

Wards affected: Abingdon Abbey and Barton, Abingdon Caldecott, Appleton and Cumnor, Faringdon and the Coxwells, Hanneys, Kennington and South Hinksey, Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, Longworth, North Hinksey and Wytham, Radley, Sutton Courtenay and Appleford

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECT (PLANNING)
TO THE EXECUTIVE
5 AUGUST 2005

Thames Waterway Plan

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

1.1 This report comments on the Thames Waterway Plan prepared by the Environment Agency. Whilst welcoming the preparation of the plan concerns are expressed about the open ended nature of some policies and that greater weight should be given to balancing environmental issues with the desire to see greater use of the River. A copy of the Waterway Plan is available in the Members Room.

1.2 The Contact Officer for this report is Alison Blyth, Principal Planning Officer on (01235) 547633.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 *The Environment Agency be thanked for the opportunity to comment on the Thames Waterway Plan, and that amendments to the plan be sought as set out below.*

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

3.1 The Environment Agency are intending that the River Thames Alliance should adopt the Thames Waterway Plan and the Council should modify its own plans and policy documents to reflect it.

4.0 Background & Supporting Information

4.1 At a meeting of the Council's Executive in July 2004 the Council agreed to join the River Thames Alliance and appointed Councillor Green as the Council's representative. Councillor Green has been consulted on this Plan and his comments will be reported at the meeting.

4.2 The purpose of the partnership is to bring together key stakeholders including the Environment Agency, Local Authorities, Riparian landowners and River User Groups to focus on strategic issues affecting the rejuvenation of the non-tidal River Thames.

4.3 One of the objectives of the partnership is to produce jointly agreed proposals for the development and management of the river and the preparation and implementation of a sustainable 'waterway plan' for the Thames.

4.4 It is intended that the Alliance should adopt the Thames Waterway Plan and that individual members, including the Council should modify their own plans and policy documents to reflect it. A Waterway Plan workshop was held in Reading last year from which a summary of draft policies and actions emerged.

4.5 The Council were consulted on the draft policies and actions last October. During the consultation period Jayne Mills of the Environment Agency gave a presentation to relevant Members and Officers of the Council. A small working group of officers and Councillor Green replied, on the Council's behalf, to the draft policies and actions.

4.6 Whilst many of the Council's comments on the draft plan have been taken account in the revised

plan, there are still two main concerns:

- Greater weight should be given to balancing environmental issues with the desire to see greater use of the river.
- Some policies are either inappropriate or are too open ended to be adopted by the Council in the review of its local plan. The proposed vision, core objectives and policies contained in the Draft Plan are included as an appendix to this report.

4.7 The Waterway Plan covers the corridor of the River Thames from its source near Cricklade in Gloucestershire to Teddington on the outskirts of London. The character of the river and its corridor varies vastly over this length. Towards London it is very busy and urban, whereas upstream, it is tranquil and runs through attractive open countryside. Because of its special character long stretches of the Thames flow through areas which are afforded special protection such as green belt, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and open countryside. If the Waterway Plan is not consistent with the policies operating in these areas it could cause confusion and lead to conflict. The vision, core objectives, underlying principles and policies from the plan are included in Appendix 1.

4.8 In view of the above concerns it is suggested that the Council requests the Waterways Plan be amended as set out below. The Agency has provided a consultation response form to assist those making representations and the comments below are framed to fit the form provided. The comments relate only to those sections and policies of the plan where it is considered that a change would be beneficial.

Section 1 – Introduction

Vision (page 4)

Add after Thames 'and its environs'.

Core Objective (page 4)

Bullet point two after "improve and maintain" add "in a sustainable manner"

Bullet point four insert at the start "where appropriate"

Section 3 – Underlying Principles (page 6)

At the start of this section of the plan it would be helpful to describe the diverse character of the Thames and some of the special policy areas through which it runs and that development which is appropriate to one stretch may not be suitable in another. An acknowledgement that conflict can occur between different users of the river, for example cyclists and walkers, or boaters and fishermen would also be helpful.

