



Town Hall | 61 Newland Street | Witham | Essex | CM8 2FE

OPEN SPACES MANAGEMENT SUB-COMMITTEE

AGENDA

TUESDAY 5TH DECEMBER 2023, 2:00PM

MEMBERS:	Councillors	S.	Ager	OFFICERS:	H. Andrews
		P.	Barlow		S. Dyer
		B.	Fleet		S. Puckey
		P.	Heath		
		R.	Ramage		

CO-OPTEEES:	S.	Black	-	(Witham & Countryside Society)
	S.	Brailey	-	(Witham Tree Group)
	J.	Casement	-	(Witham Wombles)
	B.	Fleet	-	(Tree Warden)
	J.	Goodman	-	(Local interests)
	J.	Palombi	-	(CPRE)
	P.	Shuttleworth	-	(Local Wildlife Interests)

1) APOLOGIES

To receive apologies for absence.

2) INTERESTS

To receive any declarations of interest.

3) MINUTES

To receive the minutes of the meeting of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee held on 5th September 2023 attached at pages 3 to 5.

4) QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

An opportunity for members of the press and public present to comment upon any item on the agenda or raise new concerns.

5) CONSIDERATION OF WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS

To consider any written representations received by the Council.

6) CLERK'S REPORT

To receive the Clerk's Report attached at page 6.

7) OPERATIONS MANAGER'S REPORT

To receive the Operations Manager's verbal report on recent open spaces activities and to answer any questions put by members.

- 8) WHETMEAD NATURE RESERVE SECTION 106 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT**
To receive an update report on the Section 106 Whetmead improvement project attached at pages 7 to 10.
- 9) SECTION 106 FUNDING AND OPEN SPACES**
To receive information on future opportunities for enhancing open spaces with Section 106 funding.
- 10) A12 WIDENING AND WHETMEAD NATURE RESERVE**
To receive an update on potential future improvements attached at page 11.
- 11) RIVER WATER QUALITY**
To receive a report attached at pages 12 to 13.
- 12) DUCK POND ENHANCEMENT**
To receive an update on duck pond enhancement potential project attached at page 14.
- 13) ESSEX WILDLIFE TRUST WILDER TOWNS**
To receive an update on Essex Wildlife Trust Wilder Towns' scheme attached at page 15.
- 14) DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**
To note that the next meeting of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee will be held on Tuesday 5th March 2023 at the earlier time of 1.30pm.



Town Hall | 61 Newland Street | Witham | CM8 2FE
 01376 520627
 witham.gov.uk

MINUTES

Meeting of: **Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee**

Date: **5th September 2023**

Present:	Councillors	B	Fleet	(Chairman)
		P.	Barlow	
		P.	Heath	
		R.	Ramage	
	Co-optees	S.	Black	(Witham and Countryside Society)
		J.	Casement	(Witham Wombles)
		J.	Palombi	(CPRE)
		P.	Shuttleworth	(Local Wildlife Interests)
	Officers	S	Dyer	(Operations Manager)
		S	Puckey	(Open Spaces Administrative Assistant)

One member of the public was present.

13. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Ager, Cllr Hewitt and S Brailey.

14. INTERESTS

No interests were declared.

15. CO-OPTION

It was **AGREED** that Mr John Goodman be appointed as a co-opted member of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee.

16. MINUTES

The minutes were **AGREED** and subsequently signed by the Chairman.

17. OPERATIONS MANAGER'S REPORT

The Operations Manager provided a verbal update. Following the breakdown of the larger mower (Ransomes Parkway) and also the trailer, combined with the wet warm weather encouraging grass growth, it has been a challenging period, however the team are up-to-date with their maintenance schedule.

On the River Walk there has been a spate of vandalism around the Ebenezer entrance which the team have rectified throughout the summer, while close to Luard Way a new bench has been installed.

At James Cooke Wood, regular maintenance has continued and our Tree Surgeon has cut back a Willow Tree overhanging the fishing lake, while at Whetmead, the frequency of grass cutting has increased on the top and the paths have been widened to allow two people to walk side-by-side.

