

Please reply to; Ivor Caplan, RBOA Chairman,  
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Graham Thomas  
Inland Waterways Branch  
Defra  
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Dear Mr Thomas

### **Review of British Waterways**

The Residential Boat Owners Association (RBOA) is pleased to be involved in this review and I am submitting this response on behalf of the RBOA Committee taking into account comments from members.

The RBOA is the primary national organisation formed over 40 years ago to represent the views of those living afloat, both on British Waterways (BW) canals and rivers and on other inland and coastal waters. We are involved in all major national consultations on issues related to inland waterways and our views are well received by navigational authorities, Defra and other national and local bodies.

This response follows the questions set out in your consultation paper and is based on the policies set out in the Government document *Waterways for Tomorrow* and the BW corporate plan *Our Plans for the Future 2003-2007*

### **How well has BW met its objectives?**

The general objective as set out in the *Framework Document for British Waterways (DETR 1999)* is **to maintain and develop Britain's inland waterways in a sustainable manner, so that they fulfil their full economic, social and environmental potential.** We submit that this objective has been largely achieved over the preceding 5 years and great improvements have been made both in the standard of the actual inland waterways system and in the impact that it has on society. There is a greatly increased awareness of the economic, social and environmental benefits, amongst both authorities and individuals and a recognition of its true value to the nation. This has largely resulted from the higher profile that BW has given

to the inland waterways and the generally improved promotional material available.

The major concern of organisations such as RBOA is the actual quality of the 'track', as the canal or river section and associated bank and towpath is referred to. The system will only be sustained if the standard of these elements can be improved and the past 5 years has shown only partial success here, with different lengths of canal varying considerably in overall quality. A concern here is the investment often put into cosmetic treatment of the towpath, surfacing, landscaping and signage at the expense of real improvements. The gradual reduction in the amount of dredging completed annually is the major example of this. Without it, the long term sustainability of the system can not be assured. We fully understand the increased cost and regulation associated with dredging, but believe that a solution must be found if BW is to meet its objectives.

Although huge investment has gone into 'honey-pot' sites such as the centre of Birmingham, there are still canals within a short distance which have not improved over this period and present a poor image to the public. If these canals are to fulfil their true potential, improved quality and amenity value must be continued across the entire system. We support the introduction of Waterways Standards and believe that this is a step towards bringing the maintenance of all inland waterways up to the same high quality.

**Conservation of the waterways heritage and environment** is the next objective from the Framework Document that we have considered. We submit that the results here are variable and lack consistency across the entire system. Certainly, there are good examples of conservation of the waterways environment and of individual buildings, but much has also been lost over this period. A major concern is that many canal side buildings and artefacts are outside BW control and therefore they have only the voice of consultees within the planning process. We believe that the canal environment needs to be redefined to take into account a wider corridor than the waterspace and towpath which it often covers.

That aside, BW has not always met its objectives of conserving the waterways heritage and there are examples where the commercial interests of maximising development potential have overruled heritage and environmental considerations. Many of the smaller artefacts such as details of lock furniture have been lost through careless lack of maintenance, or often simply through lack of understanding about their significance in interpreting our heritage. The requirements of working boats towed by horse and working pairs are an example of this.

The restoration projects successfully completed over the previous 5 years are to the credit of BW and its partners and they clearly meet the objective of continued development. We do however have some concerns that the funding available and timescale that had to be met resulted in completion to a less than ideal standard. In order to make these additional waterways fully

sustainable and able to meet customer needs, additional and continued investment will be needed in the future.

The objective **to promote and enable rural and urban regeneration** is one that we believe BW has had success within the scope of its navigation function. Many waterside villages and towns have seen an enormous revival in their economy from visitors, both on boats and from those simply attracted there by the amenity value of the waterway (The recent emergency stoppage on the Staffs & Worcs. Canal brought recrimination from the shopkeepers in Kinver at their loss of trade). The RBOA particularly promotes residential moorings as an economic benefit to local communities and we are having considerable success progressing this in conjunction with BW.

The objective **to maintain and enhance leisure, recreation, tourism and educational opportunities for the general public** is one that has been largely met over the previous 5 years. BW has succeeded in bringing large numbers of people with varying backgrounds and interests to our inland waterways, although there is sometimes an imbalance between the overcrowded 'honeypot' locations and other little used lengths. Whilst we support the need for quieter and less commercially developed places, additional public focus would benefit for example the northern reaches of the Birmingham Canals.

We support recent educational initiatives such as WOW (Wild over Waterways) and the way it has promoted the relevance of inland waterways to the national curriculum and addressed the major problem of anti-social behaviour. In line with the IWAAC report 'Towards Social Inclusion' more still needs to be done to address minorities within society.

