

PARKS AND OPEN SPACES COMMITTEE

24 AUGUST 2021

RIVER ERME IN LONGTIMBER WOOD

Following the tragic incident in Longtimber Wood on 15th June 2021, it was agreed that the provision of information and safety equipment along the river bank should be reviewed.

As emotive as this issue is, it's important to separate a heartfelt response to such an incident from an objective view of whether the safety of the public at large is unreasonably compromised.

Current situation

The riverbank in the wood is almost all natural with very limited manmade structures interfering with the vast majority of the bank, it substantially being natural, gently sloped or low banked.

It is unlikely that anyone would enter the water accidentally or struggle to climb out of the water if they did.

There is currently no life-saving equipment or advice about swimming in the river, but the natural nature of the location could negate this.

The river is extremely susceptible to rain fall, and can quickly rise and speed up.

'Wild swimming' has become an extremely popular past time nationally, and there is a lot of public information about the safety precautions to take while wild swimming – mainly that it is risky unless you are very experienced and have taken precautions to protect your own safety.

Cold water swimming is a high risk activity. There is no encouragement or promotion by the Council to carry out this activity.

Examples from other locations

Dartmoor National Park Authority

We do not supply life saving equipment but we do not actually own river-side sites. As far as I am aware the Forestry Commission do not supply it at sites by the river such as Bellever, however South West Water and South West Lakes trust do have life rings at reservoir sites (not rivers).

I don't think personally this would be a good idea as it is a natural feature and as far as I am aware other riverside sites do not have such equipment. It will become a maintenance issue and also due to the fast flowing nature of the river will be difficult to successfully deploy if such a terrible incident should happen again.

Birmingham City Council:

Rivers and Brook Courses

In circumstances where rivers or brook courses run through parks and public open spaces under normal conditions the depth of water is negligible, and only in flood conditions the risk to users of the site increases. It is not practical to sign or provide lifebuoys for all sites where rivers and brook courses flow, in the event of such storm or flood conditions the use of the local media shall be used to highlight the potential increased risk to possible users of these sites.

Environment Agency advice for watercourse owners:

*Report an incident
Let water flow naturally
Prevent pollution
Protect wildlife*

Suggested actions

Swimming in the river is a high risk activity and the river is a natural feature.

People can have accidents in a wide range of circumstances, and there's no evidence that the recent incident would have been prevented by the provision of a lifebuoy.

The provision of a lifebuoy could be considered unusual on this site given the consensus that lifebuoys are often ineffective in a river situation and highly susceptible to vandalism and so will often be missing.

The provision of lifebuoys may also be interpreted as an acknowledgement, or encouragement, by the Council that swimming is an acceptable activity in the area, whereas this Council should discourage such activity.

A reminder to Longtimber Woods users of the danger of cold water swimming could be provided on new noticeboards at the main entrances to the woods at Stowford Mill, Station Road and where the public foot path enters the northern edge of the woods. These could be funded from **9101/901 Parks Woods and Open Spaces** reserve (currently £18,745 at time of writing). Up to £800 per sign should be budgeted to get long lasting permanent signs, and installation, and they would have space for general notices too.

The signage could include clear messages against swimming – especially aimed at children, parents of children, and adults with limited cold water swimming experience.

The design of the signs can take the best examples from elsewhere, and importantly be clear and concise.

The information on these signs could also be shared with local schools along with details of national schemes that work with schools to promote water safety.

If in addition the Committee wanted to consider lifebuoy provision, these would cost around £500 for a basic red/orange plastic holder plus installation. For a bespoke wooden holder more in keeping with the natural environment would be considerably

more. Replacement rings would be approximately £45 each including tether line rope which would be required in a moving water environment. You would also need to decide how many along the river bank to place and at which locations. You would also need to budget for replacement rings when they are stolen/vandalised as well as the extra staff time to monitor and replace. Signage as described above would still need to be provided on top of this.

The education on cold water swimming and the reminders to children and adults of its danger along with clear discouragement to take part in such activity should be considered as a priority.

The Committee is asked to decide their preferred course of action.

Jonathan Parsons
Town Clerk