

Report to the Southwold Harbour Management Committee HMC: Fire at Southwold Harbour, 1 May 2023

On Monday 1 May 2023 a fire broke out in retail food premises within Southwold Harbour. The alarm was raised by a port user at approximately 0100 who contacted the emergency services and subsequently phoned the Harbour Master. The Harbour Master arrived on site at approximately 0130. Initially 3 fire units were on site and were subsequently joined by more.

A control centre was set up and initial dialogue took place between the Harbour Master and the Senior Fire Officer. The Harbour Master gave advice in relation to water availability and local knowledge relating to the scene including the fact that gas bottles were present in or near the units.



At 0130 only the Sole Bay Fish and Chip and wet fish sales property and the Fisherman's hut belonging to the Winerbotham family were alight. The Fisherman's hut owned by Tom Partridge and Mrs. T's premises appeared unaffected at that time.

The weather was dry with light South Easterly winds.

It is thought, but has not been confirmed, from CCTV coverage that the fire initially started at around 0040. The initial site meeting took place at around 0200 and was attended by the Harbour Master and the emergency services.

It is believed that around this time while cooling of gas bottles was underway the fire spread to the other units, mentioned above. Each of the units mentioned above are privately owned and operated and are sited within the harbour on a commercial lease.

It is believed that five fire units were engaged in the main suppression, two operating in a tandem in-line operation, pumping water from the location of Harbour Marine Services with a further 3 units pumping water directly from the river. The Harbour Master liaised regarding pump positioning and tidal information.

The Harbour Master observed the extent of run off and concluded that no pollutants entered the watercourse.

The fire was finally extinguished at around 0450. It is believed that the fire was caused by an electrical fault. There were no casualties.



Given the weather and wind speed and direction the fire did not spread further than the units damaged however in different weather conditions the damage may have been greater.

Several issues have been brought in to focus as a result of the fire:

A number of huts are in a poor state of repair and others seem to have been extended beyond the leased area without the benefit of the landowners permission, or the required Planning and Building Control approvals

Some businesses and hut owners are storing combustible material some in significant quantities in and around their premises. This raises a number of Health and Safety and lease/licence compliance questions.

Numbers of pressurised liquefied gas cylinders were noted stored within and between the retail food and storage units. This raises further compliance concerns.

There appears to be limited access to mains water supply for firefighting in the area.

Asset Management - Implications

As a result of a historic seemingly light touch approach to tenancy management within the harbour while ownership was being contested commercial estate management of the tenancies within the harbour has historically been somewhat 'light'. This has resulted in what now appear to be un-regularised leases and other issues in terms of covenant enforcement. A substantial number of tenancies are holding over on expired leases with the vast majority of tenants/licensees reporting that they have no physical lease document to which to refer.

A resource has been identified to undertake day-to-day management of the commercial estate within Southwold Harbour. This will include ensuring that tenants comply with their lease obligations and management of leases generally.

A review of all business tenancies is being undertaken with the aim to ensure that all leases are regularised and new lease documents agreed and issued in a standard form. This is a large piece of work and in some cases requires services of notices in collaboration with colleagues from the Council's legal team.

Previously lease obligations have not been enforced to their fullest and often breaches of tenancies have been allowed to persist. This situation will be rectified to enable a positive harbour management function, clear health and safety obligations for tenants, and cleanliness and tidiness of the harbour area.

In conjunction with the management of the commercial leases and tenant's lease obligations, persistent breaches of covenants will result in tenancies being declined or the landlord exercising its rights to remedy breaches at the tenant's costs.

With regard to the reinstatement of tenanted areas effected by the recent fire the Council has reminded the tenants of their lease obligations to obtain Landlords consent, Planning permission and Building Control approval before undertaking any works. The Estates team has met with the effected tenants to assist and co-ordinate this process.

The above approach will ensure a safer managed asset with improved landlord and tenant relations.

Recommendations

- The Harbour Management Committee notes the review of all leases to ensure tenancy agreements are in place, consistent and up to date.
- The Harbour Management Committee notes the use of the Councils' powers under leases to ensure compliance with lease obligations and effectively manage its assets.
- The Harbour Management Committee notes that any redevelopment of tenanted areas needs to be undertaken with coordination with the Council as Landowner and if with appropriate Planning and Building Control consents