



# Middle Marches Community Land Trust: External Evaluation Final Report

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## 2. List of Acronyms

BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
CLT	Community Land Trust
LNRS	Local Nature Recovery Strategy
SALC	Shropshire Association of Local Councils
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
MMCLT	Middle Marches Community Land Trust
NNR	National Nature Reserve

## 3. Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone at the Middle Marches Land Trust for all the time and support they have provided to the evaluation. Thank you also to the wide range of people who agreed to participate and take time out of their busy schedules to provide very valuable insights.

All images used in the report have been provided by MMCLT.

## 4. Executive Summary

### Background

The state of nature in the UK has become critical and there is often strong public support for nature recovery initiatives at national and local levels. Recent policy shifts within the government have recognised these concerns, for example, mandating Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) at the County Council level, but council finances are under significant pressure and changes to the planning laws raise concerns that nature will not be prioritised over development. Within this context, there is an appetite amongst communities to have more say over how land in their communities is used and to have the opportunity to protect biodiversity and nature that is important to them.

### The Middle Marches Community Land Trust

In response to these challenges and trends, Middle Marches Community Land Trust (MMCLT) was established in 2019 to empower communities to take ownership and control of land that they considered valuable for nature and protect that land in perpetuity. Adopting a Community Land Trust (CLT) model with crowdfunding campaigns, MMCLT provides residents

across The Marches (Shropshire, Herefordshire and Powys) with an important opportunity to acquire land, complementing other organisations and institutions working on nature-recovery. At the same time, MMCLT has made its mark through events and conferences that convene, co-ordinate and mobilise collective effort to support nature-recovery. This work has been nationally recognised and offers important lessons to others who are looking for ways to promote nature recovery.

### Evaluation Purpose and Approach

This independent evaluation has been commissioned by MMCLT with the following objectives: i) to provide accountability to MMCLT shareholders and partners by documenting MMCLT's results; ii) to identify where MMCLT has been effective and not so effective and why; iii) to make recommendations for how MMCLT can be strengthened going forward; iv) to learn lessons that can inform others working on nature-recovery.

The evaluation has interviewed 30+ stakeholders across the sector, reviewed 20+ documents, conducted two site visits, attended one MMCLT conference and held three workshops with the MMCLT Board.



## Key Conclusions

**C1:** MMCLT has provided important strategic, nimble and innovative support to nature recovery efforts across The Marches, using its awareness of the local context and relationships to ensure it is complementary to other initiatives whilst operating at pace.

**C2:** The land that MMCLT has acquired is of significant importance for biodiversity which is now protected in perpetuity. However, there is a need for MMCLT to refine some of its organisational systems to keep pace with its continued growth.

**C3:** MMCLT is unique as one of a handful of CLTs focused on nature. It has demonstrated that the CLT model is an important tool in the nature-recovery toolbox, contributing to large-scale nature-recovery strategies. The CLT model provides an important opportunity to

mobilise community interests to protect land and compete in land acquisition markets where other conservation organisations can't or won't.

**C4:** MMCLT has trialled a variety of land management approaches, learning lessons about how these can best be delivered, under what circumstances and what this means for the roles and responsibilities of MMCLT and its partners.

**C5:** MMCLT has had a catalytic effect on nature recovery and provides a model that is excellent value for money. It now has an important role to show how this model can respond to high demand whilst maintaining the unique characteristics that make it successful.

## Key Recommendations

**R1:** Map out MMCLT's existing land assets and management responsibilities that clearly sets out ongoing liabilities and resourcing required.

**R2:** Informed by a clear understanding of MMCLT's liabilities and responsibilities develop a business plan that includes income generation activity to cover MMCLT operating costs.

**R3:** Review MMCLT's land management models and resolve any outstanding concerns whilst setting out options that can inform acquisitions and management agreements.

**R4:** Develop a plan to augment the social capital of MMCLT in order to safeguard from

disruptions that may be caused by changes in Board members or other key associates.

**R5:** Develop a 1-2 year out-reach strategy that is accompanied by a guide and set of criteria to facilitate future management of conferences and events.

**R6:** Work with local government to develop an action plan for how MMCLT can support two to three parish clusters as a proof-of-concept for how local mobilisation can deliver Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

**R7:** Hold ½ day Board meetings to reflect on progress every three months.

**R8:** Identify opportunities to amplify MMCLT's objectives and vision, scaling-up or helping to replicate the MMCLT model.

## 5. Context

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on the planet<sup>1</sup> and continues to decline in many places.<sup>2</sup> Proposed changes to UK planning laws are seen by some as regressive and a potential further risk to nature.<sup>3</sup> In response, calls for nature recovery are growing louder and the biodiversity and climate crises are concerns that have climbed up the political agenda in recent years.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, this has led to moves by the government to promote nature recovery, for example, mandating all county councils to have Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).<sup>5</sup>

However, councils are already under financial constraints and the main source of funding that may fuel the LNRSs is likely to come from proceeds from Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) mechanisms which are nature-credits designed to offset nature-depletion caused by developments.<sup>6</sup> In other words, where nature recovery within the LNRS is funded by the government, it is likely paid for by nature depletion somewhere else.

This dichotomy presents a confused picture of national intent, which does not promote confidence at the local level where the impact on nature is played out. Many citizens are concerned that land dear to them will be lost for future generations to enjoy and there is also a sense of disempowerment from planning processes.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, the outlet for this concern has been through volunteering or donating to large well-established conservation organisations but these organisations tend to be retreating from the direct purchase of land.<sup>8</sup>

This opens up the opportunity for new approaches to conservation and community mobilisation through Community Land Trusts (CLTs) focused on nature. Whilst well-established in Scotland, CLTs in England and Wales are typically focused on community infrastructure, and so the advent of the Middle Marches Community Land Trust (MMCLT) provides a relatively unique model for nature-recovery.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. The Middle Marches Community Land Trust

MMCLT was set up in 2019 as a Society for the Benefit of the Community with a mission to enhance nature and biodiversity in the Middle Marches area of Shropshire, Herefordshire and

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<sup>1</sup> Natural History Museum Biodiversity Intactness Index

<sup>2</sup> <https://naturallengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/29/state-of-nature/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/changes-to-the-planning-bill>; comments made by MP Helen Morgan at the MMCLT Parish Council Conference 03/10/25

<sup>4</sup> A 2025 survey of how people in the UK feel about the nature and climate crises found high levels of concern and a desire for strong action to be taken: <https://climateoutreach.org/btc/2025/chapter-5/#how-people-feel>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategies/local-nature-recovery-strategies>

<sup>6</sup> <https://defraenvironment.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/07/incorporating-local-nature-recovery-strategies-when-planning-for-biodiversity-net-gain/>

<sup>7</sup> In the *Britain Talks Climate & Nature 2025* survey of the UK public, respondents were asked “When you think about the world that young people and future generations will live in, how do you feel?” Selecting all that apply from a list of options, 55% selected “worried”, 52% selected “uncertain” and 28% selected “frustrated”; <https://climateoutreach.org/btc/2025/report/>

<sup>8</sup> KII CT3, KII CT2

<sup>9</sup> KII CT4, KII CT2

Powys. Through acquiring land directly or working with existing landowners, large and small, MMCLT aims to reconnect and restore fragmented habitats, creating connectivity that allows species to migrate, find new territories and adapt to environmental changes.

The MMCLT mission responds to an important study commissioned in 2015 by the National Trust and authored by Dr Richard Keymer<sup>10</sup>, the current Chair of MMCLT, which provides a strategy to link the Long Mynd Nature Reserve with the Stiperstones Nature Reserve. Associated with this study is the “Stepping Stones Project”,<sup>11</sup> a scoping paper that set out the basis for establishing MMCLT, co-authored by Dr. Richard Keymer and another MMCLT Board member, Jonathan Brown. Focused on nature corridors, the Stepping Stones project requires land to be managed with nature in mind, either through existing landowners or the transfer of ownership to nature-focused land managers.

Whilst land acquisition and community engagement are key strategies of MMCLT, it has also provided technical advice to other landowners and convened events and conferences to promote nature recovery. As vocal advocates for improved land management for nature, MMCLT has promoted and supported progressive policies such as the LNRS whilst also championing hyper-local actions, such as Species Action Plans (SAPs)<sup>12</sup> and the development of a Town and Parish council workbook directly linked to the LNRS.<sup>13</sup>

Key achievements of MMCLT to date are:

- Acquired four sites, totalling 79 acres with an ongoing campaign to acquire a fifth site
- Raised over £880,000, mostly through public appeals as well as one loan and one Heritage Lottery Fund grant
- Held 13 conferences, including two annual National Meadow Conferences
- Currently has 200 shareholders
- In 2025, two of its sites were formally included by Natural England into the new Stiperstones Landscape National Nature Reserve (NNR) – a first for any CLT nationally.

