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## Understanding the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarer wellbeing

Notice to all Shipowners, ship operators, shipping managers, shipping agents and Masters

*This MIN expires 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022*

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### Summary

This note provides information on the potentially long-lasting and far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarer wellbeing. It provides guidance for shipowners on the stressors which have been created or exacerbated by the conditions throughout the pandemic and provides some mitigating strategies.

In this document the term shipowner is used in the sense that it is used in health and safety regulation, as the person responsible for the operation of the ship. This is often the same organisation as the 'company' referred to in the ISM code.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences, including mental health and wellbeing impacts. As those in the maritime industry will know these effects have been felt especially hard by seafarers, and it is expected that this will have long-term impacts on crews. Whilst the full impacts are yet to be seen, social research can provide early indications. A Lloyds Register survey<sup>1</sup> on maritime workers' wellbeing identified workload and fatigue, quality and variety of food, and lack of exercise as areas of concern. The Mission to Seafarers Quarterly Happiness Index Q3 2020<sup>2</sup> 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" but Mission to Seafarers suggest that the small uptick in happiness levels reported in quarter 4 could show that the actions of some shipowners are making a difference. The stressors and difficulties related to the pandemic and crew change crisis are expected to continue for some time, and the wellbeing impacts could be felt for months and years after.
- 1.2 During the pandemic, many shipowners have been proactive in supporting seafarer's wellbeing. The MCA takes seafarer wellbeing extremely seriously and is dedicated to supporting shipowners, managers and seafarers throughout the pandemic and beyond. In anticipation of the long-term impacts on seafarer wellbeing, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has developed this notice as a resource for shipowners to refer to.

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<sup>1</sup> [Lloyd's Register survey on maritime workers' wellbeing during COVID-19](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Mission to Seafarers Quarterly Happiness Index Q3 2020 Report](#)



1.3 Shipowners are responsible for the health and safety of seafarers and they, along with all levels of management, are in a great position to make a real difference to seafarers' lives. The exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, and the associated crew change crisis, have put extreme pressures on seafarers. This guidance is intended to help shipowners understand the pressures associated with the current situation and suggest ways for shipowners to continue to support seafarer wellbeing and maintain safe operations in the period following the pandemic and crew change crisis.

1.4 Managers should ensure that they not only care for their crew but look after their own wellbeing and seek support where needed – good leadership includes leading by example and good decision-making arises from positive wellbeing.

## **2. The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis situation**

2.1 The pandemic is a long-lasting situation, and many seafarers will experience the whole period, or parts of it, as a crisis. A well-handled crisis sends positive signals to current and future seafarers. Prioritising seafarer wellbeing will mean seafarers can get back to their normal duties quickly. It also sends a clear message that seafarers are valued, which aside from positive wellbeing outcomes, strengthens a company's corporate image. The way seafarers are treated during this period and beyond will have impacts on the reputation of the industry and on recruitment. MCA's publication *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations* Chapter 3.4 provides advice on how to handle crisis situations.

2.2 As time passes the situation will evolve, and industry and seafarers will need to adapt to changes to travel restrictions, emergence of new variants of the virus, vaccination programmes and infection control requirements, among other factors. Throughout, the welfare of seafarers must be paramount, and the MCA will continue to support industry.

## **3. The crew change crisis**

3.1 The conditions of the pandemic and government responses to the situation by closing borders and restricting movement of people has led to increased numbers of extensions to seafarer's employment agreements (SEAs). Extension of these agreements should only be used as a last resort and with the documented consent of the seafarer and the shipowner should make every effort to repatriate the crew in the first available port once the initial SEA has expired. Seafarers must be repatriated as soon as the exceptional circumstances are no longer present. International protocols<sup>3</sup> have been agreed to facilitate safe crew changes to ease the current difficulties.

3.2 Extended periods on board can exacerbate poor mental wellbeing, increase fatigue, lead to a culture of complacency, and increase interpersonal tensions. Where exemptions have been made to contract length requirements, the master and all seafarers should monitor and be alert for signs of lapses in safe behaviour, increased fatigue and decreased wellbeing and report any concerns to the master or the safety committee.

3.3 For more guidance on mitigating addressing the current impacts of the crew change crisis, refer to the Maritime & Coastguard Agency's Marine Information Note MIN632(M+F) Amendment 2 and the protocols issued by the International Maritime Organisation.

