

Response to: Manchester City Council Draft Local Plan From Friends of Ryebank Fields – 2024 refreshed edition

In April 2020, the Friends of Ryebank Fields (FORF) submitted a formal proposal that Ryebank Fields be classified as a **Local Green Space** in the Local Plan. As the Local Plan process has been delayed for the last 4 years, FORF have reiterated this wish at every opportunity. Preserving this [rewilding](#) urban greenspace would safeguard it for present and future generations of people and wildlife, and serve as a signal of intent and model of excellence in fostering connection between urban dwellers and nature, to mutual benefit.

As declared by Manchester City Council in July 2019, we are facing a Climate Emergency. In March 2022, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority declared a Biodiversity emergency, and signed the **Edinburgh Declaration**, a statement of intent calling for action to reverse biodiversity loss, and making a case for the role of cities and local authorities in delivering that



change. Protecting existing wild spaces will play a significant part in the response to these intertwined and urgent crises. In March 2024 [The GM State of Nature Report](#) included a commitment to Nature Recovery and to increasing the accessibility of nature connection within walking distance for Greater Manchester residents.

Ryebank Fields, pictured above, is 12 acres of Greenfield land which was purchased by the Council in the 1960s, to preserve it as open green space for recreation and education. In the early 1970's it was remediated with Government funding and then allocated to Manchester Polytechnic - at that time part of Manchester City Council and now Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) - for use as playing fields. MMU moved its sports facilities elsewhere in the 1990's and the fields, no longer mown, have rewilded into meadow and boundary hedges into woodland. Ryebank Fields is special to the local community, and exemplifies all the criteria for 'Local Green Space' designation, as confirmed by the Council's Planning Strategy Lead in an email in June 2024.

Legal Framework

The [National Planning Framework](#) (NPPF), published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities in December 2023, sets out the government's planning policies for England.

Paragraphs 105 to 107 of the NPPF¹ provide for a Local Green Space designation (LGS) to **protect local green areas of particular importance to local communities**. These paragraphs set out the use of the designation and the criteria to be satisfied, which are as follows:

Local Green Space Criteria:

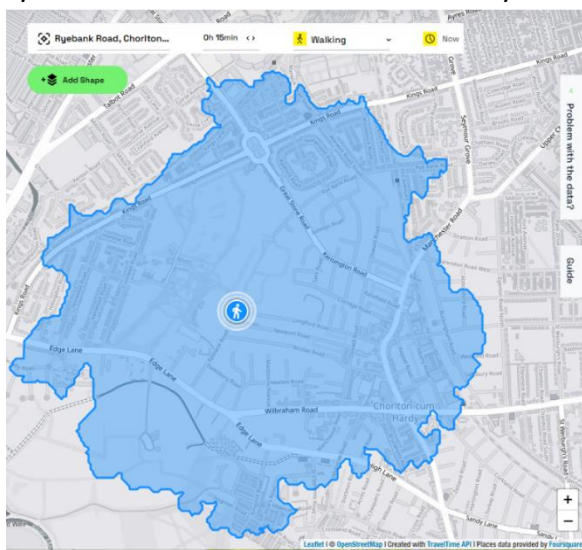
- (1) The Green Space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;
- (2) The Green Space is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquility or richness of its wildlife;
- (3) The Green Space is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land

Annexed to this proposal is also a 2020 [Research Report on the uses and impacts of Ryebank Fields](#) by Dr Jenna C. Ashton, University of Manchester. It provides detailed evidence and analysis of the eligibility of Ryebank Fields as a Local Green Space and has informed both our original response in 2020 and this refreshed version which includes some updates and other relevant evidence.

Evidencing the Local Green Space Criteria:

(1) The Green Space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;

Ryebank Fields is within the community it serves. Located within the North West of



Chorlton ward, Manchester, to the north and west it is bordered by Stretford, in Trafford.

The Fields are extensively visited by the local community. At least 12,000 people² from broad socio demographic and housing mix live within a 15 minute walk of the centre of the Fields.

