



**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water



# Boating & mooring research: report of findings

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# Background & objectives

Boating in London has become increasingly more popular over the last decade. It is estimated that more than half of the boats on London's waterways are used as a permanent home, a figure which has doubled from around 2,000 in 2010, to 5,000 in 2018.

While the surge of interest and enthusiasm for boating in London offers many benefits and opportunities for local communities and businesses, it does present some challenges for boaters and communities in London.

The Canal and River Trust plan to identify some sustainable solutions to the problems caused by overcrowded waterways.

To move forward with these plans, the Trust commissioned DJS Research to carry out research to further understand the experience, motivations and challenges faced by liveaboard boaters.

## The objectives for this research are to:

- Understand who lives aboard in London; their life context, background and motivations for moving aboard
- Bring to life the day-to-day experience of boating in London; how they feel about their circumstances, challenges faced, the impact of Covid on their lives, and any solutions they feel would help them overcome some of their problems
- Explore the Trust's role in supporting boaters, the extent to which boaters feel supported by the Trust, and what the Trust could do differently to help boaters





# Methodology & sample

1

Two-week online community with liveboard boaters – ethnographic 'video diary' activities, forum discussions and polls

**44 participants invited. 37 were 'active' in the community**

- 5 moorers (previously continuous cruisers)
- 32 continuous cruisers

2

**Series of Zoom and telephone depths with:**

- 20 boaters
- 4 Boating Organisation representatives

The sample of participants who took part included a mix of living situations, socio-economic groups and length of time on the boat.

## Living situation

- 19 live alone
- 11 live with partner/spouse
- 7 live with partner/spouse and child(ren)

## Socio-economic group

- 25 ABC1
- 12 C2DE

## Length of time on boat

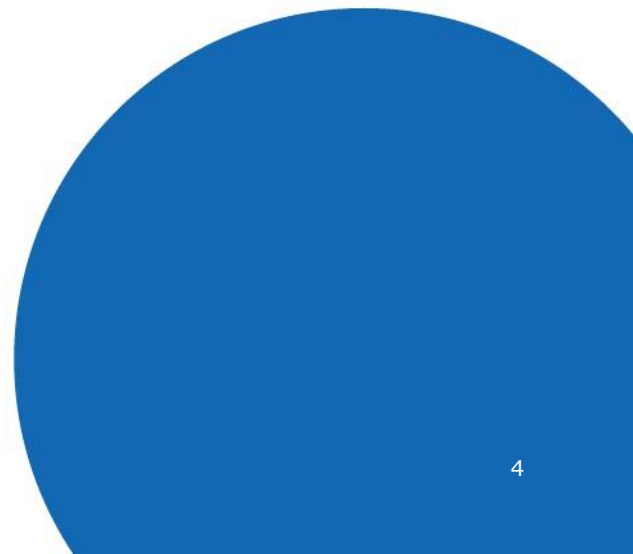
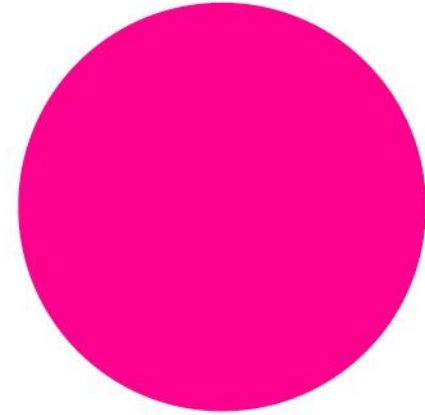
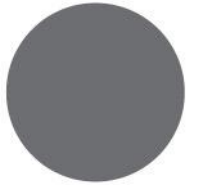
- 12 up to 3 years
- 10 between 3–5 years
- 15 more than 5 years



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# Insight 1:

Affordability combined with a desire to enjoy an alternative lifestyle are key motivations for living aboard a boat in London.





# Boaters often desire a certain lifestyle along with a more affordable way of living

## Motivations

internally driven

alternative lifestyle

sense of freedom & affinity with nature

affordable way of living

experience of renting



## Connecting with nature & finding a way to live affordably are frequently mentioned by boaters...

"Being more connected to nature. I grew up in the countryside, so I like the space and air...London is just an onslaught on the senses, its high stress, and when you're near a river or canal, it's like a loophole way of living close to nature while in London."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"It's a creative response to a housing crisis...and not feeling able to afford adequate housing...it wouldn't last long without some enthusiasm for the lifestyle."

