

## **PWG meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2009.**

Simon and I attended.

The speaker was Robin Evans.

There were a number of MPs there, DEFRA, EA etc, and the usual group of user group and trade associations.

Evans spoke for 30 minutes, giving a briefing on the current situation and then there were 30 minutes of questions.

I summarise what he said.

There are now 33,000 boats on the canals, more than any time since the industrial revolution. BW's survey figures show 3.4m people visit the canals every fortnight. 60% of general costs come from income and 40% from government grant. There is a continuing need to generate public benefit with the canal assets.

Evans described his vision of 2020, based on three sustainable legs.

**Environmental.** This includes items like

- canal water management, flood prevention and drainage
- management of SSSI's, reserves etc
- benefits of countryside, towpaths, wildlife
- own operations

**Social.** This includes items like

- Boating
- Angling
- Tow path users
- Regeneration in deprived areas
- Use of volunteers
- Heritage

**Economic.** This includes items like

- Improvements in own operations
- Earnings from property
- Way leaves earning
- Licenses (He said that BW must be aware of boater opinion and the limits of ability to pay.)
- Improved local authority contribution
- New sources of funding are hard to find.

Evans then talked about the current treasury review of the BW property assets. Treasury are looking generally to identify properties that are "wasted assets" to either sell or at least get more benefit from. He said that he could make a case for retention of what he had, so on an economic case he felt safe. But he said that if the call was for cash, then he could not rule out a forced sale. MP's jumped in here, and said that they had been lobbying the Treasury to leave the canals alone. Evans pointed out that if income earning property was sold off, then the current cash shortfall would only get bigger. The Treasury review will be public in May. The Treasury Minister involved is Evet Cooper

### **Then there were questions**

Evans was asked by one MP if BW could create jobs on the canals system. He said that he had made proposals to DEFRA for tow path improvements in tranches of £50m to create work. This is currently being considered. The idea is to create a usable national network.

Evans was asked about dredging. He said that he always asks DEFRA for extra money for dredging. The cost for dredging as a result of the silt washed into the canals by floods two years ago is £8m, and this has never been paid.

Evans was asked about engagement with Local Authorities. He said they had examples which were good. Some other attendees with council experience said that they disagreed. Evans agreed that there was more work to do. Various others including MPs said that this was really needed, as opportunities for funding were being missed.

IWA asked about bridge strikes. Evans said it is a serious cost. Local authorities do not contribute, but it is not for lack of asking. BW has had success pursuing individuals. They are thinking about CCTV camera in some bad areas. If incidents are seen, BW should be informed.

I asked about safety of the canal assets in view of the maintenance cut backs. Evans said that safety would not be compromised. Assets would be closed if there were risks to users. Support and contributions were needed from many people and that would be compromised by scare stories on safety.

Evans was asked about support for remainder waterways. He said that he could not divert major resources to that when he did not have money to run what he already had. But he did say that they would give moral and technical support to schemes, and he mentioned Daventry, Grantham, Lichfield, Bedford and MK, Cotswold.

IWAC asked about hydropower and micro generation schemes. Evans said they were considering 7 projects on water flow, and he was supportive of CHP schemes for their own assets as this is cost effective.

My take on all this.

Evans spoke easily, and was briefed with numbers that we did not recognise, and were presumably the latest news. He is clearly under pressure to make ends meet with what he has. There were no great surprises in what he said. For the first time I felt that there were opportunities for local government money, but that these must come with wider continued attraction to the canals of the general community. The Treasury review is a clear threat to BW assets and the future earnings. The possibility of special funding for job creation schemes for tow path reconstruction appears to fit with the governments policy of spending for employment on green infrastructure. Let us hope it is successful.

David Fletcher, Chairman