

Agenda item 4

For decision - Adoption of the Avon Bioregional Charter for the River Frome

Author: Rob Holden, Environment Manager

Summary (incl. recommendations)

The River Frome is one of Frome's most important natural assets, providing wildlife habitat and connectivity to surrounding wildlife rich landscapes, climate resilience, flood management, recreation opportunities and a strong sense of place. As a tributary of the Bristol Avon (joining near Freshford) it forms part of the wider Avon bioregion.

The Avon Bioregional Charter is a community-led, council-adopted statement of principles that recognises rivers as living systems and provides a framework for considering river health in decision-making. It has been developed by We Are Avon, the University of the West of England and councillors from across the region and is being adopted by increasing numbers of local authorities throughout the Avon catchment, notably Bath & North East Somerset and Bristol to date. The Charter does not create new legal duties, alter planning law or impose statutory obligations. Instead, it provides a shared set of principles which signatories agree to consider when making decisions that may affect river health, a public pledge against which future council actions can be held to account.

The proposal aligns strongly with Frome Town Council's environmental priorities, the proposed Nature Recovery Plan and the Council's growing role as a riverside landowner and steward.

Recommendations:

1. To adopt the Avon Bioregional Charter and agree that the Charter principles are considered within relevant Council policies, projects and decision-making.
2. To explore the future appointment of a Community Guardian, or equivalent mechanism, to advocate for the River Frome and support community engagement with the Charter.

Background

The River Frome forms part of the Bristol Avon catchment (it joins the river Avon near Freshford, south of Bath) and contributes significantly to the ecological health of the wider Avon bioregion. The river is central to Frome's landscape, biodiversity, heritage and identity.

Figure 1 - The Bristol Avon passes through many notable Wiltshire towns, including Malmesbury, Chippenham, Melksham, Trowbridge and Bradford-on-Avon before the river passes through Bath, Keynsham and Bristol in the lower reaches.

