



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

Survey Briefing Note

SEAFARER WELFARE PROVISION IN AUSTRALIA

A Survey on structural pressures and system sustainability

April 2026

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Introduction

Seafarer welfare remains a key aspect of port-side support, providing crews with communication, transport, welfare centres, shopping assistance, pastoral care, emergency aid, and rights-related information during port calls.

As part of the Human Rights at Sea (HRAS), Maritime Levy Campaign, an online survey was conducted with voluntary participation.

Across Australia, survey responses from 13 respondents, including major hubs such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Fremantle and regional locations such as Port Pirie and Bell Bay, indicate that these services continue to operate, but not on a consistently secure footing.

The data shows a clear national pattern. Welfare centres deliver many frontline services despite chronic underfunding, limited staff, and heavy dependence on volunteers, including many in their 70s and 80s. Ten responses report no paid staff. Only a small number indicate that current funding is adequate.

The findings indicate that the issue is not the existence of services, but whether the current model can keep them going over time.

This Briefing Note assesses the current operating picture, identifies the principal structural pressures emerging from the survey data, and considers what these findings mean for the future sustainability of seafarer welfare provision in Australia.

It is written as a Briefing Note rather than a full report and focuses on recurring patterns evident across the survey responses.

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Key findings

Several observations can be drawn from the dataset.

First, the national pattern is consistent. Across responses from both large and small ports, the survey points to chronic underfunding, dependence on volunteers, limited paid staffing, restricted operating hours, and demand for a more sustainable funding base.

Second, the current model relies heavily on goodwill. This is evident not only in the degree of volunteer dependence but also in the extent to which local centres are expected to fundraise for core operating capacity. The survey indicates that this model is under strain.

Third, the service offer is substantial. Centres report providing communication access, transport, practical assistance, welfare support, advocacy, and rights-related information to seafarers across Australian ports.

Fourth, the stakeholder environment is mixed rather than absent. Some responses describe regular cooperation or active Port Welfare Committees, while others report no regular cooperation even where a committee exists. One response from Brisbane states that most terminal operators avoid engaging and do not regard seafarer welfare as their priority or responsibility.

Finally, the survey supports the conclusion that the current model is structurally under-resourced. The responses consistently point to underfunding, dependence on elderly volunteers, inability to maintain adequate staffing levels, demand for paid staff, and a broad service offering operating under constrained conditions.



Current operating context

Survey responses indicate that Australian seafarer welfare centres provide a broader range of services than the term “welfare centre” implies.

Reported services include Wi-Fi and SIM cards, transport to town, shops and medical appointments, access to welfare centres, shopping services, support for mental and physical wellbeing, faith-based services, foreign currency exchange, emergency medical support and advocacy, justice and rights support such as the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) referrals, and information on Maritime Labour Convention 2006 rights. Some responses also refer to Christmas hampers and meals for crew joining or signing off.

However, service availability remains inconsistent and often limited. Responses refer to restricted opening hours, reduced ship visits, and limited capacity to provide transport or practical support. The survey indicates that while services exist, access is not always consistent, timely, or reliable.

Port Welfare Committees exist in most responses, but activity levels vary. Some committees are inactive or have not met for over a year, while ports without committees have shown interest in forming them. Where committees are active, agencies such as the ITF or Maritime Union, AMSA, Australian Border Force, port authorities, pilots, terminal operators, and agents are represented.

The responses indicate that local stakeholder structures are often identifiable, but not consistently active or integrated into a national framework.



Structural pressures

The survey findings indicate that the pressures facing welfare centres are structural rather than incidental.

Funding is fragmented and predominantly voluntary. Centres report relying on donations, public grants, voluntary contributions from shipowners and seafarers, fundraising activity such as sausage sizzles, and, in some cases, shop income. Only a small number of responses indicate that funding is adequate.

Responses link inadequate funding to practical constraints, including restricted operating hours, inability to provide 24/7 support, inability to employ staff, and difficulty covering overheads such as insurance, vehicles, and utilities.

