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SOMERSET RIVER FROME FROME LOCALITY STRATEGY 2020 – 2030

Draft for consultation
Prepared by the Friends of the River Frome River Strategy Action Group
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The Friends of the River Frome invites comments on these draft proposals from anyone with an interest in the river

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The Friends of the River Frome is an unincorporated association registered as a charity in England and Wales No 1062090

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VISION & AIMS

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.

Strategic Aims

- 1. To maintain and improve the ecological quality of the river and 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 green corridor**
- 4. To promote public enjoyment and the health benefits of the river by enabling environmentally sensitive access.**
- 5. To nurture interest in and knowledge of the river**

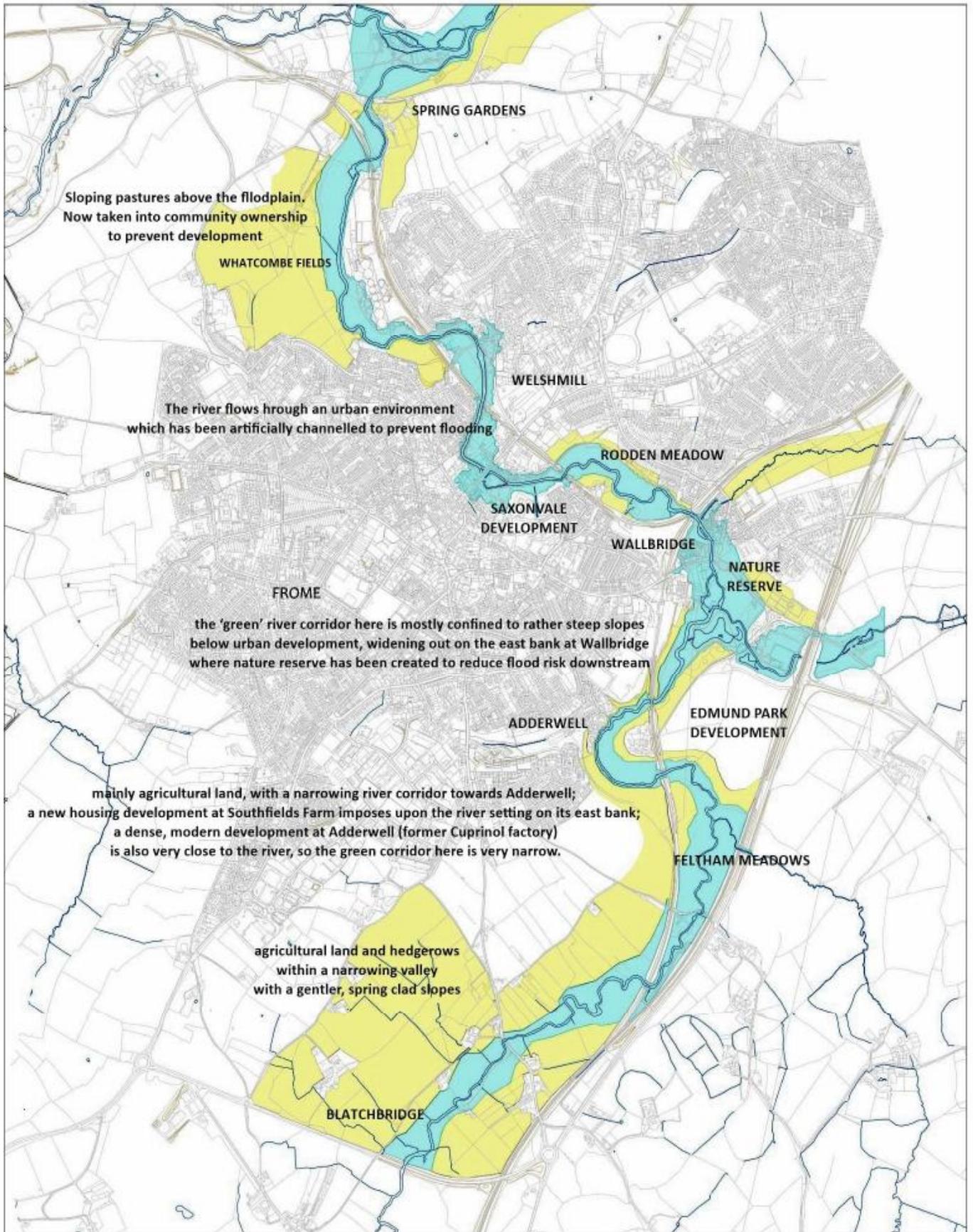
THE SCOPE OF THIS STRATEGY

This draft strategy offers a set of proposals in order to create a new consensus about how to conserve and enhance the River Frome and the its landscape setting. We have gathered ideas, big and small, from many organisations and individuals who have an interest in the health of the river. The Friends of the River Frome has considerable professional expertise amongst its members but is a voluntary group with limited resources. Realising our proposed vision will require the goodwill and commitment of many other partner agencies, including Frome Town Council, landowners, funding bodies the agencies who sit with us on the Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group. Our key ally is the Bristol Avon Rivers Catchment Partnership with whom we look forward to close co-operation.

RIVER FROME AND ITS LANDSCAPE SETTING

This Strategy relates particularly to the five-mile stretch of the River Frome close to the town of Frome between Blatchbridge and Spring Gardens and its landscape setting. It also takes account of factors outside this zone (especially upstream) which affect this stretch of river.

The river flows through a variety of rural (agricultural) and urban settings and provides a natural green corridor which is much valued by residents and provides an important continuous habitat for wildlife. its level and flow vary considerably depending on rainfall and other factors. Protecting the floodplain is crucial both for flood management and for biodiversity. There are also areas adjacent to the floodplain which are highly significant to the health of the river. The following map shows both the floodplain and the areas we consider sensitive in which any proposal for development should be rigorously assessed for drainage, flood risk, wildlife and other impacts on the river and its ecosystem.



- Flood plain zones 2 and 3 refer to NRA flood maps
- Areas of sensitivity

BACKGROUND

History

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 below Bradford-on-Avon. 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 15th century onwards brought Frome its wealth, was reliant on power from thirty mills along the river. Later Frome's famous foundries depended on the river's water supply. Those industries have now gone.

