

## **DORSET BIRD CLUB**

### **SHAPING THE FUTURE: STEPS TO SUCCESS**

#### **SUMMARY**

Recognising that the Bird Club needs to address concerns for the future, members of the Committee undertook a series of conversations with bird- and nature-related partner organisations in Dorset during 2023. These were extremely helpful and gave the Committee a clearer idea about the main issues and how they might be addressed. Following these discussions, a working group was formed to help develop ideas for moving the Club forward. As a result of working group meetings in February and March 2024, a set of proposals has been made to address the key topics of expanding membership, supporting members, attracting volunteers, appealing to different groups of people, promoting our brand and supporting conservation initiatives.

This document sets out a long-term strategy and ‘stepping stones’ arising from discussions with the partners and working group. The many actions, all of them important, will require prioritising so that they can be delivered by our small Committee with the help of others. Attracting volunteers will be a crucial first step as the rest can only be achieved with help. Achieving the long-term goals may take years rather than months: up to five years is probably a realistic horizon. However, by addressing these steps in order of priority, significant progress can be made quickly – in fact some have already been put in place. Implementation will require a ‘call to action’ to Committee members, Trustees, volunteers and members.

This document is for presentation to the Committee and Trustees in May 2024 and to the Club’s AGM on 25 July 2024.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Dorset Bird Club was formed in 1986 when it split from the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society. At that time in the UK, there was a large body of keen young birdwatchers who started in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and formed the core membership of most county bird clubs, and still do. Dorset Bird Club’s core membership has remained, but is now predominantly males aged over fifty. The Club’s image probably reflects a certain stereotype, which may not appeal to others.

Dorset Bird Club is not alone in this. A BTO survey in 2023 found that 65% of bird clubs were worried about the future, the main cause for concern being ageing membership, followed by the need to find new committee members and volunteers. A survey for Birdwatch magazine the same year found that 57% of bird clubs were finding it harder to recruit volunteers for key committee roles. However, that survey found some good news – for example, 47% of clubs had increased their membership in the last 10 years – and it identified good practices for giving new members a warm welcome and involving young people and women.

Now is a time of great opportunity, with growing interest in birds, conservation and the environment. We know there are many young, enthusiastic birdwatchers in the county, many of whom are employed in professional roles in conservation, many of them female. And we know from the number of people who follow the Club’s social media that there are thousands of people with a keen interest, who regularly photograph, study, survey, report or count birds in Dorset. We currently have 6,050 followers on X (formerly Twitter) and 3,900 members of our Facebook group, but less than 450 Club members.

Increasing the size of the Club's membership may not be essential from a financial point of view – the rise in annual fee from January 2024 means that the Club's income should usually cover its expenditure – but is extremely important to breathe new life into the Club and its leaders, and to serve all those who are interested in Dorset's birds. We need to make sure that the Club is welcoming and appealing to all.

As previously mentioned, the Club's Committee undertook a series of conversations with our bird- and nature-related partner organisations in 2023, to ask their views about the Club, seek suggestions for change, and consider possible areas for future collaboration. These conversations were extremely helpful and positive. Partners value our annual bird report, data management, newsletter and social media but were less enthusiastic about our website, indoor and outdoor meetings and our conservation efforts. We were delighted that all partners value their relationship with the Club, and that many saw potential for useful collaboration in the future.

Following these conversations, a working group met in February and March 2024 to help us work out how to bring about the changes we need. The group helped us to frame a draft vision for the future and to identify key areas we should address to achieve that.

## **WHERE WE WANT TO BE: OUR VISION**

Our vision for the future is of a Club that:

- continues to do what we do well: striving for excellence in data recording, the annual bird report, daily bird sightings news, regular newsletters, and informative social media.
- provides more to meet the expectations of younger and more casual birdwatchers: more talks, walks, and opportunities to meet other like-minded people.
- makes new members feel welcome and valued.
- has a small, purposeful committee supported by a large team of volunteers, sharing tasks so that no-one feels overloaded.
- has a diverse membership, who feel involved with the Club.
- has close links with other bird- and nature-related organisations, collaborating for mutual benefit and to further conservation goals.
- supports the development of informal local bird groups, especially in the north and west of the county.
- is an active partner in conservation measures, including supporting farmers and landowners interested in nature-friendly farming or landscape recovery.
- has a modern, attractive and up-to-date website that is easy to navigate and use.
- is a recognised and respected brand, which partner organisations want to work with.

## **WHAT WE NEED TO DO: STEPPING STONES**

The working group represented a diverse range of age, gender, birdwatching and conservation experience within Dorset. We have presented the group's feedback about the Club and ideas for moving forward under six headings: expanding membership; supporting members; attracting volunteers; appealing to different groups of people; promoting our brand; and supporting conservation initiatives. The following sections incorporate the working group's suggestions along with those from partners and others.

