



BASINGSTOKE CANAL JOINT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Date: 3 November 2022

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Officers' recommendation

That the Committee resolves to Authorise the BCA Canal Manager and Strategic Manager to:

- Work with the BCS to implement this alternative bench policy and scheme of provision of benches for the Canal as an alternative to a memorial bench scheme.

Alteration to the planned memorial bench scheme

Key issue

To agree an alternative method of bench management on the Basingstoke Canal to be able to better manage the Canal's bench provision.

1. Background

The Canal has a variety of benches already in existence on the Canal, mostly situated alongside the rear of the towpath. The majority of these are memorial benches, as can be seen from the associated plaques on them.

The Basingstoke Canal Authority (BCA) has no record of who funded or in many cases who installed these benches. Neither is there any records of agreements for ongoing upkeep or maintenance; and as they are on canal land the responsibility has come to rest with the BCA and ultimately the Canal's owners. They are in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and designs and in varying condition.

Benches are provided along the Canal for the use of the public to allow them to rest and undertake quiet contemplation of this wonderful resource. It also enables people of lower mobility to be able to walk sections of the Canal with regular rest stops. Benches also help prevent wear and tear of structures that may be used for a seat but not specifically designed for this purpose. Despite the desirability of having benches, unfortunately, they are not a core asset or safety requirement and thus they are not currently able to be attributed funding from the BCA revenue budget.

The JMC agreed the outline design for benches on the Canal as part of its new branding guidelines in 2013. These guidelines have been implemented and as such the house style is gradually being changed along the Canal to a more appropriate, consistent and recognisable canal style.

2. Issues

Many of the existing benches are not in the most appropriate locations, some partly blocking access for maintenance or contributing to wear in sensitive areas of the site. To overcome this any new benches would need to be in agreed locations. A programme of mapping has already been conducted by the BCA to identify sites that will not cause undue damage (footfall and associated dog washes) to sensitive areas nor hinder maintenance or the need for emergency access to the Canal.

Removal and replacement of the existing benches to the new designs over time is likely to be quite emotive, and it may be found that the original donors/family members of the bench donors approach us at that time.

There are several other potential issues associated with continuing with a memorial bench scheme.

- People tend to be quite specific about where they would wish to have a bench relating to the person whose memorial the bench is for and their use of the Canal. This may not be able to be fulfilled.
- To create a house style there needs to be restricted choices for bench design (already agreed with JMC) however this may not be what a family want or what they can afford.
- There are only so many bench spots to offer and often people want the same key locations that are particularly scenic, and this could result in bare sections of canal with no facilities.
- Who pays for maintenance of the bench could be an issue and the timescale in which repairs are able to be made.
- The lifespan of a bench is limited and there are issues around how these are replaced and paid for. This will be an emotive subject for the original donors.
- The difficulties in meeting reasonable timescales for bench production may upset people due to BCA workload and procurement and canal logistics.
- Benches can become memorial areas with gifts, flowers and other objects regularly being left next to them that then become litter.

Some of these issues can be partially dealt with through having a robust policy in place from the start which is what had originally been planned and this could help cover the issues of;

- Set design choices
- Designated location options
- Initial charge and ongoing charges for maintenance fees
- Accurate record keeping and review
- System/set parameters for Plaque wording/size/design
- Restriction on use of bench/bench area for placing other objects in memorial

Hampshire County Council implemented a memorial bench scheme based on the BCA draft policy, which BCA then planned to follow with a few minor changes to tie up canal specific subtleties. However, BCA noted that it still didn't cover off other issues that are harder to solve.

Even with some of the above covered by the policy, there is still the risk at every stage to upset people, through for example, not being able to offer the design, or location they want even though they are paying for the bench. A bench in a rural area is unlikely to be able to be kept in an immaculate state of cleanliness and plaques and benches in urban areas are likely to get graffitied.

The scheme would be administratively heavy, to be able to liaise appropriately and timely with upset customers and keeping contact details up to date annually would be difficult when the visitor services team are already stretched in capacity.

BCA staff would potentially be continually telling people what they couldn't have and setting themselves up to fail to deliver the service that people might expect from such a scheme.

3. Proposal

To provide the opportunity to fund and install new benches in the agreed design and in appropriate locations through discontinuing the proposed memorial bench policy and using an alternative policy.

