



BASINGSTOKE CANAL JOINT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

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Canal Management Report

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Key Issue

To inform the Committee of actions taken by the Strategic Manager and BCA Canal Manager in managing, maintaining and operating the Canal since the preceding meeting, and look forward work likely to happen in the 2nd half of 2021; and to report the work of the Conservation Steering Group.

Operation & Maintenance

BCA Maintenance & Inspection Works

- Summer reactive tree works
- Length Inspections, Supplemental Inspections, Reservoir Surveillance Inspections / Reservoir Inspection by the Supervising Engineer, and the Lock General Inspections were all conducted.
- Summer mowing on towpath edges and in picnic areas/car parks/moorings.
- Installation of security fence at Ash Lock Depot.
- A leak was discovered between Locks 27 to 26 after large oak tree self-felled on the embankment during heavy rain. Emergency Contractors were called out to make good temporary repair, and subsequently followed up with more permanent repair by contractors since.
- Minor overtopping from the lock 1 by-pass channel occurred due to excessive vegetation caught on bypass weir during a summer storm – there was no reported damage to third party property.
- Lock 2 upper gates were lifted again by a boater again; contractors attended and assisted ranger team to re-sit gate.
- Regular reactive call out to neighbouring landowners to assess, trees, embankments, land ownership issues.
- Ongoing increased inspection/monitoring of Mytchett Lake reservoir due to seepage. This now reduced back to standard inspections.
- High priority tree works arising out of the programmed inspection by SCC Arborists have been contracted out. A large number of lower priority matters arising from the tree inspection are now being procured.

Staffing

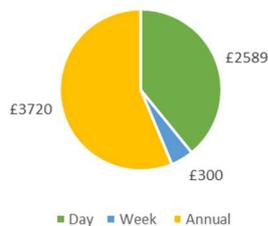
- Canal Ranger Steve Bennett who was on long term sick for over 6 months, returned to work but has subsequently now applied for retirement and will leave shortly. We would like to thank Steve for his service to the Canal and wish him well in his retirement.
- Canal Ranger Andy Foster has now handed in his notice with the intention of retiring after over 34 years' service at the end of October. We would like to formally thank Andy for his service to the Canal for so many years. His fountain of knowledge will be sorely missed and his impact on the Canal has been immense.

- One further Canal Ranger has resigned from their post and has now left.
- Our Lock Keeper, Alex Veness, has also resigned to move onto a new job as a Countryside Ranger with another authority – this is an excellent career progression, and we wish him well for the future. Fortunately, we had already recruited to a short-term lock keeper contract to help with us being short staffed. Lock Keeper Roger Jones was able have a hand over from Alex and will now be with us at least until March 2022.
- We trialled temporarily a Campsite Warden position for a few weeks at the end of the summer and showed this role to be valuable and one management would like to continue for the whole of the next summer season.
- There have been quite a few staffing issues particularly in the Waterway Ranger team which has left the BCA extremely stretched for most of the year. As a result, the Strategic Manager and Canal Manger have sought approval for urgent recruitment to some of the now vacant roles – together with changing and introducing new roles to fill skill shortages. A fuller explanation of the staffing changes is made below, and the effect on the BCA’s finances are contained in the Financial Report.

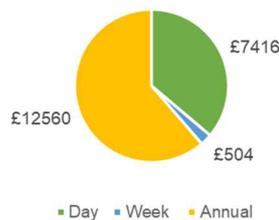
Events/Visitor Services

- “Glamping” Bell Tents were introduced on the Canal Centre campsite as 2-year trial – there has not been as much uptake as we might have expected, possibly due to an oversupply of this type of offer due relaxation in planning rules.
- We now have 7,096 followers on our Facebook page, 1,831 followers on Twitter and 1,130 on Instagram (as of 5th Oct 2021).
- The Canal Centre’s unpowered boat hire did well this summer despite still under some covid restrictions in number of hires and pre booking only, and additional staffing to deal with enhanced cleaning.
- *Rosebud* (the BCA’s trip boat) was operational throughout the summer from July running public trips and the popular cream tea trips staffed entirely by volunteers.
- On the Canal more generally licenses for private unpowered boat are continuing to be at a record high and we are increasing boat licence checking to help improve this further.

Total income of unpowered licenses sold
2019-2020 £6609



Total income of unpowered licences sold
2020-2021 £20,480



Total income of unpowered boat licences sold
so far 2021-2022 £22,727



- Due to the rainfall throughout the summer water levels were better than usual, with the canal staying open for powered boating with the exception of the Deepcut and Brookwood Locks which had to be closed for 1 week due to water shortage late in the season. Overall, it has been a healthy season for boating with 77 visiting boats from other waterways.
- After a break of a year, Santa Cruise tickets went on sale at the end of Sept and within a week were 99.3% sold out most within the first day and now completely sold out.

