

The forgotten keyworkers: challenges faced by British seafarers as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Research Report

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We would like to thank the seafarers who kindly gave up their time to take part in this study.

Introduction

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching and one important area which has been impacted is people's working lives. Workers in many industries have had to navigate new ways of working and organisations have had to make changes to how they operate. One industry in which workers have carried on working much the same as before but in which new – and somewhat unusual – challenges have arisen is the international seafaring industry.

This research project used an online questionnaire to explore the experiences of British workers in the seafaring industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its aim was to consider the impact of the pandemic on seafarers and in particular to provide indicative summary evidence from which the industry could develop supports for its workforce at this most challenging time. In this report, we present a descriptive summary of seafarers' experiences. We structure the findings around five broad themes:

1. Organisation of employment
2. Health and well-being
3. Recruitment, retention and career progression
4. Financial impact
5. Support

In doing so we present some of the experiences of an often-forgotten group of workers – totalling around 22,970 men and women – who at the outbreak of the pandemic, were designated as keyworkers by the UK Government (Department for Transport 2021). Given the fact that the UK shipping sector moves 95% of all UK trade it is clear to see why seafarers were considered key workers (UK Chamber of Shipping 2020). Yet, despite the importance of the shipping industry to the UK economy – and the importance of the supply chain as a whole – little attention has been paid to the experiences of these workers.

This report therefore sheds light on the experiences of British seafarers during the pandemic. In addition to this report an [animated film](#) highlights the key findings from the research project. This report and the animation will be further complemented by discursive publications which consider our key findings in greater depth for particular audiences.

Background

This research project focused on the experiences of British seafarers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to appreciate that whilst there are a small number of ships which are crewed solely by British seafarers, the norm is for such individuals to be employed alongside workers of various different nationalities. In addition, on each ship there may be some individuals who are employed on fixed-term contracts and others who are employed on permanent contracts. Globally, the majority of seafarers are employed on a fixed-term basis, however, the opposite is true for British seafarers with Sampson et al. (2016) finding 88% of British participants of their study to be employed on a permanent basis. In addition to the type of employment contract, seafarers – even those of the same rank onboard the same vessel – can experience differing employment terms and conditions particularly with regards to salary and tour of duty duration. Seafarers' employment contracts also often allow for the duration of the tour of duty to be reduced or extended at the discretion of and to meet the requirements of the employer. Whilst reduced tours of duty are unheard of, for many seafarers extended tours – and consequently delayed repatriation – are commonplace (Devereux and Wadsworth 2021). However, prior to the pandemic, the maximum duration of such extensions tended to be something that seafarers could roughly anticipate, depending on what was in their employment contract. For example, a clause of one extra month is likely to be found in the employment contract of a seafarer who has a contracted tour of duty of three months.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it became apparent that seafarers' delayed repatriation was going to be a substantial issue. In an average month it is estimated that globally 150,000 seafarers are repatriated. However, with national borders closed and unprecedented travel restrictions in place, seafarers were no longer working an extended tour based on their contracted employment terms. Rather, for many there was simply no end to their tour of duty in sight.

This situation led to various calls for 'stranded' seafarers to be repatriated and concerns were raised about the health, safety and well-being of those workers who were, in effect, prisoners onboard their own ships. Research conducted prior to the pandemic revealed that delayed repatriations have a detrimental impact on seafarers' well-being (Devereux and Wadsworth 2021). Thus, widespread and longer delays in repatriations as a result of the pandemic are particularly concerning, especially as seafarers are recognised as having relatively high levels of mental ill health and suicide ideation when compared with other groups of workers (Lefkowitz and Slade 2019).

Whilst the delayed repatriation of seafarers is a clear cause for concern in relation to those stuck at sea, it also has direct consequences for others in the workforce. With so many colleagues remaining

on board, many other seafarers remained at home, waiting for their turn to join a ship. For those seafarers employed on a fixed-term basis, this meant that they received no salary for this period of time. Many of these workers were also ineligible for the job retention scheme put in place by the UK Government (Nautilus 2021).

Given these issues, the seafaring industry is a particularly important place in which to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce.

Method

We initially undertook a review of literature relating to workers' experiences during the pandemic. This included workers across various industries as well as a more considered focus on literature relating to the international shipping industry.

Following this, we designed an online questionnaire. This questionnaire was piloted among a small group of seafarers and amended in response to their feedback. The JISC platform was used to host the questionnaire. This was chosen due to its suitability for low bandwidth internet users, an issue which is of importance to seafarers since many ships have limited internet access. The use of a low bandwidth platform meant those seafarers who were on board could complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then opened at two points in time. It was first opened early in the pandemic (June-August 2020) and then again six months later (January – March 2021). The questionnaire included a range of questions which focussed on the health, safety and well-being experiences of those completing it. Upon closure of the questionnaire the two datasets were combined.

In total there were three hundred and fifty-two responses to the questionnaire and whilst the overall number of seafarers who took part in the study was small, the respondents came from across the spectrum of ship types, ranks and departments¹. This suggests that the impacts of COVID-19 are being felt by seafarers across the industry.

The questionnaire was intended solely for British seafarers and participation was entirely voluntary. The questionnaire was primarily advertised via social media. This included the use of various Facebook groups as well as Twitter and LinkedIn posts. Various online professional forums were also used, and adverts were placed in a trade union monthly magazine and on a trade union website.

¹ Further details regarding the participants can be found in appendix i.

Findings

In this section we present the findings from the questionnaire. The findings are arranged into separate sections for each of the five themes: organisation of employment; health and well-being; recruitment, retention and career progression; financial impact; and support. Each of these themes is presented in turn.

Organisation of employment

Around three-quarters of our respondents were permanently employed and one-fifth experienced temporary/voyage contracts (figure 1). Whilst in the international shipping industry precarious employment relationships are far more widespread than those reported by our respondents, our results are broadly in line with those seen in relation to British seafarers by Sampson et al. (2016). Thus, in terms of the contract type experienced by our respondents, our sample is broadly representative of British seafarers.

