

CEO's report to MSSC Annual Court 2026

Good afternoon and thank you so much for being here today. Your support for Marine Society & Sea Cadets is hugely appreciated, and I'm particularly grateful for the support I've received from members, supporters, volunteers and employees during my first full year in post.

Cadet leadership has been a real theme of the year, and I've been delighted by the growth and tangible impact of our Cadet Voice programme.

Feedback suggests that being heard through Cadet Voice is having a direct influence on the current upward trend in cadets' average length of stay – which has risen to 28 months, from 26 months in April 2024. That's why we continue to invest in the programme, with seven new volunteer roles created to promote Cadet Voice during the year – helping to grow the proportion of units holding cadet forums from 50% to 60%.

I've also been delighted to watch our National Cadet Voice Team influencing decision makers at the Party Conferences over the past few weeks. In making the case for the economic and social value of Sea Cadets, they were not just on the conference fringe (like most charities) – but speaking with the likes of the Defence Secretary Wes Streeting, and supportive ministers like Calvin Bailey and Louise Sandher-Jones.

This engagement is a crucial way for our charity to align with relevant national policies – including the government's National Youth Strategy, which makes it clear that access to charitable funds will be increasingly dependent on being able to demonstrate effective youth participation.

It is worth highlighting that as an independent charity, we are the only cadet force able to attend party conferences in this way. This means only our cadets have a platform which empowers them to advocate for the things that really matter to them – whether relating to Sea Cadets, or the wider youth issues they are so passionate about.

Thanks to our cadets, those influential politicians went away understanding the importance of government funding for our cadets and volunteers; but they also learned why Sea Cadets is a ready-made solution for tackling the NEETs crisis facing the UK.

On average, across our country, 16% of 18 to 25-year-olds are not in education, employment or training. But when we just look at Sea Cadets alumni between those ages, that figure drops to just 1.9% – an astonishing difference. Furthermore, 80% of our alumni said that Sea Cadets increased their community spirit and desire to help others.

So, let's look at some of the training and activity that is preparing our cadets so effectively – and allowing them to launch well in life.

As ever, our activity on the water was the cornerstone of that careful process of development and progression. And in spite of increasing disruption from extreme

weather and other environmental factors, the tireless efforts of our unit boating volunteers, regional boat station instructors, and our Offshore Team, allowed Sea Cadets to reach its benchmark of 30 boating hours per cadet in 2025/26.

This was the fourth successive year we have achieved that crucial KPI, with over 400,000 cadet boating hours delivered in total – down by just 1.7% on 2024/25, despite the circumstances beyond our control.

We continued to put the ‘Sea’ into Sea Cadets, with almost 1,400 cadets enjoying a memorable offshore voyage in 2025. 92% said they had fun, and 90% found the adult staff to be fun and engaging. 91% said the training encouraged them to develop new skills or try new things.

A highlight of the season was being chosen to accompany the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships on their very special 85th anniversary return to France. The cadets onboard TS John Jerwood were exceptional ambassadors for Sea Cadets while in France – even assisting His Royal Highness Prince Michael of Kent at several official ceremonies.

Another success story was seeing a revitalised TS Royalist put on a tremendous showing in the Tall Ships Races 2025. In a fitting celebration of her 10th anniversary, our young team secured a fantastic second place in the first race – up against 40 much more experienced crews – and remained in the top five after their long final leg to Aberdeen.

Thanks to the amazing supporters who contributed almost a million pounds to our refit appeal, Royalist can now look forward to another decade at sea – giving around 6,000 cadets the adventure of a lifetime.

Sea Cadets is now the leading sail training provider within the Association of Sail Training Organisations, accounting for more than 21% of all training berths annually and offering 39% more training spaces than the next largest provider.

And we continue to remove financial barriers to participation, by providing substantial subsidies for all cadets and generous bursaries for those in most need. Thanks to the kindness of our donors, we were able to award bursaries totalling almost half a million pounds over the 2024 and 2025 sailing seasons – reducing the cost of a week at sea to just £51 for eligible cadets.

