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<u>Item</u>
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RIVER SAFETY

**Responsible
Officer**

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1. Synopsis

- 1.1 Following the tragic loss of lives in the River Severn at Shrewsbury earlier this year, a report on river safety was commissioned, the findings and recommendations of which are presented here along with proposals for improving safety in future.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Shropshire Plan sets out our vision to develop Shropshire as a safe, strong and vibrant destination to attract people to visit, live, work and learn in. The development of a positive response to the challenge of river safety in Shropshire meets our Strategic Priorities of supporting Healthy People and a Healthy Environment, as well as a Healthy Economy.
- 2.2 This report sets out the findings of a river safety review undertaken by the Council's contractor WSP, following a motion agreed by Council on 12 May 2022 to explore the ways in which safety can be improved, following sad incidents in which residents lost their lives. The review has focussed upon the River Severn in Shrewsbury, as this is the location of most river incidents.
- 2.3 The report further outlines that the recommendations of the river safety review will be the subject of an Action Plan, coordinating the work of the range of agencies and landowners with responsibility in this matter. It is proposed that the drafting of the action plan and the coordination and monitoring of ongoing work on river safety will be the remit of a new Water Safety Action Group. Cabinet is recommended to ask the existing Team Shrewsbury group, which is a partnership of key statutory and voluntary organisations focussed on the safety of residents in Shrewsbury, to establish a Water

Safety Action Group as an offshoot of their current operation, with a remit to develop and monitor the Action Plan and its delivery by all partners.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet notes the findings and recommendations of the River Severn Shrewsbury Safety Review report, attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.2 That Cabinet asks the existing Team Shrewsbury Group to establish a Water Safety Action Group to coordinate all partners in the review, detailed design and delivery of the proposed actions to be set out in an Action Plan, to improve river safety in Shrewsbury.

REPORT

4 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 Recent deaths in the River Severn at Shrewsbury, along with other incidents where people have entered the river and come to harm, highlighted the need for a safety review of the River Severn around Shrewsbury, and consideration of the risks that lead to such events.
- 4.2 A previous public safety risk assessment was published in October 2010, and work has been undertaken to improve safety since then. Whilst the original remit of the study included consideration of the whole of Shropshire, the predominance of incidents occurring in Shrewsbury means that the greatest focus must be upon the River Severn as it passes through the town. The River Severn corridor is much valued by residents and visitors alike, so the risks which arise from its proximity to the town centre must be balanced accordingly.
- 4.3 Evidence of the cases of deaths and incidents associated with the rivers show that these are all adults and predominantly although not exclusively males, and that timing of the incidents is frequently associated with Friday and Saturday nights. There is no evidence that children are at risk in the river side setting in Shrewsbury. Recorded suicides indicate that some vulnerable adults may choose to enter the river, and this is an important consideration when planning solutions. The compilation of the river safety report included consultation with a wide range of relevant bodies, and also with some bereaved family members, in order to capture the impact of this issue on the community. Some changes that may be

proposed following the report recommendations may require further community consultation.

- 4.4 Separately, in line with the Council motion of 12 May 2022, the Strategic Licensing Committee meeting of 5 October 2022 received a report on the responsibilities of Premises Licence Holders under the Licensing Act 2003. This set out legal responsibilities placed on premises licence holders as they relate to adult customers and highlighted the advice available in statutory guidance. This includes the promotion of public safety. The evidence base for action to revoke premises licences was discussed, as well as the importance of reporting incidents so that issues can be effectively investigated.

5 River Safety Report context

- 5.1 The WSP river safety report notes that a certain level of risk is acceptable, and any safety measures should be applied 'as far as is reasonably practicable'. Measures must be technically feasible, and reasonable in time, money and effort. It is noted that waterway users share responsibility for their safe use by not ignoring hazards, abusing facilities or equipment, or exercising poor judgement.
- 5.2 The report analyses the distribution of incidents by day of the week, showing that Friday, Saturday and Sunday account for 64% of all incidents. River incidents were higher in warmer months, whilst river deaths are higher in winter months. This may be linked to the longer daylight hours and milder weather in summer months, making successful rescue more likely.
- 5.3 Based on the findings from all cases several common themes have been identified:
- Drugs and alcohol and concerns about spiking
 - Scarcity of late-night transport resulting in the use of unsafe routes to walk home
 - Use of the river as a place to urinate at night-time
 - The difficulty of getting out of the river if alone and unaided
 - Concerns about the use of the river for leisure swimming
 - People jumping from Kingsland Bridge and Porthill Bridge
- 5.4 The report reviews the range of risks which may contribute to incidents of injury or death and considers how they may be addressed.

