

Press release

For immediate release

Centre provides first port of call for sailors

THE FINISHING touches have been applied to a drop in centre that is set to welcome more seafarers than ever at a growing port.

Seafarers from around the world are benefitting from new facilities at the Stella Maris Centre, a drop in facility based at Port of Sunderland, which is provided by the Apostleship of the Sea (AoS) the Roman Catholic Charity and ministry to seafarers, which aims to provide practical and pastoral support during their time in the North East.

The drop in centre was first refurbished in 2008 after Sister Mary Scholastica of St Anthony's Convent, spotted the building, then known as West House, which had been sitting empty for some time.

Sister Scholastica and Juliana Henderson, are both qualified ship welfare visitors who maintain and run the centre, provide tea and coffee, toiletries, warm clothing and phone top ups as well as the use of a new laptop to help the seafarers stay in touch with loved ones while away at sea.

Tony McAvoy, AoS North East regional co-ordinator, who oversees the running of the centre, said: "The centre is a safe haven for seafarers visiting Port of Sunderland and we aim to care for all ranks, nationalities and beliefs of those that pass through the door. There's always an outstretched hand and smiling face awaiting their arrival, which perfectly reflects the ethos of our volunteers and that of the people of Sunderland.

"From India to the Philippines, each seafarer travels far afield generally expecting nothing but appreciating everything in the way of help, and the commitment and support shown by our volunteers and local parishes is invaluable in keeping the centre open and giving visitors to the city a warm welcome. So much work has been done to refurbish and decorate the building, with great support and funding from the port's management team, so that today it is a really welcoming place for seafarers."

The management team at Port of Sunderland donated the unused building to the charity to allow it to make use of it for visiting sailors looking for somewhere to go. As well as use of its facilities, volunteers at the centre help seafarers explore Sunderland, offering directions to the city centre, which is within walking distance of the port.

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Matthew Hunt, port director at Port of Sunderland, said: "Seafarers can be on contracts of six months or more with barely any time ashore, so the drop in centre brings a welcome break from life on board a ship or sea vessel. Such support is rare among smaller ports but we're thrilled to be able to offer this service and utilise what would have been a redundant building to give people a warm welcome to Sunderland and make their stay here as enjoyable as possible.

"Traffic into the port has almost doubled over the course of the last year or so, and as it becomes busier, with more and more commercial vessels coming into Sunderland, this centre will become an increasingly well-used resource and one that will play an important role in showcasing this great city to people from overseas."

For more information about Sunderland and the Port of Sunderland visit www.makeitsunderland.com, email info@makeitsunderland.com or call +44 (0) 191 305 1194.

Alternatively, for more information on the Apostleship of the Sea (Stella Maris Centre) visit www.apostleshipofthesea.org.uk, email info@apostleshipofthesea.org.uk or call +44 (0) 20 7588 8285.

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