



All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways
“Canal & River Trust – DEFRA grant review”

Wednesday 2nd November 2022
from 9.30 am to 11 am in Room M, Portcullis House (PCH)
and by Video Link

MINUTES

Present

Present at the meeting in Room M, Portcullis House were: Michael Fabricant, MP for Lichfield and APPG Chair, Wendy Morton MP for Aldridge and Brownhills, Suzanne Webb MP for Stourbridge and Heather Wheeler MP for South Derbyshire. Other MPs and peers joined by video or sent representatives to attend on their behalf.

Also present by video link were officials from Defra and representatives of navigation authorities and waterway organisations.

Apologies had been received from Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville, Dame Maria Miller MP and Mark Francois MP.

Welcome and Introductions

Michael Fabricant MP, APPG Chair, welcomed the parliamentarians and the speakers who were present in the meeting room in Westminster, and those who were joining by video link.

The main topic of the meeting was the importance of waterway funding, particularly in the context of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs’ (Defra) review of Canal & River Trust’s grant funding which is currently taking place.

Michael Fabricant introduced Richard Parry, Chief Executive of Canal & River Trust, as the first speaker.

Canal & River Trust - Securing the Future of the Waterways

Richard Parry, Chief Executive of Canal & River Trust, gave a presentation on “Securing the Future of the Waterways”. He explained that the outcome of the Defra review, due to be announced this autumn, will be critical for Canal & River Trust’s long-term financial position, with the current grant funding contract only in place until 2027.

Richard gave an overview of the Trust’s achievements during its first ten years, and explained the importance of the Trust’s waterways to the 9 million people who live within 10 to 15 minutes’ walk of them. He also highlighted the importance of the inland waterways to the government’s plans for “levelling up”, with 61% of households within 1km of their waterways experiencing wellbeing inequalities.

Richard also outlined the wider benefits that waterways can bring through access to the outdoors, mobilising volunteers and community support, water transfer, waterborne freight and helping to tackle climate change. New research published in Canal & River Trust’s new *Valuing our Waterways* report, shows that their waterways provide £4.6 billion in social value each year, as well as £1.5 billion in annual economic value.

Richard Parry’s presentation is available to download from IWA’s website.

Michael Fabricant MP thanked Richard for his presentation and asked the MPs present if they had any questions for Richard. Heather Wheeler MP asked a question about the alternative fuel payment for boat dwellers and whether Canal & River Trust had raised the issue with the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Richard Parry confirmed that they had been in discussions with BEIS about how such a scheme might work. Heather Wheeler MP advised that a meeting with BEIS recently suggested that a scheme would be announced shortly.

Wendy Morton MP asked what more could be done to get the message about how important the waterways are to Government. Richard Parry responded that raising awareness about the importance of continued investment in the waterways is crucial. It’s vital for the safety of communities as well as the ongoing leisure uses of the waterways. Wendy Morton asked if Government regarded waterways as critical pieces of national infrastructure. Richard Parry noted that reservoir safety in particular was essential, with the money for this having to come from the same pot of money, which will have an impact on where else money can be spent.

Michael Fabricant then introduced the second speaker, Jonathan Smith, Chief Executive, The Inland Waterways Association.

The Inland Waterways Association – *Waterways for Today*

Jonathan Smith, Chief Executive of the Inland Waterways Association, gave a presentation detailing IWA’s new report, *Waterways for Today*. This report demonstrates how the country’s network of 5000 miles of inland waterways can all contribute to the country’s

economic recovery. It details the 12 most significant benefits that the inland waterways can bring to our economy, environment, local communities and lives. The target audience for the report is politicians, at national, devolved and local level. Jonathan outlined the key recommendations identified in the report, which has been sent to all MPs with waterways in their constituencies.

The *Waterways for Today* report, and Jonathan's presentation, are available to download from IWA's website.

Questions and Answers/Discussion

Michael Fabricant MP thanked Richard Parry and Jonathan Smith for their presentations, and turned to the questions that were submitted by the virtual audience.

