All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

Skills, Jobs and Apprenticeships on the Waterways

Weds 4th November 1-2pm 1 Parliament Street Room C

Present: Lisa Smart MP, Helen Morgan MP, Sureena Brackenridge MP, Wera Hobhouse MP, Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer, Tim Davis, assistant to Simon Opher MP, David Banwell, assistant to Tessa Munt MP, Emily Jones, assistant to Bill Esterson MP, Sophie Rogers, Secretariat to Water Pollution APPG, Lee Wilshire, Chair, Commercial Boat Operators Association, Joanna Richardson, British Marine, Kelly Hemus, Resourcing & Future Talent Manager, Canal and River Trust, Bethany Windsor, Head of Multimodal and Skills Policy, Logistics UK, Charlie Norman, Inland Waterways Association, Amy Tillson, Inland Waterways Association.

1. **Apologies received due to parliamentary business on the day:** Received from Bill Esterson MP, Ruth Cadbury MP, Baroness Jones

2. **Welcome and introductions**

3. **Speakers:**

   Joanna Richardson External Relations Manager, British Marine

Joanna Richardson outlined the work of British Marine, the national trade association for the marine industry, including coastal and inland businesses. She explained the industry is made up of around 6,300 businesses, predominantly small and micro-enterprises, many of which report difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled staff. Overall, the industry supports 81,370 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs, half of which stem from the inland marine sector and contributes £3.76 billion in gross value added (GVA) annually.

Joanna stressed the significance of the inland marine sector which, when combined with the hospitality and tourism spend of those participating in inland boating, delivers an estimated £7.6 billion in GVA each year. Members of British Marine have said that what they need help with is addressing the skills gap and future proofing their workforce.

They are lobbying for access to training and improved quality of marine apprenticeships. British Marine offer extensive online training through a new Training Academy platform on general and more specific topics. This offers CPD and resources to members.

Encouraging careers and professional development improves customer confidence in the industry leading to growth.

The marine industry has a good story to tell with 50% increase in marine apprenticeships since the Boatbuilding Trailblazer Group established in 2018.

She outlined two key policy priorities for the sector:

Protecting safety-critical skills and assessment: Assurance from the Secretary of State that full comprehensive assessment of apprenticeship standards for marine electrician, marine engineer and boatbuilders will be retained given the vial high safety thresholds required in the marine environment.

Establishing an employer-led taskforce: The Secretary of State should press Skills England to establish a marine industry employer-led taskforce , akin to what has been agreed with the construction industry, to retain industry expertise in the design and review of apprenticeship standards and the assessment levels requirements.

Lee Wilshire Chair, Commercial Boat Operators Association (CBOA)

Lee Wilshire explained that CBOA represent freight vessel operators, and work with Logistics UK's Water Council. He explained that the sector suffers from a lack of visibility, and they have been told that water freight is a hard-to-reach sector. Whereas everyone can engage with rail and road transport water is less visible, but one barge can replace 20 to 25 lorries. The sector is not just containers in seaports but much more local and beneficial.

It can offer very specialist transportation and each waterway is unique. Knowledge is niche and held by only a few people. Often the freight operators are small businesses with not enough capacity for taking on apprenticeships. Much is learned on the job.

Schools and careers advisors aren't aware of water freight as a career so they struggle to recruit. It can be physical work at odd hours although it can offer great career progression with lots of responsibility. Together that makes it hard to sell as a job advert.

Another issue is how to share information about how to go about shipping freight by water the visibility is not there for customers. Freight operators are busier than ever, but this means that they don't have time to advertise and find new work.

CBOA are calling for a national freight strategy - they would like to see a growth target for water freight similarly ambitious as that for rail freight. Businesses are willing to invest but they need targets. This would trigger growth and jobs in the sector.

4. Roundtable and Next Steps

The APPG also heard evidence from Kelly Hemus, Resourcing and Future Talent Manager with Canal & River Trust about the importance of recognising the waterways sector as a provider of skilled, sustainable and meaningful careers.

Kelly added that greater government support and advocacy for the waterways would help the sector grow, attract new talent and create long-term opportunities in green jobs.

The discussion highlighted the need for apprenticeship and skills policies to be more flexible and responsive to smaller, specialist sectors, where workforce requirements and career pathways do not always fit mainstream training models.

Bethany Windsor, Head of Multimodal and Skills Policy at Logistics UK, explained that some maritime occupations are considered niche when measured by apprenticeship numbers. However, they support activities and infrastructure whose economic and strategic importance extends far beyond the size of the workforce itself.

She emphasised that apprenticeship numbers should therefore be considered alongside the wider economic, strategic and societal consequences of failing to train enough people in these occupations.

Participants also agreed on the importance of setting clear targets, particularly for growth in water freight as a key part of the UK's logistics network. Such targets would provide a framework for investment and modal shift, while creating further opportunities for apprenticeships and skills development.

The roundtable concluded with parliamentarians recognising both the significant potential of the waterways sector to provide apprenticeship opportunities and the need for greater support to realise that potential.

IWA will work with members to lay down written questions on these topics.

Wera Hobhouse asked how her local waterways stakeholder group could start to develop their remit beyond the littering issues they currently focus on tackling. IWA to liaise with her team.

Sureena Brackenridge asked how a young person in Wolverhapton would go about embarking on a career in the waterways sector.

Concluding the meeting, Sureena Brackenridge, MP for Wolverhampton North East, said:

“If there are opportunities for young people to go into apprenticeships, we should all be interested in them. It was good to hear about the capacity of our nation's waterways to offer skilled work, clearly much needed.”