



## ADDRESS TO FULL CITY COUNCIL 7 December 2015

Lord Mayor and Councillors, my name is Dr Judy Webb, Chair of the Friends of Lye Valley. I am a professional ecologist with a special interest in plants, invertebrates and fungi, especially those of fen wetlands and pollinators of all types. In a voluntary capacity I record species and advise the Council on the management of many of their wildlife sites and on their Pollinator Strategy. Since 2007 I have advised both the Council and Natural England on management of the 8,000 year-old Lye Valley tufa-forming, valley-head spring-fen wetland. This is part SSSI, part Local Wildlife Site and is adjacent to the Site 60 proposed for development off Warren Crescent, known locally as Warren Meadow, a crucial rainwater catchment and infiltration area for the Lye Valley fen.

The rareness and national importance of the remaining wetland fen habitat in the Lye Valley cannot be overstated. National losses have been great. Recent figures show that the Lye Valley SSSI fen has **1.5 of only 19 hectares of this rare flower-rich M13 habitat left in all England**. I can stand in the fen in summer and looking around me I can see 20 species of plants now rare in Oxfordshire, including 1000 nationally scarce marsh helleborine orchids and flowers which are glacial relicts, have survived in situ for 10,000 years since the last ice age. Fourteen plants in the valley are on the New England Red list. There are a large total number of insects recorded, including seven with Red Data list status and 27 Nationally Scarce. It is surely the wildlife jewel in the Council's crown – valued by expert botanists since the 1600s, along with both Universities' geologists, ecologists, wildlife experts and students.

It is to the credit of the Oxford City Council, who hold and manage this land in trust for residents, that this fen's biodiversity is now increasing each year, so there is now nearly as much area of quality M13 fen in the Lye Valley as in Cothill Fen, southwest of Oxford, which is designated a Special Area of Conservation, and thus of European importance. So the Lye Valley fen is equal to a site of European importance.

In the 1980s, it was David Steel, then Council Countryside Officer, who first recognised the neglected and overgrown Lye Valley fen's importance and kick-started its recovery. Now thanks, to the Council and armies of volunteers from the Friends of Lye Valley, BBOWT, Oxford Conservation Volunteers and Council Countryside Volunteers, species thought lost have returned from the seed bank, so biodiversity is increasing.

But this site is under threat – from pollution, changes to hydrology, arson, development and fly-tipping. Councillors may not realise that Natural England's views on this proposed Warren Crescent development are coloured by the fact that its powers have been watered down over the last 10 years by Government policy to

promote development, meaning that (in our view) there is now insufficient regard to protection of such highly important parts of the natural environment.

We were astonished by the description in documents of Warren Crescent Site 60, as *'a patch of grass ...with very little amenity value'*. Friends of Lye Valley consulted local people. It was clear the description was very economical with the truth.

The result was a petition to ask Councillors, should they decide not to develop the space, to preserve it as Local or Public Access Green Space. The petition has received over 175 signatures online – despite enormous difficulties with the website crashing twice for several days, bugs in the software, and counter-intuitive instructions. In addition there are over 475 signatures in writing – almost half being from residents of Town Furze estate itself.

In view of this, do councillors consider that the National Planning Policy Framework Section 8, Point 74, requirements have been met that:

**'Existing open space, and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:**

- **an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, or land to be surplus to requirements; or**
- **the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or**
- **the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision**

We are unaware of any evidence demonstrating that this land is 'surplus to requirements'. The Council have not proposed replacement public access green space. Nor is the land proposed for alternative recreational provision.

Given these NPPF requirements have not been met, should Town Furze estate lose this valued local amenity? – almost the only one it has!

Councillors, you are the guardians of this rich natural heritage site in the Lye Valley, for the benefit of present and future generations. We ask that, should you decide not to develop the Warren Meadow land, to take into account this petition's request from local people. Friends of Lye Valley would like to work with the Council, local schools and nurseries to enhance its biodiversity, in line with the Council's Pollinator Strategy, increasing wildflowers which would support the rare insects of the adjacent SSSI fen and, in the process, provide education and enjoyment for local young people.

Dr Judith A Webb  
Chair, Friends of Lye Valley