

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND MEMBERS

In accordance with Rule No. 3.3.3 the following questions were submitted to the Council from Members:

Question from Councillor John Lee

'I want to address a matter of significant concern pertaining to wildlife protection and community safety within our towns and villages. This issue was brought to my attention during recent interactions with residents in Wellow, highlighting an alarming trend that seems to be emerging across our district.

Specifically, I wish to draw your attention to two distressing incidents. The first is a recent allegation from Wellow, where an individual reportedly threatened to shoot fireworks at a peahen. The second incident, reminiscent of this, occurred last year around Balderton Lake, involving harm to wildlife. These episodes not only cause distress among our residents but also pose a serious threat to the well-being of our local wildlife.

Given these circumstances, I am compelled to ask, what proactive measures is the District Council implementing to combat such anti-social behaviour and wildlife crimes in our towns and villages? It is essential to understand the Council's strategy and the collaborative efforts with the police and other organizations in addressing these issues.

The protection of wildlife and the maintenance of community safety are paramount. I am keen to learn about the initiatives and policies the Council has in place or plans to introduce to prevent such incidents from recurring. Ensuring a safe and harmonious environment for all, including our wildlife, is a shared responsibility that I believe our Council can lead on effectively'.

Reply from Councillor Paul Taylor – Portfolio Holder for Public Protection & Community Relations

Since 2021 the Council and Police have undertaken a lot of work in relation to wildlife crime following reports received by Council and Police in early 2021 of wildlife being catapulted, birds killed, particularly along the Sustrans Track (around London Road Pond) and at Balderton Lakes but also other areas, such as Sconce Park.

As a result, Newark has a targeted operation, tackling youth related wildlife and green space crime, as well as ASB in rural and green spaces, named Operation Swift. Wildlife crime was a priority throughout 2021, and it was not only targeted patrols and taking action on individuals identified. The Police completed awareness sessions in schools, and NSDC, in partnership with Police and Fire Services hosted events such as the Balderton Day of Activity (August 2021) at Balderton Lakes, to raise awareness of wildlife crime and safety elements (water safety) responsible dog ownership, etc.

As part of our safety events engaging local primary schools, during 2022 (Farndon, Sconce Park, Riverside Park) we have delivered sessions on wildlife crimes and conservation. Also including harm to wildlife with deliberate fire setting (we had young people deliberately setting fires at Vicar Water Country Park and Sconce Park). Vicar Water was subject to repeat incidents in 2021 and 2022, with the Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) running awareness sessions in local primary schools (no fires reported in 2023).

In June 2024, NSDC in partnership with NFRS and Police will be delivering the 999 Safety Zone event, this is offered to all year 6 primary schools and will include talks by NSDC Rangers on wildlife and conservation, and the police/ASB team on wildlife crime.

The operation began back in 2021 where targeted patrols, enforcement, partnership working and school education sessions around these topics were undertaken, resulting a number of youths detained and interviewed in relation to wildlife offences.

It became apparent that catapulting wildlife, hare coursing, causing distress to animals and birds at local greenspaces and ASB were becoming a trend and fashion amongst local young people. The initial project was in partnership with NSDC and Hill Holt Wood, with £12000 of funding from the Locality Funding 2022/23.

Due to the success of this pilot scheme, Newark Neighbourhood Policing Team worked alongside Hill Holt Wood and submitted a successful bid for £66,000 for a two year program, based on education, diversion and restorative justice. This is a long term project with a simple mantra – inspire today to protect tomorrow. Although NSDC supported the project bid, the work has been carried forward by the police and Hill Holt.

The three parts to Operation SWIFT are as follows:

Education – Neighbourhood Policing Team officers and Hill Holt Wood Rangers are in the process of visiting every primary school in the Newark and surrounding area, around 15 schools, and complete an interactive presentation on wildlife and ASB, exploring offences and consequences and also promoting a sense of ownership, getting across an emphasis of being champions of the local area. When the talk is complete, bird box kits are provided, where officers and rangers build them with the children. Since this began, children have actually been reporting incidents directly to police and feedback from schools has been excellent. By next year, over 1000 primary school children will have had an input.

Diversion – Neighbourhood Policing Team officers and Hill Holt Wood Rangers host two diversion sessions a month for youths identified as ASB offenders. Referrals for the sessions come from police directly and our partners. Officers agree for the youth to attend with parents, collect them on the day and take them to Hill Holt Wood. Here they have a short input which can be tailored to a particular type of crime of ASB such as arson, off road bikes, catapulting for example. The youths will then go into the woods and do some hands on work such as dead hedging or similar. Those taking part get all the PPE, get shown how to do whatever skill they're learning and once the session is done get taken home again. If we get a troublesome youth then they can attend two sessions and get a UK Rural Skills qualification which for some of the youths, who are not in school for example, is quite the achievement.

Restorative Justice – Neighbourhood Policing Team officers and Hill Holt Wood Rangers hold 10 of these sessions a year. These are very similar to the diversion events but tailored to the specific crime. A recent example is two youths found to be hare coursing. They were signed up for the session, collected and taken to Hill Holt Wood, where they were educated on the law around hare coursing, the consequences of hare coursing and police powers if they were to continue to commit wildlife offences. They were shown the impact on the environment, ecology and more. Both youths then went and repaired some local hare habitat and this is very much about giving back.

The Police have had referrals for our division sessions from the Youth Justice Service, Nottinghamshire County Council and we are working on this becoming a recognised disposal via the Youth Justice Service for such offences.

The program has a further 12 months to run and has been hugely successful, and played a real part in not only reducing wildlife and green space crime and ASB, but nurturing the future of town to take responsibility and ownership.

Not one of our offenders who have been through the Restorative Justice program has reoffended.

Operation SWIFT was recently presented at the National Wildlife and Rural Crime conference with huge success, with several forces across the UK looking to take on the program. Operation SWIFT is fully supported by the National Wildlife Crime Unit

Supplementary Question from Councillor John Lee

“You have reported in the Newark Advertiser that crime is down, but you have also admitted it is down because people are not reporting it. Would you clarify whether reported crime is down or is crime down due to people not reporting it. If it is down because people are not reporting it, what are you going to do about it?”

Reply from Councillor Paul Taylor – Portfolio Holder for Public Protection & Community Relations

“Crime is down and ASB is also down. Looking at the latest figures for Devon and Castle Wards it was down by 50%, which is really good. It is however not good enough. People are suffering from ASB and crime and we are determined to try and tackle this. It is nice to report ASB and crime is down as it makes me believe that we are having an effect, however in many ways I would like to see that number go up because people are reporting more things that are currently going unreported. We have had that discussion already, seeing the figures go down is clearly positive and seeing less victims is positive. However, there is still not enough reporting and I urge everyone if they see ASB or crimes taking place to report it to the local authority and the police and not to just make postings on their facebook pages”.