

# Broads Authority

26 January 2024

Agenda item number 9

## Funding the Waterways of the Broads National Park

Report by Chief Executive

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### Purpose

This report seeks Board approval for the paper setting out a position on the funding of the Broads waterways and support for the Chairman writing to the Secretary of State for the Environment attaching a copy. It also outlines the bid submitted just before Christmas for capital funding.

### Broads Plan context

All strategic actions under Theme C: Maintaining and enhancing the navigation.

### Recommended decision

The Board endorses the paper entitled Funding the Waterways in the Broads National Park and supports the Chairman writing to the Secretary of State for the Environment attaching a copy.

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### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report deals with two separate but related issues: firstly, a paper addressing concerns about the revenue funding available for caring for Broads and in particular the maintenance of the waterways and secondly, details of a bid submitted to Defra for capital funding.

## 2. Funding the Waterways of the Broads National Park

- 2.1. A productive meeting was held with representatives of British Marine and the Broads Hire Boat Industry on 6 December 2024. At that meeting it was agreed that a paper would be prepared arguing the case for Government financial support towards the Authority's costs of maintaining the waterways.
- 2.2. This is critical because Defra has indicated it will be reviewing the basis for the allocation of National Park Grant and it is desirable that any future formula takes account of the special qualities and expense involved in managing Britain's most important wetland and includes funding for the maintenance of the waterways.
- 2.3. The intended audience for the paper is Ministers and their officials. A copy of the draft is included in Appendix 1.
- 2.4. The Navigation Committee was consulted on the Funding paper on 11 January 2024 and unanimously endorsed it. Questions were asked about revenue versus one-off capital funding and whether the paper was proposing the removal of the ring fence for navigation income and expenditure.
- 2.5. As Members will know, normally the Authority funds its capital purchase of equipment through revenue contributions to earmarked reserves. Last year's capital grant from Defra for biodiversity purposes has therefore been very helpful in reducing the need for those revenue contributions. While we hope that our latest bid will be successful, the central focus of the Funding paper is to make a robust case for on-going revenue funding for the Authority's National Park duties and the maintenance of the waterways. The paper is not proposing any change to the ring fence for navigation income and expenditure.
- 2.6. Please see the [Chief Executive's report and current issues \(broads-authority.gov.uk\)](https://broads-authority.gov.uk) for the correspondence with British Marine, the Broads Society, the Norfolk and Suffolk Boating Association and the Broads Hire Boat Federation.

## 3. Capital Funding Bid

- 3.1. Using the arguments set out in *Funding the Waterways of the Broads National Park* a bid has been submitted to Defra for £706,500 of capital funding from the *Water in Protected Landscapes* programme.
- 3.2. This programme consists of up to £5 million capital funding for National Parks and National Landscapes for environmental water projects or land acquisition for the benefit of the water environment. Applications that meet the criteria will be approved on a first come, first served basis until the whole £5 million has been committed, with a reserve list then kept should any of the approved applications drop out for any reason. The funding must be spent in the 2023/24 financial year.
- 3.3. Set out below is the list of items we have bid for.

Item	Cost	Use
Industrial concrete pump	£190,000	Dredging the rivers and broads
Doosan long reach excavator	£165,000	Dredging the rivers and broads
Extension arm & weed bucket for excavator	£16,000	Watercourse and drainage management in Protected Sites
Hitachi Crawler Crane	£80,000	Replacement of marker posts in Breydon Water benefitting wildlife and boating
4 x Nato floats	£30,000	Mounting equipment on the water
NEW Steel welfare unit	£7,000	For operational staff in remote locations
Diggers mats	£8,000	Stabilise heavy equipment on soft ground
Replace 6 vehicles	£193,500	Replace operational vehicles
New launch development	£10,000	Patrol launches at the end of their life need replacement
Harlequin 9250 Litre HVO Fuel Dispenser with Fuel Management	£7,000	Enable the Spirit of Breydon to use HVO fuel and reduce carbon emissions
<b>Total</b>	<b>£706,500</b>	

- 3.4. Most of the items are used partly for National Park purposes and partly for the maintenance of the navigation. For example, the old concrete pump used in the CANAPE project for dredging sediment from the navigation channel in Hickling was employed to recreate reedbed for the benefit of biodiversity and improve water depth for boating.
- 3.5. The demise of commercial traffic into the Port of Norwich at the end of the 1980s means that all navigational use of the Broads is for recreational purposes and is consistent with the Authority's purpose of *"promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Broads by the public"*. The way the public largely enjoy the special qualities of the Broads is through getting on the water either in their own boats, hired ones or passenger vessels.
- 3.6. Officers have therefore proposed to Defra that the capital items listed above can be described as "funding primarily used to deliver National Park purposes, with a co-benefit to navigation". If successful it will make a significant difference to the Authority's future capital replacement requirements for navigation.

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[Broads Plan](#) strategic objectives: All strategic actions under Theme C

Appendix 1 – Funding the Waterways of the Broads National Park

# Appendix 1 – Funding the waterways of the Broads National Park

## FUNDING THE WATERWAYS OF THE BROADS NATIONAL PARK

### Summary

The current funding model for maintaining the waterways of the Broads National Park is outmoded and unsustainable and must change if this national asset is to be preserved for future generations. In an era of climate change, biodiversity loss and a recent pandemic, the rivers and broads are acknowledged to be beneficial for public well-being, wider ecosystem services, and recreational boating. Far from being an entirely private benefit to boat owners the waterways are undeniably a public asset. With Defra's recent commitment to review the funding model for Protected Areas (National Parks and AONBs), now is the time to present Ministers with the reasoned justification for a contribution from public funds towards the maintenance of the waterways.

### Background

When the Broads were recommended for National Park status in 1949 it was recognised that the *"Broads have a special claim to selection as a National Park quite apart from their natural beauty, by reason of their holiday and recreational value and the interest of their plant and animal life. ... On this great system of waterways, ..... thousands of people annually enjoy the quiet adventure and refreshment of water-borne holidays, under sail or in cabin cruisers; while others find waterside accommodation with small-boat sailing, fishing or bathing at their garden's end."* (Report of the National Parks Committee July 1947).

From the beginning, it was recognised that boating was an integral part of the special qualities justifying National Park designation, and yet, in the summer of 2007, when the Broads Authority Bill was proceeding through Parliament, the Minister's position, contrary to that of the Authority, was that the use of the waterways was a separate, private benefit and *"The Government's policy is that it does not think it should routinely contribute towards navigation costs in the Broads"* (House of Commons Committee 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007).

We now know that freshwater rivers and broads are the reason why the Broads National Park has a higher biodiversity than any other, despite being the smallest. About 17% of Britain's 65,000 – 70,000 species are found here, 1,500 of them threatened, and most of them dependent on freshwaters. We also recognise the great importance of wetlands in sequestering carbon and adapting to flood, drought, and sea-level rise.

The Authority has two main sources of income. In 2022/23, the National Park Grant (including capital funding, access money and Farming in Protected Landscapes grant aid) provided £5.39 million to the Broads Authority, while navigation tolls from boat owners amounted to £3.81 million. The requirement that the Authority must ensure that navigation expenditure equals navigation income in any one year and be accounted for separately from National Park expenditure represents an expensive, risky, and artificial distinction. Only a few lines in the Authority's budget are devoted solely to National Park or Navigation expenditure. Most budget items are a mixture, and evidence-based judgments must be made.

For example, while the cost of staff collecting tolls is clearly 100% navigation, and the planning service is chargeable 100% to the National Park Grant, the picture is less clear when considering the allocation of Ranger expenditure. Their activities are a blend of National Park functions such as providing guided walks and tending conservation sites, and navigation roles such as patrolling the rivers, marking hazards, managing moorings, giving advice to boaters, and removing overhanging trees. To take another, a recent restoration project at Hickling Broad improved biodiversity and water depths for navigation through the restoration of reedbeds using dredged sediment from the channel.

## **Adapting to Change**

Boating on the Broads is often wrongly perceived as exclusively for the rich. This is not the case. The visitor profile of the Broads has changed since Covid, with more first-time visitors and young families engaging with the landscape and nature. While land-based activities remain popular in the Broads, enjoyment of the water is essential too, and we have seen massive increases in 'entry-level' activities such as paddleboarding and kayaking. The number of short visit tolls for paddle/rowing craft has increased by 72% since 2016 and membership of British Canoeing has increased by 259% between 2018 and 2022. This welcome development has a minimal impact on navigation income but increases the demand for the Authority's services to ensure safety for everyone.

When the Authority was hit by above-average inflation in the price of materials and salary increases, it became essential to review the allocation of shared expenditure to ensure it reflected the reality of time and resources spent on activities. This revealed that there were some areas where, over time the split tended to tilt mixed expenditure lines in favour of navigation and was mitigating the impact on toll charges. As a result the National Park budget was in some cases inadvertently cross-subsidising navigation activities. With the National Park Grant in 2023/24 representing just 51.4% of its value in 2005/06, the budget reached breaking point. Activities were assessed objectively and in order to redress the issue costs were shared more fairly between the respective budgets. For example, 80% of the costs of the Rangers are now funded from tolls and 20% from National Park Grant reflecting the time spent on the different activities.

Following the fatal accident at Great Yarmouth in August 2020 the Marine Accident Investigation Branch made recommendations to the industry and the Authority to improve safety on the Broads. Under the Port Marine Safety Code, the Members of the Board are individually and collectively responsible for safety as the 'Duty Holder'. One of the actions the Authority took was to increase the number of Rangers patrolling in the summer. In the debate on the charges for 2024/25 a majority of the Members believed that retaining the additional Rangers was essential in the interests of public safety, which inevitably meant that tolls had to increase above inflation.

One current major challenge which illustrates the growing demands on navigation resources is the exponential increase in the need to manage plant growth within the navigation, caused by improvements in water clarity and the effects of climate change. This activity alone has stretched our operational resources requiring us to reprioritise our ongoing navigation works programme. Doing less is not an option.

The Authority's income from tolls has also suffered from the long-term decline in the number of weekly hire boats in the face of competition from cheaper overseas holidays. In the last ten

years they have fallen by 25% from 869 to 647 registered hire boats, a loss in tolls income of around £325,000. The Authority has had no option but to increase tolls above inflation to pay for the essential maintenance of the waterways. Not to do so would lead to the decay of both the navigation and the landscape, placing the future of the National Park itself in jeopardy.

## **Conclusion**

With waterways management costs rising above inflation, the need to accommodate a wider range of users of the waterways, and the challenges of climate change, the budget will come under inexorable strain, with inevitable consequences for toll payers and, ultimately, the National Park itself. If we consider that visitors to the Broads contribute over £711 million annually to the area's economy, supporting around 7,500 jobs, and that it is largely the waterways that draw 7.5 million people to the National Park each year, the argument of the Minister in 2007 that the “navigation is a private benefit” is incorrect and the notion that it should be funded entirely by its users, is not justified.

Funding the navigation from tolls income alone is unsustainable, and the continuing appeal and prosperity of the National Park and its associated businesses, both water and land-based, is at serious risk. The funding model is a precarious and improper basis for preserving what is a public asset, rather than purely a private benefit, and the maintenance of the navigation should attract a substantial contribution from public funds befitting the unique status of this precious landscape.