

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR THE WATERWAYS

**Minutes of a meeting held on Tuesday 13th March 2018
Starting at 9.30am in the Jubilee Room, Palace of Westminster**

Present:

Parliamentarians

John Grogan MP, Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways
Michael Fabricant MP, Vice Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways
Lord German OBE, Vice Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

Stakeholders

Julian Kennard, Chair, Association of Inland Navigation Authorities
Ann Banks, Chair, Association of Waterway Cruising Clubs
Philip Riley, Chairman, Basingstoke Canal Society
Howard Pridding, Chief Executive, British Marine
Brian Clark, Head of External Relations, British Marine
Adrian Clarke, Senior Waterways and Recreation Officer, Broads Authority
Richard Parry, Chief Executive, Canal & River Trust
Martin Ludgate, Deputy Editor, Canal Boat
Emma Howard Boyd, Chair, Environment Agency
Jonathan Shaw, Policy Connect
Alan Wildman, Chairman, Residential Boat Owners Association
Neil Edwards, Chief Executive, The Inland Waterways Association
Ivor Caplan, Chairman, The Inland Waterways Association
Alison Smedley, Campaigns Officer, The Inland Waterways Association
Janet Richardson, Editor, Towpath Talk
Bobby Cowling, Editor, Waterways World
Tom Fewins, Public Affairs Manager, Canal & River Trust
David Thomas, Chief Executive, Middle Level Commissioners
Gareth Morgan, Director, Cavendish Place Communications (Public Affairs consultants to CRT)
Paul Ayres, Commercial Boat Operators Association
Harry (surname tbc), Researcher from the office of Wendy Morton MP

Present from 10am

Rebecca Pow MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary, DEFRA
Jonathan Brennan, Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister, Dr Thérèse Coffey MP

1. Opening remarks and welcome

John Grogan MP, Chair APPGW, opened the meeting and welcomed those present. He introduced two vice chairs of the APPGW – Michael Fabricant MP and Lord German.

John Grogan reported that a message had been received from the Waterway Minister, Dr Thérèse Coffey just before 9am advising that she would be unable to attend the meeting at 10am as previously planned due to urgent government business. She had, however, arranged for Rebecca Pow MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary to attend instead.

2. Richard Parry, Canal & River Trust

Richard Parry, Chief Executive, Canal & River Trust, was introduced as the first speaker. Richard gave a round-up of the background to the creation of Canal & River Trust in 2012. 5 years on,

Richard feels that CRT has proven itself a success. It was unchartered territory when it was set up and it has been a journey of discovery with a new governance model. Whilst it is early days and there is still more to do, Richard considers that CRT has been successful for the following reasons:

- 1) Stewardship – assets have continued to improve, fewer failures and closures, they are spending more money on assets.
- 2) Growing income has been successful, £500 million endowment has grown to £800 million, new funders and partners.
- 3) Huge growth in volunteering, with 500,000 volunteers.

Richard noted that there are 8 million people with CRT waterways on their doorsteps, many in urban communities with high levels of deprivation. CRT is reaching out to them eg through the Community Roots programme funded by the Esme Fairburn Foundation which has seen towpath improvements in Birmingham and Rochdale.

Transfer of the EA navigations to Canal & River Trust remains CRT's preference. EA and CRT have worked well together but terms have to be agreeable to both Government and CRT. The Minister has indicated that she is not minded to progress the transfer at the current time, and CRT is looking to understand how they can improve the offer.

CRT has also had discussions with the Basingstoke Canal Authority about the Basingstoke Canal. Richard noted that there are only 4 years before CRT will need to engage with Government about funding from Government beyond 2027.

CRT have published a "Waterways and Wellbeing Report!" which makes a start in demonstrating the value of the waterways to the country.

3. Questions for Richard Parry

3.1 EA Transfer

John Grogan MP asked - as CRT and EA are in agreement regarding the transfer, what is it that Government is looking for?

Richard Parry replied: Operation of the navigations is clear and agreed, it is ownership of the assets which is the issue. He has had limited contact with DEFRA since the Minister's announcement that she was not minded for the transfer to proceed. CRT have offered to take on EA's navigation responsibilities within the envelope of EA's existing funding for navigation from DEFRA. EA were originally happy to keep larger assets, but if there is now an expectation that CRT will now take on all those assets then more money would be required for CRT to manage that long term risk.

