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# 'Overstretched and under-resourced': the corporate neglect of port welfare services for seafarers

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of the provisions of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, this paper draws on new qualitative data collected from seafarers' welfare centres, charities involved in seafarers' welfare service provision, seafarers, port chaplains and seafarers' centre volunteers. It examines the kinds of port-based welfare services currently provided to seafarers, and whether these meet seafarers' expectations/needs. It provides new data on the perspectives of chaplains and stakeholder organisations in relation to the provision of seafarers' services and starkly reveals the contemporary funding challenges experienced by these individuals/groups. The paper critically appraises the current reliance by ports, shipping companies, and government entities on the provision of free welfare services for seafarers. It concludes that Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, guidance relating to the funding of seafarers' welfare services requires strengthening and that the funding of seafarers' welfare services in ports across the world requires remedial action.



## KEYWORDS

Maritime labour convention; seafarers' centres; port welfare; maritime charities; port chaplains; cargo sector

## 1. Introduction

On 1 April 2020, the *Guardian* newspaper published an article highlighting the work of Reverend Woodward (The Guardian 2020). Based in the port of Rotterdam, he was reported to be the last of 20 local port chaplains continuing to visit ships in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic. The reception he received, was unsurprisingly warm given that seafarers' sense of being incarcerated on board had grown in the period of coronavirus-related social distancing, quarantine, extended time on board, and fear.

Historically, the provision of welfare services for seafarers in UK and US ports (Cadge and Skaggs 2019) has been associated with religious groups. Port chaplaincy has a long tradition in the UK where the two main providers are the *Mission to Seafarers* and the *Apostleship of the Sea* (*Stella Maris*). The *Mission to Seafarers* was established in 1856 building on the work of *The Bristol Channel Mission* (<https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/about/history>, Accessed 24/4/20). Today it serves 200 ports worldwide and operates seafarers' centres in 121. The *Apostleship of the Sea, Great Britain*, is a Catholic charity working in 334 ports in 59 countries. While both charities provide religious services when requested and/or when appropriate, their day-to-day activities focus on seafarers' welfare. As such, both organisations provide support and services to international seafarers, regardless of their religion (Montemaggi 2018).<sup>1</sup>

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In the UK's 120 commercial ports (<https://www.maritimeuk.org/about/our-sector/ports/#:~:text=There%20are%20about%20120%20commercial,such%20as%20coal%20or%20oil>. Accessed 1/2/21), the Merchant Navy welfare Board states that there are over 30 seafarers' centres (<https://www.mnwb.org/non-uk-seafarers-fishers-in-uk-ports> accessed 1/2/21). These are operated by a range of charities described as: Mission to Seafarers, Stella Maris, Sailors Society, Seamen's Christian Friend Society, Aberdeen Seafarer Centre, Felixstowe Seafarer Centre, Liverpool Seafarers' Centre, Queen Victoria Seaman's Rest, Immingham Seafarer Centre, Port of Bristol Seafarer Centre. This suggests that in the UK, where there is a long history of provision via welfare centres and services for seafarers such provision can only be found in 25% of commercial ports. A directory published to support global seafarers (<https://www.seafarerhelp.org/en/seafarers-director> accessed 1/2/21) indicates that Europe is the region with the largest number of seafarers' centres overall. There are 150 seafarers' centres identified in Europe, 110 in North America, 49 in Asia-Pacific, 39 in Australia and New Zealand, 21 in the Middle East, 18 in Africa, and 11 in South America. This amounts to a total of 398 seafarers' centres across the globe. To contextualise this figure, it is noteworthy that France and Denmark alone have a combined total of 427 ports listed by 'World Port Source' (<http://www.worldportsource.com/countries.php> accessed 1/2/21). In line with these figures, it is worth highlighting that published ethnographic accounts indicate that seafarers' centres and welfare services are infrequently encountered by seafarers (Sampson 2013) and that in providing 121 seafarers' centres of the 398 worldwide, the Mission to Seafarers is one of the major providers of seafarers' centres globally.

