

All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

The need for dedicated financial support for waterways businesses

Tuesday 14th May 11.30am -12.45pm via Zoom

Minutes

Speakers:

Chair Michael Fabricant MP (Lichfield) Chairman of the APPG for the Waterways

Paul Rodgers: National Chairman, The Inland Waterways Association

Richard Parry: CEO, Canal & River Trust

John Packman: CEO, Broads Authority

Brian Clark: Head of Public Affairs, Policy and Research, British Marine

Parliamentarians

Michael Fabricant MP (Lichfield) Chairman of the APPG for the Waterways

Jerome Mayhew MP (Broadlands)

Simon Baynes MP (Clwyd South)

Heather Wheeler MP (South Derbyshire)

Lord Mike German

Waterways Partners unite in calling for Government intervention to save the sector from the ‘catastrophic impact of COVID-19’

On 14th May 2020 Paul Rodgers, IWA National Chairman, passionately addressed an online meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways. The urgent meeting was convened to discuss the urgent issues facing waterway businesses affected by the Covid-19 lockdown. The meeting heard how government's failure to commit to a £20m support package could lead to a decline of businesses on our waterways.

Paul Rodgers outlined the timeline of activity so far: On the 23rd March 2020, a joint letter from British Marine, Broads Authority and Canal & River Trust was sent to the Secretary of State at Defra asking for vital support for the sector. After an initial disappointing reply from DEFRA on the 15 April 2010, IWA joined the 3 organisations in reiterating in a follow up letter to DEFRA the need for a support package of £20m to cover all commercial boat

licence and mooring fees for 1 year from the 1st April 2020. A simple measure that would make a significant difference to many small waterway businesses.

As a means of providing DEFRA with detailed analysis of the situation, IWA commissioned a client base survey in partnership with Waterways World, which was one the largest survey of waterways with 1500 businesses consulted. Over 250 of these responded in the first week from every business type across the sector.

This analysis highlighted the immediate catastrophic challenges waterways businesses were facing due to Covid-19 and that the government schemes and support measures were inappropriate for the sector.

The waterways leisure industry is worth more than £1.5 billion but 90 per cent rely on the summer months April- September for income and to build up reserves.

Paul concluded his presentation to assert that “the waterways is like the patient – critical life changing injuries but still in triage for 6 weeks after the case was presented to DEFRA for help. In conclusion the triage system is flawed, and the patient is left to die. This is not acceptable after the sector lobbied for help at an early stage and provided detailed data and information to DEFRA”.

Paul added that the stakeholders are confused, and the government response is weak and the controlled lifting of lockdown is not reflecting the views of the industry.

IWA considers that the £20 million support package would provide the best intervention and could be forwarded throughout the business network in the most equitable way. Paul concluded that “the window of opportunity is closing and the failure to act will lead to a decline in the waterways industry on par with the 1940s.”

IWA's call for action was supported by a strong statement from Richard Parry, Chief Executive of Canal & River Trust, who acknowledged that the government have put in considerable support for businesses due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Richard argued that there is intent from government to support the waterways sector but the mechanism in place does not match this. “There needs to be dedicated sector specific support for the waterway businesses. Most businesses do not currently qualify for government schemes and support and their futures are in doubt.”

Richard added that Canal & River Trust have deferred licence payments and are taking every step to support these businesses where they can. Qualifying criteria for sector specific support can be put in place. Navigable waterways need to open but within new restriction guidance, and this would offer some solace to businesses.

John Packman the CEO, Broads Authority echoed these sentiments supporting the joint call for £20 million for the entire sector, including specific fund of £3.6 million for Broads waterway and boating businesses to see them through the winter.

John was clear that without this there will be catastrophic consequences for the sector that is worth £600 million to the Norfolk/Suffolk economies and provides 7000 jobs. In addition, the Broads Authority are calling on the government to underwrite £2.5 million the potential loss of toll income to the authority so they can continue essential maintenance work to support the waterways industry.

Brian Clark from British Marine argued that additional fiscal packages are vital for the sector who will also be affected by social distancing rules and added that they are working as Trade Association across the sector in preparing for the lifting of lockdown – to demonstrate that they can comply with new government guidance.

A surprise but welcome participant to the meeting was Alice Mayne of the Environment Agency who expressed support for the campaign led by IWA, CRT, Broads Authority and British Marine. Alice added that the reopening of business sector is important but significant work needs to be done before lifting restrictions.

A number of parliamentarians attended the meeting and Simon Baynes MP for Clwyd South confirmed that he has written in conjunction with Craig Williams MP for Montgomeryshire to the Tourism Minister supporting the call for the £20 million support package.

A number of waterway businesses then gave examples of how financial help is much needed, and the case was made for some waterway businesses, such as hire boat operators, being able to open up at the earliest possible opportunity.

Several MPs including Heather Wheeler MP for South Derbyshire gave updated Government advice on local support measures including that guidance to local authorities has recently changed and there is an extra lift in government money.

Jerome Mayhew MP for Broadland added that local authorities can apply discretion to applications for small business grants.

Actions

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Waterways to write to DEFRA, DCMS and the Treasury calling for an immediate fiscal support package of £20 million. APPGW letter to include:

- Seasonal businesses are being hit hard due to the timing of the lockdown.
- The inland waterways leisure industry is worth approximately £1.5bn a year to the UK economy. These businesses' income is heavily biased towards the summer months; for many they are totally reliant on a 6-month window and will have lost almost all of their annual revenue.
- Without this income, they will have no means to repay any sort of loan and rather than get into further debt, will have no option but to cease trading. The timing has hit many businesses doubly hard off the back of the severe winter which caused widespread damage from flooding and closures of some waterways.

- APPG for Waterways asking for a specific financial aid package, like that recently announced for the fishing industry, to allow navigation authorities to underwrite licence and mooring fees for waterways businesses this year.
- This is crucial to not only allow these businesses to survive but also to enable navigation authorities to continue to maintain the waterways so that people can safely use them once the lockdown restrictions are lifted.