

An Inland Waterways Conservancy - The IWA Vision

Introduction

1. Over 50 years ago the Inland Waterways Association's (IWA) co-founder and great visionary Robert Aickman proposed that a National Waterways Conservancy be created as an all purpose authority concerned with all the functions and potentialities of every navigable waterway in the country. Since that time IWA has always maintained the vision of a single body managing the inland waterways although it remained a long term aspiration. However change for the waterways is back on the national agenda with DEFRA producing a new consultation document Waterways for Everyone, BW proposing a move to the third sector with their 2020 vision and political parties beginning to lay out their stall in the run up to the general election. IWA believes it is time to revisit the idea of an Inland Waterways Conservancy and this paper sets out the arguments in the modern context.

Current Context

2. The Inland Waterways Association was founded in 1946 and acted as a champion of the waterways setting out to transform public and official attitude to the nations system of navigable rivers and canals. At that time freight, the original purpose of the waterways, was in sharp decline and early IWA effort was devoted to preventing further closures because it never lost sight of the potential of the waterways for a new role as a unique national asset available for public appreciation and enjoyment in a variety of leisure pursuits, as well as a continuing role for freight. Further closures were prevented by the end of the 1960s and IWA effort shifted to campaigning for, and taking the lead on, restoration of derelict waterways with hundreds of miles of derelict waterways reopening, the peak of this activity occurring around the millennium.
3. Since those early years the waterways have, as IWA predicted, undergone something of a renaissance and are now appreciated by the public as a multi user recreational facility for boaters, anglers, walkers and cyclists with around 11 million members of the public regularly using them. There has also been a steady shift in government opinion moving well away from a desire to close the system in the early IWA years to recognition that the waterways have a role to play in the modern social agenda with Waterways for Everyone identifying the following key initiatives where waterways are making, and can continue to make a contribution:
 - Climate change mitigation and adaptation.
 - Environmental improvement.
 - Healthy lifestyles and improved wellbeing.
 - Neighbourhood renewal, including the role of green infrastructure, community cohesion and social inclusion.
4. However, management arrangements for the waterways have not fully responded to the new challenges and opportunities. Following nationalisation of many of the waterways in 1948 there

were a number of changes resulting in the formation and regularisation of British Waterways in the 1960s but little change since. The formation of the National Rivers Authority (NRA) in the 1980s, transitioning into the Environment Agency (EA) in the 1990s should have represented a step forward but the profile of navigation within the multi purpose EA has remained low and the three disparate waterway groups under EA control (Thames, Medway and East Anglian waters) have stayed largely locally managed with little harmonisation or achievement of economies of scale. The Thames is worthy of note as the formation of NRA and then EA did away with the old Thames Conservancy, which on a small scale could have been the model for a national body with its early realisation of the wider role for waterways (leisure boating taking off in Victorian times), its strong stakeholder engagement and close links to the local communities it served with its rate precept funding model.

5. Today there are more than 30 waterway authorities, mostly public bodies, reflecting the complex evolution of the waterway system and frankly is a historical anachronism which starting afresh no-one would create. Some are operating under antiquated legislation which is in need of updating or replacement, for example the Middle Level Commissioners have no authority to seek payment from leisure boaters using their waterways. This disparate management system is ill placed to respond to national challenges and initiatives and it is time to look for something better. IWA believes that their original concept of a National Waterway Conservancy is as relevant today, if not more so, as when it was first suggested over 50 years ago.

The IWA Vision

6. The vision for a Conservancy is that of a single authority controlling as much of the inland waterway system as possible (scope is more fully addressed later). This body would not only produce an economy of scale but would also be a powerful influence able to represent the interests of the waterways and its stakeholders at a strategic level. Waterways for Everyone set out a vision for how waterways can contribute to a wide range of public policy objectives identifying eight themes:

- Place making and shaping.
- The natural environment.
- Climate change.
- Cultural heritage.
- Health, well being, recreation and sport.
- Sustainable transport.
- Tourism and business development.
- Fairer, stronger and more active communities.

Responding to these objectives will require new strategic arrangements and could not be fully met with the current disparate and fragmented waterway management bodies.

