and phosphate levels) and food production.

What difference will it make?

NEW PONDS & BACKWATERS

15,657m² at Clifton Meadow

28,634m² at Church Farm

2,355m² at Overy Mead

=

new wetland
habitats covering
an area the size
of 8 football
pitches

4 new ponds will
provide breeding
habitat for great
crested newts in
Little Wittenham
Wood

Wetlands are not
only a haven for
wildlife, but also
filter water before it
reaches the river
and hold back
floodwater

Year 5 (2025)

Riverside backwaters and ponds are establishing well, new trees at Church Farm are maturing and new ponds in Little Wittenham Wood are being used as breeding habitat by amphibians. Diverse and established wetland areas are in tune with floodplain and riverside landscapes.

Year 50+ (2075)

Mature riverside wetlands, rich in biodiversity, can be seen at Church Farm, Clifton Meadow and Overy Mead. Church Farm wet woodland has reached maturity and fish refuges have boosted and maintained local fish numbers. All ponds in Little Wittenham Wood are well established breeding habitat for great crested newts and other wildlife.

Year 1 (Summer 2021)

New habitats are becoming established. Where earth has been moved, plants have germinated from the surrounding soil's natural seed bank. Trees planted at Church Farm are thriving.



How will the excavation affect you?

Beneficial re-use of excavated soil

Excavation of the backwaters and ponds will, of course, generate soil. This soil needs to be moved out of the flood zone (a requirement by the Environment Agency). All the excavated soil from Clifton Meadow and Church Farm will be moved using tractors and trailers and will be distributed on nearby fields away from the river. It will be spread evenly before being ploughed in and then the fields returned to arable production.

Removal of soil from Clifton Meadow

Our current proposal is to move the soil from Clifton Meadow in barges along the river to Church Farm.



Suggested method for moving soil from Clifton Meadow © Land and Water Services Ltd

Removal of soil from Church Farm:

All the excavated soil from Church Farm would remain on Church Farm, avoiding the public highway.

Access to Little Wittenham Wood:

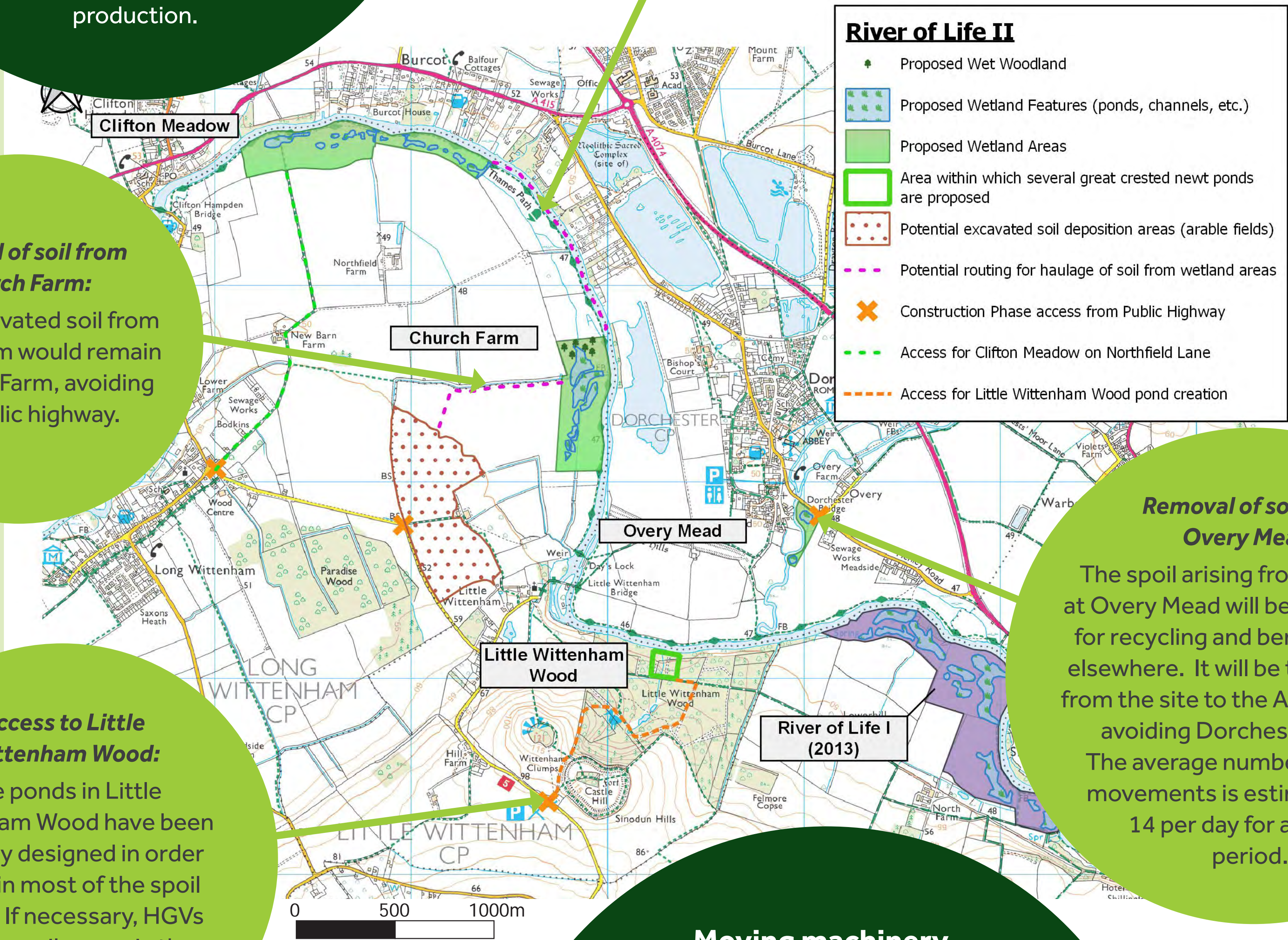
The ponds in Little Wittenham Wood have been carefully designed in order to retain most of the spoil on site. If necessary, HGVs will take soil away via the A4130 for reuse elsewhere.

Moving machinery

As with any large scale project, River of Life II will have some short term traffic implications: at the start of the project the equipment and machinery needed to excavate the new wetland features will need to be delivered to each of the four sites, and then collected again once the project work is complete. Throughout the project there will be some additional vehicle movements of staff arriving and departing on a daily basis. Tractors and trailers used to move the excavated soil will avoid the public highway.

Removal of soil from Overy Mead:

The spoil arising from the works at Overy Mead will be taken off site for recycling and beneficial reuse elsewhere. It will be taken by HGV from the site to the A4074, thereby avoiding Dorchester village. The average number of vehicle movements is estimated to be 14 per day for a 5 week period.



Answering your questions

Accessing the areas during excavation

“ What will I see while the wetlands are being created?

In all four areas you will see excavators forming the wetland features. At Clifton Meadow and Church Farm, tractors with trailers will take excavated soil to local arable fields to be spread and ploughed. Working hours will be restricted in line with a planning condition expected from the Council. If the river is used to transfer excavated soil from Clifton Meadow, you will see two temporary jetties on the riverbank and barges moving excavated soil to Church Farm. In Little Wittenham Wood you will see machinery excavating the ponds and possibly vehicles hauling excavated soil out of the wood, although we're aiming to avoid this scenario.

“ Will I still be able to access the footpaths and river area whilst work is carried out?

There will be some short term impacts on public access. Public safety is paramount and given the nature of the heavy plant used in forming the new wetland features, it will be important to keep members of the public away from the works. At Clifton Meadow and Church Farm, the Thames Path will remain open but with temporary short distance diversions while the backwater channels are being excavated. At Overy Mead the two proposed backwater locations will be restricted for safety reasons but access to the Thames Path will be maintained and the majority of the area will still be available and open for all to enjoy. In Little Wittenham Wood the bridleway through the woodland will remain open, with restricted access to the area where heavy machinery will be working.

