



# BLEAN FARM CLUSTER

## A Scoping Exercise

FWAG South East 2024

REPORT PREPARED BY  
FWAG South East

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# Table of Contents

## BACKGROUND

Introduction	3
Proposed cluster area	3
	4

## LOCAL INFORMATION

Ongoing Biodiversity Initiatives	5
National Character Areas	5
Statements of Environmental Opportunity	6
Soil Type and Land Use	7
Proposed Developments and Infrastructure Projects	7

## ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

Delivery Objectives and Nature Priorities	8
Collective Goals	9
	10

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Assessing the need for a cluster	11
Funding	11

## NEXT STEPS

Concluding remarks	12
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## APPENDIX 1 - LANDSCAPE MAPS

13

# Background

FWAG South East has been commissioned by Kent Wildlife Trust and funded by Rewilding Britain to produce a report to summarise the current and future initiatives and objectives of interested parties, conservation organisations and landscape managers that are active in the landscape around the ancient woodlands of Blean.

FWAG South East supports farmers to employ sustainable farming methods and the development of environmentally sound practices that underpin strong businesses that are rich in biodiversity and economically robust. FWAG recognises the principal roles farmers play in protecting landscape heritage, food production and managing farm habitats and the opportunities this has for shaping the local character in areas such as The Blean.

This report aims to identify the conservation and landscape character objectives of active conservation organisations and landscape managers in the region – referred to as interested parties. This information will be used to initiate engagement with the farming sector and identify ambitions to align landscape resilience at scale.

## INTRODUCTION

This report highlights the findings of a scoping exercise led by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South East (FWAG SE) in collaboration with the Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT), exploring the potential for developing a farmer cluster group within the Blean landscape. The Blean landscape is located to the north of Canterbury City and is an area of rich ancient woodland, a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and productive agricultural land, supporting both urban and rural economies. 'Blean' is frequently used to generically describe the village, Parish and wider ancient woodland network. To acknowledge this landscape wide recognition the proposed cluster is referred to as 'Blean Farm Cluster'.

The idea for a new farmer cluster was developed by interested parties (local wildlife organisations, government bodies, and Local Authorities) in early 2024. This report summarises characteristics of the Blean landscape as well as the objectives and priorities of interested parties related to habitats and species within the proposed cluster area. Key groups who have an interest in the Blean landscape were consulted, and their feedback on the proposed cluster has been incorporated into this report. This report will be used to inform future farmer engagement strategies.



## PROPOSED CLUSTER AREA

The proposed Blean farm cluster boundary is shaped by geography, the context of the ancient woodlands and with consideration of existing farm cluster groups in the area. Blean is surrounded by four other cluster groups: Northeast Kent Farm Cluster, Barham downs, Stour valley and Stone street, and Swale Farm Cluster



**Figure 1.** Locations of existing farmer cluster groups in north-eastern Kent. Image produced courtesy of Kent Wildlife Trust ([kentwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://kentwildlifetrust.org.uk)).

The Blean Farmer Cluster does overlap on the east with the North East Kent farm cluster. There are farmers in this location that have holdings that cover two distinct characters and it is therefore possible for them to be a member of both named clusters.

The proposed boundary extends from the Thames Estuary in the north to the A291 in the east, the Great Stour River in the south and a line from the railway at Old Wives Lees to Seasalter. The proposed farm cluster boundary is shown in Figure 2. The locations of existing farm cluster groups are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 2.** Proposed Blean farm cluster boundary in black. Image produced courtesy of LandApp ([thelandapp.com](http://thelandapp.com)).



# Local Information

Maps of key environmental and geographical features and designations found within the Blean landscape are provided in Appendix 1.

## ONGOING BIODIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Within the Blean area there are several ongoing initiatives to improve biodiversity, most notable are the following:

- **Wilder Blean** – an initiative set up by Kent Wildlife Trust and Wildwood to introduce European Bison (*Bison bonasus*) into West Blean and Thornden Woods to naturally manage the woodlands.
- **Biodiversity Grants** – a grant scheme through the Canterbury City Council available to groups to improve biodiversity within the District. Projects can receive up to £15,000 for biodiversity-focused work.
- **E3 East Kent Research Project** – a project designed by the University of Kent to understand and establish innovative initiatives for nature recovery, climate change mitigation via forest and coastal ecosystem restoration, and nature-based job creation.

## NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA

The proposed cluster area is contained within the North Kent Plain National Character Area (NCA), which is a strip of land running between the Thames Estuary and the Kent Downs. The area is characterised as open, low and gently undulating. The North Kent Plain is classified as having very productive agricultural land with fertile loam soils. Central areas host traditional orchards, soft fruit and other horticultural crops. There is an extensive area of ancient woodland around Blean Village, plus significant areas of ancient woodlands farther west. Agricultural areas are generally open and feature scattered and poor hedgerows. However, some shelterbelts occur within the fruit-growing areas.



*Figure 3 North Kent Plain as defined by natural England*

## STATEMENTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITY

The North Kent Plain NCA outlines several key Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEOs) relevant to the Blean area:

**SEO 1:** Maintain the historic character and long tradition of a farmed landscape, creating habitats to establish more resilient and coherent ecological networks within the farmed and peri-urban areas, benefitting biodiversity and geodiversity, and helping to regulate water and soil quality. Protect traditional practices including the longstanding associations of the fruit belt, maintaining a strong sense of place and reinforcing Kent's reputation as the Garden of England.

**SEO 2:** Plan for and manage the effects of coastal change, by allowing the operation of natural coastal processes and improving the sustainability of current management practices, to maintain and enhance the local landscape character and the area's biodiversity assets. This can lead to habitat creation, flood-risk reduction to built-up areas, and opportunities for recreational activity.

**SEO 3:** Protect the distinct wooded areas of the landscape, particularly through the management of nationally important, ancient semi-natural woodlands, increasing the area of broadleaved woodland where appropriate, while increasing the connectivity of the mosaic of associated habitats notably wooded heath and semi-improved grassland while enhancing the recreational resource.

