

Isle of Wight Beaver Introduction Project Steering Group

Minutes from Meeting 7/6/ 2023

Attendees:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<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>Nicola Wheeler</i>	New Beaver Officer /HIWWT
<i>Mark Simmons</i>	AONB Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer
<i>Caroline Knox</i>	East Yar Farmer Cluster
<i>Darrel Clarke</i>	Isle of Wight Rights of Way
<i>Grace Booth</i>	Isle of Wight Council
<i>Lilley Gray</i>	Wildheart Trust
<i>Robyn Munt</i>	NFU
<i>Mike Greenslade</i>	National Trust
<i>Keith Ballard</i>	RSPB

Apologies:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role/Organisation</i>
<i>Ian Boyd</i>	ARC Consulting
<i>Nigel George</i>	ARC Consulting
<i>Lucy Charman</i>	CLA
<i>Adam Cave</i>	Environment Agency
<i>Jennine Gardner</i>	Local Access Forum
<i>Colin Pope</i>	Isle of Wight Natural History Society
<i>Carol Flux</i>	Island Rivers
<i>Mark Roberts</i>	Island Roads
<i>Richard Wilson</i>	Newchurch Piscatorial Society
<i>Brendan Jones</i>	Southern Water
<i>James Attrill</i>	South Wight Farmer Cluster
<i>Katiana Saleiko</i>	Forestry England
<i>June Davison</i>	Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils

Introductions and Welcome:

- **MC** welcomed all attendees and asked for apologies.
- **IT** reported that it was her last Steering Group Meeting
- **NW** introduced herself as the new Beaver Recovery Project Officer and outlined her previous experience working on a landscape scale project based on the River Ouse in North Bucks, then for HIWWT as Wetlands and Ponds Officer and land adviser and then Natural Enterprise implementing Water Environment Grants in the East Yar valley and coordinating the control of Himalayan balsam.

- **MC** welcomed Nicola to the role and thanked Izzie for her tremendous work and wished her every success for the future.

Review of Previous Meeting's Minutes:

- Minutes from March's meeting agreed to be a correct record.
- Actions from previous minutes resolved:
RB reported that the farmers she'd visited during the field trip to Devon were not keen for her to put their views in writing to share with the SG because they were tenant farmers and didn't want to compromise their relationship with the landowner.

IT had followed up with **NE** to ask about Beavers in the development process given their EPS status. **NE** reported no current beaver -specific development licence but this is being worked on and they would need to be considered as part of the planning process.

IT had circulated Beaver management Strategy for comment – discussed below.

IT had completed parts of the Ecological Appraisal – **NW to circulate work completed so far to the SG for comment.**

CK reported that she had visited Bathingbourne reservoir with **ML** and shown him the habitat that has developed there.

Update from Statutory Agencies:

- **ML** is continuing to liaise with **NE**'s national team – there was a meeting of the National Beaver Management Forum in April and Jake Chant (**NE** National Beaver Officer) would be updating National Beaver network with outcomes later this month – **IT, JM and CK went to the Beaver conference and IT presented an update to the SG (see attached). CK attended the Beaver Forum and reported frustration that DEFRA weren't present.** There will be another meeting in September.
- **ML** - Giles Wagstaff reported that licencing isn't progressing quickly and there doesn't seem to be an imperative from DEFRA to progress. **CK** met Rebecca Powell (DEFRA) who said that progression of licencing lies with **NE**.
- **DC** – following last meeting he met with Izzie and a rep from highways, Ian Dawson. He reported that they were provided with very good answers to the questions they put to her. Summary points in AOB below.
- **IT** reported no updates from **FE** or **EA** in their absence.

Presentation by Caroline on Farming with Beavers in Scotland – Unintended consequences

CK delivered a presentation on the impacts of Beavers based on her knowledge of the Strath-Tay and the Tay Valley and interviews with four landowners (two with high quality agricultural land, one with medium quality land and one non-farmer) see attached.

CK suggested that the Tay valley could be compared with the Arreton Valley both in terms of its highly productive arable and horticultural land and sandy/loamy soil type. The key points were that from just two pairs, beavers had spread throughout the 2000 sq mile catchment in 20 years. Protecting land was costly and time-consuming for landowners and liability uncertain. In areas with prime agricultural land, farmers were removing habitats to make it unfavourable for beavers.