Conservation

- The Conservation Management Steering Group meeting was held on 13th October. The Vegetation Survey was discussed further as we have still not accepted the final report or condition assessment from HBIC. Natural England was asked to consider the accuracy of the methodology for water level monitoring in the Common Standards for Assessment which the Strategic Manager did not consider an appropriate measure of draw down levels on canals.
- Other subjects covered included a discussion around dredging and the relative benefits and disbenefits of systematic dredging of longer stretches of canal channel – this includes short term disturbance of aquatic plant species, long term improvement in substrates for aquatic plant species balanced against release of CO₂

from large scale dredging operations. It was noted that despite considerable efforts by volunteers and staff the BCA's maintenance dredger *Unity's* hydraulic system failed in several places on test – there will be no spot dredging programme (the main requirement for navigation) until either the dredger is fixed, or a decision is made to abandon it altogether and the deployment of contractors is built into the canal maintenance budget in future years.

- Other topics include the control of invasive species, particularly floating pennywort, and the national consultation on the wild reintroduction of beavers.

Volunteers

- Volunteers have been operational each Tuesday and some additional days, organised and overseen by a Canal Ranger and Volunteer Leaders who are taking a greater role. We continue to use the online booking system and manage group numbers depending on the task we are undertaking. Winter sapling cutting is now underway, and we continue to work on removal of the floating pennywort in Woking.
- Volunteer Skippers and crew have been taking the Patrol Boat and work boats back out and have been assisting with some weed control work in Woking.
- 11 volunteers undertook canoe training during late summer and early autumn and added to our tally of volunteers able to assist with water-based tasks while also benefiting from a new skill for life and yet another water to enjoy the Canal.

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Management Actions

Staffing

As stated in the Canal Manager's report above the BCA have been very stretched for the last 12 months in terms of staffing. Three Canal Rangers and a Lock Keeper have now left, and the opportunity was taken to examine the staffing structure and skill requirements of the BCA to ensure that it remains effective in all inspection, operations, and regular maintenance activities.

The Strategic Manager has therefore sought approval from the heads of service of both County Councils and the Partnership Treasurer to re-employ but to a revised staff structure.

In order to ensure all planned asset inspections are undertaken on the programmed basis, one of the vacant Ranger positions is to be re-employed as an Inspector/Ranger who will lead on inspection whilst assisting the remainder of the ranger team in fulfilling the 24 hour "duty" cover rota and larger pieces of teamwork. Further one of the other vacant ranger positions will be re-employed as an Assistant Ranger (on a lower grade and without responsibility for duty cover) to work alongside the remaining three Rangers and two new full time Lock Keepers. The Assistant Ranger and Lock Keepers will major on water management (especially in the Surrey half of the Canal) and practical site maintenance aspects of the Ranger role such as vegetation control. The current Seasonal Lock Keeper role will be deleted.

This presents a slight saving in payroll for the new Waterway Operations team, but these savings cannot be banked. It is expected that the current Canal Engineer who is hosted by SCC on a cost recovery type contract will retire within the next 12 -18 months. It would be highly worrying for such a heavily engineered canal to be without a skilled civil or structural engineer to advise on asset management and repair works – at a time when appropriate engineering skills are not now readily available to call off from in either County Council. The proposal is then that a half-time Canal Engineer position is employed within the BCA on the retirement of the current SCC Canal Engineer, this position will also take line management responsibility for the Project Officer and Waterway Inspector/Ranger – until appointment these positions with report to the Strategic Manager and Canal Manager respectively. The creation of this new position within the BCA will have an additional £9000 call on the staff budget when the position is recruited to – this will need to be balanced off by a reduction in the canal maintenance budget that is currently used to pay for the SCC Engineer's time. Where the Canal Engineer and Project Officer work on separately funded asset projects there may also be some opportunity to recover costs.

The existing and proposed staffing structures are appended to this report.

The Canal Manager and Strategic Manager have also been working on the following matters:

- **Regular Liaison Meetings** – Basingstoke Canal Society (BCS), Boat User Group, Basingstoke Canal Angling Association, Woodham Houseboat Tenant engagement sessions and regular meetings with a number of commercial/quasi-commercial operators. The Canal Manger gave a presentation on unpowered boating at BCS AGM.
- **New Commercial Licences** – Kiwi and Scott are now operating their successful takeaway business from a boat at Woking wharf and Galleon Marine are starting a coffee van (a very tasteful converted sheep trailer) at Colt Hill.
- **British Canoeing** – Negotiations were completed, and improved arrangement was made for continuing access to the Canal by BC members. The BCA will now be receiving approximately double the annual fee, but part of this will be based on numbers of canoeists using the waterway.
- **Procurement** – A sizable proportion of the Strategic Manager, Canal Manager and Project Officer’s time has been in dealing with a variety of procurement matters relating to both normal operations and projects – this is a significant disbenefit of the current partnership arrangement as the financial and procurement arrangements of both County Councils which differ (sometime widely) need to be negotiated. Further difficulties with approved contractors being extremely busy and poor availability of some materials have compounded the delays to some projects.
- **Embankment Inspections** – The Principal Inspection of Embankments (10-year cohort) across the entire canal estate was undertaken by a specialist contractor under the supervision of HCC Engineers. This has highlighted a small number of high-risk embankments with defects that need urgent attention most notable are three minor leaks at locations in Woking.
- **Tree Inspections** – SCC carried out a programmed inspection of the tree stock on the Surrey half of the Canal in May – July. This is instead of employing a dedicated arboriculture inspector for the BCA. SCC’s Arborists will now carry out a similar inspection of the Hampshire half of the Canal over winter. The Strategic Manager has been asked to prepare a tree risk improvement plan which is appended to the Risk Register review also being present to the Committee.

Asset Management Programme

The following works from the County Councils’ “capital” asset management programme were planned for the 2021/22 programme:

Surrey

- **Towpath Repair Works** – sections of towpath between Deepcut High Bridge and Frimley Green are now procured, and await a start date from the contractor with completion expected by the end of March 2022.
- **Bank repairs** – the bank protection budget has been used to permanently repair the leak which occurred when a tree self-felled below Lock 27, and the remainder will fund the three minor leak sites identified by the Embankment Principal Inspection in Woking.
- **Houseboat Moorings** – BCA Officers are assisting SCC Officers with implementation of this large project to replace all the sheet piles along the Houseboat Moorings above Lock 2 to prevent the raised embankment deteriorating and to give the residents a safer environment. This is project has separate funding from SCC aside from the normal SCC canal capital budget, due to the way the Houseboat Moorings are managed. However, this project is going to need to be delayed 12 months due to contractors requiring a longer program than anticipated and ecological constraints.

Hampshire

- **Crookham Deeps** – The Project Officer has made good progress with this project to solve long term leaks at a site which has long history of instability and leakage at Crookham. A contractor is expected to be formally appointed shortly, and work due to commence early in January 2022.
- **Swan “cutting”, North Warnborough** – The Canal Manager and Strategic Manager together with Engineering and other professional colleagues at HCC continue to work on this project and are currently in discussion with our neighbouring landowners in the area directly adjacent, to agree a sustainable design solution for

the slopes above the canal channel. This is a long-term project. A narrow strip of land has been purchased by HCC to help enable any future works at this location.

- **Reading Road Weir Repairs** – Procurement is underway for repairs to the weir wall and replacement of handrails on the footbridge with a contractor about to be appointed. Works are expected to be completed by March 2022.
- **Hampshire Path Recovery Programme** The section of towpath between Ash Lock to Ash Embankment Railway Bridge was particularly badly worn during the Covid lockdowns. Part of the HCC Path Recovery fund are due to be spent on the repair of this section – but there have been difficulties obtaining an acceptable quotation from a contractor. Further plans for a section of towpath repairs near Norris Bridge that also suffered during Covid from increased use – this was to be repaired by staff, the BCA dredger and volunteers - but has been delayed by lack of availability of both staff and dredger.

Surrey Property matters

Café at the Canal Centre

Surrey County Council was disappointed negotiations hadn't been completed on the café at the Basingstoke Canal Centre when the tenant decided to close at the end of September. It has been supportive of all its tenants throughout lockdowns over the last 18 months and continues to remain open to discussion on how it can support local business. Council Officers are courteous and professional in their engagement and follow standard business practices in the industry. We are pleased that after further discussion and review the Council and the tenant were able to come to an agreement that worked for both parties.

SCC is obligated to maintain commercial confidentiality and cannot comment further on the details of individual cases.

Should you have any enquiries regarding this matter, please avoid emailing officers directly and contact the team using the following email address: property.estatesteam@surreycc.gov.uk