Principle 5 – Economic Principle (page 7)

The Draft Plan currently states "We will optimise the assets of the River to help achieve a sustainable economy. To avoid any misinterpretation of what is meant by a sustainable economy this principle should be re-written and should make clear the need to balance sustainable economic growth with environmental considerations.

Section 8 – Tourism (page 15)

Policy 3 Tourism policy – no objection to the policy but it should be noted that the Council has yet to decide the direction of its main tourism branding. If the Council does decide to go with for example Oxford it could still give support to The Thames with links on its website and provide information locally.

Section 9 – Sport and Recreation (page 17)

Policy 7 Sport and recreation policy – objection

Bullet point 3 of the possible actions to achieve this policy refers to providing facilities for multi sport clubs. This action should be prefaced with “In appropriate locations”. New facilities for multi sports may not be acceptable in the green belt or areas of open countryside.

Policy 8 Sport and recreation policy – objection
Same comment applies as to Policy 7 above.

Policy 11 Access policy – objection

In environmentally sensitive locations along The Thames it may not be appropriate to encourage the creation of car parks. “Where appropriate” should be inserted in the policy itself and against bullet point one.

Policy 13 Access policy – objection

The third action under this policy refers to provide camp sites or budget accommodation at 16km intervals along the river. The provision of camp sites may again not be appropriate along certain stretches of the river, “where appropriate” should be inserted into the action.

Policy 15 Boating policy – objection

Comment made to Policy 13 applies to the second action under this policy.

Section 10 – Powered boating (page 25)

Policy 17 Boating policy – objection

Add resisting the loss of public slipways to bullet point one and insert “where appropriate” in front of support provision of facilities like dry docks and boat repair yards for the same reasons as set out above.

Policy 18 Permanent mooring policy – objection

As written this policy would allow permanent moorings to be created anywhere along The Thames. The current policy operated by the Council allows permanent moorings to be created only at or adjacent to settlements and by locks where they are most likely to be accessible and less likely to affect the character of the river sites environs. The policy should be amended to reflect this policy approach.

Policy 20 Residential boats policy – strong objection

This policy allows for residential boats that can be navigated but are lived on for all or most of the year, to be located in off-river basins with suitable facilities. Because the Vale is very rural there is unlikely to be any location where it would be appropriate to encourage residential boats. If residential boats were to use existing moorings this would take away spaces for those seeking to moor overnight. This policy should be deleted from the plan.

Policy 21 Hire boat policy – objection

The last bullet point of possible actions under this policy to support the creation of new hire boat bases is to open ended and needs to specify where new facilities may be appropriate.

Policy 22 Passenger boat policy – objection

The same comment under Policy 17 applies to the second bullet point under possible actions.

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Background Papers: Thames Waterway Plan – Consultation 2005

Summary of Waterway Plan

Vision

The vision of the Environment Agency and its partners in the River Thames Alliance is **the healthy growth in the use of the freshwater Thames for communities, wildlife, leisure and business.**

The overall aim of the Thames waterway plan is to map out the reinvigoration of leisure and tourism along the river corridor in ways that are both socially inclusive and sustainable.

Core objectives

- Improve and promote access and information for all users (on water and land)
- Improve and maintain the river infrastructure, facilities and services for all users
- Contribute to enhanced biodiversity, heritage, and landscape value in the waterway corridor
- Increase use of the river and its corridor

These objectives can only be achieved through action-oriented partnerships. The recently formed River Thames Alliance offers a focal point for delivery of the plan.

Underlying Principles

Stakeholder engagement principle

The Thames waterway plan will be developed, reviewed and implemented with the involvement of all interested stakeholders.

Sustainability principle

The plan will be a model for sustainable development of the river.

Funding principle

Long term funding is essential to maintain the infrastructure and facilities along the river and implement the plan objectives.

Health principle

We will optimise the assets of the river for people's health and fitness.

Economic principle

We will optimise the assets of the river to help achieve a sustainable economy.

