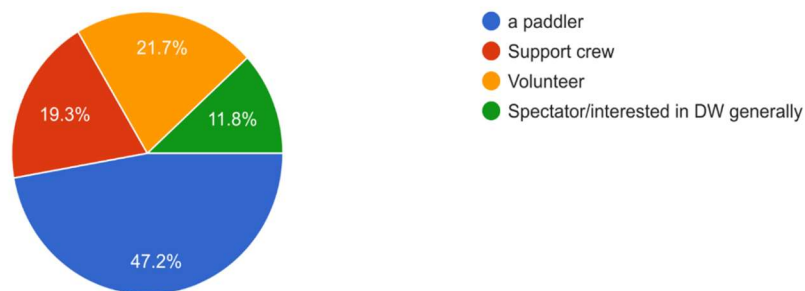


Analysis of the DW 2023 Questionnaire

The following is a summary of the responses to the DW Questionnaire. We received many detailed suggestions and the full detail from the responses is available on the website. We are grateful to all who took the time to share their feedback. This document brings together the key messages. We will use your feedback to develop, enhance and modify relevant systems and processes to improve the experience of paddlers, supporters and volunteers, and to promote the race more generally.

Perspective
161 responses

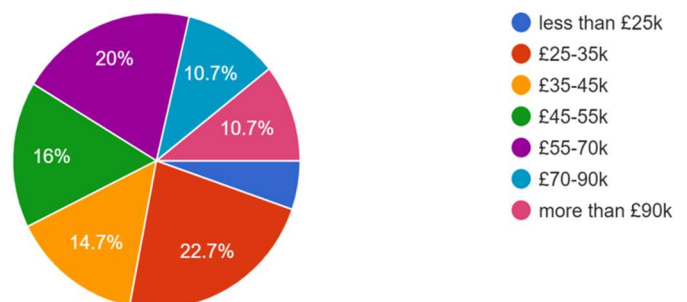


Race organisation

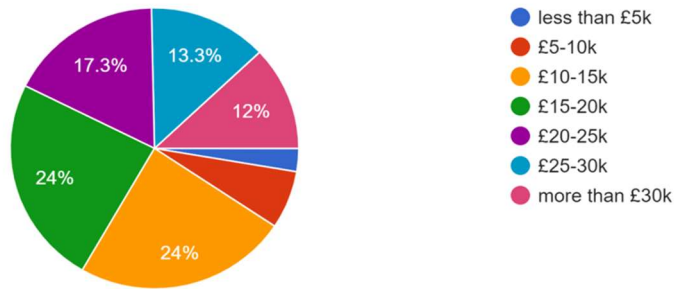
Costs and fees

Many of the costs of putting on the race are fixed and in order to break even, the entry fees reflect the estimated number of paddlers. In a typical year, the cost of running the race is around £80,000. Our survey revealed that this is not widely understood, and we want to be more transparent in future years.

Entire race costs
75 responses



Westminster costs
75 responses



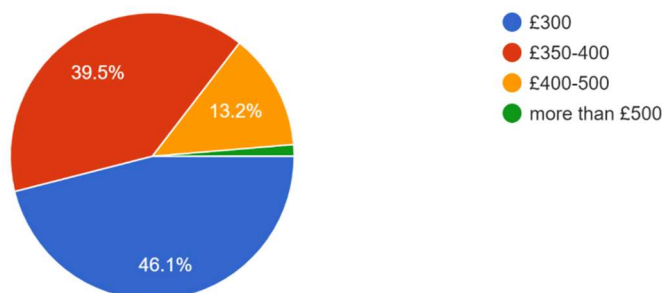
A significant part of the cost relates to the finish at Westminster, including tideway safety cover, steps crew, first aid cover and facility hire charges. A Westminster finish costs over £30,000 but our survey revealed that most people thought it was less.

We asked for suggestions of ways to reduce costs, both for the organisation of the race and the overall cost to competitors, without compromising safety or the ability to secure permission from the authorities to race. Around a third felt that the facilities provided are about right, but a number of respondents addressed aspects of the compulsory kit (more on this later). A few people made suggestions about the stage race, including a question about the cost and logistical effort required for the Juniors’ camp sites and whether support crews were really necessary for the shorter distances.

We also asked what was missing and a number of respondents reflected on the loss of breakfasts, toilets and showers, etc that used to be at Westminster, which has been due to lack of access to appropriate space rather than cost. Opinions about free tee shirts differed, with some liking the idea of a commemorative “finishers” tee shirt with others preferring the organisers to do what they could to keep costs down. The compromise suggested by some was to have an easy way to buy merchandise.

Across a number of questions, respondents addressed the challenge of boosting the number of entrants, with suggestions covering advertising, the website (more of this later), social media visibility and opportunities for non-paddlers to get involved along the course of the race. Respondents commented that this is one of the toughest races in the world and this needs to be celebrated wider. Many specific suggestions were made and each and every one will be considered carefully.

Entry fees
76 responses



We asked how much people would be prepared to pay to enter the Senior Doubles race and 76 people responded. A number of respondents suggested looking for sponsorship to keep fees down and ensure the race remained accessible.

Entries

We asked how easy it was to enter the race. Of the 77 responses to this question, 94% felt it was easy, although half of those indicated some scope for improvement, including swift notification of that entry had been accepted.

Some events offer a discount for early entry. We asked if that would be of interest, and if it would encourage paddlers to enter before 1 January. Just under 80% of those who responded said it would.

Race rules

A number of people suggested that the portage diagrams could do with a refresh, to simplify and improve clarity. This has been done for the 2024 race.

As mentioned above, there were many suggestions about emergency kit but little consensus. We will take all the comments into account as we strive to find the right balance between cost, personal responsibility and race safety. Some respondents pointed to confusion over the precise requirements for some aspects of kit, whilst others would prefer to make an independent choice. It is hard to please everyone.

One respondent suggested a rule about not feeding while stationary at a portage or on the racing line would be a big improvement. This might be hard to police unless we have marshals at every portage.

It was clear from a number of comments made that the rules are not always fully understood by all and as some of the penalties relate to rule infringements by support crews, not just paddlers, it is important that crews share the information across their whole team.

Safety

A number of respondents made suggestions regarding safety. A handful supported greater reliance on crew self-assessment. Some key points for race organisation are highlighted below:

- Portage guidance needs to be updated to suit the prevailing conditions, with Windsor, Shiplake, Sunbury and east Molesey cited as examples. Briefing by marshals was particularly important at locks that could not be reached by the support crew.
- An easy option to switch classes or withdraw without penalty within a specific window if conditions are adverse.
- Improved lighting at weirs and/or to show the location to get out, visible from when approaching the lock from the river
- A requirement to have paddled the relevant section of the race in the dark, noting that completion of the Waterside series alone is insufficient, but with alternative arrangements in place for overseas crews (involving discussions with the umpires).

Support along the race

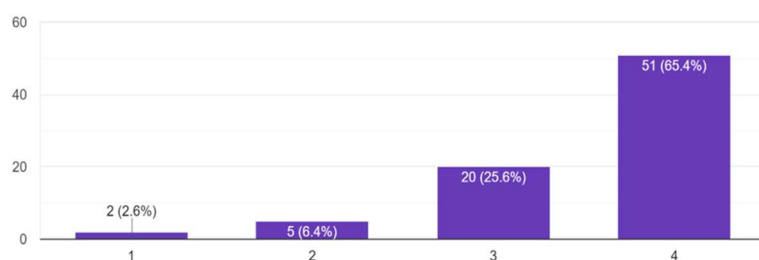
When we asked for suggestions for things to add to the race, a number of people suggested more aid/food stations along the course (which could be sponsored), both for emergencies and for those, particularly for the stages race, who would like to complete the race without the requirement for a support crew. Those suggesting aid stations noted that this could reduce traffic congestion and crowding at portages. Other suggestions included an option to pay for a lift back to a parked car at the start (for the stages race) and a list of support locations using what3words.

