



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Cabinet 8 June 2022

<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

INTERIM REPORT ON RIVER SAFETY IN SHROPSHIRE

**Responsible
Officer**

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1. Synopsis

Following recent incidents in the River Severn at Shrewsbury resulting in the tragic loss of lives, Council passed a motion requesting a report to Cabinet to provide an interim update on Shropshire Council's actions in relation to river safety in Shropshire.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report provides a summary of the evidence currently available in relation to river deaths, and of current and future planned activity to address the causes of such incidents and safeguard our residents.
- 2.2. At the Full Council meeting of 12 May 2022, the following Motion was passed:

The Council Notes:

1. The recent deaths in the River Severn at Shrewsbury and a notable rescue of a man from the water who was in serious risk of drowning.
2. The dangers posed by flooding which are not always understood by the public.

The Council Resolved:

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:

1. Consider where additional appropriate barriers may be necessary to improve safety in risk assessed locations
 2. Ensure that all existing safety measure and equipment is adequate and in good order
 3. 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
 4. 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.
 5. 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.
 6. Work with Police, existing providers, and other volunteers to establish whether greater surveillance can be organised in areas of risk.
 7. Take account of representations made by the public throughout our communities
 8. Present an interim and progress report to Cabinet on 8th June 2022
 9. 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
- 2.3. River deaths in Shropshire in the last 20 years have occurred predominantly in and around Shrewsbury. This is likely to be linked to the town's geography, creating a close connection between river and town, in particular the location of pubs, bars and clubs, and the need for people occasionally to cross the river when making their way home. The focus of review is therefore proposed to be upon Shrewsbury.
- 2.4. Shropshire Council works in partnership with Team Shrewsbury, a group of key local statutory and voluntary service providers, to address issues of safety in the town including around the river. Team Shrewsbury continues to review river safety, as well as the wider factors that contribute to river emergencies and deaths, and coordinate responses from a range of partners. This is the key channel for further activity to improve safety.
- 2.5. Reports on river safety have previously been commissioned, most recently in 2010, and Shropshire Council, along with Shrewsbury Town Council, has undertaken riverbank safety works in response to

the recommendations received. A further review of riverbank safety in Shrewsbury has now been commissioned from the Council's contractor WSP, which will consider what further measures, such as those referenced in the agreed Council Motion, would be most effective in reducing any identified risk represented by the river. Once received this review will be shared with partners and contribute to an action plan and reported back to a future Cabinet meeting.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet notes the contents of this report.
- 3.2. That Cabinet agrees to receive a further report on river safety when the planned review has concluded, and key partners have had the opportunity to consider its findings and propose appropriate action.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. River safety is significant issue for all of Shropshire's community. Any loss of life or injury is unacceptable, and measures are required to avoid this. To understand better the key risks that have contributed to river deaths, data on incidents over past years is being reviewed, to establish any patterns and identify common issues, geographies, or characteristics. This will allow any proposed measures to be targeted to the factors most likely to prevent further loss of life.
- 4.2. Evidence from the county Coroner shows that over the last 20 years there have been 41 river deaths recorded in Shropshire. Appendix 1 indicates the number of these deaths recorded in each year. Whilst there were some years with no loss of life, it is evident that most years have seen one or more incidents. Twelve of these deaths were ruled to be suicides, with the remainder found to include a combination of accidental deaths, misadventure, unascertained causes or open verdicts.
- 4.3. The location of river deaths is shown to be predominantly in the Shrewsbury area. Other locations of accidental deaths are Cressage, Atcham and Preston. It is notable that the river in Shrewsbury routes directly through the town centre, near the town's night-time economy venues, as well as some residential areas, and has footpaths and bridges which are commonly used as walking routes. This characteristic is not shared with other locations in Shropshire and is therefore likely to be a key factor in the number of incidents here.

- 4.4. River deaths have tended to be associated with a younger demographic, and with males, with a ratio of 33:8 male to female Shropshire river deaths in the last 18 years. The timing of deaths, and non-fatal incidents, is often associated with weekends when people are out drinking, and then make their way home alone at night. An excess of alcohol, and in some cases drug use too, can result in poor physical coordination, as well as reduced awareness and judgement of risks.
- 4.5. This is so significant a causal factor nationally that the Royal Life Saving Society runs an ongoing [Don't Drink and Drown](#) campaign. A key focus of activity to address the number of river incidents must therefore be upon raising awareness of the risks of excessive drinking, and of travelling home alone in these circumstances.
- 4.6. It is notable that of approximately 300 unnatural deaths that were the subject of an inquest over the last year to April 2022, river deaths accounted for 2. However, there are links to alcohol and drug use in many of the other deaths that have occurred. This indicates that alcohol and drug use is a key risk to Shropshire's younger population and must therefore be a focus of education and information beyond the issue of river deaths. The large number of suicides in the river also indicate that support for mental health, particularly for men, must remain a key priority.
- 4.7. The tragedy of recent river deaths in Shrewsbury has resulted in a strong community response, from friends and family of those who have lost their lives, as well as from wider groups, organisations and stakeholders. Team Shrewsbury has met with representatives of the Make Our River Safe facebook group, to hear their concerns and requests. A range of measures have already been initiated in response, from a variety of key partners in Shrewsbury, as listed at Appendix 2.
- 4.8. The current safety measures provided on the River Severn in Shrewsbury were upgraded following previous reviews of river safety, and now comprise a range of physical installations including:
- Railings at key points along both sides of the riverbank, including at all points where footpaths join the river path
 - Chains fixed to sheer riverbank edges to allow anyone falling into the river to gain a hand hold
 - Ladders, pontoons and slipways at various points along the river, allowing access to and exit from the river
 - Lifebuoys placed along the riverbank for public use in emergency
 - Throwlines located at key points on the riverbank with instructions for use

