

Scottish Waterways for All - Chairperson's Report 2019/20

Welcome to the first AGM of SWfA. As you will all know, this group came from a desire to create an advisory group and to encourage partnership working on Scotland's canals. We evolved what was the Lowland Canals Volunteer Group (LCVG) consisting of canal charities, social enterprises and Scottish Canals and merged this with LCA, RYA Scotland, IWA and representatives from the Crinan and Caledonian Canals, forming a group with a wide range of skills and experience in all things canal-related - all working together for the benefit of our canals.

SWfA's mission and strategic aims are as follows:

"To improve the user experience of Scotland's Canals by improving, protecting and enhancing the canal environs.' This will be achieved by:

1. Being recognised as an advisory body by Scottish Canals and Transport Scotland;
2. Working collaboratively to improve, protect, preserve and enhance Scotland's canals utilising the skills, knowledge and expertise of the group and wider stakeholders;
3. Working co-operatively to identify challenges and create a Strategic Plan and Action Plan with shared goals and defined outcomes which will benefit all users;
4. Representing all users of Scotland's canals;
5. Encouraging greater involvement through community engagement and volunteering opportunities which will lead to increased opportunities for learning and skills development;
6. Contributing to the community regeneration of canal-side communities encouraging shared ownership of the canals;
7. Improving water channels, towpaths and destinations.

Over the past year we had started our work to deliver these aims. We created action checklists covering:

1. Dredging and winding holes
2. Vegetation management
3. Third Sector engagement
4. Council engagement in canals
5. Boating / Boater engagement, vibrancy, events, litter challenges
6. Health and Wellbeing benefits of canals
7. Asset management and small works prioritisation

Individuals were allocated to each of these topics and we are working our way through the issues raised.

SWfA worked on the Year of Coasts and Waters event, planning a Boat Rally for May 2020 – which has been postponed until 2021.

A great deal of work was put into creating the Scottish Canals Volunteering Awards – which have also been postponed until 2021.

The Big Splash funding campaign was launched for canal charities to attract donations at a local level to help them survive COVID-19. Huge thanks must go to Stuart Rennie who masterminded these last two initiatives.

The elephant in the room though is the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Just as we were getting into our stride the pandemic hit and, just like everything else in our lives, this has had an impact on where SWfA are and what we have achieved. Things moved

from being proactive to fire-fighting, with everyone involved having to dedicate their efforts into ensuring their group and/or organisation was safe and able to come through lockdown and still be standing in the 'new normal'.

We have not been able to evolve our group into the cohesive partnership we would all like, and we have not had the time to review how we operate to ensure the best results. This will be a priority for the second year of SWfA.

On a personal note, as everyone knows, I am against talking shops and much prefer to set tasks and actions and achieve them. We need to look at new ways of working together and do things faster. While we need SC to help with the strategy and direction of the group if it is to be a true partnership we must be given the space to contribute and take opportunities to make things work for the sustainability of our canals.

We have a great opportunity to step up volunteering as long as the infrastructure is there to support it. The appointment of a Volunteer Manager, and implementation of a training programme for volunteers in the use of power tools would mean that volunteer teams could carry out works which would free up SC staff to carry out more meaningful works on the canals and would epitomise the whole ethos of working in partnership.

Another of my favourite topics is dredging. We have been very impressed with reports of new equipment being purchased to do the job but the 'proof will be in the pudding' when we see evidence on the ground (or in the water) of improvements. We have advised for over 20 years - if you don't dredge the canal, people won't or can't use it.

With millions being spent on repairing the bridges on the Forth & Clyde Canal it is so important to get it open from Bowling to Grangemouth to allow free passage for all sorts of vessels.

If we are to be a proper advisory body, everyone around the table must be willing to work together to implement actions quickly to ensure tasks don't drop off lists and get forgotten about. Let's get back to the 'good old days' where British Waterways and the voluntary sector worked hand in hand in harmony to forge ahead with the reinstatement of our canals.

Busy canals encourage people to visit, bring prosperity to towns and villages en route and, as proven in a recent study by Glasgow Caledonian University, have a huge impact on the health and wellbeing of communities alongside them which is especially important at this time.

In conclusion, our first year working together has had its ups and downs. We have had a lot of full and frank discussions on topics the group feel strongly about, including volunteering, training, dredging and operational matters, with Scottish Canals bearing the brunt of frustrations that sometimes are out with their control, but we are still all in the same room – or on Zoom!

We must get this idea of 'partnership' to the fore and get away from the 'them and us' scenario which has been prevalent in the past and has always been counterproductive.

Our achievements may not have reached the levels we want yet but we all realise we are stronger together and need to keep this idea of partnership working, sharing skills and expertise and listening to advice going to ensure the sustainability of our canals.

Ronnie Rusack
Chairperson
August 2020