At the Churchyard, the small wild flower project has been a success and it will be continued next year, however the general maintenance schedule is currently under review as it is outdated.

At the allotments there has been a series of difficult plot clearances which have been undertaken by the team, and at the station, the planters have been filled for the summer season and will be refreshed at the end of September ready for Winter.

Members were advised that working without the Ransomes Parkway mower meant that the grass cutting was slower but options were being explored for future grass cutting on Witham's open spaces.

Members were advised that the Operations Team would have access to Whetmead for most of the A12 widening scheme and Members **RECOMMENDED** that this be monitored to ensure regular access is maintained.

18. DUCKPOND ENHANCEMENTS

The report was received. Members were interested in potentially adding to the reeds in the duck pond and it was **AGREED** that this would be investigated in more detail.

It was also **AGREED** that the floating islands would be researched further as it was considered a potential haven for wildlife which might currently be detrimentally impacted by the heavy footfall of the area. Members felt that although funding may be an immediate issue, it would be beneficial to have the information for future planning and that sponsorship by local business could potentially be considered.

The Operations Manager advised that a list of small manageable jobs is kept aside for local volunteers who contact the Council offering their assistance.

The Operations Manager left the Chamber at 14.29

19. QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

A member of the public expressed concern that Whetmead would be closed to the public from 2024 to 2027 and wanted to know if alternative access had been considered and whether it could not be included. Furthermore, concern was expressed about the flora and fauna and whether they had been logged as part of the planning process, of particular concern was the Lizard Orchid, the only example in central Essex. Finally, the member of the public would like reassurance that this would not become a brown field site and therefore considered for building land. The concerns were noted.

It was **AGREED** that the environmental surveys conducted on behalf of Essex Highway would be reviewed.

20. CONSIDERATION OF WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS

No written representations were received by the Council.

21. CLERK’S REPORT

The Clerk’s report was received by Members. Members were further informed that some trenching work would begin on farmer’s field next to Whetmead during the week commencing 11th September 2023 and that a welfare unit would be sited at the A12 bridge entrance. Members were also advised that National Highways would be clearing the silt under the A12 bridge on behalf of Witham Town Council.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

22. RIVER WATER POLLUTION

Members **AGREED** to receive the report and wanted to see the layman summary when it was available. It was **AGREED** that the water pollution level report should be requested annually.

23. RIVER WALK LAND BY LIDL

Members **AGREED** to receive the report. Members were keen for Witham Town Council to take ownership of the land between the old Bramston site and Newland Street from Braintree District Council. Members further requested clarity on the Lidl sign planning application and the time allowed for Churchills for sale signage.¹

24. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the date of the next Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee meeting will be held on Tuesday 5th December 2023 at 2pm.

Meeting concluded at 2.56pm

SP/06.9.23

Signed by Chairman.....

¹ Further investigation has revealed that Lidl’s retrospective planning permission for there was refused and it is currently going through appeal. Churchill’s signage can remain until the last property is sold.

Clerk's Report: Open Spaces Management Sub-committee

To note:

- 8 substantial trees have been planted on the River Walk during National Tree Planting Week in November. These are made up of Alder, Hornbeam, White Beam, Goat Willow and Weeping Willow trees with 6 of the trees planted at Chipping Dell end of the River Walk compensating for trees felled earlier in the year.
- As part Braintree District Council's Safer Streets scheme, wayfinding columns are due to be installed on the River Walk. These will be located at Chipping Hill, Armond Road, River View Bridge and replacement arms will also be installed on the current wayfinding column near the duck pond junction. The Safer Streets scheme has also seen additional CCTV cameras installed throughout the town including two cameras on the River Walk.
- Ecology assessments and management recommendations have been commissioned for James Cooke Wood and the Closed Churchyard to be used as a basis for new management plans for both sites.
- Network Rail will be carrying out a structural examination of the rail culvert along the River Walk that runs from Armond Road towards the duck pond during February 2024. This will involve a jet vac and remote reel from the path to the structure to carry out high pressure water jetting and a CCTV examination of the culvert. Further information will be obtained nearer the time and public access to this area should not need to be restricted while work is taking place over approximately five days.



Advice:

To receive and note.

