

ANNUAL MEETING 2009

Robin Evans, Chief Executive, British Waterways

Good morning and thank you Tony. I really only want to spend a couple of minutes, because I know you want to get on and hear from our experts, but I just wanted to remind you why we set out a new 2020 vision and asked for this debate. I should say right from the start, that a good deal of what I am going to say is about England and Wales and may not always apply to Scotland because as you know, their waterways are at a different stage in their evolution and they have a very different funding regime from what we have in England and Wales.

Just looking back, it was in 2003 that we set out our last 10 year strategy and a great deal has changed since then and Tony has already referred to and I have no doubt will be referring to it again, that the enormous change in the economic climate and we all know that the public sector is not going to have the money it has had and we also know that the commercial world and the property world in particular is going to have a tough time over the next few years and those are our two principal sources of income. Of course the core maintenance of the waterway is a long term business, requiring long term investment and we need to debate and find a solution that allows us that and does not make British Waterways or have us distracted by shorttermism and short term demands. We also know that the waterways are hugely valued by the vast majority of people in this country, but we have found it very difficult to turn that support and harness it into something tangible, something that we can really take benefit from. Of course we all know that the KPMG report said three things - it said there is a £30m gap in the funding of the waterway. There is no silver bullet that will change that, but the third thing they said is that status quo staying as we are, is not tenable and I think it is under that background that we launched the 2020 debate to consider

moving into the third sector and I believe that move would transform our governance and engage a much wider stakeholder group that will have a greater sense of ownership and most importantly, responsibility for our waterways. It will open up new funding opportunities and protect most importantly our existing sources of income.

Most importantly, I believe it will bring together the power and the passion of all those people represented here today who really care about the inland waterways and create a cause that will forever protect our beloved network and help it thrive into the future. So for me this debate is all about changing attitudes. Its about re-setting people's perspectives on what British Waterways and the waterways are about. Its about clarifying what BW does and its allowing the waterways to benefit from a very different and more broadly based governance and funding regime.

Now as Tony said, our debate has got off to a good start. There has been a lot of interest in it and there is a thirst for a greater understanding and more detail. So we have asked a consortium of leading third sector experts to look at our proposal and they will be publishing a "next steps" report in November and they have a done a lot of work already as they are about to tell you, so today and after today, they hope for input from the waterway movement and I am sure you will want to question them later on, but first I think they want to tell you what the picture looks like to them on the basis that they have researched to date and so I would like to invite Mike Hudson from the Compass Partnership to give us his views.