

<b>Report on</b>	Blackwater Study
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	September 2021
<b>Reporting Officer</b>	Michael Browne
<b>Contact Officer</b>	Michael Browne

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	To seek approval from the Council to carry out a study on the economic, recreational and environmental benefits of reopening water access to the Backwater River.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Background</b>
2.1	The River Blackwater has its source to the north of Fivemiletown, and divides County Armagh County, Tyrone and Monaghan, entering Lough Neagh at Maghery.
2.2	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.
2.3	The Blackwater River has a separate Canal Cut to allow navigation, rather than through its main mouth. The last record of dredging the mouth was in 2004/5 by the then DCAL.
2.4	Waterways Ireland previously carried out a survey and upgrade report in 2017 of all the markers in the Lough on behalf of then Department for Culture Arts and Leisure, now the Department for Infrastructure. Clear costed recommendations were provided with a recommendation for new lateral entrance markers at the Blackwater Canal cut entrance.
2.5	The Irish government has also announced funds to reopen the canal between Clones and Clonfad, County Monaghan. The final commitment to funding for the €12m (£10.4m) project, which includes a greenway, refurbishment, and a marina, was recently agreed.
2.6	There are no immediate plans to do any work on the Northern side of the Ulster Canal on the Blackwater River or Coalisland Canal section and this tender intends to identify potential projects that could be initially developed and supported by Mid Ulster District Council and other Councils/Departments.

2.7	Currently on water access to the Blackwater is limited due to the blockages caused by silt deposits at the entrance of the river. For nearly 15 years the section where the Blackwater River meets Lough Neagh has been virtually impassable, this subsequently discourages commercial fishing and recreational vessels to use the river and the potential tourism and economic growth along the River towns such as the Moy has not been realised.
2.8	The Lough Neagh Partnership has met with representatives from the Department for Infrastructure and lobbied extensively for the River Mouth to be dredged and new markers installed. They along with elected representatives from all parties continue to press for this action.
2.9	On Saturday 17 <sup>th</sup> July this was highlighted by a flotilla of 60 boats, both commercial and recreational expressing their concerns. This event was organised by the Blackwater Community Barge Project, who are calling on Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council and Mid Ulster District Council to carry out a study that will present short term and long-term solutions for the Blackwater that will address the issues raised and realise the potential of the river.
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	There is now a need for a study to be undertaken to produce a feasibility report with practical recommendations to assess the potential of opening the Blackwater River and extending and developing its navigation remit.
3.2	<p>The study will require a consultant(s)/company to prepare a comprehensive Feasibility Study to include the following main areas, but not exclusive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Gathering of all relevant maps, photos of river, river mouth and Coalisland Canal including planning zoning, and environmental designations.</li> <li>○ Identify and engage with all relevant statutory bodies with identify all legal responsibilities for boating, tourism, planning, navigation, water quality, flooding, dredging, waste disposal, and funding</li> <li>○ Research all previous reports/studies and strategic content.</li> <li>○ Details of current activity along the proposed area and develop a consultation programme with all relevant stakeholders</li> <li>○ Consult with stakeholders and identify technical requirements and cost estimates for the dredging of the mouth of the river and repeat maintenance costs. Requirements for Planning, NIEA, HED and dredged waste disposal permissions to be identified.</li> <li>○ Liaise closely with the Lough Neagh Partnership and DFI regarding proposals and support</li> <li>○ Assessment of connectivity between River Blackwater and Ulster Canal, Coalisland Canal, main towns along river and Lough Neagh.</li> <li>○ Provide recommendations for potential development projects along the river.</li> <li>○ Identify potential funding sources and lobbying opportunities for all potential river and mouth project work</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Complete project by 30/Nov/2021 and provide a full presentation to Council elected representatives</li> <li>○ The consultant(s)/company will attend an initial briefing meeting, and thereafter progress meetings as and when required, until the final completion of the study</li> </ul>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Other Considerations</b>
<b>4.1</b>	<b>Financial, Human Resources &amp; Risk Implications</b>
	Financial:  Financial: £12,000 from existing tourism budget.
	Human: Support by council officers to manage and deliver the project
	Risk Management:
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Screening &amp; Impact Assessments</b>
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: N/A
	Rural Needs Implications: N/A
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Recommendation(s)</b>
5.1	To procure a company to produce a feasibility study and recommendations report to assess the potential of opening the Blackwater River.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Documents Attached &amp; References</b>
	N/A