

# Navigation Committee

22 October 2020

Agenda item number 7

## Improving safety on the Broads waterways

Report by Chief Executive

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### Purpose

To consult members on proposed measures to improve safety on the Broads waterways.

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### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions and ‘unlocking’ of the Broads in June, which allowed the public to venture out and stay away from their home locations overnight, the Broads National Park has seen a massive upswell in visitors. This influx has been compounded by the shorter holiday season, usually starting in April, which was condensed into July, August and September.
- 1.2. Many of these visitors are new to the Broads, with some hire boat companies reporting that over 80% of their holiday bookings have been to families and groups who have not hired a boat here before. While this has been excellent news for Broads businesses, a

new audience brings many challenges and we have seen a lower level of experience in boat handling and an increase in poor behaviour.

- 1.3. The Broads is a relatively safe environment for the boating public, but this year in a short period there have been four fatal accidents, three in a very short period. On 19 June, a man returning to the boat he lived on missed his footing and drowned in the River Wensum in Norwich. On 19 August, a woman fell from a boat near the Great Yarmouth Yacht Station and was fatally injured under the boat. On 6 September, a man returning to a boat at Loddon Staithe fell in and drowned. On 15 September, a man was severely injured by contact with a propeller in the Lower Bure and later lost his life from his injuries.
- 1.4. These have been terrible accidents. As well as thinking about the families and friends of those who died, our staff who attended the scenes were deeply affected by the incidents, requiring support from the Authority. This season has also seen a high number of serious incidents and injuries, including broken legs and ankles from falls.
- 1.5. The Department of Transport's Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) is investigating the fatal incident on 19 August, and the Head of Ranger Services and I met them recently, as has our Head of Safety Management. The normal timescale for the publication of their findings is 7-9 months. While it would be wrong to comment on the individual incidents at this stage, or try to second guess what recommendations will be in the MAIB Report, the Authority has a duty regarding public safety on the water and needs to respond to the increase in poor behaviour on the water and to the issues that have emerged from the discussions with the MAIB Inspectors. The Inspectors have indicated that any actions taken by the Authority in advance of the publication of their report can be included within it.

## **2. Pre-visit training**

- 2.1. Last year, the Authority discussed the proposal that an online training package should be jointly developed with the hire boat industry, part-funded by the industry and with a financial contribution from the Authority of £20,000 funded by a small increase in tolls. This option was not actioned in 2019.
- 2.2. In the light of the incidents this year, this project is re-presented as an option, with the view to making it compulsory for most hirers to provide evidence that they have completed the training course before their holiday. Some hirers, such as those providing sailing boats, already require evidence of competence through a qualification.
- 2.3. This proposal has since been welcomed by the Broads Hire Boat Federation.

## **3. Handover procedure**

- 3.1. Questions have been raised about the adequacy of the handover procedure, particularly the following:

- Is it appropriate for a hirer to have the option not to have a river trial, on the basis of having made a previous visit?
  - Should more than one person be trained to operate the vessel?
  - Given the tidal nature of the system, is the duration of the practical training session offered sufficient to equip the recipient with the required knowledge to safely command the vessel?
- 3.2. These questions were all discussed at the recent meeting of the Boat Safety Management Group. It was agreed to take up these issues with the Broads Hire Boat Federation as a matter of urgency.

## 4. Hire boat licencing

- 4.1. The Broads Authority is the licencing authority for hire boat operators who supply vessels within the Broads executive waters. This relationship and our duties and powers have been a line of questioning from the MAIB following the fatality in August.
- 4.2. The licencing charges made by the hire companies allows the Authority to employ a Licensing Officer on a part-time basis. The role of this Officer is to audit the hire companies to ensure that compliance against the Hire Boat Code is maintained. The audit is heavily focused on safety (handover) and the information (awareness of tides, bridges, navigation marks, moorings) given to hirers.
- 4.3. In December 2019, the Hire Boat Code was put out for consultation. The proposal for changes to the Code considered the many advances in boat design, regulation and operation since the first Code was published in 2008, to make sure the licensing framework is fit for the future. The outcome of this consultation has been delayed due to Covid-19.
- 4.4. As part of the MAIB investigation is focusing on hire boat licencing and powers within the Broads Authority Act 2009 and the Code itself, the Authority will also carry out an internal review of its function as part of its continual improvement plan.

## 5. Tidal conditions

- 5.1. On a few occasions over recent years, the Ranger team has provided briefing sessions for hire yard staff at Great Yarmouth Yacht Station to familiarise those staff with the area and conditions. For the 2021 season, Rangers and Yacht Station staff will be available to host free training sessions for all boatyard staff involved in handovers. These will be held at the start of each season. Training will include first-hand experience of the tides and water flow (either from the shore or a short boat trip), a discussion on what boaters get wrong and, most importantly, what they need to know to keep safe. Training could also cover general issues such as speeding and wash around the whole Broads system. It could also extend to throwline training, which could be done in partnership with RNLI.

## 6. Single sex and young parties

- 6.1. For several years the Broads Beat team has carried out a 'meet and greet' service, when they are available at yards to speak to single sex crews before they start their holidays. Lists of single sex crews and young crews are provided by yards to both the Police and Authority ahead of these groups arriving. This 'meet and greet' service has proved a successful tool in helping such groups to understand the area, safety considerations and their potential impact on others using the area. However, it is time consuming and, on turnover days with multiple groups going out, not all can receive this briefing.
- 6.2. Single sex parties, often celebrating key events in their lives, are welcome on the Broads. They may well return to holiday in the area later in life. However, their behaviour is often influenced by the consumption of large amounts of alcohol which in itself can be dangerous but it can also be distressing and dangerous to other water users and residents who live adjacent to the rivers and Broads.
- 6.3. The Authority has a long term and successful relationship with the Norfolk Constabulary through Broads Beat, with the Authority making an annual contribution towards the costs of two officers. The Authority will review the situation with the Broads Beat officers.

