

Amenities & Leisure Committee Meeting – 16th October 2024

Agenda Item 6.2 – Desilting Works at MELNR

General Information

Silt is a sediment that is washed into lakes, ponds etc through an inlet or water course and can block inlets/outlets, prevent water flow and reduce the general quality of the water. Silt occurs at the lake at Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve because of the inlet at the eastern end of the lake.

To deal with the silt at MELNR, some years ago the Park Rangers created a silt entrapment pond which collects the silt before it has a chance to enter the main body of the lake. However, the silt in the entrapment pond builds up over time and once it starts to appear above the water level of the entrapment pond, the sediment can start entering the lake. This is when the silt needs to be removed from the entrapment pond.

History

Approximately 10 years ago an external contractor was appointed to carry out desilting works of the silt entrapment pond at MELNR. Following several major Thames Water leaks in the area at the time, Thames Water agreed to pay for the desilting works, as it accepted that the leaks had significantly contributed to the amount of silt built up in the entrapment pond.

Current Situation

The silt level in the entrapment pond is now starting to appear above the water level and, during the annual inspection in 2024, the Supervising Engineer advised that the entrapment pond is now at a point that desilting should be arranged.

The officer involved with the 2014 desilting works no longer works at ETC so the Deputy Town Clerk met with the original contractor and he provided detailed information on how the 2014 works had been carried out. The contractor explained that, in 2014 using a long reach excavator and dumper truck, the silt was taken from the entrapment pond and deposited into geotextile silt retaining pockets, which had been installed along one of the banks around the lake, near Lakeside. He observed that over the last 10 years there has been much vegetation growth around the entrapment pond itself and along the bank where the silt retaining pockets were located, much of which would need to be cleared if the desilting works were to be carried out in the same way as before.

The contractor identified that there were two options in the way the desilting works could be carried out in 2024: -

Option 1 – to carry out the works the same way as in 2014.

Option 2 – to deposit the silt as a thin layer over a section of grass located along the Green Fair site. When first removed from the pond the silt would be in slurry form, but it de-waters by moisture seeping into the ground underneath and evaporation by the sun and wind. The silt is not offensive in smell and is rich in nutrients and when drier, can be used as a compost for planting projects. The grass beneath any remaining silt would simply grow through and could be grass seeded to speed up growth if needed. The drying period is approximately 1 week, depending on weather conditions, and a temporary fence would be installed around the layer of drying silt.

Both works would require some degree of vegetation clearance at the edge of the entrapment pond, but the first option would also require vegetation clearance around the original silt pockets on the Lakeside bank. This work would need to be carried out by ETC officers, prior to the desilting works commencing.

Conclusion

The officers' current preference is for Option 2, to deposit the silt on an area of land at MELNR. This option requires less vegetation removal (less habitat destruction), produces a compost-like substance that can be used at other ETC sites, and will be cheaper than Option 1.

We are awaiting quotes for both options, as detailed by the contractor, but we are aware the costs could be significant. Officers will also endeavour to obtain comparative quotes.

Although there is a maintenance budget for the Nature Reserve this desilting work has not been budgeted for separately. Once the quotes have been received and we have further information on the best time of year for such work, we will look to see what budgets could be used to fund this remedial work. The Supervising Engineer has suggested that desilting could be required every 8 years or so, therefore, going forwards, a separate ear marked reserve code will be created to fund any future desilting works.

Emma Carroll, Deputy Town Clerk
4th October 2024

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Agenda Item 6.3 – Biodiversity Projects

As part of our review of the Park Ranger team, senior officers revised the job role to create something more proactive and forward looking as well as ensuring day to day maintenance tasks are dealt with. Our new Park Ranger has fitted in well with the team, she brings with her a wealth of knowledge and technical experience which complements the existing Park Ranger's experience of ETC and its assets.

The Town Clerk, Operations Manager and the two Park Rangers meet monthly to plan and discuss ideas to improve local biodiversity. We have agreed a statement of intent which guides this work:

A wide ranging project to measure and record the natural world at various sites in order to inform actions which will improve the biodiversity at these sites and across Earley.

We will use the evidence and knowledge gained to develop and carry out both short term and long term initiatives in a variety of areas including: habitat development; collaborative working with other groups and organisations; educational and recreational activities for residents and so on.

We will aim to apply this project to all sites that ETC either owns or has control of. We will encourage others (residents, businesses, organisations) to follow our lead in their own physical spaces.

The biodiversity project will help ETC achieve the aims of its Green Infrastructure and Climate Emergency agendas.

This project is open ended and flexible. Results will be measured by observable and recorded improvements to the biodiversity of a site or location.

