11.0 CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this feasibility study, as follows:

1. The St Helens Canal could be restored to navigable standards over its full length from St Helens town centre to Widnes.

2. There are practicable and economically viable solutions for removing or avoiding all the major physical obstructions to restoring a through route to navigation.

3. It would be possible to secure adequate water supplies to serve the canal, using original canal sources albeit supplemented by direct abstraction from the River Mersey and the installation of back pumping at Widnes Lock. Securing these water supplies would require detailed negotiation with the Environment Agency, British Waterways, Pilkingtons and PowerGen.

4. The ecological work that has been undertaken has acted as a scoping study in identifying the main issues and areas of concern raised by the proposal to restore the canal. No environmental issues have been identified that would constitute an overriding impediment that would prevent restoration. Inevitably, there will be disturbance and some localised loss of habitat but mitigation measures could be undertaken, such as the translocation of established water related habitat to designated areas before commencement of construction. Temporary disturbance and other losses, however, should be considered in the context of the resulting long term environmental gains within the canal corridor.

5. The restoration proposals contained in this feasibility report are not intended to be prescriptive but they represent a coherent set of integrated ideas of how the canal could be restored in a cost effective manner. The proposals have evolved from consideration of the various, sometimes conflicting, objectives of and constraints on the restoration. In some cases a single solution became apparent and, at other times, a number of equally valid options emerged, the most promising of which has been selected for costing purposes. Where valid alternatives exist, it would be appropriate to consider these at or before the detailed design stage.

6. The high costs likely to be involved in removing the physical obstructions to navigation on the Blackbrook Branch are difficult to justify in terms of the

benefits to be gained. In its present condition, the branch has a high ecological value and it should be retained and enhanced as a water feeder canal.

7. The cost of restoring the canal to full navigable standards, at over £40M for about 15 miles of waterway, can be regarded as being high. To some extent this is due both to the nature of the canal as originally constructed with low moveable bridges and the length of time that has elapsed since the canal was abandoned. These factors have resulted in a large number of fixed structures which now obstruct navigation.

8. A major influence on the cost, however, arises through the need to remove refuse and other contaminated materials from the infilled sections and to dredge contaminated silt for the in-water sections. The cost of handling and disposing of such materials has risen over recent years as a result of changing environmental legislation. It could be argued that these costs are not solely related to canal restoration but should be considered in the context of dealing with contaminated land and industrial dereliction and, hence, attract the appropriate funding through grants.

9. A strategy for restoring the canal has been identified which meets the combined objectives of gaining early benefits from those sections presently in-water, securing water supplies, early involvement of the voluntary sector, balancing quantifiable benefits with environmental improvements and lifting the public profile of the canal to assist with fund raising for the more expensive sections.

10. It can be demonstrated that the costs of restoration produce a positive return, in terms of input into the local economy, within thirty five years of the restoration work commencing, if a relatively high discount rate of 8% is adopted. Should a less conservative discount rate be used, the payback period would be accordingly reduced.

11. In addition, restoration of the canal would produce less tangible benefits, such as improved local amenities for recreation and leisure, attractive pedestrian and cycle routes, landscape improvements and environmental enhancements. These produce no direct financial return but add to the quality of life for the local communities. As such, restoration of the canal can be seen as a natural progression and further enhancement of the work already undertaken in developing the Sankey Valley Park.

12. When considering whether to proceed with the proposal to restore the canal to full navigation, it will be necessary to take into account the implications of adopting alternative policies towards the canal such as "do nothing", partial restoration or abandonment, including the effects on existing investments in the Sankey Valley Park.

13. It will be necessary to establish an organisational framework for progressing the canal restoration and for its subsequent management and operation. There are a number of alternatives by which this may be achieved.

14. A substantial element of the cost of restoration lies within the excavation and disposal of refuse and other materials from the infilled sections and in the dredging and disposal of contaminated dredgings from the in-water sections. Costs would include tipping charges for all materials disposed of to licensed tips and also, in respect of the infill materials, the application of landfill tax. When the restoration programme has been established it would be necessary to give detailed consideration to options available for minimising these costs such as recycling/reuse of materials where appropriate and economic and to the possibility of providing a licensed canalside lagoon for the disposal of dredgings.

15. Further study and investigative work, forming a Project Development Stage, will be needed to resolve areas of uncertainty, to allow alternative solutions in some areas to be evaluated and for the project definition to be confirmed. Such work would include, for example, ground investigations, on sections where no ground information is available, field trials of stabilised silt, monitoring of canal water levels, ecology baseline surveys and the preparation of an Environmental Statement.

12.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation of full restoration of the St Helens Canal would require the following recommendations to be considered.

1. Pursue funding for the costs of restoration, the most promising sources are likely to be:-

   - European Regional Development Funds
   - Single Regeneration Budget
   - National Heritage Memorial Fund

   Discussions with funding agencies should include consideration of the contaminated land and industrial dereliction issues.

2. Establish the organisational and management structures needed both to progress the restoration project to completion and to subsequently operate the canal.

3. Establish the mechanism for funding the operation and maintenance of the canal.

4. Discuss with the Highways Agency and the Commission for New Towns the proposed M62 motorway widening scheme, which is currently being designed, with the view to facilitating the future canal crossing.

5. Discuss with British Waterway's, Pilkingtons, the Environment Agency and PowerGen the means of securing short, medium and long term water supplies. Discuss with PowerGen the investigation of a sound economic and technical solution to the possible conjunctive use of their existing pumping and lagoon assets.

6. Promote the restoration of the canal through the Sankey Valley Initiative.

7. Establish a programme for monitoring water levels within those sections of the canal that are presently in-water, in conjunction with rainfall measurements, so that more accurate forecasts of likely water losses can be made to compare with the theoretical approach adopted in this study.

8. Investigate potential sites suitable for the establishment of a lagoon for the disposal of canal dredgings.

9. Implement a Project Development Stage.

10. Prepare an Environmental Statement for the entire project to restore the full length of canal.

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Appendix 1

List of Consultees

Barhale Construction plc
BOC Ltd
British Coal
British Gas
British Pipeline Agency
British Rail
British Telecom
British Waterways

Cheshire County Council (Highways)
Cheshire Waste Regulation Authority
Cheshire Wildlife Trust
Commission for the New Towns

John Freeman (Former BW Engineer)

HM Customs & Excise
Highways Agency

ICI plc

Joint Countryside Advisory Service

Land and Water Services Ltd

Manchester Ship Canal Company
Manweb
Mercury Communications Ltd
Mersey Basin Trust
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

National Rivers Authority
North West Water
NYNEX Cablecomms Ltd

Pilkingtons
PowerGen

Railtrack North West
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Sankey Valley Country Park Rangers
Shell UK Ltd
St Helens Renaissance

The Groundwork Trust
The National Grid Company plc
Trafalgar House Mining Ltd

UK Waste Management Limited

Westminster Dredging Company Ltd
Woodland Trust