

BLACK SLUICE INTERNAL DRAINAGE BOARD

MINUTES

of the proceedings of a meeting of the Environment Committee

held at the offices of the Board on
27th February 2024 at 2pm

Members

Chairperson - * Mr P Holmes

* Mr W Ash	* Mr J Atkinson
* Mr V Barker	* Mr K C Casswell
* Mr M Rollinson	* Mr P Robinson
* Mr R Welberry	* Mr R Needham

Cllr C Rylott

* Member Present

In attendance: Mr D Withnall (Chief Executive)
Mr P Nicholson (Projects Director)
Mr S Harrison (Maintenance Director)
Mr M Smith (Waterlife Recovery Trust)

2274 Recording the meeting - Agenda Item 1

Board Members were informed that the meeting would be recorded.

2275 Apologies for absence - Agenda Item 2

Apologies were received from Cllr C Rylott.

The Chairperson welcomed and introduced Malc Smith (guest from Waterlife Recovery Trust).

2276 Declarations of interest - Agenda Item 3

There were no declarations of interest.

2277 Minutes of the last meeting - Agenda Item 4

The Minutes of the last meeting of the Environment Committee held on the 7th March 2023, copies of which had been circulated, were considered. It was AGREED that they should be signed as a true record, with the following amendment:

- Minute 2107 – reference to ‘gun licence’ should be ‘general licence’.

2278 Matters arising - Agenda Item 5

(a) Water Levels - Minute 2107

The Chairperson noted the reference to the lack of rainfall and drought conditions at the time of that meeting (March 2023) in comparison to the current conditions (large quantities of rainfall).

(b) Bird Flu (Avian Influenza) - Minute 2112(a)

It was noted that there have been no further reports of dead swans or birds. The Board received no feedback from Defra regarding the birds the Board reported as per the government guidelines.

2279 To review the Biodiversity Action Plan (Policy No. 11) - Agenda Item 6

The Chairperson introduced the Biodiversity Action Plan, noting that it is a dynamic document and that it is available to view on the Board's website.

The Maintenance Director noted that there are no proposed amendments.

Mr K Casswell questioned how many mink have been trapped? It was confirmed that 28 have been trapped, adding that there have been some issues experienced with the mink rafts floating away and sinking. The equipment has been recovered but will require extensive repair. Further noting that the proposed work with Waterlife Recovery Trust will be of great benefit, it being noted that two mink were caught over the past weekend (Helpringham and Hammond Beck). Control of mink was discussed further at minute 2284.

The Committee RESOLVED to recommend that the Biodiversity Action Plan (Policy No. 11) be approved at the next Board meeting.

2280 To receive a report on environmental work completed in 2023/24 and recommendations for proposed works for 2024/25 - Agenda Item 7

The Maintenance Director presented this agenda item, highlighting particular points as follows.

Completed Works 2023/24

Owl Boxes

The Board has purchased three new owl boxes. There has been a large decline in barn owl numbers. Mr W Ash noted that the water vole population can affect this. Reference was made to 87% of the barn owl boxes having Jackdaws present, Mr R Welberry questioning whether there is anything that can be done about this – culling or licenced traps? Mr M Rollinson noted that in order to prevent Jackdaws getting into an owl box, two doors are required (outside door on right hand side, inside door on left hand side). Jackdaws nest with long twigs and therefore can't get the twigs round the corner to build a nest. The Maintenance Director noted this and that he will look into the existing boxes being adapted.

Mr V Barker noted that he has also witnessed Buzzards taking barn owls as they fly along so sedately.

Early Flailing Works

The Board continue with early season bank flailing of high-profile watercourses and early health and safety cuts on main river highland carriers for the Environment Agency (EA).

Environmental Surveys of Larger Hedgerows in our Bushing Programme

It was noted that there has been difficulty in finding a consultant to conduct the Board's environmental surveys. Tim Smith, used by a neighbouring IDB, has conducted them this year, but is due to retire in the near future. The Board are currently advertising for an Environment & GIS Officer who will complete these surveys going forward.

Mr M Rollinson added that there is an app used for surveying hedgerows for the purpose of Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), suggesting this may be of some benefit. Mr M Rollinson noted that he will share the details with the Maintenance Director.

Operation Fly Swat

The Board continue being a partner with the Operation Fly Swat team. However, it was noted that the council won't collect rubbish from the Board depot unless a forklift is used to put it onto their truck. The Board therefore often recover from the drain and leave on the roadside for the council to collect from there.

Invasive Species

The workforce are reminded of the invasive species at the annual pre-cutting brief.

Bat Boxes and Surveys

There is still no activity in the Board's bat boxes.

Environmental Schemes

The Eel Screen Exemption period concludes in November 2024, it being expected that this will be extended again, as it has done previously.

Grass Snake Nesting Sites

No activity has been seen in the Board's Grass Snake Nesting Sites.

Wildflower Meadow

The area has been redressed again this year. It will be redressed again with a different type of seed if required. Previous seed has failed due to nitrate levels in the soil.