**SEO 4:** Protect and enhance the strong character and heritage of the urban areas. Plan for the creation of significant new areas of green space and green corridors to provide a framework for new and existing development in urban areas and along major transport routes.

The most relevant SEOs for the Blean landscape are SEO 1 and SEO 3, given the area's strong agricultural heritage and extensive woodland. SEO 2, which focuses on coastal habitat management, is less applicable as the coastal parts of Blean are heavily urbanised with minimal farmland. Meanwhile, SEO 4 addresses urban character and expansion pressures. Although the Blean landscape consists mainly of small villages and hamlets, it is experiencing increasing urban pressures from both the north (Whitstable, Herne Bay) and the south (Canterbury).



## SOIL TYPE AND LAND USE

Land across the proposed cluster is graded from 1 to 4. Prominent levels of grade 1 and 2 land is found at Chartham Hatch while grade 3 and 4 is found to the north of the cluster near Whitstable and Herne Bay. Soil type also ranges from free draining loam to wet clay loam with drainage into stream networks. This platitude of soil types allows for a wide range of diverse farm businesses.

Land use follows the soil type and land classification. Northern areas of the proposed cluster feature more permanent pasture and arable. Central areas feature woodland, top fruit and arable while southern areas host more holdings growing top fruit and soft fruit.

There are several small grazing pastures to the north of the proposed cluster and around wooded areas. Prominent grazing occurs by cattle and sheep across the proposed cluster. Equine can be found more in the northeastern and southwestern areas.

Public rights of way PRow cover most of the area, most notably across the wooded and pasture areas. CRoW common land is also present at Clowes Wood.

Steep hills are present across the proposed cluster which given the predicted affects of climate change could lead to cases of serious soil erosion. Over grazing is also noticeable, visibility the area contains a high density of 'pasture' land uses which opens the opportunities to focus on grassland management and livestock systems.

## PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Canterbury City Council's Local Plan (2017) outlines development, infrastructure improvements and environmental initiatives within the proposed cluster area. The Local Plan designates land for housing and infrastructure while also addressing biodiversity, public health and access to nature.. A consultation ended in early 2024 for a revised local plan lasting till 2040.

Within the proposed cluster area, the Local Plan allocated six development sites, primarily on agricultural land adjacent to urban areas.

Notably, a site north of the University of Kent has been designated for a new housing development of approximately 2,000 homes, along with associated infrastructure. This location, situated centrally within the proposed cluster area, also serves as a habitat corridor between Tyler Hill and Blean Village.

Other key developments and infrastructure projects include the Sturry Link Road, which crosses the south eastern portion of the proposed cluster area, and the Western Bypass, which was originally planned to pass through Rough Common but may be removed from future iterations of the Local Plan.

Additionally, South East Water has proposed a new drinking water reservoir near Broad Oak, in the south eastern part of the proposed cluster area. The reservoir will be supplied by rainfall and the Sarre Penn Stream, with an aim to enhance local water resources.

The recent consultation for the development of an electrical converter station at Minster Marshes has identified the need to upgrade the overhead power cables extending from the site towards the Canterbury Converter Station. From there, a section of lines runs across the proposed cluster area towards the Isle of Sheppey.

# Engagement with local organisations



To develop a list of objectives and priorities related to the proposed farmer cluster, one-to-one meetings were held between FWAG SE and organisations working within the Blean landscape. A wide range of organisations were involved, including those working in nature conservation as well as local government and governmental bodies (e.g., Forestry Commission and Natural England).

The following organisations were included in the engagement process:

- Canterbury City Council (Martin Hall)
- Forestry Commission (Alex Cooke)
- Kent Wildlife Trust (Helen Pitman)
- Natural England (Dan Tuson)
- Nature Friendly Farming Network (Stuart Harris)
- RSPB (Alan Johnson & Nicole Khan)
- South East Water (Michaela James)
- Turtle Dove Friendly Zones (Nicole Khan)
- Woodland Trust



# Delivery objectives and nature priorities



The following table summarises delivery objectives and prioritises that each organisation would like to see incorporated into a future farmer cluster group within the Blean landscape.

## SUMMARY OF PRIORITIES FROM LOCAL ORGANISATION AND INTERESTED PARTIES

Organisation	Priorities
Canterbury City Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support biodiversity, local economy and community access</li> <li>• Create secondary woodland, public rights of way (PROW) and areas for greater societal access</li> <li>• Focus on habitat connectivity</li> <li>• Supports a privately funded cluster</li> <li>• Local policy supports nature recovery, rural businesses and societal access</li> <li>• Priority habitats: complementary woodland areas to existing Blean woodlands</li> </ul>
Forestry Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on carbon sequestration and UK woodland cover targets</li> <li>• Promote sustainable land management, biodiversity and public access</li> <li>• Support native woodland creation for biodiversity corridors</li> <li>• Priority habitats: ancient woodland, lowland heath and wood pasture</li> <li>• Key species: Hazel Dormouse, Nightjar and Heath Fritillary</li> <li>• Supports Pine Marten reintroduction</li> </ul>
Kent Wildlife Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on habitat restoration, sustainable land management and community engagement</li> <li>• Key project: Wilder Blean using European bison and conservation grazing</li> <li>• Farm cluster priorities: biodiversity enhancement, sustainable farming and community involvement</li> <li>• Priority habitats: ancient woodland, chalk grassland, wetlands and heathlands</li> <li>• Key species: Hazel Dormouse, Nightingale, Heath Fritillary, European Beaver</li> </ul>
Nature Friendly Farming Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support nature-friendly farming and farmer collaboration</li> <li>• Encourage knowledge sharing and linking of environmental payments</li> <li>• Promote habitat connectivity across the Blean landscape</li> <li>• Priority habitats: hedgerows and scrub corridors</li> <li>• Key species: Nightingale, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Tree Sparrow</li> </ul>

