

River Walk Path Update

March 2019

Fairford Town Council, along with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and FWAG (Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group) is undertaking a project to resurface River Walk, from Dilly's Bridge to the benches at Cutlers Ford. This will create an accessible path to help people of all levels of mobility to access the countryside and the River Coln. The accessible path will be part of a wider project (led by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, FWAG and other partners) in Fairford that aims to increase biodiversity in the town, and there will be a public meeting about this when the funding is fully secured. This project will improve habitats for water voles, birds and pollinators, and will be looking for local volunteers to help with it.

We are aware that there have been some concerns raised over the timing of the works. As part of the preparation for the resurfacing, a water vole survey was carried out (the findings of which are available on the Town Council website <https://fairfordtowncouncil.gov.uk/town-council/projects/>). This survey also gave a comprehensive programme of works, with specific timescales, the basis of which has formed the licence application to Natural England to undertake the works and the construction specification which formed the tender documents.

Specifically, with regards to water voles:

In terms of the timing, spring is the recommended time to be working in areas where there are water voles – they are the species most likely to be affected given the nature of the works. This is because the animals are 'active' so can move away from the works, are less likely to have dependent young underground, and they are used to moving around at this particular time of year. It would be inappropriate to do the work:

- Over winter – as the animals will be likely to remain in their burrows and there would therefore be a greater risk of them being killed or injured. It is also difficult to confirm where they are in winter as they spend so much time below ground.
- In late-spring or summer – as they will have dependent young below ground, so will remain in their burrows and there is a greater risk of animals being killed. Works which disturbed the breeding cycle in mid-summer (June to August) would be particularly disruptive and could threaten the viability of the population.
- During autumn – the population will breed and expand over the summer, meaning that there will be a greater number of water voles present in autumn, with little vacant space to allow animals to move out of the way of the works. They will therefore be far more likely to be affected, and they will still be breeding – so will have dependent young below ground.

Fairford Town Council are currently seeking a licence from Natural England for the works. Natural England generally only licence these sorts of works during spring, and not at other times of year.

There will, of course, be some disruption to other wildlife, but appropriate steps will be taken to minimise this and to ensure compliance with legislation. A licensed ecologist will be on site during the works to ensure that this is the case. There will be limited works required within the river itself, and these will be timed to minimise the impact on fish as well as water voles. The Environment Agency has been consulted throughout the planning for this path and has granted an exemption, where necessary, for bank maintenance works.

Specifically, in relation to vegetation cutting in spring – this is not illegal, however we agree that ideally the vegetation would have been cut back earlier than this, and that is why it will be done as a priority this week, with every plant being carefully checked before cutting, and being left if there is any nesting activity (as previously stated). There is not much that needs removing.

The nest of any wild bird is protected, so the vegetation can be cut back provided that no nests would be affected. The work to cut back vegetation is being done by FWAG volunteers.