Sutton Bingham - visitor experience and accessibility improvements

January 2021
Background

Constructed in 1955, Sutton Bingham reservoir holds more than 2,600 million litres of water and spans an area of up to 143 acres. It routinely provides fresh drinking water to the local area and also support regional supply, increasing resilience and ensuring we can continue to provide water to our customers in all circumstances.

Today the reservoir not only provides an essential supply of water to the area, but also offers a picnic area, trout fishery and sailing, model boat and canoe clubs.

The reservoir plays an important part in providing opportunities for local communities to get outdoors, take an interest in nature and participate in recreational activities.

Surrounded by high value grassland, woodland and other rich areas of habitat the reservoir is often visited by birdwatchers and other nature lovers.

There has been a settlement at the site of the reservoir since the medieval period and the Manor House and Norman church remain nearby.

We now have plans to update and improve accessibility and the facilities at Sutton Bingham which will benefit both local communities and visitors. These improvements are outlined in this leaflet, while you can also leave feedback by visiting the information page on our website: wessexwater.co.uk/community/improvement-projects
The vision

Sutton Bingham is a place celebrated and protected by local communities, set in beautiful surroundings and within an area of ecological importance. It is vital that the reservoir is conserved while also accessed by local people and visitors.

We want to ensure that people of all abilities can have an enjoyable experience at the reservoir. Sutton Bingham is a place where visitors can:

- visit to escape the pressures of modern life
- spend quality time outdoors with family and friends
- connect with nature
- discover more about conservation, the natural world and water efficiency through events and education
- improve their health and wellbeing by taking part in activities such as walking, angling and sailing.

Through the community user group, development of management plans and partnership working with local groups, we will continue to ensure the reservoir is an enjoyable and sustainable place to visit.

Our aim is to make Sutton Bingham an attractive and accessible place for families and individuals wanting a day out in the great outdoors. Following the challenges faced by so many in 2020, improving access to outdoor spaces has never been so important.
Health and wellbeing

Sutton Bingham is a great location for anyone wishing to improve their health and wellbeing by accessing green and blue spaces, taking part in physical activity and play, connecting with nature or taking part in social and educational activities.

Improved facilities at Sutton Bingham will ensure a safe, accessible and free to access resource is available for visitors of all ages and abilities from our local communities to take part in activities such as:

- walking
- children's play
- open green space and views over the water
- nature trails and activities
- relaxation and mindfulness (a place to escape and unwind)
- picnics.

Wildlife and nature

Sutton Bingham is home to a range of important species and habitats including birds, butterflies, bugs, bees, bats, hoverflies and traditional hay meadows of local importance. Wessex Water manage these carefully for their natural value and provide access to visitors for their enjoyment, wellbeing and education.

The picnic area itself is predominantly an amenity area and has lower natural value than the surrounding areas such as the meadows. We have therefore focussed the improvements and provision of benches and other facilities here and will continue to provide access for those wishing to walk and connect with other areas of the site.

We will be reviewing our conservation management plan for the area and seeking to make further improvements where possible in the way that we manage scrub, grassland and trees in order to create a shared space for people and nature. One example of this is the introduction of a wildflower meadow area near the picnic area entrance, which will both be attractive and create a new habitat for wildlife.

We will support people with interests such as birdwatching or research to further our shared understanding of the local environment. We are also exploring how we may enable the wider community to learn new skills, develop their understanding of the environment through volunteering activities or small events which may be delivered through our partnerships charities such as local Wildlife Trusts and similar community groups.
Education

We want to help current and future generations appreciate and value the importance of the natural world, water resources and the benefits of leading healthy and active lifestyles.

Our team of education advisers deliver classroom and site-based lessons for up to 25,000 schoolchildren every year across our region.

Following the improvements to the picnic site, we will work with our expert team to create new and engaging on-site interpretation to help visitors learn more about the natural environment and water resource. This is likely to include updating on-site signage and a mix of activity sheets and small on-site seasonal events for visitors to enjoy during their visit.

Previously we had looked at installing small shelters which would also provide spaces for educational activities. However, following consultation, these have now been removed from the improvement plan in the picnic area.

