

Cabinet

9 September 2021

Warwickshire Waterway & Canal Strategy 2021-2026

Recommendations

That Cabinet approves:

- 1) the Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2021 – 2026 at Appendix
- 2) £50,000 funding from the Place Shaping and Economic Growth Fund to support the implementation of the Strategy including the commissioning of a county-wide towpath survey.

1. Executive Summary

This report summarises progress on developing a Waterways Strategy for Warwickshire, as part of the wider Heritage and Culture Strategy 2020 - 2025 and its three main themes: health and wellbeing, sense of place and economic vibrancy.

Background

- 1.1 The decision to develop a Waterways Strategy for Warwickshire was taken before the pandemic. The Council (WCC) and the Canal and River Trust identified synergies of purpose and common ground in their policies and forward planning, which warranted formal collaboration to achieve shared ambitions. The development of the Strategy and associated action plan (on page 9) also supports the motion approved by full Council in September 2020 (see section 5 for further detail).
- 1.2 WCC, working with county and sector-wide partners, launched a Heritage and Culture Strategy in 2019 and agreed an initial action plan in March 2020. The five-year strategy was shaped around three main themes: health and wellbeing, sense of place and economic vibrancy.
- 1.3 The Canal and River Trust was working towards similar goals and was keen to promote Warwickshire waterways as a valuable community resource and tourist attraction. Key areas of crossover included physical and mental health benefits of outdoor activity and exercise, and the canal and river network's place in county history.
- 1.4 There were benefits of working together to promote the county's waterways - in terms of potential impact and access to funding. In October 2020, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust joined the strategy working group to provide a focus on nature and wildlife.

1.5 The strategy will build on well-established working relationships and bring together existing projects, and ideas already under consideration - such as:

- £8,000 of regeneration funding to link the Grand Union Canal and Warwick town centre, including plans for a map and replacement signage
- WCC commissioned feasibility study and business plan, completed in March 2020, to develop a George Eliot Visitor Centre outside Nuneaton, with linked walks along the Coventry Canal to the town centre and museum
- Ideas to develop a cycling tourism offer for the county

Coronavirus and beyond

1.6 The health crisis paused developments, but in May 2020 partners began realigning the proposed Waterways Strategy to aid recovery and increase public awareness and usage post-pandemic.

1.7 This was informed by the results of a WCC Heritage and Culture survey from May 2020 which revealed a renewed appetite for sector collaboration, particularly on publicity and increased networking as venues, individuals and organisations sought to re-establish themselves and adapt to a 'new normal'.

1.8 A more localised response, within the context of countywide co-operation, seemed the way forward - and the proposed Warwickshire Waterways Strategy could be a valuable mechanism for making things happen.

1.9 The Strategy will link to and support other WCC strategies, such as the Local Transport Plan and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, along with initiatives to support post-pandemic recovery.

Working group

1.10 A small officer working group has continued to meet virtually. The group comprises relevant specialists from WCC, the Canal and River Trust and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

1.11 The group agreed the draft Warwickshire Waterways Strategy attached as Appendix 1. The partners will meet again to progress the action plan for 2021 - 2022, initially focused on post-pandemic recovery.

Stakeholder engagement

1.12 Engagement with other key stakeholders, including river trusts and the Environment Agency, as well as community groups across the county, will continue. We will liaise with Shakespeare's England - which has been working regionally to promote waterways and the visitor economy as a key partner in the England's Waterways project.

1.13 We have developed a good working relationship with the Canal and River Trust - which is keen to showcase the joint working as an exemplar project to their Trustees, who will be visiting the region in Summer 2021.

2. Strategy aims and key themes

2.1 The aims and key themes contained within the Strategy are:

- Improve public health and wellbeing via waterways-related physical/outdoor/leisure activities and 'family fun 'events
- Further explore/share the history of the waterways, locally and countywide, to increase sense of place
- Contribute to the county's economic vibrancy by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy
- Promote the waterways environment as green spaces and wildlife habitats worthy of attention and protection
- Present and promote the waterways as sustainable transport routes - for walking and cycling
- Support efforts to reduce the county's carbon footprint and address issues around the impact of climate change
- Explore opportunities for linkage with Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022

2.2 We will explore available sources of pre-pandemic data against which to measure progress. Key performance measures will include volunteer and visitor numbers, customer satisfaction surveys, plus any indicators of raised awareness amongst potential users.

3. Financial implications

3.1 The production of the strategy does not have financial implications. However, £50,000 funding from the Place Shaping and Economic Growth Fund is required to support the implementation of the strategy including the commissioning of a county-wide towpath surveys for which Cabinet approval is sought as part of this report.

4. Environmental implications

4.1 Key elements of the strategy relate to issues around climate change, biodiversity and the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitats, and to the environmental and health benefits of 'active travel'. The action plan for 2021/22 will seek to address and support the environmental implications of increased use of Warwickshire's waterways and canals.

5. Supporting information

5.1 At a Full Council meeting in September 2020, Councillors unanimously supported the following resolution:

The canal network in Warwickshire passes through all five districts and boroughs and is a massive asset for tourism, wellbeing and ecology. In developing recovery plans for Warwickshire, and mindful of the need to increase UK-based tourism, the County Council:

- Acknowledges the work being undertaken to develop a Waterways strategy for Warwickshire as part of the Heritage and Culture Strategy action plan
- Will actively promote our local canal network and its opportunities for leisure, wellbeing and employment (including 2021/22 City of Culture, Birmingham 2022 and beyond)
- Will work with the Canal and River Trust and other partners to identify, prioritise and cost key stretches of towpath to improve accessibility and connectivity in order to better attract funding

Appendix

Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2021 - 2026

Background Papers

None.

Contact information

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): None

Other members: Councillors Parminder Singh Birdi, Sarah Boad, Jonathan Chilvers, John Holland, Caroline Phillips, Will Roberts, Jerry Roodhouse, Izzi Seccombe, Heather Timms, and Adrian Warwick