

# **Policy Presentation and the Political Process**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. The way that a waterway restoration society promotes its case with respect to policy presentation and the political process, (at both local and national level) is crucial to the successful achievement of its objectives. This includes lobbying local and often national authorities, getting the support of the local population and obtaining favourable coverage by the local press and media, including radio and television where appropriate.
2. The first important task is for the organisation to set out its aims and objectives for a particular campaign in a form that is completely clear to the general public, the media and politicians. The document should be as concise as possible, but must cover all the relevant arguments and possible objections, leading to precise conclusions. This is so that, even with a cursory reading, the non-waterway-orientated public can see all the benefits easily.
3. The aim must be to build up a credible profile as soon as possible so that the local politicians, public and media alike realise that the campaign is being orchestrated by a responsible organisation they can trust and approach at any time.

## LOBBYING

4. Before successful lobbying can take place, it is necessary to obtain a thorough knowledge and understanding of how the political process works both locally and, if necessary, nationally. This involves two basic elements, the people and the system. In any discussions that take place, it is necessary always to be mindful of people's roles and place in the decision making process, so that matters, which may at the time be confidential, are handled in an appropriate way.
5. The local authorities concerned may be county, borough, or district, unitary or parish depending on the location. The first step is to obtain details of all the council members including their names, postal & email addresses and telephone numbers. In addition a list of the committees on which they serve and dates of future council or committee meetings can be obtained from the appropriate local authority, usually through its website. If an item relating to the campaign is to be discussed at a future meeting attendance may be useful.
6. It is essential to find out the names of the council members who might be sympathetic to the campaign and also to get to know the cabinet member or chairman and vice chairman of the appropriate committee that deals with any matters in connection with the campaign. As he or she can be crucial in any forthcoming discussion this is essential. If the cabinet member or chair is well briefed in the subject then it is easier for him or her to lead the discussion of a particular item.
7. Another important person to get to know and lobby is the leader of the council as he or she is very influential and leads the majority group on the council. Members of that group, particularly the cabinet members, should be lobbied first to elicit their support for the campaign. However it is important not to leave out the other members of the council to avoid it becoming a party political issue. If the local authority is a hung council then the task may be more difficult as relationships are much more complex.
8. Where your organisation is dealing with a number of local authorities, a good idea is to try and set up a local authority liaison committee, preferably with an officer and member from each authority (exclude parishes from this if there are several along your route). Presentations can then be made to each authority by prior arrangement, ideally to the appropriate committee.

9. Because a local authority is people-centred it is also essential to be familiar with the names of the relevant senior officers who would deal with a waterway campaign or issue. This varies between councils: in some councils it is the leisure department, whereas in others it could be the environment or planning policy departments that would be involved. The actual officer who deals with day to day matters in the appropriate department should also be cultivated as he or she may well be the regular contact.
10. Regular briefing of officers is an important part of the lobbying campaign: you are more likely to gain their support if they fully understand the issues involved and any proposals being made. The officers write the reports to be considered by councillors, so the officer needs to be fully aware of all the facts and arguments.
11. An understanding of how the local authority system works in practice is also essential. One way of achieving this is to attend an appropriate meeting to get the feel of things. Copies of the reports and agendas of the appropriate committees should be downloaded from the council's website in advance of their meetings so that there is time to lobby and brief sympathetic councillors and, if necessary, the chair of the committee, before the meeting.
12. If it is considered appropriate to make a presentation to a group of councillors, either formally or informally, then it is a good idea to have several officers from the waterway organisation present to make the best impression. In normal circumstances a petition to advance a campaign will have only limited effect unless it can demonstrate consensus among a wide cross section of the local population affected by the proposals. Rules concerning the presentation of petitions or the admittance of deputations can be seen in the council's standing orders. Try to obtain the help of a sympathetic local councillor to help with this.
13. A proven way to influence local councillors and officers is to take an invited group on a visit by coach to another waterway restoration scheme, either in progress or completed. The inclusion of a boat trip of some sort is particularly effective. It will be fairly easy to identify a suitable location by contacting the selected waterway organisation and asking them to host the visit.
14. As a result of this visit or tour, members and officers will have seen at first hand the potential benefits to be gained by supporting the proposal. By having a completely different perspective away from their own locality, they can assess the proposals objectively, without their own local pressures clouding the issue. In practice this can be very effective if it is timed carefully to occur in advance of a particularly important meeting to discuss the issues. Officers may also be able to write a more favourable report as a result of the visit, especially if they were impressed by what they saw.
15. Local authorities are required by law to draw up a local plan to cover all aspects of development and land use in their district or borough. See Chapter 13 [Town & Country Planning for Beginners](#) and the Planning Guide from the Restoration Handbook for the background to the planning system. It is very important to influence the progress of the local plan during the consultation period, so that the scheme is included in the adopted final version, as this will make it much easier for subsequent detailed issues to be accepted. If a proposed canal restoration scheme passes through more than one local authority area, then it needs to be included in each authority's plan.
16. The local plan process usually ends up in a public inquiry conducted by an inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. This gives local people or organisations the opportunity to make their case, whether to support a policy that is already included in the draft plan or to object that a certain policy is not included. Waterway organisations should ensure that they take part in this process as the result can have a great bearing on the future acceptance by local authorities of detailed proposals for a restoration scheme.