Organisation	Priorities
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on bird and wildlife conservation through habitat management, species protection, education and engagement</li> <li>• Farm cluster priorities: habitat connectivity (coppices, agroforestry, hedgerows) and sustainable land management</li> <li>• Priority habitats: ancient woodland and heathland</li> <li>• Key species: Nightjar, Adder, Hazel Dormouse and Turtle dove</li> </ul>
South East Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on reducing nitrate leaching through habitat creation and sustainable cropping</li> <li>• Favour catchment-based approach for pollution reduction</li> <li>• Support hedgerows and wildlife corridors for water quality goals</li> </ul>
Woodland Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise carbon sequestration and increasing woodland cover</li> <li>• Promote biodiversity, sustainable land use and public access</li> <li>• Support native woodland creation to link habitats</li> <li>• Priority habitats: ancient woodland and veteran trees</li> <li>• Key species: Heath Fritillary, Hazel Dormouse, Nightingale, Stag Beetle</li> </ul>

## COLLECTIVE GOALS

The organisations involved in the Blean landscape demonstrate a strong, collective commitment to restoring and enhancing biodiversity through sustainable land management, habitat connectivity and community engagement. A shared priority across most organisations is the creation and management of connected habitats, particularly through the restoration of ancient woodlands, development of secondary woodlands, and establishment of hedgerows, scrub corridors and wildlife-friendly margins. This connectivity is seen as vital for supporting species recovery and resilience, especially for key woodland and farmland species such as the Hazel Dormouse, Nightingale, Heath Fritillary butterfly and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

There is a significant emphasis on carbon sequestration and climate resilience, particularly through tree planting and woodland expansion. Community involvement is widely encouraged, whether through public access to nature or environmental education programmes.

While each organisation brings its own focus, the collective vision aligns around nature recovery, landscape-scale conservation and sustainable land use. Together, these organisations advocate for a coordinated, catchment-based approach that balances ecological health with social and economic value, supporting both wildlife and the communities that depend on the land.



# Key Considerations



## ASSESSING THE NEED FOR A CLUSTER

Two approaches were considered for the proposed farmer cluster. One approach would be to combine the existing North East Kent cluster with a potential Blean cluster. This larger cluster could contain sub-groups, with a western Blean sub-group working alongside the existing Thanet-based group to the east. Alternatively, farmers and landowners could work together to create a dedicated Blean landscape cluster focused on building strong relationships within a targeted area. Local organisations agreed that increasing farmer engagement and fostering positive relationships within the agricultural community must be priority for the success of any future farmer cluster.

Some interested parties suggested that the development of a landscape recovery project instead of a traditional farmer cluster group may be more suited to the area's goals. However, this approach would require a large amount of up-front administrative work to develop a project and apply for appropriate grants.

## FUNDING

The interested parties agreed that cluster group funding should allow for:

- Holding trainings, meetings and events
- Administration and group management
- Attracting funding opportunities for habitat creation and bespoke projects within the cluster's boundary
- One-to-one visits and advice for cluster members

It often takes times to build relationships between cluster members and to develop trust between members and a cluster facilitator. Ideally, initial funding should be secured for a minimum three-year period to allow for this relationship building phase to be successful.

Funding is typically secured through one of two routes. Clusters can be privately funded – usually with a combination of fees paid by members and support payments made by a local organisation like a water company or wildlife organisation. Or clusters can be publicly funded through grants such as the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, which pay a set annual fee based on farmer membership numbers. Private and public funding both have their positive and negative considerations for the cluster's operations and goals. Decisions on how to fund the cluster will need to be made by future members.

# Next Steps

Building strong relationships with local farmers is central to the success of a future Blean landscape farmer cluster. The next phase of the project will focus on farmer engagement, beginning with an upcoming workshop designed specifically for local landowners and farmers. This workshop will showcase successful cluster groups from nearby areas, highlighting the practical benefits of collaborative working.

Following the workshop, funding will be required to deliver one-to-one meetings. Farm visits should be offered to discuss individual farm priorities, address concerns and identify opportunities for participation. Developing a farmer-led steering group could also be a valuable next step, ensuring that local voices guide the direction of the cluster. By focusing on collaboration, transparency and shared goals, these actions aim to foster a strong foundation for a farmer cluster that is rooted in the needs of the local agricultural community.

