

# Water Points

Researchers **Ruth Sylvester** and **Helen Underhill** speak with boaters around the network to find out about the provision of sanitation services on our waterways

**A recent 'Who's on London Boats' survey conducted by the Canal & River Trust found that, second to additional moorings, more water and Elsan points were the improvements boaters want prioritised.**

And boaters of all stripes will know the consequences of an empty water tank, full toilet cassette, or chewed-up pump-out card. The functionality of these services is the backbone of a healthy and happy life, as WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) research has shown in countries around the world.

As two water researchers, one of whom has been a liveaboard for the past six years, we decided to investigate service provision on the waterways by speaking with boaters across England and Wales. Although they comprised a mixture of leisure and liveaboard boaters, with and without moorings, some common themes emerged: the condition and frequency of service points, the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns, disparities between London and the rest of the network, reliance on facilities beyond those provided on the canals, seasonal considerations, and anxiety about increasing pressure on, and loss of, facilities.

## WATER PALAVER

The time people had available, their location, and the technology on their boat all combine to influence their experience, as well as the quality and quantity of service points. For example, a couple working from home and continuously cruising had the time and energy to fill up with water and dispose of waste regularly, and if they entered a



stretch of canal with less frequent service points, they were prepared. Meanwhile, a single person working full-time away from their boat, with significant pressures on their time and energy, struggled to cope if their nearest service point broke down.

Making use of facilities beyond the waterways was regularly mentioned in interviews (particularly the shock people had when suddenly trying to cope onboard during Covid lockdowns). Examples included: waiting to use the toilet at work, showering at the gym and washing clothes at friends' houses. Most took 'Navy showers', where you turn the water off when you are lathering soap or shampoo. This is an effective means of saving water, although some people longed to have a relaxing shower, not a purely functional one.

Conversely, some boaters were appreciative of this enforced austerity. As one boater told us, "I'm very aware and conscious of the interconnections that I have in life to

the services that I use, compared to when I lived in a house." Several interviewees expressed gratitude for the current level of canal-side services: "It's a means to continue travelling," one told us. "It's a means to move. I feel very lucky that the technology is there to live a very comfortable lifestyle in comparison to how boat families would have had it when they were travelling in the 19th and early 20th centuries."

**Top left:** A CRT water point mooring with a message for work boats.  
**Top right:** A drinking water point.  
**Above left:** A narrowboat water tank.  
**Above right:** Taking on water.

## WHO IS LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE?

In the UK, those living in standard households on land receive 24-hour services to their homes that are protected (by the 1999 Water Industry Act) from being disconnected. The responsibility for providing high-quality services is held by the water and sewerage companies. However, they are not required to provide services to non-customers, and so canal boaters fall outside of their remit, along with other groups such as van dwellers and traveller communities.

Waterway authorities, such as the Canal & River Trust and Environment Agency, bear the legal duty to provide water and sanitation services on the canals and rivers of England and Wales "to such extent as they may think expedient" (Transport Act, 1:10). The specifics of this obligation are left to the discretion of the authorities.

**"UNSURPRISINGLY, BLOCKED ELSAN DISPOSAL POINTS WERE A COMMON COMPLAINT"**

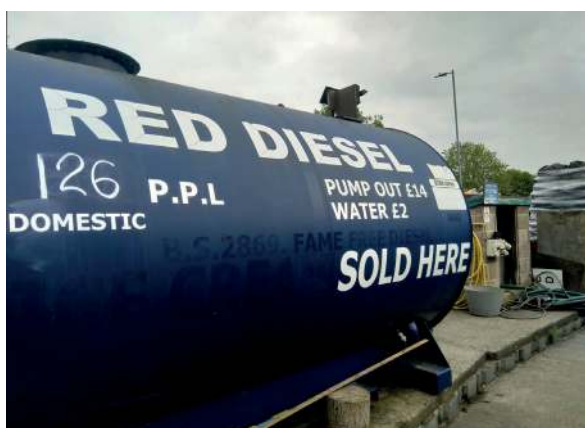


**Top:** Filling up with water.  
**Top right:** No mooring at this water point.  
**Above:** Rubbish disposal is also an issue for boaters.

**WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE...**

Installing water filtration systems on board is becoming more common, driven by boaters' desire to take water security into their own hands. One boater, Penny, lives onboard with her husband and children, who are all disabled, in large part due to housing costs. Because of school and work, they use the boat as a base, not for cruising, and they used to collect water by walking up the towpath to the nearest service point – close to 2 miles pulling a garden trolley. During the Covid lockdowns, however, her husband was unable

**Below:** Canalside pump-out and water facilities.



to go out and she could not carry the water that distance. Their engine would regularly break down and eventually it became impossible for them to access the water point. "I decided enough was enough really, and I created a water filtration system from scratch," she says.

She got the idea from a boater support group and researched the different stages involved online. Now her family filters canal water for all their water needs, except drinking and, although this is sufficient in many ways, there is an underlying concern about the quality: "There's still this thing in the back of your mind that you're testing for a lot of stuff but you might not be testing for the one thing that's damaging you."

Penny described how the process of seeking help from different authorities led her to feel that they slipped through the cracks between disability services, council, housing benefits and navigation authorities' responsibilities. Startlingly, the most helpful service they received was from a supermarket: "I contacted Tesco and they have been delivering our drinking water ever since, which has been wonderful."

**TOILETS**

Unsurprisingly, blocked Elsan disposal points were a common complaint. Maintenance and cleanliness at services are clearly issues but overall responsibility is harder to pin down. Some people see a collective responsibility to take care of the available facilities, while others complain of a lack of attention from CRT. More than one interviewee explained that Elsan points were a factor in their choice to change systems: "[Cassette toilet disposal was] the worst thing I've ever had to deal with."

Most people don't mind others using the facilities, but issues arise when they are vandalised or left unclean. Safety is also a concern for some, and one female solo boater described feelings of uncertainty when approaching urban services.

**A FRUGAL FUTURE?**

With drought being declared throughout the UK this summer, the importance of being water wise is becoming urgently apparent to non-boaters. Encouraging customers to adopt more sustainable practices is a pressing target in the water industry but is already part of the waterways lifestyle.

It is clear that boaters lead the way on water saving habits. Most will be familiar with monitoring visiting friends or family who don't understand water saving behaviour. Responses to the aquatic *faux pas* range from gentle bemusement to outrage: "They leave the tap running while they're cleaning their teeth!"

One boater told us, "I actually think it's a good thing as a human to know the consumption of water that you use, to be wary and to save water. I'm proud that my son understands not to waste water."

**SANITATION SITUATIONS**

Our research highlights the importance of water and sanitation in the daily lives of boaters. Although there are many commonalities, people's experiences, and impressions of services vary greatly depending on their location, their boat set-up, and whether or not they have a mooring.

Living on the water (whether it's a week's cruise or a permanent lifestyle) requires a certain amount of time, energy and manual skills to keep on top of 'boat chores'. Several boaters told us that this kind of work is simply part and parcel of living aboard: "It's just something to be 'got on with', no more of an inconvenience than finding my own electricity or transporting groceries along the towpath."

While many people occasionally experienced water and sanitation issues, such challenges can have very serious for those with mental and physical health issues. "My partner is 74 now and he is mobility disabled," one lady told us. "I am de-facto his carer. So running out of water and having to go five or six hours somewhere else to get water, you know, it's a big deal."

The old joke about boaters loving to talk toilets does, though, speak of a positive aspect of these challenges – sharing stories is one way that people on the cut bond, and learn from each other.

**HAVE YOUR SAY**

If you'd like to help shape this research and share your story, visit [waterdweller.com](http://waterdweller.com).