Map – from [Travel Time](#) map demo³

(2) The green space is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquility or richness of its wildlife;

General evidence that Ryebank Fields is demonstrably special to the local community

The Fields and their trees, woodlands, meadows, hedgerows and scrublands are an integral part of the history and culture of the [communities](#) that surround them. This is demonstrably reflected in

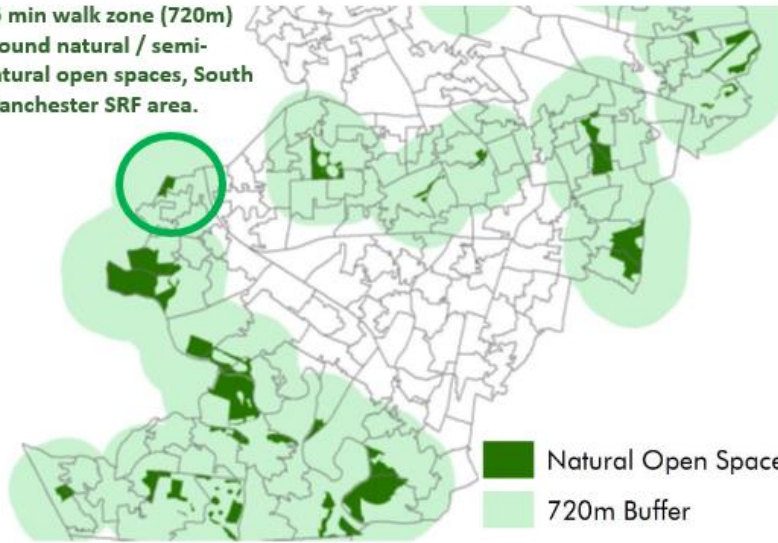
¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/8-promoting-healthy-and-safe-communities#para100>

² Source: <https://www.freemaptools.com/find-population.htm>

³ <https://app.traveltime.com/>

the passions driving the decades long, multigenerational campaign to save the Fields from being developed, and also in the [arts and cultural activities](#) that have sprung up here over the decades.

15 min walk zone (720m) around natural / semi-natural open spaces, South Manchester SRF area.



This map from Manchester City Council’s Green Infrastructure report 2015 (p52), shows areas within a 15 minute walk of Natural Open Spaces (Ryebank Fields is circled green). It’s clear from this map how much of the South Manchester Regeneration area has no walkable access to nature. This lack of natural green spaces also means that current access, even before new housing developments for 100s more residents, falls well below MCC’s

quantity standard of 1.9Ha / 1000 people. Only Central SRF has a lesser amount per person.

Campaign

[Save Ryebank Fields](#) is an umbrella campaign, involving a diverse range of individuals and community groups who work together to protect the Fields. The overriding objective is to protect the Fields from development, as reflected in the campaign motto ‘Not One Blade of Grass’.



Photos by Jay Clarke

As at July 2024, the [Friends of Ryebank Fields](#) Facebook Group has over 2.5k members, the [Instagram](#) channel had 860 followers, and on [Twitter/X](#) 1,360 followers, both local and from further afield, reflecting alliances with related campaigns elsewhere.

The overriding message of the Local Plan consultations, as highlighted in [MCC’s own report on the consultation findings](#), was that 44% of respondents received across the whole city wanted Ryebank Fields to be protected and given Local Green Space status.

a) Beauty

“I prefer Ryebank Fields to the park nearby because there is a plethora of wildlife and vegetation that is limited in the park. The bird song is immense [...] it is such a beautiful way to start the day surrounded by wild grasses full of glistening spider webs and a beautiful sunrise.” (57, m)



Through the seasons - Pictures by Jay Clarke

The land has rewilded over the last 25-30 years. This gives it a unique untamed beauty, rare in urban spaces, and provides a different character and ecology to the neighbouring mown and managed parkland. It offers an invitation to rediscover our own wild selves. Emerging [research](#)⁴ suggests the physical and mental health benefits of wild spaces have significant effects not experienced in more managed parks and gardens.

