

The Caledonian Canal Customer Forum 2009

Saturday 3rd October Letterfinlay Lodge, Loch Lochy

Attendees:

Dr Jon Hargreaves CBE, British Waterways Board Member and Chair of the British Waterways Scotland Group
Steve Dunlop, Director, British Waterways Scotland
Russell Thomson, Waterway Manager, Highlands, British Waterways Scotland
Jo Spragg; John Stafford; Joanna Harrison, British Waterways Scotland
Hugh MacLeod; Mr and Mrs Paterson; Sidney Oakley; Polly Kasper; Marco Bate; Arthur Cowie; Maurin MacDonald; Martyn Bateman; Jancis Bateman; Bill Harris; Mrs Harris; Tom Scott; Pat Scott; James Foster; Anne Foster; Paul Betts; Janet Betts; Gordon Malloch; Tor Justad; Patricia Justad; Adrian Varwell; Vernon Kennard; Francis Mansell; Linda Bowman; Mark Bowman; Tom Kent; Margaret Kent.

Apologies:

Alec Clarke; AD Tenant; CPT J Jingon-Rouse; Scott Wilson; Gordon Young; Jane MacLennan; Finlay Finlayson; Matthew McGrath; Peter Wilsher; Brian Fallows; Iain Fraser; I R Philips; John Fleming; Ken Gray; John Marshall Cross; David Bowen; David Roy; Sandra MacIntosh

Forum

Welcome

Dr Jon Hargreaves (JH), British Waterways Board Member and Chair of the British Waterways Scotland Group, welcomed everyone to the forum and outlined the format – an overview of British Waterways Scotland (BWS) activity in the Highlands over the past year and a look forward by Russell Thomson (RT), Waterway Manager, Highlands, British Waterways Scotland and an introduction to a general discussion on British Waterways' new 'Twenty:Twenty' Vision by Steve Dunlop (SD), Director, British Waterways Scotland.

Overview of British Waterways Scotland Activity in the Highlands

2009

Russell Thomson outlined the key statistics for 2009:

- 1,400 Transit Customers (54% from UK)
- 50,000 Boat Movements
- 2,500 Paddlers
- 730,000 Towpath Visits
- 188 Boats on Permanent Berths and 165 on Waitlists
- 60 Hire Fleet Boats and 15 Commercial Operators

Events 2009/beyond:

- Caledonian Canal Ceilidh Trail – 50+ local venues (now in 8th year)
- Maggie's Monster Bike & Hike (now in its 5th year)
- Telford's Tales
- Splash! 2007
- The Round Britain Powerboat Race 2008
- The Crossing 2009
- The Crossing 2010 and onwards
- Tall Ships Race 2011

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The Crossing

- 12,500 attended the five day event
- An estimated 40,000 spectators along the route
- 31% of visitors from outwith Scotland
- 55% on a short break of 4 nights or more
- 32% stated that The Crossing was the main reason for visiting the area
- Event attracted £104,000 worth of media coverage

RT concluded by noting that planning is now underway for 2010 and beyond and asked guests to get involved.

Heritage

RT outlined current plans for the heritage portfolio in the Highlands:

Bona Lighthouse, Lochend. Working in partnership and benefiting from available grants, the aim is for up to 10 heritage holiday lets.

Other properties to be included as holiday lets are:-

- Telford House (Gairloch)
- Laggan Bridge House
- Kytra Locks (Fort Augustus)
- Dunnolly (Inverness)

Partnership Working

RT gave an overview of current partnership working:

- Loch Ness Piers & Jetties (Highland Council, Highland Tourism Forum, DLN & private sector)
- Great Glen Canoe Trail (Highland Council, SNH, Forestry Commission, Scottish Canoe Association)
- Bridge Protocols (Highland Council, Public Forums & Community Councils)
- Inverness TLR, canal and river crossing

Freight

RT advised that BWS continues to encourage freight activity on the Caledonian Canal and that a business plan had recently been produced by Lembas Consultancy which would help BWS in this important area.

Major Projects and Stoppages

RT noted:

- No Closures in Winter 2009/2010
- Kytra Lock & Third Party Works in January 2011
- Laggan Power – funding in place, still securing partner approvals
- Lighting Projects – Clachnaharry Sea Lock, Corpach Double Lock and Corpach Sea Lock
- Navigation Marks
- 3rd Party Works – Transerve and Network Rail

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RT then opened the floor to questions:

Q. Arthur Cowie asked if there would be access for all built into the heritage lets and would it be best practice?

A. RT confirmed there would be access built in, advising that the Vivat Trust, the charity which will manage the lets, has a local community focus and will work with local people during the refurbishment process. He added that it would be best practice, noting that staff and length inspectors were being trained on this subject.

Q. Polly Casper asked if there was any likelihood that the locks would be open at the weekend during the winter months for those working during the week.