“ Will the roads be affected by the project while the wetlands are being created?

In the interests of road safety, we will keep road users informed and manage traffic appropriately and in line with the requirements of Oxfordshire County Council Highways. Signage will warn users of the public highway in areas where larger vehicles are expected.

“ I am a member of the local angling society, will I still be able to go fishing on the Thame and Thames during the works?

Yes, but access to some sections of the riverbank (in/near excavation areas) will be temporarily restricted for safety reasons while works are being carried out. Please ask for further information.

“ Will I be able to use the river while the ponds and backwater channels are being excavated?

Yes, there will not be any restrictions for river users on the River Thame or Thames. While the backwater channels are being connected to the river, excavators will be working close to the river banks. Warning signs will alert river users to the works.

There will be two temporary jetties on the banks of the Long Wittenham side of the River Thames and barges moving excavated soil. There will be plenty of room to manoeuvre at this location.

Got a question?

Please let us know if you have any other questions or would like further information.



Answering your questions

Protecting the environment during excavation

“ How will the existing habitats (e.g. wildflower meadows, woodland) be affected?

The grazed meadows at Clifton Meadow and Church Farm contain areas of wildflowers and wetland plants. Where appropriate, the topsoil, which contains the seedbank, will be retained and spread back over the banks and margins of the newly created ponds and backwaters. This will help quickly establish plant communities.

In order to make way for the new ponds in Little Wittenham Wood we will need to fell approximately 150 trees. This sounds like a lot, however, the areas where the work will take place is predominantly secondary woodland planted relatively recently and so will support a lower abundance and diversity of species than other parts of the wood. Wildlife surveys are taking place to make sure that we have a complete understanding of which species are using the area. This will allow us to plan the work accordingly to avoid any potential damage. At Overy Mead, mature willow trees will be pollarded during winter 2019-20 to enable access during excavation.

“ How will you ensure the safety of protected species during the excavation of the wetlands?

We will work under licence from Natural England and will minimise any potential impacts on great crested newts during excavation; Little Wittenham Wood is a designated site so special permission will be required to create the ponds. We'll carry out tree work during the winter to avoid impacting nesting birds. Effects on bats will be avoided through careful design informed by surveys, alongside the appropriate method and timing of work.

“ Will any trees be removed?

No trees are expected to be removed at Clifton Meadows or Church Farm. As described (left), approximately 150 trees within Little Wittenham Wood require removal in order to excavate the ponds for great crested newts. The ponds have been located in areas that don't contain veteran trees or ancient woodland.

“ How will retained trees be protected?

We will be avoiding the root protection areas of retained trees to minimise impact. Where this is not possible (for example due to a pinch point for access) temporary trackways will be used to spread the weight of vehicles.

The design at Overy Mead has been adapted to allow the mature willows within the northern backwater to be retained. Willows are water loving trees and thrive on the riverbanks. Willows are resilient to root impacts and excavating near the trees will be carefully managed in agreement with the council's Tree Officer.

“ How has the potential for buried archaeology been considered and how will this be managed during the excavation works?

Extensive archaeological trial trenches were explored in June 2019 at Church Farm, Clifton Meadow and Overy Mead. One significant find, recorded at Clifton Meadow, was a piece of worked wood. An archaeological watching brief is an expected condition of the planning application, meaning that an archaeologist will be present during excavation of specific ponds and backwaters.

“ How will flood risk be managed during the works and in the long term?

For the works a Flood Risk Activity Permit will be required from the Environment Agency, the requirements of which would protect the floodplain during the excavation of the backwaters and ponds. Soil excavated from the newly created ponds and backwater channels in the floodplain will be spread and ploughed into neighbouring farmland. The Environment Agency has stated that the excavated soil can only be spread outside of the flood zone - the area that will flood once in 100 years, plus a 35% allowance for climate change. The aim of this restriction is to avoid reducing flood storage capacity elsewhere.