6 River Safety Report findings

- 6.1 Anecdotal evidence reveals that pedestrians and cyclists have been observed scaling the gates to access the towpaths at times when the towpaths do not appear flooded. However, closing the gates at

specified flood levels provides a factor of safety to protect the public prior to anticipated rises and potential surges in river levels.

- 6.2 The Shropshire Plan includes the Strategic Objective to support Shropshire residents to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, choosing healthy lifestyles and preventing ill-health, reducing need for long term or hospital care. A key aspect of the river safety work to date, and now proposed, has been to support people to make safer choices when travelling home and be informed and educated about the risks of the river.
- 6.3 In most cases the landowner is responsible for the safety of those using their land. Shrewsbury Town Council is responsible for the towpath through the Quarry up to Greyfriars Bridge, Mardol Quay, Abbey Gardens, and the section adjacent to Coleham Head. Shropshire Council is responsible for Victoria Quay/ Victoria Avenue, and the section from Greyfriars Bridge to the weir. Private landowners adjacent to the towpaths in this latter section have riparian rights under common law, such as the right to access for swimming, boating, and fishing. The section south of the river between Porthill Bridge and Kingsland Bridge is owned by Shrewsbury School.
- 6.4 WSP has individually assessed each section for the risks they pose to the general public. The risks have been considered according to the likelihood of harm occurring and the severity of the harm in accordance with a risk assessment matrix.
- 6.5 There are existing measures in place to reduce the likelihood of people entering the river, as well as features designed to reduce the consequences should people enter the river. Some measures were introduced following the 2010 report into river safety, including increasing the number of lifebuoys, relocating them to more suitable settings, clearly numbering them, providing emergency information on them, reviewing safety equipment inspection practices, and providing emergency services with information on all equipment.
- 6.6 Additionally, there are now improved practices for maintaining riverside paths and keeping them clear of mud and silt. Throw lines have been introduced, additional pedestrian barriers have been installed, and lighting has been improved, including in The Quarry.
- 6.7 The report reviews the lighting levels along all river side paths, and notes variations in lighting provided, due to installations by different owners at different times, with the potential for further improvements in future.

- 6.8 The provision of CCTV coverage is referenced. This is live monitored by Shropshire Council 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, with funding recently received to increase coverage of the riverside.
- 6.9 River frontage barriers are noted, installed at different times in locations which have been judged to be particularly hazardous.
- 6.10 Signage is present in various locations along the river to prompt people to keep safe beside the river, to direct them to rescue equipment, and to seek help if contemplating suicide. However, the size and clarity of the signage is noted as requiring attention.
- 6.11 The report notes the variety of river safety equipment in the form of lifebuoys, throw lines, grab chains, and ladders, which are all available to assist those who have entered the water and are in trouble. The report comments upon the potential to improve this provision in various ways.
- 6.12 The report considers the significance of future plans for riverside development captured in the Big Town Plan for Shrewsbury. This is likely to encourage more people to use the riverside for active travel and leisure in the future. Developments at Victoria Quay and at the Riverside are likely to encourage more people to gather near the river in the evening. This has the potential to increase the frequency of river incidents, but at the same time may increase passive surveillance of the river, and so improve outcomes of any incidents.
- 6.13 The report reviews other towns and cities which feature rivers running through them, to consider ways in which they have addressed safety. Examples include Durham, York, Milford Haven, and Amsterdam. In each location, similar concerns are identified around younger men, frequently having become drunk on weekend nights out, falling into rivers and canals, sometimes when urinating into them. Solutions adopted are similar to those already in place in Shrewsbury, or which can be considered for adoption here.
- 6.14 Measures proposed for adoption in Shrewsbury will support delivery of a Healthy Economy, meeting the Strategic Objective set out in The Shropshire Plan to develop Shropshire as a safe, strong and vibrant destination to attract people to live, work, learn in and visit.

