Press release: Environment Agency shortlisted for UK River Prize 2017

The Environment Agency has been praised for an ambitious restoration project on Hampshire's famous River Avon.

The agency's 'whole river approach' to restoration and natural flood management impressed judges who voted it the best entry in the 'catchment category' of the 2017 UK River Prize, a national competition that celebrates the most innovative and successful river projects across England, Scotland and Wales.

As category winner, the Hampshire Avon project automatically qualifies as a finalist. The Environment Agency is up against three other finalists – each winners of separate categories – vying for the top UK River Prize. The overall winner will be announced at a special ceremony in Brighton next month and presented with a trophy and cash prize.

Russell Spencer for the Environment Agency:

> This is well earned recognition for the efforts of many people and organisations working together to help realise the vision for the Avon catchment – and a great springboard for the next phase of the programme, where we would like many more to be involved.

The River Avon Restoration Project was set up to restore the River Avon Special Area of Conservation (SAC) to a natural river system supporting chalk stream habitats and wildlife to meet the government's obligations under the EU Water Framework and Habitats Directive.

The aim of the project was to restore reaches of the river most damaged in the past by man-made physical changes including the straightening or dredging of the river channel and construction of weirs and sluices. Various methods have been used to improve habitats and restore natural flows and functions including the removal, modification and bypassing of structures and re-alignment of the river to more natural positions in the floodplain.

Led by the Environment Agency, the project is supported by a number of organisations including Natural England, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Wessex Chalk Streams and Rivers Trust, Wessex Water, Wiltshire Fishery Association, National Farmers Union and Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust.

The restoration started in 2012 and will culminate in the completion of Phase 1 of the project later this year. Further work is needed to restore the remaining 185km of river and enable the catchment to respond and adapt to climate change.

Notes to Editor:

The UK River Prize celebrates the achievements of individuals and organisations who improve the health of our rivers and catchments and recognise the importance of healthy rivers and the benefits they bring to society. It is run by the The River Restoration Centre who will announce the overall winner of the UK River Prize at its annual dinner and conference in Brighton on April 4.

In 2009, the need for a strategic approach to catchment river restoration was identified by the European LIFE funded Strategic Restoration and Management (STREAM) partnership. This led to the creation of the River Avon Restoration Programme (RARP).

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Press release: Response to the Home Office review of the retention and use of custody images

The use of facial images has been a regular part of policing since the development of photography led to the taking of custody images. The current use of facial images is different in that images are now digital, can be housed on a national database and searched using software based on algorithms that claim to find possible matches.

The use of such images is important in policing and it is in the public interest that they are used to prevent, detect or prosecute crime. However, because capturing, storing and searching such images is intrusive of individual privacy there is a need to ensure that the use of facial images is within a governance framework that strikes an acceptable and proportionate balance between public benefit and individual privacy.

In 2012 the High Court held that the governance framework then used by the police was not proportionate in its retention rules and as such was unlawful. The court drew attention to the 'risk of stigmatisation of those entitled to the presumption of innocence' and that holding images of those unconvicted for a long period (a minimum of 6 years) was not proportionate. They added that retaining images in such cases for minors would be especially harmful.

The recently published Home Office review of the use and retention of custody images makes proposals as to a future governance of the police use of facial images in order to make their use more proportionate in response to the Court's ruling.

The review still proposes that a routine police review of retention of those who should be presumed innocent should happen only after 6 clear years for a Group 3 offence and 10 clear years for Group 1 or 2 offences. The only response to the Court judgment is that such individuals may apply to the police to have their images deleted after the conclusion of proceedings. In considering such applications there should be a 'presumption in favour of deletion' and a 'strong presumption' in the case of those under 18 but that the police are entitled to refuse such an application.

Adding this limited application process does add a degree of proportionality but whether this would be enough in the face of any future challenge may depend on how many presumed innocent people apply successfully to have their images deleted before the minimum 6 year review period. The nearest equivalent existing process is that of the records deletion process whereby people can apply to the police to have their arrest records and/or biometric records deleted from the Police National Computer.

In the year ending on 31 March 2016, Home Office statistics show that 896,209 people were arrested for a notifiable offence and in the same period 1,003

applied to have their police records deleted, of which 233 were accepted by the police.

The review leaves the governance and decision making of this new process entirely in the hands of the police but future public confidence might require a greater degree of independent oversight, transparency and assurance than is proposed.

The applications process, the power to nevertheless retain and the routine reviews mean that the compliance costs of this proposal will be high because individual decisions will have to be made in every case. Although the review proposes that guidance should be issued about making such decisions there still might be variation in decision making between forces resulting in a postcode lottery as to whether images are retained.

