

DEVELOPMENT OF A RIVER TEES PARK

BREIFING PAPER FOR ARTS, LEISURE AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE - 28 NOVEMBER 2007

1. Introduction

This paper summarises some of the key issues related to the development of a linear park within the River Tees corridor. It sets out some broad project objectives and outlines the strategic context for the development of a River Tees Park. The paper identifies links to other projects and initiatives and highlights a number of key issues which need to be addressed before a detailed project plan can be developed.

2. Background

It is widely accepted that the River Tees corridor represents one of the Borough's principal assets. The development of a 'linear park' would seek to enhance and conserve the environmental quality of the river corridor, while at the same time maximising its potential as a driver for economic regeneration and for the contribution it can make towards enhancing quality of life.

Recent proposals for the development of a 'linear park' have focused largely on that section of the river between central Stockton and Yarm. The Council for the Protection of Rural England adopted the working title of 'River Tees Heritage Park' for this area and subsequently the 'Friends of the River Tees Heritage Park' has been formed to 'promote the protection, enhancement and recreational use of the river, its tributaries and adjoining lands'.

Stockton BC has also adopted the 'Heritage Park' as a working title and concept, and the Council's Countryside and Greenspace Team are in the early stages of developing this as a major new partnership project. Papers have been presented to the Council's Urban Environment Task Group in February and July 2007, outlining the vision for a River Tees 'Heritage' Park and making recommendations for how this project might be taken forward.

Initial discussions with partners such as British Waterways, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and The Tees Forest have demonstrated broad 'in-principle' support for this proposal. However, it is also agreed that further consideration needs to be given to the geographical and thematic scope of the project, and that the 'Heritage Park' title may not be the most appropriate. These issues are addressed later in the paper.

3. A River Tees Park – broad objectives

It is not possible to define these too closely at the stage, but the broad objectives for a River Tees Park are likely to include:

- Conserving and enhancing the landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage of the area.

- Improving access to and within the river corridor – particularly for walking and cycling and on the river itself.
- Providing a wide range of sporting, recreational and leisure opportunities, making full use of the river and surrounding areas.
- Engaging with local communities: ‘re-connecting’ people to the river and their local environment and creating a ‘sense of place’.
- Promoting learning and understanding based on the special features and characteristics of the area.
- Contributing to the Borough’s tourism ‘offer’.
- Improving the image of the Borough as place to live, work and invest.
- Adding value to and complementing strategic regeneration initiatives such as the Green-Blue Heart and North Shore.

4. Strategic Context

A number of existing and emerging strategies recognise the potential of the River Tees corridor to contribute to towards the environmental, social and economic regeneration of the Tees Valley and Stockton. A number of these documents also support the development of a linear park along the River Tees:

Stockton on Tees Local Plan

The current Local Plan states that ‘Land along the Tees and Leven Valleys will be designated as a county park’ (Policy Rec 8).

Stockton Local Development Framework

The draft Core Strategy Preferred Options report identifies the River Tees as a key asset of the Borough, and highlights the potential to increase of the use of the river and its environs for leisure, sport and recreation. It also recognises the need to protect and enhance the role of the River Tees corridor as an economic driver, for example, by promoting the river corridor as a tourist and water sports destination.

River Tees Navigation Strategy (2002)

The Strategy outlines proposals for a ‘River Forest’ covering the area of the Heritage Park. The action plan contains detailed proposals under four themes:

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ○ Biodiversity, | ○ Waterspace and Water Recreation |
| ○ Culture and Heritage | ○ Recreation and Access |

The document goes on to identify six potential delivery mechanisms:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ○ Conservation and Community | ○ Funding |
| ○ Marketing and Branding | ○ Sustainable Development |
| ○ Planning Policy | ○ Management |

Regeneration Strategy for Stockton Borough 2007-2012

One of the key ambitions is to achieve better use of the River Tees, including quality urban and rural environments with good public access.

Green Infrastructure and Regional Strategies

Green Infrastructure can be defined as networks of multi-functional greenspaces, countryside and stream/river corridors which provide a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits.