- Information signs indicating points of significant risk, such as the weir
- Street lighting along the river path to support safe passage
- Gates at key points to prevent access to the river path during times of flood

4.9. These physical measures are complemented by the following provision to support safety:

- Regular checks take place of lifebuoys and throwline boards
- Provisions are in place to close barriers in times of flood
- The Street Pastors work to warn late-night drinkers of the dangers of being near the water
- Shropshire Fire and Rescue have an ongoing programme of throwline training for the Street Pastors, door staff from town centre pubs, and Shrewsbury Town Council staff
- West Mercia Police officers are throwline trained and carry water safety equipment
- Key partners meeting as Team Shrewsbury monitor river safety issues alongside a range of town centre safety matters

4.10. A fresh review of river safety in Shrewsbury has now been commissioned from the Council's contractor WSP, funded jointly by Shropshire Council and Shrewsbury Town Council. WSP's water division has accredited water safety specialists with public risk advisors and works with the Environment Agency and the Department of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs to manage safety around their assets and are therefore appropriately qualified to provide the necessary advice.

4.11. The review will reflect on any changes to the riverbank, as well as to the town's relationship with the river, such as new developments, changes of land use, etc., which may mean that the existing measures require strengthening to support safe use of the riverbank both at night and during the day. It will also reference any implications for future river safety arising from the Shrewsbury Big Town Plan.

4.12. A report on the findings of this review will be brought back to Cabinet, along with recommendations of any works that are identified to improve safety. Proposed measures may require planning approval and should be subject to public consultation to balance the amenity and leisure value of the River Severn in Shrewsbury with the safety of all users. Whilst the focus of the review is upon Shrewsbury, the findings can subsequently be applied to other locations where the river passes through towns in Shropshire, where appropriate, to ensure that the river safety benefits are shared.

- 4.13. Whilst further physical measures to protect residents from harm when walking home along the river will be considered, the significant number of fatal incidents associated with alcohol, whether river-related or not, means that this must be a major focus of attention in prevention of unnatural deaths in the community. In addition, the number of river deaths which are suicides means that this is also a key issue to consider.
- 4.14. Options to improve public safety through behavioural change, both in Shrewsbury and throughout Shropshire, will be reported back to Cabinet alongside the physical safety review findings and proposals.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Responsibility for river safety lies with a range of different landowners and partners throughout Shropshire. Addressing safety through physical measures is the responsibility of the landowner. Shropshire Council already undertakes maintenance and replacement of a range of river safety measures as part of its current responsibilities, and this is covered within existing budgets. Any additional costs arising from measures planned or undertaken on Shropshire Council land in response to the safety review will be reported back to Cabinet.
- 5.2. In partnership with Shrewsbury Town Council, Shropshire Council has commissioned a river safety review from WSP, the findings of which will be reported back to Cabinet with recommendations for further action. The costs of the review will be funded by a contribution from Shrewsbury Town Council and from existing revenue budgets in Highways.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. No impact is anticipated because of 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.
- 6.2. 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.

7. Background

- 7.1 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.

- 7.1 Evidence from the county Coroner indicates that of 41 river deaths in Shropshire between 2004 and April 2022 the majority have occurred in Shrewsbury. All deaths recorded were in the River Severn. Of river deaths which were not recorded as suicides, only five have occurred in locations other than Shrewsbury since 2004, meaning that the focus for river safety review should primarily be upon Shrewsbury. Of the 41 river death cases in Shropshire that have occurred in that 18-year period, 12 were listed as suicides, with 9 listed as accidental deaths. Others are listed as open verdicts, misadventure, narrative verdicts or unknown circumstances.
- 7.2 The focus of river deaths in Shrewsbury is likely to be the result of the town's geography, creating a close connection between river and town, in particular the location of pubs, bars and clubs, and the need for people occasionally to cross the river when making their way home. The focus of the river safety review now planned is therefore proposed to be upon Shrewsbury.
- 7.3 According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) there were 442 water-related fatalities in England in 2021, which is a figure consistent with previous years. Of these 155 were suicide suspected fatalities. Of the remaining fatalities, the following key points are noted:
- 86% of accidental fatalities were male
 - Males 30 – 39 and 50 - 59 were the highest group for accidental fatalities
 - Recreational activities accounted for 56% of accidental fatalities
 - 49 accidental fatality reports noted the presence of drugs or alcohol
 - The rate of accidental drowning is reducing
- 7.4 Shropshire Council works in partnership with Team Shrewsbury, a multi-agency partnership established as part of the Department for Communities & Local Government Our Place Programme. The Partnership is made up of representatives of Shropshire Council, Shrewsbury Town Council, West Mercia Police, Shropshire Fire & Rescue, Shrewsbury Business Improvement District, Safer Shrewsbury Partnership, Shrewsbury Street Pastors, & Shrewsbury Shopping Centres.