CK expressed concern that beavers would, because of its much smaller size, very quickly colonise across the IOW.

- **IT** confirmed that she had calculated there would be approximately 19 beaver territories on the IOW based on average territory size.
- **CK** asked what would happen to the excess beavers after that?

JM asked if the original Tay beavers had been supplemented with others from out of the catchment due to illegal releases?

- **CK** explained that beavers were being moved around and into new catchments and she thought that there was an ambition to move them out of the Tay Catchment because of the high degree of conflict there.
- **IT** confirmed that the conditions in the Tay valley encouraged rapid beaver expansion, given the landscape, availability of crop forage and the lack of initial management and mitigation due to the illegal nature of the releases/escapes.
- **IT** outlined that running concurrently with the illegal Tay beaver releases there was the sanctioned, legal Scottish Beaver trial where beavers were released into Knapdale, Argyll – a peninsula deliberately chosen because of its inaccessibility and where there would likely be low natural dispersal. The Knapdale project was intensively monitored and at the end of the Trial the Scottish government looked at both populations, the Tayside in terms of beaver management and conflicts and the Knapdale in terms of ecological benefits. The outcome of the reports was that the Scottish government allowed both populations to remain and in 2019 they were given protected species status.
- **IT** reported that there were about 255 territories thought to be in the Tayside catchment in 2019. Nature-scot began to try to address the conflicts as late as 2019 through offering help with mitigation and management but it's a huge area and there hasn't been adequate resourcing or monitoring. There was no compensation and farmers understandably felt frustrated that there was no consultation with them, and they were left to deal with the problems themselves.
- **IT** pointed out that it's not a textbook example of how you would manage a beaver re-introduction project – as a result 100-200 licenced culls per year plus many more unlicensed culls are taking place. Policy in Scotland is evolving, translocation is now legal

between catchments which should help to deal with conflicts in areas of prime agricultural land.

IT pointed out that in smaller catchments in South England such as ours, there is a smaller carrying capacity and it is easier to monitor beavers and through a licenced process the release can be controlled, consultation can occur, base-line monitoring can take place, proactive management, risk assessments and mitigation can be properly resourced and put in place. For example, Devon WT have taken ownership of the River Otter population and there hasn't been the same level of conflict.

- **CK** commented that perhaps that was because it was “early days”, and the beavers hadn't yet been there for 20 years.
- **IT** confirmed that the beaver populations in Devon will continue to grow, and DWT are currently continuing to provide support beyond their licence period.
- **MS** commented that the issue is the scale of the damage - one of the Tay Beaver studies (that included a larger number of landowners) found that around 40% of the people that had beavers on their land were either positive or indifferent to them. Of the 60% or so that were antagonistic, the majority wouldn't take up any mitigation measures, and as they weren't interested in doing anything about it, the damage therefore continued. In the report, most people, especially the public are pro beavers and lots of eco-tourism businesses have benefitted.
- **IT** said that Jake Chant had reported that there are hot spots of conflict in the Tay Catchment but also areas where there is very little conflict.
- **CK** quoted Roisin “Better the Beaver you know”! If you have a beaver on your holding in a place where there is low conflict, it will keep other beavers away, so better to let it remain.
- **MS** pointed out that the Salmon fisherman are pragmatic and are promoting separation between crop and beavers to diffuse conflict. Also, as 60-70% Scottish agricultural income is subsidy, this will be switching, as here, to provision of public goods including environmental work.
- **CK** emphasised that Scotland has low amount of prime agricultural land (15%?) and Tay catchment includes approx. 40% of this so that is why food production is high priority there compared to other parts of Scotland, where farming with wildlife is more realistic. The value of land there is high and can't be mitigated by any of the incentives currently on offer.
- **MS** said that eco-tourism is around 1/3 of the value of Scottish agriculture and the damage caused to an individual farm, while unfortunate for the landowner, is very small in economic terms.
- **CK** responded that in Scotland the eco-tourism benefits were not being felt in the areas with prime agricultural land and unfortunately the beavers like the agricultural areas because they have “easy living” there and that causes conflicts.
- **IT** - our dam capacity modelling shows a lesser likelihood of damming in the lower catchment, which is preferable for the beavers because they won't dam if they don't have to and they like easy access to forage and deep water. Fortunately, on the IOW, this corresponds with where the nature reserves are situated. Beaver damming on the Island is much more likely to occur on the steeper gradient land where the floodplain is narrower and therefore the impact over the landscape would be less.