John Grogan asked what proportion of additional money would be required. Richard Parry said £17m/year was the current EA budget for navigation, and that an extra £10m to £12m would be required for taking all the assets (such as the 120 weirs on the Thames).

John Grogan asked how many miles of waterway each of the navigation authorities had; Richard replied that CRT have about 2000 miles of which three quarters are canals and a quarter are rivers, and EA have 640 miles of rivers. The difference with rivers is that the river bank is mostly privately owned and there are fewer towpaths.

Michael Fabricant MP noted that there had been many TV programmes about canals in recent years and wondered if there was any measure as to the increased use of canals as a result of this coverage. He also asked if CRT received an income stream from the TV companies. Richard responded that they get a small amount of money from filming fees.

Howard Pridding noted that the majority of British Marine members would like to see the transfer take place and the current situation was causing uncertainty for the marine industry.

John Grogan noted that he was on the EFRA committee and could arrange for a one-off session of the committee on the transfer.

Lord German noted that in the debate that he had secured in the House of Lords Grand Committee held on 8th March, that Lord Gardiner, responding on behalf of DEFRA had said that Government are providing funding of £13 million to the Environment Agency to support the maintenance of its navigation assets from 2016-17 to 2019-20 (rather than the £17 million quoted by Richard Parry). Lord German also noted that Lord Gardiner had said that “the Minister has instructed officials in DEFRA and the Environment Agency to work with the Trust on a revised proposal which fully accounts for which assets could be transferred and the timings for that.” Lord German will follow up the offer of further information in writing from Lord Gardiner.

Richard Parry noted that during his 15 minute phone call with DEFRA, following the Minister’s announcement that the transfer would not take place at the current time, it became clear that further clarification was required and an agreed action following that call was for further talks. Emma Howard Boyd noted that the EA Board were due to meet this week where they will be catching up on the issue. She noted that a lot of time and effort had been put into the discussions by both EA and CRT. She noted that EA had not yet had an instruction from the Minister to continue discussions.

Emma Howard Boyd noted that, as she had announced at the Inland Waterways Association’s Parliamentary Dinner held last week, EA will be looking at a 5 year strategy for its navigation responsibilities, whilst at the same time bearing in mind that at any moment in time they could be asked to progress the transfer.

3.2 Volunteering

Ivor Caplan, on behalf of the voluntary sector, noted that the benefits of volunteers in support of Canal & River Trust has been well established with a range of opportunities both in maintenance of their waterways to the highest standard but also in engaging with local communities and in other roles. He asked if there were ways to progress the involvement of volunteers from The Inland Waterways Association in working with the Environment Agency on their waterways to achieve similar benefits.

Richard Parry replied that he appreciated the importance and history of volunteering, and he was pleased that CRT had been able to tap into this to mobilise volunteering to the extent that they have been able to.

Emma Howard Boyd said that EA are keen to progress volunteering activities and would be happy to discuss this further with IWA.

3.3 Navigation authority alignment of licensing and enforcement

David Thomas thanked all those parliamentarians who had supported the Middle Level Bill so far, and he looks forward to the Middle Level Commissioners being brought into line with other navigation authorities. One question arising from the progress of the Bill so far is the difference in the line taken by CRT and EA on unlicensed boats, and he asked whether, with the approach being so different, was there any plan to do any work for closer alignment on this and other issues.

Richard Parry said that CRT do work hard to get licence evasion down, along with educating boaters about the rules. A secondary factor of the transfer would be alignment of things like boat licensing, and he noted that EA has different systems across their waterways. CRT’s recent announcement that they will be charging additional fees for wide beam boats will go some way to aligning the systems in future. Richard noted that the current “Gold Licence” scheme enables boaters to use both EA and CRT waterways with one licence.

3.4 Residential boating

Neil Edwards noted that one of the challenges for the waterways is the use of boats as cheap housing, with this having increased in recent years due to the cost of housing. He asked what CRT thinks Government could do to help this situation.

Richard Parry responded that the nature of housing costs has had a major impact and CRT are working as actively as they can to ensure boats move in line with the rules. He noted that there are also issues on other navigation authorities' waterways, such as in Cambridge and in London on the tidal Thames. He confirmed that CRT wasn't specifically looking for any active support from Government in this.