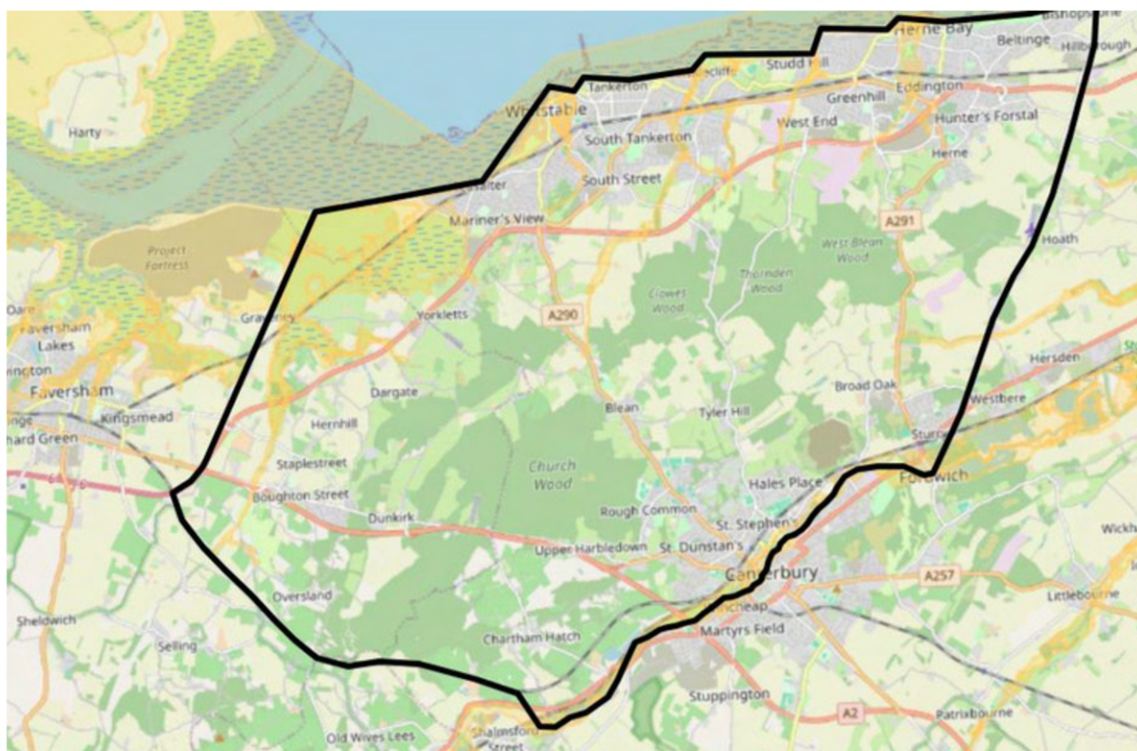
## Concluding Remarks

The findings of this scoping report highlight the considerable potential for establishing a farmer cluster group within the Blean landscape. The area's rich natural heritage, combined with productive agricultural land and increasing development pressures, presents both challenges and opportunities. Through engagement with key local organisations, it is clear that there is strong alignment around nature recovery, habitat connectivity and sustainable land management. A farmer cluster within the Blean landscape could provide a valuable framework for collaboration, knowledge sharing and coordinated environmental action.

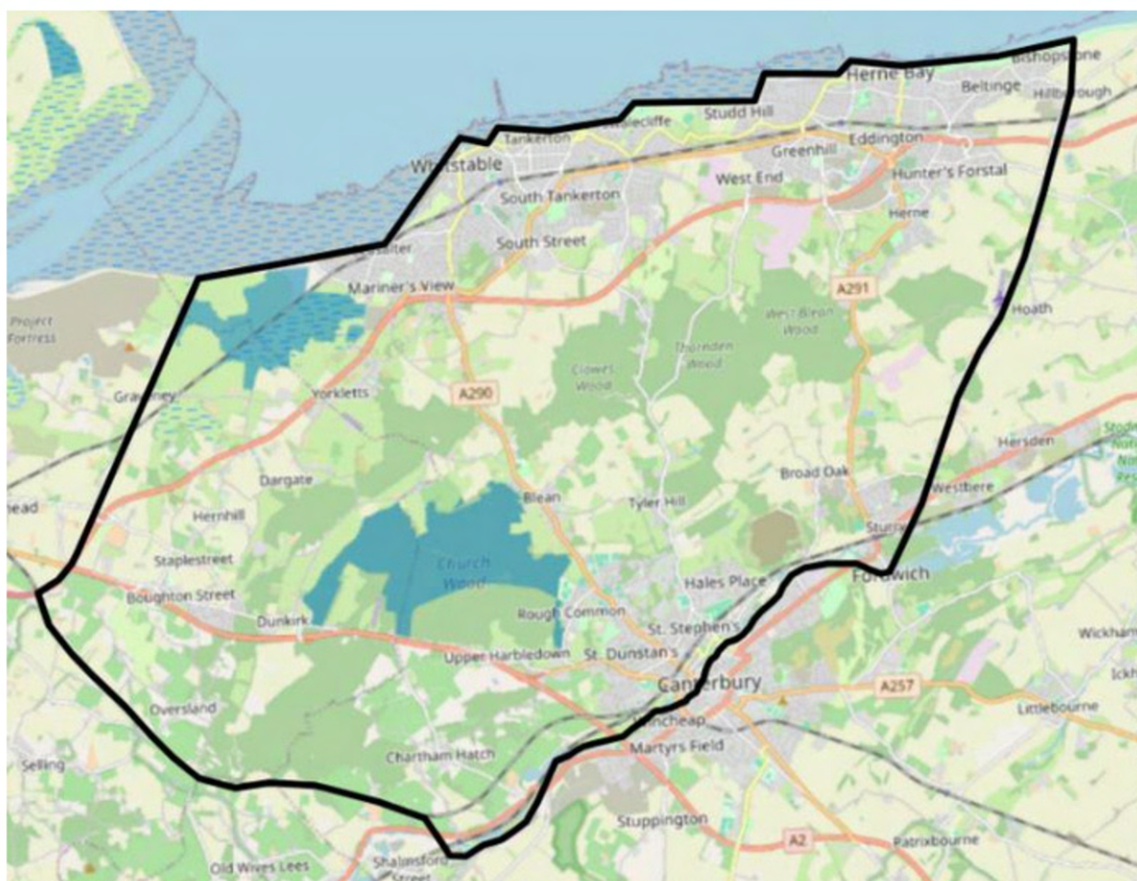
Early and sustained engagement with the farming community will be critical to ensure success of any future group. Establishing trust and building relationships must be prioritised in the initial stages, supported by adequate funding for facilitation and training. With the right structure and support, a Blean landscape cluster group could become a valuable resource for local farmers to address agricultural resilience in a landscape of both ecological and strategic importance.



