

Boater briefing

Low flows in the non-tidal River Thames and impacts on boating: update 1

22 July 2022

Low flows - what to be aware of

Over the last 12 months we have received significantly less than average rainfall in the Thames Area. This has resulted in below average groundwater levels and below average flows in the rivers including the River Thames and its tributaries. The flow in the River Thames is much lower than we would expect for this time of year. Our latest [Water Resources Report for the Thames Area](#) has more information.

Water levels in the non-tidal River Thames may be shallower than you are used to in some places. With this in mind we are asking boaters to take extra care, especially immediately downstream of locks where the natural gradient of the river means levels are always slightly lower than elsewhere in the reach. Our lock and weir keepers or volunteer assistant lock keepers will advise you of any known shallow areas ahead of you.

You should also be prepared for restrictions in lock use, as explained below.

What we are doing to manage water levels for navigation

We will do all that we can to maintain water levels in order to provide our published [approximate maximum drafts](#) as published here. Please remember that the drafts serve only as a guide and cannot be guaranteed, especially during extreme weather conditions, such as we are currently experiencing. If you don't already know it, we strongly recommend you check your boat's draft and plan your cruising accordingly.

Where necessary, weirs are fully closed (many have been for some considerable time) and we are placing 'summer boards' on those that can accommodate them to raise their height. This helps to maintain water levels for a longer period. We are also carrying out additional checks for any leaks in our weir gates and we are ensuring they are repaired or staunched (plugged) where possible.

As you will be aware, every time a lock is used, a substantial volume of water is lost downstream. The more we can limit this, the more water is retained in the reach above, helping to maintain levels.

Due to very low levels in the area and the current weather outlook, we expect that we will have to introduce limits on lock useage during the day, and closures outside of lock and weir keepers' current hours of duty (9am until 6.30pm), at the following series of locks very soon:

- Pinkhill
- Eynsham
- Kings
- Godstow
- Iffley
- Sandford
- Abingdon.

Should this be necessary, we will issue a Harbour Master Notice to that effect. If you do not already, you can subscribe to receive these directly [here](#), where all active and pending notices are listed. Please be aware that it is an offence not to comply with the requirements of a Harbour Master Notice.



What you can do to help

Should we need to limit lock use, please plan extra waiting times at locks into your cruising plans and, if need be, plan to arrive at the final lock on each day's journey well before 6.30pm. Please also be patient and respectful towards our lock and weir keepers and volunteer assistant lock keepers who are doing an always-difficult job under extremely trying conditions. Remember, any restrictions we introduce are with the sole intention of avoiding, or at least delaying, additional restrictions at a later date. We will have a much better chance of achieving this if we all work together.

Where lock use is not restricted, please still share the lock with as many boats as you can and always let the lock keeper know if there are boats travelling behind you in the reach so that you can transit the lock together and avoid unnecessary water losses.

We all need to be as conservative as possible with our use of treated drinking water as much of this in our area is drawn from the Thames. We therefore also ask that you do not use drinking water from our locks or other sites to wash down your boat at the present time, including any used to fill bulk water tanks. Please use river water to wash boats with instead. We would also encourage you to consider not to use hoses or sprinklers at home to water your gardens, but to use watering cans instead - ideally filled from water butts if there is any water left in them. This is what we have asked our lock staff to do.

We all need to do our part to conserve water usage to ensure that we can continue boating for as long as possible during this prolonged dry period.

Thank you for your understanding and co-operation.

River Thames Waterways Team

