

Boats on the canal “your time is up”?

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Basingstoke Canal could stop leisure activities like boat hire and camping because they’re not financially viable.

The 32-mile-long Basingstoke Canal was jointly acquired by Hampshire and **Surrey County Councils** in the 1970s to manage risks, protect the canal, and provide public recreation.

It is a site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and due to its hydrological biodiversity and effective management of its ecosystem, it is home to numerous nationally scarce species of flora and fauna.

The Basingstoke Canal Partnership was established to fund the canal operation following restoration in the late 1980s. The partnership includes a number of “riparian” partners like district, borough and town councils that contribute financially to the running of the canal.

In 1990, county councils for Hampshire and Surrey, as landowning authorities, created the Basingstoke Canal Authority. Under the arrangement, Hampshire employs the staff, provides IT and finance support to the authority, and Surrey manages the visitor centre at Mytchett.

However, according to the report, the current arrangement is not financially sustainable. In 2023/24, the cost of the canal required a draw of £192,000 on existing reserves to cover a shortfall in income.

The canal is funded by the landowning authorities and the riparian funding partners; however, some have indicated the reduction or withdrawal of their contributions, like Woking and Rushmoor Borough Council, which confirmed it was pulling all funding in 2023/24.

Due to the withdrawal of some funding, the two landowner authorities commissioned an external company to review management and recommend a sustainable operating model.

From the five alternatives, the chosen one indicated that the Basingstoke Canal Authority will continue to deliver statutory requirements and leisure navigation.

However, under this option, the authority will no longer deliver activities such as boat hire, camping, running the visitor centre, and events.

The proposal will be debated at the universal select committee (March 11), and the executive member for countryside and regulatory services, Cllr Russell Oppenheimer, will take a decision later that day.

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Image credit: Basingstoke Canal Authority