

Holyhead Port storm damage and closure

Initial findings

April 2025



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About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddEconomy

Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:
Andrew RT Davies MS**
Welsh Conservatives



Hannah Blythyn MS
Welsh Labour



Hefin David MS
Welsh Labour



Luke Fletcher MS
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Samuel Kurtz MS
Welsh Conservatives



Jenny Rathbone MS
Welsh Labour

The following Member attended as a substitute during this inquiry.



Mike Hedges MS
Welsh Labour

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Recommendations and conclusions

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Recommendation 3. Members feel they still do not have a clear picture of how the Welsh Government’s response to the incident and port closure unfolded. The Welsh Government should set out a timeline of internal actions it took in response to the closure from the first collision on 6 December 2024. This should include steps taken to obtain the most up to date trade data from HMRC.Page 17

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should urgently decide what financial and other support it will provide to local businesses affected by the closure, and publicly communicate the reasons for its decision.Page 20

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should expedite its work to implement the recommendations in the Committee’s A New Direction for HGV Drivers and to bring forwards the maritime and ports strategy and freight plan as a matter of urgency once the task force has completed its work..... Page 26

Recommendation 6. The Committee intends to monitor the work of the Irish Sea Task force. To assist with this, the Welsh Government must set out full details of its terms of reference, membership and tasks including timescales. The Task force should regularly update the Committee. The Irish Sea Task force’s objectives should include:

- Understanding the causes of the events at Holyhead to understand whether there are any implications for the wider ports sector or ports policy;
- Ensuring the future safety of the Port;
- Improving facilities for drivers at / en route to Holyhead;

- Assessing the resilience of, and improving transport links, to Holyhead including consideration of rail connections;
- Supporting the long-term viability of the Port and avoiding trade diversion; and
- Ensuring there is a strong contingency plan for any future closure at Holyhead in particular and Welsh ports in general. In particular, this should include traffic management, communications, implementation of alternative maritime routes and support for local businesses.

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Conclusion 1. Despite our best efforts, the lines of Ministerial accountability and responsibility are unclear to the Committee and to key stakeholders involved in the response and recovery efforts. Members believe this confusion may have exacerbated issues with Welsh Government’s response to this emergency.

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Conclusion 2. The Committee was dismayed by the apparent lack of speed and urgency in the Welsh Government’s response to the closure of Wales’ busiest ferry port along a crucial European trade route. The Committee has seen limited evidence that the Welsh Government has adequately addressed the closure in the past three months. Members believe it was local action and collaboration between ports that prevented Holyhead's closure from being a true disaster for Welsh trade and the economy..... Page 16

Conclusion 3. Whilst the Committee was broadly satisfied that the work the Isle of Anglesey County Council undertook gave a clear view of how business were affected by the closure, Members are concerned about the lack of understanding of how the consequences of the closure impacted the workforce. For example, the Committee would like to have a clearer picture of the effects of job losses and lost working hours on households. For this, and any similar future incidents, the Welsh Government should examine how it can work with partners to directly understand the impact on workers as well as businesses.....Page 19

Conclusion 4. The Committee outlined concerns about trade diversions in its report, the Border Target Operating Model: A view from Wales report. The Welsh Government must use all available levers to ensure Holyhead remains an attractive choice to avoid trade diversions.....Page 23

Conclusion 5. The Welsh Government has shown a lack of attention to both ports and freight during this Senedd. Members believe that if there had been greater engagement with the Ports and freight sectors, and the recommendations set out in the Committee’s A New Direction for HGV Drivers report had been implemented, then Welsh Government would have been in a better position to respond to this crisis. We believe that the delays to both the maritime and ports strategy and freight plan illustrates a lack of engagement with these sectors may have placed the Welsh Government at a disadvantage now. Page 26

1. Background and causes

1. On 6 March the Committee held a one day exploratory session looking at the Holyhead Port storm damage and related closure. The Committee took evidence from a number of organisations and experts, including Stena Line Ports who operate Holyhead, and the Welsh Government. The Committee focused on the following issues:

- Causes: the factors contributing to the severity of the damage.
- Communication: the approach to communication during and after the storm, including communication with port users, communities and businesses affected by the closure as well as between Governments.
- Remediation: the speed of response in assessing and repairing the damage, including the support provided by Government.
- Impact: the impact of the closure, as well as the extent and effectiveness of the steps being taken to mitigate the impact.¹

2. Storm Darragh hit the UK on 6-7 December. Wales faced the brunt of the storm, the Met Office issued a Red Warning (indicating risk to life) for most of the Welsh coast from 03:00-11:00 on 7 December.² However it should be clarified that, according to Stena Line Ports, the damage actually occurred prior to the red warning coming into effect.³

3. Stena Line Port's written evidence set out details of the incidents which led to the Port's closure:

"On 6th and 7th December 2024, there were two berthing incidents, which rendered Terminal 3 berth unusable. Storm Darragh was forecast; however, these incidents immediately preceded the peak of the storm when the red weather alert was in place.

The berthing incidents involved two different vessels contacting monopile D2.2 on successive calls, resulting in a collapse of the monopile immediately following contact by the second vessel. The

¹ Senedd.Wales Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs [Holyhead Port storm damage and closure](#) inquiry

² Metoffice.gov.uk [Storm Darragh](#)

³ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 18

first incident was while manoeuvring on arrival at T3, the second contact was as the vessel departed the berth.”⁴



Figure 1 A birds-eye view of a section of Holyhead port

4. Stena Line Ports also noted “The incidents and damage caused are now subject to an ongoing insurance claim and potential recovery action. As such no further details can be provided at this time so as not to prejudice this process.”⁵

5. The incident led to the total closure of the Port from 7 December until 16 January. This meant the Port was closed for the busy run-up to Christmas. While terminal 5 has reopened, terminal 3 is not expected to reopen until 1 July.⁶

6. Professor Andrew Potter’s written evidence contained details from the Marine Accident Investigation analysis of the incident:

“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

⁴ Written Evidence – [Stena Line Ports](#)

⁵ Written Evidence – [Stena Line Ports](#)

⁶ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 29

standard departure manoeuvre that is used in strong onshore winds. Whilst the stern was resting on a dolphin and the bow thrust 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.”⁷

7. Professor Potter went on to say “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.”⁸

8. The Committee is still undertaking work on both the closure and impact. Members will follow this line of work up as more information becomes available and the insurance case concludes. However, this report explores the issues caused by the Port closure and contains the Committee’s initial findings.

9. The Chair has written to Irish Ferries, who did not respond to the Committee’s invitation to attend its session on 6 March. The Chair is still awaiting a response to this letter. Members are extremely disappointed to have had no engagement with such a key stakeholder at this point in the inquiry.

⁷ Professor Andrew Potter [written evidence](#)

⁸ Professor Andrew Potter [written evidence](#)

2. The initial Welsh Government response

10. The Committee has concerns around the initial Welsh Government response to the closure of Holyhead Port. The Committee heard evidence that the actions Members would have expected to happen on day one, for example contact with key trade bodies representing road freight, did not happen for the best part of a month. In general the Welsh Government response timeline is unclear and hard to understand. The Committee is also concerned about the command and control structure of the response. Members believe the Welsh Government must undertake a thorough lessons learned exercise for this incident and should publish its findings to help avoid similar issues in the future.

Confusion over Ministerial Responsibility

11. The Welsh Government website indicates Rebecca Evans MS, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning is responsible for “ports policy, including freeports” (as well as “aviation policy”)⁹ and that Ken Skates MS, Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales, is responsible for wider devolved transport and transport policy.¹⁰ However in January, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales told Members of the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee he “retained responsibility for aviation policy and maritime policy” in order “to make sure that there are synergies across all transport modes”.¹¹

12. This confusion around remits was illustrated when the Chair asked representatives of the British Ports Association, Stena Line Ports and Milford Haven Port which Cabinet Secretary was ultimately responsible. None could offer an immediate answer and all three said they would have to come back to him on the issue.¹² Though the BPA did note that they didn’t “have a problem communicating with both Ministers and with their officials.”¹³

13. When the Chair asked the Cabinet Secretaries the same question Rebecca Evans MS told Members:

“I’ve got responsibility in relation to the contribution that ports and aviation make in relation to economic growth and stability, and then

⁹ Gov.Wales [Responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning](#)

¹⁰ Gov.Wales [Responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales](#)

¹¹ Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee, 08 January 2025, Paragraph 229

¹² Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraphs 193, 194 & 196

¹³ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 198

Ken has responsibilities in relation to the transport matters more generally. Of course, there's close engagement between ourselves and our officials on this."¹⁴

Our View

Whilst we acknowledge that certain areas may require input from more than one Cabinet Secretary or Government Department, we feel it is vital there is clear and obvious accountability, particularly when responding to an emergency such as the Port closure. We thought it was telling that key stakeholders could not answer the straightforward question of which Cabinet Secretary was responsible. Whilst we would not have anticipated their detailed knowledge of internal Welsh Government working, we would expect them to be able to point to a single lead Cabinet Secretary they had been working with since the Port had closed. In future incidents Ministerial lines of accountability must be clearly set out and explained, with one specific person charged with responsibility and accountability for the response.

We also note that the Welsh Government website entries detailing the responsibilities for each Cabinet Secretary do not reflect the division of responsibilities outlined by Rebecca Evans MS. This should be corrected.

Conclusion 1. Despite our best efforts, the lines of Ministerial accountability and responsibility are unclear to the Committee and to key stakeholders involved in the response and recovery efforts. Members believe this confusion may have exacerbated issues with Welsh Government's response to this emergency.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government must undertake a lessons learned review from the Port closure and publish the findings. This should include lessons from the acute response to the closure but also any overarching lessons from the ongoing incident.

Recommendation 2. The Committee believes the incident may have been better managed if there had been a specified Cabinet Secretary leading Welsh Government's response. In any future incidents of this scale or complexity Welsh Government should agree a Ministerial lead who will oversee and be held accountable for management of the response.

¹⁴ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 449

A sluggish initial response and poor communication

14. On 14 December, a week following the incident, Welsh Government issued its first statement relating to the closure. That statement noted that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales had met with the Port and Isle of Anglesey County Council on 12 December “to get an update on the situation”. It also described ongoing freight diversions, work the Port was undertaking to reopen and said “Officials in the Welsh Government are maintaining close contact with all relevant stakeholders, including in the Republic of Ireland and in the UK Government, to understand the full extent of the damage at the Port and when this vital trade link will re-open.”¹⁵

15. In their written evidence the Road Haulage Association (RHA) told Members they were “initially contacted by Transport Scotland on the evening of the 11 of December to let us know that Holyhead had shut, and Operation Overflow would be in place at Castle Kennedy.”¹⁶ They explained that most hauliers chose to divert north via Cairnryan and Stranraer or south to Fishguard and Pembroke and that the RHA “were invited on to the partnership calls with Transport Scotland, Police Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway Council and other key stakeholders at 9.30am on the 12th of December and almost every day after that in the run up to Christmas.”

16. In stark contrast, the RHA also told Members that:

“the first contact that I had with the Welsh civil service throughout this whole process was that I got an e-mail on Christmas Eve, giving me an update on the Port. By that time, not only had the issue been live for nearly two weeks, but we had also secured the relaxation of drivers' hours, and that had run out by the time that I was first notified by the Welsh Government.”¹⁷

17. The RHA said this lack of communication hampered the response because normally they are usually able to “disseminate the information on behalf of the Government, or at least signpost our members or any of the ancillary bodies that are around us to your one point of contact, where the information is there. That was not the case in this particular episode.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Welsh Government [Written Statement: Port of Holyhead Closure](#) issued 14 December 2024

¹⁶ Road Haulage Association [Written Evidence](#)

¹⁷ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 277

¹⁸ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 278

18. The Irish Road Haulage Association (IRHA) criticised the communications from the Port and authorities saying “The communication at the advent of this storm was dire.” They highlighted issues with messaging that the Port would “be up and running tomorrow” leading to “delay and obfuscation and people not shipping in time”. They went on to say “There was a build-up of over 1,000 trailers in the Holyhead area, and they kept pouring in, because we weren't told to stop, that it wouldn't be happening. And of course, we learn now of the absence of alternative routes. And to get the different bodies to come together, to allow us to go in through Milford Haven and into Fishguard and into Pembroke was slow. All of it went on for about a week.”¹⁹

19. The IRHA also raised similar issues with the speed of communications as outlined above from the RHA. Specifically they highlighted issues with “the efficiencies and the timeline of how quickly those remedial works started on this.” They explained “It was a perfect storm, politically, for something to go wrong” “because we were just after the general election here, so to get the momentum up onto this platform took a little while, I acknowledge, and the Welsh Government had never faced this before, and to get momentum up from that side was a little slower.”²⁰ As with the RHA, the IRHA also highlighted the Scottish Government’s response as an example of good practice.²¹

20. The Irish Maritime Development Office told the Committee “when the necessary people were brought together, the level of co-operation and commitment to getting the problem sorted out was quite remarkable. We had very good engagement with officials on the Welsh side, led by the Minister for transport, Ken Skates, who engaged thoroughly in the process.” However they highlighted that time was lost at the very beginning saying:

“We could have been quicker into action, I think, but a lot of that rests with the communication at the early stages and the anticipation that Holyhead would reopen sooner rather than later, that these problems could be overcome within a matter of days. If there was clear visibility of that problem right at the very beginning, as I said in my remarks, it would have helped us a great deal.”²²

21. The Irish Road Haulage Association supported the suggestion saying “On the potential around trying to get momentum moving and support from the Welsh

¹⁹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 226

²⁰ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 225

²¹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 224

²² Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 234

Government and Irish Government, that was good, but it was hard to see that momentum transferred into the actual work at sea.” They asserted that although the incident happened in early December remediation didn’t really start until after Christmas.²³

22. It should be noted that the weather played a part in slowing down the work to start getting the Port reopened. Stena Line Ports explained “after the incident, you then need to do a full inspection. That’s where the problem is, because it’s a steel pile structure that sits in the sea, then you have to do it by diving.” “We had divers available 24/7, but it’s quite a slow process because you need the right weather conditions, but then you need the clarity of water” “we admit it was a long time, but it was, unfortunately, the time of the year and the safety of divers involved in those operations.”²⁴

23. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales told Members “we were also holding very regular meetings not just internally, but with stakeholders. I was speaking almost on a daily basis with my counterpart in the Irish Government, so engagement was incredibly effective. Indeed, I think that’s what avoided a crisis from taking place.”²⁵

24. A Welsh Government official added that Welsh Government have good relationships with the RHA and Logistics UK but “In the immediate aftermath of the incident, our focus was very much on communications to HGV drivers who were approaching the Port, or at the Port, to make sure that traffic flows were managed appropriately”. He went on to say that “In terms of the Scottish Government’s model and earlier engagement with trade bodies, that’s certainly something that we would look into, perhaps under the auspices of the Holyhead taskforce in terms of how we would respond to any future incidents of this nature”.²⁶

Our view

In an unfolding emergency clear, consistent and timely communications are vitally important. We do not believe Welsh Government achieved this regarding Holyhead closure. We would have expected communication between the Cabinet Secretary and the Port to happen sooner, and in general communications to be clearer.

²³ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 243

²⁴ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 137

²⁵ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 457

²⁶ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 458 & 459

We were particularly surprised to learn the first communications between Welsh Government and the Road Haulage Association did not take place until weeks after the incident. Trade bodies are well placed to assist in communicating both to and from their Members and in this case the RHA would have been able to get messages out to drivers on the ground and to assist Welsh Government's understanding of the unfolding incident.

It appears that the Welsh Government handled 'high profile' parts of the response quickly and efficiently. However, day-to-day elements seem to have slipped. We are concerned this may be a symptom of having two people ultimately responsible for the response, which created a gap between them where issues could fall.

We were also disappointed to hear that time was lost, particularly at the beginning of the incident. Whilst we can not comment on the repair work as we did not take technical or engineering evidence, we were concerned to hear the IRHA's view that they felt remedial work did not start as quickly as it should have. We were also very concerned that the RHA, IRHA and the Irish Maritime Development Office all felt that communications could have been quicker immediately following the incident.

Whilst we have tried our best to piece together a timeline of events including working out who knew what when and who had spoken to whom this is something we have not been able to do with the information available. It would be immensely helpful to aid the Committee's understanding of events and our work on this issue if the Welsh Government would clearly set that information out.

The evidence makes it clear many stakeholders felt the Scottish Government got their response to the Port closure right. Welsh Government should ensure they examine the Scottish Government's response as part of the lessons learned exercise we have recommended.

Conclusion 2. The Committee was dismayed by the apparent lack of speed and urgency in the Welsh Government's response to the closure of Wales' busiest ferry port along a crucial European trade route. The Committee has seen limited evidence that the Welsh Government has adequately addressed the closure in the past three months. Members believe it was local action and collaboration between ports that prevented Holyhead's closure from being a true disaster for Welsh trade and the economy.

Recommendation 3. Members feel they still do not have a clear picture of how the Welsh Government’s response to the incident and port closure unfolded. The Welsh Government should set out a timeline of internal actions it took in response to the closure from the first collision on 6 December 2024. This should include steps taken to obtain the most up to date trade data from HMRC.

Understanding the challenges for the local area and offering support

25. Cybi Business Forum told Members that even though the Port has reopened “footfall is still significantly down in the town, whether that's down to the Port closure or not, and the reopening and the uncertainty about what's happening moving forward. We still are seeing decreased footfall in the town”.²⁷ This was supported by data from the Isle of Anglesey County Council which showed footfall in Holyhead Town Centre had decreased by 36% in December and 33% in January compared to the same month a year earlier.²⁸

26. Cybi Business Forum also highlighted that the Port was closed at an important time saying “It's not the peak tourism season, but certainly in terms of Christmas and travel to and from Ireland, it is a peak time, and this is what severely impacted on the hospitality businesses in the town.”²⁹

27. Isle of Anglesey County Council highlighted that the drop in footfall has negatively affected a wide range of businesses, with some businesses reporting trade was down by 90% during the closure. In particular, transport, storage, retail and accommodation sectors were impacted by the closure.³⁰ West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce had received evidence of impacts of the closure from businesses all the way down the coast to Deeside.³¹