**Female, Moorer, Live with Partner & Children**

"I was looking for a new adventure and a different lifestyle, something more relaxing, London can be so stressful and the boat life is more relaxing and more in contact with nature, also it's a great way to meet people."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**

"We also could not afford to buy a flat/house in most places let alone in our home city of London. This felt like an affordable way to own our own home (something I thought might not happen for me)."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner & Children**



# New circumstances or knowing someone with a boat can prompt the decision to move aboard

Prompts to move aboard

family & friends  
with boats

receipt of inheritance

inability to work and pay rent

savings or loans used to  
purchase boat

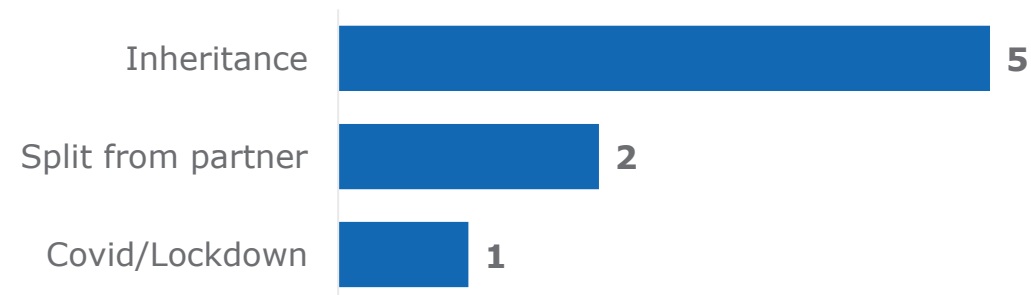


"I did so by buying the boat with some help from some inheritance money from my grandparents."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"I separated from my wife about 18 years ago. We kept the house we bought together and I had a flat...over time, my share of the house was reducing. A two bedroom flat in Hackney was quite expensive, as was renting. So I had a friend who had a narrowboat, and I often walk the River Lea. So I bought a boat to live in that has two bedrooms."

**Male, Moorer, Live Alone**





# Advice is often sought from other boaters & the London Boaters Facebook group

- Amount of research done before the purchase varies
- First time on boat always a learning curve
- Moorings not an option: deemed unaffordable, hard to obtain and/ or unable to provide the lifestyle



"I just knew the two options and I couldn't afford the mooring. If you're going to pay for a mooring in London you might as well pay for a flat."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**

"I spoke to one boater initially and they told me the basics of how it all worked. A good resource was the London Boaters Facebook Group, because there's all sorts of useful posts, people posting about boating all the time...speaking to people who owned the boat sales."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

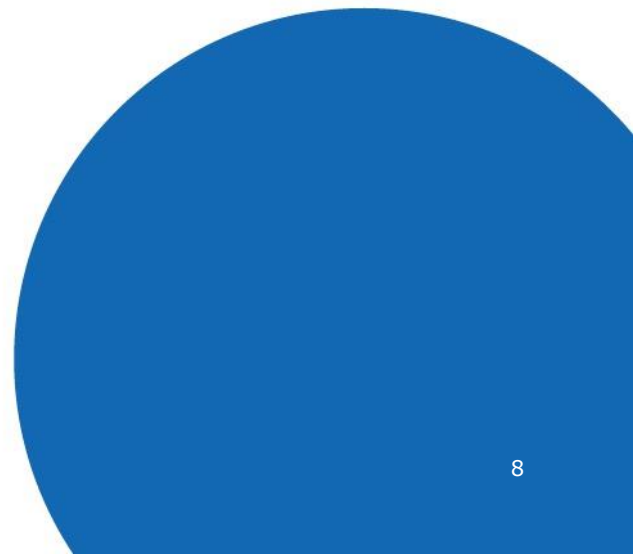
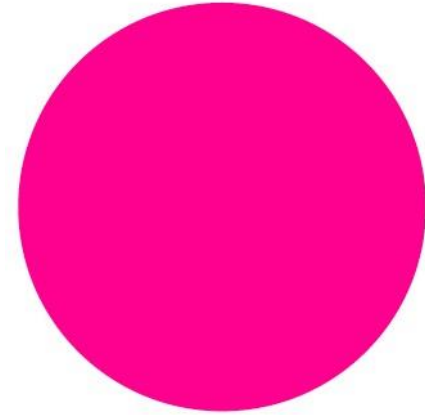
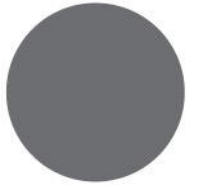
"Permanent mooring; for a start I didn't want to stay in one place... this to me negated the whole idea of being on a boat in the first place."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

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## Insight 2:

The majority of boaters are satisfied with their lifestyle choice, although it is noted there is a high churn of boaters in the first year of living aboard.