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<sup>10</sup>Keymer, R. (2015) *Stiperstones to Long Mynd Landscape Scale Project: Stepping Stones Part 1 Final Report*

<sup>11</sup> Brown, J. & Keymer (2016) *The Stepping Stones Project: The Creation of a new landowning organisation able to hold land in perpetuity*

<sup>12</sup> <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/info-sheets/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/nature-recovery-town-parish-councils/>

The MMCLT journey:



## 7. Evaluation purpose, scope and methodology

MMCLT has been operating for several years, it has demonstrated a level of success and is looking now at how best to continue to scale-up. At the same time, it is attracting more and more shareholders as well as institutional grant makers. MMCLT has a responsibility, therefore, to demonstrate accountability for those funds received and encourage further funding in the future. Hence, the purpose of this evaluation is to provide an independent assessment of MMCLT and its achievements since its inception until November 2025, and to inform its strategic direction going forward. The evaluation objectives are to: i) to provide accountability to MMCLT shareholders and partners by documenting and verifying MMCLT's results; ii) to identify where MMCLT has been effective and not so effective and why; iii) to make recommendations for how MMCLT can be strengthened going forward; iv) to learn lessons that can inform others working on nature-recovery.

The methodology taken is a theory-based evaluation, informed by two workshops with the MMCLT Board, two site visits, attendance of a MMCLT conference, a literature review and over 30 key informant interviews. These interviews were from a mix of stakeholders and are referenced in the report footnotes as follows: MMCLT Board Members (BM), MMCLT shareholders (S), parish councillors, county councillors and council employees (C), conference attendees (CA), well-established conservation trusts and ecologists (CT), MMCLT land management volunteers and paid co-ordinators (VC), the University of Exeter (A), and representatives of others within the national CLT network (CN).

Please see Annex A for a detailed evaluation methodology.

The primary audience for this report is the MMCLT Board, its shareholders and funders. A secondary audience are those working on nature-recovery who wish to learn from the CLT model. The remainder of this report provides the key findings of the evaluation (Section 8), the conclusions (Section 9), lessons (Section 10), and recommendations (Section 11).

## 8. Key Findings

The key findings are organised according to standard criteria for evaluations<sup>14</sup> which include 1) **Relevance:** is the intervention doing the right things? 2) **Coherence:** how well does the intervention fit? 3) **Effectiveness:** is the intervention achieving its objectives? 4) **Efficiency:** how well are resources being used? 5) **Impact:** what difference does the intervention make? 6) **Sustainability:** will the benefits last?

### a. Relevance and Coherence

***Finding 1: MMCLT’s model is highly relevant to the context, tapping into public concern for nature and providing a unique avenue for local residents to protect and connect with their environment.***

Public concern for nature across Shropshire is high.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, there are concerns about changes in planning laws and the erosion of key government institutions responsible for nature. MMCLT have tapped into that public concern and provide a unique avenue for community-led land acquisition that is empowering for local residents,<sup>16</sup> without which they would have no opportunity to protect the land that MMCLT has acquired.<sup>17</sup>

The MMCLT model is particularly relevant as the larger conservation organisations that might also be able to buy land are typically unable to respond quickly enough to land acquisition opportunities on the open market, may not wish to buy the smaller parcels of land that MMCLT has acquired to date, and are withdrawing from acquiring new land in any case.<sup>18</sup>

The relevance of the MMCLT model is demonstrated most clearly in its success, having crowdfunded significant sums from local residents to buy four sites. The local amenity element to the acquisitions is important, without which crowdfunding would not be as successful as communities are unlikely to fund what they do not care about. The appeal of MMCLT is increased by being part of something bigger - that their acquisitions are strategically valuable to the Marches (see Finding 2) and that their protection is “in perpetuity”.<sup>19</sup> As one respondent commented, there is a real appeal to local people that they are “putting a jigsaw piece back into place”.<sup>20</sup>

As one of only a handful of CLTs in England and Wales to focus on nature recovery, MMCLT has been recognised for its unique approach nationally<sup>21</sup> (see also Finding 9), has provided advice

<sup>14</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recommended evaluation criteria <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/development-co-operation-evaluation-and-effectiveness/evaluation-criteria.html>

<sup>15</sup> Shropshire Council (2024) *Local Nature Recovery Strategy: General Public Survey Report*

<sup>16</sup> This view is shared by one respondent from a large conservation organisation who noted that fundraising for land acquisition is relatively easy as people like the idea that they are buying land that they can be connected to (KII CT3).

<sup>17</sup> KII S2, KII CT3, KII CT2, KII C3, KII

<sup>18</sup> The National Trust and the Shropshire Wildlife Trust are consolidating their land acquisitions and are concerned about the burden associated with owning many sites (KIIs with both organisations).

<sup>19</sup> KII VC3

<sup>20</sup> KII PC4

<sup>21</sup> KII CN2; winner of CLT 2024 award

to other CLTs focused on nature<sup>22</sup> and stands out for its ability to channel the power of the community into nature recovery.<sup>23</sup>

***Finding 2: The work of MMCLT provides an important complementarity to other organisations and institutions through its land acquisition model, events and technical assistance, and is aligned to regional and national nature recovery strategies.***

MMCLT was established in response to the Stepping Stones project that proposed a strategy to strengthen nature corridors between two major protected sites in Shropshire. The project has wide support from major stakeholders engaged in conservation and nature-recovery and there is strong evidence that the work of MMCLT is an important complement to other initiatives in the area.<sup>24</sup>

MMCLT’s relevance and complementarity is enabled by the extensive connections and local knowledge of the MMCLT board members.<sup>25</sup> These local connections mean that MMCLT has good awareness of where the gaps are in conservation and nature-recovery efforts and how to maximise the strategic value of MMCLT.

“MMCLT is massively important”<sup>26</sup>

This is evidenced not only in the relevance and added value of the CLT model (see Finding 1) but also in the perceived value of their technical assistance and events. The latter has become a strong association of MMCLT with significant support and appreciation from attendees at its events, providing practical guidance, a co-ordination and convening function and positioning MMCLT as a thought leader (see also Finding 6). As such, the combined land acquisition and convening power of MMCLT makes it a valued asset recognised by Natural England, National Trust and Shropshire Wildlife Trust.<sup>27</sup>

Going forward, the context within which MMCLT operates can be expected to change and these changes are likely to increase the added value of MMCLT. Currently underway are systemic shifts that are intended to strengthen nature-recovery objectives regionally and nationally with a convergence of interests across a broad spectrum of stakeholders (see also Finding 12). For example, county-level LNRS mandated by central government will provide a broader strategy than the Stepping Stones project, albeit with similar nature corridor and recovery objectives.<sup>28</sup> This combined with the 2021 Environment Act<sup>29</sup> provides a more comprehensive and far-reaching strategy that MMCLT activity aligns with, elevating the significance of their work.

<sup>22</sup> KII CN1

<sup>23</sup> KII A1, KII CN2

<sup>24</sup> KII CN2, KII CT3, KII CT2, KII C3

<sup>25</sup> KII CT2

<sup>26</sup> KII CT2

<sup>27</sup> Incorporation of MMCLT sites in National Nature Reserves is indicative of Natural England’s confidence in MMCLT and there is regular partnering and collaborating between MMCLT and National Trust/Shropshire Wildlife Trust

<sup>28</sup> <https://next.shropshire.gov.uk/environment/shropshire-and-telford-wrekin-local-nature-recovery-strategy/>

<sup>29</sup> Section 102 of the Environment Act 2021 that Public authorities must aim to conserve and enhance biodiversity through the exercise of their functions.

## b. Efficiency and Effectiveness

**Finding 3: The CLT model is nimble and able to respond quickly, allowing MMCLT to be competitive within land acquisition markets and seize opportunities that other organisations may miss.**

From the outset, the CLT model has been characterised as being light-footed and was chosen, in part, for the simplicity of its set-up.<sup>30</sup> Managed by a board of 12 volunteers (although typically MMCLT has not had a full board), decisions can be made quickly whilst support for their vision and mission can buy them time from land sellers.<sup>31</sup> MMCLT have proven themselves to be efficient and effective at raising funds, for example, raising £400,000 in 10 days to buy High Leasowes. As one respondent commented, “they just get things done”.<sup>32</sup>

Central to all of this, is MMCLT’s demonstrated ability to deliver successful crowdfunding campaigns. Learning and adapting over time, MMCLT has refined its crowdfunding model to be an efficient mechanism for channelling financial contributions from communities. Combined with grassroots communication campaigns and leveraging their networks and events to spread the word, MMCLT has demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilise communities. As one supporter commented, “loads of my neighbours know of them in one way or another”.<sup>33</sup> They have also been able to top up funding through a combination of interest-free loans and grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The table below summarises the acquisition approaches that have been adopted to date.

