

# MARITIME INSIGHT

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First published: December 2020

## Improving the mental health of seafarers' worldwide



Seafarer wellbeing is a hot topic and now is the time for industry to drive forward this issue supported by seafarer charities and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

The working conditions, wellbeing and mental health of seafarers has been an ongoing concern which the MCA has been working on for some time, but the pandemic has brought this to the forefront of discussions throughout industry.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a big impact on the shipping industry and the wellbeing of seafarers. The response of the UK and support given to seafarers has shown why it is a world class flag bearer. The Red Ensign is recognised globally for the maintenance of high standards, maritime safety and the welfare of seafarers.

Besides intrinsic respect for the wellbeing of these essential key workers, why is seafarer welfare so important? Research has overwhelmingly shown that safety and wellbeing are inherently linked. Poor employee wellbeing is often associated with a greater accident and error rate, reduced productivity and increased absenteeism at work. The benefits to organisations of improved staff wellbeing are

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numerous. Historically seafarers have relied on the essential support of the maritime charities, but long-term strategies to improve seafarers' lives and working environments can help to prevent wellbeing and mental health issues from arising.

Seafarers work in unique environments that can be immensely rewarding and at times challenging. As understanding of health, wellbeing and safety increases, the industry is becoming increasingly aware that some characteristics inherent to the environment on board (e.g. prolonged periods away from loved ones, noise and vibration) can have a negative effect on the wellbeing of seafarers.

### The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting crew change crisis has brought seafarer welfare issues to the fore. The Mission to Seafarer's quarterly happiness index identified workload, social interaction and shore leave as areas where the pandemic is being felt most by seafarers. The same survey found that seafarers felt trapped, isolated, worried and desperate to return home to their families. A Lloyds Register survey identified workload and fatigue, quality and variety of food, and lack of exercise as areas of particular concern.

The economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the fishing industry in particular was devastating, as demand for products ceased, markets shut down and businesses could not operate. Large numbers of fishing vessels were left tied up, with fishers not knowing when they could resume fishing or when their next pay cheque was coming. This undoubtedly led to an increase in anxiety and stress amongst fishers and their families – mental health suffered across the industry.

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The welfare of seafarers was of paramount importance to the MCA and its UK Ship Register, who joined forces with the Department for Transport to form a specialist crisis support working group. Exceptional measures were put in place to help people and to keep vital shipping moving.

The goal of this group was to act quickly to ensure the welfare of seafarers and passengers who were on board ships when the pandemic escalated in March. 15,527 crew members from 112 nationalities were on board ships in British waters and needed help to get home.

The UK was the first to designate seafarers as key workers and the first to carry out mass repatriations, facilitated through colleagues at the Department for Transport.

### Understanding the relationship between safety and wellbeing

Time and again, we see accidents and near misses as a result of a poor safety culture. A culture in which distraction was tolerated, slips and lapses covered up, work-rest hours fabricated and near misses not reported. A just culture, where individuals feel collectively responsible for maintaining safety and empowered to speak up contributes to seafarer self-esteem, feelings of autonomy and overall safety. A true just culture means a fair place to work and an understanding of how seafarer fatigue, stress and mental health contribute to the culture on board.

The most influential source of a good safety culture is the seriousness with which senior management approaches it via training, staff investment and the implementation of work processes that accommodate the time that safe practices take. Workforce mistakes increase not just because of the absence of this investment, but also because of the meaning people attach to the absence of the investment by their senior

management. Investment in people, in training and development, as well as in supporting their wellbeing, similarly sends strong messages to seafarers.

### Industry is beginning to take seafarer wellbeing seriously

It is great to see maritime charities and industry increasing welfare services for seafarers and proactively trying to improve wellbeing. Some examples of current initiatives are:

#### Maritime UK launch mental health network

Maritime UK launched a mental health network in May 2020 as part of the Diversity in Maritime programme. The network identified creating a holistic approach to mental health and a culture of care as important steps in creating a better industry.