The draft North East Regional Spatial Strategy and the Northern Way growth strategy both advocate a 'green infrastructure planning' approach in the Tees Valley and elsewhere in the region, while the North East Regional Economic Strategy (2006) states that:

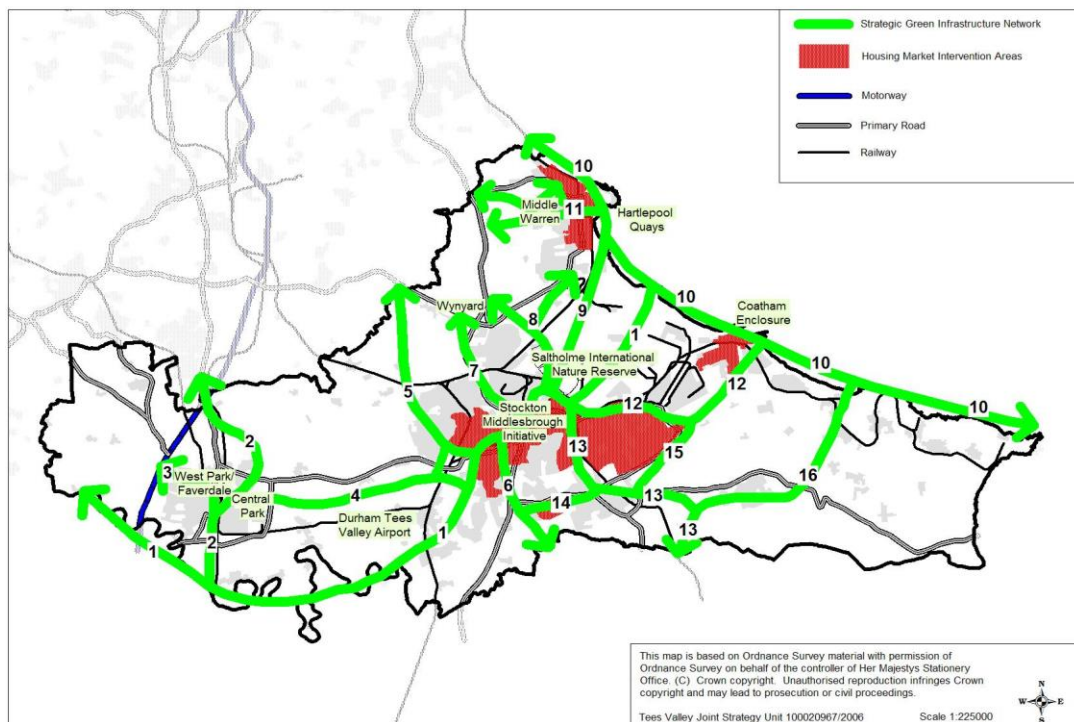
“Our green infrastructure is increasingly recognised as being a key component of sustainable communities. It is critical that the benefits of these public assets are maximized through sound planning and management”.

Delivery of a River Tees Park would be, in effect, a strategic green infrastructure project.

Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy (draft 2006)

In response to the above regional policy drivers, a Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy is being developed. This identifies a Tees Valley wide 'strategic green infrastructure network', shown in draft form in Figure 1. The River Tees Corridor is one of the key components in this network (Corridor 1).

Figure 1: Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy – Strategic Green Infrastructure Network



5. Links to other projects and plans

It is vital that the development of a River Tees Park is fully integrated with other projects and regeneration initiatives in this area, including:

Major Regeneration Initiatives

Any proposals for a River Tees Park must be considered in the context of the wider regeneration of the Borough and the development of key sites within and adjoining the river corridor. This includes sites such as Bowesfield North, Boathouse Lane, Stockton Riverside and North Shore, as well as the various sites which comprise the Green Blue Heart. Work still needs to be done to define the geographical boundaries of any River Tees Park, but in any event the project cannot be developed in isolation from these strategic regeneration programmes, and indeed the project should itself be recognised as a significant regeneration initiative in its own right.

Preston Park and Hall

The river corridor provides a high-quality landscape setting for Preston Park and Hall, which in turn would could form one of the primary 'gateways' to a River Tees Park. These issues are being considered in the context of the current regeneration scheme for Preston Park and Hall.

Connect2 / Strategic cycle network and river crossings

There are currently proposals for the development of new cycle routes and river crossings to improve linkages between Ingleby Barwick, Yarm and Eaglescliffe, with the potential for project funding through Sustrans Connect2 programme. If implemented, these schemes will contribute towards improved access within the river corridor as a whole.

