

Isle of Wight Beaver Introduction Project Steering Group

Minutes from Meeting 7th December 2022

Attendees:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<i>Jake Chant</i>	Guest Speaker - National Beaver Officer/NE
<i>Matthew Chatfield</i>	Independent Chair
<i>Mark Larter</i>	Deputy Chair / Natural England
<i>Izzie Tween</i>	Beaver Officer / HIWWT
<i>Jamie Marsh</i>	HIWWT
<i>Mark Simmons</i>	AONB Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer
<i>Nigel George</i>	ARC Consulting
<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>Leanne Sargeant</i>	Forestry England
<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>Colin Pope</i>	Isle of Wight Natural History Society
<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

Apologies:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<i>Ian Boyd</i>	ARC Consulting
<i>Mark Roberts</i>	Island Roads
<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:

- MC led introductions of all attendees
- MC invited those in attendance to present AOB for consideration at the end of the meeting
 - CK wished to raise sources of funding

Review of Previous Meeting's Minutes:

- An error in the previous meeting's minutes was corrected from Stodmarsh Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust to the Wildfowl Group. Minutes agreed to be a correct record following this amendment.
- Actions from previous minutes resolved:
 - *IT to study beaver population growth rates more closely to provide further information on this to be shared at next meeting*
 - *CK has emailed IT more details on Arreton Valley land use to be incorporated into the beaver management strategy*
 - *All: Any further questions or concerns to be raised by email to IT by the date of the next meeting 7th Dec 2022 : None sent*
 - *AC to look into being able to share University of Exeter risk to assets modelling: Layers used to create modelling unable to be shared at this time due to data licencing.*
 - *IT has sent Information Sharing Agreement to GB of IoW Council, to be signed before U of E modelling data transfer*
 - *IT to share subject headings to invite further suggestions to be provided by the next meeting*
 - *IT to develop and disseminate a rough working plan to manage steering group input into the licence application process*

Beaver Project Update:

- IT gave a presentation on beaver population growth rates on the River Tay and the River Otter
- JC inputted that only 10% of beaver territories in Tayside in 2021 had licences issued for beaver management, meaning that 90% of territories required no licenced management for conflict resolution.
- CK asked JC whether he saw similarities in the agricultural landscape of Tayside and that of the Isle of Wight.
 - JC replied that he sees similarities between conflict areas of Tayside and within other large catchments across the UK with intensive levels of arable farming. He clarified that beaver management in Scotland has been on the backfoot due to the unofficial nature of their reintroduction leading to polarisation and resulting in high levels of lethal control, which would differ from management of a reintroduction carried out in a planned and organised fashion.
 - JC clarified that the beaver territories requiring management in Tayside were concentrated in a relatively small area of intensive arable farmland with flood protection banks that are the management responsibility of the landowner, which is not the case in England where management and maintenance of flood banks lies with the Environment Agency.
- CF asked if studies had been carried out on the impact of other mammals where beaver populations have been increasing.
 - IT replied that ecological monitoring of the Scottish Beaver Trial in Knapdale reported negligible impact on red squirrels, while the River Otter Beaver Trial documented increases in water vole range in beaver dammed areas on the River Tale in the presence of Mink. JC mentioned that the University of Exeter lab hopes to release a paper on this soon.

** No evidence was found that beaver reintroduction has had a negative impact on the presence of otters in Knapdale according to The Scottish Beaver Trial: Ecological monitoring of the European beaver *Castor fiber* and other riparian mammals 2009-2014, final report*

Available at <https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-commissioned-report-685-scottish-beaver-trial-ecological-monitoring-european-beaver>

- LC asked for clarification on the definition of “conflict”
 - IT clarified that conflict encompassed direct management actions required to resolve foraging, burrowing or damming issues
- JC added that the socially acceptable number of beaver territories on the River Otter may well be less than the potential carrying capacity of the catchment.
- CF queried the reason behind why beaver population growth rates decline over time.
 - IT clarified that as carrying capacity is reached, beaver birth rates may decline and mortalities may increase from intraspecific territorial aggression and dispersal
- CK compared the population density of people on the Isle of Wight (*approximately 140,400 people over an area of 380.7km² = 372 people per km² as of 2021 census*) to Tayside (*416,080 people estimated in 2019 over an area of 7,519km² = 55 people per km²*)
 - IT commented that much of the Isle of Wight’s population is concentrated on the coasts where beaver habitat is less suitable due to declining forage in urban areas and increasing influence of salinity in estuaries.
- RM questioned whether the timeframe of the licence duration (5 -10 years) would reflect increased beaver population growth after introduction.
 - IT replied that HIWWT are committed to monitoring and managing a wild beaver population during and after any licencing period to help ensure that any conflict arising during rapidly expanding beaver population growth can be resolved.
- CK queried the process of funding for a licence
 - IT clarified that a project budget with identified income streams would need to be submitted as a licence document. Not all money would necessarily need to be in the bank at the time of application, but amounts and sources of income required need to be identified in the submission.
 - JM added that the position of Beaver Officer would be core funded by the Trust given successful licence application, with further fundraising able to support any equipment and materials needed in addition to staff salary.
 - JC added that the River Otter Beaver Officer position is currently funded by climate resilience funding by Devon County Council given beavers’ role in natural flood management as part of the natural processes portfolio allowed to take place within the catchment. Landowners are currently paid to put in woody debris dams in the catchment to alleviate flood risk in rural communities where further support from the Environment Agency is not feasible, with beavers able to provide a similar service to help build resilience against more dramatic climatic events in future.

