

The Commercial Boat Operators Association (CBOA) is the national trade organisation for the inland waterways freight industry. We have nearly 100 members, including associates.

Our members operate craft with carrying capacity between 2,700 tonnes and 25 tonnes on the tidal estuaries and the canals and rivers linked to them.

Cargoes carried include aggregates, oil products, grain, steel industry materials and products, construction materials, containers, residual domestic waste, abnormal indivisible loads and bagged domestic coal and other fuels

Introduction

We welcome the NIC's Baseline Report which sets out the current state of the UK's economic infrastructure and identifies key challenges for the coming decades.

We would endorse the challenges set out for the Second Assessment but particularly that:

- a multimodal interurban transport strategy can support regional growth.

The Assessment, however, refers only to road and rail freight despite highlighting that "effective distribution of freight is also essential to growth in any area".

Against this backdrop, the NIC is also right to highlight that "greenhouse gas emissions from economic infrastructure must reduce further, fast."

Inland Waterways can play a valuable role in freight carriage and does so in a way that actively contributes to moving towards net zero.

It is currently an underutilised resource and it is extremely disappointing that the Assessment does not refer to the contribution they can make. We believe that inland waterways can play a valuable role in the movement of freight and is a fundamental part of the critical infrastructure of the country. Too often, outdated, historical impressions of the waterways sector can dominate and that means that opportunities are missed.

This also ignores the contribution that the movement of freight on inland waterways has played to some of our biggest, most modern infrastructure projects including the Thames Tideway Tunnel which even developed its own River Transport Strategy.

But more can be achieved with the right level of recognition, not least from the NIC.

Background

Heavy goods vehicles account for around 16% of UK greenhouse gas emissions from domestic transport, while making up just 5% of vehicle miles (DfT figures).

According to Defra, moving freight by water can lead to CO2 emissions that are 25% of the level of road transport.

Many companies in the inland waterway sector have invested heavily in their fleets and shifted to renewable fuel creating significant reductions in NOx and particulates emissions, whilst eliminating Sox emissions completely.

There is enormous potential for more freight to be moved to water to help achieve Net Zero targets. Barge use avoids the noise, air pollution, congestion, carbon emissions and risk of accidents that result from heavy road vehicles.

It is also less expensive to carry freight by barge than by lorry.

Transporting by water has a huge range of benefits not least keeping heavy goods vehicles off already congested urban and rural roads and reducing accidents. This is critical as air quality and its impact on health continues to be a major concern. Many cities are coming under pressure, with other being obliged, to deal with the poor levels of air quality. Shifting freight off the roads and onto waterways can help challenge poor air quality.”

Many household names already use water freight include Tesco, Rank Hovis MacDougall, Capespan fruit as well as aggregate companies like Lafarge, Cemex, and Hanson and waste/recyclables companies like Cory Environmental.

The 1968 Transport Act enshrined in law that commercial waterways are “principally available for the carriage of freight”. The Canal and River Trust (CRT) is the largest owner and navigation authority of the canal network in England and Wales. It receives an annual grant from Defra which is used for an ongoing programme of waterways infrastructure maintenance and development.

We have an existing asset that could be utilised more effectively and make a positive contribution to climate change.

For instance, the North of England is uniquely positioned to realise the benefits that can be derived through the greater use of the inland waterways for the carriage of freight. Unique because the North West has a purpose built ‘ship canal’ connecting the two largest cities in the region (Liverpool and Manchester) and because many other significant conurbations in the North of England (Leeds, Rotherham, York, and others) are linked to East coast ports via commercial waterways.

Planning permission has recently been granted for a new inland port for Leeds. It has the potential to handle water borne freight equivalent to taking an estimated 44,000 lorry journeys off the roads. Developing the Port is also a major opportunity for transport across the North, as has been clearly expressed to Transport for the North and others.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) has agreed a £3.25m grant towards building the new wharf, but to complete the whole development is expected to cost around a at least further £3m. Sitting at the western end of the Aire & Calder Navigation, which is a mixture of canal and navigable sections of the Rivers Aire and Calder, the new port will enable cargo to be carried by barges carrying up to 500te each from the Hull, Goole, and Immingham docks to Leeds.

Furthermore, there are 8 locks between Goole and Leeds which need upgrading, including to work by remote control, if the Navigation is to operate at full potential. This cost is estimated at £7.5m. Other places along the route of the Navigation would benefit from the upgrade, such as Wakefield, Castleford and Knottingley.

Whilst the Port can operate at lower capacity without this work, the extra investment would maximise its use.

As Jake Berry, then Minister for the Northern Powerhouse; said in 2019:

“Leeds Inland Port presents a fantastic opportunity for our charity (Canal and River Trust) to help reduce the environmental impact of transporting goods, reducing carbon emissions and road congestion.”

Significant opportunities also exist across waterways in other parts of the country not least the Thames and the Severn.

We acknowledge that there are challenges to be overcome to ensure that the commercial waterways play their part in the development of an integrated and sustainable freight carrying network but feel that the NIC are well positioned to bring a focus to help address those challenges.

The whole of the inland waterway freight community recognises that road and rail will more often be the focus of policy makers, however that does not mean that inland waterways do not have a significant role to play in achieving the integrated and sustainable freight carrying network. The hope is that this NIC Report and consultation will act as a catalyst for further discussion and focus on the freight carrying potential of the waterways.

Even as things stand, we believe that 1,300 miles of the UK's 5,000 miles of navigable inland waterways have significant potential to carry freight. Despite the work on some large infrastructure projects, the trend is downward.

Inland waterways can support other critical infrastructure such as ports, including those with new 'freeport' status but also road and rail. Part of the overall solution to help support them.

Overall

Referring to the questions posed in the consultation, we would point to the themes of 'Reaching Net Zero' and 'Levelling Up' as being the key contributions by inland waterways if the opportunities for growth are recognised and pursued.

Any growth in freight on waterways will require additional funding to ensure the integrity of the infrastructure. The CRT is seeking funding through the DfT and HM Treasury but a constant issue that the sector faces is the lack of a champion in government. Whereas other sectors have a ministerial specifically responsible, this is not the case for inland waterways.

We also encounter many challenges regarding collaborative working between bodies such as the Environment Agency and local authorities. An assigned minister would help to overcome such challenges by giving the sector a strong and powerful voice within government capable of championing the sector and dealing effectively with barriers to development.

The first stage of any programme for waterways should be consideration of the 'constraints and challenges' that exist and are preventing the full freight carrying potential of the inland waterways along with a prioritisation of critical schemes. One of the challenges is that an analysis of the state of the infrastructure has not been conducted.

We can then start to unlock the inclusive and sustainable transformative economic growth that benefits the country. Significant opportunities for growth in the sector exist and can be done so utilising an existing resource, albeit one that will require investment that has long been lacking. We must reverse this decline to make the most of the valuable opportunities on offer both in terms of climate change and levelling up. Critically, we have a private sector willing to get involved.

Most commercial waterways can carry barges which can carry 400-500 tonnes (even more on the Thames and the Manchester Ship Canal) but there is a desperate need to a coordinated effort across government and industry to realise the potential of waterborne freight carriage on the commercial waterways

The Government has recently proposed that the new Great British Railways should grow freight in the rail network. We would suggest that CRT should have a duty to promote water freight to secure the economic, environmental, and social benefits on offer.

In omitting inland waterways, the Baseline Report has made a major omission. The sector would be delighted to engage in more detail with the NIC to rectify this.

Tim West
Vice Chairman
Commercial Boat Operators Association