Badger Setts

The workforce follow Natural England guidelines when working adjacent to Badger Setts under a specific licence.

Pollution

There have been no reported pollution incidents.

Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership

The Maintenance Director attends the GLNP, noting that the last meeting was focused on carbon recovery.

South Lincs Pollinator Project

The Board continues with this at Kirton Marsh, noting that there has been no further contact from the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, who were leading the project, adding that he will follow this up.

Artificial House Martin Nests

The House Martins have shown interest in the nests and so it is hopeful that they may nest this year.

The Wash and North Norfolk Marine Partnership

The Projects Director attends these meetings, noting that the current focus is on the Norfolk coastline.

The Environmental Good Governance Guide for Internal Drainage Boards

It was noted that this is a useful reference point for the Board.

Proposed works 2024/2025

Water Vole Surveys

Committee approval requested to continue using consultant Tim Smith for the Board's environmental surveys until successful recruitment of an Environment & GIS Officer. The vacancy is currently advertised, it has received interest, but from applicants that are more GIS based than environment based. It was confirmed that the Board are seeking a predominantly environmental based person, who could then be trained to complete the GIS element of work.

Winter Bushing and Cleansing

The Board are slightly behind on the programme due to recent rainfall events. A budget of £2,000 is proposed for fish relocation during cleansing.

Owl Boxes

A budget of £2,100 is proposed for the repair / replacement of three existing owl boxes. The Maintenance Director noted that, following previous conversation about stopping Jackdaws entering the boxes, this budget could go towards adaptation of the boxes.

Recording by Machine Drivers

The Board's machine drivers continue to record sightings on their Tom-Tom units, with a proposed budget of £1,700 for Tom-Tom repairs and updates in 2024/25.

It was confirmed that Otter sightings are recorded but is very rare that they are seen. It was added that a family of Otters have shown interest in the Board's Otter Halt.

Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS)

A new Invasive Non-Native Species was displayed on screen – the Chinese Mitten Crab. They have not been seen in the Board's catchment but are present in the Welland and Deepings IDB area. They burrow into the bank, effecting the stability of it. They eat anything and are found in both salt and fresh water. Welland and Deepings IDB are actively trying to catch them, within a day of putting out the trap in the weir, there were hundreds caught.

Operation Flyswat Partner

An estimated contribution of £4,000 has been budgeted, which outweighs the cost the Board would incur if carrying out the work.

Grass Snake Nesting Sites

Mr V Barker noted that with the increase in automatic weedscreen cleaners, there aren't the heaps of grass that have come out the watercourses and are therefore losing some potential nesting sites. The Maintenance Director noted that the Board could look at introducing more nesting sites, noting that Sempringham Pumping Station would lend itself well for this (sightings here previously).

Wildflower Meadow

If redressing is required, a budget of £700 has been allocated for this.

Pollinator Project

It was noted that previous discussion has taken place with the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust about when bank slips are repaired are redressed, pollinator seed can be used (in addition to grass, needed to stabilise the bank).

Environment Budget 2024/25

The big increase in budget for the Environmental & GIS Officer was noted (which will be charged 50% Environment and 50% GIS). This creates an overspend for 2024/25 of £13,598. Mr V Barker suggested targeting graduates.

The committee AGREED the budget as below:

Winter bushing & cleansing (fish relocation)	£ 2,000.00
Slip Repairs Pollinator Seed	£ 600.00
Barn Owl Box Replacements	£ 2,100.00
Tom Tom Repairs/Updates	£ 1,700.00
Mink Control	£ 2,600.00
Operation Fly swat partner	£ 4,000.00
Grass Snake Sites	£ 300.00
Wild Meadow Maintenance	£ 700.00
Pollinator Project	£ 875.00
WNNMP	£ 400.00
GLNP	£ 300.00
Environment & GIS Officer (new role 50%)	£24,023.00
Total	£39,598.00

The Chairperson thanked the Maintenance Director and team.

2281 To receive a report on Barn Owl Nesting Boxes for 2023 - Agenda Item 8

The Maintenance Director presented the Barn Owl Report for 2023. The Chairperson noted that A Ball, who completes the report, has conveyed his thanks for the Board's commitment to this project.

2282 To receive a report on the 2023 butterfly records from Windmill Lodge Butterfly Conservation and Wildlife area, Amber Hill - Agenda Item 9

The Maintenance Director presented the 2023 butterfly records from Windmill Lodge Butterfly conservation and wildlife area at Amber Hill.

2283 To receive the 2024 Conservation surveys of watercourses - Agenda Item 10

The Maintenance Director presented the conservation surveys for the North Forty Foot Drain, Horbling Fen Drove Drain and Old Forty Foot (Horbling). It was noted that these reports are concise but are still compliant with what the Board are required to conduct. It is also a document that the workforce can easily refer to on site.

2284 To receive a report from Malc Smith (Waterlife Recovery Trust) - Agenda Item 12

The Chairperson introduced Mr Malc Smith from the Waterlife Recovery Trust (WRT) to give a presentation on the eradication of mink.

