

Isle of Wight Beaver Introduction Project Steering Group

Minutes from Meeting 7th September 2022

Attendees:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<i>Mark Larter</i>	Deputy Chair / Natural England
<i>Izzie Tween</i>	Beaver Officer / HIWWT
<i>Jamie Marsh</i>	HIWWT
<i>Colin Boswell</i>	CLA
<i>Lucy Charman</i>	CLA
<i>Caroline Knox</i>	East Yar Farmer Cluster
<i>Adam Cave</i>	Environment Agency
<i>Carol Flux</i>	Island Rivers
<i>June Davison</i>	Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils
<i>Grace Booth</i>	Isle of Wight Council
<i>Ian Dawson</i>	Isle of Wight Council
<i>Lee Matthews</i>	Isle of Wight Council
<i>Richard Grogan</i>	Isle of Wight County Mammal Recorder
<i>Jennine Gardner</i>	Local Access Forum
<i>Robyn Munt</i>	NFU
<i>Mike Greenslade</i>	National Trust
<i>Keith Ballard</i>	RSPB
<i>Lisa Banfield</i>	Wildheart Trust

Emma Hunt of HIWWT was also present in a secretarial capacity to take minutes.

Apologies:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<i>Matthew Chatfield</i>	Independent Chair
<i>Mark Simmons</i>	AONB Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer
<i>Ian Boyd</i>	ARC Consulting
<i>Nigel George</i>	ARC Consulting
<i>Leanne Sargeant</i>	Forestry England
<i>Mark Roberts</i>	Island Roads
<i>Colin Pope</i>	Isle of Wight Natural History Society
<i>Darrel Clarke</i>	Isle of Wight Rights of Way
<i>Richard Wilson</i>	Newchurch Piscatorial Society
<i>Brendan Jones</i>	Southern Water
<i>James Attrill</i>	South Wight Farmer Cluster

Introductions and Welcome:

- ML led introductions of all attendees
- IT listed apologies of those not able to attend
- ML invited those in attendance to present AOB for consideration at the end of the meeting
 - RG wished to raise the legislative steer behind the Beaver Introduction Project
 - RM wished to raise government's release of the national beaver management strategy

Review of Previous Meeting's Minutes:

- One outstanding action from previous minutes:
 - AC has contact details for Angling Trust and RFaCC and will forward onto IT
- Actions from previous minutes resolved:
 - IT contacted feasibility study authors with regards to steering group membership, have declined but are happy to attend in a guest appearance capacity
 - DC passed on JG of LAF details, IT extended membership, JG in attendance
 - IT redrafted ToR and circulated for review on 18th August
- ML opened the floor for comments on minutes. No comments were raised.
- Minutes agreed as being correct by all, proposed by CK, seconded by JM

Review of Terms of Reference:

- ToR now draw a distinction in role of Steering Group now, and how that would evolve if and when a licence application may be made.
- RM raised reservations about the purpose of the Steering Group and expressed the view that the purpose should be for consideration of the project and assessing its validity as opposed to pushing forward.
- RG added to this by questioning the Project with regard to its desirability as opposed to feasibility.
- ML welcomed all opinions on the ToR and the purpose of the group, and invited anyone to state their sentiments via email.
- ML held ToR as they stand as a valid document while welcoming additional thoughts.

***The following statement made by the Deputy Chair to be circulated to the Steering Group encapsulates the purpose of the Steering Group and justifies the acceptance of the Terms of Reference as they stand:**

"The formation of the Steering Group is predicated on the prospect of applying for a licence to release Beaver on the Isle of Wight, as is sought by HIWWT. HIWWT have therefore expressly set up the group with that primary objective and are now seeking to determine its feasibility. Government has indicated the desirability of Beaver releases at the national level. The purpose of the steering group as framed within the Terms of Reference is therefore correct."

Beaver Project Update:

- IT gave a presentation to all attendees on beaver history, ecology, benefits of beaver activity observed during the ROBT, the outcome of the IoW feasibility study including the modelling data on beaver habitat suitability and dam capacity, beaver management and the results of HIWWT's door drop consultation. The presentation also included recent legislative updates

regarding beavers' European Protected Species Status that are due to come into force on 1st October, on government policy and guidance on beaver management that was released on 2nd September, and also countryside stewardship grants that were made available on 5th July. She further clarified that these legislative updates have not included the release of the wild release licencing criteria, and that as yet licence applications for the wild release of beavers are still not being accepted by Defra.

