

Save Our Waterways Campaign



Summary

“Our inland waterways are an important national asset and play a key role in improving the quality of life for us all by providing beautiful and peaceful environments, recreational opportunities and access to the countryside.” Jim Knight MP, British Waterways AGM 2005

Defra, the Government department responsible for our inland waterways, for reasons nothing to do with the waterways, has slashed the annual budgets of organisations charged with looking after canals and rivers across the UK. And they're threatening to do it again and again for the next five years.

In reaction to this illogical act, users of our waterways have come together to fight the Government on these decisions and make it change its mind.

You can help in many ways, big or small, but your help is needed all the same. Together, as individuals and as existing organized groups we can make sure that everyone knows what this will mean to the qualities of lives across the country.

This Document

These pages outline the background to these cuts, explain the high profile protests planned by individuals and groups alike and tells you how **you** can get involved. Remember, whatever you do to help this campaign, you are helping yourself and millions of other people too.

Our waterways are more than boats, more than wildlife, more than heritage. More than anything they are wonderful places which benefit people regardless of background or location. Here's your chance to make a difference for everyone.

Contents:

1. [Background – The Crisis facing our Waterways](#)
 - [Why has this happened?](#)
 - [How does this affect me?](#)
2. [National Protest Events](#)
 - [The Blockades](#)
 - [The Flotilla](#)
 - [The Community Protests](#)
3. [How You Can Get Involved](#)
 - [Being Part of a Community Protest](#)
4. [Organising an Event](#)
 - [Funding](#)
 - [Celebrities](#)
5. [Who and What is Save Our Waterways?](#)
6. [Timetable of Events - Your Campaign Action Plan](#)

Background – The Crisis facing our Waterways

The organisations that look after our navigable waterways in England and Wales receive yearly grants from the Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

British Waterways (BW), and to a lesser extent the Environment Agency (EA), reasonably expect Government pledges of yearly funding to be maintained once the financial year has begun. However, Defra appears to have other ideas, and in 2006 slashed funding without warning. As a result, everybody's waterways are in real danger of slipping back into unwelcoming, unpleasant and uncared for places.

Why has this happened?

When the financial year for 2006/7 opened BW had a budget of £62.5 million. In March 2006 Defra announced a cut of 5% (£3 million). Astonishingly, during the summer, Defra announced a further cut of 7.5% (about £4.5 million).

The origin of these cuts was that mismanagement within Defra led to a deficit of £200 million. Defra have yet to come up with a breakdown of how this loss was incurred, however, they have admitted that £23 million is due to difficulties with the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) which is responsible for paying farming subsidies. We suspect that another part is the estimated £130 million that will not be rebated by the EU as a 'fine' for RPA's failure to make payments to farmers on time. Defra have also admitted that the losses include the costs of preparing for Avian 'flu.

Rather than approach the Treasury to cover these extraordinary losses from the Contingency Reserve which is designed for such unanticipated expenses, Defra decided to impose cuts to the grants to BW and EA and other organisations in its charge.

Whatever caused these exceptional losses, the reality is that the £62.5 million grant-in-aid that Defra agreed with BW for 2006/7 was reduced in-year to £55.4 million and a similar figure for 2007/08.

Furthermore, it is Government policy to continue with similar reductions over the next 5 years. Government seem to have missed the point that much of the canal structure is 200 years old and it simply isn't realistic to expect that it can be maintained year after year on a declining budget. This is Government thinking gone very, very wrong.

How does this affect me?

One of the ironies is that BW's total grant requirements are relatively small change in terms of total Government income. Thus, total revenues from Council Tax are in the region of £20 billion; BW's annual government grant is a mere £60 million, less than 0.3% of that. What is the point of Government penny-pinching by reducing what is such a modest sum to it, but so critical to BW?

