

Manchester City Council is the first authority in the country to produce a vision for the revival of its entire waterways system.

Words Ben Willis

Photographs courtesy of the Northwest Development Agency

VENICE OF THE NORTH

Imagine for a moment the banks of central Manchester's stretch of the River Irwell alive with people. Some will be taking a stroll along the water's edge, some perhaps a run; others will be sitting outside a café sipping a coffee or something stronger, enjoying the scene.

For there is plenty to watch: boats chug up and down on their way from the restored Manchester-Bolton-Bury Canal; cyclists weave in and out of the walkers; anglers line the banks waiting for some of the river's fish to bite. One takes the bait and flickers in the evening sun as its captor reels it in.

Now hold that thought. The slow transformation of Manchester and Salford's waterways over the past few years is about to pick up pace, and scenes like this could become a familiar sight across the two cities. They may be an aspiration yet, but soon the gauntlet will be thrown down for all Greater Manchester's waterways to follow the example of Salford Quays and start smartening themselves up.

This autumn Manchester City Council will become the first authority in the country to produce a vision for the revival of its entire waterway system. Some, like London, have toyed with the concept, while others, notably Birmingham through its Brindley Place development, have recognised the value of a waterside location in regeneration. But Manchester can lay claim to being the first to go the distance and set out what waterways could mean for the whole city.

Given Manchester and Salford's progress over recent

years in converting stretches of their extensive waterways from scars of the industrial revolution into valuable regeneration opportunities, there may seem little purpose for a "waterways strategy". What use is a plan for a process that has clearly already begun?

According to Councillor Val Stevens, Manchester City Council's Executive Member for Planning and the Environment, who has led the development of the strategy, the answer to this question is precisely because the process had already begun. "Through a number of our regeneration schemes we had what you might call the beginnings of a water strategy," she says. "But it seemed to me as though we hadn't got the baseline of what we were dealing with, where the ownership was, what the water quality was, and what the developments were going to be."

For Councillor Stevens, the state of its waterways is one of the Northwest's greatest challenges - "the last stage of clearing up after the industrial revolution." But she also believes that as pressing as this challenge is, it should nonetheless be carried out with a clear idea of where to start from and where, ultimately, to go.

