

PRESS RELEASE



For immediate release

Date: 15 April 2026

Fund Britain's Waterways statement for the local and devolved elections, 7 May 2026

- **80% of local authorities have a navigable or restorable waterway in their area**
- **The acknowledged benefits of canals and navigable rivers are threatened by underinvestment**
- **A coalition of over 160 organisations is campaigning for an urgent review, with boats spreading the message across the country from Woolwich to Walsall, Liverpool and Bedford throughout 2026**

Britain's network of 5,000 miles of canals and navigable rivers is a unique national asset which improves the lives of millions [1]. Almost 80% of local authority areas include a navigable waterway or a waterway under restoration. Their benefits are widely acknowledged both by local communities and nationally, contributing to environmental resilience, heritage, health and wellbeing and economic prosperity [2, 3, 4]. Well-maintained waterways enable people to enjoy time on or by the water. Jobs are provided by inland waterway businesses and the wider tourism and hospitality trade.

Yet our inland waterways and the benefits they bring are increasingly threatened by underfunding, at a time when the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather arising from climate change is combining with the age of the network, resulting in infrastructure failures and waterway closures [5].

The events of 2025 demonstrated the urgency of the threat. Winter storms and heavy rainfall caused a major breach of the Bridgewater Canal near Lymm in Cheshire and damage to a lock on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. A dry spring developed into drought and the closure of 20% of the canal network over summer, an unprecedented proportion. No sooner had water levels begun to recover than sudden heavy rainfall caused river levels to rise rapidly and go into flood. The year culminated in the breach of the Llangollen Canal near Whitchurch in Shropshire and the failure of a culvert on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal in Penkrige. The result was multi-million pound repair bills and lengthy closures, impacting businesses as well as individual boaters and other waterway users.

In response to this threat Fund Britain's Waterways (FBW) came together as a coalition of more than 160 organisations representing hundreds of thousands of users and supporters of inland waterways. It has been campaigning since June 2023 for national and local government to act now and protect the public benefit and natural capital of our waterways. Last year the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority demonstrated what is possible, by providing £500,000 towards the repair of a lock on the River Cam. This is a hugely valuable start, but it is nowhere near enough.

FBW will be taking the message across the country throughout 2026. The joint Icicle Cruise in March on the Walsall Canal with the Birmingham Canal Navigations Society started the journey. Next will be a flotilla of historic narrowboats travelling up the tidal Thames past the Palace of Westminster in May. The main campaign cruise will converge on Liverpool and the northwest waterways, though planning is being hampered by closures across the network. In July a fleet of watercraft will travel the length of the River Great Ouse to Bedford in a joint campaign cruise with the Great Ouse Boating Association, engaging directly with MPs, mayors and councillors and highlighting critical navigation and flood risk issues caused by failing infrastructure.

Christine Colbert, an Inland Waterways Association member, local councillor and former Mayor of St Neots, said:

"I have a deep love of water and have lived beside the River Great Ouse for most of my life. I have swum in it, boated on it, and thanks to reservoirs and purification systems I drink from it! Every living thing on our planet relies on water and we must take the greatest care of this wonderful resource. Our water courses are beautiful and give essential support to wildlife and in many ways benefit human health and welfare.

Our elected representatives need to bear all of this in mind and also consider the economic benefits which communities can gain from water-based leisure and tourist activities and the stimulation which flows from them into the wider local economy."

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For more information:

For further information about Fund Britain's Waterways contact info@fundbritainwaterways.org.uk

Notes to Editors

The benefits of Britain's inland waterways are documented in:

1. ['Waterways for Today' report](#) published by the Inland Waterways Association (November 2022)
2. ['Valuing Our Waterways' report](#) published by the Canal & River Trust with social value experts Simetrica-Jacobs, with all methodology aligning with 2022 HM Treasury Green Book valuation techniques (November 2022)
3. ['Economic Benefits' report](#) published by British Marine, April 2024
4. ['Impact Report 2024/25'](#) published by the Canal & River Trust, January 2026
5. The impact of climate change on the waterways and the adaptations required are documented in ['Our Climate Adaptation Report 2024'](#) published by the Canal & River Trust, December 2024

About [Fund Britain's Waterways \(FBW\)](#):

FBW brings together a wide range of organisations with the sole purpose of campaigning collectively for an increase in government funding of Britain's inland waterways to avert their decline, and to promote awareness of the huge economic, environmental and social well-being value they provide. Established in June 2023, it already has over 160 members representing hundreds of thousands of users and supporters of inland waterways.

Photographs accompanying this release:



1. Narrowboat stranded by the breach in the Llangollen Canal in Whitchurch, Shropshire, December 2025 (credit: Taylors Aboard)



2. Narrowboat dressed with FBW banners in the Birmingham Canal Navigations Society / FBW campaign cruise to Walsall, March 2026 (credit: Kev Maslin, Chasing the Boats)