

National Bargee Travellers Association

Consultation response: Grand Union Canal Transfer Phase Two Public Consultation

Introduction

This consultation response is from the National Bargee Travellers Association (NBTA). The NBTA is a volunteer organisation formed in 2009 that campaigns and provides advice and support for itinerant boat dwellers on Britain's inland and coastal waterways ("Bargee Travellers"). This includes anyone whose home is a boat and who does not have a permanent mooring for their boat with planning permission for residential use. The NBTA is the only national organisation in Britain dedicated to upholding and defending the rights of itinerant boat dwellers. The NBTA has members on all the major navigation authorities' waterways and beyond. The NBTA deals with at least 200 individual cases each year.

The navigable inland waterway system in Britain is home to an estimated 15,000 to 50,000 Bargee Travellers. There are as yet no accurate statistics for the number of people living on boats either with or without a permanent mooring in the UK. The 2021 Census found 105,000 people living in mobile accommodation such as caravans and boats, but did not break this down further; analysis by Gypsy and Traveller organisations suggests that boat dwellers made up around half of that population identified in the Census, but also that both populations are likely to have been significantly under-counted.

There are at least 21 inland navigation authorities in the UK. Canal & River Trust is the largest, with around 80% of the UK's inland waterways. Other significant navigation authorities are the Environment Agency; the Broads Authority; the Conservators of the River Cam; the Middle Level Commissioners; Peel Holdings (the Bridgewater Canal) and British Waterways Scotland (trading as Scottish Canals). An unknown number of Bargee Travellers live in coastal harbours and estuaries, some of which are controlled by harbour authorities.

The NBTA can be contacted via secretariat@bargee-traveller.org.uk or 0118 321 4128. Our web site is www.bargee-traveller.org.uk Our postal address is 30 Silver Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 2ST.

Responses to selected consultation questions

3. We've shared our proposals for new pumping stations, gravity bypasses, and transfer locks along the canal. Do you have any feedback on our proposals for this infrastructure, or on the indicative designs we've shared, to help us finalise these plans? If so, please specify the infrastructure and location in your response.

The proposed Grimes Bridge Transfer Lock on the North Oxford canal must not remove any of the moorable bank to the north west of Grimes Bridge. At this location there are about 6 boat lengths of sheet piling. There is no opportunity for towpath mooring to the north west of Colehurst Farm because of the long stretch of permanent moorings on the off-side. This location is extremely important and is one of the best mooring locations for Bargee Travellers because it is the only moorable stretch of towpath with viable road access between All Oaks Wood Brinklow, and Ansty. The towpath to the east of Grimes Bridge is marginally moorable. Installing sheet piling here, to the east of the new transfer lock, would improve the availability of moorable towpath with road access. We recommend

as mitigation for the loss of moorable bank for the transfer lock that sheet piling is installed east of the Grimes bridge transfer lock.

In addition, the Grimes bridge transfer lock appears to include the area of Wilson's Wharf, which is a private mooring. Does the scheme intend to compulsorily purchase Wilson's Wharf and displace the private mooring?

4. We've also shared our proposals for adjustments we'll need to make to existing infrastructure such as bank raising, adjustments to weirs and Bridge 88 (also known as Peartree Bridge, in Woughton Marina, Milton Keynes). Do you have any feedback on our proposals for this infrastructure, to help us finalise these plans? If so, please specify the infrastructure and location in your response.

The main problem is with bridge 79 in Milton Keynes. Higher water levels would definitely prevent towing under that bridge. It is a tight squeeze already, even with the water at the normal Spring level.

Where bank raising is carried out in locations where towpath banks have become eroded and shallow at the edge, preventing mooring, these should be reconstructed with sheet piling to accommodate flow and prevent erosion. Sheet piling should be included as part of any bank renovation, in order to create additional 14-day mooring space.

If the freeboard on the raised and reconstructed towpath bank is higher than about 0.5 metres, this can make mooring for 14 days (or indeed any length of time) difficult or impossible.

Any fluctuations in water level should not be greater than 0.15 metres, otherwise when the water level drops, boats moored for 14 days (or indeed any length of time) on the towpath will ground, list and therefore be in danger of sinking if they do not rise when the water level rises, due to water entering the hull ports such as the engine exhaust. Grounding can also cause damage to the hull of a boat and can distort the superstructure if a boat is grounded on an uneven surface; the bed of most canals is littered with bricks, rubble, and rubbish such as old bicycles and shopping trolleys.