# On the whole, boaters are satisfied with their lives & enjoy the peaceful aspects of boating

## Best parts of living on a boat:

- close to nature
- being on the water
- noticing seasons and wildlife
- beautiful views

"My favourite part about living on a boat is being able to see the water flowing and having the feeling of being part of that same flow. I found it very appealing, almost like a therapy. It allows us to escape from our busy lives."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

## Boaters share videos of the views surrounding their boat, nature being a frequent theme



"I adore spending so much of my time outside and connecting with the basic essentials needed to live life."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"Being closer to nature - you are much closer to nature than in a conventional house - you see and hear the weather daily you are effected by the seasons much more, you see birds and trees and feel much closer to them."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**



"Being in nature and surrounded by water is really beautiful and enjoyable, and is a great source of inspiration for my artistic practice."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**



# Freedom, sense of community and ownership are other reasons why boaters feel positive about living aboard...

## Other positive aspects of boating

freedom to explore

seeing different areas

sense of adventure

sense of community

sense of ownership

financial benefits

"I have discovered so many new places and visited areas that I would never have visited before (or even had known existed) if it wasn't for the boat. It has given me a wide knowledge of different areas and means I am always finding new walks, new pubs, new restaurants, new journeys into work etc - there is no monotony."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner**

"I also really value the boating community and making friends and connections with people in different places and the transient nature of this."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live  
with Partner and Children**

"Owning my own place. Having the security and being able to change things as I need whereas in my last flat I wasn't even allowed to put a nail in the wall."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live  
with Partner & Children**



# Not all boaters can endure the hardships of living aboard & many 'give up' within a year

**Boaters must be relatively practical and willing to live without home comforts...**

**...our sample is likely to be skewed towards more experienced boaters, who are happier with the lifestyle.**

"I think people have an idealistic view of the waterways and have no idea what it's like."

**National Bargee Travellers Association**

"You need to be able to deal with toilets, water...be ready to be hands on, not 'Oh I need to call somebody.'"

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**



"It can be cheap, but you do away with convenience. Have to spend lots of own time maintaining your lifestyle, getting water, gas, coal, moving the boat, which isn't part of what is sold to people when they first decide to do it. This is why I think lots of people stay on average eighteen months."

**The Inland Waterways Association**

"If you know what you're getting into it's a real awesome decision. People who make it through that first year, tend to be the ones who have a baseline technical understanding, know what it's like to move every few weeks, have jobs and account for that, and like the toil."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**



# Movement patterns are largely determined by the rules, convenience & proximity to green spaces

## Decision to move determined by rules and need to re-fill water tank

### Reasons for mooring in certain areas

- easier access to work, school or transport links
- closer proximity to green spaces
- amenities (water, fuel, cafes or shops)



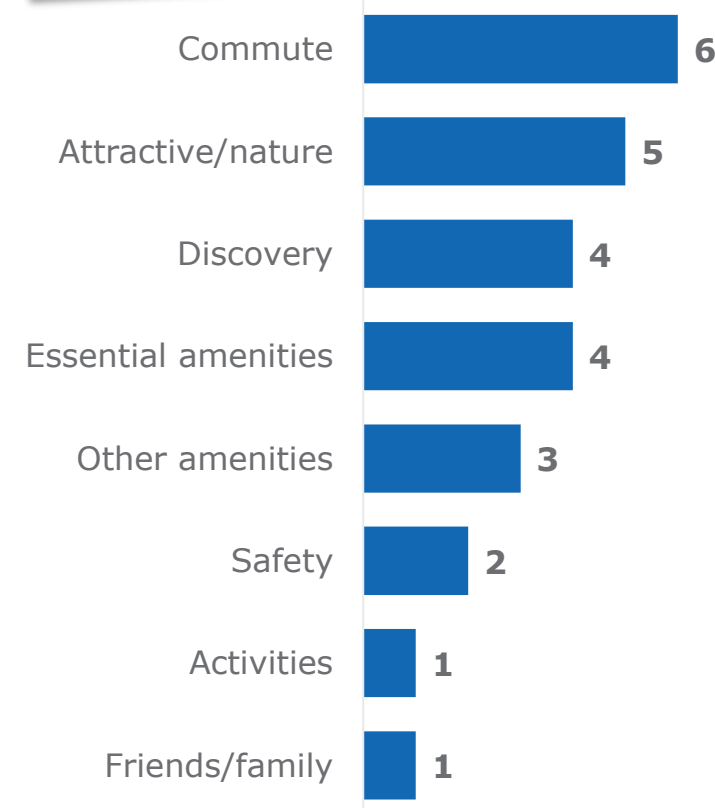
"I make a conscious effort to do my mileage and move progressively each time and not return to the same spot for a few months at least."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"Central locations like Angel and Granary Square are brilliant and we regularly moor there, cycling and walking distance for school and access to central."