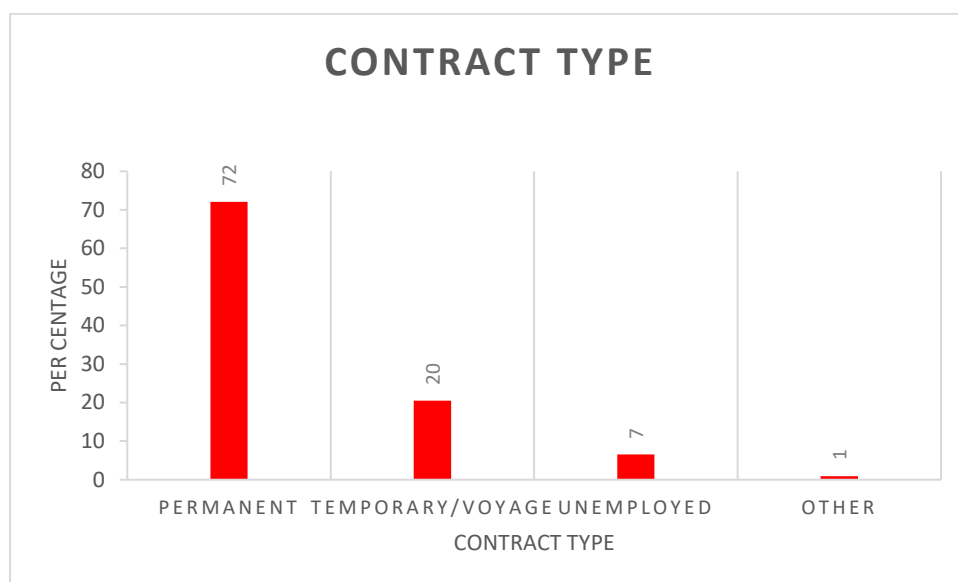


Figure 1 Contract type

Over half of our respondents who had been at sea during the pandemic reported that they had worked beyond the end of their contract (figure 2). Whilst working beyond the expected end of a contract is not a new phenomenon resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Devereux and Wadsworth 2021), the number of those experiencing delayed repatriations is thought to be much higher than would have been expected previously. For example, in the BIMCO (2015) survey approximately 43% of international respondents stated they were sometimes asked by their employer to extend their contracted voyage period. Roughly 20% of international respondents in the survey stated that this rarely happened and approximately 18% said it never happened.

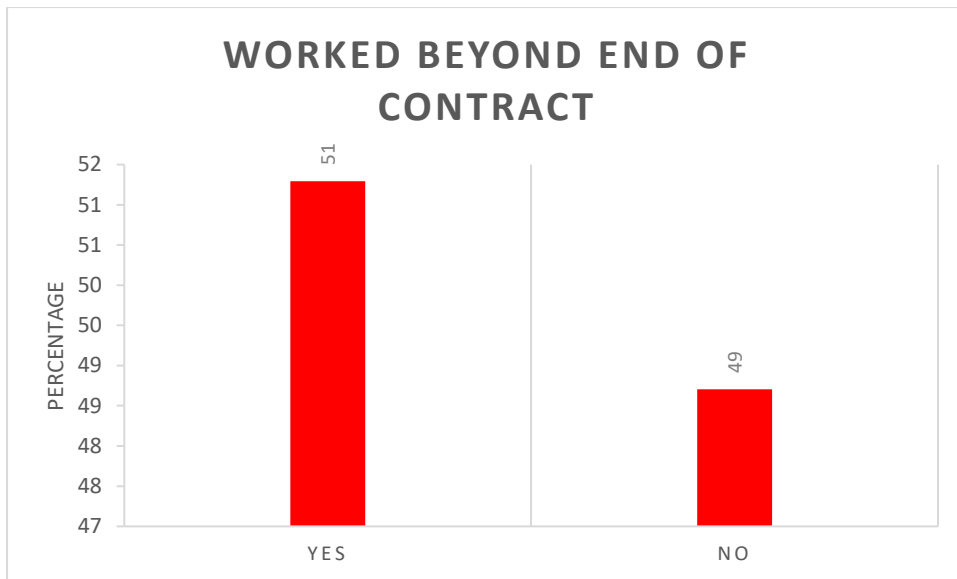


Figure 2 Worked beyond end of contract

The findings show that the experiences of seafarers who were not onboard during the pandemic were also of concern. 6% (n=24) of respondents stated that they had not joined a ship despite being scheduled to do so and were not being paid. A similar number (6%, n=23) stated that they had not had their employment contract renewed or had been made redundant (figure 3).

