

Questions from Resident and TTC answers

1. In cases where Council officers are responsible for drafting reports or recommendations, is there guidance in place on how and when those officers should engage in public commentary on those same proposals before formal consideration?

Answer: Yes, we have a social media policy. Any specific examples / concerns should be referred to the Clerk.

2. Given the importance of maintaining public confidence in neutrality, will the Council review whether officers should publicly defend or promote proposals they've authored prior to a vote?

Answer: We are constantly reviewing our processes and promote a culture of continuous improvement by reviewing lessons learnt and implementing improvements where appropriate. If there are specific examples the Clerk should be contacted.

3. Can the Council confirm whether Cllr Catherine Jones, who is both Chair of the Environment and Assets Committee and a declared member of the Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers (CBCV) Management Committee, will be recused from chairing or voting on this item due to a clear conflict of interest?

Answer: Cllr Jones is a representative of CBCV on behalf of the Council and The Full Council vote on membership of committees at their annual meeting. Representatives of recognised external groups (such as the CBCV) have dispensations granted. As Cllr Jones has no pecuniary interests in cuttle brook, she will be chairing the meeting and has the right to vote in line with Council Policy.

4. Is the Council aware that members of the public who raise legitimate concerns about Cuttle Brook are frequently challenged in public forums by members or affiliates of CBCV? What steps will the Council take to ensure residents can question public proposals without backlash or reputational harm?

Answer: The legal processes that we are governed by allow residents to question public proposals by coming to talk at Council meetings. If residents choose to try to generate support for any proposals that they bring to these Council meetings by sharing them in other places then unfortunately, it is not within our ability to take action to stop others responding how they choose to. We have been very aware of hurtful and unkind comments being shared around this issue from all directions. In these situations, the administrators of those sites need to be contacted to take the appropriate action in line with their policies, and we would encourage you to do so. The council would not support any inappropriate posts and will act within its powers to prevent them.

5. The officer who produced the diagrams has confirmed they were based on a flooded image and are not to scale. How can these visuals be used to support a formal Council recommendation?

Answer: The maps were to scale, but the flooded image used meant the area of the scrape was not correctly defined. We have since updated the map, and the report accordingly, this has been published, shared with Councillors and those registered to speak today and will be discussed to ensure that Councillors at this meeting can ask any questions before considering the recommendations.

6. Will the Council review or amend any part of the report that relies on these inaccurate visuals, especially given their potential to exaggerate the scale of the scrape and justify the fencing area?

Answer: As mentioned above, action was taken based on the feedback received.

7. Has the retrospective planning application for the scrape used the same inaccurate visuals or scale? If so, will the application be updated?

Answer: No, this map has not been used. The new maps used at tomorrow's meeting will include a drawing from this application, as well as a drone photograph supplied today by a local resident.

8. If the scrape is still awaiting retrospective planning approval and may not be legally compliant, why is the Council progressing a permanent fencing proposal now?

Answer: In order to carry out this work, funding will have to be sought so that it is done at minimal expense to the taxpayer. The funding that is being sought requires approval from Thame Town

Council (as landowners) as part of the application process. However, the grant panel does not sit to make a decision until September 2025. We expect planning permission to be decided before this date. By getting everything approved in advance, if planning IS granted, we will be able to move ahead with the fence and hedge planting as soon as possible after the grant is awarded, as all permissions will be in place. This is important as best practice determines that hedge planting is most successful and cost effective if done during the winter months. If planning permission is not granted then we will take the actions required of us by the planning decision.

9. The proposal uses vague terms like “approximately” and “probably” and includes non-scaled visuals. Why is this level of imprecision acceptable in a proposal affecting public land, when it would not be accepted in a private planning application?

Answer: This is not a planning application process. Rather the aim of the report is to seek the Council’s approval that they are happy for the fence to be put up in this location. When it comes to delivery of the project, if approved, there needs to be some flexibility to allow for the natural geography of the location. Following feedback we have a scale map that determines a recommended area within which the fence line could fall.

10. The proposal references concerns about dog flea treatments contaminating the scrape. Has any local data been gathered on:

- a) The number of dog owners using topical treatments containing pyrethrins or neonicotinoids?

Answer: Not to our knowledge but working to share the information about the risks of these chemicals with dog owners is something we could do through our communication.

- b) The frequency of dogs entering the scrape or watercourse?

Answer: Before the scrape was installed, two surveys:

- 20/09/2024 – 7:05 – 8:05 - 27 Dogs
- 17/12/2024 – 9:30 – 10:30 - 16 dogs, all but one off the lead.

If no data exists, how is this a proportionate or evidence-based rationale for fencing?

Answer: As the scrape does not have running water, even one dog entering it could pollute it. This would then mean the only way to remove these chemicals is to dig further soil out of the area, which we do not want to have to consider. However, flea treatments are only one of the ways that dogs disturb a nature reserve. Even when well-intentioned, they can disrupt wildlife and their habitats. Their presence can cause stress to animals, leading to energy expenditure and potential breeding disruptions. Additionally, when dog waste is not picked up it can negatively impact soil and plant life. The reserve used to be home to ground nesting birds that are no longer found there due to nesting sites being disturbed. Fencing off this area from dogs will allow the potential for nature recovery on a much wider basis than just the scrape. As stated in the report, the area will also serve

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

This is all part of creating nature first areas within our nature reserve. This is the only location in Thame where nature is legally given the priority over humans.