



# FROME RIVER STRATEGY

## 2020 - 2030

The Friends of the River Frome  
May 2020

## BACKGROUND

This strategy was developed by a working group of the Friends of the River Frome: Richard Ackroyd, Mike Bull, Sue Everett, Grant Gellatly, Sally Greenhalgh, Teresa Hadland, Simon Hicks, Simon Keyes, John Nelson, Bill Palmer, Bob Sargent, Les Stather and Clive Stephens,

Editors: Simon Keyes & Sue Everett

We have gathered ideas, big and small, from our membership and from other organisations and individuals who have an interest in the health of the River. This strategy is only part of the story for protecting and improving our River and we will continue to support the priorities identified in the [Bristol Avon Management Plan](#) published by the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership.

## AGENCIES WITH AN INTEREST IN THE SOMERSET RIVER FROME

Bristol Avon Rivers Trust\*, Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership\*, Environment Agency\*, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (SW)\*, Friends of the Somerset River Frome\*, Frome Recreational and Open Grounds Society (FROGS), Frome Town Council\*, Frome Angling Association\*, Frome Canoe Club, Frome Missing Links/Sustrans, Mendip District Council\*, Save Open Spaces Frome, Somerset County Council\*, Wessex Water\*, The Wild Trout Trust\*, Selwood Forest Partnership, Somerset Wildlife Trust\*.

\*Represented on the Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group

## FRIENDS OF THE SOMERSET RIVER FROME

Friends of the River Frome is an unincorporated association registered as a charity in England and Wales (Charity No 1062090). Any individual interested in the River can become a member – refer to the website for details.

Our work is overseen by a committee of volunteers which has considerable professional expertise, including in the fields of hydrology, landscape design and planning, engineering, ecology, consensus building and communication. There are no staff. All of our projects depend on external funding, and most are delivered by third parties.

## DATA

Environmental Data, including assessments of ecological quality, for the River Frome, which forms part of the “Bristol Avon Rural” operational catchment, can be viewed via the Catchment Data Explorer (<https://bit.ly/3fE7d4l>).

Note: in this document River Frome refers to the Somerset River Frome

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## VISION & AIMS

### Vision

**As Frome grows, its River should be conserved as a clean, healthy, nature-rich, free-flowing river system which provides a natural habitat for a diversity of life and an accessible green corridor which connects people to nature.**

### Aims

- 1. To maintain and improve the ecological quality of the River, its green corridor and tributaries.**
- 2. To promote landscape improvements which enhance the urban River environment.**
- 3. To prevent and remediate adverse human impacts on the River and its catchment.**
- 4. To promote public enjoyment and health benefits by enabling environmentally sensitive access.**
- 5. To nurture interest in and knowledge of the River and ensure its condition is monitored.**