- Andrew Denny, Waterways World "*A question for Richard Parry - Which is the one remaining CRT structure still on the At Risk register?*" Richard Parry replied that it was the Hanwell Lock flight on the Grand Union Canal in West London, and noted that there was an open day at the lock flight coming up for anyone interested.
- Carl Onens, ABC Leisure Group "*What consideration has been given to the employment and economic benefits generated through the waterways network, which would be lost if the network falls into decline?*" Richard Parry responded that the 80,000 jobs he mentioned in his presentation is just part of the story, with local communities and villages all benefiting from the knock-on effect of having an active waterway running through them. If waterways fall into disuse this would have a detrimental effect on these communities.
- Les Etheridge, IWA "*Over the last few years the impact of climate change has been felt quite significantly on the inland waterways. Toddbrook Reservoir and the 2022 drought being good examples. How much impact has climate change over the last 10 years had on the costs of maintaining the waterways to a safe standard and how is this reflected in the discussions with government about the essential future funding.*" Richard Parry responded that they are seeing an increasing frequency and intensity of flash floods, long dry periods and the investment they need to mitigate against severe weather with a historic infrastructure such is rising. Emergency intervention is taking up more of their funding.
- Sir Robert Atkins (Former Minister for the Waterways) "*What contact has Richard Parry had with the new Minister for Waterways - whoever that is - and what was discussed?*" . Richard Parry noted that the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Therese Coffey MP, is a former Waterway Minister herself. They are awaiting confirmation as to which of the Defra ministers will take responsibility for Waterways, but its likely to be either Trudy Harrison MP (who has been Waterway Minister for the last couple of months) or Rebecca Pow MP, former Waterway Minister earlier in this government's term.

- Peter Parkinson, Bridgewater Canal Company “*The public benefits and importance of inland waterways to communities is clear, and the government CRT grant should be maintained to keep them navigable and open. However, several inland waterways and canals do not fall within the ownership and operation of the CRT and therefore should a government grant be available to all navigation authorities, restoration societies, and inland waterways operators?*”. Michael Fabricant MP regarded this as a rhetorical question and a point well made, and the MPs present were in agreement.
- Nigel Stevens, Shire Cruisers “*How can we persuade Defra to pay for the Trust’s reservoir upgrade?*” Michael Fabricant MP responded that lobbying was the best way and the APPGW would support this.
- David Metcalfe “*The investment on reservoirs, why is this a charitable cost, how are other reservoirs funded in the UK? Allowing the network to fall into disrepair will only aggravate the consequences of Climate Change through increased flood risk.*” Michael Fabricant MP noted this was a statement rather than a question.
- National Barge Travellers Association – “*Question to Defra: will Defra make the grant to CRT conditional on CRT dropping its unlawful 20-mile range requirement for boaters without a home mooring?*”. Michael Fabricant MP noted that there was no-one present from Defra to respond. Richard Parry noted that the premise of the question is not one that CRT would accept. CRT offers guidance to boaters without a home mooring because they have an obligation to navigate, moving every two weeks over a range. Advice is given by CRT for the distances required for CRT for people to avoid being in breach of their licence and lots of individual conversations take place with individual boaters.
- Terry Cavender, Buckingham Canal Society “*It has been good to see CRT evolve from BW and the ongoing support for restoration groups across the country. It is obviously critical that restoration groups recognise the need to have a network to connect to and support the Trust’s Defra bid in every way they can. Any suggestions of how this should manifest itself beyond the great support via IWA and the Waterways for Today report?*” Michael Fabricant advised that restoration supporters should write to their MPs. Heather Wheeler MPs suggested having open days to invite the public along and encourage the public to write to their MPs. All those attending the video meeting were encouraged to write to their own MPs. Michael Fabricant suggested that a letter template could be made available on the IWA website, and Jonathan Smith confirmed that there would be a letter template available by the end of the following week.
- Wendy Morton MP asked if there was a clear idea on the timeline of an announcement from Defra about the review. Richard Parry felt that it could be later than the previous “in the autumn” date but time is still of the essence.
- Graham Pressman: “*Is it possible to offer a cost per mile of maintenance of the average stretch of canal? Total cost divided by the number of miles?*” Richard Parry responded that it varied tremendously depending on the number of structures. What’s

more important is the cost of addressing the highest priority risks, with the rising costs and inflation in the construction industry which is putting real pressure on their operations.

