

Minutes of Upper Itchen Initiative meeting
10am, 30th September 2009
Alresford Salads, The Nythe, Alresford, Hampshire SO24 9DZ

Present:

Chairman: Graham Roberts (GR) (Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust)
Cat Robinson (CR) – Minute Taker (Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust),
Tom Amery (TA) (Watercress Company),
Tim Sykes (TS)(Environment Agency),
Rue Ekins (RE) (Natural England),
Lord Ashburton (LA) (Riparian owner),
Martin Burton (MB) (Independent Consultant),
Tom Davies (TD) (The Test and Itchen Association),
Roger Harrison (RH) (Riparian owner),
Chris Jeffes (CJ) (Watercress Company),
Steve Rothwell (SR) (Vitacress Salads),
Pete Shaw (PS) (University of Southampton),
Rose Timlett (RT) (WWF-UK)

Apologies:

Charles Barter (CB) (Watercress Company),
Gail Taylor (GT) (University of Southampton)

Graham Roberts welcomed everyone and thanked Alresford Salads for hosting the meeting.

1. Minutes of the last meeting

All agreed that they were a true account of discussions which took place

General discussion followed

It was mentioned that the NRA (pre EA) introduced Grayling into the upper Itchen

RT advised that similar initiatives as the Upper Itchen Initiative exist in Northern Ireland and that WWF Northern Ireland have written 'Action Plans' which set out the purpose of the group and what is hoped to be achieved.

The need for baseline data was discussed. TS advised that this would be possible using existing data held by the Environment Agency (EA)

PS advised that collating the data could be done as a student project through the University.

PS also advised that he had spoken to Lawrence Talks from the EA, about developing a national database for Chalk Stream documents. He advised that this may also be possible through a student project. PS advised that student projects are launched in February, project decision made in May and project start date is July.

GR advised that the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) are looking for storage options for their document archive which contains a lot of research and documents on chalk rivers.

TS advised that he is meeting with Lawrence during the week and will discuss it further with him.

Terms of reference discussion

Discussions then moved onto how the group should function. GR distributed a draft Terms of Reference before the meeting, and the format was discussed.

T D requested that 'Management Group' should be amended to 'Stakeholders'

Martin suggested that the group should identify issues, actions required and how they will be achieved, and that this should be done through the Action Plan.

It was agreed that a representative from the fish farm industry should be invited to attend the next meeting, Christopher Saunders Davies was suggested. Inviting other industries to attend was also discussed, particularly water companies. It was agreed that Southern Water should be invited, but that other industries should be invited when the agenda is relevant.

TS advised that there is only one abstraction in the upper Itchen on the Candover Brook, and that it is not often used. He also advised that there is only one discharge. RT advised that WWF are compiling data on the abstraction from the river, and TS advised that the EA have an aquifer model for the Itchen.

Martin advised that if the government climate change predictions are correct, the source of the Itchen will migrate 5 miles downstream.

'Rivers on the edge'

To help with discussions, RT gave an overview of the work which WWF are currently undertaking through the 'Rivers on the edge' project;

The focus is on abstractions and flows

WWF are currently putting together a river 'health' report which reviews issues, impacts on the river (housing and climate changes), policies and who should be engaged. The report will be completed in December. She also advised that WWF are in talks with Southern Water to take forward a programme of demand management with customers. S Water has an aim to have 93% of customers on meters by 2015 and this has been approved by Offwat. WWF are going to lead on this S Water campaign and it will be launched in summer 2010.

The issue of demand management was discussed further. Points which arose included;

Water metering has shown to reduce usage by 10-14%

Change of attitude towards water is needed

New housing is a problem as demand will still increase

ACTION: CR to send RT a list of email addresses of all attendees

ACTION: RT to distribute an example Action Plan to all

ACTION: ALL to send CR and GR 'action' suggestions for the plan

ACTION: TD to contact Christopher Saunders Davies to invite him to attend the next meeting

ACTION: GR to invite Southern Water to join the group.

