

10. Urban gulls

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Purpose of the Report

To report back the considerations of the working group set up to review options to deal with gulls, following consideration of the matter by Area South Committee in July 2009.

Recommendation

To note the report and considerations from the working group set up following the July meeting of the Joint Area Committee - South.

Background

Previous reports considered by the Area South Committee in December 2008 and July 2009 included details about complaints received, the legal position and possible options that may be available to try and control the gull population in parts of Yeovil.

Since the report in July 2009 a change has been made to legislation that relates to Herring gulls. Previously, if certain requirements were met, it may have been possible to destroy adult birds under the terms of a General Licence. However, this species of gull has now been listed as a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species and meets the criteria for red listing as a bird of conservation concern. Therefore, whilst it is still possible to act under a general licence for destroying eggs, it is no longer possible to destroy birds without applying for a special licence.

Action since July meeting

1. Working group

Following the July meeting it was agreed a working group would be set up to examine some practical options for controlling the gull population. This group was formed and has met four times.

In order to help inform the discussions and establish the extent of the problem the group produced a newsletter with a questionnaire that was delivered to 700 houses in the Forest Hill area.

In summary, there were 121 questionnaires returned (17%). Of these 82 recipients said they had been affected by gulls in 2009, with 20 saying they actually had gulls nesting on their roof with 33 chicks successfully hatched. 64 households said they would be willing to take part in action against the gulls, of these about half were in Yew Tree Close (20) and Beechwood (14). The rest were distributed across the area. There were 48 households who specifically said they would not take part in any action with 3 of these in Yew Tree Close and 1 in Beechwood. These results suggest the problem is sporadic across the area in question but more concentrated in a couple of streets.

The group has discussed options that may be available to address the problem. One resident had paid for egg oiling at his property in 2009. After three visits the gulls did not lay any more eggs. This cost of £75. It was indicated that this cost could be significantly reduced if a block of houses were treated at the same time.

The group also trialled a hand held scarer at the end of August for a week. This mimics the distress call of the gulls and again showed some success at driving birds away, although this may not have the same success in the breeding season. Experience elsewhere suggests that the gulls quickly become used to such devices and any success may be short lived.

Contact has also been made with some contractors who offer proofing services. Quotes are being obtained based on a number of properties all undertaking work at the same time with the hope that this will provide a more cost effective for householders.

This group has only considered the issue as it relates to the Forest Hill area. As has been previously reported, complaints have been received from across other parts of Yeovil, as well as other towns within the district, in particular Chard.

2. Regional meetings

Since the July Committee, a regional group has also been set up, consisting of local authorities in the area suffering problems with gulls. The main purpose of this group is to share best practice with a view to identifying a successful model for action. Several authorities in the group have significant gull problems and have been carrying out some form of treatment for several years, mostly egg oiling or replacement. This has had some impact in reducing noise and aggression in the treated areas but generally populations are increasing. It has also been noted that in areas of concentrated treatment, populations in that location may decline, but they appear to be pushed out to other surrounding areas. Overall the conclusion so far is that there is no easy answer to the problem and the most that seems possible is to minimise the impact. Those that do act only do so in town centre areas.

The group has also now met with the Food and Research Agency (FERA) who provide technical advice to the Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Separate meetings have also taken place with Natural England, who administer the gull control licenses, and Defra representatives, with a view to seeking guidance and support with the issue. These meetings have all served to raise the issue as a growing one, and share experience, although again have not identified any new options or 'magic' solutions. As it stands there are no plans by the Government to make any changes to legislation or to make any funding available to deal with gull problems. The Government recognises that some urban areas have problems and there is support for an 'integrated approach' although to date it is not clear what this would mean. It is possible that it may be more research, or may be action centred on food sources.

One action that has been identified is closer working with the Environment Agency regarding conditions on Waste Management Licences to control gulls at landfill sites. It is considered that this can be done more effectively by working as a regional group.

3. Meeting with Augusta Westland

A meeting took place with representatives from Augusta Westland to discuss any support that they may be able to give to the local community. It was agreed that the company would discuss the possibility of flying the falcons that they use over a wider area with their Falconer. If this is possible it should provide some benefit to the wider community

by disturbing the gulls nesting environment. It was also agreed that support could be given to the production and distribution of some literature.

Conclusions

Having undertaken extensive investigation into this issue and having attended many meetings both locally and regionally it is concluded that there is very little can be done on a district wide basis to prevent problems with gulls occurring. The problem being that most action available will simply 'push' the problem around.

However, there are various options available to householders and property owners to take action in relation to their own properties and where small communities can join together to take action it is likely that costs can be reduced.

Residents in the two main affected streets are therefore looking to work together to access some community funding that has been identified. This, together with a commitment to provide some funding themselves, will most probably be used to proof properties against gulls nesting. The success, or otherwise, of this work can be feedback to other residents experiencing similar problems.

In addition, further guidance will be produced in partnership with Agusta Westland giving useful information to householders about what can be done to control gulls on their own properties.

Work will also continue with the regional group of local authorities in particular to engage with the Environment Agency over gull control at landfills.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications. Any officer hours involved can be met within existing budgets.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

There are no specific implications for any of the Corporate priorities, however there are links to the following objectives

Objective one – Increase to 75% by 2012 the number of residents who feel the council gives good value for money

Objective 16 – maintain above 80% the people satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live

Other Implications

There have been complaints about gulls across Yeovil and in other parts of the district, in particular Chard, although not yet at the same scale. There are also believed to be gulls nesting in Crewkerne. Any action taken in one part of the district could set a precedent for action throughout the rest of the authority's area.

Background Papers: *Area South Committee Agenda 3rd December 2008, agenda item 9*
Joint Area Committee - South Agenda 1st July 2009, agenda item 11