

Declaration of Ladies Walk Down and Abbotswood Nature Reserve as Local Nature Reserves

Report of the Climate Emergency and Countryside Portfolio Holder

Recommended:

- 1. That the areas of land at Abbotswood Nature Reserve, Romsey and Ladies Walk Down, Andover, as shown edged red in Annexes 1 and 2 to the report, respectively, be declared as Nature Reserves in accordance with sections 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.**
- 2. That the Head of Community and Leisure be authorised to publish the requisite notice of declaration.**

SUMMARY:

- Abbotswood Nature Reserve, Romsey and Ladies Walk Down, Andover have met the standard set by Natural England to be declared as Local Nature Reserves (LNR).
- LNR status recognises a site's ecological quality as well as its importance as a resource for local communities to enjoy and learn about the natural environment.
- Declaring these areas as LNR's is low risk and a clear signal to the community of the Council's commitment to ensure sites are in positive management, delivery on key priorities in the Corporate Plan and will ensure both sites are properly taken account of when planning applications are submitted in the locality.
- Conserving these important sites will add to the council's existing network of LNR's located at Anton Lakes, Rooksbury Mill, Tadburn Meadows and Valley Park Woodlands.

1 Introduction

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to seek declaration of Abbotswood Nature Reserve, Romsey, and Ladies Walk Down, Andover, as Local Nature Reserves under section 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949. Mapping identifying the proposed LNR boundary for each site can be found in annex 1 and 2.
- 1.2** The designation "Local Nature Reserve" is given statutory recognition in Section 15 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, and both County and District Councils have power to declare land as being managed as an LNR where it appears to be expedient, and in the interests of the locality and local community that it should do so.

2 Background

- 2.1 Through proactive site management and significant effort by the Parks and Countryside team working with the local community, Natural England have confirmed that both Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down are of the quality to be declared as LNR's.
- 2.2 Natural England define LNR's as areas for both people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally, which give people special opportunities to study and learn about them or simply enjoy and have contact with nature. The LNR declaration helps to:
- Protect wildlife habitats and natural features
 - Increase people's awareness and enjoyment of their natural environment
 - Provide an ideal environment for everyone to learn about and study nature
 - Build relationships between local authorities, national and local conservation organisations, and local people.
- 2.3 Both spaces offer a tremendous resource for borough residents and the declaration as LNR reflects the site's importance. Declaration of Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down will add to the network of four existing LNR's managed by the Council at Anton Lakes, Rooksbury Mill, Valley Park Woodland's and Tadburn Meadows.
- 2.4 The declaration will add the sites to Natural England national register and mapping and means that any potential impact on the site's ecology is considered during the planning process should an application be registered, locally. In the case of Ladies Walk Down, the site is located on the boundary of proposed allocated site in the Draft Test Valley Local Plan 2040. Any development in this location, would need to consider the adjacent LNR and positively respond to its ecological and social value in design and masterplan.

About Abbotswood Nature Reserve

- 2.5 Abbotswood Nature Reserve covers approximately 19 hectares and comprises a mixture of ponds, woodland, species rich grassland and scattered scrub. The ownership of the site was transferred to the Council in 2014, forming part of the planning agreement of the Abbotswood housing development. A management plan was adopted for the site which specifically targets the protection of Great Crested Newts (a European protected species) and provides a framework to reinstate traditional methods of woodland management and habitat creation as well managing informal recreation.
- 2.6 A dedicated community group, Wilder Romsey was established in 2020 focussing on enhancing the natural environment around Romsey. This group supports the management of the site, carrying out practical work and ecological surveys. Over 300 school children have benefited from the annual education programme since it was set up in 2022 and the site is frequently used by Sparsholt College as a case study for students.

About Ladies Walk Down

- 2.7 Ladies Walk Down covers approximately 5.4 hectares and comprises three chalk grassland meadows, scattered scrub and an avenue of mostly veteran trees. The site has been proactively managed for the benefit of wildlife and people since 2012 with funding secured for the delivery of the management plan through an Environmental Stewardship Grant Scheme (Higher Level). The predominant management is delivered through the grazing by local rare breed cattle during the summer months.
- 2.9 The site hosts a number of volunteering events supported by the volunteer group The Anton River Conservation Association (TARCA). This work includes tasks such as scrub management and annual ecological surveys including a butterfly transect and bioblitz days. The site is used as an educational resource where students learn about habitat management and conducting practical habitat management tasks.