Much still remains to be done to facilitate waterway transport and we believe that BW could be more pro-active in supporting both commercial and passenger transport by water. The current proliferation of regulations,- environmental, financial and health & safety based, do not encourage the private sector to invest in waterways transport. One real concern is the progressive loss of wharfage without which commercial transport cannot exist. We maintain that BW could do more to encourage developers to retain these facilities.

We are satisfied that BW has **played a leading role in co-ordinating other UK navigation authorities**. It actively supports the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA) and this has been instrumental in producing some valuable resource documents recently.

**How well do the Government objectives for BW as set out in its Framework Document meet current needs and do they need further definition?**

Our view is that these objectives are as relevant today as they were 5 years ago and we would not wish to see any removed or redefined. Much has been

achieved in this period but there is still some way to go before these objectives are totally realised.

There is however one further objective that has been somewhat neglected and we would wish to see included:

***Support and enable the work of the voluntary sector involved with the Inland Waterways.***

In the Framework Document and the BW *Our Plan for the Future* there is much reference to the general public and it is right that the waterways should be accessible to everyone. We are concerned however, that many enthusiastic volunteers, without whom the success story would not have been realised, feel belittled and ignored in the current climate. As an example, many of those who give their time organising public events feel that they are not being supported as well as they might by BW. The current plethora of regulations,- health & safety, environmental, financial etc. make them wonder if it is worth continuing to give their time so freely. Similarly, volunteers working on restoration projects feel that they are not needed once major funding is in place. We would like to see BW taking a more pro-active role in supporting this invaluable contribution by working more closely in partnership with the private sector.

**How well do the services and functions of BW meet the needs of its customers, visitors and stakeholders?**

We have unfortunately seen a detrimental move in the BW's service delivery over the last year which gives us considerable concern. Associated with their reorganisation, some of the new waterways units relocated to office accommodation away from the immediate waterside and less accessible to customers and visitors. Alongside this move, they have vacated several of the traditional locations, toll houses, maintenance yards etc. which gave easy and direct access for their customers ( This has also put several buildings of significant heritage value at risk) This move, together with a general reduction in the BW personnel to be seen on the ground, has been seen by customers as a policy to keep them at arm's length. We recognise that the quality of communication by consultation papers, the *Waterscape* web site and publicity leaflets has improved, but this does not compensate for lack of first hand contact.

**How could BW improve its service and relationship with its customers, visitors and stakeholders?**

The issue of lack of first hand customer interface, as detailed above needs urgent consideration if BW's customers and visitors are to feel valued.

The other major issue is the balance between maximising commercial income and retaining the loyalty of long standing customers. Whilst we understand the need for income from licences, moorings etc. to contribute toward maintaining the waterways, this must be carefully balanced against losing existing customers which would have an equally detrimental effect on overall

income. We are aware of many longstanding boaters, many of whom have given their time in a voluntary capacity to supporting BW, who have left the waterways purely because the ever increasing cost of licensing, mooring, BSS compliance etc. have made it impossible for them to continue. We recognise the need for BW to move towards self sufficiency and to make their waterways economically sustainable, but there must be balanced against losing its loyal customers.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, we are of the opinion that BW has generally performed well in meeting the objectives set out in the Framework Document "Waterways for Tomorrow". There has been considerable progress in eliminating the backlog of maintenance safety related and otherwise, and success with completed restoration projects. The increased profile given to the inland waterways has opened them up to the general public for enhanced leisure and educational opportunities.

Our concerns can be summarised as a need to refocus certain elements of their service delivery and to give more consideration to the loyal and enthusiastic users who form the backbone of their customer base. There is a need to reconsider the balance between commercial gain and affordability, which will allow the widest number of longstanding customers to retain their interest and loyalty.

There is a real concern that we have now reached a turning point in the development of the inland waterways and there is a danger that the next 5 years could see a period of decline. There is already evidence that resources within BW are being reduced, following the reorganisation and subsequent reassessment of staffing. Indications are that routine maintenance is falling below the established standards and budgets for major works have been reduced. The inland waterways are a fragile, 200 year old system and any shift from a policy of continued maintenance and development will result in a rapid decline. We are anxious that there is no return to the previous huge maintenance deficit, with all the safety and service delivery problems that this brought. Whilst increased income from BW commercial interests and third party funding will be needed, a strong level of government grant will always be essential for the future of the inland waterways.

We thank you for this opportunity to submit our comments for the review and await the outcome with interest.

Yours Sincerely,

Ivor Caplan  
Chairman