## INTRODUCTION

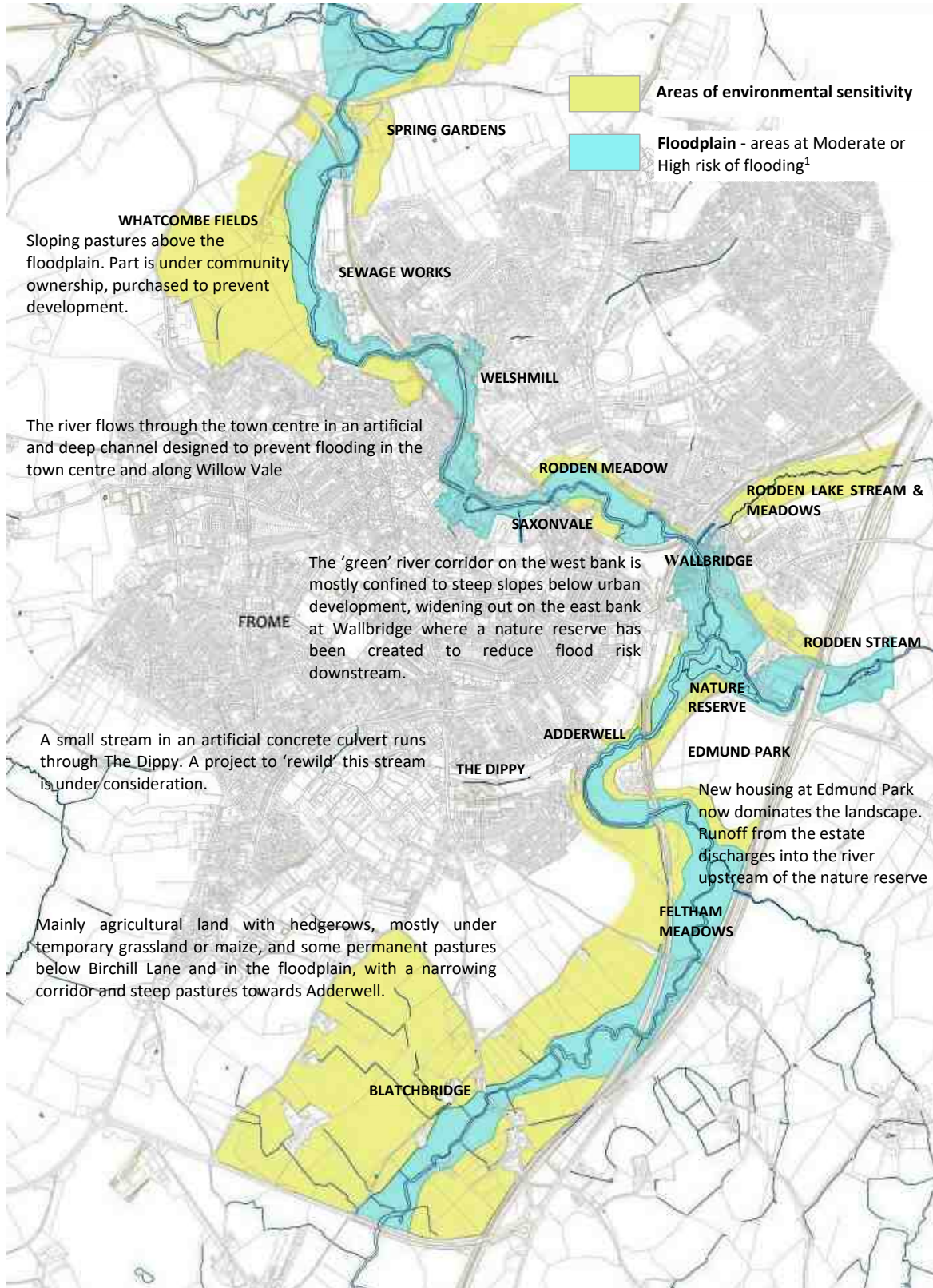
This document sets out a strategy to create a new consensus for protecting and enhancing the River Frome and its surroundings in the locality of the town of Frome. Realising this vision will require the goodwill and commitment of many other agencies and individuals, including Frome Town Council, landowners and land managers and the organisations which sit with us on the Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group, as well as funding bodies.

## THE RIVER FROME AND ITS LANDSCAPE SETTING

This strategy relates specifically to the five-mile stretch of the River Frome and its landscape setting between Blatchbridge and Spring Gardens adjacent to the town of Frome. It takes account of factors outside this area which affect this stretch of River, especially upstream. This section of the River flows through a variety of rural, agricultural and urban settings. It provides a natural green corridor which is greatly valued by local people and is important for wildlife.

Water levels and flow vary considerably, depending on rainfall and other factors. At times of high rainfall, there is an increased risk of flooding affecting Frome, especially at Wallbridge. Protecting the low-lying land liable to flood (the floodplain) adjacent to the River is vital for reducing flood-risk to our town and for protecting the River's ecosystem and River-corridor wildlife. The following map shows the floodplain and areas we consider particularly sensitive. In these areas development and drainage proposals must be rigorously assessed for their environmental impacts and to identify the potential to increase flood-risks. Both zones provide opportunities for restoring nature through natural flood management interventions. These include sustainable drainage measures in new urban developments, improved farming practices and measures such as tree planting, meadow creation, hedgerow and wetland restoration.

## FLOODPLAIN AND AREAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Source: Environment Agency flood maps. Online at <http://bit.ly/3b8kAqp>

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frome is a river town. The landscape, history, economy and people of Frome have been shaped by the presence of the River Frome, which flows 22 miles from its source near Witham Friary to its confluence with the Bristol Avon at Freshford. Even the name of the town derives from the ancient word *ffraw* meaning fair, fine or brisk, referring to the River. The wool trade, which from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards brought Frome its wealth, relied on power from 30 mills along the River.

Later, Frome's famous foundries depended on the River's water supply until the ascent of coal. Those industries have now gone. The River Frome now runs less briskly, its flow is more erratic, with low flows during periods of low rainfall and high 'spatey' flows during and after heavy rain.

