River Anker Access and Nature

Project Summary

March 2025

Atherstone Town Council

Introduction

In August 2023 Atherstone Town Council, in our response to North Warwickshire Borough Council's consultation on open spaces, set out that there was a need for improved access in and around Atherstone.

We recognised that there is a particular need in the northern part of the town due to a lack of greenspace. The need is increased due to a lack of public rights of way and no existing cycling, walking and wheeling routes to connect people with employment and leisure destinations and to the town centre. There will also be an increase in residents in this area due to large areas of development.

We were successful in securing funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to carry out a feasibility study into improving access and nature along the River Anker. The main focus of this was between Anker Mill and the Carlyon Road Industrial Estate.

The River Anker Access and Nature Study investigated the potential for improved access along the River Anker, the links with the surrounding area and the potential for improving the meadows alongside the river for nature.

We also asked Atherstone residents what they thought and for their ideas on how access and nature could be improved. We asked stakeholder organisations what they thought and how they might help, including North Warwickshire Borough Council, Warwickshire and Leicestershire County Councils, the Environment Agency and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

This report contains an overview of the project and the main findings.

A bold vision for Atherstone

This is an ambitious project. Implementing the vision in its entirety may not be possible but we think it is worth trying. It would create a much needed area for people and nature and the scale of the project would create something bold and exciting for Atherstone. It would provide many benefits for people living in Atherstone and would attract people to visit our town.

The stakeholder organisations we spoke to have all been excited about the possibilities. Most importantly - you also told us that it was important to you and that it was something which Atherstone needs.

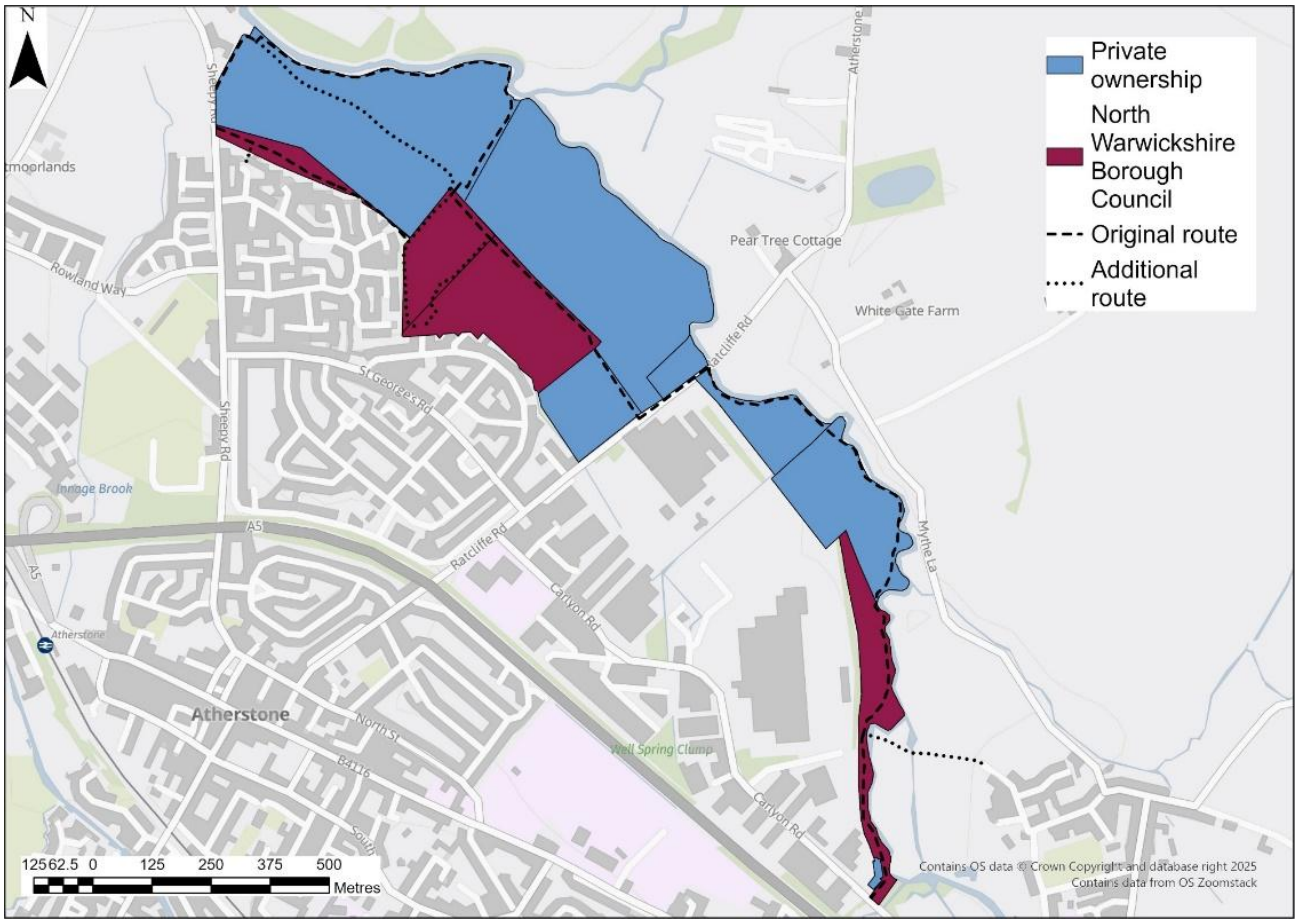
The project will need co-ordinated effort by many people, including Atherstone Town Council, but other organisations as well. It will need the agreement of many different landowners. It will also need significant amounts of funding. This is just the first stage, but we hope that the town will work together to turn the vision into reality.