A. RT reminded guests that there had been a trial three years ago which showed a very poor uptake of weekend winter openings amongst a group of boats which tend not to move much during the summer season either but noted that he was very happy to hold another trial to see if potential usage has changed since then. He also pointed out that lower manning levels in the winter were focused on a Monday to Friday roster and that any cover at weekends could only be on a volunteer basis and there would have to be very real demand to justify the costs that could be incurred.

SD added that, after a £20m investment in the Caledonian Canal, he was keener than ever to see it used as widely as possible but in a cost-efficient way so that monies can be reinvested in the waterway and facilities.

Group moved on to discuss locking fees. RT confirmed that he was content that the Special Locking fee payable on that day was split between boats, not that each boat had to pay the full value of the locking fee.

Q. Pat Scott raised the subject of access across pontoons at Gairloch where mooring ropes and items on the pontoon made access difficult, particularly for those with access issues.

A. RT said that he would ask John Stafford to work on this in conjunction with berth holders with an aim to have better access for a visiting/transit boat on that pontoon.

Q. Pat Scott asked who was responsible for the maintenance and safe navigation around the pontoons of the Lochs.

A. RT advised that BWS was not responsible for the pontoons on the lochs, nor did they receive specific funding for their upkeep. However, BWS recognises the value of these pontoons to customers and has been inspecting and maintaining the pontoon on Loch Oich which had included £12,500 to repair the pontoons at the Well of the Seven Heads in 2007. BWS were also aware of the issue with Eala Bhan at Invergarry but did not really have any authority to move it. *(Post meeting note: Eala Bhan dragged anchor that morning. It is now clear of both the pontoons and the navigation channel and her position is being monitored. HM Coastguard have been advised.)*

Q. Jan Betts raised the subject of lighting in the local authority car park at Laggan.

A. RT said that BWS would raise the subject with the Highland Council with a view to working in partnership to fill the gaps between the Local Authority car park and BWS property.

Q. The issue of parking around the lock at Laggan was also raised.

A. RT said that, where parking or vehicle movements were prohibited as a result of BWS Towpath Risk Assessments, then nothing more could be done.

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- Q. Jim Foster asked about the timescale for the installation of water on to the pontoons at Gairloch.**
- A.** RT said that he personally didn't know if/when those works were planned in for. He would ask John Stafford to investigate and update Mr Foster direct.
- Q. Stratherrick & Foyers Community Council raised the subject of destination activity at Foyers asking if BWS were aware of Donald Forbes current regeneration plans.**
- A.** RT advised that, yes, BWS was aware and that BWS was acting with a number of partners which had *together* identified Foyers as an area with potential and also importantly as a community currently in decline which would benefit economically from such a project. Two or three areas had been identified as having the potential for a mooring location in the Foyers area but all partners recognised that the Forbes' project, with all the associated shore-side facilities, would offer the 'gold standard' solution.
- Q. Francis Mansell asked if BWS had any plans for Invermoriston, noting that there are currently no facilities between Foyers and Fort Augustus.**
- A.** RT advised that development such as a new pier is dependent upon external commercial activity i.e. the Scottish and Southern Energy power station. He added that, if that happens, BWS would be very keen to see the development of a leisure mooring facility. With the very good and safe access to the local hotel/pub/shop, it would serve to benefit both the community and boaters.
- Q. Francis Mansell had rang the telephone number given on The Crossing leaflet asking to be part of the flotilla and had received no replies to three calls placed.**
- A.** RT apologised for this and promised to investigate to ensure this did not reoccur with future events.
- Q. Mr Paterson raised the issue of the difficulty in selling boats without berths and asked if a transfer fee could be imposed allowing this.**
- A.** RT noted the core reasons for BWS policy in this area:
- There are substantial waiting lists and any changes in ownership in this way places an unfair advantage on new parties and upsets those waiting.
 - BWS may wish to take the opportunity of changing the designation of a berth – for example changing it to a transit berth or access for all berth. This flexibility is important if BWS is to continually respond to changing usage and opportunities for the Caledonian Canal.
 - This allows BWS to ensure the credentials of new owners.

RT also noted that BWS has a legal right to levy a charge on boat vendors but chooses not to do so.

RT concluded the Q&A session by emphasising that BWS is genuinely making great efforts to ensure things are good on each site and asked guests to pick up a copy of the Site Rules and feed back any comments to him after the meeting. It would be extremely valuable to be able to capture positive support for aspects of the Site Rules which some customers had made verbally, in parallel to being made aware of concerns with them.

The Forum gave special thanks to RT for his efforts over the year.

Twenty: Twenty

JH and SD introduced the discussion about British Waterways' new 'Twenty: Twenty' vision. SD asked that, due to time restraints, the forum break out into three groups and consider three key questions presenting a collective answer to each at the end of the break out session.

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Ideas and comments were as follows:

Does it matter who owns or manages the canals in Scotland? If it does, why?

