

Report to Sustainable development panel

24 February 2016

Report of Head of planning services

Subject River Wensum Strategy update

Item

6

Purpose

To update members on progress made to date by the River Wensum Strategy Partnership with preparation of a strategy for the River Wensum in Norwich, and to provide an overview of key themes and emerging proposals.

Recommendation

To consider the progress made to date and comment on the direction being taken by the emerging strategy.

Corporate and service priorities

The report helps to meet the council's corporate priority for a safe, clean and low carbon city, and a prosperous and vibrant city.

Financial implications

None

Ward/s: All wards

Cabinet members: Councillor Bremner, environment and sustainable development
Councillor Stonard, resources and income regeneration

Contact officers

Graham Nelson – Head of planning 01603 212530

Judith Davison – Planning team leader - projects 01603 212529

Background documents

None

Report

Background

1. The River Wensum is a key but under-utilised asset for Norwich with the potential to contribute significantly to the city's regeneration. However this potential is currently not being realised. Despite creation of significant stretches of riverside walk over the past few decades and provision of new bridges, much remains to be achieved in terms of promoting better access / signage to the river, increasing activity on the river, enhancing its function as a key piece of green infrastructure and its contribution to biodiversity, and increasing its attractiveness to tourists and visitors. The complex range of responsibilities for management of the river and its environs (split between the city council, Broads Authority, Norfolk County Council and Environment Agency) poses a key challenge to effective management of the river corridor and delivery of change.
2. The River Wensum Strategy Partnership was created in December 2014 to develop a strategy for the River Wensum in Norwich to maximise its potential for regeneration, in particular by encouraging greater access to and activity on the river, enhancing its environment and biodiversity value, and by stimulating leisure and business opportunities. Members will recall that the background to establishing a partnership body was discussed in a planning update report to sustainable development panel in January 2015. In considering options for developing a wider strategy, the council favoured a partnership - rather than a corporate - approach, as being more likely to lead to sustainable regeneration of the river and its environs, to ensure effective liaison between the authorities on river related issues, and to be an effective vehicle for overseeing strategy development and future implementation, capable of reconciling potentially conflicting priorities of stakeholders.
3. The River Wensum Strategy Partnership is led and project managed by the city council, and the strategy is being developed in partnership with the Broads Authority, Norfolk County Council (also representing the Greater Norwich Growth Board), the Environment Agency, and the Wensum River Parkway Partnership (also representing the Norwich Society). The partnership board is chaired by Councillor Stonard.

Roles and responsibilities

4. Most of the partner organisations have statutory responsibilities for different aspects of the river and its environs. These include Norwich City Council's role as local planning authority and its ownership of a large part of the river bed and other land including New Mills Yard and the Norwich Yacht Station. The Broads Authority is both navigation authority and harbour authority and is also the local planning authority with responsibility for planning matters relating to water, including the tidal section of the river downstream of New Mills Yard. The Environment Agency is responsible for the non-tidal reaches of the river upstream of New Mills, and has a number of other regulatory and monitoring responsibilities. Norfolk County Council has responsibilities for public health, transport and economic development as well as coordinating and delivering strategic green infrastructure within the GNGB area. The county council also manages the Norfolk Trails network which includes the Marriott's Way, Wherryman's Way and the Boudicca Way all of which connect with the River Wensum parkway within the city.

5. The Wensum River Parkway Partnership (WRPP) is also a key member of the partnership given its role as an umbrella stakeholder group focused on river issues. Its involvement helps to ensure ongoing stakeholder input into the developing strategy.
6. The development of this strategy provides an opportunity to address the complex range of statutory roles and responsibilities and ownership issues to encourage more effective joint working between partners on a range of river issues including mooring, enforcement, navigation, and conflicting uses.