Where respondents provided figures, estimates of what would constitute adequate annual funding vary widely, from \$10,000 (AUD) in Melbourne to circa \$750,000 (AUD) in Brisbane, with intermediate figures reported for Sydney, Bell Bay, Gladstone, Hobart, Bunbury, Fremantle, and Geelong. Some responses did not provide a figure.

A further structural issue is the operational time required to sustain the funding model. Responses indicate that between 5% and 50% of staff or volunteer time may be taken up pursuing funding, with several stating that fundraising consumes half of their available operational capacity.

Workforce fragility is equally clear. Ten responses report no paid staff. Centres repeatedly identify the same missing roles: a full-time manager or chaplain, paid drivers, and administrative support. Many also report insufficient volunteers, especially drivers, and several note that existing volunteers are elderly, often in their 70s and 80s.

Governance and coordination also emerge as uneven. Some responses report inactive committees. Additional concerns were raised around governance and financial compliance in Fremantle, and around transparency and community representation in Sydney. In Port Pirie, the response indicates that one staff member is needed to support activities in South Australia.

These findings do not suggest uniform weakness across all locations, but they do indicate variable local governance quality and no consistent national baseline.

Impact: Reduced access and capacity

The survey responses make clear that these structural pressures are not abstract. They translate directly into reduced service access and reduced service flexibility.

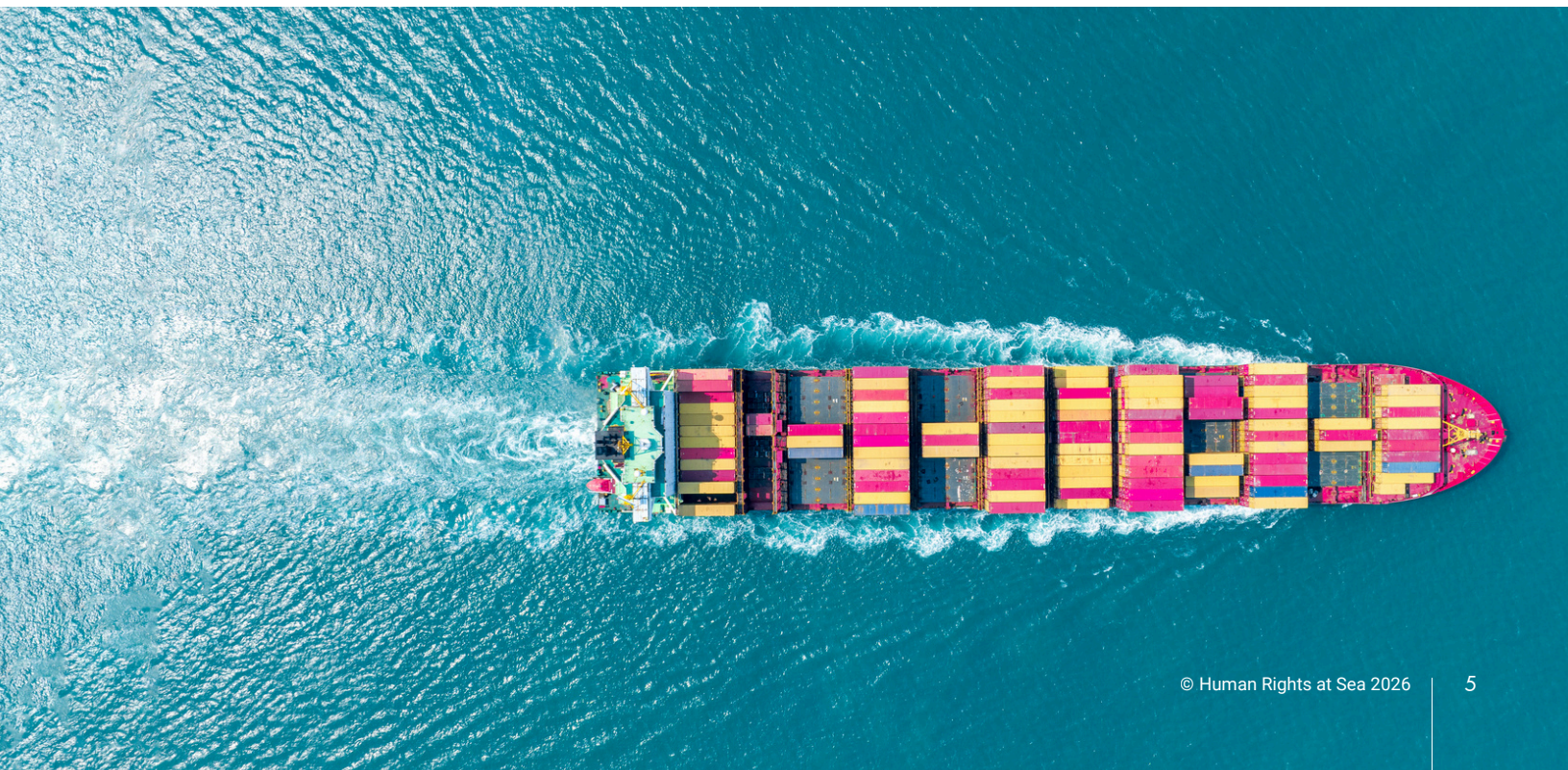
Common consequences reported across the responses include limited opening hours, in some cases weekday-only afternoon access, inability to pick up seafarers when called, reduced ship visiting, inability to maintain or upgrade facilities, no capacity for 24/7 access, and volunteer burnout. These are recurring operational effects, not isolated comments.

