

NPA approves Burley stream restoration

A WETLANDS restoration project to redirect a stream in Burley has been approved by New Forest National Park Authority members, despite strong local objections.

At a planning committee meeting on Tuesday, members gave a unanimous nod to the Forestry Commission's application to replace 320m of previously straightened stream with 525m of restored meander; raise the bed level for 340m; infill a redundant drainage channel and create a gravel stock crossing at Harvest Slade Bottom.

In a report, case officer Emma MacWilliam said it was "one of a phased programme of works designed to restore and enhance the internationally important habitats of the New Forest."

But Burley parish councillor Robert Clarke told the meeting residents were not happy with the scheme and wanted an environmental impact assessment (EIA) to be carried out to determine the im-

pact of the work on downstream properties. They also claimed they had not been properly consulted.

When the plans were revealed, around 40 local people attended a public meeting in the village and raised concerns that not enough was known about the impact of the works, and claimed similar local schemes had failed. They also expressed concern about the effect on birds, fish and trees, and raised the issue of potential flooding.

At the NPA meeting, Ms MacWilliam explained that the watercourse flowed in an eroding channel through mire, wet heath, scrub and grassland habitats, and joined Mill Lawn Brook at the boundary of Turf Croft Farm.

She said it was in the New Forest Special Area of Conservation, a RAMSAR site (Wetlands of International Importance) and SSSI, and part of it lay within ancient woodland and was grazed by commoners' stock.

Ms MacWilliam said: "Between the 1850s and 1960s the area was subject to significant drainage modifications through the straightening and widening of the watercourse to improve ground conditions for forestry and grazing. This has subsequently resulted in the loss of significant areas of mire habitat.

"As a result the SSSI within the site is currently classed by Natural England as being in unfavourable condition."

The FC work would take approximately four weeks to complete.

Speaking at the meeting, Coun. Clarke said: "We've been faced with an enormous amount of paperwork. There is anxiety in the village about the scheme because of the uncertain consequences and the lack of consultation.

"The parish council recommends refusal for the reason that an environmental impact assessment of the downstream pressure needs to

be done and properly assessed."

He asked members to defer making a decision on the scheme until an EIA had been done. NPA member Richard Frampton backed his request, but planning director Steve Avery said it did not meet guidelines for projects requiring EIAs because of the scale of the works.

Ms MacWilliam's report said: "It is noted that concerns have been raised from several residents of properties within the surrounding area regarding impacts upon flooding. These relate to the consequences of reducing water flow into Mill Lawn Brook, impacts further downstream of Turf Croft Farm and consequences of reduced water flow in summer."

However, a flood risk assessment suggested there would be minimal impact on flood levels, and where any did occur they would be localised. This was in line with the objective of the scheme, which sought to

reconnect the watercourse with the adjacent floodplain and restore the mire habitat through more regularised seasonal flooding.

The proposed scheme will result in a reduction of flood risk downstream, the report continued, because of greater connectivity with the floodplain upstream and the restored meanders would store more water than the existing artificial channel.

Member Maureen Holding said: "I was concerned about what Burley Parish Council said, "[But] this will restore something very precious. I'm not technical enough to know the whole of this. I'm very grateful they are restoring something that will make a difference."

David Harrison said he understood the parish council's concerns but added: "It's amazing the way nature repairs itself so well after the works are completed."