



# Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land Habitat Action Plan

Scottish Biodiversity List Habitat Y

UK Biodiversity List of Priority Habitats Y

## Summary

The rich industrial heritage of North Lanarkshire has resulted in over 1,300 hectares of land being listed as vacant or derelict. These brownfield sites can be incredibly important for biodiversity, often supporting nationally important populations of rare and endangered invertebrates, alongside other wildlife such as birds, reptiles, plants and lichens. With the loss of natural habitats in the wider countryside through agricultural intensification and development, wild areas within the urban environment have become crucial to the survival of many increasingly threatened species in the UK. As a result Open Mosaic Habitat on Previously Developed Land (OMHPDL) is a priority habitat and is on the Scottish Biodiversity List.

Vacant and derelict land provides an often-unrecognised contribution to wildlife habitat. Frequently sites have a variety of small-scale habitats within them, such as pools; areas of rocky, exposed soil and scrub. This complex make-up can, in turn, provide home to a wide variety of species. Many of these have only a brief existence, but where heavy disturbance ceases and re-development is delayed, semi-natural habitats such as grasslands, wetlands, ruderal habitats, scrub and secondary woodland start to develop and can evolve in to highly complicated habitat mosaics.

As vacant and derelict land sites tend to be in urban environments, the wildlife using them has an added value in being able to be enjoyed by large number of people who pass by these sites. Despite this, there is a sometimes a tendency to view them as unsightly areas, leading to a pressure for them to be 'tidied up'. Vacant and derelict land is also under significant pressure from redevelopment. Whilst by its nature it can be perceived as a transitory habitat, due to the reduction of heavy industry and current economic climate, the overall amount of this habitat looks as if it will be reduced in North Lanarkshire, along with a number of important species that utilise them.

These sites can be an invaluable resource for local communities by providing easily accessible areas of informal green space in urban parks where a rich variety of wildlife can be appreciated, and the often robust nature of the sites can support heavier recreational usage than many wildlife sites.

## Habitat Profile

'Open Mosaic Habitat on Previously Developed Land' (OMHPDL) was designated as a UKBAP priority habitat by the UK Government in 2007 (Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group, 2007). OMHPDL is still a priority habitat and is recognised as such on the Scottish Biodiversity List. For sites to be classed as OMHPDL, a number of criteria must be met (Appendix I). One of the key features is initial disturbance, followed by natural colonisation by plants and animals



without human intervention or management. Disturbance from previous land use and remains of building material often adds to the variety of habitat types at different stages of succession found at brownfield sites. Another important characteristic of brownfield sites is a lack of topsoil, which sometimes results from sites being cleared. Other bare habitat includes artificial surfaces such as cracked concrete or rubble, which are poor at retaining water and are low in nutrients. These conditions encourage high floral diversity as fast-growing species are unable to out-compete other plants, which in turn provide many opportunities for invertebrates to exploit. Other wildlife groups like birds and mammals are often attracted by the abundance of invertebrates to feed on. Bare patches are important for warmth-loving (thermophilic) invertebrates as they provide opportunities for basking as well as for ground nesting species such as solitary bees and wasps (Whitehouse, 2008). Additional features provided include varied drainage, ranging from freely draining gravel and rubble to impermeable substrate such as concrete, where seasonal pools can form. This variety is important for insects that have a complex life history; e.g. some species have aquatic larval and terrestrial adults. A lack of management at these sites allow many species to complete their life cycle within the same site, especially those that over-winter in plant stems or within grass tussocks (Macadam and Bairner, 2012).

What is characteristic of all vacant and derelict land sites is their transient nature and the fact that they are host to 'new' or successional habitats. In the UK, this habitat is rare, if not unique to vacant and derelict land and can attract uncommon plants and animals, such as orchids, bees and solitary wasps. From a starting point of bare earth or rubble, if the land continues to be undeveloped, later stages of succession can emerge, including scrub and bushes and moving through to woodland. These stages are also important in hosting species such as grasshopper warblers. As well as vegetation or 'soft' habitat, vacant and derelict land can also contain old buildings, which may provide roosting habitats for bats and birds.

OMHPDL is by its nature a temporary habitat. Without management intervention OMHPDL is likely to have an average lifespan of between 15 and 20 years and may take up to 15 years to achieve its biodiversity potential. By prioritising the re-development of brownfield sites it would be possible to produce a redevelopment schedule whereby sites without OMHPDL or those with OMHPDL coming to the end of its natural lifespan were developed first. Where sites with OMHPDL need to be redeveloped, Integrated Habitat Network models may assist in identifying which sites are the most important as "stepping stones".

