

Earley Environmental Group

Proposal for a Lower Earley Local Nature Reserve

January 2021

Introduction

The Earley Environmental Group (EEG) has a membership of around 300 volunteers and supporters. The objectives of the Group include:

- to undertake investigations and practical works to conserve and improve the environment within the Civil Parish of Earley; and
- to promote education and interest in natural history, the environment and the activities of the Group.

The Group has become increasingly concerned that there are important areas of natural green space within Earley that urgently need additional protection against urban development. These areas include a long-standing corridor of woodland and natural green space within Lower Earley that runs adjacent to Lower Earley Way and the River Loddon. The EEG proposes that, to give this corridor the protection it deserves, this area should be declared a Local Nature Reserve (LNR).

The Proposal

The Lower Earley Local Nature Reserve (LELNR) would extend north-eastwards from The Grove at Shinfield Road to Loddon Bridge at Wokingham Road. It is bounded to the north by the urban area of Lower Earley and to the south by the M4 motorway and the River Loddon.

The proposed LELNR covers a mixture of established woodland, natural green space, open fields and recreation areas. It provides a continuous wildlife habitat and green route for many birds, animals and insects, and is used for recreation and enjoyment by many local residents. It also forms an important natural barrier between Earley and the M4 motorway.

Boundary Map

The Boundary Map below shows the area to be considered for the proposed LELNR. The exact boundary would be subject to a detailed survey of land ownership and consultation. The primary areas for consideration are shown as green hatched and brown dotted areas of land that lie to the north of Lower Earley Way and the River Loddon. This covers areas collectively known as 'Lower Earley Woods and Meadows' extending between Pearmans' Copse and Loddon Bridge and which are already being managed and protected as a wildlife corridor by Wokingham Borough Council (WBC). It also includes Pearman's Copse, hatched orange, which is in neighbouring Shinfield and is already designated as a Local Nature Reserve.

It is understood that WBC owns much of the land covered by the primary proposal. There are, however, two sections of land, shown dotted brown, which are believed to be privately owned. These are at Swallows Meadow, west of Meldreth Way, and land located between Barn Croft Drive and Paddick Drive. These important central sections of the proposed LNR need protection from further urban development. If LNR status cannot be designated at these locations through negotiation with the landowners, public access could be retained by establishing broad strips of public open space across the land and designating them as Green Corridor or Local Green Space.

Other areas of land, shown as crossed pale yellow, could also be included in the LNR to form a more comprehensive Local Nature Reserve. These include woodland at Danehill, open green space south of Lower Earley Way and green areas adjacent to Hatch Farm Way.

Why Lower Earley?

It is becoming increasingly clear how important access to natural open space has become for local communities, especially in an urban area such as Lower Earley. The recent Covid-19 Lockdowns have demonstrated how contact with nature is vital for wellbeing and quality of life, with many people in Lower Earley making more use of their local green space. Much of Lower Earley's available open space is, however, a patchwork of small parks, woodland, playing fields, meadow land and LNR, with varying levels of protection. With further urban development already taking place to the south of the M4 and the possibility of new development proposals within the existing urban area, Lower Earley's green spaces and wildlife need the best protection available.

The EEG's proposal would provide Lower Earley with a continuous corridor of protected natural green space along its urban fringe, combining the LNR in Shinfield at Pearman's Copse with other local authority park and woodland and possibly with privately owned sections of green space. The LELNR would preserve the wildlife corridor extending from The Grove to Loddon Bridge and beyond to Dinton Pastures. It would preserve habitats for wild mammals, birds and insects, and flora, and ensure that lengthy walking routes and local play areas are retained.

Most importantly, such a declaration would help to protect the whole green corridor from further urban development and maintain the important green barrier between the Lower Earley built-up area and the M4/Lower Earley Way corridor. In addition, the Borough Council would be giving a very clear signal to the local community that it is committed to nature conservation in Lower Earley and to meeting its Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP)¹ and sustainable development targets.

¹ Wokingham Borough Biodiversity Action Plan 2012-2024; Wokingham Borough Council

Why an LNR?

LNRs are places to play, learn and explore, and can deliver significant physical and mental health benefits. They are typically close to where people live and can be reached on foot. Not only do LNRs support and protect habitats and species, but they allow people to get close to nature and appreciate the contribution it makes to their quality of life. Natural England's document LN301² gives guidance on selecting and declaring a LNR. It can be downloaded from the following link:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140605112608/http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/31039>

The guidance document states that LNRs are covered by Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt). Ideally, they should form part of a network of LNRs and other accessible green spaces that help to meet the ANGSt standard, which seeks a minimum of 1ha of LNR per 1,000 head of population. The existing LNRs at Maiden Erlegh Lake and Pearman's Copse in Earley and Shinfield, respectively, cover 17.04ha and the 2011 census gives Earley's population as 30,868. On this basis, the current allocation of LNR for Earley is 0.55ha per 1,000 head of population; around half the recommended minimum.

