

CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY & PLANNING COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 30 January 2024

Title: Riparian and Watercourse Works

Contact Officer: Operations Manager - Angus Whitburn

Background

A report was submitted to Full Council in December 2021 outlining the Town Council's responsibilities as a riparian owner, and the following was resolved by councillors.

'That, the Town Council undertake a full review of watercourses of riparian ownership and set a program of works to ensure they are cleared and maintained.'

Council responsibilities as outlined by the Environment Agency are as follows, enable water to flow naturally, this involves removing all blockages that could reduce flow and cause flooding.

As knowledge has been gained by officers in watercourse management, it has been observed that the silt build-up around Bridge Street bridge is an operational task Witney Town Council could undertake, although not within its jurisdiction. Action to de-silt the bridge has been raised by those at risk of flooding numerous times to multiple authorities with no actions taken.

Current Situation

Watercourse management

Watercourses across Witney Town Council's estate was surveyed in December 2021 by officers and maintenance staff. It was estimated that a 6-year program would be required to clear them and then a rolling program would ensure they were kept clear. This program is ahead of schedule mainly due to the Environment Agency clearing the entire stretch of the river from Farm Mill to the east side old rail bridge (See Appendix A).

There is still a large amount of work to be done and the majority of this would need to be undertaken by contractors. However, due to the council bringing the grounds contracts in-house in October 2022, it now possesses some of the equipment required. One final piece of equipment required is a powered winch capable of pulling fallen trees from the river. The cost of the winch is the approximate cost of removing two mature trees from the river by a contractor.

With this piece of equipment, the maintenance team would be able to undertake the majority of debris removal from the watercourses internally. This inherently negates the need for contractors and would reduce costs. Contractors would then almost solely be required for large tree felling reducing the councils costs substantially. Additionally, the council would then be more reactive to blockages in watercourses.

Bridge Street bridge de-silting

The lack of action to de-silt the bridge on Bridge Street has been raised numerous times by those at risk of flooding and Witney Flood Mitigation group. The bridge has a heavy silt build which is reducing its channel size and creating a dam forcing water to flood areas surrounding. (See Appendix B) This is not the sole contributing factor to the flooding in December 2020 but was identified as one of the main action points from the flood investigation report in January 2022.

The landowners for this area are the Environment Agency and Grange Property Management. As officers understand, the Environment Agency is responsible for the riverbed under the bridge and Grange is the riparian owner of the water course besides Riverside Gardens. The Environment Agency have confirmed that they will not be desilting the bridge and have no plans to do so. Also, in 2023 when officers attended the West Oxfordshire Multi Agency meetings all relevant authorities were present, the desilting was raised and there was no intent to de-silt the bridge by responsible parties.

The Environment Agency has been contacted by officers to see if they would object to another party undertaking the de-silting of the bridge. They have confirmed there would be no objections and have offered support in undertaking this task in site visits and if required, a permit application. Grange has also offered their approval pending a program of works and there is a potential for funding support.

The process would be carried out by a contractor that would use floating barges to excavate or pump the silt. The cost to complete the de-silting is greatly reduced for the Town Council as the Council can remove the silt from the site and repurpose it. If the Town council commit to these works there are no assurances it would take place if permits were not obtainable or there are objections from an authority.

Witney Town Council has no responsibility for this work or area of land. This would however be a positive step for Witney Town Council as it is acting in flood prevention for Witney, which would help those at risk feel more secure. It is important to understand this is not the sole reason for the flooding in Witney but one that much attention has been drawn to.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

Any works undertaken would need to be run through the Environment Agency permit regulations which include protections for wildlife species and potential environmental damage.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Water Course management

Without the correct equipment, the Town Council would still be reliant on contractors to undertake the removal of fallen trees from watercourses. This means those works would be completely reliant on the underspend from the Lake & Country Park maintenance and arboriculture budgets. In failing to remove blockages due to the highlighted reasons, the Town Council would then not be fulfilling its responsibility in watercourse management.

Bridge Street bridge de-silting

As outlined in the report, Witney Town Council has no responsibility for this work or land. It could be seen by residents that the Town Council is the lead authority in flood prevention in Witney which causes confusion. To advertise this, it would be essential to communicate these works in the correct context if agreed.

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

- Portable Winch with winching kit - £2,049.00 Excl VAT
- The river level has been too high to obtain an accurate quote, but contractors have provided a day rate for desilting. It is quoted at £1000.00 Excl VAT, and would require an estimated 4 days.
- Officers could seek possible grant funding (OCC Councillor Priority Fund) to help meet the costs of the desilting.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. Approve the procurement of a portable winch.
2. Allocate appropriate funding to the de-silting works.
3. Consider the proposal to fund de-silting on Bridge Street Bridge and delegate Officers to apply for relevant permits, permission, and potential supplementary funding.