We currently use phones for immediate two-way communications with Race Control. We asked support crews if they would you find it more practical to use some other method when on the towpath, and if so, what. Many felt that use of phones was fine, but many suggested a text of messaging service would be helpful in case there is no signal, or the phone is in the car.

The finish

Many respondents missed the finish line ambience of years gone by, reflecting on the loss of toilets, changing facilities, showers, breakfast and parking. Many missed the space to celebrate and mingle with other competitors. Similar comments were also made by more recent competitors and supporters, and by those with experience of races in other countries, albeit not those that finish in the centre of the capital.

How significant is the Westminster finish to you personally? (1-4 option)
78 responses



We asked how important the Westminster finish is, and whether an alternative end point, such as Teddington or Hammersmith would deter entries.

Of the 97 responses to this question, many said they would still enter, but nearly two thirds said they would not.

For many, a race without a Westminster finish was just not DW, it would not be the iconic and traditional race for many, particularly for the senior doubles. For some, a shorter race could also jeopardise entry into the 1,000 mile club. However, many respondents were also pragmatic about the difficulties and felt that a finish somewhere in London (at least over 100 miles) would still represent a significant challenge for competitors, especially if access was easier, facilities better and cost lower. This was particularly the case for the stages race, improving safety and reducing cost.

Marshals and checkpoints

We asked for general comments about marshalling and the response was overwhelmingly positive, with examples of really clear information about the portages and water conditions from friendly, knowledgeable, encouraging and helpful people. Some respondents cited particular advice given, and considerate conversations about whether to stop or carry on. Where there had been changes to the portages to reflect the river conditions, these were appreciated. The enormous contribution made by volunteers to support paddlers was acknowledged by many, both paddlers and support crew, with “these guys are legends” summing up the views of many.

In terms of things that could be better, one questioned whether checkpoints are necessary now that all paddlers wear a tracker. Some people noted that not all portages were marshalled in the dark (such as the later stages of the canal and Penton Hook) and some were concerned about some of the advice given.

Race Control

When asked about expectations of Race Control, the overwhelming response was about the responsibility to run a safe and well organised race and to give clear and timely advice and information. Some greater clarity was required by some, for example, understanding the chain of command or the procedures for making decisions on rule breaking. Over a quarter of respondents felt Race Control worked very well, *“current team do a cracking job - they are professional, reliable and risk is very well managed as you expect and need for this event”*.

Many cited the role Race Control plays and a checkpoint for information and updates, whether for reporting a retirement or incident, updates on race progress, and for marshals and volunteers, information about which boats to expect over what time periods, and when the last one has gone through, and whether there are any changes to conditions or to the race itself. Communication was mentioned by over a quarter of respondents, in terms of information, advice, updates and decisions, reflecting a need to manage both the targeted and general communications before, during and after the race.

Pre-race communication

We asked some questions about communication more generally. Around half of respondents reported that they found information via Facebook (official and unofficial sites), slightly fewer using the website and fewer still using Instagram and Twitter/X. In terms of communication before the race, many were satisfied, with around half commenting that it was “OK” through to “excellent” and “brilliant under the circumstances”. The remaining comments focused on areas for improvement.

The newsletters were appreciated, but many would like them emailed, for them to be more frequent and regular and a number of volunteers commented that they would appreciate being included in circulation so that they can feel fully involved. Many reflected on the information being on Facebook before it was on the website, a point that we understand and are addressing through the new website.

Communications over the decisions about the race in 2023 were clearly in the mind of many respondents in answering this question, especially for those not able to take part.

