

Too Many Tugs?

NABSO

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The safe and effective use of tugs, including conventional tugs, is essential for maintaining navigational safety. In accordance with the Code of Practice for Ship Towage Operations on the Thames, this note provides further guidance to ensure the deployment of conventional tugs is driven by operational risk and safety requirements, without placing undue burden on the pilot or crew.

Following a review of conventional towage practices within the Port of London, it has been identified that, on occasion, excessive numbers of tugs have been ordered—most notably for military vessels. These additional tugs may not enhance navigational safety and, in some cases, may actively detract from it.

The following points are provided for pilots to consider when determining tug requirements. Ship agents are encouraged to be aware of these principles and to support appropriate tug allocations through dialogue with the vessel's Master and pilot:

Avoid over-allocation: Assigning more tugs than necessary can complicate operations, increase the risk of miscommunication, and reduce overall situational awareness.

Define tug roles clearly: Each tug should have a specific and justified role (e.g., bow control, stern check, turning assistance).

Assess safety contribution: Pilots are encouraged to critically evaluate whether each tug meaningfully contributes to the safety of the manoeuvre.

Limit reliance on conventional tugs: Over-reliance on conventional tugs, particularly in large numbers, should be avoided unless clearly justified by specific safety concerns.

Do not under-equip: Equally, pilots must ensure that tug allocation is sufficient for the safe conduct of the passage. Avoiding over-allocation must not come at the expense of having the necessary support in place.

If there is any doubt regarding tug requirements or the pilot's intentions, ship agents are advised to contact the River Pilots directly to clarify expectations and ensure alignment with navigational safety.

This guidance is intended to support safe and effective towage practices and to encourage proactive dialogue between all parties (master, agent and river pilot) where tug allocations may not align with navigational safety.

Telephone calls, VHF radio traffic, CCTV and radar traffic images may be recorded in the VTS Centre



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It does not override or interfere with the pilot's statutory authority or professional judgment, nor the shared responsibility in decision-making between the Master and Pilot regarding tug requirements. River Pilots retain full discretion to determine tug usage based on real-time conditions and are encouraged to always act in the best interests of vessel safety.

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