



STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Members of the Public's Questions to Council.

Question from Councillor Haydn Jones

Restoring a navigable link via the Cotswold Canals between the Severn and Thames has received general cross-party support at Stroud District Council since at least the turn of the millennium. Political arguments have ebbed and flowed but until recently support for this project has been almost universal and unstinting. The Cotswold Canals Trust and Cotswold Canals Connected, of which this council is a lead player and partner, have a well-publicised ambition to 'restore the historic link between England's two greatest rivers'.

Members will be aware that a Canals Strategy, which will form a Supplementary Planning Document underpinning and informing the Local Plan, has been making its way through the council and consultation process. This culminated recently at Environment Committee where members had the opportunity to question officers, review the canals project and debate its future. The debate helped to bring out an apparent dichotomy between the councils stated ambition and policies within our plans to achieve that end. Whilst there is a commitment to protect the canal route there is no such proactive policy to take the next steps in achieving our ambition. This is perhaps illustrated best by the officer response to some residents concerns with extending the canal east beyond Brimscombe where the statement given is 'The canal Strategy is not a prescriptive masterplan for projects along the corridor nor does it propose or advocate for specific improvements (e.g. making the canal fully navigable from the Severn to the Thames or the restoration of the upper canal reaches) but provides a design framework for decision making where proposals come forward'. Perhaps some of this statement leaves open the possibility of more than one outcome but, by implication at least, it gives the impression that our original ambition has been abandoned.

Economists amongst you will know, expectation is a fundamental predictor of the future. If potential funders believe we, as a council, have 'gone cold' on the original idea their confidence will evaporate along with their money.

Twenty years of steadfast commitment from members across the chamber working with council officers will deliver within a few short years complete restoration of the Stroudwater Canal bringing social, economic and environmental regeneration to the Stroud District. To work towards the goal of connecting England's two great rivers over the next twenty years the same unequivocal commitment will be required.

Can the council make a statement that clearly indicates our commitment to create a navigable link via the Cotswolds Canals between the Severn and Thames remains.

Reply

On 29 April 2021, the Council formally approved the Draft District Local Plan for submission to Government for examination.



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Draft Policy ES11 “Maintaining, restoring and regenerating the District’s Canals” of the Plan states that: “The Council will continue to support and deliver the restoration of and other necessary functional improvements to the District’s canals. It will seek to improve access to and along the canals to encourage use for transport and for leisure / recreational purposes. Development on the route of, or adjacent to, the Stroudwater Navigation, the Thames and Severn Canal or the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal must not prevent the improvement, reconstruction, restoration, widening or continued operational use of the canals or towpaths.”

The supporting text to the policy at paragraph 6.74 states that:

“Within Stroud District, the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal, the Stroudwater Navigation and the Thames & Severn Canal provide a valuable resource for the public to enjoy both active and passive recreational activity. The latter two canals are now known collectively as The Cotswold

Canals and are subject to an ongoing restoration project, led by Stroud District Council, to reconnect the canals with the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal at Saul Junction and to reconnect with and restore the former canal basin at Brimscombe Port to the east of Stroud. There are longer term aspirations to continue the Thames & Severn Canal east of Brimscombe Port to reconnect with the Thames at Lechlade.”

In summary, the Council has already approved wording in the Draft Local Plan which both demonstrates the commitment of the Council to the protection of the canal route and the longer term aspiration to reconnect with the Thames at Lechlade.

There are no specific proposals within the adopted Local Plan or the Draft Local Plan for canal restoration east of Brimscombe because a local plan has to demonstrate that proposals will be delivered within the lifetime of the plan and there is no current project to deliver restoration east of Brimscombe which could be delivered by 2040, the end date for the Draft Local Plan.

The Canals Strategy approved by Environment Committee on 4 October 2022 as a Supplementary Planning Document to the adopted Local Plan, cannot go beyond the policy set out in that Plan and for that reason does not refer to canal restoration east of Brimscombe.

If and when there is a future project to restore the canal east of Brimscombe, Council can decide at that time whether or not to put that proposal into a future local plan, taking into account the views of the Council at that time on canal restoration, the specifics of the proposal and whether it addresses all environmental matters and the practicalities as to whether the project is capable of being delivered during the lifetime of that future plan.