



To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 3 November 2020
Title of Report: Oxford waterways project update

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To update on the Oxford Waterways Project
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member Safer, Healthy Oxford
Corporate Priority:	A Vibrant and Sustainable Economy, Meeting Housing Needs, Strong and Active Communities, A Clean and Green Oxford
Policy Framework:	None
Appendices	
1) Summary of key activities (within main report)	
2) Cabinet response to Scrutiny recommendations – 22 nd January (separate)	

1. Introduction and overview

1.1 The city council established a Waterways Coordinator post (September 2018) to lead new work to explore how Oxford's waterways (the River Thames and Oxford Canal) could be improved, opportunities and new partnerships created.

1.2 Working alongside the Environment Agency and Canal & River Trust, a shared vision for Oxford's waterways was published in September 2019. It provides a framework for partners to work to, focused on a set of five themes: City regeneration, mooring & services, tourism, active communities and the environment.

1.3 This report provides an update to Scrutiny's previous recommendations to Cabinet, which were accepted at the meeting 22 January 2020. **Appendix 2**

1.4 The table at **Appendix 1** provides a summary of activity delivered/initiated within the waterways programme since the last update to Scrutiny, for information.

2. Scrutiny Committee recommendations

2.1 In January 2019, Cabinet accepted the Scrutiny Committee's set of recommendations which were made following the last update on the waterways project. This section of the paper updates on those specific recommendations.

3. Recommendation 1: Waterways officer post

3.1 The post was extended by a year from August 31 2020 until August 2021. However, due to the COVID emergency budget review and resource pressures, the executive decided that the waterways officer would be reallocated.

3.2 Since August 2020 the post has spent three days per week focusing on waterways, with two days per week supporting other priorities within the Environmental Sustainability team, specifically around commitments made in response to the Citizens Assembly on Climate Change in relation to biodiversity. Work on the waterways has therefore reflected this reduction in capacity accordingly.

3.3 The current post holder has recently resigned from post and a review of resourcing is underway as part of the budget process.

4. Recommendation 2: The waterways in the council's wider plans

4.1 The Local Plan was adopted earlier this year. It has been updated throughout, reflecting the contribution the waterways make to the city's outdoor spaces, public realm, health and wellbeing, ecology and biodiversity and local economy.

4.2 The City Centre Strategy is under development, with contribution made with regard to the public realm and visitor attraction provided by the city's waterways. This includes reference to the concept of key "gateway areas", where the city interfaces with the waterways at key sites such as Folly, Osney and Hythe Bridges.

4.3 Work continues with the Green Spaces Team, contributing to the recently-published Biodiversity Review actions with respect to particular sites alongside the waterways. The council chairs the Green & Blue Network, a forum bringing together a range of partners, landowners, environmental charities and NHS bodies, working together to maximise benefits of the city's outdoor spaces. The waterways feature in a recent bid made for funding from the government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund and we await feedback on the success of this application.

4.4 The waterways are reflected in the Environmental Sustainability agenda, our response to the climate crisis and the Citizen's Assembly on Climate Change recommendations. In particular, this includes opportunities to protect and enhance biodiversity and any contributions to the net-zero carbon agenda.

4.5 The waterways offer a range of leisure and sports activities in addition to active travel routes. Post-lockdown and fine summer weather saw a huge increase in use of the waterways. The development of a new "Thriving Communities Strategy" will replace the existing Leisure Strategy and provides an opportunity to ensure such

sports/leisure opportunities and the benefits they provide are promoted within a more holistic approach to thriving communities.

4.6 The Green Spaces team is exploring what is required to make an application for Designated Bathing Water Standard, a motion recently approved by council.

5. Recommendation 3: Waterways as an infrastructure asset, requiring investment

5.1 Cabinet agree that the waterways are part of the city's infrastructure, but our responsibility with regard investment in their maintenance is limited to those sites the council owns. The council continues to work with our partners to ensure that day-to-day maintenance is undertaken. By example, recent work has been undertaken to resurface towpaths to improve the cycling/walking infrastructure, led by the County Council with Canal & River Trust – further sections are planned for 2021.

5.2 While at times challenging, we continue to engage with partners and other land owners alongside the waterways to influence their efforts to improve the city and to identify opportunities to develop joint investment bids.

5.3 Where there are opportunities for improvements requiring investment, there are the normal Development Board mechanisms through which to apply for funding. Such applications are judged on their merits and in line with our priorities. These are challenging times for the authority and we will be looking to our partners to ensure that they meet their responsibilities.

