

**Basingstoke Canal Joint Management Committee**  
16 October 2014



## **Conservation Management Plan - Change to SSSI status**

### *Decision Paper*

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### **Key Issue**

To authorise officers to request Natural England to consider re-assessing the SSSI status as recommended by the Conservation Steering Group.

### **Summary**

As a result of surveys carried out in 2012 and subsequent analysis of this data by Dr John Eaton, it is felt that the condition of the canal SSSI has changed significantly enough to warrant a re-assessment of its official status: a change from 'unfavourable declining' to 'unfavourable recovering'

### **Officer's recommendation**

That the JMC commends Dr Eaton's detailed study, and authorise officers to submit his report together with a letter requesting Natural England to re-assess the officially recorded condition of the Basingstoke Canal SSSI.

## **1. Introduction and Background**

A re-assessment<sup>1</sup> of the condition of the SSSI has been carried out by Dr John Eaton of Liverpool University; a leading British expert on botany in canals. Dr Eaton's assessment is against the Conservation Objectives (COs) and Favourable Condition Tables (FCTs) provided by Natural England for the Basingstoke Canal SSSI (which are set out in Appendix 2 of the Basingstoke Canal Conservation Management Plan 2008).

Data has been drawn from Groome & Hall 2012 Survey of the Wetland Flora of the Basingstoke Canal. Their field survey methodology very broadly followed the procedures set out in Common Standard Monitoring Guidance for Canals (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2005, but not against the specific Conservation Objectives and Favourable Condition Tables of the Basingstoke Canal.

Dr Eaton has used Groome & Hall's very detailed data as far as possible to construct a Condition Assessment of the two Canal SSSI units (Canal East and Canal West). In addition, some older reports on vegetation and habitat were used to attempt to test for trends in the Condition of the SSSI up to 2012.

The SSSI includes designated features other than channel vegetation (invertebrate assemblages, off-channel areas and Pondtail Heath). These were not part of the survey remit of Groome & Hall and no recent data are available on them. No assessment of them is made here.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Eaton's report is entitled "AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CONDITION OF THE CHANNEL VEGETATION COMPONENT OF THE BASINGSTOKE CANAL SITE OF SPECIAL INTEREST IN 2012 by Dr J.W.Eaton University of Liverpool 25th April 2014 - incorporating amendments to the Introduction received from members of the Basingstoke Canal Conservation Steering Group up to 27th May 2014".

## 2. Discussion

Dr Eaton's report concludes that overall condition of the SSSI is "Unfavourable" because 7 out of 14 assessments for Canal West and 8 out of 15 for Canal East remain unfavourable; Norris Bridge, Hampshire, being the dividing point between the two SSSI parcels of Canal East and Canal West.

Two attributes for which condition appears to be deteriorating are: emergent fringe widths in Canal East, and overall species richness in Canal West. However, set against the latter there is a re-appearance of submersed vegetation along the 6 km of Canal West, in the form of a continuous population of milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*). This length has been devoid of submersed plants for many years. Milfoil can function as a pioneer coloniser, probably originating from seed which drifts downstream, sinks into the canal bed and germinates there. If it maintains the 2012 colonisation it is likely to increase population density along the margins of the navigation channel and provide habitat for secondary colonisers to develop. This is a potentially major development towards recovery within Canal West.

The other attribute for which decline is recorded is the continuing spread of non-native species in both SSSI units. This is an apparently inevitable national trend. Dr Eaton concludes that what can be done to control it is being done effectively by the BCA and its volunteers; Dr Eaton especially mentions the control in the spread of Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*). It is notable that elsewhere the presence of quite dense populations of non-native species also support the largest numbers of native species.

On the positive side, the quantity of native aquatic vegetation is increasing for the first time for many years, perhaps in part a response to the reduction in shading, following bankside tree management in recent years. The previously noted spread of milfoil in Canal West is a part of this process.

The Canal has maintained a strong alkalinity gradient, and recreational pressures from boating and angling remain within the limits set by the Conservation Management Plan and are therefore considered "Favourable". Water turbidity (cloudiness) however continues to be poor.

Floating mats of algae and/or duckweeds were absent from Canal West, but present at the eastern end of Canal East. Canal East however has supported mats of floating vegetation for at least 30 years and it should be noted that although technically this requires its condition to be reported as "Unfavourable", these mats are largely composed of a recognised natural community of duckweeds (*Lemna minor*, *Lemna trisulca*) and crystalwort (*Riccia fluitans*) and do not prevent some of the richest submersed plant communities along the whole canal from developing beneath them.

Dr Eaton concludes that balancing the limited declines against recoveries or improvements in condition that a conclusion should be reached that the overall condition of the SSSI should now be **"Unfavourable, recovering."**

This conclusion is based on the detailed assessment of a very thorough botanical survey by a leading expert in the field, and represents a major success for the way conservation has and is being managed on the Canal, and reinforces the need to continue with the policies and work programmes contained in the Conservation Management Plan.

## 3. Consultation

This has been consulted on at length with the Conservation Steering Group (an advisory group made up of appropriate officers, key stakeholders and experts from the Environment Agency and Natural

England). The Conservation Steering Group recommend that Dr Eaton’s report is submitted to Natural England, and they are invited to use it to formally re- assess the Canal SSSI’s condition.

#### **4. Financial and value for money implications**

There are no direct financial implications for the submission of the report to Natural England.

The positive progress of the SSSI condition from “Unfavorable, declining” to “Unfavorable, recovering” has implications that may lead to further grant funding being made available for conservation work on the Canal where it furthers the policies contained in the Conservation Management Plan, for example through Higher Level Stewardship, or a scheme which replaces it.

#### **5. Equalities & diversity implication**

5.1. None

#### **6. Crime & disorder implications**

6.1. None

#### **7. Conclusion and recommendation**

7.1. Officers recommend that Dr Eaton’s proposal is submitted to Natural England, together with a request to use it for re-assessing the formal condition of the SSSI.

#### **8. What happens next**

8.1. If accepted Dr Eaton’s proposal will be submitted to Natural England for verification.

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