BW's 2,200 miles of canals and rivers, enjoyed by millions of citizens and tourists, received 300 million visits last year. Less than 5% of these visits are attributable to the only leisure users who pay for that access, boaters and anglers. It is difficult to come up with another example of a public asset that enhances the lives of so many people for such a modest investment from Government. It is interesting to note that the Government contribution per visit to English Heritage sites amounted to £2.90 whereas those to BW's linear park cost only 20 pence. Why is Government's contribution to these two important parts of our heritage so different?

BW has begun to assess the implications of the cuts and it seems likely that it will need to make savings of between £10 million and £12 million per annum over the next five years. Cuts in jobs have already been announced, with 180 BW employees facing redundancy, and £5.5m has been slashed from this winter's nationwide maintenance programme. Other options include the need to delay or abandon some waterway restoration programs, close some waterways and increase boat license fees, possibly by as much as 30%

The Environment Agency (EA), which is responsible for major rivers like the Thames, also suffered cuts to its navigation budgets. However, while BW wants to avoid fee increases at all costs, EA appears to have decided to recoup the 'lost' funds by imposing a substantial increase (nearly 40% over the next three years) in boat and boating visitor registration fees. This will surely have the effect of reducing the number of visitors to the Thames and other rivers that the EA manages, and in turn affect local economies that mostly rely on the trade that rivers bring to their doorsteps.

Whatever the mechanism, cuts of this magnitude will have a profound effect on the future of Britain's waterways. It seems particularly unjust that these cuts have been necessitated by Government departmental incompetence related to farming and other non-waterway issues. It has been pointed out by Tony Baldry MP, former Waterways Minister in the previous Government, that he successfully applied in

that administration for other extraordinary costs to be funded from the Treasury's Contingency Reserve. Why this approach hasn't been used to cover Defra's £200 million loss is a question that needs to be asked. Perhaps the logic behind this is that Government believes that waterways enthusiasts won't complain as much as the powerful farming lobby. If that is what they believed, they were wrong.

National Protest Events

It is a common misunderstanding that the inland waterways are resources that are primarily used by boaters and anglers, but in its Annual Report for the years 2005/2006, British Waterways stated that there were over 300 million visits to its waters in 2005. Less than 5% of these visits were from boat owners and anglers and yet these two groups are the only users that make a direct contribution to the costs of the upkeep of the national treasure that comprises the waterways and towpaths of our navigable rivers and canals.

These waterways offer jobs, leisure, recreation and health benefits to millions of people in all walks of life. A thriving, attractive waterside environment is a highly desirable place in which to live, work and play. It is a resource that should be guaranteed additional funding from Government on a year by year basis.

In October 2006, the main waterways user groups announced that they would stage massive national protest campaigns up and down the country on specific dates between Autumn 2006 and early Spring 2007. In themselves these user groups represent tens of thousands of members, and these protests offer opportunities for other waterways enthusiasts across the country, regardless of allegiances, to participate in these protests to make the Government realise the folly of its ways.

The First Event Weekend

The weekend of November 25 & 26 2006 was the campaign's first major spectacle when around a 1,000 boats in 27 protest events blockaded canals on navigable rivers and canals around the country. While the major waterways user groups organised the mass blockade at Birmingham's central water district (Gas Street Basin), SOW coordinated 26 local and regional rallies organised by AWCC clubs and IWA branches around the country. Together, these events generated unprecedented cross-party support in Parliament with nearly 200 MPs signing Early Day Motions against the cuts and helped to warn Government that we consider the waterways as our national heritage and, as such, a vote winner (or loser) too!

Apart from the obvious spectacle and media attention that these simultaneous protests created, the blockade rallies proved to be ideal places to seek the support of the wider public who came to support the protest by:

- Encouraging them to sign a nation-wide petition and e-petition.
- Taking the advice offered on flyers by writing letters to local MPs and Ministers (Guidelines for writing such letters can be found on our web site <http://www.saveourwaterways.org.uk>)
- Attracting the support of local MPs and MEPs.

