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BSS points boaters to important safety issues highlighted by recent boat tragedies

In the space of a few days, three people on two vessels have died from suspected carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning and the Boat Safety Scheme is pointing boat owners to its advice to help stay safe.

A man living on his narrowboat in Banbury died along with his pet dog and two fishermen have been found dead aboard their vessel in Whitby harbour.

In the context of the initial reports that these people may have died from carbon monoxide poisoning, boat skippers and crews are being strongly encouraged to take stock and ensure that they are properly protected against the threat from the extremely toxic gas.

CO is a colourless, odourless gas – often dubbed the ‘Silent Killer’ – and can kill quickly if inhaled in high concentrations. The early symptoms of poisoning are similar to flu or food poisoning, and include headaches, nausea and dizziness.

CO poisoning is a significant threat when sufficient heating and electrical power is difficult to maintain for people aboard boats on the inland waterways especially where the use of heaters and generators rises particularly in the colder, darker months.

Any fuel burning equipment can be a potential source of CO including stoves, gas appliances and any engine exhaust.

The Boat Safety Scheme warns that CO build-up in boat cabins can occur with any one or a mix of these factors:

- with faulty, badly maintained or misused appliances
- exhaust fumes from a boat's engine or generator
- escaped flue gases from solid fuel stoves
- blocked ventilation or short supply of air - fuels need the right amount of oxygen to burn safely

Boat Safety Scheme advice on avoiding a carbon monoxide incident is to:

- Install fuel burning appliances properly
- Maintain appliances and engines routinely
- Use the equipment correctly
- Don't allow engine fumes into the cabin space
- Deal with problems immediately
- Don't allow bodged repairs and maintenance
- Install a CO alarm certified to as meeting BS EN 50291-2
- Test the alarm routinely
- Never remove the batteries
- Know the signs of CO poisoning and how to react

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Graham Watts, manager of the Boat Safety Scheme said:

'Over a million people go boating safely each year including thousands of people who live aboard on the inland waterways, but our reminder to crews and skippers is to treat the risks with due respect.

He added:

'Prevention is the key to staying safe, equipment needs to be properly installed, well maintained and used according to the instructions.

'But CO can occur or be made worse when ventilators are blocked, or fresh air is in short supply – burning fuels need the right amount of oxygen to combust safely.

'Our belt and braces advice is to fit a CO alarm approved as meeting BS EN 50291-2; these are best suited for boats.

CO alarms and/or their batteries should be replaced if they do not work when tested, or if the replacement date marked on the alarm has passed.

The All Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (APPCOG) is also urging boaters to follow Boat Safety Scheme advice, which will help protect boaters from dying or being seriously injured from the noxious gas.

Supporting the BSS message, APPCOG chair Barry Sheerman MP, said:

'Yet again we have been given a tragic reminder that carbon monoxide poisoning poses a deadly threat not only in the home, but in a variety of settings, not least on boats and in other vehicles.

'My condolences go to the families of the deceased and I implore all boat owners and operators to urgently take the necessary steps to ensure their vessels are fully protected against the threat of CO poisoning.

'If you are in any doubt about what to do, visit the Boat Safety Scheme website, where you'll find clear and helpful guidelines on how to make your boat CO safe.'

The BSS has the latest advice for boaters on www.boatsafetyscheme.org/CO – Don't let CO ruin your life.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The Boat Safety Scheme, or BSS, is a public safety initiative owned by the Canal & River Trust and the Environment Agency. Its purpose is to help minimise the risk of boat fires, explosions, or pollution harming visitors to the inland waterways, the waterways' workforce and any other users. Boat Safety Scheme www.boatsafetyscheme.org

The All-Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (APPCOG) is a cross-party coalition of MPs and peers working together to improve policy around the carbon monoxide sector. The Group also provides a forum for Parliamentarians, gas industry representatives and other key stakeholders to discuss issues affecting the gas industry and consumers. The APPCOG is chaired by Barry Sheerman MP, Jason McCartney MP and Baroness Finlay of Llandaff. www.policyconnect.org.uk/appcog/