

Why Port Levies are vital to sustainable welfare services for seafarers

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to be with you this afternoon. As many of you will know, The Mission to Seafarers is the largest provider of charitable port-based welfare services, operating in over 260 ports in 71 countries, and so the issue of finding sustainable sources of funding for our work, particularly in light of the guidelines laid out in the MLC regarding Port Levies is extremely close to us as we seek to do our very best for the world's 1.3 million seafarers.

I was grateful to have sight of Dr Swift's paper, as I'm sure all of us who have been asked to speak were. As the research suggests, ports thrive best when everyone on the local maritime scene is brought together for a common purpose. But as the research also highlights, there is still some way to go before all ports create a Port Welfare Committee and maintain such a useful source of income for those who care for crews.

We have already heard from Professor Mihei on setting up and operating a statutory levy, and from our side of the fence, we would welcome such a fee being implemented on all ships arriving into the ports in which The Mission to Seafarers works. This is for the simple reason that it affords local centres a minimum level of financial security so they can meet the ever-changing needs of the men and women who go to sea.

But whilst we welcome the guidance contained within MLC on financing welfare facilities, we do think that commonsense and ease of use should be guiding principles. And with that in mind, I'd like to concentrate my remarks this afternoon on three main areas:

1. The administration of a port levy scheme
2. The governance and accountability of such a project and;
3. The quality of service.

Firstly, organisations such as the Mission to Seafarers enjoy being independent from the administrative burden of collecting port levies. Indeed, such a process is a commercial decision which, one could argue, is outside the remit of the welfare worker. Our main focus is and always will be caring for the needs of the visiting seafarer, and our chaplains and teams could not do this as effectively if they are required to divert resources away from welfare and spend time sitting around a negotiating table.

In Southampton and Tilbury where we work with our partner organisation Centres for Seafarers, the chaplaincy teams are completely removed from the negotiation and collection process, which allows them to concentrate on ensuring the services they provide, are relevant and required. Then, if any changes in need come to light which might require an increased levy; they informally report to the PWC who can take an informed view about a way forward.

Secondly, before maritime missions are given the money, the decision has to be made as to how much to give and to whom. Does the chaplain who works from a large seafarers' centre command more than the ship visitor who works from the boot of his or her car? Or what about an organisation such as the Mission to Seafarers which receives only voluntary donations, versus one which is partly- government funded?

As has been widely discussed, the creation of a Port Welfare Committee is absolutely vital before introducing a Port Levy Scheme, and we look forward to working closely with the ISWAN in exploring this important issue. The two go hand in hand and local missions of any denomination and none need to feel supported and encouraged by the local maritime community.

For levies to work successfully, we believe schemes should have terms of reference and a clear set of guidelines on how the money will be collected and distributed. But these terms of reference should not be so tight as to restrict funding only to certain projects, such as a minibus or centre-based work.

Welfare comes in many different forms and it would be inappropriate to take a one-size-fits-all approach when distributing funds – although having said that, organisations receiving the funding should obviously have a demonstrable track record of working in the port welfare environment.

These terms of reference should also be clear enough to ensure that the money raised is to be used to support the general welfare activities which are being carried out inside the port. Organisations such as the Mission to Seafarers have long-established national and international processes regarding specific support for seafarers who have been abandoned or who face more complex problems such as financial hardship.

In Mombasa, for example, the local port levy sustains the welfare facilities on offer, whilst the International Headquarters here in London, provides the funds for work with victims of piracy. So we should always be clear that the funds generated in Port X are to broadly support the practical needs of seafarers arriving in the port – that is, after all, the mainstay of our work.

In Teesport, as Dr Swift highlights, the Mission is in part supported by a voluntary levy, and along with the other missions that operate in the port, chaplains are given the freedom to use the monthly allowance in the most appropriate way. If chaplaincies are to benefit from port levies, they must be allowed the continuing freedom to do what they feel is right for the seafarers they serve.

But whilst PWCs are vital in creating and implementing a port levy system, local welfare providers also need to play their part in assisting the process and making it clear and transparent.

This comes not just from being a key player in the port welfare committee, but also accurately reflecting the views of seafarers. Techniques such as “monitoring” and “evaluation” are vitally important if subscribers to a port levy are to have the confidence that the system is working.

I mentioned earlier about the need for there to be a level of trust between a port welfare organisation and the benefactors. I hope I have conveyed the importance that local centres should not be required to navigate a bureaucratic minefield in order to receive a proportion of the levy.

As a charity, The Mission to Seafarers is accountable to the Charity Commission and our donors. As such we report yearly on our income and activity. On a local level, a simple line within a centre’s annual accounts should suffice any PWC on how the levy is being spent.

Finally, we all want to make welfare services suitable for the men and women who use them on a daily basis. You do not need me to tell you that it’s because of seafarers’ welfare services that young men and women are able to reconnect with life back at home.

So many of the heart-warming stories we receive are from seafarers who have used our facilities or those of our kindred organisations to see their newborn child on Skype, or who have been able to make a vital telephone call home to say that they have safely navigated pirate hotspots. The only way this is able to work is because we have the promise of sustained funding.

Port Levies, whilst making up a small part of a centre’s income are indeed vital in allowing the chaplain to exercise his ministry. To put it bluntly, they assist us in keeping the computers switched on and connected to wifi, the telephone lines open, the shops stocked with vital supplies and fuel for the minibus. Moreover, they allow us to provide a space which crews can call their own for a few precious hours.

Thank you.

Ben Bailey
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