**Topsham Lock Cottage project**



**Authored by:**

**Bob Lucas & Andrea Gallagher**

**Introduction**

Topsham Lock Cottage represents a great opportunity to provide a facility of great community benefit to be run by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal (FESC) with volunteer labour. The vision is to provide a facility offering an information point, internal and external exhibitions areas and a café providing refreshment for those using the leisure opportunities afforded by the canal and its environs. The costs and benefits are discussed below under 4 headings: Community engagement and social action, financial considerations, environmental impacts and Lock Cottage as a min-hub. We then suggest a pathway to completing the project.

**Community engagement and social action**

Community connection and health and wellbeing prior to the pandemic were of critical importance. In light of the pandemic and its impact, we feel this project plays an even more significant role in creating connectivity and supporting local health and wellbeing agendas. Social prescribing through Wellbeing Exeter is also a key priority to “improve Health and Wellbeing by encouraging people to take part in activities and be more active”.

While the project will be run by FESC, it is our intention to involve local groups and societies in what we offer at Lock Cottage. These include:

* Topsham Museum
* Estuary League of Friends
* Love Topsham
* RSPB Exminster
* Marine Conservation Society
* Oakwood College in Dawlish for Young People with Specialist Needs *(Phoenix Learning and Care group)*
* Devon Wildlife Trust

We also intend to approach other organisations including the following:

* Exeter and other local Libraries.
* RAMM
* 64 million artists https://64millionartists.com/about/
* Colab - <https://www.colabexeter.org.uk/>
* Schools, colleges and Exeter University to support through social action their wider curriculum
* Local art groups or artists (writers, artists, artisans)

Already Topsham Museum have agreed to contribute exhibits for our exhibition area and we are studying their considerable archive of documentary and pictorial records relating to the canal and the cottage.

We are already involving educational establishments in our plans and we are currently finalizing a close partnership with Oakwood College, Dawlish, for young people with specialist needs. Students and staff have already visited to give thoughts and ideas. So far, we have had horticultural students with their tutor to advise us on the layout of the garden and we anticipate their help with its construction. We also expect students to participate in running the café as this provides the opportunity for them to demonstrate practical experience, an essential part of their course*.*

Involvement from students can help them work towards qualifications and employment but it also provides accessibility and agency that lead to visibility and voice in a way that more mainstream, larger scale projects do not always achieve.

To expand on this further, linking back to the wider remit related to health and wellbeing, well created resources and well supported strong mini social action projects can lead to wider engagement with a range of key stages within the education sector including further and higher education. Our plans tackle critical aspects of the curriculum. But what is just as important to note, is that it supports cross generational working and provides access routes for those who might sometimes find this difficult. Working with Colab, for example, could support meeting social impact measures with the right input and support.

We are aware of current thinking in providing meaningful activity as an alternative to medicinal solutions and would welcome the opportunity to work with groups who have clients that would benefit from working with us. Working with Wellbeing Exeter in relation to social prescribing would be critical here. There is much emphasis to be placed upon the therapeutic aspects of this project as well as bountiful learning opportunities.

**Financial considerations.**

We recognise that ECC has to make a significant financial outlay of around £40k to carry out essential repairs to the cottage. However, we understand that the bulk of this funding is in relation to roof repairs which will have to be completed regardless of FESC occupation. We understand the additional costs required to allow us to complete our plans are quite modest.

The centre will be run entirely by volunteers and therefore our overheads will be low. Setting up costs will be borne by FESC either directly or by accessing external funding. This includes any additional kitchen equipment that we may require, garden furniture and internal display units. We have also acquired a boat, which is currently undergoing renovation at the Exeter Canal Basin, which will be used as a supply boat for the cottage (including the café). As these items represent a considerable outlay for us, we would look to have a 5-year lease in order to make the project viable.

At the outset we cannot accurately predict the level of income generated by the café but, based on local soundings and feedback, we believe that it will generate sufficient income to at least cover its running costs. While working on the garden at Lock Cottage we have been amazed at the interest shown by walkers, canoeists, paddleboarders, cyclists, anglers and ferry users for our project and we anticipate a customer flow more than sufficient to sustain our enterprise. Local organizations that we have spoken to are also confident that the project will be successful.

Should our profit exceed an agreed level, we would be happy to consider a profit share arrangement with ECC.

In addition to FESC operating the cottage as a self-financing unit, we anticipate financial benefits also accruing to others, particularly to the Topsham Ferry, Turf Hotel, Topsham Museum and those organisations who work with us and who will benefit from the publicity that we can give them. We also expect FESC’s increased public profile to generate increased membership and volunteers thus giving us the resources to assist with other canal related activity.

