Evidence for Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry on Holyhead Port Storm Damage and Closure.

Context

Holyhead plays a key role in UK to Ireland freight movements, with the consequence that it has become the second largest roll-on, roll-off (Ro-Ro) port in the UK. The port is operated by Stena Line Ports Ltd., which is a separate business area from Stena Line ferry services.

In terms of trade volumes, there are around 100,000 units per quarter handled through Holyhead, compared to approximately 115,000 units per quarter in 2019, a 13% drop. Post-Brexit, volumes had stabilized at around a 20% drop so there has been a slight recovery since early 2023. By comparison in Wales, Pembroke and Fishguard combined have continued to remain at around 60-70% of pre-Brexit levels. Comparing to English ports offering services to Ireland, volumes through Liverpool are similar to pre-Brexit levels, while Cairnryan continues to see growth.

Day-to-day operations at Holyhead involve 8 sailings to Dublin per day, four operated by Irish Ferries and four by Stena Line. Both companies use two vessels on the route, and the timetable is based around commercial priorities. This means both ferry operators have similar departure times from Holyhead and Dublin. In the summer peak, Irish Ferries operate additional services using a high-speed ferry.

These sailings use two berths at the port – Berth 3 is normally dedicated to Irish Ferries and Berth 5 is used by Stena Line. Both berths are constructed with berthing dolphins, freestanding structures that are fixed to the seabed. These are fitted with fenders to absorb the energy from a moving ship, and connected by walkways.

Storm Darragh and the immediate impact on the port

Storm Darragh hit the UK on 6th and 7th December, with many sailings across the Irish Sea cancelled. However, some services did operate between Holyhead and Dublin, and during this time there were two berthing incidents at Berth 3. The exact details of what happened have not been disclosed by either Stena Line Ports or Irish Ferries (as the ferry operator involved), and a recent evidence session of the Welsh Affairs Committee in Westminster revealed that an ongoing insurance claim limited what could be revealed.

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) also note the incident occurring, and state "A [Ro-Ro] vessel was using a piling to assist departure when it collapsed. [T]he vessel was undertaking a standard departure manoeuvre that is used in strong onshore winds. Whilst the stern was resting on a dolphin and the bow thrusted off, the dolphin gave way and collapsed into the harbour." However, it appears from their website that the incident is not subject to a full MAIB investigation.

Also in the MAIB data is information about two other incidents at Holyhead involving the berthing dolphins and their fenders, one in 2023 and the other in 2024. Again, there is only limited information but both involved manoeuvring in strong winds.

Following the incident in December 2024, the port was closed and sailings cancelled. For users of the port, and especially freight users, this initial closure may not have raised concerns – storms in Irish Sea are not uncommon and services may be cancelled at short notice.

Response to the closure

As it became apparent the closure was going to be longer, a number of actions were taken by the ferry operators.

- Stena Line: Both vessels used on the Holyhead route were redeployed by 13th December, with one operating an additional service to Liverpool and the other on a new service to Fishguard. To provide further capacity, an additional vessel was chartered to operate between Heysham and Dublin. All of these services were on a daily basis due to the extended sailing times compared to Holyhead.
- Irish Ferries: On 11th December, Irish Ferries redeployed a larger vessel from the Holyhead – Dublin route to Rosslare – Pembroke, and on 20th December started an additional daily service from Dublin, firstly to Fishguard carrying passengers only and then in early 2025 this switched to Pembroke, with freight capacity available as well. A larger vessel was also used on some Ireland – France services.

With these additional services, capacity across the Irish Sea from Welsh ports was no more than 50% of what would have been offered with a full Holyhead schedule.

For freight users of the port, many switched to alternative ports. This displacement occurred to all ports offering ferry services to Ireland, with road congestion noted around ports from Pembroke to Cairnryan as a result of the extra traffic. There was also the need to recover trailers from Holyhead where they had arrived before it became clear the port would be closed in the longer term, incurring additional costs.

Many shippers noted delays in delivering goods to/from Ireland although much of the freight had cleared by Christmas. In some instances, freight switched to air cargo between the UK and Ireland.

The UK and Republic of Ireland governments eased driver hour restrictions for freight between the two countries, which helped to facilitate these movements.

Recovery to normal service

Holyhead port reopened on 16th January with just Berth 5 available to use. The temporary services put on by ferry operators were withdrawn. The reopening of Berth 5 has required a coordinated timetable to allow eight departures per day, with departures at three hour intervals alternating between Stena Line and Irish Ferries.

There are risks in operating with a single berth and the same intensity of service as normal, and delays could quickly propagate. However, operations do appear to have largely operated as planned albeit during a quieter time of the year for freight traffic. The next peak in volumes is likely to be around Easter, and particularly for passenger movements. At this time, the seasonal fast ferry service also resumes. This increase in services and traffic volume will test how effective the new working arrangements are at Holyhead.

With the full port reopening on 1st July, it could be assumed that services will return to their previous arrangements and a more commercially focused timetable with departures not coordinated between operators.

Potential long term impact

While there has been a short term impact on port volumes, with a full timetable of services returning since January, there is now the opportunity for traffic to return to passing through Holyhead. Publicly available data is not yet available but it seems likely that volumes will return relatively quickly to expected traffic levels.

Thankfully, port closures are relatively uncommon but when they do occur, the impact can be significant. While much larger than Holyhead, ports in Durban, Houston and Baltimore have all had unscheduled closures in recent years and traffic volumes have returned quickly. Closures that are short term and one off do not generally lead to long term changes to the supply chains through ports.

With Holyhead now also being a freeport area, there is a need to ensure that lessons are learnt from the closure, and that all stakeholders are engaged in developing

resilience plans going forward. The announcement by the Cabinet Secretary of a taskforce to look at the resilience of Holyhead is welcome, especially as it is planned to involve stakeholders from both sides of the Irish Sea. What is needed is clarity as to the scope and timeframe of its activities, as well as the stakeholders invited to participate.