

British boat-dwellers left out in the cold

by Tom Wall



- 1 People who live on narrowboats and barges¹⁾ – many on low incomes – say they may struggle to stay warm this winter because an increasing number of councils are planning to fine people burning wood on moored vessels¹⁾. Under the Environment Act, which came into force in 2021, council enforcement officers can issue on-the-spot fines of up to £300 to boat-dwellers emitting smoke from wood burners that damages the environment.
- 2 The National Bargee Travellers Association (NBTA), which represents thousands of travelling people living on Britain's waterways, said most boaters do not have an alternative way of heating their boats, unlike almost all residential homeowners with wood-burning stoves.
- 3 “The vast majority of boats are fitted with solid-fuel stoves,” said Jack Saville from the NBTA. “Many poorer boaters cannot afford smokeless fuels or the latest stoves, which would solve the problem. Some rely on foraged wood, donated wood or waste wood, which gives off more smoke. They 17. So the threat of fines from an increasing number of councils could stop these often vulnerable people from heating their houseboats this winter.”

- 4 There are estimated to be 30,000 to 50,000 people living on boats across the UK. About 15,000 are travelling, moving from mooring to mooring. According to the annual survey of boaters by the Canal and River Trust, almost a quarter are disabled and 70% are pensioners.
- 5 While boaters have always burned wood, there has been a boom in homeowners installing log burners in recent years. Government figures show toxic pollution from domestic combustion has almost doubled in the past decade, with the chief medical officer warning that even the most modern stoves emit 450 times more pollution than central heating. Saville, who lives on a boat and moves from place to place across the UK, said most boaters accepted air pollution was harmful: “They know wood smoke is dangerous to health, including their own. But they need to stay warm. They should not be criminalised for what is basically survival.”
- 6 Councils are unlikely to have the resources to regularly monitor the output of people’s chimneys so they will rely on public complaints. The NBTA said this could be abused by residents hostile to travelling lifestyles. “There is a risk that the smoke controls could be used to move on boaters,” said Saville. “ 20 there is an issue with resentment towards travelling populations here in the UK.”
- 7 The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said councils were required to consult boat owners on smoke controls and consider the impact on vulnerable groups: “Our Environment Act made it easier for local authorities to reduce pollution from domestic burning in smoke control areas.”

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