“Walking in Ryebank Fields is very different to visiting parkland which has been managed and controlled. There is a wonderful sense of serendipity to each visit; a rural rather than urban environment.” (52, f)

⁴ <https://www.outsideonline.com/health/wellness/wilderness-nature-outdoors-good-your-health/>

*"This unique green space has an aura of its own, different to other local green spaces."
(64, f)*

'Longford park...is ..well looked after. However, Ryebank Fields has a roughness of nature diversity of wildlife plants and a sense of history" (75, m)

(b) Historical Significance

The Nico Ditch crossing Ryebank Fields from East to West dates back to Anglo-Saxon times and is of significant historical importance, recognised by Historic England and written about by [scholars](#).

Within modern history, many of the local houses are believed to have been built from the clay extracted here, so people's homes are intimately connected with the land. Generations of local families have played, loved, laughed and grieved on Ryebank Fields. The local community has long loved, fought for, and cared for the land, and the Fields in turn bring us both solace and joy.



Robert, Jackson, Steven,
Martin 1992

"I used to play there in the 1950s and 60s [...] I can remember on really hot days how the willow herb flowers and stems used to be covered in hawk moth caterpillars. At school we read a poem about a young boy spending the long summer days out in the fields. That poem revives

childhood feelings in a similar way. Occasionally instead of feeling like an elderly sick person I feel like a child." (68, m)

"It is very important to me in that I first went there 30 years ago when my children were small, and so it does have many memories for me." (61, f)

I was born in 1952 and for as long as I remember the fields have been part of my life. I played there as a child and have many happy memories. In adult life it has been just as important for physical and mental health." (67 m)



I have walked this area for over 40 years with many memories." (52, f)



In the 1990's residents ran a successful campaign to save the Fields from being developed.

Community Picnic June 2005



In 2017 the community launched the Save Ryebank Fields campaign. 'Friends of Ryebank Fields' formed in August 2017 and became constituted in October 2019.

(c) Recreational value

"I am a single parent [...] full time carer. This was very isolating but using the Fields involves me in the neighbourhoods and community events." (54, f)



"I have walked dogs on the fields for 15 years. Before having dogs we often took our children there to play and make dens. We picked blackberries there and had bonfires picnics and other social events with friends. (61, f)

“There are a lot of elderly people with dogs who use the Fields. Everyone stops for a chat; I think it’s important to them.” (46, f)



Local people have been using Ryebank Fields for recreational purposes for more than 80 years, fulfilling the covenanted purpose of the City Fathers in purchasing the land, then having it remediated under publicly funded Operation Eyesore, and finally in gifting it to Manchester Metropolitan University for use as Playing Fields with public access.

There is an explosion of research into how spending time in natural environments improves people’s health and well-being outcomes⁵

The now naturalised rewilding space is no longer used for Football. Instead they are a place for play, exploration, nature connection, and an almost limitless array of arts, cultural and community pursuits.

A few of these are listed below, and many can be viewed on our YouTube channel

- Everyday outdoor activity, walking to work or school or to visit friends and family, running, dog walking, bike riding;
- Guided community nature walks and citizen science, dawn chorus walks, Birdwatching, Butterfly watching, Bat watching, Wildflower searches, Fungal forays; tree measuring, dowsing, pollinator surveys, bee, bird and butterfly surveys;
- Cultural events like Christmas carol singing, Easter egg hunts, snowflake trail, Valentine hearts trail, wassailing, and other land based and seasonal rituals and celebrations;
- Fruit picking and foraging
- Children playing - climbing trees, daisy chains, playing ball sports, make believe and adventure play, making dens;
- Nature therapy, forest bathing, observing and feeling part of nature in a wild setting;
- As a place to unwind and de-stress informally or through activities such as Yoga, Tai Chi, Sitting circle, silent walks;
- Stargazing and moon watching
- As inspiration and source material for arts, Craftivism, Photography, and music

⁵ White, M.P., Alcock, I., Grellier, J. *et al.* Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. *Sci Rep* **9**, 7730 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-44097-3>

- Archery, Kite flying, Flying model aircraft and drones, in the past driving model cars on the undulating terrain;
- Picnics, coffee breaks, walking meetings, organised social gatherings and incidental chats;
- Performances, folk music, dancing, travelling mummers, mini ‘festivals’.