DW Website

We have updated the website since the 2023 race and in order to inform the next phase of its development, we asked what additional information would be useful. Nearly 90% of respondents said they had used the old website and many of the suggestions have already been incorporated, but those that haven't yet included:

- A copy of the race briefing
- An explanation of contingency plans under different conditions, the thresholds and timelines
- Information for navigation, on the water and roads and parking, bridges, marshalling points, portage diagrams that are helpful for support crews as well as paddlers, points of interest, locations for bacon baps and cups of tea, toilets, use of what3words to pinpoint precise locations, estimated times to drive between support points
- Regular news items, newsletters and updates, all easy to reach from any page, with a news feed linked to social media posts and weather, tide times, water levels and flow rate updates, especially in the months and weeks before the race

- More about sponsors, to encourage potential sponsors to get in touch (as is in place for volunteers)
- Clarity on how to get merchandise
- An easy to download kit checklist
- A guide on how to follow the race using the tracker, for support crew, friends and family and spectators
- Details about the prizegiving
- All the information you need whilst the race is on needs to be easy to find, including breakdown by classes, race stats and splits, etc.
- A bit more information about each of the roles so you know who to contact
- Live web cams at the starts and at key points
- More guidance and advice – kit, training, how to support the race
- Testimonials and stories

Spectating the race

Spectators followed the race in a variety of way, physically and on-line. Spectators had raced in the past, supported a crew or been a volunteer. A small number of respondents had a member of the family or friend competing. Asked how the spectating experience could be improved, suggestions included a live stream web cam at key positions along the course and/or Facebook Live broadcasts and suggestions of places to go to watch the race that would not be a hinderance to those taking part.

Specific reflections on the 2023 race

Screening

We asked those paddlers who entered the race in 2023 to provide some very specific feedback on this exceptional year.

Amongst those who were screened out and not able to race, 81% said they understood why but 62% did not agree with the decision. Many gave us valuable suggestions for additional screening evidence and criteria, particularly for those who live at a distance from the Thames and those with non-marathon paddling experience. A formal appeal process was suggested, reducing the potential for unfair treatment of those who didn't know which DW Official to contact.

Amongst those screened in, not all finished the race. Some were to do with illness or injury, having started in the wrong boat or suffered damage to the boat on the Thames/Tideway.

As elsewhere on the questionnaire, many respondents asked for greater clarity about the screening process so that they could make arrangements to improve their preparation and provide the necessary evidence.

Stages Race

Seventeen respondents answered the question about the decision to shorten the stage race, with all reporting that they understood the reasons, however, under half agreed with the outcome. Some felt that competent paddlers in all classes should have been allowed to race on the Thames.

Tideway conditions

Bridge navigation advice was felt to be helpful by 90% of those who responded. All but four of the 26 respondents reported facing big washes or waves on the tideway, particularly from Uber taxis/clipper boats travelling at considerable speeds, and around bridges. Some reflected that in previous years it has been the wash from safety boats that has been a problem.

“We were washed into the barges from an Uber Clipper near the finish which destroyed our boat. We passed an Uber clipper earlier and its wash was easily navigable but the second one produced a large wave that sent us backwards into the moored barges.” “Uber boat stopped then crossed in front of us 3 bridges out. One wave came over the bow and into our C2”, “a person with their own large cruiser came up right past us and caused loads of wash”.

Many paddlers met the sort of conditions that they were expecting on the Tideway, although some had not anticipated the washes from the Uber taxis. Some commented on the benefit of arriving early within the tide window, to limit the amount of river traffic in central London.

Stability and navigation

We asked all paddlers if they capsized. Of the 52 responses, 71% didn't. Other than relating to the Tideway, other explanations included hitting an object in the water, making a mistake when tired, water conditions, navigating into a strong eddy after a lock and hitting an island by mistake.