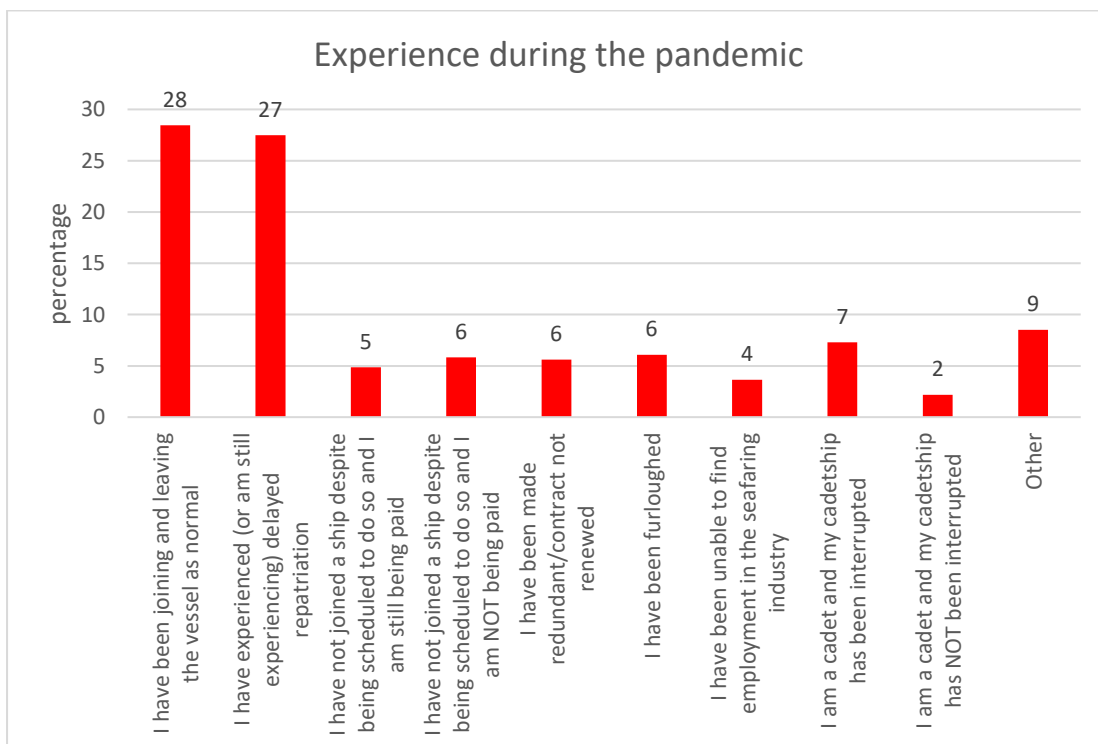


Figure 3 Experience during the pandemic

Health and well-being

Nearly half of our participants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted on their physical health (figure 4), whilst just under two-thirds felt that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic (figure 5). Findings from previous research indicate that separation from family is one of the most significant causes of stress for seafarers (Thomas et al. 2003) and that seafarers' experience well-being issues due to delayed repatriation (Devereux and Wadsworth 2021) and thus such findings are unsurprising. Nevertheless, in an industry in which workers are already over-represented in terms of ill mental health (see, for example Sampson et al 2019) these findings regarding seafarers' mental health are particularly concerning.

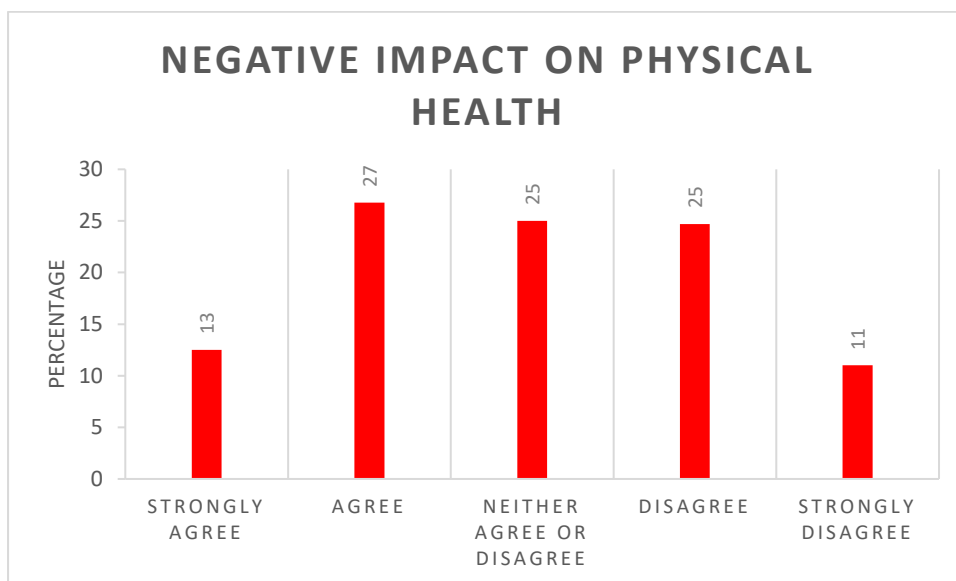


Figure 4 Negative impact on physical health

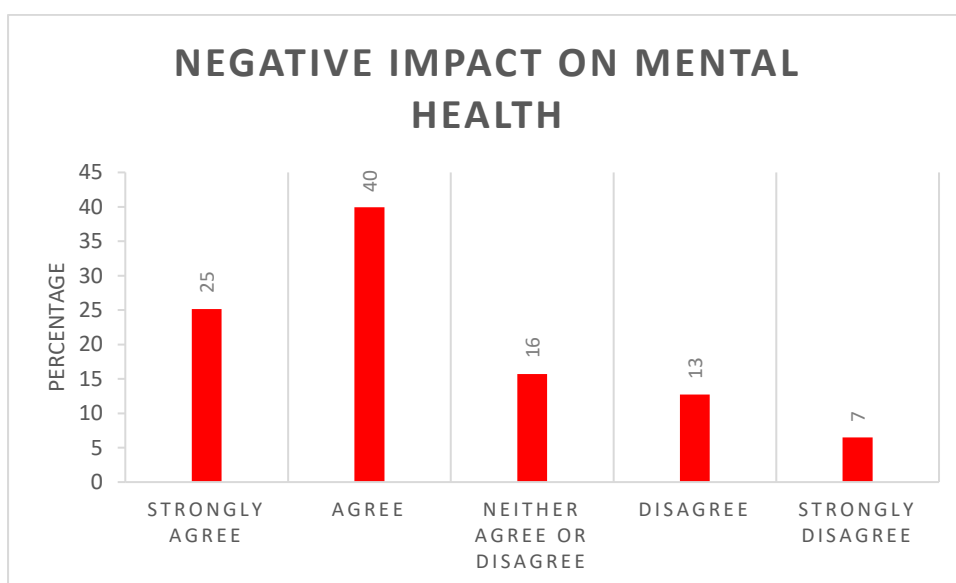


Figure 5 Negative impact on mental health

Also, concerning are the findings around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarers' relationships with their family, with over one-third of our respondents (figure 6) reporting that the pandemic had had a negative impact in this regard. Previous research (see, for example, Thomas et al. 2003) has indicated that in terms of family relationships the negative consequences of seafaring can be minimised by policies such as allowing family members to sail onboard with seafarers and shorter tours of duty – options which have been unavailable during to the pandemic.

