

Broads Local Access Forum

Minutes of the meeting held on 06 March 2024

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Present

Keith Bacon – in the Chair, Christine Cane, Peter Dixon, Tim Harris, Duncan Holmes, Kate Leonard, David Lilley, Christopher Yardley.

In attendance

Richard Cooper- University of East Anglia, Dan Hoare – Head of Construction, Maintenance and Ecology, Andrew Hollis- Norfolk County Council, Kylie Moos – Administrative Officer, Jo Thompson – Waterways and Recreation Officer.

1. Apologies for absence and welcome

Apologies received from, Geoff Doggert, Tony Gibbons, Peter Mason, Steve Read, Deborah Wicks.

2. Declarations of interest

Members indicated they had no further declarations of interest other than those already registered and set out in Appendix 1 to these minutes.

3. Minutes of the Broads Local Access Forum meeting held on 29 November 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. Summary of actions and outstanding issues following decisions at previous meetings

Lost paths in the Broads

There has been no formal response from officers at Norfolk County Council or Suffolk County Council. There will be an update on the Bramerton footpath later on in the agenda.

5. Water quality in the Broads

Dr Richard Cooper, Catchment Scientist at the University of East Anglia (UEA) provided a short presentation on water quality monitoring in the Broads, focusing on the River Wensum. The River Wensum is a priority chalk stream and has received funding from central government to set up monitoring programmes.

The UEA has been working on a project to pull together 22 years of water quality data for the River Wensum using a combination of data generated at the university, and data that is freely available, produced by the Environment Agency (EA). 10,950 samples were collected from 57 sites over a 22 year period for the Wensum catchment.

Phosphorus

Phosphorus is a key pollutant and major driver of algal growth in the Broads. It is often released from sewage treatment works and agricultural fertilisers. Data for the Wensum shows a pronounced decline in phosphorus concentrations over the last 22 years with a decrease of 44%.

Concentrations significantly dropped between 2000-2005, primarily due to improvements in wastewater treatment and the installation of phosphorus stripping technology in some of the big treatment works. Whilst the phosphorus levels are heading in the right direction, for the water quality to be considered 'good' for supporting healthy ecology in the river, further reductions need to be made. To achieve another significant drop in phosphorus concentration, like in the early 2000's, there would need to be further upgrades to treatment works and a reduction in surface run off from agricultural land.

Using the data from the EA and UEA it is possible to pinpoint where in the river the phosphorus is highest and prioritise areas to work in. For example, sampling points on the River Tud had a particularly high concentrations of phosphorus which is likely due to the three sewage treatment works which drain into that stretch of river. Anglian Water are trying to address the amount of phosphorus coming out the treatment works, particularly at Mattishall which has seen a lot of housing growth in recent years. Management of these particular locations is only possible with high resolution data over a long period of time compared to a single sampling point that is analysed once a year.

Ammonium

High ammonium levels are a good indication that there is sewage pollution in the river. Results from the Wensum show the same trend as phosphorus over the last 22 years. There was a pronounced drop off after the early 2000's and results have been steady throughout the last decade.

Concentration needs to be less than 0.6 milligrams per litre for good water quality and the catchment is significantly below that.

Nitrogen

Total oxidised nitrogen is a fertiliser pollutant. Most of the nitrate in the Broads rivers is getting in from the widespread use of agricultural fertilisers leaching down through the soil into the ground water. Concentrations of total oxidised nitrogen is higher in the winter months when there are no crops growing in the field to soak up the extra nitrogen fertiliser. The Wensum saw a modest decline of 15% in the first decade, but in the last 5-8 years there has been an increase of 23%.

Higher nitrate concentrations increase the chance of having algal blooms and negatively impacts drinking water, which cannot go above 11 milligrams per litre. The safe drinking water level is occasionally being breached, this is likely due to the increase of wet winters and is a longer term concern.

Nitrogen in the Wensum catchment is predominantly an issue up in the upper catchments, up stream of Fakenham where 90% of river flow is from groundwater. More work needs to be

done with farmers and landowners to try and reduce the amount of fertiliser that is getting down into the aquifer and contaminating the groundwater.

