

BANBURY – OPEN BOATER MEETING, 26 FEBRUARY 2014

Names of those asking the questions are included when they were given/audible. The questions from the two sessions have been combined, as some of the issues raised were raised in both meetings.

Canal & River Trust staff

RP: Richard Parry, chief executive

JW: Jeff Whyatt, South East waterway manager

DB: Dan Barnett, South East contract delivery manager

SA: Sally Ash, head of boating

VM: Vince Moran, operations director

IC: Ivor Caplan, council member

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Please note that the South East User Forums are planned for 8 April – Tring; 15 April – Braunston. See <http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/south-east-waterways> for more details.

There were many requests to have contact details clarified:

- Enquiries.southeast@canalrivertrust.org.uk can be used for any query, question or complaint, and
- The [South East webpages](#) will be developed and updated with relevant local content as we move throughout the boating season. Have a look and let the South East team know what else you'd like to be included.

Questions about vegetation management

Colin Garnham-Edge: Last year, down the South Oxford, from King's Sutton Lock to Oxford became pretty impassable because grass had overgrown. Why isn't there a continuous strimming policy from hedge to canalbank? What's the policy?

RP: We need to balance usability, ecology and getting boats in.

JW: This is our policy: hedge to edge cut once a year, everywhere on network. We did ours at the start of winter. We look at zones very carefully, which are important for ecology, there are lots of SSSIs, we have lots vole habitat, we have to think about the cost. There are 9-10 cuts a year of grass, we don't do hedge to edge everywhere.

DB: We follow a mowing guidance document which defines best practice, taking into account ecology, operational use and local views, listing differing regimes or specifications. We selected our cutting regime and specs in 2008 and have embedded it within the core contract appropriate to use across the waterway. The area mentioned on Oxford Canal has a very rural character and low footfall, so is managed according to a specification which most fits the use and character of the section of canal. There have been financial restraints which affected the grass cutting programme towards the middle of last season, I needed to drop one entire cut and selected what is normally the dry season to withdraw this cut only to find the grass fuelled by persistent rainfall. Sometimes we are forced to make some tough decisions.

Carol Nicholson, Warwick IWA: In some areas where hedges are trimmed, hawthorn is left scattered and brambles are left in the canal. Fountains are not canal people, do they realise what's important?

DB: It's a constant challenge. Annually we cut a year's growth of c.400 km of hedges. The Fountains guys are aware of the quality aspect and try hard to meet a standard, but it's down to the amount they are cutting off and the relatively short period of time they have to complete the works outside of nesting season. It's inevitable that we will get thorns on the towpath; interestingly I have received no complaints since we changed our methods and choice of labour. Fountains do adopt a specific methodology to limit any disruption caused by leaving thorns. Fountains work through mulching and blowing the thorn of the paths as best they can. Ideally we would cut earlier in the season when the thorn is soft or carry out two cuts a year to limit the waste, however this activity becomes unaffordable to cut twice in one financial year.

JW: Fountains came into British Waterways in 2008 in the South East and of all the contractors who came forward, Fountains were far and away the best equipped and best value, they may not be perfect but they've learned a lot. There's more of our own labour on the South East contract than when they went further north. It's the same faces year in year out, adding to local expertise and experience.

DB: The team have their own respective patches so have a sense of pride. Where it hasn't worked well in the past is when Fountains sub-contracted the activity out three years ago. The rate is competitive but clearly faceless non canal aware sub-contractors can affect quality. Consistent use of the same local labour is a big improvement, and set up their paths well for the grass cutting season.

RP: If you see a location where standards have dropped or thorns are a problem, please tell us and we'll follow it up.

Lyndsey, continuous cruiser: We were at Crick and there were eight contractors who all came from Devon, expenses paid, hotel paid – how can you afford it, and justify it? Vegetation on the offside is atrocious in a lot of places.

