Stakeholder Communication Advisory Group

Meeting 2 Agenda

24th September 2024: 1500-1700

Boardroom, Rolle Estate Office

Summary of actions:

- BH/KE to send next SAG date in January.
- KE/BH to consider opportunities to engage /communicate with volunteer groups (e.g. on Himalayan Balsam removal) or large land management groups upstream of the project area. KE already in contact with Luppitt LR project.
- SB/KE to discuss with Geckoella Japanese Knotweed presence in project area.
- SB/KE/BH to consider people perceptions of the benefits and the negatives of the project and prepare responses in advance for any social media comments.
- All to email in any further questions or comments to KE/BH.

Welcome & Admin
Attendees
Chair Cllr Paula Fernley
John Varley (JV) – Clinton Devon Estates
Kendal Archer (KA) – Clinton Devon Estates
Kirstie Ellis (KE) – Clinton Devon Estates
Sam Bridgewater (SB) – Clinton Devon Estates
Beth Humphrey (BH) – Clinton Devon Estates
Kate Ponting (KP) – Clinton Devon Estates
Edward Fane Trefusis (ET) – Clinton Devon Estates
Cllr Geoff Jung (GJ) – East Devon District Council
Danuta Joyce (DJ) – Colaton Raleigh Parish Council Footpath warden
Cllr Janice Papworth (JP) – Colaton Raleigh Parish Council
Geoff Porter (GP) – Otter Valley Association
Derek Wensley (DW) – East Budleigh Parish Council
Tom Garner (TG) – Clinton Devon Estates

Bruce McGlashen (BM) – River Otter Fisheries Association

Haylor Lass (HL) – Otter Valley Association

Sarah Slade (SS) – Devon Countryside Access Forum

Kate Farmer (KF) – Environment Agency

Presenters:

Josh Butterworth (JB) – Geckoella

Jamie Foster (JF) - Geckoella

Seb Bentley (SBY) - Dynamic Rivers

Rory Clements (RC) - Dynamic Rivers

Lorna Critchlow (LC) – AC Archaeology

Apologies

Clare James – Clinton Devon Estates

James Clack – Clinton Devon Estates

Cllr Melanie Martin – EDDC

Cllr Charlotte Fitzgerald – EDDC

Keith Wood – Budleigh Salterton Town Council

Jacqui Baldwin – Newton Poppleford and Harford Parish Council

Cllr Rosemary Walker – Newton Poppleford and Harpford Parish Council

Cllr Chris Burhop – Newton Poppleford and Harford Parish Council

Susan Tyrall – Colaton Raleigh Parish Council

Fran Mills – Otterton Parish Council

High level Project Update

- Background and land management recap
    - LR aims to future proof the valley against changing policy and mitigating climate change. It is about protecting the ecosystem services in the valley and making sure it is fit for purpose moving forward
    - DEFRA told landscape recovery projects to "be ambitious": deliver big landscape change for nature recovery but ensure choices optimise all the things we get from the local landscape currently (food, timber, recreational access…). Long term sustainable changes
    - Lots of livelihoods depend on our agricultural land (33%) but there are also many opportunities for improvement e.g. biodiversity enhancement, access link-ups.
    - No changes in land management have been decided at this point. Baseline reporting will inform on potential options and these will be reviewed from now to December.
- Additional comments to slide deck:
    - Bicton College is the main other landowner in the project area.

- The Ecology phase 1&2 reports are to understand our baseline and where the biggest impact can be made from the baseline.
- The hydrology modelling is Phase 1 / early stage. Modelling shows the fullest extent of what can be achieved with wetland creation and water retention. This will be narrowed down into options of what is feasible/practical.
- The Heritage Phase 1 report is complete and details potential areas where land management changes could be made to preserve history of land and heritage and potential opportunities for exploration.
- Stakeholder Engagement Workshop, 15th Oct: some SAG members will have received an invite. The workshop is initial engagement to broaden spectrum of communities and land users with two aims: 1) to determine the public's broad vision for the project and 2) to formulate plans of engagement.