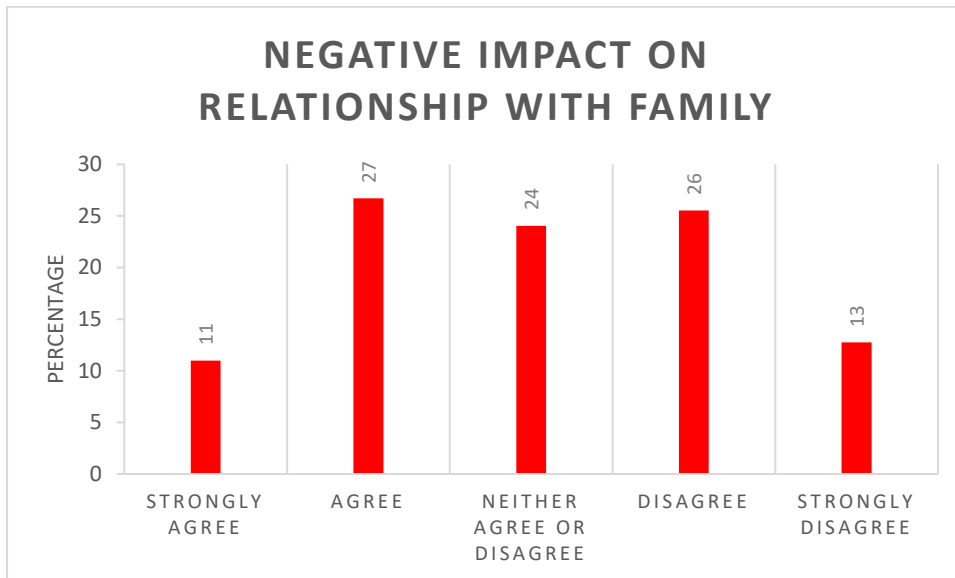


Figure 6 Negative impact on relationship with family

The Maritime Labour Convention (2006) states that: “Each Member shall ensure that all seafarers on ships that fly its flag are covered by adequate measures for the protection of their health and that they have access to prompt and adequate medical care whilst working on board” and “Each Member shall ensure that seafarers on board ships in its territory who are in need of immediate medical care are given access to the Member’s medical facilities on shore.” It is therefore particularly concerning that one-fifth of our respondents reported that they had experienced difficulties accessing medical care (figure 7). It is equally concerning that 12% of respondents stated that they had experienced difficulties in obtaining prescription medication (figure 8). Those who faced difficulties in obtaining prescription medication are primarily those individuals who experienced delayed repatriation.