Where there is no sheet piling but the bank is moorable, at least 1m of grass at the water's edge is needed for hammering in mooring pins, unless mooring rings are installed. Where the towpath is widened or re-surfaced for pedestrians, the 1m stretch of grass should be retained unless sheet piling is installed.

6. Do you have any comments on the two options we've presented for the location of the Springwood Transfer Lock, to help us decide which location to take forward?

We are opposed to Option 2 as the site for this transfer lock. The towpath immediately east of Springwood Haven Marina and Wood bridge is one of the best mooring locations on the Coventry canal. We do not want to lose this site. It has good road access and sheet piling, both of which are extremely important for Bargee Travellers. It also has very good sunshine and is not overshadowed by trees, which is important for charging batteries via solar panels; unlike Location 1 which is near or under trees. Unusually, it also has a beautiful view, unlike a lot of the Coventry canal, which is in cuttings or overshadowed by trees or buildings for much of its length. Siting the transfer lock at Option 2 would deprive the entire boating community (leisure, liveaboard, holiday hire etc) of a superb mooring location.

In addition, the canal at the location of Option 2 has a number of sharp bends, and siting a transfer lock on such a sharp bend would create considerable navigation hazards in addition to navigating the bends. The majority of narrowboats that cruise in this area are 57 feet long; a boat this size needs almost the whole width of the canal to negotiate sharp bends. With no clear sightlines to and from the transfer lock, this would increase the risk of collisions between boats.

7. Do you have any comments on the two options we've presented on the proposals for the Iron Trunk Aqueduct, to accommodate the additional water as part of the transfer?

If the Iron Trunk Aqueduct is not modified, the alternative proposals to put in another transfer lock would cause problems for Bargee Travellers due to the loss of moorable towpath. Also, both of the proposed locations of the transfer locks on the Grand Union canal are areas that are very important mooring spaces for Bargee Travellers. We propose that the moorable towpath space that is lost to the construction of the transfer lock(s) is directly replaced metre for metre at a location immediately adjacent to the transfer lock(s). Otherwise, the loss of the mooring space for transfer lock(s) would make it more difficult for Bargee Travellers to maintain access to their employment and their children's education.

In addition, the stretch from Cosgrove lock to the Iron Trunk Aqueduct has been designated as a 'permanent work area'. This is an important and very well-used mooring location for Bargee Travellers. It is not clear whether the designation would remove the moorable towpath space in that area. We require clarification of the designation of a 'permanent work area'; if this means the removal of moorable towpath space, then we require it to be replaced metre for metre immediately adjacent to the 'permanent work area'.

12. Do you have any comments on our construction plans or any impacts of our construction of the scheme, and how we propose to mitigate them?

From the interactive map, the construction compound at All Oaks Wood, Brinklow, appears to be sited on the public car park. The loss of parking for boaters at that mooring location, which has road access, will have a serious adverse impact on Bargee Travellers. It appears that the section of the towpath with the deepest water at All Oaks Wood will also be taken up by the construction compound. If this is the case, it will mean that only the shallowest draughted boats will be able to moor there, inconveniencing all boaters, making life very difficult for the owners of deep draughted boats (over 2'6"), and making it much harder for Bargee Travellers to pursue their daily lives.

We recommend that the GUCT carries out an investigation into whether any of the canalside road locations that will be used for construction access are formal or informal vehicle parking areas used by Bargee Travellers, who frequently need daily road access in order to travel to their workplace or their children's school. If so, provision needs to be made to enable Bargee Travellers to continue to use these to park their vehicles in order to maintain their access to employment and education for their children.

It appears from the interactive map that the village of Ansty on the north Oxford canal, which is another very sought-after 14-day mooring location for Bargee Travellers, will also

have significant construction activity taking place that could make mooring impossible either temporarily or permanently. We require clarification of this.

The siting of the construction compound at Hillmorton on the north Oxford canal is likely to increase congestion around the busiest locks in the entire CRT waterway system due to the removal of usable towpath mooring space to make way for the compound.

