

CONSERVATORS OF THE RIVER CAM

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE CONSERVATORS, HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, THE GUILDHALL, CAMBRIDGE ON WEDNESDAY 7 DECEMBER 2011 AT 9.30 am

Present: Mr J A Adams (in the chair)

Conservators: Dr G Brighty, Mr A C G Brown, Mr R Ingersent, Cllr M I Nimmo-Smith, Mr L Phillips, Mr J R Pryce-Jones, Prof K Richards, Dr R D Walker and Cllr T Ward.

Observers: Mr D Bradley, Mr R T Bryant, Dr T W Davies, Mr W Key, Mr G Parrish, Ms E Witcomb-Vos and Cllr M Wright.

In Attendance: Dr P E Noon (River Manager) and Mr J R Wakefield (Deputy River Manager).

And of the general public who signed the attendance record: Mr J Leader, Ms L Scott, Mr C Walker, Mr C Rees, Ms A Tillson, Mr S Allen, Mr T Lohman, Dr H Hedgeland, Mr S Duncan, Mr A J Godfrey, Mr G McPherson, Mr J Macnaghten and Ms E Wynne.

Action RequiredBy

The Chairman, Mr Adams, opened the meeting at 9.30am, introducing Mr Walker and Ms Scott of Ecorys Ltd who had been invited to present their report. A question and answer session was to follow their presentation.

1. Apologies for absence had been received from County Cllr Williamson and Observer Mr R Moseley.

2. Declarations of interest: Mr Ingersent, a commercial punting operator, declared both personal and prejudicial interests. He would not take part in discussions. Mr Brighty declared his interests - as a representative of the Environment Agency - being limited to issues concerning the boat licensing interchange agreement. Mr Brown declared that he was a boat owner with a mooring on the Cam. Dr Walker declared that his employer was a riparian landowner. Prof Richards declared his interests as a riparian landowner. Mr Pryce-Jones declared his personal, but not prejudicial, interests as a boat owner and a rower. Mr Phillips declared his interests as a boat owner, adding that his employers were a riparian landowner.

Chairman A means of dealing with declarations of interest was to be brought to the January 2012 meeting. Conservators inevitably, had interests in the river.

Mr Leader

entered the room 3. Presentation by Ecorys Ltd (River Cam Navigation Benefits' Assessment): Mr Walker, Director, with the support of a Powerpoint presentation, introduced the study and its 3 aims; (i) to provide an evidence base for setting licence fees; (ii) to assess value and benefit; and (iii) to make

recommendations in light of a public consultation. The brief had identified an additional £50k p.a. requirement for specific expenditure needs and maintaining capital assets. The study used applied economic theory (the benefit principle) and a multi-criteria approach. Proxies had been used to reconcile the lack of comprehensive data quantifying use and benefit. The study had commenced in June 2011. Eighteen stakeholders had been interviewed initially. A full public survey was conducted in September/October generating over 700 responses. Charging options were assessed for their fairness, acceptability and practicability and also comparability with other navigations. Recommendations were made in light of statutory and existing resource constraints. The response rate had been highest from rowers (45%) but the spread of responses across all user groups was deemed to be good. Duplicate responses had been identified and screened.

Mr Macnaghten entered the room Ms Scott gave more detail about the practicability of levying charges on different groups. There was no objection against charges being levied upon river users. Respondents favoured higher fees being levied upon those who generated income from the river. Uniform fee increases across the major user groups were not generally supported; instead, respondents were supportive of targeted action. Event fees produced divergent views. There was limited support for charging based on ability to pay. Respondents wanted the Conservancy to improve their enforcement efforts, look at other income streams, make efficiencies and demonstrate steps being taken to reduce their costs, including the use of volunteers.

In summary, four groups provided the most coherent justification for fee increases due to the benefits received: houseboat owners, punt hire operators, rowers and powered craft owners. Targeted increases were preferred, including a residential boating fee and event charging, bringing the Conservancy into line with other navigation authorities. Regarding the apportionment of the £50k amongst these groups, the study recommended that commercial punts took a 50% share (requiring approx. 18% increase in fees), rowing boats a 15% share (approx. 18% increase in fees), residential boats a 20% share, event fees making up the remaining 15%. These should be reviewed in the context of the ongoing negotiations with the Agency over the interchange agreement. Also, the local authority, Cambridge City Council, could be approached for a contribution.

The Chairman invited Conservators to raise questions with the consultants. It had not been possible within the terms of this brief to look at the differential benefits from different parts of the river. From inception, it was recognised that the authority had a statutory duty to maintain the whole navigation. The consultants had taken measures to ensure that the results were not skewed by one user group. The report chapter on benefits made consideration of the relative obstruction of the navigation by different user groups. The data had been analysed using a scoring system; survey responses had been subject to significance testing. The findings were robust. The consultants confirmed that there had been 8 survey days in the catchment, capturing approximately 100 responses from towpath users. The questionnaire had been designed to reduce the likelihood of an alternative approach leading to different findings.

