

4 Spatial Planning and Character Areas

The geographical focus for the Taunton Waterways Strategy is predominantly along the River Tone within and around the town centre, extending upstream to Silk Mills Road (A3065) and downstream to the M5. Between Firepool Weir and the M5, the Waterways also include the Taunton and Bridgwater Canal.

The relationship between the town, river and canal is generally less defined by what happens on the water and more by the activity around the water and hence reference to ‘Waterways Corridor’ (as opposed to simply ‘waterways’) in this Strategy, referring to the adjoining and nearby land that benefits, or could benefit, from a strong interaction with the river and canal.

Beyond that definition, the geography of the Strategy extends further to address the tributaries that flow through many of the town’s neighbourhoods into the Waterways Corridor, and the footpath and cycle links that connect the communities to the Corridor through the town’s green wedges and interacting

with the tributaries. Still further out are the upstream and downstream parts of the River Tone catchment which have an enormous influence on all aspects of the water corridor through the town. So, whilst the Taunton Waterways Strategy is primarily focused on the river and canal, it necessarily addresses wider considerations.

4.1 Functional areas

In order to effectively communicate that geographic spread and to best understand the varying challenges, opportunities and interactions across the whole geography, the Strategy identifies three key Functional Areas which form the basis for mapping and planning.

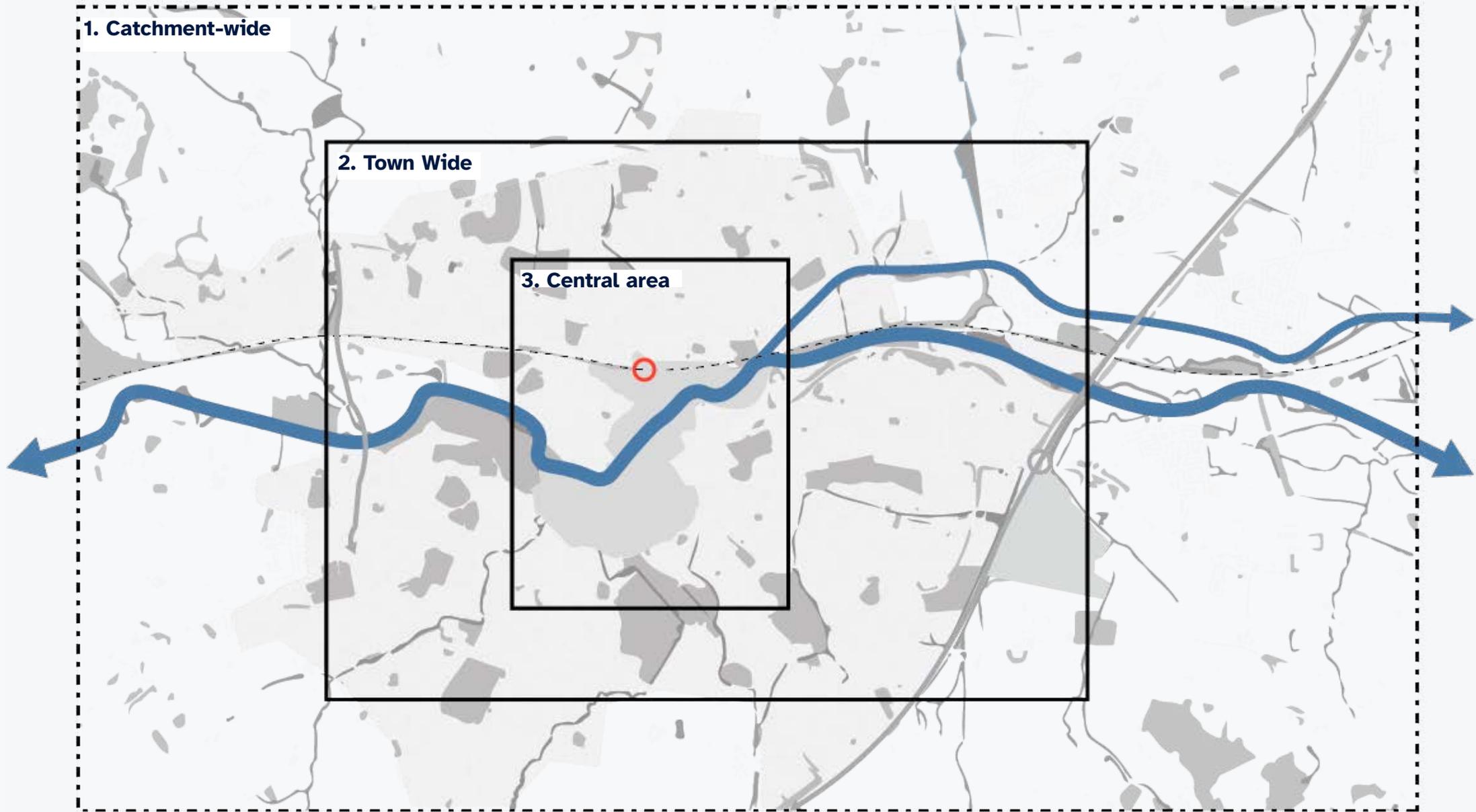
The Functional Areas are:

1. **Catchment-wide:** the wider river catchment that extends upstream and downstream beyond Taunton’s settlement boundary. The wider river catchment lies beyond the defined

scope of this Waterways Strategy but, owing to its importance to the conditions of the water within the town, it is necessarily referenced and key issues and opportunities are recorded

2. **Town-wide:** the river and canal extending from Silk Mills Road in the west to the M5 in the east, with connections through the town’s neighbourhoods through green wedges and associated tributaries. Linear issues and initiatives that apply to the whole of the water corridor are included. The corridor is sub-divided into seven **Character Areas** reflecting their individual attributes, qualities and potential
3. **Central area:** the water channels and waterside extending from French Weir to the west of the town centre, eastwards to Firepool Weir, encompassing three of the Character Areas. The river is an integral part of this central urban area which is rich in culture and history and yet the urban form is not particularly focused on the water as a placemaking asset

Diagram showing the three Functional Areas



The Central area includes the numerous potential brownfield redevelopment sites for which design guidance is provided, and three of four identified project clusters are within the Central area making this the area in which the most substantial change is anticipated to occur.

The Taunton Waterways Strategy is intentionally ‘high-level’, aiming to identify opportunities and facilitate collaborative working towards achieving the wide-ranging positive Outcomes from Investment. As such, it does not provide detailed guidance or precise definition and costing of potential investments.

It sets out:

- overarching principles for opportunities that are not site-specific
- waterways-specific principles for each Character Area and
- site-specific guidance for identified redevelopment sites

4.1.1 Relevant catchment characteristics

Details of relevant catchment characteristics are summarised below:

- The river is 63km long with an average gradient of 1 in 130. The total catchment area is approximately 385 sq km² (148 sq miles)
- The River Tone drains land from 14 main sub-catchments (including three reservoirs) as defined in the South West River Basin District,
- The overall Catchment is semi-rural but includes the urban areas of Taunton and Wellington, the main railway line serving the South West and a section of the M5
- Multiple watercourses flow into the River Tone through Taunton; Mill Leaze, Lyngford Stream, Sherford Stream, Galmington Stream, Blackbrook, Taunton Mill Stream, Allens Brook, Priorswood Stream, Maidenbrook Stream and Kingston Stream
- The catchment and land-use has historically been permanent pasture, arable and sheep and cattle grazing and woodland
- Fluvial flooding in the Upper Tone is relatively limited. This reflects the relatively small and steep watercourses which dominate the area. Recent flooding in this sub-area has been strongly driven by local surface water problems, exacerbated by some farming practices which have increased field run-off locally
- Downstream of Wellington, flood risk is primarily along river corridors within a defined floodplain made worse by some farming practices which can increase runoff. Functioning floodplains provide a natural storage area with very little modification to the River Tone itself. Some villages, such as Hillfarrance, benefit from a Flood Alleviation scheme

