

All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

Waterways and Building Back Better

Tuesday 8th December, 2020

Minutes

The Webinar was opened by **Michael Fabricant MP** at 9:45am.

Parliamentarians in attendance included **Lord Popat**, **Lord Bradshaw**, **Craig Williams MP** and **Tony Lloyd MP**.

Mr Fabricant began by introducing the event's key speakers:

- **Richard Parry:** Chief Executive, [Canal & River Trust](#)
- **Adrian Main:** [Avon Navigation Trust](#)
- **John Packman:** Chief Executive, [Broads Authority](#)

Richard Parry began by speaking about the economic benefits of the waterways and their wider efforts to support health and wellbeing. He noted that the Trust's waterways estate comprises of 2000 miles of rivers and canals, with 16 percent of the English population living within 10 to 15 minutes' walk from one of them. During the first COVID lockdown, there had been a significant increase in the number of people using towpaths for recreation and exercise, something that had been particularly noted for residential areas.

Mr Parry went on to discuss how the waterways could contribute to the Government's "Levelling Up" economic development agenda, helping to improve health and well-being in urban and deprived areas across the Midlands and North of England. He added that recent changes to the Treasury's Green Book, the criteria for setting out the funding, would be placing greater emphasis on these factors in the future.

As part of these measures, Mr Parry added how the Trust's network of canals and rivers represent a critical aspect of national infrastructure, particularly as a response to extreme weather events such as flooding. He noted that the Trust had identified almost 70 "high risk" dams, and hundreds of examples of "high-risk" cuttings, culverts and embankments as necessitating investment. The estimated funding would be £125 million over the next five years.

Mr Parry also spoke about the promotion of active travel as a benefit from the waterways. He noted that the Trust had identified several hundred kilometres of routes to form part of the National Cycle

Network. He added that there was further scope for the canal network to make a positive contribution to decarbonisation, such as by promoting green freight transport via the canals.

The Trust had also been successful in their bid for the Government's Kickstart Scheme, and that throughout the recent crisis had maintained their supporter and volunteer networks. However, in the longer term, Mr Parry noted that the Trust have a Grant Funding agreed until 2027, but owing to the long-term benefit of the waterways to the economy, he emphasised that future funding would also be well served to consider the social benefits from the waterways, as well as the risks to safety that would come from not funding renewal of infrastructure.

Lord Popat asked about the lack of dredging in the Cumberland Basin within the Regent's Canal.

Responding, Mr Parry said that he would be responding to Lord Popat formally (as well as to a response by the local MP, Sir Keir Starmer), but added that the Trust spent £7 million annually on dredging, but that the scope of the waterways network presented a challenge to meet requirements.

The second speaker was Adrian Main of the [Avon Navigation Trust](#). Mr Main began by introducing the scope of the 48 mile route between Tewkesbury and Stratford-upon-Avon as well as the volunteer-led focus of the navigation authority. During lockdown, Mr Main noted that the river had seen a high level of engagement from the public, and that they had seen a further surge in visitors during the summer.

He then provided an overview of the Trust's investment projects. These include the Neptune Project, a repurposed barge to serve as a floating youth centre. Other schemes include the Avon Extension - intended to provide a direct link between the Severn and the Grand Union Canal at a cost of £29.6 million, the Evesham Lock Youth and Volunteer Centre, and the Wyre Whitewater Project.

The final presenter was John Packman, Chief Executive of the [Broads Authority](#).

Mr Packman began by noting the impact of climate change was already being seen in the Broads as a result of coastal erosion and rising sea levels. He emphasised that the Government's Building Back Better approach should take a long-term view with regard to making waterways and National Parks more resilient to future environmental pressures. He then gave a brief overview of the Broads Authority Executive Area, and the considerably larger catchment area of the Broadland rivers. He noted how the Authority was working with organisations such as the Environment Agency to develop the Broadland Futures Initiative, aimed at using the waterways to mitigate the impact of sea-level rises on the area.

Mr Packman noted that Broads tourism was a vital contributor to the East Anglia economy, worth over £600m per year. He noted that the Broads had seen a tremendous increase in interest with the general public since lockdown had limited foreign travel. In particular, he highlighted the Broads Authority's increased marketing to domestic visitors, but also a renewed interest from local people.

