



Basingstoke Canal Vision – Vision Statement and Executive Summary

Vision Statement

The Basingstoke Canal was built in 1792 and in its current form runs for 32 miles through Hampshire and Surrey from Greywell to the Wey Navigation. A lot of people care passionately about the Canal, its environment and heritage and this has been clearly endorsed during our study by the stakeholder consultation and initial onsite visitor research.

It is an important green corridor which includes pockets of idyllic tranquillity. Within the immediate community, the Canal is a valued and much loved recreation and leisure resource. The Canal is about the **people**, both local communities and visitors, as well as the **fabric**. As the quality and awareness of the Canal grows and through a number of strategic interventions it has potential to engage with a wider user base among residents in Hampshire and Surrey, education based visits, extended volunteer involvement, day visitors, recreation users, canal boat users and short break holidaymakers. In many ways, the Canal is able to offer a response to the search for tranquillity in modern life, particularly apparent in many parts of South East England.

Whilst maintaining the environmental quality of the Canal, the owners Hampshire and Surrey County Councils have a vision for the Basingstoke Canal to become self-sustaining and less reliant on local authority support, to act as a catalyst for economic development and add to the critical mass of tourism facilities.

The Vision

*The Vision for the Basingstoke Canal is to create a thriving **natural environment** for wildlife and public enjoyment and a vibrant **recreation** and **heritage resource**. Central to the Vision is to create an accessible waterway serving the public. The Vision seeks to unlock the potential **economic contribution** of the Canal and its corridor and also to become a focal point for increased **community and volunteer** involvement and use. The ambition is to become a well loved, distinctive and well known **destination** for an extended market including **day visitors** and **tourists** attracted to discover and enjoy its peaceful setting and unique character.*



To achieve the Vision requires further strategic **investment** to reach a steady state of infrastructure quality and integrity. It also requires further positive **partnership working** with a fully engaged and motivated **'network' of volunteers** and a more streamlined and effective **organisational structure**.



Executive Summary of the Technical Report and Vision / Action Plan

The objective of our work has been to create a Vision and Action plan which delivers maximum recreational, heritage, environmental, educational, economic and community 'value'. It has also been to consider enhancing revenue generating opportunities which include improving the camping offer, introducing additional moorings, bringing the Canal Centre into more economic use and maximising developer contributions. Our work incorporates a Technical Report and a separate Vision and Action Plan document.

The Technical Report sets out the current position and assesses its strengths and weaknesses in terms of the product, its market / user profile and organisational management. The Canal's main strengths lie in its rich heritage and unique environmental value, the wide range of existing land and water based recreational users and easy accessibility to a large and relatively affluent population. The main constraints have been a lack of adequate investment and funding, significant water supply issues, the fact that the Canal is not navigable along its whole length, its limited profile as a visitor destination. In addition, the organisational structure appears unwieldy and there are currently limited opportunities for volunteer and community engagement.

Other UK Canals have been reviewed for comparative purposes, including The Wey Navigation, Huddersfield Narrow Canal and Lancaster Canal. Reference has also been extended to the Kennett and Avon, Montgomery Canal and Rudyard Lake. A number of common issues and lessons can be learnt and applied to the Canal such as, balancing the needs of stakeholders through partnership working, dealing with budgetary pressures, benefitting from varied roles for volunteers and balancing revenue generation opportunities with environmental management.

A detailed market review has assessed the demographic profile of residents living within the 30 and 60 minutes drive time contours of the Canal Centre as well as the 30 minute catchments from either end of the Canal. There is a significant residential population base living within the 60 minute drive time contour – some 4.2 million residents (within 30 minutes there are just over 700,000 residents).