DB: I'm not sure where this information is coming from. All labour is local on the South East waterways. Labour from Devon may be a different region, perhaps the Kennet & Avon? Over the years it's become apparent that Fountains manage activities far more effectively using their own direct labour teams, the labour team in the South East are the same year on year. Hedge cutting, as with all vegetation activities, has a nationally tendered rate applied – hedge cutting is 28p per metre, the Trust pays this rate regardless of how Fountains resource it.

JW: If there's an issue at Crick we'll follow it up. In last five years we've had highest percentage of direct labour. The offside programme hasn't finished, we hope it carries on to the end of March, please highlight to Dan the areas you think are atrocious. I would be disappointed if there are bad areas that hadn't been gone over or aren't in programme. We've spent a lot of money – will it be perfect, probably not, but five boats over 120km have achieved a lot.

RP: Offside vegetation will not have got better until 8-10 weeks ago as the programme didn't start until then. We need to fix it if contractors aren't doing the right thing.

[Post meeting note, following discussion with the customer the issues of Devon labour and poor offside cutting were in another waterway in the south west, not the South East or at Crick.]

Peter Caswell: just north of Soulbury top lock, all the vegetation has been cut but one tree has been left that will impede navigation when it starts flowering. Is there a reason it was left? Are the guys equipped to deal with anything?

DB: Generally, dealing with offside vegetation, there's a specific rate for soft vegetation including limbs, tree rates are outside this rate and need specifying alongside the works. In this year's order, there is a 10% provision for tree work. The Soulbury offside works were carried out four years ago, the offside team at that time were not equipped to carry out large scale tree works. We have learnt a lot since then.

Mort: Why aren't small ash saplings taken out?

DB: The winter programme finishes at the end of March, let's take a look then about what's left then. Where hedgecutters go, this stuff [fender growth] should be taken out. It's the bane of our life, we want it out.

RP: It should be coming out, if they're not, help us identify where they are and we'll address it. There's no different objective, we want what you want, help us to achieve it.

Kevin McNiff: It's difficult when you're on back of boat to explain to someone in office what the problem is. I got Dan on boat to show him a vegetation problem in person. How many more of senior management team go out on narrowboats?

RP: I think in fairness to them most of them have. I'm enthusiastic about our boating buddies scheme and I've insisted all new starters go on a trip on a boat. I feel other staff should go out in numbers when they can. I've been impressed with the extraordinary generosity boaters have shown in taking the time and effort to take me out. I know on vegetation we had problem in autumn that had

built up over summer. We now need to prioritise to keep on top of it. Past years' focus has been on principal assets; that has to continue but we know we need also to look at the 'linear' assets like off-side banks and vegetation, those need more attention. Principle assets are critical because if those assets fail, that's where you might have structural failures and breaches. Hopefully in 2015 we will have more money to spend on vegetation as well as core assets. I can't make any promises though.

KM: If a boater found vegetation that was a problem, would a supervisor go out and see it and solve it?

JW: I think this typifies what happens already. Our staff get lots of feedback. I encourage people to get in touch, we have standards to respond, we don't pick and choose. Don't get frustrated if the first line of contact doesn't work as we're normally out of the office on track, following up with contractors.

RP: We always deal with things that are unsafe, otherwise they generally go into the programme, which means repairs may not happen for month or so as it may be more efficient to do it later when we're going through that area. We're getting better at putting more things in the plan to do things more efficiently, though it can mean it doesn't always happen quickly.

Colin Garnham-Edge: The only complaints we get from customers are 'it's sometimes boring as all hedges'. I don't think hedges should be more than 4-5ft.

RP: I will take this away.

Questions about cycling

Ron Heritage, chair, Oxford IWA: I don't think you should encourage cycling unless you prepare the towpath, and that means hard surfaces, which won't work on the Oxford as it's rural.

RP: The whole use of towpath issue is a key thing for us to try to get right. Cycling happens whether we encourage it or don't. There are sympathetic towpath treatments for rural locations but with harder surfaces, eg: on the Montgomery. It brings in funding from others, it does improve the towpath for all users. Now we have to tackle the issue of how to get cyclists to be more respectful and recognise shared space. We're about to start a consultation for feedback. We need to work to solve the problem together.