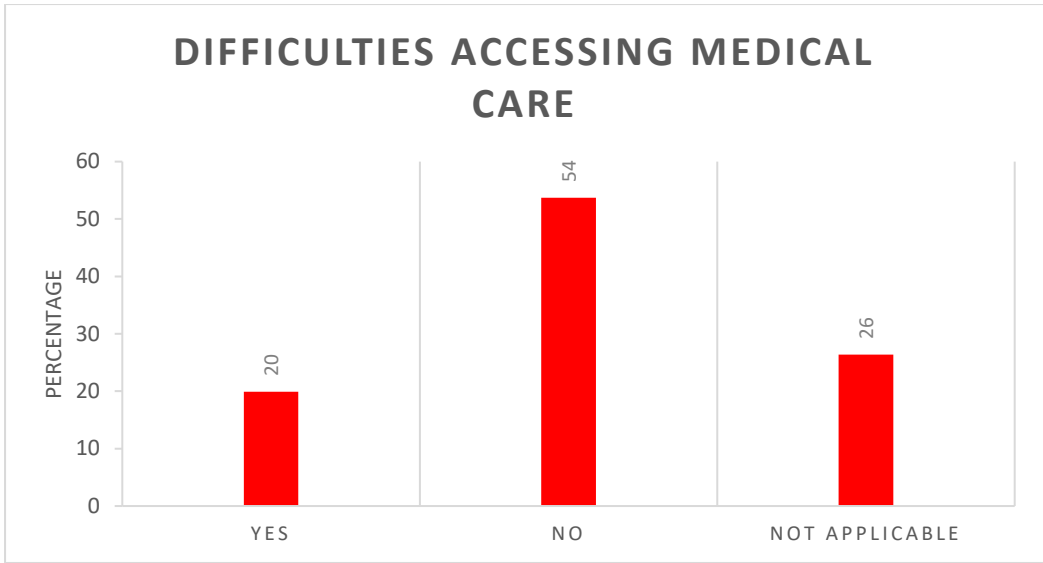


Figure 7 Difficulties accessing medical care

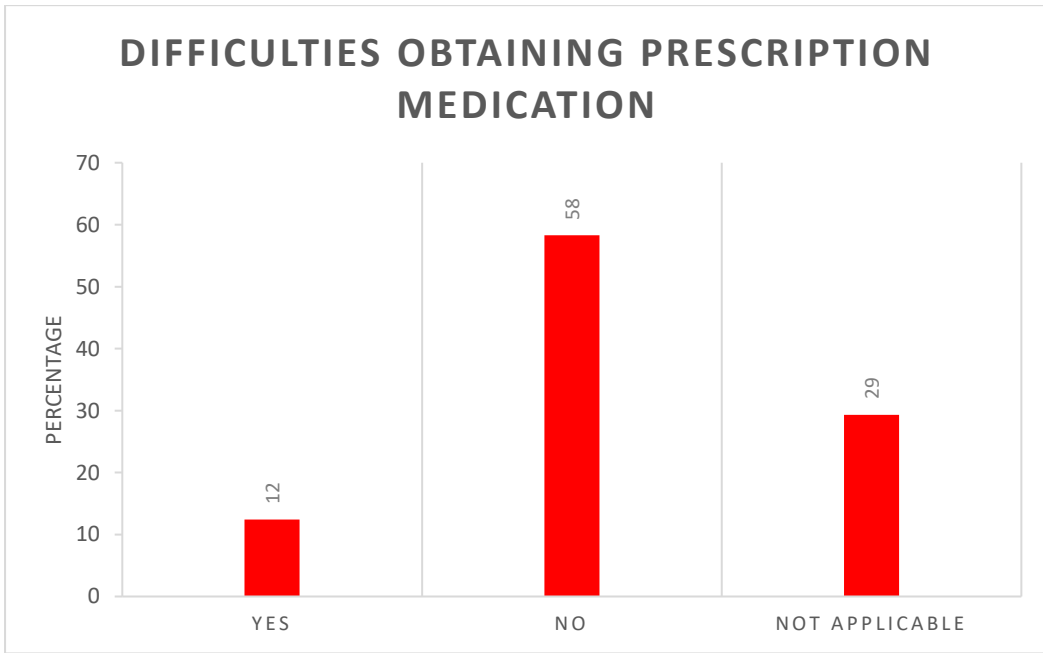


Figure 8 Difficulties obtaining prescription medication

Recruitment, retention and career progression

Our respondents reported relatively high levels of redundancies with nearly half reporting that redundancies had already happened or that they were expected soon (figure 9). This is particularly concerning given that the UK Seafarers Projection Study predicts that by 2026 there will be a shortage of approximately 4000 UK deck and engine officers and 2000 UK ratings (Oxford Economics 2016). The reasons for such a shortage are two-fold: a shortage of individuals entering the industry in relation to the number of trained seafarers exiting the industry. In addition to concerns raised over the use of redundancies, several key stakeholders have also raised concerns that the

COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reduction in individuals choosing to enter the industry owing to negative press surrounding the industry and the possible mass exodus of trained seafarers from the industry (see, for example, Chambers 2021). Such concerns are likely to be well-founded given our findings which indicate 16% of respondents intend to exit the seafaring industry (figure 10) and over one-third stated that the COVID-19 pandemic meant they were less likely to recommend seafaring as a career (figure 11).