Progress to date

7. The early work of the partnership, in winter / spring 2015, included gathering of background information about the river including mapping of land ownership, topographical details, and existing river infrastructure, and the development of a stakeholder database of all those with an interest in the river and its environs. The database includes special interest groups (covering a range of leisure, conservation, and environmental interests), local authority members and officers, landowners, businesses, charities, residents' organisations, and interested members of the public, and will be added to throughout the development of the strategy.
8. A key element of the early work also included discussions in early 2015 within each partner organisation to identify issues and opportunities relating to the river, in order to ensure that the strategy builds upon the wealth of expertise and experience that already exists within these organisations. A wide range of service areas was consulted within Norwich City Council including Planning, Transportation, City Development, NPS, Leisure, Housing, Communities and Neighbourhood teams, Parks and Open Spaces, Environmental strategy, Environmental health, and Culture and Event Management.
9. Following this, the first stage of consultation on the River Wensum Strategy took place in June – July 2015. This was an Issues and Opportunities consultation, seeking to identify issues to be addressed by the strategy and potential opportunities.
10. There was great public interest in the consultation event (held in Blackfriars Hall on 24 June) and in the online consultation which ran to 24 July. Over 160 individuals responded, with a total of over 800 individual comments. The report of consultation summarises the comments which include many leisure related issues and opportunities related to improved river infrastructure, improved access, better signage, and opportunities for enhancement for specific sites, eg. New Mills, and environmental issues and opportunities including opportunities for enhanced biodiversity, and green infrastructure enhancements (see further references below.) The issues and opportunities raised demonstrate a high degree of consensus with those identified by internal discussion within the partner organisations earlier in the year.

Strategy development

11. The draft strategy and action plan is currently being developed, taking into consideration the comments made through the public consultation exercise and input from the partner organisations. The strategy will include policies and proposals, with an action plan of projects capable of implementation in the short to medium term, which will be illustrated on a strategy map. The strategy will cover an approximately 10 year period.
12. Given the complexity of responsibilities and the cross-cutting nature of many of the emerging projects and proposals, development of the strategy requires discussion and coordination between the partner organisations in their various capacities, and with relevant stakeholders as appropriate. As the intention is to produce a strategy that is focussed and deliverable, the process of developing proposals also includes investigation of feasibility and of funding sources where relevant.

Strategy scope

13. The scope of the strategy was subject to consultation and although comments were largely supportive, some amendments are proposed in response to comments raised.
14. The proposed vision is 'to breathe new life into the river corridor by enhancing it for the benefit *of all* [rather than for 'a variety of groups'] and increase access to, and greater use of, this important asset. The river will once again play an important part in the growth and vitality of the city'.
15. The proposed strategy area remains unchanged and includes the Wensum corridor in Norwich, from Hellesdon Mill to Whitlingham Country Park (see plan at Appendix 1).
16. The objectives are proposed to be amended to reflect greater emphasis on biodiversity, and the need to tackle social deprivation and reduce inequalities:
 - Management of the river and its surroundings for the benefit of the city, residents of the wider Norwich area, and visitors
 - Increased access to, and use of, the area by all
 - Enhanced economy, particularly boosting leisure and tourism
 - Enhanced natural environment and biodiversity
 - Enhanced heritage
 - Address social deprivation and inequalities
 - Identify potential income and funding opportunities.

Emerging themes and proposals

17. An overview of the key themes and a flavour of the emerging proposals is summarised below. Some of the proposals mentioned are existing priorities but it is considered appropriate to repeat them here where their delivery will help meet strategy objectives.

Access

18. The river is a major piece of green / blue infrastructure with the potential to link to existing and proposed green infrastructure and with walking and cycling networks. It will help support the green infrastructure requirements of new and anticipated development in the city centre and east Norwich in particular. Emerging proposals include:
- Completion of missing links of the riverside walk. There are key missing links in the vicinity of the Playhouse between St George's Bridge and Duke Street bridge, and on Fishergate between Fye Bridge and Whitefriars;
 - Accessibility improvements to the existing riverside walk to replace steps where feasible and make it more accessible for those with mobility difficulties;
 - Wider connectivity improvements, for example linking the riverside walk with the Marriott's Way and Wherryman's Way;
 - Improved signage and promotion, to link the river to the cultural and visitor offer and the city centre; and
 - New bridge links in east Norwich including over the Wensum (to be delivered through new development) and the Yare (an existing Green Infrastructure Strategy priority).