Malc Smith gave an informative and interesting presentation as follows.

Waterlife Recovery East was the first of the charities to be set up (2018), which then changed to Waterlife Recovery Trust in 2022.

Work to date over the past three years has focused on the 'core area' (displayed on screen), highlighted in green (Norfolk and Suffolk). There were no juvenile mink caught in Norfolk and Suffolk in 2023. With only five adults caught in Suffolk and seven in Norfolk in 2023. It was noted that there was around 400-500 in the first year. This has been achieved through WRT mink trapping alongside other additional mink trapping. The Trust try to catch the mink whilst they are breeding (February – end of March) and then the dispersal later in the year (August). The Trust started with the Norfolk and Suffolk area because of the coastal area, which means there is not much immigration from the coast and other existing projects. Mr M Smith further noted that mink have been known to travel up to 70km over land.

Mr M Smith next showed the committee the 'buffer zone' (displayed on screen), highlighted in red (Cambridge). This area has been trapped by the Trust for 2.5 years now.

Mr M Smith next displayed the newest area taken on last year through Natural England funding (North of the Thames, London up to Lincoln).

Mr M Smith showed a map of all the traps deployed as at September 2023, with very few in Lincolnshire. A comparison map was displayed next, showing the traps deployed up to date. Mr M Rollinson noted the traps shown in isolated areas, with Mr M Smith noting that some people show an interest and request a trap in their area.

Mr R Welberry noted his surprise that there aren't more traps in the Newark area. Mr M Smith noted that the funding only takes the Trust area up to Lincoln. Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust and South Yorkshire Wildlife Trust have each got 100 traps to deploy in addition to the Trust's work.

Since autumn 2023, the Trust have deployed 320 rafts, with 166 mink caught so far. The data showing the number of mink caught annually was shared as below:

County	Mink captures 2024 to date
Argle & Bute	9
Beds	24
Berks	2
Cambridgeshire	4
East Sussex	2
Essex	9
Greater London	1
Kent	9
Leicester	3
Lincolnshire	69
Northants	12
Nottinghamshire	9
Oxford	1
Rutland	4
Staffs	1
Surrey	1
West Sussex	2
West Yorks	4
Total 2024 to date	166
Mink captures 2023	588
Mink Captures 2022	241
Mink Captures 2021	362
4 Year Grand Total	1327 to date

Once the mink has been caught, it is shot, bagged and stored in a freezer for preservation. The mink is then analysed using the following methods:

- Weighed and measured
- Look for distinctive features
- DNA Sample Analysis (Cambridge University)
- Muzzle removed to extract teeth to identify age (Cambridge University & America) (mink live up to 7 years old)
- Female fertility analysis
- Anal gland extraction (scent used in traps to attract mink)
- Remaining body is used as food for local raptors

Mr M Smith next showed maps showing the different DNA data of mink in various locations. Mr P Robinson noted that historically there was a mink farm in New York which was sabotaged, and the mink released. It was noted around how far some of the same DNA strands are apart, therefore, noting the distance travelled.

Mr V Barker noted the DNA work done on squirrels to make them only produce males, questioning whether the same should be considered for mink? Mr M Smith noted that the aim for mink is eradication, not control, as it is with squirrels.

Mr M Smith explained about the Remoti traps themselves, noting that they send an email / text notification if there are any issues i.e., turned over or if a mink has been trapped, therefore they do not need constant monitoring. All traps use scent glands to attract the mink and is replaced after three months. If a mink is caught in a trap, then that mink will have left a scent in the trap and so a new lure is not required.

Mr M Smith continued by explaining how the Board can help. The equipment is free, it is information that is key. Mink can be reported through the Waterlife Recovery Trust website or ringing. Any mink recovery is wanted i.e., trapping or roadkill so that the body can be analysed. It was noted that this information has been included in the Rating Brochure.

Mr M Smith also noted that the Trust are looking for volunteers to host a raft (2 volunteers per raft). The aim is to deploy 24 traps in the Board's area. There are freezers for the mink at the Board's depot, Welland & Deepings IDB, North Level IDB. As previously noted, it does not require constant monitoring, as any errors or trapping will be made known to the volunteers by an email / text notification. The Trust will set up the trap and provide training. If a non-target species gets trapped, they are released. It was noted that the traps don't have to be on water and have been dug into banks previously, but generally, mink use water as highways.

Mr M Smith provided his contact details, as below, for anybody interested in hosting a raft to get in touch about. The Chairperson and Mr M Rollinson noted their interest.

Mr M Smith - WRT Project Manager
07778768965 malc.smith@waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk
www.waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk

The Chairperson questioned that if there are Moorhens present, does this indicate that mink are not present? Mr M Smith noted that this is not an accurate indicator of whether there are mink or not.

Mr M Smith referred to four traps in a one-mile radius in the Langtoft area, and that 27 mink have been caught in those traps.

The importance of educating the public and the reasoning for the eradication was noted.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the committee, thanked Mr M Smith for his informative and interesting presentation.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 15:10.