

## Environment & Assets Committee

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<b>Report Title:</b>	<b>Cuttle Brook Local Nature Reserve – Fencing the Scrapes &amp; Educational signage Project</b>
<b>Meeting Date:</b>	<b>15 July 2025</b>
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Becky Reid – Environmental Project Officer Andrea Oughton – Operations Manager</b>

### Purpose of the Report

1. To propose the installation of a fence, hedging and gates to protect the scrape in South Meadow in the Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve (NR) from access by dogs in order to preserve its intended benefits to wildlife.
2. To propose the installation of a gate in Nontron Meadow and making this area 'dog free', to establish a 'nature first' area within the reserve that is delivered in line with the NR 5-year management plan.
3. To propose up to 7 educational signs across the reserve to help build awareness of the important work being taken to support biodiversity, with approval given for the final locations to be decided in consultation with the Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers.
4. To support the grant funding application made by Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers to the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) to erect fencing and planting around the newly formed scrape.

### Action Required

(see recommended action at the end of the report)

### Watkins Bridge and Nontron Meadow Scrapes Background

5. In February 2025 two scrapes were implemented in South Meadow, by Watkins Bridge, and within Nontron meadow.
6. As reported to Full Council on 25 March 2025, the creation of scrapes were included in the original plans and the latest Cuttle Brook Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2025 - 2029, which was approved by the Environment and Assets Committee in [January 2025](#).
7. These scrapes were detailed on Page 6 of the approved NR Management plan as follows:
 

*'it is expected that there will be at least two new scrapes – connecting to the fish refuges and complementing that created in Rycote Meadow.'*
8. The purpose of the scrapes is to improve habitat and biodiversity. Scrapes like this provide a new, dynamic environment for wetland wildlife, including insects and birds and they offer food and breeding areas for a wide range of species, helping to increase the overall biodiversity of the area.

9. At the time of installation there were concerns raised locally by residents, leading to investigations with the EA, SODC and RTCT. As previously reported, these investigations determined that both planning approval and approval from the EA should have been sought. RTCT and officers incorrectly understood that the works would have been completed under permitted development and that the permit approved by EA and received by RTCT was all that was required.
10. Following the Full Council meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025 it was agreed that retrospective planning for the scrapes as they were dug, was sought. This application was submitted in June, and we are waiting for the outcome of this process which we expect to receive in advance of this work.
11. The Management Plan has outlined the need for Nontron Meadow to be established as a nature first area as follows (Pg 5 Management Plan):

*Work towards establishing Nontron and Rycote meadows as quiet, 'Nature-First' areas by:*

- *Allowing the mown paths to grow out;*
- *Encouraging walkers to use the lane adjacent to Nontron rather than the meadow, including the erection of a field gate to control access to Nontron at the Oxford Road end;*
- *Reconnecting the fenceline alongside Spring Path, preventing direct access to or from Spring Path;*
- *Continuing management, including as necessary 'Beating up' of the meadow-side hedgerow adjacent to Nontron;*
- *Putting up notices to explain to regular visitors the reasons for the change in management*

This report outlines the next step in achieving this through the implementation of a gate.

### **The need for fencing to protect these newly installed scrapes**

12. Following the completion of the scrapes, it quickly became apparent that the areas were very popular with dogs who enjoyed running through the water after periods of rainfall. The CBCV have been keen to allow dogs to enjoy the reserve wherever this is possible, however their presence in the scrape can unintentionally harm the delicate freshwater wildlife they are working hard to attract.
13. Some common dog flea treatments (administered externally) contain Neonicotinoids—a group of pesticides banned from agricultural use in the UK since 2017 due to their devastating impact on bees and aquatic life. These chemicals can be washed off into water bodies if dogs enter the scrapes, posing a risk to aquatic insects and invertebrates, which are a crucial food source for fish, otters, kingfishers, and herons.
14. Unlike the brook, the wetland scrape does not have a through flow of water, so any contamination is much harder to remove and could require significant intervention, such as removing soil.

15. In order for the CBCV to manage public access to the nature reserve consistent with biodiversity and conservation, it has been deemed that preventing dogs from entering the scrape is the most effective way to protect this newly created and sensitive habitat.