Table 1: Summary of land acquisitions by MMCLT

Location	Start date	Final purchase	Duration	Funds raised	Acquisition process
Cudwell Meadow	2020	2021	6 months	£25,000	Local citizens approached MMCLT to buy a wetland meadow, using MMCLT as a conduit and legal framework to make the purchase.
Norbury Hill	2020	2021	6 mths	£45,000 k crowdfunding and a long-term interest-free loan	100 acres came on the market and MMCLT purchased half whilst an individual known to MMCLT purchased the other half.
High Leasowes	2022	2023	10 days	£400,000 crowdfunding	Local citizens approached MMCLT to buy meadows on the edge of Church Stretton and largely managed the crowdfunding themselves with assistance from MMCLT as a conduit and

<sup>30</sup> MMCLT Progress Workshop

<sup>31</sup> For example, the owner of Minsterley Meadows preferred to sell to MMCLT, extending the deadline to allow them to raise the funds they needed.

<sup>32</sup> KII CT3

<sup>33</sup> KII S3

					legal framework to make the purchase.
Minsterley Meadows	2023	2024	11 months	£158,000 crowdfunding and £224,000 from Heritage Lottery Fund	The meadows came onto the open market and MMCLT liaised with the owners to provide enough time to raise the funds. MMCLT led the campaign but fell short of the asking price, topping up the balance with Heritage Lottery Funding.
White Grit	August 2025	Dec 2025	5 months	Ongoing target £45,000	The owners were known to one of the MMCLT Board Members and after struggling to sell their cottage due to it being part of an Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), they negotiated with MMCLT to split the cottage from the SSSI and sell that to MMCLT without going to market.

The crowdfunding success of MMCLT is laudable (however, as a comparison study was not conducted as part of this evaluation, it is unclear how this may compare to others).<sup>34</sup> Raising funds from the public is helped by the geographic variation of the sites that have been acquired but there is a risk of campaign fatigue if appealing to the same supporters each time and potentially coming into competition with other organisations.<sup>35</sup>

***Finding 4: Opportunities to acquire land are unpredictable and a challenge to defining long-term strategies. Whilst MMCLT has developed sensible criteria to guide purchasing, there is uncertainty as to whether purchase of SSSIs is the best use of limited resources.***

One challenge for MMCLT is that it is not possible to accurately predict where land will become available for sale. This means that MMCLT cannot develop a strategy that includes specific sites and there is a risk that the site that seems to be most important today may not be tomorrow. In other words, MMCLT cannot eliminate the risk that in the future more important land will become available at a time when it has reached a threshold for land acquisitions (see Finding 11).

<sup>34</sup> The majority of the respondents interviewed for the evaluation highlighted the success of the MMCLT model to crowdfund. However, this is not unique to MMCLT: a CLT in Harrogate has had similar success raising over £800,000 for one site and it has been a model in use by well-established conservation trusts for many years.

<sup>35</sup> KII CT2

To manage this challenge, MMCLT has developed a set of evidence-based criteria to guide their purchases<sup>36</sup> and to decide whether land should be acquired or not.<sup>37</sup> These include:

1. the position of the site in the surrounding ecological network
2. status of the land for conservation
3. vulnerability of the land to change
4. the potential of the site to develop increased biodiversity
5. value of the site for landscape, history, water catchment
6. value of the site for carbon capture and sequestration
7. existing public access and proximity to a local community
8. potential for community engagement
9. existence of local support / partnerships
10. potential costs / likelihood of income generation
11. other approaches that could be used to keep the interest of the site intact
12. views of strategic partner organisations

During the evaluation, questions were raised about whether acquisition of SSSI are the most strategic given that they, in theory, already have a level of protected status. Indeed, this contributed to a decision by another organisation not to purchase Minsterley Meadows and has clearly influenced buyers of the cottage at White Grit.<sup>38</sup> However, MMCLT counter this view by highlighting that SSSIs are only protected in principle and, in reality, Natural England and Natural Resources Wales are unable to monitor and enforce SSSI maintenance by existing landowners. This view is supported by the majority of evaluation respondents and further substantiated by the original advertisement for Minsterley Meadows<sup>39</sup> that suggested it would make a good horse paddock – a land use which would be at odds to maintaining its SSSI status.<sup>40</sup>

Despite some questioning of MMCLT's land strategy and a suggestion that Stepping Stones partners are more closely consulted when choosing land to acquire<sup>41</sup>, overall, there is consensus that MMCLT sites provide good strategic value and support the principles and objectives of the Stepping Stones strategy<sup>42</sup> and MMCLT objectives.

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<sup>36</sup> Lawton (2010) *Making Space for Nature: A review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network*

<sup>37</sup> Middle Marches CLT: Draft Land Purchase Policy, 2021

<sup>38</sup> KII CT3

<sup>39</sup> Land agent advertisement – Roger, Parry & Partners

<sup>40</sup> Whilst it is possible to graze horses on an SSSI site, it would need to be managed very carefully with long periods where the horses were not present and a regular faeces collection regime. A number of respondents felt that most horse owners were unlikely to do this and hence there was a risk that if the land was not acquired by MMCLT it would not be managed in line with its SSSI status. (KII PC4)

<sup>41</sup> KII CT2

<sup>42</sup> Apart from some questions of whether SSSI were the most relevant sites to purchase, all respondents agreed that the land MMCLT has acquired was appropriate.

***Finding 5: MMCLT’s engagements with local residents and other organisations are founded on a sensitive, respectful and knowledgeable approach which has led to high-levels of respect for the organisation across the region. However, gaps in early planning and communication around land management has led to confusion and, in one instance, tension.***

MMCLT as an organisation and its board members are highly regarded and respected by a significant majority of those that they engage with. Board members have strong ecological credentials and are well connected to local residents and organisations. Furthermore, MMCLT’s energy is seen as an important asset to the conservation sector in the region.

While a relatively new organisation, the Board members of MMCLT are well established in conservation circles and the local authorities, with members including a parish clerk, a barrister, land agent, university lecturer and ecologists who used to work for the National Trust and Natural England.<sup>43</sup> These connections have helped MMCLT to quickly form good working relationships with key stakeholders and their obvious commitment to nature and reputational distance from more established organisations provides an opportunity to play the role of trusted convenor. This convening role, largely through MMCLT events and conferences, was highlighted repeatedly during this evaluation as a key benefit of MMCLT’s work.

“They’ve changed the local conservation scene probably more than anything else; they are so dynamic and active.”<sup>44</sup>

As such, MMCLT has found itself taking on a role which, whilst welcome, was not necessarily originally envisaged. A good example of this, is MMCLT’s convening role to organise and motivate parish councils in support of the LNRS, a role that might be assumed of the County Council but lacks the resources to do so (see Finding 9).<sup>45</sup>

Whilst these additional roles add a burden and expectation on MMCLT, it is not without benefits. For example, the relationship with the National Trust means that, when needed, MMCLT can tap into National Trust volunteer networks for surge support.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the conferences that MMCLT organise provide influence and an income stream that is important to MMCLT (see Finding 6).

However, confusion has arisen over land management at MMCLT sites which has in one instance strained relations between MMCLT and a key partner.<sup>47</sup> This was due to a misunderstanding of how the site would be managed and who would own it. MMCLT has learned lessons from this which has informed the operational models it offers volunteer groups who wish to help steward MMCLT land. Whilst lessons have been learnt,<sup>48</sup> residual technical issues remain at two sites which suggests some operational details still need to be worked through.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The Chair of MMCLT has also been involved in the Langdyke Countryside Trust which has similarities to MMCLT.