Leisure

19. One of the key objectives of the strategy is to encourage greater activity on the river by a variety of small craft. The lack of activity on the river is evident to anyone walking along the riverside walk and there is potential to increase this to deliver a vibrant and attractive river corridor. One of the barriers to this is the relative lack of existing river infrastructure suitable for use by canoes and small boats in a range of locations (with parking provision where appropriate), and the need for more moorings in suitable locations. It is also important to understand the Broads Authority's legal responsibility to maintain the navigation of the river which can impinge on location of pontoons or other means of accessing the river.
20. Emerging proposals include:
- Improved new river infrastructure including new canoe launch points, upgrades to existing infrastructure to increase its use, and improved mooring facilities;
 - The strategy map will address conflicting uses where possible, for example by clarifying areas of the riverbank for use as moorings and those for anglers, and also those which need to be kept free for navigation purposes.
 - There is potential for events based on and around the river, to raise its profile and encourage greater use.

Environment

21. Environmental issues raised in the consultation process include biodiversity, flood and water management issues, the need for general environmental enhancements including litter reduction, and encouragement of renewable technologies. It is important also that the strategy reflects the differing character of the river environment, particularly upstream and downstream of New Mills.
22. Emerging proposals include:
- Biodiversity enhancements including habitat creation. This could focus on local nature reserves and county wildlife sites upstream of New Mills but also on sites in the city centre. Habitat enhancements could also include floating planters attached to pontoons.

- Naturalising of edges of the river where appropriate to maximise natural water storage and reduce flood risk.
- Work with relevant authorities including Anglian Water to improve water quality.
- Investigate the potential for renewable energy generation, particularly water source heat pumps.

Site specific proposals

23. A number of key sites in the city offer the potential for development or enhancements that could meet strategy objectives and contribute to regeneration of the river corridor. Given that the feasibility of a number of specific proposals is currently being explored, it would be premature to refer to them at this stage, but a number of these proposals will be included in the draft strategy which will be produced for consultation later in the year.

Management

24. As noted earlier the management and ownership of the river corridor is split between a number of bodies and this complexity poses a challenge to effective joint working. The strategy will address this through providing clarification of roles and responsibilities for all river related activities of partners including enforcement and maintenance. It will also signpost all relevant policy and guidance, for example planning policy of the relevant authorities within the strategy area and BA published guidance, so that members of the public, developers, and those authorities discharging their statutory responsibilities will have a 'one stop shop' resource for the whole range of policy/guidance relating to the river.

25. The strategy will promote joint working with relevant bodies or partnerships, for example Norfolk Trails, and health authorities, where they share common objectives, which could assist with funding bids and project delivery.

26. The strategy will also consider future delivery arrangements, which is likely to involve a delivery board made up of representatives of the partner organisations, to oversee delivery of the strategy and monitor outcomes.

Funding

27. The action plan referred to earlier in the report will act as a basis for funding bids. Potential sources of funding include Community infrastructure levy (CIL) funds for green infrastructure, and the CIL neighbourhood fund. Other sources of funding will be explored as part of individual project development and may include Heritage Lottery Funding, and LEP funding where appropriate. Other funding sources may also become available as the strategy progresses.

