

Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee

2 NOVEMBER 2017

PRESENT: Councillors M Bateman, A Bond (In place of S Jenkins), S Chapple, S Cole, M Collins (In place of R King), P Cooper, B Everitt and N Glover (In place of A Cole)

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor A Macpherson

APOLOGIES: Councillors M Winn, B Foster and T Hunter-Watts

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Everitt be elected Chairman for this meeting only.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2017 be approved as correct a record.

3. ECOLOGY UPDATE 2017

The Committee received an Ecology report from the AVDC Ecologist, Paul Holton, which provided an update on the service. In attendance for the item were volunteers that had been invited by the Ecologist and each gave a short presentation.

Doug Kennedy – Active Volunteer

After a brief introduction on how he became involved in activist work, Doug Kennedy explained how he had been involved with the Website Working Group and liaison meetings with Thames Water regarding the River Thame's cleanliness. The Committee heard of the importance of monitoring water quality and holding perpetrators of pollution to account. A brief summary of why Thames Water (TW) was fined £20million earlier in the year for breaches of environmental legislation at the Haydon Hill Sewage Treatment works was provided. A liaison group that included AVDC, TW and The River Thame Conservation Trust ensured better communication between all parties. Fish had been monitored this year in the Aylesbury section of the River Thame and numbers were lower than anticipated. Fresh water Invertebrate populations had also been monitored with a lower threshold seen than expected. Both these declines were indicative of water quality so continued monitoring by volunteers to support the Environment Agency statutory monitoring stations was critical to understand what was happening in the River Thame. The value of a healthy river in Aylesbury Vale was considered to be a huge asset and it was hoped work to achieve this would be supported in full by Councillors and Staff at AVDC.

Natalie Brehan – The River Thame Conservation Trust

A map showing an overview of the River Thame's route and catchment area was provided to Members along with notable locations of the Conservation Trust's work. The four main strategic aims were as follows:

- Increase understanding of the freshwater habitats and species of the Thames catchment and monitor changes in them
- Improve biodiversity by practical habitat works on the ground
- Improve water quality
- Improve knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the freshwater environment of the River Thames catchment and increase its recognition in local planning frameworks

Work that had been carried out by the Trust included Eythrope Habitat Improvement Works and Eythrope Fencing which intended to improve habitats and reduce livestock access to the river. The Trust had also worked at Cuttlebrook Nature Reserve in 2016 in order to reduce silt deposition and discourage dog entry into the river as this caused bank erosion. Designated dog access points into the river had been successful in combating this as these entry points were gravelled which prevented excess mud and sediment entering the river. Volunteers were important in the Trust's work and were crucial in the implementation of species surveys, river cleaning and the removal of invasive Himalayan Balsam. The Trust wanted to advise Households on how they impact the river even without being in proximity to it as surface drainage often ended up in rivers. Incorrect waste in sewage systems would also cause blockages and issues at treatment plants which may cause inadvertent damage to rivers and wildlife. Phosphate reduction in households was also another household change that would benefit rivers, and community incentives through Thames Water Funding would be investigated for future projects. Further information was available via leaflets that would be distributed: <http://riverthame.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Phosphorus-Leaflet-New-Forest-WEB.pdf>

More information was sought by Members from the Trust representatives and Ecologist and advice included:-

- i. Engaging of young people in schools was a future priority but the Trust did not have the resources to fully engage. It had been found that children were better engaged where they can see the issues faced and the Trust did not have land in which to facilitate this type of learning. The present focus was on advising adults, households and Parishes.
- ii. Member assistance would be appreciated through the Trust's work and advice being passed to constituents wherever possible. Thames Water would also be receptive to Member and community engagement.
- iii. Industrial polluters in the Vale were not known but would be checked with the Environment Agency and reported back to Members.
- iv. The Trust wanted to create more volunteer patrols along the river to monitor pollution 'spikes' as continuous monitoring equipment was costly and subject to weather conditions. AVDC was limited in how much assistance it offered through current Ecological workload.
- v. The Environment Agency helpline was the first point of contact for any concerns members of the public had over pollution.
- vi. Enforcement would manage any statutory damage claims.

Representatives from Bucks Owl and Raptor Group (BORG) who also brought George, a captive bred Barn Owl

Originating in 2012 from the Aylesbury Vale Project, BORG was run completely independently by volunteers. Barn Owls and Kestrels were both listed under RSPB classification as Amber Status which meant they had an unfavourable conservation status and were generally in decline. Part of this reason had been due to a decrease in nesting sites which was attributed to Dutch Elm disease and farms removing or changing usage of their storage barns.

It was explained that barn owls were iconic and a barn owl in flight captured the public's imagination. BORG hoped to build on this iconic image by working with landowners to supply and install barn owl boxes (£75) and other boxes (£40). The boxes provided a safe environment to roost and breed which had consequently had a positive impact on barn owl population numbers. There were 700 boxes in Buckinghamshire, 400 of which were for barn owls, and there were 55 nesting sites in the county. The group linked into The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to ring chicks in the district. There had been 137 chicks rung in 2017 which was an increase from 120 in 2016. The UK population of Barn Owls was thought to be 30,000 and had resulted in changing the status to Green. However the major Bird Charities were minded to continue the conservation work for this species to fully achieve its potential distribution across the country which was still considered to be some way off. BORG was helping achieve this aspiration in Bucks and had developed an educational programme working with young people to inspire a new generation of people the value of these birds. George, the captive bred barn owl, had been instrumental in this process and he was brought in to the meeting to meet Members. As well as being a part of Vale Lottery, BORG had launched a 'friend' subscription scheme to raise funds and appreciated all promotion that Members offered.

