



**MEETING Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023 2pm**  
**Online via Teams**

Item	<u>Notes</u>
<b>NN</b> Cllr Nabil Najjar Wiltshire Council (Chairman) <b>JL</b> John Laverick (President) <b>GE</b> Cllr Graham Ellis Melksham Town Council <b>JG</b> Cllr Jim Grant Swindon BC (for part of meeting) <b>MH</b> Cllr Mark Harris Melksham Without PC <b>JR</b> Cllr Judy Roberts Oxfordshire CC <b>MS</b> Cllr Marina Strinkovsky Swindon BC (for part of meeting) <b>JA</b> John Allan Cotswold Canals Trust <b>CG</b> Colin Goodhind Melksham Hydro <b>PH</b> Paul Harris Oxfordshire CC <b>RH</b> Rod Hacker Wilts & Berks Canal Trust <b>MHo</b> Martin Holliss Wilts & Berks Canal Trust <b>GP</b> Graham Puddephatt K&A Canal Trust <b>PS</b> Peter Scatchard Wilts & Berks Canal Trust <b>DM</b> Dick Millard Sustrans <b>KO</b> Ken Oliver Wiltshire Council (Partnership Officer) <b>LW</b> Luke Walker – Wessex Waterways Restoration Trust	
<b>1</b>	<b>Apologies:</b> Gavin Champion Cooper Tires; Mike Gibbin WBCT; William Scott Semington PC; Chris Clark Wiltshire Council
<b>2</b>	<b>Notes from the last meeting 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023</b> (pre-circulated) were agreed
<b>3</b>	<b>Chairman’s Announcements</b> <b>NN</b> noted that the monthly update meetings with Canals Officer have been continuing to progress matters between meetings.
<b>4</b>	<b>Action Items –</b> <b>Partnership Deputy Chair- NN</b> asked again if other Councillors would please consider whether they might consider taking on the role as deputy Chair particularly to support the work of the group and to cover for occasional absences of the Chairman at meetings etc. Please contact NN directly if you might consider the role. <b>Towpath Challenge sub group report back- KO</b> said that the group was due to meet again the following week on Dec 13 <sup>th</sup> . The concept of the Towpath Challenge seems to be getting quite a bit of traction with those who are not directly involved in the canal restoration. Recently there had been discussions with Wiltshire Council Transport planners with the aim of getting the project included in the Local Cycling & Walking Improvement Plan (LCWIP). The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust has recently appointed Abi

	<p>Oluwande to lead on the Towpath Challenge and she is currently starting to familiarise herself with the project – hopefully this will revive the impetus of the project to move things forward in the same way that the original project manager had managed to do some time ago. Abi is a keen towpath walker on the K&amp;A Canal and would like to be able to inspire and deliver further progress to the Towpath Challenge.</p> <p><b>Funding-Group-</b>Setting up of the group is deferred to 2024. <b>KO</b> noted that the aim of the group will be identify the sort of funding that would be possibly helpful to the project. An example of this is the DeFRA Rural England Prosperity Fund. Most of this type of funds have defined application windows and therefore knowing about them in good time is essential.</p> <p><b>Letter of Support from Local Authorities</b> <b>NN</b> said that a draft is currently the legal team for checking. <b>NN</b> suggested that the draft is sent by WBCT to the new representatives from Oxfordshire CC and Swindon BC for consideration. <b>MHo</b> said that the aim was to continue building the case for support for the project. <b>PS</b> asked to be included in the circulation. <b>JG</b> asked that if the letter is sent to him and Cllr Strinkovsky, could further background information also be sent as they were both new to the project. <b>JG</b> noted that he would appreciate as much information as possible as the canal restoration was ‘hard to sell’ in Swindon.</p>	
5	<p><b>Proposed Partnership changes to MoU and revised Strategy</b> (pre-circulated)- <b>KO</b> said that the Strategy document had last been revised in 2019. The revision was to consolidate in the document the change in emphasis for the priority of the Towpath Challenge, to remove details of the Masterplan projects (which are now being dealt with directly by WBCT) and to generally update projected timescales and costs. The revision of the MoU was to more closely reflect how the Partnership operates. <b>MHo</b> noted that the Cotswold Canals Partnership had very active support from Stroud DC and hoped that with four major Local Authorities along the line of the Wilts &amp; Berks a similar active support could be encouraged. <b>KO</b> noted that the support of LA’s is more easily gathered when external funds for restoration are in place. The ‘attractiveness’ of the restoration is certainly enhanced when major projects are actually being delivered and it is fair to say that there is active support for projects like the Melksham Link <b>JL</b> agreed that the HLF funding for the K&amp;A restoration was a major factor but that partnership had been built on an existing strong foundation of Local Authority support prior to funding being received. <b>CG</b> said he was disappointed to learn that the canal restoration in Swindon was a hard sell and wondered if there was anything that could be done to help. <b>JA</b> said that the Stroud DC had stepped in to support the project when British Waterways withdrew. The arrival of the funding was at the same time, but beforehand Stroud DC had been actively involved not least because the canal is located in the centre of the town- the situation is circular in the interest attracts the money and vice-versa.</p> <p><i>[ At this point connection was temporarily lost with NN- KO temporarily took over the role of chairing]</i></p> <p><b>MS</b> said that to sell the canal in Swindon required outreach and information. Interaction with those in the town was primarily via the boating activity of Dragonfly in Wichelstowe. While this was a positive experience, the town centre required much more outreach from the Canal Trust, not so much to identify the value of restoration, but to explain the theory of change so the community can envisage the digging up of the town centre to recreate the</p>	KO

	<p>canal, and what that means in terms of disruption and loss of what is already there (which has an intrinsic value to residents). Using the shop might be one of the ways to help explain the journey to get from the current situation to the finished scheme to create somewhere like the setting of the Oracle in Reading – why is it realistic – why should the investment be made- why will it succeed. The local scepticism in Swindon is all about the answers (some of which may not be possible) around these perceived issues – residents need to see a clear roadmap from A to B. <b>KO</b> noted that there were many examples (Liverpool for instance) where major works had restored or created new canals and perhaps these could be used as examples. <b>MHo</b> said that perhaps first the attention should be focussed on less contentious sections where short term restoration/construction is more easily achievable. <b>MS</b> agreed that demonstration of the advantages and benefits of the canal to the local community in sections where there is less disruption would be a stepping stone to tackling the more difficult areas. <b>KO</b> said that perhaps the first ‘difficult’ section to be considered should be the extension of the canal from Kingshill to Wharf Green where the line is obvious (although still technically challenging).</p> <p><b>KO</b> said that he was seeking approval of the document revisions but if members required more time, then this could be done at the next meeting. <b>MHo</b> said that the two key issues for moving the project on were land and funding and it would be good to see some proposals for dealing with these potential problems. The meeting <b>agreed</b> to defer the approval until the March meeting.</p>	
6	<p><b>WBCT update</b> <b>MHo</b> said WBCT has now agreed the six objectives for 2024 and these will be circulated in a separate document with these notes. <b>MHo</b> then said that the main potential issue for WBCT is that it is now certain that the Trust will be prosecuted for a breach of the Health &amp; Safety at Work regulations following the fatality on site in August 2016. In the event of a fine, this will impose a severe financial strain on the Trust. The conclusion of the aftermath of this tragic event will however allow WBCT to move on and engage with funders in a way that has not been possible for seven years.</p> <p><b>MHo</b> said that WBCT was currently the only other member of the Partnership that funds the project officer post (with the exception of Wiltshire Council) .WBCT while remaining fully committed to supporting the officer post would like to urge other members to consider whether they might be able to financially contribute.</p> <p><b>Wiltshire Local Plan consultation – summary of WBCT responses.</b> <b>RH</b> said that the WBCT response had been made in two parts - firstly to comment on the issues raised by Wiltshire Council in the consultation documentation and secondly to submit a detailed land-take requirement for the restoration of the canal.</p> <p>The aim of the response has been to try to bring some coherence to other policies in the document to the aims of Policy 94 (Canals) and also to align with the policies set out by Swindon BC and the Vale of the White Horse DC in their Local Plans.</p> <p>The response also suggested that canal restoration might be relevant to other Policies in the Local Plan (sustainable transport- wellbeing etc) In general WBCT supports the positive changes that are outlined in Policy 94, particularly to support the restoration as well as safeguard the route.</p>	RH

