



**MEETING Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2023 2pm**

This was a hybrid meeting -in person at Wiltshire Council Offices Monkton Park Chippenham Committee Room D or online meeting via Microsoft Teams

Item	<u>Notes</u>	
<p><b>NN</b> <b>JL</b> <b>CG</b> <b>MH</b> <b>JMB</b> <b>PS</b> <b>JA</b> <b>DD</b> <b>MHo</b> <b>DM</b> <b>KO</b> <b>CS</b> <b>LW</b></p>	<p><b>Attending</b> Cllr Nabil Najjar Wiltshire Council (Chairman) John Laverick (President) Cllr Colin Goodhind Melksham TC Cllr Mark Harris Melksham Without PC Cllr Jane Milner-Barry Swindon BC Cllr Peter Smith Semington Parish Council John Allan Cotswold CC David Dewart Swindon BC Martin Hollis Wilts &amp; Berks Canal Trust Dick Millard Sustrans Ken Oliver Wiltshire Council (Partnership Officer) Chris Sims K&amp;A Canal Trust Luke Walker – Wessex Waterways Restoration Trust</p>	
<p>1</p>	<p><b>Apologies:</b> Mike Gibbin Wilts &amp; Berks Canal Trust, Cllr Duncan Enright Oxfordshire CC, Mark Evans Canal &amp; River Trust, Peter Scatchard WBCT, Cllr Graham Ellis Melksham TC, Cllr Chris Watts Swindon BC. Chris Clark Wiltshire Council. KO noted that Natural England had appointed Rachael Finch as their representative.</p>	
<p>2</p>	<p><b>Notes from the last meeting 4<sup>th</sup> March 2023</b> (pre-circulated) were agreed</p>	
<p>3</p>	<p><b>Chairman’s Announcements</b> The meeting was recorded for the purposes on note taking. <b>NN</b> Welcomed everyone and noted his recent very useful meeting with Mike Gibbin and Martin Hollis (WBCT) and said this would form the basis for further discussion. <b>NN</b> also welcomed Luke to the first meeting he has attended for WWRT. <b>NN</b> also wished to draw partnership members attention to the forthcoming Wiltshire Local Plan which will be discussed by Wiltshire Full Council on 18<sup>th</sup> July and if approved by full Council will go to public (Reg 19) consultation in the autumn. <b>NN</b> suggested this is an Agenda item for the next Partnership meeting. [ Post meeting note the papers for Full Council are downloadable <a href="#">here</a>. The proposed Canal Policy is shown at page 371]</p>	<p><b>NN</b></p>

	<p><b>JL</b> was concerned that there would not be enough time for members to comment as he had seen a current consultation that closed in July [Post meeting note: The current consultation is for the Wiltshire Design Guide closing on 30 July]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Partnership Deputy Chair</b></li> </ul> <p><b>NN</b> noted that this meeting had been rescheduled due to his unavailability for the original date. For the meeting taking place it depends on his availability to attend and therefore it would be worthwhile to consider appointing a deputy Chair. <b>JL</b> suggested that if there is a deputy this could be from another lead Council. <b>NN</b> said that would not be a problem and suggested that elected members of the Partnership are approached to see if one or more might be interested in taking on the role. <b>MHo</b> thought it is a very sensible suggestion. The more engagement we have from senior councillors the better. <b>LW</b> also supported the idea. <b>NN</b> said there seemed to be consensus on this issue and therefore he opened the opportunity with those elected members attending to volunteer for the role – please contact him directly- otherwise it would be circulated to all elected council members of the Partnership to try to recruit a deputy chair for ratification at the next meeting.</p>	
4	<p><b>Action Items – Partnership sub groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Towpath Challenge</b> <b>MHo</b> reported that an inaugural meeting was held in the last week of May which was well attended with representatives of all the Local Authorities. There was consensus of the aim of the project to open the towpath as much as is possible along the route of the canal, recognising the many difficulties in doing so. This would define the route of the canal to local residents as a leisure resource for walking and cycling. The conclusion of the group was that two things were needed to progress – a comprehensive map with land ownership and a traffic light system showing likely co-operation, and perhaps more crucially someone to lead the project. The next meeting of the group is on 13<sup>th</sup> July after which MH will send terms of reference and possible suggestion for a chair to NN. <b>KO</b> thought it was a very encouraging start and would gain further support from the Local Authorities who have Rights of Way as part of their responsibilities. <b>LW</b> suggested that it would be helpful in landowner discussions to be able to confirm how the path would be maintained. <b>KO</b> added that new members to the groups would be welcomed. <b>MHo</b> said that the group is keen that it needed to take action rather than just be a talking shop.</li> <li>• <b>Funding</b> <b>KO</b> noted that this group had not formally been set up . <b>MHo</b> said that the purpose of this group is not necessarily to directly raise funds but to gather evidence to produce a solid case for support to present to grant funders. It would seem sensible to park formation of this group until the New Year.</li> </ul>	
5	<p><b>WBCT Chief Exec</b> Mike Gibbin was unable to attend so <b>MHo</b> made the presentations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reorganisation and Strategy of WBCT-</b> a paper had been previously circulated to partners and was shown on screen at the meeting. <b>MHo</b> said that over the last six to nine months, there has been a substantial</li> </ul>	<b>MG</b>

