



Mr Jamie Chestnutt
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Wirral Council

David Armstrong
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Date: 4 October 2023

Your Ref:

Our Ref: DA0065 /DC

Service: Neighbourhood Services

Dear Mr Chestnutt,

WIRRAL COUNCIL & HOYLAKE LIFEBOAT MEETING 14 SEPTEMBER 2023

I met with your RNLI Area Lifesaving Manager for North West England, Lee Firman at Hoylake Lifeboat Station on 14 September 2023. Also in attendance was the local lifeboat Coxswain Howie Owen. You may know that Wirral Council is developing options for the management of Hoylake Beach and as part of that process is keen to fully understand the requirements of key stakeholders such as the RNLI so that their essential lifesaving activities can continue without any detrimental impact from the management options under consideration.

The beach management options and supporting Habitat Regulations Assessments will be put forward for public consultation, be considered fully by the council's committee system and also be subject to scrutiny by Natural England. The options that go forward will therefore be subject to significant public scrutiny and challenge and I am keen to ensure that the options can be defended robustly in that they meet the requirements of our Environment, Climate Emergency and Scrutiny Committee, the conservation tests and priorities applied by Natural England and meet the requirements of key stakeholders.

I had previously met with Lee Firman and Dave Whitely of the Hoylake Lifeboat Station in June this year and mapped out some draft requirements for operations relating to launch and recovery of the lifeboat and also hovercraft. The second meeting in September was useful as it refined some of those requirements and improved my understanding of how the absence of management at present is impacting on Hoylake Lifeboat operations and also the volunteer crews. The draft notes of the meeting are attached which provide more detail on these discussions.


The meeting was also interesting as we had an opportunity to discuss some of the particular characteristics of Hoylake Lifeboat Station that perhaps make the combination of all its operations unique within the country. The recent significant financial investment in the Lifeboat Station and equipment was also discussed.

The meeting concluded with the primary action falling to the RNLI to set out their local operational requirements with approval from both a regional and national perspective. In doing this you should be mindful of Natural England's advice on the evidence that they would expect to be provided in support of those requirements:

- Provide evidence they can't approach from their normal slipway at certain times of the day (for example due to tide/wind direction/daylight hours)
- Provide data on how often they use different approaches and access routes.
- Proof they utilise routes and how often.

It would also be useful if you provide a full summary of your lifeboat and hovercraft operations and assess these against the three bullet points above, perhaps through the provision of a worked example with supporting launch, tide and weather data. I'd also be grateful if Lee Firman could let me have any comments on the draft meeting notes or accept them as an accurate record. The notes will be used to support the evidential requirements set out by Natural England.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Armstrong". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

David Armstrong
Assistant Chief Executive

**Hoylake Beach Management Plan
RNLI Meeting**

Date: Thursday 14th September 2023

Time: 10:30 – 11:30

Venue: Hoylake Lifeboat Station

Invited Attendees		
1. David Armstrong (WC)	2. Mike Cockburn (WC)	3. Neil Thomas (WC)
4. Martin Jones (WC)	5. Sarah Wardle (WC)	
6. Jamie Gardiner (Haskoning)	7. Luke Evans-Jones (Haskoning)	
8. Lee Firman (RNLI)	9. Howie Owen (RNLI)	

1. Introductions, Attendees and Apologies

All parties introduced themselves:

David Armstrong, Wirral Council, Assistant to the Chief Executive
Mike Cockburn, Wirral Council, Assistant Director Climate Emergency & Environment
Neil Thomas, Wirral Council, Senior Manager Flood & Coastal Risk Management
Martin Jones, Wirral Council, General Parks Manager for Hoylake
Sarah Wardle, Wirral Council, Merseyside Partnership Coordinator (Note taker)
Jamie Gardiner, Royal Haskoning DHV, Consultant
Luke Evans-Jones, Royal Haskoning DHV, Consultant
Lee Firman, RNLI, Area Lifesaving Manager
Howie Owen, RNLI Hoylake Lifeboat Coxswain

2. Summary of Position

DA set out that the Council is preparing a beach management plan that will eventually go to Natural England for approval. As part of the development of that plan we need to understand which parts of the beach need to be clear for the RNLI to operate their equipment. Natural England have stated that lifesaving activities take priority over conservation interest. So the understanding of what the RNLI requires needs to be clear and Wirral Council would like National and Regional sign off of those requirements.

MC added that if certain thresholds are met then Natural England may approve the beach management plan.

JG tabled plans which had been developed based on the understanding of RNLI operational requirements. JG explained that Natural England will need justification for their requirements.

DA & LF agreed that the two different vessels (lifeboat and hovercraft) should be considered separately as there are different risks to the operations of both vessels. HO explained that the hovercraft has 4 legs on the bottom and it's easy for the legs dig into vegetation humps and stop suddenly. Launching the hovercraft in the dark causes problems and the vegetation humps can't be seen.

LF explained that by coming to a halt in this manner can

- Increase the likelihood of damage to the hovercraft
- Increase the risk to the crew as they can be thrown out of the hovercraft
- Increase the risk to the life saving operation because it introduces delay

NT explained that Natural England had provided advice on the proof / evidence that would need to be provided by the RNLI in support of their operational requirements:

- Provide evidence they can't approach from their normal slipway at certain times of the day (for example due to tide/wind direction/daylight hours)
- Provide data on how often they use different approaches and access routes.
- Proof they utilise routes and how often.

DA suggested a working example of the working practice for certain conditions.

HO & LF agreed that they have the data regarding launching during certain conditions however the launch location is a decision made on conditions at the time. DA asked whether launch nearer the lifeboat station was preferable. HO agreed it was.

DA asked whether the old slipway at Alderley Road could be used for recovery. LF explained that it couldn't because it would damage the lifeboat.

NT asked whether recovery track could be located seaward of the existing vegetation. HO & LF explained that this wasn't possible as there would be delay waiting for the tide to drop and that the needs of the crew need to be considered. The view of the ground is also poor.

JG asked whether the 25m strip from the seawall was necessary for recovery. LF & HO confirmed that 25m is not necessary and a 10m strip is suitable for recovery operations.

NT asked whether the provision of a clear strip of beach will provide the necessary accessibility for the lifeboat and hovercraft. LF confirmed that it would also allow for recovery.

NT said that there may be plants growing immediately against the wall which are protected. Would a 2 or 3 metre buffer between the wall and the 10m clear strip work for the RNLI?

HO said that would be OK.

DA summarised the RNLI concerns in 3 key points

1. The impact of the vegetation growth and the ability of the RNLI to operate with their current equipment
2. The impact on lifesaving response
3. Current approach to operating could have the capacity to increase risk to life

HO confirmed that RNLI crews are currently waiting an additional 2 hours for recovery because conditions inshore are no longer suitable and to avoid conflict with the public. HO stated the crew are volunteers who have normal working lives and this additional time is not acceptable.

DA and LF discussed recent investment in the lifeboat station, and equipment and calculated it was approximately £7m. MC asked whether the station could continue to operate if access isn't maintained. LF explained that the RNLI may need to adapt operations and that this could negatively impact on operations. The Coastguard would need to be informed that Hoylake was not available.

DA asked whether the video provided by the RNLI could be shared with Natural England. HO confirmed that it could and added that if the site is left unmaintained it could result in damaged vessels. MC asked whether the implication of damaged vessels was that they would be inoperable? HO confirmed that was correct.

JG asked whether the strip to the east and west of the lifeboat station was correct for launch and recovery.

NT explained that the Council are looking to consult on 2 beach management options:

- An amenity beach between the RNLI station and Trinity Road
- Do minimum but with improved access for all.

At the moment the RNLI requirements have been mapped on the west side as far as Trinity Road and this has effectively removed the do minimum option. So we are looking for some clarity on whether the Trinity Road extent is required by the RNLI

LF & HO identified Clydesdale Road as the limit of the RNLI operational requirements. DA & MC explained that the improved access for all would include the RNLI operational requirements

3. Next Steps

NT asked how RNLI will provide evidence of their operational requirements.

LF said RNLI can provide service call locations and launches for the last 5 years.

DA suggested the RNLI provide a full introduction to their operations detailing both lifeboat and hovercraft use. The statement should identify how the efficiency of lifesaving operations are impacted by the vegetation on the foreshore.

NT asked Haskoning to update the plans for vegetation removal based on the discussions at this meeting.

LF confirmed that he can set out the Hoylake Lifeboat operational requirements and share with National RNLI for their approval.

DA also suggested a working example showing why the request is necessary.

NT talked through the programme timeframe. RNLI response is need by end of September. This will allow Haskoning to finish the Habitat Regulations Work and support the management options with the RNLI evidence. Haskoning will submit the HRAs with RNLI evidence to Natural England for advice. If a favourable position is identified with Natural England then public consultation on the two options can begin, with committee approval on the preferred option around Christmas or early New Year

4. Any Other Business

HO asked about the sand build up at the west slipway. It is currently passable for the hovercraft but the sand is preventing the large boat being recovered there with the cradle.

DA asked whether this was a key health & safety issue. Once made aware there is a position of responsibility. DA asked whether we could ask Natural England if we can move the sand.

NT said there is still a process around Habitat Regs to follow but would ask Haskoning to look at the HRA requirement there so we can act prior to the beach management plan implementation.



