

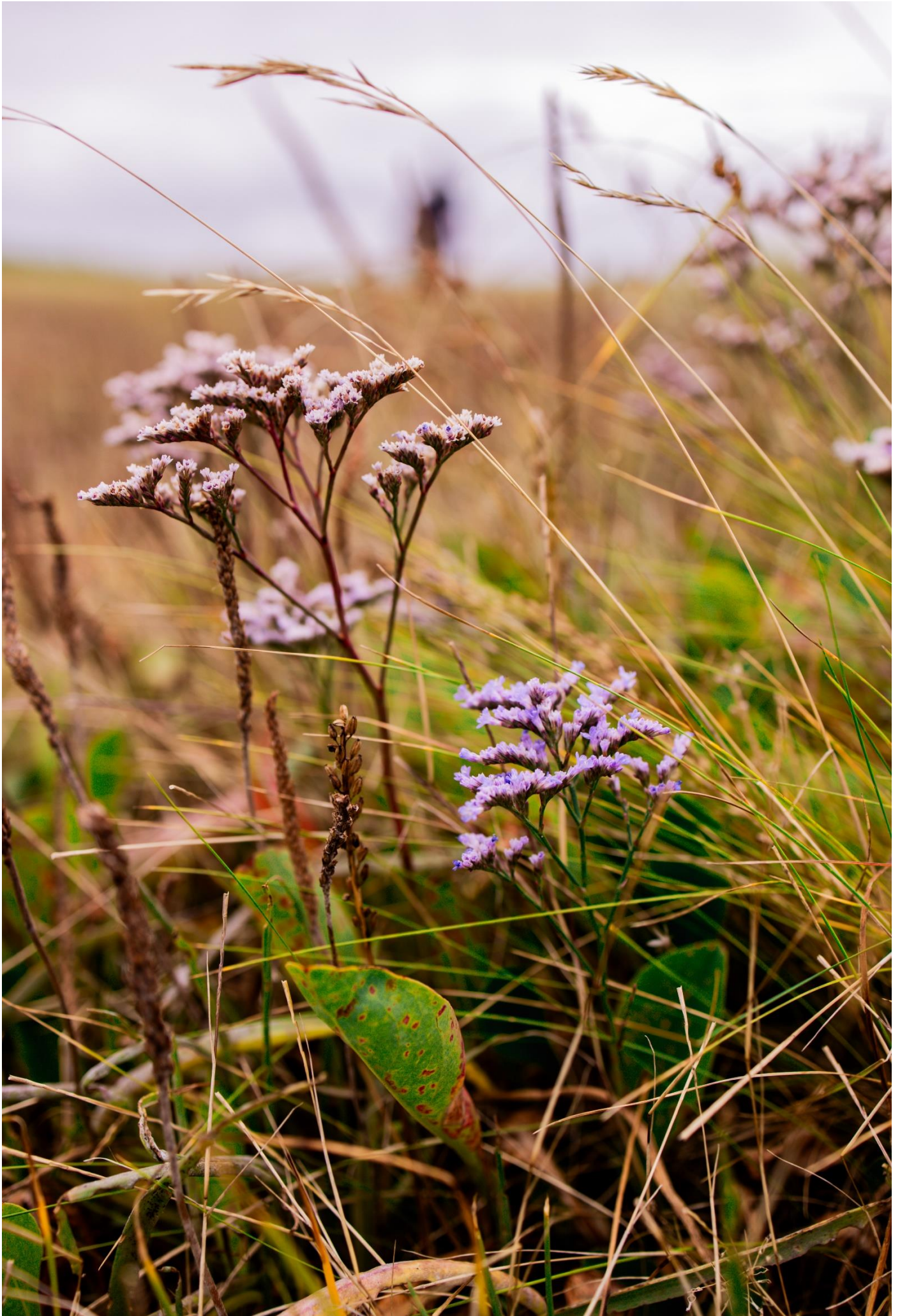


Aviva Natural Capital Carbon Sequestration (ANCCS) Project

The UK's first 'Blue Carbon' saltmarsh creation: a catalyst for change at scale.

