



## **All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways**

### **General Meeting**

Tuesday 2nd March 2021 starting at 9.45am by video meeting

*“Getting out on the Water” - The Health, Social and Economic benefits of boating and recreational sports on our Inland Waterways*

**Waterways APPG members present** - Michael Fabricant MP (Chair), Lord Bradshaw, Jo Gideon MP, Mark Garnier MP, Gagan Mohindra MP, Simon Baynes MP and Imran Ahmad Khan MP (represented by David Badger)

### **Welcome and Introductions**

Michael Fabricant MP, Chair of the Group, welcomed parliamentarians and representatives of waterway organisations to the meeting.

Paul Rodgers, National Chairman of The Inland Waterways Association (secretariat) ran through some video meeting housekeeping, and explained that the meeting was being run as a zoom meeting rather than the webinar format that had been used for previous meetings.

### **Report on Waterways APPGW AGM**

Michael Fabricant MP reported on the AGM of the Group which had been held immediately prior to the start of this meeting. 14 Officers from the House of Commons and the House of Lords had been elected, many of whom were present for this meeting. Michael Fabricant MP had been re-appointed as Chair of the Group.

The AGM had also noted the change of secretariat from 1st January 2021. The Inland Waterways Association (who had previously paid for but outsourced the running of the Group), have now brought the admin in-house and are now providing the secretariat with Alison Smedley as the named contact.

Michael Fabricant MP then introduced the first speaker, on the subject of “Getting out on the Water”.

### **Ben Seal - Places to Paddle Manager, British Canoeing**

Ben Seal started his presentation by noting that the case has been well made for the health, wellbeing and economic benefits of using the inland waterways, but the last 12 months had brought it into perspective with a huge growth in people taking up canoeing and paddle boarding.

British Canoeing has doubled its membership in 3 years, with 25,000 additional members since last May year. There had been significant growth in paddle boarding as well as a significant increase in the number of families and women taking part. Surveys suggest that people with good access to the environment are 22% more likely to be physically more active. Physical activity reduces the risk of mental illness, dementia, and physical conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Obesity accounts for around 30,000 deaths a year, costing the economy an estimated £27bn.

Ben noted that good progress had already been made by the major navigation authorities but there is more that can be done collectively. Only 6.4% of all inland waterways in England & Wales have an ‘uncontested’ right of navigation. An estimated 8 million people live within 1km of a Canal & River Trust waterway. 13% of the population is from a BAME background but only 26% of BAME population spend time in the countryside. Equality of access to, and connection with, a healthy natural environment would save billions of pounds in healthcare costs. British Canoeing has been asking MPs to lend their support to the amendments to the Environment Bill put forward by Philip Dunne, particularly around water quality and tighter regulations around sewage pollution.

British Canoeing has the following messages for decision makers:

- *For Government: To place sport and physical activity at the very heart of a Green Recovery – to save lives, to enhance our quality of life & grow the economy*
- *For Policy Makers: To embrace the opportunity to improve access & our ability to engage with nature through ELMS, the Environment Bill and Glover Review report.*
- *For Navigation and Local Authorities: To continue support the needs of recreational users – to help create Active Environments with safe and easy access to our waterways.*

Ben concluded by saying that British Canoeing believes that this can be achieved through:

- Fair, shared, sustainable open access to water in England – a clear and consistent right for everyone and every community to access water.
- More places to play – Safe, sustainable access to and from the water, good infrastructure throughout the inland waterway network to support all users
- Clean, healthy, nature rich waterway environments – water companies, regulators, users and Government all committed to caring for and protecting our waterways.

## **Howard Pridding - Director of External Affairs, Royal Yachting Association**

Howard Pridding started by giving an overview of RYA, which is the national governing body for the sport of sailing and windsurfing, as well as being a membership organisation with 105,000 Personal Members, 1,500 Affiliated Sailing Clubs and 2,400 Recognised Training Centres around the world. They manage the GB Sailing Team, who are all in training for the Tokyo Olympics. RYA represents members involved in all types of boating, powered and unpowered on the coast and inland waterways. They aim to maintain and promote safe, responsible and sustainable recreational boating. “Green-Blue” is a joint initiative working with British Marine providing information about boating in an environmentally friendly way.