In addition to 'natural' colonisation, vacant and derelict land can also be seen as an opportunity to actively create a rich habitat for wildlife within a built-up area. There are a number of examples in North Lanarkshire of where former industrial sites are now being at least partly managed for wildlife, such as Gartcosh Nature Reserve, Ravenscraig former steel works, Brownsburn community green space, Dumbreck Local Nature Reserve, and Greenhead Moss Local Nature Reserve.

## **Legal Status**

Vacant and derelict land has no legal protection as a habitat. In fact, reclamation of these sites is encouraged in Scottish planning policy (SPP), the National Planning Framework (NPF) and through the Vacant and Derelict Land Fund. Almost all new development is controlled through the planning system and overseen by the North Lanarkshire Local Plan. This aims to steer development to the most appropriate sites and in doing so avoid damaging important wildlife sites. However, because of the lack of information on brownfield sites and the general



perception of them described above, the habitats and species of vacant and derelict land often fail to be protected.

The Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Survey (SVDLS) which lists all vacant and derelict sites known to local authorities and is regularly updated is the primary data source for brownfields in Scotland. Across North Lanarkshire 504 sites covering 1,363 hectares (ha) were identified as vacant and derelict land in 2021.

With its designation as a UKBAP priority habitat in 2007 and listed as a priority habitat on the Scottish Biodiversity List, Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land (aka brownfields) need to be identified and considered for their biodiversity. Fifty seven sites (715 hectares) on the 2011 SVDLS were identified in North Lanarkshire as potentially supporting as OMHPDL. Since then, 18 of these (totalling 59 hectares) have been removed. A further 224 sites on the 2021 SVDLS have yet to be assessed for OMHPDL as these have been added in the last ten years.

Many species that are found on the sites may be protected. The Great Crested Newt is a European Protected Species by virtue of being listed under Annex IVa to the EU Habitats and Species Directive 1992. It is protected under UK law by the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations, which translates the Habitats Directive into UK legislation, and also under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is also a UK BAP Priority Species. They are often found on these sites, where shallow ponds form. Badgers protected by the Badger Act have been known to form setts in bings. Other protected species that have been found in this habitat in North Lanarkshire are: Water vole, nesting birds such as sand martins, bats, Common Toad, Common Frog, Palmate Newt, and Smooth Newt.

## **Current Status**

North Lanarkshire is currently one of the biggest contributors to vacant and derelict land in Scotland, with the sites spread across the council area, particularly in its western half. The 2021 SVDLS recorded 1,204 ha of derelict land and 160 ha of urban vacant land within North Lanarkshire. The largest single area is at the former Ravenscraig Steel Works, which is undergoing a huge regeneration programme. As this site is developed, the amount of vacant and derelict land will be reduced, however new sites will appear according to variations in the local economy. In times of economic prosperity or during major infrastructure improvement projects, when development of brownfields is most prevalent, sites with OMHPDL provide important refugia for wildlife. At other times, when redevelopment is at a slower pace there is greater scope for wildlife to spread out from these refugia to other brownfield sites.

The importance of vacant and derelict land as a wildlife habitat is being increasingly recognised, particularly by the inclusion of OMHPDL as a UKBAP Priority Habitat. A key indicator of this is the drive to replicate some of the small-scale habitats that are found in vacant and derelict land sites within developments. Examples of this are Sustainable Urban Drainage ponds, green roofs and using native plants in landscaping schemes.

There are several projects that will offer the opportunity to reclaim vacant and derelict land as a functional area. Examples are the North Lanarkshire Council Open Space Audit and the Vacant & Derelict Land Investment Programme (VDLIP). VDLIP is a capital programme scheduled over the next five years to help with tackling persistent vacant and derelict land and supporting place based approaches to delivering regeneration and sustainable inclusive growth,



as part of a 'just transition' to net-zero by 2045. It is being established in the context of the Scottish Government's economic recovery being a green recovery – tackling climate change and providing opportunities for new work and growth in today's challenging global market.

## Future Status

The amount of vacant and derelict land in North Lanarkshire looks set to decrease in the future, particularly with the redevelopment of the Ravenscraig Steel Works. However, the long term extent of the habitat depends on a number of factors such as the economic climate, the development of mechanisms to remove contamination and climate change, which will affect the species which colonise vacant and derelict land sites.

## Current Factors Affecting This Habitat

Brownfields are often threatened with development as they are viewed as being low value land that is preferable to develop over more 'green' sites including agricultural fields. The National Planning Framework (NPF) aims to bring "disused or neglected land and buildings back into productive use" (Scottish Government, 2009). Brownfield sites often have a much higher biodiversity value than neighbouring sites including agricultural land or parks. Restoration of ex-industrial sites into green space can be just as damaging to their biodiversity value as more intensive development. The majority of brownfield land can be developed with relatively low impact upon biodiversity, however it is important that sites are assessed for their ecological value so that objective decisions can be made and those of high biodiversity value can be retained.

