

**British Waterways cares for Britain's historic canals and rivers**

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## **BW to hold public debate on future of Britain's waterways**

14 May 2009

On Monday 18 May 2009 British Waterways will be launching a national debate at the House of Commons about the future of Britain's former industrial waterways, and their role in the 21st century.

The organisation is proposing that its 2,200 miles of canals and rivers should, over time, be moved out of direct state control and into a new 'national trust' for the waterways in order to continue the renaissance of the 200 year old network.

Despite a turnaround in fortunes, which has seen the waterways playing an increasingly important role in supporting jobs, waterside regeneration, biodiversity and the UK leisure and tourism industry, the mounting cost of maintaining an aging network – including the UK's third largest collection of listed structures – has led British Waterways to explore alternative ideas for securing the waterways' future.

In becoming a trust, British Waterways believes it would be able to encourage greater community ownership of local waterways, more involvement from the voluntary sector and a wider funding base. If successful the move could help to make the waterways safer, better maintained and more vibrant while increased community support would help to ensure that they never revert to the dereliction and decline that saw historic canals abandoned and filled-in during the 20th century.

Tony Hales, British Waterways' chairman, comments: "The waterways have had an extraordinary rebirth since the middle of the last century when all but a handful of enthusiasts viewed them as dangerous ditches. Today they offer some of Britain's greenest recreational facilities, they are breathing new life into scores of waterside towns and cities, and they collectively comprise one of the most important examples of industrial heritage anywhere in the world.

"The network is more than just a pretty place though: it is important in alleviating flooding; it provides refuges for threatened wildlife; it offers alternative transport routes and; thanks to the latest technology, it is even helping to generate clean electricity. For this to continue, we need to look at a new model of ownership for our waterways, one which provides greater certainty and flexibility over funding, and gives communities more of a role in the running of their local canal or river."

British Waterways believes that it should become a third sector, 'public interest company' or trust in the next decade and is suggesting that, as part of this, its annual deficit grant funding could be changed into new government contracts. This would give a clearer understanding of the public benefits, which the governments in London and Edinburgh want the waterways to continue to deliver, and allow British Waterways greater certainty in planning future expenditure.

Tony continues: "The public sector model has arguably seen the waterways through difficult times and enabled their rebirth in the last decade. We strongly believe that a new voluntary sector model is the next logical step for us. It would still embrace all that the public and private sectors can offer but, more importantly, allow the passion and support amongst the voluntary sector to make a much greater contribution to the management and financing of the nation's historic waterways.

“In the long term we believe that the waterways should join the great family of voluntary sector organisations and good causes, which have achieved so much for our heritage, wildlife and landscapes. This change will take time to implement fully and successfully, so we believe it is right to start the debate now.”

Over the next six months British Waterways will be holding a series of stakeholder meetings to discuss its strategy with councils, devolved assemblies, partners, waterway communities and third sector organisations. In particular it will be discussing the ideas with Defra, which sponsors and funds the organisation’s activities in England and Wales, and with the Scottish Government, which is responsible for British Waterways Scotland. It will be seeking to raise greater public awareness of the contribution waterways make to modern Britain, and to debate the most appropriate structure for British Waterways as the guardian of the nation’s historic waterways.

Today’s waterways are used and enjoyed more than at any other time in their history and deliver an estimated £600m of benefits to the UK each year:

- 64% increase in investment in the system in the last decade
- 32,000 boats – more than at the height of the Industrial Revolution
- Over 260 million visits each year by walkers, anglers, cyclists and nature lovers
- UK’s third largest collection of listed structures - 2,756 locks, aqueducts, bridges, etc
- 1,000 wildlife conservation sites – waterways are home to many protected and endangered species
- 200 miles of new or restored waterway opened in the past decade
- £11 billion worth of waterside regeneration and community renewal.

Visit [www.britishwaterways.co.uk/twentytwenty](http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/twentytwenty) for more information about British Waterways’ 2020 strategy.

## **Ends**

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## **Notes to editors:**

British Waterways is a not-for-dividend public corporation responsible to Defra in England & Wales and to the Scottish Government in Scotland. The organisation cares for 2,200 miles of the canals, rivers, docks and reservoirs across Britain. Rich in heritage, abundant in wildlife and teeming with activity, inland waterways are as popular today as they've ever been.

Half the population lives within five miles of one of our waterways and an incredible 11 million people use them every year as part of their everyday life – as a short-cut to work, for walking the dog or simply for taking time-out and watching the boats. British Waterways' job is to ensure the waterways attract enough investment to be well maintained and remain appealing to society and the local communities through which they pass.

## New idea floated for canals

Monday, May 18, 2009, 08:20

A call for the Kennet and Avon Canal to be taken out of state ownership and put under the control of a charitable trust was being made today.

The Government agency which currently looks after the nation's canal network, British Waterways, says it should be replaced by a new trust body to spearhead the renaissance of the 200-year-old system.

British Waterways believes trust status would enable it to encourage greater community ownership of the country's waterways, more involvement from the voluntary sector and a wider funding base.

It says the move could help to make the waterways safer, better maintained and more vibrant with increased community support helping to ensure that they never revert to the dereliction and decline that saw historic canals abandoned and filled-in during the 20th century.

Chairman Tony Hales said: "The waterways have had an extraordinary rebirth since the mid of the last century when all but a handful of enthusiasts viewed them as dangerous ditches. Today, they offer some of the greenest recreational facilities, they are breathing new life into scores of waterside towns and cities, and they collectively comprise one of the most important examples of industrial heritage anywhere in the world.

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British Waterways believes that it should become a third sector, 'public interest company' or trust in the next decade and is suggesting that, as part of this, its annual deficit grant funding could be replaced by new government contracts.

It said this would give a clearer understanding of the public benefits which the Government wants the waterways to continue to deliver and allow British Waterways greater certainty in planning future expenditure.

Mr Hales said: "The public sector model has arguably seen the waterways through difficult times and enabled their rebirth in the last decade. We strongly believe that a new voluntary sector model is the next logical step for us. It would still embrace all that the public and private sectors can offer but, more importantly, allow the passion and support amongst the voluntary sector to make a much greater contribution to the management and financing of the nation's historic waterways.

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kennet and avon