In addition, deletion will happen some time after the police decide to take no further action against a subject and it is not clear how far legacy holdings will be weeded against these proposed new retention rules. If there is a ‘presumption of deletion’ then these costs could all be avoided and the process made more timely by automatic deletion. This could be built into Police National Database and the next generation of databases currently being developed.

The review suggests that the retention and use of facial images is ‘generally less intrusive (than DNA or fingerprints) as many people’s faces are on public display all the time’. I disagree with that assertion. In fact for that reason the use of facial images is more intrusive because image capture can be done using cameras in public places and searched against government databases without the subject being aware. Facial images are no longer only used solely for custody purposes and image capture and facial searching capabilities have and are being used by the police in public places.

The review points out that the police are currently using a number of different databases and matching software products. The Police National Database currently holds 19 million images and that does not include all police forces and most notably the images held on a separate database by the largest police force, the Metropolitan Police Service. The review provides no statistical information in relation to how these databases are being used or to what effect.

The fact that so many different systems are in use means that the software used is of varying quality and the consequent processes of interpretation will also vary. In spite of that the review encourages all forces to pool their images in the existing national national. As a recent report by HMIC(S) concluded: ‘This means that differing standards are being applied to a common UK database’.

Use of facial image database searching for intelligence purposes requires that users understand the scientific quality and reliability of the software and use a common process of interpretation and assessment that takes account of any weaknesses or biases in the overall system. To achieve this, the police need to move to a common database, matching software and interpretive

process which can provide the best available quality and reliability and is understood by all those using the system. Such a new system ought to meet quality standards set by the Forensic Science Regulator.

Furthermore, since the review envisages future facial images database information being available to the rest of the criminal justice system then such a system needs to be totally transparent in its mode of operation if it is to meet evidential requirements.

My predecessor made similar comments about the problems with the current police use and retention of facial images.

Paul Wiles Biometrics Commissioner

Caroline Lucas: George Osborne must resign as MP

17 March 2017

*** Caroline Lucas demands answers from Prime Minister over appointment of George Osborne as Evening Standard editor**

*** Lucas: "By taking this job George Osborne has shown contempt for his constituents."**

Caroline Lucas MP has called for George Osborne to resign as an MP saying his appointment as London Evening Standard editor raises questions about his ability to serve as an MP, and the paper's impartiality.

Lucas said Osborne should at the least be stripped of his role as Privy Councillor, and asked the Prime Minister how she intends to make sure Osborne's appointment does not result in Ministers having undue influence on the paper – and vice versa.

Four parliamentary questions tabled by Lucas [1] also demand to know how Theresa May will ensure Osborne does not misuse his position as an MP to gain stories, or use Parliament's facilities for his editorial work.

Caroline Lucas MP, co-leader of the Green Party, said:

"Osborne's appointment as Editor of the Standard raises very serious questions about both his own ability to continue as an MP and the newspaper's impartiality. At the very least George Osborne should be stripped of his title as a Privy Councillor and barred from any secure briefings that the role gives him.

“The truth is that by taking this job George Osborne has shown contempt for his constituents. The only honourable thing would be to step down as an MP so he can concentrate on making money from City firms and learning how to do a job at the Standard that he’s entirely unqualified for.”

Notes:

1. Full text of Caroline Lucas’ Parliamentary Questions to the Prime Minister:

   - To ask the Prime Minister, what arrangements will be put in place by 10 Downing Street to ensure that the Editor of the London Evening Standard is not able to misuse his position as a member of the Privy Council to generate news stories based on confidential government briefings or advance notice of any prime ministerial decision to commit HM Armed Forces in enemy action; and if she will make a statement.
   - To ask the Prime Minister, what checks and balances will be put in place by 10 Downing Street to ensure that government ministers do not exert undue influence on the editorial policy of the London Evening Standard newspaper, and that the Editor of the Evening Standard does not exert undue influence on the policy positions of government ministers; and if she will make a statement.
   - To ask the Prime Minister, what arrangements will be put in place by 10 Downing Street to ensure that the Editor of the London Evening Standard newspaper is able to fully comply with three-line whips in relation to parliamentary debates and divisions; and if she will make a statement.
   - To ask the Prime Minister, what arrangements will be put in place by 10 Downing Street to ensure that the Editor of the London Evening Standard newspaper does not make inappropriate use of parliamentary estate premises and facilities when undertaking his editorial duties; and if she will make a statement.

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