Update from Statutory Agencies:

- ML had no project update from Natural England
- AC had very little project update from the Environment Agency, other than to report that preparation continues for wild release through modelling and risk assessment to assets to ensure an agile response. The EA has an Organisational Licence in place issued by Natural England to facilitate management in catchments with wild beavers already present.

- GB had no project update from IoW Council other than to report having received the Information Sharing Agreement from HIWWT which is to be signed to facilitate the sharing of the University of Exeter modelling data.
- JG reported that IoW Rights of Way continue to be concerned by the future impact on the RoW network.
 - IT stated that HIWWT is committed to monitoring the RoW network and will intervene with management if any issues arise.
- CF asked after the impact on the RoW network in Devon
 - JC detailed the public access along the River Otter including Devon's busiest public footpath which runs from Ottery St Mary down to the coast. A handful of trees were felled over footpaths during the five years of the trial, some of which impacted upon agricultural fencing when they were felled. Staff from the Clinton Devon Estate were supportive of the trial and tidied the trees up. The majority of trees felled were small willows. To some extent falling willows caused issues before, but increased after the introduction where windblown trees gnawed by beavers were blown over more frequently than before. Two collapsed burrows occurred during the five years of the trial that required management, but this was not significantly different from ongoing path management and erosion control regularly required from escaped livestock and dogwalkers. Footpath relocation to create buffers alongside watercourses can help manage the impact of beaver activity on RoW.
- LS had no project update from Forestry England other than to report a similar position to the Environment Agency

Presentation on beaver management by Jake Chant, NE's National Beaver Officer, formerly DWT's River Otter Beaver Officer:

- JC delivered a presentation on recent government updates including beavers' status as European Protected Species, the beaver management licencing framework, and the five point management approach recommended by Natural England, i.e. education, making space for nature and lawful mitigation management techniques, lower impact licenced actions and higher impact licenced actions. Case studies included beavers in an urban landscape (Honiton), beaver dam and burrow impact on agriculture, and downstream flood risk reduction.
- CF asked about the potential impact of beavers on 5 year RPA agreements.
 - JC responded that NE are discussing this with the RPA to build flexibility into agreements and avoid fines if beavers were to move in and alter habitats.
- CK asked whether dam removal was a successful management strategy given beavers' propensity to rebuild
 - JC clarified that beaver response to dam manipulation is very variable and cited a case study where beavers had built another dam further downstream following the installation of a flow management device, but at the same site following the second dam's removal the beavers didn't rebuild at the same location. JC mentioned that there is an escalating hierarchy of management interventions where beavers are rebuilding, such as translocation.
 - CK questioned the effectiveness of translocation where habitat is suitable that could be occupied by the arrival of other beavers, which JC acknowledged
- CP asked for clarification on the ability to remove dams younger than two weeks given beavers' EPS status

- JC clarified that removing two week old dams or younger does not require a licence, but acknowledged the grey area given the difficulty of accurately identifying how old a dam is
- CK asked about the potential impact of beaver burrowing on above ground storage reservoirs
 - JC suggested the use of beaver exclusion fencing
 - AC added that the EA is carrying out similar analyses of risk to flood embankments and reservoirs
- CK questioned whether beaver dam building reduced the flow of water downstream
 - JC replied that beaver dams are remarkably leaky and that in combination with the creation of multiple braided side streams across the floodplain did not reduce downstream water input
- CK asked about the timeline for wild release
 - JC replied that he had no indication on the timelines of when wild release criteria may be released
- LS asked whether any Landscape Nature Recovery projects incorporate beavers with regard to funding for beaver management
 - JC confirmed that there is definitely scope to incorporate beaver funding through LNR projects, and mentioned green finance options such as woodland creation grants, and stacking benefits for providing increased water quality or flood attenuation. These ideas are being talked about but are not yet in place.
 - JC mentioned the Woodlands for Water scheme, being led by the Rivers Trust through the Riverscapes partnership with Defra, which provides funding for landowners through the England Woodland Creation Offer
- ML asked whether there was enough of a body of evidence to predict impacts and mitigations to present to landowners
 - JC mentioned the University of Exeter dam capacity modelling which can be overlain with Environment Agency infrastructure, arable crops, farm infrastructure, roads, trains and biodiversity metrics which JC used as a traffic light system to identify reaches where dams were highly likely to cause conflict. EA Lidar data can identify areas already at risk of flooding where beaver damming may be frustrating.
- CF asked whether any areas of the Island were unlikely to be touched by beaver activity
 - IT acknowledged that beavers are unlikely to tolerate high levels of salinity in estuaries, although not heavily researched in the literature, but even estuarine systems in the west of the Island have freshwater tributaries that do provide suitable beaver habitat, so it would be difficult to demarcate large areas at the catchment scale that would be unlikely to see any beaver activity at all.
- ML asked whether we have detailed modelling data for carrying capacity for the Eastern Yar and Island
 - IT replied that estimates have been made based on average territory size but JC confirmed that territory size varied on the River Otter depending on location within the catchment
 - IT to follow up with University of Exeter hydrologists to assess carrying capacity of territories for the Eastern Yar and the Island
- ML followed up to ask that Countryside Stewardship/ELMs options recompense landowners appropriately with payments reflecting the actual cost of fencing
 - JC replied that NE are advising Defra on this

