

MBACT Response to Torfaen CBC Draft Canal Strategy Consultation April 2023

The Monmouthshire, Brecon and Abergavenny Canals Trust (MBACT) is a local charity in South East Wales actively working with local councils; Glandwr Cymru (the Canal and River Trust in Wales); and other partners to improve and sustainably restore the Mon & Brec Canal for the benefit of the local community.

Background

Torfaen County Borough Council (“TCBC”) are undertaking, from the end of April to early May 2023, a public consultation and survey on their Draft Canal Strategy 2023-2033 for the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal (“Mon & Brec canal”). A report to the TCBC Cabinet is planned for June 2023.

As a founding partner, and member of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canals Regeneration Partnership Group, the TCBC Canal Officer has asked MBACT for proposals as to where MBACT can assist in future canal projects. We are using this consultation as a way of providing feedback on this version of the Canal Strategy and Action Plan.

Torfaen County Borough Council’s Vision for the Mon & Brec Canal (as at April 2023)

“By 2033, a well maintained and thriving navigable waterway has been created, connecting Cwmbran Town Centre to the wider northern canal network. It is a vibrant corridor for recreation and leisure, providing investment, employment, training, and participation opportunities along its length. The canal supports the local economy and is a major contributor to quality of life in the area.”

Structure of this document

This document consists of overall comments on the Draft Canal Strategy followed by more specific comments.

Document Control

Document number:

Document Type: Google Doc

Document Name: MBACT Response to Torfaen CBC Draft Strategy Consultation April 2023

Issue Date: 8th May 2023

Approved by: MBACT Chair

Owner: MBACT Directors

Review period: N/A

Version number: 1.0

Latest Review Date: 8th May 2023

Reviewed by:

Overall Response from MACT

As the Monmouthshire, Brecon and Abergavenny Canals restoration charity we warmly welcome the initiative that Torfaen County Borough Council (“TCBC”) has started. The appointment of a full-time Canal Officer and now this 10 year Strategic document provides a template for neighbouring canal owning authorities to follow. Given the limited resources that the Council has, and the fact that there is only one dedicated Canal Officer, we recognise the thought, effort and time that has gone into the Strategy document.

We are also grateful that TCBC recognises our skill and experience as part of the Torfaen Canal Partnership, and as a partner working with volunteers.

However, we do have some feedback and comments that we wish to make on the document:

1. Overall Approach and Methodology

The document is very much a Vision document focusing on the Council’s main strategic themes. This strategy, survey and consultation is a public consultation with TCBC ratepayers. The document is then being used to gain support from the Council Cabinet and Council.

However, the document doesn’t really build a business case for the canal restoration project. We would suggest that this working document should be enhanced substantially to document the Council’s Policy and Strategy for the canal and to develop a sound business case for the programme of works. We feel that this should include risks, constraints, dependencies, the economic case, critical success factors, key target dates, and a list and assessment of possible implementation options.

Along with other grant funders such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, it is likely that a programme of this size will require support and funding from, or through, the Welsh Government. It would therefore make sense to align the Council’s project approach with Welsh Government best practices for large infrastructure projects. This will mean that future work to apply to the Welsh Government for funding will be reduced. The Welsh Government recommends that public sector bodies should follow the Five Case Model for Infrastructure Investment.

Welsh Government documentation says:

“The Five Case Model can be used for the preparation of:

- *Programme Business Cases (PBC)*
- *Project Business Cases (three stage: SOC, OBC, FBC)*
- *Business Justification Cases (BJC)*

- *Policies and Strategies*”

A template for the initial strategic case can be found here -

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-08/strategic-outline-case.odt>

Recommendation: amend this Strategy document to fit into the Welsh Government template format now, and develop further documents such as Programme Business Cases to support the work using the Five Case Model templates as part of Phase 1 2023 - 2025.

2. Stakeholder Support

This strategy, survey and consultation is focused on being a public consultation with TCBC ratepayers. And as a result of that, then gaining support of the Cabinet. However, there are many other stakeholders that need to be consulted and lack of support from those could be critical to the success of the programme. We see other stakeholders to possibly include Welsh Government, Canal and River Trust (CRT), National Resources Wales (NRW), various commercial landowners adjacent to the canal, local canal groups, volunteer groups and other charitable organisations. Other partners of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canals Regeneration Partnership Group are also key stakeholders. Early direct consultation with all of these stakeholders is critical. We would recommend that this is done as soon as possible.

We would recommend a workshop is formed as soon as possible for undertaking the strategic assessment, consisting of the senior responsible owner from the Council, key stakeholder representatives, members of the senior management team and other personnel with the required business and technical skills.

Recommendation: Adapt Phase 1 2023 - 2025 to consult with other Stakeholders and build the case and support for the Programme.

3. Programme Phasing and Funding

As indicated in the recommendations above we strongly feel that the Programme Phasing can be more ambitious, and that more work should be done upfront to support funding applications and to involve all stakeholders much earlier.

Much of the thrust of the document is that the programme is focused on building a business case for the work, rather than the work itself. We feel that the document should be much stronger and clearer in showing when key targets on the ground will be achieved. For example “Five Locks - open to navigation - Dec 20XX”

Phase 1 does include a review of existing designs and intends to come up with a fundraising strategy. However, much of the required design has already been done and only needs updating with new costs. Therefore, we feel that a programme and fundraising team can already be set up in Phase 1. We believe that Phase 1 should include development of the Programme and Business Cases with detailed designs and costs. And alongside this then funding work for the various projects can also start. The Programme can already start

working on this now. Obviously this needs initial “seed-corn” funding and resourcing with people so initial startup funding needs to start now to support the work in Phase 1. We strongly feel that the fully resourced project team identified in Phase 2 should be set up earlier.