Whilst there are other green areas available in Earley, such as at Thames Valley Park to the north, there is insufficient accessible allocation of LNR in the Lower Earley urban area. This proposal would fill the gap in the south of Earley; protecting the green space currently available to the public and enhancing the network of LNR's throughout the area in general, as sought by Natural England.

LNR status as 'urban fringe' has already been declared for Pearman's Copse. Extending this status along the entire length of the proposed LELNR would provide the level of status needed to protect the area from further urban development and enable local biodiversity to thrive.

What are the Benefits?

By declaring the entire length of the proposal as a LNR, the local authority will be providing many benefits for local people and wildlife. The LELNR will:

- improve local quality of life, health and wellbeing;
- increase people's awareness and enjoyment of the natural environment within walking distance of their homes;
- protect wildlife habitats and natural features close to the urban area;
- provide an environment for people to learn about and study nature, including local schools and environment groups;
- help to build relationships with national and local nature conservation organisations;
- preserve links with the local community's past;

² Local Nature Reserves in England: A guide to their selection and declaration; Natural England; NE301

- provide a great opportunity for people to become involved in managing their local environment;
- offer a positive use for land which would otherwise be under the threat of urban development; and
- make it possible to apply byelaws which can help in protecting and managing the site.

In the spirit of Wokingham Borough Council's 2020 Sustainable Environment Strategy³, the LELNR will contribute towards the Borough's sustainable environmental policies aimed at improving the quality of life by respecting the environment and protecting it from the impact of development and growth; reducing the increasing pressure on limited natural resources and on local biodiversity.

Why Now?

It has become increasingly clear in current times that; firstly, we must take much better care of our natural environment, especially its biodiversity; and secondly, recent lockdowns have shown that there is an increasing demand from the public for access to wildlife rich land and open space within walking distance of their homes. In addition, there are growing pressures on local authorities to lead the way in taking better care of the environment. With threats of development and the increasing need to sustain environmental assets, there is a need to act now in providing the clear and consistent powers of protection that will be gained under LNR powers.

Meeting the Criteria for an LNR

LN301 describes a Local Nature Reserve as a protected area of land designated by a local authority because of its local special natural interest and, where possible, educational and community value. Natural England believes LNRs should be:

- of high value locally for environmental education and/or research;
- of high natural interest locally;
- of reasonable natural interest and of high value locally for enjoyment of nature by the public.

Natural England recommends that LNRs should be:

- greater than 2ha in size; and
- capable of being managed with the conservation of nature and the maintenance of special opportunities for study, research or enjoyment of nature as the main concern.

Natural England's guidance provides a checklist of information that would be helpful for consultation with it. This includes:

- a boundary map;
- details of site ownership;

³ Sustainable Environment Strategy 2010-2020, Wokingham Borough Council

- a description of the habitats and species of interest based on a full survey of habitat types;
- a description of the value of the site's main natural and physical features;
- a description of the value of the site to schools (where appropriate), and the type and scale of current use;
- A description of the value of the site as a place in which local people can enjoy contact with wildlife (where appropriate); and
- Outline management policies/objectives/prescriptions and costs, including access.

Whilst the guidance states that there is no statutory requirement to submit this level of detail, the case would be better supported if the criteria were shown to be met in as many ways as possible. In this respect, the area of the proposed LELNR is of high value locally both in terms of community and educational value. It is larger than 2ha in size and much of the area is already being managed by the local authority for the purposes of nature conservation and enjoyment by the public. Work would need to be undertaken by the WBC to negotiate with landowners and carry out surveys of habitats and species of interest, as well as to extend the existing management plans for Pearman's Copse and Lower Earley Woods and Meadows to cover the new LNR.

Assistance from the EEG

The Earley Environmental Group could potentially assist with surveys of wildflowers, trees, butterflies and moths; assist with public engagement to support the designation; assist with the development of a management plan and possibly assist with practical conservation in the future.

Declaring the Local Nature Reserve

It is Earley Environmental Group's belief that declaring a new (expanded) 'urban fringe' Local Nature Reserve at Lower Earley will provide multiple environmental, leisure, health and educational benefits to the area's local residents. It will change how residents living near this land perceive and make use of their local green space; increasing their environmental knowledge, ecological involvement, love for nature and their desire to protect it. It will also support the Borough Council's environmental and sustainability policies and goals and fit well with the Council's policies for managing the biodiversity, climatic and economic benefits of its land.

Declaring the LELNR will draw attention to the land's nature conservation and recreational value and provide a positive use for land that might otherwise be perceived as available for development. Designation of this area as a Local Nature Reserve is a relatively straight forward process and the required steps for designation are detailed in Natural England's guidance document NE301 referenced above. We believe that the criteria for declaring the Lower Earley Local Nature Reserve can be met and urge Wokingham Borough Council to take this proposal forward with immediacy.

Earley Environmental Group Lower Earley Local Nature Reserve Outline Proposal Boundary Map

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