

Note: This report was written in early 2024, prior to the establishment of IWA's Restoration Development Group, and many aspects written about in the report have substantially changed since the report was written; indeed the report was instrumental in the reorganisation leading to the current (as at September 2026) new structure

Report to Trustees by the Restoration Hub High Level Panel Capacity Sub-Group.

IWA Restoration Hub Central Services Support Improvement

Background

IWA's income has not kept up with costs. The Association has suffered from the general economic situation, which has seen substantial rates of cost and wages inflation, particularly in recent years, greater competition for senior staff in an expanding third sector and competition for donations, legacies and membership, particularly since the change in status of British Waterways into CRT. CRT being established in the third sector confused the established donors and diverted potential new supporters of IWA.

Over the past few years the IWA has been struggling to maintain its position as champion of canal restoration. A squeeze on funding has caused a reduction of headcount at head office. Cost cutting has been apparent as staff are lost and replaced with less experienced people, if at all. This staff turnover means that the excellent Restoration Hub developed to support Trusts some years ago is now much reduced.

The Association's last few attempts to recruit leaders has failed with appointees leaving after only a few months. While this obviously calls into question past recruitment techniques the outcome is that the Association has been slow to move on and tackle the funding and other leadership issues.

Restoration Trusts have therefore experienced a situation where the previously established Restoration Hub was understaffed and therefore not helpful and contacts with IWA staff were broken by many changes of staff. It was then natural for these bodies to deal with matters themselves.

The continued need for networking and communal sharing of experience continued and this is evidenced by the successful reestablishment of the Northern Canals Association. This is an informal grouping that invites all Trust members to visit another restoration site, experience talks on helpful topics, but

more than anything else to talk to each other and swap experiences and contacts.

This function had also been promoted very successfully by the Annual IWA/CRT National Restoration Conference; although the staffing issues for IWA and CRT cost pressures have meant that this too has lost its presence and popularity with senior decision making Restoration Trust members.

The Issue

The High Level Panel comprises a number of members from across the country selected from Restoration Trusts supplemented by members from IWA restoration type positions. This forum provides a basis for comparison of restoration practices and problems. So, in the light of the background above members of the Panel identified that many local restoration trusts struggle to get access to the range of skills necessary to restore canals safely, efficiently and within budget. Individual trusts cannot create a pool of skills to cover all eventualities and may not be experienced in contracting with and managing contractors and consultants. The Restoration Hub used to go a long way to filling the gaps or at least guiding Trusts in the right direction. This mechanism is no longer working effectively and there are still many gaps.

The current outcome is risk to the health of restorations due to inadequate controls, slower restoration and inferior canals. That may mean that restored waterways may not be up to acceptable criteria to meet relevant authorities standards, such as CRT, EA etc, for ultimate adoption (where relevant) or may even fail and fall into disuse. It is apparent that a failure by one Trust reflects on all others and therefore poor restoration threatens the whole industry.

The Project Brief

The brief is to suggest ways that the IWA can best ensure that restoration needs are met, whether it be by providing the resource directly or signposting to expertise. In doing this due consideration should be given to funding the service/assistance, particularly in the current IWA leadership, staffing and funding challenges.

Approach

The High Level Panel of the IWA Restoration hub asked three members to undertake research to determine:

- the type of skills requirement;
- the volume of skills required; and
- How such assistance could be funded and delivered.

The team contacted 15 trusts thought to be representative of geography, complexity, size and achievement to date. Whilst the normal method of fact finding might be by questionnaire it was decided that each of the three members would contact the chairmen (or delegated representative) by phone. Whilst this was more time consuming it provided a more nuanced response from a two way

dialogue. It also allowed the team to clarify what was meant by terms such as “green book” as it is our belief that not all Trusts are currently aware of these aspects, current legislation or best practice approaches to restoration or how critical they can be to success. Conversations were agreed to be in confidence with outcomes being reported in an anonymised summary.

