

Historic Narrow Boat Club Health and Safety Position Statement

Introduction

The Historic Narrow Boat Club is aware that Health and safety often gets a bad press.

Health and safety legislation exists primarily to protect employees from unscrupulous or careless employers. It also protects the general public from the carelessness or corner-cutting of others.

There are many powerful vested interests who would like nothing better than to see health and safety legislation, and the powers of the Health and Safety Executive to enforce it, watered down or even abolished altogether, in order to increase their profits by putting others in danger. Nothing in this statement should be taken as an attack on this aspect of health and safety as a concept.

At the other extreme, however, are those who would undermine this excellent cause by using 'health and safety' as a frivolous pretext for pursuing their own interests, avoiding doing things, and stopping others harmlessly enjoying themselves, because it is easier than doing the most basic risk assessment. This is just as damaging to genuine health and safety as deliberate efforts to undermine it.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the drive for the ever greater reduction, and ultimately the elimination, of risk is self-defeating. People's awareness of danger and ability to assess risks declines as they have fewer opportunities to exercise it. More accidents happen, risks are reduced even further and a vicious spiral ensues – with the massive side effect that many hugely beneficial activities and opportunities are then denied to people.

Caught in the middle are those who have a duty to the public and are genuinely trying to do their best in a difficult situation; criticism of the outcomes of their efforts, which HNBC will make as and when necessary, should in no way be taken as a criticism of the intentions. But when those outcomes arguably increase rather than decrease the level of danger, criticisms do need to be made and lessons learned for the future.

Health and Safety on the Waterways System

HNBC recognises that CRT (and their predecessors BW) are in a uniquely difficult position when it comes to the safety of the public. They are responsible for a system which is unavoidably and inherently hazardous. Without water, locks, paddle gear and swing bridges, the system would not only cease to function; it simply would not exist. But unlike, say, Network Rail, BW cannot simply exclude the general public from the vast majority of its land and its operations. Public access has become part of its *raison d'être*. They are treading a difficult line in balancing the needs of waterways users with the safety of the general public, and on the whole, they achieve a generally good safety record without generating too many complaints. However, sometimes measures aimed at protecting the general public actually increase the risk to boaters, and this is what HNBC seeks to highlight and help CRT avoid.

HNBC appreciates that CRT/BW have been receptive to representations from boaters, and to the particular needs of historic boats, in remedying such situations in the past. However, it would of course be preferable - for both safety and financial reasons, not to mention the

maintenance of good relations between CRT and their largest group of users - to prevent such situations arising in the first place.

Nearly everyone would agree that the canals need to be made as safe as possible for the people who use them, within the constraints posed by their very nature. We as boaters accept that we are undertaking an activity that has risks. We make ourselves aware of the risks and we take care to minimise the dangers.

HNBC recognises that on the rare occasions when a serious accident does occur, CRT need to be seen to take it seriously and to re-examine any safety measures in place. **However, HNBC believes that significant new health and safety measures should not be implemented in a hurried fashion, reacting to any given incident. Rather, there should be detailed discussions with the Health and Safety Executive to decide whether any new measures really are necessary, with CRT arguing as strongly as possible for minimum intervention; and secondly, if new measures are deemed necessary, they should not be undertaken until there has been extensive consultation with waterways users – boaters above all – to ensure that they do not make matters worse or increase the dangers to the people who actually use the canals.**

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