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<sup>3</sup> [Industry Recommended Framework of Protocols for Ensuring Safe Ship Crew Changes and Travel During the Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) Pandemic](#)



## **4. Stressors**

- 4.1 Stressors are events or environments that individuals might consider physically or psychologically demanding, challenging, and/or threatening to their safety. Threats to personal performance or ability to do your job can also be extremely stressful.
- 4.2 There are multiple stressors on seafarers created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Annex A lists some of these stressors and provides guidance on how to address each one. The list is not exhaustive, and shipowners can also use the *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations* Chapter 3.9, which lists causes of poor mental wellbeing and considers how these may have been exacerbated during this period.
- 4.3 It is important to consider that individuals may have experienced the pandemic differently, and shipowners should strive to support individuals according to their needs and situations, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. Cultural norms in terms of dealing with stress as well as the specific situation in the seafarers' home countries should be considered.

## **5. Performance**

- 5.1 As well as direct impacts on seafarer wellbeing, similar factors can impact performance. Sometimes called 'human performance limiting factors', these factors in turn affect both productivity and safety.
- 5.2 In a Lloyds Register survey<sup>1</sup>, 39% of seafarers believed that workload had increased during the pandemic, and 66% felt that health and safety was not balanced appropriately with operational demands. It is important that managers understand the factors that affect their crew and mitigate these to ensure continued safe operations.
- 5.3 Some factors that affect performance, which have been exacerbated during the pandemic include:
  - Motivation
  - Communication
  - Fatigue – long and short term
  - Workload and time pressure
  - Interpersonal issues
  - Stress
  - Distraction
  - Competency (including training)

A more in-depth explanation of some of these factors, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on these is listed in Annex B. This list is not exhaustive, and managers should ensure that they pay attention to the performance (in terms of both operations and safety) of crews, so that issues can be addressed as they arise.

## **6. There are wellbeing impacts for seafarers not at sea during the pandemic**

- 6.1 Reduced crew changeover and travel restrictions have meant that many seafarers have been unable to work for extended periods. As managers and maritime charities alike are seeing, this has negative impacts on wellbeing now, but these impacts will persist in the coming months and years. Financial worries are a common stressor, and unemployment is also known to have negative impacts on wellbeing and self-esteem, as well as future job prospects.
- 6.2 The IMO framework of protocols gives practical steps for joining and leaving ships, including the need for compliance and strict adherence with COVID-19 testing and quarantine requirements, and measures to prevent infection on board ships. Communication of the risks and procedures, in addition to ensuring infectious disease control, may improve seafarer trust and confidence in



their employers. When seafarers return to work after an extended period, especially under unusual circumstances, management must ensure that seafarers are appropriately briefed on health and safety procedures; have up-to-date training/familiarisation and remain competent at their job. Managers should also provide opportunities for seafarers to speak up if they or their colleagues are struggling with their workload or life onboard, including their mental health.

- 6.3 Managing human resources over the next months and even years may be difficult, with the usual rhythm of in and out of contract seafarers disrupted. Forward planning should consider the fact that seafarers that have had their contracts extended may not be able to return to work after the usual length of break. Seafarers may also have accrued leave which should be honoured. If seafarers return after a short break, careful consideration must be given to their wellbeing, morale and fatigue levels.

## **7. Supporting seafarer wellbeing**

- 7.1 Research<sup>4</sup> has shown that seafarers identify a range of areas where shipowners could provide resources that would support seafarers' mental wellbeing on board. The seafarers hardly mentioned reactive strategies such as improved access to support from charities or self-help approaches. Whilst the latter strategies play an important role, the researchers conclude that emphasis should be placed on proactive measures aimed at improving the conditions of work and life on board for seafarers. Improvements in welfare can be made in, among other things:

- better work-life balance for seafarers,
- ability to sustain good relationships with family and friends ashore (e.g. the provision of internet access)
- improvements in shipboard relationships
- better recreational opportunities

- 7.2 Much of the day-to-day care for seafarers' welfare falls on the shoulders of masters. Senior and shore-based management should consider how to support onboard managers and consider what resources, skills or training they may need to effectively undertake this aspect of their role. Pastoral support must be provided to managers too. It is important that shore-side managers consider how pressures on onboard managers will impact all seafarers.

- 7.3 Shipping agents can join in local Port Welfare Committees (run by Merchant Navy Welfare Board) which review, support and work collaboratively to improve seafarer's wellbeing. A peer support system can be a valuable and cost-effective way to address wellbeing issues in the workplace.