- MG commented on the Eastern Yar as the focus on release and questioned whether any other sites were being actively consider for beaver introduction.
 - *IT explained that the feasibility study authors focussed on the Eastern Yar during their site visit, that as the longest river on the Island it has the most suitable habitat, that HIWWT has a large landholding along the lower catchment which may help minimise conflict during the initial phase of the project. Other rivers are not actively being explored for release but given the nature of a wild release, beavers are likely to spread to other catchments in time. Generally rivers in the west of the Island are shorter and have a greater saline influence so have less suitable habitat.*
- CK mentioned red squirrels and asked whether there was evidence on their coexistence with beavers given their mutual dependency on trees.
 - *IT replied that to her knowledge, there has not been any evidence from the results of the Scottish Beaver Trial to suggest that red squirrel populations had been negatively impacted by beaver activity, since beaver tree felling is restricted to a relatively narrow strip along riverbanks and so has minimal impact on woodland away from waterbodies.*
- LC raised questions on: beaver family group size
 - *IT replied that beavers form a monogamous breeding pair that breed once a year and that offspring remain with the parents typically up to age 2, at which point they can disperse if there is available unoccupied habitat*
- along what length of river the 28 dams were built during the ROBT.
 - *IT clarified that this was across the entire catchment and that those dams were built in the upper tributaries with no dams being built in the main stem of the River Otter but was unable to clarify in further detail at the time*.*
**According to the River Otter Beaver Trial Science and Evidence Report, the catchment area is 25,010 ha comprising 594 km of watercourse. By Oct 2019 1.9km of these had been dammed which represented 0.3% of the stream network.*
- the likelihood of a beaver dam being breached naturally
 - *IT replied that beaver dams can be dynamic structures that may naturally wash out especially in areas of steep gradient with high stream power. Heavy rainfall events may wash out beaver dams but the impact of this may be moderated where beavers build sequences of dams back-to-back.*
- The downstream impact of beaver damming during periods of drought
 - *IT replied that beaver dams do slow down water flow and store water on the landscape in ponds, some of which can absorb into soils and percolate into the ground. However beaver dams are permeable and do not tend to dramatically change water availability downstream as water input tends to merely be staggered and released over a longer time period while trickling through dams. Research from the United States aimed at detecting stream temperature changes have detected cold water inputs from groundwater upwelling and entering stream channels further*

downstream of dams, indicating that water “lost” through percolation can remain accessible to downstream users.

- RM wanted to know if modelling had been done of beaver population growth from a prospective release of beavers onto the Island, based on data from the ROBT and SBT.
 - *IT has yet not modelled beaver population growth for the Island, but has modelled possible number of territories based on an average territory size of 3km (the average territory size of established beaver populations in both the Netherlands and Norway) which would equal approximately 19.*
 - *IT to study beaver population growth rates more closely to provide further information on this to be shared at next meeting*
- Acknowledging the work that has been done to identify areas of habitat suitable for beavers on the Island, RM questioned whether any thought had been given to the beaver’s suitability for the habitat
 - *LC broadened this to encompass beavers’ impact on land used for food production*
 - *RG raised the legal requirement for the landowner and Natural England to maintain any special features of designated sites*
 - *ML referred to the baseline botanical survey work along the lower Eastern Yar within Alverstone Marshes SSSI conducted by CP and made available to the Steering Group on August 18th*
 - *RG offered up the example of Lower Knighton Moor as an example of fen degradation as a result of waterlogging from the construction of manmade dams to protect the integrity of the peat (a special feature of the SSSI) that made management impossible.*
 - *ML acknowledged the large amount of money subsequently spent by NE on scrub removal on Lower Knighton Moor*
 - *AC cited Stodmarsh SSSI, NNR and Ramsar site in Kent, where beavers were first recorded in February of 2021, as being an example of effective wetland management. The Wildfowl Group had previously been spending a lot of money on scrub control to prevent succession to alder carr and reedbed. Opinions on beaver impact were initially sceptical. Beavers have manipulated the habitat and kept the carr at bay and dug channels through the reedbed.*
 - *With relation to beavers’ impact on the wider landscape, AC referenced ongoing successful management of wild beaver populations in Devon and the developing Defra policy, guidance and schemes based on DWT’s beaver management hierarchy*
- GB wondered if there would be an asset inventory done of protected trees etc.
 - *IT is writing a Beaver Management Strategy which will encompass the risk to assets which will include TPOs etc.*
- CF asked about Himalayan Balsam management
 - *IT and JM confirmed that Himalayan Balsam pulling will continue in line with current management practice.*
 - *CF followed up to ask if there had been studies done on beaver impact on Himalayan Balsam.*
 - *IT replied that there is little evidence in the literature of beaver impact on Himalayan Balsam, but the River Otter Science and Evidence Report does mention beavers eating it.*
- ID raised the impact of beavers on highways and rights of way, how would any impacts be managed and who would pick up the cost associated with that management

