

Protecting, Preserving and Promoting the River Itchen in Southampton - Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In his presentation to Southampton's historical Court Leet on 4th October 2022, Gavin Millar from the Friends of Itchen Estuary stated that:

'The Itchen Estuary has been central to the history and development of Southampton – from the Roman settlement of Clausentum, to the Saxon town of Hamwic, through to the period of industrialisation with shipbuilding and aircraft manufacturing amongst many other industries along its shores.

Over the centuries and through to the present day, Southampton citizens have made a living by this tidal river, they have fished on this river, walked by the river, swum in the river and rowed and sailed on the river.

Few cities can lay claim to a river estuary within their city boundaries. Although much of the wildlife rich salt-marshes and green riverbanks have been lost to development some still remain. The Itchen Estuary still has huge value for biodiversity, and carbon capture, and as the world's climate heats up, this estuary becomes increasingly important for countering the urban heat island we inhabit during our hotter summers.

*Despite its huge heritage, wildlife, ecological and recreational value this precious open space within Southampton faces multiple threats from pollution, from increasing restrictions to access, and from development.'*¹

Echoing Gavin's words, many of those who attended Panel meetings referenced the value of the Itchen Estuary, and the globally important non-tidal section of the river above Woodmill, to the city, recognising it to be an asset that we should cherish.

However, despite, as eloquently put by Graham Linecar from SCAPPs, *'the river giving the city its identity and a sense of place'*, he, like many, are of the view that the River Itchen in Southampton is under appreciated and is taken for granted.

The threats identified leave the river's health in the balance. A healthy river that supports abundant flora and fauna enhances our health and wellbeing, encourages recreation and active community support, and increases the desire to be by the river thereby increasing investment and economic prosperity.

A healthy river therefore leads to a vibrant river and potentially a better connected river.

Reflecting the concerns raised and the evidence presented, a different approach to the river is required. An approach that recognises the value of the River Itchen to Southampton, where the focus is on investing in the health of the river and a high quality river environment rather than, as has historically happened, exploiting the river.

Fortunately, a number of timely developments mean that this is an opportune moment to commit to the new approach. The most significant of these being the refresh of the Local Plan and the opportunity it presents to guide planning applications and shape the city as a place to 2040 and beyond.

Progress has been made, and if these opportunities are harnessed there is the potential to rise to the challenges set and to have a fluvial and tidal river that is closer

¹ [Appendix 1 Court Leet Presentments 2022.pdf \(southampton.gov.uk\)](#) – Number 8

to being of high ecological status; a distinctive waterfront that is well-designed, attractive, sensitive to the character and context of the area which also protects and enhances the natural environment; and a river that effectively links people, places and habitats.

This will contribute significantly to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the city as the foreword to Thames21 5 year plan explains:

*'A healthy and clean river is joyous and energising, it gladdens our hearts and restores our souls. It is abundant with nature and flourishing wildlife. It empowers, enables and protects human activity and achievement. A healthy river builds community. Urban and rural populations consistently gather, grow and prosper around a healthy river.'*²

Recommendations

In this report recommendations have been identified against each of the ambitions for the river. In summary, reflecting the key findings and conclusions the following actions are recommended to protect, preserve and promote the River Itchen in Southampton:

Strategic Management and Partnership Working

To facilitate improved outcomes for the River Itchen in Southampton, the following actions relating to strategic, sustainable management, relationship building, and partnership working are recommended:

1. Establish an Itchen River Forum comprising key stakeholders, including representatives from recreation users, community groups (Respect River Campaign), Wessex Rivers Trust, Southern Water, statutory agencies and the business community to develop relationships, acquire a greater understanding of the issues and to determine collective solutions.
2. Develop, through the Forum, a River Itchen vision and plan that sets clear objectives for the River Itchen in Southampton.
3. Undertake regular monitoring and evaluation to underpin the plans objectives.
4. To develop understanding and influence regarding issues impacting on the Solent coastline, the City Council should re-join Solent Forum as a full and active member.

A Healthy and Resilient River

To improve the health and resilience of the River Itchen in Southampton and move it closer to a Water Framework Directive Ecological Status rating of high, the following actions are recommended:

5. The Council works with partners to actively pursue opportunities to restore and enhance biodiversity and natural habitats along the river to improve the situation for wildlife. The Nitrogen Neutrality Scheme could be a source of funding to support such initiatives, dependent upon discussions with Natural England.

