

Harbour Master report to the Harbour Board 25 September 2023

The shortening days herald the 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' but for the Waterways teams the on-coming autumn means that we start gearing up for a busy maintenance period interspersed with convoys and boat storage at the canal and navigation aids repairs and moorings servicing in the river.

Patrolling

Of note now in the river Exe our patrollers have been very active this summer, teams have been out most weekends since Easter barring just a few because of poor weather. We have had a positive response to patrolling in the main, most people in boats that we ask to stop and speak to are receptive, understand why we might need to ask them to reduce speed in the river and in some cases we offer advice such as wearing a lifejacket and wearing a kill-cord in powerboats. We will continue our patrolling up to the October half-term period but less frequently.

Our volunteers that help with patrolling have again been invaluable and I extend my thanks to them. We are always on the lookout for more, we can offer full training and for members of the local community it is a worthwhile engagement exercise particularly if other water users know the volunteer.

Office

The new office space that we are going to lease at the Exmouth marina will be available to us mid-September so I hope that the admin base will move to there by October, there will need to be some small interior alterations but should all be completed by the end of that month.

Moorings vessel

The Can-Doo has been decommissioned now and we are looking at how we can dispose of the vessel. The replacement boat that we are going to charter is still being fitted out and I hope to have the contract for five years use in place and take control of the vessel by late September or early October. The dory workboat replacement is due to arrive in October. Once it arrives, all of our boats will then be MCA coded as the Port Marine Safety Code directs that they should be for our areas of operations so that is a further step closer to compliance with the code.

Abandoned/sinking vessels in the river

Since our last meeting we have dealt with two abandoned boats, one of them is still afloat and we are waiting for the tides to be right before we can recover it from a part of the riverside that is difficult to access. We also went to help with a sinking catamaran on a mooring in the channel off Starcross. Unfortunately, as our team got to the vessel it slipped under the water so our first action was to raise a Local Notice to Mariners and mark the vessel with a 'wreck' mark. We managed to get hold of the owners and assist with the recovery of the boat, the rigging and interior has suffered significant damage. The vessel is now back on a mooring and I am waiting for the owners to decide what to do with it.

Net Zero

We have invited three different consultants to look at our area and put forward quotations for the work, we have received two and I am just waiting for the third before deciding on the next step forward.

Business plan for the port

We are putting together a plan, there is a meeting planned for late September with Council Officers to review the outline plan before we write up the detail. I will brief on this at the next Harbour Board. The business plan will also make a recommendation for a more realistic budget to be set against a too optimistic current target.

Harbour Revision Order

This will be the subject of an update at the meeting with representatives from Ashford's Solicitors. As discussed at the last Harbour Board meeting, and attached to this report for information, is a communication citing the reasoning and benefits as well as what a HRO will mean for everyone, to offer a focal point of contact, and manage expectation in advance of the consultation. The attached information was published on the City Council's weekly newsfeed in July 2023.

Topsham Ferry

The Topsham Ferry continues to be popular with walkers and cyclists although the numbers of passengers is starting to reduce now that the summer holidays have ended. We will continue to run the service until the end of September and then halt. The vessel is in need of some considerable maintenance and so we are planning to move it to the canal basin in October, lift it out and block it up on the west quay for the work to be completed.

Exeter Ship Canal

Since our last meeting, the canal team have been carrying out the typical summer duties of canal bank repairs and foliage control, weed cutting in the canal and the locking in and out of visiting vessels to the Turf. Visitors in yachts and larger craft are reluctant to go further up the canal because of the weed issue.

Weed in the canal is becoming a problem to navigation, exacerbated by the warm weather in the early part of the summer the weed is a hindrance to all leisure users as well as the moving of workboats and equipment. Going forwards we will definitely need to explore a better way of controlling weed, the numbers of rowers, kayakers and paddle-boarders is only going to increase.

Lock gate leaks

Some of the lock gates are leaking badly and in need of extensive refurbishment and repairs. The inner set of gates at the Turf are particularly bad and our engineer is consulting with a possible contractor on the most economical way to make those repairs.

Convoys and craning/boat storage over winter

The team are starting to work out the plans for this winter, at present there are three sets of dates for locking vessels into the canal from mid-October and at least two dates for convoys to travel up to the basin later in the month and early November.

Snark and Britannia

I hope that by the time we are at the Harbour Board meeting both these vessels will have arrived at the basin. I will brief fully after the weekend Historic Harbour events.

Anti-social behaviour

At Double Lock and Salmon pool Bridge, we do receive complaints about anti-social behaviour. This can be diving and swimming in the lock, which is not allowed for safety reasons or at worst the throwing of stones and flinging of mud onto the passing ferry, kayakers and paddle-boarders. We do not have the staff resources to police these areas but we do contact the local neighbourhood police teams to help. Fortunately, at the height of the summer this year there was slightly less of this bad behaviour because of the poor weather conditions.

Visitors to the service

The Lord Mayor of Exeter Councillor Kevin Mitchell and Consort visited the Buoy Store in August and had a tour of the river Exe, the Chief Executive of Exeter City Council Bindu Arjoon visited the canal office and had a tour of the site in August.

Staff

The service remains undermanned; much of the urgent and necessary works needed to keep the infrastructure going is unable to be done due to the lack of work force. The business plan that we are preparing will address this issue.

Grahame Forshaw