The Frome now runs less briskly but its flow is more erratic - low flows during periods of low rainfall, and high 'spatey' flows during and after heavy rain. Over the centuries the course of the river has been altered many times, not always with positive effects on the river landscape. The stretch through the centre of town, for instance, is now in a deep artificial channel, engineered to stop Frome from flooding, which offers 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 unfortunate example is the housing development at Knights Maltings which has hemmed in the river with an ugly steep bank which narrows dangerously the public riverside footpath below.

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 in the town with nature and provides a healthy space for exercise, recreation and quiet enjoyment of the natural world. It is much valued by nature-lovers, walkers, canoeists and anglers. It provides water for agricultural purposes and carries away the town's treated sewage.

The river Frome remains a multi-faceted natural resource which defines the identity of the town.

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, plus to develop habitats and amenities along the river corridor in this area. It contained a number of proposals, some of which have been delivered or are on the way. Others, such as remodelling of the Market area river frontage and replacing the Welshmill Weir still require major investment and decisions from other stakeholders, if they are to proceed.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT

Frome is growing rapidly and is slated to receive a further 2000+ homes over the next 10-20 years, bringing its population to over 30,000. Since the earlier strategy the redevelopment of Southfields Farm as Edmund Park adjacent to the river has significantly altered the river setting. Further developments at Saxonvale, Caxton Road and, potentially, the creation of a major new settlement (“Selwood Garden Village”) will provide new challenges and perhaps some opportunities for the river environment. It will be crucial to consider properly the environmental and human implications of these changes, especially as green space/green fields are likely to be replaced with concrete and tarmac (even if some of the green is poorly managed agricultural land at present).

What happens in the rural catchment, upstream of Frome, is critical to the health of the river. Currently, the river fails to achieve “good” quality status¹; in fact much is categorised as having ‘Moderate’ status or ‘Bad’. This is mainly due to pollution from agriculture, related to nutrients from slurry and fertiliser, and soil from damaged fields.

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. These have implications for both 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. Changing patterns of food production and agricultural practice may have similar impacts.

In 2017 Frome Town Council was the first British Local Authority to attempt to implement 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, but the significance of the river to the town will continue to be expressed in other ways.

Since 2012 public awareness of environmental issues has greatly increased and new information has become available about the river and the factors which influence its condition². 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.

