



Colne Valley Regional Park Trust (CVRP) Statement in response to 2025 call for 'evidence and insights on how to support and incentivise private sector investment in nature recovery'

Preamble to this submission

This response is submitted on behalf of the Colne Valley Regional Park Trust (CVRP) by Jerry Unsworth, a chartered town planner, assisting the CVRP on a part-time basis.

Over the last 12 years the CVRP has been involved in various large development and infrastructure proposals, many of which have been agreed and implemented. This includes the HS2, Heathrow third runway expansion and other large scale commercial developments such as film studios, hyperscale data centres, motorway service areas and housing estates.

This has involved liaising with the various local planning authorities, local communities, politicians (national and local) and the developers themselves. This experience over the last decade or so has given us an insight into how national and local policy works 'on the ground' and what interventions, at the national level, could support and incentivise the private sector to get the best out of the natural environment – in our case on the edge of the country's capital.

Our experience has highlighted the importance of a carefully considered, and strategic, approach to protecting and restoring nature on the edge of large urban areas. Critically, though, this is not only for the benefit of nature itself, but also to foster people's access to, and understanding, of nature.

We note that the supporting paper sets out two policy principles 'Environmental improvement is key to economic growth' and 'Business investment is key to environmental improvement'. It then goes on to seek evidence on how government can work with business sectors to:

- 1) use the most effective policy measures to increase business investment in protecting and improving the natural environment in England
- 2) secure the economic benefits of a healthy natural environment and business innovation in environmental protection and improvement
- 3) identify and manage any risks for businesses, communities or consumer

We structure our submission to:

- firstly, in section A, provide an overview of the CVRP and its natural environment resource and potential (section A and elaborated in our annexes)
- then, in section B, offer insights against the 3 issues set out above

A. The CVRP – overview

The CVRP is the first substantial taste of countryside to the west of London. It covers over 110,000 hectares between Rickmansworth in the north to Staines/the Thames in the south. It adjoins the western side of the capital and crosses the boundaries of nine local authorities. The Regional Park features a network of 200km of rivers, more than 70 lakes and associated wetland habitats and paths on the valley floor at the edge of London, Herts, Bucks, Berks and Surrey.

The CVRP is managed on a day-to-day basis via a contract between the Colne Valley Park Trust (a registered charity) and Groundwork South. Groundwork is a long established and well recognised environmental management organisation.

Further information is included in Annexe 3.





