

SUBJECT: MOTION FOR THE RIVERS AND OCEAN

MEETING: PLACE SCRUTINY

DATE: 15TH SEPTEMBER 2022

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To outline the challenges facing our marine and river environments and set out how Monmouthshire County Council can play its part in realising clean, healthy and productive rivers and oceans, in order to see all the biodiversity, economic and health and wellbeing benefits that this will bring.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 To agree to the actions outlined in the Motion for the Rivers and Oceans Action Plan (see Appendix 1).

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 In Monmouthshire, rivers and the ocean are at the heart of our heritage and economy. From the rich maritime and ship building heritage of Chepstow to the thousands of visitors who come on holiday to enjoy the Wye Valley and follow in the footsteps of the historic Wye Tour, many come to experience the sight, sound and feel of our rivers and coast. They are popular routes for walking and cycling and have high ecological value as well as being the foci of historical settlements. However, pressure from development, increases in recreational use, changes in agricultural practice and climate change continue to affect these attractive landscapes.
- 3.2 The health of our ocean is inextricably linked with our climate and with human health, wellbeing and prosperity. A healthy ocean is fundamental in regulating the global climate system and is an essential ally in our fight against climate change. The ocean absorbs more than 90% of the excess heat in the climate system as well as absorbing around 20% of annual carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions generated by human activity.

- 3.3 However, decades of irresponsible marine exploitation and pollution have led to significant levels of degradation, and this together with the detrimental impacts of our changing climate on marine ecosystems has led to national and global recognition that the world ocean is in crisis. An unhealthy ocean does not absorb or store carbon as effectively as a healthy one, further worsening the impacts of the climate crisis. The impact of the climate crisis on the ocean is profound, from rising water temperatures and changes in ocean chemistry, to sea level rise and increased storminess. This is increasing the risk to infrastructure and properties, and increasing the risk of flooding and storm damage both along the coast and in our riverside communities.
- 3.4 Likewise, Monmouthshire's rivers are in crisis, with water quality deteriorating as a result of pollution from sewage, agricultural practices and pressure from development. Phosphates and nitrates entering the river cause a process called eutrophication to occur, where toxic algal blooms feed on the excess nutrients and multiply and reduce light and oxygen levels, killing fish and other species. This effect has been exacerbated this year with extremely dry weather and high temperatures, which mean that the water levels in our rivers are very low.
- 3.5 Monmouthshire is a coastal community but its estuary location means that it is often not viewed as such. We recognise that our ocean, rivers and climate are in a state of emergency and we need to play our part in working towards nature recovery for our oceans and rivers.
- 3.6 First-hand experience of our rivers and ocean are essential if people are to be motivated to play their part in protecting it, whether that is through disposing of their litter responsibly, recycling what they can or volunteering in conservation or volunteer monitoring and data collection projects with local organisations. Helping individuals to develop their ocean literacy is an essential part of this motion, as is individual and collective river and marine citizenship.
- 3.7 There are many organisations and agencies who have an impact on how our oceans and rivers are managed. Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Dwr Cymru Welsh Water have the most significant role. However, local government has an important role to play as well, in terms of participating in partnerships to look after rivers and coast. Local authorities cannot solve the ocean and river crises alone, but we can – and must – play our part.
- 3.8 Following discussion at Council in March 2022, a Motion for Rivers and Ocean was declared, and a commitment was made to bring an action plan

back to council within six months, outlining the steps the council will take to protect our rivers and ocean. There is much work going on within the council to address the nature emergency and protect water quality. However, there needs to be more of a co-ordinated focus on how we have an impact on our rivers and coasts. This action plan aims to pull together the work that is going on across many different council services in a co-ordinated way and to address areas where the council could be doing more to protect our rivers and coast.

4. INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT EVALUATION:

- 4.1 The actions outlined in the action plan will have significant positive impacts on a Prosperous Wales (valuing the role rivers and coasts play in tourism and enabling development to happen in a way that does not have a negative impact on the environment), a Resilient Wales (helping with nature and ocean recovery), a Healthier Wales (by improving water quality, as well as encouraging more people to enjoy rivers and coasts for recreation). There are no negative impacts on the Wellbeing Goals.
- 4.2 The action plan will benefit everyone and will not negatively impact on people with any particular protected characteristic.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 5.1 Doing nothing is not an option. Water quality is a key priority of the Cabinet and it is important that steps are taken by the Council to play their role in helping to tackle these challenges.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 It is anticipated that progress towards actions in the action plan will be monitored every six months and reported back to Council.

7. REASONS:

- 7.1 As described above, our oceans and rivers are in crisis. The Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and our Climate Emergency Action Plan recognises the importance of managing green spaces to reduce energy use, absorb carbon and be resilient, but didn't include anything specific about oceans or rivers. When the plan was updated in 2021, the emphasis on nature recovery was strengthened, in recognition of the nature emergency, and an action on addressing water quality was added.

7.2 However, there needs to be more of a co-ordinated focus on how we have an impact on our rivers and coasts. The Motion for the Rivers and Ocean agreed by the Council in March 2022 was followed by further debate in Council in June 2022. Implementing the measures outlined in the action plan will ensure that we are playing our role in improving the health of our oceans and waterways and could yield new jobs and opportunities, more resilient coastal and riverside economies, and happier, healthier people; as well as a cleaner, healthier and more productive natural environment.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

It is anticipated that at present there will be no additional cost to implementing this decision as actions in the plan come within existing financial and officer resources.

9. CONSULTEES:

Officers who are responsible for actions within the plan have attended 2 workshops to shape the action plan

Cllr Catrin Maby, Cabinet Member for Climate and Environment

Senior Leadership Team

Cabinet members

Alys Morris, Severn Estuary Partnership

Dr Emma McKinley, Cardiff University (Diverse Values project)

Natural Resources Wales

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix 1 – Motion for the Rivers and Ocean Draft Action Plan

For more background on the Motion for the Ocean see

<https://lgacoastalsig.com/motion-for-the-ocean/>

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