East of the Borough Area Action Plan biodiversity issues paper

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Introduction

This paper reviews evidence around the biodiversity constraints and opportunities in the East of the Borough Area Action Plan (AAP) area, and makes recommendations as to how the AAP could address these.

Key sources

The main sources of evidence used in this paper are:

Tower Hamlets Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2019-24

Tower Hamlets Local Plan 2031 Policies Map

Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in Tower Hamlets

Lee Valley Regional Park Biodiversity Action Plan 2019-2029

Species and habitat data from Greenspace Information for Greater London

Estuary Edges

Designated sites

There are no statutory nature conservation sites in or near the AAP area.

There are three non-statutory Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) within the AAP area: the River Thames & Bow Creek, the Limehouse Cut and East India Dock Basin.

River Thames and Bow Creek

Bow Creek is the mouth of the River Lea, which forms the eastern boundary of the AAP area joins the Thames at its south-east corner. It is part of a large, cross-borough Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation covering the whole of the Thames and its tidal tributaries. It is a tidal river, with significant areas of intertidal mud exposed at low tide, but the upper intertidal zone is restricted by vertical flood walls. Water quality is impacted by sewer misconnections further up the Lea. The creek nevertheless supports populations of fish including European Eel. The intertidal mud supports locally significant populations of waterfowl and wading birds, particularly wintering Teal and Redshank. Its ecology could be enhanced by creating habitat in the upper intertidal zone as terraces or narrow strips of planters on the river walls, as has been done along the west side of London City Island.

The River Thames within the AAP area has very little exposed foreshore even at low tide, with almost the whole intertidal zone replaced by vertical walls. Strong currents

make it much more difficult to undertake habitat enhancements on the river walls of the Thames than it would be in Bow Creek.

Limehouse Cut

The Limehouse Cut crosses the north of the AAP area before connecting to the River Lea at Bow Locks. It is part of a large, cross-borough Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation covering the whole canal system in London. The Cut supports populations of fish and aquatic invertebrates, and small numbers of common water birds. It has vertical walls on both sides, and is tightly constrained by built development with little room for wildlife habitat alongside the canal. The tow-path is very narrow. Floating rafts with wetland vegetation have been installed in a few places on the off-side (away from the tow-path) within the AAP area. There is scope for much more of this, which provides habitat for fish, invertebrates and birds. This also creates a greener view for people using the tow-path than the existing bare concrete or steel walls.

East India Dock Basin

East India Dock Basin is the southern edge of the AAP area. The former dock basin was landscaped as a nature reserve by the London Docklands Development Corporation in the 1990s. It is a Site of Borough Grade 1 Importance for Nature Reserve, and probably the most important site for water birds in the borough. In particular, 200 or more Teal are present during the winter, moving between the basin and Bow Creek. The reed bed along the northern edge of the basin is the largest in the borough. Terrestrial habitats include dense scrub along the north and eastern edges of the site, meadows and woodland. The basin has silted up over the last 25 years, so that there is little open water for much of the monthly tidal cycle. The resulting mud is good for Teal, but the diversity of water birds has fallen in recent years, as there is not sufficient depth of water for diving ducks and grebes, and terns no longer nest on the rafts provided for them, as these are often aground rather than floating. The mud is also less aesthetically attractive than open water to most human visitors to the site. De-silting the basin, along with measures to prevent future siltation, is a high priority.

Habitats

In addition to the habitats mentioned in the section on designated sites above, the most important habitat within the AAP area id open mosaic habitat on previously developed land (OMH), a priority habitat in England. This is the typical habitat of brownfield land, which supports uncommon invertebrates and birds such as Black Redstart. There is one sizeable area of OMH in the AAP area on the site of the former Leven Road Gas Works, though this habitat is of poor quality. It is soon to be redeveloped, with suitable mitigation and biodiversity net gain secured. There are

other small pockets of OMH scattered throughout the AAP area, all on sites which are likely to be redeveloped. This is not an easy habitat to include in amenity landscaping, so replacement habitat is most easily provided on biodiverse green roofs.

There are several small open spaces within the AAP area. These consist largely of amenity grassland with scattered trees and are generally of very limited biodiversity value. Recent enhancement projects have improved habitats at Langdon Park and Jolly's Green. There is scope for further significant enhancements in most of the open spaces.

Species

Most of the priority species listed in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan are likely to occur within the AAP area, and actions to benefit them could be included in new development. The following are species that are of particular importance within the AAP area compared with some other parts of the borough.

Bats

Bow Creek is known to be important for foraging and commuting bats. The creation of insect-rich habitats, such as meadows and treelines, alongside the creek will benefit bats. Much of Bow Creek is currently unlit at night, due to low-intensity land uses and lack of public access. It is important that external lighting in Creekside developments is designed in such a way to avoid light spill onto the creek or adjacent treelines.