Over centuries the course of the River has been altered many times, not always with positive effects on either the ecology or appearance of the River. The stretch through the centre of town, for instance, is now sunk in a deep, artificial channel, engineered in the early 1980s to stop Frome flooding. This has created an uninspiring setting for such a central and well-used space. The scene is not enhanced by the presence of Combined Sewer Overflows which, at times of high rainfall, spew raw sewage and excess rainwater from overloaded, ancient pipework. Another example of adverse landscape impact is the housing development at Knights Maltings which has hemmed in the River with an ugly, artificially-clad steep bank, leaving a dangerously narrow public footpath beside the River.

Today, the River Frome continues to play a key role in the life of the town. It provides a leafy green corridor through the centre of the town of value to wildlife including fish, bats, otters, kingfishers and yellow water lily. It connects people with nature by providing a healthy space for exercise, recreation and quiet enjoyment of the natural world. It is much valued by nature-lovers, walkers, canoeists and anglers. Above Frome, its headwater streams supply water to homes and farms. The River also carries away the town's treated sewage.

The River Frome remains a multi-faceted natural entity which defines the identity of the town.

### **Frome River Strategy 2012**

In 2012 Friends of the River Frome commissioned the first comprehensive Frome River Strategy from hydrologist Bob Sargent. It was adopted in full by Frome Town Council in 2013 and incorporated into the Neighbourhood Plan which was agreed in 2016.

Its primary focus was on delivering projects to improve public access along the River within and close to Frome town, and it made some proposals to improve aspects of the River for wildlife and amenity along the River corridor in this area. Some of these have been delivered or are in progress. Others, such as remodelling of the Market area River frontage and replacing Welshmill Weir still require major investment and decisions from other stakeholders, if they are to proceed. We will continue to advocate for them.

Since 2012 public awareness of environmental issues has increased and The Frome River Strategy 2020-2030 reflects the greater emphasis now given in public policy-making to environmental responsibility and value.

## THE CHANGING SCENE

Frome is growing rapidly and a further 2000 homes are likely to be built over the next 10-20 years, bringing the population to over 30,000. This will add to pressure on the River. Since the 2012 Strategy, the development of Southfields Farm as “Edmund Park” has significantly altered the River setting. Further developments at Saxonvale, Caxton Road and other locations provide additional challenges, and perhaps some opportunities, for improving the River environment. It will be crucial to consider fully the environmental and social implications of these changes, especially if undeveloped fields are proposed to be replaced with concrete and tarmac.

What happens in the rural catchment, upstream of Frome, is also critical to the health of the River. Currently, the River fails to achieve “good” quality status and upstream of Frome much is categorised as having ‘moderate’ status or ‘bad’. This is mainly due to pollution from agriculture, related to nutrients from slurry and fertiliser use, and polluted runoff from damaged fields close to the River. Water abstraction upstream of Frome may also contribute to reduced flow, further concentrating pollution and adding to the poor health of the River.

The impact of climate change is becoming more visible as weather patterns change. Increased runoff, flood risk, soil and riverbank erosion are associated with higher and more prolonged rainfall with implications both for people and River wildlife. It is now widely agreed that mitigation to reduce these impacts in town and upstream in the rural catchment is an essential and urgent responsibility on those involved in land use and planning.

In 2017 Frome Town Council was the first British local authority to attempt to introduce a River Rights byelaw designed to recognise the River Frome as a subject of the legal system, capable of bearing rights in the same manner as humans and companies. Sadly, this has been rejected by the Secretary of State and we hope this decision will be reviewed in time. Meanwhile the significance of the River to the town will continue to be expressed in other ways

Since the River Strategy 2012 better evidence has become available about the nature of the River and the factors which influence its condition. New research and monitoring have identified opportunities for restoring it to good health and for improving protection to Frome from river flooding<sup>2</sup>. Policy and good practice priorities are shifting with new emphasis, for example, on sustainable drainage in urban areas, rewilding and natural flood management principles. These are already becoming embedded in government policy, with increased resources promised as, for example, farm payments are restructured to encourage actions for environmental and public benefits.

