

WATERWAYS IRELAND OPENING STATEMENT

JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HERITAGE.

A Cathaoirleach, a ball den Choiste. Mo buíochas as ucht cuireadh a tabhairt dúinn inniú chun teacht in bhur láthair agus dréach fó-dleithe na Sionainne agus na Cánálacha a phlé. Thank you Chair and members for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement on behalf of Waterways Ireland on proposed changes to the Canal Byelaws (including the Royal Canal, Grand Canal, and Barrow Navigation) and Shannon Byelaws (including the Shannon Navigation, Shannon-Erne Waterway and Ulster Canal).

My name is Éanna Rowe, Operations Controller in Waterways Ireland. I am joined by my colleague Patrick Harkin, Inspector of Navigation.

Respecting the time restrictions for opening statements, we have provided a more expansive briefing document which provides additional information about our remit.

Introduction

Established almost 25 years ago under the British-Irish Agreement Waterways Ireland is the cross-border navigational authority responsible for almost 1,100km of inland navigable waterways across the island of Ireland. Our statutory function is to manage, maintain, develop, and restore specified inland navigable waterways, principally for recreational purposes. We create social, economic, and environmental, well-being valued at over €600m annually for the public good in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

As many of you are aware we are also presently undertaking the restoration of the Ulster Canal. A transformative project of scale and significance that will link navigation from Lough Erne to Clones.

Byelaws

The current Shannon and Canals Byelaws pre-date our establishment and have been in place since the 1980s. They are no longer fit for purpose given the changing nature of the waterways themselves, the user needs, the environmental, and health and safety developments that have occurred in the intervening period.

Consultation Process

We commenced a Public Consultation on the draft revisions to the Byelaws on 19th June this year – three months ago. It will continue until the 2nd of October – a total of 108 days. We advertised the public consultation widely in both the National and Local Press, across social media channels and online. So far, we have held open Public Consultation Information Events in 7 locations, with a further information event this evening in Mullingar.

The public have also been invited to visit our website or visit a public library where copies of the draft Byelaws and explanatory note are available for review. Comments and submissions are invited in writing, by email or on our submission form on the website.

When the public consultation period closes, we will publish details of all submissions and a consultation report on our website. We will consider and review all submissions and make changes and amendments to the draft Byelaws as appropriate. We will then publish the amended draft Byelaws on our website.

Reasons for Revisions

In the briefing document that we submitted with this opening statement we have outlined the detailed purpose of the revisions.

It is our intention that the cumulative effect of the revisions to the Byelaws is to make our waterways safer, to protect those using our waterways, our blueways, and our greenways, and to continue to provide a wonderful recreational experience for everyone to enjoy.

Proposed Key Provisions of the draft Byelaws

1. We are proposing a single annual registration/leisure permit costing €200 for users of our navigations. This single permit will replace several existing permits, simplifying regulation and improve accessibility. The existing permit cost was set at £100 punts (€127) in the 1980s.
2. Under the Shannon Byelaws a revised mooring period is proposed of 3-days at specified locations. This along with the proposed abolition of winter moorings, are intended to reduce congestion on the water. Lock passage fees will be incorporated into the annual registration.
3. It is proposed a fixed penalty notice of €150 introduced in the 2005 Maritime Safety Act for breaches of the Byelaws will be implemented. We hope there will be good compliance with the Byelaws and that we will not have to collect this penalty.
4. New insurance provisions requiring a minimum of third-party insurance is being proposed across all navigations to enhance safety measures. Other health and safety measures such as wearing of life jackets and minimum age limit for driving boats are also proposed.
5. Another key provision of the draft Byelaws are environmental provisions. Examples are water quality, prevention of discharges into the waterways, and invasive species controls, taking into account environmental legislation introduced over the past 30 years and provisions reflected in the Heritage Act 2018.
6. One of the key provisions proposed in the draft Canal Byelaws is the introduction of houseboat permits and associated houseboat standards. We acknowledge we are starting from a brownfield, unregulated environment. However, the proposed changes will confer the right to reside aboard a boat for the period of the permit at established residential mooring locations. It is proposed that a permit will be for 1 year and renewed annually. Priority will be given to those who are currently moored in these locations.

Waterways Ireland engaged KPMG to conduct research into a houseboat permit pricing model providing transparency on the calculation of fees, future proofing a pricing mechanism, and assisting with the development of a Sustainable on Water Living programme. The KPMG report is provided with the brief and is also available on our website.

The houseboat permit pricing that is proposed is considerably lower than that in the KPMG report. Mindful of the purpose of the review, fees are proposed across Urban, Suburban, and Rural locations to offer permits representative of location, facilities, and affordability – a total of five categories.

Our vision is to manage a canal network of residential houseboat communities, avoiding over-concentration across the canals which would have a detrimental effect on recreational boat usage. This would be aligned with an investment programme to secure additional property for increased mooring locations, along with enhanced safety, security, and service facilities which will be integrated into the Sustainable on Water Living (residential mooring) programme in future years.

In summary, Waterways Ireland is proposing to revise the Shannon Byelaws and Canal Byelaws with a view to updating the regulation of our waterways. The Byelaws are over 30 years old and their application to the navigations today are no longer fit for purpose. The waterway, blueway, and greenway user needs have changed. The environmental landscape and health and safety considerations have developed significantly and the waterways themselves have been transformed. It is for those reasons that Waterways Ireland is proposing new, updated, and revised Byelaws for the Shannon and Canals. The 108-day public consultation is nearing completion, and we in Waterways Ireland would once again ask all interested parties to have their say and contribute to the process by making a submission.

A Cathaoirleach, we are more than happy to address any questions from you and the Committee members present.

Go raibh maith agat.