Two comments captured in the survey illustrate the tone of the responses. One centre states: **“Everything is provided on a limited basis due to restricted operating hours and the lack of volunteers.”** Another states: **“We are struggling with opening 1-5pm weekdays only. This is unacceptable.”**

These comments do not argue for expansion in principle; they describe the current inability to provide what centres themselves regard as an adequate level of access.

The survey also records what centres say they would do with more funding. Recurring priorities include longer opening hours, in some cases 9am-9pm, seven days a week, paid drivers and centre managers, more ship visits, better communication with ships, expanded mental health and medical support, and improved facilities, including 24/7 access arrangements such as an unmanned donga.

Taken together, the responses indicate that centres are largely calling for stabilisation and operational reinforcement rather than broad speculative expansion.



Conclusion

The survey findings indicate that seafarer welfare centres across Australia remain highly committed and continue to provide an extensive range of practical frontline services. However, the same findings also indicate that the current provision is sustained by a model characterised by fragmented funding, heavy reliance on unpaid labour, inconsistent governance, and growing workforce fragility.

The immediate policy question, therefore, is not whether these services matter. The survey responses indicate that they do. The question is whether Australia wishes to continue relying on a largely volunteer-led and locally improvised system for delivering services that ports, agencies, and welfare organisations clearly regard as necessary.

Future consideration should logically focus on more predictable funding arrangements, greater workforce stability, clearer governance expectations, and a more coordinated national approach.

The evidence supports a conclusion that the system remains functional, but is not yet structurally secure.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

This Human Rights at Sea Briefing Note has been prepared for public awareness and use. The contents are based on available survey data and supporting materials at the time of writing and may be superseded post-publication.

The Briefing Note should not be viewed in any way whatsoever as formal legal advice. Specialist professional advice should be sought on the issues raised, as necessary.

WHO WE ARE



Human Rights at Sea was founded in 2013, formally established in April 2014. It started as an initiative to explore issues of maritime human rights development, review and develop related policies and legislation, and undertake independent investigations of abuses at sea. It rapidly grew and for reasons of governance it became a registered charity under the UK Charity Commission in 2015. It achieved ECOSOC special consultative status in 2022 and evolved in June 2025 to become a non-profit social enterprise Community Interest Company to assure long-term sustainability.


Today, Human Rights at Sea is an established and independent UK registered non-profit organisation based on the south coast of the United Kingdom. It undertakes research and advocacy specifically for human rights issues in the maritime environment, including contributing to support for the human element that underpins the global maritime and fishing industries. We work internationally with all individuals, commercial and maritime community organisations that have similar missions and objectives as ourselves.


UN ECOSOC. We are an organisation in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council 2022.

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We aim to detect and remedy human rights abuses at sea. We raise public awareness of abuses at sea through reliable, trusted and factual reporting. We support people working at sea to understand their rights. We address core issues around Human Security, Human Sustainability and human rights protections at sea.

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