



MERCHANT NAVY WELFARE BOARD

**THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR
UK SEAFARERS CENTRES
“IDENTIFYING BARRIERS AND BEST PRACTICE FOR SEAFARERS
CENTRES IN THE UK”**

Conference Summary

This summary captures a two-day programme of presentations, workshops and discussions that took place at the first UK Seafarers' Centre's Conference on 1st and 2nd May 2018 at the Chilworth Manor Hotel in Hampshire.

Funded by the Merchant Navy Welfare Board (MNWB), and hosted in collaboration with Solent University, the conference was attended by staff and volunteers from over 40 seafarers centres, including 16 fishermen's missions, based in major ports around the UK, Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands, as well as representatives from leading national maritime charities and organisations involved with the welfare of seafarers¹.

Aimed at *“Identifying barriers and best practice for seafarers' centres in the UK”* this important and highly successful conference brought together some 50 delegates from the UK's maritime sector to tackle the challenges currently facing seafarers' centres.

From frontline welfare practitioners to national policy makers, participants were guided through a series of collaborative workshop exercises, using research evaluation methods to identify key issues facing UK seafarers' centres.

Facilitated by senior research colleagues from Solent University, the workshops were considered an effective mechanism by which participants were able to coordinate and evaluate information on the challenges centres are currently experiencing as well as possible opportunities for future action.

Providing a valuable and significant opportunity for networking and information exchange across the UK's maritime sector, the conference concluded by setting the stage for the next national seafarers centres conference, with the support of a new national network of seafarers' centres.

This was made possible by a joint commitment to continued collaboration between seafarers centres and the organisations that work alongside them to ensure the provision of welfare services and support to our seafarers in the future.

Welcome & Introduction

Opening the conference, Mr Bob Jones², Chairman of MNWB, welcomed participants to the first national conference of UK Seafarers Centres. He hoped the conference would provide a lively, open forum for discussion and debate in which colleagues could share information as well as experiences, opinions and good practice with a view to addressing the challenges currently facing seafarers' centres and fishermen's missions across the UK, in Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands.

Background & Overview of UK Seafarers' Centres

¹ The term “Seafarers” in this summary includes fishermen.

² Capt. Andrew Cassels succeeded Mr Jones as MNWB, Chairman.

Setting the scene for the conference, Mr Peter Tomlin, Chief Executive of MNWB, focused on “collaboration” and “partnership working” which was fundamental to the work of MNWB as the national umbrella charity for the Merchant Navy and Fishing charities sector. Totally committed to collaboration and partnership working, across all organisations and across all levels, MNWB aimed to encourage and support the best welfare service provision for merchant seafarers across the UK, including seafarers’ centres.

Traditionally considered a “home from home” for visiting seafarers, seafarers centres are considered an integral part of current frontline provision. Referring to MNWB’s recent review of jointly run seafarers centres³,



Mr Tomlin said the report findings provided a useful overview of the challenges currently facing the centres, as many continue to strive to find new ways to maintain their services and support to seafarers.

The review found that whilst all seafarers’ centres shared the same ethos, “putting the seafarers first”, and fulfilled the same function, supporting seafarers and fishermen, each centre is different.

Differing in size and facilities, some centres are manned, some are unmanned and some may be both. Some centres are jointly run, some are run by a single society and others are independent.

Although their roles may be the same, each seafarers centre is unique, just like the port it is located in. Yet, port and centre need to evolve, in tandem, if they are to meet the changing needs of the maritime industry and, more importantly, the welfare needs of the seafarers’ who visit them.

Trying to meet those welfare needs, centre managers and volunteers continue to face a wide range of issues albeit with one major challenge that is common to virtually all centres, being able to raise sufficient funds to cover even basic operating costs, with some facilities struggling to survive. Given the importance of seafarers centres to current welfare provision the review suggested this was an issue that no single centre, or maritime agency, could solve on its own.

Becoming a catalyst for closer collaboration between seafarers centres, the maritime charities sector and organisations involved with seafarers’ welfare, the review findings recommended this first national conference to address the key challenges facing the majority of seafarers’ centres, particularly as they evolve to meet the welfare needs and expectations of today’s seafarers.

Presentations

Meeting the needs and expectations of seafarers was highlighted in a series of excellent presentations by maritime charities and centre operators that provided a valuable opportunity to highlight both the diversity of their respective centres as well as their uniformity in a shared commitment to seafarers’ welfare. The presentations also revealed the common challenges shared by them all.

Being able to share their concerns, first hand, centre managers, staff and volunteers, were also able to share their knowledge and understanding of “what really matters to seafarers” when they visit seafarers centres.



³ MNWB reviews individual, jointly operated centres requested by Mission to Seafarers, Apostleship of the Sea and Sailors’ Society 2017

They also provided maritime industry colleagues with the opportunity to listen to staff and volunteers, highlighting the need for stakeholders to address the challenges facing seafarers centres, collaboratively, if they are to remain relevant and integral to future maritime provision.

Consequently, the presentations brought a unique, interactive backdrop to the conference, constantly updating and informing participants, as well as the 3 workshop exercises that proved to be major drivers in helping participants to identify key barriers to centres achieving best practice

Introduction to Collaborative Workshop Exercises (Solent University)

Facilitated by Dr Kate Pike and Dr Kev Harris, both highly respected researchers, whose joint expertise brought a new dimension and energy to the conference, the collaborative workshop exercises adopted a “realist evaluation” approach which enabled participants to focus on the different environmental factors and characteristics of their respective centres (context), as well as the key issues that challenge them (drivers) with a view to identifying potential solutions (outcomes) by working collaboratively and sharing best practice.

With perennial challenges such as lack of funding, lack of volunteers, lack of space and lack of awareness, appearing to be a permanent default position for many seafarers centre, the evaluation process encouraged and empowered participants to adopt a more collaborative, interactive approach to identifying the key barriers to achieving best practice in running seafarers centres.

Guided by the workshop facilitators, participants were then able to use the research evaluation methods to analyse why this is happening with a view to identifying innovative solutions and a potential “way forward” for seafarers’ centres and the wider maritime charities sector.

Workshop 1 Collaborative Exercise: “Identifying Barriers to Best Practice” - Summary

Workshop feedback showed that the issues raised varied according to which port or location the centre was based in as well as access to available welfare facilities.

Whilst lack of funding, lack of volunteers and lack of space inevitably restricted the range of welfare facilities and services many seafarers centres would routinely wish to offer visiting seafarers, lack of awareness of the centres by local and port communities, as well as seafarers, themselves, contributed to the **barriers to best practice** for running seafarers centres

The key areas where **barriers to best practice** were identified included:

- ✚ Communications
- ✚ Addressing seafarers’ needs
- ✚ Access to seafarers centres, local port & city (particularly 24/7)
- ✚ Community engagement & centre awareness
- ✚ Well-being & mental health
- ✚ Staff & volunteers
- ✚ Governance
- ✚ Ecumenical & pastoral

Workshop 2 Collaborative Exercise: Identifying Best Practice - Summary

Having identified the **barriers to best practice** in seafarers’ centres in Workshop 1, Workshop 2 aimed to identify **best practice** in centres. As in the previous exercise, the issues raised varied according to the port or location each centre was based in, as well as access to available welfare facilities.

The **key themes** to emerge from best practice include:

- ✚ Centre staff & volunteers
- ✚ Raising awareness
- ✚ Ecumenical & pastoral
- ✚ Seafarers
- ✚ Governance

Given seafarers are looking for a 'home from home' environment when they visit a seafarer's centre it is important that there are good support services and facilities in place to help make this happen.

Key areas of best practice

- ✚ A coordinated combination of 24/7 access and ship visits.
- ✚ Treating centres individually, 'one model does not fit all'.
- ✚ Engender trust in the relationship with seafarers and put them first.
- ✚ Listening and responding to the seafarers.
- ✚ Creating a 'home away from home'.
- ✚ Appropriate professional advice regarding interfaith working.
- ✚ Good governance.

Workshop 3 Collaborative Exercise: Emerging Themes for Actions & Solutions – Summary

Having identified **barriers to best practice** in Workshop 1 and **best practice** to running seafarers' centres in Workshop 2, Workshop 3 was able to use the findings of the previous exercises to identify emerging **themes for future action** which were: **Communications, Fundraising, Seafarers' Wellbeing & Mental Health, Access & Transport, Centre Staff & Volunteers, Community Engagement & Centre Awareness, Centre Environment & Facilities, Ecumenical & Pastoral & Governance.**



For a complete breakdown of the actions and solutions identified against each theme, please refer to the Solent University report⁴.

For the purposes of this summary, however, using an example from just one of those themes, **Communications**, it was possible to provide an interactive snapshot showing how key actions and potential solutions in one area invariably impacted or "crossed over" in to the other themes. **"Crossover" themes are shown in red, below.**

Communications - Actions

- ✚ Communication remains a key challenge for many seafarers centres unable to keep up with or afford the latest developments in technology
(fundraising/centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/governance)
- ✚ Uneven provision of internet facilities across means there is a need to close the "digital divide"
(fundraising/centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/governance)
- ✚ New technologies present new opportunities to use different communication methods such as WhatsApp and Skype and provide cheaper, faster ways of communicating for seafarers
(fundraising/centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers)
- ✚ New technologies still "cost" so there is a need to find additional funding to ensure improved facilities and provision for seafarers
(fundraising/centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/governance)

- ✚ Access to information can be both empowering and good for seafarers' general wellbeing with beneficial applications such as e-health and social media
(centre environment & facilities/ wellbeing & mental health/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral)

⁴ "Identifying Barriers and Best Practice for Seafarers' Centres in the UK" A realist informed report for the Merchant Navy Welfare Board By Dr Kate Pike and Dr Kev Harris of Solent University

- ✚ Need to balance the benefits of effective internet provision against concerns at seafarers' dependency on it whilst at sea causing social isolation, performance and safety issues (*wellbeing & mental health/centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral*).
- ✚ Communication with non-national seafarers is an issue common to many centres (*centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral*).

Communications - Potential solutions

- ✚ Parent organisations (maritime charities) and MNWB to consider joint approach to corporates for sponsorship of Wi-Fi provision from providers such as: BT, Apple, Samsung and Walmart (*fundraising/centre environment & facilities/ centre staff & volunteers/ community engagement & centre awareness*)
- ✚ Provision of additional training and support in IT skills, cultural awareness and management training for seafarers' centre staff and volunteers (*centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral/governance*)
- ✚ Targeted recruitment of culturally diverse volunteers and staff (*centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral/wellbeing & mental health/governance*).
- ✚ Development and management of a dedicated national seafarers' centres website that could link in to MNWBs new interactive web portal, Seafarers Welfare Information Management System, giving instant access to current information, online directories and technology specific to seafarers' welfare in ports such as the Sailor's Society "Wellness at sea" App⁵, ITF Seafarers' Trust "Shore Leave App"⁶ and many free "translate" Apps (links to mental health and wellbeing) (*centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral/wellbeing & mental health/governance*)
- ✚ MNWB to commission additional research and advice on identifying best deals for centres on IT/technology/sim cards. A maritime "comparethemarket.com" website which could be linked to a new national website dedicated seafarers' centres (*centre environment & facilities/centre staff & volunteers/ecumenical & pastoral/governance*)

Recommendations and scope for further Research and Evaluation

Whilst a number of useful suggestions on a possible way forward were discussed during the course of the 2-day programme, workshops findings highlighted a variety of options for consideration which could be implemented individually or collaboratively, based on further research.

Although specific suggestions were made to help centres deliver good practice, it was acknowledged that there are still some complex issues that would benefit from further independent and extended research with a selected range of maritime stakeholders. In order to achieve maximum impact, it is suggested that this research is conducted through a series of facilitated focus groups which look at the following **critical issues facing identified by the workshops**:

- ✚ What do seafarers want and need?
- ✚ How to increase the number and diversity of volunteers?
- ✚ How to improve collaborative working between faith-based welfare providers?
- ✚ How to achieve 24/7 access for centres?
- ✚ How to improve the sustainability of funding?

Seafarers' Welfare Information Management System

⁵ www.sailors-society.org

⁶ www.seafarerstrust.org

During the conference there was a call for a centralised online referral system that could be a point of information about welfare facilities in ports and the locality which could be downloaded onto various devices. Building on the technology of the existing MNWB UK centric databases, the Board and its stakeholders are creating an interactive, web-based referral system where the maritime sector can access regularly updated welfare information on computers and mobile devices.



The interactive web-based portal will enable authorised users from multiple welfare agencies to update welfare information simultaneously, thus providing a unique joint picture of welfare services in UK ports. It will also make available updated information for seafarers, as well signpost them to autonomous welfare providers. The portal will be compatible with desktop computers and a wide range of handheld devices to keep it as up to date as possible with the changing technological landscape. Participants welcomed and fully endorsed MNWBs new centralised online portal dedicated to the welfare of seafarers, with the recommendation of continuing sector support to ensure the delivery and implementation of the new system.

Collaborative approach

Having started off the conference focusing on “collaboration” it was appropriate that one of the major recommendations was for continued collaboration between seafarers’ centres, management, staff and the wider community in host ports or local communities not only as a mechanism for increasing awareness of centres and raising their visibility but also as a catalyst for increased footfall, funding and the daily operation of the centres.

Future seafarers’ conferences

Following on from the success of the first Seafarers’ Centres Conference in May 2018, it is clear that, if affordable, centre managers wish to meet at least annually to maintain and strengthen links with each other, share ideas and experiences. The reasoning is that there is much to learn from these events and it can help managers and centre workers feel less isolated and part of a network of similar operators.

Closing Remarks

In their closing addresses, Mr Jones and Mr Tomlin thanked all participants for their enthusiasm, energy and good humour in embracing the workshop exercises. Participants were congratulated on the positive nature of their discussions as well as the extensive networking that had taken place over the 2-day period, which it was hoped would continue well in to the future. An extended special thanks was made to presenters, facilitators and MNWB staff, alike, all of whom had worked hard to bring together an informative, enjoyable and highly successful conference.

The conference has also helped to clarify the role of MNWB as a national policy driver for the UK MN and fishing sector with the ability to provide oversight and build trust, as an honest broker. Laying down infrastructure, providing information, guidance and support, MNWB can use its limited resources effectively to empower and enable a collaborative seafarers’ centre network to support future conferences and encourage wider community engagement.

The success of the conference means that a national conversation about seafarers’ welfare and seafarers centre provision is now under way with shared responsibilities for all agencies to maintain the momentum engendered by the conference with a view to turning shared values in to action. Turning rhetoric in to reality. It also means that the future of seafarers centres and fishermen’s missions is now on the national maritime agenda. Watch this space!

This summary was prepared by the Merchant Navy Welfare Board. It is based largely on the findings of the conference report, including comprehensive workshop notes and tables, compiled and written by Dr Kate Pike and Dr Kev Norris of Solent University, which has been produced as a stand alone research paper. The MNWB would like to thank Dr Pike and Dr Norris for their expertise, guidance and good humour in facilitating the 3 workshops which were pivotal to the success of the first ever Seafarers' Centres Conference, as was the enthusiasm and commitment of all the participants.

