

Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance

September 2024

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Foreword

The River Tone is the reason why Taunton is 'Taunton'. Its blue/green corridor runs through the heart of the town, combining with the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal and multiple tributaries to form a waterways network that reaches into the countryside in every direction. The Waterways interconnect the town's neighbourhoods and root communities within the history and culture of the town and its surrounding Somerset landscape, providing an understanding of place and a sense of identity and belonging.

The network of waterside footpaths links key historic and cultural sites, and one of the best ways to experience, understand and connect with the town is from the

water or the water's edge. As such, the Waterways remain the most important of all place-makers, are rightly at the core of the Taunton Garden Town Vision and are as important to the town's future as they were to its past.

This Strategy and the Guidance that it incorporates have been grant funded by Government Garden Town capacity funding. They will help the town to properly re-establish the Waterways as an enormously valuable asset, and to optimise the benefits that can be derived from the asset for the good of Taunton's communities, environment and economy. The 'Outcomes from Investment' indicate the wealth of benefit that can and should be drawn from

well-planned and well-managed Waterways, not the least of which is the crucial on-going management of the water itself to protect the town from flood risk.

We are particularly appreciative of the collaborative and willing attitude expressed by each of the key Stakeholders, including the water-management agencies, who have supported preparation of the Strategy, sharing their valuable time, energy, knowledge and ideas. That sharing of perspectives, and the collective willingness to achieve wide-ranging and long-lasting benefits from investment, are central to the Strategy and its implementation and we look forward to working together going forward.



Councillor Mike Rigby, Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets

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Executive Summary

The Taunton Waterways Strategy has a spatial focus extending from the Silk Mill park and ride facility west of Longrun Meadow to the M5 motorway, encompassing both the River Tone and the Taunton and Bridgwater Canal. It incorporates the tributaries that connect to the river and canal through the town's neighbourhoods.

The Waterways Strategy sets out to enable the necessarily incremental investment in Taunton's waterways to be better coordinated, so that responsible bodies are identified and work to a common direction, and each investment contributes towards a suite of positive outcomes and delivery of Garden Town principles.

The intention is to adopt the Strategy as a material planning consideration for planning decision-making, and adoption of the Strategy will further demonstrate Somerset Council's commitment to

delivering on Garden Town principles, strengthening funding bids and helping to lever other funding sources that will be vital to achieve delivery. Over time, and subject to the identified projects and recommendation securing funding, the Strategy will make the water corridors feel more like a cohesive linear asset that benefits the town as a whole, and the effectiveness of each investment will be multiplied by the interaction with other investments.

The purpose of this document is to provide a clear, overarching strategy and supporting guidance to direct investment in Taunton Waterways to bring about and sustain coordinated improvement for the benefit of the whole town, in alignment with the Taunton Garden Town Vision, the Local Plan and committed water management and maintenance projects.

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance has been prepared on behalf of Somerset Council by LDA Design and Calm Engineering, with EAD Ecology and a supporting team. It has involved analysis of key Issues, Constraints and Opportunities relating to different parts of the Waterways, from catchment-wide and town-wide challenges and potential, down to more detailed Character Areas.

At the heart of the commission has been a group of key stakeholders who have worked collectively to provide the information, understanding and direction necessary to ensure that the content of this document is accurate and that the strategy and associated guidance have a realistic prospect of being implemented. That collaborative approach is at the core of defining, and implementing, the Waterways Strategy.

Outputs include:

- a **maintenance and management plan** which has been developed in consultation with the Lead Local Flood Authority, Environment Agency and Canal and River Trust
- identification of strategic goals for the strategy to deliver
- definition of prioritised investments
- provision of, site-specific design guidance (primarily for the brownfield regeneration sites within the Waterways as allocated for redevelopment in the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan October 2008), and guidance for smaller potential sites close to the tributaries within Taunton's neighbourhoods
- delivery-focused recommendations and
- identification of potential funding sources, the receipt of which are necessary to deliver the strategy and projects



1 Introduction

1.1 Study area

The spatial focus for the Taunton Waterways Strategy extends from the Silk Mill park and ride facility west of Longrun Meadow to the M5 motorway, encompassing both the River Tone and the Taunton and Bridgwater Canal. It incorporates the tributaries that connect to the river and canal through the town's neighbourhoods.

Necessarily it demands an understanding of and commentary upon the wider river catchment, extending upstream and downstream beyond the town since investment here can have a significant effect on water management and use within Taunton. The wider river catchment lies beyond the scope of this commission, but key opportunities are referenced at higher level and encompassed with the strategy.

1.2 The need for a strategy and guidance

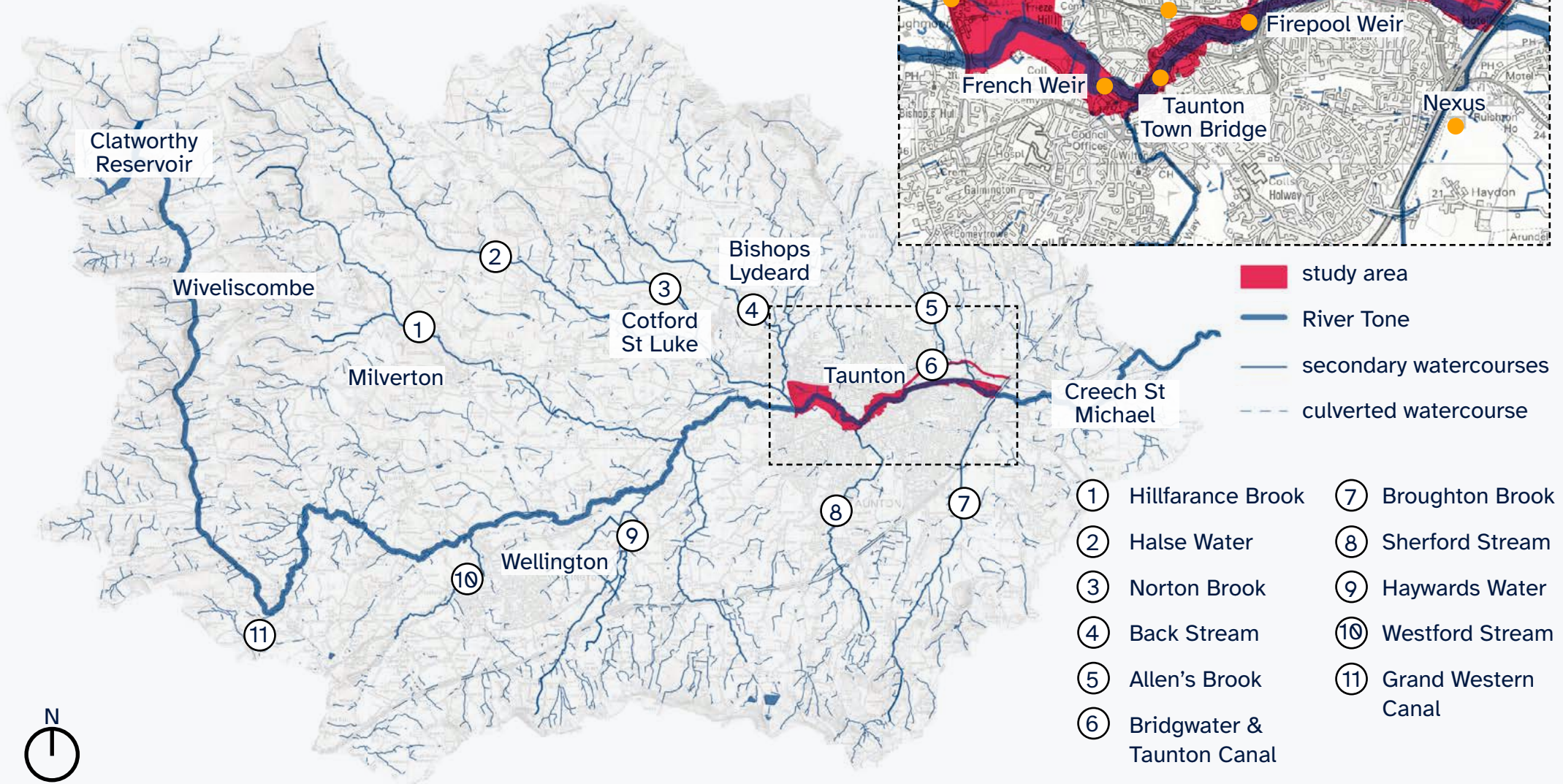
Taunton is one of the UK's Garden Towns and one of its key objectives is to rediscover the historic connection between the town and its surrounding landscape. Whilst Taunton looks to connect outwards, it also seeks to turn its face and activity towards the river and put the river at the heart of the town in a positive way, rather than a negative association with its waterways as a result of risk of flooding. One of the means identified for achieving that positive association is by making the most of its river, canal, streams and watercourses. The aim is to transform the perception of Taunton over time, so that it is once again recognised as a town and culture embedded within its remarkable natural environment and it is that water-based environment that was, remains and will continue to be one of the key reasons for Taunton's appeal and success.

Placing rivers, canals and watercourses at the centre of transformative regeneration

is not without its challenges. There are overlapping responsibilities for maintenance of the river, canal and tributaries, and each responsible agency has different needs, approaches, funding criteria and priorities. For these agencies, effective water conveyance is the critical driver of investment. Managing flood risk is fundamental to the town and surrounding area and transformative measures to improve the town must not hinder the effectiveness of the investment and initiatives proposed. However, where practical, solutions should be planned and designed to deliver additional benefit, over and above the functional conveyance of water.

Additional to the multiple water management agencies is the multiplicity of riparian landowners, and a wide range of other agencies involved in investment within the Waterways Corridor, encompassing recreation, wayfinding, highways and the development of waterside sites for example, and so the complexity of the situation becomes clear.

River Tone catchment and study area



Further, there is no single funding pot to bring about that transformation and so there is a heavy reliance on investment in individual projects which tend to fall into three groups:

- investments in the maintenance or improvement in water management - primarily designed to serve a functional purpose
- investment that responds to the availability of Government funding and addressing specific agendas, for example in wayfinding, active travel and public realm enhancement related to town centre rejuvenation
- redevelopment of major brownfield sites within the water corridors where the need for commercial viability can constrain the ambition of investment to only what is essential to bring development forward

Over time, these investments will bring about change and improvement, but unless there is strong coordination, clarity on responsibility and a concerted movement to a common set of goals, the investment will either not be realised or will be ad hoc

and the opportunity for the Waterways to bring about the sort of transformational change envisaged by the Garden Town Vision such as benefits to the wider town and linking up to wider green infrastructure, which in turn will also deliver wider benefits, will be missed.

There is therefore a need for an overarching Waterways Strategy that enables the necessarily incremental investment to be better coordinated, so that responsible bodies are identified and work to a common direction, and each investor contributes towards a suite of positive outcomes. The water corridors will start to feel more like a cohesive linear asset that benefits the town as a whole, and the effectiveness of each investment will be multiplied by the interaction with other investments.

Every future investment in the water corridors will be informed by the Waterways Strategy and will need to demonstrate how it adheres to the associated guidance. With the Strategy and Guidance in place, gradually, as major water-related projects,

waterside redevelopment of allocated sites and delivery of smaller scale public realm improvements come forward, there will become a higher quality of waterside environment, better connectivity along the waterways, improved awareness of the role, and importance of water to the town and a higher level of water-focused activity in particular around the town centre, all of which will help to sustain the town's long term vitality, reinforce its character, sense of place and livability.

The purpose of this document is to provide a clear, overarching strategy and supporting guidance to direct investment in Taunton Waterways to bring about and sustain coordinated improvement for the benefit of the town as a whole, in alignment with the Taunton Garden Town Vision, the Local Plan and committed water management and maintenance projects. It also provides planning guidance for allocated town centre brownfield development sites located adjacent or in close proximity to the waterways.

The document prioritises future initiatives, projects and investments within the Waterways, setting out clearly where further work is required to support a coordinated approach to investment. It also provides a structure around which the diverse group of stakeholders and the Taunton community can work collectively to achieve wide-ranging positive outcomes from all investments in, adjacent and related to the Waterways. The Strategy and Guidance will assist responsible bodies in making well-informed decisions about the Waterways and the related environment, supporting collaboration, helping to target funding opportunities more effectively and becoming a material consideration in planning decision-making.

1.3 Continuity

The Taunton Waterways Strategy has been instigated by the Taunton Garden Town Team and is integral to its implementation. It is part of an on-going process aimed at optimising the value of the Waterways for the benefit of the town as a whole. This section summarises the key work that led to this Strategy.

Previous relevant work on Taunton waterways

The Strategy builds on a body of previous work undertaken by the Council including the River Tone Task and Finish Group (2014) which was established to identify projects which would improve the River Tone and its surroundings. The associated Working Group, and the Taunton Town Centre Rethink Framework that was developed and published at the same time, raised the importance of the River Tone to Taunton and stated that it should be placed at the centre of the Council's future development plans.

The Taunton Rethink highlighted the need for a more detailed action plan and strategy and set the foundation for design work undertaken by Atkins in 2018 and 2019. Only Stage 1 of that work was completed, and it forms an important part of the evidence that informs the new Strategy.

The new Strategy also brings matters up to date through the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders to ensure its alignment with current and projected water-related investments and planned maintenance and management projects.

The opportunities, direction and actions identified within the Strategy are deliberately high level and are intended to stimulate and structure discussion and cooperation amongst the key organisations responsible for the Taunton Waterways going forward, as well as helping to deliver some 'quick wins'.

The Strategy is therefore an important step in an established and on-going process rather than a free-standing document. The strategies and projects identified in the document will need to be further developed, tested, designed and funded and will inevitably be refined through that process. In order to avoid the Strategy and Guidance rapidly becoming out of date, proposals are included for improved governance across the key stakeholder organisations so that the principles established in this piece of work will continue to be upheld long after the commission has come to an end.



1.4 Collaborative working

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance has been prepared on behalf of Somerset Council by LDA Design and Calm Engineering, with EAD Ecology and a supporting team.

At the heart of the project has been a group of key stakeholders who have worked collectively to provide the information, understanding and direction necessary to ensure that the content of this document is accurate and that the strategy and associated guidance have a realistic prospect of being implemented. That collaborative approach is at the core of defining, and implementing, the Waterways Strategy.

Project team

The project team is a collaboration between:

- Somerset Council (Garden Town Implementation Manager and Green Infrastructure Officer)
- LDA Design (Planning and regeneration Urban and landscape design)
- Calm Engineering (Water management / Civil engineering)
- EAD Ecology (Biodiversity and ecology)
- City Science (Active travel and transport)
- SLR consulting (Local transport)
- Peter Gunning & Partners (Costs)

Stakeholder team

We wish to thank the following stakeholder organisations for their time and engagement in the process of defining a strategy and guidance for Taunton's Waterways:

- Canal and River Trust
- Environment Agency
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG Southwest)
- Somerset Council Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA)
- Somerset Council Landscape, Open space, and Green Infrastructure
- Somerset Council Taunton Garden Town, Town Planning and Regeneration
- Somerset Council Highways Authority
- Somerset Council Active Travel
- Somerset Council Ecology
- Somerset Council Community
- Somerset Council Climate Change
- Somerset Council Placemaking
- Somerset Council Public Rights of Way (PRoW)
- Somerset Council Cultural Strategy
- Somerset Drainage Board Consortium
- Somerset Rivers Authority
- Somerset Wildlife Trust
- Taunton Town Council
- Wessex Water

1.5 Structure of the strategy and guidance document

Section 2 of this document states the primary aim of the Strategy and Guidance in the context of the established Taunton Garden Town Vision. It also sets out and illustrates the ‘Outcomes from Investment’ which have been defined by the project team and endorsed by the stakeholder group.

These represent the values behind the Strategy and form criteria against which potential investments should be considered: the aim being to deliver multiple positive outcomes across four key distinct but related categories.

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance has not been prepared in a vacuum: it is informed by changing global and local environmental context, variation in national policy drivers and agendas and the continuous supply of new information. The contextual factors

of particular relevance to this piece of work are referenced in **Section 3**.

The broad geographical spread of the waterways and interactions between different parts of the water network has necessitated a strategic spatial approach that defines three Functional Areas for ease of reference: Catchment-wide, Town-wide and Central Area, as illustrated and described in **Section 4**. The definition of Functional Areas has determined a set of base maps that are used throughout the document for consistency.

The map-based **Section 5** highlights the key Issues, Constraints and Opportunities relating to different parts of the Waterways, from catchment-wide and town-wide challenges and potential, down to the more detailed Character Areas. This section has been substantially informed by the Stakeholder Team and is primarily focused on water management.

The Management and Maintenance Plan (MMP) for the Waterways is summarised in **Section 6** with more detail provided in Appendix B. This part of the document

addresses committed and planned management and maintenance projects which are established and do not need to be assessed or prioritised in this Strategy. The MMP has been developed in consultation with the LLFA, Environment Agency and Canal and River Trust and is designed to provide an overview of the maintenance and management of the waterways through Taunton, and some wider aspirations on the future maintenance and management of these systems as the town and wider catchment evolves over the next 30 years. The responsibilities of riparian owners are highlighted in the MMP.

Section 7 sets out the Goals of the Taunton Waterways Strategy that need to be achieved if the maximum benefit is to be derived from the town’s water assets in line with the Taunton Garden Town Vision. Its remit is wide-ranging, from evolving and sustaining a collaborative mindset among stakeholders, through to education and engagement programmes that raise awareness of the importance of water to the lives of all of the town’s residents, employees and visitors.

The overarching objective of the Strategy is to coordinate incremental investment in such a way that the ‘whole’ becomes greater than the sum of the individual investments, which is one of the building blocks of successful and sustained urban regeneration. It is also intended to support funding bids, thereby leveraging in investment.

In **Section 8**, the process of identifying, evaluating and prioritising potential investments is outlined, and the nature of the prioritised investments is described.

The Strategy encompasses the need for site-specific design guidance, primarily for the brownfield regeneration sites within the Waterways as allocated for redevelopment in the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan October 2008 to ensure that opportunities to re-connect the town with the River Tone are maximised when these sites are redeveloped. This is supplemented by guidance for smaller potential sites close to the tributaries within Taunton’s neighbourhoods.

The design guidance is set out in **Section 9** and is intended to be adopted as a material planning consideration for planning decision making purposes.

Section 10 is focused on delivering the Strategy. It builds on the willingness to collaborate demonstrated by all of the key stakeholders throughout the process of preparing the Strategy and Guidance, considers existing Governance structures and illustrates a possible Governance approach. The stakeholders have endorsed the principle of utilising a body to inform better coordinated investment over the longer term and one of the priorities identified by the Strategy is to implement that Governance Structure at the earliest opportunity.

Document Structure

Key Outputs

Section 2 Primary aim and outcomes from investment



Vision & values behind the strategy, outcomes from investment

Section 3 Context for the Taunton Waterways Strategy



Planning, climate change, ecological background and other contextual research

Section 4 Strategic spatial approach



Defining functional and character areas

Section 5 Issues, challenges, opportunities



Map-illustrated issues, constraints & opportunities for catchment/individual character areas

Section 6 Summary of maintenance and management plan

Section 7 Taunton Waterways strategy



Strategic goals and overarching objectives of the strategy

Section 8 Prioritised investments



Individual project identification, evaluation and shortlisting

Section 9 Design principles



Site-specific design guidance

Section 10 Delivery



Proposal of a governance structure and coordinated investment