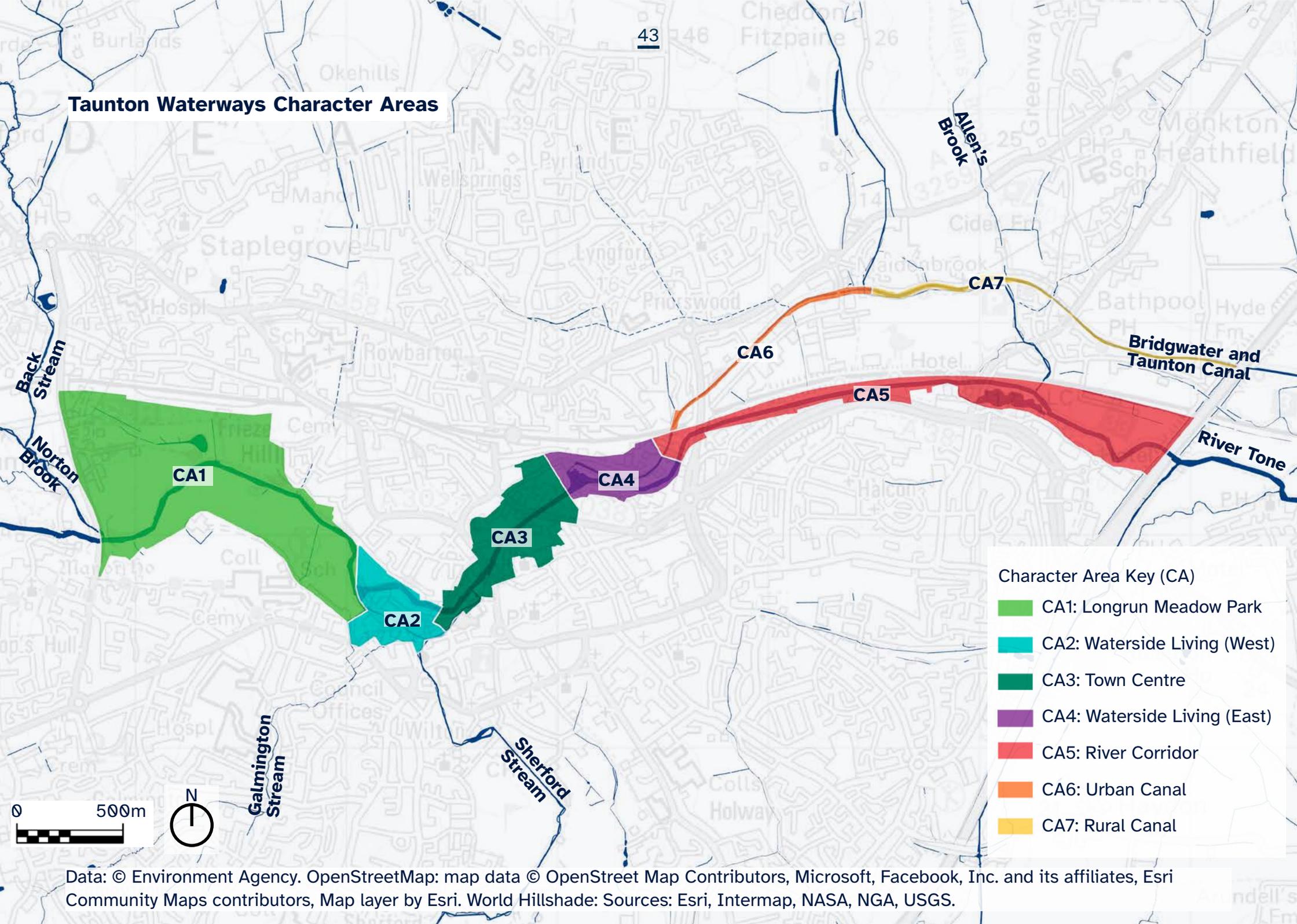
- Historically flooding in Taunton has been dominated by the River Tone. The 1960 flood event was reported to have flooded nearly 500 properties in the town. In response to this flooding the Taunton flood defence scheme was constructed in the 1960s and the scheme was further upgraded in the 1990s. Since the scheme was built in the 1960s there have been no major flood events in Taunton although the defences were tested in October 2000
- Most of the remaining flood risks in Taunton are related to tributary flooding. It is a fast-responding catchment with very little water storage due to artificial modification of the watercourse and adjacent floodplain. The risk of flooding has also increased by the loss of alternative waterways and storage in the valley floor, growth on the riverbanks and loss of capacity due to silting from agricultural practices
- Canalisation and culverting of some tributaries has also increased flood risk as crucial floodplain storage has been lost over time. Blockage risk is increased within the urban areas due to rubbish being discarded
- The Taunton and Bridgwater canal is 23.33km (14.5 miles) in length, passes through the unique lowland areas of Somerset, many parts of which have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The canal became one of the first canals to commercially carry water when Wessex Water needed more capacity during the summer months (Durleigh Reservoir). Wessex Water reached a commercial agreement with the then National Rivers Authority (now the Environment Agency) and British Waterways to pump water from the canal to Durleigh
- The canal maintains its level with water from the River Tone at Firepool Lock, which is its link to navigation of the River Tone

4.2 Character areas

The Strategy and Guidance divide the main river channel into 7-character areas:

- CA1: Longrun Meadow Park: (including Park Ride)
- CA2: Waterside Living (West): (French Weir Park + Tangier allocation site)
- CA3: Town Centre (including Firepool, Morrison, Goodland Gardens and Cricket ground sites)
- CA4: Waterside Living (East): (in the vicinity of Firepool Weir)
- CA5: River Corridor
- CA6: Urban Canal
- CA7: Rural Canal

Taunton Waterways Character Areas



Character Area Key (CA)

- CA1: Longrun Meadow Park
- CA2: Waterside Living (West)
- CA3: Town Centre
- CA4: Waterside Living (East)
- CA5: River Corridor
- CA6: Urban Canal
- CA7: Rural Canal

