Environment Agency's draft National Navigation Strategy 2026 – 2031

British Marine's response to the above draft strategy was submitted via MS Forms on 15th October 2026 after seeking members' views.

Extract from British Marine's response to the survey questions

Our long-term vision is for "thriving waterways that continue to be valued for generations to come". Do you support our vision?
Yes

Do you support our strategic approach to be agile and adaptive, focussing initially on building strong foundations and delivering our core duties while we gather the evidence needed to make informed decisions and embed what works?
Yes

The strategy is ranked around four long term goals - rank them in importance (1 being most important – 4 less)

1. Open and reliable waterways
2. Modern and streamlined services
3. Stronger financial resilience
4. Adapt and innovative for the future

What would make our objectives clearer?
Whilst British Marine welcomes the objectives in the strategy which explains what the Environment Agency (EA) plans to focus on and the difference it aims to make, its real value will remain questionable without the provision of more specific action plans that cover "the what and the how". Most especially, our members would be more assured if the plan and objectives were accompanied by specific delivery times.

What else would you like to see within our goals? (Please also state within which goal(s): 'Open and reliable waterways' / 'Modern and streamlined services' / 'Stronger financial resilience' / 'Adapt and innovate for the future'
Modern and streamlined services (Goal 2) refers to stronger communications in connection to customers - for it to be of value this should be a two way process. Moreover, BM members are concerned that knowledge and expertise within the EA itself, such as intelligence captured and fed back to senior EA officers by lockkeepers is not adequately considered / utilized in planning and decision making. Communications both with customers and within the EA (including request for and use of feedback) should be improved.

Stronger Financial Resilience - the need to strengthen compliance through consistent checks and enforcement is all too apparent, for example our members estimate there are currently around 40 unlicensed boats moored along the Thames between Cookham and Marlow alone.

Objective 3b refers to making better use of the navigation estate and whilst British Marine supports this, it is strongly opposed to plans to introduce riverbed leases on moorings below Staines as this could severely impact the value and sustainability of marine businesses.

What parts of the Strategy do you particularly support?
British Marine strongly welcomes the EA's long-term vision for a thriving waterways and its objectives around delivery open and reliable waterways.
Realization of that will depend on improving the experience of recreational boaters using the EA waterways - see additional comments below.

If you could change one thing in the Strategy what would it be and why?

For it to include, or at least be accompanied by, actual delivery times.
British Marine welcomes the ambitions and objectives set out in this Strategy, it is mindful that real change will require the strategy being backed up by SMART delivery plans.

Additional comments

Critical to improving the experience of recreational boaters on EA waterways is action to reduce the number of repeated breakdowns of locks which are often followed by slow and expensive repairs. We would like to see far better planned maintenance across all EA waterways and for the Agency to be focused on maximizing income through more effective enforcement measures.

There is some frustration amongst the inland marine trade that its businesses are viewed as an easy target in helping address the shortage in funds, from higher license fees to the latest plans to introduce riverbed leases. And yet it is evident from the number of unlicensed boats on its waterways that the EA is losing income due to insufficient enforcement and failing to curb costs by not investing resources into planned maintenance.

There is also a question over whether the EA could make better use of its own expertise and whether it has sufficient organizational stability to deliver this laudable strategy. (We want to be confident that delivery will continue irrespective of any further staff changes.)

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