Appendix 1 – BCA staffing structures

Figure 1 - existing structure

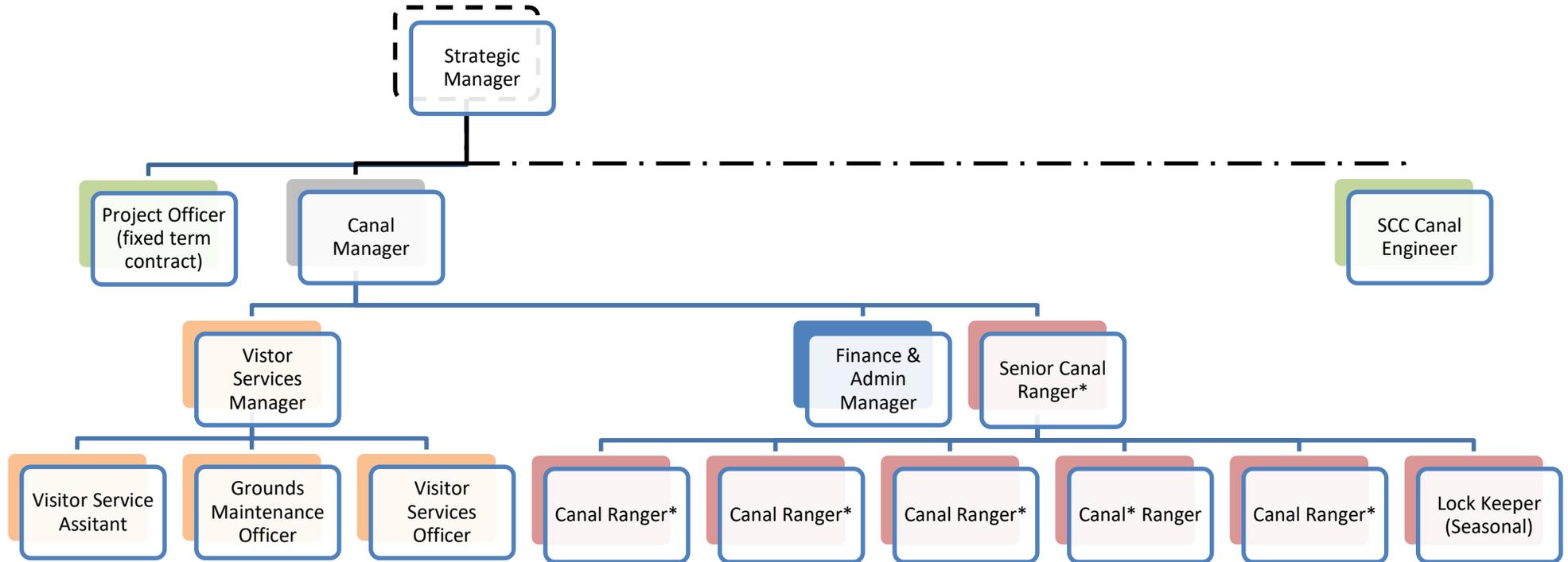
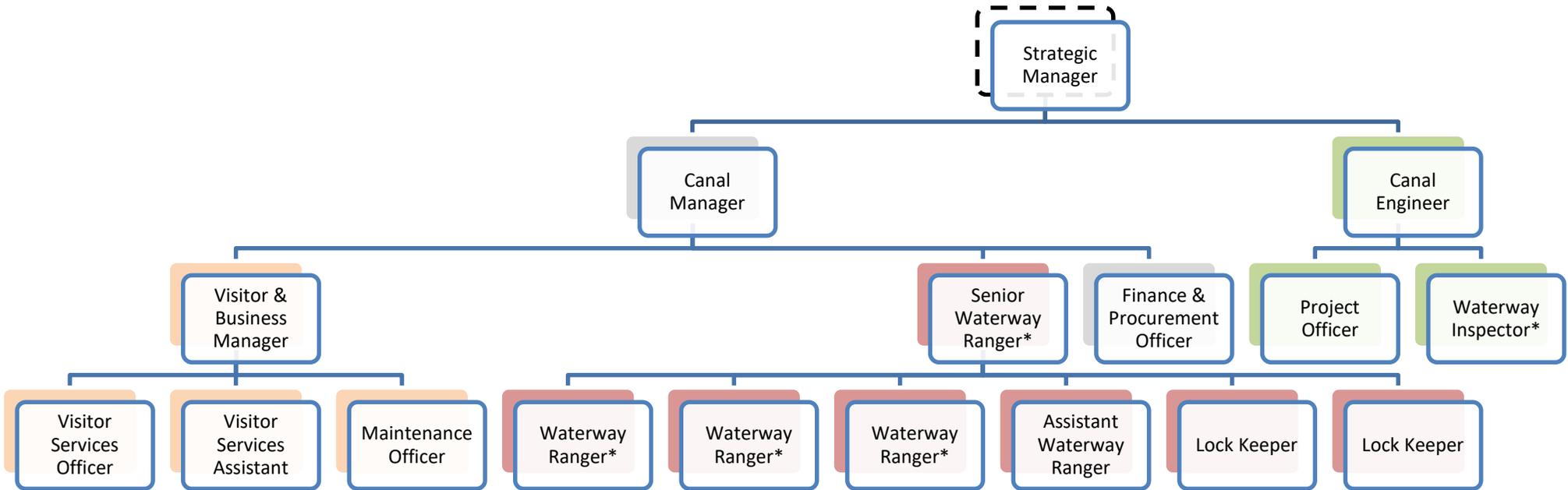


Figure 2 - proposed structure



* Denotes roles undertaking 24-hour duty cover

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