

Thames APPG Meeting – 14<sup>th</sup> November 2018

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## **Thames Boaters Perspective Re Current State of Non-Tidal Thames Funding Issues.**

Drastic reductions in public purse contributions to funding for the non-tidal Thames waterway managed by the Environment Agency are having a major impact on the maintenance of the waterway and the provision of services for all classes of boaters. Government policy is to move towards a self-funding regime, but outdated legislation and observance of treasury rules conspire to prevent much needed identification and growth of alternative funding streams.

Boating users currently contribute some 50% of current revenue but this falls well short of the level of funding needed to maintain the river as a recreational waterway. Total spending has fallen from some £20 million in 2010 to less than £9 million in 2017/18.

The number of vessels registered to use the river and contributing to direct revenue income has declined considerably since reaching a peak in the early 1970's. The decline in holiday hire craft has been exceptionally severe from a high of almost 800 in 1980 to well under 200 today, whilst private powered craft registrations have fallen from almost 14,000 in 1973 to approximately 8,000.

Powered craft are the major users of the 45 locks situated along the length of the river and very much value, and depend on, the assistance provided by the lock and weir keeping staff who also undertake the weir keeping duties which assist in the flood control process.

This paper makes no attempt to address the flood control and risk management issues, but it is important to note the current stalemate regarding progress on the lower Thames flood relief scheme covering Staines to Teddington.

The Authority of the day has struggled with the issue of funding for many years and levels of service and maintenance have declined, although there had been a significant investment programme a few years ago, which was welcomed and appreciated by river users. However, there is a real risk that these improvements will be at risk if continued maintenance cannot be ensured.

In recent years new challenges have started to appear, in particular a growing problem with itinerant and unsuitable craft being used as residential accommodation. Such craft are creating huge enforcement problems for both the EA and landowners and legislation is complex. These craft are also imposing strain on the general availability of moorings for recreational craft.

Being dependant on government funding for so much of its income has left the Agency little room for manoeuvre when faced with draconian reductions in grant aid such as those experienced in recent years. The legal financing and charging constraints facing the Agency make it all but impossible to replace these funds with any other income in the short to medium term other than imposing further rises in registration and related charges on the small number of river users that already pay the greater share of revenue income.

The EA have recently announced significant increases in charges (5.7% p.a.) for each of the next two years (even greater for the other waterways under their control) but this additional income can only be described as a sticking plaster when considering the scale of the funding problem. It cannot be right that the only avenue for increasing income is to charge more to a decreasing number of customers.

The Agency is severely limited in its ability to raise income from any sources other than the provision of navigation services and mooring rights together with limited contribution from the water companies. In the original 1932 Thames Conservancy Act local authorities bounding the river were required to contribute specified sums but these requirements were removed by subsequent amendments to the legislation. Today the local authorities bounding the river face their own severe funding issues and are unable to contribute to the river. Similarly, the statutory payments from the

water companies were significantly affected by the privatisation under previous administrations and, it is fair to say, are today a small contribution when considered against the undoubted importance of the river as a key natural resource and raw material serving the population of greater London and the south east.

The EA have recently estimated that they require at least £20 million p.a. to fund all their inland waterways responsibilities but have been slow to recognise alternative sources and seek the changes to legislation needed to permit them to pursue these opportunities for new income streams. Although the Inland Waterways Order 2010 provided some enhancements to charging rights these are still restricted to purposes covered by the TC Acts.

We understand that the EA are now creating a director led unit to consider all aspects of recognising and exploiting commercial opportunities to replace previous public purse funding, but are concerned that, however successful this may be in the longer term, it will do little to assist in alleviating the immediate problems.

Whilst the Thames above Teddington still remains a pleasant cruising ground, particularly during the summer period, the pressures on funding are having significant impact on maintenance, particularly maintaining channel depths and ensuring overhanging trees and vegetation permit clear passage.

It should be noted that these 'paying customers' are by no means the only people that depend on and enjoy the river, whether for recreational or commercial purposes. Millions of people visit the river every year to participate in events or simply to enjoy the environment. Local communities and businesses the length of the river derive income from these activities and value the Thames for what it clearly is – a national recreational asset. It is only right that both central and local government should recognise this and contribute to the river's maintenance and management funding.

Some of these other recreational activities, particularly the growth in wild water swimming and similar events attract considerable commercial involvement but it would appear that under current legislation there is little opportunity for the EA to enjoy any financial benefit. (The growth in swimming activities is particularly concerning given the absence of monitoring and control of discharge of sewage into the waterway in breach of the bye laws.)

Mention must be made of the current uncertainty regarding the possible transfer of the EA managed waterways into the care and control of the Canal and River Trust which is currently on hold. Regardless of whether or not such a transfer might eventually take place it is likely that these same funding constraints will apply.

In considering the longer-term future of the EA waterways, three potential scenarios appear to present themselves:

1. Government recognises the public benefit of the waterways and provides a more appropriate level of funding.
2. Government permits and enables changes in current legislation to give the EA greater freedom to pursue new income streams.
3. Government decide to press on with transferring the EA managed waterways to the Canal and River Trust which will also likely require further funding and revised legislation. It is impossible to identify any other potential transferee for the waterways.

It should be noted that all 3 options require Government support and intervention and cannot be resolved by the EA acting in isolation.

**How do we make the Thames what it should be – A thriving, vibrant, and valued waterway ?**