

**WATERWAYS IRELAND OPENING STATEMENT**  
**JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND**  
**HERITAGE.**

A Cathaoirleach, a baill den Choiste. Mo buíochas as ucht cuireadh a tabhairt dúinn arís inniú chun teacht in bhur láthair agus dréach fó-dhlíthe na Sionainne agus na Cánálacha a phlé. Thank you Chair and members for the opportunity to return to the Committee to update you on proposed changes to the Canal Bye-laws (including the Royal Canal, Grand Canal, and Barrow Navigation) and Shannon Bye-laws (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 25 years ago under the British-Irish Agreement Waterways Ireland is the cross-border navigational authority responsible for some 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. Over the last 25 years we have:

- (i) Completed the restoration of the main line of the Royal Canal from Dublin to the Shannon, crossing Counties Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Westmeath, Longford.
- (ii) Doubled the mooring capacity on the Shannon increasing berthing at numerous locations and catering for over 3,000 vessels.
- (iii) Established new boating destinations on the River Suck to Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, Boyle River to Boyle Co, Roscommon, Cleighreanmore on Lough Allen in Co. Leitrim and on the Inny river to Ballymahon Co. Longford.
- (iv) Transformed through investment, development and on-site works many waterway assets including Meelick Weir, connecting East Galway and West Offaly, Castle and Connaught Harbours in Portumna, Co. Galway, Killaloe Marina in Co. Clare, Carrick-on-Shannon and Leitrim Village in County Leitrim, Lough Key Marina in Co. Roscommon, Athlone in Co. Westmeath, Clondara in Co. Longford, the Round O in Ennsikillen Co. Fermanagh and many more location across the island of Ireland.
- (v) Developed and promoted over 600km of Greenways and Blueways in counties Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Westmeath, Longford, Offaly, Leitrim, Roscommon, Cavan, Fermanagh, Clare, Tipperary and Galway.

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. This is a transformative project of scale and significance that will link navigation from Lough Erne to Clones.

## **Bye-laws**

My colleague Patrick and I appeared before this committee on the 21<sup>st</sup> September last to engage with you on the proposed changes to the Bye-laws. At that meeting, Members of the Committee made a number of observations and suggestions about the public consultation process and about the substance of the proposed Bye-laws.

As agreed, we considered the issues that were raised at that time and the 933 submissions that we received.

## **Public Consultation**

One of the first issues raised by many of the Members was to consider an extension of the public consultation.

To recap, we commenced the public consultation on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 2023 with the intention of concluding on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, which would have been a period of 108 days. Following engagement with this Committee and with the consent of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, we extended Phase 1 to 133 days.

We are pleased to report that concerns raised in the Committee that people would be confused by running the consultation on the canals and the Shannon together did not come to pass. We received 933 submission in total, there was a clear distinction identified with 733 submissions relating to the Canals and 537 relating to the Shannon (337 submissions related to both sets of Bye-law revisions).

A second suggestion from the Committee was that we enhance our public engagements along with additional one-to-one stakeholder meetings. Following our appearance at the Committee we broadened and deepened our public and stakeholder outreach with many of the groups suggested by Committee Members. This included all relevant Local Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, local tourism groups, State Agencies and sports and recreational groups. We also increased our social media reach and frequency with information on the Bye-laws.

Over the period of Phase 1, we held public meetings in 8 locations which were attended by more than 600 people. We held 24 meetings with relevant stakeholder groups and Local Authorities.

In addition to this we announced that we would carry out a second phase to the public consultation process. We communicated with over 2,500 stakeholders on 15<sup>th</sup> January to let them know we had commenced Phase 2 of the Public Consultation. It will conclude on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2024.

## **Phase 1 Consultation Report**

Informed by the 933 submissions, we published a detailed report of Phase I of the Public Consultation on the 15<sup>th</sup> January which outlines the revised draft bye-laws. Many of the concerns raised by Members of the Committee are addressed also. A copy of the consultation report is included in the information we sent to the Committee.

## **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 Bye-laws is to:

- make our waterways safer,
- protect those using our waterways, our blueways and our greenways, and
- continue to provide a wonderful recreational experience for everyone to enjoy.

## **Consultation Process – Phase 2**

. As part of this phase of the consultation

- (i) We published the revised draft Bye-laws for the Canals and Shannon Navigation along with explanatory notes and the Public Consultation report on our website.
- (ii) We again advertised the consultation widely in both the National and Local Press, across social media channels and online.
- (iii) We will be hosting 2 Public Consultation Information Events at which stakeholders will be informed about the proposed Bye-law changes in the following locations:
  - a. Hodson Bay Hotel Athlone on 6 February at 6pm
  - b. Mullingar Park Hotel on 7 February at 6pm
- (iv) We presented the revised Bye-laws to the members of Offaly Co. Co. and the Nenagh Municipal District of Tipperary Co. Co. and received positive and welcoming comments in the discussion that followed.
- (v) We have invited the public to visit the Waterways Ireland website or visit one of 17 public libraries where copies of the draft Bye-laws, explanatory note and consultation report are available for review.

Again, we are inviting comments and submissions in writing, by email or on the submission form on the Waterways Ireland website.

## **Significant changes from Phase 1 to Phase 2**

Having considered all 933 submissions received during Phase 1 we have made changes to the proposed Byelaws to endeavour to equitably deal with legitimate concerns raised. The changes from the Phase 1 proposals include:

- (i) Introduction and extension of a five-day rule on Canal harbours to facilitate watersports activities.
- (ii) Continuation of winter moorings on the Shannon Navigation.
- (iii) Removal of a proposed three-day rule at certain harbours on the Shannon Navigation.
- (iv) Removal of proposed speed limit on Greenways / blueways / cycleways.
- (v) Reduction in proposed houseboat permit fees in suburban areas of the canals.

We believe that these substantial changes to the proposed Bye-laws will alleviate the concerns of most stakeholders and address many of the issues raised by Members of this Committee.

## **In Summary**

In summary, Waterways Ireland is proposing to revise the Shannon Bye-laws and Canal Bye-laws with a view to updating the regulation of our waterways. The Bye-laws are over 30 years old and their application to the navigations today are no longer fit for purpose.

The needs of those who use our waterways blueways and greenways have changed. The environmental landscape and health and safety considerations have evolved significantly and the waterways themselves have been transformed. Our bye-laws need to reflect this.

The public consultation will end on 26 Feb 2024, 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 agaibh.

Ends