

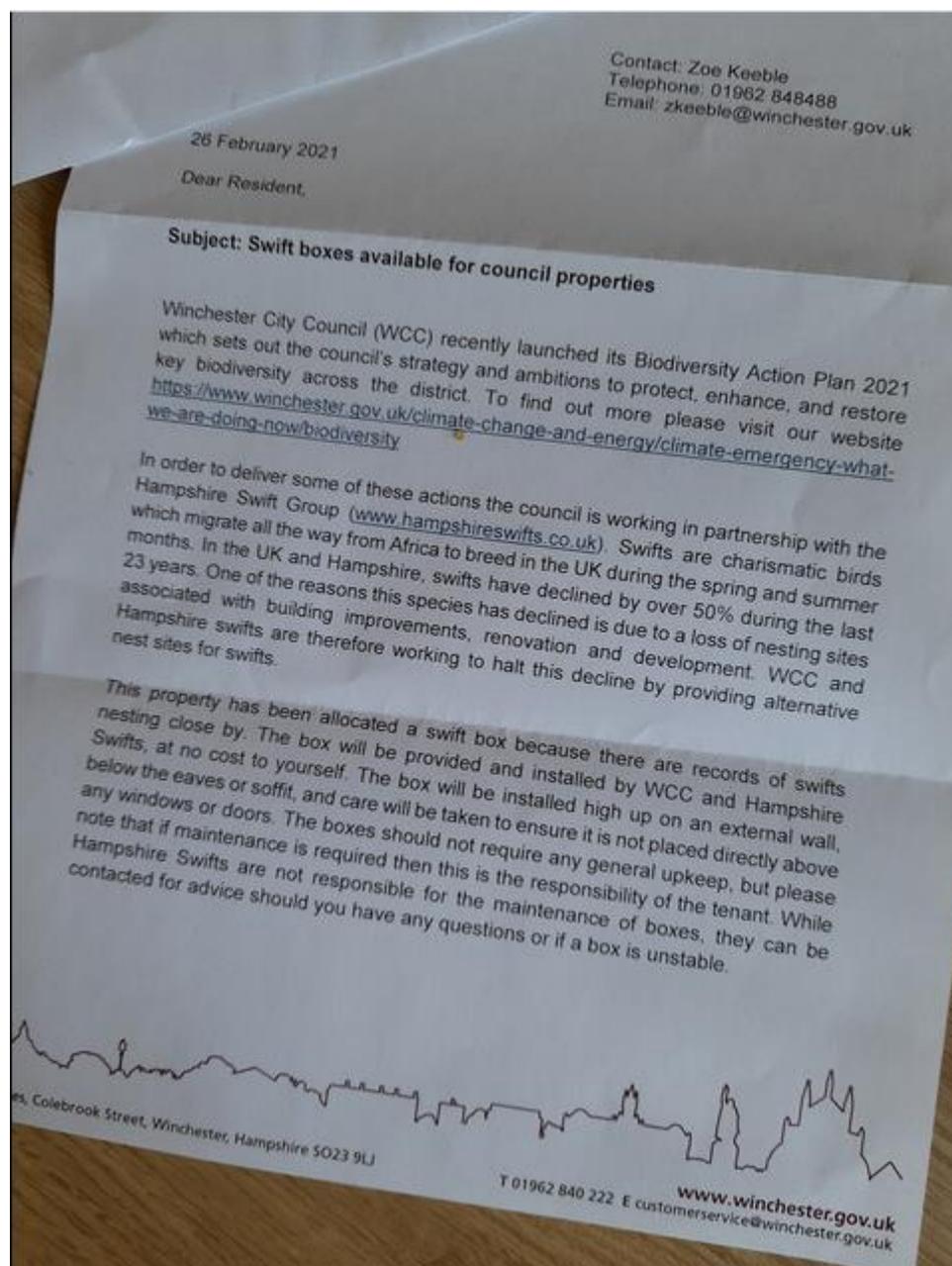
Urban Wildlife – Correspondence from Councillor Bullen.

