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<b>Title of meeting:</b>	Culture, Leisure and Economic Development Decision Meeting
<b>Subject:</b>	Countryside Officers update
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	28 July 2023
<b>Report by:</b>	Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services
<b>Wards affected:</b>	All

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1. **Requested by** the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Economic Development.

2. **Purpose:** to appraise the Cabinet Member of the key work progressed by the Countryside Team over the past year.

### 3. Information Requested:

3.1. The Council's Countryside Officers have a remit to manage several key natural sites throughout the city. As identified in the Council's draft Parks Strategy [Parks Strategy draft 2022.pdf \(portsmouth.gov.uk\)](#), these sites play a central role in the provision of green and open space in the city and offer several benefits to residents of and visitors to Portsmouth. The management of the countryside sites complements the city vision, *Imagine Portsmouth 2040*, by contributing to 'green city', 'healthy city' and 'lifelong learning' objectives. There is a natural arc of countryside sites, from Mountbatten via Hilsea Lines following down the eastern side of the city, taking in Tangier and Baffins, Milton Common, Fort Cumberland and Eastney Beach. In addition there are numerous countryside 'pockets' within the predominantly urban areas of the city.

3.2. The work of the Countryside Officers balances other workstreams that the Council is undertaking to promote and protect our environment, through other portfolios such as the portfolio for Climate Change and Greening the City and work across the Council being undertaken by other departments, including: Regulatory Services (air quality), Public Health, Greening and Climate Officers. For example, Public Health are currently looking to introduce a cross cutting working group to deliver a Greening Infrastructure Delivery Plan, comprising Parks, Planning, Strategy



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(Climate), Transport, Housing and external stakeholders, which will be a sub-group of the Climate Programme Board.

3.3. The Countryside Officers sit within the Parks Service and form a diverse team with a broad range of skills, experience and specialist knowledge:

### **3.3.1. Countryside Officer (inner city)**

The officer for the inner city has a degree in botany and zoology, together with postgraduate level qualification in wildlife management and conservation. They have worked in local authorities in the north-east of England and conservation charities before coming to work for Portsmouth. They have a particular interest in enhancing and promoting biodiversity, particularly through outdoor education opportunities. The officer is a member of the Countryside Management Association.

### **3.3.2. Countryside Officer (Baffins and Milton)**

The officer for Baffins and Milton has a degree in ecology. They initially volunteered at Hilsea Lines, then worked in environmental education for an activity centre. They previously held the role of Countryside Officer for an organisation which served a local authority in Kent before coming to Portsmouth. They have a particular interest in botany and orchids together with public engagement opportunities. The officer is a member of the Countryside Management Association.

### **3.3.3. Countryside Officer (Portsdown)**

The officer for Portsdown has a degree in botany and in M.Sc in ecology and is also a Member of the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management. Prior to university they worked as an agricultural contractor and in Environmental Health. They volunteered for the jointly funded Portsdown Hill Countryside Management Project that preceded Portsmouth unitary authority arrangement. They progressed to a paid post as Project Officer for the PHCMP, then Countryside Officer following the change to Unitary status. They have a specialist interest in restoring biodiversity to a wider environment.

### **3.3.4. Countryside Officer (Hilsea Lines)**

The officer for Hilsea Lines is educated to university and postgraduate level. They initially worked for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (now



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[TCV | The Conservation Volunteers](#)) and they are a specialist in volunteer training. They have worked as a Countryside Officer at local authorities in Shropshire and Fareham, before coming to Portsmouth. The officer is based at Hilsea but covers other sites such as Fort Cumberland.

3.4. The work of the Countryside team can be subdivided into three workstreams:

- 3.4.1. Site Biodiversity
- 3.4.2. Volunteer Engagement
- 3.4.3. Outreach and education opportunities.

