



MERCHANT NAVY WELFARE BOARD

NOTES OF THE COVID-19 SEAFARERS' WELFARE WORKING GROUP (COVID-19 SWWG) VIDEOCONFERENCE MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 2ND FEBRUARY 2022

PRESENT: Mr Stuart Rivers (Chairman)	MNWB
Revd Ijeoma Ajibade (IA)	Mission to Seafarers (MtS)
Mr David Appleton (DA)	Nautilus International (NI)
Mr Alexander Campbell (ACL)	QVSR/Tilbury Seafarers' Centre (TSC)
Mrs Ruth Campbell (RCL)	Tilbury Seafarers' Centre (TSC)
Mr John Cousley (JC)	Department for Transport (DfT)
Ms Sharon Coveney (SC)	MNWB
Ms Lynette Crossley (LC)	Manchester Port Health Authority (MPHA)
Cdre David Dickens (DD)	The Fishermen's Mission (FM)
Miss Sarah Edward (SE)	MNWB
Mr Ben Gibbons (BG)	Maritime Charities Group (MCG)
Mr David Hammond (DH)	Human Rights At Sea (HRAS)
Capt Ian Hodge	Merchant Navy Association (MNA)
Mr Tom Holmer (TH)	MNWB
Ms Barbara Kidd (BK)	Sailors' Society (SaSo)
Miss Victoria Muir (VM)	Trinity House (TH)
Ms Sophie Peacey (SP)	Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA)
Ms Carla Rockson (CR)	Marine Society (MS)
Mr Tim Springett (TS)	UK Chamber of Shipping (UK CoS)
Ms Cath Stamper (CS)	Care Ashore (CA)
Mrs Deanne Thomas (DT)	Sailors' Children's Society (SCS)

The meeting opened at 11.00am. The Chairman reported on feedback from PWCs around the UK from the last couple of weeks that accessibility of vaccines continued to be problematic in some regions. NHS Scotland appeared to be working well in providing vaccines and an improved form of certification. A Community Health Index (CHI) number was provided which allowed the registration of seafarers on their system. In Wales there were reports of some difficulties in accessing vaccines partly due to misinterpretation of the rules for seafarers and partly due to the location of vaccination services. IA had also reported on the possibility of tensions between Russian and Ukrainian seafarers onboard and out in the community.

Members noted that Gwen Lancaster, MCA would follow up on an action from the previous meeting to raise the question internally on the possibility of plans to introduce a common reporting form for MLC 2006 to ensure that information shared by the societies was relevant and not superfluous.

The Chairman reminded members that the working group provided a useful two-way communications route between government, industry, maritime charities and local Port Welfare Committees around the UK. Useful links and notes from the meetings would be posted on the MNWB COVID-19 Maritime Resources web page <https://www.mnwb.org/maritime-updates> Members provided COVID-19 specific updates on their respective organisations as follows:

TS, UK CoS – No recent reports of difficulties with seafarer movements in the UK and the near continent. Still hearing of cases in the Netherlands of entire ships being quarantined on arrival, although not aware of where these ships are coming from. The general trend is the lifting of restrictions. Restrictions are being lifted in France and this doesn't appear to be conditional on a reappraisal of infection figures. Although Omicron is widespread it is not resulting in higher numbers of hospitalisations or deaths and there is a general move to endemic from pandemic. There are reports of difficulties with crew changes in China, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

In Singapore, crew changes have not been banned but the onerous conditions on seafarer travel are almost impossible to comply with. ICS is working with its international partners (WHO, IMO & ITF) to try and bring about alleviations for seafarers there. TS was pleased that the MNWB had taken the initiative to write a letter to the Vaccines and Public Health Minister to re-emphasise the importance of vaccinations for visiting seafarers being accompanied by documentary proof. This was not just a UK issue but an international issue also. The WHO had been asked to come up with solutions on this. In TS's role as Chair for the ECSA Social Affairs Committee, the European Commission was being encouraged to motivate member states of the EU to issue seafarers with QR codes along with their vaccines. The Netherlands, Belgium and Greece already do this. EU Healthy Gateways has already produced some guidance on safe crew changes and infection prevention protocols for passenger shipping. They were currently working on a revised guide on crew changes and minimising infection risks. Several drafts had been produced already as the first drafts were far out of line with existing guidance from WHO and IMO protocols. The UK Chamber through ECSA, and Nautilus through the European Transport Workers' Federation, are working closely with the European Commission and Healthy Gateways to make this acceptable to be used by the industry. There would be value in such a document provided it was realistic and not placing unduly onerous conditions on seafarers.