17. County councils should not be overlooked as it is important to get their members and officers to support a waterway proposal. There is a statutory obligation on county councils to draw up a new county-wide structure plan every few years, which sets general guidelines for development and economic activity in their area. A structure plan inquiry is always held where it is possible to influence future policies after written submissions have been made. However it should be noted that to appear at a structure plan inquiry an organisation has to be invited.
18. This contrasts with a local plan inquiry when, having made a written submission, there is a statutory right to appear and present your case. A timetable and programme is always drawn up, so that participating organisations have enough time to prepare their case in detail.
19. Lobbying nationally is essentially concerned with Government, Whitehall and Parliament. The first issue to clarify depends on whether the waterway organisation is a registered charity. If it is, the law is clear that charities must not have political objectives. In practice, however, there is not much guidance from the courts on the line to be drawn between activities by charities which are permissible and those which encroach too far into the sphere of politics.
20. As a general basis, however, a charity may engage in political activity if:
  - there is a reasonable expectation that the activity will effectively further the stated purposes of the charity;
  - the activity is within the powers which the charity committee or council of management have to achieve these purposes;
  - the views expressed are based on a well founded and reasoned case and
  - are expressed in a reasonable way.
21. However, a charity may not seek to organise public opinion to support or oppose a political party which advocates a particular policy favoured or opposed by the charity. It must also not provide its members or supporters, or members of the public, with pro forma letters or other pro forma material to send to MPs or the government.
22. Definitive advice and detailed guidelines on political activities and campaigning by charities is obtainable from the Charity Commission PO Box 211. Bootle L20 7YX. See also appropriate sections in Chapter 7, *Waterway Societies and their Constitutions - the Legal Perspective*.
23. One of the best ways for a waterway organisation to start to be heard nationally is to join the Parliamentary Waterways Group (PWG) where presentations, discussions and questions are made on a variety of waterways issues. It is possible at these forums to air an issue of particular concern where it relates to the topic of a particular meeting or has a general similarity to this issue. Occasionally the minister responsible for the waterways will be invited to attend and make a short presentation on government waterways policy. Some interested MPs or members of the House of Lords attend these meetings of the PWG but, whether they do or not, minutes of the meetings are circulated afterwards to those who have joined the PWG so they are made aware of the presentations and discussions.
24. Probably the best way, however, for a waterway organisation to have a platform nationally is to cultivate its local MP who may, or may not, be interested in waterways in the first place. A starting point which many waterway organisations adopt is to invite one or more of their local MPs to become a vice president of their organisation. In this way their names can appear on the headed notepaper and they can receive copies of the regular newsletters or magazines of the waterway organisation. As a result, providing they read it, they are kept continually informed and briefed about the campaign or activities of the organisation.