The main risk identified with the new policy is upsetting people who are on the current waiting list for benches. However, this could be overcome with a suitable letter to all explaining the new policy and how they can contribute to that instead. It is better to do this now than to start to implement it and then change part way through.

The main risk with sticking to the current policy is not being able to maintain the administration, timescales and quality of service for such a scheme with the BCA's current resources resulting potentially in the issues already discussed.

Not doing anything leaves us in limbo with a mix of existing old memorial benches, no finance or resources for new bench provision and the public ultimately lose out on the towpath through lack of provision. It has been discussed with Basingstoke Canal Society (BCS) that we could achieve the same outcome for the Canal in terms of new benches in the locations we want over time, while also reducing the emotive issues and administrative workload of a memorial bench scheme.

The Canal Society recently ran a successful campaign to create and install new interpretive signs on the Canal. By advertising their campaign for fundraising for a specific project they were able to obtain funds and work alongside BCA to implement the project.

The BCA propose to work alongside the BCS to deliver new benches in a similar way.

If this policy is approved, then the BCS will launch a campaign to fund new bench provision along the Canal. A pot of money would be fundraised for this provision which can then be spent on generic bench designs as already agreed at BCA's chosen appropriate locations. People who wish to donate memorial money to bench provision can do so through this on-going scheme, but no benches will be person specific or have plaques, thus reducing the level of 'ownership'.

This will remove many of the emotive issues around the scheme and allow the flexibility to install and maintain benches in line with our own timescales and resources.

Existing benches will either be repaired if appropriate and cost effective or removed as they reach the end of their life expectancy. The bench locations may or may not then receive a new bench over time.

The BCS have offered to help with installation of these benches and also with maintenance, of which some costs can be reimbursed from the scheme funds.

This is a good public engagement project that the BCS can help with and one which is appropriate for a fundraising campaign.

This scheme will not benefit the BCA financially, but it will allow;

- Improved management of the benches on the Canal, allowing ease of repair or replacement.
- Provide greater provision of benches for the public
- Continue to roll out the Canal branding with a house style of bench

- Remove the administrative burden of managing a memorial bench scheme that would not bring in any direct income
- Give the public a way to contribute towards a greater provision of benches on the Canal
- Remove the emotive issues for the public that could have the potential to cause misunderstanding or disappointment at a difficult time.

If approved, then the current proposed memorial bench scheme would be discontinued.

4. Consultation

- Canal Society - through discussion and approval by Committee
- Joint Advisory Group - by comment on draft paper – Officers were supportive of the proposal having experienced issues in their own boroughs with practical and emotive issues around provision of memorial benches.

5. Diversity and equalities

This will allow people of all incomes to contribute to benches on the Canal even if they can't afford to buy a full bench.

The Canal Society propose to openly thank (with their permission) all donators to the scheme in their regular newsletter publication and provide updates on new bench installation and locations.

Benches in themselves provide rest stops for the infirm which further enhances an already very accessible area for those who may be wheelchair users or simply unable to walk long distances without a break. It thus encourages people to walk further and thus also improve physical wellbeing.

Spending time walking or sitting by waterways is also well known to enhance mental wellbeing.

6. Crime and Disorder

There are considered to be no new crime and disorder implications for these changes.

The scheme will reduce potential memorial items randomly being left, with benches not being person specific.

7. Conclusion

The introduction of this scheme will provide an excellent joint working (BCA/BCS) on-going project for the Canal where the BCS can clearly contribute funding and reduce administrative burden and provide a facility for the public that the BCA may otherwise not be able to prioritise for funding.

Funding for benches could also be sought by BCS through other grant funding mechanisms as well as direct donations.

8. Next steps

The BCA and BCS will agree outline terms for the project and agree who will be delivering which aspects.

BCS will help BCA to find suppliers for the benches who can most closely meet the existing outline design and follow a formal tender process.

BCA and BCS will agree a timescale for the implementation of the project and pick some key spots for benches that can be targeted for the first round of fundraising, and subsequent bench purchase and installation.

The BCA will write to all people on the current waiting list for memorial benches and inform them of the new scheme and putting them in touch with the BCS if they should then wish to contribute to the new benches fund.

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