**Female, Moorer, Live with Partner & Children**

### Reasons for mooring in certain areas





# At the same time, continuous cruisers often moor up wherever they can find a space

## Movement patterns

- many travel from East to West (or vice versa) over a year, then turn around
- mooring wherever there is a space
- 'swapping' practiced between boaters

**Non-compliance often occurs when families need a closer school commute**

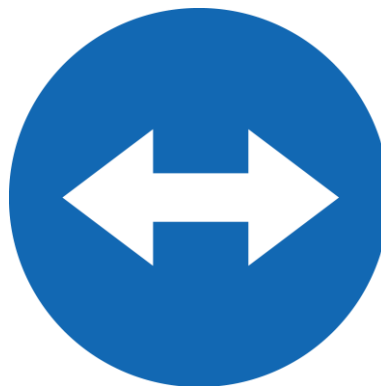


"We really need to be within a certain area for aspects of our life... I remember my son getting incredibly anxious because he felt like he was too far from the school."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**

"They are forced to move occasionally, so they all sort of move. You can go to a private website where you can exchange your mooring with somebody else on the other side, so the CRT don't come after you. A lot of them try to be as legal as they can be by moving every fourteen days."

**National Association  
of Boat Owners**



"I go from East to West without turning around until I've reached the end."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**



# Strong community yet there appears to be some tension between 'old school' & new boaters

**help each other out  
reliable Stronger  
during Covid**

"People do look out for each other and if there is a problem they would help you definitely."

**Female, Continuous  
Cruiser, Live with Partner**

"I can't think of another way of living where that would happen...everyone's living in this chaotic pattern and every now and then you come together... a temporary community that exists only for a few weeks."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner**

**Boater community: negatives**

**Heated discussions  
on London Boaters  
Facebook group**

**New Facebook groups  
formed as a response  
to hostility**

"Those who are in it because it's a cheap way of living aren't really involved in the community."

**The Inland Waterways Association**

"There's London Boaters, then another one was set up in response to a lot of sarcastic comments, called New London Boaters, to try and weed out the people that were just...if a novice asked some questions they would get some sarcastic responses."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

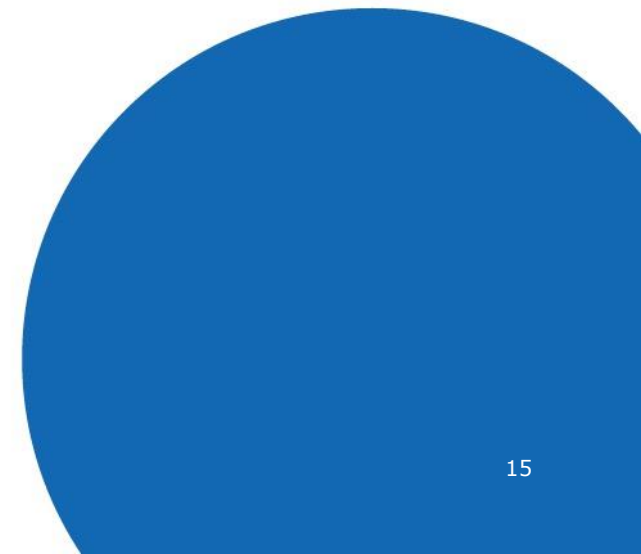
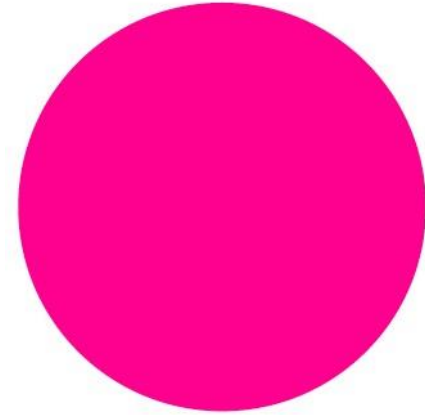
"In person boaters are very friendly. Online there's a lot of sass and grandstanding."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

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## Insight 3:

High levels of crime on towpaths is the greatest challenge for boaters; with moorings just one of a number of logistical considerations.





