

Wightlink's next generation fleet set to enter service at Lymington and Yarmouth



For the last three years Wightlink has been working towards the replacement of its old ferries on the Lymington to Yarmouth route with its new W-Class ferries custom-designed and purpose-built for operation in the Lymington River.

The entry into service of the W-Class will be the fruition of a £26million investment to introduce vessels offering 21st Century standards to the one million passengers each year who rely on this lifeline service.

The existing ferries are 35 years old and are in desperate need of replacement with modern vessels that meet current safety and environmental standards. The investment will benefit Wightlink's customers and the economies of Lymington, Yarmouth, the New Forest area and the Isle of Wight as the new vessels secure the future of the route and help develop jobs in the region.

Consultation and various detailed studies on the operation and impact of the new ferries are either now complete or nearing completion including independent sea trials and environmental assessments. Following the extensive research and receipt of expert scientific advice, and in compliance with its statutory obligations, Wightlink is satisfied that the new ferries are safe to operate and will have no discernable impact on the environment or the surrounding habitats in the Lymington estuary.

Wightlink acknowledges that concerns have been raised regarding the new ferries and their potential effect on the protected mud and salt marsh habitats at Lymington. Environmental consultants ABPmer have undertaken extensive studies of the effects of the ferries and have engaged in detailed discussions on environmental issues with Natural England, their consultants – HR Wallingford, Lymington Harbour Commissioners and their consultants, Black & Veatch.

All parties have recognised that an assessment of the past and likely future environmental effects of the ferries, both old and new, is extremely difficult. It is particularly hard to isolate the effects of the ferries from the natural forces that have been and continue to act upon the mud and salt marshes. Despite this difficulty, all parties have gone to great lengths to try and reach an agreement as to the most reliable data regarding the historical rates and causes of erosion of the protected sites.

Natural England has advised Wightlink that it cannot be ascertained that the new ferries will not have an adverse effect on the protected sites. ABPmer disagrees with HR Wallingford's approach to the data and the conclusions that Natural England has drawn from it, suggesting that insufficient consideration has been given by HR Wallingford to the prospective causes of erosion, other than the ferries. On the basis of clear advice from ABPmer, Wightlink is confident that the new ferries will not have an adverse effect on the integrity of the mud and salt marshes in the Lymington estuary.

Discussions regarding the introduction of the new ferries will continue with the regulatory authorities with regards to environmental issues and the final sea trial. Until this trial is completed, which requires a very specific combination of tide and wind and the final assessment of the sea trials is received from BMT Seatech, the independent consultants overseeing the trials, the new ferries will be introduced under a 'Safe Operating Profile'.

A copy of the legal advice that Wightlink has received on its environmental obligations can be obtained from the following link. www.wightlink.co.uk/newships. This advice shows that Wightlink has fully complied with its legal obligations.

Finally, Wightlink would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has supported it in realising this investment in the service. The new ferries are good news for the region and will improve considerably the service between Lymington and Yarmouth, a vital transport link that is depended upon by over one million passengers every year.