



THE WITHEY BEDS

Boardwalk and River Enhancement



PROPOSAL FOR THE WITHEY BEDS BOARDWALK

The existing boardwalk at the Withey Beds is in poor condition, with parts rotting away and the decking frequently submerged through winter, meaning that it is often unsuitable for use. In addition, the viewing platforms at either end of the boardwalk have become unsafe for use, where supporting beams are rotten. It is for this reason the boardwalk is currently closed to the public.

There is a desire among local stakeholders to have the entire boardwalk replaced at a higher level, however the cost of doing this is prohibitive at £170,000. There are no grant schemes which would support such expenditure given the resulting increase in the quality of the site would be limited.

The minimum required to reopen the boardwalk is replacement of the western viewing platform with a continuation of the boardwalk. It should be noted that views from this platform are already restricted by the density of vegetation in the surrounding wet woodland. This would mean the rest of the boardwalk remained inaccessible during periods of high water levels, and the boardwalk would be liable to further deterioration.

Our preferred option is to replace a shorter section of boardwalk, up to 80m in length, incorporating a viewing platform and turning place at the end of the boardwalk. This is shown on the accompanying map. This would enable visitors to walk to the middle of the fen and view the fen and the ponds within it, as well as the small area of wet woodland at the start of the boardwalk. The remainder of the boardwalk would be removed. The cost of this is expected to be approximately £60,000.

The positives of this approach are that:

- It would increase the ecological value of the site by further reducing disturbance in the largest block of wet woodland on the site, protecting vulnerable species.
- It would maintain easy access to the fen for wildlife surveying and to facilitate maintenance activities for this habitat. The wet woodland is managed through non-intervention therefore access to the wet woodland is not required.
- The requirement for tree works would decrease as trees through the eastern wet woodland would no longer need to be managed to protect the boardwalk and people on it.
- The viewing platform in the fen could incorporate interpretation relating specifically to fen and wet woodland to help inform the visitors about these rare and important habitats.

The only negative is that there would no longer be a circular walking route around the site. However, during high water levels this is already impossible, due to surface water in the wet grassland. The grassland remained inaccessible throughout 2024.

PROPOSAL FOR ENHANCEMENT OF THE RIVER COLNE

The river Colne is a chalk river, which is internationally rare and a priority habitat in the UK. Chalk rivers flow from underground aquifers and in their natural state are typified by good water quality and steady water temperatures. Healthy chalk rivers are characterised by clear waters, gravel beds with patches of in channel vegetation and gently sloping banks supporting rich marginal vegetation.

Enhancements were carried out in 2015 to improve the river habitat including the creation of gravel bars, which are vital to spawning for several species of fish and a wide range of aquatic invertebrates, the backwater, which provides a refuge for fish out of the faster flowing and more exposed water of the main channel, and some woody in-channel structures. This stretch of the river Colne (from the confluence with the Ver to the Gade) was recorded as being in moderate ecological condition in 2022 and some of the in-channel features delivered in 2015 remain evident. However, due to the growth of scrub on the banks, the section of the river adjacent The Withey Beds is largely overshadowed and appears turbid, with little in channel vegetation.

It is recommended that the scrub along the river is thinned, in addition to the ongoing programme of willow pollarding, to increase light levels and promote the growth of aquatic vegetation which will in turn help to bind sediment within the channel. Thinning scrub will also improve views of the river from the grazing compartment.

In-channel structures made of natural materials should be made using the brash and wood generated by the thinning to ensure a flow rate characteristic of a chalk river, strong enough to carry sediments and maintain a gravel bed, is maintained through this section of the river. Brash structures also provide refuges for small fish and silt up over time to become marginal habitat used by a different range of species.

FUNDING

The Veolia Community Fund has been identified as a potential source of funding for delivering these proposals as a single project. This fund offers grants of between £10,000 and £75,000 to projects which improve spaces for the benefit of the community including nature reserves.

The aims of this fund fit this project well for the following reasons:

- The plans for this project and the wider site have been informed by public consultation.
- Volunteers will be involved in delivering the river enhancement.
- Repairing the boardwalk will make the site more accessible for people with reduced mobility.
- It will support the ecological function of the river.
- It will support biodiversity within the river and wet woodland habitats in particular, and facilitate management to maintain current biodiversity within the fen.
- Using site won materials in the river enhancement minimises the project's carbon footprint and maximises biosecurity.

A Flood Risk Activity Permit for the river enhancement must be secured prior to submitting the grant application, therefore the earliest viable application submission window would close on 26th June 2025, after which a decision would be received in September 2025.

The project must start within four months of the grant being awarded and be completed within 12 months of starting.

