

## Cabinet – 13 January 2010

### Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust: Support for the Restoration of the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals

**Portfolio:** Councillor A Andrew, Deputy Leader and Regeneration

**Service:** Regeneration

**Wards:** Bloxwich East, Brownhills and Pelsall

**Key decision:** No

**Forward plan:** No

#### 1. Summary of report

- 1.1 This report has been prepared as a result of the motion passed by full Council on 14th September 2009 relating to the restoration of the Lichfield Canal which would reinstate the long abandoned canal link between Brownhills and the Coventry Canal north-east of Lichfield. The motion was supportive of the restoration work by the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust (LHCRT) and asked *'that officers enter into discussion with the officers of the LHCRT with a view to reporting to Cabinet at an early date setting out ways in which the Council can provide meaningful support to the efforts of the Trust in bringing this major project to fruition.'*
- 1.2 This report outlines the progress made by officers in following up the requirements of this resolution.

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Cabinet:
- (i) Authorises officers to pursue the formation of an officer steering group with relevant organisations including neighbouring local authorities (Lichfield, Cannock Chase and South Staffordshire District Council's), Staffordshire County Council, British Waterways and the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust. The steering group would meet annually or twice yearly initially.
  - (ii) Agrees that the role of the steering group would be to advise the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust on specific planning and strategic issues relating to the restoration of the Lichfield and Hatherton Canal links.
  - (iii) Agrees that Walsall Council should play a supporting role, rather than the leading role in this group.

### 3. Background information

#### 3.1 Context

3.1.1 Until the 1950s Walsall's canals were linked to the wider network through links between Brownhills and the Trent and Mersey Canal (the Lichfield Canal) and between Pelsall and the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal (the Hatherton Branch). Unfortunately in the 1950s these canal links were abandoned due to loss of boat traffic and high maintenance costs.

3.1.2 Over the last 20 years the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust has undertaken the restoration of both canals. **Appendix A** shows the canal network with the two stretches of canal being restored by the Canal Restoration Trust shown as thickened lines.

3.1.3 In dealing with the requirements of the Council motion, officers have also considered the restoration of the Hatherton Branch Canal, not just the Lichfield Canal. This is because both canal restoration schemes are being undertaken by the same group and both contribute jointly to the wider strategic canal network.

#### 3.2 Progress to Date

3.2.1 The Canals Restoration Trust has achieved a great deal:

- More than £3 million has been raised.
- Feasibility studies have been carried out for both canals.
- Stretches of the Lichfield Canal have been restored.
- An aqueduct over the M6 Toll motorway and a navigable culvert under the A5 have been constructed for the Hatherton Branch Canal.
- The routes of the canals have been protected through planning policies.

3.2.2 However, obstacles remain.

- Considerable funding is required. The costs of the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals restoration have been estimated as £47.7 and £44.1 million plus land acquisition respectively.
- A culvert under the M6 motorway is still required for the Hatherton Branch Canal.
- It is still to be demonstrated that there is sufficient water available to feed the new canals.
- The restoration projects rely on landowners being prepared to sell land for the canals restoration. Agreement of all landowners will be required.
- The Canals Restoration Trust is primarily a pressure group raising awareness and promoting the canal restoration project. It accepts that raising sufficient funds to complete the project in a reasonable timescale is beyond its capabilities and it requires the support of external partners.

3.2.3 The September Council motion required officers to explore the support which could be given to the Canals Restoration Trust.

### 3.3 The benefits of the restored canal links

3.3.1 If either or both the canals was restored there would be considerable direct benefits for the borough. The restored canals would create through-routes for canal boats providing much better links between the borough's canals and the wider UK network. This would have the following benefits:

- Increasing boat traffic and towpath use would stimulate physical and economic development and regeneration, particularly leisure, tourism and retail-related waterside development. This would include the development of previously under-used or vacant sites adjacent to the canal for mixed-use schemes and provision of increased marina and mooring basin opportunities. Local shops and businesses adjacent to the route would also benefit.
- Providing towpath links for anglers, walkers, cyclists and the local community.
- Creation of wildlife habitat. Canals and their margins are important wetland habitats which also contribute to the green infrastructure network.
- Improvements to the visual quality of the environment.
- Promotion of the local heritage of canals and associated industries;
- Support the case for upgrading Walsall's canals to 'Cruiseway' status leading to higher levels of maintenance and investment.

3.3.2 While the northern part of the borough would benefit most, increased canal traffic on other local canals would also benefit other parts of the borough.

3.3.3 There are two factors which may reduce the level of support the Cabinet considers it appropriate to provide to the projects:

- Most of the restoration schemes are outside the borough. Only about 305 metres of the Hatherton Branch Canal is within the borough and all the Lichfield Canal is outside.
- The timetable for completion is long-term. The Lichfield Canal will be restored from the junction of the Coventry Canal and would not provide a link to the Walsall canals until the final phase by perhaps 2026. There is no current timetable for the restoration of the Hatherton Branch Canal.

### 3.4 Support proposed by the Trust

3.4.1 The Canals Restoration Trust put forward the following suggestions for support from the Council for discussion:

- Establishment of a steering group involving the local authorities, British Waterways, Environment Agency, Inland Waterways, and Natural England. The local authorities should accept ownership of the project and drive forward with the support of the Trust. Good examples where this has happened are the Huddersfield and Rochdale Canals restoration projects.