Development of Ingleby Barwick

Through the development process new bridleways, footpaths and cycle routes are being created (or existing routes diverted), including a bridleway around the north-western periphery of Ingleby Barwick. These routes can provide enhanced access to the river corridor, while appropriate landscaping can help to integrate new developments into the wider landscape.

Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Implementation Plan (2008-2016)

An Implementation Plan for the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy (see above) will be in place by March 2008. Development of a River Tees Park should form a key component of that Implementation Plan.

Culture 10 / Activity and Nature Based Tourism

Project proposals are currently being developed under the Culture 10 initiative and through the Rural Development Programme for England to add to the Tees

Valley's 'tourism offer' through the marketing and promotion of key natural and heritage assets - including the River Tees corridor.

6. Key issues / Next Steps

Some important issues need to be addressed at an early stage in the development of a River Tees Park:

Project area, scope and branding

Determining the geographical scope of the project is one of the first priorities. There is a strong argument for the project area to extend from the Green Blue Heart through to Yarm (and possibly beyond into the more rural sections of the Tees corridor). Alternatively the project could focus on the area between central Stockton and Yarm. It is suggested that important tributaries such as the River Leven and other linking green corridors should form part of the project area. Whatever the geographical focus of the project, it is important that it contributes towards the social and economic regeneration of the Borough and is not seen as a purely environmental initiative.

Delivery of high quality, multi-functional green infrastructure would be the key objective of the project - whether that be in an urban or rural setting. However, there needs to be further discussion with partners such as British Waterways, Sport England and the Environment Agency to determine the extent to which the project should focus on promoting use of the river itself, e.g. for sport, recreation and transport.

The above considerations will have a bearing on how the project is branded – including the formal title given to the park.

Securing new and improved public access to the 'rural core' of the Park

Figure 2 shows existing access routes in and around the original 'Heritage Park' area. It also identifies a number of 'indicative links'; i.e. corridors where it would be desirable to create new footpaths, cycleways or bridleways. In some cases these would require new river crossings, either via bridges or through the introduction of small ferries or river taxis.

One of the major issues which needs to be addressed is the lack of public access in the 'rural core' of the proposed park, i.e. that section of the river corridor to the south of Preston Park. This, coupled with the lack of river crossings, means there is no linkage between the northern and southern ends of the proposed River Tees Park, and limited access to Preston Park. This already detracts from the quality of the Teesdale Way – an existing recreational route which is routed away from the river in this area. To address these issues two major developments would need to be progressed:

- The Council or its partners would need to acquire land on the eastern bank of the River Tees to the south of Preston Park - a highly attractive stretch of the river corridor with immense recreational potential. Ideally this land would be linked to Preston Park via a bridge or river taxi/passenger ferry, in effect creating an extension to Preston Park.

- A cycle/foot bridge would need to be constructed, providing a crossing point on the River Tees to the south-west of Barwick Farm. This forms part of the proposed Connect 2 project, but would also deliver significant benefits in relation to the River Tees Park. For example, such a bridge provides an opportunity to re-align the Teesdale Way – crossing from the western bank of the river and continuing along the eastern bank towards Stockton. It would also deliver improved access to the River Tees corridor for residents of Ingleby Barwick and Eaglescliffe.

The Council is to enter into informal discussions with the relevant landowners to discuss the feasibility of the above options.

External Partnerships

A wide range of external partners and stakeholders have an interest in the management, development and use of the river corridor; e.g. private landowners and developers, Tees Valley Regeneration, VisitTeesValley, Environment Agency, British Waterways, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, The Tees Forest, Council for the Protection of Rural England, Natural England, Tees Archaeology and numerous community organisations.

Further discussions need to take place to ensure a shared common vision for a River Tees Park and broad agreement regarding the project objectives. In particular it is important to ensure this process builds on the work which has already been undertaken in relation to the existing River Tees Navigation Strategy and Action Plan.

Community engagement

Local community consultations will be required to ensure the project takes account of local issues and addresses the needs of neighbouring communities. There will be significant opportunities for community participation in the development and on-going management of a River Tees Park. The 'Friends of Tees Heritage Park' will be an important partner, but a number of other community organisations will need to be involved. As with other countryside and greenspace regeneration schemes the respective Area Partnership Boards will play an important role in local consultations.