### **3.5. Site Biodiversity**

Several themes emerge from an exploration of the biodiversity management for all the sites. The restoration of species rich grassland is important for biodiversity outcomes, together with light penetration and a protection and development of the reedbed wetlands environment. To allow wildlife to move freely, habitat connection is key together with supporting local species and provenance. The work undertaken to improve the sites also enhances the visitor experience. Spending time in the city's parks and open spaces will benefit the health and wellbeing of visitors of all ages and abilities.

3.5.1. **Portsdown Hill** is of considerable ecological significance, due to its calcareous (chalk) grassland, with 55 hectares of the Council managed land designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The non SSSI part of the site is also managed sympathetically to wildlife to complement and extend the wildlife of the SSSI. Calcareous grassland is a Priority Habitat recognised by the Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). There are Priority Habitats both on and off the SSSI, bringing visual and biological diversity to the area. It is unusual to have a site of such rich biodiversity directly adjacent to an urban area which includes numerous species of butterfly, moth, ladybird, grasshopper, cricket, beetle, bee, wasp, fungi and spider, together with amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals and hundreds of flowering plants.

3.5.2. The Countryside Officer implements a management plan to maintain the calcareous grassland. This includes undertaking a balance of scrub control to maintain the biodiversity of the grassland habitat, but also make the site more accessible for visitors. The scrub control and limited mowing operations also generate organic material which is incorporated into tree planting areas. For



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scrub control, the aim is to mimic grazing, by undertaking 'conservation grazing' where possible, borrowing livestock.

- 3.5.3. Some areas of heavily mown grassland have been removed from the committed mowing regime to allow it to flower into the summer. This benefits pollinators and the many invertebrates that are associated with taller grass communities. In the autumn the grass is cut and cleared to maintain botanical diversity by preventing the build up of a thatch of vegetation and excessive soil nutrients that encourage dominant grasses. Repeated annual clearance reduces soil fertility and thus increases the number of plant species. A mosaic of grassland and scrub habitats is achieved to maximise the variety of light and moisture regimes. An example of biological enrichment is the re-emergence of the Lizard Orchid, an endangered species (listed as a Schedule 8 species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act).
- 3.5.4. A species rich grassland, such as that found at Portsdown, has many deep rooted perennial plants and is a good sequester of carbon.<sup>1 2</sup> The Countryside Officer at Portsdown has also undertaken the control of invasive species, such as cotoneaster and holm oak as such species prevent native plants from flourishing and their associated insects are lost as a result.
- 3.5.5. Tree and hedge planting has also been undertaken, as part of an integrated and considered approach to connect habitats. For example, scrub plants in grassland have been relocated to form hedges. When increasing biodiversity, a regenerative approach has been undertaken, by using seed from elsewhere on the Hill. Local plant provenance is important, as it maintains local ecotypes adapted to the area which the insects are adapted to feeding on. This keeps the genetic 'local' code (standardising will weaken the existing flora).
- 3.5.6. The Countryside Officer, with volunteers and ecological consultants, undertakes regular monitoring to record wildlife. This includes butterfly transects from April to September which is reported to the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme<sup>3</sup> and a bumblebee transect from March to September. The officers also use iRecord<sup>4</sup> for plant species which feeds into a national database which is verified by relevant experts.

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<sup>1</sup> [Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat 2021 - NERR094 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Carbon-Storage-and-Sequestration-by-Habitat-2021)

<sup>2</sup> [Grassland | The Wildlife Trusts](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Welcome to the UKBMS | UKBMS](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Home | iRecord](#)



