

APPG for Wetlands - Minutes of the 3rd Meeting

Held on the River Princess Thames boat and at WWT London Wetland Centre 7 June 2022 at 9 am

Attendees (MPs and Peers)

Siobhan Baillie MP (Chair)
Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (Officer)
Lord Randall of Uxbridge (Officer)
Lord Teverson (Officer)
The Earl of Leicester (Officer)
Alex Sobel MP
Chris Grayling MP
Sarah Olney MP
The Earl of Devon

Opening remarks from the Chair

Welcomed all to the event, introduced the topic of the multiple benefits of urban wetlands, and introduced the speakers.

Presentations from outside speakers

Adam Nice, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Mental Health Foundation and Abimbola Junaid, Project Manager, Blue Prescribing Project, Mental Health Foundation

Adam explained why it is important to tackle mental health problems, including due to their high prevalence in the population. Explained the cost of mental health problems to the economy. Explained the importance of connection with nature for mental wellbeing, including how this has been made clear by people visiting and connecting with nature during the pandemic. Described the need for greater, more equitable access to good quality nature to help prevent mental health problems. Detailed how the wellbeing benefits of green and blue spaces need to be considered as part of policy, especially connection to nature. This could include through improving access to nature by protecting and increasing biodiversity and green space, making green spaces more accessible, and integrating nature into planning and urban design to give people opportunities to connect with nature in frequently visited places.

Abimbola gave a case study of the Blue Prescribing Project being run at London Wetland Centre. This project sees participants take part in hands-on, nature-based activities in a 'watery' natural setting to help improve their mental and physical wellbeing, with the effects of the project being scientifically evaluated. Activities will build participants' health, knowledge and confidence in wetland nature and facilitate peer support to enhance social inclusion and resilience. Overall, the aim is to enable people to continue independently exploring nature to improve their long-term mental health. Abimbola gave examples of comments from participants in the project showing the effect it has had on their mental wellbeing.

Andy Graham, Senior Project Manager (Community Wetlands), Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)

Explained that urban wetlands can future-proof our urban communities against climate change and address the nature emergency at the same time. Also explained the way that we deliver and look after urban wetlands can also build knowledge, develop skills and increase community cohesion. Explained that over 5 million homes at risk of flooding and the devastation that brings. Described how flooding from rainfall in urban areas is just as devastating as river flooding. Noted that climate change is changing how the rain falls from the sky – we're more likely than ever, especially in urban areas with

powerful heat islands driving urban storms, to experience damaging cloudbursts. A month's rain in a few hours is the new normal, and our drains just can't cope anymore. We can't engineer our way out of this as it's too costly to extend or build new sewer networks. Explained that SuDS and other nature based solutions are a key plank in the fight to adapt to climate change. There's always space for SuDS – WWT have shown in the award-winning SuDS for Schools programme in North London that even in the smallest, most complex urban space you can squeeze in a SuDS that work.

Described WWT's Bridgwater Blue Heritage Project creating urban networks of blue spaces, demonstrating the benefits of urban wetlands. This includes restoring a floodplain grazing marsh right next to the town. He also gave the example of WWT's project to save the Salt Hill Stream in Slough, which day-lighted a long forgotten and mistreated stream. This project included 1000 volunteering days, additional flood attenuation, and improved water quality. Mosques, churches, temples, local schools and Slough refugee support group were all involved. Finally gave the example of upcoming WWT projects to explore innovative responses to flooding with Slough Sponge City and restoration of the Beverley Brook in Richmond. This includes co-producing natural flood solutions to future-proof communities against flooding and climate change in general (drought, heat stress etc).

Noted that working with communities from the get-go to co-produce these urban blue spaces is critically important in capturing all the multiple benefits that urban wetlands offer. Creating a community of wetland activists who are knowledgeable and ready and willing to act to look after and manage their blue spaces because they value what wetlands do in their urban neighbourhoods.

Finally, he urged the meeting to imagine an inner city neighbourhood filled with blue oases in gardens and public spaces where wetland plants thrive, dragonflies and butterflies abound, birds and bats forage overhead, where the air is clean and safe to breathe. And where, when there's a sudden cloudburst, instead of going down the drain the rain is gathered safely in blue/green roofs or downpipe planters full of wetland plants, or rain gardens that grow food. The rain is guided towards temporary wetlands or urban willow woods and kids play in the clean water after it's stopped raining. Explained that this is not far-fetched and can in fact become a reality – WWT's work in urban communities shows wetlands make a difference to people's lives.

Sarah Fowler, Chief Executive, WWT

Explained that to create urban wetlands we need partnerships, a supportive policy framework, political support, and public support. Described how current access to nature is unequal, with 1 in 3 people not having access to nature within a 15-minute walk. Noted that WWT has published a route map to show how WWT, government, business, and communities can work together in partnership to create new natural wetland spaces across the country. It sets out what urban wetlands for wellbeing will look like, why they are needed and how to create them, including through policy change. Explained that to accelerate this, WWT is working with over 60 other organisations on the Nature for Everyone campaign which wants increasing access to the benefits of natural spaces to become a core part of Levelling Up, including through making it a legal requirement for developers and public bodies to provide access to nature-rich local spaces for everyone.

Explained the practical policy changes needed to drive urban wetland creation. First, Developers will soon have to provide 10% biodiversity net gain on all new developments due to the Environment Act. This needs to be done right. This means making sure that on-site restoration and creation is prioritized, so that we create nature where people live and work. Wetlands should also have to be replaced with wetlands, so diverse habitats and landscapes are provided and historic landscapes and local character are retained.

Second, Natural England is currently developing a Green Infrastructure Standards Framework – a promise of the 25 Year Environment Plan. It is crucial that the standards produced encourage local authorities to meet minimum standards for access to blue and green space and show developers and authorities how to create wetlands that provide multiple benefits.

Finally, by making sustainable drainage systems compulsory for all new developments the Government could facilitate the creation of 1,000s of urban wetlands up and down the country. Making SuDS mandatory for new developments would create savings of £3 billion from flood damage alone. The Government is currently reviewing whether to implement Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. This would make SuDS compulsory for new developments but has not yet been implemented. Sarah asked members of the APPG to sign a letter to the Government asking for Schedule 3 to be implemented.

Concluding remarks from the Chair

Asked Parliamentarians to ask questions of the speakers during the rest of the meeting, thanked the speakers, and hoped attendees would enjoy the rest of the meeting.

Tour of the urban wetlands at WWT London Wetland Centre

The group was led on a tour of the mosaic of wetland habitats at WWT London Wetland Centre by Nick Oliver, Engagement Manager at the centre. He explained the development of the centre from a reservoir to a thriving wetland habitat. He noted the vast range of species inhabiting the wetlands, including rare reptiles, birds, mammals, and invertebrates. He demonstrated how the site's proximity to London and its welcoming layout allowed new audiences to access wetlands who may not otherwise do so. He explained how this allowed them to access the wellbeing benefits of connecting with nature.

Event concluded 11.30 am