Policies

Policy 1

Development policy We will support appropriate development necessary to achieve the objectives of the Thames waterway plan

Possible actions

- 1 establish a planning policy sub group of the River Thames Alliance

- 2 develop model policies for the Thames for adoption in Local Development Frameworks
- 3 define “appropriate” with reference to the character of the river, for example to ensure that tranquil and remote reaches are not compromised
- 4 follow principles of Thames Environment Design Handbook guidance
- 5 undertake environmental impact and flood risk assessments of relevant projects and proposals
- 6 introduce mitigation and enhancement measures in accordance with Environment Agency guidance

For the river to thrive some development will be necessary to sustain the visibility of its sport, recreation and tourism assets.

Policy 2

Social inclusion policy We will make the benefits of the river available to all society.

Possible actions

- 1 focus attention on areas of deprivation
- 2 gain understanding of barriers and participation
- 3 develop projects to increase involvement of ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities
- 4 work with clubs and user groups to promote existing opportunities to all

Reports by the Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council and Sport England reveal socially excluded groups have low levels of participation.

Policy 3

Tourism policy We will promote the Thames as a “must visit” destination, developing it as a key brand within Tourism South East.

Possible actions

- 1 provide up to date information that inspires people to visit the river
- 2 work in partnership through the River Thames Alliance Marketing Group
- 3 maintain, improve and publicise the visitthames website
- 4 establish a brand identity for the River Thames
- 5 seek positive media coverage to raise the profile of opportunities on the river
- 6 publish up to date tourist information about the river, including camping, angling, hiring a boat and reach information
- 7 provide a telephone answering service about the river
- 8 maintain an atmospheric photographic image library
- 9 erect signs on bridges and main routes identifying the River Thames

The river faces strong competition from other destinations employing significantly greater marketing spend. Users expect high quality information in a variety of media.

Policy 4

Tourism policy We will provide an excellent experience for visitors to the Thames.

Possible action

- 1 set waterway standards for the provision of services and facilities
- 2 encourage take up quality grading schemes including hire boats
- 3 improve provision and quality of riverside facilities

Operators along the river must offer the highest standards.

Policy 5

Tourism policy We will provide information and interpretation for visitors at the riverside.

Possible action

- 1 provide interactive touch screen Thames information at key lock sites and principal towns along the river
- 2 display local information at all lock sites
- 3 include information about the landscape, wildlife and fishing
- 4 provide signs from the towpath to nearby shops, pubs, restaurants and places of interest
- 5 promote sensitive design and siting of signs through adoption of Thames Environment Design Handbook guidance

Visitor surveys have revealed a strong demand for better information.

Policy 6

Sport and recreation policy We will use the river to increase participation in sport and active recreation.

Possible actions

- 1 ensure that the Thames Waterways Plan is consistent with other regional strategies such as the South East Plan for Sport
- 2 encourage innovative, inclusive and sustainable schemes to involve more people
- 3 plan and manage increased use to minimise potential conflict
- 4 publish codes of conduct in consultation with users

The river is one of the region's major natural resources, right on many people's doorstep.

Policy 7

Sport and recreation policy We will work with sports and recreation clubs on the river to help increase their membership.

Possible actions

- 1 support sport governing bodies and clubs with outreach programmes that encourage participation by all sections of society
- 2 provide accurate up to date information about sport and recreation opportunities on the river
- 3 provide facilities for multi sport clubs

Canoe, sailing and rowing clubs provide people with access to boats, training and facilities. Angling clubs can promote participation.

Policy 8

Sport and recreation policy We will realise the open-space opportunities provided by the Thames.

Possible actions

- 1 work in partnership through the river Thames Alliance to ensure that the value of the river is included in open-space audits and development plans
- 2 provide accurate up to date information about sport and recreation opportunities on the river

3 provide facilities for multi sport clubs

To implement the Planning Policy Guidance advice given by Government (in PPG 17).

Policy 9

Access policy We will encourage people to travel to the river on foot or by cycle.

Possible actions

- 1 create footpath links and cycleways to the river, particularly from urban areas
- 2 provide bridges or ferry services to cross river to access the Thames path
- 3 use fingerposts and waymarking to identify all access points

Access to the river by cycle or on foot promotes health and is environmentally friendly.

