



Inland Waterways Association of Ireland

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IWAI Response to Waterways Ireland Public Consultation re Draft 10yr Long Term Plan

IWAI welcome the opportunity to participate in the public consultation in relation to Waterways Ireland draft 10yr Long-term plan 'Reimagining our Waterways'

As a major stakeholder representing a large body of waterways users, we feel we are uniquely positioned to make a significant contribution to the finalisation of this draft plan.

As stated in the draft plan, this is a high-level strategic document that is a directional pathway for the organisation, with the details as to how the key outcomes of the 10yr plan are to be achieved contained in the Corporate Plan 2023-2025 and Business Plan 2023. However as these are not publicly available on your website, it is difficult to provide constructive feedback. This is creating a lot of disquiet on social media channels. As is stated elsewhere in the draft long term plan 'a good reputation is easily lost and hard to restore'. We as an Association need sight of the Corporate and Business plans if we are to measure the detail against the strategic objectives in the long term plan.

The purpose, vision and values defined in the draft plan are concise and laudable. The scale of ambition is commendable but without the detail as to how this is to be achieved, due to the lack of medium and short term plans.

Strategic Priorities

1. Organisational development and governance

As the draft plan clearly states, Waterways Ireland has been severely under-resourced for many years, with the consequent gaps in capacity and capabilities. To achieve the detailed success statement, significant increases in investment will be required from both governing departments. How is this to be achieved, especially given the lack of a decision making body in Northern Ireland?

In addition, the entire country is experiencing difficulty in recruiting suitable qualified personnel. Waterways Ireland are no different.

There is no detail in relation to the two-phase digital transformation strategy. Again digital transformation is costly. How is this to be funded?

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Another key output is robust governance structures and legislative framework. The lack of any published annual accounts since 2020 is causing grave concern amongst waterways users, especially given the proposed charges in the draft bye-laws

2. Sustainable funding model

- Long term budget planning for maintenance and capital projects over multiple years will increase efficiencies and result in cost savings.
- The allocation of funding from NI is based on the proportion of funding allocated by the ROI government in the annual budget. However pension costs have to be covered in the resource funding from ROI but are treated separately in NI. This inequity gives rise to considerable concern from waterways users. There is great concern that monies raised from charges imposed on users by new byelaws will be swallowed up by the rising pension costs. There should be a published written undertaking in the Corporate Plan, that these monies will be ring-fenced for capital projects to improve the navigations.
- The long term funding plan should seek to prioritise budget increases from both governments, in particular in relation to resource funding
- Exploring opportunities to align funding with international comparators should not result in increased financial demands on the boating communities, as the increased cost of living is already negatively impacting waterways users ability to enjoy their leisure activity

3. Asset portfolio management

Realising value from Waterways Ireland assets should not include realising increases in capital budget from the sale of heritage sites along our waterways

4. Corporate Reputation and Brand Equity

No comment

5. Development

Waterways Ireland's stated statutory function is to manage, maintain, develop and restore specified inland navigable waterways principally for recreational purposes. While development along the waterways that increases footfall and brings economic benefits to communities along the canals is to be welcomed, the focus for Waterways Ireland must be the development, including restoration, of waterways that are/could be navigable.

There are 'new markets' being restored for navigation by the project branches of IWAI, such as Boyne and Lagan, the management of which by Waterways Ireland would support the key output number 4 of this strategic priority. In addition, recent works by IWAI River Blackwater have revitalised interest in this amenity. We strongly encourage Waterways Ireland to explore the scope of acquiring the River Blackwater as new navigation.

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We note from the implementation roadmap that the development plan for each navigation is scheduled between now and the end of 2025. In what order are these been prepared and are there any drafts available as yet?

6. **Climate Action, Environment and Heritage**

Without access to the corporate Plan 2023/2025 this is difficult to assess. However, we fully support any policies protecting our environment and heritage and any reasonable and practical policies that contribute towards the goals set in the national climate action plan.

A sustainable water management strategy is to be welcomed, but this needs to be done in conjunction with other bodies who impact on the water reserves in our inland waterways.

The eradication of aquatic invasive plants that are choking our canals, our harbours and the sheltered areas on our lakes and rivers is key to the safe and enjoyable use of our waterway navigations during the summer by Boaters, Canoeists, Kayakers and Paddleboarders. A strategic plan is needed to obtain financing, educate others and implement a solution for dealing with this.

Overall, the implementation roadmap gives a good feel as to where Waterways Ireland hope to go over the next decade but we would be more confident in this long term plan if we had sight of some of the short term detail underpinning the roadmap.

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