Faecal indicator organisms

Faecal indicator organisms such as E. Coli and salmonella are not monitored extensively as it is an expensive and labour intensive parameter to measure. The data that has been collected in the River Wensum has shown high levels of bacteria which are all above bathing water limits. As there are no designated bathing water sites in the Wensum, so there is not a requirement on water companies to reduce their level of bacteria down to safe swimming levels. Most of the bacteria will be coming from the 21 sewage works across the Wensum catchment and a small amount of bacteria will be from livestock accessing the water.

Comments and answers to questions

BLAF members welcomed the presentation, and thanked Richard Cooper (RC) for the update.

A Forum member noted that there had been little progress on the Wensum for phosphorus reduction and nitrogen pollution has increased in the last 20 years. It is likely that that the similar results will be found across the rest of the Broads and the results presented today should focus the efforts of the Broads Authority to push for more EA monitoring. They also asked why there isn't more salinity monitoring taking place on the Ant to review environmental damage to the river and Fens. Richard Cooper is planning to carry out the same review on the River Yare, Bure and Waveney as the Wensum however, it has taken six months of work to pull together the data on the Wensum. EA sampling points can be viewed on the following website: <https://environment.data.gov.uk/water-quality/view/explore?search=&area=1-samplingPointType.group=&samplingPointStatus%5B%5D=open&loc=642780%2C323394&limit=500>. The website displays a variety of sampling point types and allows users to zoom in to the sampling point location.

The data presented today looked at the last 22 years, Dan Hoare noted that in the 1980s-1990s phosphorus levels were considerably higher and continuous progress is being made. A significant decline in phosphorus took place once the sewage treatment works were upgraded in the 1980s. Since then, it has been a difficult and expensive task to continue removing the remaining small amount of phosphorus.

A Forum member suggested that the EA data sets should be reviewed on a regular basis if the information is publicly available. Focusing on two or three pollutants that are doing the most damage and publicising the results will have a greater impact than trying to review them all. Dan Hoare added, there is already a history of water quality improvements for ecological drivers, there should be a focus on water access related pollutants such as the monitoring of faecal indicator organisms. Faecal indicator organism monitoring is often limited to priority sites and more work is required to pull out the relevant data from the EA website.

A Forum member commented not only does water quality need to be monitored regarding access to the water, but the number one attraction to the Broads is the natural environment and this is being damaged by the water quality of the rivers.

Richard Cooper informed the forum of a citizen science group that have been funded by Catchment Systems Thinking Cooperative (CaSTCo) and are carrying out their own monitoring on the River Lark. The group have been monitoring nutrients on average once a week with handheld kits that can be taken out to the river. Samples are taken from more locations than the EA carry out as part as their statutory monitoring programme. The results provide a more granular picture of what is going on in the catchment and individual point sources can be addressed. For example, the group have been able to identify particular septic tanks that are discharging into the river. Anglian Water have also set up the 'Get River Positive' scheme, providing millions of pounds of funding to set up citizen science groups and encouraging ownership of the river and to get people out monitoring.

A Forum member asked with nitrate levels increasing in the Wensum due to fertiliser run off and increased wet winters, who is responsible for liaising with farmers to look at alternative agricultural practises. Richard Cooper responded, Natural England administers Agri-environment schemes, one of which is the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). Through SFI farmers and landowners can receive funding for planting winter cover crops which hold on to the nitrogen and reduces the nitrogen reaching the aquifer. Natural England farm advisors also support landowners to bid into these schemes and will be aware of the data that is available on the EA website.

Richard Cooper agreed to present the results of the River Bure, Waveney and Yare to the Forum once the assessment has been completed over the next few years. The assessments will not include any additional bacterial monitoring by the UEA

The River Waveney Trust are applying for a designated bathing site at Falcon Meadow, Bungay, and are experienced in testing for faecal indicator organisms and working with citizen scientists. Richard Cooper recommended contacting the River Waveney Trust for more information. Dan Hoare commented that the designation process is difficult, with on average 100 people need to use the site per day and the necessary supporting infrastructure is often the limiting factor in gaining bathing water status.