**Environmental impacts**

We know that it is imperative we remain aware of environmental issues in relation to all of our activity at Lock Cottage and that we are also proactive in addressing these.

In relation to the garden and outside display area, we will not use any chemical weedkillers and will try to compost as much waste as we can.

We will take great care with packaging used by the café and try to minimize waste. We intend to source products locally if at all possible and to deliver them to the cottage by canal using our own boat which will be powered by an electric motor. We will always use environmentally friendly cleaning materials.

Our recently constructed garden furniture has been built using reclaimed wood and we will seek to use reclaimed items in other areas wherever possible.

Potentially, students helping us, with support from local environmental groups, will be able to conduct significant research to ensure we are minimising our environmental impact as far as is possible. We are very keen to involve environmental studies students in this significant aspect of our work, both to assist us in keeping to our commitments and to assist them in completing their studies.

**Topsham Lock Cottage as a mini-hub**

We believe that Lock Cottage has great scope as a mini-hub with our information and refreshment provision generating increased footfall in the area and additional recreational activities. We believe that we can assist this process by issuing guides to local walks and bird-watching opportunities produced by other organizations.

We are in discussions about producing a local guide for a walk from the Topsham Ferry to Lock Cottage then along the canal to Turf Lock for the ferry back to Topsham. We also see opportunities for the provision of leaflets encouraging the use of the new Marsh Barton Station as part of a circular, or longer, walk.

We also plan to sell maps and guides to encourage discovery of a wider area. These sales would also provide a useful supplementary income.

Increased activity at the min-hub may also mean that a Double Locks to Turf ferry could again become a viable proposition. This would increase the scope for local walking and exploring and encourage activity over the full length of the canal.

In the longer term, we see the mini-hub generating further revenue from holiday boat rentals and other water-based activity.

As a result of the increased visibility afforded to the Friends by their involvement at Lock Cottage, we expect an increase in our membership and thus more volunteers. (We have already seen some evidence of this). We expect this will allow us to provide help with lock opening duties and other canal related tasks which will lift a financial burden from the council and encourage greater boater access to the entire length of the canal.

**Going forward**

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal currently have a pool of motivated volunteers keen to progress this project led by the joint project co-ordinators Bob Lucas, who has an MBA and long experience in management consultancy, and Andrea Gallagher who has significant experience in education, including working on major projects within the city through education and training pathways whilst at Exeter College. She has also worked in Offender Education for Weston College. She is now working in the SEN sector as part of the senior management team at a local college. She thus has strong links into the education and voluntary sectors.

We have already made significant progress in clearing and tidying the outside area at Lock Cottage and in planning the layout of the garden. We have willing partners in place ready to help us progress both in the garden and in setting up the exhibition area inside. We have acquired display boards, display exhibits, garden furniture and a supply boat. We have an experienced café manager willing to help us set up the café on site including advising us on meeting health and safety requirements, cleaning standards, staff training, sourcing supplies and handling funds.

We are making a significant contribution in terms of labour, time and money to support the project and, we believe, providing an important local amenity. We now need to have a commitment of support from the Council in order to keep the team motivated and to continue with our current momentum*.* Early access to the cottage is an important factor here.

We recognise that we are asking for an initial financial commitment for repairs to the cottage in difficult financial times but we believe that the resulting asset will more than justify the outlay.

**Immediate needs**

Our most immediate need is for access to toilet facilities, some tool storage space, access to an electricity outlet and for some shelter from inclement weather for the volunteers. In particular, a lack of toilet facilities means that we cannot host college students or other willing helpers. A lack of tool storage means that we have to carry in tools and equipment each time we visit in addition to our food and drink requirements. Lack of an electricity supply means no powered equipment for garden use or in constructing furniture.

Although we are aware of the need to repair the roof, we are awaiting information as to what needs to be done inside the house. We are hoping for access toat least part of the house while repairs are completed. A brief look inside the house appeared to reveal a building in relatively good shape. The toilet, accessed externally, has a modern suite and appears in good repair.

We look forward to a solution that will enable us to agree a timetable to progress in stages to our full occupancy of the cottage. Clearly, we would like the end date to be as soon as possible but a staged approach would at least allow us to make noticeable progress and to maintain morale. We have tentatively agreed with Topsham Museum that we will co-operate with them in staging a major exhibition relating to the history of the canal from and we would certainly want to be in a position to support that enterprise.

**Summary**

In summary, we have a motivated team willing to take this project to a successful conclusion. We believe we have progressed this project nearly as far as we can without access to the cottage. We are confident of the financial viability of the project and of the benefits it will bring to the community and to the waterway.

We appreciate the opportunity of developing this project and look forward to receiving your continuing support in carrying this project forward.

**Bob Lucas and Andrea Gallagher**

**For the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal**

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