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4.2.1 CA1: Longrun Meadow Park

Character

- Expanse of large open fields with blocks of trees and hedgerows and some limited agricultural fields.
- Character is predominantly meadow – informal, recreational, semi-natural space with community activity. It feels like a large community asset – plenty of paths and space for recreation.
- Paths connecting to the tree-lined river have a clear open meadow character, but the path under the trees connecting Roughmoor Close to French Weir Avenue feels intimate.
- The character area has an established riparian corridor along low river banks with clear views of the river.
- The park and ride at the northern-west edge of the character area is predominantly hard paving enclosed by semi-mature shrub and tree shelter belt edges.

CA1 covers a total area of 76 ha. Longrun Meadow including the area south of the river between Silk Mill Road in the west and French Weir in the east.

Silk Mill Park and Ride, which is a large area of hard paving, is in the northwestern corner of CA1. The Park and Ride (P&R) has 760 car parking spaces and is convenient for drivers coming from West Somerset and for people who need to get to Musgrove Park Hospital. It has a waiting room facility with toilets, but currently no other active travel offers such as e-bike hire or a small retail facility. It has the potential to become a new Mobility Hub at the entrance to the nature reserve with wayfinding information for pedestrian and cycle routes to Taunton town centre. A Public Right of Way across the site, from the P&R along the river past French Weir to the town centre. The meadow is well used by walkers, dog walkers, cyclists, and school children. Water sport activities include kayaking and wild swimming.

Surfacing around Longrun Meadow is variable, it can be muddy, stony and can

be difficult for commuters using the routes through this area into the town from the park and ride site. A well-surfaced and direct route into town would be helpful.

Adjacent to Taunton's railway line along the northern boundary is a small area of land allocated for development (industrial). Included in the character area is the Frieze Community Orchard in the North.

Longrun Meadow is a large public open space with open views across fields of arable crops and semi-improved grassland. As the land was formerly used for growing crops it is currently fairly limited in its range of plants.

The meadow is home to a large open barn providing a covered community space, a picnic area, and the Willow Cathedral. The park contains young clusters of woodland and Wetland habitat. There are two water storage areas located in the southern edge. The river running along the boundary on the northern edge of Longrun park breaks its bank during heavy rain and all the meadow can flood.

Off Silk Mill Road in the west is a small cluster of mixed -use development (including a nursery and fitness studio). There is restricted direct crossing over Silk Mills Road providing link to Nether clay park in the west. Somerset College of Arts and Technology and the Castle School are situated at the southern park boundary.



A Green Infrastructure (GI) link runs along the Northwest of CA 1, connecting the town and the Quantock Hills AONB to the north.



Site photos Character Area 1
Longrun Meadow

4.2.2 CA2: Waterside Living (West)

Character

- North and south have different characters.
- The north feels like a well planned urban area, mixing residential street with riverside green space that has urban parkland characteristics. There is predominantly positive interaction between the built form and the river corridor and green spaces.
- French Weir park is a large public civic open space surrounded by large mature specimens of London planes, horse chestnuts and oak trees, and there are open views of the southern river bank with dense vegetative growth.
- The south is much less organised and has little discernible urban form. It is dominated by highway infrastructure and large footplate buildings in car parks.
- There is currently a lack of positive relationship between existing development and the River Tone and Mill Stream.

CA2 includes the French Weir Park, the Tangier and Tesco site allocation area (Tg1, Tg2) west of the town centre. The combined CA2 area north and south of the river covers about 12 ha.

French Weir Park, adjacent to the River Tone is a small community park with play equipment, covering 2.4 hectares. The public open space is surrounded by large mature trees. The park includes a privately operated Weir café, which facilitates the Centre of Outdoor Activity & Community Hub (COACH), situated next to the French Weir. In the summer, the sports and canoe club TASC is based at the centre. It offers various water-based activities including kayaking, canoeing and stand-up paddle boarding with coaching and guidance. Recreation, both on land and water are of significance within this area.

The character area plays a key role in providing connections between Longrun Meadow and the town centre. As a neighbourhood park it is used by all ages and acts as an attractive through route between residential areas, shops, schools, and colleges.

The Tangier brownfield site is allocated development land, part of the Town Centre Area Action Plan (2008). The River Tone and Mill Stream run through the site, effectively forming an island.

The character area boundaries are the historic French Weir in the west and Third Way Bridge in the east. Over the French Weir structure runs a shared pedestrian and cycle link. The weir limits the potential for navigation along the waterways.

