

## **BRINGING LIFE BACK TO THE RIVER**

### **Thoughts on an Integrated Access Strategy for the Norwich River Corridor**

#### ***A Discussion Paper***

##### **Introduction**

1. Why do we have a live City but a dead river? The streets and alleys of Norwich bustle with business and entertainment; pedestrians, pleasure-seekers and shoppers throng its streets and pavements. Meanwhile the Wensum, the river that brought prosperity to Norwich, and served as its main thoroughfare down the centuries, winds blankly through the City centre.

Broads cruisers come to the Yacht Station, City Boats come up to Elm Hill quay once a day, but apart from that on a normal day in Spring, Summer and Autumn there are practically no small craft on the river. Anglers line the banks, but there are no day boats, no rowboats, no punts, canoes or paddleboards.

Unlike Cambridge, Ely, York, Bath and many other cities and towns in Britain, Norwich has little in the way of regular river traffic. The Wensum, which flows within metres of the great tourism and leisure attractions of one of England's most historic cities, generates little in the way of boating business, activity or enjoyment. What a waste.

2. The question is: How can we help to create a bustling waterside and waterborne environment and economy to match those of the surrounding City? It would be stupid to ignore the fact that public funds are either drying-up or non-existent at the moment, but things will eventually get better, and having a set of plans in place will make it much easier to compete for funds when they become available.

It would therefore be useful now to note the necessary pre-conditions for the start and continuation of self-sustaining and sustainable growth, to consider a long-term strategy for river access, and to discuss a number of practical measures to begin the process of resuscitating Norwich as a River City.

##### **Aims**

1. The Wensum River Parkway Partnership was formed to foster co-operation between public, private and voluntary bodies to help Norwich capitalise on one of its most neglected and under-used assets. An effective action plan to bring life and activity back to the Wensum within and beyond Norwich will require an agreed and co-ordinated approach over the years as well as a continued and, on occasion, larger input of public resources.

The aim would be to create a cluster of sustainable businesses within a publicly-regulated and publicly-encouraged environment, and in conjunction a self-sustaining critical mass of boat users, for tourism, leisure and possibly residential purposes. Where possible, ways should be found to enable businesses and individual owners and users to contribute financially towards the public subsidy which makes the river navigable, safe and business-friendly.

A multi-authority approach may be envisaged with the City Council, the Broads Authority, the Environment Agency and other bodies, co-ordinated by the Wensum River Parkway Partnership, and drawing on the additional strengths of the many relevant voluntary amenity groups, societies and trusts. The eventual overall result should be a vibrant, thriving and economically self-sustaining waterfront and waterborne culture which adds to and draws strength from Norwich's huge international drawing-power as a centre for good living, leisure, heritage and tourism. Bringing more small craft back to the Wensum inevitably also means improving the offer of the bankside attractions that will draw boats into the City.

2. Since the river, by definition, stretches far beyond the City limits, it would be necessary to decide where the City's riverborne and riverside economy shades into the separate zones of Broadland and the Upper Wensum beyond Norwich. Provisionally the limits might be set somewhere near Ringland to the West and Whitlingham to the East.
3. Historically the dams and sluices at New Mills have separated the tidal Wensum from its upper reaches. Originally the Parkway Partnership - with its early preoccupation with increasing pedestrian footfall along the river banks – did not take in the Wensum beyond New Mills. But any small craft policy has to consider the potential of the river as far West as Fakenham for leisure and tourism - canoeing is already becoming popular along many stretches. There is no legal right of navigation above New Mills, so an access agreement such as that set up on the Waveney would be required, including all landowners. It will also be necessary to work with Natural England, who are engaged in the NE Wensum Restoration Strategy.

Once the river is seen as a continuing entity on both sides of the City, it becomes obvious that the existing complex at New Mills has the potential to become the heart of Norwich's riverborne activity instead of merely a full stop at its Western end. This possibility is explored further below in the Opportunities section. Unless otherwise stated or obviously impractical, all proposals below are meant to be applicable to the river along the entire stretch from Ringland to Whitlingham.