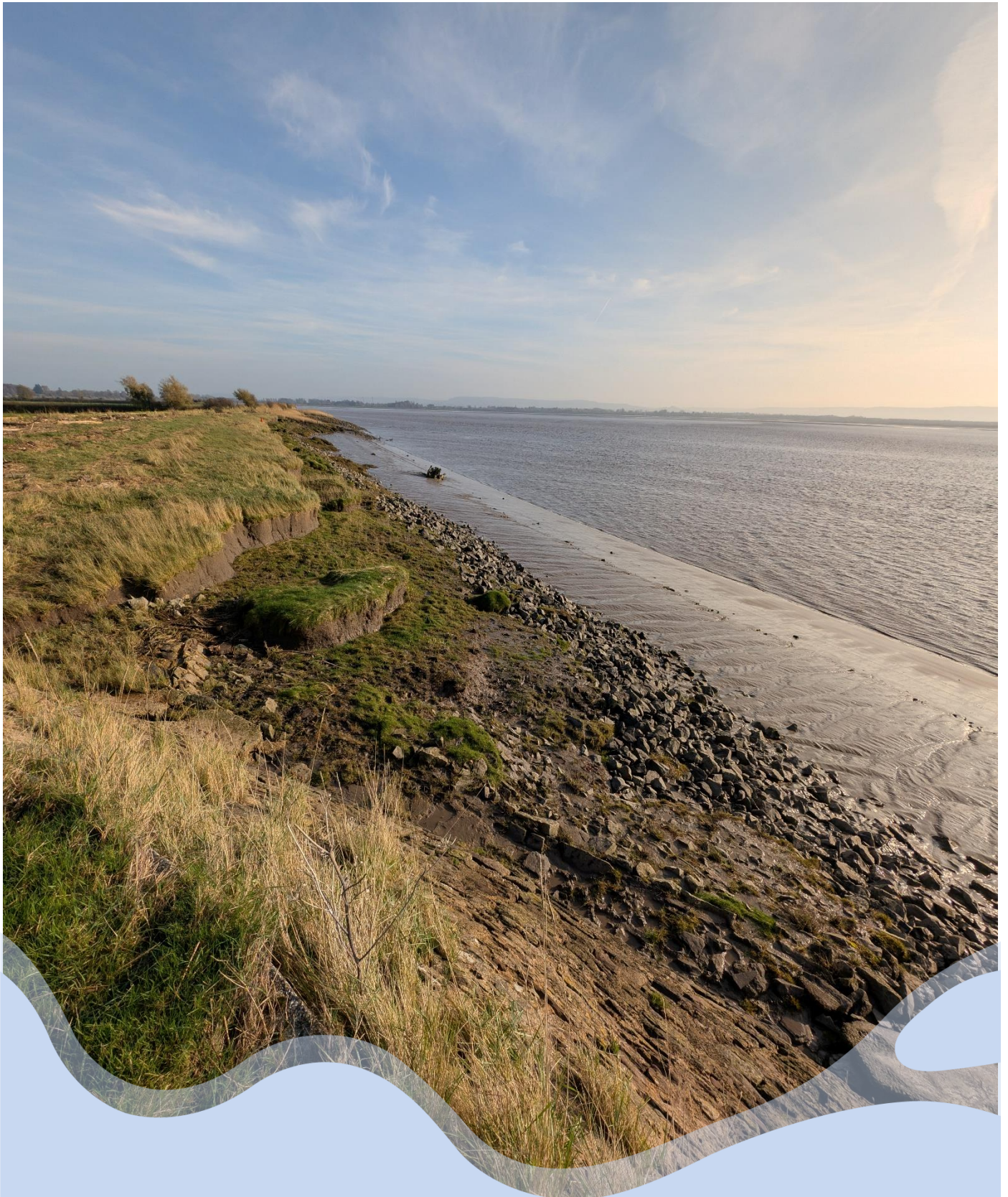
2023/2024 Impact Report.





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Project development and delivery:

Site feasibility and assessment acquisition

At the end of June 2023, we commissioned Jacobs to carry out a feasibility study to help find suitable locations for a new coastal wetland restoration project. The following month, Jacobs created a screening process for identifying suitable sites and used data from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and WWT to put together a longlist of potential locations. After discussions with us, this list was narrowed down to 11 sites: nine in the Severn, one in Dumfries (Caerlaverock), and one in Carmarthenshire (Laugharne).

