Isle of Man Government
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BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Manxman return, Sea Services Agreement, dredging position and new Steam Packet vessel

The following collaborative document is published by the Isle of Man Government and includes information compiled and agreed by the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company, Treasury, Department of Infrastructure and Ship Registry.

Wednesday 18 November 2026

1. Cause, investigation and detection

Do we know what caused the wear to Manxman's shafts, liners and bearings?

No. An investigation is currently taking place aimed at identifying the cause.

Who is undertaking the investigation?

Lloyd's Register (LR) Advisory's Technical and Failure Investigation (TFI) service and their Root Cause Analysis Team is undertaking the principal investigation commissioned by the Steam Packet Company. Finnish engineering and technology company Wärtsilä — the original equipment manufacturer of the shafts, propellors, hubs and liners — are also expected to undertake a separate investigation.

What are its terms of reference?

The investigation will involve a comprehensive review of operational reports, photographs and vessel data, alongside an assessment of the vessel's maintenance history. Findings from the relevant manufacturers' engineers will be considered, supported by laboratory analysis of removed liner material. Measurement and video equipment will be installed to facilitate data collection, followed by initial trials under varying load conditions and ahead/astern operations. Further measurements will be undertaken during normal service across a range of loadings, tidal conditions, weather conditions and manoeuvring styles. The final report is expected to identify the root causes of the issue and set out any mitigations and recommendations.

When will the report be ready?

The full and final Lloyd's Register report is expected by the end of March 2027. Initial trials are planned after the liners are replaced, followed by an in-service monitoring period. The exact trial programme remains subject to confirmation by Lloyd's Register.

Why was the problem not noticed sooner?

The wear was only identified during the scheduled July 2026 dry docking and its full extent became apparent during disassembly and removal of the shafts and related components.

Has proper maintenance been undertaken?

Yes. The Steam Packet Company operates a rigorous planned maintenance schedule for all of its vessels, through a computer-based planned maintenance system which is approved by and is regularly surveyed and certified by the classification society, Lloyd's Register.

Is the vibration noticed by passengers caused by this issue?

While this is a possibility, it is regarded as unlikely as the vibration often referred to is only present in port when the vessel is turning.

Did the March 2025 grounding cause the problem?

There is presently no evidence that it did. The 2025 grounding report recorded no damage following the incident, but only the current technical investigation can determine whether the event had any relevance later on.

Is this unusual for this type and age of vessel?

The deterioration was significantly greater than would normally be expected for a vessel of this age. The causes of this level of abnormal wear are a key part of the investigation that's currently taking place.

2. Repair, recurrence and return to service

Is the repair replacing like-for-like components?

Yes. As confirmed publicly, the components were removed and transported to Denmark for repair and machining. New bearings and liners have been manufactured to compensate for the wear discovered during maintenance. Following advice from Marineshaft and with agreement of the bearing makers and the classification society, the new shaft liners have been manufactured from a slightly different alloy to original, which has greater surface hardness.

If it is like-for-like, is the problem likely to recur before the report is complete?

At this stage, a risk of recurrence cannot be determined as the root cause has not yet been identified. In the meantime, risk will be managed through the approved repair, oversight by the regulator and classification society, testing and sea trials, the installation of monitoring equipment and ongoing in-service measurements.

Could Manxman have to go out of service again?

Any vessel can be withdrawn if testing, monitoring or inspection identifies a safety or technical concern. There is no present evidence that a further withdrawal will be required. Manxman should return only after repair, testing, sea trials and regulatory inspection are satisfactorily completed.

3. Repair funding and financial impact

Will the Steam Packet need to access Government funds to pay for the repair?

No.

Where is the money coming from?

The repair will be paid for initially through company reserves. Discussions around mitigation payments are underway with insurers and may also take place with the shipbuilders once the Lloyd's Register report has been concluded.

What is the impact on Steam Packet finances and customer fares?

Company reserves will be drawn down to pay for the repair but may be recovered through insurance and warranty mitigations. Customer fares will not be affected as increases are dictated by the Sea Services Agreement.

4. Douglas Harbour depths and responsibility

What are the correct depths?

The Sea Services Agreement (SSA) stipulates that the Department of Infrastructure Harbours division must maintain the navigational approach channel to both linkspans, each with associated manoeuvring area and each of 6-metre depth below Admiralty Chart Datum. It must also maintain a berth of 5m depth in front of Berth 1 Linkspan (Victoria Pier) and 6.5m depth in front of Berth 5 Linkspan (King Edward VIII Pier). The Department must use its best endeavours to ensure that the depth in front of Berth 1 is increased to 6.5m if required by the Company and upon reasonable notice.