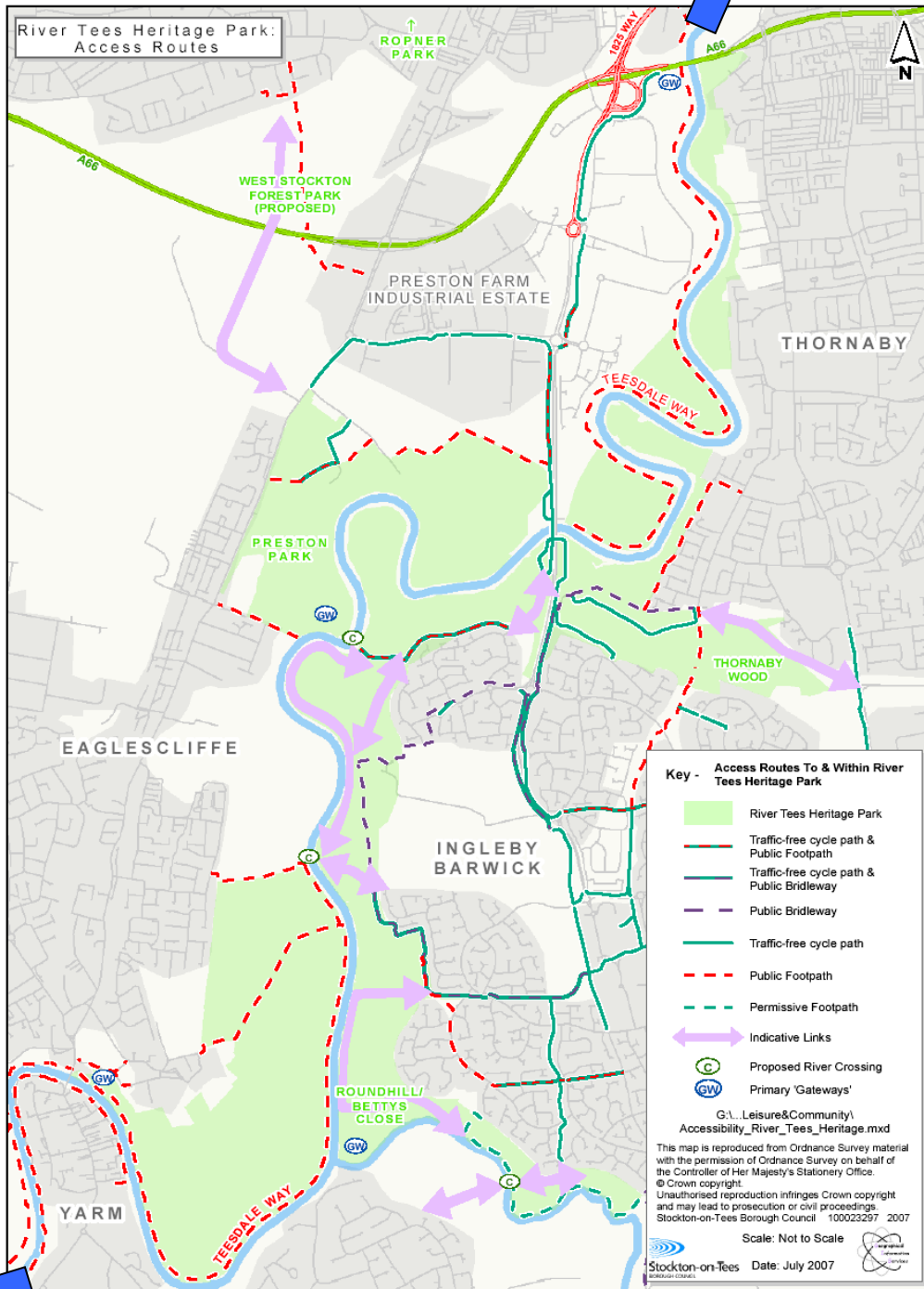
Project delivery and coordination

Once the broad scope and objectives of the project have been more tightly defined detailed project and management plans will need to be agreed and implemented. This would be based on a multi-agency approach and may require the appointment of a project coordinator and the establishment of a 'steering group' and themed working groups. To some extent project delivery would be achieved through the effective targeting and alignment of existing resources, but inevitably additional funding would also be required.

Graham Clingan - November 2007

Figure 2: The River Tees 'Heritage' Park – routes and possible extension into a wider 'River Tees Park'

'Park' can extend to Stockton Town Centre, North Shore & Green Blue Heart



'Park' could extend beyond Yarm to more rural sections of Tees corridor