

Meeting notes

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Waterways held the first of three meetings on 29 January 2012 looking at how the Canal & River Trust's Waterway Partnerships have developed since July 2012. The Trust's chairman, Tony Hales, and chief executive, Robin Evans, gave an update to the Group, which included chairman Sir Tony Baldry, MP for Banbury, Andrew Miller, MP for Ellesmere Port & Neston and Huw Irranca-Davis, MP for Ogmore.

The Group was holding the first of three meetings to understand the aims and progress of the Waterway Partnerships in forming local relationships with local government and communities and to hear about their plans for the future. The meeting was held in public and included representatives from the Inland Waterways Association, National Association of Boat Owners, Association of Waterway Cruising Clubs, Great Ouse Boating Association, the Environment Agency and other interested parties.

Tony Hales confirmed that the Trust had made great progress since its launch, with 11 Waterway Partnerships (one for each of the Trust's operating units), an All Wales Partnership and a Museums & Attractions Partnership all in place. He described the great knowledge and expertise that the Partnerships were bringing to the Trust, the very high calibre of their Chairs and the talented and enthusiastic members they had recruited. The Partnerships were all busy preparing strategic plans to identify their priorities and set out how they were going to improve community engagement, and these were expected to be ready for publication as early as this summer.

Tony Hales emphasised that while it was still early days, he expected the pace of engagement to increase over the next year, and he saw no structural or cultural barriers to the Partnerships succeeding in the role.

Robin Evans explained how the Partnerships were being embedded into the Trust's structure and how all staff were enthusiastic about the contribution they were making. There had been a noticeable increase in local engagement across a very wide range of subject matters, which was constantly highlighting opportunities for joint working. He gave the example of collaboration with councils on litter collection and waste disposal and the initiative of the Manchester & Pennine Partnership to launch an appeal towards the cost of repairing the breach on the Trent & Mersey Canal.

Robin Evans reminded the Committee that it had been an extraordinarily challenging past six months having had to cope with the wettest summer on record. It was a great credit to the staff of the Trust that they had coped with the excesses of the weather at the same time as making the transition to the Trust and welcoming over 150 people into governance and advisory roles.

The Group then invited Charlotte Atkins, Chair of the Central Shires Partnership, and Councillor Mike Maryon of Staffordshire County Council to speak. Charlotte Atkins confirmed that her Partnership was working well and had excellent support and

cooperation from the Trust's local management. She too felt that there had been a step change in the level of engagement and that her Partnership members were helping to open doors and have conversations with people and organisations previously not on British Waterways' radar. She praised the Trust's staff for their knowledge and enthusiasm and their tenacity in seeking new funding sources for the Trust. When asked what was not going so well she said all the Partnerships felt the Trust needed to provide more resource for local publicity but this was something that was going to be addressed in next year's budgets.

Councillor Maryon also confirmed that engagement with the Trust had improved and that the attendance of Charlotte Atkins at key liaison meetings had greatly helped understanding and cooperation between the two organisations.

A question about the effects of the newly announced HS2 route on the Staffordshire canals brought to the Group's attention the Trust's concerns about the Growth & Infrastructure Bill. This Bill would remove the Trust's power to seek a Special Parliamentary Procedure (SPP) to consider any unwelcome compulsory purchase of its land. Inexplicably the Bill sought to remove this special protection from canals and rivers owned by the Trust whilst retaining it for all National Trust land. Sir Tony Baldry asked Tony Hales to write to him about this anomaly as he wished to take the matter up with the Minister.

Sir Tony Baldry summed up by saying it was clear that the Trust and the Waterway Partnerships had got off to an excellent start and that they were looking forward to hearing from other partnerships as to their progress and aspirations.