About the Area

The area we are interested in is the riverside land between Sheepy Road and Carlyon Road. Some areas are owned by North Warwickshire Borough Council. In these areas public access is already allowed. Others areas are in private ownership. There is no legal right of access for the public to the privately owned areas, although some of the landowners have allowed a permitted path alongside the river.

The owners of some of the privately owned areas were contacted during the project but it was not possible to contact them all. None of the ideas can be taken forward without the agreement of the landowners. None of the land is owned by Atherstone Town Council.

We looked at the possibilities for improving the existing permitted routes and also investigated some possible additional routes.



Improving Access

What did we find out?

- There is less greenspace in this area of Atherstone compared to both the rest of the district and nationally. North Warwickshire Borough Council sets standards for the amount of greenspace needed and how far it is from where people live, and this area falls short of these standards. Delivering this project would mean there is enough greenspace in north Atherstone to reach these standards.
- The current permissive riverside access route is essential for people living north of the A5. There are no public rights of way running parallel to the river. The riverside route not only provides access along the river, it connects into other public rights of way.
- There is a risk that permission might be removed for the permissive access route. This is due to changes in land ownership which have happened since the route was agreed and the future plans of the landowners.
- Most of the study area is within the floodplain of the River Anker. Flooding is a significant constraint to the aspiration of access along the River Anker. The regular flooding means that paths need to be designed to have the greatest potential of withstanding extensive flooding. The extent of the flooding will lead to scouring which will damage semi-bound surfaces and can weaken sealed surfaces.
- The surfaces which need to be used will have an impact on who can use the routes. In some sections boardwalks are the most suitable solution but cyclists would not be able to use these.
- We need to consider further the safety of users crossing the Ratcliffe Road to reach the southern meadows due to restricted sight lines by the river bridge.

What did you tell us?

- In our survey, overall around half of people did not know about the routes or use them. However, when we looked at those who lived closest to the routes, within 1km, 86% knew about Sheepy Road to Ratcliffe Road route and 80% of those living within 1km knew about the Ratcliffe Road to Carlyon Road route. The people who lived closest also used the routes the most. This showed us how important the area is in providing access to greenspace. Any loss of the permissive routes would have a negative impact on access to greenspace for these people, which have one of the lowest levels of access to greenspace.
- The highest reason for using the existing routes was for dog walking (77%). However, the next highest categories were all about improving quality of life – to appreciate nature (45%), to improve mental wellbeing (43%) and to improve physical health fitness (40%).
- People also said that if the routes were improved, they would use them to improve their quality of life - 78% said they would use the routes to appreciate nature, 63% said using them would improve their mental wellbeing and 59% said it would improve their physical health.
- The highest reasons for not using the existing routes were poor surfaces or mud (41%) and the river flooding more frequently (40%). One third said that they didn't know the routes existed.
- The aspects which people most wanted to be improved information boards explaining about the river and its wildlife (90%), areas to view nature from (83%), signs (68%) and better surfaces (67%).
- Overall there was strong support for access around the meadows across the whole area. There was support for access to enjoy and experience nature and for children to use the area for education and schools visits.
- You also told us about your concerns around access, including litter and antisocial behaviour, especially in the area behind the Carlyon Road Industrial Estate. Some of you were concerned about access and dogs disturbing wildlife.

