

WEST COUNTRY BRANCH



Taunton Garden Town Team
Somerset Council

25th November, 2024

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re. Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance, September 2024

The Inland Waterways Association (IWA)¹ is the membership charity that works to protect and restore the country's 7,000 miles of canals and navigable rivers. IWA is a national organisation with a network of volunteers and branches which deploy their expertise and knowledge to work constructively with navigation authorities, local and national government and other organisations. The Association also provides practical and technical support to restoration projects through its Restoration Hub.

We thank Somerset Council for the opportunity to respond to the consultation; we have the following comments.

General

In general terms, the Inland Waterways Association is supportive of the Taunton Waterways Strategy as outlined in the consultation documents. It is good to see waterways placed at the centre of a town's strategy. However, we believe that significant benefits of waterways-focused development appear to have been overlooked by the Strategy. We hope this response will highlight the additional benefits and encourage the scope of Taunton's Waterways Strategy to be widened and thus further benefit the town.

The Strategy acknowledges and focuses on the opportunities that waterways offer to mitigate flooding, enhance biodiversity, encourage active and sustainable travel and build a sense of community. But the fact that canals and rivers can create jobs and bring financial benefits through tourism and leisure is hardly touched on within the Strategy.

You can find detailed information about the full range of benefits of navigable waterways in a comprehensive IWA report *Waterways for Today*², published in 2022. It explains how waterways that are navigable by boats deliver benefits for:

- the economy, both locally and nationally
- the natural and built environment
- local communities
- improving people's lives.

¹ <https://waterways.org.uk>

² <https://waterways.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Waterways-for-Today-REVISED-November-2022-FOR-WEB.pdf>

The *Waterways for Today* report not only states that navigable waterways can act as a catalyst for investment and regeneration, but also provides diverse evidence from across the waterways sector, showing why waterway focused projects are perfect for including in regeneration projects and third party funding bids.

More important statistics relating to the wide-ranging benefits of waterways can be found in the Canal & River Trust report *Waterways & Wellbeing: Valuing Our Waterways*³. That report is briefly mentioned in the Taunton Waterways Maintenance and Management Plan (an appendix to the Strategy), but we recommend revisiting it. Dated November 2022, the report details the economic and social value of the UK's waterways network, with headline figures showing a combined annual economic and social value of the waterways amounting to £6.1bn. We hope that reference to that report alongside the IWA's *Waterways for Today* will help shape a revised Taunton Waterways Strategy following the current consultation.

For additional, more local context, the evolution of Taunton's waterways over the last 50 years is referred to in the IWA West Country Branch's 2024 booklet *Somerset & Mid-Devon Waterways – 50 Years of Progress*⁴. Some outstanding achievements have been made during that period, including the 1994 reopening to navigation of the 14 mile Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and 0.8 miles of the River Tone Navigation into Taunton. We hope you will take some time to review what has been achieved locally and take inspiration from it.

Waterways within remit

IWA believes that the eastern boundary chosen for the Taunton Waterways Strategy, i.e. the M5, is artificial and therefore not helpful. We consider that the boundary should be extended eastwards to Creech St. Michael; in particular, the bridge across the canal to the east of St. Michael Road, which is not only reasonably close to the River Tone but is connected through to it by an access bridge over the railway line.

The 24 mile Grand Western Canal, which runs from Taunton to Tiverton, appears to have been overlooked by the Strategy. Unfortunately, its 13.5 mile Somerset section - from Taunton to Lowdells - requires restoration, whereas its 10.8 mile Devon section – from Lowdells to Tiverton - was restored to navigation in the 1970s and is now managed very successfully by Devon County Council as a popular linear country park⁵.

Restoration of a short section of the Grand Western Canal from Taunton past Silk Mills to Norton Fitzwarren has been factored into local planning policy in the past. In 2005, the new road bridge built across the railway line at Silk Mills included full provision for a restored Grand Western Canal to pass under the bridge alongside the railway (see page 9 of *50 Years of Progress* booklet).

Navigation rights and authorities

IWA research shows that there is a common law right of navigation on the River Tone from its confluence with the River Parrett at Stanmoor to approximately 100 yards before French Weir. This remains the position notwithstanding the flood alleviation works undertaken in the 1960s, which realigned part of the River Tone, and earlier works.

Canal & River Trust is the navigation authority for the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal from (but not including) Bridgwater Docks to Firepool. It is also the navigation authority for the River Tone from Firepool to just before French Weir. The Statutory Right of Navigation on waterways that were managed by British Waterways (predecessor to Canal & River Trust) was repealed by the Transport Act 1968.

It should be noted that under the Transport Act 1968 the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and the River Tone through Taunton are classified as Remainder Waterways. In brief, that means that Canal & River Trust is not obliged to maintain them as Cruising Waterways and, therefore, can choose what level of maintenance to apply to them.

