The most important port-based welfare services were thought to be transport to shops-town and seafarers’ centres, access to international phones and cheap phone cards. When they were asked about the availability of these services in the ports that they had visited during their current contracts, the overwhelming majority of the seafarers said that they were not adequately provided. However, seafarers mainly calling in ports in Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australia found the port-based welfare services were better than in other world regions.

In comparison with another major survey carried out over ten years ago in 1996 by the research agency MORI, the opinions of seafarers in relation to the most important port-based welfare services have changed. According to the MORI survey in 1996, the most important port-based welfare services listed by more than 50 per cent of the seafarers questioned were international telephones, postal services, medical facilities, computer access, facilities to buy in the way of DVDs, sports and recreational facilities, port-based medical services, port-based welfare centres, and only one shipping company provided free transport on request to their seafarers when their ships were in port. This is despite the fact, as the study has shown, transport and communication are seen as most important services by seafarers.

Eight out of ten seafarers of all ranks said that they had no access to onboard email facilities although, overall, officers were more likely to have access than ratings. However, those seafarers who said they had access to email facilities onboard expressed dissatisfaction with the limited number and length of messages they could send and also the lack of privacy. Some seafarers said that they could only have to pay for the messages they sent from their ships, but also for incoming emails too. Therefore, expensive communication facilities such as satellites and mobile phones were the only options for communication with their families and friends ashore when they were at sea. Only one out of 10 seafarers mentioned writing letters. Although this is the cheapest option available, many said that the limited time they had, and the length of time it took for letters to be sent and received, made letter writing less attractive.

Again, provision of other facilities onboard vessels, such as sports and recreational facilities, varied considerably according to the different companies our respondents worked for. One of the best reported company policies on welfare provisions included a monthly provision of a $150 welfare fund per ship. From this, seafarers would decide what to buy in the way of DVDs, sports equipment, musical instruments etc. However, the worst cases varied from very limited provision to “pay for it yourself” where seafarers contributed shipboard welfare funds either from their overtime pay or extra earnings gained from such activities as cargo handling or cleaning of cargo holds.

While many of these findings are negative, the fact that the survey has been carried out at all will, it is hoped, point the way to improvements.

In addition, there are growing concerns about seafarers’ welfare among shipping and ship management companies. For example, the president of the International Ship Managers’ Association recently stated in relation to crew shortages that too many companies took a short-term approach to seafarers, viewing them simply as a cost to be borne. “Much more emphasis needs to be placed on the welfare of seafarers and their families,” he said.

Another positive development is that the ITF and shipowners have recently formed the International Bargaining Forum (IBF) Joint Negotiating Group (JNG). The new IBF special agreement requires that 5 per cent of the contributions made by IBF members to its Seafarers’ International Welfare Assistance and Protection Fund will be paid into a special account jointly administered by the ITF and the IBF. This fund will be used exclusively for seafarers employed on the ships covered by the IBF agreement to provide benefits such as onboard welfare facilities, crew communication with their families, welfare facilities in the ports where they call, and access to onboard e-mail facilities would improve their welfare at sea and ashore immensely.