Sue [?], London: Are you doing all you can do to encourage authorities to make alternatives to the towpath more inviting for cyclists? Do you lobby highway authorities?

RP: We have a good working relationship with TfL, they have paid money for us to do work on the towpath, and putting in signage for alternative routes to divert people away from inappropriate parts of towpath. We can't force people to use these routes. It's a difficult balance as the canal is such an inviting environment. There's a whole spectrum of cyclists of course, many of whom do act considerately. It has to be about alternatives, behaviour change, education. We need to keep putting time and effort in – in London we have towpath rangers giving out information. Not every conversation will be successful but I believe if we are investing time it will make a change. We'll carry out physical change where appropriate but I'm reluctant because of buggies, wheelchairs etc. There isn't a simple solution but it is a priority.

Ian [?]: Funding is fantastic for towpaths and now cycling is a massive problem. What is your health and safety policy on people using the towpath with regard to speeding cyclists?

RP: We're working to try and manage things and try and influence that. Towpath volunteers, a cycling coordinator, improved signage all makes a difference. It's about getting into people's consciousness that this is a shared space. It's never going to be the solution to inhibit cycling by intrusive physical measures – the whole environment deteriorates. The surface you can get right. Maybe we need to step back from the sort of very smooth surfaces we have in London. We need to keep working on this actively to find solutions. I believe it's an information and behaviour issue. We have to be open to a range of ideas.

[Unknown]: I think the problem's going to be enforcement: put up as many signs as you like but bikes thrive on these paths, they're not going to worry about chicanes or bumps.

RP: We're not offering a panacea but more towpath improvements can offer more to all users and they have to share, this will be a steady process of change over time.

Questions about moorings and cruising

Geoff Wood, Northampton IWA: With the boating season Visitor Mooring trial, what's the general feedback and are you going to roll them out further in the South East and across the country?

RP: We got lots of views and real emotion around how we get visitor moorings right. I'm determined we'll try and find ways to better manage, better define, to make them better for use. We need to look carefully at gathering evidence and information about occupancy and availability before committing to new solutions. There's a balance between getting sites available for people to use – that's got to be a good thing as long as we don't cause problems for other boaters.

JW: We're committed to visitor moorings but need balance. We've been accused of being draconian – the reality is we've done a lot of learning, we have a boating sub group, we know that information on visitor moorings is hard to get, and volunteers have been helping us gathering data. There are 130 visitor moorings across the South East, way more than any other area, so we have to get it right. Visitor moorings have to be fit for purpose, we need fair and dynamic use of the network. It's good to have informed feedback.

RP: We should be able to get it right, it doesn't feel like an intractable problem. We need to marry a national approach with local solutions, each location is different.

Linda King: I singlehandedly continuously cruise in good months and take Trust winter moorings. Last year the lists were issued just a few weeks before I needed to take up a mooring, and they were reduced from 60 to 20 sites. Can we have list issued earlier in the year?

RP: We feel winter moorings have been mostly a success. However we haven't got everything right. It was released a bit later because we were consulting to get the details right.

SA: We're about to run a feedback survey, open to all who booked winter moorings and to those who didn't, and this will guide us on what we do this year. The decision to offer fewer locations was specifically based on the previous year's take up. The sites we did offer weren't that well supplied, most people opted for general towpath permits. We sold more winter mooring permits this year so we've taken heart.

Peter Braybrook – local boater: Where I moor there have been vacancies since [2003]. It would be better to let moorings and receive income from them, rather than have an ineffectual auction system.

RP: We share same end – we want people to have access to the facilities we offer and achieve a fair price for that. The auction system was intended to do that, people at the Trust accept it perhaps doesn't work quite as well as planned. I think we need to get a market value for moorings so we can reinvest money in the network, but we don't want them vacant when people want to moor on them. Maybe in a few weeks we can give an update on the review we are currently doing.