A number of categories of skill were identified (see Appendix 1) to guide the conversations and provide a response that could be more easily summarised; however it also provided an element of control in that comparative need could be better gauged. We recognise that there is no way we could check for consistency in the questioning by the three team members.

An assessment criterion was applied as follows:

- Critical to success
- Important resource
- Nice to have
- Not required

This was assessed by the representative and interviewer during the conversations, but reliance was placed on the interviewees’ assessment, albeit after challenge by questioning.

Whilst the study was commenced early in 2022, work was put on hold when organisational changes at IWA and failure of the HLP to meet prevented progress. It was felt that we should not take up individual’s time as we could no longer offer an outcome in return for participation in the survey. After discussion at the resurrection of the HLP it was agreed to complete the survey and a slot was also found to canvas views at the National Restoration Conference. This gave an opportunity for a 40 minute group session with around 35 attendees. This group typically involved those with a more hands on role than those interviewed, but was also welcomed and received very positively.

Summary of Results

Overall, the Trusts perceived the exercise as valuable and looked forward to support being available. There was general support for the scheme and recognition that any support system would need to be funded, possibly by the Trusts themselves. Insofar as there was a focus on types of skill shortage the Appendix summarises the key messages:

- Environmental Surveys, Ecology and Health and Safety were judged as “critical” more than any other response.
- Biodiversity Net Gain, Hydrology, Engineering Design, Membership Development and Fundraising were reported as “critical” by at least 4 of 9 Trusts.
- Other “critical” areas identified by more than one Trust were Project Management, Green Book knowledge and EA and Water Authority networking.
- The other areas ranked as “important” rather than critical were technical services like Insurance, Legals, and Corporate Governance Training, but these were consistently rated by most Trusts in this way.

- Low responses included Corporate Organisation and Training (although a number of respondents saw WRG as a means of delivering training).
- At the conference there was a definite recognition of the difficulty to recruit volunteers.

Overall the “average” response to the categories identified was “important” indicating a good recognition of the challenges. There was also a perceived variation in Trusts’ expectation of who might deliver these services, but a general welcoming of assistance and a realisation that not everything can be free.

In addition to the stated requirements the team noted a number of further lessons from the conversations:

- That each Trust is different. It may be an obvious statement, but each Trust is guided by individuals, each being very different in expertise, motivation and levels of support. The challenges for each restoration will vary, the stage of restoration and the strength and capacity/expertise of trustees are all very different. There is therefore no solution that can be provided to fit them all. It has to be more of a “pick and mix” option determined by individual Trusts according to need and timing.
- That there is a need for more thought on business strategy in many Trusts. There is inevitably a great deal of passion for each project by many people who enjoy physical activity. The concept of a business plan is less persuasive where the scale of project can be overwhelming and experience suggests that an opportunistic approach is often required.
- Trusts are unaware of some needs. Perhaps they don’t know what they don’t know. It is difficult to keep up with changes to legislation, best practice, new products, etc. Whilst a corporate context would allow expertise to be recruited for all relevant disciplines this is a luxury not available to trusts where expertise has to be obtained without cost from volunteers. It is difficult to assemble a comprehensive set of skills in any given trust and then to ensure they are kept up to date.
- Do the best you can. The tendency is to keep the project moving with the resources and skills available. However we have seen already that if it goes wrong and causes serious injury to volunteers or the design and/or materials used in a restoration are not appropriate, it will cause failure in the project resulting in implications for the restoration industry as a whole as well as for the trust itself.
- Two way dialogues get the best answers. Just as we found it useful to have conversations with trust members, so the delivery of help would be best achieved by a conversation with an expert or knowledgeable person. Whilst there is an efficiency in preparing case studies that can be accessed by all, they never quite match the challenge of each trust. Conversations are much more likely to gain agreement and provide a best way forward.

Correlation to Existing Services

There was a recognition by Trusts that expertise available from the IWA Restoration Hub had deteriorated significantly over the last few years. It is apparent that there is a reasonable correlation of the original services offered originally by the Restoration Hub to some of the key/critical asks. IWA has traditionally offered individual advice on H&S, BNG and Fundraising. It also offers Civil Engineering support, although this doesn't go as far as full Engineering Design.

There appear to be gaps in provision of the other key environmental, project management, hydrology, membership and Green Book areas.

Furthermore, the reduction in staff availability means it is much more difficult to get signposting help on a timely basis.

What's Needed?

Our review suggests that a complete service for restoration trusts would include the following key elements:

- A prompt means of accessing relevant and trusted expertise
- Guidance in business strategy and good governance.
- Signposting to endorsed providers of solutions. A network of external consultants and companies that have a proven track record of delivery to restoration projects with some element of vetting and review by IWA personnel
- Access to in house expertise in canal restoration. This would include specific areas such as civils and insurance – the key areas, which are already provided.
- A library of suppliers/consultants and working templates/case studies.
- A network of expertise within the trusts. This is currently provided informally or through the Northern Canals Association. If questions are posed to central IWA staff and feedback given a library of past cases can be maintained and trusts can be referred to other trusts for help. Our conversations demonstrated a willingness (within reason) to pass on expertise to sister organisations within a self help network.

How might this be provided?

There is an element of returning back to a system that worked well in the past. This is not inventing something new, simply returning to a successful model. The system worked best when IWA had an experienced individual who could coordinate all aspects of restoration and had knowledge of the progress and personalities around the country.

We therefore advocate that a high level individual is recruited with the following remit:

- To respond to enquiries and where possible to organise and attend visits to Trusts. The opportunity to understand a project and discuss issues can

be time consuming, but it is a means to start to build relationships and understanding. This scheme will grow slowly by reputation and proven value of assistance. It has been tried before with specific skills such as BNG, but we advocate a more generalist approach.

- To flag up potential issues/risks through “soft” audits. During conversations on site it will be possible to discuss areas on a list of potential concerns, such as governance and business planning. In a two way conversation it should be possible to ask pertinent questions and get issues on the agenda of trusts before they become a problem for them.
- To catalogue sources of experience/case studies. With the production of a library or database of past experiences, the potential solution and contact details, referrals can be made so that trusts can help each other.
- To identify third party suppliers and agree terms. Many of the issues revolve around smaller trusts identifying a provider that understands the issues regarding canal restoration, and can provide a tailored service at a reasonable price. As time goes by preferred suppliers can be added to a database working on a “Trusted Trader” format. It may also be possible to negotiate territories and day rates and referees. The work would be paid for by individual trusts, but this might provide the opportunity for a referral fee from the trust or contractor to IWA.
- To organise training events. Some issues may recur and, where this is so, a training need could be specified. Whilst it is unlikely that the individual would deliver the training they could provide a brief. This may take the form of a session in the annual conference and be provided by relevant contractors, who would benefit from contact with the trusts as potential customers.
- To communicate with Trusts. Whilst the individual would be the first point of contact for enquiries received there is also an opportunity to communicate out to trusts in the form of a regular newsletter outlining new issues in legislation, opportunities, enquiries dealt with, etc. This would reinforce the building of relationships.
- To raise funding for future years. Perhaps the most important aspect is to plan to raise future funding to continue the role when initial funding runs out. IWA has been successful in the past in raising grants to act as a centralised training facility. Once the system has been established it should be easier to prove the need and value of continued operation and therefore to raise the grant funding to support and even grow the operation. Whilst grants might be a key element there is also the opportunity for contributions from trusts or contractors as described above.

Whilst this list is extensive the work load would migrate during the first few years. Initially there would be a lot of fact finding and visits/conversations, which would enable the first materials and contractor network to be started. Over time the visits would decrease, but enquiries increase. The materials built up should then enable an easier route to answering queries.

