

August 2021



Warwickshire Waterways Strategy

2021 - 2026



Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 presented humanity with unprecedented challenges on a global scale - and may well continue to do so for years to come. The health crisis changed people's perspectives on everyday life and the world around them. Our locked-down existences made us appreciate simple pleasures perhaps taken too much for granted. The natural environment - green spaces, waterside locations and wildlife - helped many of us get through.

There are even bigger, global challenges ahead. There may be debate about the causes, but climate change is real - and it's already happening. In Warwickshire, as elsewhere, we must plan for changing temperatures and weather patterns that will affect us, our environment, and the wildlife with whom we share the planet.

Warwickshire's Waterways Strategy will play a key role in shaping the county's response on both fronts. The waterways network - which passes through all five districts and boroughs - is a massive asset for wellbeing, ecology and tourism as we develop post-pandemic recovery plans. The strategy will also address issues around the impact of climate change on natural habitats and species diversity.

Our waterways have connected people and places throughout history - and will continue to do so. Once main arteries for transporting goods, they are now used primarily for leisure, and provide important wildlife habitats. We must protect and promote them as vital assets for communities across Warwickshire, both now and for future generations.

Councillor Heather Timms
Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture
Warwickshire County Council



Cllr Heather Timms

Warwickshire waterways network

A total of 19 rivers cross Warwickshire including Shakespeare's Avon which runs southwards through the county from its source near Coventry, eventually joining the Severn in Gloucestershire.

There are four canals in the Warwickshire Ring: the Grand Union, Birmingham and Fazeley, Coventry, and Oxford. The Ring covers a distance of 104 miles with 121 locks. These include the spectacular 'Stairway to Heaven' at Hatton, near Warwick, where 21 broad locks raise the canal an impressive 146 feet.

The county has more than 100 miles of towpaths - which saw increased use for daily exercise during coronavirus lockdowns.

The Warwickshire Waterways Strategy 2021 - 2026 sets out a framework to promote the county's rivers and canals as valuable community assets that can be used and enjoyed by all.

Vision

- to promote and protect the county's waterways as a rich habitat for wildlife and a desirable setting for residents, visitors and businesses
- to connect people and places via the waterways network