Policy 10

Access policy We will encourage access by public transport

Possible actions

- 1 encourage bus and train services, especially at weekends, to riverside
- 2 promote access by train or bus, to walk along the towpath returning from a different train/bus stop (using leaflets, web site, posters, special timetabling, shuttle buses, ticket deals etc)
- 3 improve footpath links and signage between stations and river

Making recreation facilities accessible by public transport promotes social inclusion. Public transport is better for the environment than more cars.

Policy 11

Access policy We will provide facilities for those needing access by car.

Possible actions

- 1 create car parks to serve popular angling and boating reaches
- 2 provide adjacent slipways where necessary

Cars are used for access by anglers carrying bulky equipment, and by people bringing canoes and trailed boats. 55% of walkers use cars to get to the riverside and parking is needed for people using wheelchairs.

Policy 12

Access policy We will provide access for people with disabilities.

Possible actions

- 1 carry out an audit to identify barriers to access
- 2 provide ramps for wheelchair access to lock sites and Thames path
- 3 create wide level paths free from stiles, to accommodate wheelchairs
- 4 create access and platforms to facilitate angling by people with disabilities
- 5 introduce scent trail and interpretation for people with visual impairment
- 6 provide accurate information so that people with disabilities are able to make an informed decision about suitability of access

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires service providers to take reasonable steps to overcome barriers to access. In addition, the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems must be considered when Rights of Way Improvement Plans are prepared.

Policy 13

Access policy We will encourage walking alongside the river and on the adjoining access land and rights of way network.

Possible actions

- 1 align the Thames path next to the river on legally defined public rights of way
- 2 create, sign and promote circular walks incorporating the Thames Path
- 3 provide campsites or budget accommodation at 16km intervals (a day's walk)
- 4 provide drinking water at all lock sites
- 5 work with the National Trail Officer to promote the Thames path

The Thames is the only river to have a designated National Trail. Walking is a low cost activity that promoted health.

Policy 14

Access policy We will encourage cycling alongside the river where it is appropriate.

Possible actions

- 1 clarify where cycling is currently permitted
- 2 define on a reach, reach basis lengths that are appropriate with reference to the Thames path National Trail criteria
- 3 restore the historic towpath and provide new bridge crossings
- 4 work with Sustrans and the National Trail Office to make local improvements to path surface and access

There is demand for leisure cycling on traffic-free routes. Cycling is a low cost activity that promoted health.

Policy 15

Boating policy We will make it easier to take up low cost boating.

Possible actions

- 1 provide canoe portage points above and below all locks
- 2 provide campsites or budget accommodation at 16km intervals (a day's paddle/row)
- 3 improve slipways and car/trailer parks
- 4 provide white water for canoeists at existing weirs where feasible

It is important that people with low incomes are able to enjoy boating.

Policy 16

Angling policy We will encourage angling along the river.

Possible actions

- 1 support taster sessions with free block licences and reduced price for beginners licences

- 2 provide improved access and facilities, particularly for anglers with disabilities
- 3 promote fishing permits for use at locks and weirs
- 4 provide up to date information on free and day ticket lengths
- 5 promote angling on the Environment Agency's "free" towpath length below Staines
- 6 research ways to manage crayfish

Fishing is an outdoor sport, readily accessible at a number of levels with the potential to be totally inclusive.

Policy 17

Boating policy We will encourage more boats to use the river.

Possible actions

- 1 resist loss/support provision of support facilities like dry docks and boat repair yards
- 2 provide facilities for boats (toilets, water points, refuse disposal etc)
- 3 marketing to raise awareness of the river
- 4 run courses in boat ownership and boat handling skills
- 5 promote events on the river

The number of privately owned powered boats has dropped 30% since 1990, from 12993 to 9049 in 2004.

Policy 18

Permanent mooring policy We will encourage the creation of new permanent moorings.

Possible actions

- 1 promote creation of off-river basin with soft edge treatments
- 2 encourage improvement of existing moorings on the river supporting their extension where appropriate
- 3 examine capacity of reaches to accommodate more boats (with particular reference to lock use generated)

Adequate provision of moorings is the key requirement for boating. Existing moorings are at or near capacity.