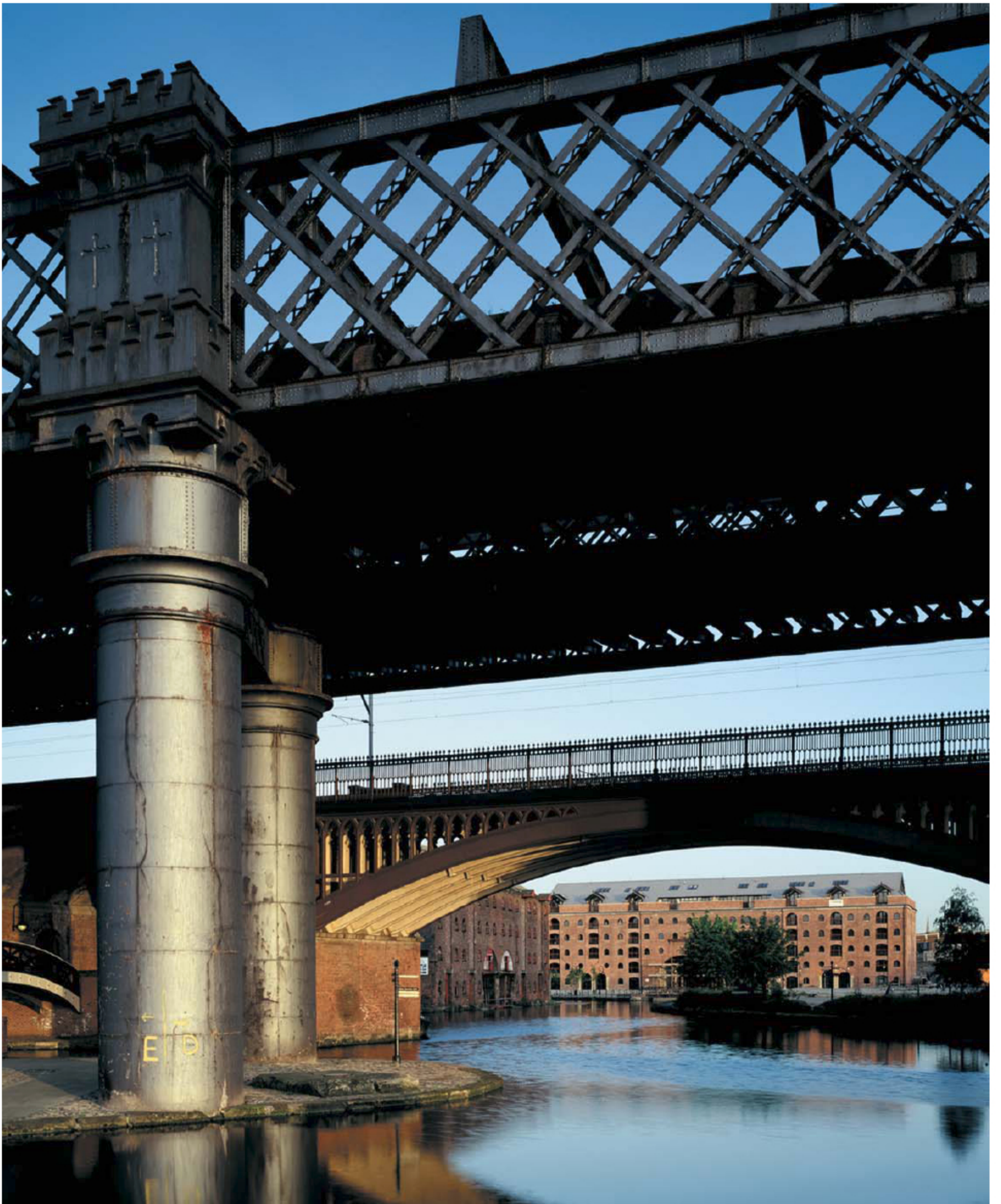
She says: "What we needed was something that would tell us what number of rivers we've got,

who's involved in that development, who's responsible for cleaning it, maintaining it, ensuring it improves, and what are the investment opportunities around that, and what added value can that bring to the city."

The strategy was designed to offer this kind of analysis. By examining each river and canal individually, the council was able to assemble a picture of the overall network, a snapshot of its environmental quality, ownership, existing regeneration programmes and, importantly, its potential for further development.

Although this process revealed few surprises, Councillor Stevens says, the analysis broadly reinforced the view that Manchester's waterways are a vast but underused resource. One striking example of this, she says, is the River Irwell.

"We've got two cities divided by a river instead of a central core united by a waterway," she says. "If you look at the waterside development, the river was always at the back of development





“We’ve got two cities divided by a river

in Manchester and the back of development in Salford. So in other words developments were looking away from the river, and the river was just a dirty little thing.”

Informed by this sense of an opportunity missed, the strategy sets out a vision of reanimating the waterways and watersides, and reintegrating rivers like the Irwell that have become backwaters into new developments. The vision is summarised thus: “The potential of the Manchester waterways should be maximised for the benefit of local residents, the economy of the city and biodiversity, bringing about sustainable environmental, recreational and regeneration benefits that are fully integrated into every walk of life in the city.”

To achieve this vision, the strategy outlines a number of key objectives or interventions for each of the waterways in question. These are organised under a number of strategic themes, including regeneration, biodiversity, crime and tourism.

Of course, visions are all very well, but are not an end in themselves. There is a danger in an age of endless regeneration strategies that too many are drawn up only to gather dust on shelf. The measure of a successful strategy is its ability to render real change.

Walter Menzies, chief executive of environmental and regeneration partnership the Mersey Basin Campaign, believes that a lack of delivery will not be an issue in Manchester. “Too many strategies are very watery, using

words like ‘strategy’, ‘social inclusion’ and ‘partnership’,” he says.

