

Remembering the Morecambe Bay cockling disaster – 20 Years On

HSE inspector Peter Lennon, a member of the investigation team that investigated the incident, has reflected on the Morecambe Bay cockling disaster in a blog

On the evening of 5 February 2004 over 30 young men and women were trapped by rising tides in Morecambe Bay as they harvested cockles – 23 tragically lost their lives. Most of those who were at work were Chinese nationals. Many of them had little experience or knowledge of the sea.

Cockling on Morecambe Bay was a long-established industry undertaken by the local fishing community, who understood the dangers of the tides in the bay and had been taking precautions over time.

Up until then, more people had become involved in what had quickly developed as a lucrative business: not all understood the hazards or the precautions needed to work safely.

HSE immediately established a team from the then Field Operations Division (FOD) North West Agriculture Group to assist in the complex investigation, right from the beginning. The team worked together with Lancashire Constabulary, the local fishing community, the local authorities and the Gangmaster Licensing Authority to understand what had happened and what could be done to prevent anything like this happening again.

What happened next?

Working with others, including HSE's Agriculture Sector, we produced guidance on how to work safely in the bay – and in similar estuaries and tidal areas – when harvesting produce such as cockles. We supported local authorities as they developed a regime for permits to regulate the activity, making sure everyone works as safely as possible.

The investigation also revealed how the workers had been exploited by gangmasters and our Vulnerable Workers' Team has continued to work with the Gangmaster Licensing Authority and others to deal with concerns about those who are being exploited and whose health and safety is being compromised.

Reflections

On a personal note, after being involved in the investigation and following the case to its final conclusions in court, "Morecambe Bay" will always resonate as a preventable human tragedy in which young people lost their lives in a foreign country, far away from their loved ones.

There is a memorial to those who died, close to the RNLI station, in Morecambe. If you find yourself nearby, please take the time to visit it.

Notes to editors:

1. [The Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We prevent work-related death, injury and ill health through regulatory actions that range from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors through to targeted interventions on individual businesses. These activities are supported by globally recognised scientific expertise.