The provision of welfare-related services to seafarers in port is recognised as important within the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (hereafter referred to as MLC). The convention states that where port-based welfare services exist they should be available to seafarers irrespective of their individual characteristics (e.g., sex, nationality, religion) and regardless of the flag of their vessel. Secondly, the convention requires member states to promote the development of welfare facilities in appropriate ports following consultation with shipowners and seafarers' organisations. Thirdly, the convention requires signatories to establish welfare boards tasked with regularly reviewing welfare provision and ensuring that services are appropriate to the changing needs of seafarers (ILO 2006).

Beyond these standards, MLC also sets out guidance pertaining to the provision of port-based welfare services for seafarers. Most significantly, these guidelines incorporate clauses relating to the **financing** of services. Guideline B4.4.4. states that:

1. In accordance with national conditions and practice, financial support for port welfare facilities should be made available through one or more of the following: (a) grants from public funds; (b) levies or other special dues from shipping sources; (c) voluntary contributions from shipowners, seafarers, or their organizations; and (d) voluntary contributions from other sources.
2. Where welfare taxes, levies and special dues are imposed, they should be used only for the purposes for which they are raised.

This clause has encouraged the belief, in some quarters, that in the future much-needed financial support will be raised from public funds or industry bodies (including shipping companies) in support of international port-based welfare services. As we will describe, however, the evidence from this research indicates that such financial support has yet to, substantially, materialise.

This article is based upon research considering the significance of faith to the world's multi-national mix of seafarers. It draws upon research with seafarers, with charities providing seafarers' welfare services, with international chaplains and with UK-based port chaplains). The paper outlines the research methods employed in the conduct of the project and reviews the literature which explains why seafarers require port-based welfare support and why, therefore, the MLC welfare provisions are so important. The paper makes a unique contribution to the limited data on port-welfare services post-MLC and it is the first to report on in-depth ethnographic work with both seafarers and UK-based chaplains in relation to the provision/receipt of port-based welfare services. In presenting the data, the paper outlines the faith-based provision which currently exists in the UK and elsewhere and explores its value to seafarers. It considers the benefits to shipping companies of

the chaplaincy/welfare services currently provided in port and highlights funding as a significant issue for providers. In doing so, it reveals the extent to which chaplains are increasingly having to devote their time to fundraising, taking them away from their primary role as welfare providers. In conclusion, the paper argues that it would be reasonable for ship operators/ports to make a greater financial contribution to these services.

## 2. Method

The research was undertaken as part of a UK Economic and Social Research Council-funded project (ESRC ES/N019423/1) considering the ways that faith is experienced and negotiated by seafarers on board as well as the provisions for faith/welfare made by charitable organisations based in ports ashore. In order to understand these different dimensions of seafarers' lives, we used a combination of qualitative research methods. Non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were utilised by a researcher who sailed for 89 days (total) on board two different multinationally-crewed vessels. Whilst on board, fieldnotes were made to record observations and these were subsequently analysed and thematically coded using Nvivo 12 software. Daily fieldnotes were made on a password protected laptop at regular intervals throughout the day. The researcher was equipped with a fieldnote guide as well as an interview guide and these structured but did not determine the content of the fieldnotes/interviews. That is to say that the researcher had the flexibility to include additional observations/questions which had not been thought of prior to the fieldwork. The process of observational work and interviewing was iterative in that each activity informed the other. The researcher maintained close contact with the principal investigator for the project by email and responded to suggestions for follow-up and new lines of enquiry. As such the process was inductive and both reflective and reflexive. Fifty-five formal semi-structured interviews with seafarers were carried out. Both officers and ratings were included in the research and seafarers of working age (youngest 21 and oldest 61) from seven different countries took part (see [Table 1](#)). Interviews with non-Filipino seafarers and port-based centre staff and volunteers were undertaken in English. Interviews with Filipino participants were undertaken in Tagalog. All seafarers agreed to take part in the research resulting in a full representation of all ranks on board. All seafarers on board (and therefore all interviewees) were male which is common in the cargo shipping sector where less than 1% of the workforce is estimated to be female. Interviews were of between one- and two-hours duration and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed and thematically coded using Nvivo 12. Details relating to the seafarers who took part in shipboard interviews are presented in [Table 1](#).