It is widely agreed that boating is beneficial to physical health, mental wellbeing, social inclusion, and the business economy. But most importantly, boating can be accessible to all. RYA has a number of programmes that give people those opportunities, including a national programme for disabled people who want to go boating (“Sailability”) and the “On Board” programme which gives young people aged 8 to 18 the opportunity to try sailing and learn leadership, independence and teamwork skills, supported by Sport England funding. “Discover Sailing” is another initiative, which encourages families to get involved.

RYA will be launching its Diversity Strategy later this year with a 10-point action plan to encourage more diversity, not just in participation but also across all that they do from clubs, committee members, staff, volunteers and Board. They will be working with other inland waterway organisations on this.

## **Simon Griffiths - Founder & Publisher, Outdoor Swimmer**

Simon Griffiths set the scene with an overview of outdoor swimming, with swimming in navigable rivers being just part of the wild swimming scene. He then presented the findings of a recent report carried out by “Outdoor Swimmer” magazine, on “Trends in Outdoor Swimming”. The report, published in February, is based on research carried out looking at the affect that the coronavirus pandemic had on outdoor swimming.

While the most popular places for outdoor swimming are the sea, lakes, reservoirs and outdoor pools, the survey found that 20% of outdoor swimmers swim in rivers. Rivers are relatively intimidating due to currents, pollution risk and other users but can also be beautiful and fun places to swim.

Based on the research, Simon suggested that there has been a 1.5 to 3 times growth in outdoor swimming in 2020, with huge demand for swim slots at supervised venues in summer 2020. Anecdotally, many swimmers are swimming in the Thames and other navigable rivers. Sport England data from November 2018 to 2019 says 444,900 people swam in open water in the previous 28 days. Simon estimates that this will increase to between 750,000 and 1.5 million for 2020.

Simon outlined some statistics about who swims outdoors, and why, with 65% women and an average age of 53 (men) and 50 (women). In the survey, 69% said that outdoor swimming was essential or very important to their mental health. 45% of swimmers increased how much they swim outside in 2020. Outdoor swimming is a year-round activity, with women swimming outside more often than men in both summer and winter, with 62% of female swimmers dipping once per week or more in winter.

Simon suggested that outdoor swimming should be supported and encouraged, by government and policy makers, because it's affordable, accessible and inclusive. It is also good for the people who do it and it's good for the environment, with 75% participants taking part in some form of environmental improvements such as litter picking.

The interests of swimmers and other water users are closely aligned on issues such as water quality and access. Swimmers are vulnerable in the water – particularly from rowers and powered boats. Simon suggested that it would be great for all waterway users to work together around education and reminders about visibility, awareness and consideration.

Simon noted that there are specific health benefits of cold exposure and outdoor swimming, as well as overall health benefits of physical exercise and therefore savings to the NHS. Swimmers are generally environmentally aware, considerate and respectful. Simon concluded by asking the politicians present to include swimmers in future discussions about our inland waterways and to support any legislation that helps improve the quality of our waterways.

## **Q&A session**

The Chair then led a discussion where parliamentarians, speakers and representatives from waterway organisations had the opportunity to ask and respond to questions around the key issues arising from the three presentations.

Gagan Mohindra MP, who has the Grand Union Canal going through his constituency, asked the three speakers how politicians as policy makers can create an environment that allows more people to use these waterways safely.

Howard Pridding responded: The huge increase in users last year unfortunately did lead to an increase of accidents. Safety messaging is vital and RYA is working closely with RNLI and with navigation authorities inland.

Ben Seal: Ease of access and making sure waterways are physically accessible to everyone is important. Policy to support the creation of physical infrastructure to create an active environment. British Canoeing also provide safety information and information about access, safety trails. Government can play a part in setting policy to enable this to happen.

Simon Griffiths: More information about water quality is important for swimmers as this information is not currently easily accessible, eg information about what comes out of Combined Sewer Overflows. It was noted that Philip Dunne MP's proposed amendments to the Environment Bill would address water quality issues.

Matthew Symonds, Canal & River Trust, reported that on parts of the River Lee in East London, they have a great many competing users on the waterways - both powered and unpowered craft. They have been developing plans for two water safety zones in these very busy areas and will be piloting these later this spring. Canal & River Trust has also been working with boaters and anglers to review and update a waterway code to help make sure everyone using the Trust's waterways is aware and considerate of the needs of other users.

