

Draft Thames Waterway Plan Strategic Sustainability Assessment Report

Executive Summary

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Thames Waterway Plan

1.1 The overall aim of the Thames Waterway Plan is to “map out the reinvigoration of leisure and tourism along the river corridor in ways that are both socially inclusive and sustainable” (draft TWP, April 2005). The draft plan includes four core objectives:

- improve and promote access and information for all users (on water and land).
- improve and maintain the river infrastructure and facilities and services for all users.
- contribute to enhanced biodiversity, heritage, and landscape value in the waterway corridor.
- increase use of the river and its corridor.

Aims of the Strategic Sustainability Assessment

1.2 As part of the preparation of the draft TWP, a Strategic Sustainability Assessment (SSA) was carried out. The objective of the SSA was to inform and appraise the evolving plan against sustainable development principles. This allowed the effects, from a social, economic and environmental perspective, to be assessed against available baseline data and objectives and integrated into the development of the plan to ensure that the plan delivers sustainable development.

1.3 As part of this process, a sustainable development framework was defined for the area covered by the TWP based on objectives included in the South East's Regional Sustainable Development Framework and Integrated Regional Framework with more detailed criteria pertinent to leisure and tourism along the Thames corridor added. A total of 25 sustainability objectives were used covering all aspects of sustainability, including for example:

- To improve the health and well-being of the population and reduce inequalities in health.
- To make the countryside and historic environment accessible for enjoyment.
- To maintain and improve the water quality of rivers and to achieve sustainable water resources management.
- To ensure high and stable levels of employment so everyone can benefit from the economic growth of the Region.
- To encourage the development of a buoyant, sustainable tourism sector.

- 1.4 The approach adopted for the SSA of the TWP drew on both Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA). The SSA is concerned with the assessment of high-level policies and proposals. Environmental assessment will also need to be applied, as necessary, to individual sites and proposals as they come forward. The principles of sustainable development and the use of SSA will be integral to the further development of the plan and its subsequent revisions.
- 1.5 The Environment Agency commissioned Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP) to undertake the SSA of the TWP, with support from the Agency's Waterways Department. The assessment was overseen by a Steering Group chaired by the Agency's Regional Strategic Unit Manager.
- 1.6 This is a short summary of the SSA, the full documents are available at www.visitthames.co.uk/twp.

2. CONTEXT

- 2.1 As part of the SSA process, background information was gathered on:
- the policies, plans, strategies and programmes relevant to the TWP and its SSA and those that it may affect.
 - the baseline characteristics including relevant social, economic and environmental data to the TWP.

Policies, plans, strategies and programmes relevant to the TWP

- 2.2 To put the proposals identified in the draft TWP in context, it was important to consider other relevant policies, plans, strategies and programmes which may have an impact upon them and in turn they may have an impact upon. The documents reviewed included: legislation; planning guidance; Government strategies; Environment Agency and other organisations' plans, strategies and guidance; and local authority development plans.
- 2.3 These were used to obtain information on:
- Legal requirements and duties.
 - Background information and baseline data.
 - Policies, targets and aspirations for the management of certain aspects of the Thames corridor.
 - Conditions and/or criteria for how development and/or other activities should take place.
 - Opportunities and priorities for enhancements.
 - Details of works or projects already planned along the Thames corridor.
- 2.4 It will be important as the draft TWP is developed through consultation with partners and stakeholders that potential synergies, as well as potential divergences, with other policies, plans, strategies and programmes are identified and either exploited or resolutions sought.

The baseline characteristics of the Thames corridor

- 2.5 Environmental, social and economic baseline data was collated to provide the evidence base for the appraisal process. The information collated on the Thames corridor drew on the vast wealth of information already available, much of which is held by the Agency. In addition, information from other sources was used such as the Office of National Statistics and river related businesses.
- 2.6 A separate baseline report was prepared as part of the SSA describing the key baseline characteristics of the Thames corridor. In addition, 26 maps were produced to illustrate some of the key data that was considered to be particularly useful to inform the appraisal process.

3. APPRAISAL OF THE DRAFT POLICIES AND WATERWAY STANDARDS

Scoping potential effects of the TWP

- 3.1 The first stage of appraising the draft TWP involved scoping the key potential effects. This drew on the context described above and focussed on three aspects that whilst closely interrelated, were considered to capture where the plan may have its most significant influence and in turn where it may have the greatest potential impact on sustainability issues. These were:
- Increased boat movements.
 - Provision of additional navigation facilities and infrastructure.
 - Increase in other river corridor users.
- 3.2 The key issues raised by each of these were identified, including both potentially positive and negative effects. In the case of potentially negative effects, possible measures to avoid or mitigate them were also considered. This was used to inform the development of the TWP to ensure negative effects were avoided or at least adequately mitigated and potentially positive effects were maximised.
- 3.3 The key types of effects that were identified as relevant to the three aspects of the plan are explored in detail in the full SSA, but the broad categories the key effects fell into were those on:
- The local and river related economy.
 - Local employment.
 - The bed and banks of the river.
 - River flows and flood risk.
 - Physical and chemical water quality.
 - Amenity value and aesthetics.
 - Biodiversity and heritage value.
 - Local transport network and congestion.

- The use of natural resources, including waste generation.
- Social inclusion and participation in sport and recreation.
- Health and safety of visitors and local residents.