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- 3.5.7. Continued engagement is also undertaken by the Countryside Officer with other agencies, for the purpose of protecting the rich biodiversity of the site. This includes work with utility companies to mitigate damage associated with large infrastructure projects down to vegetation clearance near power cables. It is important to consider the Hill as a geographical unit and protect the entirety of the site and the Council have a legal requirement to protect the SSSI. The site benefits from an Environmental Stewardship agreement, for arable reversion to species rich grassland in the Top Field and other Council sites including Farlington Triangle, Fort Cumberland and Milton Common. The SSSI and adjacent sites are in a Countryside Stewardship agreement. Other successful grant applications have been made for equipment and projects.
- 3.5.8. **Baffins Pond** site comprises both amenity close cropped grass (some exempt from cutting October to March for the benefit of overwintering Brent Geese) together with wild areas surrounding the pond comprising reedbeds, herbaceous plants and trees, a small orchard, secondary woodland fragments and a wild meadow. The marginal habitat of reedbed and marsh surrounding the pond supports a rich diversity of flora and fauna at the site and planned management is undertaken to maintain and improve this. Whips (young trees) have been planted to the east of the wildflower meadow and form part of the management plan. Consideration is underway for further areas of wildflower meadow to be created in balance with the need for sports and recreation amenity grassland. Staggs Wood comprises secondary deciduous woodland and contains a strong population of ramsons and Spanish bluebells, the bluebells being a non-native species. Scrub across the site provides valuable nesting ground for bird species. Priority species at the site include both brent geese and three types of pipistrelle bat.
- 3.5.9. The pond itself is a delicate ecosystem; as a closed water source, high nutrients in the water can be fatal to dogs, fish and waterfowl. This is because some algae species promoted by the high nutrient are toxic, not the nutrients themselves. The high level of nutrient is exacerbated by artificial feeding of the waterfowl. The lack of inflow means the pond is prone to low oxygen levels, which can also cause death of waterfowl. The Countryside Officer continues to maintain the measures in place to mitigate the risks to the pond ecosystem. This includes artificial aeration systems together with maintenance of the reedbeds which are a natural bioremediation for the nutrient levels.
- 3.5.10. The Countryside Officer is seeking to improve the quality of the wetlands; the reedbeds, sedges and grasses around the pond for the benefit of the habitat



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structure which promote species including the Marsh Marigold and Water Mint. This also makes the pond more aesthetically pleasing.

- 3.5.11. For the wildflower meadow, work is underway to reduce the nutrient rich grassland (as with the other sites). The first year of an annual cut (reduced regime) saw a reduction in tussock grass with some wildflowers starting to come through and should see a year-on-year improvement.
- 3.5.12. **Milton Common** comprises rough grassland, amenity grassland, scrubland and wetland/reedbeds and includes a good diversity of species. There are over 140 bird species (including transient visitors), over 22 species of butterfly and many invertebrates including types of wasp, damselfly, grasshopper and cricket and hundreds of moths. Mammals at the site include hedgehog, shrews, voles, foxes, rabbits and bats. The site has designation as a Site of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC). The Countryside Officer undertakes various activities to manage the area for the promotion of biodiversity outcomes. This includes activities such as the spread of the cutting times of the grassland, to promote the development of a diversity of grass species which has included bee orchids in the past. Grassland is not cut in May or June, to minimise disturbance to nesting birds. Scrubland is also managed to produce a varied environment, to appeal to a broad range of species.
- 3.5.13. Scrubland presents a limited habitat and therefore the correct proportion of scrub is important to enable wildlife to thrive. Currently the Common presents around 44% scrub and the management plan indicates to reduce this to 20%. Too much scrub also forces the wildlife closer to the urban area. Where brambles have been reduced and the seed bed recovered, benefits have included the Bee Orchid, Tufted Vetch and Wild Marjoram.
- 3.5.14. The site was used in the 1960s as a municipal refuse site and as such there are some exposed concrete blocks. By managing these and bringing them together in piles, they support reptiles, amphibians and small mammals.
- 3.5.15. The site also contains reedbeds which provide habitat to both aquatic invertebrates and breeding and roosting sites for several birds. The boundary reedbeds at the pond helps protect the pond environment and the reedbeds hold the life of the pond, by providing habitat for nesting birds and insects. As a previous landfill site, the reedbeds also provide bioremediation by extracting nitrates and filtering out heavy metals that could have been leaching from the landfill.



