

Coronavirus: Environment Agency update

The Environment Agency's priority is to protect people and the environment, and to support those we regulate during the coronavirus pandemic.

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From: Environment Agency and Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs



Our regulatory role

We have clearly set out our approach to regulation and enforcement during the coronavirus outbreak, and have published a series of temporary regulatory position statements (RPSs).

RPSs are nationally-applicable public statements that, provided certain circumstances and conditions are met, allow specified activity to be carried out without complying with a particular regulatory requirement. RPSs allow a degree of flexibility while still ensuring regulatory standards are maintained to protect people and the environment. They include clear conditions regarding standards that must be adhered to.

We have recently reviewed the ongoing need for the remaining COVID-19 RPSs. Some have been extended or replaced with new RPSs and some have now expired. Anyone using a COVID-19 RPS is responsible for checking their status.

We will continue to review the need for RPSs over the autumn and winter and will consider reinstating previously expired RPSs should the need arise.

Across the country, our teams continue to undertake investigations into environmental offending and prepare legal cases. We will consider the appropriate regulatory response to any unavoidable non-compliance in accordance with our policies and guidance on regulation and enforcement.

Coronavirus is not an excuse to operate illegally. We make clear in our approach to regulation and enforcement during the coronavirus that we expect operators to take all reasonable steps to comply with regulatory requirements using contingency plans to help them comply.

We're also continuing to work with the police to share intelligence about criminal activity and take action against those breaking the law.

We absolutely recognise the added financial strain coronavirus is putting on businesses and have written to all our customers to invite them to contact us to discuss payment options if they experience difficulties.

Applying for a permit

Permitting remains a business critical activity. We have robust plans in place which will enable us to respond to any capacity or workload issues emerging from either the pandemic or the UK's exit from the EU. For example, we have retained access to additional permitting capacity should it be required.

Overall Permitting Service performance has continued to improve and stabilise since September and the amount of work in our queues is now at typical levels for our service.

Our priority is to sustain our improved performance and implement improvements to our processes that result in quicker determinations of permits in 2021.

Our waterways

All navigation on our waterways should be limited to essential travel only. Travel on waterways and overnight stays are only permitted where the boat is your permanent residence or it is necessary for work, education or similar reasons. Those who live aboard their boats should limit their travel to access essential services and facilities. You should stay local where possible.

We will continue to support this national effort through these challenging times and will, as always, make protecting the safety of our customers and staff our top priority. Our staff will continue to work, managing and maintaining our waterways within the safe ways of working we have implemented over the past year. This may include some asset closures for maintenance. Our level of service may also be affected due to some staff who are vulnerable and need to shield. This means some tasks may not be carried out, including assisted passage at some locks, however wherever possible we will maintain essential services and facilities for those boaters who live aboard and who have to make essential journeys.

As in previous lockdowns, some activities using unpowered boats are permitted as part of your daily exercise, limited to once a day and within the Government guidance for exercise. Please check Government guidance and any specific guidance from national governing bodies, such as British Canoeing or British Rowing.

Water safety

As the government eases restrictions on movement caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the public has been warned to keep safe around rivers and canals. For advice about the dangers of wild swimming, follow guidance from police, Public Health England, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Their messages are clear: vigilance can save lives, and water-related accidents can be avoided by knowing how to stay safe.

The Environment Agency, which manages many locks, weirs and bridges across England, wants people to remember the hazards under the water in rivers while spending time with friends and family. People should not to jump or dive into water and stay away from weirs, locks and pipes. There can be unseen hazards in the water, cold-water shock can affect even strong swimmers on warm days and social distancing must be continued to protect the public, staff and boaters. Keep a look out for boat traffic. Boaters, especially on larger vessels, can find it very hard to spot swimmers.

Restarting your private sewage treatment plant

We have provided guidance to a range of industry bodies covering hospitality businesses including pubs, restaurants, hotels, camping and caravan sites and theme parks confirming the need for private sewage treatment plants to be made ready to be used again following a period of shutdown or low flows.

It comes as many pubs and other hospitality businesses re-open.

Sewage treatment plants use living microorganisms in biological treatment processes to remove pollutants from sewage effluent before it is discharged into the environment. The sudden restart of a sewage treatment plant or an increase of flows into it following a relaxation of COVID-19 business shutdown rules will very likely result in the discharge of poor quality effluent unless steps are taken by operators of sewage treatment plants to prepare them for increased flows beforehand.

Environmental impacts must be minimised when operators restart their sewage treatment plants. Those who discharge poor quality effluent risk being in breach of their environmental permits or the General Binding Rules if their discharges cause pollution of surface water or groundwater.

Operators need to take steps to ensure that their treatment plant is able to operate effectively as flows into it increase after their businesses reopen.

Those unaccustomed to restarting, should seek technical advice and support from:

- whoever normally maintains their sewage treatment plant
- the manufacturer or supplier of their treatment plant
- a competent sewage treatment plant maintenance engineer

As well as ensuring that their sewage treatment plant is ready to receive increased flows, operators must also check that any pre-treatment equipment such as fats, oils and grease (FOG) traps are ready to be used again. Operators should also avoid sending excessive amounts of chemicals and cleaning products to their sewage treatment plant as they can inhibit and harm biological treatment processes. They should also ensure any contaminated drainage from washing and cleaning does not drain to surface water sewers, water courses or groundwater or cause pollution.

Operators of premises served by their own sewage treatment plant wanting to dispose of waste beer should find other means of disposal. They should seek further guidance from the British Beer and Pub Association and refer to the waste hierarchy which is available on GOV.UK.

Notes:

General binding rules: small sewage discharge to a surface water
Guidance

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/general-binding-rules-small-sewage-discharge-to-a-surface-water>

You should get advice from a competent service engineer if you need help understanding:

- what treatment system you have
- what you are required to do under the general binding rules

British Water provides a [list of accredited service engineers](#). There may be other competent service engineers.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/small-sewage-discharges-in-england-general-binding-rules/general-binding-rules-for-small-sewage-discharges-in-england>