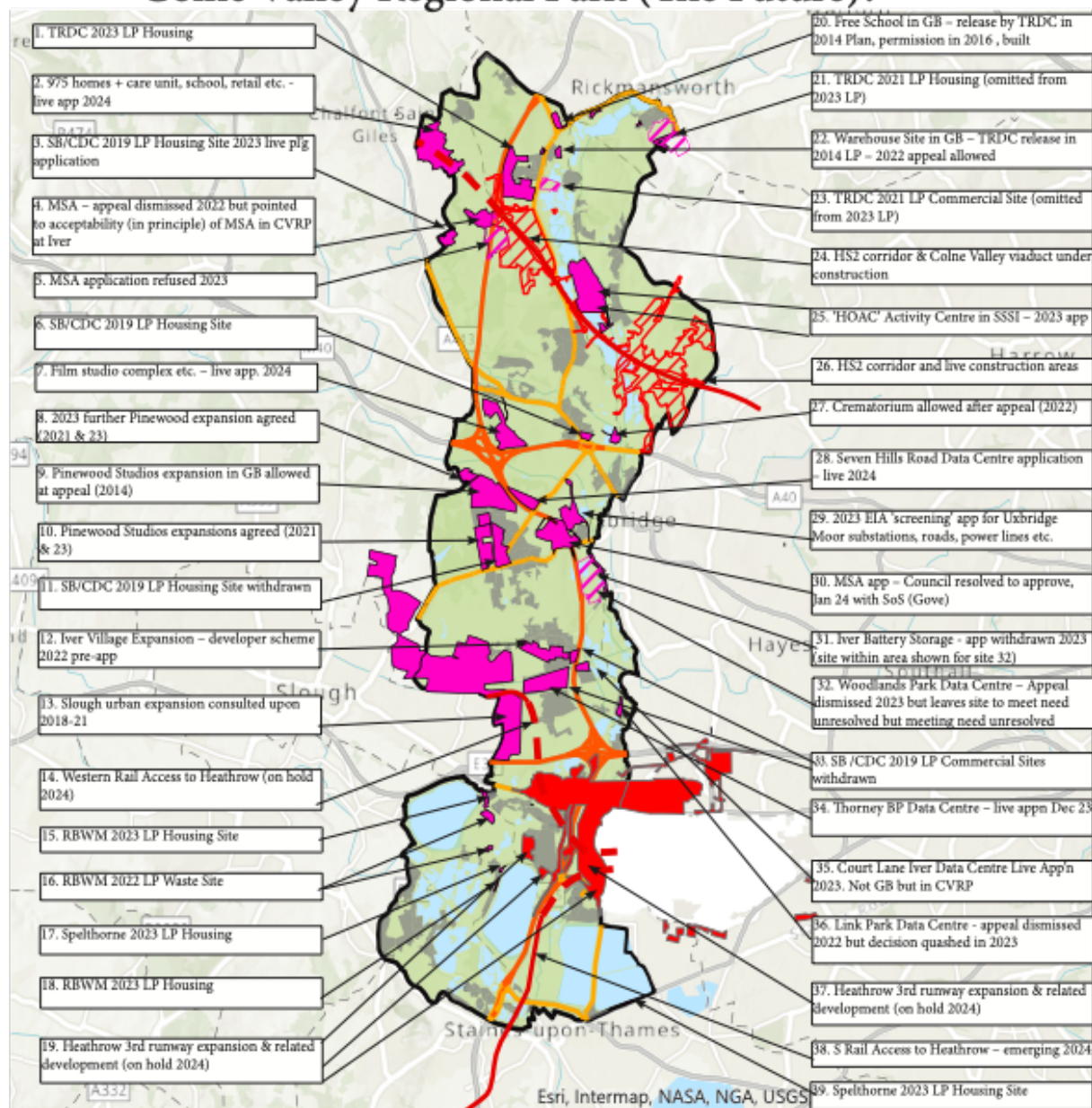
B. Our insights and against your three key issues

	The CVRP's headline insights (see evidence and links to evidence in our annexes)
Effective policy measures to increase business investment in the natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our experience is that in places like the CVRP businesses are champing at the bit to build and invest. • This directly impacts on the natural environment but what is lacking is a strategic, joined-up, cross-site and cross local authority approach • The planning system (especially when schemes are considered under 'Very Special Circumstances') is failing to direct business investment to take a spatially joined up approach to improving the natural environment AND, importantly, people's access to that environment. • We believe that planning for people's access to the natural environment is a key missing ingredient to the debate, especially in how the planning system operates and nature initiatives such as local nature recovery strategies.
Secure the economic benefits of a healthy natural environment and business innovation in environmental protection and improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, the critical thing, we believe, is for this DEFRA initiative to link with how the planning system is working • We put forward the Colne Valley Regional Park as a case study to understand the importance of this link • Our organisation has objectives (see Annex 3, para 4) that aim to foster a healthy natural environment and environmental protection and improvement and believes the key step that needs to be taken is to close loopholes in how the planning system operates • We have made submissions on this subject over the last three years and can make these available on request – but suggest a short dialogue in the first instance
identify and manage any risks for businesses, communities or consumer	See points above

Please contact the CVRP Trust to open a dialogue around the issues we identify.

Please contact SPomeroy@groundwork.org.uk or jerryunsworthplanning@gmail.com in the first instance.






Colne Valley Regional Park (The Future)?



This mapping is periodically updated and aims to capture current/ recent major development proposals in the CVRP, excluding 'temporary' e.g. minerals schemes. There may be major developments missing from the map, which will be updated next time. We welcome comment to inform updates to: Bergey.Sigurdardottir@groundwork.org.uk Feb 2024

Note: Some proposals continue outside the CVRP.

