

Committee	FULL COUNCIL
Date	12th August 2019
Agenda Item	14

River and Open Spaces Champions Report

Janet Atkinson, Malcolm Fincken

12/08/19

River

Janet Atkinson attended a meeting with Halstead River Improvement Group on 30 July. The group are very efficient and effective and have achieved much in their talks with the Environment Agency, who, because of the efforts of the group, will be undertaking works in the winter to improve the appearance and ecology of the river. In advance of this work being carried out the group are intending to arrange some clearance work by volunteers late September. A Facebook group has been set up, to provide information on the activities of the Group and opportunities for involvement, and to promote informed debate on how best to move forward. A summary of the background of the group and actions that have taken place is added below.

Open Spaces

We haven't had time to look at all the open spaces but prioritised looking at the river and land east of the high street. We will endeavour to prioritise the most urgent/important areas of the open spaces plan and identify any other possible issues in Halstead. Alongside Mick Radley, we will explore how we can best utilise the unallocated S106 contributions that he has identified.

One key area that is in the public eye and deemed urgent is Land East of the High Street. The planning inspectorate's decision is imminent. If the appellant's application is refused the issue of what happens to the land will be raised. The question of trying to have the land re-designated to protect it from un-wanted development has been asked. If the application is refused we will put it to the town council that we push for the land to be re-designated as open space in the emerging local plan.

Summary of Halstead River Improvement Group and Actions

The Halstead River Improvement Group are a group of local residents committed to preserving and enhancing the health and appearance of the River Colne at Halstead.

"In April one of us succeeded in convening a meeting attended by the owner of Townsford Mill, representatives from the Environment Agency, individuals from Halstead in Bloom, Halstead River Clean, Halstead Town Council, Braintree District Council and Essex Wildlife Trust to discuss the impact of the failure of the sluice gates at Townsford Mill. At that meeting the Environment Agency made clear that refurbishment or replacement of the gates was not an option, but that the Agency was willing to work with others to find alternative ways to enhance the appearance and ecology of this section of the river (the Mill Race) that did not adversely impact on flood risk.

As a result a number of volunteers agreed to form a small group to explore options and the Halstead River Improvement Group was established..

We have identified several issues that adversely impact upon the river's appearance, including:

- Uncontrolled growth of vegetation leading to proliferation of some unwanted species and affecting sightlines to the Mill;
- Low water levels revealing an unattractive river bed and sewage pipe;
- Greater exposure of concrete channel sides.

In terms of its ecology, the absence of the sluice gate has a positive effect in terms of enhancing the ability of the river to support diverse life forms and movement of creatures such as otters through it. But there is scope to do better by improving habitats and further assisting passage of fish. Our attention has also been drawn to the number of rats now being seen, although this is likely to be mainly due to the availability of food sources near the Causeway.

We have been informed that removal or rerouting of the sewage pipe is not an option, at least not in the near future. This is an Anglian Water structure and issues regarding its operation and appearance have to be put to them. Nor is the introduction of structures to artificially raise water levels an option. The Environment Agency have looked into this and advised that structures that are small enough not to increase flood risk do not provide enough additional water to cover the sewer pipe. However, possible proposals for addressing the identified issues include selective removal of

vegetation; clearing and remodelling of the river bed to create meanders and pools; planting of appropriate plants to enhance habitats, soften the appearance of the channel walls and obscure the sewage pipe. Decoration and/or screening of the sewage pipe may also be possible. The Environment Agency are investigating whether the introduction of a fish and eel passage through the Mill would be feasible.

The Environment Agency have informed us that they now have a confirmed budget for work on the Mill Race section of the Colne. This work needs to be undertaken in the current financial year and they are working up plans to commence this winter. In the meantime they will be undertaking required preliminary work including surveys of protected and invasive species. We have discussed the issues that we have identified with them, and they have promised to take these into account and let us have details of their proposed work. We will post information on their proposed works as and when we have them.

We are very happy that something is now happening to improve the river. But if we want the best outcome for Halstead we do not think that we should sit back and rely on the Environment Agency, which faces constraints of its own.

In the short term we propose to organise one or more volunteer action days with a view to clearing some of the unwanted vegetation from the river and channel walls and improving sight lines between the bridge, the causeway and the mill.

Rather than depending entirely on the Environment Agency, we are exploring the possibility of commissioning external expertise to draw up a plan for the Mill Race and its future management to optimise its ecological and other value to the Community. We will also explore with Anglian Water possibilities for improving the appearance of the sewage pipe. We will further pursue options for controlling numbers of rats. These will involve things going beyond the Environment Agency's remit and for which we may need to raise funding.

The Halstead River Improvement Group is arranging the first of a series of proposed clearance events in late September.

The Halstead River Improvement Group is keen to begin selective clearance of unwanted vegetation on the Mill Race as soon as possible, in advance of the Environment Agency undertaking more substantial clearance and remodelling work in the winter. However it is important that this work is carefully planned and done at the right time. To minimise the risk to nesting birds it cannot be done before September. To reduce the risk of further harm to fish and other creatures in the area already stressed by the recent high temperatures and low levels of dissolved oxygen we need to avoid loss of valuable shading and inadvertent damage to oxygenating plants. We also need to wait for an increase in the water flow. To safeguard the safety of all volunteers we need to plan for the work to be carried out without the use of power tools and keeping clear of hazards on the river bed.

To meet these conditions we are proposing a series of small scale clearance events to take place on Sunday mornings, commencing in late September. Our initial aim will be selective cutting back and

clearance of unwanted vegetation in the area in front of Townsford Mill. Members of the Committee will be on hand to advise on what action is to be taken.