LODERS PARISH COUNCIL
Annual Parish Assembly 20 April 2021

Report on River Asker Improvement Project Report

Background

The Asker project was launched at a Community Meeting for residents of Askerswell and Loders on 19 February 2018. Its purpose was to be a community-led project that would identify the causes of the Environment Agency's overall classification of "poor" due to lack of fish and aquatic plants and implement actions to remedy them. It was initiated by representatives of three local organisations:

- Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) - Ian Rees
- Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT)- Nick Gray
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West (FWAG) - Tim Bowden

A steering group of six was established comprising these three plus representatives from The Askerswell Parish Meeting, Loders Parish Council and Victor Crutchley a major landowner in the Asker catchment. The steering group is led by Ian Rees.

In July 2018 a Report on the Asker was produced which identified six issues affecting the condition of the river:

1. **Artificial barriers:** this impacts fish populations and causes sedimentation of the riverbed
2. **Shade from riparian trees:** this impacts aquatic plants and riparian plants.
3. **Catchment land use:** this has the potential to impact the duration and severity of flood waters and is a source of phosphate-contaminated sediment.
4. **Agricultural phosphate from diffuse sources:** this impacts aquatic plants.
5. **Invasive species:** this impacts riparian plants and causes bank erosion, which is a source of sediment.

and

6. the need for **monitoring and education**

Progress to date

Although the pace has inevitably slowed during 2020/21 due to the restrictions arising from the Covid pandemic, overall considerable progress has been achieved over the first three years:

- **Shade management of riparian trees and habitat improvement** - six volunteer sessions have been held to increase light levels reaching the river through crown raising. The increased light will allow bankside vegetation to flourish; volunteers have contributed 320 hours and delivered over 1.4km of improvements
- **Agricultural land management change** - Over 60% of land within the catchment is intensively farmed: working with farmers 400m of hedge on flow pathways have been planted; the eight hectares of maize fields have reverted to permanent grass to reduce soil erosion. Other work has included track improvements to reduce runoff entering the river, subsoiling to improve filtration, creation of riverside buffers to intercept overland flow, installation of three silt traps at known hotspots.

- **Natural Flood Management** - working with natural process to reduce flood risk has been a priority for the project. Over 40 small structures have been created to slow the flow of water entering the river, thereby reducing the severity of flooding downstream, over a total of two kilometres with five volunteer sessions.
- **Invasive species control** - Himalayan balsam has been pulled from the full length of the river and its tributaries. This amounts to approximately 12km of main river and a further 12km of tributaries. This sweep of the river will have had a significant impact but will need to be repeated annually for several years to have lasting benefit. The bulk of the work was undertaken by DWT and contractors, but 168 hours of volunteer time have also been put in to help control this harmful weed.
- **Monitoring & education –** there have been five community meetings with over 100 people attending, including: 38 attending a field course learning about the soils of the Asker valley and how it can be managed, along with the benefits of Natural Flood Management; a total of 110 attending two separate events with speakers from the Wild Trout trust and DWT; a "water day" with Years 5 & 6 at Loders Primary School; and the establishment of the River Asker Community Volunteer Group, eight skilled citizen scientists who actively monitor the Riverfly population and, with the help of trail cameras, the wildlife in the vicinity of the river.

There has been less progress with **Barrier removal or bypass.** The weir behind The Loders Arms in Loders is a significant barrier to fish migration and the furthest upstream migrating sea trout can travel, leaving approximately eight kilometres of potential spawning sites unavailable. To improve understanding of the fish population below and above the weir fish surveys have been commissioned in three locations at various times over the past three years, but have had to be postponed due to poor weather conditions. The surveys should take place in 2021/22 weather permitting.

Funding

Thanks are due to Ian Rees and his colleagues for securing funding for the project over the past three years. The bulk of this has come from the Environment Agency, with contributions from Dorset Catchment Based Approach, Dorset Wildlife Trust and Dorset AONB. Expenditure over the past three years has amounted to just over £70,000. Plans are already in hand to widen the range of sources of finance for 2021/22 and beyond.

Future Plans

Priority areas for delivery will be progressing the options appraisal for fish passage at Loders Weir, more invasive species control and Natural Flood Management work and developing resources to help homeowners do the right thing in the garden for wildlife. The River Asker Community Volunteer Group led by Howard Atkinson will expand their work to include the chemical properties of the watercourse, as well as the biological elements that they are already looking at.

GFM

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