

'Watchdog Backs Sea Services Agreement'

...Newspaper headline of 12-18 March 2019, But What did TravelWatch Actually Say?

TravelWatch welcomed the Department of Infrastructure's **publication** of their intended New Sea Services Agreement with the Steam Packet Company to secure the future of the island's lifeline ferry services. The agreement and the supporting documents represent a significant amount of work completed to a demanding time-scale, and include welcome proposals to ensure a **safe and reliable service**, which clearly must be the top priority.

Report by Thames Head Consultants, and Tynwald's Quick Decisions

Before Members of Tynwald make their decisions, TravelWatch urged that they and all who are interested in the development of the ferry service carefully read the report "The Social and Economic Needs of the IoM for Ferry Services and the Implications of These Needs for the Future Operation of the IoM Steam Packet Company Limited" prepared for the DoI by consultants, Thames Head Shipping Advisers Limited. They describe their discussions with groups of users, and then identify, explain and assess the various options for the replacement of vessels (ro-pax and/or fast craft), on service patterns and fare structures. This is essential reading to understand the details in the proposed agreement, and hopefully will promote wider informed debate. **However, with very little debate, Tynwald has decided that the DoI should negotiate and conclude the Agreement.**

Welcome Proposals

Particularly welcome are the proposals for the freezing of passenger fares pending delivery of a replacement vessel, and the definition of the level of saver fares relative to standard fares, which had previously been undefined and something of a mystery. The 50% discounts for student fares are also welcome.

TravelWatch commends the suggested flexible strategy for the Manannan replacement, and careful thought must be given as to whether a future ro-pax is "fast" or not.

Recommendations for Customer Involvement

Thames Head noted that the freight and tourism industries would welcome improved dialogue with the Steam Packet Company, and to be consulted on the specification of new vessels and when changes to the service pattern are planned. The consultants concluded that at a general level, **the following would almost certainly be beneficial in ensuring closer alignment with the social and economic needs of the Isle of Man and its residents**

***** " initiating a regular process of customer engagement and consultation, with the freight industry, the tourist industry, representatives of the travelling public and government. ... which should be sufficiently formal and regular that customers and stakeholders believe that it is worth contributing to. It was striking that participants in some of the workshops claimed that this was the first time they had been asked for their opinion on the ferry service.**

***** A requirement in the New User Agreement for a frequent regular review of stakeholder needs, Steam Packet Company delivery and changes which may be required in service parameters and other terms of the User Agreement.**

***** a board structure which ensures a voice for the wider interest of the Island and some independent oversight of the company's performance and response to customer requirements."**

Draft Agreement Disappoints

TravelWatch is very disappointed that the draft agreement only suggests

Every 5 years, the Department of Infrastructure would be able to undertake a "Strategic Reset" of the sailing schedules, and the Steam Packet company would be required to undertake a consultation with hauliers, freight users and the general public in relation to its Sailing Schedules in such years. The Company would have to ensure that the results of this public consultation are made available by a specified date.

When acquiring the fast-craft replacement, the Steam Packet Company would be required to "carry out reasonable public consultation as to the specification of the fast-craft vessel. "

"Business as Usual" or Real Customer Engagement?

These occasional consultations are far too infrequent and clearly do not satisfy the consultant's recommendations for a process of regular customer engagement and consultation. Public transport operators, such as the Calmac ferry company in Scotland have established official user groups in order to maintain constructive and informed dialogue between the ferry operator and a service users. **TravelWatch has consistently advocated the establishment of such a body for the Isle of Man, so that all relevant parties such as the tourism industry, commerce and freight businesses, passengers, the Department for Enterprise can all contribute, in addition to the Department of Infrastructure.**

Role of Official User Body

Early establishment of an Official User Body would ensure that other issues not addressed in the proposed new User Agreement are addressed, for the benefit of service users....

---Thames Head note that the tourism industry would like to see better co-ordination of sail and rail services, and conclude **that there seems no reason why the Steam Packet company cannot offer all improvements identified in the stakeholder engagement process**, including better co-ordination of sail and rail services. In support of this, TravelWatch remains concerned at the absence of questions in the public consultation regarding public transport connections for foot passengers, especially at the NW England ports. The proposed New Agreement appears to ignore any need to improve connections at Heysham, and TravelWatch are on record with the Infrastructure Minister and Liverpool City Planners at the apparent lack of provision of bus services to the new terminal at Liverpool, when services are removed from the Pier Head. If foot-passenger traffic, including by visitors, is to be encouraged, then efforts should be made to provide seamless connections such as those provided at some other ferry ports. Foot passengers deserve better than a raw deal.

TravelWatch told Thames Head that they would like much better publicity of timetables and fares. The New Agreement should require continuation of printed copies of "Steam Packet Times" with all details of all fares, rather than hide full fares in the website. Why are the only single tickets full fare? This is costly, eg. for anyone importing or exporting a car.

TravelWatch is pleased that the DoI have published Appendix 5, with a summary of the responses to the questions at the end of the public consultation, but is disappointed that this makes no reference to the need for a thorough review of the Terms and Conditions so that these better reflect modern consumer practice with a better balance between company and customer. The setting up of a consultative body would very beneficial in addressing and resolving these issues.