

PE1693/M

Graeme Harvey written submission of 5 June 2019

Petition for Waterways Ombudsman

With reference to the above application submitted in my name may I clarify a few points.

While the original application wording made reference to the situation on the Lowland Canals at the time of submission, the main intention, as supported by the RYA and others was that the Ombudsman's remit would be for all navigable waters in and around Scotland.

Since the application was submitted the CEO of Scottish Canals at that time has departed for pastures new. With the current CEO temporarily in post on secondment there has been a massive sea change in many areas.

It is clearly apparent that several senior members of the management team are now free to concentrate on the future of the major National Assets that are the Canals of Scotland.

Communication channels have been vastly improved between SC and the User Groups. Many of us who have been involved for decades in the protection and restoration of these historic waterways remember only too well the excellent communication and co-operation that existed between British Waterways and the customer base prior to 2012 when BW was changed to the Canal and Rivers Trust in England and Wales with the remainder of BW remaining in Scotland under the Trading name of Scottish canals.

Sadly, for the following six years all that changed and not for the best. Trust was lost, transparency totally disappeared, and co-operation was replaced by what was considered by most of the user base a totally domineering and bullying attitude towards all users whether water or land based.

At present there is a move between the majority of the user groups and SC to set up a formalised method of communication and co-operation so that SC and the user groups can share information, advice, technical skills and knowledge for the benefit of all. There is, however, some concern that if the secondment of the current CEO is not extended further, the next CEO may revert to the previous way of running the organisation.

Consequently, from the user aspect, there is a clear concern that if there is not some form of Statutory Arbitration Process whether by Ombudsman or reintroduction of a group similar in constitution as the Previous IWAC committee, the current improved situation could be eroded. I am sure that many will have seen or been aware of safety equipment around water locations that the public have access to. Lifebuoys for example for use in case someone falls into the water. What we are looking for basically is some form of lifebuoy to ensure that in case of a serious situation arising there is some form of rescue and resolution.

To date, while I have made mention that the situation has improved, one example I would like to highlight is the joint exercise in organising a flotilla at the end of May to celebrate the reopening of the Forth and Clyde Canal after the defective road bridges have been repaired. This is considered a great example of how working together can be of great benefit for all.

I mentioned above the temporary secondment of Mrs Topley as CEO and our concerns that when she is replaced we may end up back in the previous position of distrust, lack of consultation and communication etc., that caused so many issues resulting in the submission of this petition. Our fears have increased dramatically over the last week or so with the information that the Chairman of Scottish Canals are currently serving his second three year term has been confirmed as having been awarded an unheard of third term.

Finally the latest missive from the LCA concentrates on continuing to attack Scottish Canals and ignoring the global picture highlighted in the initial meeting by myself, IWA and the RYA that the request for a Waterways Ombudsman relates to ALL navigable waters in and around Scotland and not just the canal network. I would ask that the committee consider this application made in my name to take account of the needs of everyone both resident and visitor, involved in all waterborne activities on both inland and coastal waters.

Graeme Harvey

Former Chair of LCA, Current Treasurer of Lowland Canals Volunteer Group, founder member and past chair of Linlithgow Union Canal Society, member of Keep Canals Alive Group and member of RYA Cruising and General Purposes Committee.