ML thanked **CK** for her research and for highlighting clear issues. He surmised that while we understand their ecology, the re-assurance that we are all looking for is that risks are properly assessed and there is a reasonable level of mitigation available— looking at feasibility here.

- **CK** responded that Nature Scot have had to fund some of the larger capital projects such as £15k on fencing to deter beavers from prime land and although HIWWT have listed mitigation in their risk assessment, there is no funding for it
- **IT** said that some funding is available and HIWWT are looking to increase this through government and private sector. FIPL (Farming in Protected Landscapes) was used in Devon for revenue payments (more detail in her presentation). ELMs need to provide easily accessible incentives for riparian land buffers.
- **MS** added that the figures he saw were small – apart from one farmer who spent £1500, another claimed they spent £10 000 but couldn't provide any evidence to back this up, payments were modest or not at all. (*The 2015 report that is referred to is [Tayside Beaver Study Group \(webarchive.org.uk\)](#)*)
- **RM** suggested that the reason some wouldn't take up mitigation schemes is because of the onerous nature of having to answer to NE or Defra.
- **RM** also, there is an awful lot of riparian land opposite the nature reserves owned by smaller landowners which is productive land that they are producing food on. HIWWT are asking them to give over land for a significant change and hoping that there will be funding to pay them for it. She expressed concern that the agri-environment pot is not getting any bigger yet more and more is being taken out of it for capital schemes etc. so any money will only pay for costs and not for revenue.
- **IT** responded that the private sector would have a role and that it is a developing market through BNG, Carbon credits and nutrient neutrality, and government is looking to facilitate that. A discussion followed about the merits and amounts of land that would be required for those various schemes and the difficulty for individual farmers to navigate them.
- **RM** replied that these schemes were very uncertain, and many other environmental schemes were “hoping” that companies such as airlines were going to fund them. She expressed the view that the private market to fund this type of work is not there yet and some companies such as Tesco are simply expecting suppliers to farm in a nature-friendly way.
- **RM** made the point that you cannot keep saying that the money will become available for mitigation when it simply isn't there at present.
- **MG** commented that the NT position nationally is that they are holding back on getting involved in these types of schemes because they don't have the funding certainty or guarantee around them.
- **RM** further added that although the public can say that they want beavers, the people who are going to have to live with and deal with the problems and apply for all the schemes are a small group of farmers. However, just because they are small in number it shouldn't mean that they are any less valued than those of the wider population.
- **ML** we need to have a recognition that the law has changed in favour of beavers and it's only because we are an Island that we have a degree of optionality as to whether to have them here or not.

DC asked for clarification on whether a decision had been made for the IOW and **IT** outlined the project to date, a feasibility survey shows that the IOW has highly suitable habitat, work is progressing on a licence application but there isn't currently a legal process in place for submitting a licence for a wild release. There is no clear England strategy for existing wild populations or for new releases. Natural England will be the body who will authorise an application and the IOW Council will be one of the statutory consultees on that application.

DC asked what the merits were of re-introducing beavers and **IT** outlined the biodiversity and ecosystem services as well as the moral arguments for re-instating beavers.

Presentation by Izzie on the University of Exeter Beaver Conference

A 3-day conference organised by the Beaver Trust and attended by **IT**, **JM**, **CK** There were presentations from Natural England on the National Policy, Environment Plan, licencing to maximise benefits and mitigate risks, monitoring etc. Also, an update from Nature-Scot and Natural Resources Wales. There were updates from the University of Exeter on current research concerning beavers and University of Montana re. effects on fish and beavers as tools to mitigate climate change. There were presentations on UK Beaver genetics and translocations. The European perspective was covered by Gerhard Schwab who reported on Beavers in Bavaria and how they are managed. The National Trust have been monitoring the effects of beavers in large enclosures on two of their estates and have plans for further releases. Also, a re-wilding project that included beavers. Landowners and the NFU also presented their views on farming with beavers. Workshops that **IT** reported on were how to capitalise on the nature-based solutions that beavers bring, green finance, water company perspective and beaver management, consultation, education, animal welfare and on wild release criteria. Day 3 involved field trips including to Yettingdon with Dr Alan Puttock, Clinton Devon Estates and other sites that DWT have been involved with such as Bicton College.