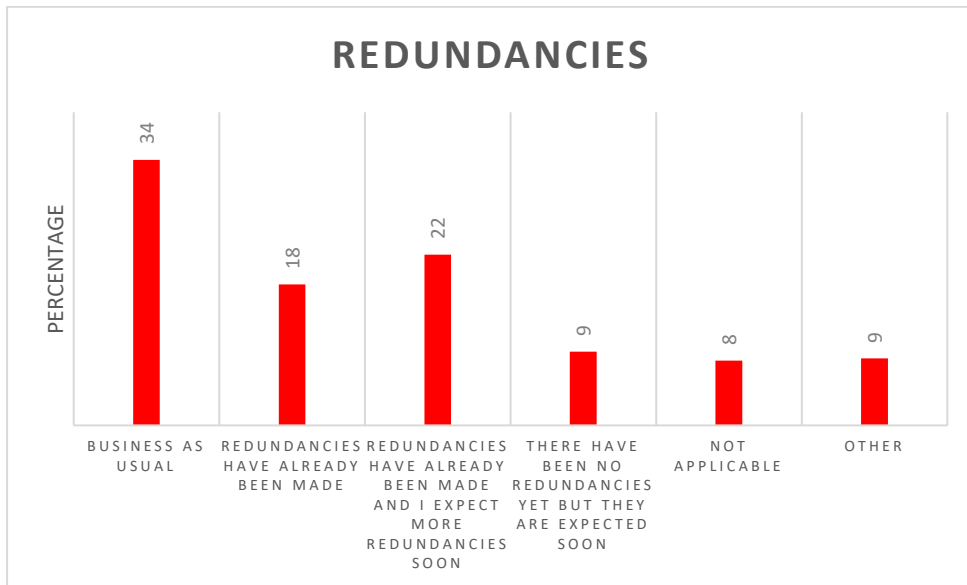


Figure 9 Redundancies

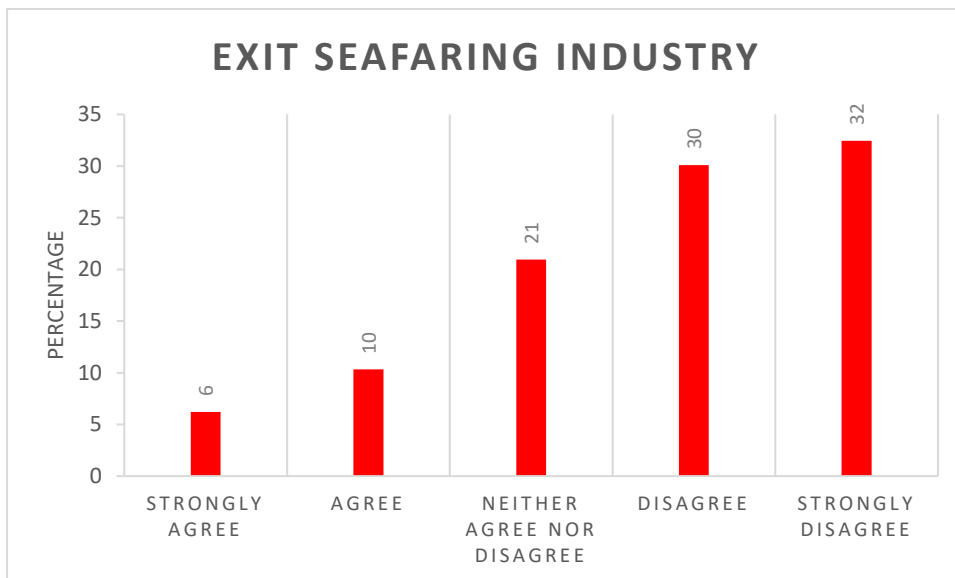


Figure 10 Exit seafaring industry

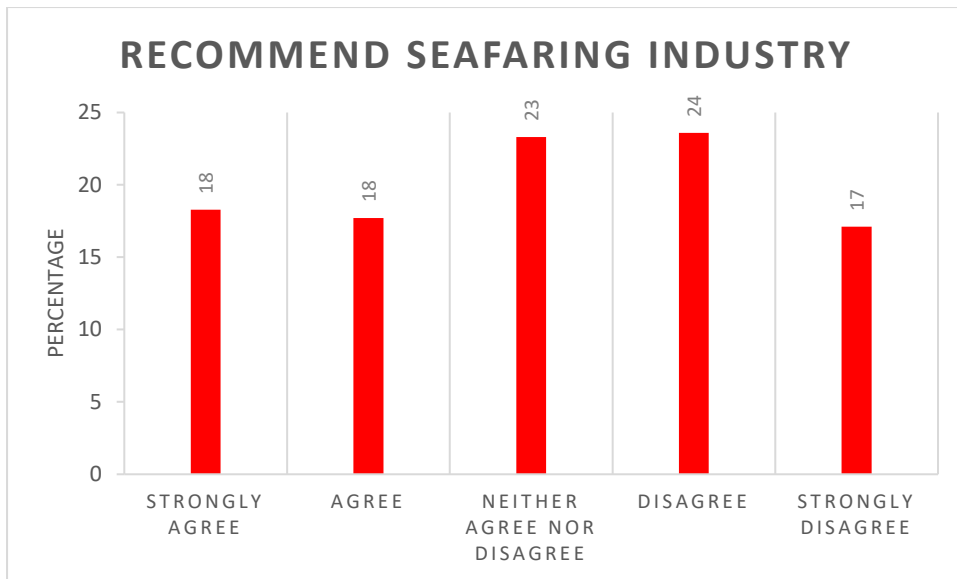


Figure 11 Recommend seafaring industry

Over half of our respondents felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted on their career (figure 12). Participants reported experiences such as the withdrawal of job offers, being unable to complete the sea-time required for career progression and taking up shore-based employment as a direct consequence of being unable to find ship-based positions.

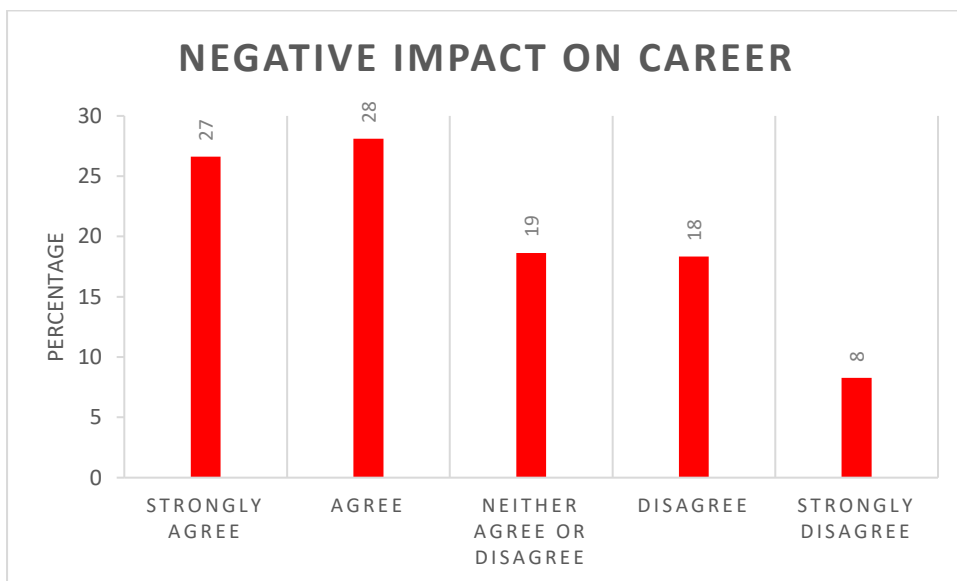


Figure 12 Negative impact on career

Financial impact

Nearly half of our respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted on their finances (figure 13). The data indicate that there were several reasons for this negative impact. Firstly, some seafarers experienced a salary reduction, with some shipping companies reducing

salaries either on a temporary or permanent basis. Secondly, some seafarers were unable to re-join ships due to a reduction in crew changes and remained at home. Some of these individuals were unpaid whilst waiting. Others had job offers withdrawn, did not have their temporary contracts renewed or were made redundant. In some cases, those who were able to find new employment found that the employment was offered at a lower salary than prior to the pandemic. Finally, in the UK many seafarers utilise the Seafarers Earnings Deduction scheme, which is a UK Government scheme providing tax relief to those who work on a ship. The scheme is fairly complex and one of the requirements for seafarers to be eligible is a minimum number of days worked outside of the UK (including outside of territorial waters). British seafarers colloquially refer to such days as ‘tax days’ and simply speaking if a seafarer does not have enough of these days they will be required to backpay tax to the UK Government in the next financial year. Over a third of our respondents stated that they were worried about not having enough days out of the country in order to avoid paying UK income tax (figure 14).