### **Pre-Conditions**

1. The river needs to be clean, navigable, safe and accessible, with bankside facilities for craft doing more than just passing through. A clearcut and well-publicised policy on moorings is necessary, as is firm enforcement of such a policy. Where these pre-conditions are already fulfilled, care will be needed to ensure they are maintained.
2. The present state of cleanliness may need to be upgraded. Water quality is in general good, but more boats on the river will bring greater scrutiny of the regular accretions of rubbish thrown into its depths. The citizens of Norwich may simply be following the practice of their forebears over the centuries, but modern standards require the regular removal of shopping trolleys, traffic cones and other even less desirable objects.

More and more regular litter clearance by the relevant authorities could be undertaken with (supervised) voluntary help from amenity groups, schools, nature charities and so forth. A community-based one-off clearance day could generate new interest. Examples from elsewhere (e.g. on the River Tawe in Swansea) of electrically-powered purpose-built litter collection vessels may be examined for possible adaptation and use when funding is available.

3. The Broads Authority will obviously continue its statutory duty of regular dredging. But will greater use by small craft make the need for this more frequent? And if the

long-term intention is to encourage craft upstream of New Mills, would it be necessary to consider some action to make the waterway more navigable through the West of the City? Here it is important to remember that the Broads Authority area and therefore its responsibility for dredging ends just outside the City, where the Environment Agency takes over. It may also again be worth investigating linkage with Natural England's Wensum Restoration Strategy.

4. The only really safe moorings within the City are at present at the Yacht Station. It is to be regretted that Norwich, unlike many other river cities, still has no purpose-built marina. The proposals (which may remain just that) for a marina on the Deal Ground would be too small and too far downstream to make much difference. Any expansion of river traffic or (much more radical) a decision to encourage and licence respectable and sustainable communities living on the river will require investment in bankside development.

The existence of Norwich's liveaboard community shows that there is a demand (as in other cities) for houseboat communities. Many of these elsewhere are pleasant places to live and a self-policing environmental asset. It may be better to admit the inevitability of such, and drive standards up by encouraging and if necessary enforcing better bankside provision by landowners.

Requiring those who rent out riverside space to provide proper serviced moorings, with access to facilities like showers and toilets, would drive prices up and undesirables away. Owners of leisure facilities should be encouraged to consider how provision of secure, serviced moorings for overnight stays would increase their customer base. The introduction of new Broads Authority planning guidelines on residential moorings will be a major step in encouraging secure, sustainable and environmentally acceptable houseboat communities.

Even if our strategy concentrates, for the moment, on encouraging leisure use rather than riverborne residence, hire fleet operators need either a purpose-built secure area on the river for overnight security, or a slipway and lock-up facility nearby. More pump-out and refuelling points may be needed to cope with any increase in traffic. So more riverbank development is a necessary requirement for the long-term goal of increasing the number of small craft using the Wensum within Norwich.

5. Access onto and from the river bank for small craft is one of the most important pre-conditions. We need more slipways, pontoons and steps simply to make it possible for small boat users to get into the City's pubs, restaurants, shops and tourist facilities. Below New Mills there is only one public slipway and very few pontoons – by far the most useful sort of access point on a tidal river with a fluctuation of at least a metre. Above New Mills the position is even worse.

Previous attempts to site a pontoon and a slipway have foundered on car parking and land ownership issues, though the recent placement of a pontoon near St George's Bridge shows it can be done. Often confused land ownership details, the necessary permissions required and design considerations tend to frustrate projects before they can start. A review of the riverbank detailing all possible access points, land ownership, and other physical restrictions is needed to establish a good number of points of ingress and egress, making the river seem a more friendly and accessible resource.

The present practice of allowing one operator exclusive rights to the two biggest and most robust pontoons will need to be modified. It is important to encourage healthy competition between commercial interests on the river, as well as offer private boat-owners or canoeists access to such pivotal entry points to the City as the Riverside

and Fye Bridge/Elm Hill. It would be useful to consider the provision of lockable moorings for those wishing to leave their craft for short periods of time.

