

AGM

Chairman's report at the 21st Annual General Meeting

Good morning.

In 2012, NABO representatives have attended a full range of consultation meetings with DEFRA, BW, then CRT and EA, BSS, NINF, and other user groups etc, both nationally and locally. This is the core work of the Association, monitoring what is going on, reading the papers, listening to the presentations and making considered comments both in writing and at meetings. Our comments are not always appreciated, but never mind.

It is important that we have a balanced view from members, so please do take the time to let us know what you are thinking. Your Council are active in seeking views, but we can always use more. We are currently active with issues concerning the licence conditions, and also the national and K&A mooring strategies, house boat certificates, EU legislation on RCD, and other matters. These sorts of issues will impact on all boaters, whether hiring, owning, home moorings or continuous cruisers and we should not sit idly by whilst changes are made.

The set up of the CRT mid-year has brought opportunities, but it is too early to call it a success. NABO was involved with candidates for CRT Council and at least two Partnership places, so far without success. But it is really too soon to know whether we will miss out from this, or whether we are better functioning independently and without any hint of conflict of interest. I have been asked to sit on the Navigation Advisory Group. There is nothing new about this; the subject matter was covered under BW by the group known as WUSIG. We debated the subject last year and concluded we should have a go and see what happens. I think the same conclusion is needed now, though I welcome your views.

We have tried to maintain relationships with some of the new Trustees, and the Council boater representatives and many of these receive NABO News. We deliberately write pieces to send messages to the outside world as well as our members. The Partnership activity is very mixed and I ask all members to monitor what is going on in your areas, and let us know about the good and bad. Minutes for some are non-existent, whereas others are much better. What is happening to your waterway?

The big question is how attitudes will change within CRT and how best to present boaters' views. We continue to be fairly robust on some of our core issues. The transition will take time. There is a nice contrast between CRT and EA over licence fees - CRT at the Consumer Price Index and EA with 2% over - and little sympathy with the impact on private boaters. As I said last year and the year before, we have not always been able to cover all the consultation meetings and there is always a need for more members to support this work and share the load. Please do volunteer. If nobody attends, we do not get the information and get out of touch, and we miss an opportunity of networking and applying pressure over a range of issues.

We should not forget EA has its issues too. Cost pressures are leading to changes in the way that it wishes to interface with us. The fact is that if we do not add value to the discussion, (that does not mean agreeing) we will get dropped. Next year will be significant for EA navigations, as they will be considered by DEFRA for transfer to CRT. Obviously CRT will have a view, but this issue will be back with us next year.

This has been my fourth year in the Chair and I have to express our appreciation to members and to Council for your continued time and efforts and support. We are still down in numbers on Council and this is now becoming a critical issue. We are fortunate that almost all the current Council members are standing again and we have one new volunteer. But it is not nearly enough and the current team cannot go on and on. If a significant number of new Council members do not come forward and take on the work, then we face a bleak future.

NABO will stop. Other factors are the membership which is at best static, and the costs reported by the Hon. Treasurer. Like many clubs and societies, even political parties, we have a crisis looming. Council is not a secret society for a few. Please do come to a meeting and see what it is all about and how you can contribute.

NABO News remains our main communication with membership. Peter Fellows is our Editor and he has been in the hot seat for more than a year. Chris Pink, who is responsible for art work and design, is also here. Can we all please show our appreciation for their fantastic work. John Slee has carried out some very significant work on the website and management of membership data. This project is not quite complete, but we are now able to recruit on-line and we do see the benefit of this. Unfortunately John has had to stand down from Council and his role as web master, and continuous cruiser rep for personal reasons. This is a very significant loss to us, and the web development is effectively stopped until we find a replacement. We may have to pay for this service if nobody comes forward. We should mark our thanks for enormous effort John has made to get us where we are. The website is functioning well and we are always in need to items, so please do let us know. The site feeds to Twitter and Facebook and we continue to experiment in these areas. It does get our name out there and all advice is to continue with this, particularly Twitter.

Our membership numbers are still dropping a little and my thanks go to all those who have recruited new members. We did not attend Crick again this year, partly because Council members were not available for the four days, and anyway we doubted the cost effectiveness of this. We suspect that many of the recruits gained from these exercises do not stay long-term, perhaps only one year. With universal tight budgets a fact of life, there remains an issue over short-term gratification, which we do not offer, and we cannot compete with the blogs and professional waterways press. Why should I join?

Money is a significant issue for us, but not a crisis. Costs continue to rise. Membership income is down and we have to balance the books. Richard Carpenter has found us some advertising and this will make a significant difference. There were several debates as to whether this is the right thing to do and we should thank Richard, for this will make a significant difference to our funding. Of course that is not the only work that Richard does and we have to thank him for his boundless energy in keeping the Association on track day in, day out.

CRT suddenly stopped consulting over mooring strategies on the K&A at the end of last year and new initiatives are underway. Geoffrey and Andy are our local representatives and they continue to be active, watching what is happening and trying to influence the outcome. What happens here is important nationally as well as locally and we must take note as it is by no means clear that proposals are to the benefit of boaters in general. The threat of Roving Mooring Permits has returned and we shall watch this carefully.

Simon Robbins has been working hard with CRT on the issue of Houseboat Certificates and we responded to the consultation. Some say this is not a significant issue, but there are several general issues of how boaters are treated and the BW Acts, which have deserved comment. Houseboat certificate holders will for the first time have a written contract. This basic business convention has been denied before, and it is primarily due to Simon's pressure that this will come about. We may not be fully happy with the outcome of the consultation, but we are moving. It is another example of where steady pressure over a long period can have an effect. Our thanks to Simon for his dedication.

There is much to be done in the coming year, both in consultation and for internal NABO business. We are needed, for other user groups are focused in a different way and we have that unique selling point. Your Council need help to carry this on and secure the future. This concludes my main report.

David Fletcher