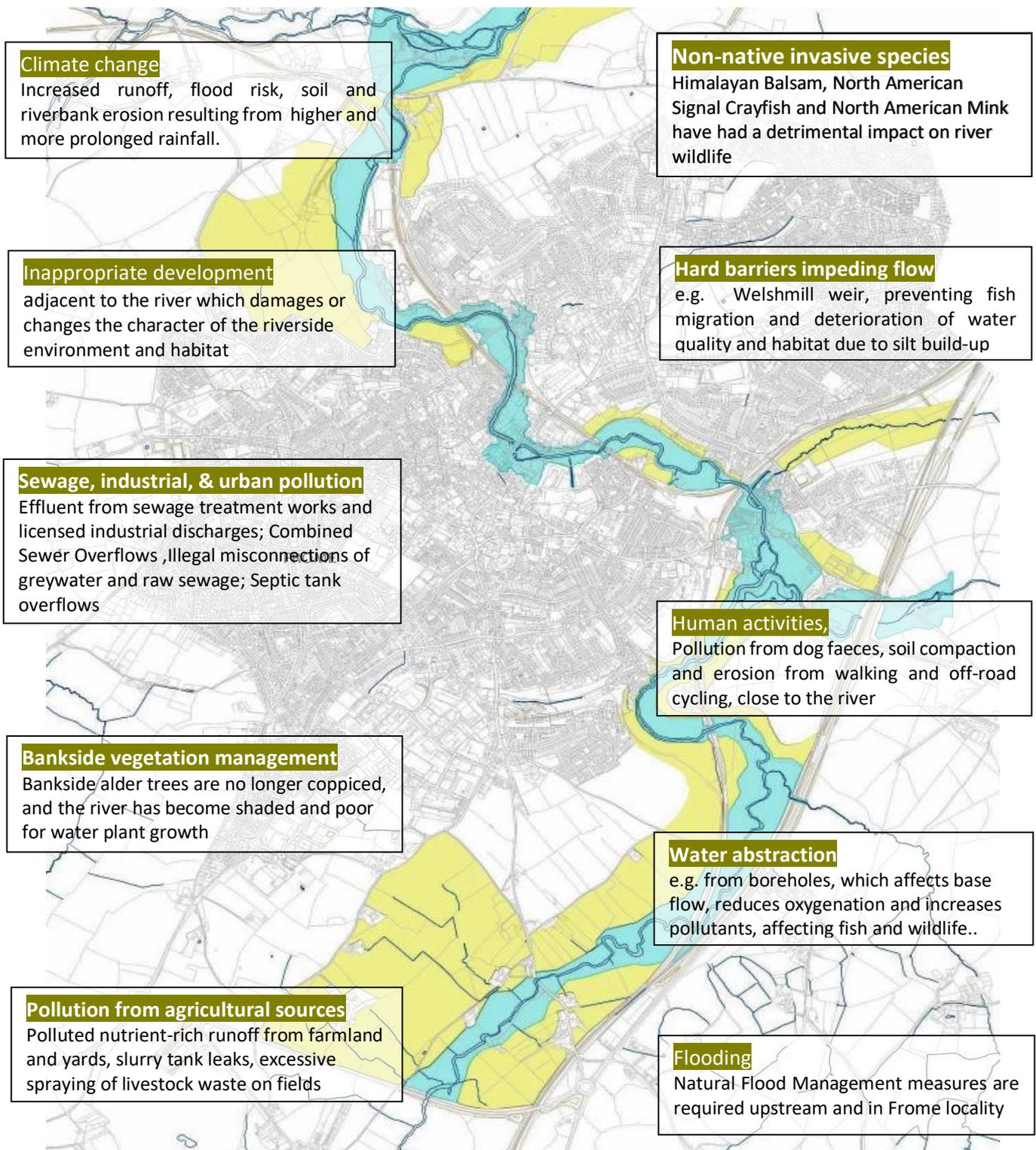
For these reasons and more we believe that the initiatives set in motion by the first River Strategy should be sustained and extended through the measures proposed below. It is intended that this Strategy will help to focus and engage all the organisations who work together under the umbrella of the Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group, whose help we rely on to deliver our vision for the Somerset River Frome.