Back on dry land, our fantastic Learning Team expanded our Cadet Training Programme to over 600 bespoke learning modules – with 150 published or updated in 2025/26, including vital new water safety and navigation sessions.

This contributed to an 18% increase in the number of qualifications awarded in 2025/26, to over 37,000 – including 550 DofE Awards and 938 BTECs. Meanwhile, our continued efforts to provide exciting courses at our regional training centres and boat stations meant that total beyond-unit training days increased by 24%, to 70,000.

This incredible range of activity generated some excellent cadet feedback in our latest Impact survey, with a number of key measures showing an increase on the previous year. 92% of cadets said they’d gained useful qualifications, 76% felt a positive impact on their overall wellbeing, and 60% said they’d become clearer on the sort of job they’d like to do in future.

Of course, none of this impact would have been possible without our extraordinary volunteers. Including the 22% who are Royal Navy veterans, serving personnel or

reservists – bringing their experience to a diverse volunteer community with skills and expertise from all walks of life.

In the past year, our volunteers gave a combined total of four million hours to supporting cadets. Using the government's methodology on the social value of volunteering, this delivered at least £53 million worth of positive impact for young people.

So, we were delighted to onboard 1,632 new volunteers, using streamlined processes that saved more time for training and activity. Despite limited resources to drive recruitment, we reached over 8,700 volunteers by year end – just half a percent below the previous year.

This resilience was supported by a 10% increase in the average volunteer's length of stay during the year, from 54 to 60 months – a welcome trend that was reflected in feedback confirming the tangible wellbeing benefits of volunteering at Sea Cadets. 79% of volunteers told our Impact Survey that their Sea Cadets service has helped them make friends and feel less isolated; 65% felt that it improved their mental health, with 55% reporting better physical health. Over a third also agreed that their volunteering had helped them find a job or advance in their career.

Now, thanks to the efforts of our volunteers to introduce cadets to maritime careers (and Marine Society's work to promote relevant and interesting opportunities), increasing numbers of sea cadets are making the transition to our apprenticeship programme – including an absolute star we'll be hearing from shortly.

This helped Marine Society to match last year's record number of 17 new apprentices recruited. We ended the year with 28 apprentices engaged (up from 21) as the programme continued to flourish in every region of the UK.

Marine Society also saw a 20% increase in the scholarships and bursaries awarded to seafarers – with 86 Slater Scholarships awarded and 38 seafarers achieving their first certificate of competency.

Meanwhile, additional generous support from the Nautilus Slater Fund gave our other scholarships and bursaries a boost – with a 65% increase in the number of seafarers using them to gain advanced qualifications and further their professional development.

Elsewhere: our Coming Ashore programme delivered more hours of mentorship and helped more seafarers secure shore-side roles;

We saw a 12% increase in purchases of our online Learn@Sea and Shore courses;

And we helped even more seafarers to access our Digital Library service at five port welfare centres around the UK – thanks to the Merchant Navy Welfare Board's decision to renew its support.

The Digital Library was also a growing commercial success too, with record numbers of e-books supplied in 17 languages, while we increased the number of crew libraries provided for ships from 24 to 28.

Looking ahead, Marine Society's focus on achieving growth through new partnerships and an expanded offer is already delivering success in 2026/27.

The total number of apprentices we support grew by over 35% in the first five months of the financial year, while nine leavers completed their end point assessments. We now have 38 apprentices on programme – an amazing achievement for a relatively new provider.

I'm also delighted to tell you that a Marine Society apprentice, Jack Hayden, actually won the British Marine 'Apprentice of the Year' last month – an incredible endorsement of our programme and all the work that Darrell and his team have put in.

We hope that continued growth in apprenticeships will be supported by an exciting new partnership with UKSA – to launch the Nautilus Slater Superyacht Bursary. This will allow current or former sea cadets and volunteers to access the excellent career opportunities provided by UKSA's Superyacht Cadetship programme – and the first three recipients have just started their training!

