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**SCRUTINY INQUIRY PANEL - PROTECTING, PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE  
RIVER ITCHEN IN SOUTHAMPTON**

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16 FEBRUARY 2023**

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**Present:** Councillors Savage (Chair), T Bunday, Cooper, and White

**Attended by hybrid:** Councillor Moulton (Vice-Chair)

11. **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (INCLUDING MATTERS ARISING)**

**Resolved:** that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2023 be approved and signed as a correct record.

12. **PROTECTING, PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE RIVER ITCHEN IN SOUTHAMPTON - HOW CAN MORE PEOPLE ENJOY THE RIVER?**

The Panel considered the report of the Scrutiny Manager detailing the issues concerning how more people could enjoy the River Itchen in Southampton.

The Panel received the following representations:

Lindsay McCulloch, Natural Environment Manager, Southampton City Council summarised the key issues about public access to the River Itchen in Southampton as:

- Riverside and recreational access to the River Itchen in Southampton ranges from excellent to non-existent.
- A notable trend is that river access reduces as you travel closer to the mouth of the estuary due to a combination of physical constraints and the historical economic uses of the river. Most economic activity has been on the west bank where land is flatter. This leaves legacy spaces for recreational access.
- Along the river open spaces occur where land is not suitable, or is no longer suitable, for commercial use. Large areas of informal green spaces exist above Woodmill that are ideal for walking and cycling.
- The east bank includes Riverside Park, a parcel of land at Bitterne Manor (the site of Clausentum), Chessel Bay and Peartree Green (that has no direct access to the river but has excellent views).
- The west bank has very limited open spaces. Small areas at Janaway Gardens and Pettinger Gardens exist and open space is to be provided at the Meridian Waterside development.
- There are about 2.5 km of footpath access through Riverside Park on the east bank, however, beyond that the footpaths move away from the river with only 380m of riverside footpath access before reaching Jurd's Lake at the mouth of the estuary.
- There are only 940m of waterside footpaths along the west bank of the river.
- The boardwalk at Bevois Valley demonstrates what can be achieved when stakeholders collaborate. The RIFAS scheme also offers the potential for additional and enhanced access to the west bank.

- There is an aspiration to develop additional waterfront access. The draft local plan states that - 'Waterfront public access to and along the city's distinctive waterfront will be enhanced wherever possible.'
- Tools exist to deliver this through planning policy and development control. There is a balance between economic interests, community aspirations for waterfront access, and reducing the impact on biodiversity and ecology. If Southampton City Council leaders provide a strong message that waterfront access is a priority it will provide a clearer steer to officers when making decisions.

Graham Linecar, Secretary of Southampton Commons and Parks Protection Society (SCAPPS) summarised the key issues about recreation, community use and access to the River Itchen in Southampton as:

- The benefit for physical health and mental well-being of being in 'green' surroundings is now widely appreciated and recognised. Such benefit is enhanced when the 'green' is complimented by the 'blue', with green spaces alongside water.
- The River Itchen is taken for granted but gives Southampton a sense of place and identity.
- Along the River Itchen more places where people can enjoy being by the river should be found with not just access but also the space and opportunity to sit and enjoy being there.
- Stretches most used are continuous routes; paths that connect from one place to another. Care and maintenance matters. High quality landscaping and regular maintenance encourages use. The more people using a path, the less the likelihood of anti-social behaviour.
- There are several riverfront green spaces which are not connected and are not part of a continuous route. Although perhaps known and used by local communities awareness of these sites should be improved. In some cases it is not immediately obvious if it is a public or private space, and means of access is hidden away. Signing could help show links from one to another to encourage more use, and there is scope for Friends' Groups to become active in care and maintenance.
- SCAPPS welcomes and supports the draft Local Plan policy of requiring public access to the waterfront and ask that is not interpreted as requiring only a narrow riverfront pedestrian walkway; it needs also to include soft and hard landscaping creating an attractive place for dawdling, for sitting and for enjoying looking-out across the river.
- There are seven public slipways on the River Itchen where you can carry in and launch small craft and not all of them are well-maintained. Other places are not formally designated which can give rise to issues with vehicles wanting access, for example at Woodmill.

Clive Aylett, 25th Southampton Sea Scouts with the permission of the Chair informed the Panel that the public hard near to St Mary's Football Stadium was currently not accessible due to the dumping of rubbish and that Crosshouse Hard, a key point for accessing the water, was in need of remedial works.

