

REQUEST FOR LIFE BUOY PROVISION
AGENDA ITEM No. 9

MEETING: ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

DATE: 8TH JULY 2026

REPORTED BY: WORKS AND ENVIRONMENT MANAGER

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Members that a request has been received from a resident of School Aycliffe to install a life buoy around the wetland pond at School Aycliffe.
- 1.2 The applicant is a member of the Rotary Club Newton Aycliffe and has offered to pay for a suitable lifesaving device to be installed in an appropriate location at School Aycliffe Wetlands.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 The request is a response to an anecdotal incident when he witnessed a young boy who was accompanied by parents at the time falling into the water in this location last summer and the child requiring rescuing.
- 2.2 It should be noted that no official incident was reported to the Council at the time or since. Therefore, there has been no official recorded incident in this location of an individual entering the water.
- 2.3 This anecdotal report has resulted in officers completing and reviewing a water safety assessment for this location and other Council owned ponds to ensure the Council are making an informed decision when considering a request for life preserving equipment.

3.0 Current Situation

- 3.1 It should be noted that there have been no incidents of this nature ever reported to or recorded by the Council in this location and this anecdotal account is the first known incident in the area.
- 3.2 The water is known to be approximately 5-6 feet deep in its deepest location with a silty bottom.
- 3.3 There is an existing deep water warning signage, but it is considered that given this review, new more highly visible signage should be displayed.
- 3.4 There are various considerations to be discussed when considering the positives and negatives of providing buoyancy aids.

3.5 Positives include:

- Reduces the drowning risk.
- Support for non-swimmers if there is a known high percentage of young and vulnerable individuals.
- Acts as a last resort safety measure when supervision fails or an accident occurs.
- Opportunity of immediate intervention by bystanders.
- Increases survival chances during the critical first minutes.
- Reduces liability by showing proactive risk management.

3.6 Negatives includes:

- False sense of security e.g. getting closer to the edge
- Relies upon bystander/ third party being available to deploy.
- Deployment can be hampered by pond vegetation.
- Equipment at high risk of being stolen, damaged and vandalised.
- Deterioration due to weather exposure.
- Requires regular inspection and replacement, adding to ongoing workload.
- Limited effectiveness without training - risk of incorrect deployment or putting the rescuer at risk.
- Presence of equipment alone does not guarantee effective rescue.
- Visually unpopular in conservation areas.
- Cost implications including initial purchase costs, installation, ongoing replacement, long term maintenance and checks.

3.7 A balanced approach is required when considering the request, considering depth of the pond, public access to the water, public usage, presence of vulnerable users including children, and history of incidents or near misses.

3.8 Depending on equipment required, prices range from £60 to £350 for British Standard safety equipment.

3.9 Any equipment installed would need to be subject to regular inspections of a minimum of once a fortnight and replacement if missing, damaged or vandalised.

3.10 If a life buoy is to be agreed, consideration needs to be given to what equipment is preferred, for example rings, throw lines or rescue tube. This will depend on the depth of water, distance from the bank side, reeds and weeds.

4.0 Matters for Consideration at School Aycliffe Wetlands

4.1 There has been no official incidents reported to the Council of users falling into this pond.

4.2 Most of the pond has tall vegetation around the sides which limits public access. In addition, most of the pond is shallow sided and so there is limited risk of a person getting into difficulties in these areas.

4.3 The exception to this is directly off the viewing platform, where the open water is approximately 5 feet deep. However, the platform is fitted with 3 substantial railings to limit falling risk.

- 4.4 Usage of the site is generally restricted to local residents that know the area and the most commonly used by dog walkers. It is rare to have unoccupied children using the wetlands.
- 4.5 Given the reported incident, consideration needs to be given whether the installation of a life buoy would be a worthwhile or proportionate response.
- 4.6 For the reasons laid out above the risk of an incident is low, but not impossible.
- 4.7 Given the ongoing cost of weekly/fortnightly checks, maintaining the aid to a high standard and most importantly managing the public's expectations to maintain the provision once established, it is proposed that this is not really proportionate or value for money in this location given the level of risk identified.