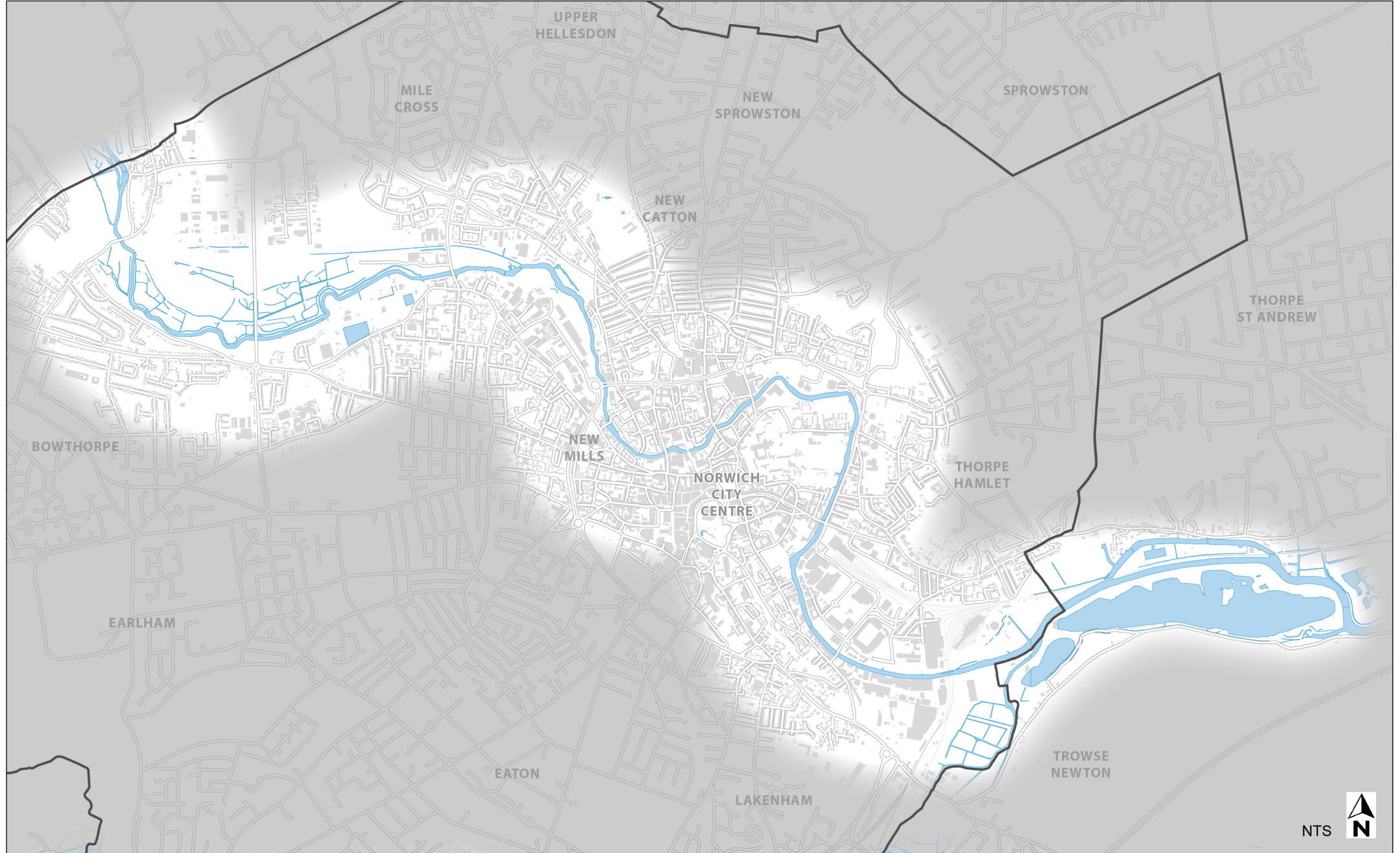
Next steps

28. Once complete, the draft strategy will be subject to a further public consultation, anticipated to be in summer 2016, to give the public and stakeholders an opportunity to comment on its proposals. As part of the consultation process, the draft strategy will be reported to sustainable development panel during the consultation period (as well as to key committees of the partner bodies) to seek member input at this key stage.
29. Following the consultation, a final version of the strategy will be produced, anticipated to be in late 2016. The strategy will be reported to sustainable development panel and cabinet (and by the partners' relevant committees), prior to adoption by each of the partner organisations, anticipated in early 2017. The adopted strategy will not only set out policies and proposals for the river corridor but will provide a framework for delivery and will support funding applications for specific improvement projects.

Further references

River Wensum strategy – Issues and opportunities consultation June – July 2015: summary of responses:

<http://www.norwich.gov.uk/Planning/PlanningPolicy/Documents/RWSPPublicConsultationReportOct15.pdf>



Appendix 1
River Wensum Strategy Area