7. The Conservancy should be at arms length from government in order to avoid the policy and funding silo mentality amongst government departments with a key interest in waterways that inevitably results when the waterways are controlled and funded by a **single** government department. The eight policy themes identified in Waterways for Everyone are the natural responsibility of a number of government departments and whilst government has recognised the

issue and set up the Inter Departmental Group, it is doubted that a single committee is sufficient and more radical changes are needed.

8. In their 2020 vision, fleshed out more in Setting a New Course, BW has proposed that it transitions itself into a not for profit organisation positioned within the third sector (possibly a charitable trust). IWA believes that many of the arguments for this are sound but doubts that all the claimed benefits can be fully realised by considering BW in isolation. A Conservancy embracing a much greater proportion of inland waterways will be much more effective in realising these benefits.
9. Expanding the user base of the waterways across the full spectrum of possibilities will be a key role for the Conservancy. With success will come tensions between users and these will need to be managed with a set of overarching national policies together with local initiatives, whilst also retaining the desirable characteristics of individual waterways. IWA recognises and applauds the efforts of the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA) in its attempts to create a single voice on waterway management issues. However the nature and structure of this body is such that it is not best placed to be fully effective in representing the interests of waterways nationwide consistent with the ambitions that could be delivered by a Conservancy.
10. Development of the waterways is an opportunity that is widely recognised. There have been notable successes over the years achieved within the current management arrangements such as the transformation of the centre of Birmingham. However such developments require a strategic approach dealing with Regional Development Agencies and other bodies. The Conservancy would be well placed to take on this role taking due note of the need to conserve both built heritage and also the natural environment.
11. One aspect of development is increasing the size of the navigable system by restoration of derelict waterways and in some cases the creation of new ones. This has been a success story over the years with IWA and the societies it represents playing a crucial role. There are many derelict canals under active restoration but few will be completed with voluntary effort alone. Strategic leadership is required to both justify and convince others of the projects' merits as well as effecting the completion. BW used to do some of this but due to financial pressures has largely withdrawn not only funding but leadership from a number of projects. IWA also notes that BW expertise in the field of restoration has atrophied over the years. This has the further effect that a number of projects when completed are likely to become separate navigation authorities introducing more unwelcome fragmentation of the management of the system. The Conservancy would take the lead in promoting restoration, making the business case, forming the partnerships, fundraising, completing the restoration and eventually absorbing the new navigation within the managing scope of the Conservancy.
12. The original Robert Aickman paper identified the need for a Conservancy to have an energetic research department. IWA welcomed the transformation of the Inland Waterways Advisory Council (IWAC) in 2007 and is impressed with the relevance, quality and content of the research it has conducted. However IWAC is only an advisor to government which can accept what it likes and quietly ignore what it doesn't. IWAC must continue to fulfil its valuable role. Options are that it could sit either within, or responding to, the Conservancy where it will have an audience ready to make the most effective use of its product.
13. It is evident from a variety of government publications that much greater consideration is being given to the use of volunteers in society. This is also mentioned in both Waterways for Everyone

and also Setting a New Course. There is of course nothing new in the use of volunteers in waterway activities and this has been promoted by IWA since its inception. However there have been, and continue to be, tensions between voluntary organisations and navigation authorities, principally BW and EA where the full contribution that volunteers can make is simply not being captured. It is questionable whether these organisations, or modest reinventions of them, can successfully jettison their background and culture to go through the necessary transformation to fully embrace the opportunities that volunteers can bring. IWA believes that a Conservancy would be better placed to achieve this from the start.

14. This paper does not set out to specify the detailed management arrangements for a Conservancy. However IWA believes it to be essential that the board structure has appropriate skills and suitably diverse stakeholder representation able to focus on the core mission without undue distraction by other commercial interests unrelated to that mission. There would also need to be strong governance arrangements to ensure appropriate use of public/charitable funds. Arrangements will also need to be in place to reassure government that the funds it continues to provide are being appropriately allocated to meet the public policy agenda (see para 23).
15. Similarly this paper does not set out the possible mechanics of a transition to a Conservancy. However one point worth stressing is that these proposals are not just about expanding the scope of an existing body such as transferring EA waters to BW or vice versa. Rather it is about the creation of something completely new. As such it will probably be necessary to create a new board and centralised corporate headquarters at the start in order to effect the new values and culture.