The 11 potential sites were then looked at more closely. This involved reviewing details like infrastructure, land features, protected areas, development needs, and current land use, and creating a database to help prioritise the sites in order of suitability. In September 2023, Jacobs presented their findings on these sites to us and the Environment Agency. A representative from construction experts Kier also joined, to provide feedback on how feasible it would be to build on each site. Following this, we reviewed the results and gathered further input from the relevant statutory bodies, finalising a shortlist of four sites to move forward to Stage 3 of the feasibility study.

Between Stages 2 and 3, we realised there were more critical factors that needed to be taken into account before any further evaluation could take place at the four shortlisted sites. Factors like the ability to acquire land, support from local authorities and the potential need for Habitat Regulation Compensation, which is a mechanism for addressing the negative impacts of development on European sites. Since acquiring or leasing land could be deal-breakers, we decided to pause the feasibility study and bring in a land agent sooner than planned to explore if landowners were willing to sell.

In January 2024, the land agent began reaching out to landowners. Unfortunately, we couldn't move forward with some of our preferred sites because the landowners weren't willing to sell. At other sites the response was more positive, but the asking prices were much higher than expected, partly due to the general rise in land prices over the past few years. Concerned about the high prices for our top sites along the Severn Estuary, we decided to branch out to consider alternative options. Project Manager Orlando Venn and Project Sponsor Kevin Peberdy visited new sites all over the UK, from West Wales to the Thames Estuary, developing a site tracker with a new list of preferred primary and secondary sites.

Taking the time to do extra research into new sites outside of the Severn Estuary gave our project team vital insight into the complexities and costs of restoring saltmarsh in different locations across the country. It also gave the project team and our board of directors the confidence to revisit an original preferred site and make an improved final offer to the landowners, which has now been accepted. This will be our primary restoration site, but we'll also keep looking for smaller, secondary sites as well.



Meet the team:

Team initiation and development

We have successfully recruited new team members and secured valuable time from current staff across various departments, including research and communications, to help deliver this project.



Orlando Venn
Principal Project Manager

One of the new hires for the Aviva project is Orlando Venn, who joined WWT as Principal Project Manager on August 29, 2023. Orlando previously worked for Natural England, where he led their work on flood and coastal projects, including their involvement in the Environment Agency's flood defense program and efforts in coastal habitat compensation and restoration across England.



Hannah Woodall
Engagement and Science Officer

In March 2024, Hannah Woodall joined the team as the Engagement and Science Officer. She previously worked for the RSPB. Hannah brings experience on land use policy, with a focus on changes to farming subsidies, as well as working with political leaders, farmers, and the public to advocate for a major shift towards long-term sustainability in these policies.



Dr. Yoav Peled
Principal Research Officer

Dr. Yoav Peled has also joined the team. He brings expertise in environmental economics and will be working with our research team to lead the economics program. His work will focus on valuing the many benefits saltmarshes offer, including carbon capture, biodiversity, health and wellbeing, and climate/flood resilience.



Kevin Peberdy
Head of Major Projects and Deputy CEO

The project is led by Kevin Peberdy, WWT's Head of Major Projects and Deputy CEO. Formal governance is in place and working well, with positive engagement and feedback from both the Board and the team. The project team has established good working practices, and everyone is clear on budgets, expectations, and timelines.

Project management processes, like planning, monitoring, control, and reporting, are all set up, and communication with statutory bodies and local authorities is going well. We've also successfully integrated support from the Environment Agency into the team, and they're aware of the upcoming steps for planning and consent. Overall, the project has solid support and is progressing well.

We've expanded our team with the creation of the Wetlands Landscapes and Processes group, led by wetland hydrologist Olly van Biervliet. We've also brought in expertise in saltmarsh restoration and carbon (Hannah Mossman), hired an environmental economist (Yoav Peled), and added social science expertise (Jonathan Reeves) to the project.



Dr Hannah Mossman at WWT Steart Marshes.



Communications:

Communications

In June 2023, we announced the £21million donation in collaboration with Aviva's media team. The announcement secured coverage across a mix of specialist financial media, environmental news outlets and local media both on and offline, all carrying key messages that this huge project will support saltmarsh research and restoration. Coverage included pieces in [Business Green](#), [Carbon Pulse](#), [The York Press](#) and Slimbridge local media such as the [Stroud News and Journal](#), [Punchline](#) and [Dursley Gazette](#).