#### Aims of the network:

1. To provide a collaborative platform to share information among all organisations, in support of aiding others to achieve and develop mental health management practices by: engaging, connecting and collaborating with organisations which have developed mental health and suicide prevention strategies for the UK maritime sector; bench-marking current training provisions; and providing bench-marking tools for the maritime sector against mental health standards.
2. To gather and share case studies profiling maritime organisations' best practice guides and policies to assist and improve mental health across the sector including, but not limited to, time to speak and toolkits for bringing crews together on board.
3. To provide individuals and companies in the maritime sector with relevant information about mental health resources, best practice guides and toolkits including, but not limited to, creating a mentally healthy workplace, treating people well and creating a safe space.

The MCA supports this network and attends its meetings, often contributing with vital information in support of the aims of the charity. For example, in December, the MCA will speak about seafarer medical examinations and mental and organisational resilience.

#### MCA wellbeing guidance

Earlier this year the MCA produced basic guidance to support seafarers and ship owners worldwide in creating better environments for seafarers to live and work in.

'Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations' and 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Pocket Guide for Seafarers' address a range of issues that can threaten wellbeing at sea to empower seafarers and management (companies and personnel) to make improvements that will enable all crew to stay safe, healthy and well.

'Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations' provides pragmatic advice for organisations on how policy, procedures and company culture can be

adapted to improve crew wellbeing. 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Pocket Guide for Seafarers' provides practical personal advice for seafarers to empower them to take care of their own, and be aware of others, wellbeing. These publications are non-mandatory but support mandatory texts such as the Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers.



Figure 1 – Wellbeing at sea booklet cover

**Mental Health Training Standard**

Earlier this year, the Maritime Charities Group, a coalition of 10 major maritime charities, and the Merchant Navy Training Board published a standard, which sets out what should be covered in training courses for seafarers on mental health and wellbeing awareness. Written by experts from the maritime and education sectors, the standard gained widespread endorsement from key stakeholder groups. This was produced in response to the growing number of mental health courses, which are of varied quality and relevance to seafarers.

**Measuring wellbeing**

In September 2020, Maritime UK launched a Mental Health in Maritime benchmark survey in collaboration with Safer Highways. Along with the Mission to Seafarers Happiness Index, and Lloyds Register's survey on maritime workers' wellbeing during COVID-19, we are starting to get a better picture of mental health at sea. This is an important step in being able to address seafarer issues with an evidence-based approach.

The MCA is working with maritime charities, key stakeholders and researchers to further develop this evidence base and find lasting ways to improve the lives of seafarers, not just through the pandemic but beyond.

**What's next**

The MCA Human Element and Seafarer Safety team are working on a variety of projects, including the development of a wellbeing application for shipping companies to assess the wellbeing of their workers.

Many organisations don't know where to start when it comes to wellbeing, and finding out how staff are doing is a good starting point. The wellbeing tool will take the form of an anonymous survey which seafarers and other personnel will complete. The results will give management insights into areas where wellbeing could be improved, such as communication, environmental factors, fatigue, social factors, company culture and more. Advice and ideas based on the areas of concern will be provided to organisations. The survey can be repeated as changes are made to ensure that wellbeing initiatives have the desired impacts. Meanwhile, seafarers will be provided with tailored information and advice via an app, based on their responses.

At this stage, we are collecting data using an initial iteration of the survey, which will guide us in creating the final tool. Seafarers interested in completing the survey, or organisations that can help to promote this initiative, should contact MCA's Human Element Policy Specialist, Pav Hart-Premkumar ([Pav.Hart-Premkumar@mca.gov.uk](mailto:Pav.Hart-Premkumar@mca.gov.uk))

In addition to the development of this tool, the MCA are actively seeking ways to promote seafarer wellbeing and collaboration with other organisations. We also continue to review our guidance through the lens of the human element.

Whilst the increased discussions around seafarer wellbeing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is positive, it is important that we remember that seafarer issues are ongoing. In addition, wellbeing needs to be looked at holistically – every part of seafarers lives and working conditions impact on their long-term mental health and wellbeing. The impacts on productivity and safety should not be underestimated, or forgotten

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**More information:**

Printed and PDF copies of 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations' (ISBN 9780115536076) and 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Pocket Guide for Seafarers' (ISBN 9780115537875) are available from [tsoshop.co.uk](http://tsoshop.co.uk)

A Standard for Seafarers' Mental Health Awareness and Wellbeing Training (eBook) is available from <https://www.witherbyseamanship.com/a-standard-for-seafarers-mental-health-and-wellbeing-training-ebook.html>