



**To: Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)
2018**

Date: 15th May

Subject: Recommendations from the Canal and Basin Task and Finish Group

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) of the recommendations from the Canal and Basin Task and Finish Group. The aim of the task and finish group was to create the canal and canal basin as a destination point of the city. The scoping document can be found at Appendix 1.

2 Recommendations

2.1 The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) recommend that:

- 1) Coventry City Council work closely with the Canal and Rivers Trust to review the use of the canal and canal basin to create a clear vision and aspiration for the increased use of the canal and canal basin in Coventry.
 - a. The review should recognise the cultural and heritage contribution the canal has and can in future make to the city
 - b. The review should maximise the public health potential and contribution the area makes as a lung of the city, which is recognised as part of the Council's Green Space Strategy
 - c. The review should assess the current use of all of the buildings at the Canal Basin to ensure that they are appropriate to the renewed vision and aspiration for the canal and canal basin in Coventry.
 - d. The review should involve all partners and organisations with an interest in the canal and canal basin.
- 2) Cabinet Members should meet with representatives of the universities, and other health and sports related organisations in the city to maximise the contribution to improved health outcomes the canal can make.
- 3) Coventry City Council consider "quick wins", such as changing the long stay car park at Leicester Row to a short stay, improved signage to the basin, improved lighting, and the removal of the wall at the entrance to the Canal Basin on the junction of St. Nicholas St and Leicester Row, to improve ease of access.
- 4) Coventry City Council work closely with the Canal and Rivers Trust to address issues of cleanliness and maintenance, as well as formally recognising the contribution made by the Coventry Canal Society to this work.

- 5) Coventry City Council support the Canal and Rivers Trust in getting local businesses located on the canal side involved to support the work in increasing the use of the canal and canal basin
- 6) Coventry City Council formally recognise the appointment of an Elected Member to the West Midlands Canal and Rivers Trust Board of Trustees.

3 Background

- 3.1 At their meeting on 20th September 2017, following a referral from Scruco, the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board considered an item on the canal and canal basin. Members heard from representatives from the Coventry Canal Society, the Coventry Canal Basin Trust and The Tin (based at the Canal Basin).
- 3.2 At that meeting it was resolved that the Board request a Task and Finish Group be arranged to facilitate improvements to and better use of the Canal and Canal Basin. The scoping document can be found at Appendix 1.
- 3.3 The Members of the task and finish group were agreed to include Councillor McNicholas, Councillor Hammon and Councillor Bally Singh.
- 3.4 In addition, Cllr Auluck as a member of the Board and Cllr Mal Mutton, representing Radford Ward, where the Canal Basin is situated, were also members of the task and finish group.

4 History and context¹

- 4.1 The canal was built primarily to transport coal from the pits at Bedworth, Coventry and Nuneaton to the rest of the midlands and beyond. The Coventry Canal Company was formed in 1768. The full length from Coventry to Fradley was opened in 1789. The basin was opened in 1769 and expanded in 1788.
- 4.2 The Coventry canal was a vital trade artery for many years. In particular, it was part of the Birmingham-London route via the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, Coventry Canal, Oxford Canal, and River Thames. The Coventry paid a dividend right up to 1947, and remained navigable to the present day.
- 4.3 Although industry adjoining the canal was booming, the actual use of the canal for the transportation of goods had declined through the 20th century, mainly due the closure of the north Warwickshire collieries which the canal had been built to serve.
- 4.4 It was nationalised in 1948 being operated first by the British Transport Board and then by the British Waterways Board, the forerunners of British Waterways. In 2012 all of British Waterways' assets and responsibilities were transferred to the Canal and River Trust.
- 4.5 In 1957, Coventry Canal Society was established to promote the proper use and maintenance of the canal, and to protect its interests.
- 4.6 Many of the buildings and the site at the canal basin were restored between 1993 and 1995. The Canal Bridge, Canal House and the warehouses are grade II listed buildings.
- 4.7 The canal and surrounding area from the canal basin to Hawksbury Junction is designated as a conservation area.

¹http://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/6098/coventry_canal_conservation_area_appraisal_4_july_2012
<http://covcanalsoc.org.uk/>
<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/canal-and-river-network/coventry-canal>

4.8 Coventry's Green Space Strategy is in the process of being refreshed and the canal will be considered as a "blue corridor" as part of the strategy. The strategy recognises that currently the benefits of green and blue corridors in the city are not being maximised.