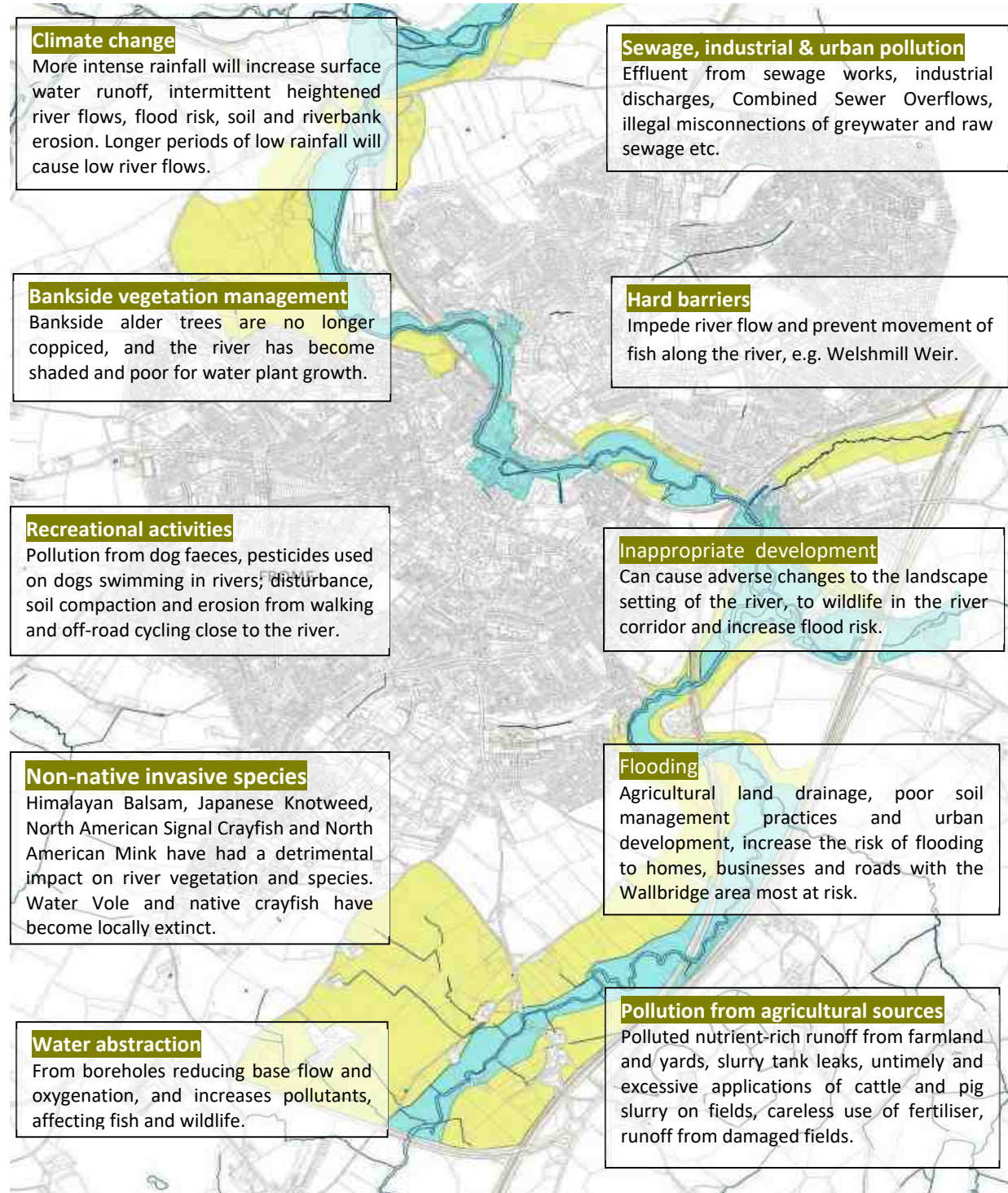
In 2020, a new farmer-landowner group has also been established, covering farms upstream of Frome, under the leadership of the Selwood Forest Partnership and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (South West). This aims to showcase and encourage good land management practices and wildlife habitat restoration. Mandatory ‘biodiversity offsetting’ for all major developments will also be introduced in 2021. As these initiatives gain momentum we should all be able to see improvements to the health of the River Frome and its surroundings.

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<sup>2</sup> Research and monitoring has been conducted agencies including the Bristol Avon Rivers Trust, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Wessex Water, the Wild Trout Trust, the Environment Agency, Somerset Floods Authority and others. This has produced a data review and business case for action that is required.

## CHALLENGES TO THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT

The ecosystem of the river is fragile and vulnerable to pressures from intensive agriculture, urban development, other human activities and the growing influence of climate change. Unless we act these factors will have a detrimental effect on the river, its wildlife and its surroundings.



## PROJECTS 2020-30

The following projects attempt to offer a comprehensive, multi-dimensional response to the range of challenges of conserving and enhancing the River Frome. As future circumstances change no doubt new measures will become necessary, but this is where we start. Projects are linked directly to our five Aims.