French Weir is part of the historic riverside setting. It was first built in the early 13th century when the mills in Taunton were reorganised, and the Castle Mill Stream was built. The weir was destroyed by flooding and rebuilt many times over the centuries. In the past the river around French Weir had become a popular place for bathing. Today a community of wild swimmers come together at French Weir, although swimming is not always safe due to the poor water quality (contaminated water run offs due to rising water levels).



French Weir public footpath



Tangier site



Site photos Character Area 2
Tangier Site and French Weir Park

French Weir cafe

4.2.3 CA3: Town Centre

Character

- This area feels like the margins of the town centre.
- The town centre abuts the river corridor here and the interface could be expected to be a vibrant focal point but instead the sense is that town centre is aware of its river but does not embrace or celebrate it.
- To the west of Town Bridge, there is plentiful vegetation and strong features which collectively convey historical character and relate well to Castle Green, but they do not feel connected to the core of the town centre. Town Bridge itself feels as if it is peripheral to the centre, rather than part of the town's heart.
- East of the bridge, the riverbank is a mix of hard engineered surfaces of brick, concrete, mud, and stone.

The character varies considerably, from the quite intimate retail feel of Riverside Place to the boldness of Coal Orchard, and then the dominance of the Cricket Ground (with its windowless facade facing the river) and the blandness of the supermarket and its car park. The intensity of the town centre bleeds quickly away.

- However, this is likely to be transformed by the Firepool development which will introduce a much stronger urban feel in the east of this character area, helping to frame the river and form a denser built connection with the town centre.
- There are some neglected spaces east of Coal Orchard, including the area under the bridges and the bandstand and riverside path next to Morrisons, and vegetation on the south bank appears unmanaged.

CA3 stretches east from Third Way Bridge to include the Firepool site in the east. It encompasses Goodland Gardens, the Somerset County Cricket Ground, the Wood Street site allocations, the Morrisons site and the Firepool site allocations (Fp1, Fp2) north of the river. The total combined CA3 area covers 22 ha.

The area has considerable historic character. Taunton Town Bridge is a landmark and most of the town centre area is designated as an Area of High Archaeological Potential. The Mill Stream at Goodland Gardens is a key heritage asset.

CA3 plays a key role in providing connections through the town centre and strengthening the relationship with the Firepool regeneration site. The Morrison site will be important in the future regeneration of the town centre (refer to Chapter 9 Design principles). Currently the urban landscape includes a series of fairly disconnected urban spaces north and south of the river. Pedestrian and cycle movement reaching the Town Bridge is interrupted.

The rear of the former Debenhams building is not well integrated with the river, Town Bridge or the historic Goodland Gardens.

The two redundant sluice structures in Goodland Gardens relate to the former town mill - an interesting focal point as a reminder of the importance of water to the town's evolution.

The riverbank east of the Town Bridge is a mix of hard engineered surfaces. The new planned Boulevard link at Firepool will connect the train station to the river edge and serve as an enhanced recreation location opposite the recently developed

Coal Orchard site adjacent to the Brewhouse Theatre. Taunton's independent quarter with courtyard spaces, restaurants, and shops create a vibrant ambience opposite the river.

The character area includes six bridge crossings. From River Tone Bridge in the west, the pedestrian footbridge at Goodland Gardens, Town Bridge in the Centre, the pedestrian bridge crossing between Morrison and the Brewhouse Theatre, Priory Bridge and the pedestrian bridge further east crossing over to the Firepool regeneration site.



Goodland Gardens
Photo credit: Stephen Craven



Coal Orchard



Town Bridge

Site photos Character Area 3

Town Bridge, Goodland Gardens and 'Rainbow footpath', and Coal Orchard

4.2.4 CA4: Waterside Living (East)

Character

- There is a distinct difference in character between the river and the canal. The canal water level remains constant, close to the footpath, with softened edges of reeds and irises, with a backdrop of small trees and shrubs, giving an appearance rich in vegetation. Whereas, the river edges are less accessible down a sloping bank with sparser vegetation.
- Firepool Lock provides an attractive, quiet, enclosed space surrounded by mature hedgerow trees with obvious historic features.
- The northern and southern banks of the canal and river respectively are paralleled by housing of sufficient scale to frame the waterways corridor, giving it a clear waterside living character.
- The character is positively influenced by Children's Wood, which has naturalistic, informal parkland qualities, and the established trees on the southern side which diminish the visual presence of the Priory Fields Retail Park.
- The Trenchard Way flyover obviously affects character and there is neglected space immediately beneath it, but its impact is tempered by the qualities of the waterside context.

CA4 includes the section from Firepool Weir to Obridge footbridge in the east. The total combined CA4 area covers about 12 ha.