Scope

16. Ideally IWA would like to see all navigable waterways within the scope of the Conservancy. However the practical reality of the current disparate management arrangements means that not all of this could or should be achieved and there may have to be a phased approach to incorporation of the waterways of England and Wales into the Conservancy. Scotland is outside the scope of this paper.
17. The publicly owned waterways on the connected system should form the initial tranche of the Conservancy. These would be principally those waters managed by BW and EA.
18. Those waterways on the connected system currently run by charitable trusts, (Wey and Avon navigations), would sit very well in the Conservancy and it is hoped that once the new arrangements have settled down they would wish to transition their waterways into the Conservancy. If the Wey is absorbed then the adjacent Basingstoke Canal, owned by two county councils (and struggling under their stewardship), would be a good candidate to include.
19. There are a number of waterways in private ownership and some of these, like the Manchester Ship Canal, are principally used for freight. Others include port areas and major tidal waters also used for freight. It would be unrealistic and inappropriate to suggest that these be nationalised then handed over to the Conservancy so these are best left alone. An exception could be the Bridgewater Canal which is a key link in the connected leisure system and no longer has a freight function; if a suitable deal could be struck with the owners to transfer this waterway to the conservancy then this should be pursued.

20. There are a number of isolated waterways disconnected from the main system ranging in character from fully engineered canals, river navigations through to unimproved tidal rivers for which there are no navigation authorities. Many of these should be included in the Conservancy but the future of these will need to be decided on a case by case basis.
21. Finally the Broads are worthy of note as a public body adopting a responsible attitude to balancing conservation, acting somewhat like a National Park, and navigation. In many ways they are already functioning as a Conservancy and could sit well within the larger body now envisaged. However the Broads are a river-lake system isolated from the rest of the system and with few navigation structures so are very different in character compared with the rest of the system. As such the arguments for incorporation immediately within the Conservancy are weaker but could be worthy of consideration at a later date.

Funding

22. Although this paper has focussed on broad vision some mention of funding must be made as that will be a key to success of the Conservancy. First and foremost the Conservancy, once it has settled down, will bring an economy of scale with a single headquarters, shared maintenance equipment, increased purchasing power for outsourcing of services and a flexible workforce. The use of volunteers, if suitably utilised can further reduce running costs. BW in its 2020 vision has already identified that a move to the third sector will open up new funding possibilities - even more so for a Conservancy with a larger role and scope.
23. It must be stressed that significant funding will still be required from government in recognition of the broader role waterways play for the country. Much of the system could not survive without this government finance to keep it functioning. Furthermore there needs to be better guarantees of continuity of funding with perhaps a ten year plan to avoid the short term variations in funding currently brought about by departmental fiscal cycles. However once the economies of scale and other funding possibilities are realised it is likely that government funding could be on a declining scale albeit never reducing to zero. Finally it will be worth revisiting the way in which government funding is provided perhaps moving to a mix of central grant in aid together with some local authority funding to reflect the considerable local public benefits and priorities.

Summary

24. The time is opportune to consider alternatives to the current disparate management arrangements for the inland waterways of England and Wales. The IWA vision is of an Inland Waterways Conservancy providing a single navigation authority for the majority of the inland waterways together with a modern management system that would:
 - a. Focus on the core mission of safeguarding, conserving and developing the inland waterway system, including its income streams, for public benefit including in particular navigation;
 - b. Provide a co-ordinated system with a single navigation licence, adopting best practice whilst also realising the economies of scale;
 - c. Act as a focus for restoration;

- d. Respond at a strategic level to relevant high level public policy initiatives such as adapting to climate change, neighbourhood renewal, sustainable transport and healthy lifestyles;
- e. Effectively harness the utilisation of voluntary effort;
- f. Still rely on substantial government funding but potentially reduce the extent of the dependence upon it;
- g. Be a not for profit organisation able to seek additional funding from the third sector;
- h. Keep at arms length from government potentially reducing funding vulnerability to the departmental fiscal cycle;
- i. Be responsive to customers needs and include stakeholder representation within the management structure; and
- j. Adopt strong governance and be suitably diligent in the use of public and charitable funds.