Jo Gideon MP noted that her constituency in Stoke-on-Trent has fantastic opportunities but also a range of challenges. The road network has been built adjacent to the Trent & Mersey Canal and recent newspaper reports suggested that people should avoid walking along the canal towpath due to the air pollution. Jo asked how this problem can be addressed. Matthew Symonds noted that most Canal & River Trust waterways have better air quality than surrounding urban areas. Natural barriers such as vegetation may help.

Terry Cavender of the Buckingham Canal Society noted a couple of near misses between their workboat and kayakers recently. He would like to see all the national governing bodies promoting visibility on the waterways, eg bright clothing, etc.

David Martin of the Cromford Canal Society – asked whether new legislation would ensure water companies have to monitor sewage outflow into rivers. Ben Seal replied the Environment Bill should help this, but pressure needs to be put on water companies to prevent the pollution happening in the first place. Gagan Mohindra MP reported that Rebecca Pow, Waterway Minister, is very receptive to Philip Dunne's amendments to the Environment Bill and it is very much on the government's agenda.

Ivan Cane, an IWA member in East Anglia reported that 1 mile of the North Walsham & Dilham Canal in Norfolk has been restored, and has been much used by locals for swimming, paddle boarders, canoeists and users of the Trust's solar powered trip boat. The Environment Agency has said that restoration of the next 2 miles will be detrimental to the ecological objectives of the canal and cause deterioration in the Water Framework Directive's status of the canal. Michael Fabricant advised raising the issue with the local MP. Ben Seal offered British Canoeing's support on this issue.

Michael Fabricant MP had to leave the meeting at this point to ask a Question in the House, but he outlined three actions that the Group would follow up after the meeting – increased access to the water (Defra/DCMS), safe areas for swimmers and is the EA doing enough to provide data that they have around water quality.

Gagan Mohindra MP took over chairing the meeting.

Cllr David Martin noted that EA's new water control legislation, coming into effect this year, will affect the Cromford Canal, and he asked whether other canal societies that rely on incoming water as a resource would be equally affected. Aisling Rollason from Canal & River Trust noted that there is a balancing act as there are always competing demands for water resources.

Howard Pridding suggested that policy making needs to be more joined up across government, as waterway activities fall into various different departments. This was demonstrated during the Covid crisis with boating recreation and tourism interests coming under DCMS, the waterways themselves sitting within Defra, with DfT and the Ports & Harbour authorities also having an interest, and the Cabinet Office taking an overview. Gagan Mohindra MP said that the Secretariat would follow this up.

Dave Chapman, IWA Chiltern Branch, raised two points on safety regarding wild swimming on navigable waterways – lack of visibility, and the fact that most powered craft are many tons in weight and cannot stop quickly. Simon Griffiths said that wild swimmers are encouraged to use bright coloured hats and tow floats which make a significant difference to visibility.

Geoff Brown, IWA Avon & Wiltshire Branch – most people who swim or paddleboard are not members of any organisation so it is difficult to get safety messages to them. Simon Griffiths noted that Swim England as the governing body work mostly with swimming clubs based in pools. Many outdoor swimmers are readers of magazine, websites and social media which can offer a good way of getting the messages out. Ben Seal said this is a challenge for any organisation, as a national governing body they put messaging out as do navigation authorities, but point of sale can offer an opportunity. More info could be provided at point of access too. In the same way as educating people about the Countryside Code, there needs to be lots of different sources of information.

Ken Burgin of the Cotswold Canals Trust raised an issue about fibre optic cables which are being installed across the country, often crossing waterways that are under restoration. This is going to create a problem for the future as the waterways are restored. Gagan Mohindra MP asked the Secretariat to pick this issue up.

Cllr David Martin suggested that another way of getting safety messages out can be through county and district council network, and through council run leisure facilities. Gagan Mohindra MP suggested parish and town councils and the Local Government Association were other routes.

### **Summary, actions, and closing remarks**

Gagan Mohindra MP closed the meeting, and confirmed that the Chair and Officers of the Group would liaise with the Secretariat to follow up the issues outlined.

### **Post meeting note:**

Michael Fabricant MP confirmed that the following letters would be written to follow up the issues discussed in the meeting:

- Letter to Defra and DCMS about better access to the water for non-powered craft
- Letter to Defra about more safe areas being designated for swimming, particularly on navigable rivers
- Letter to the Environment Agency - Is EA doing enough to provide data about safety and water quality and can EA do more to support restoration societies in opening up more waterways for navigation.



The Inland Waterways Association provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways.