

1 The need for a strategy

1.1 The River Wensum flows from its source in north-west Norfolk through the Greater Norwich area, to its confluence with the River Yare at Whitlingham to the east of the city. This strategy focuses on the section of the river within the city boundary and also includes the Whitlingham area.

1.2 The River Wensum has had a major influence on the development of Norwich over the centuries. As the city's oldest and most important highway, industry grew up on its banks and influenced the city's early development. Despite its location close to the attractions of this historic city the River Wensum generates little in the way of river-based businesses and leisure activity.

1.3 Over recent decades Norwich City Council has sought to maximise the potential of the river corridor for residents and tourists, resulting in the creation of over 11km of riverside walk through its planning policies, and the development of three new bridges since 2001 – the Novi Sad Friendship Bridge, Lady Julian Bridge and the Jarrold Bridge. The River Wensum is within the Broads National Park (up to the head of navigation at New Mills), and the Broads Authority has also had a key role in securing these bridges and improving public access to the river. In recent decades the city council has also encouraged major retail, residential and leisure developments on both sides of the river, with developments designed to face the river to encourage its attractiveness and leisure potential.

1.4 Despite recent achievements, much remains to be done to make the most of this key but under-utilised asset, both in terms of its management and through physical enhancements.

Opportunities

1.5 The Greater Norwich area is the main focus in the east of England for growth, for new homes and jobs, leisure, cultural and educational development. The development of a strategy for the River Wensum is an opportunity to consider how the river can better contribute to and support the regeneration of the city centre and the Greater Norwich area, by maximising its potential for leisure, environmental, cultural and business opportunities for the benefit of all – residents, businesses and visitors. In particular, a revitalised river corridor with improved access to both the river and the Broads will complement the city's heritage and cultural offer, giving it a competitive advantage in attracting inward investment, and help to create an environment which attracts and retains creative, highly skilled and entrepreneurial workforce. The strategy will also help inform the development of new planning and other policy in the Norwich area including the Greater Norwich Local Plan.

1.6 Key opportunities include:

- addressing the complex range of statutory roles and responsibilities and ownership issues for the river to encourage a more integrated approach to its management, with greater coordination between the RWSP partners in delivering their statutory responsibilities, and development of a shared approach to a range of river issues
- working with external partners, including the Business Improvement District (BID) which has recently expanded its area to include part of the River Wensum, and institutions like Norwich University of the Arts (NUA), as well as the wide range of stakeholder groups with an interest in the river
- enhanced green infrastructure and public realm in the river corridor, through improvements to the riverside walk, better signage and interpretation, and public art where appropriate, and by linking out to Whitlingham Country Park which is now a major leisure destination
- boosting the local economy by providing an environment conducive to the establishment and growth of various creative businesses and by attracting tourists and visitors with benefits to Norwich's shopping, heritage and visitor attractions,
- encouraging greater use of the river, through new and enhanced river infrastructure, to encourage a vibrant and thriving waterfront and help drive longer-term commercial activity
- encouraging greater activity through imaginative and sustainable new developments in the river corridor
- enhanced biodiversity in the heart of the city, and increased awareness of biodiversity issues
- the river also flows through some areas with high levels of social deprivation, so there are opportunities to address health inequalities and deprivation in the strategy
- attracting substantial additional investment: development of a set of projects for implementation in the short to medium term will form the basis for funding bids. Identification of projects in the draft strategy has already led to several funding bids.

The River Wensum Strategy Partnership

1.7 This strategy has been produced by the River Wensum Strategy Partnership (RWSP) which is led and project managed by Norwich City Council, working in partnership with the Broads Authority, Norfolk County Council (also representing the Greater Norwich Growth Board - GNGB), the Environment Agency, and the Wensum River Parkway Partnership (WRPP – a voluntary body also representing the Norwich Society and key river stakeholders). Most of the partners have statutory

responsibilities for different aspects of the river and its environs, whilst the WRPP has been instrumental in highlighting river issues since its formation in 2007¹.

1.8 The RWSP has consulted with the public and stakeholders to help it shape the strategy document. The details of the Issues and Options consultation are available on the city council's website, and the comments made through the consultation have helped to inform the development of the strategy².

The strategy document

1.9 The strategy will run for a 10 year period from adoption (to approximately 2028) and includes policies and proposals in a number of themed sections (management, access, environment etc), each of which also refer to cross-cutting issues such as heritage, and boosting the local economy. The proposals are site-specific and many address more than one theme. The strategy is not a statutory plan so its policies do not have the status of statutory planning policies. However the strategy represents the aspirations of the RWSP and is an important evidence base which will help inform the content of future planning and transport policy, the Greater Norwich Green Infrastructure Strategy and the Greater Norwich Growth strategy, and support potential funding bids.

1.10 The strategy is accompanied by an Action Plan containing proposals considered capable of implementation in the short to medium term (approximately 3 years) subject to feasibility and funding. The focus of current action plan projects is mainly within the city centre as this is where current opportunities and potential funding have been identified, however there are other projects that could be developed for the area upstream of New Mills, some of which have been identified through the consultation process. The intention is to review the Action Plan regularly as proposals are implemented and new ones developed. Potential future projects will be assessed and, subject to how they perform against the assessment criteria, may be included in a future version of the Action Plan. The strategy itself will be monitored and may be reviewed within its 10 year lifetime if appropriate.

¹ The WRPP published an aspirational study 'Regenerating Norwich as a River City' in 2007.

² Issues and Options consultation: report of public consultation (published October 2015): https://www.norwich.gov.uk/downloads/file/2841/report_summarising_the_consultation_responses