³ canalrivertrust.org.uk/about-us/valuing-our-waterways

⁴ <https://waterways.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/50-Years-of-Progress-IWA-West-Country-Branch-digital-version.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.devon.gov.uk/grandwesterncanal/>

As part of the restoration of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and its subsequent reopening to navigation a 21-year agreement was entered into by the local authorities in April 1988 to provide additional funding in order that the canal could be maintained to Cruising Waterway standard⁶. These arrangements continued past their natural termination date and were still in effect in the mid-2010s, although the current position is not known.

Page 64 of the Taunton Waterways Strategy states: “Opportunity for a formal navigation authority on the Tone”. As noted above, there is already a navigation authority for the Tone in Taunton, but we agree it may be good to have a new navigation authority for the Tone from Firepool Weir to Stanmoor where it joins the River Parrett; the previous statutory navigation authority was terminated in the late 1960s⁷.

Recreation

IWA is concerned that there is little reference in the Taunton Waterways Strategy to increasing the leisure use of the waterways by boats, other than paddle craft. While we recognise that the use of paddle craft is a fast growing pastime, we believe that the navigable Bridgwater & Taunton Canal together with the River Tone Navigation in Taunton are vastly under-utilised assets. With promotion and, consequently, much better use, they could significantly contribute to the economy of the town.

On the subject of paddle craft, IWA was a key stakeholder in the successful development of the riverside in Langport, which was formally reopened in 2020⁸. This Somerset town is now a mecca for a wide range of recreational users such as paddle craft, wild swimming and angling, as well as being popular with cyclists and walkers. Furthermore, the riverside development was a factor in attracting several small businesses to the town.

IWA envisages that Taunton, with its 14 mile navigable link to Bridgwater along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal, could go even further than Langport by encouraging the establishment of businesses such as a trip boat, day boat hire and short-term narrowboat holidays. The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal is an example of a similar, relatively short navigable waterway that thrives as a destination for all manner of boats, paddle craft, walkers, cyclists and nature lovers, thus providing employment and revenue for local businesses.

Moorings for visiting boats could become an attractive focal point for the riverside in Taunton, around which businesses such as eateries and craft shops would be happy to trade.

At several points within the Strategy, concern is expressed that access for maintenance to waterways is limited. IWA suggests that, in improving access for maintenance, there might be a symbiotic opportunity to provide access for recreation at some of the same points, thereby reducing the amount of construction work needed.

Heritage

IWA believes that greater emphasis should be given in the Strategy to the heritage aspects of Taunton’s waterways. In many ways, all the waterway corridors should be considered as heritage. Efforts should be made to identify and catalogue the principal heritage elements and then to inform and enthuse locals and visitors via heritage information boards etc. The Silk Mills visitor centre proposed by the Friends of the Grand Western Canal (see Connectivity below) could make a suitable venue for showcasing the town’s heritage.

An interesting example of Taunton’s hidden waterways heritage is the double-headed route of the former Grand Western Canal within the town. The main route ran from Firepool Lock to Frieze Hill, but another ran from French Weir Park to Frieze Hill, and this can still be traced on the ground. The latter was known as the Parliamentary Line as it was built following an Act of Parliament in 1832 to settle a dispute between the

⁶ *By Waterway to Taunton*, Tony Haskell, pages 122-123

⁷ The Variation of Navigation Rights (River Tone) Order 1969 (SI 1969 No. 1604)

⁸ <https://langport.life/things-to-do/the-outdoor-life/>

Bridgwater & Taunton Canal Company and the Tone Conservators. As stated earlier, the Grand Western Canal is not even mentioned in the Strategy currently.

Connectivity

IWA wishes to express its strong support for two proposals made by the Friends of the Grand Western Canal to enhance sustainable connectivity utilising Taunton's waterways.

i) The proposed Park 'n Glide scheme⁹. Similar to a park and ride bus concept, this would involve an electric boat shuttle from Silk Mills Car Park into Taunton town centre. Not only would it provide sustainable transport for commuters and shoppers but also create an unusual visitor attraction, bringing numerous tourists to the town. The Friends propose further enhancing the tourist offer by creating a visitor centre next to Silk Mills car park, that would include a vertical boat lift to highlight the heritage of the Grand Western Canal.

ii) the potential cycleway from Wellington to Taunton using the Grand Western Canal's towpath for part of its route, to enable cyclists to avoid using the busy A38.

The Friends of the Grand Western Canal is a corporate member of the Inland Waterways Association.

Flood prevention

Rightly, much is made of flood prevention in the Taunton Waterways Strategy. We wonder whether your consultants have considered using the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal as a Smart Canal that uses technology to help manage flood risk? The Forth & Clyde Canal in Glasgow is an award winning example of this system; a case study can be found on page 27 of IWA's *Waterways for Today* report or online¹⁰.

Renewable energy and heat

The Taunton Waterways Strategy refers in several places to the waterways as a potential source of heating and hydropower generation. Waterways also have a potential for cooling purposes. Canal & River Trust is looking at using waterways to provide low carbon heating and cooling solutions in properties adjacent to canals¹¹.

