



WELLBEING, WELFARE AND LIFE AT SEA

POLICY BRIEF NO. 6 - JULY 2020

OVERVIEW

- Fishing communities are prone to a number of wellbeing and welfare issues, some seen across many industries and some specific to a fishing lifestyle.
- Frequent issues cover both physical and mental health, with common health issues including back and joint problems, poor dental health, depression and anxiety.
- Significant factors underlying wellbeing issues include financial uncertainty, difficulty accessing services, and cultural barriers to seeking help.
- Many issues have been present for generations, but changing times have also led to new uncertainties.
- There are a number of projects across the UK, mostly regionally focused, that provide welfare services for fishermen.

BACKGROUND

Fishing is an intense career, comprising uncertainty over income, irregular and unsociable hours, and significant physical dangers. Fishers in England and Wales have been reported to have among the worst general health outcomes of any industry (1). One survey covering 41 UK ports found that over 95% of fishers reported that they suffered from stress (2). July's APPG event aimed to uncover the root causes of welfare and wellbeing challenges for fishing communities, as well as examining how they can be effectively addressed.

CAUSES

There are numerous drivers that affect fishermen's welfare. These can be grouped into traditional drivers, including financial insecurity, unpredictable weather, fluctuating markets and physical danger, and modern uncertainties, such as changing regulations and a poor perceived public image (3).

The most significant driver behind fishers' welfare issues is the unpredictability of the industry. Weather, catch and quota changes can all be unpredictable, and all affect fishers' income (4, 5).

This briefing summarises the output from the APPG on Fisheries open Parliamentary webinar, 2 July 2020. The meeting brought together stakeholders from across the sector and across the UK. Seafood industry representatives, NGOs, researchers and health practitioners were among those that met to discuss the range of measures taking place to aid the health and wellbeing of UK fishing communities. This document is a synthesis of the discussions that took place both at the event and online (via #FishingWelfare).

As well as leading to acute problems, this uncertainty also makes planning for the future especially challenging, with little financial ‘safety net’ for fishermen to support their retirement, leave or periods of sickness. A lack of autonomy in decision making, particularly when it comes to contributing to national and regional policy, can contribute to this atmosphere of uncertainty (6, 7). Implications of Brexit have also been cited by some as a cause for additional uncertainty and exacerbation of existing uncertainties (5, 8).

Even after the end of their working lives, fishermen continue to be vulnerable. Retired fishermen often have minimal statutory pensions, a lack of housing security and few savings to speak of (4, 9). Many also suffer from chronic health issues, the result of a physically and mentally gruelling career.

Problems with accessing support can compound these issues. Fishers’ unsociable hours at sea means that they are often unable to visit health practices, banks or other institutions during regular opening times, and the unpredictability of conditions means that they are rarely able to commit to scheduled appointments (4, 7).

As well as affecting fishers directly, stressors also have an impact on their families. Unpredictable working hours make it challenging to fully contribute to family life, and financial insecurity often affects whole households (4, 6). Conditions at sea are also very different from those on land, and constant readjustment can be challenging (2). From family members’ perspectives, the dangers their loved ones face at sea can be a constant source of stress and worry (10).

RESULTANT HEALTH ISSUES

One research project in north-east England found mental health, poor oral hygiene, substance abuse, debt and pressure on families to be major symptoms of poor wellbeing (11). The challenges of a fishing career can contribute to stress and depression, which can result in fishermen neglecting personal health and making poor lifestyle choices when it comes to diet, exercise and substance abuse (2, 4, 5).

There is often significant interaction between physical and mental health issues. For instance, physical injuries at sea can lead to mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression (12).

There also remains stigma surrounding mental health, particularly among male fishermen (5, 6, 10). Such matters are rarely the topic of discussion among fishing communities and can lead to a lack of visibility and awareness (12). A culture of independence and self-reliance can make fishers reluctant to seek help (2, 7). This can ultimately lead to a higher incidence of emergency procedures rather than preventative treatment (7).



BUILDING WELLBEING

A number of projects around the UK coast are committed to improving fishermen's health and wellbeing. July's meeting heard from representatives from several involved organisations.

The Fishermen's Mission focuses on addressing the welfare issues faced by active and retired fishers (4). Their round-the-clock services include emergency financial assistance, access to food banks and social services, referrals to mental health services such as Big White Wall and the Seafarers Hospital Society, pastoral support, funeral services and assistance for migrant crew members. They also implement the SeaFit programme, which acts on-the-ground to support specific fishing communities.

The FishWell project, supported by SeaFit, operates on the Norfolk and Suffolk coast. They first ran 'meet and greet' events to build a rapport with fishers, and have since helped them address mental health issues (5). This includes retired fishermen, many of whom are prone to feelings of isolation and depression.

Another SeaFit-supported project takes place on the Holderness coast, and provides lifestyle support and guidance through collaboration with the NHS and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (11). They have a dedicated vehicle where health trainers can provide support and guidance in a safe, mobile space. Fishers also have access to specialist services on the quayside such as dentistry and physiotherapy. As well as addressing immediate health problems, ongoing support has helped fishers lose weight, quit smoking and make other positive lifestyle changes. This focus on preventative health is an initiative supported by Public Health England (13).

The Maritime Charities Funding Group has funded a health manual designed to help fishermen

alleviate health challenges and access essential resources, published by the Seafarers Hospital Society and Men's Health Forum (14). Elsewhere, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation provides safety training and welfare support, and has helped implement new safety-focused policy such as ILO 188 (12).



IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

The pandemic has exacerbated all of the existing welfare concerns that fishers face, especially in the wake of a poor fishing winter (4), which has increased demand for those organisations that support them. The Fishermen's Mission has provided significant amounts of financial assistance to fishermen, including homeschooling support for their families, and has scaled up many of its regular services. They anticipate a surge in debt advice as government support schemes cease.

The FishWell project has been unable to perform its usual quayside services during lockdown, and has shifted focus to other services such as 'Parcels of Kindness' (5). These parcels have delivered essential items, treats and information on welfare services to several hundred individuals, and have led to a number going on to seek support. They plan to hold informal video chats to keep momentum through the pandemic.

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation has incorporated the role of health and minimising risk of transmission into its guidance for fishers (12). Governmental and public health bodies across the UK have also released guidance for every stage of the seafood supply chain (15).

FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

Many current government policies covering financial or health support do not apply to large sections of the fishing industry, in particular share fishermen (4). It is suggested that fisheries policy needs to focus on not just catch regulation but rather whole coastal communities, which are some of the most deprived communities in the UK (4, 7), and consider wellbeing and stress mitigation as a key tenet (6). Additionally, flexibility in healthcare and financial services is needed to ensure they can be accessed by fishers (4, 6). A concerted effort to break down cultural barriers and stigmas surrounding seeking help would also be beneficial (6).

Funding is a barrier for some of the initiatives investigated in this report, given that funding is often only for a finite length of time (5, 11). More long-term funding streams, through government or elsewhere, could ensure the longevity of beneficial projects and make certain that their benefits are felt for years to come.

SUMMARY

The fishing lifestyle is not an easy one but remains an irreplaceable way of life. Uncertainty (especially in relation to finances), inflexible or inadequate provision of support, and stigma surrounding seeking support are the biggest drivers of wellbeing issues in fishing communities. These issues are manifested through both physical and mental health problems.

A number of projects are tackling these issues through diverse approaches, both through broad-scale support measures and the building of personal relationships. The longevity of these projects relies on sustained funding and supportive government policy, which could allow them not only to continue their work but also to expand their remit to bring benefits to more fishing communities.



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