

Coronavirus: Environment Agency update: 22 May 2020

We are aware communities, businesses and the environment rely on our services. This includes the advice and guidance we offer, our regulatory work which continues to protect the environment, people and wildlife from harm, managing the risks of flooding and coastal erosion, and other roles.

In this latest update there is more news for our boating customers. Meanwhile, we continue to follow the government's guidance for blue light services to ensure those in critical roles can continue with their essential work.

We will continue to review the situation in light of further advice from the government and will update you accordingly – in the meantime, we remind you to check the government's guidance at www.gov.uk/coronavirus. You can also find out more about our ongoing work during this period in this recent [blog post](#) from our Chair, Emma Howard Boyd.

Our staff

We remain fully operational, with the majority of our staff working from home. Our remaining frontline teams will be active, where necessary, on the ground tackling priority issues such as flood risk and pollution. All staff, wherever they are working, are following PHE guidance to reduce their risk of either transmitting or contracting coronavirus.

Maintaining, operating and repairing our assets is essential to ensure they work when required. Our work will continue where it remains safe to do so and activities comply with PHE advice.

We are also ensuring our contractors are aware of site and people restrictions and are following the correct procedures.

Offices

The Environment Agency has closed most of its offices. Four offices remain open for staff whose work is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home: Horizon House in Bristol, Quadrant 2 in Sheffield, Temple Borough in Rotherham and 2 Marsham Street in London.

Our flood defence work

Our flood defence work continues in line with PHE guidance and where it is safe. We're ready to respond to flooding, and during coronavirus we continue to maintain and operate our flood and coastal defences to ensure they protect people and property from flooding. We're also maintaining our assets that support public water supply, industry, infrastructure, food production and the environment.

Much of our work has been identified as essential by the government, so we are continuing to deliver projects to manage flood and coastal risk. Where work continues, we have ensured that everyone involved has been trained on social distancing and will not put anyone at risk. If the work cannot be done safely, the work will stop.

We are also still carrying out inspections and repairs to flood defences damaged by spring storms. We are prioritising our work that has the most impact in terms of protecting lives and livelihoods, including prioritising the most at-risk communities so they can remain resilient. If repairs to major infrastructure assets are disrupted by the impact of coronavirus, we will where possible put in place temporary mitigation for the risk, pending a full repair.

All our work is impacted by the controls we and government have put in place. This is likely to mean that completion dates for new projects will slip and other key activities may take place at less regular intervals. We are keeping communities informed of any delays and the action that we are taking to minimise them.

Flood warning service

Continuing to protect lives and livelihoods through our flood warning service remains fundamental to our work as the nation continues to deal with the effects of coronavirus. In order to protect our flood warning service during this difficult time, we have made some minor changes to the service.

In order to safeguard this essential service we will be focussing on the most important warnings, where flooding is expected or where there is a risk to life. We will continue to issue our lowest level of flood warnings – flood alerts – where there is a need to take action but will temporarily stop issuing them where they indicate that there is a very low likelihood of flooding taking place. Our teams will continue to work around the clock to ensure that people have the early warning and safety advice they need to stay safe.

Our regulatory role

Our priority is to protect people and the environment, and to support those we regulate. We continue to carry out regulatory visits to sites that could cause serious environmental harm where appropriate. For all sites, we are developing ways to continue to regulate during this period, using alternative regulatory approaches such as increasing desk-based compliance activity and remote ways of working.

We continue to work closely with businesses and industry to help them meet their legal requirements. We have clearly set out our [approach to regulation and enforcement](#) during this difficult time, and have introduced new 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.

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 that we expect operators to take all reasonable steps to comply with regulatory requirements using contingency plans to help them comply.

We continue to enforce regulatory requirements, following the government's guidance on social distancing. This includes liaising with courts and, wherever possible, continuing with any sentencing cases still outstanding using remote technology to conclude our legal action.

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.

Bathing water sampling

Continuing to protect people and the environment remains fundamental to our work as the nation continues to deal with the effects of Coronavirus. We are following government guidelines to reduce the spread of Coronavirus through social distancing and only travelling for essential purposes, this has meant a temporary pause of our water sampling work at bathing waters.

Pausing sampling at bathing waters will not affect the water quality at bathing waters and our teams will continue to respond to serious pollution incidents. We will continue to publish our daily pollution risk forecasts on our [water quality website](#) during this time. Following the publication of the government's revised workplace guidance on 11 May, we are now considering if we can resume our water sampling work in line with the latest social distancing advice.

Angling and our fisheries

Our priority remains to ensure the safety of people and the angling community.

In line with updated government guidance, restrictions on angling have been eased as of Wednesday, 13 May. This means anglers may now fish on their own, with their household, or with 1 other person while adhering to social distancing rules and staying 2 metres apart at all times.

Further guidance is available [on our website](#) and anglers must fish legally,

including having a valid fishing licence and adhering to relevant byelaws.

Fishing licences continue to remain on sale and we will communicate with customers should there be any change to the provision of fishing licences.

To date, we have paused the majority of our non-essential fisheries activity, such as improving habitats for fish, facilities for anglers and fish-stocking, in line with government guidelines. Proactive operational activity will be restarted as soon as possible, also in line with those guidelines.

Meanwhile, we continue prioritising our response to reported incidents of serious harm to the environment, subject to local conditions. We are working to achieve the right outcomes for people, public health, and fisheries legislation.

Illegal fishing, pollution and incidents that harm the environment should be reported to our 24-hour hotline on 0800 80 70 60, and serious breaches of the coronavirus restrictions should be reported to the police on 101 or via the website of your local police.

Our waterways

Environment Agency teams have been out working at speed to carry out the inspections and maintenance tasks necessary to ensure the river channels, locks and other navigation assets are safe for boaters to resume their activities.

This week we reopened the Medway waterways, and stretches of the Anglian Waterways and Thames are expected soon with the remainder by 1 June. Our lock keepers will be out and about to help boaters. Other waterways regulators have adopted a similar timescale for opening up their waterways again.

We have reassured boating customers that we are keen to get people boating as soon as we can. The Environment Agency has written to boating and navigation groups 5 times throughout coronavirus to provide updates on lockdown restrictions and changes along our waterways.

To get people back on the water as soon as possible, we have also let boat owners know they can visit their moored boats to ensure they are well maintained and we have encouraged boat owners to register with us and start booking in boat safety scheme checks.

For more information head to [this page](#) for updates or call our enquiries team.

Billing

The Environment Agency recognises some customers will be particularly affected by the measures to restrict the impact of the virus. We will consider requests for payment plans if customers experience difficulties paying bills on time. Income from fees and charges ensures the Environment Agency can continue to provide an appropriate level of regulation and services for our customers to ensure the environment and people are

protected.

Customer contacts

During this pandemic the Environment Agency continues to protect people and the environment, working alongside our partners. Please report any pollution incidents on 0800 80 70 60 and stay #floodaware.

General enquiries

National Customer Contact Centre

Email: enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Telephone: 03708 506 506

P0 Box 544 Rotherham S60 1BY United Kingdom

Telephone from outside the UK (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm GMT): +44 (0) 114 282 5312