NorthStandard

Offshore Series

Safety in the 500m Zone – A Common Understanding is Key

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Introduction

The UK Health and Safety Executive (UK HSE) in March 2025 issued a bulletin the outlining risk of collision with offshore installations from attendant vessels. With the assistance of external experts Seacroft Marine, this article will review the circular and look at best practice for both vessels and platforms to ensure all operations inside the 500m zone by attending vessels is achieved safely.

What is in the UK HSE bulletin?

It outlines that the UK HSE have seen an increase in incidents where vessels attending offshore oil, gas, and renewable energy structures collide or nearly collide with installations. The main causes of such incidents listed in the bulletin are:

- Distraction of watchkeepers with non-navigational tasks.
- Poor situational awareness.
- Weak communication within bridge teams.

What should vessels consider when entering the 500m safety zone?

The circular gives some good case studies reinforcing the above findings and outlines some required actions for the vessels and their crew. These include:

- Follow IMO standards – a proper lookout must be maintained at all times.
- Provide clear, unambiguous instructions covering operations, standby, and windfarm transits.
- Review bridge teamwork, communication, and challenge culture.
- Improve training and use of equipment/DP systems.
- Bridge Navigational Watch Alarm System (BNWAS) must be active at all times during connected activities.
- Select appropriate alarm intervals on BNWAS based on proximity to structures.
- Consider new technologies (e.g. proximity warnings).
- Offshore installation should use ERRVs, AIS tracking, guard zones, or automated alerts and position standby vessels at safe distances for early detection.

NorthStandard discussed the circular with Seacroft Marine Consultants, an Aberdeen based offshore and renewables consultancy. Seacroft Marine Consultants have long run training courses and conducted incident investigations focusing on vessels operating inside the 500m safety zone. Michael Cowlam, Seacroft Marine Consultants Managing Director observed that their own findings supported the UK HSE circular stating that the most common issues they find are indeed related to bridge team distractions and crucially crew complacency. Seacroft Marine Consultants outlined that many incidents and near misses are still caused by:

- The attending vessel not fully and comprehensively completing their 500m zone pre-entry checklists.
- Some pre-entry checks being bypassed.
- A lack of appreciation of the risks of working on the drift on side of the platform.
- Not adhering to set weather windows and conditions.
- Gaps in bridge team soft skills – in particular juniors unwilling to question senior officers and their decisions.

More crucially Seacroft also pointed out that in many instances the platform themselves have contributed major causal factors in many incidents and near misses and highlighted the importance of the platform crew's knowledge of marine operations in successful and safe operations of attending vessels inside the 500m safety zone.

The UK HSE bulletin predominantly uses cases studies outlining particular failings in the attending vessel's operations. However, as with any operation involving multiple parties, it is critical that all parties involved understand not only their own roles and responsibilities but also have an appreciation of the role of the other party. As such it is imperative that the offshore installation involved in the operation with the attending vessel understands the operation and restrictions of the attending vessel.

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It's not always the attending vessels mistakes that leads to incidents.

There are some high-profile cases that involve attending vessels contacting offshore structures, a couple of them are discussed in this article and demonstrate situations where the operators and crew of the offshore platform were found to have contributed to the incident:

Sea Falcon contact with Forties Echo Platform: The Sea Falcon contacted the Forties Echo platform in 2016 when coming alongside to platform to work cargo. The vessel had received permission from the installation to enter the 500m zone, however, was reportedly moving at speeds in excess of eight times the stated operational limit once inside the safety zone directly towards the Echo Platform. The Sea Falcon collided with the installation, causing significant topside damage to the installation and the vessel.

The investigation whilst highlighting a loss of situational awareness and control by the vessel also highlighted improvements that needed to be made by the platform operators. The UK HSE served a notice of improvement to the platform operators instructing them to make significant changes to the way they monitor marine traffic within the 500m radius safety zone of the rig.

Ben Nevis contact with Valaris 120 Jack Up: In November 2024 the supply vessel Ben Nevis was alongside the Valaris 120 jack up unit in the North Sea undergoing cargo transfer. The Ben Nevis had been requested to enter the 500m zone on the platforms "drift on" side with both wind and current pushing the vessel towards the platform. The platform personnel then requested the Ben Nevis alter her position alongside to allow cargo operations to continue. In this new position, exposure to the elements meant the vessel could no longer maintain her position and made contact with the Valaris 120 platform.