A measure of the success of the campaign events was the substantial amount of local and national media coverage that they generated.

The Flotilla

On January 16th 2007, the St Pancras Cruising Club and IWA organised a protest cruise of boats of all shapes from the Royal Docks to congregate on the Thames outside the House of Commons in an event designed to create more media attention to the campaign. Representatives of the main waterways user groups that are outraged at the Government's current thinking, joined with supportive MPs and celebrities to underline further the message to the House of Commons.

More details can be found at our website, www.saveourwaterways.org.uk.

The Community Protest

November's mass protests were preliminary events to attract media and public attention to a problem that is not just about boats and boating. On the weekend of March 3rd & 4th the campaign will be stepped up as we involve other waterway users who will be affected by Defra's swingeing cuts. Along with boat rallies, politicians and communities will join in a series of protests around the waterway network. During the following week the nation-wide petition will be delivered to Parliament in London.

How You Can Get Involved

The aim of this protest is to show Government that its decision to impose these cuts is not just about boating interests but will affect the local economy of the villages, towns and cities that the waterways pass through.

Being part of a Community Protest

The success of the November protests was largely due to the impact created by the fact that they took place at so many locations around the network. Our objective for March 3rd and 4th is to increase both the number of protests and to demonstrate wide support by encouraging large parts of the community to take part.

The protests so far have involved the main leisure boating user groups like the AWCC, IWA, NABO and RBOA. We hope the sport-based boating groups like the British Canoe Union (BCU) and the Amateur Rowing Association (ARA) will join us in the March protests as well as the non-boating users. To this end we have made preliminary contact with the National Federation of Anglers, the CTC (the national cyclists organisation), the Ramblers' Association and hope their members and branches will join those of the IWA to stage events across the country. We have also written to the MPs of around 250 constituencies in the country that have waterways and many are signing up to take ownership of local petitions and support local protests.

We need to build upon the success of the November Blockades. The net effect of all that work, the media campaign, the letter writing, the petition gathering, the Parliamentary lobbying, the protests themselves, etc. is that we have gained a significant amount of support amongst MPs and the public. We now need to consolidate by taking the campaign to other communities and encouraging the active participation of the other users and members of each community that benefit from the waterway economy.

We need to involve those businesses whose livelihoods depend on a vibrant waterways economy. Many waterside communities depend on trade from people visiting their local waterway.

So, on that weekend, instead of having a leisurely time at home we would like everyone with a boat, wheels or legs to head on down to the popular waterway centre that is closest to you. The following list is indicative of where events could take place (those in **bold** are confirmed venues, those in **bold italics** are under active consideration) but we welcome your own suggestions too.

Anderton	Camden	Leighton Buzzard	Pewsey
Aldersley	Cheddleton	Lincoln	Pontcysyllte
Bulls Bridge	Devizes	Leicester	Sawley
Burton on Trent	Ellesmere Port	Macclesfield	Shardlow
Bath	Fradley Junction	Manchester	Skipton
Bradford on Avon	Great Haywood	Marsworth	Stoke on Trent
Bristol	Gloucester	Newbury	Tamworth
Buckby	Hertford	Newark	Warwick
Braunston	Leeds	Nottingham	

Once you have decided which is the most convenient protest for you to attend, invite your family and friends along and make it a day out. Make a placard or two – perhaps using the list of slogans which we will have made available on our website (<http://saveourwaterways.org.uk>) - print out some petition forms and a couple of our posters (again available from download from our website) and get as many signatures as possible from passers by and people enjoying a pint in the pub.

If there isn't an event planned for your area, why not get together with a few friends to stage your own mini-protest? Choose a popular local spot that attracts the public and turn that into the base for your local protest.

You can hold your own protest wherever you want, and regardless of how modest it is we will help to publicise it so that you get as many people as possible to come along and support your part of the campaign. If you have ambitions to stage something rather larger, read the section below 'Organising an Event'.