Group 1:

- Yes – it should still be under the Scottish Government as an elected and accountable body but with a mechanism allowing greater commercial freedom.
- Most importantly, it must be a ‘canal oriented’ organisation, remain Scottish and ensure money generated by the agency is *kept* by the agency.
- National Parks could be considered as a model?

Group 2:

- Yes – it should remain under the Scottish Government but with extra fundraising abilities allowing competitive interests.
- Perhaps it could be a trust?
- It must remain Scottish and national – not broken up into regional ownership or moved into local authority control.
- The new body must allow income generated to be ring fenced so that public support isn't damaged.

Group 3:

- ‘If it ain't broke, don't fix it!’ – BWS has done OK.
- Critical to ensure Scotland's separate identity and different needs, local and Scotland-wide.
- Management structure works well.
- A different financial structure or a different status might access additional funding though.

Greater community ‘ownership’ & involvement in running and development of the canals -

- **A realistic goal?**
- **What benefits would this bring?**
- **What issues?**
- **How would we engender active participation?**

Group 1:

- Yes – more local community involvement needed, more forums uniting the wider communities.
- They would need more scope to enhance local facilities e.g. pontoons.
- Perhaps a local consultative group involving all interested parties?

Group 2:

- Definite opportunity to harness local communities exists but BWS needs to appreciate two key potential problems with this:
 - The Caledonian Canal has a number of very small communities along its route, with large distances in between.
 - Too many potentially conflicting voices may hinder commerciality.
- BWS could replicate Re-union?
- Perhaps boaters in key areas along the canal could drive community trusts?
- Local consultation groups would involve users, community councils, recreational interests etc. giving them scope and liberty to enhance facilities.

Group 3:

- Users *do already* feel ownership through use of the towpaths and access to the water.
- BWS must note the warning that community ownership can form cliques.

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- If communities are to be involved, there must be something on offer i.e. mooring/stop off points and other opportunities for financial gain.
- Community forums could help raise awareness and, as a result, gain local economic benefit/canal benefit.

Public/Govt investment in the canals likely to be under real pressure. How could we attract more investment?

Group 1:

- Need more investment from community groups as well as Government agencies.
- More freight – why is there not more freight?
- Ownership of land – use of land and resources – can this be maximised further?
- Small scale electricity generation?
- More local involvement may stimulate ideas for development.

Group 2:

- Levying money from those using the canal and ‘not paying’ – commercial canoe holiday companies buying the keys and distributing them to holidaying groups etc.
- Raising monies from walkers; cyclists; campers; motorhomes/caravans – perhaps creating social enterprises along the routes to realise these opportunities?
- Appreciation of the inherent problem that, unlike other heritage properties, BWS can’t charge for ‘entry’. Also there are problems in levying money from individuals who aren’t affiliated to groups/national bodies.
- More freight – especially would be useful to get credit for sustainable efforts.
- More money from long-term berths – realising the value of the waiting lists.
- Green grants? Water use? Electricity generation?
- Real estate – involvement of local groups in development and use of land to realise new incomes.

Group 3:

- Consider joint ventures with other landowners – private sector and local authority/public sector.
- Attract more visitors to increase commercial activity and opportunities.
- A charge/token facility for access to facilities.
- A membership/‘Friends of the Caledonian Canal’ scheme – pay £10 and get discounts and other benefits.

SD closed the forum by thanking everyone for attending and for their input into the current business half of the event and the discursive ‘Twenty:Twenty’ debate. He noted that minutes covering the whole event would be circulated and invited guests to respond with any further thoughts on the ‘Twenty:Twenty’ conversation in particular by email or telephone.

SD also promised to keep guests informed of further milestones in the ‘Twenty:Twenty’ journey including a further distillation of the British Waterways Board’s views which is due for publication at the end of October.

-ends-

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Postscript:

In response to the small number of customers who were unable to attend the Caledonian Canal Customer Forum but who asked for further information about service provision along the Caledonian Canal, we would acknowledge that there is still much to be done but can assure all that BWS is very cognisant of what customers would like to see.

It must also be recognised, however, that, although additional service provision has been limited over the last 18 months or so, this followed a period of significant investment which resulted in over £900,000 of service improvements between 2006 and 2009. These improvements included new facility blocks at Banavie & Gairloch; transit and/or long term berths at Seaport, Dochgarroch, Laggan Bridge, Laggan Top, Banavie & Corpach reach; power/water bollards at Dochgarroch hardstanding, Banavie & Corpach; hard towpath at Dochgarroch; and the new floating slipway and pontoons for small craft at Seaport.

Moving forward, we would ask customers to be patient and recognise that we need to prioritise works on a Scotland-wide level and need to ensure that we focus on meeting the ever increasing raft of legislative requirements placed upon us.

All of that said, we are still determined to continue to improve the level of service and this winter will see the continuation of the delivery of mains power at Laggan and lighting projects to improve safety and security at Clachnaharry and Corpach.