



PORTS, SUPPLY CHAIN RESILIENCE AND #SAVINGCHRISTMAS



The old saying ‘Christmas gets earlier every year’ probably seems especially apt for supply chain professionals this year. Here at UKMPG Towers we reckon it was November last year when he got calls from the press raising panic about toy stock-outs and pigs-in-blankets famines. This year the calls are coming in the first half of October.

The reality of the last 11 months, as far as major ports are concerned, is one of high levels of activity as consumer spending has remained robust and economic activity like construction has bounced back. That has meant ports have been very busy, not just in the UK but also globally – elsewhere in Europe, North America and across Asia.

Whilst much of the media coverage focuses on shipping containers a similar story of high volumes is also true for other cargoes like bulk building materials and steel.

UK ports have remained open and resilient through the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit border changes and this surging global demand for goods travelling by sea. It has not been easy and there have been times of real stress on the ports system.

Major port operators have taken significant action to respond to the challenges and build resilience. They have extended gate opening to 24/7, increased capacity for trucks at peak hours, sought to maximise rail freight usage within the significant constraints of the network, created additional storage space and recruited more people.

But even this additional capacity and flexibility has seen additional demands placed upon it in recent weeks. The regularity of shipping schedules remains problematic. There are well publicised issues impacting all UK supply chains such as shortages of HGV drivers. And we’re seeing some shifts in the ways



customers are booking cargo, with some experience of Christmas cargoes arriving early.

Like any very busy system relatively small disruptions can cause problems. Ports therefore have to manage access to storage space very dynamically in extreme situations. This can mean some very limited, short-term restrictions at some locations. But the large majority of ports at any one time will remain fully open, albeit working hard.

So, is Christmas cancelled? No. Ports and logistics professionals throughout supply chains will be working intensively and together to keep goods moving. There could be temporary bumps and there is zero room for complacency, but we collectively addressed significant challenges around Christmas 2020.

Some of the key challenges for 2021 remain global – the supply and demand of shipping, the positioning of containers – but some are UK based. And indeed, the already visible post-Christmas challenge of the introduction of import controls on EU goods need our attention right now. What is urgently needed is a renewed focus on resilience.

That includes from Government and goes beyond short term measures like driver visas. We need the Government to work with and support industries like ports that have and continue to invest in providing UK supply chain capability, through better surrounding connectivity and maintaining a level play field that supports choice. Sometimes what Government doesn't do is just as important as what it does. That way we all stand a better chance of staying ahead of journalists calls next Christmas and beyond.

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