Given we're still undergoing feasibility studies and the land purchase process, external proactive communications have been limited to the donation announcement. However, this has given us the communications team the opportunity to properly prepare for the next phases of the project by; onboarding dedicated resource, developing an integrated communications and engagement strategy, a comms risk register and issues management process, a reactive FAQs document for inbound media and public enquiries, and tone of voice and key messages guidance for anyone internally and externally talking about the project.

Community and statutory body engagement

Community engagement

Our detailed community engagement plan has been written in collaboration with the communications team.

The plan has been developed using lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful approaches to community engagement. It is based upon a collaborative approach, which means engaging early with the appropriate people and organisations to understand their hopes, challenges, and concerns for the project. Early engagement also allows us to get key community members feeding into inclusive consultations and co-design processes from the start. Community conversations and focus groups will take place throughout the project process, capturing perceptions overtime and helping to inform further research. Throughout the process there will be opportunities for the community to feedback to inform our ongoing community conversations.



Aviva staff visit to WWT Stwart Marshes.

Engagement with statutory body engagement

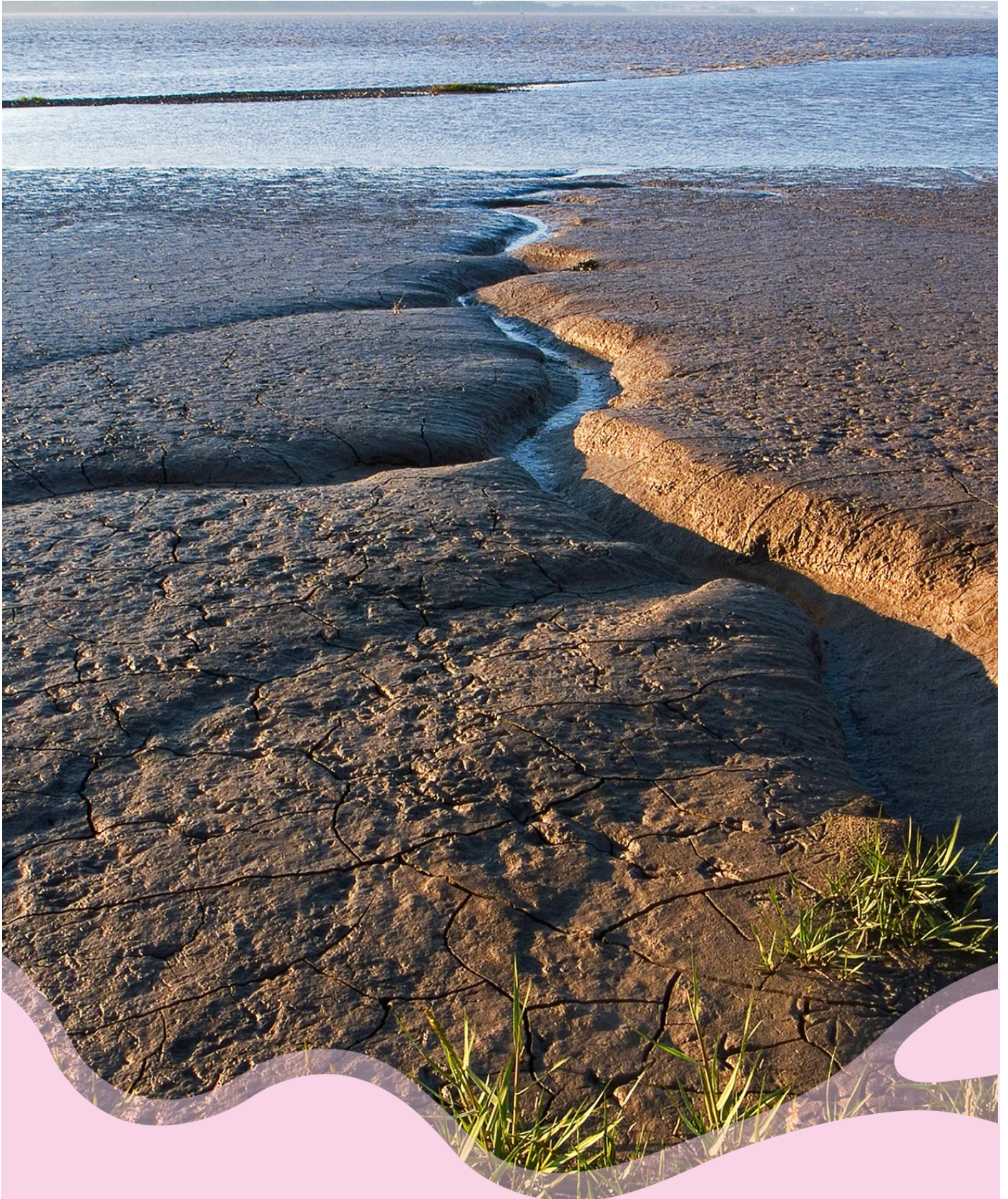
From the start, our project team has openly shared its goals and outcomes with a wide range of national and local groups to help raise awareness, explore partnership opportunities, and understand potential risks and challenges to the project.