Alan Wildman noted that RBOA would like to see Government's help with regard to residential moorings. There are moorings that are empty due to being designated leisure use only – if those restrictions were removed by local authorities, they could be used for residential use, and local authorities would benefit as they would be able to charge council tax.

Richard Parry noted that there was a real opportunity to work with local authorities. He had met recently with Andy Street, Mayor for the West Midlands, and had discussed the use of brownfield sites for residential moorings.

4. Rebecca Pow MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary, speaking on behalf of Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment

Rebecca Pow read out the remarks that the Minister had intended making, and apologised again on the Minister's behalf for her being called to an urgent meeting on Government business. The Minister thanked Lord German for securing the recent House of Lords debate, which covered a wide range of issues relating to CRT, EA and the Broads Authority. The value of the waterways cannot be underestimated.

Waterways can be a catalyst for regeneration and growth, and provide recreational pursuits. DEFRA's 25 year plan to leave the environment in a better state ties in with this, for example through encouraging the use of towpaths for health and wellbeing.

CRT was Government's first flagship of transfer into the third sector, and it has made impressive achievements with half a million volunteers. CRT will receive £800 million over a 15 year contract, with a review due to commence in 2021/22 when work will start on assessing future support. The Minister had recently met Malcolm Naish, Financial Protector for Canal & River Trust, and noted that he had been re-appointed.

The Minister does recognise the benefits of transferring the EA navigations to Canal & River Trust and officials in DEFRA and EA have been instructed to discuss further with CRT to fully account for which assets would be transferred. A date of 26th April has been set to discuss the terms of the transfer, which would have to offer the best deal for taxpayers.

5. Questions for the Waterway Minister

The following questions were asked/observations made which would be taken back to the Minister:

- Michael Fabricant MP noted that he understood that the Minister had urgent business that required her attendance elsewhere this morning, but noted that CRT needed more guidance about what Government is looking for, and this needs to be done through a face to face meeting. He noted that the Minister has been less accessible to waterway organisations than previous Ministers.
- Lord German supported Michael Fabricant's comments.

- Philip Riley, Basingstoke Canal Society, noted that there are about 30 waterways that have been restored or are being restored which are in other ownerships, eg local authority or private ownership. Could Government consider a national policy that would bring all those waterways into Canal & River Trust?
- Howard Pridding, British Marine, noted that the marine industry relies on navigation authorities to maintain their navigations in order for their businesses to survive. The majority of British Marine members based on the Environment Agency navigations are now in favour of the transfer.
- David Thomas, Middle Level commissions – noted that he was a little bit confused with the message from the Minister last month saying that the transfer was on hold, but discussions evidently still ongoing.
- Ivor Caplan, IWA – irrespective of who is managing the EA navigations, funding needs to be sufficient to avoid long term closures. He noted the recent closure of the Forth & Clyde Canal in Scotland due to Scottish Canals being unable to afford to carry out repairs on two lift bridges as an example of what can happen where sufficient funding isn't in place.
- Ann Banks noted that Association of Waterway Cruising Clubs concurred with IWA's concerns about closures.
- Brian Clark, British Marine – the current situation is worrying for British Marine members on EA navigations. Can EA be given the ability to act more commercially, as CRT can?
- Emma Howard Boyd – whilst wanting to be ready for a transfer at any time, EA's 5 year strategy will look at how third party funding can be increased. Regardless of what happens on 26th April, there needs to be a mechanism for increasing funding – how do we collectively raise more money for the waterways?
- Michael Fabricant said that CRT needed a face to face meeting and clear guidance from government.

6. Other observations

Emma Howard Boyd – noted that Lord Gardiner issued a similar statement in response to the House of Lords debate, but what is new is the date of 26th April by which Defra officials are due to update the minister. Richard Parry noted that CRT had been given a date of 24th April for CRT to submit a further proposal.

Rebecca Pow defended the Minister's stance and stated that any transfer had to be value for money for the tax payer.

Rebecca Pow noted that the setting up of a Water Commissioner had been suggested by a DEFRA Select Committee, to tie in with DEFRA's 25 year strategy, and that if that happened navigation would be included within that remit.