### **The proposed fencing and hedging**

16. The proposed fencing will be similar to the recent fencing installed in Rycote Meadow. This will be stock fencing with 2 strands of plain wire above, using tanalised materials and a high tensile wire. Either end will be tied off with post and rail.



17. Next to this fence 3 rows of hedge planting will be planted. This will allow a thick hedge to grow up providing a safe habitat for birds and wildlife, and valuable wildlife connectivity across the meadow.

18. The indicative locations for the fence is shown below without the location of the access gate as this is still to be confirmed.



Fig 1: Maps used with permission of River Thames Conservation Trust

The map above left shows the area in which the fence will be installed at Watkins Bridge.

This area remains indicative as flexibility is needed when working with contractors who may need to alter the line of the fence to take account of the natural geography of the area when it comes to the installation of the fence. The proposed line of the fence will fall within the grey triangle area.

There will be a pedestrian friendly field gate installed to allow public access and for management, this would probably be at the northern end near to the bridge. A similar length of hedgerow will be planted to screen the fence and to provide further connectivity for wildlife through this part of the reserve. It will also help to screen the scrape from disturbance by dogs. The hedge will be planted just inside the fence so that it grows out through the fencing. When the hedge is thick enough the fence could be removed or simply left in place.

The fence will have to turn a corner at the end closest to the bridge as it is likely that it will be easier to put an end strainer into the bank rather than attaching the fence directly to the bridge, which would complicate future maintenance and repair of the bridge.



Fig 2

The proposal for Nontron Meadow is to install a gate at Oxford Road end of the Meadow – shown in yellow here. This will remain closed and will encourage walkers, who are not stopping to explore the nature in the area, to walk around the meadow (red line) rather than through. This will keep it as quiet as possible.

Signage will be added to the entrance to Nontron Meadow to clearly label it as a 'Nature First' area that dogs will be restricted from entering.

### Additional benefits of the proposed fencing

19. As you can see (Fig 1), the proposed fencing in South Meadow extends beyond the boundary of the scrape. This larger areas of fencing has been proposed to allow the space to be included in this 'nature first' area in order to achieve further benefits for nature. These include:

- a. To provide refuges within the reserve for vulnerable wetland-loving birds such as snipe, as well as resident moorhens and visiting water rail.
- b. To facilitate the reintroduction of flagship species, specifically water vole, alongside the enhancement of the reserve for otters.
- c. To prevent disturbance of the establishing specialist plant communities - which could take years to develop fully and seconds to destroy.
- d. To plant further trees and shrubs, including a couple of the reserve's nationally scarce Black Poplar.

20. There are also practical reasons for the proposed fence line as follows:

- a. Given that corner posts are known to be more expensive, it is expected that a straight line of fencing will be more cost effective. However, quotes have not yet been obtained;
- b. It is designed so that there isn't a bottleneck area that the mowing contractor can't get into to the south west of the scrape area;
- c. By creating a straighter line for walking it enables better connectivity through this part of the site;
- d. This area is prone to flooding quite quickly so this will keep it from getting too churned up by walkers at wetter times of year;

### Impacts for users of Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve

21. It is important to note that both areas – South Meadow and Nontron Meadow - will **only** be restricted from dogs. Anyone interested in studying or enjoying the wildlife of these areas

will be able to access them through the gates provided, but there will be clear notices on the gates saying 'No dogs in this area'.

22. Educational opportunities will be enhanced by a series of up to 7 signs located throughout the reserve, to help those visiting understand what they are looking at, and how it benefits nature recovery and increased biodiversity. Initial proposals are for these to be located in the areas outlined here to allow for full understanding of what habitats are being supported through the reserve.
  - Watkins Bridge – Wetland Scrape
  - Cox's Wood – Woodland
  - The Pond – Still water
  - The Brook – Running water
  - Rycote Meadow – Meadow Wildlife
  - North Meadow – Meadow Flora
  - Sedge Beds – Sedge Beds
  
23. These details are still to be finalised with Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers to ensure that each location is appropriate. If not, an alternative will be found, or a smaller number of signs will be produced.
  