JC, DfT – JC reported that DfT was waiting to see what the requirements for LFTs might be going forward since the lifting of restrictions. He would report back to Martin Foley, Stella Maris, on this following his question at the previous meeting as to whether government could assist with supplying LFTs to Chaplains who were getting requests for these from seafarers. JC will also follow up with DHSC colleagues tomorrow regarding difficulties with vaccinating seafarers in Wales. DfT has spoken with Esso and the port security officer at Fawley regarding an issue on access. The need to be more flexible has been acknowledged and the officer will speak with the security team. There will be representation from Esso at the Southern PWC at future meetings. The MNWB vaccination letter was very helpful. Hoping for progress on the issue of seafarer vaccination; the Minister is still trying to arrange a meeting on this with the Health Minister. Changes to PPE regulations will be introduced at the beginning of April; requirements will cover workers as well as employees. The Chairman reported that following an interview he carried out last week on the certification issue, the government had responded with the following quote: *"We recently delivered thousands of doses of vaccines to sailors at a hospital in Southampton and will continue to work closely with the sector to ensure their vaccine status is recognised appropriately"*. RC reported that chemists had responded well to requests for LFTs for seafarers. Tilbury had a stock of the old style LFTs at the seafarers' centre but it would be helpful to have a supply of the newer LFTs.

JC reported that DfT and MCA would be carrying out a short piece of research focusing on suicide and mental health of seafarers. The research provider may contact members to ask them to participate in an interview on their experiences of these issues.

SP, MCA – The MCA is continuing to conduct surveys and inspections on UK and foreign fishing and merchant vessels. There had been a few welfare issues in January which had been dealt with. The MCA would be interested to hear reports of crew who have been treated unfairly or forced to work whilst suffering from Covid. The MCA will follow up and take appropriate action, working with Port Health colleagues and others. There is a relatively small number of seafarers on UK ships who have been onboard over the length of their contract although none have exceeded 12 months. This has been mostly due to restrictions in East Asia. The MCA is also monitoring the length of time onboard foreign vessels.

LC, MPHA – There continue to be problems with certification of vaccines for seafarers. One seafarer MPHA had helped to receive their second dose had received their first dose in Scotland and certification was achieved within two hours of leaving. No further feedback has been received so this was hopefully accepted. Aiming to get on to as many ships as possible and working as normally as possible with PPE and testing to show a presence and to get LFTs to crew as needed. Members noted that local authorities and public health teams had provided a good supply of LFTs to MPHA. The Chairman noted that port health authorities were able to facilitate access to LFTs.

BG, MCG – The MCG Redundancy & Retraining Fund has helped over 76 seafarers providing up to £500 towards the cost of training. The fund is available until the end of March 2022. Applications have tailed off which is a good indication that seafarers are not struggling to find work as they were last year. Members were encouraged to publicise the bursary on their social media channels: <https://www.maritimecharitiesgroup.org/en/news/news/maritime-charities-extend-redundancy--retraining-fund/> The MCG annual conference will be held on 5th and 6th September at Trinity House.

DA, NI – Despite restrictions easing in the UK and beginning to ease in Europe, a lot of seafarers are still in touch about onerous restrictions in place, having to quarantine before and after crew changes. This is due to government policy in some places and company policy in others. On the EU Healthy Gateways guidance, when NI has contacted companies to ask why they have these restrictions in place, a lot of them refer to guidance which was written in the very early stages of the pandemic, before vaccinations. Once government guidance is no longer in place these guidance documents may cause barriers. The Scottish government's announcement that it is releasing restrictions should bring an end to the issues seafarers have had travelling directly to Scotland. NI has been in touch with JC on a last push on the seafarer tax issue. At the time the Treasury had argued that such a small number of seafarers were affected that there was no justification in making allowances. NI does not believe this is the case as the issue has now dragged on over some time.

VM, TH – Covid funding came to an end at the end of December. TH has just had its last grants round for this financial year. Any new applications will be considered in April, the closing date is 21st March.

IA, MtS – A MtS Chaplain raised the issue of Russian and Ukrainian seafarers on the same ship. The Chaplain had witnessed a lot of tension and some violence between Russian and Ukrainian seafarers when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. Although there have not been reports of tensions, there are concerns that this could happen again. MtS have published the latest Seafarers Happiness Index, a summary of seafarers' happiness over the last year: <https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/news/yo-yo-effect-in-covid-19-infections-and-restrictions-causing-havoc-for-seafarers-says-latest-seafarers-happiness-index> This shows that the trend of happiness mirrors the waves of Covid. When cases were lower and economies opened up, seafarers were happier. When restrictions were placed and there were rising infections the happiness of seafarers fell. Issues were raised of repeated Covid testing and quarantine conditions which seafarers felt were sometimes draconian. Many seafarers were planning a career change if things didn't improve, which would lead to a shortage of seafarers in the industry. The Happiness Index also reported that there were increased levels of strain, bullying, harassment and friction onboard. Chaplains continue to ship visit and most seafarers' centres are open although seafarers were not visiting in great numbers.

DT, SCS – The number of applications for support are low. Staff are back in the office full-time and all home visiting has been reinstated. On Monday 7th March SCS will be launching a new scheme, following a 200th review of SCS in its 200th year. This will be held at Trinity House with SCS patron HRH The Princess Royal in attendance. Invitations will be sent out soon.