Any Other Business

- HIWWT are offering a funded excursion down to the southwest to see wild beaver populations in situ with the opportunity to talk to managers hopefully including Devon Wildlife Trust, Clinton Devon Estates and Chris Jones of Woodland Valley Farm in Cornwall. Dates TBC but likely early March.
 - Anyone interested in attending to email IT to confirm numbers
 - IT to coordinate with DWT
- CK wished to discuss the risk register. RM commented on the efficiency of the transition from the unmitigated risk to residual risk
 - IT clarified that in some cases there are few actions that can be taken to mitigate risk, for example in the case of beaver dam failure, but that in others, remedial actions and active management can be taken to reduce risk, including signage and education, tree guards, dam management and flow devices. Some of these actions can be taken in advance as risk avoidance, other actions may need to be taken reactively as situations develop.
 - CK and RM suggested that the risk register was optimistic
 - IT acknowledged that there would continue to be an element of risk, for example in the case of disease, beavers may carry leptospirosis that is already prevalent in catchments, the risk of which would be difficult to completely eliminate. But other disease risk factors can be addressed through the health screening process that takes place prior to translocation, that would reduce the risk of adding any additional disease such as TB or Rabies into the catchment, which can help bring disease risk down to a tolerable level.
 - CK added that beaver management may bring landowners into closer proximity of river systems and the risks these pose which otherwise could have been avoided.
 - JC acknowledged that species reintroduction changes the status quo
 - CK countered that the change in status quo is felt by only a few people who are represented by the NFU, resulting in a strong and relevant opinion that the Isle of Wight is not the right place for beavers.
 - ML stated that bringing relevant concerns to the table during the steering group is part of the process of exploring the feasibility of the proposal, that it is the responsibility of HIWWT as the applicant to address those concerns, and that of NE to assess whether this has been properly done.
- CK is of the opinion that for the majority of the NFU's membership, the benefits do not outweigh the risks, and that many of the benefits could be delivered through the installation of leaky dams.
 - JC recommended visiting the Natural Flood Management leaky dams outside Ottery St Mary in the River Otter catchment during the spring field excursion
 - LS stated that FE have installed many NFM structures that work for a few years, but that they are not self-maintaining in contrast to beaver establishments, and that some issues could hopefully be solved when ELMs schemes are released
- CF expressed concern that progress on wild release licencing will run at a faster pace than ELMS/Countryside Stewardship options
 - JC conceded that both those processes lies outside of NE control, that policy rests with government and schemes are managed by Defra
- RM was under the impression that NE are leading plans for beaver reintroduction in England while also being the independent body responsible for assessing licence applications

- JC clarified that NE is not leading on beaver reintroduction, but instead is the licencing authority and is preparing class licencing in response to beavers gaining European Protected Species status. NE's role will become clearer when government announces a position on wild release.
- LC acknowledged the benefits that beavers can bring but highlighted the importance of beaver management and funding, and the need for more clarity on this. LC further expressed concern over the conflict between beaver introduction and carbon sequestration through tree planting.
 - JC stated that beavers don't eat all trees in a catchment, and that territorial interactions result in hotspots of activity with localised impacts. Planting tree species that readily coppice can reduce the impact of beaver foraging which can improve biodiversity through increasing age class structure, and where beaver foraging is not welcome beaver fencing can be used.
 - JM added that beaver wetlands and rewetting of peat are also effective ways of sequestering carbon
 - LS acknowledged that tree planting is an easily fundable option for carbon sequestration
 - LC added that it is also the only option currently that is stackable
 - JM mentioned emerging markets of Nature Based Solutions, and that Biodiversity Net Gain credits will soon come online
- LC mentioned the current Defra consultation on species reintroduction
- LC asked about the impact of beavers on insurance and whether JC had experienced any conflict on this issue. JC replied in the negative.
- CK asked about landowner responsibility if a beaver-felled tree were to fall.
 - JC replied that this would be no different than if the wind had blown the tree over.
- IT presented a project outline and action plan

Date and Venue of Next Meeting

- Next meeting to take place after the southwest field trip in Newchurch Pavilion on Wednesday 29th March 2-4pm