The new housing scheme (Firepool Lock development) forms an attractive edge with direct frontage to the canal footpath. The remainder of the Firepool regeneration site is planned for significant development and a masterplan was adopted by the Council in 2023. It is envisaged that the weir will become a focal point for this development (refer to Chapter 9 Design principles).

Adjacent to Firepool Weir is the Grade II listed Pumphouse, a brownfield site with the potential to become incorporate a public hub as a destination for visitors to the town centre. The building currently has consent for conversion into a public house and restaurant although this has not been implemented. It fronts onto the canal and the canal road towpath. The access bridge over Firepool Weir is unsafe and the public footpath (PRoW) over the weir is currently closed. Most sluice gates are inoperable and in poor condition.

The river and canal diverge before the weir. In contrast to the canal, the river edges are inaccessible down a sloping bank with sparser vegetation. The canal footpath is used both by pedestrians and cyclists. The concrete bridge of the A307 connects the north and south of the river for vehicles.



Canal housing development



Firepool regeneration site



Site photos Character Area 4
Firepool Lock development and Pumphouse
at Firepool Weir

Pumphouse

4.2.5 CA5: River Corridor

Character

- The relatively straight river channel east of Obridge, and the parallel footpath, trees and vegetation, give this area the feel of a long, informal riverside park, albeit with few features. The river edge is softened by a small margin of reeds, grasses and small willow trees. There is only limited access to the river and only a few crossing points.
- The trees soften the visual effects of the railway and adjacent uses and the area has surprisingly rural quality. However, that is tempered by the rail and traffic noise and the engineered river.
- Further east, the character become more rural owing to the adjacent fields and broader woodland planting.

CA5 includes the section of the river between Obridge footbridge in the west and the M5 in the east. The rail line runs along north of the river. Part of this section of the river corridor is a local nature reserve.

The total combined CA5 area covers about 36 ha. The total length of the river from Obridge footbridge to the M5 is about 2.3 km.

The trail between Children's Wood in the west up to Hankridge Nature Reserve in the east is good for walking and running. The PRoW runs along both sides of the river. There is limited opportunity to cross the river at the western end at Children's Wood, making a crossing above Firepool Weir desirable.

The river edge is softened by small margin of reeds, grasses, and small willow trees. River corridor planting is of native willows, alders, and other wet habitat trees along with scrub, wet grassland, and marginal reed. From the bottom of the grassy embankment there are open views of the river.

Hankridge Nature Reserve's attenuation basin is deeply enclosed with trees with limited access to the river. The river corridor is a tranquil place, only the busy motorway forms a noisy boundary edge.



River Corridor
Photo credit: Derek Harper



Children's Wood
Photo credit: Steven Craven

Site photos Character Area 5
River Corridor at Obridge footbridge and
Children's Wood

4.2.6 CA6: Urban Canal

Character

- The canal here has a semi-urban character as if on the edge of town and is influenced by industrial estate and traffic noise
- Yet it feels traditional, being tightly contained by industrial units separated only by well established hedgerows for the most-part, with some industrial plots being more obviously exposed.
- With the exception of the canal, towpath and bridges, the sense of tradition is not reflected in built heritage or architecture which is modern and functional.

CA6 runs through industrial areas east of Taunton including Priorswood Industrial Estate. The National Cycle route goes along the footpath on the southern edge of the canal alongside the industrial units.

The CA6 area (through the industrial zones) has a length of about 1.2 km.

The industrial units turn their backs onto the canal. There may be an opportunity to improve overlooking by providing some more active frontage facing the canal over time.

The towpath along the whole length of canal provides a 10-mile level path across the Levels to Bridgwater connecting the moors to the town.

The canal is used by water sport activities, such as kayakers. The canal is crossed by the A307 bridge and Ventury Way bridge. Tall vegetative screening is included on both banks of the canal, the northern edge consists of some mature trees.



Urban canal

Photo credit: Richard Webb



Industrial units along the canal

Photo credit: Richard Webb

Site photos Character Area 6

Industrial units along the canal



Rural canal housing

4.2.7 CA7: Rural canal

Character

- Despite still being within the outer reaches of the town, this length of canal has a tranquil, rural feel that suggests being on the open countryside.
- Adjacent development has a village character.

CA7 runs through the suburban and rural parts in the east, with a village character. The rural canal in this Character Area has a length of about 1.6 km.

The pedestrian swing bridge at Bathpool connects the neighbourhoods over the canal further east and is well used by children as a route to school.

Canal mooring west of the swing bridge include narrow boats & small yachts.

This part of the rural canal has footpaths on both sides. The properties along the canal change between different boundary

treatments, from fences to hedgerows to open views along the canal.