24. The new fenced off scrape near Watkins Bridge will reduce access to approximately 180 meters (or 2-3- minutes walking time) along the edge of a small section of the bank of the brook. Despite being used by walkers, this route is not an official path within the Nature Reserve. Those who have previously walked this way in the reserve will be able to follow the alternative route that is maintained through the meadow. For those walkers keen to walk alongside the brook, the path on the other side will remain open, with ambition to seek funding to improve this path over the next 2 years. The enclosed area is approximately 1/3ha. The total reserve, excluding Rycote Meadow, is about 12ha. Therefore, the fenced off part of the south meadow would represent about 2.75% of the reserve.
  
25. Excluding dogs from Nontron would entail a reduction in available dog access of 0.8ha or about 6.7%.
  
26. So, in total, the proposed proportion to which dogs would be excluded by fencing and gates is no more than 9.4%. There would be no exclusion to any of the reserve for wildlife enthusiasts without dogs.
  
27. The recent creation of a path through Rycote Meadow has opened up additional walking opportunities. At the moment walkers without dogs already have access to the full route available (approximately 2km). Unfortunately, due to stiles that were put in by the developers, this is limited to 320m of additional pathway that takes walkers through to the Thame Meadows Estate. However, we are lobbying SODC to get the developers to remove the stiles that would then open the route up for dog walkers as well.

## Financial implications

28. All of the costs for the fencing, gates, and their implementation will be sought through a funding bid to Trust for Oxfordshire's environment (TOE) that will be applied for by CBCV. The application will also include the costs of the hedging plants, but these will be planted by CBCV with the support of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thame and the local business community as part of National Tree week in November (subject to suitable site conditions). Thame Town Council staff and Councillors will also be invited to participate in this activity. The initial application has been submitted to meet TOE's funding deadlines but is subject to approval from this Committee before it can move forward to their grants panel.

29. Funding for the signage will be sought from Section 106 funding as part of a Public Art project – this is outlined in a separate report. £1,200 has already been secured by Thame Green Living towards the Rycote Meadow sign.



## Legal sensitivities related to installing fencing

30. There has been some community concern to restricting access to dogs in parts of the reserve, however it is important to note the legal responsibility contained in running a Local Nature Reserve, as detailed in Page 2 of the approved NR Management plan:

*'Designation as a Local Nature Reserve was made under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The Act lays down that recreation is a legitimate adjunct to conservation but only, "if the management of the land for the recreational purpose does not compromise its management for the conservation purpose" (S.15(1)(b)). The legal status of the Reserve places an onus on its managers to always put conservation first.'*

31. This is in line with [guidelines from Government](#) that state 'LNRs should be publicly accessible where visitors would not damage or disturb wildlife. You can restrict access to some areas if visitors could cause damage to the natural environment, unless the public have statutory access rights'. As mentioned, we are not restricting access to the public but are restricting access to dogs in these areas.

32. As managers of the reserve, Thame Town Council has a legal duty to ensure that we are putting nature first, and this fencing will ensure that we achieve this. We would rather take this action than have to resort to byelaws to restrict potentially damaging activities.

**Proposed timeline**

33. As mentioned, a funding application has already been submitted for this project but will be withdrawn if approval is not granted. If approval is granted, and we are successful in attracting the funding, then this will be awarded in September 2025. At this point we will seek to book in the installation of the fencing as soon as possible, weather conditions allowing. The hedging plants would be planted at the end of November as already mentioned.

**Action:**

- i) To approve the installation of a fence, hedging and gates to protect the scrape in South Meadow in the Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve (NR) from access by dogs in order to preserve its intended benefits to wildlife.*
- ii) To approve the installation of a gate in Nontron Meadow and making this area 'dog free', to establish a 'nature first' area within the reserve that is delivered in line with the NR 5-year management plan.*
- iii) To approve up to 7 educational signs across the reserve to help build awareness of the important work being taken to support biodiversity, with approval given for the final locations to be decided in consultation with the Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers.*
- iv) To support the grant funding application made by Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers to the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) to erect fencing and planting around the newly formed scrape.*