Home is the sailor, home from the sea...

When seafarers arrive home on leave, the initial excitement of seeing loved ones can be contrasted with the disappointment as they find the home run perfectly well without them. One answer, says Michelle Thomas, of the Seafarers International Research Centre in Wales, is shorter tours of duty.

There cannot be many sea-farers who do not anticipate their paying-off day with some considerable excitement. Indeed, the intense emotions associated with ending a tour of duty have been so routinely experienced that British seafarers have a name for these emotions – butterflies in the stomach and you can't wait to see each other again." It's like you are on your first date all over again, you know, butterflies in the stomach and you can't wait to see each other again." As one seafarer commented: "I never felt as if I wasn't me in the routine. When I do come home everything's all in place. It's not to do with me really at all." I'm the lodger and that's basically it.

Other factors can also contribute to seafarers' feelings of displacement. Routines associated with the social, educational and employment commitments of partners and children often necessarily continue whether the seafarer is home or at sea. However, seafarers may take time to become accustomed to these routines and to find their own place within them. As one seafarer commented: "They've got a set routine haven't they? And it doesn't involve me in the routine. When I do come home everything's all in place. It's not to do with me really at all." Unfamiliarity with routines, venues or social relationships established in their absence, can leave seafarers feeling like outsiders or even lodgers when they return home. As one seafarer remarked: "First of all it's sort of like 'hang on a minute I'm just coming in and pay the rent – what's going on here?' I'm the lodger and that's basically it." These difficulties experienced during the seafarer's initial return home can encroach on valuable time and can put undue strain on family relationships. There is no doubt that communication has a role to play in smoothing these transitions. Recent developments in telecommunications, such as email and use of cellnet phones, can help bridge emotional gaps and provide couples with a sense of continuity within their relationship and, importantly, the immediate legacy of home and electronic communication can allow seafarers a sense of continued participation in their partners' and family's lives, despite their physical absence.

However, electronic contact is not always enough. What is really necessary to improve the lives of seafarers and their families are better employment conditions that include shorter tours of duty and improvements to qualifying leave time and can put undue strain on family relationships. It may be argued that such changes are unrealistic luxuries in the context of the economic realities of the intensely competitive shipping industry. However, the associated costs may in fact be a small price to pay for the retention of stable, content and, above all, safe crew who have not had to sacrifice their family life for the sake of their work at sea.