Mark Pirnie, Scrutiny Manager, Southampton City Council summarised the key issues about the important contribution played by voluntary groups in supporting the River Itchen in Southampton as:

- The various friends groups and other voluntary organisations play a vital role in the management of the river by removing litter, maintaining infrastructure, supporting flora and fauna and providing information and raising awareness.
- The numerous events organised in, on and alongside the river drive engagement and interest in the River Itchen.
- Issues relating to the need for maintenance and concerns about water pollution were raised by the friends of groups as issues that required addressing.
- Seed funding from Southampton Airport's £100,000 Community Fund could help to fund a number of initiatives.

James Hives, National Club Development Manager, British Canoeing summarised the key issues about recreation on the River Itchen in Southampton as:

- There are over twenty clubs, groups and organisations concerned with the River Itchen.
- Feedback sought for this meeting estimated that 20,000 people are active on the River Itchen.
- The River Itchen currently divides the city of Southampton geographically and is seen as dirty. However, it could be a link as a blue thread joining the communities of the city and enabling better health, environment, and cohesion as it flows through the city.
- There are multiple events that happen on the river each year bringing visitors to the city, and many businesses in the city catering to the water sports market, however this is not reflected across the city council.
- The concerns around the flood alleviation scheme and not seeing the river as part of Riverside Park have and are causing events to be moved from the city or downscaled. Over recent years opportunities such as a proposed regional White Water Paddling Venue have been lost whilst Bristol has built facilities such as the Amphitheatre to bring people to the water's edge and host events on the water.
- There are now several studies showing a link between blue space and improved health. St Denys Sailing and Rowing Club are working with SWAC to broaden the appeal of water sports to those communities who might not otherwise access the water and in Portsmouth, British Canoeing are working with Street Games to identify community hubs to improve mental health and increase participation in Paulsgrove. In Nottingham and Leicester water based Social Prescribing Schemes are flourishing, bringing different communities to the water.
- Southampton has strong sporting success across water sports, with representation in 2022 from Southampton Clubs in GB teams for sailing, rowing, kayak sprint and beach rowing. To enable these individuals to achieve there needs to be a thriving competitive grass routes scheme behind them.
- People along the river care about it, act as its eyes and ears, care for it and clean it. The recent launch of the Paddlers Code as a water based version of

the Countryside code is fast being taken up by other parts of the water sports community, and programmes such as the RYA's Green Blue or the British Canoeing Clear Access Clear Waters Campaign are looking to engage people in caring and looking after the river.

- Sewage leaks have increased fears that the river is not a healthy or pleasant spot to spend time on and around.
- The lack of toilet facilities in Riverside Park and elsewhere highlight some of the infrastructure issues around the river. The steps at Coalporters, the slipway at Crosshouse, and the "beach" at Woodmill have all been raised. In addition, the porous state of the banks upstream reduces the flow on the river and combined with the Monks Brook weir washing away at Woodmill is increasing the silting up of the river including the historic salmon pool that is important for both fishing and white-water paddling.
- Concerns have been raised about the design of the flood alleviation scheme making it difficult to access the water and the reduction in riverside parking making running events more difficult.
- Overall there is a feeling that the river and its users are a blind spot to the city, with actions being focused around land based areas and objectives such as the parks rather than the river flowing through them. A wider feeling is a lack of support for recreation be that Southampton residents not being eligible for the Hampshire Talented Athlete Scheme or the impression that clubs based at the sports centre are treated differently to those on the river being built into the Active Nation SLA, with clubs not knowing how to develop.
- Both Bournemouth and Portsmouth have blue space strategies, enabling a city-wide approach to their water. Recent examples of this proving successful are the developing British Canoeing links with Street Games in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth or the hosting of the National Beach Rowing Championships in Bournemouth. A Strategy for the River Itchen or Southampton's blue space would help to focus attention and draw together the possible developments on the river. This may also help programmes such as social prescribing to take route on the river.
- If the river had an identity such as a park or any other open space in the city there would be systems and organisations to manage the river and a mechanism of finding out who was responsible for it and who to contact.
- There is a proposal for creation of a users' group to facilitate the various clubs and organisations to engage with the council and port authority to help develop the river and its surroundings. This could create opportunities such as a river length big paddle clean up, or a mass row or paddle to the boat show.

Bill Baynes, Chairman of Southampton Sea Angling Club, with the permission of the Chair informed the panel about the lack of access to the river for anglers. They are being prohibited from fishing in places where the waterfront is owned by private companies and fear that, with more waterfront development planned, the river could be a no fishing zone. The need to include consideration of additional activities in the planning process when considering waterfront access for new developments was identified as a mechanism to protect access to the water for anglers moving forward.