Unknown benefits were recognised (e.g. payments going to national organisations such as the British Canoe Union). Block licensing arrangements with outside bodies was for future consideration. The study had summarised indicative costs at the group level rather than per individual. The setting of fees was a matter for Conservators.

The Chairman opened up the discussion to the floor. The report was criticised as being a costly exercise, delivering predictable results. Conservators were asked to reduce their costs and also seek other sources of funds. The comparison of registration fees was unfair: Avon Navigation Trust was an extreme comparator. There was no precedent for charging event fees. Only event organisers, largely volunteers, knew the real costs of running events. The consultants confirmed that the period of consultation had been extended to capture rowers' feedback. It had not been their intention to perform a full business plan review. The next 5-year Business Plan was to start in April 2013. The shape of the authority in the medium- to long-term was likely to reflect changing business circumstances.

There was concern that neutral responses had occurred because people lacked knowledge about the navigation authority and its remit however, consultants assured that 730 respondents had completed all sections of the questionnaire. There was support for the even-handedness of the survey and the principle of pay-by-use. Many rowing craft spent limited periods of time on the water. Town clubs were dependent on income raised from events. Imposing event charges could impact these clubs significantly, possibly causing them to fold. The lack of representation by rowers on the committee was raised, as was the fact that the City Council paid nothing towards maintaining the navigation. Mr Allen (CRA) requested a response to his letter of October. A complaint had been taken to the professional body which regulated the consultants; they, in turn, were to investigate the survey procedures used by Ecorys Ltd. The Cam's amenity value needed to be quantified. Local authorities should pay their share towards its upkeep rather than its users being penalised. The City Council was reviewing its appointments procedure to outside bodies. The Council's mooring fees were a substitute for Council Tax. Pre-local government reorganisation, the City Council had provided financial support to the Conservancy. Conservators were asked to make a formal approach to the City Council to seek funds because that legislation remained extant. The Chairman confirmed that nominations to the board were fixed in statute and although British Waterways and the Environment Agency did receive grant-in-aid their level of support was being reduced sharply. Other navigation authorities did not receive grant aid. The City Council was unlikely to find additional income to support the Conservancy in the current economic climate.

A waterspace strategy had been suggested to Conservators two years ago. A strategy had recently been published for Bedford. The Business Plan set out immediate priorities but there was a lack of vision for the Cam, a river of huge value to Cambridge and the country. Both the City and SCDC were revising their Local Plans. A jointly-commissioned strategy would be well-timed.

The Conservators heard further critique of the survey from the floor. Rowers did not derive benefit for the locks for which the additional funds were largely being sought. Local Councils should be approached for more money. Event fees should be rejected due to their impracticability (administration burden on both sides), acceptability (the least popular of the eight presented options, an effective double-taxation upon rowers), and comparability (other navigation authorities did not charge for events). Rowing events only accounted for 1% of the time available for navigation each year. By comparison, moored craft used an estimated 35% of river length year-round. Since the Conservators needed more money under the current business structure, staged increases were more palatable. Inefficiencies in the Conservancy's business needed to be addressed. The interchange agreement should have been terminated sooner; over the last 14 years the arrangements had lost approximately £0.5M income to the Conservancy. College Rowing clubs would find event fees unhelpful. There was a disparity in ability to pay across different rowing groups. An increase on rowing craft licence fees was the preferred option.

The Chairman drew the discussion to a close, thanking people for their views. No decision was to be made on charges today; recommendations were to be taken to the 12th January meeting. Local government reorganisation was ongoing and business rates in the future were to be collected and managed by local authorities; there was an opportunity to look at these wider benefits. Many public benefits were derived from services and assets provided by non-public bodies. Business resilience was paramount, especially in terms of potential staffing shortfalls and the need to retain sufficient equity to meet any liabilities. Businesses and clubs had not declared their operating costs during this consultation; the Conservancy had openly identified the challenge of a funding gap. Conservators needed to take their business forwards and also look at other income streams over the next 2 to 3 years.

Mr Key thanked the Chairman for allowing people to express their views. The Chairman asked Conservators if they were willing to receive the report, proposing that the existing sub-committee group, and any others, should look at the recommendations in greater detail and bring a paper to the January meeting.

On the proposition of Dr Brighty, seconded by Professor Richards, 7 Conservators were in favour of accepting the Ecorys Ltd report 'River Cam Navigation Benefits' Assessment' and its recommendations.

The Chairman thanked the sub-committee group for their help over the last few weeks and thanked Ecorys Ltd for their report. Camboaters had tabled an information note; the sub-committee group would consider it. The Agency was convening a joint meeting with the Conservancy for stakeholders regarding the interchange agreement in Peterborough on 12 December.

Chairman /
licensing sub-
committee
group

The meeting was declared closed at 11.10am.

Members of the public left the room and the Conservators went into a closed committee session, the minutes of which are stored elsewhere.