Whetmead Nature Reserve improvements

As previously advised, Section 106 funding of £13,161.21 is available for improvements to Whetmead Nature Reserve and to be spent “*towards path and access improvements, creation of outdoor education space, habitat enhancements, buoyancy aids, interpretation boards, and/or dog and litter bins*”. The funds were due to be spent by 30th November 2023 having been advised by Braintree District Council in March 2023 that Witham Town Council were authorised to carry out the project. Due to the short deadline, the project is being completed in separate parts with limited time for deliberation.

1) Installation of new steps (£3,200)

New steps at the north end of Whetmead were installed in May 2023.



2) New noticeboard (£1,340)

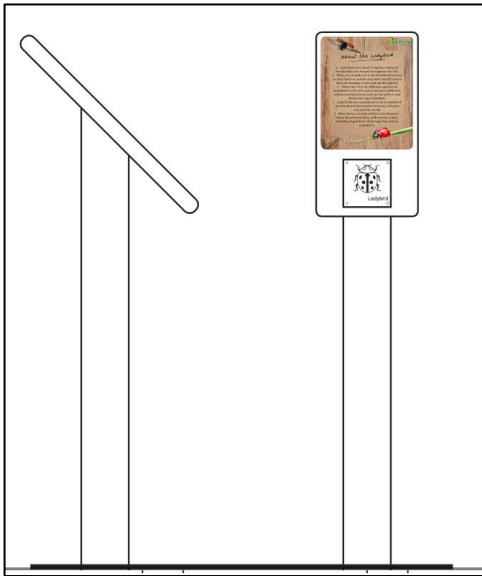
A new noticeboard was installed at the current start of the entrance of Whetmead. In order to qualify for the funding we needed to install the noticeboard and this is a temporary location and will be moved once the A12 widening works starts.




3) Installation of interpretation/nature information etching posts (£6,735)

Nature interpretation posts are currently being produced which will have etching panels on them for children. It was considered that these will provide young visitors educational information about the wildlife species and natural resources that can be found on the site. It is hoped that this will be a fun and interactive way for children to engage with their surroundings and well as having educational benefits. 15 posts are due to be installed throughout the site and a nature trail booklet will be produced for visitors to use. This will also be affected by the A12 widening but locations have been chosen to avoid moving the posts once installed.