² [Thames21 5 year plan](#)

6. Whilst the Panel support the proposed additional investment in Southampton's infrastructure by Southern Water to reduce wastewater incidents, Southern Water are encouraged to follow the example set by Thames Water relating to inland waterways and provide real time information about pollution events impacting on the River Itchen. The Panel request that this is undertaken as soon as possible, via the Beachbuoy tool or through other communication outlets, to enable informed decisions to be taken.
7. To reduce and slow the run-off and pollution into the River Itchen, build sustainable drainage solutions into highway projects, as well as those mandated for new developments by the enactment of Schedule 3 of the in the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, and utilise new gully technology to limit harmful chemicals from the highways entering the watercourse.
8. If requested, the Council provides timely support to community groups in their campaign for areas of the River Itchen to be awarded Designated Bathing Water Status.
9. If pilot schemes in the River Hamble and Isle of Wight identify them to be beneficial to the river environment, the Council should support the establishment of oyster reefs in the River Itchen to help improve water quality.
10. To help reduce locally produced waste and pollution and to build upon the momentum created by the work at Chessel Bay, work with partners to develop an accreditation scheme for businesses that 'respect the river'. There is potential for this initiative to be funded through the Southampton Airport Community Fund.
11. To aid policy and decision making and encourage investment in our natural environment, consideration should be given by the Council to adopting a natural capital approach by placing a value on Southampton's natural environment.

A Vibrant River

To increase the vibrancy of the River Itchen in Southampton the following actions are recommended:

12. Whilst the Panel welcome the safeguarding of sites in the draft Local Plan for marine uses, to enable this vitally important sector to grow and prosper in Southampton it is recommended that the Council works collaboratively with partners, including British Marine, Solent Freeport, business representative organisations, and with existing marine and maritime businesses, to address the recruitment and training challenge via the Local Skills and Improvement Plan, to develop a skilled workforce now, and in the future.
13. The Panel recognise the potential of the redevelopment of the Itchen Riverside to revitalise the waterfront, enhancing the quality of the natural and built environment. The Panel would support the creation of a distinctive, design led waterfront that, through the master-planning process, integrates biodiversity, public access to the waterfront, flood resilience and high quality green spaces into its design and planning from the outset.

- 14.** In collaboration with partners, draft a 'Blue Space Strategy' for Southampton enabling a city-wide approach to recreation on the water to be developed and priorities for maintenance and infrastructure improvements to be identified.
- 15.** To enable access to the water for watercraft, review the accessibility of the public hard on the River Itchen and ensure that they are well maintained and fit for purpose.
- 16.** In support of the ambition to activate the water the Panel welcomes the work that has been undertaken by ABP in clearing the wrecks and abandoned vessels from the River Itchen and encourage them to continue delivering their plans for further clearance activity until all such vessels are removed.

A Connected River

To increase the connectivity of the River Itchen in Southampton and meet the aspirations of residents for enhanced public access to the waterfront, the following actions are recommended:

- 17.** Access to the riverfront has improved in Southampton through developments such as the boardwalk and the River Itchen Flood Alleviation Scheme (RIFAS) provides an opportunity to extend access to the river and the waterfront footpath network. The Panel recognise the intrinsic value associated with being by the river and therefore the Council should maximise opportunities, wherever they arise, to improve public access to the Itchen River in Southampton.
- 18.** The draft Waterfront Policy in the emerging City Vision Local Plan seeks to enhance public access to the waterfront wherever possible and work towards creating continuous waterfront walkways, cycleways and public spaces. To deliver on this ambition the tools available to the Council must be deployed and City Council leaders need to provide a strong message that public access to the waterfront is a priority and that the Council will pro-actively pursue Rights of Way breaches and failures to follow Section 106 agreements. This will support officers when making decisions about future developments and balancing economic interests, environmental concerns and community aspirations regarding access and connectivity. To avoid anglers from being excluded, the ability of anglers to access the water needs to be a consideration when waterfront access for new developments is determined.
- 19.** To promote and raise awareness of the 'green' riverside areas and waterside footpaths, tidy up the publicly owned open spaces and improve the signage of these routes and associated waterfront historic sights.
- 20.** The introduction of a zero-carbon water-borne, travel and transport network, connecting communities could help to create a distinctive waterfront experience in Southampton, enable businesses to connect with their workforce, and could make a significant contribution to protecting, preserving and promoting the River Itchen for years and generations to come. The Council needs to use its influence and connections to secure a Solent water taxi service, commencing initially on the River Itchen and promote within the Local Plan a requirement for new waterfront development over a certain size to include a docking facility.