5 Visit to the Canal

5.1 Alan Dyer, Chair of the Canal Basin Trust gave a tour of the Canal Basin Warehouse, which is owned by the Canal and Rivers Trust and leased to the Canal Basin Trust. The warehouse is an historic building which has been restored and extended by the Canal Basin Trust. It is used by local artists and has about 40 residents at any one time. Representatives from The Ludic Rooms (an arts studio based at the warehouse) also contributed to the discussion.

5.2 David Moore from Valley Cruises gave a brief introduction to his business of canal cruises. It is an important, yet overlooked contributor to the tourism offer in the city, including bed space.

5.3 Elaine Tierney, Chair of Trustees for The Tin, gave an overview of the work and aspirations of The Tin, especially around training young people in music technology.

5.4 Representative from the Canals and River Trust talked about their plans for the future, including recruitment of volunteers to increase capacity and to improve the perception of the canal. They have been water and boat focused but realise they need to address issues about the towpaths as well. They have seen investments in Birmingham pay off with increased usage.

5.5 Resources are always an issue and upkeep is costly so they need to prioritise. There is also a strategic, as well as an operational aspect to the canals, in terms of sustainable transport, green space, public health etc.

5.6 Key issues identified

5.7 All partners at the meeting were given the opportunity to raise their issues and concerns. The main issues raised were:

5.7.1 Activity issues

- Footfall – there are plenty of people who walk past the canal basin, so access is not an issue, but they do not come into the basin
- There needs to be specific reason for people to come, not just reliant on passing trade
- Parking capacity
- Engagement with the local community
- Strategic joined up approach by all partners – clear vision for the area
- Links to the City of Culture as a cultural and heritage asset for the city
- General awareness, brand visibility, raising the profile
- Engagement with the traders

5.7.2 Infrastructure issues

- The visual appeal of the entrance, poor signage, unwelcoming entrance, boarded up buildings, that it looks shut
- Dredging
- Access to the towpath to make it convenient to the community
- Condition of the arts trail and storyboards
- Litter and overgrown vegetation

5.8 Members of the task and finish group were hoping to meet with representatives of the traders based at the Canal Basin. However, it was not possible to arrange a mutual time to meet.

6 Meeting with the CAN project

6.1 Helen Cuthill from Coventry University and representatives from The Tin talked about the plans they are developing for the building owned by the Canals and Rivers Trust. The building is the first building from the public access to the canal basin.

6.2 The plans include developing the ground floor to a flexible space, including a print room and community arts activity. A quick win will be to put art work on the hoardings to make the area look more inviting, interesting and open.

6.3 The university would lead on the costs and rent a third of the space for the print studio. The model will be self-sustaining. The Tin's role would be co-ordination and use of the building.

6.4 This would be part of a vision for the Canal Basin to be a creative hub for the city, with a combination of cultural, business and commercial focus.

7 Canal Trip

7.1 Members of the task and finish group went on a journey from the canal basin to Swan Lane. The Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services and the Director of Project Management and Property Services.

7.2 Members were able to experience the canal from the water, which gave a different perspective on the canal. Members identified several issues as part of the visit.

7.2.1 Canal issues

- The water by the banks is quite shallow - more visitors' moorings as well.
- The canal is a cul-de-sac – therefore there needs to be a reason for boaters to come down into the basin
- If the canal feels and looks safe and attractive it gives a reason to come down.
- Vegetation narrows the navigable water. Also on the towpath it can put walkers off.
- Work has been done to clear the canal of rubbish and vegetation, it can only be done from the water, which adds to the complexity.
- There is a programme of dredging by the CRT, but the timetable isn't necessarily available.

7.2.2 Canal side issues

- There were a lot of dog walkers on the tow path, but no dog waste or litter bins
- Lighting at night time could be an issue for safety
- The condition of some parts of the towpath could put users off
- The arts trail is looking sorely neglected, which has the potential to be a real asset as part of City of Culture 2021
- The canal seems more accessible where newer residential developments have been built that open onto the canal.

7.2.3 Canal basin issues

- Lack of information for visitors to the basin especially signage and how to get to other locations in the city.
- Complexity of landownership and responsibility. Most of the land at the canal basin is owned by the Canal and Rivers Trust. There are some building which

are owned by the Council and leased to other organisations, specifically the newer buildings; the commercial offices and retail outlets.