Key:

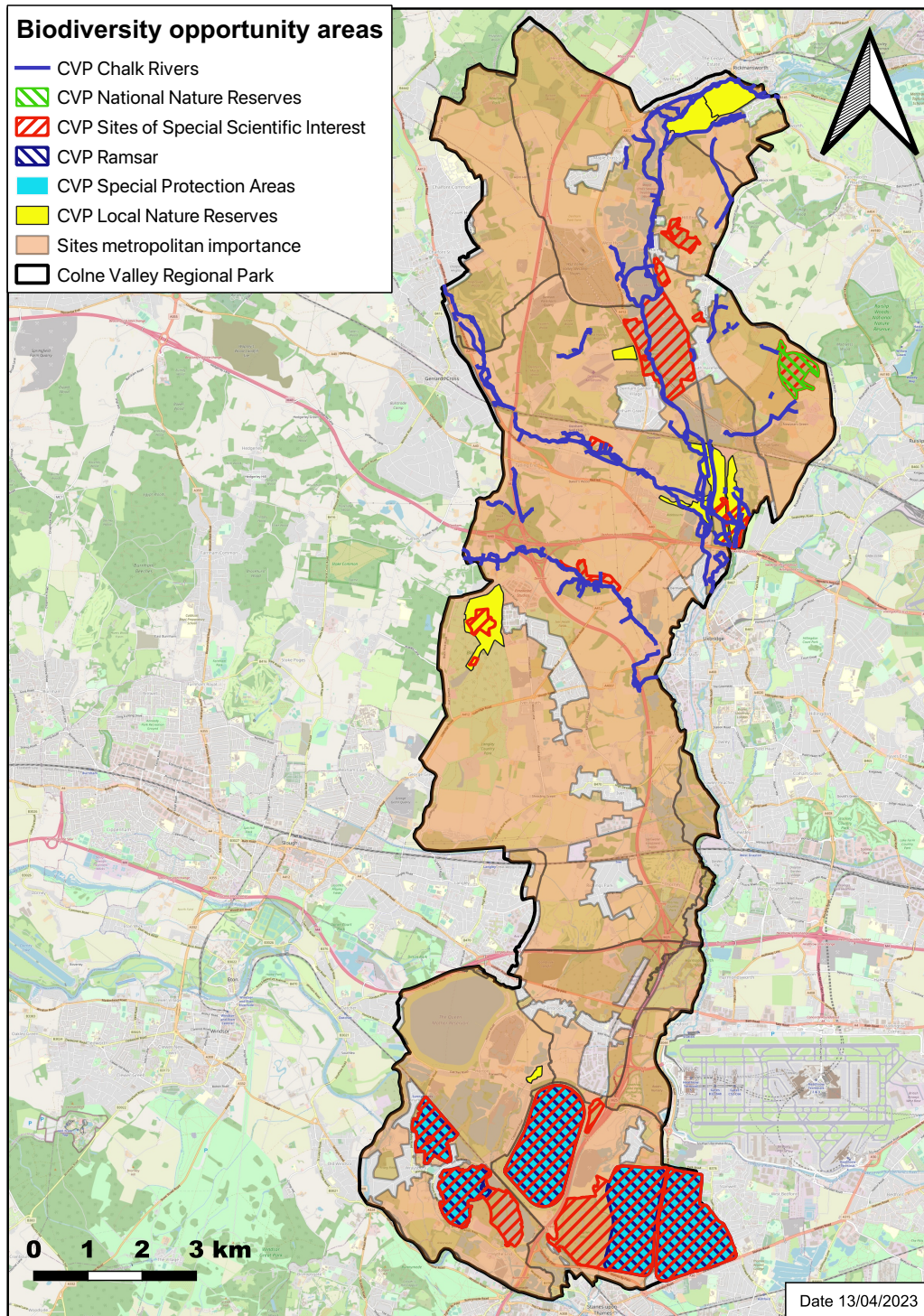
	Major development sites in the GB proposed within CVRP		Major development proposals rejected or withdrawn
	HS2, Heathrow proposed expansion & related schemes incl. rail.		HS2 construction areas (temporary but lasting about 15 years)
	Tunnels		

Abbreviations:

CVRP - Colne Valley Regional Park	SB/CDS - South Bucks & Chiltern District Council
MSA - Motorway Service Area	TRDC - Three Rivers District Council
app - application	RBWM - Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead

Comment: This mapping was done about 18 months ago to illustrate the scale of recent development proposals affecting the CVRP (and lakes). Due to a shortage of resource it has not been comprehensively updated since then, save to say that a series of development proposals have been approved since then including data centre, motorway service area and electricity sub-station schemes to the west of Uxbridge (28-32 and 34 on the map). In addition, new proposals for Heathrow expansion have now been tabled.

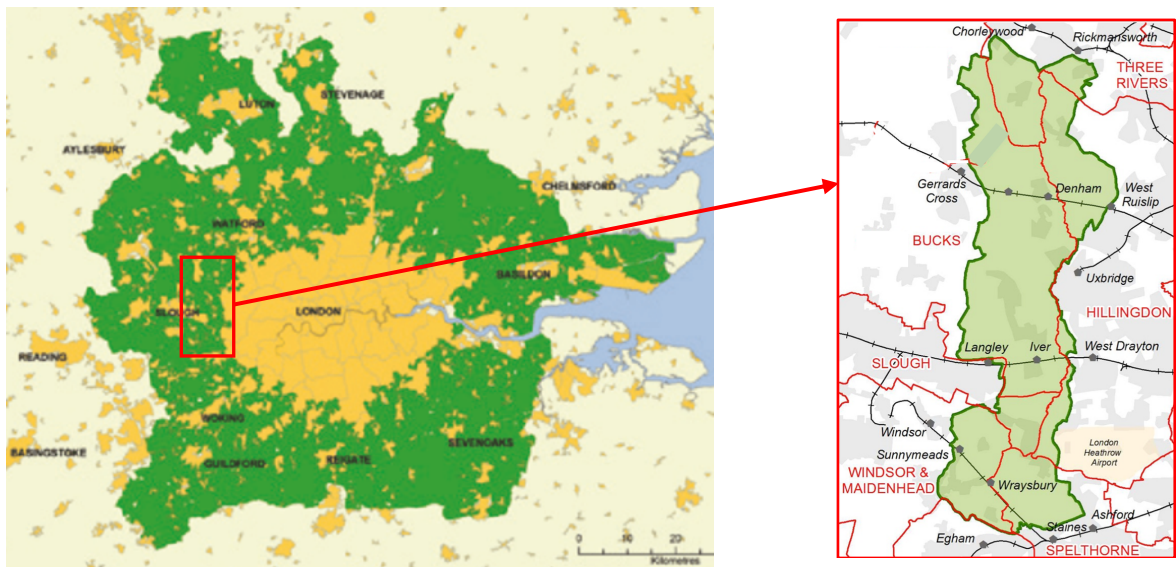
Mapping of individual designated biodiversity areas within the CVRP



Comment: The map above only identifies sites with statutory designations and doesn't highlight the links between them. It consequently underplays the nature/ wildlife value of the CVRP in relation to London and nearby large urban areas. Whilst each designation is important it is the combination of waterbodies and green corridors across the CVRP that results in a strategic wildlife corridor of more than regional importance. It is also, we believe, of critical importance to the future quality of life of the urban centres it is close to, especially London.

OVERVIEW OF THE COLNE VALLEY REGIONAL PARK, IT'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESOURCE & POTENTIAL

1. The Colne Valley Regional Park was founded in 1965 by a consortium of local authorities to co-ordinate and promote the improvement of the Park in line with objectives that remain central to its operation. It is now run as a charitable trust with the objective of improving its countryside on the western edge of London for the lasting benefit of people and nature.
2. The CVRP occupies a key 'inner' part of London's Green Belt, and we have significant experience of how major business investment has occurred over recent decades. The red box on the map below (showing the overall extent of the Green Belt) shows the approximate location of the CVRP in relation to both the capital and other large urban areas (notably between Heathrow/ Uxbridge/ West Drayton and Slough). Whilst most of its area lies outside the GLA boundary a significant part, in the LB of Hillingdon, is within it.