ACTION: GR to update the Terms of Reference as per discussions.

2. Natural England update

RE gave an update on Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

PSA is a major focus for Natural England and the target is that 95% of the total area of SSSI's are in 'favourable' or 'recovering' condition.

Natural England and the Environment Agency (specifically Tim Holzer) are working together to try to achieve this using the Itchen Water Level Management Plan (WLMP) and HLS. RE advised that there are 3 phases of work due to take place;

- Phase 1 is currently underway at Twyford which is involving re-wetting the floodplain. Phase 1 is focused on quick wins.
- Phase 2 is in the detailed design stage. These locations are the lake at Titchbourne House, Abbots Worthy and Ovington. (issues include silt deposition, phosphorus release, impoundments of the river etc),
- Phase 3 will begin the detailed design stage soon and it is looking at more difficult issues. The exact location is to be finalised but it will include the Candover Brook.

RE advised that the river has been divided into smaller sections and then the priority areas were selected. The priority areas are therefore located throughout the valley.

A geomorphological audit is being carried out by Southampton University. Rue advised that joint visits were being carried out with the EA and NE so that targets of the WLMP, River Restoration Strategy (RRS) and HLS can be integrated.

The issue of funding for implementing the WLMP was discussed. RE advised that as a commitment had been made to carry out the WLMP, some funds would be made available.

The compatibility of the RRS and WLMP was discussed as some targets seem to contradict each other. RE advised that ideally RRS actions would precede WLMP but that there are no committed funds after June 2010 for RRS. She advised that Tim Holzer is currently developing a plan which will be used to request funds.

TD advised that to aid the gathering of information, people who work along the river should be consulted with.

RE then gave an update on other work NE are involved with. She advised that there a large number of HLS applications being processed. She identified a potential issue with fishing clubs being unsure on how to best manage areas adjacent to the river and the wider floodplain.

3. Environment Agency update

TS gave an update on the Review of Consents, Water Quality and the Water Framework Directive (WFD) to the group

WFD

TS advised that after a consultation period, the WFD targets had been raised, but that so had the baseline figures, making it no more ambitious than before. It was suggested that a student project might be to pull out all relevant data for the Upper Itchen, from the River Basin Management Plan

RT advised that WWF are in talks with EA Thames Region to develop a Catchment Implementation Plan for the River Kennett

TS advised that the group could also use the LEAP (Local Environment Agency Plan) documents which were produced for the Test and Itchen and still current

Review of Consents

TS advised that Offwat are to fund S Water research into options for changes required. He pointed out to the group that a reduction in the abstraction licence won't alter river levels as the licence is not used up to its' limit.

TS advised that financial compensation is required to reduce non-consumptive abstractions. The target is to reduce these by a third and possibly to change the point of abstraction and discharge to lessen the impact of diverting flow from the river. The financial charge of abstracting water can only be increased by 5% so this will not provide enough money to pay the compensation required. Current estimates are that enough money will be available in around 20 years.

The point was made that if the EA do not tackle abstraction issues, then they will fail on targets set by the Habitat Regulations

TS advised that the control of discharge from watercress farms may be tightened within the next year with SAC designated rivers as a priority.

TS advised that fish farm discharges are usually within the limits set.

A general point was made that even if the discharges are all within the controls, the river won't reach its' targets due to diffuse pollution from the wider catchment. In light of this, Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) was identified by the group as key to improving water quality. TS advised that the CSF post (funded by Defra) is not filled at the moment but that it might be filled by December.

TS advised that group that about the Augmentation Abstraction which businesses pay a financial contribution towards annually. All businesses which contribute have an element of protection in low flows.

It is periodically tested but it has only been required once in the last 20 years.

In their Business Plan, S Water has suggested that they take on the running of this abstraction. If this was to happen, only S Water would be a protected business. TS advised that the licence to use it has been constrained through the Review of Consents. He advised that after the abstraction has been used, there is not a time period of 'hands off' to give it an opportunity to recharge.