8 Liaison with the Canals and Rivers Trust

- 8.1 The Canal and Rivers Trust (CRT) are a charity that are responsible for protecting and managing the canals in England and Wales. The areas are split into regional partnerships, the Coventry canal coming under the West Midlands Partnership.
- 8.2 The CRT are responsible for the water and towpath of the canal in Coventry and are also the landowners of part of the canal basin.
- 8.3 The Chair of the task and finish group had several meetings with the Chair of the Partnership and the Waterway Manager to discuss some of the issues that had come up as part of the task and finish group.

9 Comments from Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services and Director of Highways and Infrastructure

- 9.1 Improvements to Junction 1 of the ring road are included on the long list going to Cabinet in March, but will be dependent on funding availability.
- 9.2 Issue with the car park on Leicester Row could be easily resolved, transferring from a long stay to a short stay to encourage visits to the canal basin, as well as improved signage and some linked publicity to the canal basin.
- 9.3 The buildings that we own at the basin, we have some control over i.e. Coventry Telegraph offices. The smaller retail units would have a natural change of use as the rest of the site changed.
- 9.4 The Council could consider looking at offering alternative accommodation for any current residents of the canal basin who may need to move premises.
- 9.5 The Council could look at a partnership arrangement with residents for bin emptying arrangements. Installing bins is not the issue, the cost of emptying them is.
- 9.6 There needs to be some corporate recognition of the work that the Coventry Canal Society do in clearing out the canal.
- 9.7 Lighting could be an issue on some parts of the canal and the impact on wildlife. The canal would not have traditionally been lit, however lighting might be more appropriate in some stretches of the tow path than others.
- 9.8 Enforcement powers could be used to address fly tipping but would need to have evidence to prosecute. There could be the possibility of some communication with member of the public on this issue.
- 9.9 Access is not just an issue at the canal basin. There are points of access along the canal, which could be improved. There is the potential for partnerships to improve access, tied in with 2021, with the Ricoh and Arena Park. S106 funding from Courtauld's has been used to make improvements to the towpath previously.
- 9.10 A partnership of organisations associated with the canal in Coventry could be a useful organisation
- 9.11 The Directors welcomed Cllr McNicholas' appointment to the West Midlands partnership of the CRT.

10 Comments from Cabinet Members

- 10.1 On 10th April 2018, a meeting with the Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration, the Cabinet Member for City Services and the Cabinet and Deputy Cabinet Member

for Public Health and Sport was held to brief the relevant portfolio holders on the progress of the task and finish group and to enable the Cabinet Members to make comment on the emerging findings of the group.

- 10.2 Overall the Cabinet Members were supportive of the general approach and findings of the task and finish group. The main concern was with resources and capacity to deliver anything additional to current Council commitments.
- 10.3 The Cabinet Members were supportive of closer links with the Canal and Rivers Trust, and will be happy to work in partnership, but were clear that the Council would not be taking on any of their duties or responsibilities, particularly in relation to cleansing and maintenance.
- 10.4 The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration was clear that the main issue in realising the potential of the Canal Basin is the location on the outside of the ring road. For it to be fully successful there needs to be access links with the City Centre.
- 10.5 The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration also highlighted the limited resources and capacity for development projects in the city. The current round of Growth Funding has been allocated, with no clear picture of whether any future funding will be available.
- 10.6 The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration also suggested the potential of links with the creative industries to widen the appeal of the location.
- 10.7 The Cabinet Member for City Services was open to changes to car parking and working with CRT to improve signage, but mindful that there needs to be something to sign post people to.
- 10.8 The Cabinet Member for City Services also recognised that proposals for junction 1 of the ring road were on the “long list” of capital projects, but that there were other projects with higher priorities for the limited funding available.
- 10.9 The Cabinet and Deputy Cabinet Member for Public Health and Sport recognised the potential of the canal and basin as a public health asset, but also recognised that public safety issues, such as poor lighting and inaccessibility, could discourage use of the tow path.
- 10.10 The Cabinet Member for Public Health and Sport also offered to arrange a meeting with Public Health officers to discuss health issues related to the canal.
- 10.11 The Deputy Cabinet Member also pointed out future development happening in the location, particularly student accommodation and plugging into that market.