



Irish Residential Boat Owners Association

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**Opening Statement to the Dail Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage
September 21st 2023**

Jer Glesson and Liam Finnegan on behalf of IRBOA

We would like to thank the chair and the members of the committee for inviting us to speak here today and discuss the wider impact of the proposed new byelaws for all our Navigations – The Shannon and Barrow rivers, and the Grand and Royal Canals.

IRBOA's aim is that Houseboat dwellings be considered part of the housing mix in Ireland. Not only at a time of housing and cost of living crises but beyond those to a vision of a vibrant canal system where tourist boats, weekend boats, and boat dwellers bring life and colour through Dublin on the Grand and Royal Canals and out through Kildare, Offaly, Laois, Meath and Westmeath.

Boat dwellers are the catalyst that would make this vision a reality, as tourist and weekend boaters moor among boat dwelling communities as can be seen everywhere these communities exist.

Waterways Ireland's proposed Canal Bye-Law Amendments will crush this vision, the creation of Dead Zones with new mooring and passage restrictions will ensure that no development of this fantastic resource and amenity can happen in the Dublin and East Kildare areas.

In Ringsend, Hazelhatch, Sallins, Lowtown and Shannon Harbour on the Grand canal and Castleknock and Confey on the Royal Canal you will find boat dwelling communities that have existed for decades.

The vast majority of these boats are moored on the grass bank, they generate their own power by means of solar panels and wind turbines and, depending on the area, journey times vary to fill water tanks and empty holding tanks. These are communities of resilient, self-sufficient people that generate a significantly smaller carbon footprint than would a similarly sized community of traditional bricks and mortar dwellings.

Waterways Ireland are proposing to introduce increases in permit fees from between 400% and 2,000% depending on the area, aside from the very real threat of driving members of our community into homelessness, this will have the effect of pushing boat dwellers out of areas serviced by public transport into more rural areas where



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cars are the only option. This we believe runs counter to the stated objective of the Climate Action Plan to reduce car journeys by 20% by 2030.

Waterways Ireland is also seeking to introduce intrusive and overbearing bye-laws on people's homes. Such as defining exactly who can stay on a boat with the owner and the undefined "suitably equipped for living on board on a permanent basis".

A huge lack of trust of Waterways Ireland has developed among the boat dwelling communities over the years. Similar proposals were made and rejected by members of Dail Eireann in 2009 and 2014, and we do not believe that the current draft proposals will be significantly altered as a result of the ongoing public consultation process.

Waterways Ireland has no independent board for oversight and is now seeking to introduce rangers who can stop, question and demand identification from anyone on canal property and issue fines of €150 with no recourse to appeal other than the District Court.

This is causing genuine concern in our communities as people have no faith that Waterways Ireland will use these powers in a fair, balanced, equitable and just manner.

We feel that these issues in conjunction with the points outlined in our briefing document have the potential to turn areas populated by boat dwellers into stagnant backwaters.

We are only here today because Waterways Ireland have published draft byelaws which had little or no prior consultation with the stakeholders whom these byelaws will actually affect.

Waterways Ireland had prior consultations with semi state bodies such as the ESB, Parks & Wildlife, Inland Fisheries, etc. but had no prior consultation with local tourism interests, Chambers of Commerce, small businesses or groups that represent the vast majority of boaters and live-aboards.

These are the entities and people who the new byelaws will actually affect.

This lack of prior consultation has led to a serious breach of trust. As a result, we are now discussing a pricing structure set out by one single report drawn up by KPMG. The



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scoping brief given to KPMG was “how do we monetize our Waterways” (page 2 of the document).

We would suggest that organisations such as Focus or The Peter McVerry Trust might have a very different viewpoint on this pricing structure. In addition to the people who have chosen Houseboat living as a way of life, there are many otherwise homeless families, with little or no interest in leisure boating who are now living on our waterways.

Boaters were previously referred to by Waterways Ireland as the public, in marine notices etc. The new corporate Waterways Ireland now refers to them as customers. Their glossy plans refer to the Shannon and its lakes as assets and their corporate plan refers to sweating their assets and maximizing income. How will they maximise income? In their plan they state that the number one method of doing this is to introduce new byelaws.

We agree with Waterways Ireland that after thirty years there is need for change. Ireland’s inland waterways now contribute 590 million euro to the Irish economy.

We believe that a strategic review of Ireland’s inland waterways should be carried out, similar to the recent Parks & Wildlife review and rail review.

The Department of Heritage runs numerous beautiful National Parks. These are free to the citizens of Ireland and foreign tourists alike and with good reason. The Wild Atlantic Way is free for everyone to traverse.

Failte Ireland has no intention of introducing taxes and charges on businesses, both existing and new, that have sprung up on the route.

Waterways Ireland intends to extract additional taxes on businesses on the Shannon system just by virtue of their geographical location (Draft Byelaw No 23).

So in conclusion, we request that these byelaws be deferred until after there has been a root and branch review of Ireland’s inland waterways and an actual government policy introduced on how our waterways should be managed into the future for the people of Ireland rather than for the good of one corporate entity.

Thank you for listening.



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