The area has open, expansive views of sky and arable fields to the north. A variety of farm building architecture are located further east. M5 traffic noise is audible at the eastern extent of the character area, reducing the tranquillity and interrupting the more rural experience of this part of the canal.

Monkton Heathfield development allocation is located northeast of CA7. The area adjacent to the canal is identified in planning policy as a multi-purpose 'green necklace' surrounding the future settlement, providing allotments, outdoor recreation, and wildlife habitat with public access (Refer to chapter 5 Opportunities).



Bathpool Mooring
Photo credit: Tony Atkin

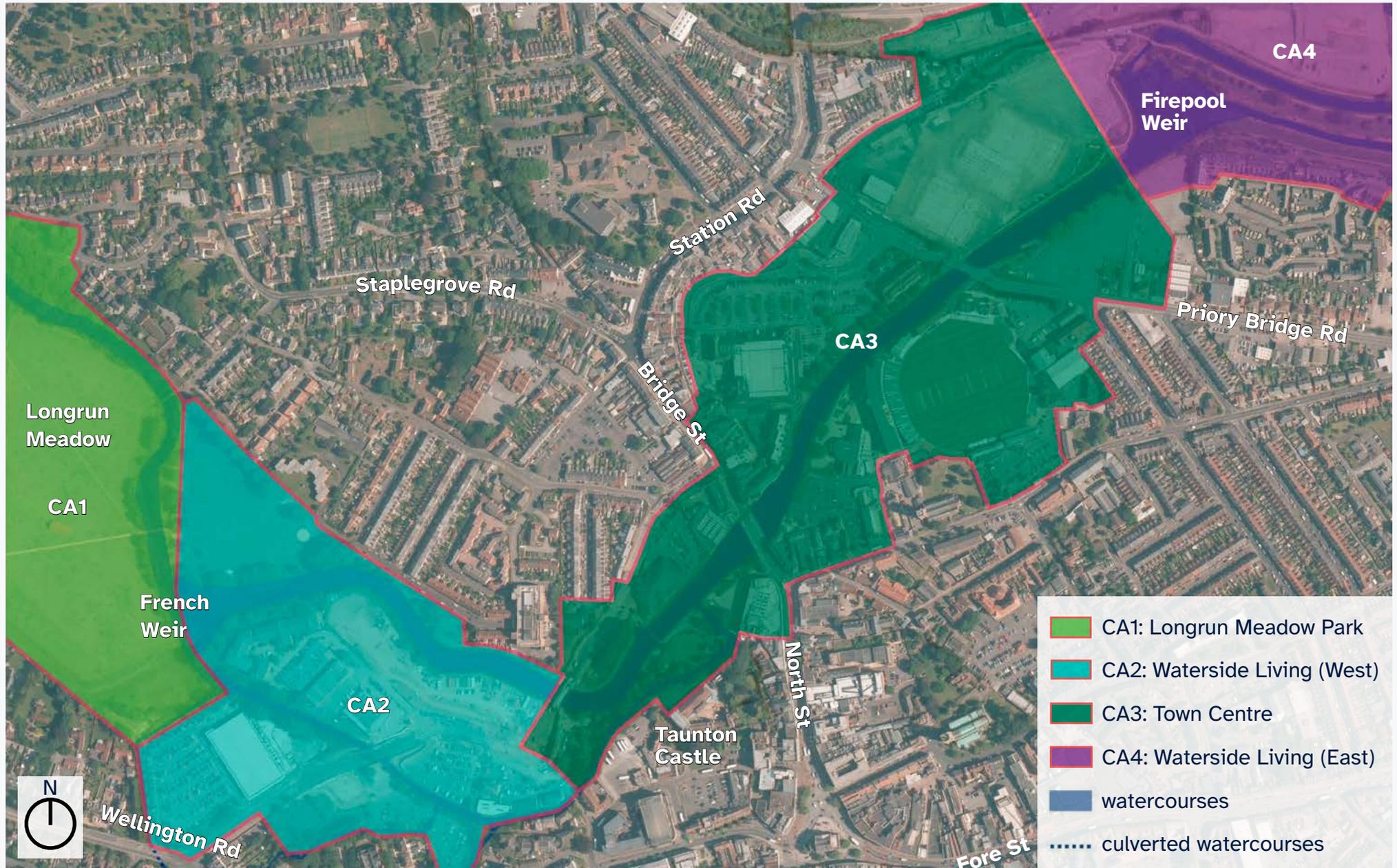


Rural canal edge

Site photos Character Area 7

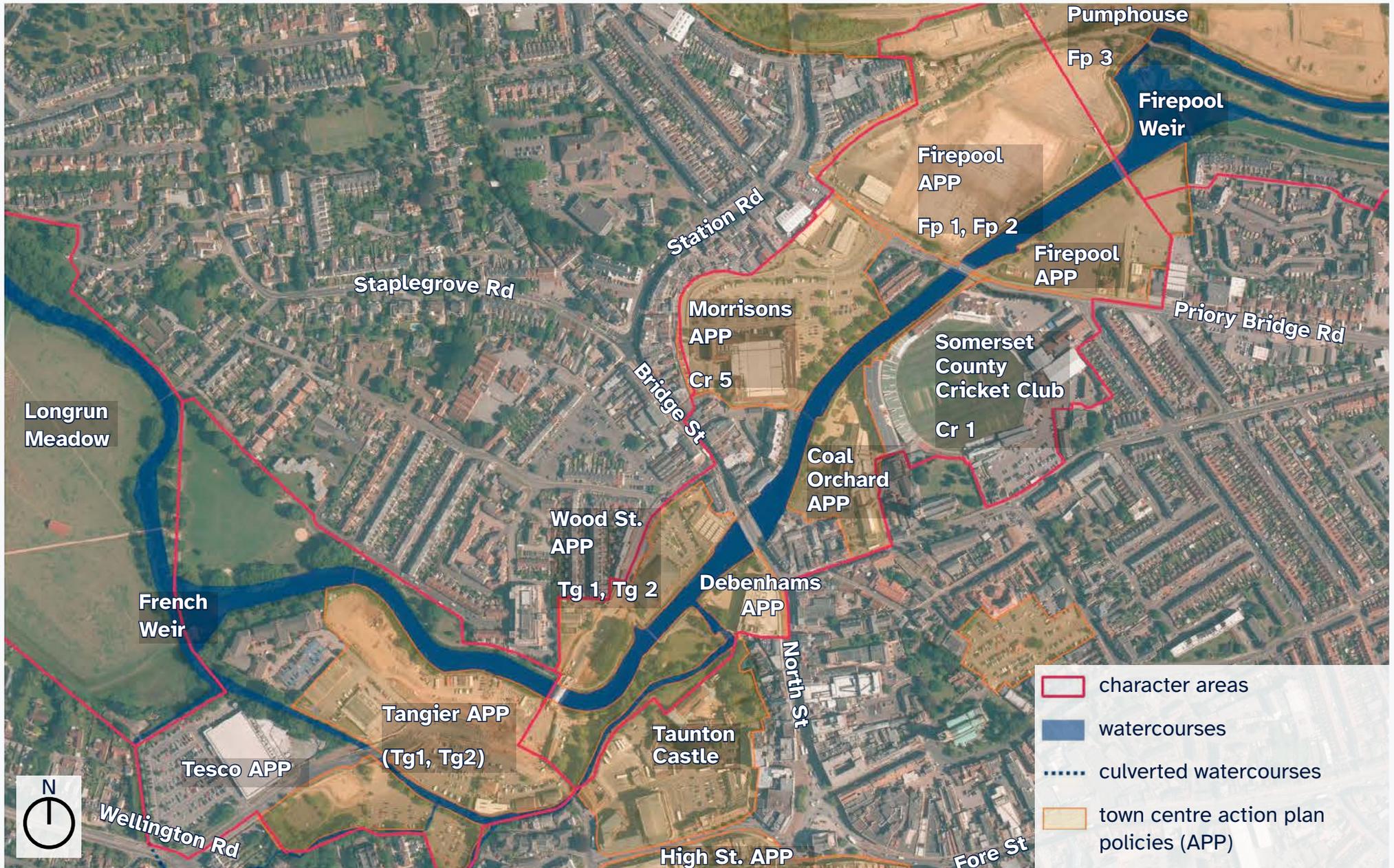
Bathpool Mooring and land adjacent to the canal as part of Monkton Heathfield development

Character areas in Taunton Town Centre Area



Aerial Photography - World Imagery (Clarity): Source: Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, IGN and the GIS User Community. World Hillshade: Sources: Esri, Airbus DS, USGS, NGA, NASA, CGIAR, N Robinson, NCEAS, NLS, OS, NMA, Geodatastyrelsen, Rijkswaterstaat, GSA, Geoland, FEMA, Intermap and the GIS User Community.

Identified development sites in Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan 2007



Aerial Photography - World Imagery (Clarity): Source: Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, IGN and the GIS User Community. World Hillshade: Sources: Esri, Airbus DS, USGS, NGA, NASA, CGIAR, N Robinson, NCEAS, NLS, OS, NMA, Geodatastyrelsen, Rijkswaterstaat, GSA, Geoland, FEMA, Intermap and the GIS User Community.