- *IT mentioned risks of beavers damming and blocking culverts and foraging activity that can lead to tree felling, both of which could impact highways and rights of way. Thorough regular monitoring of key assets including culverts and of trees along RoW, and conflict resolution including unblocking of culverts and fencing or controlled felling of gnawed trees would be part of any ongoing management plan. IT clarified that HIWWT would be responsible for the cost of monitoring and management throughout the licencing period (thought to be between 5 and 10 years), after which the responsibility would then fall upon the landowner.*
- *CK clarified that public liability insurance would be the financial responsibility of the landowner*
- *CF asked why HIWWT were pursuing a wild release of beavers as opposed to an enclosed release*
 - *IT highlighted government support for wild release of beavers as stated in Defra's nationwide consultation on beaver management, the widespread benefits that beavers could bring at a catchment scale as identified in the River Otter Beaver Trial, and the tendency of beavers to escape enclosures. Given government's tightening of enclosure licencing to try and prevent unlicensed escapes of beavers where appropriate risk assessment and consultation has not been carried out, the excessive costs of fencing that may ultimately prove wasted, and the benefits of beaver damming should they be allowed to colonise the tributaries of the upper catchment, HIWWT feel that an open release would offer more ecosystem services as opposed to being enclosed.*
 - *CF raised the difficulties of monitoring a large area compared to confining monitoring to an enclosure*
 - *IT mentioned that beaver introduction would be limited to a small number of pairs to be released on Trust reserves within the lower catchment, likely staggered over the duration of the licence. Beaver activity such as dam building and foraging is often readily visible and detectable through monitoring using site walkthroughs and deployment of game cameras. Fundraising would be required to ensure effective management to ensure project viability. The position of Beaver Officer would be in place throughout the duration of the licence, although the Island estates team would assist in monitoring and management, which could expand especially through the use of volunteers, working in close collaboration with landowners and other agencies to deliver effective monitoring.*
 - *RM raised the difficulties of monitoring land under private ownership with particular reference to large landholdings owned by farmers that couldn't be monitored regularly by the landowner, where access is not possible.*
 - *IT talked of the importance of building close relationships with landowners to facilitate monitoring on private land, and of the potential likely requirement for an annual assessment of catchment-wide beaver activity to report to the steering group and NE licensing forum.*
 - *JM mentioned the use of technology including drones that could help with monitoring in areas otherwise inaccessible.*
 - *CF asked if the beavers would be tagged*
 - *IT replied that the beavers translocated from Scotland would likely be tagged as per licencing requirements, but that the tagging requirements of offspring are still unknown, but given the beavers would be wild, it is unlikely offspring would be required to be trapped and tagged.*

- ID mentioned the reactive nature of resolving issues with highways and asked as to the legislation governing beaver management with regards to health and safety.
 - *IT outlined NE's class licensing structure and training which would authorise agencies with statutory responsibilities to act immediately in the interests of health and safety, where any site registration paperwork can be submitted after the action has been carried out.*
 - *GB asked if HRA would be required for any beaver-related activity that Highways were to carry out*
 - *RG asserted that where there's a threat to life or property the action takes precedence with discussion of the ramifications afterwards*
- LC referred to the guidance and policies recently published and asked what the likely timeline for granting of class licences might be
 - *IT clarified the class licensing structure, that there will be a NE task unit responsible for issuing class licences and also a hotline to call to guide landowners and stakeholders through taking emergency actions if there is not time to go through the class licensing process and associated paperwork beforehand.*

Review of Feasibility Study:

- CK is of the opinion that the feasibility study does not accurately represent agriculture on the Isle of Wight, with more risk assessment required for features including above-ground reservoirs used for irrigation, and drainage.
 - *CK has emailed IT more details on Arreton Valley landuse to be incorporated into the beaver management strategy*
- GB asked if further ecological and landscape impact assessment can be done for the Island
 - *IT clarified that the feasibility study is only one component of the licence application and was the first step in exploring the possibility of beaver introduction on the Island. Since the appointment of IT to the role of Beaver Officer a large amount of consultation with stakeholders, statutory agencies and landowners has taken place and IT is now in the processing of writing a Beaver Management Strategy which will again be just one component of the licence application. IT emphasised the purpose of the Steering Group being to bring together experts among all disciplines to enable the exchange of ideas and allow input of individuals' specialisms for appropriate assessment across all sectors represented on the Island.*
 - *AC brought up Defra's nationwide beaver management strategy that took place last year as being a forum in which stakeholders could input their views into beaver management at a national level.*
 - *RG stated that it could be argued that the feasibility study lacks objectivity*
 - *RM has concerns about input in decision making at the local level and feels that the licensing process lacks objectivity. RM acknowledged that HIWWT have taken on board discussion points made previously and that there has been progress. However concerns remain around the fact that HIWWT will put together the licence application pack.*
 - *ML addressed this concern by asserting that NE's formal consultation on the licence application will take place over 3-4 months during which stakeholders will be able to feed into the review process.*

- *CK raised concerns over the integrity of HIWWT, stating that her views could be misrepresented to NE, and that stakeholders don't get the chance to have their say directly to NE*
- *ML commented that the purpose of the Steering Group is to objectively reflect the views and considerations of all members.*
- *AC referred to the minutes being taken during the Steering Group that capture issues raised within the Steering Group discussion and how these have been addressed, that ensures transparency through being part of the licence submission.*
- *AC further reiterated that there is a formal consultation process following licence submission which does involve stakeholders including the EA and Local Authorities*
- *JM highlighted the open and transparent nature of the process thus far and stated that licence application documents will be circulated to the Steering Group before submission to be made available for comment*
- **RG questioned whether NE would expect the Feasibility Study to be objective, and whether it is an acceptable document**
 - *IT responded that the authors of the Feasibility Study have written most of the feasibility studies and licence applications for beaver enclosures across England which have been accepted by NE*
 - *RG came back to question whether the feasibility study is expected to reflect the desires of the applicant.*
 - *ML stated that the Feasibility Study should be objective*
 - *RG stated that the feasibility study should be rewritten as it is felt not to be objective*

Relating to the objectivity of the Feasibility Study, the following statement was made by the Deputy Chair to be circulated to the Steering Group:

“HIWWT seek to release Beavers because of the environmental and ecological benefits demonstrated within the feasibility study as accruing from this action. It is therefore an objective evidence-based approach that underpins this objective.”

- **RG raised three issues that need clarification from NE: namely that given the current legislation the wild release of beavers is at this moment illegal.**
 - *ML confirmed that any wild release of beavers at this moment would be illegal, but acknowledged the current evolving situation with regard to government legislation, policy and guidance*
- **RG further contended that due to the current illegal nature of wild beaver introduction, that this also runs against government policy, making reference to the government's 25 Year Plan.**
- **RG referred to government guidance on Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations in England which states that as a general rule, new species should not be introduced to any islands, and referred to the lack of archaeological fossil evidence of beavers on the Isle of Wight and that therefore a beaver introduction onto the Isle of Wight would run contrary to this guidance.**
- **RG further questioned the role of NE within the Steering Group forum with the view that given that wild beaver introduction currently runs contrary to government legislation, policy and guidance.**

- *ML made the assurance that wild beaver introduction would not take place until revised legislation, scheduling and guidance is in place*
- *Relating to beavers being non-native to the Isle of Wight, ML asserts that this is a contested and contended point, given that Vectis Archaeology have reported anecdotal evidence of beaver manipulated sticks on the Island.*
- *RG responds that there are no published cited records of beaver fossil evidence within the literature*
- *RG stated that the introduction of non-native species to islands is ecologically unsound*
- *IT stated that given the guidance pertaining to the Island's status, the NE national licencing team were invited down to carry out a site assessment of the Eastern Yar catchment during which they were invited to raise any red flags that would prohibit further development of the wild beaver introduction project proposal. No red flags were raised during that site assessment, and the Island's geographic location was not raised as a barrier prohibiting licence application*
- *ML stated that he too has flagged the Island's status to the national NE licencing team, with no indication from national colleagues that the Island's insular status precluded licence application*
- *RM suggested writing to NE quoting the guidance asking whether the licence application can proceed*
 - *ML has written to NE to gain clarity on this point*
 - *All: Any further questions or concerns to be raised by email to IT by the date of the next meeting (7th Dec 2022)*

***Natural England have replied with further clarification on government policy and guidance relating to a beaver release on the Isle of Wight:**

“Natural England’s position more widely is that the (re)introduction guidance as it relates to off-shore islands does not prohibit a release application. There is however recognition, in accordance with that guidance, that the Isle of Wight’s particular ecology and special species interest will need specific consideration and impact assessment in the application.”