There are already several hydropower schemes on the inland waterways network. For reference, the Canal & River Trust has produced a case study of one such scheme on the Aire & Calder Navigation¹².

Specific points

Having reviewed the Strategy documents, IWA has a number of referenced points and queries that it should like to raise in addition to its more general comments above.

- 1) Key Maintenance Issues over next 25 years. In several places within the Strategy, it states: "*The Environment Agency will cease to maintain the water levels control structures through Taunton (Firepool Weir / French Weir) as these are not flood management structures, and therefore, will not be funded to provide this function.*" IWA would like to understand who will be responsible for the maintenance of these weirs, should the Environment Agency cease to have responsibility for these?
- 2) Page 86, Planned Projects: PP05 - Raising the Flood Defences from Firepool Weir to Obridge. IWA was made aware of the initial proposals for flood prevention works between Firepool Lock (inclusive) and Obridge Railway Bridge, which we reviewed in detail. We submitted several comments on the proposals but have never had the benefit of a detailed response nor an opportunity to discuss them with what was, at the time, Somerset West & Taunton Council. A copy of the IWA's letter dated 4th August 2022 is available on request.

⁹ <https://www.parknglide.org>

¹⁰ <https://waterways.org.uk/campaigns/waterways-for-today/benefit-6-natural-built-environment>

¹¹ <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/things-to-do/canal-and-river-wildlife/nine-ways-canals-can-fight-climate-change/heating-and-cooling-systems>

¹² <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/things-to-do/canal-and-river-wildlife/nine-ways-canals-can-fight-climate-change/hydropower/where-theres-a-weir-theres-a-way>

- 3) Page 104, 5.9.1 Character Area 7, Rural Canal, Opportunities. The Strategy states: *“There is an opportunity to improve connectivity between the river and canal, linking communities and connecting them to the water and to the countryside, an alignment with the Garden Town Vision. An additional bridge over the canal, in the vicinity of the moorings, would facilitate that connection but the idea is not currently supported by the Canal and River Trust.”* IWA wishes to request more information as to why Canal & River Trust does not support this new bridge.
- 4) Page 142, section 9, Design Guidance for Development Sites within the Waterways Corridor. Within this section reference is made to limiting the storey height of buildings. IWA wishes to stress the importance of modelling waterside building developments before planning approval is given. The proposed height of buildings on the south side of the Tone seems excessive, for instance. Issues such as wind tunnelling and shadowing of the waterways and adjoining amenity land are not necessarily resolved simply by limiting building heights to five storeys or leaving spaces between buildings. Additionally, multi-storey buildings too close to the waterside can defeat the hoped-for ambience. We suggest that an appropriate modelling study is undertaken and the results discussed with stakeholders.
- 5) Appendix: Taunton Waterways Maintenance and Management Plan, page 49, point 6.4: *“Improved Access for canal users - All except the Outwood bridge (downstream of M5) are Highway Authority Bridges. Need to consider whether they need to swing to allow paddlers under and if not consider if launch areas are needed and if portage is possible.”* IWA wishes to point out that all swing bridges on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal currently swing for navigation by all craft, not just paddlers.
- 6) Traffic congestion and carbon emissions could be reduced by delivering building materials to the waterside construction sites via barge along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and River Tone Navigation. A potential transshipment point may be found at Bathpool, for example.

Wider waterway issues

IWA has previously promoted the expansion and development of the waterways within Somerset (thus including Taunton). We believe the Taunton Waterways Strategy should take this into account and, in particular, promote the following medium/long term initiatives:

- 1) Restoration of 2.3 miles of the Grand Western Canal from Taunton to Norton Fitzwarren as part of the Park ‘n Glide proposals.
- 2) Onward restoration of the Grand Western Canal from Norton Fitzwarren to Lowdwells, where it would join the currently isolated 10.8 miles of fully navigable canal through to Tiverton. This would create an exciting 38 mile through route from Bridgwater to Tiverton, centred on Taunton, multiplying the opportunities that waterways offer, as outlined in the Taunton Waterways Strategy and this response document.
- 3) Re-establish through navigation on the River Tone from Newbridge to Hankridge (currently limited by obstructions) and create a new link from the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal to the River Tone at Charlton utilising the existing underpass below the railway line.
- 4) Transfer management of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal from Canal & River Trust to Somerset Council, as enabled by the Transport Act 1968, and to subsequently create a linear country park from Taunton to Bridgwater. The canal is isolated from the country’s main connected canal network and there are examples of similar waterways being transferred to local authorities in the past, including the 10.8 mile section of Grand Western Canal that was transferred to Devon County Council in 1971 and is now run as a successful linear country park.

Conclusion

IWA believes that the Taunton Waterways Strategy represents an exciting prospect for Taunton. We hope that the points raised above will help further enhance plans to develop Taunton as a Garden Town that people are proud to call home and visitors are delighted to visit.

IWA would welcome the opportunity to discuss the above points with Somerset Council.

Yours faithfully,

Ray Alexander

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cc Cllr Mike Rigby