25. MPs need good publicity and getting involved with a campaign can help this. They have access to civil servants and ministers and often the best way to elicit a reply to a particular issue is to write to your MP with a specific question or questions which will then be passed to the appropriate minister. He will then reply to the MP (the reply usually being drafted by a civil servant) and the MP will then forward a copy of this reply with a covering letter.
26. A waterway organisation can also ask its members to write to their MP, but it is essential that they draft their letter in their own words, perhaps using a pro-forma draft to indicate the main points and issues to be covered. This is very important: otherwise MPs will receive standard letters which much reduces their impact. Many MPs estimate the strength of public opinion on a particular issue by how many letters they receive on the subject from their constituents. This fact is very important to remember and it is where members of a waterway organisation can feel that they are being very useful to help further the cause of the campaign.
27. As well as getting to know your local MPs, it may also be useful to brief your local European Parliamentary Member(s) (MEP) on the campaign. This may be useful if there is a possibility of obtaining grants from a European source in the future, where the MEP's support may be very beneficial.

## **GENERATING SUPPORT**

28. The importance to a waterways organisation of generating local support for its campaign is not to be underestimated. In fact it is probably one of the most important facets to be tackled. If local opinion is on your side then the future success of a campaign is more easily attained in spite of the fact that the originators may sometimes be quite a small group of enthusiasts.
29. The first step is to show that the objective of the campaign will benefit a wide cross-selection of the community. A waterway restoration scheme certainly meets this criterion. If local people feel that their lives will be enhanced, and the local environment improved, then it is much easier to gain their support. This support will have a great bearing on the future outcome of the campaign.
30. One of the best ways to start generating favourable local opinion is to hold a series of public meetings in and around the area of the waterway. Arrangements for a public meeting should be planned well in advance with adequate notice given to the local press and radio.
31. As far as the press is concerned, as well as paying for an advertisement, it is essential to try to obtain some editorial coverage as well. So it is worth cultivating the local reporters and getting to know them well in advance. Then information can be fed to them on a regular basis. Hopefully the reporter will then attend the meeting and write an appropriate report afterwards.
32. Posters should also be produced and distributed in suitable locations around the area to publicise the meeting. These should be clear, precise and have a suitable large caption and heading to catch the eye of the public. The colour of the paper used is also important, with yellow paper and black printing showing up very prominently. Day-glo paper is even more effective.
33. Local councillors and appropriate officers of the local authority should be invited to the meeting so that they can hear the aims of the society at an early stage.

34. The format of the meeting is important. It is advisable to prepare the text of the presentations very carefully so that the relevant points come over clearly and concisely. The presentations should be illustrated with slides or video film including examples from other waterways of the results of similar restorations or campaigns. After the presentations it is essential to allow time for questions from the audience and for responses to be given. The easiest way to do this is to have a small panel of experts both from the waterway organisation and outside.
35. If there are no press representatives in attendance, it is a good idea to prepare a press release to issue immediately after the meeting. This should summarise the context of the meeting and the issues raised and discussed during the question and answer session. (See next section - press and media campaigns).
36. An open day on a part of the proposed restoration project can help to bring the general public on board in support of the project. This will illustrate the kind of work that will be needed in the future. This could take the form of showing a derelict lock site or perhaps a blocked bridge-hole.
37. Display boards should be prepared and placed at the chosen site so that members of the public can see what is being proposed with perhaps photographs of other restored waterways. An adequate number of society members should be present, both to talk to the public and to demonstrate some work in progress. Local councillors and officers should receive an invitation so that they can see for themselves an example of the work required in a restoration scheme.
38. Before the open day, adequate notice should be given to the local press and media, together with posters at local libraries and shops and any other suitable location.
39. Local support can also be generated by mounting a display in local libraries or other publicly accessible buildings for a two or three week period, making sure there are adequate leaflet dispensers as part of the display, so that the public have information to take away with them. These leaflets should include details of the proposed project and include an application form for membership of the society. As an alternative, a display in a vacant shop window or perhaps a building society or bank should be considered. In that case leaflets are not appropriate unless it is arranged inside a building where they can be picked up by the public.
40. Most towns now have indoor shopping centres and the managers of these centres are usually only too pleased to provide an area for a local organisation to mount a display for one day or more, including a Saturday. Often vacant shop units are used for this purpose. It is essential once again to ensure that enough members are present to talk to the public and for plenty of leaflets to be available.
41. Good promotional leaflets are a vital tool for a waterway organisation to have at their disposal. Colourful and clear leaflets are best and they can be placed in local libraries or community centres. It is a good idea for the society to obtain some leaflet dispensers of its own for use where no racks are available so that they can be placed on information tables.
42. Another tried and tested way of gaining local support for a campaign or project is to produce a 'Questions and Answers' booklet. This booklet should ask all the questions that any member of the public and local councillors and officers would ask and then briefly and concisely answer the questions. This has the advantage that people who feel rather shy at public meetings about asking questions can see all the relevant questions posed in writing. These are then answered in a similar form to the answers that would be given at a public meeting.

