

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13 December 2023

Warwickshire Waterways Strategy

Recommendation:

That the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes and comments upon the contents of the Progress Report and the updated Action Plan for 2023-24 at Appendix 1.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides Members with an update on the progress made in implementing the Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2020 – 2025.

2. Background

- 2.1 On 22 November 2020, Council requested that a waterways strategy be developed for the County. The Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2021 - 2026 was approved by Cabinet in September 2021. This Progress Report outlines activities and achievements since then and introduces a refreshed action plan to take the strategy forward through 2023 - 2024.
- 2.2 Although led by Warwickshire County Council (WCC), this has been a partnership project from the outset. The Canal and Waterway Strategy Steering Group is made up of WCC Officers from different services working alongside representatives from the Canal and River Trust, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, NHS bodies and the Environment Agency. The Waterways Strategy is shaped around three main themes shared with the Warwickshire Heritage and Culture Strategy 2020 - 2025, to which it is closely aligned: health and wellbeing, sense of place and economic vibrancy.
- 2.3 The partners share common goals and ambitions - particularly but not exclusively around health. A sense of place or belonging, along with economic stability and prospects, also contribute to people's wellbeing. The strategy takes all these factors in the round, as part of a place-based approach to encouraging local people to lead happier, healthier lives whilst protecting and enhancing the natural environment and wildlife habitats for future generations to enjoy.
- 2.4 Water is fundamental to life. Warwickshire is far from the coast, but evidence suggests people feel better when out and about by canals and rivers. Our waterways were once major transport and trade routes. Nowadays they are equally important for other reasons - not least leisure and quality of life. Their long history

helps us to understand the past and how our communities developed over time. Our waterways also support the County's visitor economy and general prosperity.

2.5 Our updated Action Plan for 2023-24 will take this important work forward.

3. Context

3.1 The Warwickshire Waterways Strategy should be seen within the context of other Council policies and programmes including Safe and Active Travel and investment in cycleways, the Countywide Approach to Levelling Up, and the Sustainable Futures Strategy. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's Strategy for Nature Recovery and the Canal and River Trust's 'Nine Ways canals can fight climate change' are further examples of overlapping initiatives and common goals.

3.2 The broader, national context is provided by the Government's recently-refreshed 25-year Environmental Improvement Plan. WCC is, for example, supporting Government ambitions to treble tree-planting rates by May 2024 and has a commitment to plant a tree for every resident in the county by 2030. The aim is to restore long-lost forests and wooded areas such as the ancient Forest of Arden, which once covered most of Warwickshire.

3.3 The Government is also introducing a national nature recovery programme to stem species loss across England. This places a biodiversity duty on designated 'responsible authorities' such as WCC who will each produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy including maps, priorities and proposals for creating or improving wildlife habitats whilst pursuing wider environmental goals.

4. Partnership and Governance

4.1 Three main partners developed the Warwickshire Waterways Strategy - Warwickshire County Council, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and the Canal and River Trust. These partners, along with representatives from the Environment Agency, and the NHS, make up the Strategy Steering Group.

4.2 Although there are currently no plans to increase the membership of the Steering Group, members have discussed how best to invite other relevant, potential partners to get involved and support the strategy. These might include other agencies, local groups, landowners, and businesses with an interest in Warwickshire's waterways. It is proposed that a countywide Strategy conference is held in 2024 to explore the potential for new partnerships and joint work.

5. Strategy Aims in Brief

- 5.1 The Strategy aims to promote and facilitate cross-sector collaboration and joint working - building strong relationships with a range of interested parties - and to seek funding to:
- 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 address issues around **biodiversity** and the impact of **climate change**.

6. Progress Report

- 6.1 A video version of the original action plan, approved in November 2021, can be seen [here](#).
- 6.2 Five sub-groups were established to take forward programmes of work and have made significant progress as set out below:

6.3 Towpath survey and report

- 6.3.1 Local specialists, the Transport Consultancy, were commissioned to complete a comprehensive analysis using data provided by partners (mainly the Canal and River Trust). A report has been completed identifying areas where investment in towpath improvements could provide significant benefit to the people of Warwickshire.
- 6.3.2 This will inform the Canal and River Trust's investment decisions and support Warwickshire County Council in leveraging external funds, should future government grants be made available.
- 6.3.3 The full copy of the report is available via this [link](#). *A link has been included as the report is 109 pages and contains many images.*
- 6.3.4 This work complements the work being completed by WCC and partners including Canal & River Trust, Sustrans and Warwickshire's District and Borough Councils through investing in, and supporting, improvements to walking and cycling infrastructure.

6.4 Marketing and promotion

- 6.4.1 A photography competition was held during Spring 2023 to encourage people to visit waterways across Warwickshire and to capture and promote some of the spectacular scenery Warwickshire boasts. The competition was split into two age-groups - 16 or over and 15 or under.