3. The CVRP Trust (registered charity) oversees the Park, with day-to-day operations managed through a contract with Groundwork South, a not-for-profit company operating in the environmental sector. The CVRP runs on a small core budget but levers in major funding for countryside improvements e.g. from the National Lottery. This is estimated to represent £10 for every £1 invested in or contributed to the Trust's core budget. Projects aim to achieve lasting improvements 'on the ground' and examples of our projects can be seen here: <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/whatwedo/>
4. The work of the CVRP's small team is guided by the organisation's 6 [objectives](#) (repeated below) and focus on delivery. We see these objectives as consistent with government policy, including planning policy for the Green Belt:
 - I. **Landscape:** To maintain and enhance the landscape, historic environment and waterscape of the park in terms of their scenic and conservation value, and their overall amenity.
 - II. **Countryside:** To safeguard the countryside of the Park from inappropriate development. Where development is permissible it will encourage the highest possible standards of design.
 - III. **Biodiversity:** To conserve and enhance biodiversity within the Park through the protection and management of its species, habitats and geological features. We are the home of many areas of nature importance.
 - IV. **Recreation:** To provide opportunities for countryside recreation and ensure that facilities are accessible to all.



- V. **Rural Economy:** To achieve a vibrant and sustainable rural economy, including farming and forestry, underpinning the value of the countryside.
- VI. **Community Participation:** To encourage community participation including volunteering and environmental education. To promote the health and social well-being benefits that access to high quality green space brings.

C. The CVRP's natural environment resource and potential

- 1) The Regional Park is a natural environment resource for London – for wildlife and for people. This is a link to a storyboard (by the consultancy LUC) concerning the CVRP's assets, issues and challenges: <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/why-we-need-to-protect-the-colne-valley-regional-park/>
- 2) In Annex 1 we show mapping that reveals the onslaught of development proposals over recent years.
- 3) In Annex 2 we show mapping of biodiversity designations within the CVRP. **The key point we make is that, whilst each designation is important, it is the combination of waterbodies and green corridors across the CVRP that results in a strategic wildlife corridor of more than regional importance.** This is significant for bird life and a huge asset for our capital and country with so much potential.

This article considers the opportunity to create the best green corridor:

<https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/lets-create-the-best-green-corridor/>

And this links to a webpage considering landscape recovery projects in the CVRP area:

<https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/project/landscape-recovery-in-the-colne-valley-park/>

- 4) Regarding the CVRP's value for people, it represents the first taste of countryside to the west of London, offering Londoners and those living in nearby urban areas access to the natural environment in a large green corridor, unified by its braided river system the majority of which has its source in the chalk streams of the Chiltern Hills.
- 5) We see this location as a critical opportunity for London and the 10million people who live within 15km of the CVRP. It should also be a key consideration for how private sector investment is harnessed to make the most of that natural environment resource – both for business to thrive but also for the people who could benefit from its existence. We consider this as central to the issues your call for evidence raise – see our points in section C below.
- 6) The CVRP has multi-functional roles that can support:
 - green and blue corridors rich in biodiversity and ecological connectivity
 - opportunities for nature recovery and re-wilding
 - local food production
 - combatting climate change
 - active lifestyles, physical and mental well-being
 - recreational pursuits
 - flood management
- 7) From its inception the London (Metropolitan) GB was seen as having a role providing space for recreation and solace for the urban population. More recently the planning system seems to have shifted to view the Green Belt as a policy to prevent development happening rather than seeing it as a resource to improve the quality of life of Londoners. The outcome of this call for evidence should be to forge close coordination with, and influence, how the planning system operates.
- 8) With population and density continuing to grow in London and other nearby urban centres, realising the potential of the CVRP's intrinsic 'natural environment' will be more important than ever.
- 9) The CVRP is not only a place of value, but it also has an organisation dedicated to the improvement of the area's natural environment, akin to the Lee Valley Regional Park (but without the same funding base). This sets it aside from other areas and offers opportunities to be grasped.



10) Rather than provide detailed pieces of evidence we suggest browsing pages on <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/>. Below we offer a few links to give an insight of the importance of the CVRP to London and the opportunities that need careful strategic planning:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXogI_veFuk (an informative video made in 2017 by students at Brunel University London working with West London Film & Media CIC and Groundwork South)
- <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/why-we-need-to-protect-the-colne-valley-regional-park/> (a storyboard (by the consultancy LUC) concerning the CVRP's assets, issues and challenges)
- <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/lets-create-the-best-green-corridor/> (an article about creating the best managed and best-connected green corridor around any city in Europe)
- <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/project/green-infrastructure-strategy-colne-and-crane-valleys/> (this strategy was produced by Arup and coordinated by the CVRP just before the Covid pandemic, an event that affected the momentum during its production)