Consultation with key stakeholders and user groups confirms a broad consensus to enhancing the Basingstoke Canal as a navigation and for recreation and wildlife interest. The main themes to emerge from the stakeholder consultation include:



- The continued use of the Canal as a restored waterway is seen as integral to its appeal and activities. Addressing product deficiencies is seen as vital including the need to address water supply problems, improve towpath maintenance and upgrade the visitor centre at Mytchett. Increased camping and enhanced boat usage received strong backing.
- The Canal is recognised as an attractive linear park with high conservation value, offering great opportunities for walking, jogging, canoeing and cycling.
- Educational role of the Canal is seen as important for wildlife and outdoor recreation and also for 'developing an appetite' among young people to appreciate and enjoy the Canal.
- The contribution of a wide range of volunteers and local community engagement are widely deemed to be important to the survival and improvement of the Canal.
- There is broad consensus that the area has a low level of market awareness and could benefit from a unifying brand and stronger marketing activity. Enhancing existing hubs identified as an important theme.
- There is support for a new organisational structure. In terms of organisation / management the consultation recognised the difficulty for the Basingstoke Canal Authority to combine its core function on Canal related activities with generating additional income from non-navigation sources.

In terms of the Vision and Action Plan, **the guiding principles** are wider economic impacts, financial sustainability and regeneration, environmental conservation and social inclusion (including volunteering). To successfully deliver the Action Plan will require a co-ordinated approach with commitment and investment from public and voluntary sectors. A more commercial outlook is required to help reduce the level of public sector support and to take a holistic, balanced approach to its diverse aspects and activities.



It is important to recognise that by making the **Canal navigable on a year round basis** and **creating facilities for local recreational** use this will help to improve the desirability of the area as a place to live and work and subsequently to visit. It will also help to enhance the perception of the Canal as a living waterway and deliver key policy objectives.

The Action Plan is structured using the following headings / categories and sets out the level of priority and the indicative investment required:

- **Product / Infrastructure** (environment, Canal, Canal Centre, product – other, supporting infrastructure, interpretation, learning and training, recreation and tourism)
- **Organisation and Management** (governance and operation, volunteering)
- **Marketing and Events** (marketing and brand, events)

In terms of preparing the Action Plan for the Basingstoke Canal it is important to recognise that it is a multi-dimensional and complex product / resource and there are a number of aspects relating to the Canal which have financial and operational implications. The success of the Action Plan is dependent to a significant degree on the assumption that the Canal is restored to a navigable waterway and an appropriate level of dowry (and reserve fund) is in place for the long term sustainable maintenance of the asset.

The consultation highlighted that the existing governance structure is unwieldy. In terms of governance arrangements, in the short term these centre around revising the existing structure into a more streamlined entity, most likely with a management board. In the medium term a new Trust or Community Interest Company could be established for the management of the Canal and over time to explore the possibility of a merger with Wey Navigation / National Trust (possibly as a new separate Trust) or the Canal and River Trust. Whilst these may have higher operational costs there may also be greater opportunities to secure external sponsorship and donations.

The Action Plan sets out the opportunity to develop one or more vibrant economic hubs with the main focus at the Canal Centre in Mytchett. The Canal Centre is a vital focal point for the Canal



(as a service centre, disseminating information and delivering learning and other programmes). Whilst it is a well maintained site it does not have a strong profile or appearance as a visitor destination and more could be made of the arrival points and entrance to the main Centre as well as further integrating the different onsite activities. The building itself is in need of refurbishment to improve its revenue generating potential and the site would benefit from a re-branding exercise (to be known for example as Canalside, Mytchett or similar) to help build its visitor profile. There are opportunities to link a range of community and commercial uses within the Centre.

The camping offer adjacent to the Canal Centre has a strong case for investment and along with further linear mooring could provide a strong opportunity to build the revenue generating potential. There are also opportunities to bring the camping field into more economic use with events and with the introduction of yurts which will help to attract higher spending overnight visitors with direct spend in the local economy. Film based activities at the wider site and along the Canal will further raise its profile and the overall viability. There is also potential to secure S106 / Community Levy Fund contributions to the Canal infrastructure and activity by liaising with developers of nearby adjacent projects in the pipeline and the relevant local authority partners.

If a full restoration of the waterway can be funded then this could act as a catalyst for further direct and indirect investment. If insufficient investment is available, the Canal can still perform a role as an important recreational resource serving mainly the local communities through which it passes, but it will not have the same distinctiveness. Some actions can be taken forward with or without the full Canal restoration, however restoration is important to extend the appeal and profile of the area as a place to live and as a visitor destination.

Significant progress has been made by partners in recent years to restore the Canal and its surrounds. There is momentum in taking this forward to deliver a viable resource for community and visitor enjoyment and to become a more integral and recognised part of the wider UK waterways network.