## APPENDIX 1 - LANDSCAPE MAPS

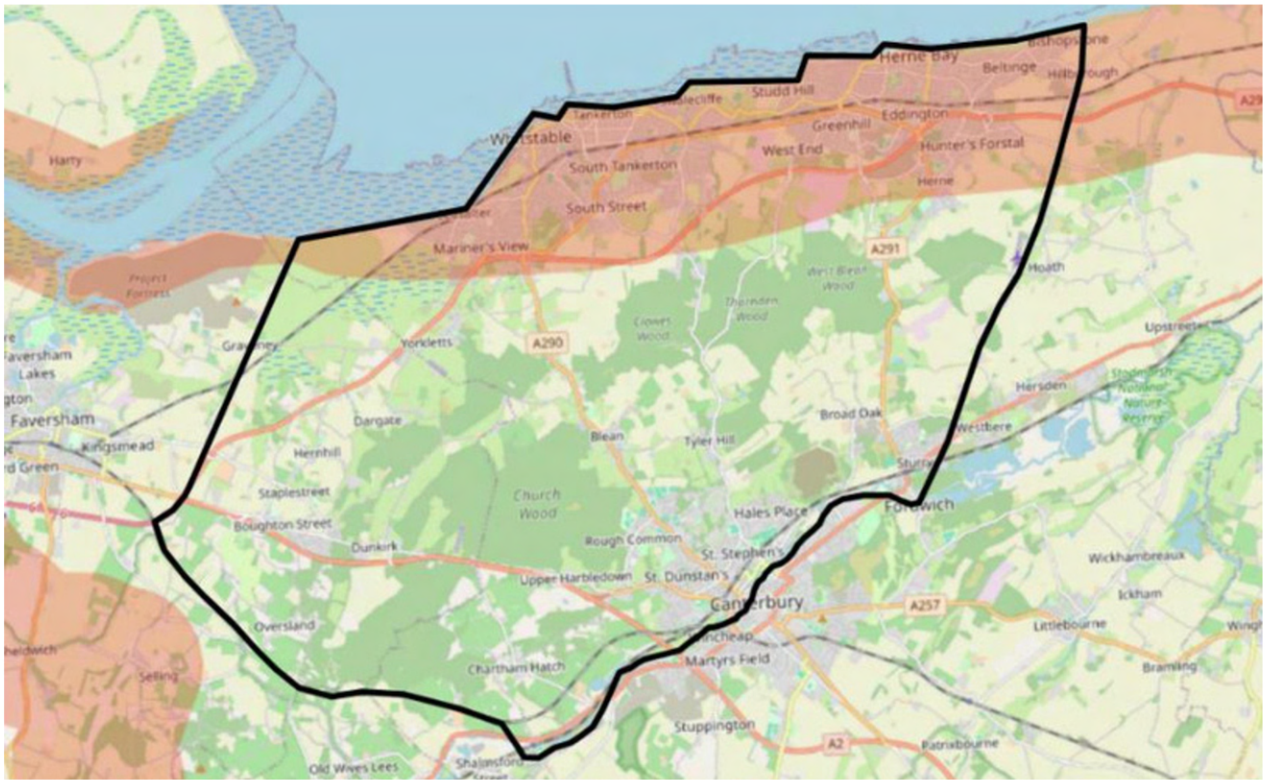


**Figure 1** Flood zone 3 is highlighted in shaded yellow. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp ([thelandapp.com](http://thelandapp.com))