# Boaters are anxious about high levels of crime on towpaths

## Challenges

Theft, boat break-ins & muggings common

Worry about leaving boat for too long

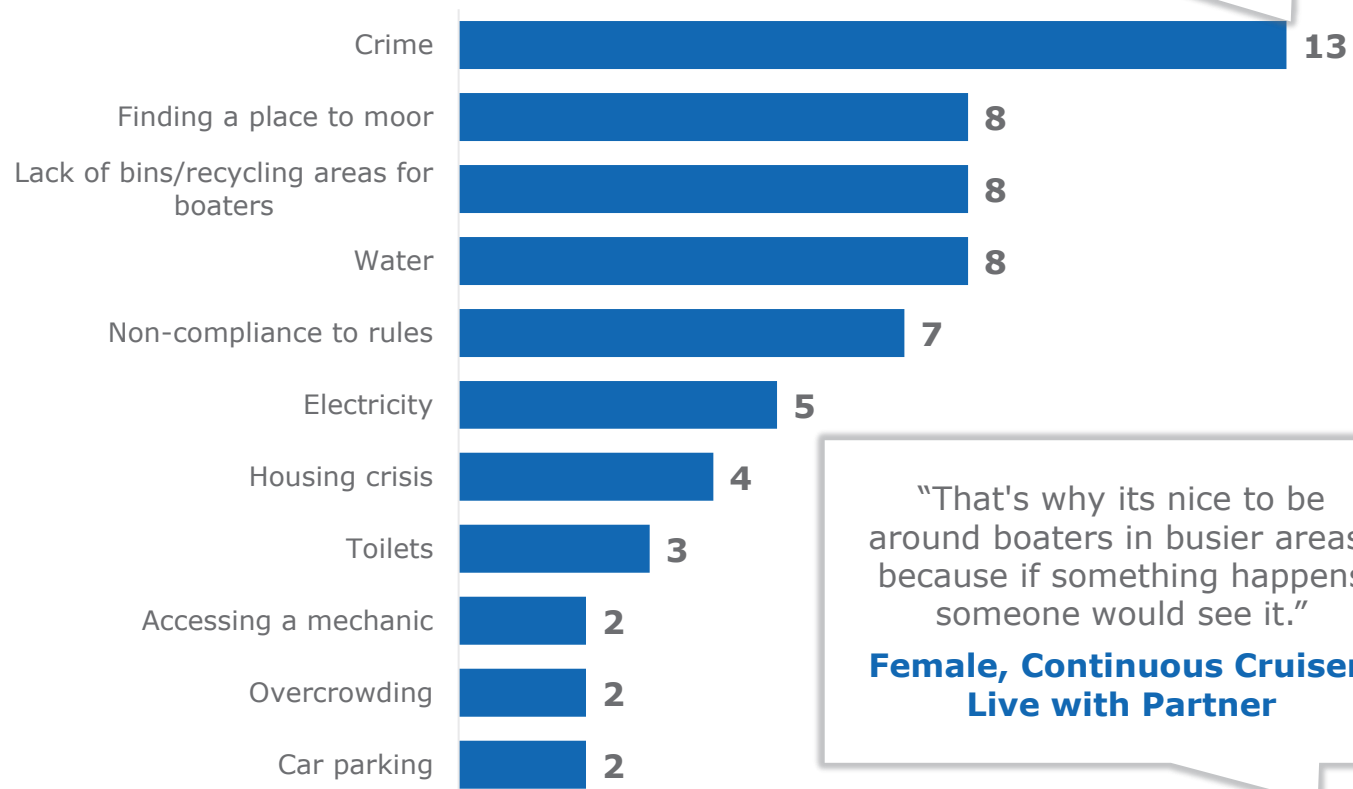
Sense of insecurity

Police don't attend crime

Boaters avoid mooring in crime hotspots



"I was broken into a year and a half ago on River Lee. Took all of my jewellery boxes and everything, all of my sentimental stuff gone... that really unsettled me."  
**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**



"That's why its nice to be around boaters in busier areas, because if something happens someone would see it."  
**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**





# Finding mooring is a struggle but also 'part of the lifestyle'

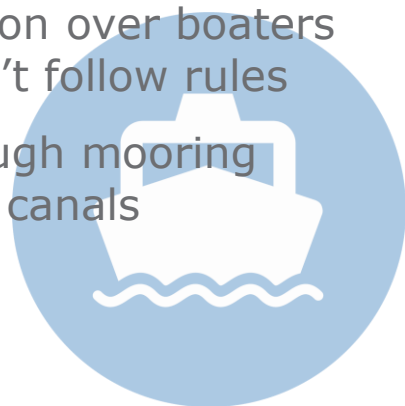
## Challenges

### Agreement that waterways have become busier and mooring is difficult

Central London tactically avoided by some

Frustration over boaters who don't follow rules

Not enough mooring rings on canals



Finding a space to moor also accepted as a part of being a continuous cruiser

### Limited bins & recycling facilities

### Long queues at water points

(exacerbated by maintenance issues)

### Limited toilet disposal facilities

"I try and avoid central London now as it's getting harder to find somewhere."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"We've all witnessed boaters who succeed in spending six months in their favourite location by feigning engine trouble."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"I wish that there were more high pressure tap points for easy water fill."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"There is a massive lack of bins along the towpath, and people are leaving rubbish everywhere."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**



