

Report on	River Blackwater Update
Date of Meeting	11 October 2022
Reporting Officer	Head of Technical Services

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	X

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To provide Members with an update on key activities as detailed below.
2.0	Background
2.1	<p>River Blackwater Feasibility Study The River Blackwater has its source to the north of Fivemiletown, and divides the Counties of Armagh, Tyrone and Monaghan, entering Lough Neagh at Maghery.</p> <p>The river flows into Lough Neagh, which is the biggest Lough in the UK and Ireland and is situated in the centre of Northern Ireland. The Lough has no navigation authority but has a marker system maintained at favour by the Department for Infrastructure.</p> <p>Blackwater Community Barge Project made a request to Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council and Mid Ulster District Council to carry out a study that would present short term and long-term solutions for the Blackwater, address issues raised and realise the economic tourism potential of the river. A Report was brought to Council in May 2022 with a River Blackwater Feasibility Study.</p>
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p>River Blackwater Feasibility Study In October 2021, Council commissioned a Feasibility Study for the River Blackwater; the study looked at the economic and tourism potential along the river. The Study has been completed and contains a series of recommendations and indicative costs presented.</p> <p>The main points covered within the study include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of river boundary on relevant maps. • Identification of any special environmental and landscape features, character and designations associated with the River Blackwater.

- Identification of the main legal responsibilities for the river in terms of planning, boating, tourism development, navigation, water quality, flooding, dredging, waste disposal, and funding.
- Context of previous River Blackwater studies and recommendations.
- Details of current tourism and community activity along the River Blackwater
- Consultation and feedback received from all relevant tourism stakeholders.
- Stakeholder consultation and identification of technical requirements and cost estimates for dredging the mouth of the river and repeat maintenance costs. Requirements for Planning, NIEA, HED and dredged waste disposal permissions identified.
- Assessment of connectivity between River Blackwater and Ulster Canal, Lough Neagh main towns that run along the river and Lough Neagh itself.
- Provide recommendations for potential development projects along the river.
- Identification of potential funding sources and lobbying opportunities for all potential river project work.

3.2 On 27 June 2022 a group of senior staff from both Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Mid Ulster Borough Council met at Oxford Island Craigavon to discuss the issues of dredging the mouth of the river Blackwater as a first stage on one pilot action to develop the larger navigable part of the Blackwater River.

There are two distinct channels by which the Blackwater River can access Lough Neagh to consider for potential dredging :

1. Straight to the river mouth where it opens into the Lough – The river is of navigational depth until it accesses the Lough, at which point, water clearance disappears and the channel is only few inches deep due to existing geology, rocks etc and the constant flow of storm drainage down the river settling when it meets with the greater water mass of Lough Neagh. This is obviously why Victorians decided to cut the Maghery Channel as part of the Canal Network at that time of construction.

Conclusion - Too Expensive, very regular clearing would be required, technical feasibility to complete is unknown until much more detailed survey and core samples would need to be taken across the silt/debris bank.

2. Maghery River Cutting, this is a 5 foot deep channel cut by the Victorians sometime around the turn of the century to enable canal traffic from Coalisland , Moy etc. The cutting itself is at or about 5 foot navigational depth, however the access into the Lough is severely silted and requires a channel cut to maintain accessibility for boat traffic.

Conclusion - Less expensive, Maghery Channel cut by the Victorians as the preferred access option at that time, less material to potentially remove to achieve a navigational channel.

In practical terms, the Option 1 would technically be a shared enterprise with Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council given the District Boundaries meet in the middle of the River. With Option 2 – Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council are the principle authority as it is in their District. However we indicated at the June Officer meeting that MUDC would be prepared to assist through a Partnership Agreement or similar in seeking to move the project on. Both Councils need to move forward together.

Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council have indicated that they would require further clarification about stepping into this space given the roles of DFI Rivers and Waterways Ireland. It is necessary to obtain some further assurances around this and potential for liability for any damage or issues going forward, along with continued responsibility for dredging in ad finitum. These issues have been previously flagged with DFI, with no real answers forthcoming.

Potential Issues for Members to consider :

1. Least expensive and most achievable solution is to clear a channel at the end of the Maghery Cutting.
2. The cutting is in Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council territory and as such MUDC can assist and support through a Partnership Agreement but Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon must be prepared to come forward in these discussions.
3. Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council indicated they would like to see some legal viries why Council would undertake this work and not DFI / Rivers Agency / Waterways Ireland.
4. MUDC / Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council need assurances on ongoing liabilities and who keeps the dredged channel clear going forward.
5. There are some very technical assessments being demanded by NIEA even before anyone starts.
6. It is suggested that a DAERA / DFI steering group needs established to consider the issues and provide a clear basis for any action by Councils going forward as well as consider the plugging of the legislative gap to enable the normal Agencies to fulfil their statutory responsibilities.

Other Considerations

4.1

Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications

	Financial: Required survey work at this stage will include a cost of approximately £40k.
	Human: Officer Time
	Risk Management: The environmental and technical requirements of the project will not be fully known until further survey work is undertaken.
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: As per Council policy.
	Rural Needs Implications: As per Council policy.
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	It is recommended that Members note the contents of the report and approve that officers progress undertaking required survey work subject to Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon Council agreeing to work in partnership and funding 50% of the cost of fees for legal and technical survey work required at this stage.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Appendix 1 – Report for Lough Neagh Steering Group Appendix 2 – Summary update presentation