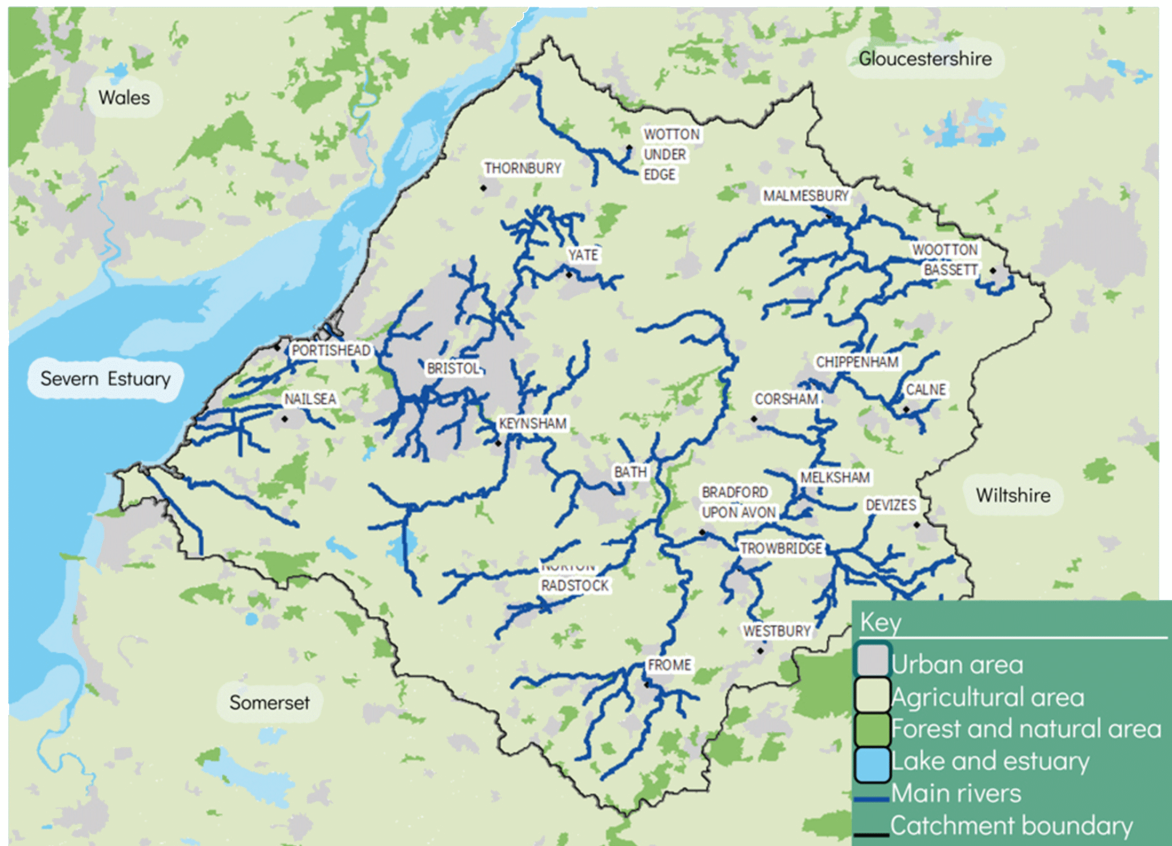
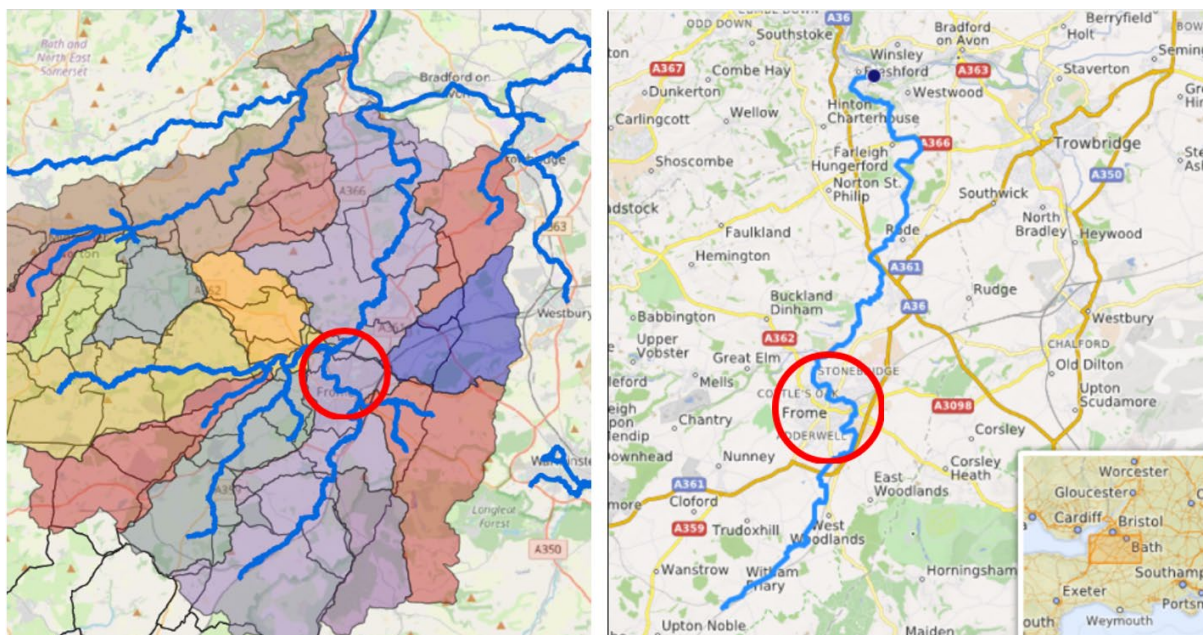


Figure 2 - The River Frome catchment area and course of the river through to the Avon at Freshford



The Avon Bioregional Charter has been developed in response to growing recognition that river systems face increasing pressures from pollution, habitat loss, climate change, water abstraction and fragmentation of ecological networks. It seeks to encourage councils and communities to consider river health proactively, rather than relying solely upon regulation after environmental harm has occurred. Full details can be seen [here](#)

Figure 3 – Most rivers in the South West are assessed as being in poor quality (brown)



More than twenty councils and local authorities across the country have either adopted, or are actively considering the Charter, notably the councils of both Bath & North East Somerset and Bristol. Winsley Parish Council was the first Avon council to formally announce the charter for the Rights of the Avon and Bioregion in June 2026. The approach builds upon wider national and international movements recognising rivers as living systems with intrinsic value.

The Avon Bioregional Charter

The Charter sets out seven rights which signatories agree to consider when making decisions that may affect the river:

- The right to **exist, thrive and evolve naturally**.
- The right to **flow sustainably**.
- The right to maintain biodiversity integrity.
- The right to regeneration and restoration.
- The right to freedom from pollution.
- The right to promote cultural and community connection.
- The right to representation and advocacy.

These rights are intended as guiding principles rather than legally enforceable obligations. They provide a lens through which decision-makers can consider the potential impact of

policies, projects and development proposals on river health. And they provide a public pledge made by the Council meaning future actions may be held to account by the public against these standards.