# Movement restrictions during lockdown have strengthened the community & sense of security

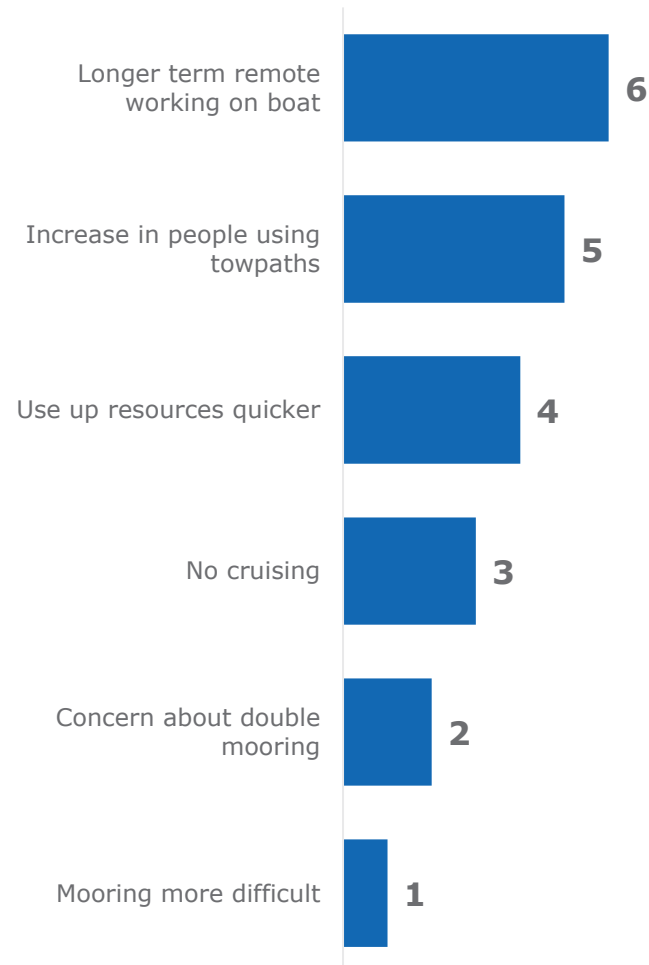
## Impact of Covid

More people on boats remote working

Government restrictions on movement means more people staying in same place

Miss the change of scenery

Longer-term working from boats may relieve pressure on waterways



"It has been a nice break from moving for a while and enjoyable to build more boater connections and have time to do all the boat jobs."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**

"I wonder if there will permanently be more people working from home on the canal now, which will mean better security in winter as people are more likely to be around."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"I think we will see more people cruising outside of the cities now a lot of companies have seen it possible for their staff to work from home."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**



# During Covid-19 resources have diminished quicker & towpaths have become too busy

## Impact of Covid

### Negative impacts:

Water, electricity & heating used up quicker

...and greater demand for accessing (already scarce) amenities

Busy towpaths

Few willing to double moor



"The remote working has been a struggle on boat resources in the winter with heating and electricity being used so much more."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner**

"My partner was recovering from a major operation (one of the last before lockdown) and it was incredibly stressful to see hoards of people passing our home by the second."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**

"Since Covid, mooring seems a bit more fraught because so few people are moving, and you're never sure a boat will 'allow' you to double moor because they may be isolating (or saying they're isolating)."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**



# Suggestions: Clearing parts of the canal and adjusting the rules could help create more mooring space

## Solutions

- ✓ **Additional mooring rings for canals**
- ✓ **Clear build up of materials at edges of canals**
- ✓ **Remove sunken boats**
- ✓ **Re-fill canal with water frequently**
- ✓ **More short-term moorings (1-2 days) in central London**

- ✓ **Relax rules outside M25 (from 2 to 3-4 weeks)**

"Would be helpful to have some properly policed 2-3 day moorings so hopefully you'd be able to find some spots in the busier places."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**



"The areas with build up of stuff on the edge of canal need to be cleared and made into mooring spots. Clear the sunken boats which are taking up space. Also where there is concrete towpath, why not turn it into mooring space."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

"Changing the two-week rule to four weeks outside of the M25 may have an interesting effect. Personally I'd be tempted to spend a few months of the year out of London and commute in to work."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**



# Suggestions: Tighten up enforcement processes to ensure boaters move on...

## Solutions

- ✓ **Ensure boaters can't get around rules**
- ✓ **Follow through with charges**
- ✓ **Greater staff presence for frequent monitoring**
- ✓ **Tow overstaying boats**
- ✓ **Develop code of practice**

"I do think there could be ways to tighten up the processes to stop the small number of non-movers that give the rest of us a bad reputation."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

"There are signs that say 'we will charge £25 for overstaying', but they don't actually follow through with these charges."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner and Children**