Organising an Event

We anticipate that most events will be organised by groups already existing around the waterways: IWA branches, AWCC cruising clubs, canal societies, marinas, on-line moorings, canal restoration and appreciation societies, etc. In many cases, these groups will already organise social events during the year. If you aren't a member of such a group but know a few motivated individuals, we encourage you to organise your own protest at a local spot on the canal that you know is popular with the general public. We have no minimum size; what is important is that we have as many boats and other canal users as possible taking part.

As we learned from the November protests, an event may be modest, but the sheer number taking part on the same weekend help give the protest a level of national prominence that increases the impact on Government's perception of how many people are against the cuts.

So we see these events falling into one of two basic categories:

- a) **Major Canal Locations.** We are all aware of places dotted around the waterways that attract the public throughout the year. Typically, that spot would have at least one pub, mooring for a reasonable number of boats (especially, if they are double, triple or quad breasted - remember, we want spectacle not normal behaviour) - and, possibly, space for over-flow parking, perhaps in the form of a nearby field.
- b) **Existing Premises.** The premises of a cruising club or marina, where there is a captive audience of boats, could be used to stage a protest. All that would be needed is for boat members to invite as many people as they can with a view to convincing them of the worthiness of the campaign and, as a minimum, to secure their signature on the petition. At best, persuade them to write a letter to their MP. It will not escape the notice of organisations with facilities that this is clearly also an opportunity to raise income for your club or favourite charity or, if you represent a marina, generate extra sales in the chandlery.

If your event has other interesting activities taking place at that time it is likely that you will encourage more people to visit.

We have had preliminary discussions with BW about mooring restrictions and we are confident that these will be relaxed during the period giving visiting boats plenty of leeway to moor several days before and after the event. This also means that multiple-breasting up will be allowed.

If there are local pubs or food outlets, it is likely that you will get their support as they will see it as extra business. In the case of the pub you might be able to persuade them to provide some musical entertainment.

At either type of venue, the aim will be to invite every boat and other waterway user in the area to take part and we will help you to get some local publicity to attract as many people as possible. The aim is always to give visitors a good time and, in return, get their support in the form of petition signatures and/or letters to their MP.

By working closely with the non-boating user groups, notably, anglers, cyclists and ramblers, we hope that they will be able to add elements to make each event more representative of all canal users (boaters, afterall, represent just 3% of all users). Perhaps we will see angling matches, visiting cyclist rallies and groups of ramblers.

SOW's part in all of this is to act as a catalyst. We will also endeavour (and we have already made some progress in this area) to attract enough funding to be able to provide each organising team with an 'Event Kit' comprising petitions, flyers, posters and, hopefully, banners. We can also make available SOW casual wear at cost + prices which you can sell at competitive prices to help defray local costs.

We will also provide advice and prepare Press Releases to be sent to your local press/media and give you access to an Internet forum where you can share ideas and skills with fellow organisers and the SOW steering group who have extensive event organising experience.

Think of SOW as a sort of franchise operation, but without the financial commitment.

Some organisers will already have had the experience of organising events of different kinds, but for those that need guidance we will endeavour to offer as much help as you need. Just contact us on campaign@saveourwaterways.org.uk

Funding

As already mentioned, we plan to provide each organising group with an Event Pack that will contain some essential items to get you started.

We will also be approaching any organisation that has a business interest in a thriving waterway economy with a view to persuading them to sponsor the campaign in some way. This might be in the form of money, goods or services provided.

Any funds or goods so received will be used to help the campaign become self-funding, for example, paying for additional items in the Event Pack. As a local organiser, you will be in a perfect position to identify local companies that are potential sponsors. We encourage you to actively seek out such support but on the express condition that you first clear each potential sponsor with us before making any formal contact. The reason for this is that we must be absolutely sure that there are no local sponsorship agreements that conflict with a possible national sponsor with whom we may be negotiating. Clearly, if you know of any companies that might be interested in sponsoring some aspect of the entire campaign, then we would be most interested in talking to them. Contact us via campaign@savethewaterways.org.uk.

