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Maintenance of pilot ladders

Pilot ladders, where appropriate, remain the most common and efficient means for pilots to board vessels. However, despite the apparent simplicity of the process, improper pilot transfer arrangements continue to give rise to claims. These can include serious injuries to pilots, occasionally resulting in death. In the last five years (2020-2024), the Club has been notified of ten incidents relating to pilot ladders, one of which resulted in a fatality.

Pilots are typically required to board ships at sea, often in challenging conditions and sometimes on vessels with high freeboards. Pilot transfer arrangements generally consist of a rope ladder constructed in accordance with statutory requirements. However, for vessels with a larger freeboard, both the ship's accommodation ladder and the pilot ladder are used.

To reduce the risk of incidents, it is imperative that pilot ladders, accommodation ladders, and all associated equipment are properly maintained, stowed, and inspected as part of an ongoing process. Defective ropes and worn or damaged steps remain among the leading causes of associated incidents. Planned maintenance systems should therefore include regular inspections of pilot transfer arrangements, with particular attention paid to the condition of the pilot ladder itself.

The importance of stringent inspections cannot be overstated. The pilot ladder remains the weakest link in the transfer arrangement, and failures (such as deterioration of the natural fibre ropes, broken chocks used to support the ladder steps or damaged spreaders) can cause the ladder to give way under load. This can result in personnel falling onto the pilot boat or into the sea, with potentially fatal consequences.

It is essential that pilot ladder certificates, inspection reports, and maintenance records are maintained on board, kept up to date and accurately reflect the condition of the equipment. Verification of these records should be included in shore side internal audits.

Detailed guidance on pilot transfer arrangements is provided in the [Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers](#) (COSWP), published by the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). Statutory requirements, set out in SOLAS Chapter V Regulation 23, also require that pilot ladders must be certified by a manufacturer for meeting the regulatory standard.

Future amendments to SOLAS V/23, entering into force on 1 January 2028, will introduce stricter requirements, including:

- Mandatory renewal – pilot ladders and manropes must be replaced within 36 months of manufacture or within 30 months after the date of being placed into service.
- Independent approval – pilot transfer equipment must undergo a stricter type-approval process (self-certification will no longer be permitted).
- Higher standards – new requirements will align with ISO 799 (Parts 1–3), covering aspects such as trapdoor design and securing methods for intermediate lengths.

In addition, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Maritime Pilots' Association (IMPA) have issued joint [guidance](#) to remind seafarers and companies of the vital importance of adhering to the rules and established procedures concerning the provision of safe transferring arrangements for pilots.

The Club recommends that Members draw their crews' attention to these requirements and ensure that pilot ladders and associated transfer arrangements are always maintained to the highest standards.