

## Environment Working Party Scoping Report

Prepared by Councillors Hilary Brazier and Nick Pettit  
10th October 2023

### 1 River Colne on The Common, Colney Heath

- 1.1 The management of the River Colne, which flows through The Common, must be regarded as a top priority for the Parish Council. Given its ecological importance as a rare Chalk Stream, it needs to be carefully looked after. Chalk Streams are a particular type of lowland river characterised by clear water and a diverse flora. They are fed by chalk 'aquifers' underground so the very pure water is rich in minerals and remains at a fairly constant temperature year-round.
- 1.2 In mid August, Cllrs Brazier and Pettit did a river walk and survey along the Colne in Colney Heath. It was noted an abundance of overgrown vegetation on both the South and North banks and barely any water flow along the river. There was also heavy algae in the shady areas and litter and debris deposited in certain places. Under both road bridges, vegetation was particularly heavy and becoming overgrown.
- 1.3 The previous Parish Council had began plans to improve the River Colne on The Common by drafting in help and advice from Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (as well as providing more guidance on the maintenance and management of The Common itself). A comprehensive report on the The Common and the River Colne was subsequently prepared by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust and submitted to the Parish Council.
- 1.4 Cllrs Brazier and Pettit met with Tim Hill from Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust on September 4th, to review this report and get professional advice as to what action should be taken, in particular the current state and management of the River Colne.
- 1.5 Mr Hill gave us a lot of background information on the current state of UK chalk streams / rivers and UK rivers in general. The overall picture is not a good one, but especially here in the South East. A 2019 study, highlighted the worrying fact that only 14% of UK rivers are in good quality.
- 1.6 More worryingly, water in the South East is being used at an alarming rate by residents and commercial premises. Hertfordshire itself is the highest water-stressed county in the UK. It is predicted that at the going usage rate, water by 2040 will be a scarcity! It's a worrying prospect.
- 1.7 Cllrs Brazier and Pettit presented their current findings about the River Colne and asked Mr Hill for his opinion. Although currently looking pretty sorry for itself because of a lack of water flow and overgrown vegetation (not helped by lots of summer rain and bursts of sunshine), he gave assurance that all is not doom and gloom. Many rivers in the county are suffering and are in a similar condition.
- 1.8 Mr Hill advised that the Parish Council's priority should be to register the 'poor state' of the River Colne in Colney Heath to the 'Colne Catchment Action Network' – a group that contains representatives from the parish's local water provider, Affinity Water. Cllrs Brazier and Pettit approved this on the spot and Mr Hill did this on our behalf on 6th September. Affinity Water has a legal responsibility to the rivers it draws water from, including the Colne, so it is hoped that by registering the Parish Council's interest, we will be able to work with Affinity Water and access 'ringfenced' funds to help with improvements along the course of the River Colne in Colney Heath in the coming months.

## Continued...

- 1.9 Mr Hill also advised Cllrs to organise local initiated works along the Colne to help improve the current 'look' and 'health' of the river. These include:
- 1.10 1. Cutting back the bank vegetation – this needs to be done professionally by a landscape maintenance contractor. It should be done in late Autumn once bird nesting has ceased and the risk to animal habitats is minimal. Debris needs to be cleared and taken away. Tenders need to be actioned asap to organise this work.
- 1.11 2. Organising a 'clean-up' along the course of the river eg. removing areas of overgrown vegetation, clearing so that the water can run more freely, removing litter, debris etc.
- 1.12 3. The Colne has an invasive plant species called Japanese Honeysuckle growing on its banks which needs to be managed. Cllr Pettit has noted a number of sightings where this is happening.
- 1.13 4. There is the long-term worry of Himalayan Balsam appearing along the banks. Cllr Pettit did a walk along the river in mid-September and noted that at the moment the river banks appear to be free of it. However it can rapidly spread from seed droppings and once established could become a major issue. Local 'water areas' around Tyttenhanger already have it growing, so the risk of spreading is high.
- 1.14 5. Mr Hill advised that the Parish Council could buy some 'Tree Poppers' – these are devices that pull out 'baby' tree shrubs by the roots and stop them establishing themselves. Each popper costs approx £300; a recommended supplier is Nature Conservation Services (NCS). Self seeding trees can become highly invasive and The Common is being blighted in places by them.
- 1.15 6. Mr Hill advised that the Parish Council could consider inviting livestock grazing back to The Warren for next Spring / Summer to help with the management of the grass and scrub. He reference contacting Willows Farm to gauge whether this might be of interest to them. The recommended livestock for grazing is cattle, however sheep or horses can be used. If there is no interest from Willows Farm, Mr Hill advised that the Council might consider spreading the word locally or maybe placing an advert into a local publication.

