



Canoe England's Position Statement Voluntary Access Arrangements

In England there is a lack of clarity and certainty for access to and along inland waters for canoeing.

Where public access to inland waters has not been recognised Voluntary Access Arrangements (VAA's) are a means to gain access for canoeing. These arrangements exist on a few rivers and typically provide highly restricted and inadequate access.

Government research for canoe access to the Rivers Mersey and Waveney has produced principles and benchmark provisions for Voluntary Access Arrangements (VAA's); forming the basis of government policy for access to inland waters to be achieved by the voluntary route.

For consistency, Canoe England believes the research outcomes should be adopted as the national standard for VAA's. The research has demonstrated that it is possible to achieve:

- 365 day access supported by an Access Code outlining responsibilities of all water users.
- environmental protection as appropriate e.g. setting a mutually agreed minimum river level
- respect of flora, fauna, other uses and users
- identified sites for launching and landing
- publicity and information dissemination

Government policy is to make more provisions for public access to the outdoor environment. The research provides the evidence and foundation for wider access and public rights to inland waters. As an initial step Canoe England would seek to harmonize all existing and additional VAA's to the principles established on the Rivers Mersey, Waveney, Greta and Mole.

A VAA shall not invalidate or erode public rights should it be subsequently established such rights exist.

The statement fully takes into account:

- Research has revealed that prior to 1830, there was general acceptance the public had a historical right of access to inland waters. Legal opinions since have continued to diminish this position to create a lack of clarity and certainty for access to and along inland waters for canoeing.
- Canoe England and the Government are aware that many attempts to negotiate VAAs have been unsuccessful.

Canoe England policy is to continue:

- the campaign for a statutory right of access to inland waters in England
- to investigate the existence of, and seek the restoration of, historic rights of navigation
- making VAA information available to paddlers and advise that the decision whether or not to paddle a water, rests with the individual and not Canoe England
- advising paddlers to take fully into account the environmental conditions and paddle only when these are suitable

Canoe England notes:

- The Governments response to the omission of inland waters from the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 by commissioning of further research. This research produced Voluntary Access Arrangements (VAA's) on the Rivers Mersey and Waveney (2006) with a 365 day provision of access. The research has failed to produce VAA's on schemes for the Rivers Teme and Wear.
- The Ipsos MORI post implementation review of the Rivers Mersey and Waveney VAA's which found support for the arrangements was high, were generally well received; no disputes have been reported between river users, having more canoeists has actually enhanced the river experience for all, and businesses are beginning to take advantage of the Schemes.
- Similar 365 day access arrangements have been negotiated by Canoe England and endorsed by the Environment Agency, for the River Greta (2005) in Cumbria and River Mole (2006) in Surrey.
- The provisions for public access to the English Coastline in the Marine Bill.

Issue date January 2009