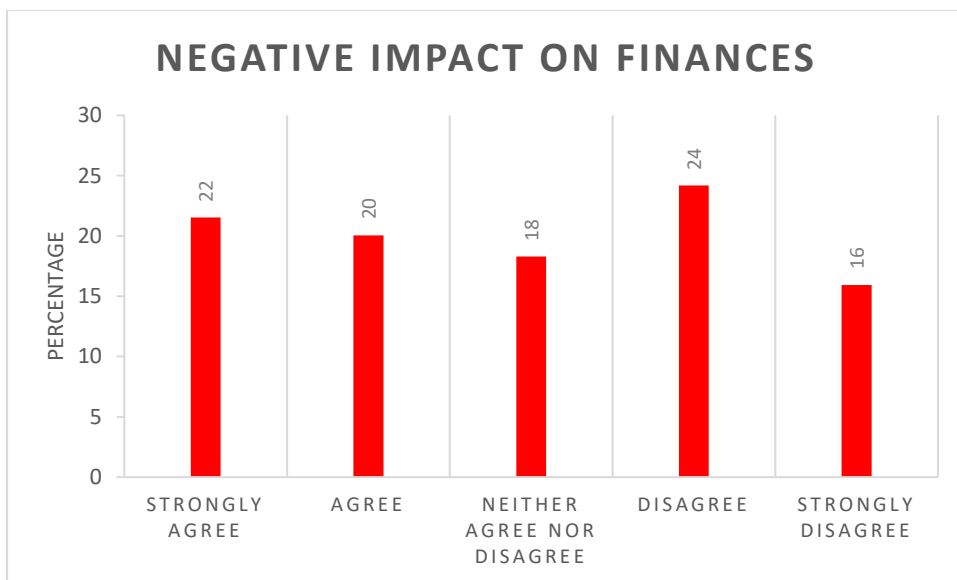


Figure 13 Negative impact on finances

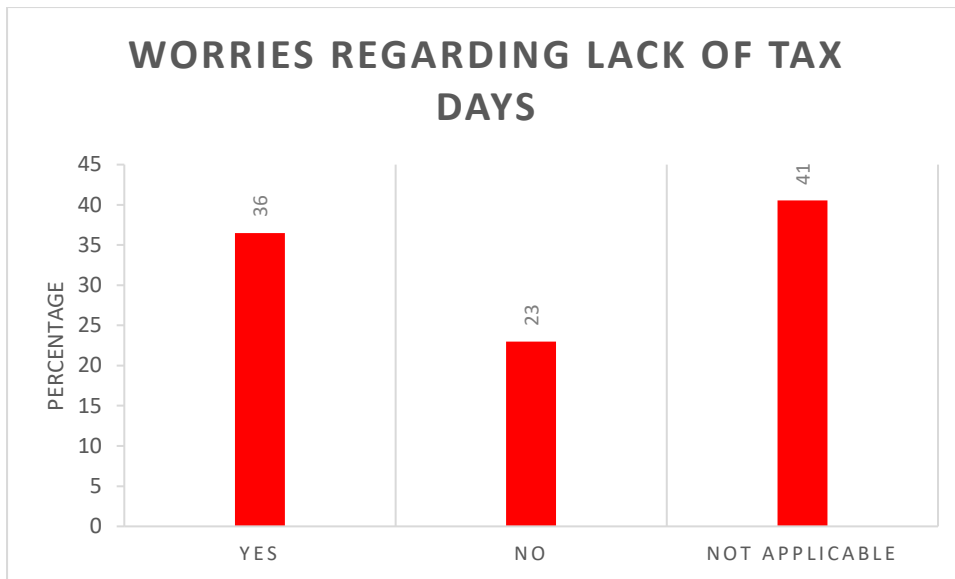


Figure 14 Worries regarding lack of tax days

Whilst only a relatively small number of our respondent stated that they had engaged in paid employment outside of the industry, this may be of concern – as discussed above in regards to labour shortages – if these individuals choose to remain in paid employment outside of the industry and not return to seafaring (figure 15).

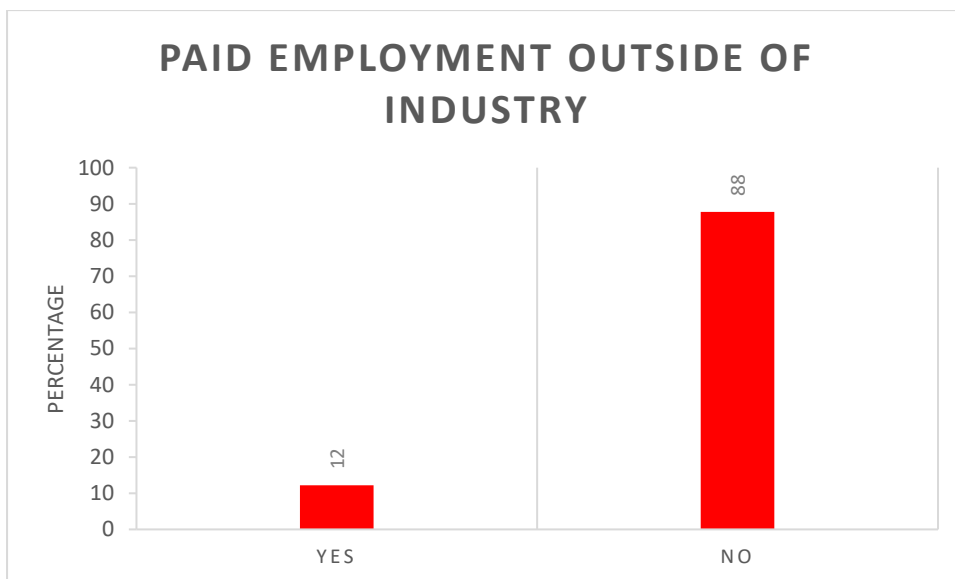


Figure 15 Engaged in paid employment outside of the seafaring industry

Support

A relatively small number of our respondents (11%) said that they had accessed some form of financial support provided by the UK Government during the pandemic. Nearly half said they had not accessed such support (figure 16).