### **Expanding membership**

**Although our membership is stable, it is mainly men, many of whom are experienced birders who are at or near retirement age. This does not reflect the birdwatching community in Dorset as it is now, which is far more diverse and with a much wider range of interest and knowledge. We need to broaden the membership and appeal not just to our long-standing members.**

- People living in Weymouth/Portland and Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole are well served by local RSPB, Portland Bird Observatory, Birds of Poole Harbour and CHOG. We should increase our focus on the rural north and west of the county.
- Affiliation with local birding or nature groups would bring mutual benefit, more scope for joint events, and more opportunity to attract new members.
- We need to market ourselves more. Opportunities to have stands at events, give out leaflets and give talks aren't being taken up as we don't have the necessary volunteer resources, so we need to grow our leadership team to do more.
- Joining the Club requires a paper form and a PayPal account, but our target group would expect to be able to join using a smartphone.
- People don't receive automatic reminders when their membership lapses, as they would expect.
- New members should be made welcome. We suggest regular 3-monthly meetings hosted by Committee members for tea/coffee and a spot of birdwatching nearby.
- Welcome pack should include a copy of the latest Dorset Bird Report (already achieved).
- The membership section of the Club's website should be separated from the rest. The general website and the membership part address different target audiences and need different expertise to set up and maintain.
- The Club's Facebook account should have a link to the website membership page.

### Supporting members

**Current members seem very happy with the bird report, newsletter, daily sightings blog and our social media but many expect more social interaction and opportunities to get together with like-minded people. This was the number one reason for joining bird clubs identified in the BTO 2023 survey. The Club's indoor and outdoor meetings are poorly attended. A wider membership should bring people who are eager to learn and can contribute to the Club.**

- Emphasis on new members and 'learners': bird i.d. walks, help with surveys etc.
- Use social media to give bird i.d. tips (now ongoing) and advice on where to go birding.
- Joint talks and walks with local groups and partner organisations (trial run with Dorchester Bird Group at Silverlake on 25th February 2024).
- Use Zoom to stream and record meetings, to make more accessible and to enable people to catch up if they miss.
- Special bird walks for volunteers, new members, younger people.
- Out-of-hours events for people who work.
- Have some fun events occasionally, and surveys that everyone can take part in.
- The November 2024 Conference will be a good opportunity to meet, network, and learn about our partner organisations.

### Attracting volunteers

**The Club has about 40 volunteers – not counting the Committee – helping with data, recording, report-writing and social media. This is almost 10% of our membership but to do what's needed requires more people taking on voluntary leadership and support roles. Those who volunteer enjoy it and find it fulfilling, but people don't want to over-commit. We need to make volunteering rewarding and appealing.**

- Publish a regularly updated list of manageable things we need help with:
  - Website restyling and co-ordination (IT skills required).
  - Digital membership lead (IT skills required).
  - Membership support – to send reminders, field enquiries etc.
  - Events support – to help arrange and publicise walks and talks.

- People willing to train less experienced birders in survey skills.
- A conservation leader to link with other conservation bodies to offer help with local conservation projects (part implemented).
- Younger people to build a Dorset network with BTO Youth leaders, Osprey Leadership Foundation, UK Youth for Nature, Bournemouth University, Kingston Maurward College etc.
- A leader to help co-ordinate Dorset Swift Groups.
- Local Club members to set up DBC-affiliated bird groups around rural towns such as Blandford, Sherborne, Shaftesbury, Sturminster Newton and Wimborne.
- Younger people to set up and administer social media accounts for the Club, such as Instagram.
- Recognise that personal approaches to people are usually more successful than general publicity. Even if they decline, people are usually flattered to be asked.
- Recognise that core transferable skills (e.g. IT, accounting, graphic design etc.) are more important than birding skills for most volunteer roles.
- Promote volunteering opportunities through Bournemouth University Volunteering <https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/students/things-do/volunteering>.
- Explore possibility of arranging placements for work experience, e.g. with Kingston Maurward students; DWT often get asked about placements but don't have capacity.
- Explore funding part-time fixed-term volunteer development post to help deliver some of this.
- Explore funding possibilities such as:
  - Dorset Community Foundation: Grants for Groups <https://www.dorsetcommunityfoundation.org/apply-for-a-grant/grants-for-groups/>.
  - Dorset National Landscape Sustainable Development Fund <https://dorset-nl.org.uk/resource/sdf-fund-2023-24/> – for areas within the Dorset National Landscape, formerly known as Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- Use social media and newsletters to promote the image of volunteering being enjoyable and rewarding.
- Give time and energy to volunteers. They appreciate support, encouragement and special activities just for them such as walks and get-togethers.

### Appealing to different groups of people

**We need to broaden our horizon to appeal to the wider, more diverse birdwatching community that we now have in Dorset. We need the contributions, presence, and perspectives of different groups of people within the Club, including younger people, women, people from ethnic minorities, disabled birders and members of the LGBTQ+ community - everyone needs to be made to feel welcome. Many say they wouldn't want to join a bird club because they wouldn't feel connected socially and would probably feel uncomfortable. There need to be special things that appeal to a wider demographic.**

- Use social media and newsletter to promote the image of birding being fun and sociable.
- Use Instagram to connect with younger people – Facebook is just for oldies these days!
- Explore automatic feeding of Club posts from Twitter/X into Instagram.
- Images (with permission!) of younger people, women birders, people from ethnic minorities to feature in newsletter, on website, in social media.
- Extend free Youth Membership deal for under-25s to include Portland Bird Observatory as well as CHOG and DBC.

- Link with BTO youth team, Osprey Leadership Foundation, ringing groups where there are already many keen young birders.
- Create opportunities for young people and less experienced birders to learn from older, more experienced ones.
- Have sessions led by young birders at future conferences (as in November 2024 conference).
- Promote locally-based buddying/car sharing schemes for people aged 18+.
- Consider whether the currently under-used Women's WhatsApp group is valued; if so revitalise to encourage group members to meet up and go birding or to events together – or replace with something more inclusive.
- Publish information about accessibility to birding sites for people with reduced mobility.
- Have loan binoculars available at walks and outdoor events.
- Promote schemes for recycling binoculars and telescopes to younger people.
- Show no tolerance of discriminatory behaviour on the Club's social media.
- Encourage 'calling out' of discriminatory behaviour in the field.

### **Promoting the brand**

**The Dorset Bird Club is not as widely recognised as a brand as it should be. People are often unclear about its purpose and how it differs from the numerous other bird-related organisations in the county. Our conversations with these partners have clarified that we are interested in collaboration, not competition with them. Our aims and interests need to be made clear to everyone. The brand name – Dorset Bird Club – may not need to change but our image does.**

- Develop a clear vision statement, mission statement and values that encapsulate how we want the Club to develop.
- Consider a change of name to 'Dorset Birds'.
- Consider a new logo or emblem.
- Improve look of website – needs a major 'fashion-up'!
- Give talks about what the Club does – have a standard presentation.
- Have a simple A5 flyer that can be put in key places.
- Send monthly newsletter by email to Club members about events in an exciting, clear and attractive way. Explore MailChimp as a possible way to do this (subject to cost) <https://mailchimp.com/?currency=GBP>.
- Committee and lead volunteers to use brand logo at the foot of emails (in progress).

### **Supporting conservation initiatives**

**The Club's own conservation efforts have been low-key in recent years, although Club leaders are involved in supporting some great projects by others such as at Arne Moors and Lytchett Bay, and we try to promote all new projects through social media, newsletter and annual report. Hands-on conservation is a great way to get people involved and we could do more to support partner organisations when they put on open-to-all conservation events. But it's not all about habitat creation and improvement – we need to get involved with farmers and landowners too.**

- Create links, through Dorset Wildlife Trust and others, with farmers and landowners interested in rewilding or adopting nature-friendly farming.
- Offer data support to let people know what birds use their land.
- Offer (cautious) help for bird-friendly farmers with bird surveys. Some farmers and landowners may be willing to pay for surveys by birders.
- Understand how to access agri-environmental grants, so that we can advise others.
- Get Club members involved with significant nature recovery projects such as Wareham Arc.

- Link with Dorset Wildlife Trust, Dorset National Landscape, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), farmer clusters and Dorset and BCP Council Countryside teams.
- Work with local groups such as Bridport Bird Club and Dorchester Bird Group, who may share the same goals.

## **NEXT STEPS**

**This is a long-term strategy which may take five years to achieve. But by taking a series of small steps in order of priority we can start making changes now, and already have. It requires a 'Call to Action' to Committee, members and volunteers to energise people and make sure the challenges are shared out so that it's manageable for everyone and no-one is overloaded. But if we achieve these goals through sharing and collaborating we should bring the Club to a position where it is fit for the future.**

**The most immediate priority is to attract more volunteers to help Committee Members and Trustees deliver the changes.**

## **PROCESS**

- Present to Committee and Trustees on 21 May 2024.
- Start work to agree vision statement, mission statement and values alongside taking the strategy forward.
- Seek approval at AGM on 25 July 2024.
- Prioritise actions and agree implementation plan.
- Include regular reviews of progress and updates to strategy over next five years.
- Implementation starts now, in fact it started some time ago.

## **DELIVERY**

- A 'Call to Action' for Committee, volunteers and members.
- Regular communication with our volunteers, members and partners on progress, challenges, achievements.
- Updates on social media.
- Celebrate achievements and successes.

**HEARTFELT THANKS TO WORKING GROUP MEMBERS AND TO ALL THE PEOPLE FROM PARTNER ORGANISATIONS WE HAVE MET OVER THE LAST YEAR OR SO, WHO KINDLY GAVE US FEEDBACK AND IDEAS, AND HAVE SUGGESTED WAYS FOR STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIPS.**

30 April 2024