

## Safety Bulletin 05 of 2025

### Mobile phones and other electronic equipment on boats – From habit to hazard

#### Why it matters?

Whether you're enjoying a coastal cruise, fishing off your RIB, taking your jet ski for a spin or taking guests on a charter trip, **mobile phone use can pose serious safety risks** on the water. Unlike bigger commercial vessels, small pleasure and commercial crafts often have fewer crew and rely heavily on the vigilance of the operator. A moment's distraction could mean missing a buoy, a swimmer, or reacting too late to an oncoming vessel.

#### What could go wrong?

- **Distracted Driving:** Use of phones diverts attention from navigation and lookout duties. Taking a photo or answering a message while helming can cause collisions.
- **Reduced Awareness:** Operators may miss critical visual or auditory cues and information. Listening to music or talking on the phone interferes with hearing navigation signals or engine anomalies (i.e. VHF communications, visual hazards including swimmers, rocks and other 'boaters').
- **Loss of Control:** If you drop your phone or react suddenly, it could lead to overcorrection or falling overboard.
- **Delayed Decision-Making:** Response times to hazards are compromised.
- **Navigation Errors:** Plotting a course or checking charts on mobile apps is useful, but doing so mid-turn or in tight areas without pausing can be dangerous.
- **Electrical and fire risk:** Charging phones with incompatible or damaged equipment can cause overheating or electrical fires, especially in confined cabin spaces.
- **Violation of COLREG Rule 5:** Failure to maintain proper lookout can lead to legal consequences.

#### What shall I do? Smart boating tips

- **Keep phones stowed** during maneuvers, docking, or navigating near beaches and harbours.
- **Designate a "phone-free zone"** at the helm.
- **Save the selfies** for when anchored or docked.
- **Switch to silent mode** when underway to avoid temptations.
- **Use waterproof, hands-free mounts** if navigation apps are essential—but only glance when conditions are safe.
- **Educate your crew or guests** on how distraction impacts safety, especially if they're taking selfies or filming.
- **Implement Red Zone Protocols:** Define areas and times when phone use is strictly prohibited.
- **Training & Awareness:** Conduct regular briefings on Marine Guidance Note MGN 299 (M+F) and distraction risks.
- **Prioritise Marine-Grade Equipment:** Use certified marine chargers and power sources and store phones in waterproof, floatable cases.
- **For commercial operators, ensure your Safety Management System (SMS)** includes strict policies and procedures on mobile phone use.

## What about route planning on my boats' chart plotter?

- Passage planning is a vital step in ensuring safe passage with your boat all throughout from point of departure to point of arrival.
- Passage planning must be completed for your entire journey before departure, including route planning, weather reports, safety checks, etc.
- Use of charts or approved plotters are key in ensuring safe navigation and should be part of your passage planning.
- Should you need to change anything on your plotter that would require increased attention whilst en route you should:
  - Adopt a safe speed (this may include stopped) before devoting your attention to the chart plotter.
  - Ensure your boat is and remains in a safe position throughout.
  - Observe the requirements of the **Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGs)** and **MSN 1781 (M+F) Amendment 3 The Merchant Shipping regulations 1996 – COLREG**

## What real-life accidents were linked to mobile phone use on boats

Incident	Description	Outcome
San Diego Bay Collision (USA)	A U.S. Coast Guard boat collided with a 24-foot pleasure craft during the Parade of Lights	An 8-year-old boy was killed, and four others were seriously injured
Scot Carrier collision with barge Karin Høj	Second Officer on Scot Carrier distracted by using a personal tablet computer	Two people fatally injured
Duck Boat Tragedy (USA)	Operator distracted by cell phone	Fatal accident involving multiple casualties

## Regulation and Guidance

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has issued **Marine Guidance Note MGN 299 (M+F)** to address the growing concern over **inappropriate mobile phone use** during vessel operations.

## What does the regulation says (MGN 299 (M+F))?

- The use of mobile phones should be **strictly prohibited in “Red Zones”** such as:
  - Approaches to ports and harbours
  - Areas of high traffic density
  - Restricted visibility conditions
- For commercial operators, **the Safety Management Systems (SMS)** must include procedures regulating phone use.
- Calls should be **diverted or silenced** during critical navigation periods.
- Shipowners, operators and skippers must **educate themselves** on the risks related to phone use whilst ‘boating’.