

Transforming how we manage boats mooring to our land

Background

Between 2013 and 2019 the Environment Agency ran a pilot scheme trialling the use of external contractors to manage use of its 21 designated short-stay moorings sites along the non-tidal River Thames.

On the whole the arrangements, which included the use of a company providing an online registration and payment system, worked well and proved popular with users.

The last contract with the external contractors involved in this pilot scheme expired in January this year, and since then all Environment Agency mooring sites - at our locks and at various locations in between our locks - have been managed by our own staff while we reviewed the learnings of the pilot scheme and considered the best long-term solution for ourselves as moorings provider, for our staff, and for river users.

We have now published an opportunity for external suppliers to express their interest in helping us manage our short-stay mooring sites once more:

<https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/b4f21472-39ec-4267-b79b-c6c74d421c04>

Building on the lessons learned

We no longer feel that we require support in managing short-stay moorings at our locksites, as these are being managed well by our lock and weir keepers. We are not aware of any issues associated with this being raised by our staff or by boaters.

However, we recognise that we do once more require support managing our short-stay moorings located inbetween our lock sites due to the volume of additional work which our patrol crews on the river - who are currently also responsible for managing use of our mooring sites - must undertake. These other tasks includes carrying out boat registration checks to ensure we protect the income we are owed, assessing planning applications for riverside developments, working with river event organisers to agree arrangements which protect the safety of participants and other river users, and supporting the emergency services in dealing with incidents including missing persons in the river.

All these tasks and many others must take priority and make it extremely difficult for patrol crews to visit mooring sites on a daily basis to monitor usage and swiftly deal with any abuses, which is our aim.

In addition, we are seeking external support in managing vessels mooring to land which we own but which we have not developed as designated mooring sites with the necessary infrastructure to facilitate this - mooring bollards, safe walkways, rubbing timbers etc.

At these 'free mooring' locations, we are happy to allow boaters to stay for up to 24 hours as part of the public right of navigation and at their own risk, but we do not actively encourage it or advertise these locations.

At some of these locations however, some boats have stayed for a considerable period of time and become a cause of concern for other boaters and the wider local community. We are taking enforcement action to ensure these boats vacate our land and are simultaneously looking to put arrangements in place, through one or more suppliers, to prevent further long term stays in future.

In doing so, we recognise that some boats provide homes for vulnerable people, and want any arrangements to ensure that any genuine cases are managed appropriately, with occupants supported to become compliant by working with other agencies - local council housing services, charities such as Shelter and organisations such as the Residential Boat Owners Association - rather than being criminalised for non-compliance. We will continue to work with partner agencies including local councils and the police to deal with any anti-social or criminal behaviour associated with boat occupants.

Our aim is that all boats mooring to our land are doing so in a compliant fashion - with our knowledge and consent and in line with any terms and conditions which may apply.

Next steps

The expression of interest advertisement expires on November 15. As of 12 November, 5 potential suppliers have expressed their interest in receiving tender documentation and we expect more to register their interest before the deadline.

All those expressing their interest will receive tender documentation setting out, in broad terms, our requirements. We do not intend to specify every detail as we want to give those specialist providers who have responded to our advertisement the flexibility to be creative, and to suggest to us what we hope will be market-leading solutions.

In doing so, we are acutely aware of the expectations of riverside communities, but also of our role and responsibilities as a navigation authority. This requires us to consider the expectations and requirements of all river users, as well as the wider riverside community. We will only implement a solution which we feel balances these sometimes competing demands, and are confident that we will be in a position to do that as a result of the fair and transparent procurement process we have underway.

Our aim is to issue tender documentation before the end of November and will allow companies between 6 and 8 weeks to develop and submit their proposals. By the end of January therefore, we hope to be able to appoint a successful applicant. This will allow sufficient time for new arrangements to be communicated and put in place in time for the traditional start of the new boating season at Easter.