

PE1693/L

Ronnie Rusack MBE submission of 17 May 2019

Petition for Waterways Ombudsman

With reference to the above I have been involved in Scottish Canals for over 48 years as a commercial operator, Chairman of Seagull Trust Cruises, Member of the Millennium Project, Chairman of Lowland Canal Volunteer Group, Founder of Keep Canals Alive, Member of the Inland Waterways Advisory Council, owner of the Bridge Inn Ratho and Edinburgh Canal Centre and given a MBE for services to the Canals and part of the submission group to the Petitions Committee.

Eighteen months ago the Lowland Canals were in dire straights and at serious risk of closure due to the previous CEO and Board clearly taking the business in the wrong direction concentrating on commercial ventures. Whilst it is important to generate extra revenue they did not appear to understand that without maintaining this wonderful asset your commercial business becomes worthless. The Canals are a national Asset and are there for all whether you are a Walker, fisherman, cyclist, boater or interested in wildlife or history which clearly sits with the Scottish Government Health and Wellbeing initiative.

Keep Canals Alive was formed to include all Canal societies, IWA, RYA, charities and individuals to lobby against the dire condition that the Canals were in. The Millennium Link was formed on the basis of reviving local communities and to be the catalyst of revival and restoration of one of Scotland's greatest assets.

At large this has been a great success however under the CEO of 18 months ago it was in great danger of collapsing.. They failed to communicate with customers and had a zero rating amongst the stakeholders.

However since Catherine Topley was seconded from the Prison Service there has been a vast change in attitudes, willing to listen and go out of her way to engage with the stakeholders. Catherine was very quickly able to sum up what was wrong with the organisation and get support from her team and make necessary changes.

The Forth & Clyde Canal was closed and in grave danger of not being reopened because of major bridge failures at Bonnybridge and Twechar and further along the stretch. There were also serious lock problems on the Caledonian Canal. Catherine clearly saw that Scottish Canals wanted to do the work but did not have the funds. We are very thankful that Catherine was able to approach Scottish Government and receive additional funding to sort out the immediate problems and reopen the canal. Throughout this difficult period Catherine's Management team are doing a wonderful job of supporting her efforts.

The danger lies in the future with the CEO's contract which has only been extended until December 2019 which could leave the organisation open and we could find ourselves back to where we were eighteen months ago with someone who does not understand the complexities of running Scotland's Waterways.

I think it is imperative to have an independent Ombudsman or body to watch over and protect these historical assets which has given employment and social engagement for nearly 200 years.