- 7.4 There may be cultural and language barriers to getting support – see *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations*, Chapter 2.1.8 for more information on cultural sensitivity. Peer support systems, family networks and translated literature can address this issue.

- 7.5 There are a variety of maritime charities that provide direct support to seafarers, such as chaplaincy, helplines and signposting. ISWAN and other maritime charities also provide a great deal of self-help resources. Managers can help seafarers by providing opportunities for visits from port chaplains and other supportive organisations. Provision of opportunities is just one small step in destigmatising asking for help. Under COVID-19 restrictions, companies may need to be creative to provide safe opportunities for support. Posters and other literature which promotes maritime charities, helplines, resources and in-house facilities and procedures play an important role in signalling to seafarers that wellbeing is taken seriously by the organisation.

- 7.6 Annex C provides a non-exhaustive list of resources for seafarers and managers.

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<sup>4</sup> Helen Sampson & Neil Ellis (2020): Stepping up: the need for Proactive Employer Investment in Safeguarding Seafarers' Mental Health and Wellbeing, Maritime Policy & Management, DOI: 10.1080/03088839.2020.1867918



## More Information

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## Annex A

### Stressors exacerbated or created by the pandemic and associated factors

Stressors are events or environments that individuals might consider physically or psychologically demanding, challenging, and/or threatening to their safety.

1. **Family/home country anxieties** – including concerns about the health and wellbeing of family in home countries with high infection rates and/or strict restrictions, as well as being unable to return home in case of family emergency or death. Seafarers' worries about family can be exacerbated by a lack of communication. Frequent opportunities to contact friends and family, without unreasonable cost, should be provided to seafarers. There should also be consideration of privacy.
2. **Health anxiety** – many seafarers are anxious about contracting COVID-19 from fellow seafarers and officials. In addition to following the recommended protocols for restricting the spread of COVID-19, anxiety around contracting the COVID-19 virus may be alleviated for some by clear communication of risk assessments and mitigating procedures, which all organisations should have. Opportunities to receive medical attention, including for mental health problems, should also be a priority.
3. **Reduced social interaction and increased isolation** – this is an ongoing concern for many seafarers which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Social isolation also increases the likelihood of other stressors such as bullying and harassment, and less ability to speak out about these issues.

The ISWAN Social Interaction Matters project<sup>5</sup> report (phase one) identified several factors that reduce opportunities for social interaction on board including fatigue, lack of time and high workloads, short port calls and less shore leave. In addition, the effectiveness of leadership and management skills onboard and ashore has an impact on interactions. Fatigue and high workload were identified as the biggest barrier and measures should be taken to reduce these where possible.

During the pandemic, social distancing increased the number of seafarers who felt isolated, unable to mingle as they would usually<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult seeing masks instead of the faces of colleagues, and there are signs this is having an impact and reducing a sense of engagement onboard.

Ensuring access to recreational, exercise and social facilities has a multitude of wellbeing and productivity benefits. Maintaining social connections to family and friends (outside of work) is also important (see family/home country anxieties for more suggestions).

4. **Bullying and harassment** – in times of stress, bullying and harassment are increased. Experiencing this can have long-term consequences on mental health. During the pandemic, and at times of economic hardship, seafarer's fears about unemployment can be exploited. Some seafarers have been forced to sign contract extensions, and occasionally threatening behaviour is used to ensure compliance. Other forms of bullying such as exclusion from activities may be particularly damaging when social isolation is already an issue.

Even if you believe that this has not happened within your company, managers should be aware that this is happening in the industry, and members of crew may have been subject to such behaviour. In addition, managers should try to actively mitigate any perceived pressure to accept contract extensions – whether that be financial worries or fear of letting down colleagues.

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<sup>5</sup> [Phase One of ISWAN's Social Interaction Matters \(SIM\) Project](#), sponsored by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and Red Ensign Group



5. **Financial concerns** – Many seafarers are experiencing financial hardship if they cannot find employment at sea. Others are afraid they will not be able to find employment in the future, and have reported contemplating career changes, which could have negative consequences for the industry going forward. Financial worries are known to be a cause of poor mental wellbeing, and in the most severe cases can be a risk of suicide. – charities support

6. **Uncertainty** – Uncertainty regarding the length of contracts, when they can return home and long-term future uncertainty about the world that we live in has all contributed to seafarer anxiety. In addition, many seafarers have experienced a lack of control of their situation, working conditions and contract.