How could we find someone for the role?

Past experience shows that it isn't easy to recruit into our sector. We believe that establishing credibility early on is critical. The IWA have employed a number of staff in roles, but in most cases these individuals have had a steep learning curve to negotiate. Our trustees and passionate restorers are not the most patient of people, so it is important for the individual to hit the ground running.

We would therefore look for the recruit to be from within the industry and with canal restoration experience. The individual must obviously be a good people manager, be self driven and perhaps with experience in the engineering side of the job (as other skills can be more easily learned and are not seen as critical by trustees). A more mature individual is likely to demonstrate these skills. The position should be at least full time and have a mix of home/office working.

We think recruitment should also look within the trusts and their contacts, and it may be possible to recruit someone already known to IWA or the industry. It must of course be treated as a professional recruitment process. The advantages of someone known to the industry is a better understanding of the individual and a known passion for the job that could mean a saving in package, training time, etc. and more initial acceptance by trusts.

We have set a suggested salary at around £50k for a full time role, but this needs to be assessed with experts. It is critical in our view that we get the right individual, who understands the role and is committed to the cause. If a higher salary is needed we should pay it for such a critical position.

Funding

The brief asked the group to consider how to fund the investment.

Given that the IWA has itself been struggling for funding we have considered how these services might be provided. We have spoken to trustees, who have a knowledge of the financial position and our proposal is as follows:

Start up

Initially we would take an existing funding pot derived from an appropriate legacy. We believe the David Goodwin Legacy of £100k would fit the bill. This would be designed to provide for up to two years of initial funding of wages, although actual costs might mean the initial period is modified to suit.

Stage 2

Once the individual is in place one task will be to research funding opportunities. IWA has in the past raised significant funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The logic that paying one expert to train and improve the whole industry was successful in the past and should succeed again, especially if the first year can demonstrate success.

Sustainability

The ongoing measure of success will be to make the system self financing. As experience is gained it may be possible to add to the resource in particular skills areas. It will be important to consider a paid basis, whereby trusts pay for the service provided. Our discussions suggest that most sizeable restorations see this as a reasonable way to move forward. This would apply to in house services offered.

Payment could be managed through a direct payment for hours spent or for a subscription model. In the latter trusts may prebuy services for a discounted annual fee (this only works once credibility is achieved and value proven).

In addition, it may be possible to collect commissions from suppliers as in the case of a broker selling insurance services – as long as independence can be assured to users. If a database is maintained of good suppliers and service is monitored by the IWA, incumbent trusts may well be prepared to agree an up front payment based upon the contract value. So if a trust commissioned an ecology survey, it could do so on the IWA's preset terms and brief and part of the cost saving could be passed to IWA for "supervisory services".

IWA should aim to establish that in this latter phase (which would overlap with Stage 2) sufficient funds are generated to increase the offering and staff available.

In conclusion

We see the re-establishment of the Restoration Hub as a valuable way forward, which is of value as much to IWA as to the restoration sector.

- This proposal demonstrates that IWA confirms its role in restoration; a role that started 70 years ago on the Stratford canal. It gives IWA members a reason to continue to support it with membership and legacies and hopefully helps to arrest the income decline. It also provides a clear separation from CRT, who now compete in the same donations marketplace.
- It is one step towards reconnecting with trusts and heading off other networking events that are also threatening its role.
- Whilst the proposal focuses on skills and knowledge transfer it would work alongside WRG operations, which might also over time be consolidated and could also move to a payment model.
- It could invigorate the local branch network, which in certain areas is struggling to retain and entertain members.
- It is a positive step that may fit the political mood. We can't continually cut our cloth to fit our income without risking shrinking into oblivion; by promoting restoration we can demonstrate traditional values and take pride in the success of each yard of canal restored by trusts. We believe that in combination with other changes being introduced by IWA Trustees this would reverse the trend of decline and re-establish the position of IWA again.