

CASE STUDY

Commercial Stand Up Paddleboarding Accident, Haverfordwest: Lessons Learnt from the Marine Accident Investigation Branch Report

January 2023

Lessons to be learned by every instructor, coach, leader and deployer from the independent investigation into the most recent accident involving multiple fatalities within a paddlesport activity.

The accident:

At about 09:00 on 30 October 2021, a group of nine stand up paddleboarders, two leaders and seven clients, on a commercial Stand Up Paddleboard river tour from Haverfordwest to Burton Ferry, Wales, descended Haverfordwest Town Weir. Four of the group became trapped at the weir by the hydraulic towback and subsequently lost their lives.

The investigation:

Due to the nature of this case, a publicly available investigation has been carried out. The tidal nature of the river below the weir meant that the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) became involved. The MAIB investigates marine accidents involving UK vessels worldwide and all vessels in UK territorial waters. The sole objective of their investigation of an accident is “*the prevention of future accidents through the ascertainment of its causes and circumstances*”.

The report:

MAIB have produced a very clear and concise report that clarifies many of the questions and misconceptions that surrounded this incident. We would urge everyone to read the report, which includes what happened, actions taken, and recommendations:

[MAIB investigation report 13-2022: Stand up paddleboards](#)

The tragedy:

This was a tragedy and as Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents, Andrew Moll OBE, said “this was a tragic and avoidable accident that had a profound effect on the participants and the families of those that lost their lives. Stand up paddleboarding is probably the fastest growing UK water sport, with participation in recent years growing by nearly 300%. However, like all water sports, those that buy or rent a paddleboard need to understand the risks”.

The tragic event was the biggest loss of life in a paddling case since 1993, when four teenagers died during a sea kayaking trip in the Lyme Bay area on the south coast of England and resulted in the Adventure Activity Licensing regime for young people’s safety that remains in place to this day. Fortunately, such accidents are rare and therefore there is more reason to take the time to understand what happened at Haverfordwest and learn all we can.

The lessons:

- **Planning and preparation**

“The leaders’ planning and preparation for the tour was inadequate and overlooked the extreme hazard posed by the weir”.

It’s important to carry out appropriate planning and preparation for activities, considering all aspects and to document your decision making processes wherever possible so that they can be evidenced should an incident occur. In the aftermath of any incident, your planning and preparation will always be in the spotlight and under scrutiny.

- **Equipment**

“Clothing, buoyancy aid and leash wearing by participants did not follow recognised guidance”.

It is important you are both familiar with current good practice and also consistent in how you apply this. The equipment you supply should comply with current guidance. You should also check the compliance of any participant's own equipment before they take part in any activity you are running.

- **Training, experience and qualification**

“The leaders did not have the training, experience, or qualifications to lead the tour”.

The scope of each British Canoeing Awarding Body qualification and award is very carefully constructed and reviewed. It is there to help instructors, coaches, leaders and deployers understand where they are competent to operate. Every instructor, coach, and leader needs to understand that going outside of the scope that they have been assessed and certificated puts them in a very vulnerable position.

- **Public messaging and safety advice:**

“UK stand up paddleboarding safety messaging and training governance is inconsistent and there was no means for the participants to judge the proficiency of training and tour providers”.

The British Canoeing Awarding Body [qualification matrices](#) and [environmental definitions document](#) provide clear information on competence, relevant qualifications, experience and the process of ensuring you are qualified to do the job.

The challenge that the adventure activity sector has yet to resolve is how to give the general public clear, consistent safety advice, providing the public with the tools to be able to recognise businesses, clubs and individuals that are certificated and competent to deliver training, tours and expeditions.

You should take pride in the fact that British Canoeing Awarding Body Qualifications and Awards are market leaders and abide to a much higher level of regulation. It is important that we all work together to promote this fact to the public so that they are able to make informed and sensible decisions with regards to paddlesport instruction and coaching.

For any questions or support please email: safety@britishcanoeing.org.uk