In the small community orchard, an annual [Wassail](#) ceremony is celebrated. An old English land based tradition to wake up the trees, ward off bad spirits and ensure a good harvest. Through the revival of such old traditions, people are rediscovering a connection to seasons and to the land, inspiring them to want to take care of it, as it does us.

‘we have lived in Chorlton for 40 years and used the fields constantly – we have walked our dogs, picked blackberries elderberries and met friends on numerous occasions’ – (f66)

(d)Tranquility

The community places great value on the tranquil “countryside” feel of the land, which differentiates it from the adjoining Longford Park. It is also noticeably quieter than Turn Moss and Chorlton Meadows, being much further from the motorway.

“with my dog I walk Ryebank Fields on a near daily basis. It is a chance for both of us to escape the deep polluted pavements of Whalley Range and enjoy a unique natural wildlife haven. To see a bird of prey hover and dive or come across an orchid (the Northern marsh orchid grows here) produces sheer elation. I feel I could be in the countryside even if only for a few minutes’ (74 m)

‘after driving through the urban sprawl of Manchester this is a getaway It is so quiet and tranquil small and unpretentious, a natural haven for birds animals and insects and lest we forget ourselves too’ (m, 74)

There is also a sense of containment and safety, as there are residential roads on three sides. This is something often spoken about between women who walk on the Fields. There’s a sense of freedom in being in a wild space that doesn’t feel isolated far away from the safety of streetlights and people.

(e) Richness of Wildlife and Nature Recovery Network

'being less manicured than the other park area it attracts far more wildlife and sometimes walking through it feels like I am back to the farm where I grew up in the Peak District' female aged 44

Ryebank Fields is the only significant patch of land outside the Mersey Valley that hasn't been intensively managed and mown for the last few decades. Its resulting rewilding nature and mosaic of habitats from grassland through scrub to woodland, hedgerow, and on different topsoil means the recorded [species list](#) is ever evolving. It is fascinating to [see the changes](#)⁶ over the years and many local and regional and even national ecologists have visited the Fields and found something of interest. Meanwhile ordinary people of all ages are inspired to get to know the natural world, taking part in surveys and recording activities.

"The fields themselves have always been so valuable for me not just for exercise but for the joy of being virtually in the countryside when walking through. The grasses flower and trees and the many birds with their birdsongs are a real delight and have helped calm me through some very troubled times." (m, 67)

[Greater Manchester's State of Nature Report](#)⁷ published in March 2024 found that Manchester's bird species populations showed declines of up to 40% over the last 40 years and the abundance of once common mammals including foxes and hedgehogs has dropped by between 20-40% since 1995.

Ryebank Fields bucks that trend, with over 82 species of birds recorded on the Fields so far, both passing migrants and nesting species including Blackcaps, Whitethroat, Chiffchaffs, Swifts, and apex predators such as Tawny Owls and Sparrowhawks.

Many different species of insects can be found on the fields including bees, hoverflies, butterflies, damselflies, rare moths, grasshoppers, crickets and beetles. Unmown tussocky grasslands left to grow tall and set seed provide habitat for moths and butterflies who struggle on mown areas of parkland.

Ryebank Fields is also home to, or provides foraging to, a rich variety of mammals including bats, badgers (protected from disturbance by their own 1992 Act), foxes, shrews, voles, mice, and hedgehogs (listed under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUSN) 'Red List of Threatened Species'). Older trees within the woodland have hollows and cracks with potential to support roosting, so rate as 'Category 1' value under Bat Conservation Trust Guidelines.