Half of the respondents to the question about incidents reported that something had happened, including taking a wrong turn, injury, broken rudder, hitting a low bridge and meeting a narrow boat blocking the canal. Not all of the incidents were reported to Race Control, with the paddlers or support crew not feeling it was appropriate, but those that were, were generally responded to well. No-one wishing to report something to Race Control reported difficulties getting through.

Future developments

Encouraging more entries

Whilst a handful of respondents reflected positively on the benefits of the reduced entries in 2023, we were very grateful to all those who took time to make suggestions as to how we could increase the number of entries, which is key to securing the ongoing future of an affordable race. Better marketing, advertising and promotion generally were mentioned frequently, with some specific suggestions involving mainstream media (BBC, radio and TV), Facebook/Instagram (including live updates during the race and at the end of each day), paddling community magazines, advertising through other endurance sports, use of drone footage, a Netflix documentary, promotion with local communities (before and during), team profiles, tips from manufacturers, interviews with DW legends, celebrity competitors, and overseas advertising (e.g. South Africa). A number noted that the politics and some behaviour on the unofficial Facebook page could be off-putting for newcomers and that maintaining a positive narrative was important.

Many felt that the entry cost was a barrier, and that sponsorship could help, both with cost and promotion.

Promotion through canoe clubs, including providing standard material (posters, videos, etc) for club websites and encouraging the club to add information about how to get involved, possibly with additional support from those clubs that do not traditionally enter, and

promotion at Hasler races, Nationals etc. On the same vein, promotion to scout groups, cadets, universities, Armed Forces, etc, with a number mentioning the need for promotion through the year, not just in the run up to Easter, given the long lead time required for someone new to the race.

A dozen respondents felt very strongly that the disruption in recent years, and in particular the decisions taken in 2023, have resulted in loss of confidence and awareness. Suggestions about changing the date for the race (better weather and water conditions), changes to boats and time windows (daylight run, second tides, etc) related to this point, reducing the risk that training and investment might be wasted and increasing accessibility. As elsewhere in the questionnaire, greater clarity over contingency plans and eligibility criteria would help make that judgement.

The challenge posed by a number of respondents is whether it is better to focus on the endurance nature of the event (“don’t water it down”, “crown jewels of ultra-distance”), to appeal to those non-paddlers who want a challenge (“not so elite”) or whether to boost easier entry points, such as the stages race, Endeavour class, surf skis or SUPs without regarding these as not really DW.

Other suggestions included:

- Open entries earlier (some also suggested a later entry deadline a few days after Waterside D), potentially with a reduced price for early entry (before Christmas) and a social media campaign to build excitement in the run up to entries opening.
- Some suggested an option for competitors to end before the tideway, or to select which of the four days of the Stages race to enter, for those who wanted to race but were concerned about safety.
- More facilities for international paddlers, such as assistance with supporting
- Boat rental, possibly combined with a coaching and assessment package for novice paddlers
- More build-up races, simply as promotion rather than being about events that could form part of safety preparation or eligibility assessment
- Improved merchandise, for promotional purposes not just income generation.

Encouraging more volunteers

Many of the suggestions for encouraging more volunteers were similar to those for increasing the number of entrants, but with a particular emphasis on working with local communities and canoe clubs, as well as reaching out to all past competitors. Clarity over the roles and expectations was noted by a number as an essential factor.

One suggested offering a discount on race fees in return for previous volunteering support.

Volunteers run the race behind the scenes, not just at Easter and one respondent noted the need for volunteers with media, marketing, advertising, communications and PR skills and experience to support the organisation in this important area.

Relay event

Respondents were divided over the suggestion of running a relay race. Those in favour included former paddlers who could no longer compete in the Senior Doubles race (including those who would like some younger legs to do sections with the most portages), as an entry or staging point for those aiming to compete in the future, as a way of engaging clubs and for those not wanting to damage their fitness for later in the racing calendar. Those supporting

the idea focussed on the scope to widen the appeal of the race and increase participation. A number remembered the Cheshire Ring with fondness and others cited parallels in other sports.