ACL/RC, QVSR/TSC – A lot of the vaccination clinics in London and the South seem to be winding down which could affect how seafarers are fast-tracked to vaccine centres. Vaccinations for seafarers used to be carried out at a clinic in the port and at the local mass vaccine clinic which had previously been open 7 days a week, 7am-7pm, but was now open 2 days a week. This was affecting the number of seafarers at Tilbury that could be vaccinated. The nurses who worked at the mobile unit in the port had now been asked to return to their original jobs. Although the UK was on its feet in terms of vaccinations, there continued to be a real demand for

vaccinations from seafarers. There appeared to be some supply issues at some of the European ports. RC asked if it would be possible for the vaccination certificate currently being used at Tilbury (and approved by the NHS) to be approved and to be rolled out to all NHS trusts to be used in the short-term. RC will send details of this certificate to the Chairman. The Ukrainians and the Russians need a QR code for proof of vaccination when returning home. Seafarers in countries such as Germany are unable to go to cafes and shops etc without a QR code. **Action: RC**

DD, FM – Staff are following up on boosters primarily for migrant crew. Skippers are taking ownership, organising boosters and certification. This is going well in Scotland and N. Ireland. A couple of centres in Scotland have guaranteed supplies of LFTs from the NHS and are offering them to boats. Skippers are carrying out testing on crew before going to sea and before going ashore. The centres are now mostly open. Some staff have Covid but no-one is seriously ill so far. Welfare – there are quite a few additional marine protected areas and closure areas being introduced, notably in Scotland, which will restrict fishing. On the NE coast of England there is a problem with dead crab and lobster which appears to be pollution associated. People are already living hand to mouth on the North Coast and are now unable to land a viable catch so a surge in welfare demand is expected and inflation is already kicking in for the elderly. DD attended a Westminster forum on fisheries management following the new Fisheries Act 2020. The environment and ‘spacial squeeze’ were noteworthy. There are now so many demands for sea space, this will likely lead to a dramatic effect on the number of fisheries available to UK commercial fishing and a squeeze for shipping around the UK as offshore/wind burgeons. Continued concerns over supply chains involving Ghanaian crew.

BK, SaSo – Ship visiting continues. The Port Chaplain team is using PPE and are all present at port, trying to keep agile to needs. In Brazil, PCR testing has been brought in for Port Chaplains for every visit. Keeping an eye on this due to the huge cost implication. Putting in place contingency plans and investigating registering SaSo Port Chaplains with the UK Foreign Office due to concerns over the Ukraine/Russia situation. Following the success of the distribution of Covid care kits in India, this is being rolled out in the Philippines. Typhoon Odette disrupted the project but distribution is expected to restart in February. Welfare assistance has increased following Odette and there have also been a lot of requests for welfare assistance from Ukrainian seafarers. Interested to hear how others are responding to the situation in Ukraine and if they can share resources. **Action: All**

DH, HRAS – Getting back to normal. Will be in the Gulf in the next couple of weeks to discuss HRAS’s work. The Geneva declaration on HRAS will be soft-launched in Geneva on 1st March and will be hard-launched later in the year in Geneva and the Gulf. There has been an increase in staff internally. By mid-February the HRAS platform will change making it easier to find details of work done and publications. Following the excellent precedent set in NZ by the Seafarer Welfare Board for the maritime levy, HRAS has been instructed by the Australian government to provide an independent report which will be issued publicly to the Australian government, AMSA, the welfare Council and the public. In short, there is no reason that the maritime levy cannot be focused to provide sustainable funding to seafarers’ welfare charities. The work on the change in the primary legislation in New Zealand will affect 130,000-160,000 seafarers annually in terms of sustainable port funding.

CS, CA – First reported case of Covid on site this week since the pandemic began and this is now expected to spread. Refurbishment has commenced to make the organisation more friendly

towards those with disabilities so that they can access CA's services. The residential accommodation will also be tackled.

IH, MNA – Branches are starting to open up and meeting face to face. Plans for the event at the National Memorial Arboretum for the Falklands 40 are progressing well. Plans for celebrations for seafarers in Trinity Square Gardens are also taking shape. Ian will chair a seminar at Fleetwood on 26th May to educate young cadets and those finishing their cadetship on the support offered by maritime charities. Encouraged members to contact i.hodge@btinternet.com if they could provide any materials he could use. Thanked HvG at MNWB for providing materials for Seafarer Support. **Action: All**

TH, MNWB – Asked by the Scottish PWCs to write some letters from MNWB to thank the NHS in Scotland for their help in getting Covid vaccines and certification for seafarers.

Closing Remark – The Chairman asked members to give consideration as to whether the current frequency and format of the WG was correct and asked for feedback on this at the next meeting. Members noted that the MNWB Serving Seafarers Working Group would be held on Thursday 17th February at 11:00. Members to forward any links, extra information and note amendments to Celia celia@mnwb.org.uk Meeting format to remain flexible. Apologies for any unintended inaccuracies.

DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS: Wednesday 2nd March at 11:00.