Investment in facilities for watersports, as well as volunteer-led investment for accessways and moorings had been a major incentive for the Authority, as well as guided walks to improve knowledge of the area, and engagement with local charities to share the Broads with refugees. He also discussed the Authority's promotion of reskilling and training projects for young people, such as providing work experience and apprenticeships in skills such as woodworking. In addition to this, he also highlighted the Authority's large volunteer base, working in areas ranging from vegetation maintenance to piloting motor launches.

Mr Packman noted that, despite the Government's "Build Back Better" incentive, the Authority was having to meet the challenges of a cut in the National Parks Grant in real terms. In order to meet the demands for the sector, more direct funding would be required.

Mr Fabricant thanked the speakers for their presentations and opened the meeting to questions from the audience.

Tony Lloyd MP noted the challenges associated with vandalism and intimidation on canals.

Richard Parry said that Canal & River Trust was working extensively with local authorities, especially in urban areas, to invest in the waterways network to increase footfall and improve the quality of the environment. Over the past few years, higher engagement from the public was serving to decrease anti-social behaviour, whilst community groups were also helping to engender a more collaborative ethos. He also noted Mr Lloyd's comments that sports such as angling also had a positive effort.

Lord Bradshaw noted the Thames Valley region was being earmarked for wide-scale housing developments. He asked how the sector was working to use the canals to improve access to and distribution of water as an alternative to new reservoirs, as well as access to leisure and transport opportunities.

ACTION: Future meeting on the canals as part of the water distribution network

Tom Larnach, River Manager for the Cam Conservancy, reiterated Lord Bradshaw's view about the high value of the waterways. He noted a recent economic impact report indicated that the river contributed £165 million and supported over 1000 jobs to the local economy. The Conservancy's small budget had been hit tremendously by COVID, resulting in a loss of £165,000 from the usual incomes. He asked if there was scope for a Government rescue package for small navigation authorities and if new housing developments would improve catchment areas for the waterways.

Mr Fabricant replied by encouraging such navigation authorities to engage directly with their local MPs.

Jim Forkin, Chairman of the Inland Waterways Association for the Chester and Merseyside Branch, asked if there was scope for the River Weaver to be aided with the expected disruptions to the Anderton Boat Lift which gives access to the waterway.

Richard Parry said that there were some very substantive maintenance works required to refurbish the boat lift and wider infrastructure. He added that the scope of the work was still to be decided but that he would be engaging directly with IWA and others to find the best solution for the area.

Andrew Denny noted the investment required for the Rochdale Canal's ongoing maintenance issues.

Richard Parry said that the Canal presented considerable challenges to Canal and River Trust but that discussions were on-going. Tony Lloyd, as the local MP, added that he was also keen for the town's redevelopment incentives, of which the Canal plays a key role, to be accomplished in a way that would be of benefit to both water users and local people.

Ivor Caplan asked how effectively both large and small waterway organisations could speak with a single voice to articulate demands effectively to Government.

Jonathan Shaw said that the most effective way of ensuring support from the Government was by presenting an articulate business case. He added that the best way to do this would be about creating a broad coalition of organisations, such as local authorities and the construction industry, to make the benefits of wider-scale investment clearer to policy makers.

Ben Seal of British Canoeing noted the massive increase in activities such as boating, paddle boating and outdoor swimming over the past year. He asked how bodies such as his could work with other organisations to improve access to the waterways.

John Packman said that physical access to rivers was essential, as was the provision of facilities such as slipways and changing rooms, in addition to providing better safety instructions.

Roger Stocker, a trustee of IWA, said that the waterway community had a poor level of diversity in contrast to the population as a whole and asked how this was being addressed.

Richard Parry said that Canal & River Trust was increasingly looking into developing urban canals in areas with a more diverse population, in addition to already established engagement in areas such as Leicester and Yorkshire. He noted that it was vital to be representative of communities the waterways serve if people are to benefit from the health and social benefits that they provide. He concluded by saying that there wasn't a top-down solution to this, but that it was best placed if it was volunteer led and with positive engagement from the wider community.

Michael Fabricant thanked the attendees for their contributions and said that he was looking forward to taking the Group's activities forward in 2021.

The meeting closed at 11:00am.