- 7.5 The partnership works at both a strategic level bringing senior decision makers together to look at management issues for the town, but also at operational level ensuring that operatives from all partners work more collaboratively, sharing information, supporting each other and working on the delivery of projects and outcomes together. This includes issues of safety in the town including around the river. Team Shrewsbury continues to review river safety, as well as the wider factors that contribute to river emergencies and deaths, and coordinate responses from a range of partners. This is the key channel for further activity to improve safety.
- 7.6 The further review of riverbank safety in Shrewsbury now commissioned will audit the current safety measures, their condition and utility, and consider whether any further measures, such as those referenced in the Council Motion, would be most effective in reducing any identified risk represented by the river. Once received this review will be shared with partners and contribute to an action plan.
- 7.7 The review will include consideration of the adequacy of existing river safety measures, the maintenance and of this provision, and where additional measures of any kind might provide improved safety.
- 7.8 It will also consider the role of education and awareness raising of the risks both of alcohol and water and look at ways in which to enhance this consistently for the future.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. Strategic Licencing Committee Members currently receive training as part of their role, to capture their responsibilities, the extent of licencing law, and what can be required of licensees operating licenced premises in Shropshire.
- 8.2. A further update session, to focus upon the licencing objective of public safety, is planned to provide committee members with refresher training, awareness raising and focus on the role of the Council, Councillors and licensees in this matter.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. River safety in Shropshire is an issue that primarily concerns Shrewsbury, due to the close connection between the river and the town centre. The Council will continue to work in partnership with Team Shrewsbury to focus upon river safety, as well as the wider issues that contribute to river deaths and other alcohol related deaths, to coordinate responses from a range of partners.

- 9.2. A report on river safety has been commissioned to consider what further measures, such as those referenced in the agreed Council Motion, would be most effective in reducing any identified risk represented by the river. Once received this review will be shared with partners and contribute to an action plan and reported back to a future Cabinet meeting.
- 9.3. The findings of the Shrewsbury river safety report and action plan will be 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'

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Dean Carroll, Portfolio Holder for Highways, Assets & Built Housing

Local Member - All

Appendices

Appendix 1 Shropshire River Deaths to April 2022
Appendix 2 Team Shrewsbury River Safety Responses

Appendix 1: Shropshire River Deaths to April 2022

Year	River deaths
2004	3
2005	1
2006	5
2007	6
2008	2
2009	3
2010	3
2011	2
2012	4
2013	1
2014	3
2015	1
2016	None
2017	3
2018	1
2019	None
2020	1
2021	None
2022	2
Total Number	41

Appendix 2 Team Shrewsbury River Safety Responses

Partners	Planned responses
PubWatch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance with education to premises managers about river dangers • Creation of an educational video • Poster campaign regarding safe walking routes • Training for over-serving and aftercare • Closer working with Street Pastors and Samaritans.
Street Pastors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a recruitment campaign for patrols and monitoring the Donkey (mobile recovery facility) • Produce safe place posters for the Donkey
Samaritans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate bar staff with mental health support • Consider directional signage to the throwline boards and water safety messages
Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate installation of additional throwline boards, subject to funding and landowner permissions • Advertise NFCC campaigns and national water safety campaigns • Advertise Home & Dry course available on websites • NTE throwline responder training
Royal Life Saving Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue education and resources from early years to sixth form college, including class-based water safety education • Review river incidents over the past 10 years to generate appropriate campaigns
Shrewsbury Town Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Problem Solving Hub for Safety Streets 4 funding bid for Street Rangers and possibly Taxi Marshalls • Liaise with CityCo for information on river safety • Update notice board at Frankwell canoe launch site
Shrewsbury BID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the viability of night bus provision and improved taxi information
West Mercia Search and Rescue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to advertise free online water safety courses to schools, colleges and clubs • Continue river patrols, working with Street Pastors and the Donkey
Shropshire Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River safety risk assessment to be commissioned and reported back • CCTV review to consider increased river monitoring • Coroner's findings from river deaths to be shared with Team Shrewsbury