

Boater briefing

Lock staffing levels 2024-25

6 September 2024

In March 2024 we issued a statement, 'Adjustment to assisted passage on the non-tidal Thames.' This briefing is intended to provide an update and further clarification.

What is the issue?

As the navigation authority for the non-tidal River Thames, the Environment Agency carries out a range of activities to support commercial and recreational boating on it. Our [Customer Charter](#) provides a summary. One activity is providing 'assisted passage' at our locks - providing staff supported by volunteers to help boaters pass through them in as hassle-free and efficient a way possible.

Although some of our locks may be more challenging than others, they are all safe to be operated on 'Self Service' by boaters themselves and remain open outside of our lock keepers' working hours for that reason, enabling navigation of the non-tidal Thames 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. However, we know how popular assisted passage is with boaters, so during the peak boating months we always aim to supplement our complement of 60 full-time lock and weir keepers with as many temporary 'seasonal' lock and weir keepers as our funding and other expenditure requirements will allow.

Although there has been some variation, for the last few years we have consistently been able to employ around 20 seasonal staff. This has enabled us to provide good levels of assisted passage across our 45 lock sites and plug most of the gaps which are unavoidably created by full time staff being on a non-working day (including as a result of being called out at night to operate weirs), on holiday or on sick leave.

This year, for reasons set out below, we have employed 10 seasonal staff. This means that our ability to provide assisted passage is reduced and boaters are having to operate locks themselves more often than usual.

What are the reasons for this?

The main driver is funding. The total amount of funding we have to work with varies from year to year and dictates how much we have available for the various activities we carry out. When deciding how to allocate our funding each year, our first priorities will always be maintaining our locks and weirs in safe and good working order and operating weirs to manage water levels, as these are the fundamental enablers of boating on the non-tidal Thames and our principal statutory duties. The cost of maintaining our 45 lock and weir sites, which have an estimated combined replacement cost of around £1bn, can vary considerably from year to year, depending on what work is required due to the age, condition and any damage sustained by these structures (impact damage by boats for example, or heavy objects such as fallen trees carried by flood flows in winter). Protecting our charge and commercial income is another vital activity. We will then seek to perform all other activities to the best standard we can with any funding we have left.

Our funding comes from a range of sources, including:

- boat registration charges - in order to simply keep or use a boat on the non-tidal Thames, the law requires it to have a valid registration and allows us to apply a charge
- charges for other services such as licensing 'accommodations' - jetties, pontoons etc owned by riverside homeowners and businesses - another legal requirement
- commercial income we generate ourselves from, for example, renting properties and land that we own, and fees for mooring at our sites



- charges made to other Environment Agency departments for operating weirs to manage water levels for reasons other than supporting boating - for drinking water supply for example. We charge our Water Resources department for this work, and they pass the charges on to Thames Water. We also charge our Flood and Coastal Risk Management and Environment Management departments for weir work carried out to manage flood risk and to sustain and protect the river environment

As the collective value of the above always falls far short of the minimum we need just to maintain and operate our locks and weirs, we also receive a substantial annual contribution from the budget allocated to the Environment Agency by the Department for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs. This amount also varies according to other Government and Environment Agency spending priorities.

Our 2024-25 funding position and other impacts

Overall funding from all sources for our work to supporting boating on the non-tidal River Thames has reduced. We are also having to spend more on maintaining essential infrastructure. The combined impact is less funding available for other activities, including employing seasonal lock staff.

We also have some vacancies in our complement of full-time lock and weir keepers and some of our team leaders (who we often call on to help provide assisted passage when necessary). Some of our full-time lock and weir keepers are also currently on long-term sick leave.

When will the situation improve?

We are looking for every opportunity to improve the situation, including getting support from other parts of our organisation for work usually carried out by Waterways team leaders, technical officers and staff in other roles, so they can spend more time if necessary helping to providing assisted passage. We will also continue to limit the amount of lock keepers on annual leave at the same time as we always do, and continue to invite lock staff due a day off to carry on working on overtime. We will also fill our full-time vacancies as soon as we can.

How can you help?

We appreciate that reduced levels of assisted passage can be a source of frustration, so thank you for bearing with us and continuing to respect our staff and volunteers - all of whom are working hard to provide the best service they can for you.

We will continue to publish our intended [lock service levels](#) on a weekly basis, so you know what level of service to expect. If you are an experienced boater, please be willing to help less experienced boaters through the lock when they are on Self Service. Please also remember that even when a lock keeper or other member of staff is on site, there are many activities which need to take priority over assisted passage, such as operating the weir to manage water levels, site safety checks and dealing with any safety issues or incidents, selling visitor licences or collecting mooring fees.

Thank you for your understanding.

River Thames Waterways Team