<sup>44</sup> KII CT2

<sup>45</sup> KII C3, KII S1

<sup>46</sup> KII CT2, KII VC3

<sup>47</sup> KII VC3, KII VC2, KII BM4, KII BM5, KII BM3

<sup>48</sup> KII BM5, KII BM4, KII PC4

<sup>49</sup> MMCLT do not have a documented approach to land management and service charges; KII VC3, KII VC2

***Finding 6: MMCLT events and conferences are highly regarded, resulting in regular oversubscription as well as a willingness-to-pay model that provides MMCLT with a valuable income. MMCLT is balancing demand and supply for its services by actively working in partnership with other organisations to share the workload and subject matter expertise.***

There is strong evidence that MMCLT events and conferences are well regarded, attracting respected speakers and are well-attended. The content is seen as relevant and the events as well organised. These events have been an important part of establishing MMCLT's reputation and provide visibility which enables a level of influence that might not be expected for such a small and relatively new organisation.

Time and again, respondents throughout the evaluation spoke highly of the events, such as conferences, site visits, educational walks and talks. These serve not only to raise awareness but also to connect people, enabling the sharing of ideas and learning.<sup>50</sup> The success of these events has led to the National Trust, Caring for Gods Acre, SALC and the LNRS commissioning MMCLT to develop and deliver conferences on their behalf. In partnership with Marches Meadow Group, MMCLT has also developed working relations with Emorsgate Seeds, Plantlife, and the Floodplain Meadows partnership. In 2026, the third national meadows conference will be delivered, this time in partnership with Kew (Wakehurst).

The events have been able to attract an impressive range and calibre of guest speakers which increase their appeal to target audiences. There has also been a good range of formats for the events, including walks, talks and more formal conferences. The conference that was observed for this evaluation was well-attended and received good feedback from participants, although the format was reliant on lecture-style presentations. More participatory approaches mixed in with presentations may be advantageous, serving multiple purposes: i) mixing up the format to keep participants engaged for longer, ii) giving participants more opportunity to share their own experiences and knowledge, iii) networking and building working relationships, and iv) giving the conferences more tangible measures of success such as action plans that can be followed up on later. It is understood that such variations are already planned for 2026.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst these events are no doubt a strong asset for MMCLT and conservation stakeholders more broadly, they are frequent, numerous and risk over-stretching the organisation. To manage this, MMCLT has expanded its Board allowing more human resources to be freed up and allocated to conferences and events. At the same time, it is increasingly working with partner organisations to provide extra capacity and support to cover a wide range of topics.

***Finding 7: MMCLT's crowdfunding model ensures there is community buy-in for its acquisitions. This increases the likelihood that volunteer groups can be found for on-going land management but does not guarantee it, with the potential of adding too much strain on MMCLT's Board members.***

MMCLT's model to manage land for nature in-perpetuity is a key part of its appeal to its supporters whilst the crowdfunding approach has the effect of testing community interest in the land that MMCLT seeks to buy. These two aspects of MMCLT's model are important and related and can provide a potential brake on MMCLT purchases.

<sup>50</sup> KII C2, KII S1

<sup>51</sup> Emerging Findings Workshop with MMCLT

Once land is purchased, MMCLT relies on volunteers to manage that land and maximise its biodiversity, guided by a management plan approved by the MMCLT board. In practice, the approach varies as follows:

- Minsterley Meadows is managed by Marches Meadow Group and a paid external consultant who is funded through a 3 year Heritage Lottery grant.
- Cudwell Meadow management is led by a local resident and a team of neighbours with support from National Trust volunteers as needed.
- Norbury Hill is mostly managed by an individual MMCLT Board member with ad hoc volunteer support from the National Trust and MMCLT networks.
- High Leasowes is managed by a Trust set up after the land was purchased.

The variety of management models demonstrates an adaptability of MMCLT that allows it to respond to the context, whether it be land that is in populated and affluent areas or in remote areas with fewer directly connected residents. So far, these models have been successful in helping nature to thrive but there is a responsibility to ensure that the land is well managed today and in perpetuity.

This has implications for the capacity of MMCLT to manage sites as there are economies of scale that may not work in MMCLT's favour, as it is the number of sites, rather than the size of the sites, that can drive the workload for any land manager. For example, liaison with neighbours, management of site teams and administrative work all increase in line with the number of sites rather than the size of sites.<sup>52</sup> As an organisation buying up relatively small and disparate parcels of land, there is concern that MMCLT will quickly reach a threshold without further capacity within its Board or other management structure (see Finding 11).

The MMCLT model may be further tested as it ventures into more remote parcels of land. In these cases, the lack of immediate residents can make finding volunteers more challenging, as experienced at Norbury Hill<sup>53</sup> and the kind of Lottery Funding found for Minsterley Meadows is unlikely without a compelling social amenity benefit. Both of these characteristics can be found at the site of White Grit - remote and inaccessible - which is the focus of MMCLT's latest acquisition. At the time of writing, the White Grit campaign was on track to be successful from crowdfunding alone but it remains to be seen how easily MMCLT will be able to mobilise volunteers to manage the site.

Whilst it is true that meadows do tend to be low maintenance, each site adds to the level of effort for MMCLT and there is a reputational risk that it does not deliver as expected. It should also be noted that MMCLT is exploring a move into woodland management and its acquisition policy allows for buildings and infrastructure. Both would be a potential step change in MMCLT's land management responsibilities and liabilities.

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<sup>52</sup> KII CT3, KII BM4

<sup>53</sup> KII PC4, KII VC1

## c. Impact

**Finding 8: MMCLT has played an important role to protect biodiversity in the region, locking land into nature-positive stewardship in perpetuity, connecting strategically important land that contribute to nature corridors and providing important ecosystem services.**

The alignment of MMCLT to the Stepping Stones project and the criteria for land acquired to have nature-connectivity value, means that the land MMCLT has bought supports a collective effort to improve conditions for nature across the region. The CLT model ensures that this land is locked into conservation objectives in perpetuity and protected from development and decline. In doing so, it can provide ecosystem services that benefit society at large.

To date, MMCLT have acquired 79 acres of land, all of which are important for biodiversity in the region with some highlights from each site below:

- Norbury Hill and Minsterley Meadows have formally been incorporated into an expanded NNR which now covers 1,562 Ha of nationally rare upland habitats which includes a mix of lowland and upland heath, woodland, bog, mire and grasslands.<sup>54</sup>
- An ecological survey conducted at Cudwell Meadow found that recorded species have increased from 145 to 169 since MMCLT took over the site which includes 31 species of spider. In 2023, a Bee Chafer beetle, which typically receives only one siting a year in Shropshire, was found and the arrival of yellow meadow ants indicate high quality, undisturbed meadow.<sup>55</sup>
- Across MMCLT sites, comprehensive dragonfly monitoring has revealed healthy populations of Golden-ringed Dragonfly and Common Hawker; MMCLT now protect 90% of all green-winged orchids in Shropshire at Minsterley Meadows and there is a growing presence of common spotted orchids at High Leasowes.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to these biodiversity benefits, there are wider ecosystem services that are of value from MMCLT's land, with some examples are provided in the table below.<sup>57</sup>

Table 2: Examples of ecosystem services provided by MMCLT sites

Ecosystem service	Value provided by MMCLT land
Direct value	Consumptive value from hay gathering and grazing for farming and non-consumptive value from dog walking, exercise, relaxation, etc.
Indirect value	Pollination of neighbouring farms, flood control, improved water quality.
Bequest value	Nature maintained for future generations.
Existence value	Rare species protected from extinction.
Option value	For those uncertain whether they value the land MMCLT purchases and may not have contributed funds, they may still appreciate the option of using the land for nature or other purposes in the future; allowing development of that land would remove that option. However, in

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/stiperstones-landscape-welcomes-rare-wildlife-and-triples-in-size>

<sup>55</sup> Cudwell Meadow Reports and email exchanges with management team.

<sup>56</sup> MMCLT Newsletters

<sup>57</sup> The table below is informed by the Conservation Strategy Fund educational videos including: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8AZHtF2f50>

contrast the “in perpetuity” focus on nature of MMCLT land removes the option for development in the future which may be a priority for some.

It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to value all these ecosystem services but the table illustrates the range of benefits that MMCLT land provides and warrant inclusion when considering MMCLTs added value (see Finding 13).

“When I am in those meadows it is freedom and peace and that is what I miss in my life. It is so lovely to have these meadows and people who can preserve them.”<sup>58</sup>

***Finding 9: MMCLT plays an important thought-leadership role and has successfully engaged local authorities and politicians. As a result of MMCLT’s advocacy, convening and practical guidance, its work to mobilise parish councils in support of nature-recovery and the LNRS has been recognised nationally.***

MMCLT is recognised nationally as one of few organisations to realise the value of CLTs for protecting nature and having helped councils across Shropshire to make meaningful preparation for the delivery of the LNRS.