	<p>However one particular issue is causing WBCT anxiety in the requirement of an environmental impact assessment for the whole canal to be part of any individual standalone restoration planning application. <b>MHo</b> said that while they fully supported environmental assessment of any plans, this requirement is in the view of WBCT not proportionate and is over burdensome. <b>KO</b> noted that he had sought out the experience of other restorations and it seems that there is considerable variability in the requirements of other Local Authority planners. <b>RH</b> added that WBCT had also commented on what appeared to be onerous requirements for Blue/Green infrastructure audits. <b>JR</b> noted that the joint South &amp; Vale Local Plan was out for consultation at shortly. <b>RH</b> said that work had already been done with VWHDC spatial planners who had already removed the EIA requirement (suggested modification by Oxfordshire CC).</p>	
7	<p><b>Partnership Officer Report- Melksham Link- planning application- update.</b> <b>KO</b> reported that following some S106 funding a contract had been placed with consultants to prepare a report on the proposed river scheme particularly looking at habitat and Biodiversity Net Gain issues. When the report is completed, it will be submitted as a further planning document together with other updates and will go once again to public consultation.</p> <p><b>Melksham Hydro Scheme CG</b> noted that a project meeting is scheduled for the New Year and that he was pleased that there was some interest in the scheme from Wiltshire Councillors.</p>	
8	<p><b>Projects update – Swindon Wichelstowe Canalside</b> <b>KO</b> said that the project team are still waiting for planning consent for the next section of canal and hope to start work in spring 2024.</p> <p><b>East Wichel-KO</b> said that work on the canal leak has had to be paused due to high levels of rainfall.</p> <p><b>Landowner issue Westleaze</b> <b>KO</b> reported that the blockade is still in place and the matter is being dealt with by Swindon BC Property/Legal team. <b>MHo</b> said he would follow up the matter with the local WBCT team.</p> <p><b>Repairs Rushey Platt –</b> funding is in place from Swindon BC and subject to environmental issues WBCT volunteers should commence the work early in 2024.</p> <p><b>Mouldon Hill-</b> no further progress to report.</p>	
9	<p><b>Partners Reports and Issues</b></p> <p><b>Cotswold Canals –JA</b> said he noted that from a funding perspective the two bookshops run by CCT had raised in the order of £100k last year and perhaps as importantly, were a way of engaging with the local community, and wondered if this is an idea to deal with the ‘challenges’ in Swindon.<b>MS</b> said that her impression of the shop in Swindon ( based on a visit) was that there was room for improvement in its ambassadorial role and she would be happy help with this process. <b>JA</b> said that in terms of promotion of the project, the new visitor centre (run jointly with Cotswold Lakes Trust ) had over 5000 visitors in its first year of operation (open part time). <b>JA</b> said that they hoped to get planning consent for Phase 1b in February 2024, but the biggest challenge particularly with continuing delays is construction cost escalation. The original estimation had risen by 20% which posed a serious funding challenge.</p>	<p><b>JA</b> <b>LW</b></p>

	<p><b>Wessex Waterways Restoration Trust LW</b> thanked Wiltshire Council for facilitating a meeting with WBCT in October. Although he had not had an opportunity to progress the issues discussed, a meeting had been set up between WWRT Vice – Chair ( joint owner of a section of the canal at Dauntsey) and WBCT (MHo). The WWRT volunteers continue to maintain this section. <b>MHo</b> said that the two meetings referred to were both difficult and forthright and wondered if there had been any updates following the subsequent email exchanges <b>LW</b> said that as this was a landowner issue then he was not in a position to comment. <b>MHo</b> said that he would like some further clarity about whether WWRT had written to the Charity Commission to challenge WBCT’s policy on restoration. <b>LW</b> said that he is seeking a view on the divergence of policy between WBCT and WWRT on the issue security of tenure for restoration projects where charitable funds are being used.</p> <p><i>[At this point connection was restored with NN]</i></p> <p><b>NN</b> apologised for the technical issues in connection and asked if there were any further items for discussion</p>	
<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>Date and time and location of next meeting:</b>  Next meeting 2pm Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024 2pm Hybrid/ Monkton Park Chippenham  Proposed dates 2024 - 6<sup>th</sup>June – Proposed in person - provisionally Swindon BC offered to host this meeting .  -5<sup>th</sup> September- 5<sup>th</sup> December</p>	