

Thetford Navigation Reopening

Following a request to local MP and Environment Secretary Elizabeth Truss about reopening the Thetford Navigation between Thetford and Brandon, I prepared a briefing note and this was sent via her to the Environment Agency (EA). The EA provided a briefing note response confirming the situation and a general overview of the work required. An offer was made to discuss this further and I met with Irvn Forbes, Nathan Arnold and Rory Sanderson from the EA on 5th November.

In summary, a scheme of four locks costing c£12m would be the minimum required to get the waterway open. Obviously the costs may vary depending on the size of locks required, what mooring/marina facilities that may be provided and what environmental mitigation is necessary. In the short term improved usage could be made of the river with improved access for boats, canoes, walkers, cyclists and naturalists.

The EA representatives explained that there is a requirement to protect the ecology of river catchment. Generally, from an ecological perspective there is an inclination to maximise the ecological potential of the river. However, as the watercourse had been altered in the past; incorporating man made features and had been in use previously, as well as providing amenities to a semi urban area, restoration of the route would not definitely be ruled out. Nevertheless, environmental mitigation would be sought to minimise the impact of the increased and different types of use, as well as seeking to improve the ecology of the area. One example would be fish passes that allow fish to move up the river which at present cannot occur due to the existing weirs. Schemes should also show a positive community impact such as getting more people using the river such as schools, voluntary groups and tourists.

To allow the idea to progress will require an environmental assessment scoping report which would consider what effects the scheme would have, whether these can be mitigated, and offer various mitigation schemes to reduce the impact. In order for this to be assessed a draft design of the scheme needs to be prepared. This initial design would then be modified to incorporate mitigation measures that may be necessary to reduce the environmental impact. It was suggested that the most cost effective way of bringing the report to fruition may be to engage the specialists who had been involved in the previous scoping exercise as the relevant people were still involved with the firm that carried out the work.

Aside from the capital costs of restoration the ongoing revenue costs needs to be considered. At present the EA is responsible for the navigation up to Brandon Bridge, with their current funding there would be little chance of them taking on responsibility for any increase in their route network. Consequently the 'new' section would need to offer a sustainable model for the route to be taken on by a group. This could be a stand-alone dedicated 'Trust', or seek to join with/learn from an existing group such as the Canal & River Trust (previously British Waterways) or Inland Waterways Association who through a subsidiary manage the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation or The River Stour Trust.

Income generation from revenue grants cannot be guaranteed so ideas for income need to be considered such as mooring fees, user licences and electricity generation (incorporating turbines in new structures).

In conclusion there seems a general support for the idea to reopen the navigation. The next steps to take the scheme any further require the development of the environmental assessment scoping report followed by a draft design of the scheme. The likely cost of such a report will be £75-£100k. I would like to propose that;

Thetford Town Council seek to work with Breckland Council (the owner of the navigation rights and river banks) to obtain the necessary funding to procure the report