

BY THE HYDROGRAPHER OF THE UK

“As it Is”™

Open any publication in the maritime sector and you will encounter a litany of discourse and debate as experts expound on the state of the industry, the latest in technology and the direction of recent and future legislation. Therefore, furnished with the title “As It Is”™, I’d like to reflect for a moment on why we’re really here.

Our first concern is the safety of the mariner. Indeed, the formation of the UKHO came about in 1795 when King George III, concerned at loss of life in uncharted territories appointed the first Hydrographer to the Admiralty, Alexander Dalrymple, to review the “difficulties and dangers to his Majesty’s fleet in the navigation of ships”™. Our commitment to safety of life at sea (SOLAS) remains unaltered. The needs of the mariner must continue to provide the focus, not simply for the UKHO, but the industry as a whole.

So what is the international hydrographic community doing for today’s mariner - are we really in touch with his needs? The evidence would suggest not.

Currently around 65 per cent of new-build ships are fitted with Electronic Chart Display Information Systems as standard. A considerable number of ships are being retrospectively fitted with ECDIS as I write. At this rate, by 2014, as many as 50 per cent of SOLAS vessels will be equipped to use digital charts as their primary means of navigation.

In sea trials we have carried out, Electronic Navigational Charts (ENCs) accounted for less than a quarter of a typical trans-oceanic journey. According to mariners we have spoken to, this leaves most crews with an expensive commodity which is woefully underutilised, complicated by the number of changeovers in systems and formats.

Yet we are supposed to be here to make navigation safer and easier.

The UKHO recently co-hosted a conference with the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore to provide a platform for prolific users, manufacturers and maritime safety agencies to review progress and debate the future of ECDIS. If we really are listening to the mariner, then for me, the statement which encapsulated the mood of the conference was made by Paul Beggs, Nautical Manager of Princess Cruises: “Don’t give me excuses, give me ENCs”. So what are we doing about it?

The organisers of the conference recognised this call for action and took the messages to the International Hydrographic Organisation (IHO), with a further commitment to carry out an independent audit to ensure we have bottomed out the issues. Also, the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office has set up an organisation called Admiralty Holdings Ltd. Its purpose is to sit alongside the UKHO to deliver new products and services to meet the needs of the mariner.

This is not enough. The IHO World Electronic Navigational Database committee is struggling to increase seamless ENC coverage. To date a solution has not been forthcoming. The regional HO commissions are moving only slowly in finding ways to produce ENCs of their territorial waters.

Meanwhile, working together, the UKHO and a small number of other HO’s utilising services offered by companies in the private sector, have both the data and the ability to create all ENCs needed in less than 18 months. Isn’t it time to consider our mariner and let progress take its course?