43. If the scheme being promoted involves a canal project in a rural area there may well be local landowners who have acquired parts of the derelict canal bed and it is necessary to obtain leases or licences over the land in due course. In this instance it is essential to make early contact with these people who may well be influential in the area. If they can be convinced that a canal restoration scheme can enhance the area and provide a good local amenity, then it will make future discussions and negotiations with local authorities much easier. It is most important to establish credibility with these landowners and this can best be achieved by demonstrating the standard of work that you intend to carry out.
44. Most local areas usually hold a carnival or a similar event during the summer. This may well include a procession in which a float could be entered to promote the project to the general public who will line the route, perhaps with handouts being distributed along the way.
45. At other local events, it may be possible to put up a sales and information stand which should be manned by appropriate members to talk to the public. The members should always wear a badge so that they can be easily identified.

## **MOUNTING PRESS AND MEDIA CAMPAIGNS**

46. Use of the press and media is one of the most important and essential tasks of a waterway restoration group to mount a good campaign. The press and other media enable the organisation's campaign to be read or seen by large numbers of the general public who could not normally be approached in any other way.
47. The first task is to make a list of all the local newspapers, both paid for and free, together with their email addresses and telephone numbers. Additionally, details of the local radio and television stations should be obtained. It is a good idea to find out the names and contact details of the local reporters who are likely to deal with press releases, reports or articles about the proposed campaign, as they will prove to be a valuable point of contact in the future.
48. A press campaign can take many forms, ranging from press releases, reports and articles to letters to the editor. Responses to these can be used to advantage. These will be discussed in more detail later.
49. A press release has to be worded very carefully to ensure that the newspaper gives it adequate consideration and coverage. It has to be concise and have a good strong campaign message or angle.
50. Unlike most forms of writing, which have an introduction, a middle and a conclusion, a press release must make an immediate impact and then build outwards. A concise, hard hitting summary should start the press release with other information following in decreasing order of importance. It is good practice to include a quote from the chairman of your organisation and possibly a respected and distinguished supporter.
51. Quotes should be the only points in the press release where opinion is directly expressed; otherwise the wording should be objective and factual. The text of a press release is sometimes used as copy by reporters directly.
52. Press releases should be issued sparingly to make the best impact, as similar repetitions mean that they are less likely to be used. It is good practice to address a press release to an individual reporter or journalist, ideally one known to the waterway organisation. If one is not known, then it can be addressed to the editor, or to the news editor at a local radio or television station.