Trust may have broken down over this period and it is important consider how organisations can build trust between seafarers, shore-side personnel and senior management. Clear communication is essential for motivational and relationship building, and can reduce feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. For seafarers that have not been at sea due to the crew change crisis or other reasons, the physical and social environment onboard, as well as procedures, may have changed. Consideration should be given to the training, briefing or support needed for these seafarers, and how best to communicate with them.

It may be useful to refer to *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations* Chapter 2, which covers fairness, communication and building trust, as well as explaining how deviations from planned embarkation/disembarkation and shore leave can affect seafarers and their families, and how this can be best managed.

7. **Limited shore leave** – Shore leave has a positive wellbeing impact on seafarers. It increases variety in the seafarer's life, and provides an opportunity to buy personal items and food and seek medical and mental health support. Without these breaks, seafarer's lives become increasingly monotonous, which has impacts on motivation, distraction and fatigue.

During the pandemic, shore leave has not been possible in the same way they are used to. A comment from the *Seafarers Happiness Index* survey<sup>2</sup> noted that shore leave has become increasingly rare in recent years, so it is important to consider how this opportunity can be increased for seafarers, throughout the pandemic and beyond.

See *ILO MLC, 2006 4.4 Access to shore based welfare facilities* for the requirements of companies to allow shore leave. Where shore leave is impossible, other ways of mitigating boredom, isolation and fatigue should be introduced.

8. **Travel restrictions** – Travel restrictions have delayed repatriation, increased the need for contract extensions and created issues with returning home even once repatriated to the seafarer's home country. This is perhaps the most obvious stressor which managers had limited power to mitigate. For seafarers' that have not been supported with getting home in a timely manner, trust may have been damaged, which will impact working relationships well into the future.

Shipowners should also be aware of the environment that some seafarers are returning to or coming from. There may be a lack of understanding and fear of the COVID-19 virus, and associated consequences for those that have travelled abroad. In addition, seafarers may have to undergo particular processes, such as self-isolation, prior to joining new vessels. It is important that managers make this the least stressful process possible. Good communication and provision of appropriate facilities may go a long way to doing this.



It's important that shipowners take steps to ensure that any future pandemic-related restrictions cause minimal disruption to crews. This includes situations where members of crews develop COVID-19 symptoms. Shipowners should continue to refer to the IMO *Recommended Framework of Protocols for ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic*.

9. **Other stressors** – there are many other stressors related to the pandemic and being on board for a longer period than usual or than expected. This includes interpersonal relationship issues due to prolonged contact with a limited number of people, feelings of powerlessness, and the boredom, fatigue and complacency of undertaking the same job for a long period of time. The primary way to mitigate such issues is to ensure adequate rest and shore leave has been taken. Good leadership, a fair and open culture, increased variety (e.g. recreational activities) and good communication can also reduce the impact of these stressors. Long periods of time at sea contribute to a deprivation of physical and psychological needs (e.g. sleep, eating patterns and autonomy, social needs, physical exercise etc.).



## Annex B

### Performance limiting factors that have been impacted by the pandemic

#### 1. Fatigue

Fatigue is a performance limiting factor which is extremely common in the maritime industry, and frequently plays a role in accidents and unsafe behaviour. Fatigue results in physical and mental impairment leading to poor performance, increased slips and lapses, increased risk to safety and potential long-term damage to health and wellbeing. Repeated or long periods of fatigue degrades performance and in the long-term increases stress and has negative effects on health. Prolonged stress can also be a causal factor of chronic fatigue. During the pandemic, nearly half of seafarers asked in a Lloyds Register survey<sup>1</sup> said that they were not well rested, and a similar number said that people they worked with were not well rested.

Adequate rest and sleep play important roles in stress mitigation. In this period of increased and prolonged stress it is recommended, more than ever, that companies go beyond the minimum mandated rest hours where possible.

Shore-leave also provides an important role in reducing fatigue. Whilst rest hours are mandated by the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 there is limited evidence (or guidance) how fatigue levels are affected by time spent onboard, contract length and shore leave. Companies have a responsibility to create work-rest patterns and manning levels which are appropriate to the length of seafarers' contracts and maintain seafarer health and wellbeing.

