



All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

General Meeting

“The Importance of the Waterways to the Environmental Improvement Plan”

Tuesday 28th March 2023

from 9.35 am to 11.00 am in Room R, Portcullis House and by video meeting

Present

Michael Fabricant MP (Chair), Simon Baynes MP

Apologies had been received from Danny Kruger MP, Brendan Clarke MP and Maggie Throup MP

Also in attendance by video were officials from Defra and representatives of navigation authorities and waterway organisations.

Welcome and Introductions

Michael Fabricant MP, Chair of the Group, welcomed parliamentarians and representatives of waterway organisations to the hybrid meeting. Presentations from the Canal and River Trust and the Montgomery Waterway Restoration Trust were followed by a general question and answer session.

Amy Tillson explained how attendees could raise questions using the Zoom Q&A function which would be answered later on.

Michael Fabricant MP then introduced the first speakers, Heather Clarke (Strategy Engagement and Impact Director) and Eoin Harris (Head of Environment and Climate Action), from the Canal and River Trust, who presented on “Waterways Contribution to the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 Delivery”. After introducing themselves they outlined the Government’s recently launched Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), explaining that the Plan has some very substantial ambitions, and that the waterways have a key role to play in achieving them. Despite their narrow width, canals are rich blue-green corridors, providing access to nature within urban areas, attracting 10.2 million visitors per year. They emphasised the importance of this network being open to the public, as access to nature is one of the key ambitions of the EIP. They highlighted the significant number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) along the canals, all linked by the network: 700 hectares of SSSIs and of those 41 are in favourable condition and 27 in recovering status. There are also opportunities to increase biodiversity along the existing hard edges of the canals.

They explained how the waterways can contribute to Natural Capital Accounting and Biodiversity Net Gain, and the work they have been doing to establish a baseline to understand the natural value across the network, using GIS mapping. This provides an inventory of the mosaic of habitats found along the canals.

Canals can contribute to the EIP's goal of clean air by providing opportunities for modal shift: Cycling and walking along the towpath fits with the government ambition to invest in active travel. They can contribute to the goal of clean and plentiful water - there are many projects ongoing to use the canals for strategic water transfer (e.g. along the Grand Union from Minworth).

They covered the issue of waste crime - litter and fly tipping - and how volunteers are helping to improve the environment through litter picks. They explained how canals can help mitigate climate change, through low carbon transport, freight, reducing urban temperatures, flood alleviation, and heating and cooling buildings. However they also emphasised how the canals could be impacted by climate change in the future, as the 250 year old system faces wetter winters and drier summers. They also mentioned how the Trust is tackling invasive non-native species.

One of the key goals outlined in the EIP is for everyone to live within a 15 minute walk of a green or blue space. Waterways are vital to achieving this. They explained how 16% of England's population live within a 10-15 minute walk of a waterway and the important factor that 61% of households within 1km of a waterway experience inequality.

They called for two key areas to unlock the potential of the waterways:

- Better recognition of the inland waterways in Biodiversity Net Gain methodology – they are currently classed in the same way as ditches.
- Ongoing investment in the infrastructure. An estimated £20-30million per year additional funding is needed to maintain infrastructure, reduce risk to communities and sustain benefits.

Michael Fabricant MP then introduced the second speaker, Michael Limbrey, Chairman of the Montgomery Waterways Restoration Trust, who spoke via video link about the Montgomery Canal as a practical example of an inland waterway contributing to the Environmental Improvement Plan.

Michael Limbrey began by outlining the history of the Montgomery Canal until its abandonment in 1944 and its subsequent restoration.

He outlined the Montgomery Canal Management Strategy, which was put together in 2005 following detailed research, and seeks to include all aspects of the built and natural heritage of the canal and canal corridor, and its use as a recreation resource by the local community. The role in recreation includes walking, cycling, angling and canoes, as well as traditional narrowboats. As an overall framework for the whole restoration, the Strategy also touches on the role of the canal in rural regeneration. He explained that “do nothing” was not an option because if the canal were not cared for it would become overgrown with invasive species and impede the flow of fresh water to the most rare and valuable plants.

This vision was put together under the guidance of the Montgomery Canal Partnership, which has representatives covering the full range of interests including local authorities, conservation organisations and waterway groups.