Shipboard research was complemented by participant observation in two UK seafarers' centres. These have been assigned the pseudonyms *Riverside* and *Porton*. Both centres supplied services to more than one port within their locality. Porton was run by a major faith-based charity and the centre provided a base for volunteers from another similar charity. Riverside was independent of national organisations but was run by two local faith-based charities dedicated to seafarers' welfare.

**Table 1.** The religious identification and nationality of participating seafarers.

	Filipino	Chinese	Swedish	Norwegian	Latvian	American	Sri Lankan	Total
Atheist	0	3	0	1	1	1	0	6
Roman Catholic (RC)	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
Buddhist	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Jesus is Lord	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iglesia Filipina	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Lutheran	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
Baptist Church	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Jehova's Witness	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Potter's House (Christian Pentecostal)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	43	4	1	3	1	1	2	55

**Table 2.** The numbers of interviews with key groups working in case study seafarers' centres.

	Riverside	Porton	UK-based excluding Riverside and Porton	Non-UK-based
Paid centre staff (including chaplains)	2	3	1	6
Centre volunteers	6	4	Not applicable	Not applicable
Stakeholder charities	Not applicable	Not applicable	3	6

A total of six months was spent in the two areas—undertaking observations, accompanying workers/chaplains/volunteers on ship-visits, and carrying out interviews with service providers and seafarers. As with the shipboard element of the research, a fieldwork guide was used in the ports but was subject to adaptation/augmentation. The principal investigator spent several days at both sites and maintained regular contact with the researcher throughout the six months. An interview guide provided the framework for semi-structured interviews with chaplains and volunteers in ports. Five semi-structured interviews were carried out with paid staff, and ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with volunteers, at the two centres. Interviews with seafarers were informal and verbatim quotes were recorded in contemporaneous fieldnotes. We supplemented our research with nine semi-structured interviews with representatives from the main charitable bodies connected to seafarers' welfare (3 in the UK and 6 outside the UK) and with seven additional chaplains (three male, four female) residing in Western Europe, Asia/Asia Pacific, North and South America, in both UK (1) and non-UK (6) ports. We have provided details of these interviews in Table 2.

### 3. The need for seafarers' welfare services

Seafarers working on board cargo vessels are employed in unique residential settings for long periods of time. It is common for ratings to be employed on contracts averaging nine months and officers are generally employed for periods of between three and six months in the deep-sea trades. Conditions on board cargo vessels are physically uncomfortable and emotionally challenging (Sampson 2013; Borovnik 2011). This is because ships operate out at sea for long periods of time, crews are relatively small and may not share a first language/national culture, ships are noisy and sleeping on a moving/vibrating vessel is difficult (Hystad and Eid 2016). Furthermore, ships are institutional, hierarchical workspaces where seafarers have little autonomy (McVeigh and MacLachlan 2019) they are known to be dangerous (Zevallos et al. 2014) and they operate on a 24/7 basis. As such, a seafarer's life is frequently stressful (Oldenburg and Jensen 2019; Oldenburg, Jensen, and Wegner 2013; Oldenburg et al. 2009; Mellbye and Carter 2017), working hours are long and arduous (Oldenburg et al. 2009; Jepsen, Zhao, and Leeuwen 2015), and life can be lonely (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Iversen 2012; Swift 2015).

There is some evidence that in recent years short-term anxiety and depression have risen among seafarers alongside fatigue and sleep difficulties (Sampson et al. 2017). Seafarers suffer more depression whilst on board than ashore (Salyga and Juozulynas 2006) and report being happier at home than at sea (Sampson and Ellis 2019).

At sea, seafarers are inevitably isolated from their communities. While improved communications technology can help seafarers remain remotely connected to others, internet provision is far from universal (Sampson et al. 2018; Oldenburg et al. 2009; Mellbye and Carter 2017). Concomitantly, seafarers have little opportunity to go ashore. Shore-leave has reduced in recent years due to rapid vessel-turnaround and the relocation of port terminals away from city-centres (Sampson and Wu 2003). These factors are particularly significant given that ports are generally served by very poor public transport and seafarers are not familiar with timetables, drop off points,

and traffic conditions. When seafarers arrive at an unfamiliar port, some are nervous of going ashore where they may be unable to communicate with local people and where they may feel unsafe. In this context, the provision of port-based welfare services is essential. Providing seafarers with an accessible space where they can safely shop, relax, and communicate with new people, is the least that could be expected. Such provision not only benefits seafarers' (Palmer and Murray 2016) but indirectly benefits ship operators who rely on seafarers to remain physically/mentally fit to navigate/maintain their vessels. Most recently, of course, the global coronavirus pandemic has meant that seafarers/fishers have faced considerable limitations in relation to shore-leave (Vandergeest, Marschke, and MacDonnell 2021) and transit to/from vessels (De Beukelaer 2021). Consequently, many have been on board for longer than usual and have been denied access to crucial services such as shops and medical centres. This has had serious implications for seafarers' welfare (Slišković 2020; Lucas et al. 2021) and has increased the significance of port-based welfare provision and ship-visiting.

Historically, port-based welfare services have been provided by voluntary organisations with access to funding from shipping organisations, local authorities, ports and local populations (particularly church congregations). However, with funding under threat and services under review, and given the provisions/guidance relating to port-based welfare services in MLC, it is timely to question whether present funding and/or services require reform.

#### **4. Current port-based welfare provision for seafarers (Porton and Riverside)**

The welfare centres which were included in the research provided services to seafarers in several different locations. Porton workers/volunteers operated in two city-port locations which provided different services to seafarers. One building was open to port-workers and seafarers and it had a shop, a cafeteria, a chapel, and a leisure area. In the other building, some self-service facilities were available to seafarers (including vending machines). Additionally, in scattered river-port locations, ship visiting services were provided. Riverside seafarers' centre was based in a building located near one of the major port-sites. Within the centre, there was a shop, games facilities, areas for relaxing, a bar, free tea/coffee, free clothes/toys and a chapel. Ship visits were frequent, and free transport was provided to the centre and to popular locations within the city. Ship visiting and other services were also provided to vessels calling at a more remote port-area.

In both areas, service provision relied on a collaboration between two different Christian organisations. These were not the same organisations in each case and consequently four different organisations were associated in the provision of services across the two sites.

##### **4.1. Services provided by welfare teams**

###### **4.1.1. Ship visiting**

In Riverside, ship visits were relatively short, and personnel called at vessels to provide information about the centre/free transport and to offer seafarers an opportunity to purchase phone/data top ups. In Porton, visitors spent more time on each ship and saw their role as providing seafarers with an opportunity to chat. They felt that it was important to show seafarers that they were valued.

In both locations, we identified examples of highly trust-based relationships. In some instances, seafarers entrusted staff with funds to be sent home while in others, staff went shopping for seafarers and trusted that they would be reimbursed for their purchases when the seafarers concerned returned to the port.

Ship visitors were very clear that proselytization was not part of their remit. However, gifts of rosaries/bibles were regularly taken on board by the chaplain/volunteers in Porton and these were occasionally accompanied by treats such as chocolates/sweets. Home-made knitted hats, donated by local people, were also regularly given away in both areas.

#### 4.1.2. *Transport*

Transport was provided to/from the welfare centres as well as to shopping malls, tourist attractions, and medical facilities. In Riverside, for example, we were told of a case where regular transport was provided for a recuperating seafarer to allow him to attend outpatients' appointments. A team member described how:

The accident actually happened here in the port and [...] he was going backwards and forwards to his outpatients appointments, [...] to get him to the hospital we would pick him up in the bus and take him and drop him off, he might be there two, three hours sometimes and then we'd go back and pick him up again and sometimes we'd just stay with him. (Team member Riverside)

In Porton, Turgo participated in a hospital visit and witnessed its significance. The local port chaplain had been contacted by the coastguard alerting him to the case and the example emphasises both the importance of existing port-welfare services and the extent to which their provision by charities is embedded in local infrastructure. A fieldnote describes the visit:

In the hospital, the Filipino seafarer was surprised to see us. [...] we talked about his family, his work at sea, and [...] his fears of losing his job if his medical condition proved to be worse than he thought. [...] When there was a lull, Peter took out something from his rucksack. 'Here's a SIM card and a top up voucher', Peter said. [...] 'Use that and call you family, have a videochat with them so that they will see you, and know that you are well looked after'. [...] Soon the seafarer was talking to his wife. 'See the people who are visiting me', he said, 'the chaplain and his friend. I don't feel alone anymore'. Then the seafarer cried. [...] Before we left, the seafarer thanked Peter 'I will not forget you', he said. 'You were here when I was not expecting you. You did not know me, but you found time to see me'. (Fieldnotes)

#### 4.1.3. *Legal assistance*

In some areas, chaplains were contacted by the families of serving seafarers. They were often regarded as the only neutral sources of advice at times when families felt unassisted by the crewing agents/employers who had hired their relatives (see also Shan 2017). One stakeholder described how:

There are also cases wherein there's an accident on board. [...] and the first thing that his family does is to come to us and ask for legal support. [...] There are also cases of families of seafarers seeking help with regard to their family members getting hospitalised overseas. (Religious Charity 1 Philippines)

#### 4.1.4. *Personal touch*

In general, the motivations of the workers/volunteers providing welfare services for seafarers are such that they go 'the extra mile' when it comes to support. Volunteers were sympathetic to seafarers, who they understood to be sacrificing time with their families/communities to earn money in a harsh living/working environment. One chaplain explained:

They are away from their homes . . . [...] many of them come from countries that are very poor. And the best job they're going to get is going on board a ship. Which means long months away from their family – which is deprivation, isolation, and loneliness. (Chaplain Canada)

We identified many examples of this kind of sentiment and associated efforts to support seafarers. In Brazil for example, a chaplain took some seafarers to her family home for lunch. She explained:

I took some officers to have lunch with my family in my town. [...] I ask captain if he would like to have a meal with my family. [...] Until today, this captain used to talk about 'that was nice to meet your family' (Chaplain Brazil)

In short, port chaplains saw their function as filling a void in relation to welfare provision. In this regard they provided an important service to shipping companies 'free of charge'. One chaplain put it this way:

Even though they have an HR department. It's not for the ship, it's not for the crew. [...] That's why I'm working with the port authority [...] So that if there's an issue with a seafarer or with an owner, or with a guy at the dock, or whatever – they have a source that they know they can come to. (Chaplain Canada)



## 4.2. Seafarers' views of provision

Quantitative research in Germany (Oldenburg and Jensen 2019b) indicates that seafarers value the services provided by seafarers' missions but does not explore why/when they are of benefit. Other data from a 2018 questionnaire-based study of seafarers' experiences in Chinese ports indicates a list of services that seafarers value but provides a limited understanding of why/how these are important in other national contexts (Zhao, Zhang, and He 2020). Our data suggested that seafarers were most happy to visit seafarers' centres if they provided free wi-fi, comfortable seating, access to sundry goods, and safety. Free transport was greatly appreciated as was the opportunity to access help, if needed, or to have a chance to chat with locals. Although seafarers can earn relatively high salaries many of them experience life at sea as an unwelcome sacrifice of time with their families. They therefore minimise expenditure, away from home, and maximise their savings in their country of origin. Seafarers also lack time when going ashore, so do not want to have to search out currency exchanges. Spending cash is therefore unattractive. Consequently, the free services provided by seafarers' centres are very welcome. One seafarer's comments were summarised as follows:

A good centre [...] provides free transportation to seafarers from the port to the centre and from the centre to the city centre; with well stocked store and bar; comfortable lounge area; and free wifi. [...] it would be a bonus if there would be indoor sports facilities; free coffee/tea and biscuits. (Fieldnotes)

Free transport was valued by seafarers. However, other services were also highly appreciated. Amongst these was help/advice. Volunteers/workers at seafarers' centres were understood to be on the seafarers' 'side' and were regarded as providing a haven from the ship. One seafarer's comments were recorded in fieldnotes:

"Centres are a big help to seafarers. We feel like if we encounter a problem whilst on shore leave, we could always come to them for help. So, when we come to a port, I always ask, is there a seafarer centre close to the port? It's always a lifeline to us." (Fieldnote)

Safety and security featured prominently in seafarers' minds when discussing the benefits of seafarers' centres and another fieldnote recorded an officer's similar perceptions:

'I want a place to feel relaxed. It needs to be safe, where I can leave my things without fear that when I return to where I left my bag or whatever, it is already gone.' (Fieldnote)

## 4.3. Service coverage

Volunteers, centre workers, and chaplains were clear that their role focussed on the welfare of **all** seafarers regardless of nationality or faith. They explained that their role was about putting their faith into practice by caring for others, not specifically about spreading/teaching their beliefs. A chaplain explained:

We're not going on ships to proselytise, we're not waving our bibles with one hand and a prayer book in the other. We go on board to find out if everybody's okay. If there's been any issues lately. We go on board and we find out somebody's lost their mother or their brother, or their wife has just had a baby and they can't get home to see this child. (Chaplain Canada)

However, during the research, we did identify centres which provided chapel/prayer facilities which would be more appropriate for some seafarers than others. Volunteers/workers assured us that should a seafarer wish to attend a mosque/synagogue/temple or similar facility, then steps would be taken to assist them. One chaplain explained:

We'll call an Imam or whoever they spiritually need. We'll put them in touch with them. [...] That's not an issue. In actual fact [...] we do have Port Chaplains of Muslim, Buddhist and other religious backgrounds as well. So, our Port Chaplains are not necessarily all Christians or ordained Pastors. (Chaplain Asia)



In these respects, existing centres largely appear to meet the provisions of MLC. However, given that they are funded by voluntary organisations, they face increased limitations relating to finance which impact on service provision and coverage.

#### **4.4. Funding challenges faced by current providers**

Historically, European shipping companies had a notion of ‘home ports’ and vessels were usually flagged in their ‘home’ states. Many companies were family-owned, and some had philanthropic outlooks. In this context, companies often made significant contributions to local welfare services for seafarers. One volunteer recounted how this previous connection between shipowners and support for seafarers was much missed. He described how:

It was different in the old days, [...] most of the shipping companies were based here, [...] and the seafarers’ centre were subsidised by the companies [...] But now, most of the companies are all foreign companies, so we don’t have any money input from them. (Riverside team member)

In the context of these lost funds and financial pressures in the voluntary sector, the funding challenges faced by some chaplains/volunteers were considerable. In many cases, chaplains, team members, and volunteers, were putting more time into raising funds than into assisting seafarers. In some cases, interviewees described taking pay cuts and working over their paid hours to try to fulfil their responsibilities. One explained her predicament as follows:

Our funding is ... it’s not sustainable at this point. We’re working very hard to try to create ways to raise money. But it’s getting to the point where it feels like we’re all about the fundraising and not about the work. [...] this year, we all had to take a 50 percent cut in pay. [...] I’m being paid half time but I’m certainly working well over my limit. [...] it’s been a really tough year for us. (Chaplain Canada)

Faced with similar challenges, some seafarers’ centres had tried to make use of MLC to get their local ports to assist in funding facilities. In Riverside, they had attempted to establish a voluntary port levy. However, it appeared that they were not encountering much cooperation. An interviewee explained:

What we have now setup is a voluntary port levy, and this is really on the back of MLC 2006, [...] a lot of those who’re responsible for paying, [say] ‘that’s voluntary’ they say ‘we don’t have to pay it’, so they won’t. (Riverside team member)

Umbrella organisations representing charities providing seafarers’ welfare services were aware of the financial difficulties which many faced. While in some places port levies and other fundraising initiatives worked well, in others, centre staff were left scratching around for resources and attempting to meet costs through the sale of sundry goods. One interviewee from an umbrella organisation told us:

They [charitable providers] get money again from local sources, often local churches or local individuals. They can get funding from goods sold [...] if they give rides to seafarers, some of them ask for donations and they have a little bit of revenue. Or one [way of raising funds] is called a levy system. In almost every place it’s a voluntary levy, where when ships come in, as soon as they leave the seafarers centre will send the shipping company a letter saying ‘we did this for your ship, if you’d like to give us a donation here’s a suggested donation form’. Some ports that works well, other ports that doesn’t. (Stakeholder)

This confirmed the picture which we had built up via our interviews with chaplains. The findings indicate that it is not adequate for ports/companies to assume that charities can meet the financial costs associated with seafarers’ welfare. Whilst some charities had considerable capacity to do so in the past, and in specific geographic areas, the contemporary landscape for such bodies has changed and it is no longer appropriate to rely on them in this regard.

## 5. Discussion

The research revealed that in many ports, charities and volunteers provide an astonishing range of welcome services to seafarers. Free hot drinks, safe places to rest close to the port (crucially away from the ship), access to sundry items such as Wi-Fi cards/toiletries, free transport, and access to advice were among the most commonly provided services. However, many volunteers also provided more unusual support when a need/occasion, arose. This included hospital visiting, free transportation to outpatients' appointments, and invitations to private family dinners. Seafarers appreciated this assistance and felt that centres provided them with invaluable safe havens when they arrived in 'foreign' ports.

In line with the requirements of MLC, the services provided by the main charities which support seafarers' centres across the world were available to all seafarers and were not determined by the gender/nationality/creed or other characteristics, of service users. In these respects, the current provision, whilst patchy, appears to be in line with MLC requirements. However, the research revealed considerable financial challenges which were being faced by the voluntary organisations which provided port-based welfare services for seafarers. It demonstrated that in many cases, staff were working full-time whilst being paid part-time and in the face of diminishing budgets, existing provision was being substantially cut.

Post-MLC there was an expectation among voluntary service providers that shipping companies and ports would do more to fund port-based welfare services. One standard form of providing such support, is via a port-levy. Regrettably, the data suggest that where these have been established, they have tended to be on a voluntary basis and that vessel captains do not make the contributions requested. It is likely that this reflects a reluctance, on the part of companies, to make additional payments for seafarers' welfare. It is indicative of the failure of 'guidance' within international conventions and supports suggestions that regulations require the 'teeth' which are associated with mandatory status and proper mechanisms of enforcement (Hamad 2015). This may be particularly the case in relation to issues of social welfare which have been demonstrated to be less of a priority than environmental protection for those shipping companies which are concerned to exercise Corporate Social Responsibility (Kunnaala, Rasi, and Storgård 2020; Sampson 2016).

MLC does not make port-welfare provision the sole responsibility of shipping companies, however, and port operators themselves have enormous scope to provide welfare centres/services for seafarers. Examples of such provision are few and far between (and did not emerge in our study) although good practice (e.g., the provision of a small centre, lease of premises for small fees, provision of maintenance and small repairs) has been identified in some UK ports operated by *DP World* (London Gateway), *The Victoria Group* (Seaham/Sharpness), *Peel Ports* (Eastham) and *ABP* (Ipswich) (Hughes 2017).<sup>2</sup>