Those against the idea were concerned that this would be a watering down of the main event, detracting from the challenge, diluting entries and that it would “not be DW”. Concerns were expressed over the logistics, the increased traffic, the cost for paddlers and how to manage wash-hanging across the different races.

Some practical suggestions were made, and questions raised about the details including whether a relay would be open to under 18’s, singles and how it would be dealt with for the 1,000 mile club. All of these detailed points will be carefully considered.

Contingency provisions

Throughout the questionnaire there has been feedback about the need for clarity about contingency arrangements, the circumstances under which alternative arrangements would be required, the timescales and the process.

Suggestions as to what those alternative arrangements could be were made, including:

- Shorter stages for juniors, whilst still preserving the four day event
- A two-day daylight race
- Shorter tide window (or mass start), improving safety through greater visibility
- Assessment or training events, such as a twilight paddle, a long paddle in October or November, a section of the Thames from Reading paddled at night, or a race/event on the tideway.
- Allow change of boat for tideway, or the whole of the Thames, to allow more stable craft when weather conditions require
- Easy mechanism to change class
- Different course – Devizes to Teddington, Lechlade or Bath to Teddington, Devizes to Reading and back or just Devizes to Reading
- Early assessment/screening of competence, across all classes to give clarity

Other suggestions

There were a number of other suggestions and comments to note:

- Members of the 1,000 Mile Club could form a knowledgeable focus group for future deliberations
- A Team Time Trial approach could be considered, encouraging the team to support the slower paddler(s)
- A bigger prize-giving event, with a formal dinner (sponsored)
- Distinguish sit-and-switch style marathon canoes from high-kneelers
- A Condor class (stability 8+) would give newcomers or ultra racers an opportunity to be involved in their own race/challenge
- Correct the treatment of Ireland in the classification for trophies
- Allow an early start for slower crews
- Provide timings for the Endeavour Class
- More classes for older paddlers

Plaudits

Throughout the survey, respondents have taken time to express their gratitude to the very many volunteers who give up their time throughout the year and especially over Easter, to run the race. These are just a few of the comments.

- What a great job you do. The scale of what is achieved is mind blowing and a privilege to be part of.
- You are all an awesome lot, and I am very grateful for all your hard work.
- You are all unsung heroes
- A massive thank you to all the volunteers
- I did really enjoy the race brief and the unflappable can do spirit of all involved particularly at the start. Well done committee
- Well done for getting the event to run in 2023.
- Thought the Senior Doubles this year was phenomenal! Hugely appreciated the sleek, professional set up, communication and appreciation for the athletes involved.
- The current team are doing a great job - thank you! Really proud to be a part of the DW family and this year was such a special year for everyone - well done
- Thank you to the organisers - without you and the volunteers it simply wouldn't happen.
- Thanks everyone for running a race on a year where I thought it would not run. Keep up the good work.
- Thanks for trying to maintain the race in its existing traditional format.
- Race 2023 for SD was top notch-knowledgeable marshals/chief/great comms and support from DW
- Thank you all for the great work
- It's an amazing event. It's great to see this survey.
- Just a very big thank you.
- Just to say what a difficult job you have and as a volunteer for other organisations I know how thankless it can seem at times - well done
- Keep up the good work.
- Great work this year. It's a phenomenal effort for a phenomenal race. And fantastic to get an opportunity to give feedback.
- Keep up the good work. Don't bow to pressure to water down the race.
- I think DW is a fantastic experience and wonderful organisation. I finish the Easter weekend feeling that I have been given the chance to be part of something special and very grateful for it.
- I think it's a wonderful race with a storied history and I hope it keeps going.
- Thank you all for huge work organising that brilliant event.
- I think the organisers did a great job this year in very challenging circumstances. I'm a big fan of the DW having been a competitor over 30 years