

**Stroud District Council Canals Vision and Strategy consultation February 2022.**  
**Response by Purton Residents Association (PRA) dated 11<sup>th</sup> April 2022.**

Contact: 

**Illegibility and incomprehensibility of the consultation documents.**

The on-line version of the consultation documents is in very small print and we are unable to increase the print size on our computers. We raised this issue and you kindly supplied paper copies. Unfortunately, the same problem exists. The print is small and the font colour is pale. We have tried our best to respond to this consultation in these difficult circumstances but must point out its presentation because of the font size and colour hinders this effort. We are aware residents have been deterred from responding at all. And we cannot overstate how difficult it is to read the documents. Furthermore, there is also a complicated reference and key system and a lot of jargon.

Given the low response to your December consultation because it was poorly publicised, and our understanding that there is no firm plan for further consultation, the illegibility and incomprehensibility of this consultation, is most concerning.

**Drivers for change.**

It is unclear about the evidence base for the overall 'drivers for change', and maximum benefit-type aims and objectives, which underpin this draft strategy. It would be useful to see the terms of reference for DHUD. We ask to see the evidence base for the 'drivers for change'.

More especially, we ask for this evidence base because there appears to be an overall presumption in your proposals that maximum use means maximum benefit, without an evidence base about why maximum use means maximum benefit, and what this expansionist approach in terms of the range and volume of use of the canal will actually mean in practice.

There is a danger that the 'maximising' use plans for the canal corridor, however well intentioned, will cause more harm than good because of a lack of thought/ planning about what these plans will actually mean in practice.

It is important to remember that the canal, and towpath, is only a small area at any point, in terms of its width. It was built as a highway, to transport people and goods, with a narrow towpath beside it. Should this core use continue and be maximised? Is this compatible with increased recreation on the water with paddle boards, for example? Is increasing access for cyclists on the tow path, compatible with more walkers, more canal boats, more fisherman, more sightseers, more paddleboards and other inflatable craft? And so on. What is meant by 'local'? Is it really understood who will benefit from these plans, 'locals' or day trippers from Oxford, Bournemouth, Swindon, and Bristol and, and in what numbers? Who will the plans put off? And who/what will they harm? Who/what will lose out? What about safety issues and overcrowding? Such matters, and no doubt many more, need far more careful thought. We ask about the evidence base for your maximum use means maximum benefit assertions and plans, and definitions for key terms such as 'local' and 'community'.

*The role of Canal and River Trust (CRT).*

We are unclear about the role of CRT in SDC's plans; do they approve them? We refer you to CRT's 'Waterways and Wellbeing' pledge to work with local communities and improve their health and welfare as well, more especially 'to build stronger communities, by giving people the chance to protect and improve the places that matter to them'.

***Issues for the village of Purton.***

Purton, near Berkeley, is a small and rural village on the banks of the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. The canal runs through the centre of the village, with villagers living in very close proximity to it and to 'access places' to the canal ('access places', as you put it). There is a Village Green, allotments, two farms, and a church. One rural road runs through Purton between Halmore and Hinton.

It is welcome, therefore, that this draft canal strategy, in your Placemaking Framework Diagrams, points out the need for 'delicate management' of any plans for the canal which will impact on the community of Purton, due to Purton's proximity to the canal and access places.

We point out, however, that your assertion that the canal is a 'locally- enjoyed destination' is no longer true. In fact, locals are driven out and visitors are arriving in cars, vans and camper vans from further and further afield attracted by tourist visits to 'the wrecks', and a pontoon access point to the canal in the centre of the village which is increasingly used by day-trippers with paddleboards and inflatable craft.

The current problems of overcrowding are associated with three things. First, extensive on-line publicity as a tourist attraction of the so-called 'wrecks', which in fact are now vastly deteriorated due to vandalism and wear and tear caused by the visitors; the pandemic encouraging people into the countryside; the increase in dog ownership; more cyclists; the paddle-board and inflatable craft 'craze' encouraged by commercial businesses and outdoor pursuits businesses, all of whom come to Purton because they have learnt, usually on the internet and from businesses and organisations such as Canal and River Trust and British Canoeing that they can access the canal here.

We must point out that all this publicity, and consequent misuse of our village, has occurred with out any consultation at all with the community of Purton, nor with any regard at all to the health and well-being of the community of Purton. It is causing the villagers harm and damaging the environment. Organisations and businesses promoting Purton carry on regardless of the harm and damage they cause to residents, and to the environment. And visitors have unrealistic and misconceived expectations of what they can and should be able to do here.