The derogation of responsibility, by port operators and states, for the provision of welfare facilities for seafarers is not a UK-based issue, but a global problem. In many countries, there is no provision for welfare support for seafarers and little interest in such matters. In others such as the USA, Canada and New Zealand the picture is similar to that found in the UK and there is considerable reliance on charities with regard to the provision of port-based welfare services for seafarers. For example, New Zealand has recently been identified as a country which substantially relies on charities for the provision of port-based welfare services for seafarers. A recent report by *Human Rights at Sea*, found that it cost NZ\$700,000 to finance New Zealand's welfare centres for seafarers and that, in 2017, only a cumulative NZ\$20,000 of this was contributed by port authorities, councils and 'Maritime New Zealand'. The report goes on to estimate the value of volunteer work at NZ\$600,000. Lambasting the government for its failure to comply with the provisions of MLC, the report's authors conclude that 'the responsibility of the state has ostensibly been outsourced to the maritime charitable sector' (Shepherd and Hammond 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to further highlight the need for port-based welfare services to be provided to support working seafarers. In the course of the pandemic, chaplains who had taken part in our research wrote to us about the extent to which seafarers were drawing on their support. Seafarers who were not able to go ashore during the pandemic found that many chaplains were willing to undertake shopping trips on their behalf. Extraordinarily, we had reports of chaplains racking up large amounts of debt on their personal credit cards in order to make purchases for seafarers who they trusted to subsequently reimburse them. In 2021, chaplains continued to attempt to make ship visits and seafarers' centres remained open in many ports. In 2022, despite the fact that some companies will not permit their employees to take shore-leave and that some captains are reluctant to allow crew to go ashore while covid persists, many chaplains report that, despite the wave of Omicron, it is 'business as usual'.

Not only has the pandemic increased the need for port-based welfare services, but it has also influenced the form of available welfare provision. In our research we identified charities that were switching to the provision of more unstaffed facilities for seafarers as well as a movement away from staffed seafarers' centres to virtual, on-line support services. The covid pandemic can be seen to have hastened the transition to the provision, by charities, of more online support. Welfare organisations that were based on 'remote contact' prior to the pandemic reported increased activity throughout 2021. For example, the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) reported that demand for their services increased by 3.5 times in the early part of the pandemic and by 1.5 times as the pandemic progressed (International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

This study was based upon detailed ethnographic and qualitative research considering the provision of port-based welfare services for seafarers. The findings from the study support a small number of others (Palmer and Murray 2016; Montemaggi 2018) which strongly suggest that port-based seafarers' centres make an essential contribution to seafarers' welfare. The personal contact between seafarers and centre staff/chaplains was identified as being of considerable support to seafarers, offering them access to assistance of both a practical and personal nature which could not be replaced by remote online services. Our findings go beyond this, however, and highlight the way in which current provision (which may be regarded as inadequate) substantially relies on the goodwill and resources of charitable organisations. For a sustained period, these have been facing severe financial challenges which have resulted in centre closures, and cost-cutting measures which have reduced the range and quality of services to seafarers. The study importantly reveals how these challenges are forcing chaplains and volunteers to spend less time with seafarers and more time fundraising. Our data indicate that this situation is prevalent on a global basis, but it has been beyond the scope of the study to systematically identify the sources of finance for all of the 398 seafarers' centres across the globe. This might be a productive area for future research which could also explore the justifications offered by stakeholders for failing to properly comply with the provisions of MLC.

There are various remedies available to policy makers with regard to this serious area of welfare neglect. The status of the relevant recommendations in MLC could, and we argue should, be changed so that current 'guidance' is made mandatory. In addition, and to support states in meeting their obligations under MLC, compulsory port levies could be introduced to fund services, and/or states could introduce measures which require port operators to fund appropriate welfare services. Such levies and funding are inconsequential when considered alongside the operating costs of both vessels and ports. Shipping is a volatile sector where the economic

cycles of boom and bust regularly play out. In this regard, the presence/absence of reasonable port levies would be unlikely to make any substantial difference to the viability of ship, or port, operators.

Further research into the perspective of port operators, state actors, and shipping companies would be valuable in helping to refine future policy and practice. In the future it will also be important to assess the impact of the COVID pandemic on both service provision and the need for services. It would be premature to undertake such an assessment now, but the early indications are that the pandemic has increased the need for port-based welfare services at a time when the provision of services by charitable groups is under severe pressure. However, neither the need for such research, nor the pandemic itself, should be allowed to delay the implementation of urgently needed change.

## Notes

1. NB in many ports, services are provided on the basis of ship visiting and do not include the provision of seafarers' centres.
2. NB the UK has approximately 120 commercial ports (<https://www.maritimeuk.org/about/our-sector/ports/#:~:text=The%20UK%20Ports%20industry%20is,ports%20in%20the%20United%20Kingdom>. Accessed 10/7/20)

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