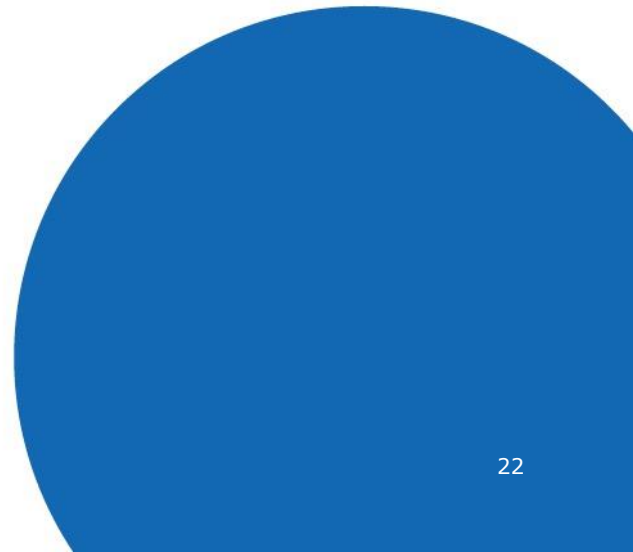
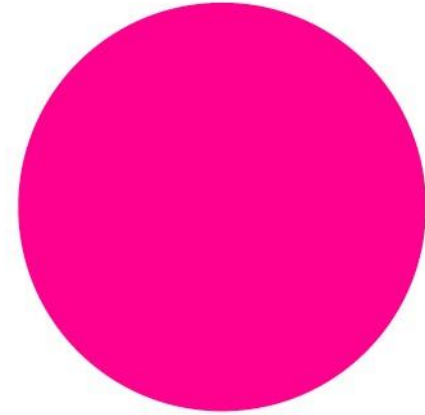
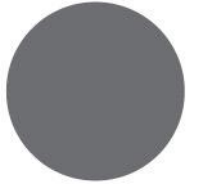
"Forcing people to move who can't afford to repair their boat is obviously dangerous territory. But equally you have ropes, and could get a tow."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

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## Insight 4:

On balance the majority of boaters are positive or neutral towards the Canal & River Trust, but understanding and expectations of the Trust's role is varied and clarity is needed.





# Perceptions of the Trust's role varies and clarity is sought

## Support wanted from the Trust

Maintain and manage the waterways

Duty of care to boaters



## Specific concerns:

Continuous cruisers fear they will be squeezed out in favour of permanent moorers.

Vulnerable boaters face anxiety about losing their home due to new rules or increased charges



**Unambiguous guidance on the scope of the Trust's role and responsibilities is sought**

"Its that constant anxiety about suddenly your home not being able to be your home. Or they put the fees up in a big way."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"I do feel slightly that we're down on their list. As a boater in London I feel like we're a problem for them to solve."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live with Partner**

"If they change the rules, it needs to be clearer with big time frames so people can adjust."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**



# The Trust appears to be taking on the responsibilities of a housing charity

## Wider housing crisis is an underlying theme

- Discrepancy between boater expectations and legal limitations
- Misconception that the Trust should support people, not waterways
- New responsibilities for housing
- What is the Trust's role?



"People live on a boat because they have no choice, its the house crisis that drives a lot of young people onto boats. If I was twenty and stretched for money I might end up on a boat."

**Lee & Short Cruising Club**

"CRT have been left to deal with a housing issue."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser, Live Alone**

"They're not a housing charity and if they behaved like a housing charity, they would end up in prison."

**The Inland Waterways Association**





# Feelings towards other organisations are largely neutral, with the National Bargee Traveller's Association receiving the most positivity

## Other boating and waterway organisations mentioned:

- National Bargee Traveller's Association
- River Canal Rescue
- Waterways Chaplaincy
- The Inland Waterways Association

[River Canal Rescue] "They also offer servicing with engineers all over the country, it gives you peace of mind."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live Alone**

[Waterways Chaplaincy] "They are really good...I was trying to apply for housing benefit for my last boat and they were really helpful."

