

Safeguarding The Slade Nature Reserve – A statement from Bloxham Parish Council

Bloxham Parish Council (BPC) has been presented with a proposal to formalise access from the Miller Homes Park behind the Woodlands Estate (Miller Homes land) and The Slade nature reserve (BPC land). The Slade has only ever had **one official** entrance via the Recreation Ground; recently, a track has been trampled through from the Miller Homes Park and into The Slade over a flattened boundary fence which separates the two. This is **not** an official footpath, bridleway or public right of way and there is no official access to the nature reserve at this point.

The Slade has been owned by BPC since 2015 and is managed on a voluntary basis by Marie Jones assisted by a committed team who, since then, have spent countless hours maintaining and improving the habitat for the benefit of the flora and fauna within. Marie's knowledge of the small, but perfectly formed area, the species of animals, birds, and plant life which call The Slade home, is outstanding. The ecological value has been recognised by Cherwell District Council which awarded The Slade 'District Wildlife Site' status and her five year management plan includes an ambition to go even further – to be recognised as a 'Local Wildlife Site' (LWS) this will require an additional assessment of the species and ecology. With careful management, this higher level of protection is achievable and would be beneficial to the village as a whole. For example, LWS status helps to challenge applications for further housing development in the area surrounding The Slade.

Part of this careful management is to minimise the ecological impact of visitors to the area – if we do this, we can maintain and even increase the biodiversity. The footpath widening that is already happening in the boggy areas is directly related to an increase in visitors as they pick a less boggy route rather than following the established path. Simply, the presence of additional visitors and dogs is a disturbance to birds and mammals who will quickly find a quieter home away from The Slade. This negative impact is also directly related to frequency and number of visitors. The Slade is a fantastic resource for the local primary school and it is hugely important from an educational and ecological point of view due to the diversity of species.

BPC has considered the suggestion to open another access point into The Slade very carefully and has also reviewed opinions and reports that have been commissioned over the years. The council acknowledges that it would, on the face of it, make perfect sense to join up two outdoor areas and give another route of access to the Recreation ground.

However, this potential change would inevitably lead to an increased footfall into The Slade as people enter from The Miller Homes Park as well as The Recreation Ground and it would essentially create a thoroughfare linking two areas of Bloxham.

Aspect Ecology produced a report on the new park on behalf of Miller Homes in April 2013 which recognised that the diversity in The Slade should be protected from visitor impacts mentioned above. It concluded that "a buffer zone of native planting a minimum of 10m in width, will be incorporated within the area of open space adjacent to The Slade. Care will also be taken to ensure that there are no footpaths within this buffer".

Inadequate fencing on the Miller Homes Park has resulted in this informal route which infringes the ecological buffer zone. The Parish and District councils continue to pursue the fencing and health and safety issues with Miller Homes as they have failed to comply with conditions of their planning permission rather than placing the burden of this cost on Bloxham residents through the Parish Council's budget.

BPC and The Slade management have considered all the pros and cons and have determined that there will be no second access point into The Slade from The Miller Homes Park. There is absolutely no intention to deny access to The Slade to anyone who wishes to enjoy it – in fact our decision will safeguard the long-term future of this area which we are privileged to have. We ask that everyone respects the official access point, the nature reserve itself and the boundaries that are there to protect this delicate area.

We sincerely hope that anyone who has backed the recent proposal via an online petition will take the time to read this statement together with supporting documentation available on the BPC website, and hopefully appreciate that The Slade's future is either as a pleasant woodland walking route through the village, or as an ecologically valuable nature reserve which needs to be protected as a long-term asset to Bloxham. The scientific evidence concludes that it can't successfully be both.

If you'd like to read more, please visit The Slade page on the Parish Council web site:
<https://www.bloxhamparishcouncil.co.uk/the-slade.php>

Thank you

Bloxham Parish Council