The UK HSE served a notice to the Valaris 120 operators stating that the unit "failed to implement safe systems of work to control vessel operations within the 500 metre safety zone around the installation so as to ensure that the risk of such collision is reduced to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable". And that the Ben Nevis had been requested to work on the drift on side of the platform "without a suitable and sufficient risk assessment and without having in place reasonably practicable safeguards such as implementing maximum environmental limits for drift-on working ..... The manner in which you performed the marine operation was contrary to your clients' marine operations procedures, the vessels operating procedures, and recognised marine industry practice and guidelines, which advise that risk of collision can be reduced by avoiding weather side working unless absolutely necessary and only under tight control after a risk assessment involving the vessel master and the OIM"

Examples such as these demonstrate that the platform crew must themselves have an appreciation of marine operations and that platform operators must consider this for their working procedures.

How can platform crew learn about marine operations?

Seacroft Marine Consultants have for many years provided a training course called Safezone 500 which was designed to educate platform crew and operators on best practice for attending vessels. Seacroft subsequently worked alongside OPTIO to develop the Safezone500 course into an industry recognised course – Safe Offshore Marine Operations (SOMO). Seacroft explain that during their delivery of this course there have been a few common themes noted:

- Many platform crew are unaware of what best practice for marine operations is and where they can find information about this.
- There is a general lack of understanding of what the marine operations entail onboard the vessel.
- There is a lack of understanding regarding what the platforms drift on side is when asking vessels to come alongside.
- There is sometimes a feeling on the platform that responsibility passes entirely to the vessel once permission to enter the 500m is given by the platform.
- There is a commercial pressure to keep the vessel alongside longer than required or to ask the vessel to work outside the prescribed weather conditions.
- There is a lack of risk awareness with regard simultaneous operations, for example leaving a vessel alongside on a hose whilst crew go deal with a helicopter arrival.

The SOMO course is OPITO approved and aims to equip the platform crews to recognise potential hazards and unsafe practice in offshore marine operations and to introduce them to relevant legislation and guidance. Topics covered in SOMO include:

- Gaining an understanding of basic nautical terminology.
- Having meaningful interaction with the vessel bridge navigational officers.

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- The taking of necessary action, including "stop the job" in the case of undesirable event and the ability to understand and manage a safe and effective marine operations.
- Recognise safe and unsafe approaches of an attending vessel in terms of course and speed and aspect.
- Recognise the importance of correct vessel set up for operations in the installation safety zone including for operations in close proximity to a platform or when performing critical activities.
- Recognise safe manoeuvring within the 500m safety zone including when moving alongside.
- Awareness of common failure modes that can lead to unsafe condition on the ship leading to drifting and drive on.
- Awareness of the potential consequence of collision for various energy levels and at locations having varying sensitivity to penetration.

Where can platform operators get more guidance?

It is important that platform crew and operators are aware of and understand the Guidance for Offshore Marine Operations (GOMO) publication. GOMO is a detailed guidance document that provides guidance on good practices for ensuring the safety of personnel and reducing risks during marine operations. Chapter 8 of GOMO covers collision risk management and should be considered by the platform operators and crew especially when establishing their working procedures.

Summary

The UK HSE circular outlines that collisions between attending vessels and platforms are caused mainly by bridge team distraction, poor communication and inadequate watchkeeping. Vessel operators must strengthen watchkeeping practices, bridge teamwork, use of alarms, monitoring systems, and assurance processes to reduce risks and ensure safety. As well as regular bridge team audits and training, vessel operators should consider circulating incident and accident reports from sources such as the UK HSE and IMCA to ensure that crews can benefit from lessons learned.

It is however clear that to safely conduct operations inside the 500m safety zone, some of the responsibility rests with the platform and that all platform operators should ensure their crews are aware of GOMO and that their own procedures take GOMO into consideration. For platform crews dealing with attending vessels, training such as the SOMO course should be considered.

Further reading:

- Guidance for Offshore Marine Operations (GOMO)
- Safe Offshore Marine Operations (SOMO)
- UK HSE circular
- Marine Safety Forum Marine Operations 500m Safety Zone
- NorthStandard Dynamic Positioning – Control Change Over & Lessons Learned
- Dynamic Positioning for Engineers

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