5.4 By example, the council has made investment with regard the Port Meadow mooring infrastructure, including investing in improving health & safety measures and commissioning a feasibility study to explore replacement of the current structure.

6.0 Recommendations 4 & 5: Boats as homes – position and policies

6.1 Cabinet agreed with the recommendation to recognise that boats do make a contribution to housing in the city and that we have clear communities living afloat.

6.2 The Local Plan contains planning criteria for permanent residential mooring developments (Policy HP13). However, as Cabinet also accepted, further work on the council's wider position and responsibilities associated with those living on boats in the city is required. Moorings are being included in the brief for the Redbridge Paddock

6.3 The Housing & Homelessness Strategy remains the most appropriate vehicle to address the issue and work will commence shortly on the refresh of this key council strategy and its associated policies.

6.4 Like many areas of work, the need to prioritise the COVID response over the spring and summer months led to a delay. However, work will shortly begin on the Strategy refresh, which includes analysis of all evidence and work to identify and prioritise those areas which create opportunities to best tackle homelessness and also to increase housing supply in the city.

6.5 The first stage to this is the homelessness review which will commence in late autumn/early winter. Consideration of the contribution to general housing supply made by boats will be included in the review, with research and analysis as required. This will build upon the existing Boat Dwellers Accommodation Needs Assessment, which was a study undertaken as part of the Local Plan evidence base.

6.6 Initiatives to promote boater access to healthcare and election services have been run, in partnership with local NHS and our own Elections Services team.

7. Recommendation 6: Culture and waterways heritage

7.1 One of the aims of the developing Thriving Communities Strategy is to encompass cultural and leisure activities. Opportunities to promote and celebrate heritage/culture associated with the waterways will be included accordingly.

8. Recommendation 7 and 9: Waterways as a health and wellbeing resource and opportunities for active travel

8.1 The waterways (like many outdoor spaces) have seen a significant increase in use post-COVID. The wide range of leisure opportunities offered by the waterways will be considered within the Thriving Communities strategy. The project will continue to seek to improve facilities and promote opportunities.

8.2 Similarly, recent towpath resurfacing and promotion of active travel methods have contributed to the increase in use. The project will continue to work with key partners, particularly the County Council, the Thames Path National Trail and the Canal & River Trust on opportunities to improve infrastructure alongside the waterways which supports active travel.

8.3 Healthwalks promoted by local GP surgeries and the NHS Sustainable Healthcare Centre continue to use routes alongside the waterways – both Thames and canal – to bring health & wellbeing benefits. These have been shared with social prescribing networks.

9. Recommendation 8: Waterways and the environment

9.1 As referenced above, work with partners continues on a range of practical environmental improvements. The Green Recovery Challenge Fund bid could create a real opportunity to fund additional resource to assist in coordinating such activities, working closely with local communities to engage and educate them.

9.2 Work continues with the Canal & River Trust to explore any opportunities for installation of electrical charging points on the canal which could improve facilities for visitors to the city, but also contribute to a small level of reduction in emissions from domestic stove use/engine or generator use.

10. Summary of key activity:

10.1 A key benefit of having established the waterways officer post is the additional resource it provides to create and to maintain strong relationships with external partners and to assist in coordinating activity. This has continued, in particular working with the Environment Agency and Canal & River Trust, with good working relationships established at a local operational and a wider corporate level.

10.2 Similarly, due to the cross-cutting nature of the work, the waterways officer post also assists in coordinating activity within the council, working across team boundaries and assisting with complex and time-consuming issues.

Appendix 1: Summary of main activity:

City Regeneration:	Lead/funder:
Canal towpath resurfacing works complete Aristotle Lane – Wolvercote lock. Phase 2: Wolvercote to Yarnton early 2021. Phase 3 feasibility underway to extend from Yarnton to Begbroke Science Park.	Funded by County Council, delivered by CRT. Presents opportunities to further promote active travel and health & wellbeing use.
Upgraded signage and benches alongside canal in Wolvercote.	Waterways Project and CRT
Repaired benches in Hythe Bridge park and Upper Fisher Row gardens, volunteer-led rebuilding of Oxford Canal memorial seating sculpture.	Waterways Project, with CRT volunteers
New litter bin facilities at Folly Bridge.	Waterways Project
Volunteer-led graffiti cleaning – Oxford Canal corridor.	Joint Waterways Project with CRT volunteers
Vegetation clearance of Thames Path adjacent to Abbey Road, Osney, opening opportunities to seek funding for path resurfacing works.	Waterways Project, working with Thames Path National Trail.
Repairs to concrete slip-way – Fiddler’s Island.	Waterways Project
Towpath / mooring clear-up sessions, working with community and ODS. Waterways Project funded.	Waterways Project
Removal of wrecked/abandoned boats on river. Waterways Project funded.	Waterways Project
Installation of gates on Thames Path for use during flooding . Waterways Project funded	Waterways Project
Exploring with CRT installation of electric charging points Hythe Bridge	Waterways Project with CRT
Mooring & Services:	