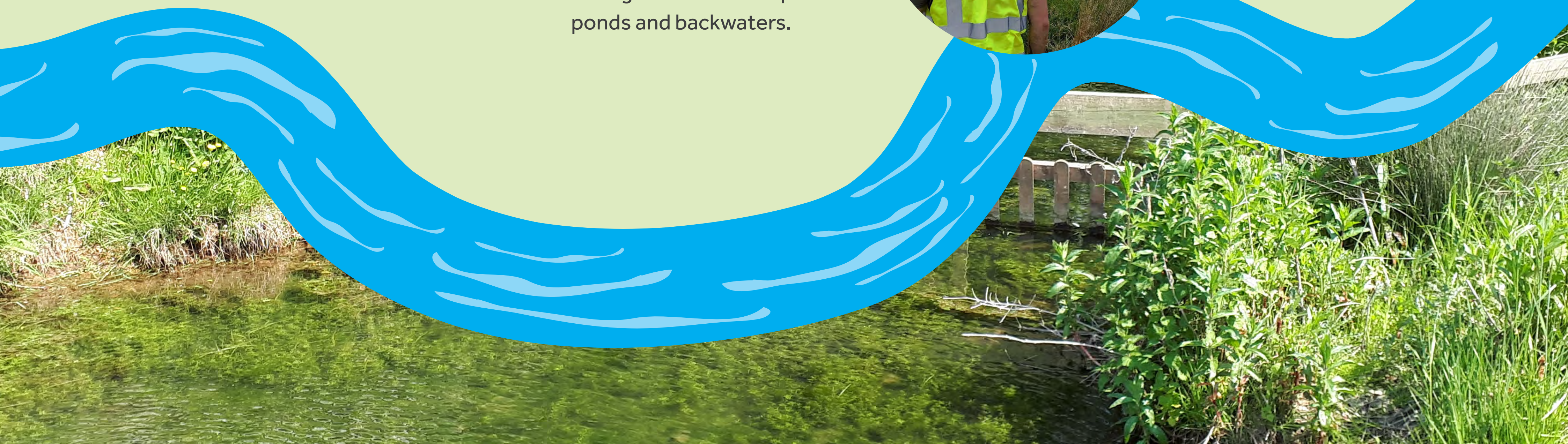
In the long term, the new ponds and backwater channels will create new flood water storage in the floodplain of the River Thames and Thame.

“ Could the river water quality suffer temporarily?

To minimise soil and sediment being transferred to the river, backwaters at Church Farm and Clifton Meadow will be excavated fully prior to digging the channels and installing the culvert/s that connects each to the river. Silt traps will also be used.

Got a question?

Please let us know if you have any other questions or would like further information.



Let us know what you think

Thank you for coming

We want to know what you think of our proposals. Please feedback your views on the post-its provided and stick them below and/or fill out a feedback form.

Ways to get involved...

Volunteering

There will be numerous opportunities for volunteering as the new wetland features are created, and with the ongoing management. Volunteers played a significant role in the development of River of Life I, for example planting reedbeds and wet woodland, and continue to support it with species monitoring and practical habitat management. Earth Trust's regular volunteer work parties, local community groups and teams from the Environment Agency all contributed and we aim to replicate this in River of Life II.

Education

River of Life II will provide the local community, river users and walkers with significant opportunities for exploration and engagement with wetlands.

Visitors can explore themes including caring for wetland wildlife and the living history of the Thames.

Visit

In time, access to parts of these working wetlands will be enhanced through the provision of paths, boardwalks and a raised viewing platform. We will tell the story of these habitats, from their history to their future. Our ambition is that access will be linked to the Thames Path, joining it at Shillingford to the east and Days Lock to the west; this would create an alternative, wild experience where people can experience nature first hand.