

# Letcombe Brook – Planning Guidance

## Advice to developers and landowners whose land adjoins the Letcombe Brook and its tributary, Manor Road Spring.

P1. Planning permission should not be granted for development proposals which would have an adverse impact on the biodiversity, functions and management of the brook and its corridor.

P2. Development should seek to conserve and enhance the biodiversity, landscape and recreational value of the Letcombe Brook and its tributaries including Manor Road Spring, Humber Ditch and its corridor through good design.

P3. Development proposals adjacent to the Letcombe Brook in urban areas should provide or retain a minimum 10m natural green buffer between the top of the river bank and the development.

P4. Development proposals should include a long term landscape and ecological management plan for the brook, buffer strip and corridor.

- With any riverside development you are advised to discuss your proposal with the Letcombe Brook Project and Environment Agency at the earliest opportunity.

This Planning Guidance is intended to protect and enhance the Letcombe brook and its corridor and is supported by Wantage Neighbourhood Plan and the VWHDC Local Plan 2031 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006.

## 1. Introduction

River corridors are of great importance to biodiversity, water resources, water quality, fisheries and recreation. They make a significant contribution to landscape character and form green links between habitats which are crucial for the conservation of biodiversity and enhancement of wildlife habitats.

The Letcombe Brook Project therefore aims to ensure that all future opportunities are taken to protect and enhance this river environment by:

- Careful design of development proposals which will serve to protect water quality, the channel, corridor and its wider environment.
- Incorporating natural riverside settings into the design of new development.
- Incorporating public access without causing disturbance to the brook.

The Letcombe Brook is a chalk stream. Chalk streams are a globally rare habitat confined mainly to England and north west Europe. In recognition of their international importance, chalk streams have been designated as a NERC Habitat of Principal Importance (previously called UKBAP priority habitats).

The Letcombe Brook is important for biodiversity, supporting a healthy wild brown trout population, Priority Species such as and otter and the UK's most endangered species, the water vole.

Chalk streams are fed from 'groundwater' held in the underlying chalk bedrock. Chalk soaks up rainwater rather like a sponge, and a chalk stream is formed where the water emerges at ground level. Flow in chalk streams is stable and constant in temperature, providing ideal conditions to support a rich diversity of invertebrate and fish life.

Chalk streams are naturally narrow and fairly fast-flowing. They possess a clean gravel bed, vital for invertebrates like mayfly larvae that live amongst the gravel, and for fish like the bullhead and brown trout.

Plants also thrive in the clear, mineral-rich waters. Species such as water crowfoot grow abundantly in the main flow, whilst watercress and lesser water parsnip are commonly found along the margins.

Chalk streams also support some of our rarest mammals and birds such as otter, water vole, and water rail and kingfishers.

Groundwater levels in the chalk can drop in summer and flow throughout the river reduces. Winter rainfall replenishes the groundwater store (aquifer) and the water table rises, re-starting springs higher up the valley. This seasonality of flow in chalk streams is an important factor to bear in mind when considering development since flow in spring can be up to ten times that of flow in autumn.

***It is for this reason that anyone considering new development close to the river should observe the requirements set out in this document.***

Reinstatement of the buffer zone on previously developed land should also be considered so as to protect and improve this rare habitat. This advice note can also be used by those already living and working by the river who have an opportunity to create a better habitat at the edge of their land.

## **Letcombe Brook Project and surveys**

***The Letcombe Brook Project arose from public concern about pollution, low water levels and general neglect resulting from litter, erosion, poor bank treatments and unsympathetic development.***

The Environment Agency's 'River Corridor Survey of 1999' noted that in places the Letcombe Brook was no longer a chalk stream in character, that there had been much realignment over the years to accommodate housing, industry, roads and the railway, and it had been over-widened and deepened. Aquatic and marginal vegetation was extremely sparse with some stretches devoid of any plants. They noted numerous negative changes including reinforced banks, numerous low weirs and impoundments. It was heavily silt-laden in places and over shaded with trees, with much rubbish in the brook. Other problems included urbanisation of the environment along with over-tidying of banks and grass cutting in gardens and on amenity grassland immediately adjacent to the brook.

The Letcombe Brook Project was established in April 2003 to enhance and protect the natural beauty of the brook and to help people appreciate and enjoy the environment. By working in partnership with local people, riparian owners, the district, parish and town councils along with other organisations, the Project has been able to bring about positive environmental benefits for both wildlife and the people that live and work along the brook.

Letcome Brook Project objectives:

1. To conserve and enhance the biodiversity and landscape of Letcombe Brook.
2. To promote environmentally responsible land management practices amongst landowners and land managers.
3. To increase awareness of countryside and environmental issues through education and interpretation.
4. To involve all sectors of the community in caring for and appreciating the Letcombe Brook.

## Environment Agency

This organisation is the government's environmental regulator, and its role includes ensuring the proper management of rivers and streams by their riparian owners. It should be noted that the Environment Agency does not generally own watercourses. Normally, where a watercourse forms a boundary between adjacent landowners (riparian owners), such ownership extends to the centre line of the watercourse. Fence lines at the top of banks, even if shown on deeds, are not in themselves proof of actual boundary location. Ultimate responsibility for the upkeep of a watercourse rests with the riparian owner, and could include clearing obstructions, repairing the banks, protecting vegetation/ trees and removing rubbish.

The Environment Agency provides a guide to the responsibilities of riverside owners – “Living on the Edge” - which is available free on request from their website.

### Flood Defence Consent

***All rivers or streams are classified as either “main rivers” or “ordinary watercourses”.***

#### **Main Rivers:**

Main rivers are covered by the Water Resources Act 1991 and are defined on maps held by the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In broad terms, main rivers include all watercourses of value for strategic arterial drainage, whereas ordinary watercourses may have more significance on a local scale.

Consent under the Water Resources Act 1991 is required from the Thames Region of the Environment Agency for any works in, over, under or within 8 metres of a main river.

Footbridges, tree planting, fences, bank repair and restoration, or even digging a ditch all therefore need consent. Early consultation with the Environment Agency is recommended.

#### **Ordinary watercourses:**

In addition consent is also needed for the construction of any control structure, such as a culvert, or weir that would affect the flow of an ordinary watercourse. Planning permission may also be required. Land drainage consent may be required from Oxfordshire County Council as the lead Local Flood Authority. Consent for certain other works may also be necessary within a designated floodplain. Early consultation with OCC is recommended.

***The Letcombe Brook is ordinary watercourse from its source in Letcombe Bassett and Letcombe Regis and becomes main river at Locks Lane in Wantage.***

## 2. The Importance of River Corridors

Over the years there have been particular development pressures experienced within the urban areas of Wantage. This has resulted in the encroachment of development into the river corridor, resulting in their partial or complete loss. However it is now appreciated that river corridors represent an extremely rich resource deserving protection in their own right.

A careful balance must therefore be struck between allowing development to take place whilst conserving and enhancing river corridors. Ideally, river corridors should be as wide as possible, preferably at least 50 metres wide in rural areas. Clearly in urban areas this is rarely possible although even narrow corridors are much better than none at all.

The key is to protect, reinstate and enhance existing riparian habitat and other wetland features so that wildlife found naturally in these environments will be encouraged to use and live in these areas.

### Why are River Corridors important?

**Visual:** rivers and river corridors are attractive in themselves.

#### Recreation:

- Riverside walks reduce mistreatment (dumping, etc.) and encourage interest in the maintenance and enjoyment of a valuable community asset.
- In urban areas they also provide an important link between areas of open space and are interesting in their own right (simply for walking or observing wildlife).

#### River Ecology:

- There are important links between water and land ecology.
- Watercourses can provide a range of habitats for wildlife: within the water itself, on riverbanks and also associated areas such as reedbeds and wetlands.
- The preservation of river corridors allows the stability of channel banks and the protection of habitats created on/ in them.
- This provides a natural habitat for increased wildlife species.
- Appropriate bank side vegetation controls light penetration and so contributes to good water quality by controlling weed growth.
- Watercourses provide important links between animal and plant populations and habitats, which might otherwise be isolated and fragmented.

### 3. Design of new Riverside Development

Few buildings sited along the Letcombe Brook, or its tributary Manor Road Spring have made the most of the riverside setting, most tending to back onto the river rather than incorporate it as a design feature. The close proximity of development to the river's edge also makes public access impossible in many areas.

Modern developments have been built very close to the river ignoring its setting in their overall design. In future, full advantage must be taken of a riverside setting to produce more attractive designs, which visually enhance the area, improve public access and offer refuge for wildlife. The construction or reconstruction of bridges must, wherever possible, take into account the importance of maintaining an obstruction-free bank for wildlife. Bridges should be designed so that there is ample room for the movement of wildlife along the edge of the watercourse.

***In essence, development must focus around the river corridor rather than the river fitting around the development.***

#### **Buffer Zones**

Wider buffer zones are encouraged as they create more effective "green" corridors. Such areas are essential as research has proved how valuable these strips are to both the water environment and the conservation of riverside wildlife.

- The Environment Agency recommend that for ecological and conservation purposes, the requirement should be a minimum distance of 10 metres (measured from the top of the river bank to the development) for all new development (buildings, car parks, paths etc.) should be set back from a riverbank.
- The 10m buffer should be maintained as a natural or semi-natural habitat free from built development, parking areas, private gardens and formal landscaping. A buffer should be provided on both sides of a watercourse that runs through a development.
- This width of buffer provides the minimum width of habitat needed to provide for the functioning of wildlife habitats, while being able to facilitate informal access for enjoyment of the river. This width also ensures that the river is buffered from land-based activities, e.g. reducing the levels of diffuse pollution reaching the watercourse.
- Provision of a 10m buffer may not be achievable in some situations, for example on some town centre sites where there is already significant built development and infringement of the river corridor. Detailed design of the buffer zone will be determined on a site-by-site basis in consultation with the Environment Agency and Letcombe Brook Project.
- In terms of setting large buildings should not be closer to the river than their height, irrespective of the 10m buffer. In all circumstances Land Drainage Byelaws dictate that an 8 metre buffer zone is maintained, and the Environment Agency will oppose development within 8 metres of a main watercourse which compromises their ability to carry out their statutory duties of flood defence. This ensures adequate access for river maintenance and it is therefore the width within which Land Drainage Consent is required.

#### **Planning Permission**

Buildings or hard standing will not normally be permitted within 10 metres of the riverbank for the reasons given above.

***Every watercourse should, ideally have continuous habitat, in channel and along both banks.***

## 4. Landscape Design of the River Bank

The buffer zone between the riverbank and new development must be adequately landscaped, ideally using locally sourced native plants that are naturally found by rivers to maintain the riverside ecosystem. This can include the creation of ponds/ small wetland areas, use of herb rich riverside grassland and appropriate native tree planting (such as alder, ash, willow, hawthorn or blackthorn). Any ponds should not be connected to the watercourse and should be set back from the top of the bank.

### Bank Improvements

***Over the years, many riverbanks in urban and industrial sites have been straightened and canalised using artificial material such as breeze blocks, concrete or metal. This usually results in an unattractive appearance and a riverside habitat with little value to wildlife.***

- Where property or statutory rights of way are threatened there will be occasions where bank protection works will be unavoidable to contain flood flows and to direct water away from built-up areas, particularly in urban areas.
- Such measures will only be considered as a last resort and even then, “soft” engineering techniques should be used, i.e. by encouraging plant growth, faggoting and where appropriate willow spilling.
- Where natural methods of protection are not possible, high quality materials in keeping with the character of that part of the river should be used.
- Where they do not exist, new areas of marginal vegetation can be created by the construction of gradual banks, beaches and shallows.
- In some stretches of the river it may be possible to screen unsightly areas of banking, which cannot be easily replaced, by planting suitable vegetation in the margins of the river or by the creation of a two stage channel.
- Wherever possible banks should be regraded to form gentle earth slopes which can then provide an area for planting and seeding of marginal vegetation which can give a more natural appearance to the river.
- Small groynes can be used to encourage collection and stabilisation of silt along the edges of the river, which will then colonise with marginal plant species.
- Such planting will however require formal consent from the Environment Agency, because within urban areas such as Wantage and Grove channel capacity is crucial and the narrowing of the channel could cause serious flooding problems.

The Environment Agency and the Letcombe Brook Project can provide further advice on a site-specific basis (Flood Defence Consent will be required for works to main river).

### Hedges, Fences & Boundary Improvements

There are many examples where poor fencing or other boundary treatment can have an adverse impact on the riverside environment. To make the most of their riverside setting many properties will benefit by being left open to their river frontage without any boundary treatment.

- Properties which require some form of boundary for security or privacy reasons should consider natural landscape strips or hedging. If more secure treatment is necessary then

fences or walls must be set back from the riverbank to allow for access for maintenance and for the establishment of screen planting.

- Where fence options are used, those with wide gaps/ spaces are encouraged to allow uninterrupted access to the watercourse and along the river corridor for wildlife.

## **5. Public Access**

Opportunities for increasing public access to the brook should to be taken, providing that this would not result in conflicts with other key interests e.g. the conservation value of the riverside area. Public access and uncontrolled dogs can cause disturbance to areas providing habitats for protected Species such as otters and water voles.

Some riverside areas are inaccessible to the public because they fall within private land ownership. However in many cases public access to riverside areas could be made possible and such access may be able to link up with existing rights of way.

## **6. Improving Water Quality**

In some reaches of the river it may be possible to improve the quality of the water by introducing additional oxygen to it. This can be done by creating small water features such as riffles (rough water). Detailed consultation should however take place with the Environment Agency before any feature is introduced into the watercourse, as it may affect river flows and flood control.

Where barriers to fish movement are present in a watercourse adjacent to development proposals, the design should include measures to allow for the natural movement of fish within the watercourse, such as fish passes.

