

Stroud Canal Strategy Comment

Summary

I am interested in the proposals and especially keen to understand any negative impact on the most highly sensitive sections of the canal from the point of view of wildlife (going towards the East from Brimscombe port) as a consequence of the various aims and objectives within the Canal Strategy.

I have particular concern about Phase 3 development (if I have grasped this correctly) to seek navigability in the eastern sections 9 & 10 of the canal (from Brimscombe onwards via Chalford and to the Upper Valley) as this would be detrimental to the way in which past neglect has been beneficial by allowing wildlife to flourish in the environs to the canal. This enhanced natural environment has provided the public with a most delightful and rich experience of walking in nature.

My interest in the canal stems most particularly from familiarity with the footpaths and natural surroundings in these Eastern sections, the sight of kingfishers, the presence of bats. And, if not a dirty word, the 'ambience' of past industrial heritage, old locks and degraded soggy banks essential to the breeding of insect-life.

I am not convinced by the claims such as in this extract (below) as there can be a fundamental contra-distinction between protecting and enhancing habitat for wildlife/biodiversity and any infrastructure (relating to development, whether the canal itself, its immediate surrounds and associated development/activities/housing/recreation and so on):

CONTINUITY: Nature:

- + the canal achieves its full potential as a continuous wildlife corridor
- + wildlife barriers are addressed and new development must have a fundamentally integrated approach to supporting nature

How will the Canal Strategy achieve that? Is this fine words? It is a good sound-bite for a grant application?

An example I have in mind is the Woodchester Valley development where clearly housing and associated infrastructure dominate and what appears to be "integrated with nature" is a highly engineered, highly developed infrastructure, parking lot and a spoil heap with potential for becoming a toboggan slope. This developed area, while justifiable in terms of housing need, has an inevitable consequence. The very good ecological report on this site at the time of planning decision making seems to have been sidelined?

We see displays of schemes for new towns and beautiful graphics of placemaking with idyllic trees, butterflies and family groups - only achievable in practice after old meadows and copses have been grubbed up or ancient brownfield now reclaimed by nature has been eradicated. I am not convinced we can successfully replace nature in this way.

My proposal

In view of legitimate concerns I propose an additional layer to the mapping of the canal - why not, given the existing plethora of symbols? This would be a graded 'sensitivity to biodiversity' layer special to the canal zone that would increase in degree of sensitivity towards the eastern section of the canal with the highest sensitivity in sections 8, 9 and 10 and indicating minimal intervention or development.

The term "fundamentally integrated approach to supporting nature" is not adequately evidenced according to actual locations and I don't trust it as a catch all. Surely there needs to be professional assessment of the ecology and biodiversity needs in such a grand scheme?

Before the Canal Strategy becomes an active SPD there should be such an assessment and a proper consultation with GWT.

Your symbols:

X Canopy linked. I agree this would benefit where there is a variety of appropriate species selected to match the assessed habitat needs of each area of planting and not “uniform” throughout.

Y Parts near Brimscombe that are lightly wooded already attract family picnickers. I don't think you need to over-provide with infrastructure other than ensure the physically less active have good access. The public realm should be less intrusive further east in the system.

X Hubs are fine but the further east needs to be less “catered for”. An immersive experience of nature can benefit considerably from a relatively unaltered environment.

AA Building for nature. Yes it is a good thing but it is not a substitute for letting nature do its own thing.

A and B Wayfinding/signposting. Hopefully this won't be too obtrusive and subtle at best.

MM I am very concerned that the eastern sections 8,9,10 which over time have slowly become reclaimed by nature will be spruced up, engineered to provide a functioning waterway once again. I hope this is not part of the vision.

NN only a genius could pull this off. A biodiverse private garden is such a space and it has to have “no-go” areas for people and dogs...and bikes etc. Pathways and seating areas, even in proximity to, should be apart from biodiverse hotspots.

H Active travel needs to be encouraged but bikes whizzing by don't mix with old people, buggies and folk walking dogs, so that needs to be managed very carefully and alternative links designed to allow for peaceful pedestrian thoroughfares.

I could go on...

Continuity/Clustering/Crossings - in specific answer to your questions

The emphasis on green infrastructure would have to include a high degree of sensitivity to biodiversity.

There is a potential conflict of purpose between this new strategy to develop and improve the canal infrastructure and facilities and the need to conserve existing and future biodiversity most especially in the upper reaches of the old canal. Protecting nature can include offering a rich experience to people but wouldn't this objective conflict with a fully developed and navigable canal system and all that it entails?

Clustering seems right for the more “urban” parts of the canal which, where it is near residential areas, lending itself to more open thoroughfares and parks for picnics, activities etc

Crossings could improve access to those who are physically less able or to families with buggies as long as cycle access is separated from pedestrian routes.

Qu 1-3

I understand the points about placemaking which make sense when there is a distinctive feature such as a canal route. The almost “algorithmic” approach using coding and phased development is a bit terrifying. Can we be assured that the usual safeguards will apply? That each development proposal, as it emerges, will be seen in its own terms and while it links in to the whole concept of the canal development, will be assessed using the safeguards in the Local Plan, particularly with regard to biodiversity and the effects of climate change.

I would have expected to see a full ecological assessment of the areas that should be set aside from development plans because of their significance for wildlife. I would have expected within all this coding to see a mapped gradation of areas of sensitivity with the highest sensitivity from Brimscombe up to Chalford and beyond. What is provided does not meet this requirement especially in respect of Phase 3?

Qu 4


I would be interested in any guidance from the GWT on these matters. I don't consider areas of greater sensitivity for wildlife suitable for the type of development that might be expected for a commercial area.

Role of SPD/Design guidance.

ES11 is a good well written policy. It is more respectful of the existing environment, heritage, setting and biodiversity than the design guidance directive which appears to override matters of sensitivity.

Qu 5

The Canals strategy requires some modification of the "vision" as applied to the upper reaches of the canal system beyond Brimscombe. The canal strategy does not seem to be informed by an ecological assessment nor a heritage/setting assessment of the area concerned.


Resident
27 May 2022