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- 3.5.16. **Hilsea Lines** has incredibly rich ecology for an urban area, with high species numbers for plants, birds, butterflies, flies, wasps, bees and ants, moths, dragonflies and damselflies. An added dimension is brought to the site in that it is a Scheduled Monument and Conservation Area, listed with Historic England, having been constructed originally in the sixteenth century to guard the crossing at Ports Creek, the current lines being finished in 1871.<sup>5</sup>
- 3.5.17. The Lines comprise a mosaic of habitats: woodland, species rich grassland, wildflower meadow, and wet environments (Hilsea Moat and Ports Creek). The overall objective of the management of the site is to improve and manage the ecological diversity. The site contains a population of White Letter Hairstreak butterflies which feed on the Elm trees. However, the trees are infected with Dutch Elm disease and die when they get older. By introducing a phased coppice regime, a proportion of the Elm is retained for use by the butterfly. The site is also managed for Ash dieback, which is a well-known concern at many wooded sites in the south-east. The management of Ash dieback and other invasive non-native species is a significant cost to the UK public sector.<sup>6</sup>
- 3.5.18. The meadows at Hilsea Lines were previously grazed. These are now managed by an annual cut and collect which lowers the nutrient level allowing more of the less invasive meadow species to grow. In recent years this natural regeneration has led to hundreds of Common Spotted Orchids and has thinned out the common grasses for a broader biodiverse meadow. Areas of natural grassland have an important role to play in carbon capture as indicated above regarding other sites.
- 3.5.19. Over 7 kilometres of pathways have been completed, with a hardcore surfacing which has made the pathways more level and accessible. This has directed users towards the main path and vegetation has started to grow in from the edges, making the pathways much more aesthetically pleasing. The tree line has also been thinned, which has allowed more light through, which, together with the development of an under-canopy of hazel trees and field maple, has allowed more insects and birds to thrive. Without the management regime, the woodland floor becomes dominated by ivy. Lighter pathways also increase the sense of safety for visitors.

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<sup>5</sup> [Hilsea Lines, Non Civil Parish - 1001861 | Historic England](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Japanese knotweed and other invasive species may be costing UK £4bn a year | Invasive species | The Guardian](#)



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- 3.5.20. The Countryside Officer and volunteer team have also developed habitat piles which provide refuge for the beetle population. The site management is also considering work to expand the reedbeds, which are both a good species habitat and provide oxygen to the water.
- 3.5.21. The site has seen considerable littering improvement following the introduction of wire mesh bins.
- 3.5.22. The **inner city** Countryside Officer seeks to prioritise wildlife improvement works for biodiversity outcomes at Portsmouth City Council parks and open spaces within the predominantly urban areas. The purpose is to continue to connect habitats to allow wildlife to move between inner city green pockets. The below table summarises recent biodiversity projects undertaken at city areas:

Location	Actions
Stamshaw Park	Areas identified for no mow, replacement of damaged trees.
White Cloud Park	Areas identified for no mow, scrub planting, hedge planting.
Gatcombe Park	Areas identified for hedgerow, native wildflower planting and seeding, scrub planting.
Tipner Coastal Walkway, Mountbatten	Revised maintenance management plan (to allow for native planting), addition of scrub, removal of dense nettles to create wildflower friendly areas.
Alexandra Park	Areas identified for hedgerow. Creation of wildflower corridor of no mow area along verge.
Highgrove open space, Drayton	90 metres of hedgerow and wildflowers planted, working collaboratively with the Landscape Architect team.
Bridge Road, Hilsea	Areas identified for no mow, scrub planting.
Victoria Park	Working with the project team to advise on biodiversity enhancement. Butterfly transect survey established.
Orchard Park	Hedgerow planting.
Fratton Bridge	Planting of native cherry tree and hedgerow (with art commission and interpretation board).
Cosham Library garden	Proposal for planting of hedgerow, wildflowers, no mow area (with activities for children).





