



Reviewing activities of the fishing sector to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection and to inform best practice guidance



For:

NFFO

From:

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1. Background

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are known to cause respiratory infections, ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. The most recently discovered coronavirus disease is the COVID-19 virus which has led to a global pandemic and triggered lockdown across many countries.

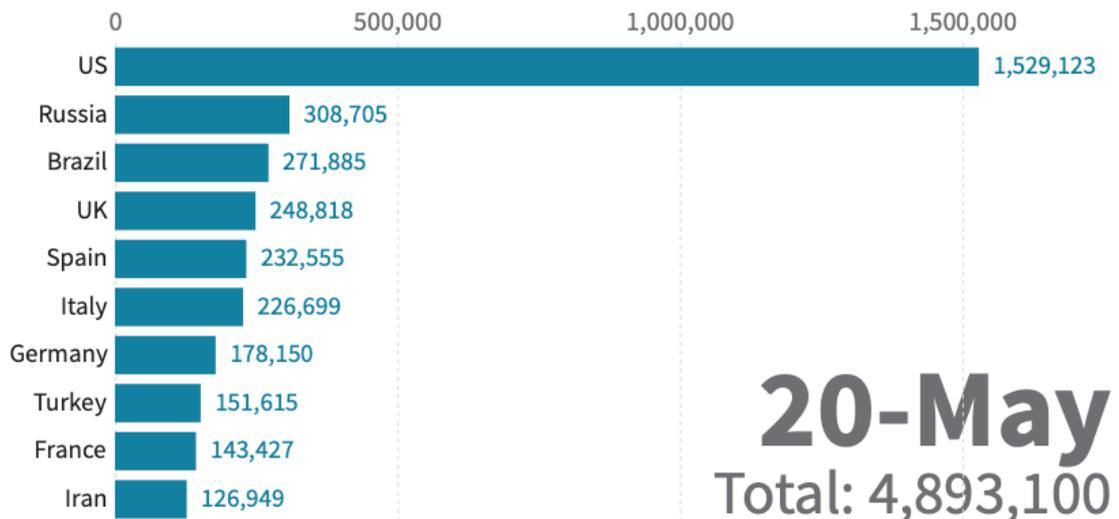
Some parts of the UK fishing fleet have been able to fish on through the coronavirus emergency, bringing food to tables during a time when the crisis was at its worst. Other vessels have seen their markets disappear completely and have had no option but to tie up.

Whatever their current situation, vessels going back to sea or continuing to fish, will face a new set of challenges relating to how they might operate in a world in which a second surge in the pandemic is an ongoing threat.

In terms of managing risk, fishing has some advantages – in particular, low levels of contact with the public. In some respects, fishing vessels can be considered as *sealed workplaces*. But fishing also presents some challenges – physical distancing in the confined spaces on fishing vessels being uppermost.

The wide variety of sizes, shapes and operations of fishing vessels do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all guidance. The present government guidance contains useful practical suggestions and broad principles but is set at a very general level. Boats and ships aren't mentioned specifically and outdoor working and working from vehicles provide the closest parallels.

How confirmed cases of coronavirus have spread



[Infographic: BBC]

2. Introduction

Parts of the UK fishing industry have developed their own guidance on how to operate safely, within the context of continuing risk from the COVID-19 virus and have ideas about how this guidance could be further developed to make it relevant and practical.

Fishermen know their vessels and operations better than anyone so capturing and sharing that knowledge is an urgent priority. For that reason, the NFFO instigated a telephone survey to rapidly collect ideas from members on good practice already in place or being developed.

The key to operating safely will be the *risk assessment* that each skipper/owner must undertake to ensure that his vessel is operating safely. Risk assessments are already well established but taking COVID-related risks into account is the new factor. What works for one vessel, won't necessarily be the answer in another but the aim is to provide each skipper/owner with the options to find his own course.

2.1 Scope of works

Like many industries emerging from COVID-19 lockdown the fishing sector needs to provide confidence and assurance to Government and to crews and their families that fishing operations can be undertaken in a safe manner, respecting the principles of social distancing and hygiene in order to minimise the risk of transmission of the disease.