**Male, Continuous Cruiser, Live  
with Partner & Children**

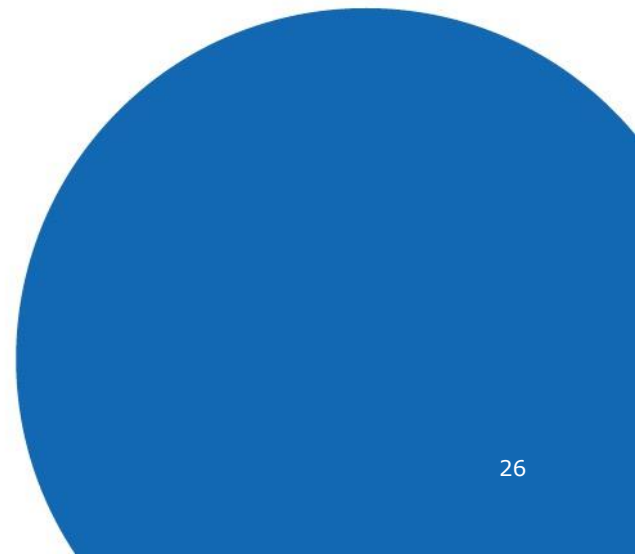
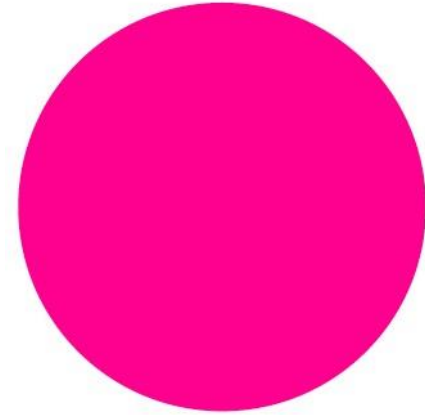
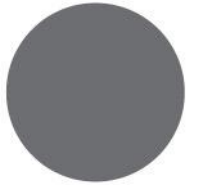
[NBTA] "You genuinely feel like they've got your back. They're not against anyone's choices in life. I actually feel like they care whereas I feel the Canal and River Trust are a lot of PR."

**Female, Continuous Cruiser,  
Live with Partner & Children**



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# Conclusion & recommendations





# Executive summary

## Liveaboard boating in London attracts a diversity

of people in terms of age, occupation, living situation, and interests. At the same time, the desire to live an alternative lifestyle, which is closer to nature and offers a more affordable option, is shared by the majority of boaters. The love of the outdoors, of the freedom that comes with cruising and the practicalities involved in day-to-day life create a shared experience among boaters, and in turn a strong community of like-minded people.

## Some enjoy boating more than others.

Individuals who stick with boating, despite the everyday hardships that come with this lifestyle, appear to benefit more from the tranquillity, beauty and freedom of being on the water, the financial

benefits seeming to be less apparent. Indeed, boaters who do not find enjoyment in the lifestyle and seek mainly to save money often cannot endure some of the more challenging aspects of boating.

Financial factors often influence the decision to move aboard, either through the receipt of inheritance money or a loan, or in fact, as a result of job loss and the subsequent inability to pay high rental costs.

The initial decision to be a continuous cruiser rather than pay for a mooring is in part driven by the desire to explore freely in nature. These aspects of the continuous cruiser lifestyle are not deemed to be accessible with a permanent mooring. Combined with this is the knowledge that a mooring is unaffordable and scarcely available in London.

Some have a clear reason for not complying to the rules. Continuous cruisers (within our sample) are conscious of the moving rules and claim to stick to them where possible, although this appears to be more of a challenge for those with children and a school commute. They are also acutely aware of a minority of boaters who don't play by the rules, which can be a source of frustration for those who do.

Crime emerges as the main concern amongst liveaboards. The threat of theft and muggings on towpaths is very real among boaters, many of whom have personally experienced a boat break-in. As the authority responsible for the canals, the Trust is expected to liaise with the wider community to tackle crime on the towpaths.



# Executive summary

The difficulty of finding a place to moor is an issue for continuous cruisers. Most have learned to accept this as 'part of the deal', but they feel more could be done by the Trust to address the problem. Utilising areas of the canals which could be turned into mooring spots and tightening up processes for enforcing the rules are among the top suggestions.

At the same time, it is clear that a minority of boaters (especially continuous cruisers) are physically or financially vulnerable (not just as a result of Covid), and as a result may be unable to move their boat. The boater community is conscious of its more vulnerable members, and suggest using some caution when making decisions about enforcement processes, or indeed anything that may impact the lives and homes of boaters.

Boaters are frustrated by the limited amenities available for the large network of boaters. The provision of more water points, bins and toilet disposal areas would ease congestion at service points, and prevent littering of the waterways.

Covid-19 has impacted boaters in a variety of ways, some of which have resulted in positive outcomes.

The boater community is stronger as a result of movement restrictions set out by the Government. Many have used the opportunity to form deeper friendships with their neighbours, which in normal circumstances would be difficult to do. Boaters have even felt a greater sense of security in the knowledge that fellow boaters are nearby during the day. Furthermore, a longer-term impact is considered to be the continuation of remote working in some workplaces.

Without needing to moor up close to work, more boaters may move further out of London to quieter parts.

Boaters have also experienced struggles during the pandemic. More time on the boat expends resources like water and electricity. Busier towpaths have also felt intrusive for some boaters.