Relationship to the Nature Recovery Plan

The Charter aligns closely with the FTC's proposed Nature Recovery Plan (see separate report on this agenda) and strengthens several of its key objectives.

In particular, it supports work to:

- Protect and enhance the River Frome as the town's principal wildlife corridor.
- Improve habitat connectivity along the river corridor.
- Deliver nature recovery and biodiversity enhancement projects.
- Improve climate resilience through natural flood management and habitat restoration.
- Support greater community engagement with nature and stewardship of local landscapes.
- Strengthen partnerships working across the wider River Frome catchment.

Adoption of the Charter would therefore complement, rather than duplicate, existing Council ambitions and would provide an additional framework through which environmental decision-making can be considered.

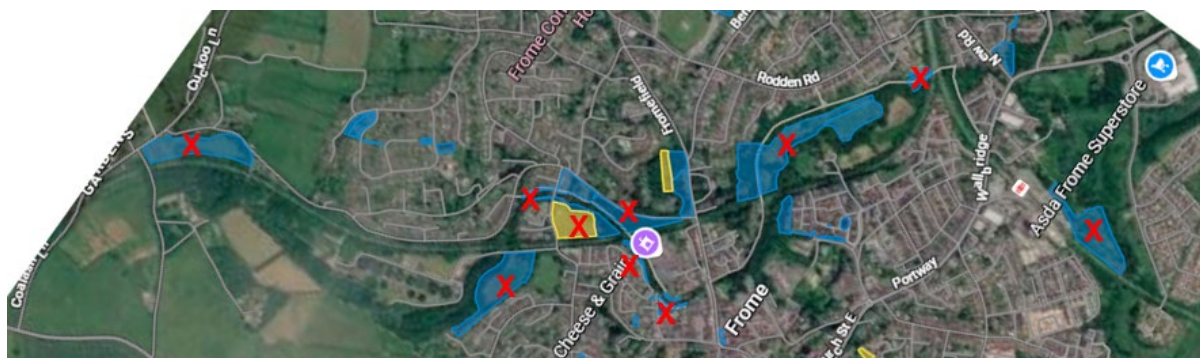
Relevance to Council Land Holdings

FTC now has an increasingly significant role as a riverside landowner and steward.

The Charter is particularly relevant to the management and future enhancement of:

- **Adderwell Water Meadow**, a site of significant ecological importance and potential habitat restoration value.
- **Rodden Meadow Nature Reserve**, where ongoing habitat management and nature recovery initiatives are being developed.
- **The Community Woodland**, which contributes to wider catchment resilience, biodiversity and natural flood management.
- **Weylands** and adjoining riverside green spaces.
- **Welshmill**, where community use, biodiversity and river health intersect.
- **Market Yard river frontage**, where future development and public realm considerations may affect the river corridor.

Figure 4 Map showing FTC riverside landholdings (Marked X)



Adoption of the Charter would help provide a consistent set of principles for considering future investment, management plans, biodiversity initiatives and partnership projects across these sites.

Wider Context and Opportunities

The Charter may also support:

- The establishment of a renewed River Frome Catchment Partnership involving key stakeholders including the Environment Agency, Wessex Water, Natural England, community groups and neighbouring authorities.
- Greater collaboration across the Avon catchment.
- Stronger advocacy for improvements to water quality and river health.
- Future funding applications relating to biodiversity, nature recovery, flood resilience and environmental enhancement.
- The appointment of a Community Guardian to provide a recognised voice to advocate for the interests of the river.

Adoption would demonstrate the Council's commitment to protecting and restoring the River Frome whilst placing local action within a wider catchment-wide movement for river recovery.

Other options considered	Legal rights for the river Frome, 10 years ago.
Key considerations for the Council	We will be committing to promoting the charter and appointing a community guardian of the river to safeguard the agreed rights for the river
Consultation and feedback	This is an initiative from community organisations in response to river vulnerability.
Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan	Cultivate environmental sustainability: campaign to improve the ecological health and biodiversity of the River Frome
Financial and Risk Implications	No costs or risks
Legal / HR Implications	The Charter is declaratory rather than statutory and does not create new legal powers, duties or liabilities.

Equalities Implications	Positive impact through improved access to, engagement with and stewardship of natural spaces and green infrastructure.
Community Safety Implications	Improved management of the river corridor creates opportunities for people to connect with nature, important for wellbeing
Climate Change and Sustainability Implications	The Charter supports climate adaptation, habitat recovery, natural flood management, biodiversity enhancement and improved ecological resilience
Health and Safety Implications	None
Constitutional Requirements	N/A
Background Papers	None
Report Sign-Off	Peter Wheelhouse, Town Clerk 29/09/26

Recommendations

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