You will recall that some time ago Colin asked me to send an email in connection with Urban Wildlife

The focus of this email will be swifts but the wider campaign also includes bats, bees, hedgehogs, house martins and swallows

Many Authorities are beginning to recognise the importance of urban wildlife in connection with bio-diversity

One such is Winchester which only this week has supported installation of swift nest boxes. There are examples listed below. This letter from Winchester City Council was recently shared with me:



I have been looking for something to "grab the attention" of the Borough Council and the Environment & Communities Panel, here it is:

The Swift

1. Swifts are Unique

Swifts only nest in buildings and therefore they are 100% reliant on humans providing and protecting their nest sites*

Many swift nest sites are in old buildings which have been occupied for generations

As old buildings are refurbished, insulated, re-roofed or replaced with new ones, the old-fashioned eaves and gable gaps where Swifts used to nest are lost. This, combined with changes in farming world-wide, requiring the massive use of insecticides, removes the food of insectivorous birds like Swifts from the environment

In Norfolk we have recently seen a boom in refurbishment of old properties. Every refurbished property has the potential for closing off a nest hole or destroying a nest

I have approached the Planning Dept. and they kindly advised that as the Borough Council are the largest property developer in the Borough they are best placed to protect and provide sites for swift nest boxes without the complication of adding conditions to Planning Guidelines

2. Swifts live in the air and other facts

On leaving their nest young swifts do not land for *at least* 18 months.

Swifts feed, sleep and mate on the wing. Swifts migrate to southern Africa every year - a round trip of at least 10,000 miles, over Europe, The Mediterranean, The Sahara, central Africa to their wintering grounds – we don't exactly know where our swifts spend the winter

Swifts can fly up to 500 miles per day and if the weather is bad locally, Norfolk swifts can even fly to Europe to feed

Swifts pair for life and they are loyal to their nest sites and return every

3. Declining numbers – the frightening bit

The UK population of Swifts, calculated from published data (BBS) and published estimates (Musgrove et al), declined from 133,600 pairs in 1994 to 52,000 pairs in 2019. That is a decline of 81,600 pairs (61.1%) in 25 years, running at 5% every year since 2009

These figures certainly apply to Norfolk

4. The Borough Council and Urban Wildlife

The Borough Council can demonstrate our commitment to wildlife by adopting a policy of supporting urban wildlife. This can be a “good news” story for the Borough Council (please see examples below of initiatives by other Councils and organisations including the BBC article this week)

The Royal Institute for British Architects (RIBA) recommends in its publication "Designing for Biodiversity " a ratio of one new nest place for every new housing unit. An increasing number of local authorities are saying the same. If this is implemented then we will be a long way down the road to creating the right conditions for a Swift recovery.

As swifts rely on buildings for their survival we have a responsibility to help them

As controller of Planning and the largest property developer in the area The Borough Council has by association the responsibility to protect wildlife in our care. The Borough's responsibilities extend further than human residents and includes the natural environment and Bio-Diversity has now been recognised by the Borough as a crucial responsibility

The Coronavirus pandemic and associated lock down has demonstrated how important wildlife is to people wellbeing. Engagement and awareness of the wildlife which lives with and around us can only be good for our communities and for the future of the Borough and its residents

5. The Emotional bit

It is difficult for some to accept but swifts live in a different world to people – the air (as mentioned before they eat/sleep and mate on the wing and they do not land for at least 18 months after leaving the nest)

Swifts are not aware of people – people do not feature in their lives other than by destroying their homes

Swifts can't be handled or cuddled and therefore they can be at an “emotional disadvantage” as it is easier for people to relate to and support more accessible animals such as seals and badgers

The problems swifts face are associated with human habitation, even if we have nature reserves, wild habitat and farmland they does not help swifts as they live with us and in our buildings

6. Conclusion

The Borough Council can make a tangible difference

The Borough Council is in a unique position to help and encourage urban wildlife

The Borough Council can take a lead proving our environmental credentials and commitment to bio-diversity

In co-operation with other organisations action can be taken at minimal or even *zero cost* to the Borough.