### 1. **Maintain and improve the ecological quality of the River, its green corridor and tributaries**

Vision: a linear, nature-rich wide, naturally vegetated buffer zone of native trees, scrub, wetlands, restored permanent grasslands and meadows alongside both main River and its tributaries.

#### Projects

- 1.1. Develop a natural flood management plan for the River.
- 1.2. Support habitat restoration with permanent grassland and other permanent vegetation on poor quality agricultural land throughout the catchment.
- 1.3. Develop a Rewilding Strategy for the River.
- 1.4. Seek protection for existing green spaces within the 'sensitive' and floodplain zone.
- 1.5. Enhance habitats for wildlife and encourage the protection and reintroduction of keystone species including beavers and water voles.
- 1.6. Control invasive non-native species, including Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and North American Mink.
- 1.7. Publish tree and woody debris management guidance.

### 2. **Promote landscape improvements which enhance the urban River environment**

Vision: The River corridor enhanced as a beautiful and accessible asset at the heart of Frome's townscape.

#### Projects

- 2.1 Replace Welshmill Weir with a more natural stepped structure to enable fish movement and enhance visual appearance.
- 2.2 Advocate the remodelling of the Market River channel area to provide a more attractive town centre environment.
- 2.3 Rewild the Dippy culvert.
- 2.4 Maximise opportunities for improving the landscape setting of the River in new urban developments.



### **3. Prevent and remediate adverse human impacts on the River and its catchment**

Vision: Threats to the River from pollution and poorly-designed development are mitigated and the River's environmental significance to the health of the town and its people is valued and respected.

#### Projects

- 3.1 Ensure that the interests of the River are properly considered in the planning of new developments, by providing advice and comment on any development likely to affect the River and landscape setting.
- 3.2 Produce guidance on development control and the River corridor.
- 3.3 Support work with farmers and landowners to improve management of riverside land and reduce surface water run-off and pollution,
- 3.4 Seek to establish constructive channels of communication with landowners, managers and developers whose activities impact on the River
- 3.5 Seek the removal of Combined Sewer Overflows and improvement of Sewage Treatment Works' effluent.

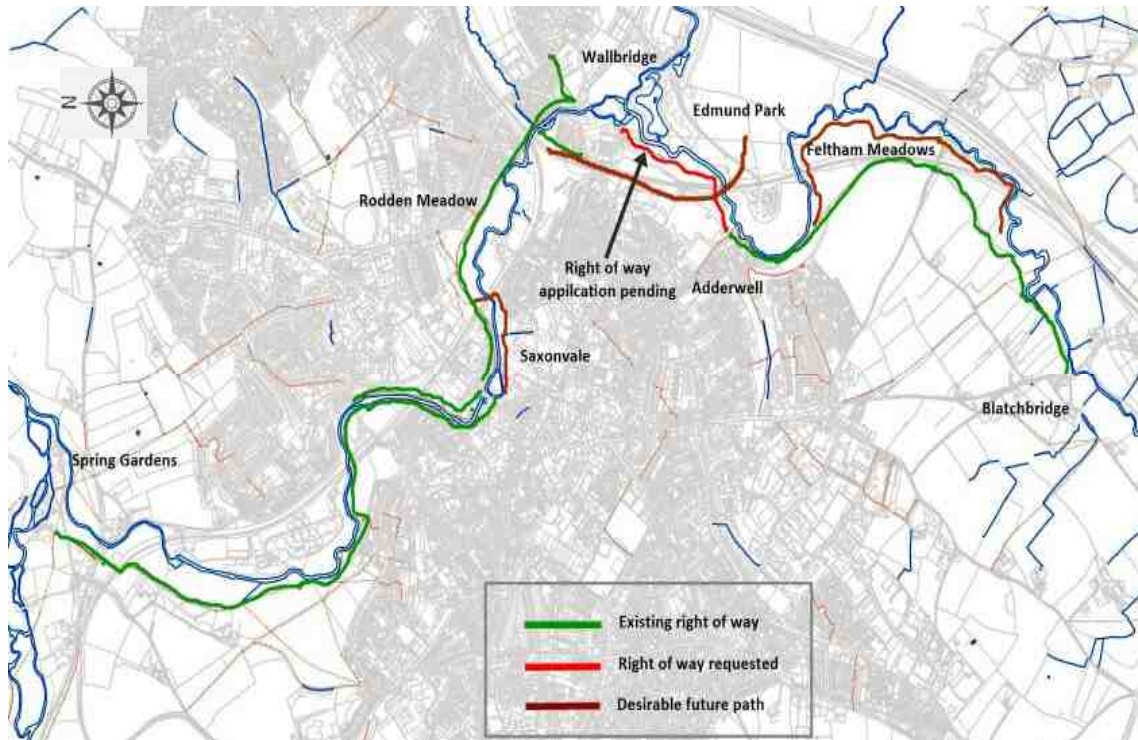
### **4. Promote public enjoyment and the health benefits of the River by enabling environmentally sensitive access.**