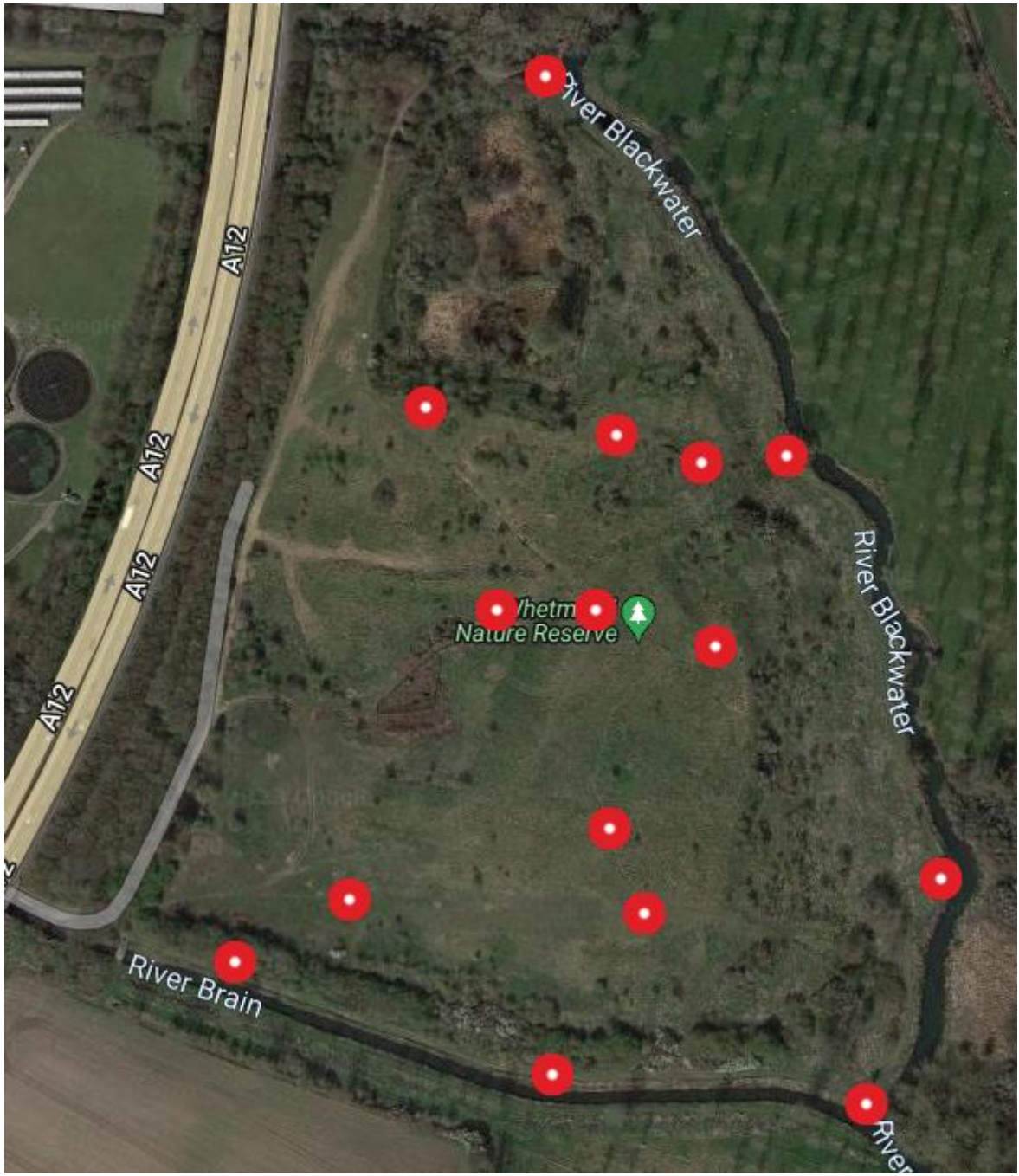
The designs will be similar to below -



 **Witham**
Lions Country Park

About the Buzzard

1. Buzzards are birds of prey that belong to the Hawk family. They are also called "vultures" in some parts of the world.
2. Buzzards are found all over the world, except for Australia and Antarctica.
3. They have excellent eyesight, which helps them find their prey from high up in the air.
4. Buzzards are scavengers, which means they feed on dead animals. They also eat small mammals, reptiles, and insects. Some species of buzzards can live for over 20 years in the wild.
5. Some species of buzzards can fly for hours without flapping their wings, using air currents to stay aloft.



Planned nature post locations

4) Installation of an interpretation board (£1,550)

With the balance of funds available it was suggested that a new interpretation board could be installed at the location on the reserve where the rivers Brain and Blackwater meet. It provides an interesting point at which information can be shared. The current interpretation boards on the nature reserve will need updating/relocating but this will be carried out once the A12 widening works have been completed. The interpretation board is currently in production with the approved design company.

Where Whetmead's rivers meet

Welcome to the confluence of the River Brain and River Blackwater! This remarkable site, where the two rivers meet, provides a haven for diverse wildlife.

The River Brain, the centrepiece of Witham's River Walk, starts as Pod's Brook near Bardfield Saling and meanders approximately 14 miles through Braintree and Witham where it converges with the River Blackwater at this very spot. The River Blackwater, whose name is derived from the time when discharge from a textile works at Bocking turned the river black, starts its journey as the River Pant, east of Saffron Waldon. The river becomes The Blackwater at Bocking, and flows on through stunning landscapes, including Witham's Whetmead, before eventually merging into the North Sea via the Blackwater Estuary at Heybridge Basin. Today these two rivers nurture a rich and vibrant environment, supporting a remarkable array of flora and fauna.