- Relevant officers (i.e. planners, open space, parks, natural environment, regeneration) to attend regular quarterly meetings that the Trust currently has with Lichfield Council. There are currently no regular meetings with the local authorities containing the route of the Hatherton Branch Canal.
- Walsall to become the central lead to engage the other local authorities, including Lichfield, Cannock Chase, South Staffordshire as well as more peripheral authorities such as the Black Country boroughs and Birmingham.
- Employment of a dedicated project officer within the Council with professional background and good knowledge to support the Trust i.e. advice on fulfilling the LDF requirements, translating professional studies into practical projects.
- Potential for the four local authorities to co-fund one project officer or potential secondment opportunity.

The Trust did not feel the existing Canals Forum could lead effective action.

3.4.2 Following subsequent discussions with the relevant partners, officers have the following response to the Canals Restoration Trust's suggestions.

- A Council-led steering group taking ownership of the project would require considerable resources both for capital projects and officer time. These are unlikely to be available.
- Employing or seconding a dedicated officer funded entirely by the Council or jointly by relevant local authorities is also unrealistic in the current financial situation.
- The proposal for Walsall Council officers to attend the regular canal restoration meetings organised by Lichfield District Council is less problematic. However, since all the Lichfield Canal is outside the borough, it has been provisionally agreed with Lichfield that Walsall officers could attend if the agenda relates to matters which directly affect Walsall. It is not envisaged by either Lichfield District Council or Walsall Council that attendance would be regular.
- If Walsall Council is to provide support for the Canals Restoration Trust in accordance with the Council resolution, the most feasible proposal is to establish an officer steering group of the relevant local authorities along the whole length of the restoration project. This would meet once or twice yearly and discuss strategic and planning issues. This has been discussed informally with relevant officers from all the local authorities involved and British Waterways and there is verbal support. This would enable strategic matters to be discussed and the composition of the steering group and the regularity of the meetings could be changed as the projects gather pace.

3.4.3 Even a relatively modest proposal such as this will have resource implications. It is inevitable that Walsall Council, as instigators, will have to establish any steering group and be prepared to lead it, at least initially. There will be a need for developing terms of reference, preparing agendas, taking minutes, acting as a contact point for the Canals Restoration Trust as well as attending the meetings.

It will be necessary to identify the officer or officers who will do this as well as adjusting their workload(s) accordingly.

#### **4. Resource considerations**

##### **4.1 Financial:**

4.1.1 Setting up a steering group as proposed in the recommendation will have resource implications. These have not been quantified but any input to the project, including the proposed setting up of a steering group, will be borne from existing revenue budgets, which will mean reduced support is available for existing priorities.

##### **4.2 Legal:**

4.2.1 None arising directly from this report.

##### **4.3 Staffing:**

4.3.1 If Council officers participate in an annual or twice yearly officer steering group meeting this will be a new area of work. It is unclear who will do it or which Council service will provide the co-ordinating officer(s). No additional staffing will be available. Additional officers will be requested to participate depending on the agenda. The staffing implications cannot be quantified at this stage.

#### **5. Citizen impact**

5.1 The benefits of the canal restoration projects to Walsall citizens, particularly in Brownhills, as acknowledged in paragraph 3.3.

5.2 There are no citizen impacts arising directly from this report.

#### **6. Community safety**

None arising directly from this report.

#### **7. Environmental impact**

7.1 The canal restoration schemes are major infrastructure projects which will have potentially both positive and negative environmental impacts. The impacts will have to be fully considered once detailed design work has been carried out.

7.2 There are no environment impacts arising directly from this report.

## **8. Performance and risk management issues**

### **8.1 Risk:**

8.1.1 The neighbouring authorities and British Waterways do not wish to participate in a steering group as outlined in this report when approached formally.

### **8.2 Performance management:**

8.2.1 Performance will be monitored as part of the officer steering group meeting and progress made on implementing the phasing of the canal restoration project.

8.2.2 The officers attending the steering group will be decided based upon the agenda to ensure that relevant expertise and knowledge is available to inform discussion and actions.

## **9. Equality implications**

None arising directly from this report.

## **10. Consultation**

10.1 Council officers invited and met with the Trust's Chairman and Finance Director on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009. The Trust outlined progress made and described the help and support that the Council could give to the project. These discussions helped inform this report.

10.2 Subsequently, Council officers have had informal discussions with Lichfield, Cannock Chase and South Staffordshire District Councils and British Waterways to gain their views on for the Trust's requests for support. This established that all partners would, in principal, support an annual or twice yearly officer steering group meeting, but currently have no enthusiasm or resources for an employed or seconded dedicated project officer.

## **Background papers**

- The Potential Impacts, Environmental Benefits and Disbenefits of the Restoration of the Lichfield Canal (Ed Sharkey Associates, February 2000)
- Lichfield Canal Restoration Feasibility Study: Final Report (Atkins Limited, July 2009)
- Lichfield Canal Restoration Feasibility Study: Proposals Maps (Atkins Limited, July 2009)
- Hatherton Canal Restoration: Supplementary Feasibility Report (Atkins Limited, February 2009)
- Notes of meeting between Walsall Council and Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust held on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009
- Notes of discussions between Walsall Council and representatives of other local authorities and British Waterways.

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**Appendix A**

Strategic position of the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals