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President: HRH The Duke of Kent KC
Chair: Janet Legrand KC (Hon)
Chief Executive: Mark Dowie

28 October 2023

Mr D Armstrong
Assistant Chief Executive
Wirral Borough Council
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Brighton Street
WALLASEY
CH27 9FQ

Dear David

We write in relation to the beach area that bounds our Hoylake lifeboat station to seaward, specifically the changing beach environment and the spread of vegetation. Since the cessation of Wirral Borough Council spraying control methods, we are increasingly concerned about the safe and continued effective use of these areas by our staff, volunteer crews, and lifesaving equipment.

Our submission intends to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the lifesaving service we provide from Hoylake, the equipment we supply to our crews and the safe operating methods designed into the station. Whether for training, or launching on a lifesaving mission, access is required to and from the beach via slipways: a primary north-facing slipway and a second (located away from the boathouse) for use in periods of extreme weather (unpredictable) or tidal conditions (predictable), or if the primary is out of service. Another slipway at the east-side of the station is employed for other aspects of launch and recovery operations. Whilst several, separate launch options may appear to be an overengineered solution, all are vital to the continuation and safety of our lifesaving procedures, as without unrestricted access to the sea, our mission to save lives at sea would fail.

Slipway utilization

The primary slipway, facing north, is utilised in over 95% of launch and recovery operations. It provides a straight, primarily firm, and level traverse across the beach to the water's edge, after which the lifeboat can be launched from its carriage rig and speed to the scene of any rescue. For recovery, once the boat is 're-carried', the rig can traverse the same track back to the station and rehouse via the same slipway.

The second slipway is a short distance from the station to the west, at "King's Gap". Operations from this locale allow the launch and recovery of the Shannon class lifeboat when the primary slipway is unavailable; for example, poor weather and / or water conditions such that a safer, expeditious launch and recovery can be achieved from here. Moreover, the King's Gap permits the lifeboat to be safely recovered during high tidal events, as this location does not require a wait of over 2 hours for the tide to have sufficiently ebbed to allow for a recovery. This secondary recovery site also allows the crew to safely reach the shore in poor weather conditions some 2 hours earlier than would be possible at the primary slipway. Once recovered, the lifeboat is brought to the station parallel to the promenade wall and rehouse.

The Inshore Rescue Hovercraft (IRH) is launched and recovered by tractor and trailer, predominantly using our primary slipway. Additionally, it utilises another station slipway for launching and is 'flown' from the south side of the lifeboat house down the west slipway onto the beach. The IRH is then recovered up the third station slipway to the east side of the station.

The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution, a charity registered in England and Wales (209603), Scotland (SC037736), the Republic of Ireland (CHY 2678 and 20003326), the Bailiwick of Jersey (14), the Isle of Man (1308 and 006329F), the Bailiwick of Guernsey and Alderney



Safe continuation of operations and training

All slipways and the surrounding areas need to be clear of obstructions, this is vital for providing the lifesaving service from Hoylake lifeboat station. Any of the slipways, or combinations of, will be utilised by either craft at any time of the day and night. The vegetation, and as it spreads, will act as an obstacle for safe operations. Thus, managing this beach area is required for our continued safe and effective service of both the lifeboat and hovercraft from the station.

Over recent years, the Hoylake team have needed to adapt operations to ensure that our interactions with the encroaching grass are limited as far as is practicable. Training evolutions, which once may have occurred in areas where the grass is now prevalent, have ceased. This adaptation is partly to ensure that local sensitivities are not provoked by the crew seemingly operating on the grass for non-lifesaving purposes. Although not ideal, this is a necessary step. However, if the grass continues encroaching towards the slipways, the team would necessarily be operating on the grass during routine launch and recovery operations and unable to keep clear of it.

Although, to date, we have not observed significant degradation to crew safety and welfare issues, the team is aware of the potential for interactions with the intruding flora, especially when utilising the west and east slipways for launch and recovery activity. We are already experiencing an increasing grass encroachment here. The crew are intensely aware of the need to take precautions when operating in the areas of the grass to ensure any interaction with the craft is minimal and not likely to cause equipment damage or instabilities.

Hoylake lifeboat station is a vital asset to the community of, and visitors to, Wirral, Merseyside and North Wales and has been providing a lifesaving service for over 200 years; Annex 1 provides further background of Hoylake Lifeboat Station and Appendix 1 portrays statistics of all assets' rescue operations. This service remains as vital today as when it was first established; the crew selflessly answer the call to assist others and they should be assured of their safety when doing so. There has been a significant investment in the station, all funded from private donations and equipment at Hoylake and the crews have been provided with a modern, safe, and effecting lifesaving base. This is something which we would like to see maintained, and the assistance with the provision of debris-free, clear and level grounds around the station and slipways on which to safely access and egress the areas would be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Jo Partner
Head of Region (Wales, West & Isle of Man)

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Annex 1 – The background of Hoylake Lifeboat Station.
Appendix 1 – Hoylake LBS Rescue statistics (all assets).

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Appendix 1 – Hoylake LBS Rescue statistics (all assets).