- Robert Moreland. *“I am a Trustee of the restoration of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal and a Friend of the ongoing restoration of the Cotswold Canals and Friend of Wilts and Berks Canals (also former member of CRT partnership and Regional Advisory Board covering South West). What can CRT do to help restorations?”*. Michael Fabricant MP noted that he and Wendy Morton MP are both patrons of the Lichfield & Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust. Richard Parry noted that CRT have a direct role in some of the restorations, eg Montgomery Canal, Grantham Canal. Where they don't have ownership they provide moral support, advice and guidance, but its important that they focus their core efforts on the network they are responsibility. IWA also supports restoration and jointly run a restoration conference. Jonathan Smith noted that IWA's *Waterways for Today* report clearly shows the benefit that the waterways bring, using levelling up and other funding can provide opportunity for funding for future restorations. A small amount of money can bring a lot of payback, as evidenced by Waterways for Today and CRT's new report.
- Andrew Denny *“Is it better to write handwritten letters to your MP or is email just as effective.”* The MPs present confirmed that emails are fine, provided full address is included, but Wendy Morton MP felt that physical letters (typed or handwritten) stood out more rather than being lost in hundreds of emails.
- Tracey Clarke *“Will Defra please include the needs of disabled boaters and other waterways users when they are considering the grant funding.”* Richard Parry acknowledged the importance of facilities and provision for people with all sorts of disabilities and impairments. Sometimes this is difficult with very old infrastructure but it's a very important part of what they need to do in the future.
- David Metcalfe *“Why can't CRT use the Water Authorities model to fund reservoirs?”*. Richard Parry responded that they don't have the same set up with consumers paying for their water to call upon. They invest what they need and they recover it from their sources of income.
- National Barge Travellers Association: *“Please will the Chair clarify whether there has been a response to the letter to DLUHCLG from the Chair dated July 2021.”* Michael Fabricant noted that there hadn't been a full response to follow up the initial holding response and it would therefore be chased up.
- *“Is there such a thing as an MP who represents all people who are 'of no fixed abode”* Michael Fabricant confirmed that there was not.
- Michael Stimpson: *“A few years back, David Gauke agreed to the use of convicted persons working on the canal, painting lock gates and minor repairs. Is this on going?”* Richard Parry responded that there is a strong relationship with probation

service providers and there are lots of examples where this is working around the country.

- Andrew Denny “*With all the new housing and other development going on nationally, what is the chance of coordinating this with BRAND NEW waterways, to allow the new housing to enjoy waterways locally? The waterways need not be built straight away, but the future routes could be protected to allow them to be built in the future.*” Richard Parry noted that there were many opportunities provided by housing and other developments, through funding or works in kind, on either existing waterways, restoration projects and even new waterway projects.
- John Dodwell, Montgomery Canal Partnership “*Can you organise an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate?*”. Michael Fabricant MP agreed that this was a very good idea and he and the other MPs present would discuss after the meeting the best way to take this forward.
- Philip Riley, Vice President, Basingstoke Canal Society “*The issues facing the C&RT are mirrored on the Basingstoke Canal (which is currently owned by local authorities) but the position is becoming more acute. The canal is not supported by long term funding commitments - the funding is essentially hand to mouth and, on current projections, the canal will fail within the next 5 years and become derelict. As part of CRT’s negotiations with DEFRA could we appeal for the inclusion of the Basingstoke in the future national network as this is almost certainly the only way to secure the survival of the canal. Time is of the essence.*” Michael Fabricant asked whether CRT would consider adopting the Basingstoke Canal? Richard Parry responded that this would only be possible with sufficient funding.

Summary, actions, and closing remarks

The meeting closed with the MPs agreeing to put in requests for an adjournment debate on the subject of waterway funding and the other issues discussed during the meeting.

Michael Fabricant MP thanked the two speakers on behalf of the All Party Group and closed the meeting. He reminded people to write to their MPs, asking them to write to Ministers in support of waterway funding in general, and Canal & River Trust’s grant review in particular, and to refer to the IWA website for a letter template.

Feedback on the technology and format for this meeting was requested to be fed back to the Secretariat (IWA).

A link to the recording of this meeting, along with the two presentations, are available on request from the APPGW Secretariat by emailing amy.tillson@waterways.org.uk.