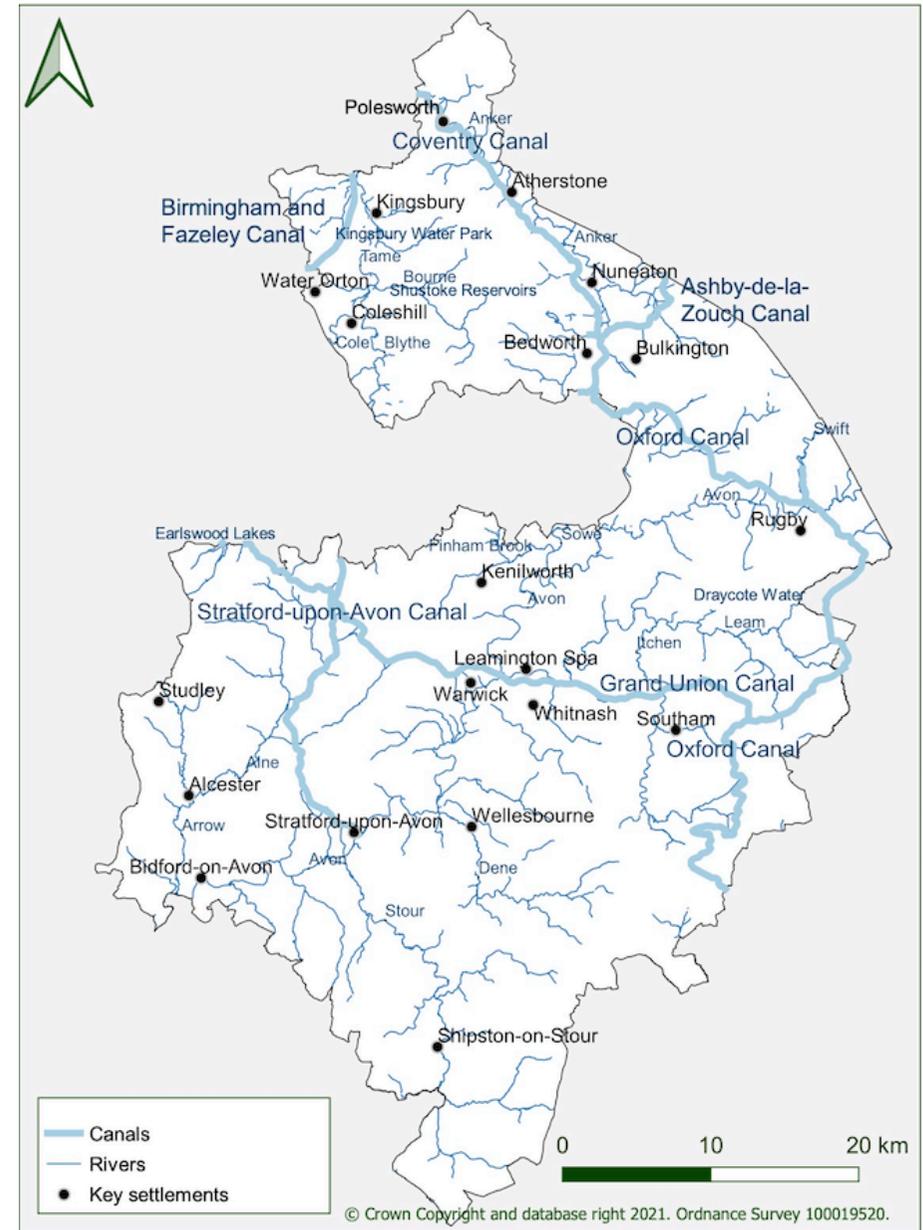
Priorities

The strategy supports partner priorities and ambitions around improving people's health and wellbeing through outdoor activity and social interaction, their sense of place through a better understanding of historical context, and the potential of the countywide waterways network to boost the local economy through tourism. In addition, the strategy has ambitions to create sustainable transport routes, for walkers and cyclists, by improving towpaths and wayfinder signage. It also recognises the incremental impact of climate change on waterspaces, wildlife and biodiversity - and the urgent need to restore natural habitats to stem species loss.

Development partners

The strategy has been developed by Warwickshire County Council (WCC) in partnership with the Canal and River Trust - with additional input from Warwickshire Wildlife Trust. A small working group was set up comprising specialist representatives from the three organisations. The partners identified considerable crossover in their policies, ambitions and forward planning, and agreed there were clear benefits of working together to promote the county's waterways - both in terms of potential impact and access to funding.

Engagement with other key stakeholders, including river trusts and the Environment Agency, as well as community groups across the county, is ongoing. We will also liaise with Shakespeare's England - which has been working regionally to promote waterways and the visitor economy as a key partner in the [England's Waterways](#) project.



Warwickshire Waterways



Context: Warwickshire Heritage and Culture Strategy 2020 - 2025

The Waterways Strategy is aligned to the [Warwickshire Heritage and Culture Strategy](#) - one of five core five-year strategies for delivering the County Council's vision 'to make Warwickshire the best it can be - sustainable now and for future generations'.

The Strategy was developed in collaboration with heritage and culture organisations - and individual practitioners - from across Warwickshire. Whilst WCC is spearheading the Strategy, it is essentially a county and sector-wide partnership.

Our collective vision is that, by 2025, Warwickshire will have a thriving, innovative and creative heritage and culture sector working collaboratively to develop and deliver a rich, high-quality, accessible heritage and culture offer for all who live, work in, and visit Warwickshire.

The Strategy was shaped around three main themes reflecting current priorities:

- health and wellbeing
- sense of place
- economic vibrancy

In March 2020 an initial action plan was developed. See the video version [here](#).



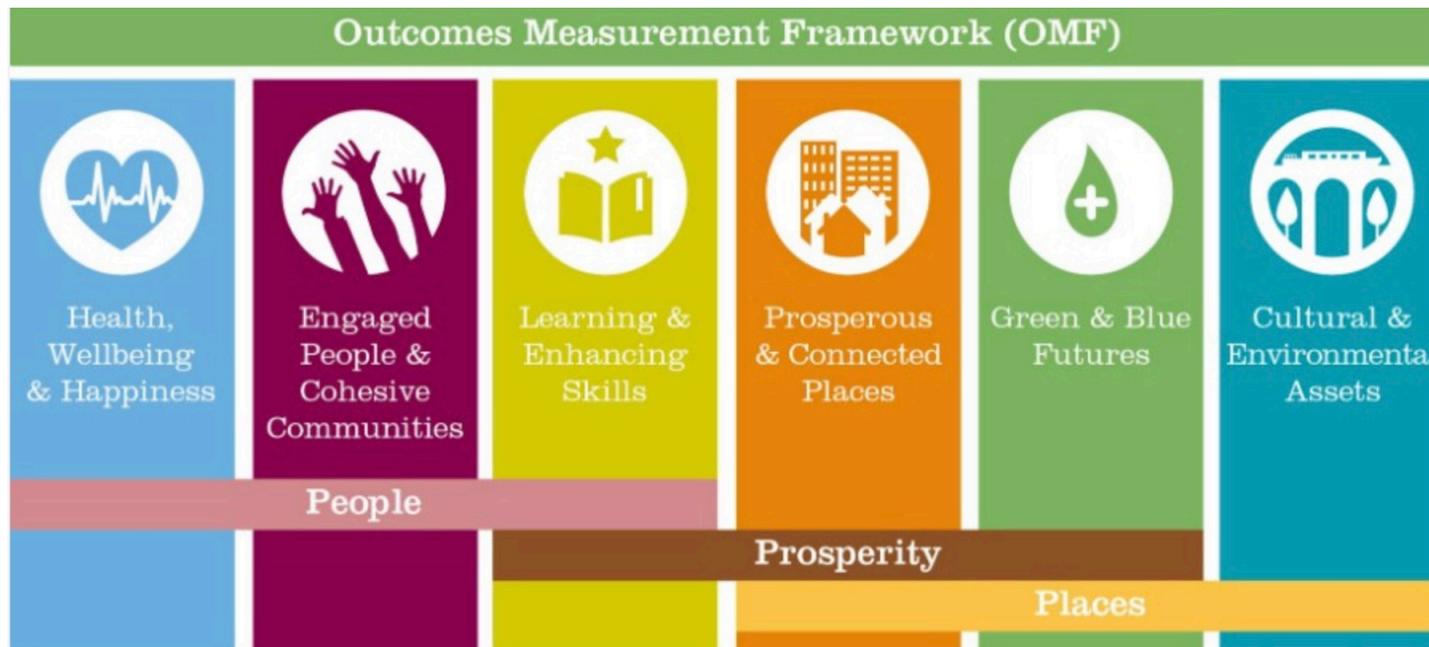
WCC Officers will ensure the Warwickshire Waterways Strategy dovetails with other Council strategies, such as the Local Transport Plan, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan and emerging place-based strategy, as well as initiatives around supporting post-coronavirus recovery. They will also review opportunities to align the Waterways Strategy to other initiatives within the county, for example: the development of the River Leam as a bathing river by 2025, and the opportunity to consider the role of the River Anchor in Transforming Nuneaton.

Context: Waterways making a difference

Making life better by water for everyone, every day

The Canal and River Trust believes that spending time by water makes us happier and healthier - also a key ambition for Warwickshire County Council. The Trust works with communities to transform local canals or rivers, creating places and spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, every day.

“We measure how we make a difference to people lives with an annual outcomes report. This looks at how we improve health, wellbeing and happiness, protect the environment, enhance learning and encourage prosperous local communities.”



The Trust was established as a charity in 2012 to maintain waterways, reservoirs and docks across England and Wales. Other priorities are improving health and wellbeing, and making a difference to people's lives.



Context: Active travel

Getting Warwickshire moving differently

The Government is keen to promote walking and cycling - or 'active travel' - as a more sustainable and healthier way to get about, particularly for shorter journeys.

In 2016 it published a briefing for local authorities, asserting that: "Switching more journeys to active travel will improve health, quality of life and the environment, and local productivity, while at the same time reducing costs to the public purse."

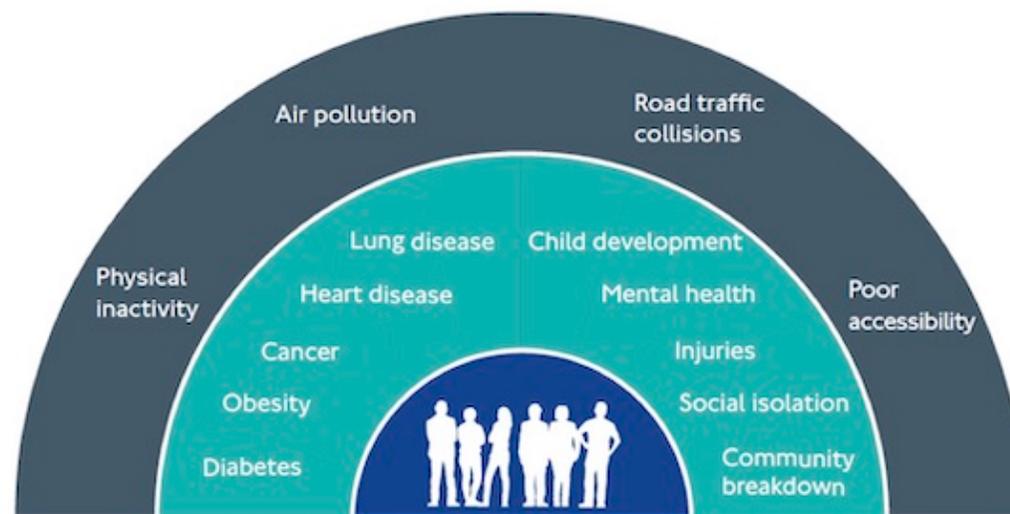
In 2020 the Department for Transport published its *Gear Change* vision, stating: "We want and need to see a step change in cycling and walking in the coming years..... We have a unique opportunity to transform the role cycling and walking can play in our transport system, and get England moving differently."

WCC is preparing a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, and has committed more than £9 million to developing the network of cycle routes in and around town centres.

These, along with improvements to canal towpaths, riverside regeneration projects, wayfinder signage and an underpinning focus on providing accessibility for all, will enable people to make healthier, pollution-free choices about local travel. The plans will include walking and cycling routes to the county's country parks and other green spaces, to further enhance the offer.

Road transport, whether public or private, is clearly detrimental to public health. Traffic pollution is bad for the planet, as well as people, and its contribution to climate change cannot be ignored. The Warwickshire Waterways Strategy will be instrumental in ensuring these issues are tackled, and that effective measures are taken to minimise and mitigate their impact across the county.

Key adverse links between motorised road transport and health



From: *Valuing the health benefits of transport schemes* - Transport for London 2015



Waterways Strategy - aims

Warwickshire County Council and partners share these key ambitions and aims for the county's waterways strategy:

Improve public **health and wellbeing** via waterways-related physical/outdoor/leisure activities and 'family fun' events

Further explore/share the history of the waterways, locally and countywide, to increase **sense of place**

Contribute to the county's **economic vibrancy** by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy

Promote the waterways environment as **green spaces** and **wildlife habitats** worthy of attention and protection

Present and promote the waterways as **sustainable transport routes** - for walking and cycling

Support efforts to reduce the county's carbon footprint and address issues around the impact of **climate change**

Explore opportunities for linkage with **Coventry City of Culture 2021** and **Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022**

Key themes of the strategy

In developing the strategy, the following key themes were identified as a framework

Finance and funding	Explore joint funding opportunities with a particular focus on projects to aid post-lockdown recovery and encourage public awareness and usage of waterways environments for leisure, pleasure, exercise and sustainable transport.
Volunteer support	Address concerns of existing volunteers who may be reluctant to return after lockdown. Plan a recruitment drive to increase numbers and widen the age and social profile of volunteers. Potential link to social prescribing.
Public confidence	Adjust messaging post-coronavirus pandemic to reflect changes in circumstances, behaviour, expectations etc. Stress mental and physical health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor activity and social interaction.
Quick wins	Initial focus on projects that can be funded/achieved relatively quickly - to benefit local communities and economies. These might include way-finder signage and interpretation, and/or towpath improvements.
Social prescribing	Investigate potential for social prescribing as part of strategy ambitions to address wider inequalities and improve mental and physical health and wellbeing. Learn from existing social prescribing projects.
Sector networking	WCC's Heritage and Culture Strategy has created a network of sector partners willing and eager to work together. Localised projects involving multiple partners would seem to be the way forward post-pandemic.
Publicity and promotion	Promotion of existing assets and attractions is a priority as the sector reopens for business. Link to existing marketing campaigns. Produce video case studies and plan localised campaigns to raise public awareness/usage.
Sustainable transport routes	Develop and promote towpaths as sustainable transport routes for walking and cycling - and link to the County Council's £9 million plans to improve and extend the network of cycle routes in and around Warwickshire towns.
Infrastructure	Seek funding to improve towpaths and public areas, including improved lighting to support community safety. Plan a signage project to provide maps and clear routes to and from nearby communities and their facilities/attractions.
Events and activities	Plan a calendar of events and activities to attract families to the waterways - potentially part of a wider '10 free (or low-cost) things to do this weekend' campaign. These could be themed around history, wildlife or 'did you know?'
Climate change	Support efforts to reduce the county's carbon footprint and counter the impact of climate change - with particular focus on restoring wildlife habits to promote biodiversity and reduce species loss.

Action plan 2021 - 2022

The three main themes align with those of the Warwickshire Heritage and Culture Strategy 2020 - 2025

SENSE OF PLACE

AIMS - Further explore/share the history of the waterways, locally and countywide, to increase sense of place

ACTIONS

- Develop a teachers' pack to facilitate class/group outings
- Improve signage along waterways and to local places and attractions

AIMS - Promote the waterways environment as green spaces and wildlife habitats worthy of attention and protection

ACTIONS

- Launch a marketing campaign to raise awareness
- Work with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust on initiatives to promote nature and wildlife around waterways

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

AIMS - Improve public health and wellbeing via waterways-related physical/ outdoor/leisure activities and 'family fun' events

ACTIONS

- Survey county towpaths and seek funding for improvements
- Investigate potential for social prescribing
- Launch a recruitment campaign to attract more and younger - volunteers

AIMS - Present and promote the waterways as sustainable transport routes - for walking and cycling

ACTIONS

- Survey county towpaths and seek funding for improvements
- Improve signage along waterways and to local places and attractions

ECONOMIC VIBRANCY

AIMS - Contribute to the county's economic vibrancy by promoting the waterways network as a tourist attraction and growth generator for the visitor economy

ACTIONS

- Run a marketing campaign to raise awareness and visibility, and increase usage

AIMS - Explore potential links to Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022

ACTIONS

- Work with partners to explore opportunities to extend relevant, existing projects into Warwickshire



We will explore available sources of pre-pandemic data against which to measure progress. Key performance measures will include volunteer and visitor numbers, customer satisfaction surveys, plus any indicators of raised awareness amongst potential users.