13. Do you have any comments on our Approach to Social Value?

The concept of Social Value adopted by the GUCT scheme makes no acknowledgement of the existence of the community of Bargee Travellers. As such, we are invisible to the GUCT scheme when we should be the primary community to be considered due to our total dependence on the waterways as our home. Making our community central to the design of the scheme would enhance the Social Value of the GUCT scheme. The NBTA can provide and facilitate the necessary contacts.

The GUCT has failed to consider that the community of Bargee Travellers does not inhabit a “local” area but travels throughout the waterways in the GUCT scheme and as such is not tied to any local area.

Also, there is no recognition of the way in which value to our community can be enhanced by retaining and improving moorable areas of the canal towpath. Social Value for Bargee Travellers in this context means the retention of all existing moorable areas of towpath and the creation of new, additional moorable areas of towpath by installing sheet piling along the bank and dredging to the edge where necessary. Social Value also means a more stable water level and increased depth of water for both navigation and mooring next to the towpath. Social Value means in addition that the community of Bargee Travellers should be invited to play a key role in developing the design and location of all interventions in the Canal Section of the GUCT scheme. Bargee Travellers and their representative groups should have been included from the inception of the scheme.

14. Do you have any suggestions for social value opportunities in your local area which we can consider as part of our approach?

Please note that our “local area” is the entirety of the waterways in the GUCT scheme. Social Value for the community of Bargee Travellers would include the creation, installation, retention or takeover of boater facilities that Bargee Travellers rely on: Elsan disposal and pumpout facilities; potable water taps; refuse disposal sites; toilets; showers; and laundry facilities. Canal & River Trust (CRT) closed all of its toilets, showers and launderettes in November 2025, and has removed other significant facilities such as refuse and Elsan disposal facilities and potable water taps. GUCT should install the above boater facilities at every transfer lock and pumping station.

15. Do you have any comments on the draft design principles (including canalside design principles) we’ve developed for the scheme, to help us refine these to site-specific design principles?

The draft design principles fail to mention the community of Bargee Travellers at all and fail to recognise the history of living on boats on the inland waterways. The principles include intangible heritage, but fail to acknowledge the community of Bargee Travellers and the itinerant boat dwelling way of life as intangible heritage.

16. Do you have any comments on any of the other information we've provided, or anything else you would like us to consider?

We require a guarantee that any reference to retaining or replacing mooring space must include the retention or replacement of 14-day mooring space on the towpath as well as designated "visitor" moorings of 24 hours to 7 days and permanent (usually on the off-side) moorings.

The consultation states that "some existing mooring spaces along the canal may need to be temporarily or permanently closed. In these cases, we'll create new mooring spaces **nearby** or at **other appropriate locations**" This is not acceptable; we require any loss of towpath mooring areas to be replaced immediately adjacent to the works that will displace them.

We require an explanation of why bank raising is preferred to dredging. Dredging would increase the depth of the canal to accommodate the extra water, and would also make life easier for all boaters, who are frequently inconvenienced, delayed and sometimes even suffer damage to their boats due to inadequately dredged canals that no longer meet the published depth specification.

We wish to work with the GUCT scheme to develop a protocol for the replacement of towpath mooring space where it will be lost to GUCT construction either temporarily or permanently.

We require there to be no loss of 14-day towpath mooring space if the GUCT scheme temporarily or permanently relocates permanent moorings.

We repeat below some of the comments we made in response to the Phase 1 consultation, which we wish to be reconsidered in the Phase 2 consultation.

The NBTA supports in principle the use of our inland waterways for water transfer. However it is clear that, even though tens of thousands of pounds have already been spent on the design of this scheme, the existence and the needs of Bargee Travellers have not even been acknowledged, let alone considered seriously. We rely on the waterways for our homes and the proposals in the consultation document will potentially have a severe adverse effect on the homes and lives of Bargee Travellers who live and travel on the Oxford, Coventry, Grand Union and Ashby Canals. The proposals in this scheme raise serious concerns about the loss of existing 14-day towpath mooring space. This has enormous potential to destroy not only the lives of Bargee Travellers who resort to these waterways, but also the character of the affected canals if only designated Visitor Moorings and permanent moorings are to be protected.

As such, the proposals engage and potentially violate the rights of Bargee Travellers under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights/ Human Rights Act 1998.

