

Committee(s)	Dated:
Port Health and Environmental Services Committee	28 March 2023
Subject: Improvements to methodology of the City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	11
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	Y
If so, how much?	£4,800
What is the source of Funding?	£4,800 City's Cash Grant
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	Y
Report of: Executive Director, Environment	For Decision
Report author: Gavin Stedman, Port Health & Public Protection Director	

Summary

This report sets out proposed improvements to the methodology used in the City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment which will serve to reduce fish mortality rates. These changes are recommended following consultation with angling associations and experienced anglers who assist with the organisation of, and take part in, the Experiment. A commitment is also made to seek additional funding from external sources towards the cost of the Experiment.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Approve the 51st City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment to proceed in 2023 on the basis that the proposed improvements to angling methodology are implemented and additional external funding is sought.
- Approve the grant of £4,800 from City's Cash to partially fund the 2023 Experiment.

Main Report

Background

1. The City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment has been held annually since 1973. The Experiment takes the form of an angling competition, with the objective to establish the environmental condition of the Thames through the variety, number and size of fish species caught.

2. Over the past 50 years, the Thames Fishery Research Experiment has become a highly regarded event which brings together individuals and groups with an interest in marine conservation. With the inclusion of school and youth participation, conservation is embedded in future generations. It is one of the longest-running citizen science projects, producing a reliable historical scientific data set which is valued by stakeholders and has achieved its objective of demonstrating the improved cleanliness and health of the river Thames. The results are shared with partner organisations including the Environment Agency and the PLA, as well as with researchers and members of the river community.
3. At the meeting of the Port Health and Environmental Services Committee on 29 November 2022, Members were supportive, in principle, of the continuation of the Experiment and for the 51st event to proceed in October 2023. However, prior to final approval being granted, officers were asked to review the angling methodology and suggest improvements in order to reduce fish mortality. Members also asked that consideration be given to securing additional funding from partner organisations.

Current Position

4. The Experiment uses hook and line angling which is one of the three main techniques used for fish surveying for scientific study. All three methods result in a small but significant mortality rate, especially for weaker species like Whiting. Mortality rates are much lower for other hardier species.
5. As the water quality in the river Thames has improved, the numbers of Whiting visiting the middle Thames have increased significantly and this is very much highlighted whilst examining the results of the Experiment, especially from the 1990s onwards. Inevitably, this has resulted in numbers of dead or dying Whiting being seen on the surface of the water following capture, measuring and release.
6. Anglers and organisers have recognised this unintended consequence and have attempted to reduce mortality rates by introducing a fish handling code of practice and altering the competition rules. However, with the sheer number of Whiting being caught, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reduce mortality further.

Suggested improvements

7. The current fish handling code of practice (last issued 2016) will be reviewed and updated. Each angler will be issued with a copy on the day of the Experiment and asked to 'sign up' to comply with the practice.
8. The number of points awarded for Whiting will be reduced and the number of points awarded for the rarer species will be increased, incentivising anglers to target species differently.

9. In order to reduce the length of time that the fish are out of the water, anglers will record Whiting themselves, rather than waiting for a Steward to be available. The fish shall be unhooked and returned to the water immediately before being recorded; they will not be measured. Trust will be a key element amongst the anglers.
10. Stewards will continue to record and measure all other fish landed. They will oversee the return of all fish, except specimens of interest, to the river. Non-Whiting species are hardier and have a higher survival rate.
11. The Experiment provides valuable data to scientists and partner organisations on the size of the species recorded. To maintain this important element for Whiting, the Head Steward will observe samples of the Whiting being returned and estimate the average size without handling the fish.
12. Following the 2023 Experiment, the effectiveness of the revised practices will be reviewed in consultation with representatives from the anglers, stewards and partner organisations. Any further improvements will be identified and introduced in the following year.

Funding

13. The Experiment is partially funded by a grant of £4,800 from City's Cash, as well as any financial contributions received from partner organisations. The balance is paid from the Port Health local risk budget.
14. In advance of each year's Experiment, we approach a number of organisations with an interest in marine conservation and/or the health and sustainability of the River Thames, to invite them to become involved in the event and/or provide financial support. Unfortunately, in recent years, donations from other sources have reduced with just three offering support in 2022.
15. Based on 2022 costs, if the 2023 Experiment proceeds, the estimated cost to the local risk budget will be approximately £6,500. Therefore, in 2023, we will endeavour to identify additional potential supporters and seek further funding.

Recommendations

16. I recommend that your Committee approves the 51st Thames Fishery Research Experiment to proceed in October 2023 on the condition that the proposed improvements to angling methodology are implemented, and further financial support is sought from external sources.
17. The March 2016 Policy and Resources Committee agreed the transfer of funding commitments from Finance Grants Sub Committee to the relevant Committees for ongoing administration. You are also required to review and approve the annual grant from City's Cash to deliver the Experiment. The amount of the proposed grant for the Fishing Experiment in 2023/24 is £4,800.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

18. **Strategic implications** - The City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment supports the aims and outcomes of the City's Corporate Plan 2018-23, particularly:
 - 4a. *Bring individuals and communities together to share experiences and promote wellbeing, mutual respect and tolerance.*
 - 11a. *Provide a clean environment and drive down the negative effects of our own activities.*
 - 11c. *Provide environmental stewardship and advocacy, in use of resources, emissions, conservation, greening, biodiversity and access to nature.*
19. **Financial implications** – The Experiment is partly funded by a grant from City's Cash and from financial contributions made by partner organisations. The balance is paid from the local risk budget. Further funding from partner organisations will be sought to offset the costs of the 51st Experiment.
20. **Climate implications** - The City of London Thames Fishery Research Experiment encourages sustainability and conservation. It is one of the oldest citizen science projects and encourages young people to become involved in conservation of the river Thames.

Conclusions

21. It is recognised that changes to the methodology of the Experiment are required in order to reduce fish mortality and better support the marine conservation and sustainability objectives. With the introduction of the changes recommended in this report, stress levels to fragile species should be significantly lessened, reducing mortality whilst ensuring that the data collected remains sufficiently consistent to assess year on year improvements in water quality and fish populations. To reduce the financial burden to the City of London, further efforts will be made to seek additional funding from partner organisations.

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