3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 3.1 The Council's Corporate Plan *A Place for Everyone – Supporting our Communities to Thrive 2023 – 2027* was developed through a collaborative approach, which incorporated cutting-edge community engagement. This engagement process highlighted the importance residents place on the protection and conservation of local wildlife and nature for the future. As a result, one of our five strategic priorities focuses on the environment and the provision of a greener borough for our communities. The declaration of Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down as LNRs would deliver against the corporate plan commitment to managing the natural environment for both wildlife and people, whilst also providing recognition at a national level of the quality of the local environment managed by the Council.
- 3.2 The LNR declaration would demonstrate the Council's commitment to placemaking and inclusion, working together to create opportunities for our communities. Through our engagement with local people, we work to ensure wilder spaces help to promote connection, with opportunities for physical activity, participation and wellbeing which fosters a sense of community belonging and ownership of local spaces.

4 Consultations/Communications

- 4.1 Natural England have been engaged with the process to confirm each site has reached the standard to be declared as LNR's. Additional contacts have also been made with conservation charities including Butterfly Conservation and local conservation groups including TARCA and Wilder Romsey.
- 4.2 In January 2024, the community were consulted via an online survey advertised at each site to understand the thoughts on the way the sites are being managed. 569 responses were received across both sites with a positive outcome and support for both sites to be LNRs. The survey highlighted that visitors enjoy and value both spaces for contact with nature, enjoying wildlife and in the case of Ladies Walk, the view across the town.

5 Options

- 5.1 **Option 1** - Do not declare Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down as LNR'S.
- 5.2 **Option 2** – Follow Natural England's recommendation and designate Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down as LNR's.

6 Option Appraisal

- 6.1 **Option 1 – Do not designate the sites LNR's** – This option will maintain the status quo. However, not proceeding with the LNR declaration will mean that each site's ecology (unless linked to European protected species) would not be considered in local planning decisions. Future opportunities to apply for funding for LNR related projects through Natural England would be lost and we would not be responding to the communities aspiration that the sites be LNR's.
- 6.2 **Option 2 - Designate the sites LNR's** - Creating Local Nature Reserves is a clear indication to the community of the council's commitment to nature conservation. The management of Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down has delivered real benefits and raised the site's importance by demonstrating how nature conservation and community access can be managed in a sustainable way. An LNR declaration is an accolade and way of celebrating the success of site management and will afford both spaces further consideration should planning application(s) be registered in the locality.
- 6.3 Option 2 is considered the low-risk option and is recommended. This option will provide the greatest benefit to the people of Test Valley, afford the sites greater recognition and will demonstrate in a practical sense the implementation of the Council's corporate commitment to protecting the environment by providing a greener borough for our communities.

7 Risk Management

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified at this time.

8 Resource Implications

- 8.1 The declaration of the sites as LNR's will not require any further revenue investment over and above existing commitments. The declaration may enable external funding to be leveraged from Natural England, allocated specifically to further the objectives of LNRs.

9 Legal Implications

- 9.1 The statutory declaration is made under section 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The Council has a legal obligation to protect wildlife and habitats under schedules listed within the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.

9.2 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) placed a specific duty on Local Authorities and other public bodies in exercising its functions to have regard to the purpose of “conserving biodiversity” (section 40). This has been further strengthened by the passing of the Environment Act (2021) which places legal obligations on the public authorities in terms of implementation and reporting on the “conservation and *enhancement* of biodiversity”.

10 Equality Issues

10.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out. The outcome of which is that there are no potential negative or adverse impacts which would contravene the Equalities Act 2010.

11 Other Issues

11.1 Sustainability and addressing a Changing Climate – Proactively managing spaces as nature reserves contributes to the delivery of the Council Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) with site management helping to manage and restore habitats which sequest and store carbon.

11.2 Wards/Communities affected – Abbotswood is located in Romsey Cupernham ward and Ladies Walk in Andover Winton ward.

12 Conclusion

12.1 Abbotswood Nature Reserve and Ladies Walk Down are important sites ecologically, as well as places where the community can take an active role in their management and benefit from contact with nature.

12.2 In recognition of the sites value for both wildlife and people, Natural England, has confirmed that both sites have reached the high standard to be declared as LNR’s. This report supports Natural England’s conclusion, and it is recommended that the Council declare both sites LNR’s.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	2	File Ref:	N/A
(Portfolio: Climate Emergency and Countryside) Councillor A Johnston			
Officer:	Kevin Harrington	Ext:	8815
Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	10 July 2024