7 Current measures to improve safety

- 7.1 Actions have already been initiated or escalated in response to the recent tragic loss of life in the River Severn in Shrewsbury. Much of this has been coordinated through Team Shrewsbury, a group of key local statutory and voluntary service providers, including Shropshire Council and Shrewsbury Town Council, which meets regularly to address issues of safety in the town including around the river.

7.2 Funding has been secured by West Mercia Police through the Safer Streets Fund which includes measures that will improve river safety, including:

- Improvement of lighting, and signage to rescue throw lines along the river
- Installation of Safer Routes Signage out of the town centre, these being well lit, diverting people from short cuts by the river
- Installation of CCTV in key locations to improve coverage, along with improvements to the current CCTV-Police communications
- Shrewsbury Rangers programme - a pro-active and visible resource focussed on reducing anti-social behaviour and crime in Shrewsbury town centre
- Quarry Security and Taxi Marshalls, to support people to stay safe and to get find their way home

7.3 Shrewsbury Town Council, West Mercia Police, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service, West Midlands Fire and Rescue, the Shrewsbury Business Improvement District (BID), PubWatch, the Street Pastors, the Samaritans, and the Royal Life Saving Society have all contributed significant action to improve safety for those going home from evenings out in Shrewsbury town centre, especially at weekends when the majority of river incidents have occurred. Additionally, the Make Our River Safer Facebook group has worked to raise awareness of river safety in Shrewsbury.

7.4 This focus upon safety helps to deliver a Healthy Environment for our communities, meeting the Shropshire Plan Strategic Objective to enable safer, sustainable, diverse and inclusive communities that pull together by reducing anti-social behaviour and risk of harm and addressing the issues they face.

7.5 Actions to address risks and improve safety to date include:

- Installing barriers, lifebuoys, throwlines, solar powered lighting in The Quarry, and throw-line training for operational staff
- Attendance at college and university Fresher's days to deliver water safety messaging and merchandise, and support for pubs, clubs, and bars with river safety posters and beer mats
- Throwline training for town council, Street Pastors, businesses, and security staff, advertising of the National Fire Chiefs Council's 'Be Water Aware' campaign and the West Mercia 'Home & Dry' water safety course, and free training of the RNLI waterside response scheme programme to businesses
- A free online water safety course for Schools, Colleges and Clubs, and river patrols, working with the Street Pastors
- A poster campaign distributed to pubs, bars, and clubs to highlight the risks of walking home along the river

- A video to be broadcast in pubs and shared on social media, to feature story-based messages about the river with a focus on looking after your friends
- Working with businesses to carry out training for over-serving of alcohol and providing after care linked in with the Samaritans
- An anti-spiking taskforce set up with partners including the Student Union and police, and a poster campaign rolled out
- Street Pastors operate on Saturday nights from 10pm to 3.30 or 5.30am, with a support vehicle (named 'The Donkey') to help those who are unwell following drugs or alcohol over-indulgence
- Education of bar staff with mental health support, providing face to face workshops and a listening workshop with Street Pastors

8 Additional safety recommendations

- 8.1 The report sets out a series of 23 recommendations which can further improve river safety, which have been reviewed and formed into a draft Action Plan for ongoing review, delivery and monitoring by the partners associated with river safety in Shrewsbury.
- 8.2 The list of recommendations is set out in the report at Appendix 1. The first priority is the establishment of a Water Safety Action Group, to be tasked with working through the recommendations and coordinating with key partners, including Shropshire Council and Shrewsbury Town Council, who can address them. It is proposed that the existing Team Shrewsbury group, referenced in paragraph 7.1 above, develops a Water Safety Action subgroup as an offshoot of its existing operation, as this already links to all the appropriate local and professional organisations, services and contacts.

9 Financial Implications

- 9.1 The costs associated with the measures proposed by the WSP report fall to a variety of partner organisations, and may also be supported by grant funding, subject to the nature of each action. Any costs to the Council to be committed which require funding additional to current capital programmes or maintenance regimes will be the subject of separate reporting for approval.