- Economic and policy pressure to redevelop sites.
- Public perception.
- Lack of information and awareness of the species and habitats that can be found in vacant and derelict land.
- Non-native species.
- Natural succession
- Recreational pressure – although light disturbance benefits early successional habitats and can increase habitat diversity it can occasionally be a problem for birds and excessive dog-fouling can promote species-poor grassland by enriching the soil. Some sites suffer from regular arson, fly tipping and anti-social behaviour which can result in sites losing popularity with the communities surrounding them.
- Restoration works to buildings, including health and safety issues linked to above.
- Contaminated land and pollution
- Greenspace management, including landscaping and a drive for woodland planting



## **Current action**

Sites have been identified as having the potential as Community Nature Parks and Local Nature Reserves. On many of these sites communities are already involved in improving the sites for their use, with assistance from North Lanarkshire Council.

Several sites have been designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs).

All Council owned SINCs have been surveyed. Sites are now surveyed where there is a threat from development, or an opportunity to take forward positive action for the biodiversity of the site.

Where a large area of vacant and derelict land is being redeveloped areas are being maintained as wildlife habitats. Part of Gartcosh Industrial site is being managed for its water vole and great crested newt populations and is now an LNR.

Greenspace Development are consulted through Planning applications, council land disposals, demolitions and in relation to development briefs for council properties potentially being sold. Through this process Preliminary ecological assessments are requested for sites with any potential wildlife interest, this will then identify any rare or protected habitats, or species and further survey requirements and mitigation recommendations.

There are now 9 Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) in North Lanarkshire, 6 of which are former industrial sites:

Braedale Hill Local Nature Reserve in Newmains to the north east of Wishaw.

Brownsburn Community Park LNR in South Airdrie

Dumbreck Marsh Local Nature Reserve near Kilsyth and Queenzieburn

Gartcosh Local Nature Reserve near the village of Gartcosh and nearby Glenboig

Greenhead Moss Community Nature Park to the east of Wishaw town centre

Kingshill Local Nature Reserve on the outskirts of Allanton which is near Shotts

These all have management plans taken forward through Greenspace Development.

The Scottish Government working with the Land Commission set up a Vacant and Derelict Land Taskforce who have made a number of recommendations and written several publications with a particular focus on greening Vacant and Derelict Land and supporting community use of this.  
<https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/about-us>

The Vacant and Derelict Land Fund has been used to take forward greening projects at Ravenscraig Park, Viewpark, Kirklee Road and Hillrigg allotments.

## **Proposed Objectives, Targets and Actions.**

### **Objectives**



1. Identify derelict sites of particular significance for biodiversity and outline any management needs.
2. Improve information about the biodiversity value of derelict sites for planners and developers
3. Raise public awareness of the biodiversity value of derelict sites

Actions	Meets objective number	Action by	Target
<b>Policy and legislation</b>			
Ensure that any site meeting the habitat criteria is notified as a SINC and is protected through the Planning System.	1	NLC	Identify all potential sites and develop a programme of surveys by 2024.
<b>Site safeguard and management</b>			
Ensure development proposals do not reduce the nature conservation value of existing sites. Formulate compensatory measures where such damage is unavoidable.	1,2	NLC	Record this process and produce a report annually for discussion within the council and with biodiversity partners. Encourage improvements with a high biodiversity value such as Green roofs where development is unavoidable.
Produce management prescriptions for SINC sites.	1	NLC, Buglife	Develop management plans for Council Owned Vacant and Derelict land SINC's in partnership with Buglife by the end of 2025.
Take forward community greenspace improvement projects using funding streams such as the Vacant & Derelict Land Investment Programme (VDLIP).	1	NLC, Buglife	1 site annually
<b>Advisory</b>			
Include information on vacant and derelict land in guidance for planners and developers.	2	NLC	End of 2028
Inform landowners/managers of the ecological significance of their sites and advise accordingly, including information on suitable grant aid.	1,2,3	NLC, Buglife, GATrust	One landowner approached annually from 2024
<b>Future research and monitoring</b>			
Continue to survey and monitor sites, especially where BAP species are present.	1,2	NLC	Annual survey of known and new sites from 2025
Re-assess the vacant and derelict land in North Lanarkshire, with a view to identifying which can be taken off the register due to them having a 'soft' end use (ie nature conservation value).	1,2,3	NLC, Buglife	Report produced from survey work with recommendations by 2026



<b>Communication and publicity</b>			
Encourage volunteer conservation work, and surveys on brownfield sites.	3	NLC, Buglife	Work with partners to provide opportunities for volunteers in annual survey.
Increase public awareness of the importance of, and threats to, biodiverse brownfield sites and the need for conservation action.	3	NLC, Buglife, ,GATrust	Through local press releases related to high profile species. Three press releases, and public survey 2025 - 28.

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