Jo Thompson agreed to request a project update from the River Waveney Trust and attendance of at a future meeting.

6. Broads Countryside Code

Duncan Holmes presented the Broads Countryside Code to the Forum on behalf of the Broads Society. Certain areas of the Broads are experiencing increasing reports of anti-social behaviour which is often due to a lack of awareness rather than intentional misconduct. The objective of a Broads Countryside Code is to foster respect for the area's natural beauty, wildlife, and local customs, reducing incidents of anti-social behaviour through education and awareness.

The Broads Society are ready to lead the initiative and are looking for input from other stakeholder groups to make sure that the content is relevant and inclusive of everybody's needs and to find funding for the printing costs. The Broads Countryside Code can be hosted through the Broads Society website and accessed through QR codes placed in the Broads. The printing costs for the leaflets are estimated at around £800 for 20,000.

The Forum supported the proposal of the Broads Countryside Code and would like to see the draft leaflet at a future meeting. Broads Local Access Forum does not have a budget to support the printing costs, but it would encourage the Broads Authority to support the proposal.

Jo Thompson agreed to discuss the proposal further with Duncan Holmes and the Broads Authority communications team.

7. Integrated Access Strategy

Jo Thompson introduced the Integrated Access Strategy report and thanked Forum members for their comments during the consultation phase. The final draft of the strategy will be presented for adoption at the Broads Authority committee meeting on the 15 March.

It was resolved unanimously to endorse the Integrated Access Strategy.

8. Any other business

Jo Thompson reported that planning permission has been submitted for improvements on the first two bridges at Hardley Flood on the Wherryman's way. Currently only one of the bridges is accessible.

A joint planning permission application from the Broads Authority and Norfolk County Council is being put together for Bramerton footpath 5. The construction start date has not yet been confirmed and is dependent on the current funding that is available. Once the work is complete it will reestablish a path along the riverbank.

Jo Thompson approached Norfolk County Council for a list of paths that have been lost to the river. The paths that have been listed as inaccessible are only from the last six months and based on members of the public reporting an issue. Dan Hoare added, not all of the paths on this list are lost due to the river, some of the paths are inland and waterlogged from the rain.

Jo Thompson agreed to review the areas where paths are at risk of erosion to the river or vulnerable to flooding, and report back to the Forum.

A Forum member reported that in the last 2-3 years the maintenance cutting for footpaths has been so late in the year that paths are often inaccessible and asked if there is a coordinated approach between the responsible bodies. An example of this is the Weavers Way between Potter Heigham and the River Thurne. Dan Hoare responded, an action for the Integrated Access Strategy is to further coordinate the existing cutting efforts of the EA, County Councils, and the small stretches of path which the Broads Authority maintains.

Andrew Hollis agreed to find out more information on the Norfolk County Council cutting programme in the Broads and to report back to the Forum.

Andrew Hollis reported that the Norfolk Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Strategy and the Norfolk Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan will be going to cabinet for adoption on 8 April. Regarding staffing updates, Andrew Hollis confirmed two roles are currently being recruited into the department.

Recruitment for new members to the Forum will be taking place in the coming months. Jo Thompson proposed moving the recruitment to April/May ahead of the summer season. It is hoped that advertising earlier will generate more interest.

Forum members agreed to move the recruitment window to April/May.

The Broads Society are hosting an event with Dr Rose O'Neill, the Chief Executive of the Campaign for National Parks to discuss 'The State of the Broads in the Family of National Parks.' The event will take place on 11 April at The Forum, Norwich.

9. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Broads Local Access Forum would be held on Wednesday 5 June 2024 at 10.00am and would be followed by an optional site visit.

Dan Hoare suggested holding the meeting in Bungay to view the designated bathing site at Falcon Meadow.

The meeting ended at 11.15am.

Signed by

Chair

Appendix 1 – Declaration of interests Broads Local Access Forum, 06 March 2024

Member	Agenda/minute	Nature of interest