Members sought more information from the Group representatives and were advised that:-

- i. Captive bred owls lived around 16 years compared to five years in the wild.
- ii. Successful liaison with developers to promote wildlife friendly sites was possible as seen at Kingsbrook, Aylesbury.
- iii. Barn owls were primarily white in colour.
- iv. Nesting sites had been identified along the HS2 route and it was deemed inevitable that those within a mile and a half from the route would be severely affected as train lines and roads were responsible for large numbers of owl deaths. Nesting boxes would be fitted outside this proximity along the line to encourage safe nesting.
- v. BORG did not advertise the location of public nesting sites so that they were not disturbed.

After the presentations from the volunteers, the Ecologist provided an update to Members. Since the Council's reorganisation, the Ecology Service was part of the Environment Team in Regulatory Services in the Customer Fulfilment Sector. This reorganisation had been deemed a benefit to ecology and heritage as the Environment Team's remit included Heritage and Conservation, Parks and Green Infrastructure, Pollution Control, and Trees. Links between ecology and parks had been aided through the efforts of volunteers that assisted with habitat management on AVDC's land and ecological input in the management of parks.

The service also worked with Development Management in order to provide a service for customers in the pre-planning process, such as carrying out checks for protected species. This benefited customers by potentially preventing delays to applications as the checks identified the need for further detailed protected species assessments early in the application timeframe. Species specific surveys would often be constrained by when they could be carried out in the year so early identification of this necessity was important in the developer's planning timetable. Screening guidance to planners on this was available and delivery teams were on hand to provide this. Additionally, planning decision notices contained a note on protected species which highlighted the importance of applicant action should it be necessary. The service had employed Swift Ecology in a consultancy capacity to support and sustain the delivery of ecological expertise which amounted to 46 hours / 6.3 days during the 2017/18 financial year. Checks had been carried out to ensure that there were no conflicts of interest from consultants. It was anticipated that the AVDC Ecologist would comment on over 500

planning applications in 2017 and would also contribute towards tree and landscape surgeries offered by Planning Officers.

The Ecology Service had worked on key projects throughout the last 12 months and the update was as follows:

Kingsbrook Development

Sales had been successful with the developer accrediting this to the site's conservation focus and relationship with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Alok Sharma, the Housing Minister for England, visited the site in September 2017 and in October 2017 representatives from the UK's nature conservation network visited the development. All attendees saw how this site was an example on how nature and housing can be integrated effectively. Scheduled next was the planning for the nature reserve and visitor centre which was likely to be managed by the RSPB upon completion.

East West Rail and HS2

HS2 had submitted 20 planning applications which had been dealt with by consultants with the Ecologist's oversight. East West Rail had informed there will be a number of applications submitted before July 2018 which would cover works commencing before the agreed Transport and Works Act Order. The applications were expected to have a high level of ecological input with particular note on the work on the Claydon rail section as this was an ecologically sensitive area. An ecological statement on the East West Rail line was expected in January 2018.

Great Crested Newt Pilot

From 2018, new District Licences would be available within the Vale through a Nature Space Partnership project. The project intended to bring the largest benefit to great crested newts whilst also streamlining licensing processes for developers. AVDC had entered a pilot scheme and the scheme providers acknowledged the need for additional resources so funds for an additional post were available. AVDC intended to employ a support Ecology Officer on a fixed term basis in January 2018. The post would initially focus solely on work generated by the pilot.

Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan

Ecology guidance had been provided to Forward Plans Team when formulating the Local Plan with the intention of providing a robust protection for habitats and species in the Vale. Policies related to ecology in VALP included:

- NE1 Protected Sites
- NE2 Biodiversity and Geodiversity
- NE3 Rivers and Streams
- NE9 Trees, Hedgerows, and Woodlands

Berryfields Mitigation Scheme

AVDC had partnered with the local Wildlife Trust to deliver a project which aimed to restore, manage and establish hedgerows in and around the Berryfields development. This would be expanded to cover meadows and ponds as the Scheme progressed, and community participation and involvement would be encouraged wherever possible. Bucks, Berks, and Oxon Wildlife Trust would employ a Project Officer for this Scheme from Spring 2018.

Members discussed the update and asked the Ecology Team to check the wording in the VALP regarding air quality. Members saw merit in a proposal from one of the Local Members regarding the designation of specific areas in Buckingham as Wildlife Corridors in order to protect sites. This suggestion would be pursued by Officers.

The Committee congratulated the work carried out by the Ecology Team and particular note was made of the progressive and coordinated work carried out at the Kingsbrook development. All volunteers were thanked for their attendance and their enthusiasm to conservation was commended.

RESOLVED –

That the Ecologist's report which updated on achievements and upcoming work be noted.

4. WORK PROGRAMME

The upcoming work programme for items coming to Scrutiny was considered as per the agenda. The Built Facilities Strategy scheduled for 19 December 2017 was subject to a three month consultation period so would not feature at that meeting. Consequently, this item would be scheduled for 2018. Members expressed an interest in receiving a report covering Sporting Facilities which was expected to be covered in the Facilities Strategy. Additionally, Members discussed the possibility of receiving an update on Aylesbury Garden Town. This would be investigated after the Member's Event was held.

Members were also advised that the next meeting would contain an update on Friars House following the fire safety inspection of residential buildings in Aylesbury Vale which was previously brought to Committee.

RESOLVED –

That the situation regarding the work programme be noted.