53. A press or news release should always have a date, precise heading, details of the issuer and at least one contact name, email address and telephone number for further information, either at work or at home, or both. At the end of the release, notes for editors can be added or brief supporting material can be attached.
54. Another method of giving publicity to a campaign is to try and arrange for a feature article in a local newspaper. Most newspapers have a features editor who should be approached about a feature on the campaign. Working with the features editor, it may be possible to arrange for the article to be prepared and, hopefully, published by the newspaper.
55. The axiom that a picture is worth a thousand words can also be used to advantage by submitting an appropriate photograph with the press release or feature article.
56. A feature article should always be on an exclusive basis because editors are unlikely to run it if they think that a competitor will also be using it. Therefore whereas a press release can be widely circulated, it follows that a feature article should be offered to only one newspaper.
57. The letters column of a newspaper is a very valuable area to support the campaign of a waterways organisation. Often an article or report in a newspaper elicits a response from readers and this can be used to advantage. A letter to the editor should always state that it is intended for publication and should be kept as brief as possible, ideally with a maximum of about one hundred and seventy words. Longer letters are usually edited before publication which can result in some of the main points being left out or distorted. So the motto is, keep it short but ensure that the important campaign message is clearly included.
58. A letter to the editor gives the chairman or press officer of a waterway organisation the opportunity to respond to a letter from a reader with further information to support a campaign objective. The letters to the editor columns can sometimes continue with letters on one issue for several weeks. Usually, however, at some stage the editor will feel that the subject has been exhausted and will call a halt to further letters. However, this period can be of great advantage to a campaigning organisation, although sometimes it can be counter productive if the arguments are too heated.
59. Local radio stations, like to conduct interviews over the telephone during certain programmes. They also invite people to the studio to conduct an interview live on the air with the presenter. An invitation will usually result from a news editor reading a news release from an organisation and then realising that it can become an important local topical issue. If an invitation is issued it should always be accepted if at all possible. The live interview will often lead to other listeners phoning in with their views or comments, especially if the live interview is part of a phone-in programme, a form which is increasingly popular. It is also possible that a representative of the waterways organisation may be asked to appear on a filmed item for a television news programme and be asked to suggest, and travel to, an appropriate location.
60. Having a press or media officer in your organisation, with good connections, is of inestimable benefit. Usually a person with these attributes can be found, especially if an appeal is made within your organisation.



## **WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

61. A good website is an essential campaigning tool these days. Almost anyone, from interested members of the public to local politicians to people who are approached for funding, is likely to look at it to find out about the organisation. It follows that a professional-looking website is essential in gaining support from across a wide spectrum. Many waterways organisations will have someone with the appropriate skills to build and/or maintain the site. If not, then it might be necessary to pay a professional to build the site, although it will usually be much too expensive for it to be maintained professionally. It is, however, very important to ensure that it is kept up to date, as out of date information or no recent postings give a very poor impression of the organisation.
62. A Facebook page can be used similarly to the website, although its content will usually be rather more ephemeral and informal. It is likely to contain some of the material from the website, but also more transient items, such as photos from last week's working party.
63. A Twitter feed tends to be even more immediate and transient, perhaps real-time messages and photos from a working party, meeting with local residents or councillors or a stand at a local show.
64. Twitter and Facebook may well be monitored by local media and used as the basis for a story in the local press, TV or radio, so that frequent updating is important.
65. The effort required in maintaining these channels should not be underestimated, but they are, in the modern world, essential to getting the message across, particularly (but not exclusively) to younger age groups.

## **SUMMARY**

66. Waterway organisations have discovered that the machinations of the political process are becoming ever more important to the success of a campaign. Campaigns are won or lost as a result of this process because, without the political will, it is impossible for restoration schemes or waterway proposals to be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.
67. Detailed research and preparation is essential but this is only the start of a long campaign. In the political process, timing is also very important coupled with a wide knowledge of those people who need to be convinced.
68. Political moods change from time to time, depending on which party or group is in control of a local authority. As a result, priorities change and a waterway organisation must be alert to use such a situation to its advantage and be ready to grasp opportunities that arise, often at fairly short notice. However, the danger of the issue becoming a party political football must be kept clearly in mind.
69. If the general public and the press and media can be convinced that a particular scheme or proposal is the right way forward then the politicians can be won over much more easily. However, in the current political climate this will only happen if the financial costs are seen as reasonable, with or without the assistance of external funding, and the long term benefits are seen as very positive for the area.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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