We will promote and celebrate the work of the biodiversity project and any improvements achieved as a result of ETC's commitment to this body of work.

Work carried out so far:

Botanical Survey

A botanical survey of the meadow area at MELNR was carried out using the DAFOR scale method (this provides a good indication of the species diversity in an area). Volunteers from EEG were recruited to assist the Park Rangers. The area was divided into quadrats and, armed with botanical ID guide books, they identified each plant species in a 1 x 1m square. The findings were collated by the Park Ranger and measured against a condition assessment criteria. As a result, the meadow area has been rated as Moderate and the Park Rangers are drawing up plans to improve it.

The volunteers said they had enjoyed taking part in the exercise, that they had learnt a lot and would be willing to help with future surveys.

Hibernaculum

Hibernacula provide a safe, warm habitat underground for reptiles and amphibians on colder days and over winter. There is evidence of reptiles and amphibians at MELNR and creating hibernacula will provide a new type of habitat for them and will provide a way of monitoring their presence going forwards.

The plan is to create three hibernacula, the first one has already been built at the reserve using materials recycled from other ETC sites.

Species Incident Reports

The Park Rangers have created a Species Incident Report Log to record instances of harm to wildlife at ETC sites and to inform measures that can be taken to prevent such harm.

There have been two incidents of birds injured by fishing line at the lake, both birds were rescued and the line removed (Park Rangers assisted by Swan Support). The Park Rangers and a Water Bailiff then surveyed the lake by boat for discarded line or tackle and removed any they found. A press release was issued, warning anglers of the dangers discarded or broken lines pose to wildlife and reminding them that they are required to report instances of broken lines to the Council so that we can remove it. Notices reminding anglers of this duty have been placed in the fishing bays.

Owl Boxes

Three owl boxes at MELNR had fallen down due to deterioration in the ropes securing them. ETC's tree surgeons donated their time and a quantity of weather resistant rope to help the Park Rangers re-install the owl boxes high up in the trees. The work was an almost instant success, tawny owls have taken up residence in at least one of the boxes. Our publicity of the re-installation of the owl boxes was picked up by Wokingham Borough Council and included in their latest countryside newsletter.

Collaborative Working

Discussions are underway with the University of Reading on ways we can work together to improve biodiversity, share knowledge and provide educational experiences for residents. Some of the ideas being discussed include ETC Park Rangers working alongside UoR ecologists; UoR using an ETC site as area for study by its students; UoR ecologists delivering workshops from the Interpretation Centre.

Further reports will be provided to the committee as and when new projects are developed or delivered.

Jo Friend, Town Clerk
7th October 2024

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Agenda Item 7.1.1 – Earley Repair Cafe

Work on the Repair Café project has been going well and the Earley Repair Café will be holding its first public session on the morning of Sunday 13th October 2024 at Centrepont Community Centre.

The response to our call for volunteers has been fantastic, we have more than 30 volunteers, a mixture of repairers, reception staff and café staff, all showing great enthusiasm. The organising committee (Cllrs Sheena Matthews, Al Neal and Andrew Bradley, plus officers Jess and Jo) held a practice repair café session for all the volunteers on Sunday 8th September. Volunteers were encouraged to bring in their own items for repair and we went through the process from booking the item in on arrival through to taking it home afterwards (hopefully fixed!), this practice should help with the smooth running of our first session.

Jess has done an excellent job in creating the documentation needed for the project, dealing with the volunteers and organising an ERC volunteer WhatsApp group. She has also become a member of a Repair Café organisers group where tips and suggestions are shared by various different repair cafes. Both Jess and Al have completed first aid training, ensuring we will have a first aider present at each session, and Andrew B has qualified as a PAT tester (portable appliance) and has been issued with a PAT testing machine. Specialist repair café insurance has been obtained and we still have approximately half of the original £2,000 budget remaining.

The volunteers are aware that the plan is for them to take over the management of this project in due course and for the councillors and officers to then step down. We are working towards achieving this in 12 months' time which will give the volunteers plenty of time to settle into their current roles and decide if they wish to step up to more responsibility. During this time, we will arrange for suitable persons to become first aid trained and will train up another PAT tester. It is also expected that over the next few months sufficient donation monies will have been received so as to make the project self-sufficient in terms of funding. We have stressed to the volunteers that the town council will continue to be supportive of the Repair Café project once it has been handed over to them. This support could take the form of advice from officers on matters of policies, insurance or documents, and the continued use of Centrepont Community Centre one morning a month at no charge.

Jo Friend, Town Clerk
7th October 2024