

## AINA CASE STUDY

### FAIRER, STRONGER AND MORE ACTIVE COMMUNITIES

#### River Thames Boat Project



*Richmond Venturer, seen here attending a river festival, was converted for use by the River Thames Boat Project and now offers thousands of people a chance to experience life on the water*

#### ***Trips along the Thames enable a range of community groups to experience life on the water***

The River Thames Boat Project is a charity which operates *Richmond Venturer*, a 26 metre Dutch barge converted into a community boat and floating classroom accessible to people with disabilities. It is equipped with educational facilities and runs day and residential courses tailored to socially excluded groups from London and the South East. Clients come from care, day centres and support groups for people with disabilities or mental health problems. Mainstream and special schools also use the barge.

*Richmond Venturer* was launched near Utrecht in 1908 but was much later brought over the channel by Sir Richard Branson for use on the Thames. In 1988 the Mayor of Richmond-upon-Thames proposed an 'environmental boat' for all to visit and learn about the Thames, and a philanthropist acquired her and sold her on to the Boat Project for just £1. Funds were raised to pay for conversion and a new engine and volunteers, accompanied by a television programme, fitted her out from cargo boat to community boat.

Trips are now organised from an office in Richmond and the boat navigates the Thames from Kingston up to Windsor and downstream to Putney. Staff consist of a full-time manager, a full-time skipper, a part-time administrator and a sessional teacher, plus 65 volunteers who crew and maintain the boat and help out with clerical work and special events. Volunteers range in age from 19 to 82, and 17% of clients came from minority ethnic groups reflecting the diversity of this part of south west London.

Much work is carried out for older and disabled people but a significant proportion involves education and training activities for children and young people, including a Key Stage 2 environmental education programme and respite trips for young carers. Clients are encouraged to participate in life on board, to steer the boat and assist with navigation or domestic tasks. Trips are designed to fit physiotherapy or occupational therapy and can offer mobility improvements, life skills, self-confidence and better self-esteem, e.g., stroke victims are encouraged to move, sit, eat, drink and stand. Staff report that participants talk about their trips on the Thames for many weeks afterwards.

Every year thousands of people of all ages and all backgrounds now discover the joys of the river and life afloat aboard *Richmond Venturer*.