There are serious misunderstandings in the proposals about the use of the waterway and specifically about the nature and definition of "moorings" that pervade and detract from the design of this project. "Moorings" are not only permanent moorings in a marina, boatyard or along the line of the waterway (usually on the offside but sometimes on the towpath side). "Moorings" are also the entire towpath side of the waterway with some exceptions.

On Canal & River Trust waterways, all boaters licensed without a permanent mooring are entitled by virtue of section 17(3)(c)(ii) of the British Waterways Act 1995 to spend 14 days moored in any one place and they may stay longer if it is reasonable in the circumstances. They are entitled to moor for 14 days anywhere on the towpath side of the waterway that is not signed with a shorter stay time or used operationally (such as a lock landing). They tie up using equipment, such as mooring pins, hammer and ropes, that is carried on the boat. This temporary 14-day mooring space is essential to enable us to continue to live in our homes. Without it our homes and our lives would become uninhabitable and untenable, resulting in mass homelessness.

In addition, boaters who do have a permanent mooring (such as in a marina) are entitled by virtue of the Terms and Conditions of the Boat Licence to moor anywhere on the towpath on Canal & River Trust waterways for up to 14 days.

Since its inception in 2012, Canal & River Trust has been incrementally removing 14-day mooring space that Bargee Travellers need to use to continue their private and family lives on a par with citizens who live in bricks and mortar housing. Many stretches of former 14-day towpath mooring space have been restricted by Canal & River Trust to Visitor Moorings of 24 or 48 hours, or have been turned into bookable pay-to-stay moorings at £25 to £35 per night, or have been made into “no mooring” areas for spurious safety or environmental reasons (in reality to placate wealthy, powerful local residents and interest groups). In addition, there are many stretches of towpath where mooring is not physically possible due to shallowness of the water at the bank, caused by the failure of Canal & River Trust to dredge in that location, or caused by the failure of Canal & River Trust to repair erosion, or due to the constructed profile of the waterway. Most narrowboats, due to their shape, need between 0.7 metres and 1.0 metre depth of water at the bank to tie up safely without leaving an unsafe distance between the boat and the bank.

Bargee Travellers need to stay in a place for 14 days or sometimes longer, to enable access to their employment and their children’s schools, to complete repairs, or to recover from illness or injury. It is disruptive and impractical for Bargee Travellers to have to move after only 24 hours in one place. Bargee Travellers are typically on the lowest incomes or pensions of all waterway users and cannot afford to pay £25 to £35 per night to stay in a place.

Therefore any further loss of 14-day mooring space on the towpath of the Oxford, Coventry, and Grand Union canals caused by the Grand Union Canal Transfer scheme will have a severe adverse effect on the homes and lives of Bargee Travellers. We therefore demand a guarantee that no 14-day towpath mooring space will be lost in the construction of this project and any towpath mooring space lost should be replaced metre for metre immediately adjacent to the lost space.

Despite our response to the Phase 1 consultation in 2024, we still have not been provided with an explanation of who the promoters of the scheme are, beyond listing the organisations that make up the partnership. We require clarity about who the members of the partnership are, what their relative shares in the project are, what the projected profit is, how that profit will be distributed, which organisation is taking this project forward, what status the organisation has, the Company number, and the names of the Directors and the Chief Executive.

If the scheme is designed to, or will incidentally deliver dividends to existing or future shareholders of Affinity Water or Severn Trent Water, we wholly oppose the scheme. We

believe that water supply should not be carried out for private profit, but only for the public good and genuine community benefit. In any event, we propose that the Grand Union Canal Transfer should become, or be transferred to, a Community Interest Company.

Public confidence in both private water companies and in Canal & River Trust is extremely low. As the only organisation in the UK that represents Bargee Travellers, we the NBTA demand membership of the Board of Directors of the Partnership, Joint Venture or other Company that is promoting and overseeing the Grand Union Canal Transfer. We require membership of the Board in order to safeguard the interests of the community who will be most directly affected by the scheme, whose existence and needs have not been fully acknowledged in this consultation.

National Bargee Travellers Association
April 2026

0118 321 4128

secretariat@bargee-traveller.org.uk
www.bargee-traveller.org.uk

30 Silver Street, Reading RG1 2ST