“You could write any strategy on the back of a fag packet with tick box words like this without even knowing what the subject is. But I don’t think this is the case with this strategy because it’s very focused indeed: it’s dealing with specific waterways and what should be done with them, and that’s good.”

Indeed, the strategy is very clear on delivery. In acknowledgement of the breadth and scale of regeneration initiatives already underway in Manchester, and the number of organisations involved in them, it proposes a citywide management body to oversee implementation of its numerous objectives.

Provisionally dubbed the Manchester Waterways Partnership, the proposed body would have a cross-local authority boundary and multi-agency remit, bringing together the wide array of organisations involved in regenerating the city’s waterways.

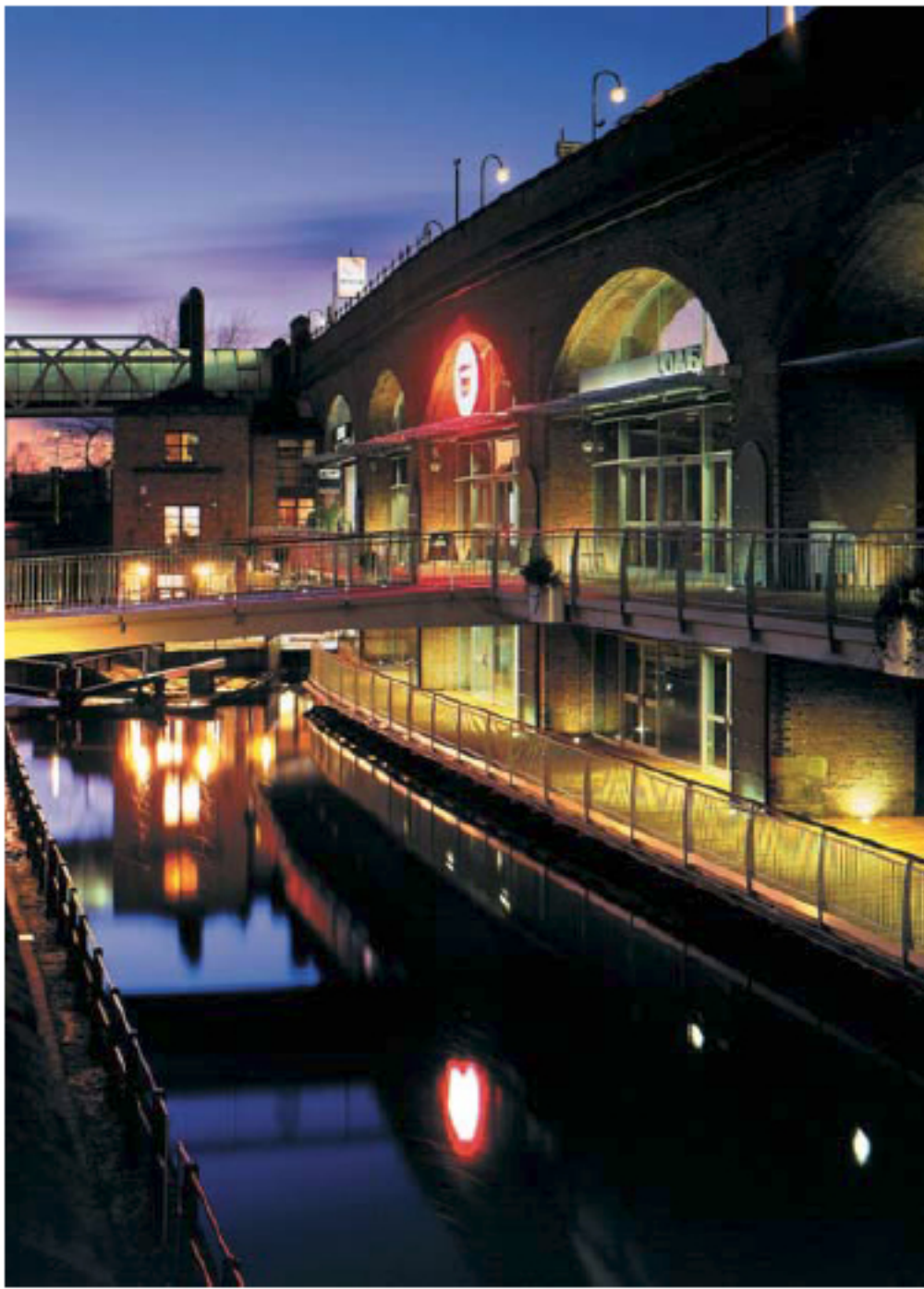
More importantly, perhaps, the council is hoping that once approved, the strategy will be worked into Manchester’s unitary development plan (UDP), the blueprint that will shape the city in the future. “My aspiration is that we embed the key