MMCLT’s strong grassroots connections and knowledge of the local area have enabled it to see where strategic connections can be made between different stakeholders and who to engage to bring about change. The additional capacity they bring to conservation in the region is valuable at a time when resources are being cut yet nature continues to decline in many places.<sup>59</sup>

As a result, MMCLT has made an important contribution to engaging politicians and mobilising local governance structures to believe in nature-recovery and to work towards common goals (see textbox below). In all counties that MMCLT has operated, they have gained the active support of the local MP<sup>60</sup>, county council, and town and parish councils. This is important for cementing systemic change, whereby nature-recovery is driven by local people as well as government programming and policy. The advent of the LNRS is a timely addition to this trend, giving MMCLT and its partners a common strategic anchor.

“There is not a group in 25 years I’ve been living here to bring together such a cross-section of interested parties.”<sup>61</sup>

The work of MMCLT has not gone unnoticed. For example, MMCLT has fed into research led by the University of Exeter which submitted a case study on MMCLT to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.<sup>62</sup> MMCLT’s work also motivated the University and the National Community Land Trust Network to petition changes to the Devolution White Paper<sup>63</sup> to extend the definition of “socially valuable” to include nature and to advocate for the use of CLTs

<sup>58</sup> KII S2

<sup>59</sup> KII S1, KII CT2, KII CT3

<sup>60</sup> MPs have given their support to land acquisitions in Shropshire and Montgomeryshire and the MP for North Shropshire and lead cabinet members in Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire councils spoke at the parish council conference on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2025.

<sup>61</sup> KII FBM1

for nature recovery.<sup>64</sup> The White Paper is still under review. MMCLT has also been recognised by Natural England, a key land management institution, and has incorporated Norbury Hill and Minsterley Meadows into an expanded National Nature Reserve. This recognition is testament to MMCLT’s capability as an ecologically-sound land manager and the strategic foresight of the land they have acquired.

**Text Box 1: The power of the parishes**

MMCLT has partnered with the Shropshire Association of Local Councils to engage parish councils in nature recovery. Parish councils are important as the most local and grassroots layer of government and often responsible for green spaces, such as verges, commons and parks. Parish councillors can be influential, channelling a “civic environmentalism” from concerned communities to put pressure on the county councils to respond.<sup>65</sup> With the advent of the LNRS, parish councils also have a responsibility and important role in delivering nature-recovery.

MMCLT recognised the strategic value of the parish councils, utilising its networks and offering its conferencing skills to partner with the council association to raise awareness, generate ideas and provide technical support to councillors. The Parish Council Conference in October 2025 brought together representatives from over 50 parishes out of 180 parishes in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin - a significant gathering that provided a mix of networking, education, inspiration and a practical handbook. Without MMCLT this event would not have happened.<sup>66</sup>

**Finding 10: There is some evidence that MMCLT has influenced other landowners beyond small holdings. Whilst this is valuable, MMCLT is yet to influence farmers and large landowners in line with its vision and mission.**

There is some evidence that MMCLT has influenced other landowners who do not wish to sell their land. Often this has been smallholders who want to encourage meadows and wildflowers on their land and parish councillors who are responsible for management of certain public spaces (see Finding 9). Whilst the evidence of this success is limited, it is difficult to know exactly what influence MMCLT has had on land that they do not have a direct relationship with.

Of course, there are landowners who wish to contribute to nature through their own land without selling it and there is an increasing trend of people migrating into the area to buy smallholdings.<sup>67</sup> As a result, the National Trust receives regular requests for technical advice which it is not mandated to give.<sup>68</sup> MMCLT responds to this demand by providing technical advice, encouragement and signposting to partners such as Marches Meadow Group, Caring for Gods Acre, Restoring Shropshire’s Verges Project and Shropshire Hills National Landscape team.

Another avenue that MMCLT is pursuing is to be granted a responsible body able to grant Conservation Covenant Status. This would allow MMCLT to enter agreements with landowners

<sup>65</sup> KII A1

<sup>66</sup> KII C4

<sup>67</sup> KII S1, KII C1

<sup>68</sup> KII CT2

to ensure that land is managed to protect biodiversity into the future. These covenants meet MMCLT objectives without the need to crowdfund and without the long-term responsibility to manage the land themselves with the risks and liabilities that entails. The covenants are also designed with BNG management in mind and there is the potential for this to be a stepping stone into BNG income-streams that could be valuable to MMCLT. Conservation Covenants are an example of the creativity, innovation and adaptability of the organisation, although the exact implication of the status and how MMCLT will manage these is unclear.

Where MMCLT is yet to make any real progress is with farmers. This is not an uncommon struggle, with other organisations recognising the need to engage farmers as key land managers but are often met with resistance.<sup>69</sup> MMCLT's role in this remains unclear and there were mixed views as to whether this should be a focus of MMCLT. On the one hand, MMCLT's style of grassroots engagement is thought to lend itself well to engaging with farmers and without the baggage that other organisations may be perceived to have.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, there are a number of organisations already pursuing this agenda and there are individuals in the farming community who are better placed than MMCLT to gain traction.<sup>71</sup> Either way, there is the potential for MMCLT to frame its work as positive for farmers, using the ecosystem services in Finding 8 to highlight the benefits of MMCLT to farming: that it is not about taking agricultural land out of productive use but maintaining vital ecosystem services that benefit farming (flood management, pollination and natural predation of pests). Plans for MMCLT to hold farmer-focused conferences in 2026 may be appropriate to try to co-ordinate existing work to engage farmers and would build on previous MMCLT events which have broached food security, livelihoods and nature.<sup>72</sup> However, the risk that MMCLT over-reaches is present here. Its parish council connections also present opportunities for more engagement with farmers but there is mistrust and scepticism within farming communities that needs to be overcome.<sup>73</sup>

MMCLT is also considerate of farming in their land acquisition and is one motivation for the purchase of White Grit. Not only is White Grit a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the position of White Grit within surrounding farmland gives MMCLT an entry point for engaging its neighbours. Even where farmers are not directly engaged, MMCLT are considerate of how they can complement and mitigate farming practices. For example, Norbury Hill and surrounding farmland have a population of marsh violets still surviving which are a focus of MMCLT's land management plan to boost numbers of the small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly, one of the identified Species Action Plans generated from the Stepping Stones project. Regenerating violets on the formerly farmed Norbury Hill maintains a bastion of this ecologically important species from which it can expand into surrounding areas, staving off poor practices and taking the opportunity should those practices improve in the future.

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<sup>69</sup> KII S1, KII C5

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> KII C1

<sup>72</sup> <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/events-2/>

<sup>73</sup> An interview with a parish councillor who was also a farmer at the conference on 3<sup>rd</sup> October felt that MMCLT could become a trusted intermediary with farmers and volunteer groups who could help farmers improve the nature credentials of their farms.

## d. Sustainability

***Finding 11: There is a risk that MMCLT is growing too fast without a full appreciation of its liabilities, obligations and capacity thresholds. This is compounded by an absence of core organisational processes that could make MMCLT more efficient and help it to maintain its unique characteristics into the future.***

As an owner of land with obligations to its shareholders, MMCLT has risks and liabilities that need to be managed for as long as it owns that land. Given that the land is intended to be under MMCLT stewardship in perpetuity, this means that these risks and liabilities are also in perpetuity. Whilst it is likely that these risks will be managed well in the short-term with established land management plans and capacity, and relatively low running costs expected for the foreseeable future,<sup>74</sup> not enough attention has been given to the long-term responsibilities of MMCLT.

It is also unclear how or why targets have been set in the 2025 Business Plan and the extent to which its targets are considerate of MMCLT capacity thresholds. Indeed, it is unclear whether MMCLT has considered what its capacity thresholds may be and how this might affect future activity. Compounding this, is the lack of routine monitoring tools to track organisational performance and progress towards its objectives.

It is worth noting that while this does not undermine the credibility of MMCLT to date, it is at a point in its growth and maturity where it needs to ensure its organisational foundations are strengthened and that any future growth is based on well considered scenario planning (e.g. full Board of 12 members, paid staff and not only volunteers, land acquired versus land agreements, number of events per year, etc.).

This needs to be accompanied by a clear-eyed review of expected operational costs, a review of each site management model to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each and associated risks, and the human resources needed to manage MMCLT's minimal operational duties.

The comprehensive risk register maintained by MMCLT is encouraging that it is not overlooking these concerns. However, there are over 40 risks registered - 11 of which are medium likelihood/medium impact and 7 are low likelihood/high impact. It is unclear whether these can be adequately overseen, especially as many are allocated to "land management teams" who are not part of the regular Board meetings and others have no-one allocated at all. Whilst this does not mean that MMCLT is currently vulnerable, it will require key components and processes of the organisation to improve if it is to responsibly grow.