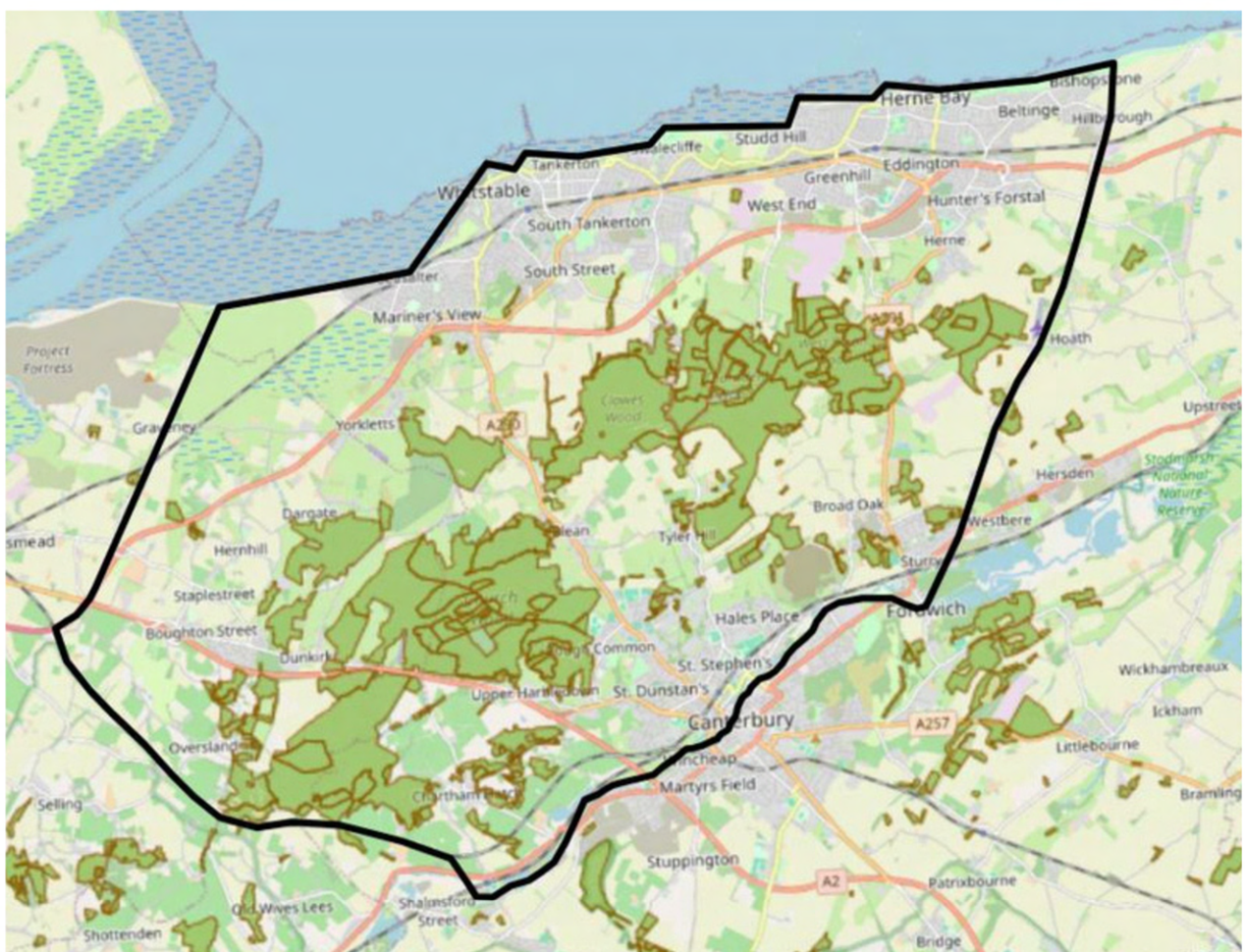


**Figure 2** RSPB Reserves highlighted in blue. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)



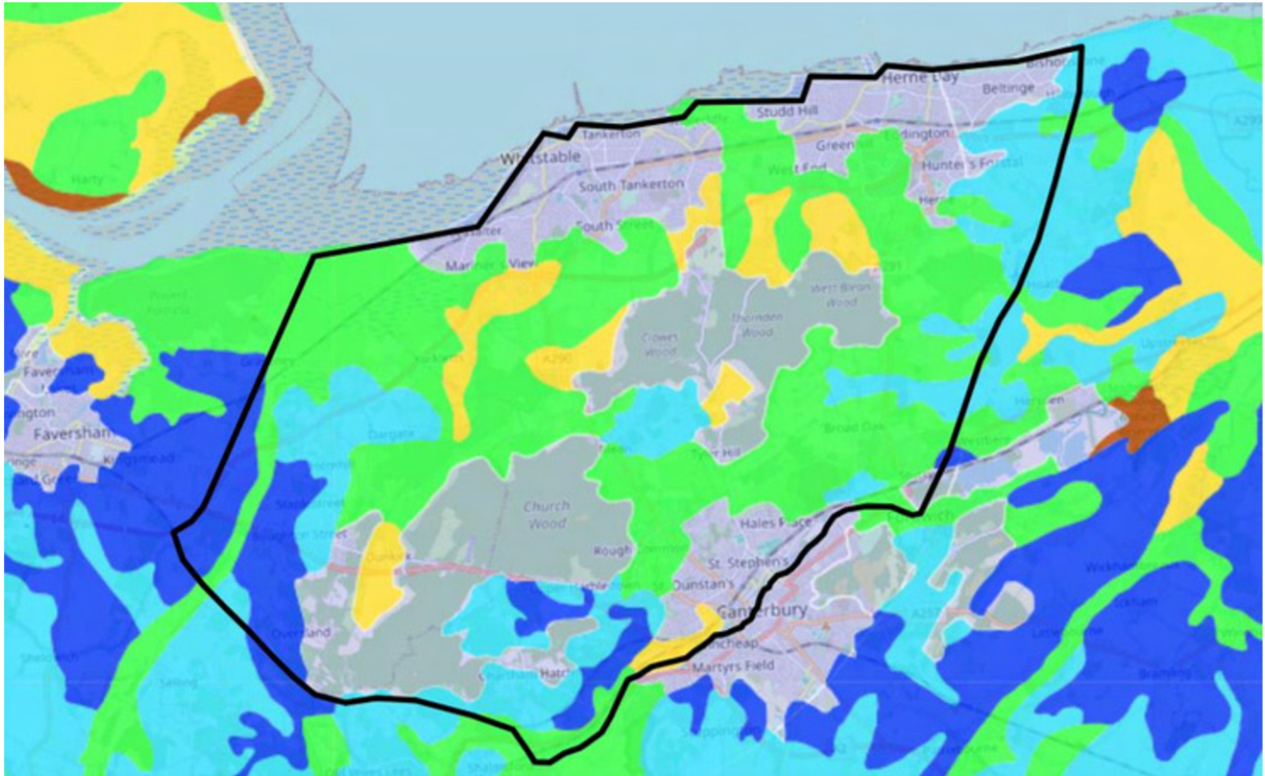


**Figure 3** lines are highlighted in red. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)s

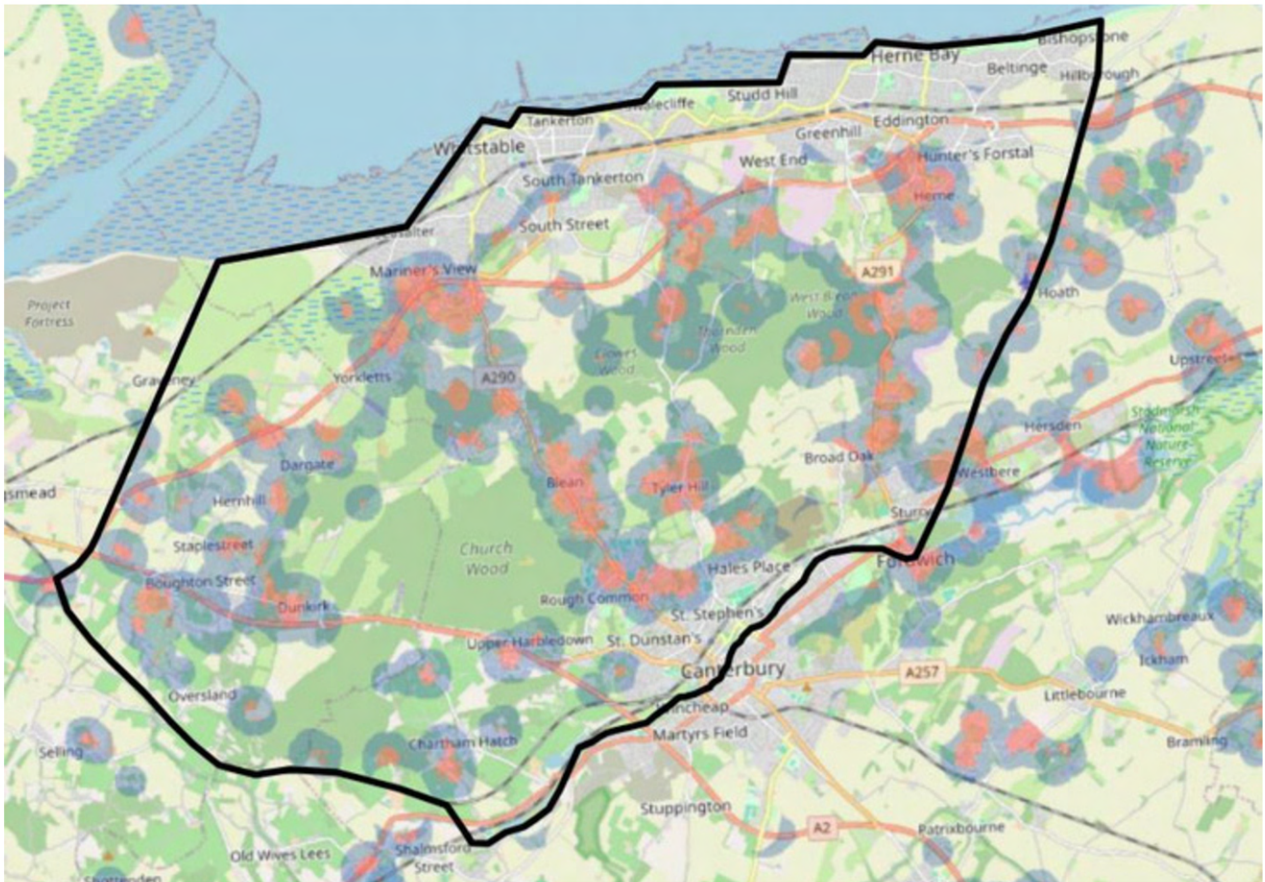


**Figure 4** Ancient Woodland is defined in shaded gold. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)





**Figure 5** Agricultural Land Classification, Prominent areas of green (grade 3 land) are found centrally with grade 1(dark blue), grade 2 (light blue) found to the south, and grade 4 land (yellow) found to the north. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)

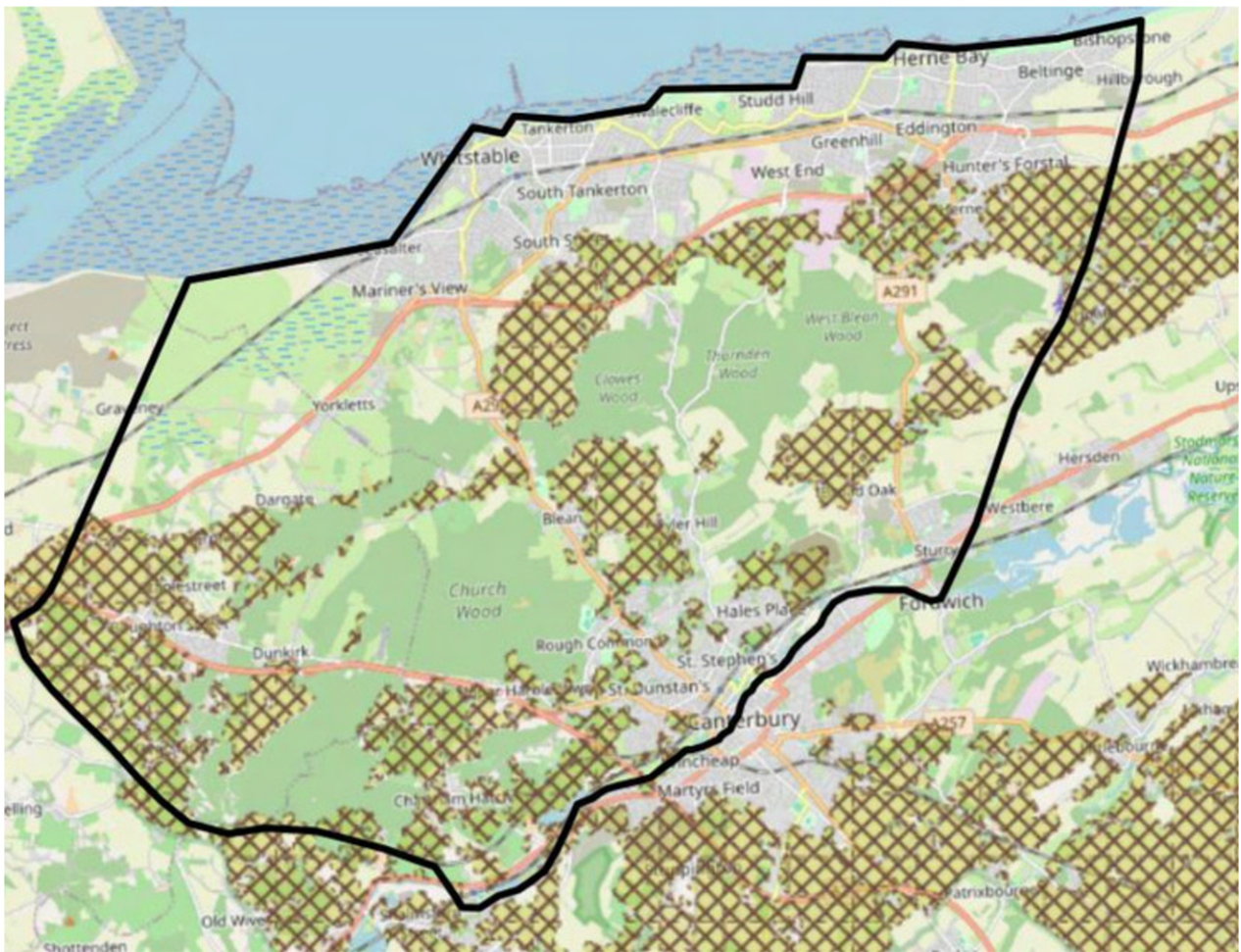


**Figure 6** Great Crested Newt opportunity shaded red with blue buffered zones. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)