Otter

Otters are present in the higher reaches of the River Lea, and there have been recent unconfirmed records in Bow Creek within the AAP area. One of the factors likely to limit the spread of Otters into the lower Lea is the lack of suitable breeding sites, due to the hard, vertical river walls. Otters require sites with little human disturbance, and some means to allow them to get up the river wall to reach holts above the spring high tide line. Such sites may be hard to find, but opportunities to create artificial otter holts should be sought.

Black Redstart

Black Redstarts have been found nesting among the small, low-intensity industrial sites along the Limehouse Cut and Bow Creek. The likely presence of this protected species needs to be taken into account in ecological assessments of development

sites. Biodiverse roofs and associated nest boxes will provide suitable habitat to mitigate losses.

House Martin

House Martins are not currently known to breed within the AAP area. However, Bow Creek and East India Dock Basin provide potential sources of mud for nest building, and they nest on Thames-side buildings further west in the borough. Provision of artificial nests in suitable places on new buildings might attract House Martins to nest.

Kingfisher

Kingfishers are seen regularly along the water courses in winter, but do not breed in the area. Lack of suitable steep banks with soft substrate for burrowing is probably the main factor preventing nesting. Opportunities should be sought to install artificial Kingfisher nests in river and canal walls in suitable locations.

Sand Martin

Small numbers of Sand Martins nest in drainage holes in the walls of the Limehouse Cut and possibly Bow Creek. Provision of additional nest sites, either in the walls of the waterways as for Kingfishers or as sand martin tower boxes, would be valuable to increase the population.

Black Poplar

The Black Poplar is Britain’s rarest native timber tree. It was once so numerous on the Thames marshes in this area that it gave Poplar district its name. Its conservation is now entirely dependent on planting as, for a number of reasons, it no longer reproduces naturally in Britain. It is a large tree requiring plenty of space. If suitable locations can be found within developments, planting Black Poplars should be considered.

Jersey Cudweed

Jersey Cudweed is protected under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Until recently it was known to survive in only one UK site, in Norfolk. In recent years it has appeared in numerous places, including east London. There is a sizeable colony within the AAP area, alongside Silvocea Way, and it could occur elsewhere in the AAP area. It is an inconspicuous plant, easily overlooked if not specifically searched for, and grows on bare ground or cracks in paving. While it is clearly no longer the great rarity it was, the protection still applies. It should therefore be specifically searched for as part of the ecological impact assessment of

development. If found, collecting seed and sowing on biodiverse roofs is likely to be the appropriate mitigation.

Access to nature

There is an Area of Deficiency in access to nature (AoD) across the middle of the AAP area. AoDs are defined as areas more than one kilometre walking distance from an accessible wildlife site of at least borough importance. Sites such as waterways are considered to provide sufficient access to nature to remove AoDs only if the accessible waterside has some natural habitat.

More generally, access not nature across the AAP area is poor, other than at East India Dock Basin. Bow Creek is largely inaccessible, and the Limehouse Cut provides little real experience of nature, being dominated by hard, vertical banks.

Opportunities should be taken to reduce or eliminate the AoD by providing new or newly accessible Sites of Borough Importance. Where that is not possible, the aim should be provide enhancements which alleviate the deficiency by providing some access to nature, even if they don't remove part of the AoD.

The recent re-landscaping of Bartlett Park, just west of the AAP area, might remove part of the AoD within the AAP area, as it could meet the criteria for a Site of Borough Importance. Probably the only realistic opportunity to remove the eastern part of the AoD would be to provide access to Bow Creek with natural greenspace beside it. This type of landscaping is proposed in a number of consented Creekside developments within the AAP. A riverside path with natural greenspace along the length of the eastern boundary of the AAP should be a key aim of the AAP.

Opportunities to provide better access to nature throughout the AAP area include biodiversity enhancements to existing open spaces, a nature-led approach to landscaping of any new open spaces, and provision of native wetland vegetation on floating rafts along as much of the Limehouse Cut as possible.

Policy recommendations

Creating an accessible, semi-natural green corridor alongside Bow Creek is key both for enhancing biodiversity and for addressing a sizeable Area of Deficiency in access to nature. This should ideally include the creation of some upper intertidal habitat on river walls.

Desilting of East India Dock Basin is a high priority should significant amounts of money become available through Section 106 and/or CIL. This would benefit biodiversity and also enhance the experience of nature for visitors.

The existing open spaces are largely poor for biodiversity, though some recent enhancements have been done in Langdon Park and Jolly's Green. Further enhancements to these parks, and any enhancement of other green spaces, will improve access to nature.

Biodiverse roofs are essential to address piecemeal loss of open mosaic habitat.

Key species to provide features for are black redstart, kingfisher, house martin, sand martin and maybe otter, and we should plant native black poplars wherever appropriate.