



River Corridor Group

Note to ECD/PDS Panel

In late 2010 the Council, acting through the Cabinet member for Economic Development at the time, Councillor Terry Gazzard and the Strategic Director, Development & Major Projects John Betty invited several people with relevant skills and experience interested in the future role of the River Avon to advise the Council on how its potential as a force for regeneration might be achieved.

The Group consisted of people with related professional disciplines, such as ecology, sustainability, regeneration, transportation, or decades of experience in managing or using waterways, together with Council Member representation from the two main political parties.

Edward Nash, founder of Bath based regeneration and design consultancy, Nash Partnership was asked to chair the Group with Michael Davis (who has had considerable experience with the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust) as Deputy Chair.

The Group met at monthly intervals throughout early 2011 and consulted with many established interests along the River before producing their first report which has been widely circulated within the Council, its Members and senior officers.

The report is extensive and runs to circa 160 pages. It sets out to illustrate the present varieties of character and appreciation of the 30km. of the River Avon through the Bath & NE Somerset Council district and explain how, in historical terms, it has come to be so under valued as it passes through most of Bath and close to Keynsham, in environmental, social, cultural and economic terms.

The report then explains how, building on the evidence of areas like Bristol's Harbourside and Central London's southbank wholly new qualities of social, cultural, economic and environmental value can be created over time to turn the asset a river ought to be, into something that significantly defines the identity of the places it passes through.

The report explains how such 'value growth' is incremental; how, growing beyond a clear conceptual framework, small changes can combine to alter perceptions, stimulate community and individual action and gradually make it possible for investment to be justified by individuals, small and large business and the public sector as the value; social, cultural, economic and environmental of an enhanced, active river can be realised.

So the report identifies – where change is most needed, and how, relatively small improvements in water-based activity, in access, in amenity, can change perceptions of value. It identifies how and where new activity, social, cultural, economic, environmental can be stimulated to best cumulative effect and how re-establishing a river focus can be significant to the future identity of several existing communities along its route.

The report concludes by listing nine areas of economic activity, many already in evidence in the economic profile of the District that, can be synergised via a river economy regeneration project, each strengthened by taking support and building stability from each other to give the District the enhanced economic identity it needs, within the West of England LEP.

The Group have been invited to discuss with the Council how this programme for action should best be progressed. Models for waterway regeneration are many and it can be seen from some, such as the Thames Rivers' Trust or the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, that there are virtues in progressing such projects via such an independent, charitable, not for profit vehicle. As a Membership organisation this can draw in volunteers and expertise and act as a body to focus established interest, the Council, Environment Agency, British Waterways etc, together around particular project missions.

Whether this is best achieved by a Trust, or a Community Enterprise body, or some other such body, has yet to be concluded. We do see much value in reconnecting several of the urban communities along the River Avon with it in meaningful social, cultural, environmental and economic ways as a large part of the project's value.

The bringing of the report formally to this ECD/PDS Panel is a major step in putting the value regeneration of our District's main river forward as an important item on Council's forward agenda, wholly consistent with, and necessary to the delivery of the Vision for the District and the major projects put in hand in recent years.

For us, re-vitalising this river promises so much – not just new development, but a new energy, the chance to set goals for making an abandoned length of the river beautiful and environmentally sound again, extending the attractions of our World Heritage City well beyond the few hundred metres of our river that currently merits that description.

Edward Nash