Despite all the good news, we remain mindful that maritime apprenticeships are currently threatened with defunding by Skills England. So, we are strongly advocating that the apprentice route is crucial for maintaining skills across the whole marine industry.

But led by our growing apprenticeships programme, there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about Marine Society's long-term future.

If we needed another reason to celebrate, 2026 marks the 270th anniversary of Marine Society – so we have launched a Friends of Marine Society membership scheme dedicated to strengthening our networks and creating even more opportunities for seafarers and maritime professionals. I hope that having heard so much evidence of its impact, many of you will consider joining!

While the future outlook for Sea Cadets is less certain (given the Royal Navy's proposal to end the grant-in-aid and explore new support arrangements), we continue to chart a course that will enhance cadet training, safety and safeguarding.

Thanks to the continued growth of our Royal Marines Cadets detachments and Junior sections, we are now supporting a record 1,059 sections. Having opened 35 last year, we are aiming to grow cadet numbers by 500 in the current year – to bounce back above the 14,000 mark.

We've made a good start on this, and cadet recruitment in the first quarter of 2026/27 is up by 6.3% on the same period of 2025/26, with 1,161 new joiners. Volunteer recruitment was also up by 5.7%, with 406 adults joining.

Boosting recruitment and enhancing training relies on new and sustainable sources of funding. This will mean adapting to the increasingly devolved systems for accessing public money – and leveraging the incredibly strong presence and reputation of our units in so many local authority areas. In this way, we can build on the proven track record of effective fundraising at unit level – which, with outstanding assistance from the National Support Centre, helped units raise £9.4m in 2025/26.

This £9.4 million deserves particular recognition. This is not incidental income: it helps fund the boats, equipment, premises and opportunities that make Sea Cadets possible in communities across the country. Behind that achievement are local charity trustees, volunteers, families and supporters, whose commitment and relationships give our units a powerful connection with the places they serve.

The funding landscape is also becoming more local. Increasingly, opportunities are shaped by local and regional priorities, with decisions made closer to the communities that benefit.

That is why we have dedicated resources to supporting unit fundraising, with Ami and Daniel Lincoln helping units identify opportunities, strengthen their approaches to funders and share effective practice.

As we consider future arrangements for Sea Cadets, we must also recognise how important the independence, local identity and charitable status of our units can be to their ability to fundraise. We need to ensure that the arrangements we develop protect, rather than unintentionally constrain, this vital source of support for young people.

This is already a live issue. Because during 2025/26, for the first time, the grant-in-aid from the Ministry of Defence did not cover the rising costs of our core activities. MSSC's fundraising earned income and wider support remained essential to sustaining delivery and investing in the Sea Cadets Experience.

That is why we are so incredibly grateful to our amazing donors and supporters, whose generosity made so much of what I've covered possible.

MSSC also remains committed to working constructively with the Royal Navy: to understand their proposal, and work towards our shared ambition of providing the best possible support for cadets.

Our trustees are seeking greater detail on the RN's proposed future plan and have a number of questions on how it will be realised. Once the trustees have made a decision, we may need to have a follow-up meeting of Court.

Foremost in trustees' minds – and I'm sure, in the Royal Navy's – is the need to preserve and maintain the positive impact and quality of outcomes we're achieving. Not just for cadets and volunteers, but for the Sea Cadet Corps as a unique and historic entity.

Whatever proposals emerge in the anticipated Cadet Strategy or Action Plan (which we have not yet seen), our priority is to preserve the strengths of Sea Cadets and the opportunities it provides.

As we look ahead, we will continue to work to protect and strengthen our valued relationship with the Royal Navy, while building on the contribution of our independent charity, local units, volunteers and supporters. Above all, we will never cease to make the case for a sustainable future that puts young people first and preserves the strengths of our charitable model.

We will now hear from three remarkable young people who discovered their passions, honed their skills, and found their futures through Sea Cadets.

Together, we must all remain committed to helping more young people like them to gain life-changing experiences with a lifelong impact.

Thank you!