

11. Langport – Access to the River and Upper Parrett Waterway Plan (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To seek councillors' approval for a financial contribution towards feasibility costs for the Upper Parrett Waterway Plan and progress of recreational access to and near the river Parrett at Langport, in association with the Langport River Group, and the Environment Agency.

Public Interest

There is strong local support in the Langport area to promote greater use of the river Parrett, for its recreation, health and economic benefits to residents and the local economy.

The area is a very important one as an internationally protected wetland, and so any plans to create more use of the river as it flows through the levels and moors must be carefully planned and managed.

This report is to request financial support from SSDC to help make further progress with this challenging ambition.

Recommendation

Approve the allocation of £5000 towards feasibility costs for the Upper Parrett Waterway Plan and progress of recreational access to and near the river Parrett at Langport from the Area North Capital programme – Langport Vision allocation. The allocation to be delegated to the Area Development Manager under SSDC financial procedures, in consultation with the ward member and Area Chairman.

Background

The Langport Vision and Action Plan (2002), and subsequent local consultation and research identified improving access to and use of the River Parrett in the Langport area, as a high priority for long-term investment.

Strong links are made between local economic and environment benefits, together with the opportunities for activity and participation on and near to the river network.

Whilst various studies have been completed, and much analysis of the issues has taken place, producing an excellent source of evidence - the progress of recent years has not kept pace with local expectations.

This report is a request for feasibility fees to support a programme of work to produce a local action plan to secure greater public access to and use of the River Parrett, and contribute to a draft Upper Parrett Waterway Plan, in conjunction with the Environment Agency.

Previous achievements and progress towards increased use of the River Parrett.

Langport River Group was formed in 2002 and includes a range of local organisations and representatives with an interest in the river and its benefits. In 2004 the River Group commissioned the Langport River Corridor Study, which established a clear framework of opportunities and constraints upon developing the use of the river.

Between 2005 and the present day Langport has played host to two successful River Festivals, and the Environment Agency has constructed a slipway near Black Bridge. The EA has from time to time provided permissive access for boat trials and of course the River Festivals. This has provided a good level of understanding of the issues faced to secure greater and more frequent use.

During 2006 a partnership was formed which created the “Waterlinks” programme – a potential £50 million award from the Big Lottery for a series of linked projects programme stretching across the Levels and Moors– all under the theme of ‘making more of water’. During this time several small pieces of technical assessments, local consultations and design work around the river area in Langport was completed using feasibility funding from the Big Lottery. Studies included a canoe study of the Parrett and tributaries starting from Langport, consultation with a range of residents and community groups including riparian landowners from Langport to Thorney, and a technical assessment of various locations to aid use of the river for boating and canoeing.

Boat trials have always been successful events, and draw much local interest. Trials to date have included electric trip boats, and a ‘wheelie boat’ – designed to carry a small number of foot passengers and one person in a wheelchair.

In 2008 the South West branch of the Environment Agency published their strategy – ‘Enjoying Water’ which promotes the EA role to facilitate greater public use of the waterways (however without a statutory role to require this).

In 2009, SSDC and the Somerset Waterways Development Trust prepared a report “Langport River Navigation”, which researched the position on public navigation rights, considered potential models to establish and manage access onto the water, and conducted stakeholder consultation.

In 2010 there is currently a Government consultation to seek views on policy relating to the promoting and facilitating use of waterways.

The Scout Assistant County Commissioner (Activities) has been in consultation with local anglers and has agreed a position for the new canoe steps to be set into the bank (near the Cocklemoor footbridge), they are currently waiting for the river level to drop before installing the steps. A new manager has also been appointed for the Langport Scout Canoeing Centre.

The Somerset Waterways Development Trust, using funding from the Big Lottery is about to take ownership of a trip boat, and have offered to provide some trial visits to Langport later this summer. There are also plans to establish a Langport based community trip boat, which is currently developing its own business plan.

Langport river access and Upper Parrett Waterway Plan

The goal of the 'Langport river access and Upper Parrett Waterway Plan' project is to promote and secure increased access to the river Parrett at Langport, and at other points along the Upper Parrett and tributaries, for boating and informal recreation (not commercial navigation).

As well as the community benefits for health and activity, a potential scheme will aim to promote local economic vitality for Langport and the surrounding area, through promoting increased sustainable tourism to the area (residents and visitors).

Due to the high degree of environmental protection of the Somerset levels and moors here is a very strong focus on the sustainability of the project for the longer term.

There is strong local support for the use of solar or electric boats, in addition to canoes. A community owned electric boat has been designed and purchased by the Somerset Waterways Development Trust, who intends to trial the use of the boat on the Parrett this summer.

The Environment Agency, whilst stressing that its role is for flood defence, has an objective to assist with the development of public access to and use of the waterways.

Natural England will wish to ensure that the areas of wetland, with designated European protection are largely unaffected by an increase in use of the river.

Project feasibility

Further feasibility work was recommended by the Langport Navigation report (2009) referred to above, which was subjected to wide stakeholder consultation including the Environment Agency, town and parish councils, ward and county councillors and Natural England. The report was made publicly available, and can be viewed – together with the results of the consultation on the SSDC website: www.southsomerset.gov.uk/river

The required activities include:

- Consideration of the establishment of a shadow Navigation Authority, for the Upper Parrett;
- The early stages of work towards the preparation of an Upper Parrett Waterway Plan;
- Monitoring the progress of the current Environment Agency Transport and Works Act Order;
- Support to the governance of the Langport River Group and links to a potential Upper Parrett Navigation Authority, and the Somerset Waterways Advisory Committee;
- Consultation with key statutory and non—statutory bodies (Environment Agency, Natural England among others.)
- Further public communications to explain the objectives of the project.

The project has received strong support from the Somerset Waterways Advisory Committee, and numerous key groups to making the ideas come to fruition. Whilst there are also concerns (financial implications and environmental sensitivity being the main ones), it is recognised that a low impact approach, carefully planned on the basis of a business case, is the right way to manage these risks.

A request for an allocation of £5,000 from SSDC as match-funding towards a target of £20,000 is attached in Appendix A.

Financial Implications

The current Area North Capital Programme includes in the future spend for Reserve Schemes approved in principle but awaiting allocation a sum of £35,000 for Langport Vision. If approval is given at this meeting to allocate up to £10,000 towards improvements to the Langport Visitors Centre and Westover car parking – from the Langport Vision allocation of £35,000 will leave £25,000 for future spend.

If this report is approved to allocate £5,000 towards ‘Langport river access project and Upper Parrett Waterway Plan’ from the Langport Vision allocation, then the remaining balance available for future spend will be £20,000.

Corporate Priority Implications

1.14 Support South Somerset Together to develop and support distinctive, balanced, local economies in South Somerset through a range of measures...

3.20 Increase children and young people's satisfaction with parks and play areas and adult participation in sport an active recreation.

3.29 Increase access to services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

Equality and Diversity Implications

The objectives of this project are to promote access to the river for people with disabilities, and for older and younger people.

Background Papers: *Langport Navigation project – report and stakeholder consultation reports 2009.*