We have held meetings with Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Marine Management Organisation, and several local authorities around the Severn Estuary. We've also presented at the Severn Estuary Partnership Forum.

While much of the focus has been on the Severn Estuary, we've also connected with relevant organisations for sites in Wales and the Thames Estuary. We've also engaged with catchment-based approach partnerships, farm liaison officers, and a citizen science hub. We're also in discussions with communities that have been involved in coastal habitat restoration and managed realignment projects, which will be incredibly helpful as we review and refine our own approach.



Aviva staff visit to WWT Steart Marshes.



Conservation evidence:

Conservation evidence

The Conservation Evidence impact for the years 2023/24 has been focused around two areas:

Saltmarsh code

We are part of the core Saltmarsh Code team, contributing to all aspects of the Code and monitoring, reporting, and verification. A full draft of the Code was presented to the Environment Agency in April 2024, with ongoing revisions and improvements.

Science strategy

We've developed a long-term science plan to address the key knowledge gaps that need to be filled to speed up saltmarsh restoration and creation across the UK. To make this happen, we've expanded our team with the creation of the Wetlands Landscapes and Processes group.

Our science plan, which will involve both WWT landholdings and partnerships with other saltmarsh site managers, aims to define what successful restoration looks like, understand the challenges and opportunities, and explore the multiple benefits restored saltmarshes can offer both people and nature. We're currently finalising this plan. In the meantime, we've already launched several projects to address known gaps in knowledge, including a PhD study with Bangor University on how fish use saltmarshes.



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Corporate partnerships

Corporate partnerships

Aviva volunteers are already making a real difference to our work, and we're on track to welcome 300 employees each year to volunteer with us.

So far, teams from Aviva have supported our Wetland Centres at Slimbridge, Arundel, and London, and we have plans to extend volunteering opportunities to WWT Welney. The Aviva teams have helped with many tasks including; restoring hides and sites, removing invasive species, planting new ponds, and building reed screens. To date, over 100 volunteers have attended volunteering days, and we have many more lined up, including an Executive Committee Senior Team from Aviva's Insurance Wealth and Retirement division, who volunteered at WWT London on September 5th. We have received excellent feedback from these groups and we're very excited for a year of more successful volunteering ahead.

The feedback so far has been extremely positive, both from the volunteers and our reserves. The most frequent praise comes from volunteers appreciating our knowledgeable and welcoming staff.

We're also excited to introduce remote volunteering opportunities. Our Conservation Evidence Unit is exploring ways for Aviva employees to contribute from a distance, such as by helping to report on insect abundance at wetlands through tasks like counting and measuring insects on slides. These activities are set to launch later this year.

Once the location for the saltmarsh project is confirmed, we look forward to involving Aviva volunteers in the next phase of this important work.



Aviva staff visit to WWT Steart Marshes.



Case studies:

Case study one – Corporate volunteering

In May 2024, we kicked off Aviva’s corporate volunteering days at WWT sites, with three events held at Slimbridge, Arundel, and London during the third week of the month.

On Wednesday, May 15th, thirteen Aviva employees joined us at WWT Slimbridge for a corporate volunteering day, where they were hosted by our reserves team. The group was split between two tasks—site restoration and building reed screens. Thanks to their hard work, the building looks fantastic, and all the reed screens are now complete. Their help was invaluable, saving us a lot of time!

The next day, on Thursday, May 16th, another thirteen Aviva volunteers arrived at WWT Arundel. They restored one of our hides and an outbuilding, both of which now look brilliant, and significantly reduced an area of invasive thistle. Suzi Lanaway, our Reserve Manager at Arundel, said the team was fantastic and were full of enthusiasm, despite the terrible weather. One volunteer shared in our feedback survey that they felt they had made a real impact and rated their experience as excellent, adding, "The people there are brilliant!" in praise of our Arundel team.