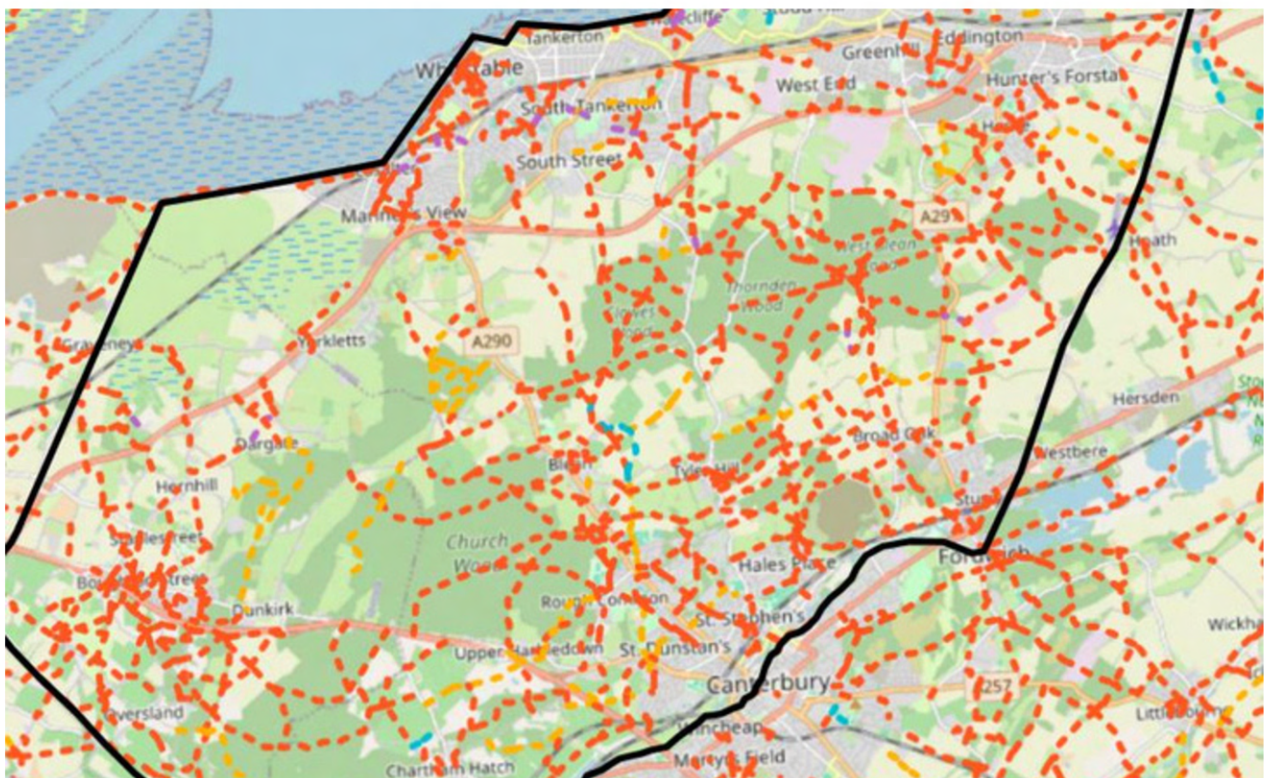






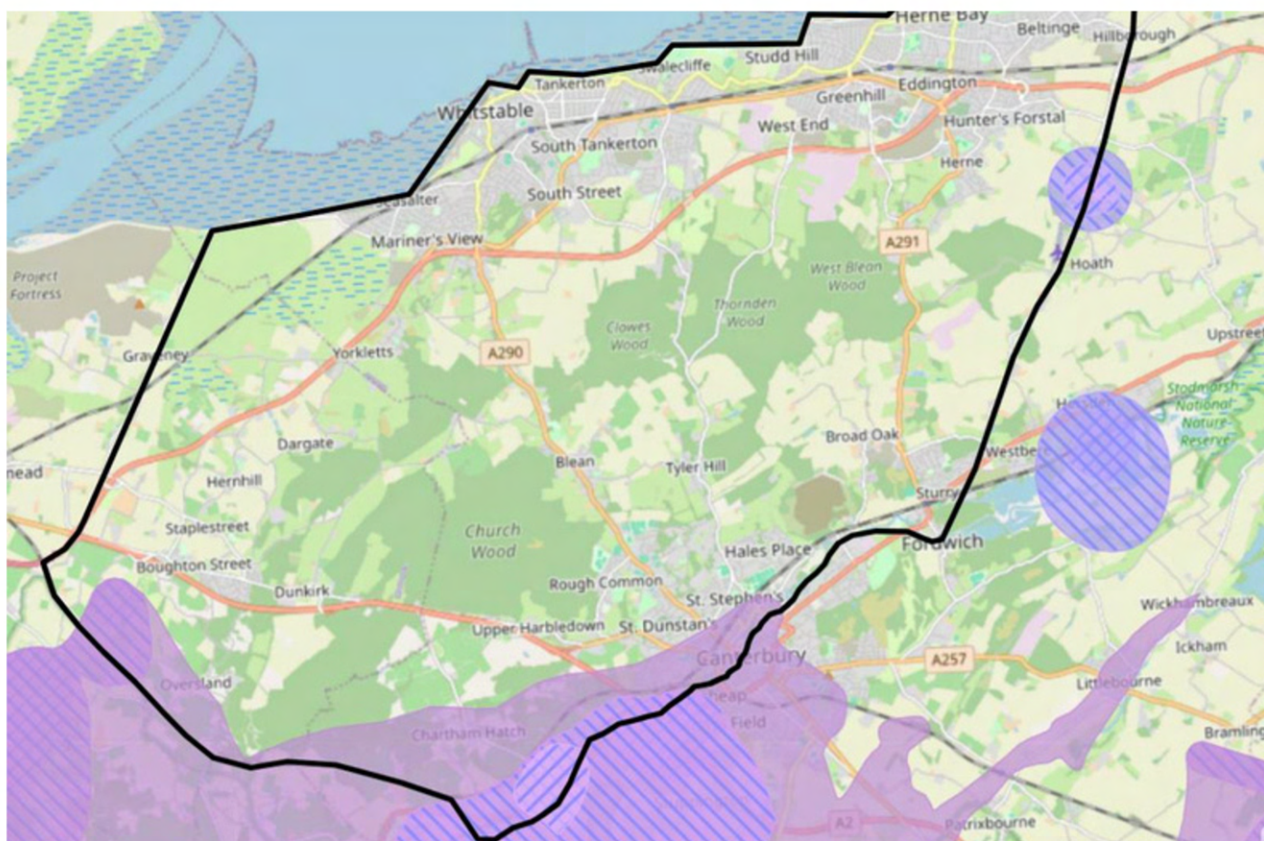


**Figure 9** Less sensitive land for agroforestry opportunities shaded with patterned yellow. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)



**Figure 10** Public rights of way (PROW) mapped in orange, yellow and blue. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp (thelandapp.com)





**Figure 11** Special protection zones (SPZ) patterned in blue with buffered areas shaded in purple. The black boundary line defines the proposed cluster boundary. Image produced courtesy of LandApp ([thelandapp.com](http://thelandapp.com))





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