
A Charitable Trust Faces Consequences After a Volunteer's Tragic Death

Description

In a heart-wrenching incident, a charitable trust has been fined following the unfortunate death of a volunteer during restoration work on the Wilts and Berks Canal. This devastating event has raised serious questions about safety protocols and the responsibilities of organizations relying on volunteer labour.

The Tragic Incident

Peter Konitzer, a dedicated 62-year-old volunteer, lost his life on August 24, 2016, when a section of a wall collapsed on him. He was working inside an excavation at Pewsham locks, removing temporary props that were supporting the wall. The collapse was sudden and catastrophic, resulting in his immediate fatal injury.

The Project and the Trust

The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust had embarked on a project to preserve, conserve, and improve the historic canal. This project, while noble in its intent, involved significant risks. Volunteers like Mr. Konitzer were frequently involved in various tasks, from clearing rubbish and overgrowth to light construction work. However, the trust's increasing reliance on volunteers for more complex tasks had serious repercussions.

Investigation Findings

A joint investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Wiltshire Police revealed troubling details. The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust had failed to ensure the safety of volunteers working within the excavation. The temporary propping was found to be inadequate, and there was no clear method for the safe installation or removal of these props. This lack of planning and safety measures directly led to the fatal incident.

Legal Proceedings and Penalties

Following these findings, the Wilts & Berks Canal Trust, based in Dauntsey Lock, Chippenham, Wiltshire, pleaded guilty to breaching Section 3(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. The consequences were significant: a fine of £30,000 and an additional £10,822 in costs were imposed by the Swindon Magistrates' Court on June 24, 2024. Additionally, the trust was ordered to pay £6,043.16 in compensation.

Expert Opinions

James Lucas, an HSE inspector, commented on the tragedy: "This was a tragic and wholly

avoidable incident. The situation which led to Peter's death would not have arisen had the temporary structural works been properly planned and implemented to ensure a suitable safe system of work prior to the incident. It is essential that those in control of work of this nature devise safe methods of working and provide the necessary information, instruction, and training to their workers to ensure their safety.

This prosecution was supported by HSE enforcement lawyer Iain Jordan and HSE paralegal officer Rebecca Withell, underscoring the importance of legal accountability in such cases.

Lessons and Implications

The tragic death of Peter Konitzer highlights a critical issue in volunteer-led projects: the need for stringent safety measures. While the involvement of volunteers is invaluable to many charitable projects, it is imperative that their safety is prioritized. This incident serves as a stark reminder to all organizations about the importance of proper planning, adequate training, and clear safety protocols.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety, plays a crucial role in preventing work-related deaths, injuries, and ill health. Their actions range from influencing behaviors across whole industry sectors to targeted interventions on individual businesses. This case exemplifies their commitment to ensuring safe working conditions, regardless of whether the workers are paid employees or volunteers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the incident involving the Wilts & Berks Canal Trust is a poignant reminder of the potential dangers inherent in volunteer work on complex projects. It emphasizes the necessity for robust safety measures and proper training. As organizations continue to engage volunteers, it is their responsibility to ensure a safe working environment to prevent such tragic incidents in the future.

CATEGORY

1. Wiltshire

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