Questions on the Beaver conference presentation

IT mentioned that DWT had secured 2-year revenue payment (£781/ha) from FIPL for land that had been flooded due to beavers as existing agri-environment schemes were too static and couldn't capture the dynamic nature of the effects of the beavers. This is the first revenue payment that has ever been awarded for land affected by beavers.

- **CK** asked what would happen in future years if the farmer continued to be unable to make silage?
- **IT** responded that it was a trial and that if successful and the land continued to be affected the landowners could potentially re-apply. However, the FIPL could become over-subscribed if other landowners also wanted to apply.

RM asked **IT** where the slide showing beavers in the south-west had originated from?

- **IT** had copied it from DWT Harry Barton's presentation which were probably taken from the EA sub-catchment dataset and combined with NE survey data showing where the beavers are present. The Tamar catchment is colour coded blue for areas that are occupied and green for not yet but likely to be occupied

soon. The river Otter shows that there hasn't been any dispersal out of the catchment, but beavers are now in the Taw and Little Dart though that is probably not a natural dispersal. Understanding natural beaver dispersal and how they choose to colonise areas is not widely known (in England context) University of Exeter beaver hydrologists are working on beaver dispersal to better be able to model and predict this.

CK felt that the beaver conference was 99% people who were enthusiastic about releasing beavers and that it was therefore an echo chamber and the NFU's presentation and her attendance represented the 1% opposing view. Also, that people there wanted to engage with farmers but because farmers don't generally know about the issues that can occur, they aren't going onto the various steering group meetings. For farmers to be able to contribute in a knowledgeable way, the NFU and the national NE beaver management group are looking at creating databases of information. The Beaver Trust is also creating a database of information, but NE are concerned that it's likely to be one-sided. There is a need for easily accessible balanced information to be available to the general public. She also said that the EA are creating a document possibly called "Living with beavers in a working landscape" which would be useful to see.

NW to ask **AC** if he would like to present on that document at a future meeting.

Beaver Management Strategy - IT had circulated and asked for any comments to be submitted by email

CK asked if there was any mapping of brackish or saltwater areas?

- **IT** responded that the modelling data excluded it because it is seen as not suitable for beavers.

CK thought that the section on reservoirs was well done however having to do the R/A on a large scale would be daunting.

- **IT** said that the steer from govt was quite risk averse and although there were valid reasons for this, it meant that the R/A was quite repetitive in that it was the same response to each risk, i.e monitoring, management – the same tree protection and dam manipulation etc.

CK asked hypothetically if a wild release licence was granted for IOW then what is the sum of money HIWWT are aiming for in order to meet the 10 year licence requirements and how long do you think it will take to raise that amount?

- **JM** responded that there is a pot that has been generated but that HIWWT are reluctant to push hard for fundraising until they know what the policy and timeline will be for licenced wild releases. HIWWT will be developing a beaver fundraising program.
- **IT** added that the River Otter Beaver trial ran for 5 years and it cost about £500 000 but by doubling the length of the licence you aren't necessarily doubling the cost of a project because it is appreciated that there isn't a linear relationship and that as the beaver population expands exponentially it will be a significant sum of money. In terms of the licence, not all of that money will need to be in a bank account, but funding sources do need to be identified.

CK reminded HIWWT that they have always said they will continue to look after the situation forevermore and questioned whether they will have a continued forward plan to keep fundraising?

- **IT** replied that similarly to DWT, their licence has expired but they continue to fund a beaver officer and continue to go out into the catchment delivering support to landowners.

CK asked whether HIWWT would hold a fund that landowners or highways could apply to for capital costs/repairs.

- **JM** clarified that after the licence expires HIWWT would not be financially liable but would commit to continue to provide staff resourcing, materials and expertise. **JM** confirmed that the intention would be to follow the Devon model and after the licence period ends the beaver officer would become a core member of staff supported by the wider trust estates team (currently 4 full time staff) who would all be trained to the class level required.
- **IT** commented that a steer that came from the beaver conference was that beaver management groups could become part of statutory catchment partnerships and funded through this mechanism.

GB asked if the Wildlife Trust were confident that they can deliver 10 years of support?