The length of the Programme and the fact that there is little progress until 2025 - 2028 could be construed by some observers as the Strategy being a mechanism for putting off real progress to a later date when the Borough Council may be in a better position. We feel that the setting up of a Programme team much earlier, the creation of the Programme and Project Business Cases, working with stakeholders earlier, and starting fundraising planning and actually raising money will show that this is not the case.

The initial works indicated at Five Locks are welcome but could be considered minor compared to what is coming next.

Recommendation: Change Phase 1 to be more ambitious - to focus on Programme and Project design, costs and fundraising. To create the Programme Team and Funding Team as part of Phase 1.

4. Governance Structure and Council Support

As indicated in the document a robust Governance structure has to be in place. The whole Programme needs to be seen to be a key element in the success of the Council and supported by all Departments in the Council. The success of this Programme of work will depend on key people being in place. A Champion (ideally the Leader of the Council) is required to oversee objectives, ownership and give guidance where advice is required on all elements of the Strategy. Our view is that the various Boards, Groups and Forums identified in the Governance Structure need to meet more often.

We also feel that it is critical that the role of the Canal Coordinator is recognised without question in terms of day to day decisions regarding the Programme.

This Programme is much more than just restoring the canal - it is about bringing more people into Cwmbran, making the town centres more enjoyable and more profitable for local businesses. As is seen elsewhere in the UK a project like this will bring huge benefits to Cwmbran and the Borough, and it needs full support from all parts of the Council to bring that success. The success of this project will also depend heavily on commercial interests being engaged and seeing that it is worthwhile for them. It is worth considering bringing key commercial stakeholder representatives into the Governance structure to ensure that their interests are recognised. This should also be considered for future key canal focused businesses - it may be useful to include representatives from existing boat hire or marina companies.

Recommendation: strengthen the Governance Structure and involvement to make the Programme more central to the core objectives of the Council. Include key representatives from outside the immediate Programme work to ensure long term goals are met.

5. No Detriment to Ongoing Maintenance and Wider Objectives

Whilst we understand that Torfaen CBC's primary focus for the Strategy is to secure a navigable canal to Cwmbran Town Centre, we believe that:

1. This should not be at the expense of lack of ongoing maintenance on the remainder of the canal. Additionally once certain sections are restored then funding needs to be put in place to keep those sections maintained. The maintenance burden will increase in time and resources need to be raised for that purpose. Since local Councils are financially stretched at present then the Council may wish to consider expanding where volunteer organisations like ourselves can assist with some ongoing maintenance tasks.
2. A longer term objective of complete restoration of the canal within the Torfaen boundary be stated up front.
3. The Strategy should also recognise the need to cooperate with other organisations and canal owners to ensure that maintenance, management and restoration is coordinated across the region.

The Programme itself is dependent on the organisations outside the area. For example, CRT ensuring that there is a sufficient water supply for the Five Locks to operate. Therefore there may be significant impact on other organisation's current operations and long term plans.

Recommendation: develop a maintenance work programme for the existing canal sections outside the active restoration sections that is updated as the active sections are completed.

6. Detailed Feedback

The following are more specific comments on the document:

Plan page 5

Indicates that the canal is navigable from Pentre Lane south, which was the case in 2010, but not now. The plan should be changed to show the canal being Un-navigable. The plan should also show the canal continuing further south from Pentre Lane indicating the Newport City Council (NCC) ownership boundary, as it shows CRT ownership to the north.

Page 11 Objective 11

We feel that this Objective is much too weak. It gives the impression that the business case and funding is more important than the actual creation of the restored canal and final destination. We feel that it should focus more on the end goal of having a commercial development around a canalside marina, winding hole and tourist facilities.

Page 12

The plan area should be extended to the north to include the new mooring basin south of Bevan's Lane (a name is needed for it) and the site of the second crossing (indicated as proposed). There is potential for moorings not only at Five Locks Basin but also at Bevan's

Lane. The latter, whilst being equipped with floating pontoons, have restricted foot access away from the canal, and do not have access to water, electricity or waste disposal facilities.

The area of proposed Public Open Space proposed between the second crossing and Cwmbran House (shown on the approved planning consent site layout drawing) should be indicated as a possible opportunity area for the canal to provide for an event space and/or temporary event or permanent canal car parking together with a boaters amenity block.

Plan page 14

Reopening the canal channel could be better indicated on the plan. It points only to the road crossing and not the long length of culverted canal.

Page 18

“Ty Coch to Pentre Lane” as a title implies that the canal ownership ends at Pentre Lane, when it continues for a further 0.5 miles. The plan should be extended further south and show the Newport City Council boundary which is the stream culvert near Oliphant Circle.

Page 22

As mentioned elsewhere above we strongly feel that in Phase 1, that there should also be specific Task & Finish Groups for “Programme Initiation”, “Consultation with Stakeholders”, and “Programme Fundraising”.

Phase 3 objective 6 and 11

Working with NCC and other stakeholders. We feel that placing this into Phase 3 pushes it too far down the programme timeline. Surely discussions should be happening now to ensure that all stakeholders are all working to the same end?

Desirable Additional Plans and List of Potential Projects

It would be useful if there was also a plan showing what sections are in water, those filled in and also locks to be restored and those already restored.

We have also previously provided an example list of potential sub-projects. Something like this even at this stage would allow all stakeholders to visualise what this strategy could look like.

7. Concluding Comments

MBACT will work very closely at all levels with the Council, and with partners, to actively support Torfaen CBC in its vision for the canal.