

Report of: Environment Scrutiny Committee

To: Executive Board

Date: 10th September 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Thames Towpath Risk Assessment



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: To present the recommendations from Environment Scrutiny Committee on the Thames Towpath risk assessment to Executive Board.



Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Jean Fooks

Scrutiny Responsibility: Environment Scrutiny Committee



Ward(s) affected: Hinksey Park, Jericho and Osney, Wolvercote, Carfax

Report Approved by: Sid Phelps, Chair of Environment Scrutiny Committee, Emma Griffiths, Legal and Democratic Service, Nichola Stretton, Finance and Asset Management,



Policy Framework:



Recommendation(s): The Executive Board is asked to respond to the Scrutiny Committee's recommendations:

1. If it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations outlined.
2. If it agrees when will the recommendations be implemented and who will take the lead?
3. If it disagrees why?
4. If more information is required from other officers when that will be considered?

1. Minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Committee – 6th August 2007

23. THAMES TOWPATH RISK ASSESSMENT

The City Works Business Manager submitted a report (previously circulated now appended) which updated the Committee with the results of the Thames Towpath Risk Assessment.

Richard Hopkins from Sitesafe UK Ltd attended the meeting and introduced the report.

Councillor Armitage said that anglers were not identified as users of the Towpath. In response Richard Hopkins said that there had been problems in getting some groups together who used the Towpath and this was one of them, but that Officers were working on this.

Councillor Roaf said that all dangerous parts of the Towpath should be fenced off and signed.

Councillor Pressel said that the County Council should put out warning signs when the rivers were in fast flow, but that signs are only useful when a river is fast flowing or in flood as people tended not to notice signs that are put up and not taken down, they become immune to the dangers that the sign is warning them about. She also said that she wanted the Officer who was being responsible for the signs to have a wider brief such as to enhance the riverside walks.

Councillor Armitage said that it was important that signs were put up in time of flood. Councillor Fooks added that the Environment Agency should put up signs in time of flood.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To ask the Executive Board to endorse the recommendations in the risk assessment report which are set out below (no's 1 – 15):*
 - (1) That full closure of the Towpath was not viable in the event of flooding due to the open nature of the Towpath and the number of both official and unofficial access points, which would make full closure an unmanageable task;*
 - (2) That the possibility of closing smaller sections of the towpath could not be achieved as this was an unrealistic goal and difficult to manage safely;*
 - (3) That the seasonal closure of historically flood affected areas, was not a suitable solution;*
 - (4) That the use of a non-physical closure system such as pictorial warning signs be provided at all official access points to the Towpath which should be placed in well-lit areas wherever possible as this was considered to be reasonably practical to achieve;*
 - (5) That a specific officer be appointed to be responsible for riverside walks within Oxford City;*
 - (6) That the City Council, County Council and other agencies worked together to ensure that workable safety codes are developed for all legitimate users and that a 'Safety First' message is delivered to schools, and via other mediums to the general public;*

- (7) *Engineering solutions such as widening towpaths to reduce conflict between users, piling of eroded banks, encouraging the path to run at least a metre away from the rivers edge, ensuring paths are level and free from loose material and the raising of any towpath which historically floods should be the long term objective. Any engineering changes made to the towpath should remain in keeping with the area;*
 - (8) *The installation of short sections of edge protection works at 'Hot Spots' such as the on the towpath leading towards Fiddlers Island from the north as the towpath is reduced in width and other places as identified in the Sitesafe UK Ltd report, and the identification of edge protection which is already in place but requires remedial works;*
 - (9) *Formal interim inspections and reports are made of the towpath as sink holes can appear without warning, under both summer and winter conditions and these inspections should be carried out in between biannual inspections;*
 - (10) *The types of surfaces of the towpath should be officially graded in conjunction with the County Council and specific statements made against each grade to aid the Inspector and confirm the level of action required when a specific type of defect has been identified;*
 - (11) *That the temporary fence line from Rainbow Bridge to just short of Fiddlers Island remains in position until the permanent repairs are made to this section of the towpath;*
 - (12) *That future repair works planned for Fiddlers Island considers the raising of the towpath in this area above the flood plain and improving the drainage system back into the main channel and that if the path is not raised that any material used in the repair should have its longevity under floods conditions considered;*
 - (13) *That temporary text signage should be exchanged for permanent information material that should be primarily in a pictorial form;*
 - (14) *That any temporary signs warning of a specific hazard awaiting repair should be taken down immediately the hazard has been rectified, as leaving such signs in placed can lead to the public becoming desensitized to such a warning in the future;*
 - (15) *That thoughtful vegetation management can reduce the risk to visitors by exposing known hazards whilst taking into account the bio-diversity objectives, wildlife and local flora and fauna;*
- (b) *That the City Works Business Manager submits a report to the Environment Scrutiny committee in 6 months on the implementation of these recommendations, once approved by the Executive Board.*
- (c) *That the extra signs are placed near the river when the Environment Agency release a flood warning to remind people of the danger. The Committee felt that permanent signage was useful, but that extra warnings should be put up if there was an imminent risk of flooding.*