Celebrities

We encourage local organisers to make contact with any celebrity who you think will add substance to your local event. Just remember to inform us of their interest.

Promotion

One of the purposes of your event is to generate attention from the media. We will be producing flyers and posters to help you promote your event and issuing press releases. We will also develop a general theme of 'sound-bites' that we would like you to use should you be interviewed by the media.

Who and What is Save Our Waterways?

Save Our Waterways (SOW) is an action group that owes its existence largely to members of the Internet newsgroup, uk.rec.waterways (URW). The newsgroup comprises people from all walks of life, income brackets, and political persuasion; in fact, a very representative slice of Britain and British voters.

As might be gathered from the name of the newsgroup, the members of URW have a common interest, Britain's waterways. Many are boaters, a mix of those who own or share ownership in a boat and others who regularly hire boats for their holidays. Other members are caravan users, campers, walkers and those who just have a love of our canals and their heritage. There is a strong contingent representing the substantial number of overseas visitors that are enthusiasts of our waterways.

The group thrives on lively debates that often result in criticism of BW and EA. However, there is universal dismay at the off-hand way that Defra has imposed the cuts to the grant-in-aid due to BW and EA. This particularly in the case of BW, which has made great strides over recent years towards clearing a sizable maintenance backlog, opening old canals and setting in motion several new renovation programs.

It is interesting to note that the current Waterways Minister, Barry Gardiner, regularly praises BW's performance yet, even in the face of wide cross party opposition, seems incapable of understanding that the cuts place the future of waterways at great risk

The Campaign Steering group comprises (in alphabetical order):

Neil Arlidge - Treasurer

Will Chapman - Founder

Paul Fortescue – Promotional Materials

Andrew Instone-Cowie – IT Consultant

Roger Millin – AWCC Coordination

John Slee – Press Coordination

Mike Stevens – Webmaster

David Stevenson – User Group Coordination

The main objective of SOW is to campaign at grass roots level to secure short and long term funding for our inland waterways to ensure that they are adequately maintained, improved and restored.

Timetable of Events - Your Campaign Action Plan

Don't forget, for the very latest information visit <http://www.saveourwaterways.org.uk>

DATE	OCCASION	WHAT YOU SHOULD DO
10 th October 2006	Launch of SOW Campaign Plan	Supporters begin to write to their MPs asking them to raise concerns with the Minister concerned.
Rest of October	Launch local petition campaign	Supporters download petition pack from the website and distribute petition forms and posters around your area. Clubs, Pubs, Post Offices, places of work, etc.
Mid November	Campaign casual wear available	Support the Campaign financially by ordering the distinctive campaign wear. A good Xmas present.
25 th November	Nationwide blockades and protest rallies across the waterways network	If you feel you could help with a future protest in your local area email SOW at campaign@saveourwaterways.org.uk .
16 th January	Protest cruise to the Houses of Parliament	Check the website for details and photographs of this event.
February – March	Volunteer to help with a protest event. Collect petition signatures. Buy your campaign wear.	Contact campaign@saveourwaterways.org.uk if you can help in any way.
3 rd & 4 th March	Communities around the country stage SOW protests	Make sure you attend and bring all your family and friends too. It'll be a fun day out and you'll be helping to Save our Waterways
8th March	Petition(s) delivered to Government.	A number of media events will be staged to publicise the delivery of the petition(s).
Late March 2007	The Budget is an opportunity for government to respond to our protests so it is important to keep up the pressure on your MP. Keep writing letters asking for responses from Ministers	We have already generated one of the largest public protest campaigns in British political history. History will tell whether we have succeeded or whether the battle continues. We will not stop until the future of our waterways are secure.