New visitor mooring signage / planters to be installed Folly Bridge	Waterways Project
New interpretation signage promoting Thames Path National Trail, Folly Bridge heritage, links to city centre to be installed Folly Bridge	Waterways Project
New interpretation signage promoting Thames Path National Trail, Osney Bridge heritage, links to city centre and connection to wider waterways walking routes to be installed Osney Bridge	Waterways Project
Contributed to updated CRT mooring Terms & Conditions, with the aim of preventing use of unsuitable fuels, to prevent smoke nuisance complaints and improve air quality and health outcomes	Waterways Project in liaison with CRT. Connects to wider Air Quality Action Plan objectives.
Further promotion of access to healthcare and election services for boaters (campaigns run 2019 and again 2020)	Waterways Project with NHS partners
Crime prevention campaign run winter 2020	Waterways Project
Partnership working with EA on issue of unlicensed and unsafe craft	Waterways Project in partnership with EA
Working with boat-dwelling communities to create better communication forum, with local partners – particularly Canal & River Trust	Waterways Project with CRT and local councillors
Supporting efforts to address illegal mooring on Castle Mill Stream, including clearance of sunken boats and exploring future options for the site	Waterways Project, Planning, Network Rail and CRT
Feasibility study underway into replacement of Port Meadow marina infrastructure	Waterways Project with Property Services
Tourism:	
Oxfordshire Guide 2020 contains Oxford waterways special feature	Waterways Project
Work with CRT and Thames Path to promote Oxford within online, social media and printed content	Waterways Project with CRT
Social media promotion of local companies, boating holidays, boat hire, walks etc	Waterways Project with Communications
Oxford Waterways Loop walking trail – signage and promotion installation in partnership with Thames Path National Trail colleagues	Waterways Project, with Thames Path.
Contributing to Rediscover Oxford programme	Waterways Project
Contributing to Experience Oxfordshire's Thrive programme bid	Waterways Project
Exploring the development of the Oxford Cruising Ring with the Environment Agency/CRT	Waterways Project with EA

Active Communities:	
Ongoing volunteering opportunities – GoodGym, Towpath Taskforce etc	Waterways Project with volunteer groups
Go Active Waterways programme – promotion of waterways and activities, routes, Healthwalks, etc – ongoing with social media advertising and promotion	Waterways Project with Communities team
Work to improve signage to encourage responsible “shared space” use on waterways by pedestrians/cyclists	Waterways Project with CRT and County
Water safety campaign – Wild Water Code, Don’t Drink & drown, throw-line training	Waterways Project with RLSS and partners
Exploring installation of fitness equipment at Long Bridges alongside River Thames	Waterways Project and ODS
Environment:	
Trees, shrubs, bulbs, water marginal plug plants have improved biodiversity	Waterways Project with volunteers
Hedge planting, trees, shrubs, bulbs, wildflower meadow seeds – Trap Grounds Wildlife Site	Waterways Project with volunteers
Spring bulbs and native shrubs planted Hythe Bridge	Waterways Project with volunteers
Spring bulbs and native shrubs planted Upper Fisher Row and gardens	Waterways Project with volunteers
£2,000 CIL funding for St Margaret’s & Summertown Ward environmental improvements, to include trees, shrubs, marginal plants, bulbs	Waterways Project with volunteers
Nature trail for Oxford Canal Hythe Bridge under development	Waterways Project/CRT
Wild flower meadow sowing Grandpont	Waterways Project with volunteers and ODS Countryside
Working with Earthwatch to develop education and engagement programme with local schools	Waterways Project
Air Quality Action Plan includes work to promote use of appropriate fuels with boaters	AQAP objective
EA re-gravelling of Osney stream to improve fishery, installation of interpretation signage	Waterways Project with EA.

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