

Stratford St Mary Parish Council

Council response to residents' proposal for closure/ restriction of river access.

Over the past two years, the dramatic increase in the recreational use of the River Stour has brought with it several problems that have, seasonally, disrupted daily life in our small rural community. This is a particular issue because, in Stratford St Mary, the river and the main access road come into juxtaposition in the centre of the village, with the result that the primary points of river access are in the middle of a residential area. Unsurprisingly, this has led some of those most affected by this influx of visitors to demand that, along with actions to better manage traffic flow, parking and litter issues, access to the river be closed or restricted by the use of some form of passcode-controlled access.

All of these suggestions from residents have been considered in detail over the two months that elapsed between the scheduled July and September virtual meetings of the Parish Council, including at three specially convened meetings involving our District and County Councillors, held in the open to comply with requirements for Covid security.

The Parish Council's proposals for taking action on these matters have been made public on the council web-pages (<http://stratfordstmary.onesuffolk.net/in-focus/lower-street-parking-and-anti-social-behaviour-issues/>) and confirmed for implementation at the September meeting (held via Zoom) (see *September minutes* <http://stratfordstmary.onesuffolk.net/assets/Parish-Council/Minutes/Sept-2020.pdf>).

At and subsequent to, that meeting dissatisfaction has been expressed by some residents, at the Council's decision not to restrict access to the river. This dissatisfaction was supported by suggestion that access could be easily permitted and controlled by means of a combination/pass-coded padlock with the pass-code given only to those deemed appropriate to have access. It was further suggested that this exclusive group should be constituted mainly of those holding a River Stour Boat Licence.

In support of this proposal, one resident put forward an example of such an access method working satisfactorily for a beach hut community. The validity of this example in the beach hut context, has since been corroborated by one of the Parish Councillors who had personal experience of a similar arrangement.

The Council's consideration of the issue has concluded that a beach hut community, such as that cited in this example, would be finite, stable and known. Also, that population would have a vested interest in maintaining the integrity of any restricted access scheme. The administration of restricted access is managed by volunteers from the community or by an appointed agency with fees paid by Hut owners. All of which would result in such a scheme being practical, relatively straight forward to manage and financially supportable within this community

The Council has concluded that the applicability of this example would not hold true in the Lower Street situation.

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The suggestion that the focus community could be restricted to only those having a River Stour Boat licence is considered to be impracticable. In addition to those with such a licence, anyone having membership of the canoe association (and some other organisations) is entitled to launch their canoe, kayak or paddle board on just about any waterway in England, including on the River Stour.

In addition, as was stated during the meeting, the Councils intention in taking on responsibility for this stretch of river bank has been that access to the garden is not just to facilitate access to the river for boaters, canoeists, and paddle boarders but is also for anyone wishing to sit and relax, contemplate the river or enjoy a picnic if they wish.

The community of interest for the River Garden is therefore, to all intents and purposes, infinite, constantly changing and as a result unknown.

For such a scheme to operate successfully, all parties using the "pass-coded lock method" would be required to adhere to its rules. The Parish Council has concluded that, based on the unknown nature, large volume and wide demographic of potential users, this is unlikely as few would have any incentive to do so. It is more likely that some at least would not bother to lock the gate behind them and that many would obtain the code and share it with their friends, invalidating the method completely.

The suggestion of using a coded access, obtained via phone in advance, therefore becomes unfeasible. Establishing the validity of the membership of the various groups involved would require information to be shared from a variety of membership databases and managed on at least a 12/7 basis.

Without such validation, anyone could gain access to the code to access the garden and the river and the legitimacy of a secure access method would be negated. Overcoming this would require still more resource to validate, approve and manage code availability. The Council has therefore concluded that the administration of a restricted access scheme for the River Garden, would be beyond the capacity of the parish to support.

Alongside the suggestion of restricted access for the River Garden, there was also suggestion from residents that the gate to the Roger Brown Bridge at the weir should be similarly secured to prevent use of the portage points as launching stages by visiting canoeists, kayakers and paddle boarders.

This gate, the bridge and the island on which the portage points are situated, are not within the jurisdiction of the Parish Council and their closure or access restriction would require cooperation/ agreement from the River Stour Trust.

Given its conclusion that access to the river should remain open at the River Garden, and the reasons for it, the Parish Council has not formally requested RST to close or restrict access to the Roger Brown Bridge. It has however been in liaison and met, with RST on this matter and has received clear indication that they do not agree with the proposal to restrict access to the bridge and would be unlikely to respond positively to any request to do so.

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The Trust's intention is to keep the gate open. There is a long history of public access to the island; in the 1950s a Mr Norfolk hired rowing boats from the island that were used on both the upper level and lower levels of the river, and Ordnance Survey maps from the late Victorian and Edwardian period show a footbridge where Gordon's bridge now stands. The Trust does not believe it has the right to stop that access.

Based on these considerations, although the Parish Council very much regrets that it is unable to meet the demands of some residents in this respect, it has concluded that, in the wider interests of the community it represents, river access should remain unrestricted.

This does not mean that the related issues of impeded traffic flow, nuisance parking, litter and anti-social behaviour should not be addressed and the council will continue to take what action it can on these matters, in line with the published proposals and using the measures legally available to it.

The Parish Council has welcomed the engagement of residents in trying to resolve these issues and is grateful for the suggested solutions which, although they have not all been implementable, have required council members to undertake considerable research into what may and may not be practicable and possible. The action agreed for implementation is a first step on the road to resolution and the council continues to work to try and find further options for action that will improve the quality of life for residents. We must however, take account of the interests of all the parties that we represent, and work within the confines of the Law and the Council guidelines.

We shall continue to do what we can, and adapt as we move forward.

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October 2020