- LC asked about other wild release plans across England
 - *IT referred to Dorset National Trust’s plans for a wild release on the Isle of Purbeck, and the Wild Ennerdale plans to release beavers in the Lake District.*
- CF asked whether the decision to apply for a wild release licence as opposed to an enclosure licence rests with HIWWT and not with the Steering Group
 - *IT confirmed that the decision to explore the process for a wild release licence application is made by the applicant (in this case HIWWT)*
 - *AC referred to the many examples of beavers having escaped from enclosures across Britain, as well as the catchment scale benefits that can be delivered by wild release*
 - *CK mentioned other possibilities of beaver introduction through the release of non-viable individuals for example only females, or sterile individuals*

Update from Statutory Agencies:

- ML updated the group on his work with three sectors of Natural England at the national level, including the dedicated beaver team, the beaver management licensing group and those working on the wild release criteria. There is no further word on the date of the

release of the wild release criteria. Training and workshops are being carried out, including for all Natural England advisors working in catchments where beavers may be released.

- AC stated that the EA at a national level is in favour of reintroduction of formerly eradicated native species across England. Work is ongoing relating to managing beaver activity such as the protection of assets and resolution of conflict around flood infrastructure and the road network using Defra's management framework and working with a broad range of stakeholders.
- GB reported that the IoW council has coordinated internally across their range of specialisms and interests and concluded that the feasibility study is a little vague and doesn't provide enough tools for the council to determine future action and what their role is. GB requested access to the GIS modelling data to integrate with the Council's data including the road network and designated sites. GB requested further ecological and landscape impact assessment be done to provide the tools to make decisions on managing services with reference to the Council's role as Lead Local Flood Authority and issuer of Ordinary Watercourse Consents
 - *AC referenced ongoing work by the University of Exeter with national interpretation of the Beaver Habitat Suitability and Dam Capacity modelling across England integrated with additional datasets including floodrisk infrastructure and agriculture to identify areas of constraints and opportunities.*
 - *AC to look into being able to share this*
 - *IT contacted the University of Exeter with reference to GB's request given that the modelling data is theirs and is not yet publicly available. Discussions are ongoing internally within HIWWT and across TWT nationally about making the modelling data available given that it was paid for by various Wildlife Trusts. HIWWT is happy to accommodate IoW Council's access to the modelling data given caveats expressed by University of Exeter relating to the data's interpretation, specifically the hypothetical nature of the data regarding beaver habitat suitability and dam capacity which is based on landscape features that don't take into account territorial interactions between beavers and resulting carrying capacity limitations. A portal is being designed to provide access to the modelling data.*
 - *IT will provide access to the portal to GB (for sole use by the IoW Council, not to be published or shared wider)*
 - *IT has sent Information Sharing Agreement to GB of IoW Council*
 - *ML referred to the release of the wild release licencing criteria which will clarify the need for further ecological and landscape assessment*
- CK asked about collaboration between the Statutory Agencies
 - *AC clarified that interagency discussions on beavers at the national level are taking place frequently, but at a local level interagency discussions can and should take place through the forum of the steering group.*

Launch of Beaver Management Strategy

- IT addressed concerns expressed about the lack of detail in the feasibility study and reiterated that the feasibility study is only one component of assessment required for licensing. IT is currently writing a beaver management strategy, another component of licence application that as its currently being written can incorporate areas of expertise and interests from stakeholder members of the steering group. IT reviewed subject headings and invited contributions for further assessment.

- *CF mentioned impact on invasive non-native species*
- *CL mentioned newly-planted grant-funded woodland*
 - *IT to share subject headings to invite further suggestions to be provided by the next meeting*
- RM requested a working plan project timeline
 - *IT to develop and disseminate a rough working plan to manage steering group input into the licence application process*

Date and Format for Next Meeting

- Next meeting to be on Wednesday 7th December in person at the Newchurch Pavilion 14.00-16.00