Policy 19

Visitor mooring policy We will provide visitor moorings to meet boaters' needs.

Possible actions

- 1 provide sufficient value for money visitor and overnight moorings at all riverside towns and attractions
- 2 create moorings at new sites where required to meet the waterway standard
- 3 encourage boaters to welcome other boats to moor alongside

Adequate provision of moorings is the key requirement for boating.

Policy 20

Residential boats policy We will support the creation of new residential boat moorings in off-river basins with suitable facilities.

Possible actions

- 1 consider the AINA guidance and adopt as appropriate
- 2 limit the proportion of berth in a marina that are for residential use

Policy 21

Hire boat policy We will encourage a thriving, high quality hire boat sector on the river.

Possible actions

- 1 provide value for money visitor and overnight moorings at all riverside towns and attractions
- 2 provide facilities for boats (toilets, water points, refuse disposal etc)
- 3 support quality grading scheme for boats on the river
- 4 work with trade bodies to support the hire boat industry
- 5 market the river as a tourism destination
- 6 support the creation of new hire boat bases

Since 1980 the number of holiday hire boats registered on the Thames has fallen by 85%, from 815 to 123 in 2004.

Policy 22

Passenger boat policy We will support scheduled passenger boat services along the river.

Possible actions

- 1 create landing stages at all major towns and attractions
- 2 resist loss/support provision of support facilities like dry docks and boat repair yards
- 3 integrate timetable with bus and train links
- 4 give priority at locks to scheduled service trip boats if necessary to keep to timetable
- 5 advertise and promote services (including timetables on web sites)
- 6 build river bus stops with shelter and timetables
- 7 evaluate possible urban commuter services

Passenger trip boats provide access on the river for people who cannot afford to hire or buy a boat.

Policy 23

Freight policy We will encourage commercial transport of freight on the river.

Possible actions

- 1 give full consideration to waterway freight opportunities in regional spatial strategies, sub regional plans and local development frameworks
- 2 commission a study into the potential for freight transport on the river

Water transport is more environmentally friendly than road or rail.

Policy 24

Landscape policy We will conserve and enhance the special characteristics of landscape value in the river corridor.

Possible actions

- 1 conduct a consistent and comprehensive landscape assessment of the entire river, updating existing studies where necessary
- 2 form local partnerships (similar to the Thames Landscape Strategy Hampton to Kew) that will use local river corridor characterisations to develop an agreed set of local prioritised actions, based on thorough understanding of the nature, built and cultural heritage
- 3 sensitively manage the key landscape, landmarks, locks, open spaces and vistas
- 4 respect and restore historic features
- 5 minimise the impact from potentially intrusive development
- 6 introduce selective landscape and amenity enhancements to reduce visual intrusion from recreation access, car parking and boat mooring facilities
- 7 create ecological buffer zones between the river and adjacent arable fields, and encourage a greater diversity of indigenous trees, shrubs and other plants where biodiversity has been reduced by agricultural practices
- 8 introduce planting to screen intrusive features (for example road, rail and pylon routes) and frame views
- 9 reinstate grassland and water meadows and introduce or regenerate woodland and scrub habitats on marginal land
- 10 review, update and promote wide adoption of the Thames Environment Design Handbook
- 11 restore river infrastructure using traditional construction materials and appropriate designs (specified in Thames Environment Design Handbook)
- 12 retain headroom restriction on boat size imposed by Osney Bridge

The special landscape qualities are a vital part of the visitor experience.

Policy 25

Climate change policy We will plan how the river is managed to respond to climate change.

Possible actions

- 1 identify how best to adapt to climate change, minimising the negative effects, whilst taking advantage of more positive aspects
- 2 plan how to protect the interests of recreation and navigation whilst meeting the demands of flood risk management, water supply and protection of key water dependent environmental sites
- 3 consider the management implications arising from possible lower flows in summer and higher flows in winter
- 4 provide space for wildlife to adapt to climate change (buffer zones, wildlife corridors etc)

Our climate is changing and instances of violent storms, droughts in summer and floods in winter seem set to increase. This is likely to have significant impact on river levels.

