



Position Paper

The challenges around the increasing residential use of waterways

Introduction

Following a briefing to the Defra Inland Waterways Team by the Environment Agency (EA) in November 2024, this paper is presented to Defra by the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA). It reiterates the EA's key messages (as AINA and the EA have been working closely together on this issue for several years) but also adds AINA's unique dimension as being the representative body for all inland navigation authorities, large and small, across the UK¹.

The challenges around the increasing residential use of waterways represent a significant issue of public interest, which continues to grow widely and rapidly across the UK.

Being the largest Navigation Authorities, the issue is being felt most acutely by the Canal & River Trust and the Environment Agency; but almost all Navigation Authorities are having to manage the effects of this rapidly growing issue.

Increasing numbers of boats are being used to live aboard as cheap housing, mooring permanently on any accessible land, with no planning consent for the mooring; often occupying short-stay visitor moorings but frequently on land with no designated use.

AINA engaged Defra on this subject with some vigour between 2017 and 2019. After significant interest shown by some Members of Parliament, the Secretary of State gave a commitment that he would bring relevant agencies together to discuss the issues and work towards finding a solution. But after some initial productive Defra-led discussion with multiple agencies (including AINA, the Canal & River Trust and the Environment Agency), the global pandemic and other priorities took focus away from this work.

Subsequently, the subject was the focus of a meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Waterways (APPG) in June 2021, following which the APPG Chair wrote to the Minister for Waterways proposing a new, Defra-led multi-agency working group to pursue solutions to the issues raised at the APPG meeting. To this day, AINA is unaware of any response from the Minister.

What is the concern?

Boats on the inland waterway network have increasingly been promoted as an affordable alternative to housing, resulting in significant growth especially in London and the south-east in the last 10 years, but escalating particularly in the last five years.

¹ About AINA – see Appendix 1

Demand for approved residential moorings (i.e. with all necessary permissions) is high and demand outstrips supply, such that many of those who acquire boats to live aboard look for a mooring only after purchase; and either cannot find or cannot afford one.

This situation is most widespread and is being felt most acutely by the two largest Navigation Authorities – the Canal & River Trust and the Environment Agency and is shown in the following data:

Canal & River Trust

Across its 2,000 mile network of waterways, the 2025 boater survey indicates that 35% of the total of approximately 35,000 boats are being used as a permanent home. This equates to some 12,250 boats which represents an increase of 12% over the past five years. The majority of these do not have a home mooring. Indeed, the survey data shows that there are 8,723 continuous cruisers² (some 25% of all boats on the Trust's waters) and that this figure has increased by more than 1,000 in the last one year, the majority of which are being used for permanent residence.

On the Trust's London waterways, the number of boats has more than doubled since 2012 to more than 4,000. It is estimated that more than 90% of these are used for permanent residential use. More than 50% of them do not have permanent moorings and 'continuously cruise'.

Environment Agency

On the non-tidal River Thames, it is estimated that some 1,800 boats are being lived aboard in 2025 – an increase of 1,300 since 2018. This figure is striking for only 144 miles of navigation and confirms the epicentre for this type of use is around London and the south-east (almost 300 of these boats are in the section from Teddington to Shepperton). Reading and Oxford are other hotspots, but the distribution is really throughout the river.

The Anglian waterways cover around 400 miles on which it is estimated that there are currently some 300 boats being lived aboard. The non-tidal Medway has 65 boats being lived aboard – a figure that's significantly high given that the navigation stretches for only 19 miles.

A concerning reality is that a significant number of those now living on boats, irrespective of Navigation Authorities' waters, are in vulnerable categories and their boats are neither fit for habitation nor suitable to be kept on the waterway. Risks to human safety and of pollution of the waterways are of concern here. This is a societal challenge brought about by the UK housing crisis, where their occupants have not made a conscious lifestyle choice to live afloat.

Navigation Authorities have been receiving regular complaints from waterway users and waterside residents, as well as MPs with riparian constituencies where the problems are concentrated. Indeed, on 29th April this year the proliferation of non-registered boats overstaying on moorings, and of wrecked, sunken and abandoned boats on the non-tidal Thames was raised by Monica Harding MP (Esher & Walton) in an Adjournment Debate in the House of Commons.

² Continuous cruisers are permitted to moor up for up to 14 days before moving to another place and must continuously cruise for the period of their licence.

There is a public expectation that Navigation Authorities are responsible for regulating the situation, but the social issues involved extend considerably beyond their sphere of control and their legal powers and duties.

Issues and challenges

There is a clear misconception that Navigation Authorities have all the responsibilities for boats and those aboard them. Even where they do have powers, these are generally not consistent and are unique to each authority – based upon a variety of legislation.

Navigation Authorities are often, particularly on river navigations, not able to regulate mooring to land they do not own or control, and much of this is in the ownership of local councils. Councils do have responsibility for housing, including a statutory duty to conduct housing needs assessments for those on boats, and considering provision of suitable mooring.

Many of those living on boats, particularly those without a permanent mooring, rely on water, waste and sewage disposal facilities provided by the navigation authorities. These facilities are under extreme pressure due to the increased demand from the rise in liveaboard boating.

Where a boat does not comply with Navigation Authority registration and licensing requirements (e.g. paying a charge, Boat Safety Scheme Certification and insurance policy), there are powers to remove it from the waterway. In the case of a boat that is lived aboard, this raises sensitive and complex issues around Article 8 European Convention on Human Rights; and there is case law supporting the requirement to consider housing needs in such cases.

