



Notes from a meeting of CVPC River Char Working Party – 16th October 2019 at Becklands Farm

Present: Ian Rees, Dorset AONB Countryside Officer ~ Nick Gray, Dorset Wildlife Trust Conservation Officer
CVPC Councillors: Hilary Joyce, Kit Vaughan, Carolyn Peck, Tara Hansford, Andrew Carey

Kit outlined the intention of the meeting:

- to invite Ian and Nick to talk about their experience of working with the River Asker project
- to consider how we might improve the water quality of the River Char and address quality concerns along the whole length of the river.

He asked that they:

- put us in touch with relevant stakeholders (given the lack of response from the Environment Agency)
- outline the constraints and options for us in relation to the Char
- consider with us a meeting on the subject with other parish councils.

Ian described the pilot project run on the River Asker and gave us a copy of the '[State of the River Asker Summary Report](#)' (3/1/19). This relates to the '[Full Report](#)' (also 3/1/19). The work on the River Asker is part of a wider approach in the West Dorset Rivers and Coastal Streams Catchment, which is huge (stretching from the Lym to the Swan) and takes in many smaller catchments that make coming together for stakeholders harder, as there isn't a central focus.. He described their approach of trying to build small community-level actions. The River Asker was EA-rated 'Poor' because of plant & fish life impoverishment.

Their approach is to begin from community engagement rather than coming in with ideas already formed about what action should be taken.

The River Asker project received £6,500 from Dorset Governance Group, £5,000 from AONB and £5,000 from DWT. It began with community meetings and the creation of the Summary Report, which took 18 months altogether. He shared a copy of the '[look-back](#)' review of the Community Project prepared by him and Nick. Early actions included tackling Himalayan Balsam and tree shading of rivers.

£20,000 funding was also received from the EA last year and again this year to slow the flow of runoff water into rivers (natural flood management). This was used for actions like:

- planting hedgerows to intercept water
- silt traps to filter ground water
- track renovations

Further works are planned up to March 2020. There is no long-term plan because no guarantee of long-term funding. But they now have new EA funding to look at barriers to fish passage (weirs).

Ian felt they had achieved considerable success with engaging local communities, though it was harder to get volunteers to participate in physical projects.

In terms of transferring the learning and experience of that project to the River Char, he stressed that the land ownership structure and the scale were very different. The delineation of the project must be the river catchment area, not a parish boundary. This would mean that involving Charmouth Parish Council and UMVPC would be important.

He suggested that we could copy the approach of getting local people in different locations to undertake regular local checks on the river's water quality. AONB can provide training to do these tests.

Ian shared the [EA results for the Char since 2009](#). These showed 'Poor' results for Phytobenthos (lack of sunlight and oxygen in the water) in 2013 and 2014. In subsequent years, that line has been removed from the report. At the same time, the water/river quality result has been upgraded from poor to moderate. He doesn't have all the information to know why the line was removed or whether these two things are directly connected.

Nick described how there were difficulties for and with local landowners because the River Char doesn't attract funding for landowners as it's not classified as a target area for Catchment Sensitive Farming (see more in the '[West Dorset Rivers & Coastal Streams: catchment issues appraisal](#)' (22/06/2015)). He felt the idea of a new project might not be well received by landowners/farmers (river awareness fatigue among farmers) but he said that farmers had been and were keen on his projects to raise tree canopy levels, etc.

Other points raised in discussion included:

Hilary:

- Local resistance to installing mains drainage may change now householders know they'll have to spend £7000+ to upgrade their septic tanks.

Carolyn:

- it's worth trying to get Charmouth involved
- *e coli* levels were high in past river tests

Tara:

- we need to see how to enhance and improve the offer to locals (e.g. in terms of beach water quality)
- the CVPC climate meeting could suggest small community projects on water/river management
- a river mapping exercise would offer a quick, easy way to stimulate local interest and get something done.

Nick:

- everyone in the community can be involved in drains, land/flood management, etc
- there could be a 'start your own monitoring' project
- a 'snapshot' survey of the current state of the river might take 12-18 months. If we want it done sooner, maybe we should get an independent consultant to do it.
- The 'Slow the Flow' natural flood management project in Pickering, Yorkshire is worth looking at ([here](#) (EA) and [here](#) (Forest Research)).

Kit:

- The River Char is a thread in the landscape and in the community that offers cohesion and something to come together around.
- Could we raise money to gather existing test data, map the catchment and use that to seek further funding?

Ian:

- Time is the issue for him and Nick. If the timescale for a report is 12-18 months, they can be involved in getting data. Otherwise, if we want it sooner, we need to do it ourselves.
- Need to avoid approaches that are divisive. e.g. don't start a community engagement programme by talking about septic tanks. Introduce that later.
- There is some National Grid money available. He will be applying for more in January 2020 and this may help deliver some river actions.
- We should start by getting validation from the Dorset Governance Group (DGG)

Agreed Action Points:

- **Ian:** supply CVPC with a list of relevant contacts at the Environment Agency
- **Kit:** draft brief Terms of Reference for an initial survey of the River Char

- **Ian:** Raise concerns from CVPC about the River Char at the next DGG meeting, establish their level of interest in taking further steps, and make a formal request for funding for a River Char project along the lines of the River Asker project.

Depending on the DGG response, available funding and timescales, CVPC (in consultation with Ian and Nick) to decide whether to commission an initial report from a consultant or wait for Dorset AONB and DWT to undertake it.

Related Documents

West Dorset Rivers & Coastal Streams: [catchment issues appraisal](#)

River Char sub-catchment: [map and description](#), assessment and threat assessment

Wootton Fitzpaine sub-catchment: [map and description](#), assessment and threat assessment

[‘State of the River Asker Summary Report’](#) (3/1/19)

[‘State of the River Asker Full Report’](#) (also 3/1/19).

[‘Look-back’ review](#) of the River Asker Community Project

River Char: Environment Agency [Cycle 2 Classifications](#)