## 7. Information and key messages

- 7.1. This season our communications team has been actively distributing additional safety messages through various channels including Authority social media accounts, website and press releases. Most recently this has featured specific advice relating to autumn boating. The 'infographic' style of messaging has resulted in good engagement from partners and the public.
- 7.2. The team is planning a comprehensive safety campaign for the 2021 season, aimed at people new to boating. This includes the filming of several short video clips on key safety topics such as planning ahead, mooring, bridges and tides and 'safety do's and don'ts which can be published online and promoted through social media. There would also be a specific film covering paddle sports, an activity that has proved so popular this year. Other initiatives include refreshing our boat safety copy within Broadcaster, producing downloadable posters, encouraging boatyards to send Broadcaster with booking confirmation information, and the creation of a series of boat safety stickers for children to collect. These initiatives will be funded from existing National Park grant budgets allocated to tourism and promotion.

## 8. Ranger services

- 8.1. Our Rangers and the staff at the Yacht Stations play a crucial role in advising and helping inexperienced hirers to enjoy the waterways safely. However, for the reasons set out below, our eight launches are not on patrol every day during the summer season. Typically, the launches are on patrol four days a week on average (NB. The

Breydon and Wroxham launches are out nearly seven days a week). While an increased number of Rangers would not have made any difference to the recent fatalities, it would have had an impact on managing the high levels of anti-social behaviour. With bookings at record levels, the Authority needs to consider whether it can afford to increase the Ranger coverage in the summer.

- 8.2. The Rangers' role is not just focused on patrolling (navigation). Usually their duties are split 60% on navigation functions and 40% on National Park work. Consequently, they have been funded 60% from Navigation Income and 40% from National Park Grant. This year because of the pressures on the waterways much more time has been spent on navigation activity (current estimate for the year 70% which will need to be updated with end of season data) and consequently the financial split will need to be adjusted at the end of the year to reflect work done. Patrolling and mooring checks were considered 'essential' work which we prioritised while most of the countryside tasks including educational visits and events were cancelled.
- 8.3. Their non-patrolling duties include carrying out countryside checks (each team has a land area to manage and check for safety – for example, Potter Heigham Staithe, Careys Meadow). They also have duties like tree and scrub maintenance, mowing Rights of Way (to meet the 40% countryside element), and carrying out the inspection of navigational marks and welfare checks on constant cruisers. Factor in adjacent waters, prosecution files or chasing up warnings and other blue book issues, and it all adds up to a considerable amount of time on tasks other than patrolling.
- 8.4. Rangers are contracted to work 37 hours a week, and have terms and conditions like all our staff. Their work is rostered and designed to allow maximum network coverage, but it has to factor in other duties, time off in lieu (accrued due to them not always being able to always finish on time if dealing with river issues), annual leave, sickness and escorts or other urgent duties, and allowing break periods and some weekends off.
- 8.5. Navigation income currently pays for 60% of a Ranger's time (Note: it will be adjusted at the end of the year to reflect actual time spent). This is prioritised on patrolling, but current funding does not afford cover on all launches over a 7-day week.
- 8.6. The support from our Volunteer Rangers is helpful, but it must be acknowledged that their role is limited:
  - Some volunteers are not active under Covid-19 mitigation rules because of their vulnerability;
  - They do not have the same powers or experience as a full-time Ranger and therefore are not required to function as a paid employee. They offer a reassuring presence; and
  - Volunteer Rangers enhance the Ranger service, they cannot replace it.
- 8.7. This year the volume and concentration of visitors has seen most parts of the network at peak levels, and the forecast is the same for next year. Indeed, next year will

probably be busier as the season will hopefully start in April and end in November as usual, giving high visitor numbers all season, extending the issues over a longer period and further stretching the existing Ranger team and the Quay Assistants.

- 8.8. An important part of the Ranger role is following through on severe breaches of the byelaws, with prosecutions in the Magistrates Court for offences such as speeding. Preparing a case file to the standard expected by the Crown Prosecution Service can take a week of a Ranger's time. Although prosecution is used only in the most serious offences, there are currently 38 outstanding prosecutions, amounting to more than a Full Time Equivalent Ranger's time. One option which is proposed is to have a Ranger dedicated to this task, enabling the rest of the team to spend more time out on patrol.
- 8.9. Rangers are the first line of assistance for most visitors, dispatched via Broads Control to deal with all manner of issues. Due to working hours we need to stagger when we have Rangers out. In the height of summer when there are 12 hours of daylight, boating traffic starts at first light and continues until 9pm-10pm. Many incidents (speeding, anti-social behaviour, untolled craft) often happen after 6pm when some users think Rangers have logged off.
- 8.10. A Ranger patrol is like a Bobby on the beat; it reassures many and its visible presence can often deter bad behaviour. If the objective was to have seven days a week 'Ranger in launch' service, we would need to increase the Ranger numbers during the peak season (April to November) by four seasonal employees. They could be contracted to work afternoon through to evening shifts, extending the cover both in terms of the number of days and the hours.

## 9. Financial implications

- 9.1. The estimated cost of the Authority's contribution to the interactive online safety training is £20,000, though this relies on contributions from the industry to meet the full cost. The costs of the additional Ranger to manage prosecutions and follow up on the Boat Safety Scheme, and four additional Seasonal Rangers, would be £110,000 in the first year. The funding of these items is covered in the following report on tolls for 2021/22.

## 10. Risk implications

- 10.1. There are significant risks to the public and the Authority if we and the Broads hire boat companies do not respond to the concerns raised in this report.

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[Broads Plan](#) objectives: 4.3