Activities

With an active fishery and local community sports clubs based at the reservoir, there are qualified instructors available for those wishing to discover and learn a new sport.

We hope that people visiting the picnic area will be able to see these fantastic activities taking place first-hand and this in turn will spark an interest to try a new activity in the great outdoors, supporting local clubs to increase participation and physical activity.

Wessex Water manage the fishing on site, and we will continue to promote the sport and provide new opportunities for people to try or improve at the sport, including family fishing days, beginner courses, and tips from Rangers and improver sessions with qualified coaches.

We will also work with the resident community clubs, run by dedicated volunteers, to support them in delivering their activities and encouraging more people to benefit from their offer.

While there is no self-launch of craft or wild swimming available at the reservoir for safety and water quality reasons, members of the community can take to the water through on-site clubs where safety standards and procedures are in place:

- fishing – Wessex Water Fisheries
- sailing – Sutton Bingham Sailing Club
- canoeing and kayaking – Sutton Bingham and District Canoe Club
- model boats – Yeovil and District Model Boat Club.

Please contact the respective clubs for more information on how to get involved.
The work

Over the past two years we have talked with local communities and users about priorities for Sutton Bingham reservoir.

Following detailed community consultation in the spring and summer of 2020, we have revised our proposals and are looking to make improvements in 2021.

We would like to hear your feedback ahead of a formal planning application, and there is a simple form below to provide this. You can also sign up to receive updates about the improvements by email and to join our Community User Group for the site which has been established as a forum for ongoing collaboration. Our aim is to make visiting the reservoir easier for those with accessibility issues and improve the quality of the facilities provided, in particular the picnic area.

This will involve:
• creating a welcome arrival for visitors at the entrance
• improving accessibility around the site
• updating the existing toilet facilities
• improving surfacing around the toilet block
• installing a water refill point - to reduce single-use plastic
• adding new tables and benches
• providing bike racks for those arriving by bicycle
• enhancing the existing play area for younger children
• installing new signage to help visitors discover more about Sutton Bingham Reservoir
• creating an outlook from the picnic area through improved vegetation management giving visitors a view of the water and activities.
Sutton Bingham picnic area

Key
1. New access gates
2. Wild flower meadow
3. New boundary planting
4. New play equipment
5. New accessible path
6. New planting
7. Improved access to WC with seating
8. New water refill unit
9. New play equipment
10. Bicycle parking
11. Picnic areas within new planting
12. Parking improvements
13. New footpaths connect the existing route to meadow zone
14. Coppicing works to increase views
15. Improved access to viewing platform
The work
Minimising environmental impact

We are committed to protecting and enhancing the environment and will ensure that any future improvements to Sutton Bingham minimise damage to existing habitats. We have an expert team of ecologists and independent consultants who complete thorough surveys of the area and advise on mitigating or compensating for all works.

While some short term impact is inevitable, we will deliver a longer term net gain in biodiversity by:
- avoiding all healthy trees.
- focusing new infrastructure and paths on areas of grassland which are of low natural value
- planning to recycle waste materials
- proposals to introduce a new wildflower meadow area.
- improving the conservation management regime of scrub and trees within the picnic area
- using permeable stone paths which balance accessibility with low impact and use natural materials wherever possible

Project development and consultation

Over the past two years, and particularly in the spring and summer of 2020, we have engaged with a range of visitors, community members, visitors, neighbours, local organisations including sports clubs, parish councils, the district council and county councils around the improvements.

We have taken on board their feedback and any concerns and have amended our current proposals to incorporate these.

For transparency these are briefly summarised as a short Q&A at the end of this document.

If you would like to share your views on the improvements, please visit wessexwater.co.uk/community/improvement-projects and complete the online feedback form.
Questions and answers

Is there a need for improvements to the site?
While Sutton Bingham is already enjoyed by many visitors, we want to ensure that the site is accessible to anyone who may wish to visit and that the facilities provided meet visitor expectations. Our priorities are to improve ease of movement throughout the site and to update basic provision such as the playground and toilets.

Is the picnic area going to be open 24/7?
No, the reservoir is part of an operational site and for security and safety reasons will continue to be opened and closed in line with seasonal opening hours.