[Unknown]: Why do we cut 10% of online moorings for marina openings? It needs looking at: lots of people want to moor online.

RP: We apply this rule as agreed with the industry in 2006. We keep a careful track of it. In 2014 it's right to ask questions about whether the formula still makes sense. In principle it's about supporting boating businesses - if marinas are opening, don't make it harder for them as businesses. It may be timely to look at that again, but we wouldn't change anything without a conversation with the industry.

Ron Heritage, chair, Oxford IWA: You shouldn't have continuous moorers, residential moorings, on the towpath side. If they want to have residential moorings, put them offline.

RP: There's a huge demand for residential moorings. It's fair to say some planning authorities have turned a blind eye to it: they haven't always been policed effectively. There are a number of places where the use of the canal for residential arguably isn't consistent with navigation, and we're looking at promoting local solutions to keep boats moving, to help solve the immediate problems, and use enforcement to deal with the extreme cases where we can't resolve it any other way. We need joint working with the boating community together. We're now getting back to new boaters after three months of getting their first licence to make sure they are still complying, so we try to prevent a problem growing further, as we have seen over the past three years.

[Unknown]: Would the Trust consider asking for further legislation through Parliament?

RP: It may come to that, but I think that while the current legislation can be frustrating, it does work well enough as long as we're active in applying it. Getting new legislation won't be easy, the prospect of parliamentary time is very difficult. I'm not ruling it out, but it's not a priority.

[Unknown]: Continuous moorers aren't going to vanish, but a lot of people on them aren't boaters, they just want a cheap home. Is it worth considering getting together with Local Authorities to set up something parallel to gypsy sites – those boats don't need to be afloat.

RP: I think there's something in your diagnosis about what's driving this, wider society issues. We try to have active and sympathetic discussions with people in difficult circumstances. Most licence problems are resolved in a constructive way – a sign of our success. But some people don't want to adopt the solutions we propose and I doubt would welcome a local authority solution. In any case it can be a struggle to get Local Authorities to engage with this issue

Brian Farrant: Continuous mooring in London is significant. Paddington Basin should be 24 hours, with wardens supervising every day. As to enforcing liveaboards, you need a bigger stick. On my way in and out of London, I passed at least a dozen boats, heading to London to live on.

RP: I'm not going to pretend there aren't issues. There is work to do. We're consulting on Paddington Basin right now. There is a boating liaison manager in London, and two rangers dedicated to engaging with the boating community to unlock some of the issues to move things on in a constructive way. Mooring in London will continue to be a big headache I fear, but we won't ignore it, we need to find solutions to make it better over time.

BF: The Trust boat at Paddington basin is being used by your chuggers as a lunch base, taking up two mooring spaces. You shouldn't have boat, and removing it would release two spaces.

RP: I will take away the point about where we moor our boat. Now our fundraisers are dedicated to us, we train them, they wear our branding. On a typical day in London they will recruit a small handful of people to Friends. At bigger events across the country they recruit more. We value what they're doing for us.

[Unknown]: Why does the Trust always blame continuous cruisers for not moving when it could be anyone?

RP: We're neutral on the issue: we have to have a regime for navigation on the system, that applies to all boaters, continuous cruisers or otherwise. If people persistently don't stick to the rules we have steps we have to take in fairness to everyone else. We try and be as even handed about this as possible, we're not applying different rules to different groups.

[Unknown]: I'm a previous continuous cruiser, we now operate hotel boats. We do feel there's a certain amount of mudslinging towards continuous cruisers, particularly to those who moor within a community region, whether they adhere to the rules or not. It's not necessarily the Trust but other boaters as well.

RP: The Trust welcomes continuous cruisers who abide by the rules of movement.

[Unknown]: There are boats that move between bridges – you're saying they're breaking the rules.

RP: If someone is moving bridge to bridge, that's not bona fide navigation.

Questions about development and marinas

Chris Wardley, Oxford IWA: Question about the development plans for Castle Quay. The Trust's obligations are only towards the navigation, but I believe they need to take a broader view in places like Banbury. Why won't you oppose it?

RP: On the strategic point I would want us to take bigger strategic view about the wider environment as much as we can. We execute our statutory duties and comment within our formal remit in our planning responses, but we're also a charity with responsibility to partners, including the IWA, and the wider community and I would be disturbed if our policy view was different to the show of hands on view today [Show of hands – most are opposed to the proposed development in Banbury]. We've done this successfully on a national level, for example with HS2 where we're working very closely with IWA and local canal societies etc.

JW: The ink is not dry on the development. It's not our land, not our development, and there's only so much we can influence. I can't comment on built environment – but on negative impact on boating experience of the canal or towpath we would not support. We're still lobbying for improvements and changes to design. I would thank yourself and other people who have been very active on this. But let's be realistic about what we can achieve.

[Unknown]: Lots of brownfield sites could be turned into marinas. Is this a revenue stream for the future?

RP: I don't think as policy we want to invest directly in making new marinas happen. We might want to facilitate it. I think we should be clear about how to do it, provide lots of info, support, here's how you go about it. But leave others to decide whether to take the financial risks involved,

Richard [?]: What is the Trust's view on allowing planning applications for new marinas?

RP: We are absolutely neutral, I know in the past we've been accused of being cheerleaders for development. We can't be negative about them other than on narrow statutory grounds (safety and water supply) as we're the network operator. Local Authorities and developers need to make the decisions; we will provide information but will not be promoting them.

[Unknown]: The situation at Pilling's Lock when the Trust wrote off £180k, could have knock on effect on other marinas, they may not pay.

RP: We haven't written it off yet. It's an unfortunate situation, we tried to work with the marina company to help them find ways to pay us. We haven't given up. Our focus is also on the boaters involved and we don't want to have them caught in the crossfire. We're ensuring we design agreements for future so that this cannot happen again.

Questions about operational issues

Mort: The bridge in Hayford is difficult – is it so hard to weight them like they used to be?

JW: I don't think we go out of our way to make them difficult, the wooden ones are a real problem as rain puts them out of kilter, and we can't fix straight away as we need it to dry out. I'll look at it and come back to you.

Dave Thomas, continuous cruiser: There's nowhere to moor on the offside at Lower Hayford lift bridge. It's the same on the Leeds & Liverpool – all on the offside there's nowhere to moor.

Ken Bryce: I'm a singlehanded boater, and the biggest problems are lift and swing bridges – you can't get back on boat, or can't close them.

RP: We recognise the issue and want to sort this out, we know we don't have facilities right for single-handed boaters everywhere. Sometimes it's land ownership that causes a problem but we know we need to solve it as a priority to support single-handed boaters.

JW: We're negotiating with land owners but we can't afford to purchase the land, they have us over a barrel. We may have to reverse the way bridges open, we've been agonising over it for 4-5 years. We need to redouble our efforts, and maybe look alternative solutions.

Richard Hoskin, Stratford Canal: At the locks at Wilmcote the piling is awful. It's so easy to rip boats apart waiting for lock movement.

RP: We'll look at this. With such an old system we can't fix everything. There are 50,000 known defects, 5,000 or so are highest priority to fix in a short time and they get done; the others are in a cycle of prioritisation, but we will never be able to say the assets will be perfect.

RH: This is a case where the top lock was repaired by volunteers, the lock was drained, the two tasks could have been completed at once. You need joined up thinking.

RP: I agree we need to join these jobs up. We try to do what we can but we're limited on resource. We'd love to do more with volunteers in future, congratulations to those who did the work at Wilmecote, they really helped us.

Sue [?]: Are you able to recover any of those expenses from lorries hitting bridges, and is there anything we can do to help?

RP: I think we try to recover our costs where we can.