MMCLT has had the good foresight to build into its constitution an exit strategy which, in principle, guarantees that the land will remain protected. However, the exit strategy is to offer the land owned by MMCLT to other conservation organisations but currently that option does not appear to exist with the two most likely candidates (National Trust and Shropshire Wildlife Trust) having a deliberate strategy to not take on any further land except in specific areas.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Cudwell Meadow is expected to cost £1,000 per year to maintain with funds drawn down from over-fundraising of the initial acquisition, donations from the community and grant opportunities. (KII VC3)

<sup>75</sup> KII PC4, KII CT2, KII CT3

Furthermore, the reasons why MMCLT might be unable to manage the land itself in the future are likely to be reasons why other organisations would not want to take the land on – small parcels of land with liabilities that cannot be covered and struggling to find low-cost solutions to land management.

Finally, there is no succession plan for Board members which is also of concern.<sup>76</sup> Whilst the Board members seem committed, there will inevitably be a time when Board members wish to step down or potentially burn-out.<sup>77</sup>

***Finding 12: MMCLT are tapping into widespread and increasingly urgent grassroots concerns for nature at the same time as central and local authorities are mandating nature-recovery from the top. MMCLT are contributing to this momentum, providing a local catalyst for action.***

Nature-recovery in the UK is a concern of many across the UK<sup>78</sup>. Whilst that may not mean government policies always align with the demands of conservationists, there is a systemic shift where action for nature-recovery is happening from the top-down and the bottom-up and increasingly converging under shared strategies. MMCLT is playing a key role in this: by operating in the middle, it is making important contributions to link the top and bottom together.

At the same time, the variations of the CLT model mean that MMCLT can offer a range of services and approaches that suit different sites and different community interests. This adaptability makes them a valuable catalyst to channel community energy into long-term nature-recovery. For example, MMCLT can and has acted as a conduit for community funds, a legal entity to facilitate the purchase of land, a technical advisor to existing landowners, and a direct landowner and manager. Focused on smaller parcels of strategically important land, MMCLT is able to focus on land that is too small for established institutions to engage and too large for communities to buy. In this role, MMCLT acts as a catalyst, providing an avenue for community energy that did not previously exist. This catalytic effect is complemented by their conferences and events that inspire action elsewhere, foster collaborations and inspire people to do more.

Below is a summary of how MMCLT has influenced change using a catalytic framework<sup>79</sup> which identifies four ways in which catalytic effect can be achieved.

*Table 3: Examples of catalytic effect influenced by MMCLT*

Catalytic effect	MMCLT activity
Unblock an obstacle to change	An obstacle to the Stepping Stones strategy has been the inability to purchase land as it came up for sale with the intention of safeguarding it for nature. The CLT model provides this opportunity where it did not exist before.

<sup>76</sup> KKI S3, KII CN2, KII CT2

<sup>77</sup> Concern for burn out of Board members was raised repeatedly throughout the evaluation.

<sup>78</sup> A 2025 survey of how people in the UK feel about the nature and climate crises found high levels of concern and a desire for strong action to be taken: <https://climateoutreach.org/btc/2025/chapter-5/#how-people-feel>

<sup>79</sup> This framework is informed by the evaluators past experience from evaluating catalytic effect.

Accelerate change	MMCLT has added strategically important land to the Stepping Stones project and mobilised support for the LNRS at the parish level. Both of which have accelerated change under these important schemes.
Building capability to enable change	Conferences and events have raised awareness and given confidence and inspiration for others to act; MMCLT’s technical advice to land management volunteers and other landowners has also led to a momentum for change.
Mobilising others to support change	To date, MMCLT has mobilised funds from well over 500 people and inspired others to engage with nature recovery in ways that they would not have done before, such as Friends of Minsterley Meadows and the parish councillors.

By catalysing change, MMCLT has created a momentum for nature-recovery that goes beyond its own land and shareholders, supporting regional strategies that make the importance of that change even more significant. However, beyond nascent activity at Minsterley Meadows, MMCLT has done little so far to bridge generational divides, and there is a risk its catalytic effect fades over time.

**Finding 13: MMCLT represents excellent value for money which is associated with the CLT model, the choice of land purchased and a dedicated network of volunteers.**

MMCLT’s low operating costs have generated significant financial returns, which have been locked away as land assets that it owns in perpetuity. Whilst there are risks that the land value depreciates given that it can never be developed, “value” in this context is much more than economic. As Finding 8 shows, when considering the range of ecosystem services that MMCLT land provides, the value of the land is much more dynamic than simply market valuations.

However, it must also be considered that the land purchased by MMCLT prevents development that many in the community may find valuable, especially in Shropshire where housing has become unaffordable for many and pushed less affluent residents out of key areas.

With this in mind, this evaluation considers the value-for-money of MMCLT against the “5Es”, illustrated below:

- **Economy:** MMCLT is almost entirely run by volunteers with expenditure for the financial year 2024/2025 at £18,421, of which £5,965 were core costs (i.e. costs not associated directly with a particular site). Where purchases are made, competitive processes are used and for two sites (White Grit and Minsterley Meadows) MMCLT secured preferential offers. Conferences and events are based on a willingness-to-pay model with some additional small grants which exceeds costs to generate an income for MMCLT.
- **Efficiency:** Land acquisitions are efficiently identified through MMCLT networks, unsolicited approaches or established market mechanisms. Procurement is through established legal services now well known to MMCLT. Conferences and events are well versed with efficient systems in place. However, crowdfunding can be an arduous process but lessons have been learnt to improve this. Further efficiency gains can be

made from improving MMCLT organisational systems and land management frameworks.

- **Effectiveness:** MMCLT has a strong track record of getting things done. It is able to compete in land acquisition markets with 100% success to date and conferences/events are highly regarded with MMCLT services sought out by others. There is limited evidence of MMCLT being able to mobilise large landowners and engaging community members who may not prioritise nature above other competing concerns.
- **Equity:** MMCLT secures land that is in the community interest and most of its land has open access to the public. However, there is a risk that MMCLT - and conservation groups more widely – tend to represent white middle-class demographics as largely represented by the MMCLT Board. There is also a risk that some community members would prefer to see land developed to ease housing pressures that primarily affect lower-income households.
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** MMCLT has been able to generate significant amounts of money from the public and grants relative to its running costs and retains much of the value of those funds raised as the land acquired are permanent assets. Cost-effectiveness is also evident from MMCLT’s catalytic effect on local government, community members and perceived added value of MMCLT’s convening power for the conservation sector. Furthermore, MMCLT’s choice of land it acquires provides significant ecosystem services in perpetuity.

As indicated in previous Findings, there are improvements in how MMCLT operates that are needed to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. Some of this may come with costs such as increased administration, possible need for paid services and human resources, and obligations from possibly more demanding land (such as the potential to move into woodland). There is, therefore, the potential for the value-for-money proposition of MMCLT to shift but it is likely to remain on solid ground into the future.

## 9. Conclusions

***Conclusion 1: MMCLT has provided important strategic support to regional nature recovery efforts, using its awareness of the local context to ensure it is complementary to other initiatives whilst operating at pace.***

MMCLT has hit the ground running, delivering nature-recovery activities at an impressive pace. Responding to a missing middle layer in nature recovery, MMCLT enables local-level action to link to regional and national strategies. Complemented by a well-regarded and active events and conference schedule, MMCLT has successfully convened key stakeholders that promote MMCLT’s objectives, strengthening nature-recovery efforts across the region. The strategic value of the organisation should not be underestimated – both in terms of protecting biodiversity and deepening cultural ties with nature.

***Conclusion 2: The land that MMCLT has acquired is of significant importance for biodiversity which is now protected in perpetuity. However, organisational weaknesses present a risk that MMCLT may over-reach and struggle to meet its obligations as a land manager as it grows.***

The sites that MMCLT has acquired to date are species rich and provide vital habitat for rare species, protecting them in perpetuity. There is a clear demand for MMCLT services, receiving unsolicited offers of land, requests for technical advice and commissioning of conference services that indicate the potential to grow substantially. To manage this demand, MMCLT needs to fully document its liabilities and management obligations going forward and accompany this with a plan for future resourcing and management that avoids potential over-reach.