On Friday, May 17, twelve more Aviva employees came to WWT London. The London Engagement Team guided them through some important excavation work to help fix drainage issues in our holding pens. Our Living Collections Manager was thrilled with their progress and sent a big thank you to the team. Their work has been a huge help in managing the reserve. Another Aviva volunteer rated their day at WWT London as excellent.

We’re excited to have more Aviva volunteering days planned for the summer and autumn and are eager to welcome more volunteers. Their contributions are making a real difference for wetlands, and we couldn’t be more grateful!



Aviva volunteer day at WWT Slimbridge.

Case study two – Acquisition of land suitable for saltmarsh restoration

This project is truly groundbreaking—it's the first large-scale saltmarsh restoration effort in the UK that isn't driven by legal compensation for environmental losses elsewhere. While there have been efforts to map out priority areas for restoration based on spatial mapping and biogeographical criteria and infrastructure analysis, very little has been done to test the reality of moving these sites forward, which often comes down to human factors.

To take the next steps toward large-scale saltmarsh restoration, we've had to engage in many conversations and negotiations. Although some areas may seem perfect on paper—right elevation, typography, and minimal infrastructure—the reality is more complex due to policy, tax, cultural, or personal barriers.

At the policy level, we've found that Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs) don't always align with the situation on the ground. Some areas, despite being unsustainable for economic or environmental reasons, are still designated as "Hold the Line." Although the SMP Refresh process is underway, changes to these policies are slow, and likely to take some time. We've had early discussions with SMP chairs and coastal groups, who recognise the need for change, but securing funding and gaining community support will take time.

Engaging with landowners has also been a learning process. There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to engaging landowners and negotiating land sales, and we've found that personal, face-to-face communication works far better than letters or emails. One landowner even mentioned that their decision to sell was influenced by meeting us in person and having open discussions, whereas previous written proposals were unclear and quickly discarded.

Timing is also crucial. Initial contact and negotiations can be time-consuming, which can impact project timelines. We've realised that building in extra time during the planning and feasibility stages is necessary unless a site is already secured.

Another challenge is the rising cost of land, even in flood-prone areas, largely driven by inheritance and capital gains tax. Many farmers prefer to hold onto land and pass it down through generations, as it can be exempt from inheritance tax after two years of farming. Additionally, capital gains tax (CGT) on land sales, including agricultural land with planning permission, can drive up asking prices. Proposed increases to CGT may further affect this. These factors limit WWT's ability to buy land that could be perfect for restoration, particularly in areas at risk of tidal flooding.

We're keeping a "lessons learned" log for every aspect of this project, from feasibility studies to land purchases, and we'll share these insights once the planning stage is complete.



**Key headlines from the
year 23/24:**

Lessons learnt from land acquisition

We found that landowners respond much better to personal contact, rather than through letters or land agents. Moving forward, we believe it's essential to meet with landowners in person to discuss proposals and start initial negotiations before sending any formal letters. Building a partnership and maintaining a personal connection is key.

Additionally, current Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs) seem to be holding back restoration efforts. More up-to-date, progressive plans for coastal management are needed, which could also help make land more affordable for these projects.

Growth of the team

Thanks to the donation, we've been able to bring three new members onto the project team. This has helped us make great progress in areas like project management, land acquisition, and working with key technical stakeholders. It's also allowed us to better prepare for broader engagement and set up well-aligned research.

Corporate volunteering

In May, Aviva colleagues joined us for volunteer days at three WWT sites, and the feedback has been fantastic. Many shared that they felt they made a real difference by volunteering with us. Their help has been invaluable, allowing us to complete important tasks and focus on our mission to restore wetlands, inspire others, and help WWT thrive. We're excited to have more Aviva volunteer days lined up for the summer and autumn, and we can't wait to welcome them back!

Saltmarsh code and other research

As part of the core Saltmarsh Code team, we're involved in all areas of the code's development and are taking the lead on drafting the monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV). In April 2024, we presented a full draft of the Code to the Environment Agency, which is now under review. We've also launched several projects to help close important knowledge gaps around saltmarshes.



WWWT

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