increase in the desire for WBCT to move forward to actually gear to deliver the project. Over the last, 10 or more years there have been a small number of major projects and a lot of routine maintenance.

We started crystalizing that if we don't get going into large projects then rather than 20 or 30 years, it's going to be another 200 or even 300 years before this canal has any hope of being completed. There's a hunger within WBCT to actually get moving.

One of the huge pieces of value that Mike brought when he joined us at the beginning of this year was to start putting together a case for support.

As a charity, we're going to be asking for millions of pounds of support- tens-hundreds of millions of pounds of support in total.

The obvious question is why should funders invest in the project.

We've already identified from other sources and existing restoration projects there are very tangible benefits when the canal is complete. These sources include the Kennet and Avon canal, research done by Canal and River Trust and other pieces of work by Simey Jacobs.

There will be an estimated £50 million per annum economic benefit once the Wilts & Berks canal is restored and a further £150 million of wellbeing benefit, - it's a softer measure, and much more difficult to define in a meaningful way, but that includes, for example the saving to the NHS so there are substantial sums of benefit.

If the total investment required is around £400 million we believe we have evidence that shows potentially £200 million per annum benefit- this clearly is a payback over two years.

It's not that simplistic, but the point is that if we have clear evidence that we can break it down into a granular level, so someone who really wants to explore the detail there is credible evidence then it suddenly becomes possible to go and talk to the major grant funders.

This is something that WBCT has never done before (to my knowledge)- i.e. starting from a blank sheet of paper and asking the question 'Why bother?'

Mike came on board in January this year and I became the Chair in October of last year.

We very quickly concluded between us that the previous structure wasn't working. We had an executive of more than 25 people all reporting into the chief executive,-totally unmanageable.

Decisions really were not properly and professionally made in our opinion.

Decisions always seemed to go to trustees, but trustees didn't have the professional canal restoration or engineering expertise.

We have now set up the Board of Directors -typically 7-8 people with professional expertise, engineers, project managers ,Construction, Health and Safety & Marketing. These people with professional expertise in those areas and they are charged with the day-to-day decision making and the running of the Trust.

Trustees have three areas of responsibility:-

- Overarching strategy.
- Governance, which includes financial control and Charity Commission,
- Most importantly, health and safety and risk management

The Trustees also liaise with external national bodies.

Effectively, WBCT Board of Directors has responsibility for 230 active volunteers across 5 branches making sure that policies and procedures are actually followed.

So we have streamlined, we've made it clearer who does what and we've made the decision making structure simpler.

Mike has devised a phased strategy to go from 7 kilometres in water now to our fully restored 100 kilometres .

We will have to do that in phases as shown starting simply at phase one, - This aim is to have enough funds in to run the Trust! This is approximately £100,000 pa to simply to run without any major projects -just some studies, equipment, etc.

Phase 2 is the next step where we're wanting to progress to in 2024 and includes work to commission specific impact studies, for example £30,000 with Simetrica Jacobs, that will give us a an economic benefit broken down by Council area so we be able to show what benefit will be given within each Local Authority area.