There is no time to lose – swifts, swallows house and sand martins are now heading back from the wintering grounds in Africa, hedgehogs will soon be coming out of hibernation as will bats – we should look after them and their homes

We can make a difference - now

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Recent articles:

13 February 2021 - BBC News: Edinburgh aims to become sanctuary for swifts as numbers decline:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-56009892>

Planning Advice 2020: Use of Swift Bricks in New Developments in Leicestershire and Rutland:

https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2020/6/29/F_S10-Swift-advice-for-planners.pdf

16/06/20: Advice for building developers aims to boost Breckland's biodiversity

<https://www.breckland.gov.uk/article/14771/16-06-20-Advice-for-building-developers-aims-to-boost-Breckland-s-biodiversity>

Swift community action to help 'amazing' birds in South Cambs

"The Over and Swavesey Swift Conservation Project 2020 has installed more than 120 nest boxes under the eaves or behind the brickwork of homes, offices, a primary school and a Memorial Hall with a *£5,000 grant from South Cambridgeshire District Council*"

<https://www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk/news/swift-community-action-help-%E2%80%98amazing%E2%80%99-birds-south-cambs>

Parma goes "Swift Friendly"/SEO, The BirdLife partner in Spain, orders 330 UK-made GRP quadruple Swift nest boxes for installation on a huge housing project in Madrid/"Bristol builds snug homes for Swifts!"/14 Swift nest boxes go up on Zaragoza's Fire Station

Oxford Swift City

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/rspb-news/news/stories/oxford-swift-city/?fbclid=IwAR0RxuJ>

Belfast Swift City

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/safeguarding-species/swiftmapper/case-studies/belfast-swift-city/>

<https://www.swift-conservation.org/news.htm>

But sadly the Swift population decline continues unabated

Dick Newell of Action for Swifts, the East Angliandesigners and manufacturers of Swift Bricks for all sites and specialised nest boxes for church towers, has made some calculations from trends derived from the British Trust for Ornithology's Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) between 1994 and 2019, as well as population estimates for 2009 published in British Birds Magazine (Musgrove et al), and has created the graphic on the right from these figures.

A good part of the reason for the decline is loss of nest places. As old buildings are refurbished, insulated, re-roofed or replaced with new ones, the old-fashioned eaves and gable gaps where Swifts used to nest are lost. This, combined with changes in farming world-wide, requiring the massive use of insecticides, removing the food of insectivorous birds like Swifts from the environment, makes the situation very difficult.

But creating new nest places for Swifts should be easy. The Government is planning for unprecedented increases in house building, millions of new homes are in the pipeline. If every one of these new homes and related infrastructure like schools and hospitals, factories, offices and shopping centres had nest places for Swifts, then more than enough would have been done to support Swifts, and other birds as well as several species will cheerfully use Swift nest boxes and bricks too.

The Royal Institute for British Architects (RIBA) recommends in its publication "Designing for Biodiversity " (available via our Shopping Page) a ratio of one new nest place for every new housing unit. An increasing number of local authorities are saying the same. If this is implemented (and you can do your bit by commenting to this effect on all the Planning Applications in your borough) then we will be a long way down the road to creating the right conditions for a Swift recovery.

The graphic opposite shows that the UK population of Swifts, calculated from published data (BBS) and published estimates (Musgrove et al), declined from 133,600 pairs in 1994 to 52,000 pairs in 2019. That is a decline of 81,600 pairs (61.1%) in 25 years, running at 5% every year since 2009.

*(there are a few examples of swifts nesting elsewhere, such as Hunstanton Cliffs, but they are so few as not to affect or distort the figures)

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