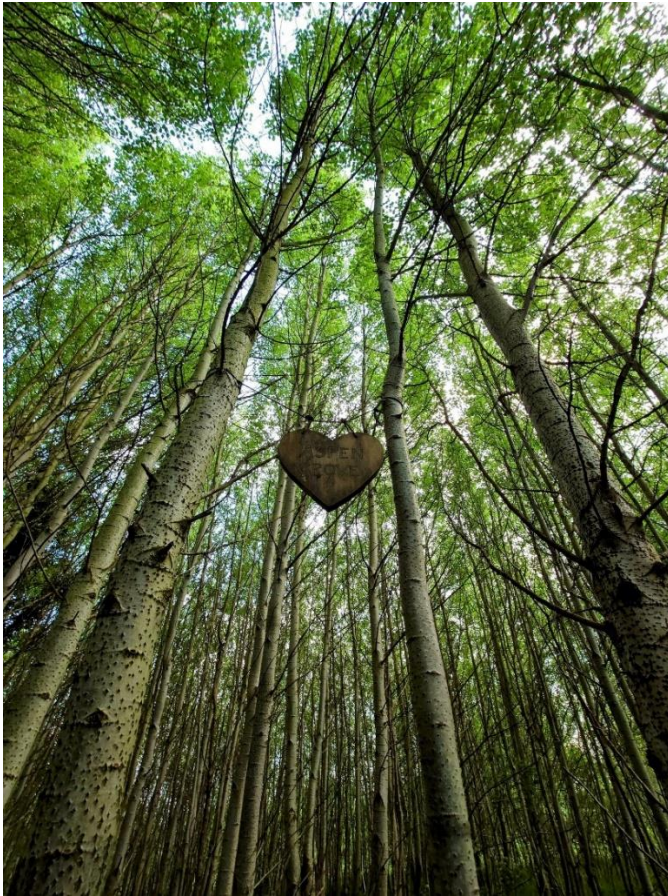
A community led audit counted over 1400 trees in one day in Ryebank Fields. This was corroborated by a [preliminary arboricultural report](#) commissioned by FORF in 2021⁸. Most of these trees are within the perimeter woodlands and along the Nico Ditch, all of which act as important wildlife corridors linking wildlife to other parts of the city and beyond. There are a few special Tree features worthy of mention:

⁶ https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeA9t7g3AZnuIDIM8MRHX_ONGmoe56k3Z&feature=shared

⁷ <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/9526/gm-state-of-nature-report.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.saveryebankfields.co.uk/forf-tree-survey-2021/>

The [Aspen Grove](#) at the northern perimeter is a unique feature, rare in the UK and the site of many community events and daily walks. It is featured in the forthcoming book “Great British and Irish Trees” by author Paul Wood, who wrote [this blog post](#) about it.



Historic Manchester Hybrid Black Poplars aka [‘Enriqueta’s trees’](#)

These trees are believed to have been planted at the behest of well known benefactor Enriqueta Rylands, wife of John Rylands in the latter part of the 19th Century. There is also a very rare native [Wild Black Poplar](#) located within this group, which is recorded on the [Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Register](#) as a notable tree.

Enriqueta’s Trees
Photo by Jay Clarke

With similar foresight, over 100 [Millenium Oaks](#) are scattered around the perimeters of both meadows, sprung from local acorns planted by a local man. They will celebrate their Quarter Century next year.

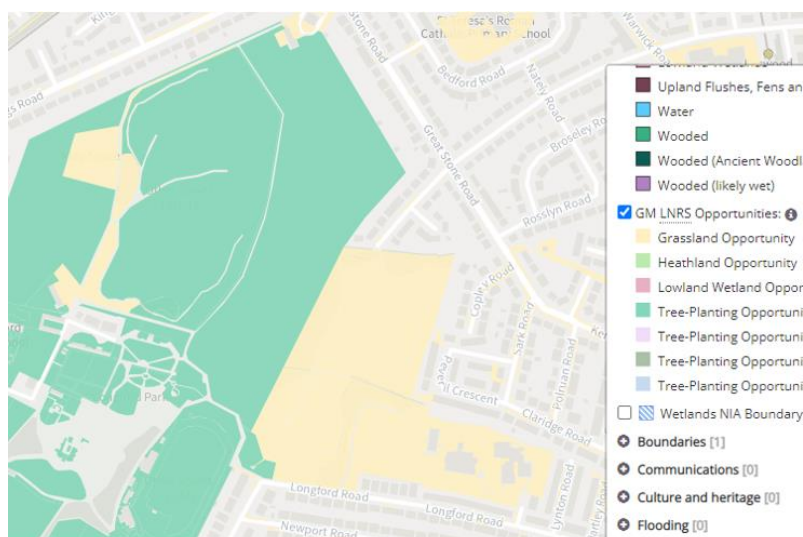
Ryebank Fields hosts a biodiverse range of vegetation reflecting the mosaic of different habitats from mixed deciduous woodland, to colonising scrub, to ruderal species that indicate its colourful past such as Bee Orchids, Marsh Orchids, Rosebay Willowherb (a popular bee feeding station), Nettle, and both Creeping and Meadow Buttercup. Pasture and nitrogen fixing plants such as clover and vetches are abundant, as are those loved by pollinators such as Thistles, Lady's Smock and Ragwort. There are a wide range of grasses include crested dogstail, reed canary grass, perennial rye grass, common couch grass, cocksfoot, red fescue, false oat grass, brome and Yorkshire fog and many more.