Policy 26

Biodiversity and fisheries policy We will enhance biodiversity and fisheries quality along the Thames and its corridor.

Possible action

- 1 conserve and enhance valued species and habitats with particular reference to river based Biodiversity Action Plan (BPA) species such as water vole, otter, white-clawed crayfish, depressed river mussel, Loddon Lily and fish BAP species, including barbell, salmon, lamprey, shad, grayling, brown trout and bullhead
- 2 conserve and enhance key features of particular wildlife importance, including flood meadows, backwaters, islands, natural banks and weir streams and pools
- 3 identify key areas of habitat protection and enhancement and manage to promote biodiversity
- 4 use soft bank protection, with hard edge works introduced only when essential and that incorporate compensation for loss of natural habitat when possible

- 5 where possible introduce bank enhancement to existing lengths with predominantly hard edge treatments
- 6 improve access for fish to reach spawning areas by modifying existing fish passes, where necessary and by introducing new passes or more natural by-pass channels around weirs
- 7 protect and restore the natural river environment, including valuable in-stream features such as gravel shoals, emergent reed beds and islands
- 8 protect underwater plant and fish communities
- 9 balance the recreation needs with the need to protect key water dependent sites when managing water levels
- 10 ensure that works and activities do not result in the transfer and colonisation of invasive non-native plant and animal species
- 11 raise wider awareness of the threat of invasive non-native plants and animals to the river's natural environment character
- 12 produce site management plans (which include biodiversity and fisheries considerations) for every lock

The wildlife and habitats of the Thames are intrinsically linked to its character and thus, to the aesthetic, social and economic value of the river and its corridor to those living and working nearby and those using and visiting it, there is a direct link between fisheries quality and the value of the Thames for angling.

Policy 27

Heritage policy We will maintain and enhance the cultural heritage, historic assets and archaeological value of the river and its corridor.

Possible action

- 1 manage land, buildings and structures (such as locks, bridges and weirs) of historic interest, or harmony with their setting, design, materials and construction methods
- 2 carry out an audit of heritage features
- 3 protect and conserve buildings, sites and objects of archaeological, architectural, engineering or historic interest
- 4 raise awareness of historical significance of sites along the Thames through education, signage and interpretation initiatives

The Thames is world renowned for its character and history which helps to attract visitors and thus contributes to social and economic well-being.

Policy 28

Education policy We will optimise the contribution the river can make to education and life long learning.

Possible actions

- 1 establish an education sub group of the River Thames Alliance
- 2 introduce learning projects in partnership with education resource providers like the River & Rowing Museum. Including a pilot using passenger boats on the river
- 3 produce curriculum support material based on the river corridor

The river provides an accessible and interesting resource, relevant to many education disciplines.

Policy 29

Visitor health and safety policy We will adopt a consistent approach to visitor risk management

Possible actions

- 1 carry out assessment and introduce risk control measures in accordance with the guiding principles established by the Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group
- 2 gather information on accidents and near misses from user groups

We believe that it is possible to achieve acceptable levels of risk and enhance the environment and encourage public access. Safety, access and conservation need not be mutually exclusive.

Policy 30

Service and facilities policy we will provide services and facilities that meet the reasonable needs of all our users.

Possible actions

- 1 set waterway standards for the provision of services and facilities
- 2 identify gaps in provision and introduce new or improved facilities to meet need
- 3 produce design guidelines for new facilities
- 4 produce lock site management plans

Other competitor waterways have already established standards. We will lose users if we fail to meet expectations.

Policy 31

Monitoring and review policy We will monitor the impacts from implementing the Thames waterway plan.

Possible actions

- 1 carry out Strategic Sustainability Assessment of the plan as it is developed and reviewed
- 2 gather data and research patterns of recreation use
- 3 set realistic, measurable targets with time scales, for every policy
- 4 measure social, economic and environmental impacts
- 5 formally review the plan in 2010

We need to be able to assess how successful we are in meeting the plan's objectives. It is important to respond to changes in people's activities and lifestyles. We must also be able to detect any adverse cumulative impacts from incremental change.