While observing the rivers, keep an eye out for a variety of wildlife species that call this place home. The River Blackwater and its tributary, the River Brain, provide a bountiful habitat for fish which play a vital role in the ecosystem, serving as a food source for a variety of predators. Silvery roach, dace and chubb, all members of the carp family, as well as the stripey perch and long slender predatory pike are among those fish that can be found in the water. Additionally, the rivers support a diverse community of aquatic invertebrates, such as dragonflies and damselflies. These delicate creatures perform important roles as pollinators and indicators of water quality, contributing to the overall health of the ecosystem.

One of the most awe-inspiring sights in the skies about this confluence is the majestic buzzard. With their broad wings and distinctive calls, these birds of prey are a common sight here. Buzzards are skilled hunters, soaring high above the landscape and using their sharp vision to spot small prey. Keep your eyes trained on the sky, and you may witness their elegant flight and hear their piercing cries.

Although almost impossible to spot, water voles, with their chestnut-brown fur, blunt rounded noses, small ears and furry tail, can be found here along the riverbank. Often mistaken for rats, they are semi-aquatic creatures who spend much of their time foraging in and around the water and make their homes in burrows along the water's edge. Water voles have unfortunately been in decline for decades due to loss of habitat, water pollution and the invasion of mink and so are now an endangered species.

As you explore Whetmead Nature Reserve, be aware that you may encounter other captivating wildlife, including playful otters, who are most likely to be seen at dawn and dusk, colourful kingfishers and other aquatic birds. Remember to observe from a respectful distance, allowing these creatures to continue their natural behaviours undisturbed. By preserving and protecting this remarkable environment, we will ensure a legacy of natural beauty for generations to come.

Witham once had a bathing area not far from where the rivers meet. It was created in the 1880s, following requests from local people, by the then Witham Board of Health. The swimming spot, which was part of the River Blackwater, was called "The Pee Hole" by members of the public although its official name was "The Bathing Place". The area had a deep and shallow end with a diving board, ladder and changing accommodation provided. During the First World War hundreds of soldiers, staying in the area, bathed in the river's water at The Bathing Place and in August 1915, the Royal Engineers had a "Water Carnival" with various events, including a barrel race, high dives and a pillow fight on a pole over the river. The river pool was returned to public use after the war but official bathing was stopped in 1929 after the diving board and steps had been vandalised too many times and were removed.

You Are Here

Please scan for Witham Town Council website

Please scan for Witham Town Trail

For site enquiries, please contact 01376 520627

Witham town council

5) Purchase of plants (£867)

The remaining part of the project to use up the balance of funds available has been used to carry out planting to improve natural habitats, increase biodiversity and to assist with creating the planned natural trails. A mixture of Buddleja, Berberis, Ceanothus, Pyracantha, Mahonia, Hypericum and Lonicera have already been planted on the nature reserve at planned locations for the nature posts.

All items of the project have been approved at either Full Town Council or at Environment Committee meetings and then funding has been approved by Braintree District Council. Total spent £13,692.

Initial suggestions and ideas for Whetmead Nature Reserve and surrounding area through National Highways detailed design and designated funds following A12 widening scheme

Detailed design

- The design of the boundary fencing to be considered
- Improvements to accessibility

North replacement land

Potential educational area for visiting school children to the nature reserve, to include -

- Woodland seats/benches.
- Shelter/gazebo.
- Interpretation board or post.
- Bird boxes, bat boxes, bug hotels, etc.

South replacement land

Potential meadow land, wildflower area, to include –

- Seating.
- Interpretation board.
- Bird boxes, bat boxes, bug hotels, etc.

Designated Funds

- Art installation or mural under the bridge leading to the reserve to provide a more attractive entrance on to the site.
- New welcome signage.
- Updated interpretation boards for the nature reserve to incorporate a new map taking into account the new boundary of the site.
- Potential enhancements to the nature trail introduced during 2023/2024.
- Improvements to the car park area and installation of new entrance gates along Blackwater Lane.
- Improvements to the land behind the car park not currently utilised.
- Installation of cycle parking in the car park and/or at the entrance to the site.
- Installation of CCTV cameras.
- Improvements to the River Walk footpaths/cycleways in the vicinity.

Officer Report: Water Quality of Witham's Rivers

To note:

Following our enquiry regarding the potential pollution levels in the rivers Brain and Blackwater, the Environment Agency has provided us with a website to access their monthly readings for our rivers.