## **7. Surface Water Run-off and the Avoidance of Pollution**

All development should be designed to minimise any possible pollution or escape of chemicals/ oil into the watercourse.

The following are examples of measures, which can prevent river pollution and/ or avoid flooding:

- The bunding of oil tanks.
- Oil/ chemical storage away from the river.
- Oil traps and wetlands or reed beds on surface drainage systems.
- Soakaways and infiltration for clean surface water run off.
- Permeable surfaces to replace tarmac and concrete.
- Construction of surface water storage ponds separate from the watercourse; to reduce flooding and/ or allow additional treatment of run-off.

Further information is available from the Environment Agency.

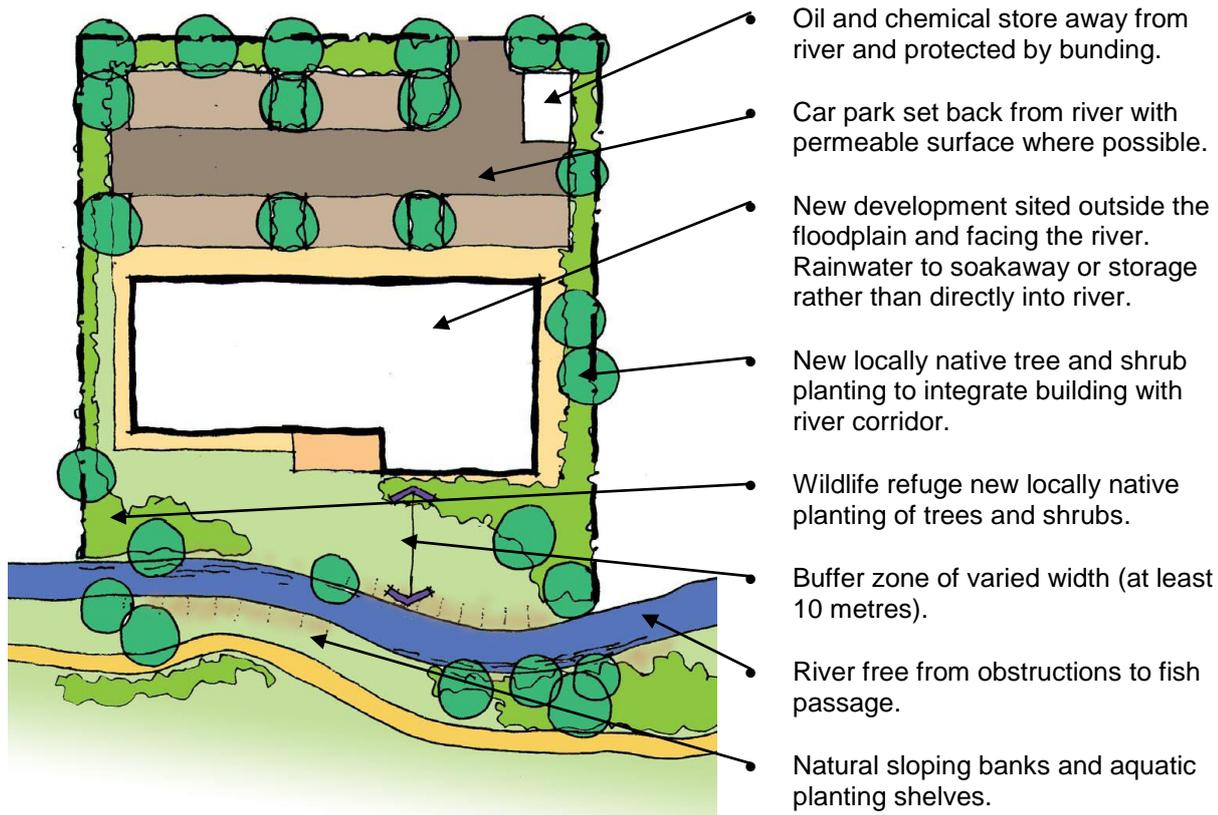
It should be noted that some of the sustainable drainage system options detailed may not be possible on some previously developed sites where there is contamination, unless remediation/ decontamination works are carried out beforehand. Further advice should be obtained from the Environment Agency.

Discharge consent is required from the Environment Agency for discharges either into the river, or into the ground. It is important that developers obtain the necessary consents prior to commencing any building work.

The Environment Agency should be consulted for advice; particularly on the measures necessary to prevent pollution of surface and groundwater.

The Environment Agency also provides free pollution prevention advice at all stages of a project from design to construction in order to avert the likelihood of costly pollution incidents in the future.

## 8. Summary of Good Practice



## 9. For Further Information Contact:

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