Important Hedgerow

The largest continuous section of [hedgerow](#)⁹ is the 270m that forms the edge between Ryebank Fields and the Longford Park conservation area. In 2021 it was surveyed by the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU) who confirmed that it fulfils the criteria for a [hedgerow of importance](#), and so is protected by law.

GM Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Manchester Biodiversity Strategy

Ryebank Fields form an important corridor and stepping stone for Nature Recovery within the City. There are apex species breeding here, a sign of a thriving ecosystem, and the land connects the green and nature rich Mersey valley and Meadows areas to the greyer more cultivated and concreted urban neighbourhoods of Old Trafford, Hulme and Whalley Range.



Greater Manchester Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Opportunities, 2021

This spatial dataset attempts to plot opportunity parcels for habitat creation, restoration and enhancement a region. It was created as part of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Pilot 2021. This dataset combines datasets. A full list of contributing datasets is provided below.

Ryebank Fields are identified on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy as having potential for grassland habitat enhancement. This habitat is vanishingly rare – we have lost 95% of our unimproved grassland Nationally since 1970. This loss is linked to insect decline, as many pollinators depend on meadow habitats. The [Manchester Biodiversity strategy](#)¹⁰ has explicit targets for developing new areas of species rich grassland, and that could happen here with appropriate management.

⁹ <https://www.saveryebankfields.co.uk/features/important-hedgerow/>

¹⁰ <https://democracy.manchester.gov.uk/documents/s35928/Appendix%201%20Biodiversity%20Strategy.pdf>

(f) Climate resilience and residents' wellbeing

As we experience increasingly warm and wet summers, respite from the heat is particularly important for the elderly and very young. Air temperatures in green spaces are typically 3-5 degrees cooler than surrounding areas especially where vegetation is dense, as both shade and evapotranspiration cool the air around the plants. As well as being a refuge in the heat, the effect also cools the surrounding area for a few 100 metres¹¹. This cooling effect can be felt on a hot midsummer day, walking through certain areas where it is damp and shady.

The streets surrounding these Fields are already in or above the [85th percentile](#)¹² for air pollution in the UK and exceed multiple WHO limits. A development on Ryebank Fields would result in more cars and increased congestion on these small roads and reduce tree cover that filters out particulates, and so will worsen this existing health risk. This is particularly concerning for neighbouring residents, children who attend the two adjacent schools, especially those who walk, and could even have an impact on air quality at the neighbouring athletics track.

Houses close by regularly experience pluvial flooding in their cellars and gardens (caused by rainfall overwhelming the drains, rather than river waters rising). Many have had pumps installed by United Utilities. Ryebank Fields form an important buffer to this rainfall burden, soaking the water like a sponge and releasing it gradually in a way that helps stem the flow.

(3) The Green Space is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.



The 4.6 ha area is bounded by the residential streets around Longford and Ryebank Roads to the South, St John's school and further residential streets to the East and North, and the edge of Longford Park to the West.

It is most frequently accessed by people who live within walking distance, though visitors come from further afield to see its special features, to experience its unique character and community.

¹¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-36850-6>

¹² <https://www.addressspollution.org/results/52933786-5550-4c8a-a5ed-48c9eb5bcc24>