More especially,

- a) Pollution from motor vehicles and their occupants, including traffic noise and fumes, damage to verges, blocking access, human waste, litter, dog mess, doors slamming, shouting and loud paddle board pumps, some of the visitors' rudeness and frustration with local residents, have resulted in the loss of a quiet and peaceful village and local environment. Furthermore, villagers have noticed destruction of the canal banks and precious wild life habitations, caused by paddle boarders and kayakers encroaching in to these areas as well as damage to the ground around the wrecks. Paddleboarders encroach into particularly sensitive wild life areas such as the timber ponds.
- b) The Village Green must be protected as a Village Green. This green space has a particular role to play in keeping all users, residents and visitors, away from motor vehicles, facilitating safe play areas for children and adults and a comfortable and accessible place for those with vulnerabilities.
- c) Purton has been widely advertised on social media, and in the press as a tourist destination especially for the wrecks, including advertising by Stroud DC, CRT and British Canoeing, in fishing magazines and in 'days out' articles. Visitors must be educated about what is appropriate behaviour in such rural settings. The dramatic increase in tourism has happened quickly, taking Purton by surprise and shows no sign of abating. Plainly, it has been caused by the pandemic, the use of social media, and the emergence of the recreation of paddle-boarding and inflatable kayaking by day trippers, most of whom do not appear to have licences to use the canal and there has been an increase in dog walkers. The village also accommodates large vans and other vehicles left by canal boat owners who do not have residential boat licenses in the village, as well as fishermen's cars and vans.
- d) The village church is unable to raise vital revenue from church teas on a Sunday, and to hold other church events because of the overcrowding. Long-standing local visitors to church teas have said they are no longer able to come, and if they do come, they will be met with a far from peaceful environment.
- e) In terms of visitors on the canal and to the surrounding areas there are many incidents of anti-social behaviour especially at night, such as paddle-boarders making noise and shining torches into villagers' houses. There are visitors to the wrecks through the night causing noise and damage. This is as well as the public urinating and defecating in the village and the public being verbally abusive to residents. There is speeding on the village road.
- f) In terms of non-residential canal boaters, there is significant concern about the increasing number of these craft who live on the canal. More, especially there are concerns about how these craft dispose of their waste and environmental pollution. Noisy generators, power tools and loud music in the vicinity of villagers' homes are a problem.
- g) Villagers are concerned about the damage to the healthy soil and reed beds especially around the wrecks and on the foreshore. The wrecks are accommodating thousands of visitors a year and the natural environment around them is being destroyed. Visitors

have been seen carrying bags of reeds back to their cars and litter is left. Villagers have also noticed a significant increase in the number of dogs disturbing the environment.

- h) Villagers and District Councillors have raised concerns about safety on the canal caused by irresponsible and unlicensed use of paddle boards and kayaks, and swimmers and people going into the water to play from the landing stage in the centre of the village. The license system is a vital tool in controlling who is using the canal. CRT's inability to monitor all unlicensed behaviour is an additional concern. The villagers can give numerous accounts of 'near misses' in terms of visitors having accidents on the canal and dangerous situations causing risk to life around the area of the landing stage.
- i) The landing stage placed in the centre of Purton by CRT in recent years is a main cause of these problems. It is unclear why it was put there and Purton residents have asked that it be removed. Furthermore, this landing stage obstructs the place where previously animals that had fallen in to the canal were recovered. There is no alternative suitable site to recover animals including live stock.
- j) Representatives from Hinton Parish Council (HPC) are supporting solutions including re-directing traffic and visitors to Sharpness. They have proposals for improving signage in the vicinity of the docks to direct visitors to the Dockers' Club and to where there is extensive parking and green space, as well as access to refreshment, toilets and to the canal. In the longer term, we have suggested this area could provide a site for a CRT visitors centre, dealing with licensing matters amongst other things. HPC also pointed to two unused and neglected landing stages at Sharpness, which could be made available to paddle-boarders and kayakers. Visitors to the tow path and wrecks can be directed to arrive from Sharpness, rather than from Purton. The difficulty is that currently CRT are resisting these suggestions, whilst promoting recreation on the canal and allowing Purton to be overwhelmed.

### **Profiling criteria.**

Please see the above issues for Purton. Accordingly, we challenge the assertion at Continuity 9, that there is good opportunity for travel and recreation along the canal and we do not agree that all the communities are thriving because of their association with the canal.

### **Strategy area profiles.**

We broadly agree with this at this stage.

We question whether Slimbridge, like Sharpness, should be considered separately given the Wetland Trust and its ambition to attract more and more visitors.

### **Placemaking Frameworks.**

We struggle to make sense of this and refer you to the issues for Purton.

### **Carbon reduction opportunities.**

We struggle to make sense of this.

We ask about the evidence base for these assertions and plans, and definitions for key terms such as 'local'.

### **The 'ingredients' of the Future Place.**

We refer again to all the above.

### **The supplementary Planning Document.**

All the above applies. Furthermore, in this planning document there should be specific reference to supporting the character, health and wellbeing and community/ green spaces in the village of Purton in line with the 'delicate management' of Purton the consultation refers to.