28. West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce gave Members examples of the challenges - “a hotel operator lost over £15,000 across that period of Christmas because of cancelled bookings, and a couple on Market Street—again, the smaller end of that SME market—their sales are down by 25 per cent in town, because they're not having those passengers that are coming off the ferries”.³²

²⁷ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 326

²⁸ Isle of Anglesey County Council [Written Evidence](#)

²⁹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 337

³⁰ Isle of Anglesey County Council [Written Evidence](#)

³¹ Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraphs 366 and 368

³² Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 343

29. The RHA gave an example of how the logistics sector has been affected, saying that a haulier reported “in the run-up to Christmas, for the amount of time that he spent or he paid for his drivers to sit idle at the dock waiting to move, in the run-up to Christmas, it totalled more than £50,000”.³³

30. In their written evidence Isle of Anglesey County Council outlined the findings of their survey aimed at understanding “the impacts the closure had incurred upon Anglesey and Welsh businesses”. Key results included:

54% of respondents stated that jobs were at risk due to the closure of the Port.

Of the jobs at risk, 74% of these included permanent roles, with only 20% being zero-hour contracts.

*95% felt that a reduced number of sailings from the 16th of January would impact their businesses.*³⁴

31. Cybi Business Forum and the West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce told us that the retail, transport and logistics sectors are relatively back to normal, but that it is too early to tell for the tourism and hospitality sectors as it’s still early in the tourist season.³⁵

32. The Council told the Committee they had “commenced discussions with the Welsh Government in terms of support for businesses. We have shared the business study, we have shared the hard data, and dialogue is ongoing. We have asked for additional financial support and practical measures to be introduced to mitigate the impacts. The request includes direct financial aid, business rate relief, marketing campaigns and also support for local events.”³⁶

33. When asked about financial support for businesses the Cabinet Secretary for Economy Energy and Planning told Members the Welsh Government had “recently had that information [the survey] from the local authority”. The Welsh Government is “exploring the information” and officials were in “constant contact with the local authority on in order to be able to come to a resolution” around support.³⁷

³³ Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 260

³⁴ Isle of Anglesey County Council [Written Evidence](#)

³⁵ Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraphs 349 and 351

³⁶ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 382

³⁷ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 558

34. The Committee discussed comparisons with support offered to business during the closure of the Menai Bridge. As part of this a Welsh Government Official told Members support during the bridge closure was offered through “advisory and capacity building and non-domestic rates”. He told the Committee Welsh Government had “already started the advisory and capacity work, but we do need to consider ... if a direct intervention is justified, mindful of setting a precedent for the future”.³⁸

Our view

We are pleased that work has been undertaken by the local authority to assess the effect the Port closure has had on local businesses. However, four months on from the start of the Port’s closure we are yet to see a decision from the Welsh Government on whether to provide financial support to affected businesses.

As we move away from the closure we are also moving away from the point of greatest need and where support would be most effective, although we are also mindful of the potential impacts facing some local businesses while one terminal remains closed. The Welsh Government needs to come to a decision quickly on this, and to clearly communicate the rationale for its decision to local businesses.

While we were relieved to hear from the local authority that the Port’s closure has not led to the anticipated level of job losses, we believe greater understanding of the impacts of the Port’s closure on local workers would be beneficial. For example, understanding how local workers have been affected by lost hours and/or income would give a fuller picture of the impacts on the town and surrounding areas.

Conclusion 3. Whilst the Committee was broadly satisfied that the work the Isle of Anglesey County Council undertook gave a clear view of how business were affected by the closure, Members are concerned about the lack of understanding of how the consequences of the closure impacted the workforce. For example, the Committee would like to have a clearer picture of the effects of job losses and lost working hours on households. For this, and any similar future incidents, the Welsh Government should examine how it can work with partners to directly understand the impact on workers as well as businesses.

³⁸ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 560

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should urgently decide what financial and other support it will provide to local businesses affected by the closure, and publicly communicate the reasons for its decision.

3. Trade diversions

35. Holyhead is a key point along the UK land bridge for freight traveling from Ireland to continental Europe. In his written evidence Professor Andrew Potter set out the trade flows through Holyhead before the closure:

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 [in Scotland] continues to see growth.³⁹

36. Fortunately Professor Potter does not foresee a long-term reduction in trade as a result of this closure. In his written evidence he said “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.” He went on to say “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” and welcomed the creation of the Taskforce.⁴⁰

37. The Irish Maritime Development Office highlighted that traditionally Holyhead is viewed as an extremely reliable port. They went on to say “104 sailings a week were lost as a result of the closure of Holyhead, and traffic had to be redeployed to other routes. The routes that were most important in terms of that reallocation of traffic were services out of Dublin to Liverpool, and then ad hoc services that Stena Line and Irish Ferries put in place into southern Welsh ports—Fishguard and Pembroke. Those services out of Dublin absorbed about 45 per cent of the diverted traffic from Holyhead, including services in and out of Liverpool and Heysham. Northern Ireland routes also benefited significantly from diverted traffic, with about 30 per cent of the remainder moving through

³⁹ Professor Andrew Potter [written evidence](#)

⁴⁰ Professor Andrew Potter [written evidence](#)

Northern Ireland routes, and Rosslare handled about 25 per cent. So, that's the split in terms of distribution."⁴¹

38. When asked about the effect of Holyhead closure on Welsh trade, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning told the Committee "The data for regional trade for the period affected hasn't yet been published. The data for up to December 2024 will be published on the twentieth of this month, so we'll have a much clearer picture at that point." She went on to say Welsh Government doesn't publish trade data but according to HMRC this December "the value of trade going through Holyhead was £432.2 million. In December the previous year, the value was £922.6 million" and that whilst those numbers need unpicking that gives a high level picture of the difference.⁴²

39. When asked about the possibility of diversion plans made in response to the closure becoming permanent, and as such trade being diverted away from Holyhead in the long run the Cabinet Secretary said:

"Ultimately, individual companies will be making commercial decisions on whether to continue to use alternative ports as a result of the closure, or whether to return to Holyhead. That information will become clearer in due course. But, more widely as well, it's not really possible to disentangle the impact of the port's closure from other events that have impacted on trade. I know, recently, we talked with committee about the impact of Brexit, for example, on trade. So, there are a range of things that I think are coming into play together. But, once we do have that data, I think we'll be in a much better position to provide a bit more detailed analysis of what the impact was."⁴³

Our view

The Cabinet Secretary highlighted that the value of trade going through Holyhead this December was almost half a billion pounds less than the year before. It is clear the closure of the port will have been a large contributing factor behind that reduction. This acutely underlines the importance of the port for Welsh, UK and European trade and the economy of North Wales. We are also concerned about how this reduction of trade may have affected businesses.

⁴¹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 217

⁴² Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 538

⁴³ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 542

We recently warned of the risk of trade diversions and dislocations away from Welsh ports in our report *Border Target Operating Model: A view from Wales*.⁴⁴ While we welcome witness' evidence, that the closure is unlikely to pose further long-term dislocations of trade away from Welsh ports, we remain concerned that this incident may have further exacerbated matters covered in our report relating to trade diversions via other ports in Scotland and England or via direct Ireland – continental Europe.

We welcome increases in trade volumes to Wales's southern ports as a result of the diversions put in place in response to the closure, however, we are acutely aware that other ports, particularly Cairnryan, are becoming increasingly attractive routes, with fewer trade barriers than Welsh ports post-Brexit.

The UK's departure from the EU has resulted in additional reporting requirements for trade, including the introduction of pre-notification at Welsh ports. As such we were also surprised to learn of the Welsh Government's reliance on published HMRC data and expected the Cabinet Secretary to instead have described steps taken by the Welsh Government to proactively obtain more timely updates from HMRC.

It is not clear to us if and how the Welsh Government is taking advantage of this new data to place itself in the best possible position to understand trade flows through Wales. This is all the more significant in light of the Welsh Government's long-term concerns regarding trade diversions away from Welsh ports to ports in England and Scotland since Brexit, and its efforts to coordinate a joint approach to the western seaboard of Great Britain in response.

Conclusion 4. The Committee outlined concerns about trade diversions in its report, the *Border Target Operating Model: A view from Wales* report. The Welsh Government must use all available levers to ensure Holyhead remains an attractive choice to avoid trade diversions.

⁴⁴ Committee report – *Border Target Operating Model: A view from Wales*

4. Long term transport policy

40. The National Transport Delivery Plan 2022-2027 contains a commitment to develop both a Welsh Ports and Maritime Strategy and a Wales National Freight and Logistics Plan by 2024.⁴⁵ Neither of those deadlines were met.