TS advised that a decision on S Waters proposal has not been made and that a consultation with businesses who currently pay, but not with wider stakeholders.

MB commented that storing water in the floodplain would benefit the catchment and that in drought prone Countries, contour farming methods are practised to reduce land runoff.

ALL congratulated WWF on their 'Rivers on the Edge' project and the progress they have made so far.

ACTION: GR to draft a letter to James Humphrys (EA) showing support from the group, for a new Catchment Sensitive Farming officer

4. WWF update

This was covered earlier in the meeting

5. Southampton University phosphate update

PS gave the group an update

S Water advised the university that they could not contribute towards funding of the work. PS advised that there is a possibility that a project could be undertaken through an Engineering Doctorate and have an industry sponsor, which would give 4 years of funding.

TD advised that the Angling Trust is interested in the impact of phosphate stored in silt in lakes. He advised that they have made contact with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust who are able to fund a PhD on the subject. He advised that they are currently looking for study sites. He invited the group to put forward suggestions for sites – The Grange, Titchbourne Lake and Alresford Pond were put forward.

The issue of septic tanks was discussed.

TS advised that old tanks are currently unregulated and that new tanks come under planning regulations. ALL agreed that private tank owners should be informed of the potential environmental impact of a leaky tank. It was suggested that John Baker should attend the next meeting to discuss this issue further

ACTION: ALL to provide TD with additional suggestions for sites for the PhD on phosphorus and TD to put forward the initial 3 sites suggested

ACTION: GR to add a phosphates as a 'action' to the plan, with specific reference to septic tanks and lakes

ACTION: TS to raise the issue of septic tanks, internally at the EA

ACTION: TD to invite John Baker to the next meeting

6. Water Quality and Catchment Sensitive Farming

These subjects were discussed earlier in the meeting

7. Crayfish

GR gave a brief update on the Chalk Stream Invertebrate Project.

GR advised that mitigation measures put in place at Candover have been successful and it is thought that they have increased the range of the native crayfish. He also reported that Signal Crayfish have been found in several new locations in the Test and Itchen catchments.

8. Swans and Ranunculus

RH advised that group that he has been trialling the use of netting to protect Ranunculus and the initial results suggest that it is successful in preventing swan grazing. During further discussions it was suggested that Defra should be contacted with regard to possible future management of swans.

TA advised that at one site, they are feeding swans away from the watercress and this has stopped swans grazing on the beds.

TD advised that the Test and Itchen Association is currently campaigning for a translocation programme to move the swans from the rivers to Chichester Harbour.

GR suggested that inviting the RSPB and/or Defra to a meeting may inform a greater understanding and extent of the issue and possible solutions.

The reason for the increase of the swan population was discussed Mild winters, lack of natural predators and loss of floodplain grassland were all identified as possible causes.

ACTION: TD and GR to contact Defra

ACTION: TA to send TD a copy of his swan egg oiling licence

9. Priorities for the group

ACTION: ALL to send action and priority ideas to GRoberts and CR by the end of October

ACTION: GR and RT to meet to ensure that the ideas put forward do not overlap with those of WWF

10. AOB

Lord Ashburton requested that the issue of predators was discussed by the group and specifically, herons and cormorants on the Candover. He expressed concern at the impacts on fish, amphibians and water voles.

RE advised that river, riparian and floodplain management will have a big influence on the impact of these predators. It was agreed that a sustainable solution should be sought.

Alresford Pond

The siltation of the pond was discussed. RE advised that it is in unfavourable condition due to the siltation problems, but that due to cost/benefit ratio, desilting has been discounted. It was suggested that it could be put forward under the PSA targets due to the potential impact on the River Itchen SSSI and SAC, should the silt be mobilised.

ACTION: T D and GR to speak to Defra to discuss predator issues.

ACTION: ALL to agree a position on the three lakes discussed during the meeting, and make a representation reflecting the position

11. Date for next meeting Friday 23rd April 2010. Venue Alresford Salads, The Nythe Alresford SO24 9DZ.