

Navigation Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2021

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Present

Nicky Talbot – in the Chair, Linda Aspland, Mike Barnes, Harry Blathwayt, Stephen Bolt, Andy Hamilton, Greg Munford, Simon Sparrow, Paul Thomas, Alan Thomson.

In attendance

Bill Housden – Collector of Tolls, Emma Krelle - Chief Financial Officer, Sarah Mullarney - Governance Officer, John Packman - Chief Executive, Rob Rogers - Director of Operations.

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from John Ash, Mathew Bradbury and Leslie Mogford.

Comments regarding agenda item 7 were received from John Ash. These were read out by the Chair and formed part of the discussion.

Recordings

The Chair announced that the meeting would be recorded and that the copyright remains with the Authority; however, a copy of the recording could be requested from the Governance team.

2. Declarations of interest

Members expressed their declarations of interest as set out in Appendix 1 of these minutes.

Andy Hamilton, Greg Munford and Simon Sparrow declared a pecuniary interest in item 7. The Chair announced that the Monitoring Officer had granted a dispensation for these members to participate in the discussion and vote. This was in recognition of the importance to the Broads Authority of knowing and understanding the views of both private boat owners and hire boat operators when setting tolls, and in the knowledge that the Navigation Committee is consultative/advisory rather than decision making. The dispensation solely related to the Broads Authority Navigation Committee.

3. Matters of urgent business

No items were proposed as a matter of urgent business.

4. Public question time

No public questions were raised.

5. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2021 were signed by the Chair as a correct record of the meeting.

6. Summary of actions and outstanding issues following discussions at previous meetings

Members received a report summarising the progress of issues that had recently been presented to the Committee.

The Chief Executive reported that publication of the Government's response to the Landscape Review was expected in December.

Members were informed that there was no further update relating to the Carrow Road Bridge repairs. The Chief Executive and Director of Operations would set up a meeting with Norfolk County Council.

The report was noted.

7. Proposed navigation charges for 2022/2023 in the navigation area and adjacent waters

Members received a summary of the proposed navigation charges for 2022/2023. The Chief Executive (CEO) thanked the Collector of Tolls and Chief Financial Officer for their work with the report. In addition to the member only 'tolls briefing' held on 28 September, the Chief Executive had consulted the Norfolk and Suffolk Boating Association (NSBA), and Broads Hire Boat Federation (BHBF) on the proposals. Their views were reported to members and formed part of the discussion.

The CEO gave members an overview of the decision that was taken last year. The use of the money from the National Park grant had allowed Broads Authority members to agree a 4% tolls increase, rather than 7%. There had been a stronger Ranger presence as a result of the implemented safety measures. However, the additional pressure on the tolls and finance teams had been growing which was no longer sustainable. Proposed changes to staff arrangements were reported to the committee as they affected the budget.

Income for the current year had consistently improved and was above what was expected. This was as a result of fewer hire boats being removed from the system than had been anticipated, and an increase in registrations for private boating especially paddle vessels. The Authority needed to consider how to make the most of this opportunity.

The CEO discussed the challenges faced by the Authority's navigation expenditure as outlined in the report. Rising inflation was a significant concern, as was the sourcing and growing costs of materials required for practical works. There were also potentially significant costs relating to pay increases and the additional Employer National Insurance. A further decline in number of hire boats was still predicted, and the effects on private boating was unknown. COVID-19 remained a real risk.

Need for replacement online tolls system

Members discussed the requirements for a replacement tolls system. The Collector of Tolls said expectations needed to be managed and options and costings for the new system would be presented to members as part of the scoping exercise. The difficulty would be finding the capacity to deliver a new system in a timely way; members were made aware that there was a vacancy in the IT team.

A member said it was important to communicate with toll payers why £250,000 was required towards the system. Members asked if an 'off the shelf' system could be modified for use. It was also suggested utilising systems used by other navigation authorities.

The Collector of Tolls explained that it would be difficult to purchase a system 'off the shelf' that would accommodate the legislation the Broads Authority works with. Registration of a toll included the inspection of the Boat Safety Scheme database; however, the database was not within the Authority's control and often included discrepancies. He added that the

systems used by the Canals and Rivers Trust (CRT) and Environment Agency would be reviewed as a starting point. It was noted that the £7million cost of the CRT system was outside the scope of what the Authority could invest.

Members queried the opportunity to incorporate differential pricing in the system for new registrations, and the historic boat class. The Collector of Tolls said this would add extra complexity but could be considered when scoping options for the new system. Wherries already received a special discount, but the Chief Executive added that there was difficulty in defining what was meant by 'historic'.

A member asked what the longevity of a new system would be and how the features would compare to the current system. The Collector of Tolls discussed longevity in terms of support for server technology and cyber security, noting the rapid advancements of technology. The last change to the tolls system introduced online payment for existing toll payers; which had been of great benefit to toll payers and the tolls team. However, this had identified an expectation for other transactions, such as short visit tolls, to be made in the same way. A mobile app was not being considered at this stage but would be investigated in the future. The CEO reiterated that expectations for the new system needed to be managed.

Members discussed the means for paddleboarders and wind surfers to licence their self rather than a board; a member commented that many had multiple boards and suggested a wristband system be used as proof of purchase of a toll. It was clarified that British Canoeing provided this option albeit via a membership sticker and card that could be displayed on a lanyard. British Canoeing membership in particular had increased dramatically, and it was noted that it needed to be clearer for Rangers to identify registered paddleboarders.

A member suggested a separate member session to assess the business requirements of the tolls system, noting that a different system may be required for annual tolls and one for short term tolls.