***Conclusion 3: MMCLT have proven that the CLT model is an important tool in the nature-recovery toolbox, providing an important opportunity to mobilise community interests to protect land that other organisations would overlook.***

The CLT model that underpins MMCLT has proved to be a sound choice that could be replicated elsewhere. The relative ease to set-up and operate CLTs lends itself well to land acquisitions on the open market whilst the social benefits a CLT guarantees can provide MMCLT with advantageous preferential treatment when bidding for land. At the same time, MMCLT has provided an important mechanism to channel community support with a willingness-to-pay model that provides it with a level of democratic credibility. This is important when there are competing demands on land use but there is a risk that it favours the more affluent in society and may reinforce a sense that conservation is a middle-class priority. Better articulation of the range of ecosystem services that MMCLT provides and the means to routinely monitor and evaluate these would help make the case for MMCLT to a range of audiences.

***Conclusion 4: MMCLT has trialled a variety of land management approaches which have all been successful overall. It has learnt lessons from these and understands the need for tailored approaches across its sites which have clear roles and responsibilities between MMCLT and any partners.***

To date, MMCLT has done well to organise management of its land, adopting a variety of models that adapt to the context of each site and tapping into local volunteer networks. However, there have been challenges along the way that could have been avoided had MMCLT taken the time to thoroughly consider and document a land management framework that would clearly set out the range of potential models available with a clear understanding of the pros, cons and costs (human and financial) of each. The continued absence of this framework means that there is a risk of misunderstandings and confusion at future sites which would exacerbate MMCLT's existing capacity limitations, such as a small Board and no core supporting (paid or voluntary) human resources.

***Conclusion 5: MMCLT has had a catalytic effect on nature recovery and provides a model that is excellent value for money. It now has an important role to show how this model can respond to high demand whilst maintaining the unique characteristics that make it successful.***

Overall, MMCLT has provided an important catalyst for nature recovery in the region. The local credentials of its Board have enabled it to see how best to maximise MMCLT's added value whilst bringing an energy that has mobilised an important cross-section of stakeholders. A recent intake of Board members provides MMCLT with an opportunity to pause, reflect and work through its organisational challenges whilst bringing new skillsets and networks that are

likely to further benefit MMCLT's ability to affect change. There is now an important role for MMCLT to play going forward, showing others how to grow whilst maintaining the nimble, responsive and locally-grounded credentials that have so far characterised its success.

## 10. Lessons

Outlined below are key lessons from the evaluation that are relevant to others outside MMCLT who are also working to promote nature recovery and conservation.

**Lesson 1:** CLTs can provide an important tool in the nature-recovery and conservation toolbox which has the potential to provide very good value-for-money, whereby the running costs are relatively low whilst able to generate significant resources to buy and manage land. Their ability to acquire land that may be outside the mandate or interest of more traditional nature-focused organisations also provides an important mechanism for building nature corridors between already protected sites.

**Lesson 2:** The CLT model can be nimble and responsive, enabling conservationists to compete with the private sector in land markets. This competitiveness can be supplemented by interest free loans from philanthropic partners and favourable terms from sellers – both of which can serve to extend the time needed to raise the necessary funds.

**Lesson 3:** As organisations grow they can require more systems and processes that could risk undermining the characteristics that make smaller organisations unique. For example, being community-led and connected, nimble and responsive, with low operating costs. However, systems and processes do not need to be a hindrance, as processes and policies can enable scale-up whilst protecting the unique characteristics of the organisation.

**Lesson 4:** The financial support from the public must not be underestimated but funds are easier to raise for acquisitions than on-going land management. This provides a constraint on CLT's capacity to buy land whilst meeting its long-term obligations. It is essential that these liabilities are fully understood and supported by long-term resourcing plans. This should inform Business Plans and organisational strategies, ensuring over-stretch is avoided that could risk the reputation and functioning of the organisation.

**Lesson 5:** Conferences and events can be a good way to add value in addition to land acquisitions, providing often-needed convening, co-ordination and lessons-sharing across the sector. At the same time, this can raise the visibility and profile of those organising these activities.

**Lesson 6:** A nature-focused CLT needs to have a broad range of skill-sets which include strong ecological expertise, community outreach skills and networks, financial and strategic skills and experience of land management. At the same time, making use of the range of ecosystem services that nature-focused CLTs can offer can help tailor messaging to different audiences.

**Lesson 7:** The added value of a CLT focused on nature will be elevated if it can tap into broader nature-recovery strategies. These can give smaller organisations an important strategic anchor whilst aligning them with landscape-level objectives. The roll-out of mandated LNRSs provide this strategic alignment in every county across the UK.

## 11. Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed by the MMCLT Board during a workshop held as part of this evaluation.

**R1:** Map out MMCLT’s existing land assets and management responsibilities into an overarching “terrier” that clearly sets out ongoing liabilities and resourcing to meet MMCLT’s obligations.

*Lead: Sue Steer*

*Delivery date: End Q2 2026*

**R2:** Informed by a clear understanding of MMCLT liabilities and responsibilities presented in the “terrier”, develop a business plan that:

- A. Ensures the consolidation of existing responsibilities
- B. Sets out potential opportunities for income generation
- C. Reviews the existing business plan and updates as needed

*Lead: Sarah Holden*

*Delivery date: End Q3 2026*

**R3:** Using a clear understanding of MMCLT liabilities and responsibilities and the potential to generate income, review the MMCLT land management models to:

- A. Ensure that existing land management teams are engaged in the process and use that process to iron out any residual clarifications and concerns that those teams may have.
- B. Develop a set of land management models that include those already in use by MMCLT and potential models going forward. Use this to write-up an easy-to-understand “menu of options” that can be used to inform discussions with future land management teams (e.g. White Grit) and to clearly communicate land management arrangements and expectations from the outset.

*Lead: Sue Steer*

*Delivery date: End Q3 2026*

**R4:** Develop a plan to augment the social capital of MMCLT in order to safeguard from disruptions that may be caused by changes in Board members or other key associates. This should consider:

- Critical responsibilities and institutional memory within the Board and the MMCLT network that needs to be retained to avoid disruption to MMCLT operations.
- Identification of actions that can bridge any disruption in the resourcing of those critical responsibilities.
- Expansion of the “associates of the Board”, i.e. those outside the Board who can provide support to Board members to deliver critical organisational functions.

- An inter-generational strategy that looks to diversify the demographic of the MMCLT Board and/or associates (which may have links to the farming outreach strategy below).

*Lead: Richard Keymer*

*Delivery date: End Q1 2026*

**R5:** Develop a 1-2 year out-reach strategy for conferences and events that is accompanied by a set of criteria that ensure resources invested in conferences and events continue to align to MMCLT objectives. This should include outreach to the farming community. Accompany this with a short guide on running conferences as part of the succession planning and retention of institutional memory.

*Lead: Janet Cobb & Richard Small*

*Delivery date: End Q1 2026*

**R6:** Work with SALC to develop an action plan for how MMCLT can utilise all its assets to support 2-3 parish clusters as a proof-of-concept for how local mobilisation can deliver the LNRS. Continue to engage with key advocacy partners (e.g. Council and University of Exeter) to promote this proof-of-concept.

*Lead: Janet Cobb*

*Delivery date: End Q2 2026*

**R7:** Hold ½ day Board meetings to reflect on progress every 3 months. Once the Business Plan and strategies outlined above are finalised, develop simple tools that can monitor progress towards MMCLT objectives.

*Lead: Anne-Helen*

*Delivery date: Quarterly*

**R8:** Informed by all of the above, identify the opportunities to amplify MMCLT's objectives and vision. This may consider the following options, amongst others:

- Replicate the CLT model through support to other nature-focused CLTs
- Scale-up the work of MMCLT within the limitations of the business plan
- Work with the Shropshire & Telford Wrekin Councils and National CLT Network to improve the enabling environment that can catalyse new CLTs to form across the Middle Marches

*Lead: Janet Cobb*

*Delivery date: End Q4 2026*

## Annex A: Evaluation Methodology

### a. Approach

The evaluation adopted a theory-based approach, using qualitative data collection to build an evidence base around a Theory of Change that underpins MMCLT's work. The Theory of Change was developed by the evaluator in collaboration with the MMCLT Board and is included in Annex B.

The Theory of Change was used as a structure for an in-person progress workshop held with the Board to explore the main achievements and challenges of MMCLT to date and better understand its history and operating model. This was followed by a series of remote and in-person key informant interviews (KIIs) with a range stakeholders inside and outside the organisation. This built on the existing evidence base documented in the internal and external literature associated with MMCLT and enabled the evaluator to make judgements about how well MMCLT has delivered its work and achieved its objectives as outlined in the theory of change.