6.5 Education pack and wayfinding

- 6.5.1 Warwickshire Wildlife Trust has led on creating learning experiences for families to enjoy together and has created a video mini-series exploring the habitats and wildlife of four different water venues. The Trust has also led ten family walks along Warwickshire Waterways, including bird watching and bat detecting.

6.6 Social prescribing and volunteering

- 6.6.1 Working with South Warwickshire GP Federation has enabled the sub-group to reach social prescribers and to identify additional social prescribing needs which partners can support. Going forward, social prescribers will be made aware of the activities of partners which support those needs.

6.7 Ecological perspective and climate change

- 6.7.1 The sub-group surveyed key partners across the sector to start the process of creating guidance for responsible construction near waterways, and of identifying locations and actions where small interventions could have a large and beneficial ecological impact.

7. Updated Action Plan

- 7.1 To build on the progress made, the Steering Group needs to update the strategy action plan for 2024-25. Our new plan is ambitious but achievable - and is the basis upon which future funding opportunities will be explored.
- 7.2 The Steering Group will update the original action plan video as a more accessible introduction to the Warwickshire Waterways Strategy.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1 The County Council allocated an initial investment of £50,000 from the Place-Shaping and Capital Investment Fund to the Waterways Strategy. Any future investment will need to come from external sources, with no additional financial implications for the Council.

9. Environmental Considerations

- 9.1 Key elements of the strategy relate to issues around climate change, to biodiversity and the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitats, and to the environmental and health benefits of 'active travel'.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 The Warwickshire Waterways Strategy has proved effective in bringing together a variety of stakeholders with interests in waterways across Warwickshire. These improved relationships have already resulted in a comprehensive report on the conditions of Warwickshire towpaths (including areas most in need of improvement), putting the county in a strong position to leverage potential government funding in the future (eg active travel). The strategy has also served as a catalyst for a number of successful promotions of Warwickshire waterways. The 2023-24 action plan will focus on addressing environmental considerations and promoting the health benefits of engaging with waterways (including volunteering / social prescribing).

11. Background Papers

Report to Cabinet (9 September 2021)

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Appendix

Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2020 -2025: Action Plan 2023 – 2024 (some of these actions support other WCC plans and strategies)

Action	Theme	Progress made	Delivery date	Lead
Identify access issues limiting use of canals	Present and promote the waterways as sustainable transport routes - for walking and cycling (Health and Wellbeing)	Access issues identified and recorded	Quarter 4	Transport and Highways, WCC
Share towpath improvements report with key stakeholders to support Canal and River Trust and Warwickshire County Council to leverage funding to improve towpaths	Present and promote the waterways as sustainable transport routes - for walking and cycling (Health and Wellbeing)	Report finalised and shared with key stakeholders	Quarter 1	Heritage & Culture Warwickshire, WCC
Continue to work with Health colleagues to develop 'green' social prescribing potential and promote volunteering opportunities	Improve public health and wellbeing via waterways-related physical / outdoor / leisure activities and 'family fun' events (Health and Wellbeing)	Social prescribing and volunteering opportunities are documented and shared with key stakeholders	Quarter 2	South Warwickshire GP Federation

Action	Theme	Progress made	Delivery date	Lead
Promote winning images from photographic competition to encourage visitors	Improve public health and wellbeing via waterways-related physical / outdoor / leisure activities and 'family fun' events (Health and Wellbeing)	Winning images shared via social media and other channels	Quarter 1	Marketing and Communications, WCC
Promote waterways activities and events to increase public participation	Improve public health and wellbeing via waterways-related physical / outdoor / leisure activities and 'family fun' events (Health and Wellbeing)	List of events created and events promoted via social media at appropriate times	Quarters 1 – 4	Heritage & Culture Warwickshire, WCC
Complete a pilot project for improved signage and wayfinding in key strategic locations	Further explore / share the history of the waterways, locally and countywide, to increase sense of place (Sense of Place)	Locations identified and signage installed	Quarter 2	Canal & River Trust
Complete volunteer led project to research and share the history of Warwickshire waterways	Further explore / share the history of the waterways, locally and countywide, to increase sense of place (Sense of Place)	Brief History of Warwickshire waterways written	Quarter 4	Heritage & Culture Warwickshire, WCC

Action	Theme	Progress made	Delivery date	Lead
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Create and distribute guidance on sensitively managing land to balance ecological / wildlife needs and human access	Promote the waterways environment as green spaces and wildlife habitats worthy of attention and protection, enhancement and restoration (Sense of Place)	Guidance created and shared with stakeholders	Quarter 3	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust
Planting gaps and improving species diversities in hedgerows	Promote the waterways environment as green spaces and wildlife habitats worthy of attention and protection, enhancement and restoration (Sense of Place)	Planting completed	Quarter 4	Canal & River Trust
Identify areas suitable for the creation or restoration of natural habitats including river margins, ponds, wetlands and hedgerows	Promote the waterways environment as green spaces and wildlife habitats worthy of attention and protection, enhancement and restoration (Sense of Place)	List of suitable areas compiled, and appropriate restoration activities detailed	Quarter 3	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust
Plan a conference to attract wider stakeholders to support growth	Contribute to the county's economic vibrancy by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy (Economic Vibrancy)	Conference planned (including identification of venue, programme created and guestlist compiled)	Quarter 3	Heritage & Culture Warwickshire, WCC

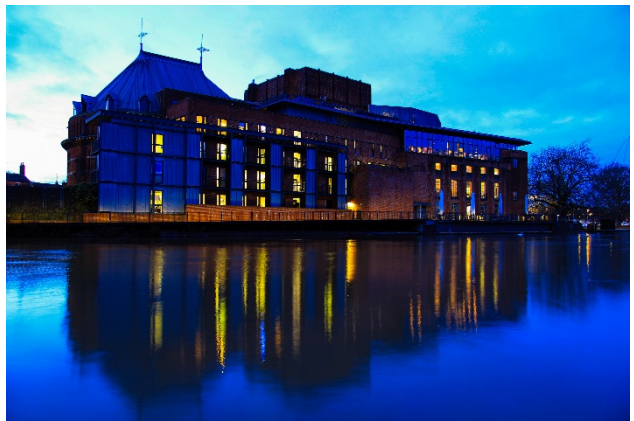
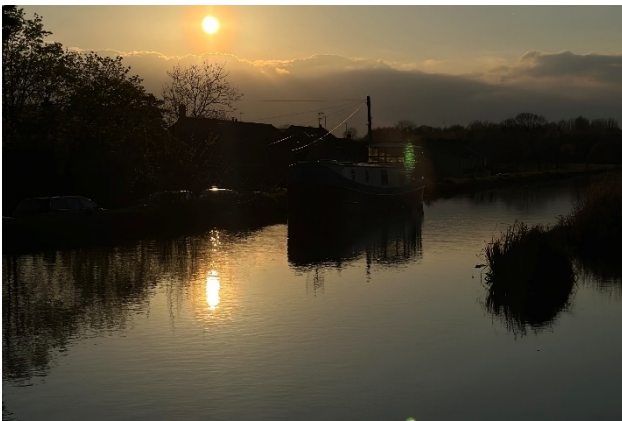
Action	Theme	Progress made	Delivery date	Lead
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Promote local businesses and communities near to waterways	Contribute to the county's economic vibrancy by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy (Economic Vibrancy)	List of local businesses compiled and shared with stakeholders	Quarter 4	Infrastructure & Sustainable Communities, WCC
Promote Project Warwickshire, Warwickshire Skills Hub and funding opportunities to waterway businesses	Contribute to the county's economic vibrancy by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy (Economic Vibrancy)	List of waterway businesses compiled and Project Warwickshire, Warwickshire Skills Hub and funding opportunities promoted to waterway businesses	Quarter 4	Infrastructure & Sustainable Communities, WCC
Finalise and distribute information / advice on ecological responsibility and climate change	Support development of a green visitor economy (Economic Vibrancy)	Information compiled and shared with stakeholders	Quarter 3	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust
Promote green businesses	Support development of a green visitor economy (Economic Vibrancy)	List of green businesses compiled and shared with stakeholders	Quarter 3	Infrastructure & Sustainable Communities, WCC

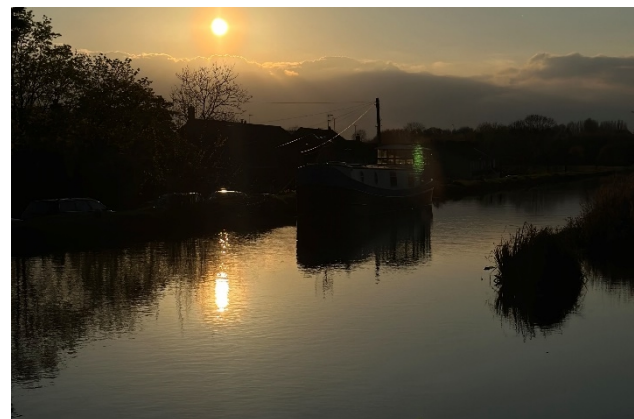
Images shortlisted in 'Sixteen and Over' category of the Waterways Photography Competition



Images shortlisted in 'Fifteen and Under' category of the Waterways Photography Competition



Winning images ('Sixteen and Over' category (left) and 'Fifteen and Under' category (right))



Examples of signage installed alongside canals to support the strategy