5.0 Matters for Consideration at Aycliffe Nature Park

- 5.1 Similar to School Aycliffe, the main pond within the Nature Park has low sloped sides and poses limited risk.
- 5.2 The majority of the pond has a low birds-mouth fence around it, limiting unplanned contact with the water body.
- 5.3 The area where a user could fall directly into deeper water is from the dipping platform. The water is 3 to 5 feet deep depending on time of year. However, this structure has closely placed railing around the entire structure and was extended several years ago to increase security from falling in. So, the only real way a person could fall in from this location is to fall over the railings.
- 5.4 Due to footfall and usage patterns on this site, young children, who are most at risk, are more likely to use this dipping platform over the summer months, The pond becomes significantly lower in the summer and is known to dry up completely in the summer, meaning there is potentially limited or no risk of drowning over this period, but this is clearly dependant on rail fall levels.
- 5.5 There is a second unfenced pond, which is approximately 3 feet at its deepest in the centre and is located to the rear of the site near the border with the A167. The pond is approximately 4 metres wide by 10 metres long. Most users do not know this small pond exists and this was installed as an additional newt pond.
- 5.6 Site usage within the Nature Park is high, dominated by dog walkers, but it is known that groups of youths frequent the site on a weekend and evening and that anti-social behaviour and damage can be a problem on this site.
- 5.7 Signage is known to have been damaged around the site but it is proposed that signage is increased to include warnings about deep water.
- 5.8 However, due to the risk of vandalism or theft as well as the protections offered by the fencing surrounding the pond, the provision of any buoyancy aid is not considered suitable for this location.

6.0 Policy Implications

6.1 This complies with the Council's Strategic Aims 2, 5 and 6:-

No. 2: To manage the Council's finances and assets in a responsible manner.

No. 5: To contribute to the environmental improvement of Aycliffe by managing and developing parks, play areas and green spaces.

No. 6: To help and encourage partnership working to improve the services and facilities for the residents of Great Aycliffe.

7.0 Staffing Implications

7.1 The life buoys would require regular checks on at least a fortnightly basis; this could be done as part of the ongoing weekly checks across the Council's sites.

7.2 However, careful consideration needs to be given to the ongoing maintenance of any proposed equipment. It is likely that any equipment will be vandalised, stolen and misused.

7.3 Officers know from past employment that significant time is required to recover life preservers from the waterbodies and surrounding trees on a regular basis, potentially putting the operatives recovering them at unwarranted risk.

7.4 It would also be prudent to have a stock of spares as it's likely that some floatation equipment, may become unrecoverable or missing and once provision is established there is a duty of care to maintain them to ensure ongoing coverage.

8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 Whilst there is a proposal by the resident to purchase and pay for the initial installation, it is clear there is likely to be an ongoing cost to replace missing, damaged and vandalised items.

8.2 This is likely to be a minimum of £60 for every ring which requires replacing. However, it is impossible to predict how many would require replacing.

9.0 Crime and Disorder Implications

9.1 The installation of life buoys can often be associated with various anti-social behaviour actions such as using the rings to throw into the water, using the ropes and rings as swings, theft of the floatation devices to name but a few.

10.0 Equal Opportunity Implications

10.1 None

11.0 Environment, Biodiversity and Climate Change Implications

11.1 None.

12.0 Risk Assessment

- 12.1 As indicated earlier this report has resulted in officers completing and reviewing a water safety risk assessment for this location and other Council owned ponds.
- 12.2 There has been no official incidents reported to the Council of users falling into this pond or any near misses.
- 12.3 For the reasons set out in the report, the risk of an incident is considered low, but not impossible.
- 12.4 However, given the reported incident referred to in this report, consideration needs to be given whether the installation of a life buoy would be a worthwhile or proportionate response in managing the residual risk.

13.0 General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

- 13.1 Is any personal or sensitive data required for this proposal which may have any implications for GDPR? **NO**

14.0 Recommendations

- 14.1 It is recommended that Members:-
1. Receive the report
 2. Confirm the officer's recommendation that a life buoy is not purchased and installed at School Aycliffe wetlands.
 3. Confirm the officers recommendation that a life buoy is not purchased and installed at Aycliffe Nature Park.

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