It was proposed to transfer £88,000 of the forecasted surplus with some of the capital receipt from the sale of the Ludham Field Base for investment of a replacement tolls system.

Members supported the proposal to place £88,000 into the earmarked reserves for the replacement tolls system.

National Park grant

Members discussed the benefits of the 5 year and 10-year repayment options presented in the report. The Chief Financial Officer's (CFO) preference was for the 5-year option as this would be more effective in offsetting the shortfall from the anticipated flat cash settlement for National Parks and the Broads Authority over the next 3 years.

It was explained that the £250,000 transfer in March 2021 was a one-off agreement with Defra and there was no expectation that the National Park reserves would be used to support the Navigation reserves in the future. The CFO said the tolls income was sustainable to support tolls expenditure. A member suggested the committee support option 2 (repayment of £50,000 per annum over 5 years) with the view that this could be changed to option 1

(repayment of £25,000 per annum over 10 years) if the Authority had a poor year over the next 12 months.

Members unanimously supported Option 2 – repayment of £50,000 per annum over 5 years.

Hire Boat licencing

Members were made aware that the current 1 day a week Hire Boat Licencing Officer post was not adequate time to support the annual traffic light system checks required for monitoring hire boat licencing. Feedback received from members at the tolls briefing and the NSBA and BHBF supported a 3 day per week Hire Boat Licencing Officer post. It was explained that the costs for this would be met by the hire boat licence charge.

Members discussed the need for an annual check. A member compared the checks to other navigation authorities that relied on self-declaration and suggested this would limit the burden on Authority staff. The CEO explained that the Broads Authority was the duty holder and part of the process included the audit and regular checks of operators to demonstrate to the Department of Transport that potential risks had been minimised. A member strongly supported the traffic light system and risk-based audit approach and observed that the better performing operators received less visits. He suggested contacting the Environment Agency who had a similar operation in place.

In response to a member question about the inclusion of new operators such as pop up paddleboard hirers, the Collector of Tolls stated that motorised boats were seen as the biggest risk when the legislation was first put in place. However, the 2009 Act allowed this to be extended to other unpowered craft. The Authority was looking to extend the licencing to recognise non-motorised boating activity and motor boat Airbnb rentals that weren't used for navigating.

Members unanimously supported an increase in Hire Boat Licencing Officer time to 3 days a week.

Sustainable Boating

Members were asked to consider if the Authority should be doing more in terms of indicating a preference for non-diesel, non-carbon producing propulsion. The CEO reported that the Broads Authority had obtained funding to investigate the electrification of the weekly hire fleet.

The report suggested offering a further discount to electric day boats to signal to the industry that electrification was the way forward. However, it was recognised that historically tolls had not been a big lever to deliver change. There were 64 recorded electric day boats in the network today compared to 34 in 1994. A member observed that day boats were a small element of hire boat operating businesses and the toll reduction penalised a sector who were unable to take advantage of the discount.

Members discussed the value of purchasing a new electric vessel vs the longevity of existing diesel vessels. It was noted that the production of new electric vessels included pollution from the manufacturing process. A member suggested promoting the use of alternative cleaner

burning fuels. Another member commented that sailing was the most sustainable form of boating and suggested this could be better promoted. Members also discussed the practicalities of converting to electric, recognising this would require an increase in power points at Broads Authority moorings to meet demand.

A member proposed the Authority host a workshop, including toll payers, to review sustainable boating in more details.

Members recommended making no amendments to the discounted charges for electric day boats and requested a focused briefing on sustainable boating next year to explore options in more detail.

Options analysis

Based on the committee's recommendations for the above proposals, members unanimously supported a 3.6% increase in navigation charges across the board for 2022/2023.

The views of the Navigation Committee would be reported to the Broads Authority at the 19 November 2021 meeting.

8. Chief Executive's report and current issues

Members were informed that a report on the safety measures implemented this year and the impacts of the additional Ranger facilities would be presented to a future Navigation Committee meeting. The Director of Operations explained that the increased Ranger patrols had resulted in more issues being identified on the network. This included speeding vessels, non-payment of tolls, and the need for prosecutions. It was noted that the increase in paddleboarders and other paddle crafts had also put additional pressures on the workloads of the tolls and finance teams.

A member said they had received positive feedback from hire boat users in response to the survey of the handover procedures. Another member commented that the Authority needed to remain cautious of the potential for serious incidents.

The report was noted.

9. Construction, Maintenance and Ecology work programme – progress update

In response to a member question, the Director of Operations explained that the dredging team would return to Geldeston Dyke once an alternative sediment storage area had been located.

The report was noted.

10. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Navigation Committee would be held on Thursday 13 January 2022 at 10am.

Members were informed that a report on remote meetings would be reported to the November Broads Authority. Legal advice sought by the Authority had indicated that consultative committee meetings could be held remotely. It was suggested that non-contentious meetings of the Navigation Committee take place remotely.

The meeting ended at 11.44.

Signed

Chairman

Appendix 1 – Declaration of interests: Navigation Committee, 21 October 2021

Member	Agenda item no	Nature of interest
Nicky Talbot	7	Private toll payer
Simon Sparrow	7	Pecuniary Interest. Private and business boat owner
Harry Blathwayt	7	Private toll payer
Andy Hamilton	7	Pecuniary Interest. Private and business toll payer
Alan Thomson	7	Private toll payer
Mike Barnes	7	Private toll payer
Linda Aspland	7	Private toll payer
Greg Munford	7	Pecuniary Interest. Chief Executive of Richardsons Leisure Ltd.
Paul Thomas	7	Private toll payer
Stephen Bolt	7	Private toll payer