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### **3.6. Engagement of volunteers**

- 3.6.1. Volunteers are an essential part of the service for many of the sites, contributing significantly to the site management outcome in return for physical and mental wellbeing benefits and an opportunity to focus their interest in nature. The total recorded volunteer hours for the Countryside team for year 2022/2023 is 10,808 hours, which equates to 5.6 full time equivalent over the year.
- 3.6.2. Volunteers bring skills, experience and enthusiasm and develop a sense of community ownership with the site through the operation of a co-production working model.
- 3.6.3. At **Hilsea Lines**, there are 3 types of volunteer groups engaged:
- 3.6.3.1. Volunteer work party: Several individuals have been engaged in this group for many years. They undertake tasks at the direction of the Countryside Officer, including fencing, pruning, clearing and pathway construction. This has provided opportunities to both bring back into use previous skills gained during employment, together with learning new skills. The volunteers themselves enjoy being out in the fresh air working together, making a difference, exploring their interest in nature and for the most part, are appreciated by the public. Contractors are brought in on occasion to undertake tasks, where this is proportionate to the risk level.
- 3.6.3.2. Volunteers from Interaction: Portsmouth Interaction ([Portsmouth Interaction - BH Live Active](#)) forms part of the BH Live offer to support those experiencing poor mental health. Hilsea Lines supports a group of conservation volunteers via Interaction referral. Activities undertaken include litter picking, maintenance of way markers and low level strimming, thereby building confidence and new skills.
- 3.6.3.3. Volunteer wardens: Over the years the Countryside Officer has built up a relationship with several interested persons local to the area. These individuals have taken on a volunteer warden responsibility, which includes litter picking and reporting any concerns or issues identified on site to the Countryside Officer.



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- 3.6.4. The **inner city** Countryside Officer is developing a core city wide volunteer group. Many of the biodiversity projects they have undertaken have involved volunteers, including the Tipner Coastal Walkway, the Victoria Park butterfly transect, working with the Orchard Park community group and the Cosham Library community. The officer has also been supporting the Friends of Old Portsmouth Association by advising and assisting with small conservation projects including the correct native planting requirements for raised planters in the area. Work has also been undertaken with the Portsmouth Climate Action group of community volunteers, at Marine Court green space. Such projects are working well on a co-production model, increasing the sense of community ownership and pride in local place.
- 3.6.5. There are two distinct groups of volunteers at **Portsmouthdown**:
- 3.6.5.1. Volunteer work party attends the hill every week and undertakes tasks such as pruning, litter collection, fence construction and repair and planting. There is a subgroup of this group which comprises mostly retirees, and conservation students from the agricultural college. The subgroup take on tasks in their own time as 'volunteer operatives' to enable them to follow larger tasks through to completion.
- 3.6.5.2. The volunteers at Portsmouthdown also have the opportunity to be engaged with the outreach programme via Friends of Portsmouthdown Hill. This has included 'thank you' events including outings to other managed sites such as the Slindon Estate.
- 3.6.6. The volunteer programme at **Milton Common** includes scrub clearance in the winter and grassland management in the summer. There is also activity to rake and pile small sections of the chalk bund (resulting from the former landfill site), which, being calcareous, can support a diversity of species.
- 3.6.7. Baffins Pond Association is a self-run organisation which has been promoting and protecting the area for several years. The Countryside Officer for **Baffins** has started a volunteer group which complements this through a conservation volunteers group. The winter programme for the volunteers comprises wetlands and meadow clearance, with summer activities including sweeping and edging. The conservation volunteers for Milton and Baffins mostly comprise retirees and individuals working part time, together with shift workers. Corporate volunteer days have also been held at these sites.



