Now is the time to put seafarers’ living conditions on employers’ agendas, says Helen Sampson, director of the Seafarers International Research Centre

LAST July, we had a symposium at the Seafarers International Research Centre at which we presented the findings from some of our research projects to an audience of policymakers, ship operators, regulators, trade union and maritime industry representatives, P&I club and classification society personnel, and academics. It’s a pity more seafarers couldn’t have been with us, but in presenting our research there was, nevertheless, an opportunity to voice some of the “collective” concerns they have reported to us. As one of our papers was about welfare facilities and we reported what seafarers felt they needed to access in port in these days of fast turn arounds and high security.

We also discussed the very poor level of welfare provision on today’s vessels. We highlighted the fact that many seafarers have to contribute to welfare funds on board in order to ensure that ships carry the most basic of entertainment facilities (e.g. DVDs). In fact, when the data we collected were analysed, we were surprised at how many seafarers in our survey reported that their on-board welfare supplies were limited (as they were) to be purchased from funds raised by “mandatory” levies (almost like taxes) on seafarers’ wages. We were less surprised to learn how few sports and recreational facilities are made available to seafarers on board. We were less surprised at how many seafarers in our survey were reported that their on-board welfare supplies were limited (as they were) to be purchased from funds raised by “mandatory” levies (almost like taxes) on seafarers’ wages. We were less surprised to learn how few sports and recreational facilities are made available to seafarers on board. We were less surprised at how many seafarers in our survey were surprised to learn how few sports and recreational facilities are made available to seafarers on board.

Seafarers are rising a little higher on their list of priorities as they are finding it more and more difficult to recruit and retain competent officers. This could be the moment for seafarers to make known to their employers the changes they would like to see in on-board welfare-related facilities. It’s a moment when they might be heard when explaining what they need to make a life of isolation, boredom, and hard work, more tolerable.

On the right is one “vision” for better welfare provision aboard – mine, based upon my time as a seafarer and the “windows”; clean, well maintained and bright furnishings; and a couple of small coffee tables. In each room there is a refrigerator containing milk, water and soft drinks. A kettle and the makings of coffee and tea are available on a table in the corner where a bowl of fresh fruit and a packet of biscuits are also provided.

On the main deck there is a surprise: a café! It contains a juke box (no payment required) and a shiny metal machine that can produce lattes, cappuccinos, hot chocolate, and expressos. Every day, ship-baked cakes are made available alongside the drinks. Mineral water, juices, and soft drinks are also on the menu. The café is open every evening from 6-10pm. Along one side is a bench upon which screens and terminals give access to free and private email. There are two card tables covered in green felt. On one, there are several decks of cards in good condition, on the other there is a complete mah jong set. Other seating is “booth style” and there is a central circular table that can seat up to six people.

No wonder the ship above is called Inspiration! I know that many of you, having read about what is on board, will be chuckling and saying “that’ll be the day” and “get real”. But many of these things are superficial and relatively cheap. Even the bigger ideas are not “off the wall.” There are older vessels, and some modern ones owned by high class companies, that offer such facilities. On a dry ship there is no reason why a café should not replace the ship’s bar that is used to be found on many ships.

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The MV Inspiration

Speaking up for better on-board welfare

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