In addition, especially when ideal fatigue management is not possible due to exceptional circumstances, other ways of mitigating fatigue can be employed. For example, shipowners could try to ensure that:

- seafarer rest hours are uninterrupted as possible
- accurate recording of work-rest hours, which can support managers in ensuring that their crew is not working fatigued
- recreational and social opportunities are provided
- access to internet is available, so that seafarers can access entertainment and keep in touch with family

For further information and guidance on fatigue see:

- MGN 505 (M) Human element guidance - Part 1: Fatigue and fitness
- *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations*, Chapter 3.5.1.
- IMO MSC.1/Circ.1598 on the Guidelines on fatigue

#### 2. Competency and training

A lack of training opportunities throughout the pandemic has meant that many seafarers feel as if they are in “a holding pattern”<sup>2</sup>. Personal and professional development is an important part of long-term wellbeing (as well as overall company performance, standards and safety) and companies should make every effort to maintain this, whilst abiding by COVID-safe practices.

“Skill-fade” is a term for a reduction of ability or adeptness over a period of non-use. For seafarers that have not been able to work onboard for some time, efforts should be made to ensure competency levels are maintained, and that seafarers are confident in their roles.



### 3. Motivation

Alongside wellbeing impacts, motivation is important for productivity as well as ensuring that seafarers actively maintain safety.

Seafarers like to know that the work they are doing is valuable, this creates motivation and worth. Despite the essential work that seafarers do for the global economy, and their status as keyworkers in the UK and other countries, many seafarers do not feel valued. In a Lloyds Register survey<sup>1</sup>, when asked (during the pandemic) whether they agreed with the statement 'I feel valued in my role', only 8% of seafarers strongly agreed, and just 13% felt they were performing an essential role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Factors that may have made seafarers feel undervalued during the pandemic include:

- Changes to contract terms
- Lack of freedom and autonomy
- Feeling ignored and forgotten about by their home country, the media or their employer (especially those not repatriated promptly, and conversely, those unable to work)
- Uncertainty, especially due to limited or unclear communication of the situation
- Unemployment or the fear of unemployment
- Lack of understanding or empathy from shore-side personnel and managers – continued or increased pressure put on seafarers to work fast and efficiently under difficult conditions

Managers can refer to *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations*, page 30 for a list of factors that may affect motivation. Managers are encouraged to think about how each of these factors have been affected by the pandemic and related issues.

### 4. Communication

An effective ship-shore relationship is critical to operations. A lack of empathy on the part of shore-side personnel can reduce seafarer motivation. Managers should understand and address any barriers (language, cultural or other) to effective communication.

Communications from shore should always:

- Be realistic about what crews can achieve
- Try to not to make your pressures their pressures
- Listen to responses of crew
- Communication from management, particularly about repatriation and working terms, should also be
- Frequent – even if there is nothing new to report, reassurance that management is aware of the situation and actively working on it is important
- As clear as possible
- Two-way – crews should be able to report concerns about employment, safety and wellbeing to high level management



## **Annex C**

### **Resources for seafarers**

A variety of resources are available for seafarers, which management can utilise and signpost seafarers to. A non-exhaustive list of these is given below.

*Wellbeing at sea: A Pocket Guide for Seafarers* and *Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations*, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, available from [www.tsoshop.co.uk](http://www.tsoshop.co.uk)

Information and resources to support seafarers' welfare, including self-help guides, are available from the [ISWAN website](http://www.iswan.org.uk)

A global directory of port chaplains is available from the Stella Maris website: <https://www.stellamaris.org.uk/contact-us/chaplains-map/>

Seafarers can get support from helplines such as [SeafarerHelp](http://www.seafarerhelp.org) and [Yacht Crew Help](http://www.yachtcrewhelp.org), Mission to Seafarers' [Chat to a Chaplain](http://www.missiontoseafarers.org) and the Seafarers' Hospital Society's access to [Togetherall](http://www.togetherall.org)

A Directory of Seafarer Centres is available from the Seafarer Help website: <https://www.seafarerhelp.org/en/seafarers-directory>

[Sailor's Society](http://www.sailorsociety.org) provide grants and support to families in need and run projects in seafaring communities around the world as well as running a helpline for seafarers and a wellness at Sea coaching programme and app

WeCare is a wellbeing programme offering free courses on mental health awareness. Visit [www.missiontoseafarers.org](http://www.missiontoseafarers.org) for more information

