

Copy of letter to Cllr Tim Ball as sent 8 February 2023 as follows:

Dear Cllr Tim Ball,

A safer cleaner river for users and wildlife

As you are aware, the River Avon in Bath & North East Somerset is recognised as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) whilst B&NES Council itself is committed to responding to the ecological emergency facing the nation.

Saltford Parish Council has become increasingly concerned at the abuse and misuse of the river and riverbanks in Saltford and elsewhere along the River Avon by a variety of visitors and users to the detriment of wildlife, local inhabitants who live along the riverside areas, the majority of the liveaboard boating community who live in harmony with the river and local communities, the sailing and rowing clubs, and to visitors who respect the Countryside Code and “leave no trace” of their riverside visits.

At its meeting on 7th February 2023 Saltford Parish Council resolved that the Parish Council should write to you to place on record and formally ask B&NES Council, supported by its Water Space Project, to make a formal commitment and objective to achieve “**a safer cleaner river for users and wildlife**” as an urgent matter of priority.

BACKGROUND

The river has become an unregulated, unsafe area where boats are left attached to B&NES land/trees for extended periods. These often become dilapidated or subject to damage, in many cases this is akin to excessive fly-tipping or abandoned vehicles on the highway. This is to the detriment of considerate users and wildlife.

Tragedies regularly occur on the river, usually young people, and this is a matter for concern as the river has also increasingly been seen as a location for young people to congregate during periods of hot weather. The latter often leads to antisocial behaviours and excessive littering, and at times this places an unsafe demand on the river and riverside as a shared space with other users.

Negative impacts that are affecting the river which is of growing concern to local communities and law-abiding river users include (this list is not exhaustive):-

- Abandoned boats that eventually sink and need to be removed at considerable expense. The latest examples are during the current winter period (2022/23):-
 1. An unoccupied narrow boat was left poorly moored in Mead Lane well beyond the 14-day mooring limit, sank when the river was in spate due to the unsuitability of Mead Lane for winter moorings (or indeed any moorings due to the design of the 2005 riverbank stabilisation scheme constructed at considerable public cost by B&NES Council*). The sunken boat’s cabin became detached and was washed downstream along with its contents to Saltford Lock Island, whilst fuel oil leaked out and dispersed down the river. That was a serious safety issue for any boat and their occupants moored downstream, e.g. by the Lock island, quite apart from the pollution inflicted on the river and local marine life. If the whole boat had broken loose, it may yet still do that, the risk to life and limb if it hits and sinks another boat is a

serious matter. *The Parish Council asks on health and safety grounds that B&NES Council keeps to its commitment to end moorings in Mead Lane under its “Better Moorings Project” before the new spring season commences.

2. An old motorboat has been left unattended in The Shallows all winter and finally sank. Another larger boat has been moored in The Shallows for over 2 years and is slowly breaking up with bits falling off and into the river. B&NES Council has been informed of this on several occasions by residents who asked the owners, who visited the boat during the recent floods, to move it but pointedly refused to do so.

- The risks of pollution and navigational hazards arising from abandoned or unsafe boats – the examples above are recent examples of many.
- Unsafe large boats entering and using the waterway without any safety checks including those that are unlicensed and/or uninsured (that in turn eventually become abandoned).
- Motorised rubber boats or speed boats arriving and entering the river from B&NES Council land (or from unauthorised use of privately owned/managed riverbanks and slipways) that are used in ways including speeding that put other river users and wildlife in danger and at risk.
- Bridge jumping from the B&NES Council owned LMS Bridge (on the Bristol to Bath Path) and other dangerous activities including anti-social behaviour by young people putting themselves and other river users at risk. There was nearly a fatality last autumn when a bridge jumper failed to surface and was rescued by a passing resident who dived in and found the young person unconscious at the bottom of the river.
- Sewage and other waste entering or fly-tipped into the waterway or left on the riverbanks causing a hazard to wildlife whilst compromising river water quality.
- The longer-term storage of boats by commercial undertakings etc. on B&NES owned 14-day moorings that prevent liveaboard and tourist access to those moorings.
- Maintenance work carried out for long periods by boat owners on the riverbank, causing access, noise and safety issues for those wishing to enjoy the area and for adjacent residents.
- The lack of protection of private moorings and privately owned riverbanks from unauthorised moorings.
- Raw sewage and assorted sanitary items entering the river, for example during the recent floods, from storm drain overflows with many items littering riparian land along the river, again to the detriment of the general health of the river and the wildlife it supports. The resulting excessive litter including used sanitary items that litter B&NES Council owned land and/or Public Rights of Way then requires prompt attention by B&NES Council’s waste/cleansing team(s) before wildlife is harmed. Whilst the Environment Agency is responsible for addressing the pollution of river water, B&NES Council is responsible for clearing the excessive litter on its land including that attached to vegetation, i.e. trees and hedges.

