

Views on the Shakespeare Marina



As the civic society which exists to support the historic character of Stratford-upon-Avon and its surrounding environment, the Stratford Society has, with others, been active over many years in challenging plans for the construction of a marina adjoining the River Avon. The Society recognises that planning permission for the scheme at Cross o' the Hill Farm was granted in March 1974, at a time when there was no requirement to specify a start-date. After several decades during which little work has been done on the site, substantial earthworks are now underway to create a 250-boat marina. The developers – in conjunction with the Avon Navigation Trust – envisage a completion date of November 2021. In the intervening years, applications have been sought to amend the originally-approved plans, the most recent being the current application which is to be determined in June of this year.

Over the past half-century, environmental awareness has undergone a complete change with a better understanding today of the damage caused by ever-increasing greenhouse gases. There is a growing recognition of the consequences of global warming and climate change, and an acknowledgement of the effect of pollution on the health of the population. In response to the generally-recognised threat to our planet's continued existence, and the very severe threat to our way-of-life, Stratford District Council (SDC) has declared a climate emergency. Mitigating and adapting to climate change is described as intrinsic to the whole Core Strategy 2011-31 to which it is committed.

Within Stratford-upon-Avon, there are moves for passenger-carrying tourist boats to convert to electric power, but nothing comparable is yet proposed for diesel-powered narrow boats of the type which cruise the whole of the Avon Valley nature corridor and will use the marina. Although these will have a damaging effect on air quality, and may discharge harmful chemicals into the water in and around the River Avon, there is as yet no indication that the developers will be required to provide clear evidence of a reduction in emissions, or any requirement to compensate for the damage done before boats using its facilities are emissions-free. While they have a previously-approved development right, it is inconceivable that planning permission would have been granted today because of the impact the creation of a marina will have on the whole of the surrounding area. As the Environment Agency has repeatedly warned, there will be a loss of water storage capacity in the flood plain as a result of deposited spoil from the construction. This will exacerbate existing flooding problems within and near the town, including on islands in the river.

It should not be forgotten that, in the Core Strategy, the Avon Valley through the town of Stratford-upon-Avon is designated as an Area of Restraint (Policy CS.13), with the expectation that its generally open nature should be maintained. In particular, the Strategy says that "Whilst open countryside is protected from most forms of development, this may

not always be sufficient to protect areas of sensitive land such as river valley corridors on the fringes of a settlement which can be under particular pressure for development and intensified use". This also recognises the threat to critical biodiversity, and acknowledges the importance of creating and managing natural habitats. The overriding purpose of Areas of Restraint is described as being "to protect the inherently open nature of a particular area because of the valuable contribution it makes to the character and physical form of the settlement." These Areas are deemed "worthy of protection as they contribute strongly to settlement character", enhancing the quality-of-life of residents and those who work in or visit the town. They make an important contribution to physical and mental health and to the wellbeing of communities.

While the Core Strategy acknowledges that some development of an agricultural or recreational nature may be reasonable, this most certainly could not be said to apply to the wholesale excavation of a greenfield site now underway to create the marina. As the Local Neighbourhood Plan for Stratford-upon-Avon – endorsed by voters in 2018 – recognises, the character and individuality of the town could be eroded by inappropriate development. This states that any proposals would be subject to consideration of design, impact on the character of the area, infrastructure provision and impact on neighbouring land users. There is little evidence that, in considering variations to the original plans for a marina, the SDC has given due consideration to any of these points. Instead, any benefits will accrue to a relatively small number of leisure boat users, while running counter to the interests of residents of the town.

Among the purposes of the Riverside Corridor proposals currently under consideration are the creation of new green routes, a reduction in congestion in the town centre and an improvement in air quality. The growing interest in green sustainable tourism is seen as a way of drawing visitors back to the town, following the covid-19 pandemic. The widespread opposition to the first draft on environmental grounds, and the willingness of the SDC and the Town Trust to respond positively to criticism by modifying their proposals accordingly, is a powerful reminder of how differently planning applications, such as that for the marina, would have been handled today.

The construction site has, until now, been an open green area crossed by four statutory Rights-of-Way. From diagrams provided by the developer in support of the latest application for amendment to previously agreed plans, it is far from clear what impact the development will have on these Rights-of-Way. In particular, would the proposed change of location of the marina's facilities building interfere with the existing course of any of the footpaths, and would any of these routes need to be diverted – even temporarily – during construction? Once a breach has been made in the river bank for boats to enter and leave the marina, it will be necessary to construct a bridge for users of the footpath which runs alongside the river. To date, no detailed design of such a bridge is available for inspection.

It is essential that this should be easily accessible at both ends for wheelchair users and children's buggies, as well as for all other walkers.

In conclusion, the Stratford Society remains extremely concerned that the construction of a marina beside the riverside corridor is inappropriate to the circumstances of the present day. Recalling its own Core Strategy and the Local Neighbourhood Plan to which it is committed, the SDC needs to show clear and evident concern to reduce the environmental impact of boats using the marina. Furthermore, if it is not to lose the trust of the people of Stratford-upon-Avon and its visitors, the Council should not grant any further variations to the original, ill-conceived scheme.

May 2021