It should be axiomatic that developers of riverbank sites where access can be improved are required as a matter of course to build (preferably public) steps, slipways or pontoons, just as present City planning policy requires them to include the riverside walkway. As our negotiations over the Playhouse pontoon demonstrate, this is not at the moment generally accepted.

6. People who own river frontages need to know what their rights are, and what they can offer potential permanent or passing users of their moorings. It would be useful to them to provide and publish some kind of blanket moorings policy or guidelines, perhaps on a zoned basis, building on existing regulations and depending on what usage the City Council and Broads Authority think desirable on particular stretches of the river. This should be produced, if possible, in consultation with riparian landowners. The existence of such a policy or guidelines would aid planners as well, obviating the need to negotiate afresh with each new planning applicant.

Part of such a policy should be hard-and-fast definitions of what facilities landowners are required to provide for what type of stay, ranging from a matter of hours to a year. Discussions already started between the City council and the Broads Authority need to be pushed to a conclusion.

### **Opportunities**

1. There are a number of sites along the river within the City where advantage may be taken of under-used possibility or development may unlock future potential. There also some more general possibilities. I am sure that everyone will have their own ideas, but these (going up-river) are mine. I am assuming that the plans for a crossing over the Yare to Whitlingham Country Park are at present unlikely to materialise. Plans including a ferry from the Deal Ground development towards the City and a chain ferry in Thorpe Parish should be encouraged.
2. The Deal Ground. Following the disappointing problems with Connect2 and the vanishing likelihood of getting a bridge built across the Yare to Whitlingham anytime soon, the present proposal to include a very small marina (even though it will be housed among flats overshadowing the river) would improve facilities.
3. Riverside. The existence of a lengthy waterfront with mooring potential by the side of a Night Time Economy which is slowly changing into a more friendly entertainment and leisure zone could attract many types of leisure craft, particularly in the evening. Secure, supervised moorings and facilities like those at the Yacht Station would be needed, but this could be a commercially attractive investment. It would obviously require robust security and proper policing, but linked in with a Waterfront Alliance of businesses right through the City (see point 9 below), there is surely potential (as in other cities) for floating and travelling café/restaurants and music boats, particularly if other riverside entertainment zones like the Playhouse/St George's/Duke's Wharf area become better established.
4. St Anne's Wharf. Although it not included in the City Council's Site Allocations Plan, future owner/developers here should be encouraged to consider the potential for a properly-sized marina (with surrounding high-value housing) opened up by the excavation of polluted soil on the site and its nearness to the widest point of the river at the old turning-point for coasters. This might be a challenging prospect for a conventional developer, but properties with a marina frontage command a high premium.

5. The Yacht Station. This facility was on the list of possible privatisation prospects put out by the City Council but has been retained in its ownership, with abolition of the grant to the Broads Authority, which remains the operator. Commercial operators could find day boat/rowboat/canoe hire an attractive addition, allowing broads cruiser holidaymakers to decant into smaller craft to explore the upper reaches, particularly if New Mills is redeveloped to allow easier access to the upper non-tidal reaches of the Wensum. It would be important to encourage more than one business user to foster competition.
6. The Playhouse/St George's/Duke's Wharf. This is already a nascent entertainment/leisure zone in its own right, particularly when we get the riverside walkway built. As work on Duke's Wharf resumes, it is to be hoped that the eventual developer will continue with plans for river-front restaurants and bars with pontoon access. Obviously most long-stay or overnight stay craft would find such moorings unattractive, but used as a drop-off or short-stay point they could attract much more custom and life to waterfront businesses.
7. New Mills. With investment, this site has enormous potential. It has a built-in tourist attraction, the almost-unique Edwardian pneumatic pumping station, only of only two of its kind in the country. Grade II\* listing of the building and its contents makes conventional development very difficult, but properly developed and curated as a nationally important industrial archaeology site it could be the heart of a major leisure complex. There is extensive car parking nearby, room on site for catering facilities, and council-owned land at the rear to expand.