41. Professor Andrew Potter told the Committee he felt it was “quite disappointing that we haven't got a freight strategy”⁴⁶ highlighting that Minister’s had committed to developing one and that “the current Cabinet Secretary said that there would be a strategy by the end of the year but there is no further progress on that. And given that the last one was in 2008, that seems to be quite remiss”.⁴⁷ He went on to tell Members “I think it's a question as to whether it's capacity in Welsh Government to deliver the strategy or broader ministerial priorities versus other elements” he went on to highlight that freight was in competition with improving the railways which tends to get more attention.⁴⁸

42. One of the first pieces of work this Committee undertook was looking at HGV driver shortages and supply chain issues. The report on that work, A New Direction for HGV Drivers, contained several recommendations that are relevant to this incident including a recommendation to expedite development of a freight plan which incorporating the recommendations from said report and to urgently work with partners to improve HGV driver rest provision.⁴⁹ All of the recommendations in that Report were accepted by the Welsh Government.⁵⁰

43. Poor quality rest provision at Holyhead will have made the experience of being stranded worse for drivers than it needed to be. The RHA told Members Holyhead is one of a number of ports “where it's really poorly served in terms of rest facilities, hygiene facilities et cetera” and that this caused particular issues where you had to stack lorries. They explained:

“Although there is a privately owned small concern that is available, you're only looking at between 30 and 50 spaces there, and in terms of facilities, it's a portaloos and a burger van”

⁴⁵ Gov.Wales [National transport delivery plan 2022-2027](#)

⁴⁶ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 267

⁴⁷ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 267

⁴⁸ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 268

⁴⁹ Committee report - [A new direction for HGV drivers](#)

⁵⁰ [Welsh Government response](#) to A new direction for HGV drivers report

44. They highlighted that although it wasn't ideal the work undertaken at Castle Kennedy made it a much better location to stack for Cairnryan.⁵¹

45. The Cabinet Secretaries confirmed that work was still ongoing on both the Ports and Maritime Strategy and the Freight strategy. However, both timeframes have slipped and both strategies will be influenced by outcomes of the Holyhead Taskforce which is yet to meet.

46. Regarding the Ports and Maritime strategy the Cabinet Secretary for Economy Energy and Planning told Members:

In terms of sequencing this work, the work of the taskforce is coming first to identify any resilience measures that we might want to put in place ahead of the autumn, when the weather starts to turn again. So, that's our immediate focus and priority, but we do of course have that commitment to provide a ports and maritime strategy, and that would be much wider than the remit just of the taskforce. And then it will give a single document that will emphasise the needs of all of our ports here in Wales, right across from north to south.⁵²

47. Regarding the Freight and Logistics strategy, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales told Members:

initial work has been conducted on the freight and logistics strategy. We're working with other UK Governments to ensure that we have as best a consistent approach to our freight and logistics strategy as possible. The work of the taskforce is going to be crucially important, I think, in helping to shape the freight and logistics strategy, so that will follow after we've completed the work of the taskforce. But we are committed to publishing that new strategy before the next election.⁵³

Our View

It is extremely disappointed that neither the Ports and Maritime Strategy, nor the Freight and Logistics Plan, have been developed. It is shocking that Welsh freight is working under a public policy framework that was developed 17 years ago..

⁵¹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 249

⁵² Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 526

⁵³ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 548

To the best of our knowledge no public consultation has been undertaken to date either, so we are unclear about the extent to which work on either the Ports and Maritime Strategy, nor the Freight and Logistics Plan underway.

We note the comments from both Cabinet Secretaries that the work of the taskforce is now relevant to both, and recognise that this is the case. However, we would highlight that according to the National Transport Delivery Plan both should have been at least ready for publication at the point the incidents took place. We are also frustrated to see the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales has set a new deadline of 'before the next election' for the freight and logistics strategy. That equates to a year and a half slippage, by that time the current strategy will be 18 years old.

We feel this is indicative of the lack of attention Welsh Government has paid to ports and freight this Senedd. We believe had these documents been in place both the Welsh Government response and the experience of hauliers and others affected by the Holyhead Port closure may have been better.

Conclusion 5. The Welsh Government has shown a lack of attention to both ports and freight during this Senedd. Members believe that if there had been greater engagement with the Ports and freight sectors, and the recommendations set out in the Committee's A New Direction for HGV Drivers report had been implemented, then Welsh Government would have been in a better position to respond to this crisis. We believe that the delays to both the maritime and ports strategy and freight plan illustrates a lack of engagement with these sectors may have placed the Welsh Government at a disadvantage now.

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should expedite its work to implement the recommendations in the Committee's A New Direction for HGV Drivers and to bring forwards the maritime and ports strategy and freight plan as a matter of urgency once the task force has completed its work.