The deliverables for this report were to:

1. Undertake desk-top research to review all existing guidance on social distancing in food production and offshore activities (shipping, yachting, offshore oil and gas and any other maritime sector) in order to recommend to NFFO members what changes/additions are required to ensure risk assessments are fit for purpose.
2. Undertake semi-structured interviews and discussion with fishermen / vessel owners (across the range of NFFO membership), safety advisers, vessel managers and other agencies (MCA, Seafish, Defra etc) to fully understand actions currently being employed by the fleet and to identify any potential gaps in guidance.
3. Identify findings from 1) and 2) and provide a summary document suitable for discussion with Government departments and circulation to NFFO members.

3. Review of guidance in other fishing nations and maritime sectors

3.1 Fishing industry response from outside UK

Around the world fishing fleets are grappling with the same issue of developing best practice guidelines on safe working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance from Australia, Spain, Denmark, Norway, America (Alaska state), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and Sea Source (from the UK) was reviewed to inform the development of sector-specific guidance on mitigating the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission on UK fishing vessels.

All of the guidance reviewed focussed on measures to implement the three pillars of the world health organisation (WHO) global approach to tackling the pandemic; these are:

- i. Social (physical) distancing - maintaining a distance of > 2m from co-workers where possible;
- ii. Cleaning & sanitisation - maintaining a high level of hygiene of all surfaces in the workplace;
- iii. Isolation - of those displaying COVID-19 like symptoms (and, where possible, testing of any worker / crew displaying COVID-19 symptoms);

The Alaska Protective Plan for Independent Commercial Fishing Vessels produced by Discovery health (in collaboration with United States Coast Guard (USCG) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC)) and published by the Alaska state government provided the most comprehensive guidance found. Here detailed documents in the form of safety manuals, checklists and flowcharts were provided to operators of all sizes of vessel to cover the following areas:

- a) [COVID19 Catcher and Tender Vessel Procedures v1.7 4.20.20](#) - Full 35-page comprehensive document
- b) [COVID19 Assessment of Symptomatic Crew Flowchart v1.8 4.19.20](#)
- c) [Bleach as a Disinfectant](#)
- d) [Preparation Checklist](#)
- e) [Sanitation & Disposal](#)
- f) [Assessment Checklist](#)
- g) [Quarantine Procedures Checklist](#)
- h) [Isolation Checklist](#)
- i) [Berthing, & Offload, Shoreleave Checklist](#)
- j) [Managing Suppliers & Vendors to Vessel Checklist](#)

These materials provides the basis of a best practice guide, although it is noted the vessels and mode of operation of many parts of this fleet are different to those in the UK. For the largest vessels in the Alaskan fleet, the cornerstone of the approach is a 14-day period of crew quarantine prior to joining a vessel. Once onboard crew will stay on the vessel for the whole season and the vessel is effectively 'locked down' with strict access and controls around loading stores and offloading catches.

Guidance to the fishing sector in other countries is more generic and in line with Government advice in working safely during the coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/5-steps-to-working-safely>).

3.2 Other Maritime sectors

a) Windfarm support vessels

With similar sized vessels, crew numbers and distance from a safe haven the windfarm support vessel sector offers many parallels to the fishing industry. The main principles adopted by operators in the sector are:

- **Questioning** on general health and potential interaction with infected individuals ashore (family, friends, co-workers etc).
- **Temperature** checks are carried out before they step on board - anyone with a temp above 37.8C is refused onboard.
- **Sanitise**
 - All crew sanitise their hands once boarded.
 - All cutlery plates cups have been removed from the galley.
 - Crews bring their own cutlery and crockery; or use disposable plates.
 - Once maintenance teams have left the vessel onto the turbine the vessel is again sanitised and also sanitised at the end of the day.
- **Distancing**
 - Seating plans have been drawn up to ensure crew are socially distanced as far away as sensibly possible away from each other.
 - Only 1 person max in the galley at a time.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)** - gloves, face masks and visors have been provided.

If anyone is suspected as having COVID symptoms the below procedure takes place.

Once in port the whole vessel is to be sanitised and not return to for a minimum of 24 hours. All persons working within that shift with a person suspected of having COVID19 are to go off shift and remain in isolation for 14 days.

b) Superyachts

In line with the International Safety Management code (section 1.2.2) captains and crew of the vessels in the sector are being advised to develop a written outbreak management plan, in the event of a suspected case of COVID-19.