The growing numbers of unsuitable boats in use for residential purposes, and the management of associated risks to safety on the inland waterways indicates the scale of the problem facing Navigation Authorities and local councils, both of which have very limited resources.

Defra has previously acknowledged that no single body is able to tackle the issues alone; a collaborative effort making best use of existing duties and powers is needed, as there would be little scope for new legislation.

A fundamental point, which Defra has previously accepted, is that Navigation Authorities are neither resourced nor seeking powers to take on the roles that would effectively make them housing authorities. These issues and challenges should be regarded on a national, societal level and a multi-agency approach across governments and other stakeholders is essential. AINA recommends that it is crucial to engage the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in England, and the Local Government Association in promoting greater understanding of these challenges and in sharing responsibilities and approaches to finding solutions.

What is AINA asking of Defra?

In short, AINA is asking Defra to undertake a facilitation role whereby multiple stakeholders, most crucially the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), become engaged in this issue. This means re-starting the short-lived, but productive activity that Defra led in 2017-19 pre-pandemic - see above in the

Introduction. AINA cannot hope to engage MHCLG on its own without the influence of Defra within government. We believe that serious engagement by MHCLG in England will encourage the Local Government Association and other stakeholders, including the devolved UK administrations to also become involved.

AINA is willing and eager to assist and support this in any way it can. In times past (between 1996 and 2012) AINA regularly and successfully bid for modest research funding from Defra to procure and deliver meaningful projects that assisted delivery of Defra policy and were also beneficial to Navigation Authorities – work that AINA is uniquely placed to deliver. We believe with that with a modest amount of Defra funding now, AINA could commission valuable research to deliver context, data, evidence, case studies and more to inform and illustrate the scale and significance of the issues and to offer potential solutions. AINA requests that Defra considers some modest project funding for AINA in this regard.

Moreover, in 2019 AINA prepared, at Defra's request, a table of concerns and issues relating to residential use of waterways. This outlined themes, possible pathways for action, and suggested which departments/agencies might be responsible for addressing them – all from an AINA perspective. This work was submitted to Defra as 'a work in progress' and served as a reminder that during the initial Defra-led discussions with multiple agencies in 2017-19 it was agreed and understood that finding solutions to these issues must be a shared responsibility across multiple agencies and must not be focused solely on Navigation Authorities which have neither the powers nor resources to bring to bear.

Summary

The scale of this UK-wide societal challenge and the speed at which it is forcing a change in the way inland waterways are being used should not be underestimated. Navigation Authorities are simply unable to manage or control the variety and complexity of the issues arising, which are only the symptoms of a far wider challenge for the country. Large sections of waterways are transforming into unofficial linear housing parks, with outreach organisations such as the Waterways Chaplaincy deeply concerned at the impact upon those affected, many of whom are vulnerable.

AINA looks to Defra for three things:

- to help unlock discussions with MHCLG and work together to come to a position that will support the role of Navigation Authorities, better manage the needs of those impacted and be more widely acceptable to all those using our waterways
- to consider some modest research project funding for AINA to commission and deliver outputs of value (context, data, evidence, case studies) in the pursuit of finding solutions to the issues and challenges referenced in this paper
- A meeting between an AINA delegation and the Defra Inland Waterways Team, as soon as possible to discuss the above

Association of Inland Navigation Authorities

13th June 2025

Appendix 1

About the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA)

AINA is the industry body in the United Kingdom and Ireland for those authorities with statutory or other legal responsibility for the management, maintenance and operation of navigable inland waterways.

AINA was set up in 1996 with strong encouragement from government to provide, for the first time ever, a single voice on waterway management issues. The broad purpose of AINA is to facilitate the management, maintenance and development of inland waterways as an economic, social and environmental resource.

There are currently 15 navigation authorities in AINA membership. Members drawn from the public, private and third sectors. They include the Canal & River Trust, the Environment Agency, the Broads Authority, Scottish Canals and Waterways Ireland, in addition to local government authorities, private canal companies, internal drainage boards and other charitable trusts.

Most AINA members are defined as navigation authorities by their own Acts of Parliament (some of them more than 200 years old) which regulate the operation of their waterways. Others, such as some local government authorities, have inherited the status of navigation authority through various statutes. Between them, AINA members have responsibility for several thousand kilometres of navigable inland waterways which include canals, river navigations and lakes.

AINA's **vision** is to be recognised by all those involved in, or associated with, the management and operation of navigable inland waterways as consistently and reliably adding value to the sector.

AINA's **purpose** is to:

- represent and promote the collective views of navigation authorities and to speak with one voice to governments, regulators, other policy makers, opinion formers, funders and stakeholders
- develop, share and promulgate information and guidance for use in the management, operation and development of inland waterways thereby assisting delivery of wide-ranging social, economic and environmental benefits
- facilitate the development and implementation of, where possible and appropriate, harmonised approaches and seamless standards of service across the sector

AINA defines inland waterways as including canals, navigable rivers and navigable lakes, and all associated land and assets such as towpaths and amenity areas – in other words any land that has an impact on, or relationship with, the waterway. Such areas may be in public or trust ownership, have public access or be privately owned, but all have the potential to be part of the navigation impact zone.