It would be lovely to take advantage of the beautiful countryside that we have on our doorstep. With an increasing amount of adults and children spending more time indoors and on devices, having a safe outdoor space that can be accessed by foot would be an advantage for everyone. Not only a place to learn but it could be a great place to help with peoples mental health.

This is the most beautiful area, and sadly because of the poor pathways and river flooding it sometimes becomes impossible to walk. I am retired and in my seventies but I don't want to sit in the house all day. I meet my friends with our dogs, this is good for a mental and physical health. It's lovely to hear and see the local wildlife.

I'm now disabled and have limited walking ability, it would be great if you could make the paths accessible for wheelchairs etc so the majority of people can use it and not just able bodied people.

What is needed?

- As a first stage, access along the current permissive routes along the river and across the wider area needs to be secured. This is important so that people do not loose the access which they currently have and which they have told us they gain many benefits from. We then need to work with the landowners to explore how access and nature could be improved further.
- Due to the need to withstand flooding, the construction of paths will be expensive. It will be difficult to secure funding for the entire project, but it may be possible to take forward parts of the project if funding and agreement can be secured.
- Further advice is needed from the Environment Agency in relation to construction in the floodplain and any further work we need to carry out to gain permission.
- We need to involve and take further advice from Warwickshire County Council and North Warwickshire Borough Council.

Supporting Nature

What did we find out?

- The grassland along the river to the south of Ratcliffe Road is floodplain grassland and it is important for wildlife. This type of grassland is a priority for nature conservation and can, with the correct management, support a wide range of wildlife. Currently none of this area is managed with nature in mind.
- Management floodplain grassland through grazing or cutting for hay, and creating small ponds and wet hollows, could greatly improve the habitats for wildlife, especially birds, reptiles and amphibians and insect life.
- There are some rare and threatened species which are living along the river.
- Supporting the nature of rivers and riverside grassland is a priority in the Local Nature Recovery Strategies of both county councils.
- Shading of the river is important to help wildlife adapt to climate change impacts. In the northern section of the river in particular there are few trees. Planting trees along the river in groups could help wildlife.
- It is important to connect habitats and areas for wildlife across the whole area. This can be done through creating wildlife corridors and ‘stepping stones’.
- Nature can be improved north of Ratcliffe Road through thickening up hedgerows, planting trees, leaving uncut grassland margins and sowing wildflowers.
- Volunteers, residents, children and schools could all get involved in improving the area for wildlife, especially the area north of Ratcliffe Road.

What did you tell us?

- There was overwhelming support for us to work with landowners to improve nature along the river, with 94% in agreement.
- 88% of people supported the designation of a new Local Nature Reserve on the land owned by North Warwickshire Borough Council south of Ratcliffe Road. You thought this would be positive in encouraging more wildlife and that it would help to protect it.
- You gave us your ideas for how we could improve nature. Top was more wildflowers, then tree and hedgerow planting and supporting pollinators and insects.
- You told us you were concerned about litter and pollution in the river.

What is needed?

- North Warwickshire Borough Council already has a policy in their Local Plan to designate a Local Nature Reserve on the land they own south of Ratcliffe Road. This could be taken forward if the council has the resources.
- There is potential to improve nature in the area north of Ratcliffe Road as the landowners here are likely to be supportive of this. This could be achieved with support from the community.
- A longer term vision would be to improve all of the land for nature. This will need the support of many landowners.

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