JW: If we get evidence our legal team goes for it, we have a high success rate. I want the problems to be solved so lorries can't keep banging into them. One bridge was hit three times in five years, it costs us £30,000 a time to fix. We're working with Local Authorities, getting section 106 money to get calming measures on bridges – it's really important for us. The answer isn't traffic lights everywhere, but high kerbs etc.

Questions about communications

Dave Thomas, continuous cruiser: I've been stuck since 20 January outside Banbury, but there's no information on the website about whether Nell Bridge is affected.

RP: We'll look at that. More generally, I'm determined that we need to get better and better at communications, I've seen improvements over the past year. We're recruiting boating communications volunteers, it's a big drive for us.

Richard Hoskin, Stratford Canal: In the past I've had cause to write to British Waterways about various things and I never got responses: I'd like you to tell me that the problem doesn't exist anymore, but I can say from experience it does.

RP: If we haven't responded I owe you an apology. You should get a reply within 10 days. Clearly it's wrong of us if we don't get it right. In fairness I think people in my team would be very disappointed with what you report also, they take pride in the service they give.

Chris [?]: Some more efforts need to be made to re-engage with boaters, I know some who decided not to come because they thought they wouldn't be listened to.

RP: Hopefully you will give them a positive report of this event and tell them to give it a chance. I've found many people want to engage with us, I've been impressed with so much willingness to support the Trust. I'm enthusiastic to capture that enthusiasm to help us get things right. We won't be able to deliver what every boater wants, but if we can focus on those things most boaters want us to do then we can make progress. We will listen; we need to be accountable and responsive to you as our customers and given your stake in the waterways.

IC: I'm surprised with how things have changed over the past four years. The vast majority of council members recognise the importance of navigation, right through the organisation at every level we've seen real effort to re-engage.

RP: I'd also say it's important we engage the wider public as well – the 10m people who walk on the towpaths, or the even bigger number who live near them but don't use them. If we can get their support as Friends, volunteers, get them coming to local meetings, lobbying their MPs – this is what future of waterways depends upon. We have to get these non-boaters to feel as strongly about the waterways as you do.

[Unknown]: I think you do an awful lot well, but you don't communicate well to stakeholders. You do so much well but it goes unnoticed.

RP: Getting communications right is always difficult especially in the digital age when there is so much to compete with - but I accept we need to try do more in this area.

Questions about hire boating

[Unknown]: On the Kennet & Avon there's a widebeam hire boat service. What are the plans on making hire boats more governed for speed, safety etc?

RP: We're working with the hire boat industry to help create more information, guidance, safety messaging, DVDs, checklists for briefings and inductions. It's on a voluntary basis for the industry – hire boat operators are keen on this. We need to talk to those companies who don't support it. We support the hire boat industry generally.

[Unknown]: With narrowboats there's room for error, but with widebeams we were concerned about safety issue. I think it needs to be looked at.

RP: We need to work with the industry to ensure that any trend that happens, happens responsibly. It's not fair to describe all hire boaters as new and inexperienced. We need to provide information and guidance for all newcomers to boating.

VM: BSS are looking at safety in general. The last thing any reputable hire boater wants is for boats to get damaged.

Questions about angling

[Unknown]: What do the anglers pay to fish in the canal?

RP: Angling clubs do pay something that goes into our funding for the waterways, if we charged them too much they'd fish somewhere else. I think it does bring value to the Trust more generally.

[Unknown]: I would like to see some way of rewriting the rules so continuous cruisers could pay the Trust to fish over the whole length of the network rather than short stretches.

RP: It's an interesting idea, I expect we would hit difficulties because of our existing agreements with angling clubs. We now have an angling development manager who is working to promote it. It makes us relevant to communities around the waterways. It's especially good for bringing young people to the canals.

Miscellaneous questions

Greg Klaes, Haybridge Wharf: I'd like your thoughts on all the wood that's being cut on the navigation, why isn't it being harvested and turned into a valuable resource? – not to mention trees that are standing that could be used for carbon sequestration?