The site is normally closed over the winter months, however, with improved paths and surfacing we hope that it will be usable 12 months of the year in the future.

Will there be lots more visitors to the site?
We do not expect there to be a significant increase in visitor numbers arising because of the improvements. However, over the past few years and especially during 2020 we have seen a natural increase in demand for outdoor spaces across all of our sites. Other providers report the same and therefore we are seeking to make sure we can accommodate the natural demand for the site.

Where we may look to hold events or activities, these will be small in size and in keeping with the site and values. They may include guided walks, conservation workshops, nature and water education or similar. From time to time we may work with the local sports clubs to encourage health and wellbeing or sports events, but again this will be scaled to suit the site and not overrun it.

Will people be allowed to cycle or swim at the site?
Swimming is not currently permitted in any Wessex Water reservoir.

Sutton Bingham does not have any suitable areas for introducing cycling. Cyclists arriving by bike will be catered for through the provision of bike parking, but they will be expected to leave their bikes in the car park and access the site on foot.

Why are you creating paths through the site, and will they be loose gravel?
In order to improve access for visitors of all levels of personal mobility, we are seeking to install self-compacting stone paths in line with good practice guidance. This will inform the surface type as well as gradients and cambers to ensure that all visitors can access as much of the site as possible.

By creating new paths, we will also connect different areas of the site and facilities while safely segregating visitors from vehicles on the roadway.

Will you provide access to the adjacent church from the picnic site?
As part of the revised plans we hope to include a path and gate which will enable our visitors to access the nearby church directly from the car park. Conversely, we will work with the church to enable their parishioners to benefit from car parking and facilities in the picnic area wherever possible.

Are you replacing the toilets?
No, we had initially considered installing a new small toilet facility but following previous consultation we will now not be installing any new structures and will instead update the fixtures and fittings within the existing block.

Are you going to relocate the car park?
No, following previous consultation and ensuring we deliver maximum value for money, we will now be retaining the existing roadways and parking areas.

We will make some minor improvements to these such as dedicated disabled parking bays and minimal road markings to assist people with parking.
Questions and answers continued

Are you installing picnic shelters or buildings that may be misused?
No, following previous consultation and concerns arising around anti-social behaviour these have now been omitted from the scheme.

Will more visitors lead to local habitats being damaged?
We aim to reduce the visitor impact to the environment through the provision of paths and benches – creating natural route and giving alternatives to sitting on valuable grassland habitats.

Additionally, we will work to help guide and educate visitors about how to care for the environment through information on our website pre-visit and on-site information plus support from our team of Rangers.

Are you felling trees to make way for the improvements?
We will be introducing an enhanced conservation management plan for the small trees and scrub at the eastern end of the picnic area. This will maintain the habitat value and connectivity for local species such as dormice, while also reducing the height of the vegetation to re-establish views out to the water from the picnic area. The large willows to the north will not be affected.

It has been independently confirmed that a number of Ash trees in the picnic area are suffering from Ash Die Back. These trees are scheduled to be removed before the improvement works start and will be replaced with suitable species.

This is essential work to manage the safety of our visitors, neighbours and nearby highways, and does not form part of the proposed improvements. However, we have designed the new improvements based on the site layout following these works.

Will improving the site lead to antisocial behaviour (ASB) in the area?
We expect the opposite as research shows that an improved, cared for and well managed facility is less likely to fall victim of antisocial behaviour and vandalism.

Where concerns have been raised by the local community, we have already worked alongside the local police to address this and help make our communities a safer place for all including the security measures described below.

How will you stop people getting into the site out of hours?
Following on from the work we undertook around antisocial behaviour, we will be improving the security of the site in three key ways:
• Upgrading perimeter gates to effected areas, installing climb resistant rural and agricultural gates and fencing to remain in keeping with the site and area
• Engaged a third party security company to support our Rangers and keep staff and visitors alike safe. This includes phone number where visitors or neighbours can report problems to us 24/7
• Established a network of residents, councillors and the police to support and deliver community action where incidents are outside of our management control.

The main entrance gates will also be improved. These will be in keeping with a visitor arrival area and include a height restriction barrier.