As a final stage in the methodology, a remote emerging findings workshop was held with the MMCLT Board to get initial feedback on the evaluation observations. This led to a final draft report that was peer-reviewed and shared with Board for feedback.

A further in-person workshop took place where the evaluator facilitated the Board to identify a set of recommendations informed by the evaluation findings and conclusions.

This final report was then finalised and submitted to MMCLT.

### b. Data collection and analysis

The data collection was driven by a purposeful sampling approach (see table below), engaging people with a knowledge of MMCLT's work. A mix of people external and internal to MMCLT was selected to reduce bias. Sampling reached a point of saturation, whereby no new information was coming forward through additional interviews which marked the end of the process.

KIIs were held either remotely or in person. Additional informal interviews were conducted whilst observing an MMCLT conference. Three workshops with the MMCLT Board provided a further opportunity for primary data collection. This was complemented by site visits to High Leasowes and Cudwell Meadow sites. Secondary data was used through a literature review (see the bibliography in the Annex).

Throughout the evaluation an evidence assessment framework was maintained to guide strength of evidence and triangulation. This informed the analytical process that drew upon contribution analysis to reflect on the MMCLT ToC. Workshops with the MMCLT Board and written feedback provided opportunities for fact-checking and validation.

*Table 4: Sampling and key informant interview list*

Stakeholder Category	Relationship to MMCLT
MMCLT Board Member x 7	Board members and responsible for the strategic direction and day to day activity of MMCLT

Former MMCLT Board Member x 2	Former Board members who stepped down; one former member exchanged with the evaluation through email correspondence
Supporter/shareholder x 6	Supporters of MMCLT, some of whom provide volunteer support to manage sites
Independent consultant x 1	Contracted by MMCLT on a 3 year arrangement to co-ordinate and deliver activity under the Heritage Lottery grant to Minsterley Meadows
Land management team members x 2	Volunteer land management teams partner with MMCLT to manage MMCLT sites
External organisations x 5	The National Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, and the Community Land Trust Network who have all partnered with MMCLT in some way, plus Longlands Community which is a CLT in Harrogate that has been in contact with MMCLT to seek advice and Rural Sussex that was part of a CLT exchange visit with MMCLT.
Academic x 1	Lead researcher at University of Exeter focused on decentralisation and the role of community-led initiatives to promote nature; included MMCLT's work as a case study in that research
Councillors (parish and county) x 3 formal interviews, plus 7 informal	Formal interviews with a senior County Council Councillor and 2 Parish Councillors, plus informal interviews with 7 parish councillors at a MMCLT conference.

### c. Limitations

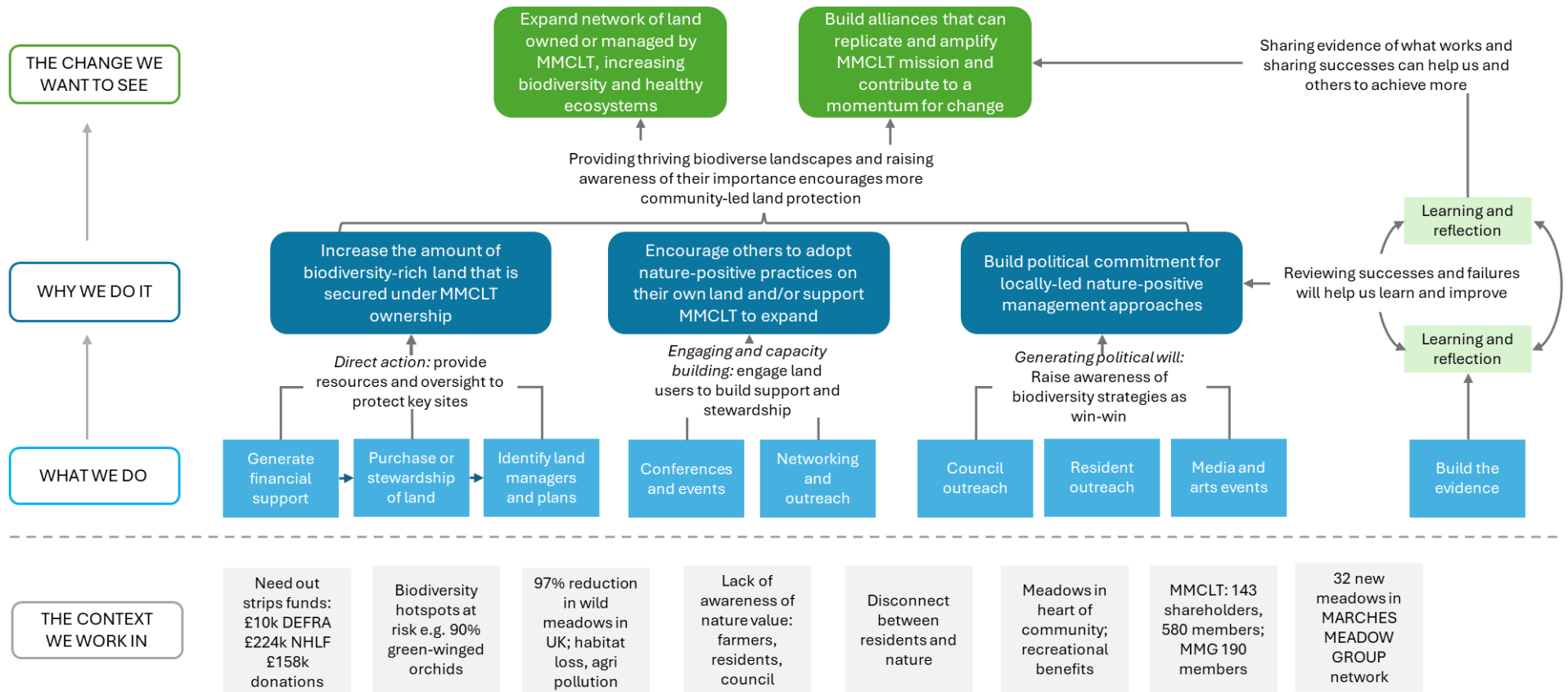
There were certain limitations that have affected the evaluation as outlined below.

- **Stakeholder selection:** The evaluator compiled a list of stakeholders that were to be consulted during the evaluation but the exact individuals were then put forward by MMCLT. This presents an opportunity for bias and there was a reluctance by the Board for the evaluator to contact certain individuals known to have left the organisation under strained circumstances. The evaluator can understand why this decision was taken but it does mean that those interviewed for the evaluation may introduce positivity bias. Whilst this is a risk, the list of individuals included a mix of people within and outside the organisation with the latter group unlikely to have reason to provide a biased view. Given the consistency of views across all stakeholders – where things have gone well and not so well - the evaluator is confident this provided sufficient balance.
- **MMCLT monitoring and evaluation systems:** MMCLT does not routinely document all of its activities and does not have robust monitoring and evaluation systems. This has meant that the evaluator was largely reliant on primary data collected as part of this evaluation. This does not significantly undermine the quality of the evaluation and evidence gathered but it does mean that there may be benefits from MMCLT's work that have been overlooked.

## Annex B: MMCLT Theory of Change

### What MMCLT does and why it does it:

The diagram below is a visual representation of the work of MMCLT. It briefly summarises MMCLT’s role in the world as the following: Nature is under threat. MMCLT responds to this by using a nimble operating model that enables MMCLT to punch above its weight. It has a proven track record of mobilising the public and its network of experts to purchase critical land and encourage other landowners to protect and regenerate land that they own. In the process, MMCLT raises awareness of the importance of biodiversity-rich land and the critical threats nature faces to build support from the public and local decision makers. This contributes to a shift in the way the countryside is managed so that protection of nature becomes the norm, not the exception. By constantly learning, sharing knowledge and collaborating with like-minded groups, MMCLT can amplify its mission for greater effect.



## Annex C: Bibliography

### Primary Documents

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Middle Marches Community Land Trust. (n.d.). *Minsterley Parish Council & Minsterley Meadows: Community Purchase of a SSSI Site by Middle Marches Community Land Trust*. Case study.

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### Newsletters

Middle Marches Community Land Trust. (2024, October). *Autumn Newsletter*. Bishops Castle, Shropshire.

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### *Conference Materials*

Shropshire Association of Local Councils & Middle Marches Community Land Trust. (2024, October 3). *Nature Recovery in Town & Parish Councils across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin* [Conference programme]. Ellesmere Town Hall.

### *Other Resources*

Natural History Museum Biodiversity Intactness Index

<https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/29/state-of-nature/>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/changes-to-the-planning-bill;>

<https://climateoutreach.org/btc/2025/chapter-5/#how-people-feel>

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