He explained that the canal is a Special Area of Conservation (under the European Habitats Directive) for Floating Water Plantain and has designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest for emergent species such as Grass Wrack Pondweed, as well as 9 Nature Reserves which create an opportunity to achieve favourable conditions for these species whilst navigation is restored. The Levelling Up funding recently awarded to the project will also provide funding for more nature reserves.

He explained how the canal benefits the local tourist economy and the communities alongside it, with the popular canal Triathlon that brings people together and also raises money for the restoration.

Questions and Answers/Discussion

Michael Fabricant MP thanked the speakers for their presentations and invited questions.

The question and answer session included questions and discussion with MPs and peers as well as representatives from navigation authorities and waterway organisations.

Mike Palmer, Chair of IWA's Restoration Hub, asked why waterways as an educational asset are not part of the plan? Both Michael Fabricant and the CRT representatives agreed that the waterways are a fantastic educational resource. Heather Clarke said that there are a substantial number of schools within a 10-15 minute walk of the canals and CRT does work with them. They have an Explorers programme aimed at young people and some schools have adopted sections of canal. They also found a lot of their digital material was well used during lockdown, so they have started to grow their digital offer for teachers. She agreed it is critical to educate children as they will be the waterways supporters of the future.

Simon Baynes MP, said that having been a supporter of the Montgomery Canal for 20 years he had seen for himself the amazing work that has been done in restoring the canal and was very pleased that the MP for Montgomery Craig Williams had secured a Levelling Up Fund grant of £20 million pounds for the canal. He asked Michael Limbrey how he sees that Levelling Up Fund grant transforming the prospects for the Montgomery Canal? Michael Limbrey answered that the fund will offer an opportunity to extend the navigable section through Welshpool, which is currently isolated from the rest of the system. They are hoping for additional finance to remove the last two obstructions, but the Levelling Up money is a game-changer for the canal and will make a huge difference.

Les Etheridge Chair of IWA asked: given waterways offer a major contribution to delivering both the Environmental Improvement Plan and Levelling Up, waterways must be properly maintained to deliver these benefits, so how can we ensure that adequate central and local funding is provided to ensure these benefits are maximised? Michael Fabricant responded that a group of 25 MPs have written on behalf of the Canal and River Trust to Defra asking them to ensure adequate funding, but ultimately, it is the Treasury who make the decisions. CRT is only one Navigation Authority but it is the largest, so it is important for it to receive the funding it needs.

Paul Burrows, new CEO of the Middle Level Commissioners in the Fens of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, highlighted the huge opportunities for navigation, the environment and well-being that could be unlocked by the proposed Anglian Water Fens Reservoir.

Tracey Clarke of the newly formed Accessible Waterways Association has been awarded grant funding to launch an organisation to represent assist and inform disabled people who want to enjoy the waterways. She invited attendees to contact her for more information.

John Best, Trustee of the Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Trust, asked the Canal and River Trust what CRT's expectation for marine transition to electric power is and how it fits with the CRT plans? Eoin Harris replied that getting waterways to net zero will be a huge challenge. They are working with the Department for Transport as part of the transport decarbonisation strategy and with AINA, and substantial investment will be needed for the installation of charging points.

Andrew Hardy from the Lapal Canal Trust asked if there was any funding available from Defra for canal restoration projects? Michael Fabricant confirmed that money is not available directly for restoration, it would need to go through something like the Levelling Up Fund. He advised anyone interested to contact their own MP.

David Lowe from the Commercial Boat Operators Association asked: The Canal & River Trust rightly promotes the use of its Commercial Waterways for freight. But its property Department has just relet almost all of a superb wharf in Leeds (the only one available) to a non-water freight user even though this contravenes the safeguarding by Leeds City Council, and a water freight customer wants to use it as an inland terminal. Only a small part of the wharf is available for water freight and it is too small to be economic. Eoin Harris undertook to follow up this question outside the meeting.

Anne Husar from the National Association of Boat Owners asked if Michael Fabricant could define the meaning of "forthwith" (referencing the answer given by the waterways minister Rebecca Pow at the recent debate in Westminster Hall when asked when the decision on CRT's future funding would be announced by Defra). No further updates were available on the timing of the decision.

Summary, actions, and closing remarks

Michael Fabricant MP thanked the speakers on behalf of the All Party Group and closed the meeting.

The presentations from this meeting are available on request from Amy Tillson, APPGW Secretariat by emailing amy.tillson@waterways.org.uk.



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