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

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 OCTOBER 2022

Present: Councillors Cooper, Savage and White

Attendance via hybrid link: Councillors Bunday, Moulton

1. **ELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR**

RESOLVED that:

- (i) Councillor Savage be elected as Chair for the Municipal Year 2022/2023; and
- (ii) Councillor Moulton be elected as Vice-Chair for the Municipal Year 2022/2023.

2. **INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE**

Representations were received from Mark Pirnie, Scrutiny Manager, who was in attendance and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Panel.

Resolved: that the Inquiry Panel noted the Inquiry Terms of Reference and approved the final version of the outline inquiry project plan as presented in the report of the Director of Legal and Business Services.

3. **PROTECTING, PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE RIVER ITCHEN IN SOUTHAMPTON - INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Legal and Business Services detailing an introduction to ownership and responsibilities, legislation and guidelines and feedback from community surveys regarding the River Itchen in Southampton.

The Cabinet Member for Transport and Regeneration, Councillor Keogh, with the consent of the Chair, launched the Inquiry by outlining the importance of the River Itchen to Southampton.

The Panel received the following representations:

Dr David Rumble, CEO Wessex Rivers Trust, outlined the importance of the River Itchen within the city of Southampton and summarised the key issues as:

- The River Itchen has global importance as a spring fed chalk stream and has Special Area Conservation status due to its provision of a habitat for specific plants and animals, including Atlantic Salmon.
- The tidal zone of the River Itchen contains mud flats which form part of a Special Protected Area for bird life in the Solent.
- Industrialisation, including at the Woodmill, has had an impact upon the River Itchen and its habitats which is in contrast to the nearby River Test. It would be possible to restore lost habitats.
- The River Itchen is now recognised to have importance to people who use it recreationally, to the benefit of their health and wellbeing. It can connect communities, and people live on it and near it.

- The River Itchen is of importance to local communities and the local economy. Boatyards, marinas, auxiliary industries and aggregates businesses are based on and around it, and generate wealth and employment.
- There are concerns about the water quality. Chalk acts like a sponge and whatever was applied to land in the river's catchment area over decades can get into the river. Pollutants contaminate the river through watercourses, highways run-off, fertilisers, pesticides, sewage, industrial processes, littering and wrecks. It is noted that developers are now required to offset nitrates entering the river for new developments. This has an impact on habitats and ecology and is a problem for recreational users of the river.
- Climate change has had an impact on the River Itchen as drought has led to increased water extraction up river to provide for increasing demand whilst the Itchen Corridor is also a flood risk zone. This is likely to cause a net loss of diversity within the ecological systems of the river over coming decades.

Sam Foulds, Flood Risk Management Team Leader, and Cara Brims, Flood Risk Officer, from Southampton City Council delivered a presentation to provide an overview of ownership, legal responsibilities, users and legislation affecting the River Itchen within the city of Southampton and summarised the key issues as:

- The River Itchen is fed by multiple smaller river catchments from a wide area of Hampshire, and activities within this area will have an impact on the river.
- Land based activities will affect the water quality in the river as run-off from buildings and roads is collected by surface water sewers and drains and will enter watercourses without being treated. It is noted that new developments will include provision of sustainable drainage systems to slow flow and reduce the number of combined sewer overflows and improve the quality of highway run-off by working with nature to recharge the ground where the rain is falling.
- No single organisation oversees the management of the river. Multiple landowners and organisations have separate roles and responsibilities including:
 - The Crown Estate owns and manages most of the foreshore area between mean high water and low water marks and the bed of the estuary.
 - Southampton City Council owns areas of land along the river and small areas of the mudflats.
 - Riparian landowners own areas of land along the river.
 - Other key organisations include the Environment Agency, Southern Water Services Ltd, Associated British Ports, the Marine Management Organisation, and Natural England.
 - Each organisation has its own vision, plan, framework and strategy.
 - Southampton City Council has no single plan for the River Itchen.
 - Many Acts of Parliament, Directives and Regulations apply to the River Itchen concerning water, environment, biodiversity, drainage and flooding.

Findings from recent community surveys were reported to the Panel:

- Rose Nicole, a volunteer and member of Friends of Chessel Bay Nature Reserve and of Respect the River Campaign, addressed the Panel, summarising the key issues as:
 - Chessel Bay was designated as a nature reserve by Southampton City Council in 1989, has the longest stretch of undeveloped shoreline along the lower River Itchen and has remained a secluded haven for wildlife in a busy urbanisation.
 - Litter is a significant problem and ranges from thousands of plastic pellets produced by local factories to huge polystyrene blocks encased in concrete. Volunteers supported by officers from Southampton City Council undertake community clean-ups on Saturdays and typically remove a ton of rubbish each time.
 - The Respect the River Campaign was formed as a response to plastics pollution, but additional concerns were raised by people living, using or working on, and near, the river and their main concern was about sewage.

- Mark Pirnie, Scrutiny Manager, Southampton City Council, delivered a presentation giving an overview of the initial findings from the River Itchen Inquiry Survey and summarising the key issues as:
 - The survey was hosted on the Southampton City Council website, ran from 21 September to 3 October 2022 and asked five questions.
 - 728 responses were received. Approximately 90% of respondents were residents of Southampton.
 - When asked how people use the river the most popular response was walking or cycling along the riverbank (78%).
 - Most respondents desire improvements to water quality (87%), natural habitats (75%) and access to the waterfront (63%).
 - Detailed analysis of all the comments received has not been completed and further results will be reported to the Panel at future meetings.