10 Climate Change Appraisal

- 10.1 No impact is anticipated from changes to support river safety or other safety measures in Shropshire, in respect of energy and fuel consumption, renewable energy generation, carbon offsetting or mitigation, or climate change adaptation.
- 10.2 The impact of climate change is likely to result in more frequent incidents of flooding from the River Severn and other rivers in Shropshire. Given the potential for greater risk during times of

flood, this emphasises the need for effective measures to reduce risks associated with water.

11 Background

11.1 The 6 September 2010 Safer and Stronger Communities Partnership Group received a report titled Incidents of Accidental Drowning on the River Severn in Shrewsbury. This reflected on incidents of deaths by drowning of people walking home alone when drunk after an evening out in Shrewsbury. Following this loss of life, a review of river safety was commissioned by the Council, which recommended safety upgrades along the river. These were undertaken and have been added to further over the years since. In addition, publicity campaigns were initiated, which highlighted the dangers for those drinking in venues close to river courses.

11.2 Following the recent sad loss of life in the River Severn in Shrewsbury the following resolution was approved at the Council meeting of 12 May 2022:

To join with other partners, landowners, stakeholders, and the general public to undertake a countywide review of the circumstances and siting of river deaths and serious life-threatening incidents and to use this evidence and other risk assessment outcomes to:

- Consider where additional appropriate barriers may be necessary to improve safety in risk assessed locations
- Ensure that all existing safety measure and equipment is adequate and in good order
- Ensure that there is improved CCTV coverage and monitoring in areas of risk and that there is adequate lighting operating in such areas on a 24/7 basis
- Work with stakeholders to produce promotional material regarding risk and river safety and ensure that such material is prominently displayed in relevant premises. This to include the provision of learning material in schools, colleges, youth facilities, etc.
- Call a meeting of the Strategic Licensing Committee to clarify the obligations on liquor licensees regarding care and protection of their users and work with the Police to ensure that the responsibilities are exercised, including giving advice to vulnerable people on leaving such premises.
- Work with Police, existing providers, and other volunteers to establish whether greater surveillance can be organised in areas of risk.
- Take account of representations made by the public throughout our communities
- Present an interim and progress report to Cabinet on 8th June 2022

- Devise a promotional campaign warning people of the dangers from floodwater to include more signage and public information in news articles/social media postings/adverts/posters

11.3 Further to this resolution the Council, in partnership with Shrewsbury Town Council, commissioned the River Safety report now finalised with recommendations for action.

11.4 In addition, a report was presented to the Strategic Licensing Committee of 22 October 2022, with a focus upon the licencing objective of public safety and provide committee members with awareness raising and focus on the role of the Council, Councillors and licensees in this matter.

12 Additional Information

12.1 The drafting of the Action Plan is being undertaken in partnership with a range of statutory and voluntary organisations who play significant roles in the delivery of public safety outcomes in Shrewsbury and Shropshire. Their contributions are critical to the successful delivery of this work, and greatly appreciated.

13 Conclusions

13.1 The River Safety report sets out the history of measures for river safety that have been undertaken over many years by both the Council and partners which have clear benefits. It also provides a range of practical recommendations for additional improvements, which are especially significant for Shrewsbury due to the close connection between the river and the town centre.

13.2 The report findings and recommendations are being shared with partners and an action plan is being developed, including the establishment of a Water Safety Group tasked with delivery and monitoring of the impact of the actions undertaken.

13.3 The findings of the Shrewsbury River Safety report and recommendations will be further considered for applicability to other locations in Shropshire where the river passes through towns, to ensure that the river safety benefits are shared.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

6 September 2010, Safer and Stronger Communities Partnership Group report, 'Incidents of Accidental Drowning on the River Severn in Shrewsbury'

8 June 2022 Cabinet, Interim Report on River Safety in Shropshire

5 October 2022 Strategic Licensing Committee, Responsibilities of Premises Licence Holders under the Licensing Act 2003

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Dean Carroll, Growth and Regeneration

Local Member

All

Appendices

Appendix 1 – WSP River Severn Shrewsbury Safety Review