

Public Questions - APPENDIX A

Public questions at Full Council on Wednesday 22 November 2023:

1. "I am writing to you as someone who has spent most of my life in Chippenham and the surrounding areas, as someone who has come to love rivers from learning to kayak on the River Avon through Chippenham, and as a now River Restoration professional.

Our rivers are in a critical state. Only 14 per cent of England's rivers are classified as being in "good" ecological status by the Environment Agency, and without substantial and bold change, that figure is predicted to drop to just 6 per cent by 2027. This includes the River Avon through Chippenham, which is failing to achieve good status. Recent public outrage regarding sewage pollution has shown just how much the public cares for our rivers and how much they are concerned about their health. This understanding of river issues, unfortunately, does not yet extend to the impacts caused by river modification, however, these are well researched and extensive. Weirs and other artificial river impoundments have a number of impacts, including:

- Habitat fragmentation: habitats which were once continuous become divided into separate fragments, restricting the movements of organisms such as fish;
- Degrading upstream habitat reaches by impounding and deepening flows: Deeper levels drown out natural features like riffles and reduce oxygenation of the channel. Slower flows also encourage sediment to settle on the riverbed, smothering gravels and the invertebrates and plants that live within them, both key parts of the food chain;
- Impounding water pollution for additional time between weirs: which, coupled with reduced oxygenation, increases its impacts.

Deeper sections of river caused by impoundments also pose additional barriers to supporting public access to our rivers. Access to blue spaces has proven mental and physical health benefits and shallower water allows greater interaction by the public with watercourses.

I understand from social media posts that there are a number of anglers who are concerned about the impacts that removal of the Radial Gate will have on the river, and I can understand that any changes to a current environment that has existed for some time will receive concern. Please be reassured that angling will still be possible following any removal of the radial gate, and that re-naturalisation of river channels has positive impacts on fish populations. Whilst some changes to fish populations may occur as a result of a switch to natural levels, this will result in healthier, more

resilient populations that are better adapted to the natural processes present in free-flowing river systems. Many of the angling clubs that I have worked with on similar projects have provided positive feedback from their members once changes post weir-removals had been seen. The question I regularly pose to organisations in similar positions, is, how can any man-made structure put into a river benefit the health of a river more than a naturally functioning system?

It is my belief that, at a time when our rivers are in such critical state, that the Council should be doing everything in its power to ensure that positive improvements are made to ensure that we have a healthy river for generations to come. Particularly, if the alternative is that public funds are to be spent at vast expense to maintain the poor condition of rivers. Many thanks for considering my statement.”

2. “The consultation provided the Council and Partnership board with some very clear messages as detailed below from the subsequent report

- 1 Commentary from the consultation with reference to the radial gate replacement

While 45% of respondents wanted the Radial Gate replaced it was clear from analysis of the free text questions this was not a support of the structure per se but rather of the higher water levels it maintained. It is clear that a sizeable number of responders (albeit a slight minority), were supportive of the aesthetic and recreational contribution the artificially maintained levels could provide.

- 2 Commentary reference use of the river frontage

The community would like there to be greater opportunities for making active use of the river frontage, especially the Island Park. Having kayaking access to the river was a consistent request as was outdoor performance space and play areas. This was strongly correlated to the request to maintain the green and natural character and making any changes in keeping to enhance and not radically change the area.

These conclusions are further supported by the free text comments in Appendix 3 where the vast majority of comments refer to maintaining the current water level and green space to provide both water based amenities as well as improved river bank access for all. There is also much concern noted that reducing the water level will cause the river to become a "dribble" particularly in summer.

Is the Council going to follow this clear message from the consultation or merely go for the cheapest option being proposed by the EA?”

3. “The Environment Agency carried out a test exercise on 9 October 2023 involving the controlled opening of the radial gate in order to evaluate the effects on water levels of a permanent removal of the gate. Whilst the EA have not made their findings of this exercise public to my knowledge, having visited the river upstream of the gate on the day of the exercise, the exercise had serious effects on the river levels with the river only inches deep in certain places.

Have the Council sought feedback from the Environment Agency on their findings from this exercise and if so, what information have the EA provided? If no feedback has been sought, do the Council intend to seek this from the EA before committing support to the EA's preferred re-naturalisation option?”

4. “On behalf of the Heritage Quarter group, I would like to confirm our support for the approval of the above Memorandum of Understanding.

As the Council is aware we are group of local businesses, organisations and volunteers operating under the existing Town Centre Partnership which has over 60 members across the town. During the last 12 months we have encouraged more and more businesses to engage with initiatives to improve the Town Centre and are already working successfully with Councillors and Officers for the good of Chippenham.

To continue this work and involve more businesses and volunteers it is now appropriate to formalise the operating arrangements and what is expected of the Town Centre Partnership. We believe that by encouraging community involvement a better understanding of the issues and potential improvements in the local areas can be shared and positive outcomes achieved.”

5. “I would like to ask Councillors to support the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding by the Chief Executive on behalf of the Town Council.

As set out in the report it is not introducing new work, it simply records those activities that are currently taking place.

As chair of the River and Rail Quarter it has been great to see the hard work and dedication by many in the Town Council, Wiltshire Council and Town Team, which in turn spreads the workload and enhances communication. The Town Team now has a strong base established over the last two years and I look forward to that being formalised by the signing of the memorandum of understanding.

The River and Rail Quarter which sits under the Town Team has 26 members. From Alliance Pharmaceuticals, Borough Lands/One Chippenham,

Doorway, Wessex Water, businesses, residents, churches, Olympiad, Swindon and Wiltshire History Centre all working together with the Chippenham and Wiltshire Councils to enhance our town. The leaflet produced last week now gives us the tools to grow the Quarter further, with a new local business added this week.”

Not Part of the Meeting - APPENDIX B

Responses to Public Questions - Full Council 22 November 2023

1. Thank you for your comments made at Full Council on 22 November 2023, these have been noted. The Town Council is being consulted on this matter and is not deciding the outcome but indicating a preferred option to be forwarded to the Town Centre Partnership Board.

Council resolved to support the principle of a scheme that will deliver amenity outputs alongside the works needed to address flood risk. Council agreed that the Town Centre Partnership Board partners work with the EA to define and further consult upon a scheme that responds positively to the consultation findings of the One Plan, which is viable and can be delivered within the timescales proposed. Council did not support option a), 'Replace the Radial Gate as it is at present'. The majority of Councillors abstained from option b), 'Remove the Radial Gate with the channel upstream naturalised to create a wilder feel similar to that south of the town centre to maximise the ecological value'. The majority of Councillors supported option c) 'Remove the Radial Gate and replace with a series of weirs to retain some amenity use while still providing some ecological improvement' as the Town Council's preferred scheme option.

Finally, Council requested a further stage of consultation with the Town Council beyond just a single preferred option so there can be more information between now and the consultation to make a decision.

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4. Thank you for your comments made at Full Council on 22 November 2023, these have been noted. Council resolved to support the request from Wiltshire Council to sign the Memorandum of Understanding which formalises working arrangements that were currently taking place between Wiltshire Council, the Town Council and the Town Team/Chamber of Commerce in relation to economic development within the town. The relevant minute can be read in full in the minutes which will be published on the Town Council website under 'Your Council', 'agendas and minutes'.
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