Whose responsibility is it to achieve the correct depths?

The Department of Infrastructure is the statutory harbour authority and is responsible for harbour infrastructure, hydrographic information, maintenance dredging and the publication of navigational information.

The Steam Packet remains responsible for the safe navigation and operation of its vessels, including passage planning, draught, under-keel-clearance assessments and operational decisions.

The Ship Registry and classification bodies oversee vessel safety and regulatory compliance within their respective roles.

Have the correct depths been maintained since the March 2025 grounding?

There are certain points that do not comply with the parameters specified in the SSA, particularly beneath the fenders on Berth 5, despite the best efforts of the Harbours division and the machinery available within the normal dredging process. Achieving full depth across a greater area may require a capital dredge, which is under consideration.

Since the grounding, Harbours has undertaken enhanced survey programmes, in-house and contractor dredging, improved monitoring arrangements and strengthened communications with the Steam Packet Company.

It is important to note that while the SSA specifies depths within navigational approach channels, associated manoeuvring areas and ferry berths, it does not define fixed geographical boundaries for those areas.

At a recent meeting between harbours and the Steam Packet Company it was confirmed that no sailings have been compromised by the current available depths since March 2025.

If depths are not at the target, what is being done?

The Department has implemented a long-term programme of survey, monitoring and maintenance dredging. This includes: undertaking regular hydrographic surveys and communicating the survey information; ongoing dredging by Tarroo Ushtey; engaging specialist contractors where required; the acquisition of a more capable plough; enhanced survey capability; and verification through post-dredge surveys.

The objective is to improve resilience around safe and effective access to the ferry berths and navigational areas that relate to SSA operations.

5. Capital dredging

Is a capital dredge likely in the near future?

It remains under active consideration as part of the long-term development of Douglas Harbour, and funding is being sought to progress the necessary preparatory work. A licensed disposal route is a key prerequisite and work towards establishing that is underway. In the meantime, the operational focus remains on monitoring, maintenance dredging, contractor support and continued improvements to harbour dredging capability.

Capital dredging should be viewed as a strategic investment in long-term resilience and future capacity rather than a substitute for routine maintenance dredging.

Is it required for Manxman or the new vessel?

The Steam Packet has requested that the Department increases Berth 1 to 6.5m for operational resilience and to meet the needs of the future fleet.

What processes need to be followed?

Any capital dredging scheme would require technical survey and design, sediment characterisation, environmental assessment, regulatory approvals, disposal-site arrangements, business case and funding approval, procurement, stakeholder engagement, operational planning and post-dredge verification. The precise sequence and programme would depend on the scope of the project.

Will this delay delivery of the new vessel?

It is too early to determine, although it would be a possibility if the new vessel's design has a draft similar to Ben-my-Chree or Manxman. Any relationship between harbour works and vessel introduction would depend on the final vessel specification, the extent of any harbour improvements and the programme adopted for both projects.

6. New Steam Packet vessel

Has a design been agreed?

No design has been agreed at this stage. Concept designs have been worked on, incorporating the feedback from the travelling public who responded to a survey run by the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company in January 2026. Key findings from this survey included ensuring the vessel is capable of all-year-round service to Liverpool, a preference for comfort, range of facilities and cabins over pure speed, and a need to ensure the vessel is capable of efficient operations (ie, lower fuel consumption).

When is it likely to be in service?

Current plans say 2030 but that requires a number of key milestones to be met, including work required in Douglas harbour.

Will it use the same system as Manxman and risk the same problems?

No. The design concepts for the Manannan replacement envisage a different type of transmission to the propellors. This will enhance manoeuvrability and eliminate the risk of similar wear occurring.

Is it being designed for the existing harbour, or will expensive changes be needed?

The design is likely to assume depths of 6.5m at Berth 1.

Will it work in Liverpool or will further changes be required?

The new vessel will be designed in line with the Isle of Man Ferry Terminal in Liverpool.

How will the new vessel be funded?

By the Steam Packet Company, partly through accumulated reserves and partly through debt. Proportions will be dependent on the price of the build which will only be clear once shipyard tenders are complete. Treasury has indicated its support for this approach.

Has a public consultation been conducted into what the public want as a replacement vessel for Manannan?

Yes, January 2026. More than 4.500 responses were received. News release: https://www.steam-packet.com/news/over-4-500-respond-to-new-vessel-2030-public-consultation

Are these results being incorporated into the design of the new vessel?

Yes, the results have been supplied to the project team for implementation.