RP: I really support respecting the ecology of our waterways – what the environment offers to support wildlife, and for people who love wildlife. We've got a very capable ecology team, and do what we can to support them. We've cut down a lot of trees on offside – spending close to £2m this winter, as people asked us to, we're pleased with what we've done on the South Oxford – for example. I'm interested in any ideas to help us earn money from this resource – I think you're the first person to make the suggestion!

JW: Greg, we met recently, and we'll give you a well thought out response. We're committed to having dialogue and thinking about new ideas, but also being honest where they won't fly.

Jim Hanks, Continuous Cruiser: Can canal dredgings be spread on fields? Can you bag and sell to gardeners?

RP: Part of our 10 year approach has been to work with our contractor Land & Water to find places to take dredged material to dry out as it's easier to dispose of in that form. We may be able to find other uses, and we are keen to make more uses. It costs lots of money to take out! It's most effective to use at the site where it's taken out, eg: for bank protection. That's the least costly, but if we could find a way to make money that would be great.

JW: Most of the mainline dredging in the South East, 80-85%, is recycled locally. Minimising the cost of transportation is the best approach where we can.

Pat Johnson: Although I'm delighted in the Trust's use of volunteers, one set of people has not been mentioned – the paid staff who work on the track. It's vital that they are looked after.

RP: I think that's a fantastic sentiment, I couldn't agree more. It's a challenge with such a distributed workforce, it's important to find ways of supporting them; we need to make sure our people feel valued. In fact we've just come out of a meeting earlier today where we've been talking about how to engage more effectively with our staff.

John Jago, leisure cruiser, gold licence: The potential amalgamation with Environment Agency – is that going to be a bad thing or good thing?

RP: I think it's no secret we'd welcome a transfer. Government policy is to support transfer although it is quite long term, and I think senior level EA staff also see the benefits. In principle there's value in the transfer, but the devil lies in the detail, there are lots of difficult things to think about, like flood defences and liability for the large costly assets. I urge you to support in principle, bringing all navigation together has to be good, but it may be a while before we can resolve everything.

[Unknown]: You talk about boaters being a small group but we put in the highest amount of money.

RP: I'm determined not to look for more money from boaters. We have agreed there will be no inflation rise on fees for three years. I think it will be a failure if the percentage of income from boaters goes up. There is no way to get people using towpaths that they have to pay to use them – that would fail as a strategy. We have to grow support so people are willing to support us, with their time and money, and visit and use facilities like waterside businesses. The future is growing income from other places, finding creative ways of drawing people to us rather than putting obligations on them.

[Unknown]: When you purchase a car, you get first year's road tax zero rated. Is there a possibility for someone purchasing a licence for the first time to have a reduced rate to make the first year more affordable?

RP: I'm not ruling it out but I think there are better ways we can use money to attract people.

[Unknown]: I want to turn all this round, there are a third of us here who live on boats, is there anything you want to ask us?

RP: I want your feedback on tonight's event; we want new opportunities to engage, and if we don't talk and spend time together, how can that happen? I'd like to hear is how you think this went, how we can make it better. More generally, you're experiencing things that we don't, you're our eyes and ears. The greatest single thing you can do is to tell us what to fix. You can be our advocates – my frustration when I came here was that our number one advocates should be the boaters. How can we engage with you to get more people to support us from the wider audience?

[?] If you advertise what you do, you'd get more positivity.

RP: We'll take away the challenge to communicate better.

VM: We want boaters to help us improve our communications with other boaters. We're looking for people to take on that role.

JW: Feedback from customers helps us to shape what we do tomorrow or the day after. Think of practical ways you can help us – if there's a group that says we've got poor towpath, give us some help to get it fixed – a big difference can be made by each of us. My challenge would be, if you're prepared to roll your sleeves up, there's loads we can do.

RP: Finally, if someone says 'the Trust has done something wrong again' don't take it on face value. Of course we won't get everything right but we share the same goals; as the Trust, we have no agenda apart from looking after our waterways for the long term, that's what we're here to do.