Update on Ecological Assessments – Geckoella

- Presentation from Jamie and Josh
- Additional comments to slide deck:
  - The baseline spatial data collected in Phase 1 reasonable enough for a first glance but not detailed enough for a localised area assessment
  - Soil profiles received from Cranfield University.
  - Ecological walkovers on 4 additional sites to assess risk to nature of interventions
  - There is lots of room for habitat improvement based on UKHab condition summary.
  - Majority of 'good' condition linear features/hedgerows are found on Otterton Hill
  - Species rich grasslands mostly found on Otterton Hill
  - Large amounts of grassland found on border of R. Otter fall into Coastal Grassland and Floodplain habitats category
  - The grasslands in 'poor' condition are mostly due to creeping species e.g. thistle
  - On the Phase 2 MoRPh survey slide, each dot shows the locations of MoRPh survey
  - On the MoRPh Opportunities slide: these suggestions are not suitable at all sites. Needs consideration as to which examples would suit what site.
  - On the Next Steps slide: Phase 2 undertook detailed habitat assessments of <500ha project area. The rest of project area has not been looked at with field scale resolution assessments. The Phase 2 assessments are used as a proxy to consider habitats and condition of the rest of project site to give a full picture.

Update on Hydrological Assessments – Dynamic Rivers

- Presentation from Seb (Dynamic Rivers)
- Additional comments to slide deck:

Update slide:

  - Modelling represents largest extend of wetting possible, these are NOT agreed options. No final decisions have been made at this point.
  - Initial high-level modelling of water course, tributaries and the ditch system across whole project area to consider how can we naturalise and restore the hydrological regime of the R. Otter and its catchment.
  - With some low intervention methods, we could make some large, exciting gains of wetland creation both on the main river and the ditch network.
  - The hydrological models do over-estimate wetting as ground infiltration of water is not included in model

Study Area slide:

  - Dynamic Rivers have undertaken desktop analysis of the river system using old maps.

- The majority of R. Otter modifications (artificial straightening and deepening) predate official mapping in the late 1800s.
- Disruptions to the river course have resulted in the main channel holding more water and limiting where it can go, which has led to incidences of flooding.

Valley floor wetland habitat slide:

- Comparing ariel imagery from 2006 to present day, Dynamic Rivers found small pockets of wetland naturally reforming where ditches haven't been maintained or underground drainage has failed. This indicates what might occur if we create more wetland habitat across project area

Broad Wetting Opportunities slide:

- Modelling for wetland rejuvenation and restoration of hydrological regime
- The pink and blue areas show lower topography and existing rainfall collection area where there is potential for realistic wetland habitat creation without having to excavate material at additional expense.
- The pink and blue highlight depth of water already in existence during high rainfall periods, NOT new water introduced to landscape.
- Rainfall computer models help to identify flow routes across area. This shows where we can put interventions.

Possible features slide:

- The map shows where low intervention methods could be employed to maximise wetting gain
- All features are NOT FINAL and instead are for the purpose of engaging more widely to decide options

Evolution of features several years slide:

- These are examples not on Heaths to Sea project area. They should what could occur depending on the interventions chosen.

Potential Ditch activated wetland slide:

- Localised, low intervention ditch blocking could result in some localised wetland across fields. We can target areas specifically with this method.

Update on Heritage Assessments – AC Archaeology

- Presentation by Lorna Critchlow
- Additional comments to slides:
  - HER = Historic Environment Record
  - All 6 sites of potential historic interest may benefit from removal from cultivation for further research.
  - Phase 2 will involve potential further works including possible site walks or digs.
  - The landscape/s we see today in the floodplain and woodland creation areas were really created during the medieval and post-medieval periods. Proposed changes might revert those landscapes back to a more similar state to what we would have seen prior to medieval period when the areas would largely have been a natural floodplain/intertidal zone.

Discussion

Do the Habitat surveys look at recovery of salmon in the river? There are some important spawning grounds in the lower Otter. (BM)

- KE: Planned fish surveys for November and have received advice from the fisheries teams in EA/NE, and our initial thoughts included electro-fishing to understand fish species and completion of REDD surveys. But these have now been postponed to next year due to seasonal monitoring restrictions. We will baseline fish species and abundance in Spring 2025 and will discuss methodology in more detail once river change plans are known.

Looking at the watercourses surveyed by Geckoella, was Otterton Brook mentioned? (GP)

- SB: Otterton Brook hasn't specifically been surveyed this time but may be considered for surveying in next phase.