The appraisal of the draft TWP objectives, policies and waterway standards

- 3.4 As the draft TWP was developed appraisal was carried out divided into a series of steps, namely:
- Compatibility of sustainable development objectives and draft TWP core objectives.
 - Compatibility of draft TWP policies against one another.
 - Appraisal of draft policies and waterway standards.
- 3.5 The appraisal was an iterative process over several months resulted in various recommendations and proposed changes to the text of the draft Plan and its policies and waterways standards. This included proposals for rewording, additions and proposals for the inclusion of conditions and mitigation to be applied during implementation. This culminated in the full SSA report being published alongside the draft TWP which incorporates many of the recommended changes from previous iterations.
- 3.6 For the appraisal of the 31 policies included in the draft TWP, each was assessed against the sustainable development objectives using the appraisal criteria as prompts. This was informed by the baseline data and scoping of potential effects. A matrix was generated for each policy to summarise the results, with a score recorded on a five point scale (major and minor positive, negative and neutral effects) for each objective and a commentary against those where an expansion on the score was needed. A summary of findings and recommendations was included at the end of each matrix.
- 3.7 At the same time as appraising the policy, the possible actions proposed in the draft Plan and related waterway standards were also considered and comments and recommendations included as necessary. The appraisal of the waterway standards was also informed by a gap analysis undertaken as part of developing the TWP. This highlighted where meeting the proposed standard would require additional facilities. Note that the Aspirations maps prepared as part of developing the TWP have not been subject to appraisal as yet.
- 3.8 The policies, and their related waterway standards, that raised the greatest sustainability concerns were subject to more detailed appraisal and very more extensive recommendations were provided to those preparing the draft TWP. This included proposed wording changes, additional actions and details of guidance and conditions to include in the supporting text to guide implementation. These policies included:

- Policy 11: Access – we will provide facilities for those needing access by car.
- Policy 15: Boating – we will make it easier to take up low cost boating.
- Policy 17: Boating – we will encourage more boats on the river.
- Policy 18 and 19 Permanent and Visitor Mooring –we will encourage the creation of new permanent moorings and we will provide visitor moorings to meet boaters' needs.
- Policy 30: Services and Facilities – we will provide services and facilities that meet the reasonable needs of all our users.

Results of the appraisal

- 3.9 The appraisal has shown that many of the draft policies proposed have the potential for major benefits on sustainability. However, there are some policies which do have the potential to cause significant negative effects, as well as positive effects. This is inevitable with a plan such as the TWP and the challenge is to find an acceptable balance between the potentially conflicting sustainability objectives.
- 3.10 The appraisal has focused on these potential conflicts and has sought to ensure that either an alternative is considered or measures are specified in the draft Plan to ideally avoid the negative effects and maximise the positive, or where this is not possible, to at least ensure appropriate mitigation to minimise negative impact is required. The implementation of these measures will therefore be critical to the final performance of the plan in terms of sustainability.
- 3.11 The sustainability objectives that the appraisal has identified as likely to benefit most significantly, include:
- Improved health and well-being.
 - Improved accessibility to services and facilities.
 - Making the countryside and historic environment accessible for enjoyment.
 - Development of a buoyant sustainable tourism sector.
 - Stimulate economic revival in areas requiring regeneration.
- 3.12 The sustainability objectives that the appraisal has identified as potentially being at risk from negative effects are listed below. However, by following the appropriate implementation conditions and measures included in the draft Plan and the SSA report in many cases these could be avoided or reduced and in some case turned into positive effects.
- Reducing the risk of flooding.
 - Conserving and enhancing biodiversity.
 - Protecting and enhancing the countryside and historic environment.
 - Reducing road traffic and congestion.
 - Reducing waste generation.
 - Maintaining and improving water quality and achieve sustainable water resource management.

Monitoring significant sustainability effects

- 3.13 During the course of the SSA and development of the TWP, there has been much discussion regarding 'carry capacity'. The management of a recreation asset such as the River Thames requires judgement regarding the acceptable number of visitors and users and their impact on the resource. The need to balance the quality of the recreational experience, the conservation of the natural or historic resource, the desire to provide public access and facilities for as many people as possible and the need to maintain or increase income, means that decisions about visitor numbers and their management will remain a central issue for the Agency and others involved in managing the Thames.
- 3.14 However, whilst it is clear that the capacity is not finite we do not fully understand the cause and effect of the complex processes that operate across the different dimensions of sustainability relevant to the Thames. As a result, and drawing on one of the fundamental aspects of sustainable development, it is important to take a precautionary approach whilst we continue to seek to understand these processes and plan using a combination of historic data, current and future trends and the advice of specialists. This needs to be within a continuing process of review as new information and understanding is available and amendments to policy made accordingly.
- 3.15 A firm conclusion of the SSA is therefore that we are not in a position to define an explicit carrying capacity, for example in terms of boats numbers, for the Thames and indeed it may not even be desirable or appropriate to do so. Rather an approach of understanding the current state of the Thames and its environs (environmentally, socially and economically) is recommended, followed by monitoring progress towards agreed goals or targets and planning and managing accordingly in response. Developing the TWP and undertaking the SSA has allowed us to make progress on understanding the current state of the Thames and to identify some of the key gaps. The SSA proposes a series of indicators and targets to be used to inform future revisions of the plan.

Next steps in the SSA process

- 3.16 The next steps in the SSA process will include:
- Appraising any significant changes to the TWP resulting from the consultation responses and in developing the final Plan.
 - Recording in a statement how the SSA has changed the plan and summarising the consultation responses relevant to the SSA.
 - Developing and applying appraisal of the aspirations as part of developing them into firm proposals for the final Plan.
 - Agreeing indicators and target for monitoring significant sustainability effects.