This plan should include descriptions of:

- i. where suspected cases will be isolated
- ii. how the necessary communications between departments will be managed
- iii. cleaning and disinfection procedures for potentially contaminated areas including isolation cabins
- iv. how food service and waste management services will be provided to isolated travellers.

Staff on board should have knowledge of the plan and implement it as required.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), crew should implement a pre-boarding screening with the purpose of deferring or rescheduling the boarding of any traveller identified through a questionnaire as being in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19.

The sector is referred to official WHO guidelines which are as follows:

- Frequent hand washing by crew (and passengers) using soap and hot water or alcohol-based (at least 65-70%) hand rub for 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching the face including mouth, nose and eyes with unwashed hands (in case hands have touched surface contaminated with the virus)
- Seafarers (and passengers) should be encouraged to cover their nose and mouth with a disposable tissue when sneezing, coughing, wiping and blowing the nose then dispose of the used tissue immediately
- If a tissue is not available crew should cover the nose and mouth and cough or sneeze into a flexed elbow
- Seafarers should aim to keep at least one metre distance from other people, particularly those that cough or sneeze or may have a fever. If they are too close, other crew members can potentially breathe in the virus
- Meat, milk or animal products should always be handled with care, to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, consistent with good food safety practices.

In the event of a suspected case of COVID-19 on board, guidance suggests that:

“the person should be instructed to wear a medical mask and isolated in a predefined isolation cabin with the door closed. Following International Health Regulations, the captain must immediately inform that port health authority at the next port of call about any suspected case of COVID-19. It is important to disembark suspected cases as soon as possible in cooperation with the health authorities at the port, to prevent the endangerment of others. During the disembarkation process, every effort should be made to minimise the exposure of other persons and environmental contamination”.

After a suspected case has been identified, all persons on board should be assessed for their risk of exposure. Anyone who has been in close contact (this means those who have stayed in the same cabin, participated in a common activity or dined together) is considered to have had a high risk of exposure and must be separated from others on board as soon as possible.

4. Summary of UK fishing industry stakeholder responses

4.1 Fishermen

Vessel length / metier	Comments from UK vessel owners and operators
Single handers (typically 5-10m)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ These operators perceived themselves as low risk at sea and believed their greatest risk of becoming infected was on land. ➤ Most were focussed on social distancing & hygiene measures accessing / leaving the vessel and when landing. ➤ Some skippers were practicing a regime of sanitising hands and boot upon boarding the vessel and when returning though it was impossible to gauge how widely this practice had been adopted. ➤ There was recognition that minimising social interaction with other fishermen and keeping to a distance was required though there were mixed views on how well this was being implemented in practice. ➤ Some had been discouraged from chatting with other skippers / crews on other vessels when in harbour by local safety advisers.
Crewed 'dayboats' (typically 8 - 12m)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Responses were largely in common with those of the singlehanded skippers; with the addition of the following points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wheelhouse and working deck arrangements on almost all vessels in this category would result in the 2m social distancing advice being compromised most of the time while the vessel is at sea. - Skippers / owners were concerned about what measures crew were taking away from the boat and felt that younger crew in particular believed they were virtually immune and therefore less engaged in efforts to control the spread of the pandemic. This was of particular concern where the ages of crew on the same vessel range from 19 to 70yrs old.
10-15m crewed trip vessels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skippers and owners were engaged in the subject and many provided significant detail on steps being undertaken to reduce the risk of the virus being transmitted. ➤ These measures included twice daily monitoring and recording of crew temperatures. ➤ One owner had developed a mobile phone App for the skipper to use for daily reporting of the measures taken. ➤ Other owners have provided written guidance to 'live aboard' crews on zero-socialising with other crews when in harbour.
15-24m crewed trip vessels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Typically, these vessels were company owned and the emphasis on safety and crew welfare was more formalised, with written guidance being provided and crew briefings undertaken at time of boarding. ➤ Many crews on vessels of this size were aboard the vessel for 2 or more consecutive trips and hence there was a greater emphasis on 'locking down' contact with the outside world once 14-days had passed as there was a high degree of confidence that none of the crew were infected and a more 'normal' style of working could return. ➤ Owners were also increasingly aware of broader community perception of what the industry was doing to reduce the spread of the disease and the reputational risk that could arise if crews were seen not to be adhering to guidance and photos being posted to social media.

<p>24-30m crewed trip vessels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ All vessels in this category were company owned and were operated under the guidance of a fleet manager. ➤ The need to set, and adhere strictly to, guidance was understood. ➤ Vessel managers were proactively engaging with crews about social distancing when ashore, emphasising the health and safety of the vessel and whole crew and their families depended on every person sticking to strict social distancing and hygiene. ➤ A considerable proportion of crews in this section of the fleet are from non-EEA countries and may be onboard for months at a time. These crews are advised not to leave the vessel for any purpose or to allow friends from other vessels to come onboard. ➤ As with 15-24m vessels, crews were typically onboard for 2 or more consecutive trips and so the focus was on health questionnaires and pre-boarding checks. ➤ Typically these vessels offered greater space in the galley / mess deck area which made social distanced seating plans possible. ➤ Operators believed all feasible steps were being undertaken with a high degree of compliance; however, it was stressed that even on vessels of this size communal accommodation was common and that social distancing in this area was therefore very difficult. ➤ Towed gear vessels were generally finding it easier to stagger meal times and social distance in the mess deck due to the 'shift style' operational nature of fishing on these vessels when only half the crew would be up / on deck at any time. ➤ PPE (masks and visors) were being provided and available where needed.
<p>Over 30m catcher / factory ships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trip lengths are typically longer and trips further from a safe haven ➤ The emphasis is therefore even more focussed on the pre-boarding screening through testing (where available) and the quarantine of crews prior to crew changes ➤ A sign in / out log is kept for all contractors working on the vessel in harbour in order to support track and trace in the event of infection ➤ Where there is a testing regime and there is in effect a COVID free 'bubble' in place the social distancing can be relaxed to allow normal working practices to take place, whilst remaining vigilant ➤ Where testing prior to boarding is not in place crew were required to observe social distancing and hygiene in a number of ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Staggered eating times with own plates and cutlery ii. Hand sanitising stations onboard iii. Wearing of visors on deck iv. Washing of clothing daily at > 60 C v. Twice daily temperature screen and logging ➤ All vessels of this size have cabin space and existing protocols for quarantining of any crew members that may exhibit symptoms of COVID-19 infection and crew that may have been in contact are independently isolated and kept under observation ➤ When landing the number of crew that were in contact with shore landing staff was kept to a minimum ➤ Additional PPE is taken on board for situations when social distancing cannot be observed ➤ Due to the distance from a safe haven some of the largest vessels were carrying additional oxygen and regulators (to those required by law) in case of a medical emergency. ➤ Operators of these vessels were committed to rigorous checking pre-boarding and using the testing services available to them.

5. Discussion points

Feedback from stakeholders suggests that further discussion around the measures and advice / guidance is needed in the following areas.

Pre-boarding

- Pre-boarding screening
 - Health questionnaires
 - Temperature taking and logging
 - Access to testing and speeding up of test results
 - Roll-out of track and trace technology
- Harbours and markets
 - Working with harbours / markets to ensure appropriate cleaning is in place
 - Understanding isolation and evacuation procedures in the harbours

Practical steps onboard

- Use of PPE
 - Wearing of masks (how and when)
 - Wearing of face visors
 - Cleaning regimes for oilskins and gloves
- Adapting to compromised ability to social distance
 - Floor markings / hazard tape
 - Seating plans
 - Sleeping opposite ends of bunks
 - Avoidance of working face to face at close quarters
- Use of visuals to improve communication
 - Use of tick vs cross imagery, especially where English is not the first language
 - Laminated guidance to be displayed at several locations onboard
- Cleaning regimes
 - Guidance on which chemicals to use for cleaning
 - Stressing the need to frequently and properly wash hands and to minimise touching the face (eyes, nose and mouth)
- Engaging the 'complacent'
 - Reports of younger people not engaging as perceived high immunity or low risk of mortality due to age and health