Vision: A continuous, natural, pedestrian River Trail between Spring Gardens and Blatchbridge, with information about the history and biology of the River, and supported by landowners

#### Projects

- 4.1 Develop a footpath linking the Town Centre to Rivers Reach
- 4.2 Reinststate the historical bridge between Saxonvale and Willow Vale to allow improved access to Rodden Meadow.
- 4.3 Create a public right of way between Wallbridge and Adderwell
- 4.4 Provide a new bridge at Adderwell as a crossing between Edmund Park, the Caxton Road development and the Station, with access to the River path.
- 4.5 Seek improvements to the path going south from Adderwell towards Feltham Meadows.
- 4.6 Negotiate public access to existing informal path along River in Feltham Meadows and examine feasibility of a footbridge from St Edmunds.
- 4.7 Improve paths and access between Feltham Meadow and Blatchbridge.
- 4.8 Produce signage and public information points along the existing paths.

## RIVER TRAIL FOOTPATHS - EXISTING AND DESIRABLE



### 5. To nurture interest in and knowledge of the River and ensure its condition is monitored

Vision: The value and character of the river is well-understood by Frome's citizens and policy-makers and there is in place a good system for monitoring its ecological health

#### Projects

- 5.1 Organise an annual river festival event.
- 5.2 Establish a Citizen Science Programme for young people.
- 5.3 Establish a River Information point to collect and disseminate information about all aspects of the river.
- 5.4 Work with local schools to promote the river as a learning resource and promote awareness of its history and ecology.
- 5.5 Establish Frome River Watch – a network of volunteers who adopt a specific stretch of the river and monitor events and the condition of the river and adjacent sites.
- 5.6 Establish regular river fly and other water quality monitoring by trained volunteers.
- 5.7 Establish robust systems for reporting incidents of pollution and damage to the Environment Agency and other authorities.

## THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Frome's Neighbourhood Plan (2016) states: *The River corridor will be seen as the central open space in the town's network of green infrastructure providing a string of inter-connected open spaces for visitors and residents to enjoy. Its agreed policies for the River Corridors are: To ensure the green infrastructure associated with the Frome River Corridor is maintained and enhanced, for benefit of people and wildlife; and to improve access in a way compatible with protecting the River environment, that will enable residents to walk or cycle in relative peace and safety through the town"*

Mendip Council's Local Plan (2014) includes: improving access, recreation, education and wildlife opportunities along the length of the River establishing it as a linear park. A Green Infrastructure Strategy is promised and the revised Pt II Local Plan is awaiting adoption.

Decisions about the River and its neighbouring environment are also influenced by:

- Priorities identified in the Bristol Avon Catchment Plan
- UK and local climate-change policy
- New legislation and evolving policy that will implement the European Water Framework Directive, following the UK's departure from the European Union.

The revised [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (2019) highlights the importance of Flood Risk Assessments (including Natural Flood Management) and measures to enhance the natural environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils. [Biodiversity Offsetting](#) will become mandatory for large developments, once the Environment Bill is enacted – expected in 2021.

Friends of River Frome and its partners will monitor the evolving policy framework and continue to advocate for the interests of the River.

## IMPLEMENTATION

There is already strong support amongst local agencies for many of the projects in our 2020-2030 River Strategy. To realise them will require the collaboration of a wide range of agencies and individuals. These include local authorities, landowners, land managers (especially farmers and developers), as well as specialist agencies, such as the Bristol Avon Rivers Trust and Environment Agency. The Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group is a key vehicle for this in which we will continue to play an active role

Promoting good communication to foster a common understanding of the value of the River will be an over-riding concern. The revision of Frome Town Council's Neighbourhood Plan and the development of a Green Infrastructure Strategy by Mendip District Council will offer opportunities to incorporate this strategy into those authorities' plans. Our strategy will sit within the wider Bristol Avon Catchment Plan.

We will play our part in seeking funding and resource commitments, as well as nurturing constructive relationships with land-owners, managers and developers. We will work with anyone who shares our vision and seek to persuade those who don't. [END]