Previous plans to turn the sluices into a canoe slalom foundered (I believe) on the seasonal lack of flow at this point, due to water extraction by various interests further up the Wensum valley. The same problem makes it difficult to generate green electricity, although a seasonal demonstration project would be possible. It is worth noting that as yet the City has no bio-energy demonstration centre – would there be enough space for one here?

The site also has two small basins, upstream and downstream, which would serve well as bases for boat/canoe/paddleboard/punt hire. If funds are available, and legal problems of ownership and maintenance can be overcome, constructing a lock and canoe portage would join the two halves of the river sundered since mediaeval construction of the flour mills that gave the site its name, and suddenly make Norwich the centre of a major leisure navigation, instead of simply being the end of the tidal reaches of the Yare and Wensum. A canoe/kayak instruction centre is another possibility.

8. The Waterworks. Again, development is likely on this site in the coming decades. Construction of a marina to serve the upper Wensum would add considerably to the attractions of any major development.
9. Waterfront Alliance. The pubs, clubs, restaurants and leisure attractions that face onto the river make little or no use of it at present as a plus factor - people are always interested in sitting by running water and watching the craft that travel on it - and the possibility of generating waterborne custom. The Riverside Association, despite its name, has so far largely failed to make use of the river and its environmental advantages as a business generator.

An association drawing together these businesses and co-ordinating a joint approach to promotion of riverbank facilities would be worth investigating. Pilot projects such as evening trips by a jointly-financed free water bus, stopping off at participating attractions to pick up and land, could be discussed. Joint promotions such as meal

deals for day boat or night-time waterbus users stopping or dropping off at pubs and restaurants on the river or adjacent should be considered.

10. Floating Playboat/Classroom/History Boat. Cambridge has a highly-successful Lottery-financed playboat which doubles as a floating classroom, heavily used for nature study lessons and special outings. With the Broads just downriver there is clear potential for linkage with wildlife interest groups, and the possibility of use by anglers during school holidays and slack periods. The craft would also be available for waterborne heritage tours organised by HEART or the Blue Badge Guides.
11. Theatre Boat. The Norfolk and Norwich Festival (in conjunction with the Theatre Royal and Playhouse) could be approached to consider the possibility of a floating performance craft for occasional or tourist-season use.
12. River Festival/Water Frolic. Some elements are sporadically in place – swimming races, duck races etc. - but this will need finance and extra organisational input to realise major long-term success.

### **An Action Plan and a Strategy**

1. This is of course a discussion paper, and I do not think I should propose specific actions to be undertaken individually or jointly by the Parkway partners until we are all agreed that they are worthwhile. I would hope that an Action Plan will emerge from the debate which will follow the thoughts above. It is worth noting that several towns and cities in the region are in the process of considering or acting on their own waterspace access strategies. Spalding and Bedford already theirs, employing a landscape architect who specialises in waterspace planning and urban regeneration, and Cambridge, Ely, Huntingdonshire District and East Northamptonshire District Councils are considering similar projects.
2. If we are to proceed further towards the aims listed in this paper, it would be worth considering calling a conference of all interested parties, public, private and commercial, centred on this document, to agree on the requirements and work necessary to produce a Norwich River Corridor Integrated Access Strategy. All major interests (e.g. hire boat operators, canoe clubs and sailing clubs, riverbank publicans and restaurateurs, anglers and major property holders) should be approached and consulted.

Areas of possible disagreement between interests should be identified and, where possible, avoidance strategies proposed. There is, for instance, a potential conflict between conserving the river and its trees, vegetation and wildlife as a purely aesthetic resource and making it more accessible for leisure purposes. Arguments between boating and angling interests are a constant. But the over-riding principle of any access strategy must be that the river is a common heritage, and should ideally be accessible to all.

3. I hope this is helpful.

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