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### **3.7. Outreach and education opportunities**

- 3.7.1. Outreach and education can include the provision of learning opportunities for people of all ages either through activities, formal talks or other forms of promotion and publicity. The outdoor environment provides an ideal education setting and many local schools have been engaged with the service, together with education partners outside the school setting such as the museums and libraries of the city.
- 3.7.2. The Countryside Officer for **Portsdown** is ex-officio on the committee for Friends of Portsdown Hill<sup>7</sup>. There is a regular programme run by FoPH to promote the care and enjoyment of the site, which includes walks and events in the summer months and visiting speakers for talks in the winter months. Undertakings by FoPH include completing a historical walk guide and interpretation boards.
- 3.7.3. The officer has also undertaken talks to other external groups including the Portsmouth Beekeepers, local gardening groups and Inner Wheel Club. Outreach for younger audiences has included bughunts, school visits and working with Cumberland House.
- 3.7.4. **Hilsea Lines** provides several education opportunities. The site offers two week placements to students from Sparshott College which forms part of their agricultural course. It also provides work placements to year 10 students. Several volunteers (not students) have moved into job roles with the Council's Grounds Maintenance service.
- 3.7.5. The Lines also facilitates a Forest School environment together with a dipping pond (both facilities having been constructed by the volunteers). There are woodland trails available and the site is accessible by radar key activated gates if required.
- 3.7.6. At weekends and during holiday periods, activities are also run for family groups. The Countryside Officer is currently engaged in a project to convert one of the casemates into an education room which will enable the expansion of the educational opportunities on offer.
- 3.7.7. Activities at Hilsea, such as tree planting, have included invitations to the local community to take part.

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<sup>7</sup> [Friends of Portsdown Hill : Home](#)



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- 3.7.8. The Countryside Officer for the Lines offers bespoke walks and talks when requested. This has included offers for Sustrans (Home - Sustrans.org.uk), the military academy, business away days and students. The Officer has also promoted the Lines on BBC Radio Solent.
- 3.7.9. The **inner city** Countryside Officer has undertaken several projects with local schools. The project at Peronne Road Hilsea is engaging with Highbury Primary School to plant wildflower seed together after collecting it at Hilsea Lines. Wildflower planting at Long Curtain Moat was undertaken with the local school to the area, St. Jude's Primary. Craneswater School were engaged to provide artwork for the Canoe Lake Interpretation Board which focuses on educating the local community and visitors about the swan diet. The café were also engaged in this project together with Cumberland House and the Mobile Library, and a self-led children's trail is being developed for the summer.
- 3.7.10. The inner city Countryside Officer has developed children's activities as part of community outreach events. This has included working collaboratively with the Library Service at last year's Summer Reading Challenge event to promote pollination through children's activities and craft. A further event was held in Victoria Park reading the children's book '*Tidy*' by Emily Gravett and holding a subsequent scavenger hunt. A '*Love Our Pollinators*' event was held in conjunction with Cumberland House Museum where numerous stalls included a bee workshop, the presence of the local beekeepers' association and children had the opportunity to create seed bombs.
- 3.7.11. Further collaboration with Cumberland House Museum has included a '*Coastal Celebration*' event, which brought together groups including Hampshire Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Friends of Langstone Harbour, Final Straw and Solent Bird Aware. This included talks and workshops for families and those with a coastal interest with the aim of bringing more awareness of the coastal environment.
- 3.7.12. Outreach by the inner city Countryside Officer has also included talks to Friends of Portsdown Hill and RSPB Portsmouth about the role of the Countryside Officer and the rationale behind particular projects. The officer also set up and maintains a social media presence on Instagram, Nature of Portsmouth <https://www.instagram.com/natureofportsmouth/> .
- 3.7.13. The Countryside Officer for **Baffins** and **Milton** has given talks and promotional material to organisations including RSPB Portsmouth, Milton



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Neighbourhood Forum and Friends of Portsdown Hill. They have also been present at local events including Milton Picnic on the Green (organised by the Forum) which comprised a community event where the officer had a stall and collaborated with Cumberland House for material. Similarly, the officer has had a stall at Baffins Fun Day community event (organised by Baffins Pond Association).

- 3.7.14. Baffins Pond site also includes an artificial pond for dipping and education purposes. Reconstruction of this pond was completed in spring 2023 with a view to introducing flora at a future point.

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Signed by  
**Stephen Baily**  
**Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services**

**Appendices:** None

**Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location