Phase two will also expand branch projects -there are already 20, but specific projects that we're wanting to tackle for next year are important because public and community awareness is what will drive future interest. We want to expand our community engagement significantly next year. It is also very important as it's a mandated requirement for the National Lottery Heritage Fund i.e. Community engagement-getting more and different people involved in heritage.

Once this is up and running the next phase will then need to start and go to source millions of pounds. For example, we need the best part of £1,000,000 for a detailed design and planning to go under the M4.- later on similarly the A 34.

Phase three is where we really start getting going with gathering momentum before we go into phase four and we're talking £20 million per annum of external funding.

To get us past and through phase two there are two things that we need Councils all along the route to help us with-

One is letters of support from Leaders and Chief Executives basically saying that the Local Authority understand what the project is wanting to achieve and is supportive because of the accrued benefit both economic and wellbeing . This would count for a lot when speaking with Grant Funders.

Maybe at this point we should hear from John Allan about how important the support of Stroud DC has been to the Cotswold Canals

**JA** I think there are probably three things that spring to mind:

The first is that if you're likely to go down the Heritage Lottery route as your principal funder to act as the door that opens other funders to come to the project, which is certainly our experience, you will need to identify who will be the lead organisation of the project and the funder of last resort.

As I commented previously if the project requires additional funding to what can be delivered by NLHF, as ours did then when British Waterways withdrew from the project, the only viable solution was Stroud District Council, because Cotswold Canal Trust was not a credibly large enough, well-funded, organisation to take that role in the eyes of the NLHF and I think they were absolutely right.

So I think step one is you need one of the riparian councils(or the biggest one) to be prepared to step up and be the lead in the eyes of the NLHF.

That's, I think in addition, to my second point of getting the senior leaders that you spoke about, and I think both elected and employed like in the chief executive position, to demonstrate their support by whatever means. I'm not sure we've ever actually got them to do that in writing-despite years of trying!- but that leads to my Third Point which has proved to be quite helpful for us, which in the case of Cotswold District Council there are a couple of valuable and not particularly large sections in their Local Plan which talks about the importance of when planning considerations are made that decisions aren't made which result in destruction or damage to the route of the canal, or activities which might lead to subsequent restoration being made more difficult and being able to refer to that. Having this written down in the 20 or the 30-year Local Plan is actually very powerful in a world where the chief executive and the elected roles do change over time.

**MHo** said one of the big observations and I think my biggest frustration about this canal partnership, is we meet every three months for an hour and a half and very little action appears to happen or support appears to happen in the meanwhile. There's a lot of lobbying and meetings to try to make that happen but from a big picture very little actually appears to happen. **JL** agreed. **MHo** continued so the first thing that we really need is letters of support and Mike and team are pulling the concept together- a briefing that can be sent around and talking with Nabil recently it should be possible to get those sent out with a template letter.

The second thing is, and I am going to put this straight, The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust is running out of money. We currently have £60,000 free cash with quarter of a million of restricted funds sitting there. So far this year we have been totally unsuccessful in raising core funds particularly for cost-of-living reasons as grant funders have been diverting their funding elsewhere. We have basically until the end of this year before we start breaching what trustees of defined as minimum balances, at which point we would need to be essentially winding activity down to very little indeed.

So the simple message is we do now need to know if there is financial support from the Councils along the line, and we need to ask for a commitment for funding, not just a one off, but to help us underpin moving forward annually.

The kind of sums that we are looking at, and we believe is realistic, is to request £50,000 per Council, leaving the majority of work of fundraising in our court.

Moving on to the third, these are the kind of things that we want to be doing next year.

- Community engagement. - school liaison in particular.
- We have a really good chief marketing officer who is looking at our marketing comms.
- The economic impact study by Simetrica Jacobs costing £32,000.
- The biodiversity baseline -A fundamental benefit of what we're doing is biodiversity net gain but we need to define the baseline so we will know in five years, what we've actually gained. It is essential information for all stakeholders.
- Heritage landscape We have already started looking back in time at what we've got on (or very close to) the canal.
- The Towpath challenge, we've already talked about.

- 20 volunteer led projects. An average of four for each of our five branches.
- Two or three major project pre studies. For example, the M4 crossing that we were so close to National Highways agreeing as part of their funding but they turned us down because they said we could not prove enough biodiversity gain.

**JM-B** asked which tunnel was being referred to – the already constructed road tunnel?

**MHo** replied that this is a new culvert for the canal only – the opportunity to co- site the canal and road was sadly lost many years ago.

**KO** added that another reason that NH may have rejected the request for funding for the stand-alone culvert may be that while the cost of the culvert construction might be in the order of £3-5m the cost of traffic management (lane diversions) could double or triple the cost.

**JM-B** asked if the project was therefore on hold at the moment. **MHo** said that the Trust thinks this so strategically important that it is seeking external funding.

- The last item on the presentation is a CAD route study ready to plug into the Local Plan process.

**NN** thanked Martin for a thorough and comprehensive presentation and invited Cllr colleagues to comment firstly because he thought a lot of your immediate asks would fall on us and then he would give his perspective from the Wiltshire side,

**JL** said he was not a councillor but wanted to make a couple of observations. Martin mentioned that the ‘Why bother’ public community benefit issues that you're projecting is probably the first time that's being done. I'd just like to say that that public benefit projection was made eleven years ago as part of the Trust bid for the Queen's Award for voluntary service. **MHo** said that it had not crossed his radar and that it has been buried since then and that he had not been briefed on it. **JL** said the other observation is the £150 million well-being that was mentioned on the first page of your paper is a significant amount of money. The Wiltshire Local Plan, which Nabil referred to at the beginning, which has just been online- the draught plan-makes a big issue of public wellbeing but it doesn't mention the canal as far as I can see so those two loose ends certainly need to be tied together. **MHo** said that he imagined that in Stroud in the Stroud plan, there will be rather more than a mention of their canal.

**LW** said that he could speak for the Lichfield Local Plan where from chapter one the canal benefits are right in front of you. **JL** said that he thought the Wiltshire Plan does not have such strong recognition and was again concerned about timings for responses to the consultation and allowing enough time for discussion at the September meeting.

*[Post meeting note the draft Local Plan goes to full Council for approval on 18 July. If approved the Regulation 19 consultation will follow in Aug/Sept] The draft Plan is downloadable as part of the Public pack [here](#). The Canal Policy is at page 371]*

**MH** said that he read the Melksham section of the draught Local Plan and the route of the new alignment of the Wilts & Berks Canal is protected. But the original route a lot of which has disappeared, is not protected. It is mentioned in the Local Plan. You might just have to drill down through all the different sections to find that information for the particular section or town.

	<p><b>NN</b> said that he did not want this to get derailed into a discussion about the Local Plan itself. It is a living document. It hasn't even been laid before full Council yet and won't be for another week so there will be plenty of opportunity to comment.</p> <p><b>NN</b> wanted to pick up a few of the points made during the presentation. Firstly, on letters of support, I think that's something which we can address fairly quickly. If you have a draft that you're ready, I'll be very happy to share that with councillors and discuss it with them. I think the request for £50,000 of funding per authority, I don't speak for my colleagues, but from a Wiltshire perspective it will be very difficult-certainly this financial year-given the cost pressures we've had as a result of inflation and the reduced Government grants to Local Authorities you have all heard a million times. We're having to make some very difficult funding decisions and we've been able to retain the levels of funding we currently provide and the and the hosting function for the Partnership, but I don't want to get anybody's hopes up about additional money coming soon. The other thing is we do have annual budgets which are agreed in April and that's a budget we have to adhere to until at least next April .</p> <p>I expect that's going to be similar for some of my colleagues.</p> <p><b>JM-B</b> I can't speak for the Cabinet, but I would have thought it's a big ask given the awful financial situation which we've just inherited.</p> <p>If you could send me the draft of the letter of support for funding and explanation of what you want, I can present that to Cabinet Member Cllr Chris Watts and the new interim CEO.</p> <p><b>NN</b> said there while Wiltshire Council may not be able to provide central funding WBCT can certainly apply to area boards for funding if you have work going on in their areas. I chair the area board in SW Wiltshire, and we funded the Cranborne Chase AONB for example.</p> <p>For relevant projects I think you can bid for up to three a year for up to £5000 so in theory there's £15,000 that you can unlock for projects by bidding. I am very happy to support appropriate bids.</p> <p><b>MHo</b> said that this is not an area that is currently being pursued and it is always a fundraising dilemma to know whether to chase a large number of small bids or concentrate on single larger bids.</p> <p><b>NN</b> said that it would be helpful for him to enable obtaining the letters of support if WBCT could supply a template and explanation of what it was going to be used for.</p> <p><b>CS</b> suggested also approaching the Parish Councils for smaller sums of money.</p> <p><b>KO</b> noted for clarity that Area Boards will only fund capital projects not revenue.</p>	
6	<p><b>Partnership Officer Report-</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Melksham Link- planning application- update</b> <b>KO</b> reported that the planning case officer Kenny Green is still in the process of consolidating the EA and Wiltshire Council ecology responses to the brief sent to consultants. The aim is to agree the terms of reference for further mitigation work proposals. The project manager and I are meeting with the WC ecologist and Kenny on 17<sup>th</sup> July. <b>KO</b> also noted some progress with the hydro scheme in partnership with the Town Council . Following the feasibility study the group is now considering the best way to take things forward particularly trying to ascertain the EA's attitude to the flood gate and weir in the long term. <b>CG</b> noted that the proposed hydro scheme had much local support</li> </ul>	

	and added impetus to the Melksham Link canal scheme. Paul Lenaerts project manager and he are attending the WC Flood group on 27 July and hope to make some progress in the meanwhile in having discussions with EA about the future use of the flood gate after the Cooper Tires site closes.	
7	<p><b>Projects update –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Swindon Wichelstowe</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Canalside KO</b> said that the main issue still remains the blockage of the canal by the landowner. There was a brief discussion about the issues and KO agreed to brief Cllr Milner- Barry further outside the meeting. WBCT have now been able to extend the short boat trips by creating a turning point at the southern end of the canal.</li> <li>▪ <b>East Wichel- canal leak KO</b> said that work was now nearing conclusion to identify and fix the remaining leaks where the canal bed joins some of the structures.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Mouldon Hill KO</b> noted that the canal restoration at Mouldon Hill is a longstanding project and that previous restoration work had been undone as the section does not retain water at full depth and has re-wilded over a number of years. <b>KO</b> had approached <b>DD</b> a few months ago to start discussion on how some existing S106 funds for the Country Park might be used to complete the canal restoration works (The section is over a mile long and includes one lock) <b>DD</b> said that Mouldon Hill was one of the newer Country Parks in Swindon and the Borough wished to take an integrated approach to creating more biodiversity and include both the River Ray and the Canal as significant features. The approach will be to work with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and WBCT on an inclusive scheme to enhance the Park. To deliver this scheme Swindon BC will be appointing a project manager to work with partners to produce an integrated approach. <b>KO</b> noted that having recently walked around the park there are going to be significant environmental issues to mitigate to bring the canal back into use, however this initiative is to be welcomed as the operational canal should be a significant feature of the park.</p> <p><b>JM-B</b> asked if there is a projected date for two sections of canal (E Wichel/Canalside) to be joined together. <b>KO</b> said that date has yet to be determined but it will be done in phases. The next work should start either in the autumn or early next year to extend the E Wichel canal westwards to Mill Lane. Further phases will include the required culvert under Mill Lane, and then extension to the new junction – also a new road bridge is required south of Canalside and restoration of the canal bed south to the new junction.</p>	
8	<p><b>Partners Reports and Issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cotswold Canals –JA</b> said there are no significant updates since the last meeting. Progress on Phase 1b is dictated by the speed that planning and flood modelling issues can be resolved.</li> <li>• <b>Wessex Waterways Restoration Trust LW</b> said his organisation is pleased to be part of the Partnership. He would talk to KO offline about logging volunteer hours.</li> </ul> <p><b>CS</b> noted the general downturn in business this year on the K&amp;A Canal .</p>	
9	<p><b>Date and time and location of next meeting:</b>  <b>Proposal for one annual meeting to be in person only &amp; all others to be online:</b></p>	



<p>There was debate about a number of further proposals. It was <b>agreed</b> by majority vote that one meeting a year (June) would be in person – the venue of this meeting to be rotated in the three Local Authority areas. The other meetings to be hybrid (located at Chippenham) Next meeting 2pm Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023 2pm – hybrid at Chippenham Further dates 2023: 7<sup>th</sup> December</p>	
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