On 25 March 2022 B&NES Council passed a motion concerning river water quality that included the following specific two paragraphs relevant to this letter:-

3. That rivers in B&NES are an irreplaceable asset for both people and nature, enjoyed by many for recreation and leisure, and part of the rich landscape character and natural capital of our area.

4. That Bath and North East Somerset Council is a member of the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership which includes Wessex Water, the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council and is working closely with partners to identify and deliver collaborative solutions to improve water quality and improve the water environment for people and wildlife.

That motion is very welcome; a “**safer cleaner river**” study and the supporting action sought by this request can support and help B&NES implement its motion.

ACTION: SAFER CLEANER RIVER STUDY & CONSULTATION WITH KEY AGENCIES

In support of a safer cleaner river for users and wildlife objective, Saltford Parish Council requests that the Water Space Project urgently carry out an investigation, e.g. a desk study, for Saltford (as a starting point) to gain an understanding of the measures including, where appropriate, physical deterrents (as recommended by Canal and River Trust) and also the use of byelaws undertaken by other similar local authorities that have effectively dealt with problems associated with unhindered, unregulated use and abuse of the main river or rivers in their area.

The Parish Council would be keen to engage with the Water Space Project to further highlight issues faced at different areas of the river and riverbank. Saltford Parish Council has taken numerous steps to assist in the river through Saltford being safer and cleaner. However as the situation in Saltford deteriorates the Parish Council requires B&NES Council to immediately address the matter of a safer and cleaner river and riverbank.

Alongside and possibly preceding that study, B&NES Council should consult with key agencies including the Environment Agency, Canal and River Trust, Wessex Water and the Avon and Somerset Police with the aim of implementing measures and co-ordinating activity across those agencies to improve the safety and cleanliness of the river for users and wildlife. Neighbouring local authorities should be involved where appropriate as they may welcome such an approach too - such as South Gloucestershire, Bristol CC and Wiltshire CC. It is widely known, for example, that the River Avon from Hanham into Bristol is more effectively regulated and kept safe by byelaws and the involvement of the Bristol Port Authority; there must be lessons that can be learnt for the B&NES stretch of the river.

The objective of the study, cross agency working and resulting actions would be to make the river a safer cleaner waterway for users and wildlife. Whilst the Water Space Project “*includes opportunities to create moorings, improve green spaces and parks, enhance biodiversity, realise safe access for sport and leisure and improve public spaces and paths*”, making sure this space is properly regulated and protected from abuse and inappropriate or anti-social behaviour has not been an aspect covered by the project. However, such appropriate regulation and protection would be an intrinsic part of the much-needed priority and commitment to achieve a safer, cleaner river.

CONCLUSION

It is the wildlife habitat that in turn attracts considerate visitors and users alike who appreciate, value and respect the river and riverside areas as a great place to be to relax, enjoy leisure pursuits, and experience nature in peaceful surroundings.

In addition to being a major riparian owner, B&NES Council is the unitary local authority with overarching responsibilities for environmental health, planning and transport with published commitments to protect the natural environment and habitats of our area as well as the provision of safe access to recreational green spaces.

This means B&NES Council is best placed to take leadership and responsibility for this agenda on behalf of B&NES residents and the wider community whilst working closely and in partnership with the Environment Agency, the Canal and River Trust and other agencies including the police for ensuring that the River Avon within Bath and North East Somerset can become once more a clean and safe waterway in which its wildlife habitat is protected as an SNCI and anti-social behaviour as described in this letter that puts others and nature at risk can be minimised.

Saltford Parish Council looks forward to hearing from you that B&NES Council would be willing to take such important work forward and give it the priority it needs and deserves and that it would welcome engagement with the Parish Council to help achieve this.

I am copying this letter (as an email attachment) to B&NES Council's Leader Cllr Kevin Guy, B&NES Council's Chief Executive Will Godfry, the Environment Agency Wessex Area's Director Emma Baker, CRT's Wales and South West Director Mark Evans, Avon & Somerset Police Chief Constable Sarah Crew, and Wessex Water's Chief Executive Officer Colin Skellet, North East Somerset MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Saltford's B&NES Ward Cllrs Duncan Hounsell and Alastair Singleton.

Yours sincerely

Saltford Parish Council