

Andrew RT Davies
MS Chair: Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF99 1SN

SeneddEconomy@senedd.wales

27th January 2026

Holyhead Port Closures

Dear Mr. Davies,

The handling of the most recent incident was notably improved when compared with the events of 2024/2025. That progress should be acknowledged. However, as with all incidents of this nature, there remain clear lessons to be learned and further improvements that must be made.

On this occasion, Stena were slow to recognise the severity of the damage and to notify either the Welsh or Irish Governments and their respective Departments of Transport. The damage occurred at approximately 08:00–08:30 and was clearly visible, including a hole in the vessel's hull. It would be reasonable for any competent operator to understand that such damage would inevitably require delay, inspection, and contingency planning.

Despite this, it was the Irish Road Haulage Association that alerted the Irish Government at approximately 10:00. The Irish authorities then informed the Welsh Government while simultaneously seeking clarity from Stena. Only following this intervention was the incident classified as major or severe, triggering the appropriate level of inspection and response.

This raises a fundamental issue. In incidents of this scale, there should be a mandatory requirement for ferry operators to immediately notify the relevant authorities. Whether this obligation is established through legislation, protocol, licence conditions, or binding regulation, it must be unequivocal and enforceable.

At a minimum, ferry operators such as Stena and Irish Ferries should immediately alert freight and coach operators holding direct accounts with them. There remains a reluctance to do so, which we believe is driven more by market protection and commercial interests than by the needs of Wales, Ireland, the travelling public, tourism, and the haulage and transport sectors.

Notably, the ferry operator did not initiate any discussion regarding alternative routing or contingency arrangements. Such discussions should commence immediately upon the occurrence of an incident and continue throughout the inspection process.

In fairness, a decision and reopening timeline was communicated at approximately 15:00, representing a significant improvement. However, we firmly believe this was influenced by the direct involvement of both Welsh and Irish Government officials. Our association was actively pressing Departments, Ministers, Politicians, and Media outlets. Without that level of pressure, it is doubtful that the same urgency or responsiveness would have been achieved.

One striking observation from this response is the continued absence of pre-prepared alternative plans or route scenarios, despite the experiences of 2024/2025. We have not been informed, nor do we believe either Government has seen the completion of the promised interoperability trials allowing ferries to berth and manoeuvre at all ports serving Wales and Ireland. These trials were repeatedly committed to at meetings and forums, with completion promised by November 2025.

Once these trials are completed, there should be ready-made scenario templates for alternative routing. These must account for freight logistics, departure and arrival ports, and include Birkenhead, Liverpool, and all ferry operators, not solely Ro-Ro services. Such planning is essential for worst-case scenarios arising from weather, climate impacts, human error, or unforeseen accidents.

We would also ask the Welsh authorities to assess whether any older berths further within the port remain available or could be reactivated, even for smaller vessels, particularly when shelter is required.

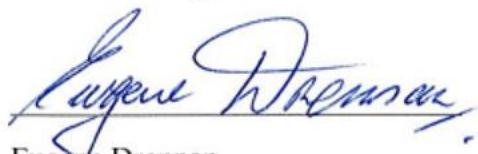
In addition, we strongly encourage a detailed review of the current single-berth scheduling system. From our observations, this approach is now well embedded and functioning effectively. During two test periods over Christmas, the single-vessel scheduling allowed heavy seasonal traffic to flow steadily, with reduced congestion, less clustering, and improved safety on the A55. It also improved access for local traffic and reduced emissions, contributing positively to carbon reduction.

From a safety perspective, this system significantly improves conditions within the port for employees, users, and statutory agencies, allowing them to operate more effectively and securely. The efficiencies gained benefit all stakeholders.

While ferry companies are private entities, there are wider public, economic, and safety considerations that must take precedence over purely commercial interests. If operators believe they have incurred losses, they should quantify these and engage constructively so that such concerns can be incorporated into workable solutions. However, under no circumstances should we revert to scenarios where multiple ferry arrivals and departures are scheduled simultaneously, as this creates unnecessary risk and congestion while reducing flexibility for all ferry customers. With eight sailings constrained to just four available time slots, the resulting compressed timetable forces ferries to arrive and depart at the same time. This leads to traffic congestion within ports and on surrounding road networks, as well as excessive vehicle stacking inside port areas, particularly in Dublin, where space is already severely limited.

We respectfully request a thorough and in-depth review of these matters.

Yours sincerely,



Eugene Drennan