Maize – we are seeing increasing amounts planted in the valley and seeing more water runoff with rainfall due to soil compaction? (GP)

- SB: We will be engaging with farmers on all aspects of land management, maize included. The growing of maize is widespread. Although not inherently bad per se, it is a high-risk crop and can cause soil erosion and water quality issues and even exacerbate flooding when grown 'badly'. What is most important is improving maize husbandry. It is unlikely we can ever eliminate it from the landscape, and it does have some value.
- JV: Home Farm starting growing maize this year in agreement with EA. We are doing tests and trials for the EA to determine for best practice in Maize management. We want to support landscape recovery within a productive landscape. Maize will still be grown in some farms, but we may be able to influence for better management practices.

Will Phase 1 reports be publicly available? (HL)

- KE: These reports are only guiding options for land management change and work needs to be done to finalise options. These presentations will be shared with the SAG members, but we will wait until options are developed from then before sharing with the public.
- SB: We will be transparent over plans once they are developed but are hesitant about sharing preliminary concepts without a clearer idea of what will be taken forward. We would welcome SAG advice on this.
- SB: Dynamic Rivers brief is to understand what can be done to regenerate the floodplain. This round of output models currently does not show constraints but shows the greatest extent possible. Next step is to understand what is practical once we factor in constraints. These will be remodelled.
- SB: We will use the stakeholder engagement workshop to understand the communities' concerns and aspirations and then build options we can share.
- KF: It is good to involve public early, but when sharing modelling we need some practical options in place first.

Himalayan Balsam – what can be done?

- KE: Eradicating it completely is extremely difficult as it is washed down the main river from upstream. We will focus on removal from the tributaries via volunteer action – existing on some of the western tributaries.
- BM: We must look at opportunities to engage /communicate with groups upstream of the project area.
- KE: We are talking to LR project in Luppitt but between Luppitt project and Newton Poppleford is an area with no LR project which is more difficult to engage with.
- GP: Japanese Knotweed is not mentioned in the ecology assessment, but it is present in Otterton – SB/KE to pick up with Geckoella

People will consider "what's in it for me?" We have got to consider what the benefits are and the negatives some people will perceive and get ahead of any social media comments / have responses ready in advance (GJ)

What is the meaning of 'good' vs 'poor' in ecology assessments? Can we have some examples? (DW)

- JB: There is a scale on which each habitat is assessed for its condition. For example, good quality grassland has structural diversity with a number of species present and no large areas of bare ground. Poor quality grassland would mostly only have a few species present or large areas of bare ground.
- JB: For every parcel of different habitat type, we do a separate condition assessment. E.g. bog is a separate habitat to grassland, so there would be different condition assessments.
- JB: If we notice area of grassland is tending to scrub this doesn't necessarily reduce condition but it's something we'd note

Do local volunteer groups just deal with Himalayan Balsom or do more? (PF)

- KP: There are a few citizen science groups which do estuarine fish monitoring, bird surveys, bee surveys etc
- KE: We could expand the monitoring and evaluation plan to include these existing groups

When considering water course conditions, how much of water chemistry and biological factors are included in the condition assessments? Has SW Water been looped in? (JV)

- JF: MoRPh assessments are physical assessments of the river structure. Chemical assessments aren't included and would need to be done separately. Biological assessments are included as part of MoRPh and also picked up in UK Hab surveys.
- KE: Aim to do some water quality baselining next year. We will also tap into EA existing data and local river fly monitoring data.
- SB: We are talking to SW Water about infrastructure running thought the valley.
- JV: Can SW Water fund any of these assessments? They should be a stakeholder in this.
- GJ: I have engaged with SW Water in quite a few catchments in East Devon. The Otter was left out.
- BM: SW Water are funding farmers in the middle R. Otter catchment.
- BM: We can tap into EA monitoring assessments for the Water Framework Directive reporting.
- GP: Westcountry Rivers Trust also hold a lot of data which could be useful.
- RC: The MoRPh surveys do map a lot of vegetation up the banks. These can be indicative of water chemical quality in stream.

Can beavers be trained to eat Himalayan Balsam? (HL)

- SB: They do but not as part of main diet!

Please email in any further questions.

Next steps

Stakeholder Engagement Workshop on 15th October is the next step in engagement process.

A programme of stakeholder engagement and consultation events to be developed for January – March 2025

AOB, date of next meeting & feedback

Action: BH/KE to send next SAG date in January.