<http://envionment.data.gov.uk/water-quality/view/explore>

In the **Sampling point name or ID box**, type in the relevant sample code. There are two which are key to review:

- AN-BL3192B – (This is for Coleman's Farm for River Blackwater with 3 measurements) **OR**
- AN-BR01 – (This is for the sample point at Guithavon Flume for River Brain with 14 measurements)

There is no need to fill any other box in, simply press the green box "Find sampling points"

A small table will appear below the green box and simply click on the word "**view**" in the final column to see the detailed water readings over time. Below is an example of what is shown

Below AN-BL3192B results

Sampling results

Displaying the twenty most recent samples. You can [see all 32 sample results](#) (note that in some cases this may take a considerable time, and use significant data bandwidth).

Samples from 1 Dec 2022 to 30 Oct 2023

Notation	Determinand	Units	1 Dec 2022 09:36	17 Jan 2023 12:54	1 Feb 2023 12:09	1 Mar 2023 09:49	28 Jun 2023 09:10	14 Jul 2023 10:15	16 Aug 2023 10:47	29 Sep 2023 09:48	23 Oct 2023 09:51	30 Oct 2023 14:09
0061	pH		7.56	7.78	7.76	7.83	7.49	7.28	7.63	7.6	7.56	7.61
0135	Solids, Suspended at 105 C	mg/l	4.7	8.1	9.9	14	6.6	7.4	11	8.7	16	28
0664	Visible oil or grease, significant trace: Present/Not found (1/0)	pres/nf	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Samples from 11 Nov 2021 to 3 Nov 2022

Notation	Determinand	Units	11 Nov 2021 10:11	22 Mar 2022 13:38	13 Apr 2022 14:50	16 May 2022 14:40	14 Jun 2022 14:39	5 Jul 2022 09:30	2 Aug 2022 11:56	21 Sep 2022 14:30	6 Oct 2022 10:07	3 Nov 2022 14:20
0061	pH		7.77	7.87	7.93	8.02	7.84	7.56	7.86	7.62	7.51	7.58
0135	Solids, Suspended at 105 C	mg/l	4.8	6.1	8.4	17	12	5	7.8	11	9.9	17
0664	Visible oil or grease, significant trace: Present/Not found (1/0)	pres/nf	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Samples from 3 Feb 2020 to 20 Nov 2023

Notation	Determinand	Units	3 Feb 2020 11:58	9 Mar 2020 10:21	25 Apr 2023 15:09	25 May 2023 11:53	29 Jun 2023 14:10	28 Jul 2023 11:36	4 Aug 2023 08:31	14 Sep 2023 13:06	16 Oct 2023 12:56	20 Nov 2023 13:29
0061	pH		7.94	7.99	8.35	8	7.82	7.63	7.78	7.9	7.97	7.92
0076	Temperature of Water	°C	8.7	7.9	10.9	14.1	17.6	17.4	16	16.3	10.3	10.6
0077	Conductivity at 25 C	µs/cm	989	987	989	1070	1058	789	831	1090	1018	822
0085	BOD : 5 Day ATU	mg/l	1.9	1.7		1.3	< 3					
0111	Ammoniacal Nitrogen as N	mg/l	0.98	0.72	< 0.03	0.061	< 0.03	0.03	< 0.03	< 0.03	< 0.03	0.051
0116	Nitrogen, Total Oxidised as N	mg/l	12	12	14	16	16	9.2	9.8	14	13	12
0117	Nitrate as N	mg/l	11.8	11.8	14	15.9	16	9.16	9.77	14	13	12
0118	Nitrite as N	mg/l	0.24	0.18	0.036	0.091	0.048	0.044	0.029	0.02	0.0068	0.04
0119	Ammonia un-ionised as N	mg/l	0.0142	0.011	< 0.00058	0.0015	< 0.00064	0.00041	< 0.00052	< 0.00069	< 0.00052	0.00081
0162	Alkalinity to pH 4.5 as CaCO3	mg/l	250	260	240	240	220	190	200	250	230	240
0180	Orthophosphate, reactive as P	mg/l	0.68	0.87	0.31	0.4	0.51	0.47	0.47	0.7	0.45	0.26
6030	Silver	µg/l	< 1	< 1								
9901	Oxygen, Dissolved, % Saturation	%	91.3	91.5	113.8	98.4	75.2	80.6	77	85.2	93.5	92.2
9924	Oxygen, Dissolved as O2	mg/l	10.6	10.8	12.6	10.1	7.16	7.71	7.58	8.33	10.5	10.2

And here are the latest results for AN-BR01

The environment agency has provided information about the meaning of each measurement and why it is important but we are now making enquiries with regards to the safe standards we should monitor for each.

