

Look who's returned to Southend foreshore

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Oyster pickers on Southend foreshore

OYSTER pickers have returned to Southend foreshore despite a public health crackdown.

Groups of up to six women have been spotted leaving [Chalkwell](#) with large bags of oysters after scouring the mudflats for four or five hours a day.

Southend Council, which has confiscated almost 900lb of oysters from suspected illegal harvesters since November, has pledged to investigate after being passed evidence from the Echo.

Rogue collectors may ignore strict procedures to clean oysters, three quarters of which Food Standards Agency research suggest contain the norovirus, before selling them on to restaurants.

Fishermen fear a public health scare could decimate the shellfish industry, which is vital to the local economy.

Paul Gilson, chairman of [Leigh](#) and Southend Fishermen's Association, said: "The fishermen have always been fearful of a food poisoning epidemic.

"There are a huge amount of oysters there, but they should be harvested in a professional manner and treated in the same way.

"The last thing we want is for someone to become ill and that reflect on the industry."

Groups of women, who arrived, left and collected together, gathered oysters off Chalkwell Esplanade on Friday, Sunday and Monday.

Members of the public are allowed to gather limited numbers of oysters for personal consumption, but commercial operations need official transport documents and oysters must be decontaminated before being sold.

An eyewitness from nearby Crowstone Avenue, Chalkwell, said: “They were definitely working as a group. They all stuck together and walked back together. They are definitely a collective.

“These people have the potential to make people ill.

“I think the police or whoever should regulate them more.”

Dipti Patel, the council’s head of public protection, said: “We cannot say from the images provided whether the quantities constitute personal use or commercial purposes, and without being on site at the time we cannot make any assumptions.

“Residents and visitors are legally able to pick a limited amount of oysters for their own personal consumption and it would not be appropriate for us to discourage that. We do however provide guidance on the safe cooking of oysters.

“We are also aware of a local fisherman crew that recently picked in a similar area over the weekend to provide oysters to a bona fide purchaser.”