

The need for green corridors and a proactive green infrastructure policy

The RDS Natural Environment Committee is a subcommittee of the Romsey and District Society tasked with promoting and safeguarding the natural environment in and around Romsey. Our comments are therefore mainly limited to the Romsey area.

It is composed of local people who know the area well and regularly visit, walk and volunteer at various locations. Members also contribute to Romsey Forum, the Romsey Waterways Partnership and other enquiries as appropriate.

We have become increasingly concerned by the poor response to the importance of nature in new developments. This was particularly so after Oxlease was given consent and planning applications were submitted along the length of Cupernham Lane and given permission, cutting off the Abbotswood Conservation Area from the rich corridor that used to run through to Fishlake Meadows and from there to the River Test (SAC) and putting additional pressure on Fishlake Meadows itself. Despite our pleas for green corridors to be retained only one small gap exists and this is largely due to the need for drainage management.

During this same period a number of other speculative applications were submitted for sites in the countryside which were of wildlife importance. Only a small number of sites have statutory protection.

We therefore welcomed the TVBC Green Infrastructure Strategy of 2014 which sets out a good description of the natural environment in our area and the need to protect and enhance it. However we were disappointed that there was very little detail as to how this would proceed. When we made enquiries of the planning department we were told that the work to produce it had been done by Hampshire County Council and the Wildlife Trust and that TVBC did not have the resources to take the work any further.

This prompted the Natural Environment Committee to carry out its own assessment of where green corridors were needed, using our local knowledge, information from the strategy document and from the Hampshire Biological Information centre (HBIC).

The criteria were those contained in the TVBC strategy document;

- enhance the biodiversity of the Borough
- enhance the quality of the natural environment
- maximise the opportunities for the public to enjoy the environment
- support the Council's response to a changing climate
- support the well-being of the residents of the Borough

We have chosen sites based on the distribution of important sites (SINCs, SSSIs and LNRs) plus ancient and important woodland, and trying to protect links between them to allow wildlife to move between them. We are concerned that isolated pockets of ecological interest will lead to a lack of interaction between populations leading to inbreeding and a loss of biodiversity. We have also looked at OS maps and satellite photographs. Some of our proposed sites are not of great ecological

value in themselves but are needed to prevent development and act as a buffer to more sensitive sites which cannot cope with high levels of use by people and their dogs. Within the green corridors we are proposing there are opportunities to provide improved walking routes and opportunities for informal recreation. These will be much needed as further developments occur. It is necessary to have a strategy that developers can respond to. At the moment large scale sites have to provide for informal recreation on site but smaller sites cannot do so.

Another concern is that a lot of the land around Romsey has been identified by owners for housing development and is therefore treated as land banks. There is no interest in caring for the environmental quality of these areas and in some cases the owners actively deter any wildlife that might affect their long term plans by destroying the habitat. For example the site to the south of Wren's Corner which was rich in wildlife including breeding Nightingales and was bulldozed just weeks before a planning application was submitted. Similarly, Casbrook Common, which is the only other Nightingale breeding site left close to Romsey which was cleared of scrub when the owners were informed that it had been proposed as a SINC. Other landowners who are hoping to develop in the long term rent out their land for grazing and again no work is undertaken to promote biodiversity. For example the fields around Halterworth are designated as a local gap and are rented out to a tenant for sheep grazing. There are a few fine hedgerow Oaks but little is left of the hedges. There is scope for working with local landowners to improve/maintain hedges and plant trees around field boundaries to improve biodiversity and create more effective green corridors without adversely affecting the owner's long term aspirations for the site.

There are a number of changes coming up through new legislation, for example the Environment Bill, changes to building regulations, and changes to agricultural subsidies which all offer opportunities to fund/ require improvements to our natural environment. The revision of the Local Plan and the updating of the Green Infrastructure Strategy offers the opportunity to set out plans for how we can start to reduce the decline in our natural environment and address climate change. The development of the Forest Park and land at Sherfield | English is welcome as mitigation for additional recreational pressure on the New Forest but we would like the whole of the proposed green corridor to be eligible for such treatment. There are also opportunities to create enhancements to the green corridor as mitigation for increased nitrate levels resulting from new housing developments.

We have brought together all the information about local sites of importance for nature and put them into a GIS map together with our proposals for green corridors to connect them.