points of the strategy in our UDP - so that these things are recognised in five, ten, 20 years,” says Councillor Stevens. “This means there will always be a presumption of access to water, and that people look towards water, not away from it.”

For people working on the ground to regenerate Manchester’s waterways, official take-up of the strategy is now crucial. Sarah Flynn is co-ordinator of the Manchester Waterways Initiative, a Mersey Basin Campaign programme focusing on the city centre. With daily problems of litter, dog fouling and crime to contend with, it cannot happen quickly enough.

“One of the issues about the strategy is how it will be disseminated when it’s finalised,” Flynn says. “If it trickles through the council into all the relevant departments across the whole of Manchester, it could be fantastic. Once it becomes part of the UDP people will start to work with waterways and not against them.”

Apart from encouraging local



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stakeholders to sing from the same hymn sheet regarding waterways, Flynn hopes the strategy will also be a useful lever for securing funding for new projects. One of the problems at the moment, she says, is that although ideas for ways of improving waterways are never in short supply, drumming up the cash to fund them is a different matter.

For example, an issue in Flynn’s area is poor street lighting, which discourages pedestrians from using the canal towpaths as a direct route across town. She has had a lighting survey done, but is wondering how to take this further. “Once you’ve had the survey done, it’s a question of where to take it to next,” she says. “Who’s going to take responsibility for paying for the projects? I think the strategy will help with the funding of our projects.”

As well as offering practical assistance in brokering partnerships and leveraging in funding, outside observers also believe the strategy might mark a turning point in the way

waterways are regarded as an engine for regeneration. According to John Fletcher, chairman of the Inland Waterways Association, waterway regeneration has often been characterised by the narrow view it takes of what can be achieved by bringing a canal or river back into use.

He says: “If you look at how waterway regeneration has been used, it has tended to pocket off the areas with the highest land values: the centre of Birmingham, or the centre of Manchester are the areas where it has been concentrated.

“Even as recently as the [2002] Commonwealth Games it took a very significant effort to get all the players involved to understand that the importance of the location was not just the three or four hundred metres of canal outside the stadium.”

Fletcher believes that for too long waterway and waterside regeneration have been cherry-picking exercises, where the best bits of land are creamed off and developed, leaving the rest to rot. His hope is that an over-arching strategy will enable the council and its partners to tackle Manchester’s waterways in totality, rather than just regenerating bits here and bits there.

Derek Cochrane, managing director of British

Waterways North, argues that other areas of the country would do well to gain a similar appreciation of the wider role of waterways. Rivers and canals are, he says, an integral part of the UK’s landscape, both urban and rural. Regeneration and the health of the nation’s waterways are therefore inextricably linked.

“There is a deeper reason why this report is so important,” he says. “Most of our major towns and cities were either built alongside existing rivers, or developed along the back of the canal network being constructed in the 1800s. What that means is that there is a cultural thing happening.

“When rivers are not used for recreation, when waterways become unused and derelict, it begins to depress areas around them. By bringing waterways back to life with animation and vitality, you return to that original culture.”

What must happen now, Cochrane continues, is that other towns and cities in the UK follow the example set by places like Manchester, and to a lesser extent Liverpool and Birmingham, where waterways are rising rapidly up the political agenda. “I wouldn’t really say that other places have failed to grasp the importance of waterways - some have,” he says. “Now what it’s about is action on the ground, and making sure that for UK plc, waterways really make a difference.”

MORE INFORMATION: rachelchristie@notes.manchester.gov.uk