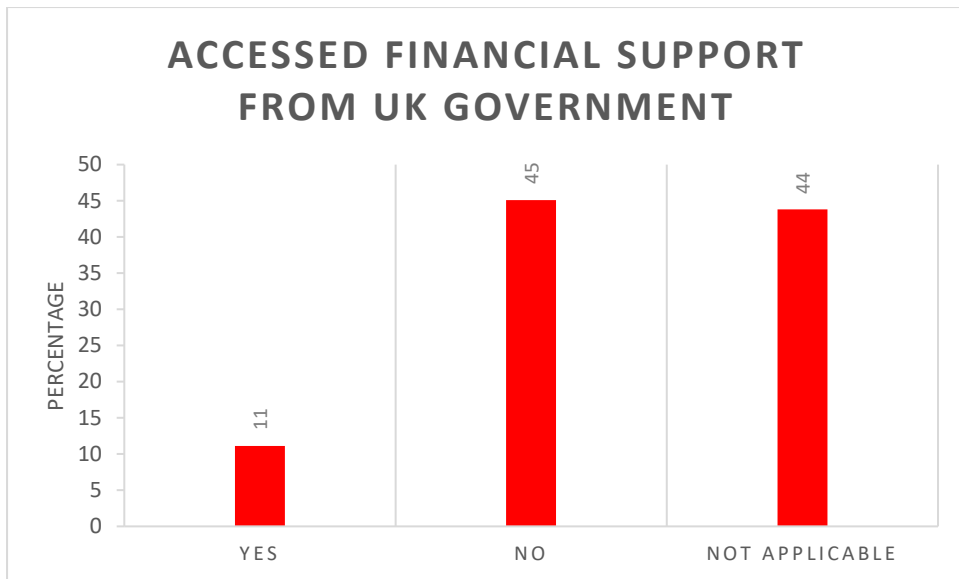


Figure 16 Accessed financial support from UK Government

Within the UK there are several charities which offer support to seafarers and their families. Most of these charities offered additional assistance during the pandemic. Nearly one third of our respondents stated that they were aware of various charities, but they had not needed their advice or support. Over half, however, were not aware of the presence of these charities (figure 17). Given the various needs of seafarers during the COVID-19 pandemic outlined in this report it is unfortunate that so many individuals were unaware of the presence of organisations which may be of assistance to them.

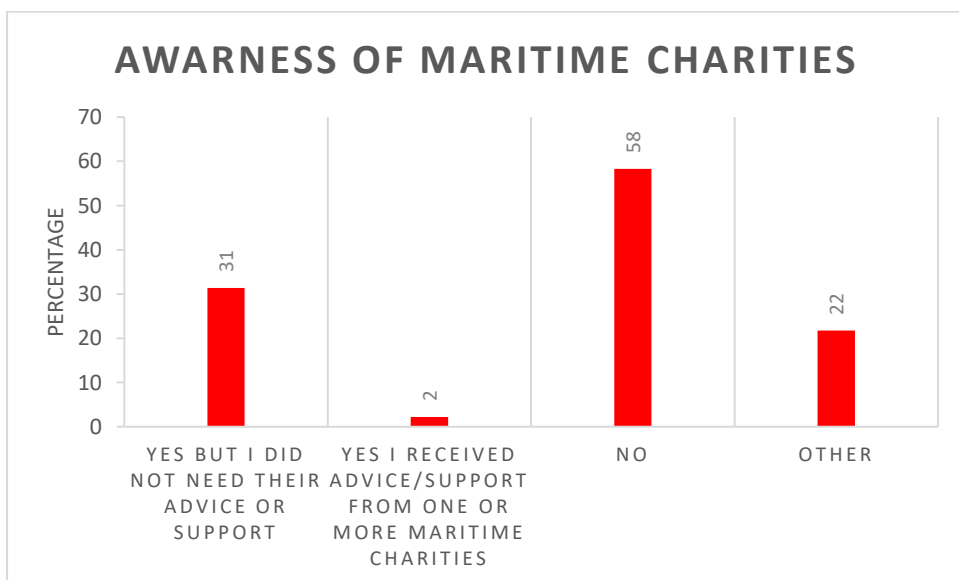


Figure 17 Awareness of maritime charities

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the British seafaring labour force has faced a number of concerning issues as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst some challenges – such as delayed repatriation and difficulties in accessing medical care – have been experienced only by those who have been onboard ships during the pandemic, the challenges faced by those seafarers who have not sailed during the pandemic are equally troublesome. Seafarers who have been unable to sail, and consequently earn a salary, have faced financial difficulties.

The long-term consequences of the experiences of the British seafaring labour force during the COVID-19 pandemic remain to be seen. However, the data indicate that the pandemic has had a negative impact in various ways including affecting some seafarers' physical health and the mental health of others. In terms of the retention of skilled workers in the seafaring industry the data paint a worrying picture with some seafarers indicating that they wish to exit the industry and seek employment elsewhere. In an industry which is vital to the UK economy and where workforce shortages are predicted, any increase in the loss of workers is of concern.

It is clear from the research that there is much that needs to be done in order to improve the experiences of those who work at sea. The research recommends that all seafarers must have prompt access to medical care, including dental care, should they need it. Port states must start to fulfil their obligations that are determined by the Maritime Labour Convention. Obligations with regards to repatriating seafarers on time must also be met. Finally, it is recommended that the UK Government consider the easing of the Seafarers Earnings Deduction qualifying days in order to assist those who have either been unable to join ships or who have spent extended periods of time in UK waters.

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Appendix I – Respondent demographics

Age

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
335	17	16	36

Sex

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	288	85
	Female	48	14
	Prefer not to say	2	1
	Total	338	100

Rank

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Captain/Master	47	14
	Officer other than Captain/Master	222	66
	Rating	28	8
	Other	42	12
	Total	339	100

Department

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Deck	216	63
	Engineering	91	26
	Hotel/catering	26	10
	Other	6	1
	Total	339	100

Ship type

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Passenger ferry	17	5
	High speed ferry	1	0
	Freight ro-ro	9	3
	Products tanker	18	5
	Crude tanker	4	1
	Chemical tanker	8	2
	Gas tanker	15	4
	Offshore support	40	12
	Supply vessel	19	6
	Standby vessel	5	1
	Dredger	6	2
	Tug	14	4
	Pilot boat	2	1
	Cruise ship	75	22
	Bulker	6	2
	Container ship	16	5
	General cargo	14	4
	Other	70	21
	Total	339	100

Housing status

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Own and pay mortgage	165	49
	Own and no mortgage	34	10
	Rent	52	15
	Live with parents	82	24
	Other	6	2
	Total	339	100

Sole wage earner

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	133	39
	No	206	61
	Total	339	100

Children

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	125	37
	No	213	63
	Total	338	100

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