Scenario planning

- What if?
 - Treatment of infected crews
 - Isolation protocols
 - Evacuation procedures

6. Conclusions

- It was found that detailed guidance, checklists and flowcharts were available to the fishing industry in other countries; though not definitive, these provide practical guidance for the UK fishing industry and have been summarised into a risk assessment style approach (see Annex III).
- It was clear that all sections of the NFFO membership interviewed were engaged and had a high level of awareness of the risks posed by COVID-19. Although limited in scope, it also appeared there was good adherence to the essential Government advice on hygiene and social distancing; however, further improvements could be made through adoption of a more formalised approach to identifying and then mitigating against COVID-19 infection and transmission risks.
- It was recognised that even on the largest vessels in the fleet, existing guidance on social distancing cannot be observed at all times, most notably in the cabin / accommodation areas. For this reason the emphasis of owners and operators of larger vessels was pre-boarding procedures and in particular access to widespread testing. This is particularly relevant for crews who maybe onboard vessels for weeks and months at a time. For these crews access to COVID-19 testing is an urgent priority measure. Through this route crews on these vessels could work at a much lower risk and therefore operate under 'normal' working conditions.
- It was found that the operators of single handers perceived themselves to be at minimal risk of becoming infected once at sea. However, where these operators are selling catches direct to the public they are interacting with a greater number of people on a daily basis and therefore the probability of infection increases. The messaging and guidance to single-handed operators needs to highlight this risk and guard against complacency.
- It was reported by many skippers that younger crew were less engaged in measures being taking to reduce the spread of the virus. This was not only endangering the health of older crew but also the families of all crew.

7. Recommendations

1. In the absence of specific COVID-19 guidance for the fishing industry relevant government departments and agencies should continue to work closely with the fishing industry to develop specific advice for vessel owners, masters and crews on how to reduce the risk of catching and spreading COVID-19.
2. The fishing industry should take a proactive stance and work closely with maritime charities and other support bodies to disseminate this guidance (when produced) and encourage uptake across the UK industry via industry press, social media and through co-operation with harbour managing authorities.
3. Harbour managers should be encouraged to:
 - a. display suitable guidance around ports and harbours, in particular at access points to vessels (ladders, marina, jetties, piers, slipways etc);
 - b. discuss isolation and evacuation procedures with local fishing stakeholders
 - c. put in place rigorous sanitising regimes for all surfaces that multiple fishermen or harbour staff may come into contact with.
4. To improve the effectiveness of messaging the basic principles of public health guidance to limit the spread of the disease (i.e. social distancing and hand washing) consideration should be given to commissioning the production of graphics / visuals for use by the fishing industry.
5. Until COVID-19 testing becomes more widely available consideration should be given to encouraging the use of temperature guns as part of crews' pre-boarding health checks.
6. Skippers / masters should be encouraged a daily risk assessment of COVID-19 risks through the adoption of a 'flowchart' approach and risk mitigation plan.
7. Industry should encourage the use of the safety folder as a means of formalising the preventative actions that are already being undertaken across the fleet and to use this as the benchmark for best practice.

Annexes

Annex I - Guidance reviewed

MCA, Marine Information Note (MIN) 616
Alaska Protective Plan for Independent Commercial Fishing Vessels
Norwegian fisheries
Windfarm service vessel guidance
FAO guidance
World Health Organisation guidance
Defra guidance
Public Health England

Annex II - Stakeholder engagement list

CFPO, Cornwall
ANIFPO, Northern Ireland
Waterdance, SW England
Tony Delahunty, SE
Hooktone Ltd
Locker Trawlers, Whitby
Simmonds Partnership
Silver Dawn Fishing
Ned Clark, NE
Macduff Shellfish
South Devon & Channel Shellfish
Hayle Fishermen's Association
N Devon Fishermen's Association
Welsh Fishermen's Association
UK Fisheries, Hull
Pride & Joy Fishing Ltd (Whitby)
North Devon Trawlers Ltd
JNS Fishing Ltd
Hazel Smith, Sea Fit lifestyle and mental health adviser
Clive Palfrey, Seafood Cornwall Training safety adviser

Annex III Guidance for fishing vessel COVID-19 risk assessments (attached)