2. Background

2.1 The City Council commissioned a risk assessment of the Thames towpath and other waterside paths to assess how Oxford City Council might respond to flooding episodes in those areas.

2.2 Sitesafe UK, a safety consultancy, carried out this work and reported their findings to Environment Scrutiny Committee on 6th August 2007. The risk assessment report contained 15 recommendations for the Council and partners to consider implementing.

2.3 The main findings of the risk assessment were:

- It would not be practical to close off the Thames towpath in the event of flooding because of its open nature and the number of official and unofficial access points; likewise, closing smaller sections of the towpath would be difficult for similar reasons;
- Pictorial signs should be placed at access points and along the towpath warning people of the potential dangers;
- An officer should be appointed with responsibility for riverside walks in the city.

2.4 Environment Scrutiny Committee endorsed the 15 recommendations made in the report and asks that progress on their implementation is reported back to the Committee in 6 months time.

3. Signage

3.1 The Committee debated the merits of permanent signage along the towpath, warning people of potential dangers. One of the main concerns that members had is that people become de-sensitised to warning signs if they get used to seeing them.

3.2 The Committee agreed that some permanent signs should be left in place warning people of the dangers should the river flood. However, the Committee also felt it would be suitable to add additional signage when the Environment Agency issue a flood warning for the rivers in Oxford. This would reinforce the message that the towpath can be extremely dangerous when the river is in flood.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The Environment Scrutiny Committee asks that the Executive Board endorse these recommendations.

5 Comments from the Strategic Director (Sharon Cosgrove)

- 5.1 This is a welcome and comprehensive risk assessment of the Thames towpath that the City Council commissioned following a tragic accidental drowning in January. The City Council was rightly concerned to ensure that its systems and procedures were appropriate to respond to flooding episodes in water side areas and in particular to consider the feasibility of closing off the towpath during periods of flood and thereby remove the hazard by user exclusion.
- 5.2 The risk assessment concluded that due to the open nature of the towpath and the number of officer and unofficial access points onto the path, it would be unrealistic to close the towpath and unmanageable if attempted.
- 5.3 The risk assessment report acknowledges that the recommendations it proposes will have resource implications and suggests that the long term aim of the Council should be to ensure that conflicts on paths are reduced, that all paths are level and free from loose material, and that paths that regularly flood are raised. The risk assessment also identifies that flood control systems are complex and the need for County Council and Environment Agency input into the plan.
- 5.4 To allow the Executive Board make an informed decision about the recommendations and resource allocation, officers should prepare an assessment of resource implications against the current budget allocation and provide a full report to Executive Board. It is recommended that the Heads of City Works and Built Environment are instructed to report back to the Executive Board in order to feed into the budget process.

6 Comments from the Portfolio Holder (Councillor Jean Fooks)

- 6.1 I should like to thank Sitesafe and City Works for this very useful report and endorse all the recommendations from the Environment Scrutiny committee. Recommendation (12) on possibly raising the level of the towpath on Fiddler's Island may be impracticable due to the need to preserve the ability of flood water to spread out, but this will be investigated during the major maintenance work being done this autumn.
- 6.2 Erecting extra temporary signs during flood conditions will have revenue implications. These situations should be carried out in partnership with other stakeholders who may be best placed to provide such a service. As the Environment Agency already has resources deployed adjacent to the towpath and know when flooding is imminent, I propose that they be requested to provide this service as a partner of the City Council.

- 6.3 I also note that the appointment of an officer with responsibility for walks in the City will also have revenue implications. Although this is an excellent opportunity to show off the City's waterways, this should be carefully thought through. I would therefore propose that a partnership approach is adopted, perhaps with the use of a third sector organisation. I shall ask the Head of City Works to look in to the feasibility of such a provision.
- 6.4 As there are resource implications for the City Council if all recommendations are followed, I am asking the Heads of City Works and Built Environment to provide a report for the November EB meeting if possible.

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 Background papers:

