

CABINET - 9TH JULY 2009

Report of the Director of Loughborough Regeneration

ITEM 8 RIVER SOAR AND GRAND UNION CANAL STRATEGY

Purpose of Report

To outline for Cabinet the content of the Final Draft of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal Strategy and to seek endorsement of the Strategy.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet welcomes the preparation of the Strategy as an important contribution to the development and enhancement of this key strategic corridor through Charnwood and Leicestershire
2. That the Strategy is endorsed and approved and that its proposals and recommendations are taken into account in future strategy and policy development in Charnwood and in considering actions and activities within the corridor.

Reasons

1. To acknowledge the importance of the document
2. To establish the status of the document

Policy Context

The Council's Corporate Plan recognises the importance of Place and the importance of the Environment in ensuring a high quality of life for all Charnwood's residents.

Planning policy in both the Borough of Charnwood Local Plan and the LDF Draft Core Strategy recognise the need to protect, enhance and exploit the potential of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal corridor as a key piece of strategic green infrastructure.

Background

The importance of the Grand Union Canal and the River Soar corridor have long been recognised in planning policy in Charnwood, from the Canal Subject Plan of the late 1970s to the Wanlip Action Area Plan (Watermead Country Park) and the inclusion of policies in the Borough of Charnwood Local Plan to promote informal recreation, tourism and water recreation in the corridor and to protect the Soar Valley Area of Local Landscape Value.

More recently the Council undertook consultation on 'Alternative Strategies for the Future Development of the Borough' as part of the preparation of the LDF. This consultation has informed the proposed development strategy in the Draft Core Strategy which is based on a priority to safeguard environmental features and the identity of individual settlements. There is also a strong focus on regeneration in the urban areas and the need to support local needs in the rural areas.

In particular, the Draft Core Strategy recognises the concept and importance of Green Infrastructure. Green infrastructure comprises wildlife habitats, public open spaces, formal and informal recreational facilities, historic sites and areas, woodlands and landscapes. It is the network of multi-functional green space that contributes to the high quality natural and built environment of the Borough. It consists of both public and private assets, with and without public access, and in both urban and rural locations. These elements of green infrastructure should create a linked, coherent and ecologically robust network of green space.

In Charnwood the strategic network of green infrastructure includes the following:

- Charnwood Forest Regional Park;
- **Strategic River Corridors of the Soar and Wreake, including the Grand Union Canal and Watermead Country Park;**
- Rothley Brook Corridor;
- Green Wedges.

The strategic elements of green infrastructure are those key landscape features which provide an overall framework within which a series of local corridors of green infrastructure can be created and enhanced. The network must link in with the wider Green Infrastructure network beyond the boundaries of the Borough.

The overall aim is to develop a comprehensive network of multi-functional green space across Charnwood to ensure a hierarchy of green spaces for people and for wildlife. To achieve this there needs to be a net increase in green infrastructure across the borough, targeted to those areas that are deficient.

The economic, recreational and tourism potential of the Strategic River Corridors will be maximised particularly where this complements the approach to the regeneration of deprived areas, and where this would serve as complementary diversionary recreational activity to the Charnwood Forest Regional Park. It will be important through the overall development strategy to establish greater linkages with the Charnwood Forest Regional Park.

The River Soar and Grand Union Canal Strategy was commissioned by the Waterways Trust and the British Waterways Board.

Funding from the East Midlands Regional Development Agency (emda) and match funding from British Waterways (BW) and the Waterways Trust was provided to produce the River Soar and Grand Union Canal Strategy. A Steering Group (with officer representatives from Blaby District Council, Charnwood Borough Council, Leicester City Council, Leicestershire County Council, Leicestershire Promotions, Oadby and Wigston Borough Council, and Leicester Regeneration Company) was chaired by The Waterways Trust. This Steering Group guided the production of the strategy, providing valuable information and feedback to the drafting stages. The Steering Group will own and oversee delivery of the strategy on completion. The detailed work on the study was undertaken by Arup.

In due course it is hoped that the delivery arrangements will be overseen by a formally constituted Partnership comprising all the key partners and delivery agencies.

A copy of the strategy can be viewed by following this link:

The strategy aims to improve and promote a 23 mile long corridor of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal in Leicestershire in the East Midlands. Its significance is that it brings together for the first time a coordinated approach for Waterway development along this corridor that will inform, guide and shape policy, plans and local strategies.

The strategy sets out the wider rationale, context, strategic priorities and actions for maximising the positive economic, social and environmental contribution of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal Corridor, “the Waterway”. The section of the Waterway covered by this strategy runs from Kilby Bridge in the south, through the centre of

Leicester, and north to Loughborough Meadows. The width of the corridor varies along the route to take into account the numerous features along the Soar Valley.

The Waterway is not currently fulfilling its potential for a number of reasons, including its low profile and poor accessibility in places. This strategy recommends a series of actions to improve the physical landscape of the Waterway and more crucially how the Waterway is utilised. The emphasis is on outlining a route-map of short to medium term interventions that are realistic and affordable, and can help to put in place the conditions to secure long term change.

The vision for the Waterway is to **“Maximise the Impact of the Waterway for the economic benefit of Leicestershire”**

This strategy complements the emerging Local Development Frameworks and the Masterplans guiding development in central Leicester, Charnwood, Blaby and Oadby and Wigston. It provides a unified strategy for the Waterway as it passes through this part of Leicestershire.

A structured approach has been used to develop this strategy with reference to a substantial body of existing research, supplemented with site and desk based analysis. A series of reviews of the area have been undertaken to inform its development. These include understanding the policy context for the area, the importance of the Waterway as a natural corridor, its regional economic importance, and the Waterways’ physical issues and assets. From this baseline review, a number of key objectives, reflecting the key themes have been identified. The study team has undertaken a wide ranging consultation with stakeholders and the public in the preparation of this strategy. This has included meetings and presentations with key public organisations and a web based public consultation exercise.

The consultation has been used to confirm the key objectives and test a number of ideas. The outcome is a route map identifying priority projects or interventions which will maximise the Waterways environmental and economic potential. The Strategy concludes with a way forward which identifies time based milestones divided into the short medium, and long term.

The Strategy

Introduction and Vision

This strategy provides an action plan for “delivering the promise” of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal Corridor, “the Waterway” in Leicestershire. This strategy is to guide policy and investment, providing a number of objectives which shall ensure

the economic potential of the Waterway is maximised and is a neconomic driver in the sub-region. This Waterway corridor is currently under-exploited and under-valued with its latent potential unrealised.

Developments across the country, from the London Docklands to the Leeds Waterfront, Chesterfield to Kennet and Avon Canals, reveal waterways can be unique assets that generate significant regeneration benefits. They can act as stimulus for new investment and provide a vital link between rural and urban environments. The strategy document identifies the context and issues that effect the Waterway including policy and the physical conditions. From this baseline, the key objectives and subsequent priority actions which will enable the improvement of the Waterway are identified. Finally a way forward is recommended which sets out a number of milestones which should be achieved over the short, medium and long term.

Context and Issues

The first sections of the report assess the current context within which this strategy will need to be developed and includes an assessment of the area's socio-economic conditions and the policy framework within which the Waterway is situated. This includes a discussion of the relevant national, regional and local policies that apply to the area and that frame the development of this environmental asset. These documents primarily support the development of the Waterway as an economic and leisure resource. However, they stipulate that such growth should not be accrued at the expense of environmental quality. Five key policy themes are identified and include:

- Landscape and the natural environment
- Improving the urban offer and quality of place;
- Development and heritage;
- Green infrastructure; and
- The health agenda.

A fundamental part of this strategy is the character assessment. The Waterway is extremely diverse along the 23 mile corridor and varies from a city centre urban landscape, to predominantly rural scenery. Understanding the function and form of the different sections ensures the strategy is tailored to meet the needs for each area, enhancing and building upon the features already in existence.

This section of the strategy is completed through an analysis of the main barriers and opportunities that are presented. The main factors identified include:

- The importance of maintaining and enhancing the landscape and ecological value of the Waterway;
- The potential to maximise heritage resources along the waterway that form an integral part of its character and identity;
- The need to improve access along the Waterway to pedestrians, cyclists, and all members of the local community to ensure that use of the area is maximised;
- The need to improve and advertise the profile of the Waterway to increase local engagement along the corridor;
- Improving existing Waterway animation and interaction so that the community can access these leisure facilities;
- Improve signage of, and along, the Waterway to create a cohesive image and visible image of this asset;

- Addressing the fragmented nature of ownership of the Waterway;
- The opportunities for receiving funding for the Waterway through recent initiatives including the Leicestershire Multi-Area Agreement and the New Growth Points Initiative;
- The need to address anti-social behaviour along the Waterway, to ensure that users feel safe in this space; and
- The lack of a coherent approach in planning policy to the Waterway makes the production and implementation of this strategy more complex.

The Framework for Intervention

Potential interventions fall into the three key themes of the: Green, Visible, and Accessible Waterway.

These themes are supported by nine objectives.

- Respecting the Natural Environment
- Development and Public Realm and Valuing Heritage
- Promote Green Transport
- Secure Funding
- Raising the Profile of the Waterway
- Inspiring Interest and Involvement
- Improving Access
- Optimising Waterway Activity
- Enhancing the Visitor Experience

In satisfying these objectives the strategy will:

- Seek to Balance increasing access to the Waterway with the need to conserve and enhance its landscape and ecological value.
- Value the importance of the Waterway's heritage and ensuring new development makes a positive contribution to the waterside.
- Encourage increased use of the Waterway corridor by providing a high quality green open space.
- Develop a coherent and realistic framework for securing funding, increasing the legitimacy, and visibility, of the Waterway as an asset to the County.
- Increase the Waterway's perception and profile by developing opportunities to publicise the Waterway.
- Develop a coherent identity, signage and other way finding material for the Waterway which is user friendly. Encourage engagement at all levels through education and active participation.
- Provide safe and improved access along the Waterway and enhance gateways to enable access to the Waterway by a range of transport modes.

Financial Implications

There are no immediate financial implications although the adoption of the strategy may inform future capital and revenue funding decisions and priorities.

The New Growth Point Fund for the "6 Cs" area recognises the importance of strategic green infrastructure in providing a sustainable context for both existing and planned new communities. Bids for funding have been invited in order to support the development of strategic green infrastructure and the Borough Council is working

with its Steering Group Partners to promote a bid for the Grand Union Canal and River Soar corridor.

Risk Management

The risks associated with the decision Cabinet is asked to make and proposed actions to mitigate those risks are set out in the table below.

Risk Identified	Likelihood	Impact	Risk Management Actions Planned
That other partners will not endorse the strategy	LOW	MEDIUM	The Strategy has been produced by a Joint Steering Group on which all the partners are represented
That there will be insufficient funds to implement the strategy	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	The actions identified will have to be phased to reflect the availability of resources. Efforts will have to be made to secure external funding and to maximise contributions from SI06 contributions

Key Decision: No

Background Papers:

The Strategy at <http://www.thewaterwaystrust.org.uk/strategy/strategy.pdf>

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