



STRATEGY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

MEMBER REPORT

BRIEF REPORT: Canalside site on the A419 Stonehouse

At its meeting on 5 October 2023 Strategy and Resources Committee considered a report about the future of the Canalside site on the A419, known as the Former Ship Inn Site (FSIS). The purpose of this briefing note is to provide an update to Committee on work to progress this resolution. The full resolution is at Appendix A.

The report considered by Committee which presented the resolution, referenced work by the urban design agency DHUD that examined the future use of the site within the context of the wider canal restoration project. This work included a particular assessment of the site as a community resource produced by the specialist consultancy company, The Onion Collective. In its assessment, the Common Ground report, looks at how local people can help shape the site's use and relationship with the communities of Stonehouse and Bridgend.

The Common Ground report reflects that the site has become 'about community voice' and that there is now a great opportunity to harness the community's energy surrounding its future use in a positive way.

The Committee resolved to appropriate the site from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) into the General Fund and, taking into account the work of DHUD and Common Ground report, it also agreed, in principle, to grant an option to a (future) community group to take on the site, subject to a number of conditions being met.

It asked for that a representative working group be established to address these conditions and a report be brought back to Committee within 18 months, i.e. Spring 2025.

Assessment of progress to date

The working group and project group.

The Committee resolution requires that a working group be set up for the site to move the process forward and to identify a constituted community organisation which could potentially hold the freehold or leasehold of the site in the future. It should have representatives from Stonehouse Town Council, community representatives and Stroud District Council alongside other key stakeholders.

Since the resolution by Committee a working group has been established. This has been structured as two groups: the working group (Anchor Group) and the project group (SpICE Group - Ship Inn Community Enterprise)

The terms of reference of the groups reflects an ambition to support and facilitate the project to ensure the successful delivery of a canal-focused community space on the site to.

The working group has met four times (Oct 25; Nov 29; Jan 8; Jan 30 and 27 Feb). The group's membership is Stonehouse Town Council and Stroud District officers and elected members. At this stage

it has not been possible to identify any new members. Widening the base of the group will be important in helping it meet the requirement of the Committee resolution for wider stakeholder involvement and given the timescales and other challenges, doing this as soon as possible would be advantageous.

The working group has given some focus to gaining practical access to the site. Linked to this it has looked at developing meanwhile use on the site and using activities on the site as a vehicle for raising the site's profile and so assisting with community engagement.

The project group comprises members of the Town Council, the Cotswold Canal Connected Community Engagement Manager, who is an employee of SDC, and a number of local residents with interest in the site and its future use.

It has met three times, In October, November 2023 and February 2024. It has been working on a group logo, potential site designs and researching acoustic fencing as well as the cost of providing utilities. It has also looked at the cost of putting electricity, water and drainage utilities on the site. Work is also underway on potential governance structures (as below)

It is taking the lead on business planning and community engagement matters. This is at an early stage. It is important that this work progresses and that the working group is kept updated. This is so the working group is able to support the process as much as it can. Strengthening communication between the project group and the working group will therefore be beneficial and may help avoid failure to meet deadlines further into the process. This has been discussed at the working group and with the chair of the project group.

Access to the site and planning constraints.

Planning constraints on the site may impact on its longer-term development. They are already impacting on the planning of meanwhile use and delivering activity on the site linked to community engagement.

There are significant ecology and environmental considerations which must take primacy regarding access to the site. These have become more apparent and since the Committee agreed its resolution, have been underscored by emerging new Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) legislation. It is now clear that ecological surveys will be required before any development, meanwhile use or community activity can be permitted. Stonehouse Town Council has commissioned these surveys to be undertaken mid-April 2024 at a cost of £6,400.

Stonehouse Town Council (STC) has sought advice about planning constraints from the District Council's Development Management Team and a pre-planning meeting was held with a senior planning officer on January 5, 2024. A number of planning constraints were identified. The canal corridor is a key wildlife site (KWS) and the boundary of the KWS extends approximately 5m into the site from the canal bank. Furthermore, the next 10m form a buffer zone which has special planning restrictions. This leaves a narrow approx. 8m corridor at the northern end of the site that is free from special planning considerations. Discussions are ongoing between STC and SDC with regard to drawing up a license agreement to enable meanwhile use as outlined in the Common Ground report. By way of an exploratory exercise to establish how a community enterprise on the site would align with the Onion Collective's recommendations, some design options have already been produced.

The group acknowledged that understanding and dealing with planning and licensing issues 'has been a steep learning curve'. SDC officers have attended a number of meetings and have made themselves available to informally assist the group.

Taking these issues into account, the working group is being constrained in exploring the potential for meanwhile use and some aspects of community engagement but care will need to be taken to ensure this does not overshadow meeting the main requirements of the Committee resolution.

Business Plan and governance

It is a requirement of the Committee resolution that the working group develops a business case for the site that sets out possible proposals for future use. This work has been allocated to the project group. The chair of the project group has informally reported back to the working group that it has considered future business planning for the site, although at the moment, this is at an early stage with more details to follow.

The project group is also in the process of evaluating governance structures, including various community interest company models. To research strengths and weaknesses, it is in communication with community and voluntary sector organisations and subject experts.

Feedback from the project group to the working group about its work to develop a long-term business plan and governance arrangement will help the working group give support and keep Members of the Strategy and Resources Committee appraised as the work evolves. The importance of openness and transparency cannot be overstated.

Community Engagement

The Committee resolution makes reference to wider community engagement and that this should be reflected in any business plan brought back to Committee for its consideration. Community engagement has been allocated to the project group.

The project group has reflected that local people are now more likely to become interested and engaged in the site when there can be a tangible sense of progress. Given previous publicity, it has been suggested that without being able to gain access, do work and run activities there may be some consultation fatigue. To this extent, challenges in accessing the site, which are outside control of the working group, have hindered progress.

Work has been undertaken with the Stonehouse Court Hotel to deliver a canal festival. This is a very positive step and will strengthen the local community's involvement in sustainable activity on and around the site. This is at an early stage and no detail can yet be provided.

The project group has begun to work more closely with the Cotswold Canal Connected community engagement team and has discussed potential collaboration as part of the wider canal project in Stonehouse. The project group has resolved to have a presence at events and activities.

During 2023, SDC commissioned work to refurbish the childrens play area at Wharfdale Way. A public opening/launch of the upgraded play area would also provide an opportunity to raise the profile of the canal project and support community engagement.

Other activity being considered by the group is a town hall-style meeting and site design discussion day, a monthly programme of engagement days to include activities such as treasure hunt, bug trail, plant a barrel for pollinators and scavenger hunts etc.

Specific reference to is made in the Committee resolution to further consultation with sections of the community who have been insufficiently involved to date; that is, young people, businesses, charities/social sector and the Bridgend community and undertakes open public engagement once concept designs for the site are in place. This is an area that everyone seems committed to progress. The project group plans to reach out to the groups specifically identified in the Committee resolution and run activities with them. A detailed timetable is being produced but this is at an early stage and no detail can yet be provided.

REPORT SUBMITTED BY	Keith Gerrard, Strategic Director of Communities
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