

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

8 SEPTEMBER 2022

Report Title	STROUD CANALS VISION AND STRATEGY			
Purpose of Report	To consider a Final Canals Strategy for the District.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to: a. Approve the Council response to representations made during the public consultation process, as set out within the Consultation Report in Appendix A; and b. Approve the Final Canals Strategy set out in Appendix B as a Supplementary Planning Document to the adopted Stroud District Local Plan; c. Delegate to the Head of Planning Strategy and Economic Development, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of Environment Committee, the ability to agree minor textual and formatting changes to the final document for publication.			
Consultation and Feedback	This report has been discussed by Strategic Planning Advisory Board. Public consultation has involved key stakeholders, town and parish councils and members of the public and changes have been made to the documentation in the light of feedback received.			
Report Author	Mark Russell, Head of Planning Strategy and Economic Development Email: Mark.Russell@stroud.gov.uk			
Options	Option 1: to do nothing. This is not recommended as it could lead to the Council being without a clearly articulated strategy and objectives for supporting the canals network. Option 2: to agree or make amendments to the final Strategy. This is recommended to provide a strategic framework for future canal projects.			
Background Papers	Evidencing the Strategy; Summary of Public Online Survey; Piloting the Strategy in the Wallbridge Area; Project Delivery Process Tool			
Appendices	Appendix A – Consultation Report Appendix B – Final Canals Strategy Appendix C – Equality Impact Assessment			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The network of canals within the District (the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal running from Hardwicke in the north of the District to Sharpness in the south, and the two Cotswold Canals running from Saul Junction in the west, to Chalford in the east) provide a valuable resource for the area, whether for water borne commercial or visitor activities, as a leisure or travel route for walking and cycling or as an attractive setting for residents and businesses at our towns and villages. The canal corridors also contain a wealth of natural and built environment features, which contribute to local ecology, heritage and our general physical and mental wellbeing.
- 1.2 The Council Plan identifies the need to develop a long term vision and strategy for the canals network in the District to ensure projects maximise opportunities to achieve broader social, economic and environmental objectives. A long term strategy will provide the strategic direction for the future and provide a framework for an evolving detailed action plan. An effective Canals Strategy with a powerful narrative will also provide the platform to make effective future funding bids to Government and other funding bodies.
- 1.3 Urban design consultants DHUD, working with Hilton Barnfield Architects, were appointed in April 2021 to prepare a draft strategy working with the Council, key stakeholders and local communities.
- 1.4 In January 2022 Strategy & Resources Committee considered a Draft Canals Vision & Strategy and resolved to approve the documentation for a period of public consultation.

2. PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND FEEDBACK

- 2.1 Public consultation was carried out in accordance with the Council's Statement of Community Involvement. This included publishing material on the Council's website and at local libraries and at town and parish council offices open to the public. A Consultation Report, set out in Appendix A, summarises the way in which the consultation was carried out.
- 2.2 Consultation commenced on 21 February 2022 and was scheduled to end on 18 April 2022. However, following initial feedback on the readability of documents, the formatting of documents was revised and the period for public consultation extended till 27 May 2022.
- 2.3 At the close of public consultation, the Council had received 115 representations from individuals and stakeholders including Active Gloucestershire, Canal & River Trust, Environment Agency, Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Historic England, National Highways, Natural England, Stroud Valleys Project, Woodland Trust.
- 2.4 A summary of all points raised by each respondent, with a recommended response to each one and recommended changes to the document, is set out within the Consultation Report in Appendix A. There were some common themes which can be summarised as:

Readability issues and use of jargon

- 2.5 57 respondents reported readability issues. These ranged from issues regarding the accessibility of documents and the ability to read on-line, through difficulties navigating between a suite of documents, to requests for plain English and reducing jargon.
- 2.6 In response, it is recognised that the suite of documents in different formats available for consultation were not as clear and as readable as they could have been. As a result, consultants and officers have reviewed the formatting of the documentation to ensure the final documentation is both readable and accessible. A number of changes are proposed, including: developing a single A3 sized document with all relevant material in one place; reviewing the size and content of text; simplifying terminology; providing a glossary of terms; and adjusting mapping and diagrams for clarity.

Objections to development east of Brimscombe, advocating for the protection of the canal in its current state and/or the protection of the natural environment surrounding the canal

- 2.7 60 respondents objected to any proposal to restore a navigable canal east of Brimscombe to Sapperton. Related to this are concerns about the impact of development in terms of loss of biodiversity and wider environmental costs.
- 2.8 In response, whilst the Council's Local Plan Policy ES11 does support the restoration of canals within the District, the Canals Strategy does not propose the restoration of the canal to become a navigable waterway east of Brimscombe, nor does it propose any development or project which might have an adverse impact on biodiversity or the environment more generally. The Place Making Frameworks for the Chalford and Eastern Upper Valley Canal Areas do identify opportunities for ecological enhancement and for activities in keeping with the rural character of the area, including high quality recreational spaces, wayfinding and improving connections to walking routes including the Wysis Way. To remove any confusion, it is proposed to clarify this in the final Canals Strategy document.

Apparent conflict between the Strategy and legislation / planning policy

- 2.9 40 respondents implied that the Strategy was in some way in conflict with national or local policy.
- 2.10 In response, apart from some detailed points where additional or amended wording will resolve matters, there appears to be a broad misunderstanding about the role of the Strategy and its relationship with statutory policy documents, such as the Local Plan. The Canals Strategy highlights design opportunities focused on upholding, protecting, harnessing and encouraging inherent physical and cultural characteristics associated with the District's canals. This includes natural fauna and flora and cultural heritage sites. What it does not do is "allocate" specific land uses to specific parcels of land, nor does it include policies which need to conform with national or local policy or technical guidance. To clarify the status and purpose of the Canals Strategy, it is proposed to include within the final document an early section explaining what the Strategy is, how it should be used and by whom, and its status in planning terms as a supplementary planning document (SPD), relative to national and local planning policy and guidance.

Need to emphasise the importance of biodiversity and nature conservation and the ecological emergency

- 2.11 A number of bodies and groups highlighted the importance of referencing the valuable ecological resources within the canal corridors and ensuring that the strategy supports the Council's 2030 Strategy in addressing not only the climate emergency but the ecological emergency.
- 2.12 In response, a number of changes are proposed to the Strategy and supporting documents to emphasise the biodiversity importance of the canal and its surrounds. This includes improving referencing to the biodiversity evidence base, ensuring biodiversity features strongly in the new vision and drivers for the Strategy and including specific references to sensitive resources and opportunities for enhancement within the place making frameworks and amended ingredients.

3. FINAL CANALS STRATEGY DOCUMENTATION

- 3.1 A Final Canals Strategy document, incorporating changes as a result of public consultation, is set out in Appendix B.
- 3.2 The Canals Strategy has utilised the Future Place methodology, endorsed by RIBA, MHCLG, Homes England, Historic England, the RTPI and Local Partnerships, to understand and inform the function and identity of the canals corridor throughout Stroud District.
- 3.3 Using this methodology, the Canals Strategy identifies unique and locally distinctive drivers to define an overarching vision for the whole canal corridor; align a series of individual canal strategy areas with these drivers; set out a place making framework for each area with opportunities identified for enhancement; and establish a catalogue of ingredients with broad timescales to enable the Council to implement this vision.
- 3.4 The document is supported by the following background documents:
- Evidencing the Strategy - sets out the documentation and stakeholder views which have contributed to developing the strategy
 - Summary of Public Online Survey - sets out a summary of the responses made during the online public survey including key challenges and strengths identified for each of the canal strategy areas
 - Piloting the Strategy in the Wallbridge Area - applies the strategy to the Wallbridge area of Stroud, to both test the appropriateness of the strategy and to design, identify and select ingredients to implement the vision for this particular area
 - Project Delivery Process Tool - a spreadsheet to help identify and select future projects to deliver the strategy

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 It is recommended that the final Canals Strategy is adopted as a design focussed SPD, supporting the delivery of Policy ES11 (Maintaining, restoring and regenerating the District's Canals) of the Stroud District Local Plan. This will give the document weight within the planning system and ensure that all future developments within the canals corridor take account of and reflect the contents of the Strategy.

- 4.2 The Council Plan identifies that an Action Plan should be developed, to identify projects to take forward to deliver the Strategy. Officers have begun to put together a Draft Action Plan with key stakeholders to set out key projects for the Action Plan set against short, medium and long term timeframes, identifying the relevant delivery partners and financial resources. Initially, the Canal Project 1B Activity Plan will form a large part of the Action Plan. It is proposed to bring the Action Plan to Regeneration and Investment Board for regular review and updating.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no significant implications within this report as it is proposing a Strategy to provide a strategic framework for future canal projects in the district.

Adele Rudkin, Accountant

Tel: 01453 754109 Email: adele.rudkin@stroud.gov.uk

5.2 Legal Implications

The adoption of the Stroud Canals Vision and Strategy to form a Supplementary Planning Document will enhance the application of policy ES11 within the Stroud District Local Plan (2015). The existence of the Vision and Strategy will also strengthen the Council's position in respect of negotiating appropriate terms in section 106 agreements for developments that impact on the canals. Additionally, the Vision and Strategy will assist the Council's case in promoting Compulsory Purchase Orders as part of the restoration of the canals.

One Legal

Tel: 01684 272691 Email: legalservices@onelegal.org.uk

5.3 Equality Implications

An equality impact assessment of the contents of the final Canals Strategy has been produced which indicates positive impacts relating to a range of protected groups. Equality impact assessments will also be carried out for any projects or other schemes included within the Action Plan that have the potential to impact on communities and/or staff on the grounds of protected characteristics.

5.4 Environmental Implications

Maximising the environmental benefits of the canal network is an explicit objective of the Canals Strategy and various tools are used to promote this objective, including the use of our carbon neutrality tool to assess the potential for the Strategy Areas to deliver on our 2030 Strategy. The intention is for the Canals Strategy to be adopted as Supplementary Planning Document to policies contained within the Stroud Local Plan, which is itself subject to full Sustainability Appraisal.