

Clearly passengers are very concerned at the recent number of cancellations of Steam Packet sailings. The particular combination of events (weather and mechanical problems) is unprecedented in recent memory and the re-fitting of the re-built bow thrust unit at the earliest possible opportunity appears to be the only way in which a satisfactory outcome can be achieved for all parties, including passengers. We are glad to note that pressure has been brought on the supplier to enable that to happen – weather permitting.

During this period TravelWatch's activity has concentrated on the improvement of information available to passengers in what is clearly a very unsatisfactory situation for all involved.

Recently **Passenger Focus**, whose Passenger Director David Sidebottom spoke at our November Public Meeting, published a report on passengers' needs during unplanned disruption. The conclusions are clear – and applicable to the current situation:

- **accurate, timely and consistent information** is critical - because it allows passengers to make informed decisions about what to do.
- passengers do not always trust the information they are given, **particularly the reasons offered for delays and cancellations** – they want more honesty
- the **attitude and empathy of staff** towards passengers during disruption is a key factor
- passengers want operators **to actively tell them if there are problems**, particularly cancellations or if a temporary timetable is being introduced.

In the initial phase of cancellations, information from the Steam Packet did not rate well against most of these criteria. We were pleased to find that as the problems have continued, the timing, detail and reasons given for cancellations has improved very considerably. We trust that these improvements will become standard practice in all cases of future disruption.

Clearly as an Island community passengers are very dependent on the efficiency of our transport links both for their own and business travel – and the Island's businesses would no doubt take a similar view. This differentiates us from communities in mainland UK who have alternative means of travelling in most circumstances. Despite being used to the fact that from time to time weather may disrupt flights and shipping, it would appear that volcanic ash and heavy snowfall (last winter) – plus the current run of high winds, mean that passenger and other transport to and on the Island has been unusually disrupted by “natural causes”. To this then needs to be added the inconvenience to passengers of the slow-running of the *Manannan* for considerable periods in the summers of 2010 and 2011, plus the contribution of the *Ben-my-Chree*'s bow thruster problems to the current weather problems.

What is important is that lessons are learned from these situations – and further questions need to be asked:

- Are weather patterns changing to such an extent that previous service levels may not be sustainable?
- Do these weather changes, as they effect Douglas and Heysham Harbours, as well as berthing in the Mersey, make Steam Packet services more vulnerable to weather cancellation than those of other Irish Sea operators?
- Should there be any reciprocal arrangements between air and sea carriers for cancellation-affected passengers to be offered space (if available) without having to pay top level walk-up fares?
- Can bookings be changed without penalty before a sailing is cancelled if the operator has announced that the sailing is in doubt or the forecast suggests it may not happen.
- What extra costs passengers are incurring in the event of cancelled services.
- Are there any effective contingency plans for maintaining services in the event that the *Ben-my-Chree* suffered a breakdown requiring her to be taken out of service for lengthy repairs – particularly at a time when *Manannan* could not run?

The answers to these questions will be of wide interest as they are fundamental to long term planning for future investment in both infrastructure and services to provide the Island with the reliable air and sea services it needs. Opportunity needs to be provided for input from all interested parties and an effective way of independently reviewing such in-put needs to be found.

TravelWatch Isle of Man suggests that the Department of Infrastructure investigates these issues and looks forward to contributing to such process.