The PH Levels appear to be acceptable but further information will be provided once received.

Advice:

- To note the information.

SP/27.11.2023

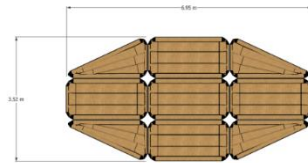
Officer Report: Witham Pond Enhancements Update

To note:

Following a meeting at the River Walk Pond with Darren Tansley from Essex Wildlife Trust, he advised that planting additional reeds in the pond would not be beneficial. However, if WTC wanted to add interest to the pond while supporting wildlife, Darren recommended the consideration of a floating island, which would provide a refuge for fish and nesting birds and with appropriate planting, a haven for bees and butterflies.

Two indicative quotes were sought in the first instance:

Quote 1



This is the smallest project undertaken to date and may be too big for Witham's Pond size so further enquiries would need to be made if WTC planned to proceed. The initial cost of each rectangle shown is £950 and each triangular island is £885. Totally £8,290 in this 19 m² example. Added to this are 4 anchor kits, stainless steel posts and fencing at £1,266, plants at £718.69, delivery at £575 and installation at £3,760. Total example price of £14,509.69



Quote 2

Their pricing was £185 m² (Total of £3,515 if 19m²) with additional costs for anchoring, fencing, plants, delivery and installation for which they would like to view the site. On the surface this looks a cheaper option. It was decided that this would be pursued further with a visit if it was considered to be a serious proposal with funding available.

The pond enhancements are not in the Town Council's budget and initial investigations have not shown any potential funding available this financial year. Grants are typically for pond restoration or creation. WTC will seek to put pond enhancements on the Potential Open Spaces Improvement Document with BDC with a view to potentially accessing 106 monies in the future.

Advice:

- To note the information.

Officer Report: Essex Wildlife Trust Wilder Towns

To note:

On the 9th October, the Wilder Communities Manager from Essex Wildlife Trust, Danielle Carbott, came to review our Open Spaces and to offer advice on how we can make them more of a haven for people as well as wildlife.

The Closed Churchyard

It was agreed that this was a great wildlife haven in the town centre and would benefit from a biodiversity audit. Also -

- highlighted that the churchyard would not be the optimum place for a wild flower meadow due to the degree of shade and high nutrient rich soil.
- recommended allowing long grass to grow in clearly defined shaped areas with clear mown paths and spaces which demonstrates to residents that WTC is deliberately managing the area for nature.
- recommended including additional infrastructure such as stag beetle stumperies, log piles, swift boxes, bat boxes etc.

James Cooke wood

It was noted that we had already asked for a quotation for a full management report from Essex Ecology, which she agreed would be beneficial, and supported our current strategy of thinning and felling to allow more light to penetrate down to the woodland floor.

The River Walk

It was acknowledged that the River Walk is a well-managed open space already, however additional potential ideas to consider include:

- Trial an area of cut and collect at Mill Lane Meadow to reduce the nutrients in the soil and see if the area returns to buttercup and orchid flowering.
- Consider trialling a clearly defined shaped wild meadow at one of the open spaces around the Pattison Close area, allowing natural growth in the first instance to see what naturally appears.
- Allow a site close to River View, where there are already signs of sapling growth, to naturally regenerate into woodland rather than be cut back once a year which promotes nettle growth. Paths could be mown in to allow access.

Other areas of discussion involved engaging the community of any changes via signage (potentially using Wilder Village emblems) and engaging River Champions to monitor The River Brain.

Advice:

- To note the information.