5. The Irish Sea Taskforce

48. On 7 January the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales announced the establishment of “a Welsh Government-led multistakeholder taskforce to develop a new strategy for the future of Holyhead” in a statement to Plenary.⁵⁴

49. On 14 March, following a meeting with the new Irish Government, the Cabinet Secretary released a Written Statement outlining further details on the Taskforce. The Cabinet Secretary said “I met Ireland’s newly appointed Minister for Transport, Sean Canney, and discussed the Ireland-Wales relationship and the proposed terms of reference for the Welsh Government led Taskforce on Irish Sea resilience.” He went on to say:

I have asked my officials to circulate the draft terms of reference to the Taskforce members ahead of the Taskforce agreeing them at its first meeting on 27 March on Ynys Môn. Membership of the taskforce will consist of a core group, including among others, representatives from the Government of Ireland, the UK government, the Scottish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, local authorities, port and ferry operators, and representatives of the logistics sector. We also intend to draw on specific sectoral expertise during future thematic meetings of the Taskforce.⁵⁵

50. On 6 March, when the Committee took evidence on Holyhead Closure, Members were surprised to hear that very little work had been undertaken on the Taskforce at that point.⁵⁶ However witnesses had many items they thought the Taskforce should consider. Regarding the Taskforce Stena Line Ports told Members “Obviously, we’re reviewing procedures and what happened and our own resilience. I think, when you look at the bigger picture of what’s happened and the mention of a taskforce, we all recognise Holyhead’s importance in this logistics chain, this very important logistics chain between the UK and Ireland, but we are but one part of that chain. There are a lot of other parts; there’s the road, there’s the rail, there are the bridges that connect either side, and so forth.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Plenary, 07 January 2025, Paragraph 217

⁵⁵ Gov.Wales [Written Statement: Visit to Ireland](#)

⁵⁶ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 142

⁵⁷ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 159

51. The West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce told Members they would be keen for the Taskforce to examine “the plan for refurbishment [of the Port], but then that longer term plan of maintenance and continuity and that side of things as well.”⁵⁸

52. Cybi Business Forum expanded on this saying “an economic impact assessment would be useful, but also to try and think about all these different projects in the round as well. Because you have got the gateway project, the Port expansion, you've got the free port that has been identified. Travel routes into the town, from a local perspective, are very congested, and, if you think about the volume of traffic that goes over black bridge, any sort of disruption to that just stacks traffic up right through the town.”⁵⁹

53. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales explained that the delay in establishing the taskforce was because Welsh Government needed the details to be “approved by Irish Ministers, given that this is a joint endeavour, and there has been a huge amount of change” “within the Irish Government in the past couple of months following the Irish General Election.”⁶⁰

Our View

There is a large weight of expectation being placed on the shoulders of the Irish Sea Taskforce. Whilst we are glad the Welsh Government is working with partners, including the Irish Government, to improve Irish Sea links we have concerns around the speed the taskforce will be able to work at and its agility.

While we note the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales comments regarding the effect of the Irish General election, we also note that the Irish Government was formed on 23 January,⁶¹ six weeks before our evidence session. We also note that the Irish Ministers in place at the time of the incident, while the Government was being formed, were highly engaged with the events.

Stakeholders have raised a long list of issues that could be addressed by the Taskforce, and the Welsh Government has also noted that long anticipated policies on freight and ports will now also be subject to the work of the Taskforce. The Taskforce will need to take a dynamic approach that prioritises necessary improvements and helps bring these to fruition, and avoids potential

⁵⁸ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 420

⁵⁹ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 422

⁶⁰ Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee, 06 March 2025, Paragraph 504

⁶¹ Gov.ie [Speech by Taoiseach Micheál Martin](#) on announcement of Members of Government, 23 January 2025

pitfalls such as trying to take on too much, resulting in delays. We will keenly follow the work of the Taskforce over the remainder of this Senedd.

We also feel it is important to remember resilience does not stop at the Port gate. A key part of the list of stakeholder concerns were bottlenecks and weak points of the transport network outside of the port – particularly the two Mani crossings. Any increased resilience for Holyhead Port itself will not achieve its goal if it is not supported by increased resilience along the route into Holyhead, including the crossings.

Recommendation 6. The Committee intends to monitor the work of the Irish Sea Task force. To assist with this, the Welsh Government must set out full details of its terms of reference, membership and tasks including timescales. The Task force should regularly update the Committee. The Irish Sea Task force’s objectives should include:

- Understanding the causes of the events at Holyhead to understand whether there are any implications for the wider ports sector or ports policy;
- Ensuring the future safety of the Port;
- Improving facilities for drivers at / en route to Holyhead;
- Assessing the resilience of, and improving transport links, to Holyhead including consideration of rail connections;
- Supporting the long-term viability of the Port and avoiding trade diversion; and
- Ensuring there is a strong contingency plan for any future closure at Holyhead in particular and Welsh ports in general. In particular, this should include traffic management, communications, implementation of alternative maritime routes and support for local businesses.