### Possible action:

- 1.16 A cutback of the bank vegetation needs to be discussed and actioned asap before the river becomes too overgrown – and before the Winter weather kicks in. Going forwards, can this become part of the budget for vegetation cutting on the Common?
- 1.17 Can we organise resident volunteers to help with aspects of litter picking and cleaning along parts of the river? If so, does the Council already have health & safety guidelines in place to accommodate this? Do we need to draw up new guidelines? Is there a process needed for gaining access rights into the Colne itself? Clerk to advise and guide.
- 1.18 Pulling out the self-seeding saplings on the Common would be a cost-effective way of keeping tree species under control. If the Council was to buy some Tree Poppers, could volunteer residents and Cllrs help with the removal of the self-seeding saplings? Does the Council already have health & safety guidelines in place to accommodate this?
- 1.19 Contact Willows Farm to enquire about livestock grazing next year. Clerk or Councillors?

## **2 Horseshoe Field, Smallford**

- 2.1 Cllr Pettit was asked by Smallford Residents' Association to attend its meeting in September to hear resident's views about the current state of Horseshoe field and to take their ideas for possible better use of the field to the Parish Council.
- 2.2 Currently Horseshoe Field is in a state of neglect. It is overgrown, the fencing is 'battered' in places and it's very difficult for vehicle access – a ditch has been dug alongside the original entrance on Oaklands Lane and the only bit of level land from Oaklands Lane to the field is underpinned by sandbags. There is an old gate of sorts.
- 2.3 There is an on-going concern that trespassers might access the land and claim squatter's rights. Cllr Pettit did a survey on 11th October and noted that gaining access with a vehicle would be very difficult given the ditch and also that the land is very overgrown, which is not a bad thing at the moment as it creates a 'natural barrier' to getting onto the land.
- 2.4 Smallford Residents' Association raised the issue of fencing as the boundary in certain places is open, however from Cllr Pettit's observations the fact that natural hedging has become overgrown, it is helping screen the field from the adjacent roads.
- 2.5 The big question is what should be done with the field?

### **Possible action:**

- 2.6 Bring improved security to the field with clear signage to be placed along each boundary eg: PRIVATE This field is owned by Colney Heath Parish Council. No access at anytime.
- 2.7 Review current fencing with the emphasis on 'repair or replace' to improve security and signal the fact that the area is being maintained.
- 2.8 Organise a cutting of the overgrown grass and vegetation? Or leave alone for the moment, to make it much harder to access until more concrete decisions about the field's future have been finalised?
- 2.9 Bring to Council ideas for long-term better use of the field – a maintained public garden; a memorial garden; an orchard; garden and children's playground?
- 2.10 Consideration could be given to partnership projects with horticultural businesses or charities to encourage the development and maintenance of the field. Some time ago, Smallford Residents' Association was in consultation with Oaklands College about creating a public garden designed and maintained by its horticultural students. Mr Jeff Lewis has agreed to supply the original ideas and the drawings which were created by the students to reference and future review.

## **3 Road markings and signage, Colney Heath Village**

- 3.1 Resident concerns have recently been raised with the Parish Council about the poor state of the road markings outside Colney Heath JMI School, especially on the Zebra crossing. Cllr Pettit has previously raised concerns with Highways about the same subject, as well as the poor state of the curbsides, pot holes along Coursers Road and lack of clear, visible direction and speed signage.
- 3.2 On Friday 29th September, Cllr Pettit spoke on the phone with Cllr John Hale from the District Council about the poor state of the road markings and signage in Colney Heath. He provided Cllr Hale with

## **Continued...**

photographic evidence to support his concerns.

### **3.3** The concerns relate to:

- Poor state of the road markings on the two Zebra crossings in Colney Heath
- Poor state of the white line markings throughout the Village, especially outside the school
- Poor state of the 'SLOW' road markings throughout the Village
- Poor state of the yellow no parking lines outside the school
- Lack of directional arrow signs on the bend out of the Village leading to the A414 junction
- Lack of directional arrow signs on the bend into the Village by Frederick's Wood on Coursers Road

### **3.4** Cllr Hale presented these concerns at a meeting with Highways on 4th October. We await feedback and next steps.