- **JM** responded yes

AOB

DC – there is a dense network of 530 miles of rights of way and therefore potential for them to be affected. Currently there is a small, already stretched staff resource (1 manager, 1 office-based, 1 maintenance officer and 2 operatives plus a temporary coastal path officer) and very limited budget provision. Understandably, there is concern that this proposal could add to their workload and be expensive. He explained that ROW are not against the scheme but would like to know what mitigation and support would be in place. **DC** detailed the work involved in just one path closure as an example and the public pressure they receive as a result. There is particular concern about the cycle-track being undermined by burrowing and tree felling onto the path.

- **JM** confirmed that during the licence period there would be help available and after there would continue to be support and that through the management hierarchy effective monitoring would be key. He envisaged that there would be a team of staff and volunteers coordinated by the beaver officer who would monitor all the footpaths within the area that beavers are using so that issues can be predicted and mitigated before they occur.

DC asked if something was spotted that could potentially lead to a damaged footpath, could HIWWT step in and stop that happening?

- **JM** said that they could certainly attempt to stop it happening. HIWWT could provide tree guards and through protection by sand-based paints and if there was damming and a risk of the footpath flooding, then manage the dam structure.

IT recommended developing a memorandum of understanding such as the one written between DWT and Devon CC. There is a draft MOU between HIWWT and the EA that focusses on knowledge sharing and it helps to set expectations. EA staff would report potential issues to HIWWT as part of their routine works and the same could work for ROW staff.

- **DC** replied that he felt it would be essential to have a MOU.

DC pointed out that diverting footpaths as DWT had done in one place to give more of a river buffer wouldn't be possible here.

- **IT** accepted that it may not be but that beavers don't take up much space and so moving a path away from that riparian edge can remove conflict.
- **JM** commented that on the footpath diversion slide a major part of the erosion shown was due to dogs entering the river rather than beaver burrowing.

ML asked whether potential flooding of footpaths could be identified proactively so that solutions could be delivered before issues arose?

- **JM** agreed and suggested quarterly meetings with ROW to look at that and also where areas of the existing network are already seasonally inundated, these could be improved. For example, new boardwalks etc.
- **MS** suggested using EA LIDAR data to help identify those footpaths at risk.
- **IT** explained that she uses flood maps, LIDAR data, contours and beaver dam modelling layers in her site visits with landowners to predict flood risk.
- **JM** pointed out that beavers are part of the solution for restoring our rivers and wetland systems but not the entire solution and HIWWT are carrying out other significant capital works to create better floodplain/river connectivity and more floodplain storage in areas where that is acceptable. This will reduce surface flooding in some areas including on footpaths.

RM followed up with a query about the possible increase in water in the E. Yar catchment that could be due to a recent shift in the aquifer contributions and asked whether the data being used to predict flooding was up to date?

- **IT** explained that the dam modelling data commissioned for the beaver project was based on remotely sensed data, looking at the area of the catchment, the digital elevation model to take into account the gradient and quantifying from that how much water falls over the area and what rate it falls through the hydrological network to assess whether or not a dam could persist under those flow conditions.

DC asked if there were any other examples of beavers living on Islands?

- **IT** responded yes, lots of examples of where beavers have naturally colonised Islands around the world including Islands in the Baltic, Estonia, plenty in US Great Lakes, fjords and islands off the coast of Norway where beavers swim through brackish water and on an island off of the coast of Scotland and in the Tierra del Fuego, off coast of Argentina, where there are a great deal of *non-native beavers* living on islands and causing problems for the native ecosystems that are not adapted to them living there.

DC asked **ML** and **HIWWT** if there was not a degree of irresponsibility to introduce something that after 10years was going to be left to "run riot" and cost the local authority and landowners a lot of money and cause problems?

- **IT** responded that beavers are a native species, a protected species that has already been given the right to remain across England and Britain.

ML reflected that there was a question over whether the ecological and environmental impact that they would have would be detrimental or whether, overwhelmingly, as the evidence shows, its actually efficient.

- **CK** commented that you could add to that question about the beaver welfare – is it fair for the (beached) beaver and is it fair for the landscape?
- **IT** agreed it's a valid question and when the beaver feasibility study was conducted, the two top beaver ecologists who wrote it (including Roisin Campbell-Palmer who is the UK's top expert on beaver welfare) didn't highlight any particular concerns regarding the fact that we are an island. It was acknowledged that beavers do need management and genetic diversity is something we would need to carefully monitor.

MC concluded the meeting and thanked **DC** for coming along and taking part in discussions. **IT** received applause and thanks from all the SG

Date for next meeting TBC