¹ required under the EU Water Framework Directive and UK law

² See *Somerset Frome Data Review and Integrated Business Case for a Project to deliver Multiple Environmental Benefits in the Somerset Frome Catchments* (Bristol Avon Rivers Trust and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, March 2019).

CHALLENGES TO THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT

The ecosystem of the river is fragile and vulnerable to pressures associated with intensive agriculture, urban development and other human activities as well as the impact of climate change. These factors, if unmitigated, may affect negatively the natural balance of the river environment and may cause species and habitat decline and affect the flow and quality of water.



PROJECTS

1. To maintain and improve the ecological quality of the river and 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 tributaries.

In the next ten years

- 1.1. Develop a natural flood management plan for the river
- 1.2. Look for opportunities to encourage the restoration of permanent grassland and other permanent vegetation on poor quality agricultural land
- 1.3. Develop a Rewilding Strategy for the river
- 1.4. Seek protection for existing green spaces adjacent to, or impacting on the river
- 1.5. Enhancing habitats for wildlife throughout the catchment and protection and reintroduction of keystone species including beavers and water voles.
- 1.6. Establish regular river fly-monitoring and other additional water quality monitoring by trained volunteers
- 1.7. Take action to control invasive species including Himalayan Balsam and North American crayfish
- 1.8. Publish tree and woody debris management guidance

2. To 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

In the next ten years

- 2.1 Replace Welshmill Weir with a more natural stepped structure to enable fish movement and enhance visual appearance
- 2.2 To advocate the remodelling of the Market river channel area to provide a more attractive town centre environment
- 2.3 Reinstatement of the historical bridge between Saxonvale and Willow Vale in a location which allows access direct to Rodden Meadow
- 2.4 Rewilding of the Dippy culvert
- 2.5 Maximise opportunities for improving the river environment in the Saxonvale, Caxton Road and proposed Selwood Garden Village developments, along with future proposals as appropriate

3. To prevent and remediate adverse human impacts on the river and its catchment

Vision: Mitigate threats to the river from pollution and inappropriate development and ensure its importance to the ecology and health of the town is recognised, valued and respected

In the next ten years

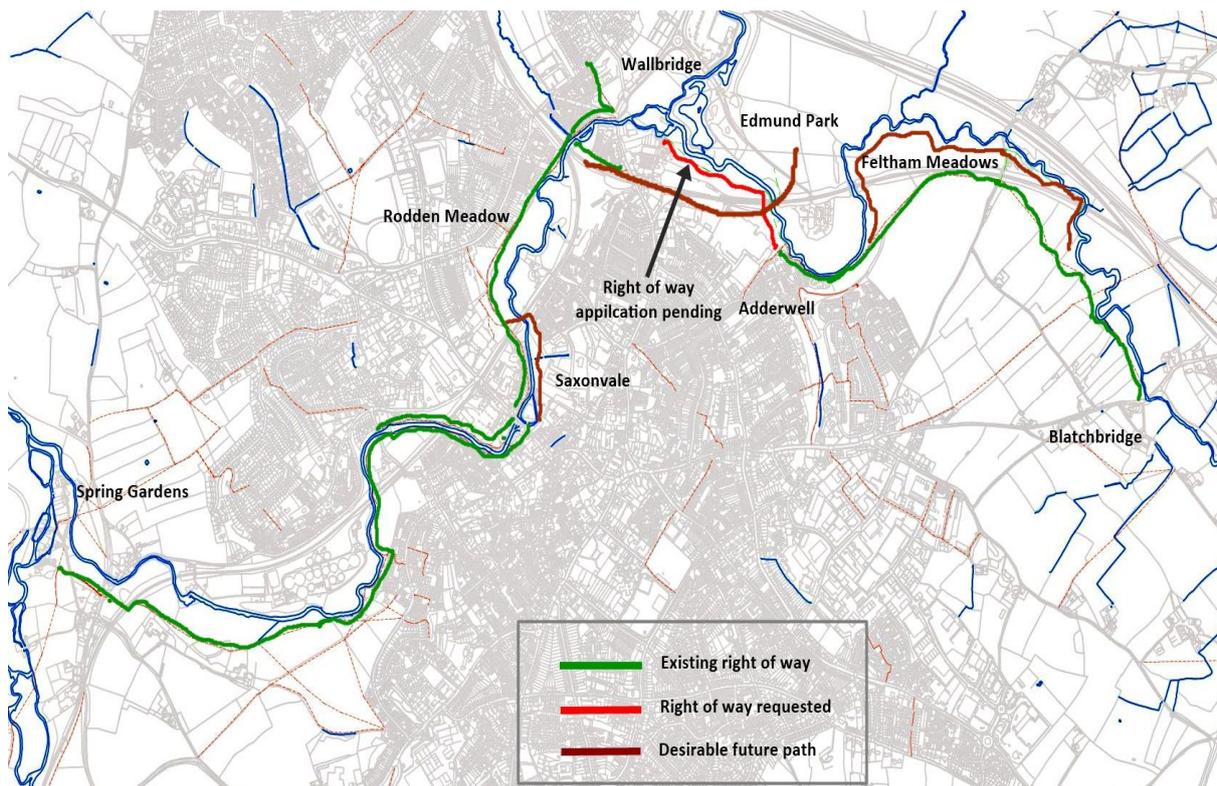
- 3.1 Ensure that the interests of the river are properly considered in the planning of new developments, by providing advice and comment on any development potentially affecting the river catchment environment.
- 3.2 Produce guidance on development control and the river corridor
- 3.3 Monitor potentially adverse impacts including on terrestrial natural and semi-natural features, the water bodies and flood risk.
- 3.4 Work with farmers and landowners to improve management of riverside land and reduce surface water run-off and pollution
- 3.5 Seek the removal of Combined Sewer Overflows and improvement of Sewage Treatment Works' effluent
- 3.6 Establish robust systems for reporting incidents of pollution to the Environment Agency and other authorities

4. To 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 good information about the history and biology of the river, supported by landowners

In the next ten years

- 4.1 Develop a footpath linking the Town Centre to Rivers Reach (as part of the Saxonvale development)
- 4.2 Regularise pedestrian access between Wallbridge and Adderwell by registering the existing path as a public right of way.
- 4.3 Provide a new bridge at Adderwell as a new river crossing between Edmund Park, the Caxton Road development and the Station, with access to the river path
- 4.4 Seek improvements to the path going from Adderwell towards Feltham Meadows
- 4.5 Negotiate public access to existing informal path along river in Feltham Meadows and examine feasibility of a footbridge from St Edmunds
- 4.6 Review and improve paths and access between Feltham Meadow and Blatchbridge
- 4.7 Produce signage and public information (boards and leaflets) at key points along the existing paths



River Trail footpaths - existing and desirable

5. To nurture interest in and knowledge of the river

Vision: The value and character of the river is well-understood by citizens, policy-makers and visitors through educational programmes, public events and volunteer opportunities

In the next ten years

- 5.1 Establish Frome River Watch – a network of motivated individuals who adopt a specific stretch of the river and monitor events and the condition of the river and adjacent sites.
- 5.2 An annual river festival event
- 5.3 Establish a Citizen Science Programme for young people.
- 5.4 Establish a River Information point to collect and disseminate information about all aspects of the river
- 5.5 Work with local schools to promote the river as a learning resource and promote awareness of its history and ecology
- 5.6 To improve communication between organisations with an interest in the river in Frome to promote collaboration

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 Frome establishing it as a linear park. A Green Infrastructure Strategy is promised as a means of securing this.

Decisions about the river and its neighbouring environment are also influenced by

- The Bristol Avon Catchment Plan
- UK and local climate-change policy
- Water Framework Directive and evolving legislation

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.

It will be important for Friends of River Frome and its partners to monitor the evolving policy framework and advocate for the interests of the river wherever necessary.

IMPLEMENTATION

This strategy can only be realised through collaboration with a wide range of agencies and individuals including landowners, farmers, developers, Local Authorities and the specialist agencies which are members of the Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group. In particular, ensuring close co-ordination with the Bristol Avon Rivers Trust (BART) will be essential.

Promoting good communication and dialogue to foster a common understanding of the value of the river will be an over-riding concern. The first steps will be to consult and seek the endorsement of this strategy by all the key stakeholders. 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. This Strategy will in due course sit within a wider, catchment-wide Strategy for the Somerset River Frome, part of the Bristol Avon Catchment Plan, prepared by the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership.

STAKEHOLDERS & PARTNERS

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*

Somerset Wildlife Trust*

*= Somerset Frome Catchment Partnership Steering Group members