
THE SOURCE OF THE DENES PROJECT

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor David Lyonette,
Regeneration and Planning Portfolio**

Responsible Director - John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval following successful consultation on proposals for the improvement of the Cocker Beck and area surrounding for a range of purposes, but especially for biodiversity and informal recreation. This follows concerns expressed by the communities of both Mowden and Branksome that the beck is frequently in a poor state, presenting a potential health hazard. Monitoring this situation over a period of several years has shown there be long periods where the water becomes stagnant, resulting in increased concerns about contamination and infection amongst the public.

Information and Analysis

Existing Information

2. For many years the area known as Cocker Beck has been seen as presenting problems for the local community. It is an area that although attractive superficially has a number of problems associated with it, so restricting its use and hence its value to the wider community. A chief concern has for some time been the semi-stagnant nature of the beck itself which comes about as a result of the combination of a number of factors. Chief amongst these is the lack of flow within the water course itself caused by a historical event where most of the water was diverted down Baydale Beck in order to solve a flooding problem.
3. In order to address the various environmental problems, a phased project has been assembled in coordination with the Environment Agency, Durham Wildlife Trust, Northumbrian Water and other interested parties that will bring about some highly beneficial changes to the area for wildlife and local residents alike. These can be summarised thus.
4. Firstly, to increase the flow rate by pumping water (possibly using a wind driven pump), in a controlled way (so as not to raise concerns over increased flood risk), out of Baydale Beck and back into Cocker Beck. This will help flush out the beck with clean water. The resulting infrastructure will require minimum maintenance and may result in some savings with reduced level of grass cutting. The Environment Agency will retain responsibility for the occasional dredging of the watercourse.
5. Secondly, the project will aim to improve the water course by introducing a series of back waters through the construction of low weirs and by widening the water channel at various

places down its length. This will improve the visual and biodiversity aspect of the channel which is especially important for water voles, a species in serious decline both locally and nationally and badly in need of an increase in this kind of habitat. Alongside this, Northumbrian Water will be looking at the number of misconnections in the adjoining housing estates and beginning the process of reducing these to improve water quality.

6. Thirdly, the project will look at a number of ways to improve the whole area for wildlife, especially through the process of changing existing closely mown grassland into wildflower meadow. This will be done in a way that allows for both informal recreational activities, such as football and cricket, on well drained areas of short grassland that are surrounded by areas of longer grass and wildflower meadow. This will be carried out with close collaboration with the Council's Community Service teams as well as extensive consultation with the public and local partnership groups.
7. Finally, the scheme will look at the whole issue of access to an open space of this kind. Subject to approval, it will include a new cycle link (funded as a part of the Local Transport Plan and Cycling England in 2007-2008) close to the river that will allow safe off road cycling to Branksome School as well as informal pedestrian and cycle access through an attractive multifunctioning nature reserve and informal park.
8. This report seeks approval only for a first phase which stands alone and provides discrete benefits not dependent on any later phases. Phase 1 covers the consultation stage, the feasibility study and a number of pilot projects carried out in order to gauge reaction and make the most of the initial funding package. Were further funding to become available, a second phase could see a wider scheme rolled out, providing we have received a positive reaction from the public during the pilot phase of the works. Subject to funding the final phase could look at the possibility of continuing the improvements for biodiversity and countryside access further out towards the A1 motorway.
9. The funding for the first phase of project has been raised entirely from external sources, including through the Cleaner, Safer, Greener monies, targeted through the Local Area Agreement (£45,000) and from the County Durham Environmental Trust (CDENT) (£28,000) both for Phase 1, as well as in kind support from DBC in the form of officers time, and similarly from Northumbrian Water and the Environment Agency and contributions are anticipated at a later stage through the Lowland Grassland project managed by the Durham Biodiversity Partnership.

Phase 1

Capital	Survey Work)	
	Feasibility Study)	£5,000
	Consultancy)	
	Water Course Work	£35,000
	Wind Pump	£20,000
	Wild Flower Meadow	£5,000
	Miscellaneous including Interpretation, Monitoring etc	£8,000
	Total	£73,000

10. Phase 2, were funding to become available would involve further works to the watercourse, further wildflower planting and works by Northumbrian Water and the Environment Agency.
11. Approval is being sought only for the Phase 1 works at this stage. CDENT have expressed interest in Phase 2 of the project and have asked to be kept up to date on the progress of Phase 1. Phase 1 in isolation will still see significant gains in the quality of the environment in the Cockerton area.
12. The works described above will be carried out by suitable contractors chosen in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

Outcome of Consultation

13. Initial consultations with all parties have been very supportive, including detailed discussions with the Environment Agency and Durham Wildlife Trust, as well as initial discussions with members of the local community and colleagues in other sections of the Council, including Community Services.

Legal Implications

14. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

15. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. The project should help reduce the level of crime and disorder by providing a higher quality of environment.

Council Policy Framework

16. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

Decision Deadline

17. This is not considered an urgent decision.

Recommendation

18. It is recommended that:-
 - (a) Cabinet approve the pilot phase (Phase 1) of the Source of the Denes Project.

(b) £73,000 of capital funds is released.

Reasons

19. The recommendations are supported by:-

- (a) to enable work to begin on implementing the project as soon as possible.
- (b) to achieve the combined objectives of improving an important recreational facility as well as significantly enhancing the area's level of biodiversity.
- (c) to improve the environmental qualities of the Cockerton area.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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