

NAVIGATING THROUGH THE CRISIS

Portsmouth International Port has faced a plethora of challenges; from the uncertainties of Brexit to the coronavirus crisis – which has led to a reduction in passenger capacity for its freight and cruise services – to protect staff and the general public from contracting Covid-19. In spite of these issues, the business has remained open throughout the pandemic, after successfully adopting a number of safety and infection control measures, resulting in the port gaining industry recognition for its concerted efforts to protect employees and consumers, during this volatile time. *Quality World* speaks to Portsmouth International Port's Systems and Standards Manager John Feltham, CQP FCQI, and Port Director Mike Sellers, CQP MCQI, to find out how the business is continuing to navigate through the crisis, while it prepares for a more sustainable future

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The maritime and shipping sector has endured its fair share of challenges after the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown measures took their toll on the global economy – leaving many businesses in the dark. In March this year, millions of workers in maritime and shipping were affected by the coronavirus crisis globally,

due in part to the travel restrictions imposed by governments to try and contain the virus. This, in turn, created many hurdles for crew changes and repatriation of seafarers, as countries started devising ways of combating the coronavirus. According to the BBC, “1.6 million seafarers, on 50,000 tankers and cargo carriers” were affected worldwide because they were “unable to leave their ships, or found themselves stuck in hotels without pay and unable to get flights home” at the time. The BBC also reported that up to 2,000 seafarers from the UK were “stranded” and left in “limbo” as the UK Chamber of Shipping urged the government “to become the first to sign up to a global plan to get crews home”.

The travel restrictions also had a severe impact on the transportation of goods from different ports globally – resulting in damages to supply chains and consumer confidence for businesses that were forced to close, until the restrictions were lifted.

For Portsmouth International Port, closing temporarily was never an option. And after some contingency planning, the port was able to remain open throughout the pandemic, as it continued sailing through the rocky waters. Portsmouth International Port is a major transport hub; renowned for its cross-channel ferry services to Spain, France and the Channel Islands, as well as its cruise ship operations and fruit importing services. The municipal port – owned by Portsmouth City Council – has been in operation since 1976, and is a key destination for imports of fresh ▶

produce that is then transported on to fill the shelves of shops and supermarkets across the UK.

Even though the coronavirus pandemic has adversely affected the maritime industry, Portsmouth International Port has been navigating through the crisis with its business continuity team, which has helped the port to maintain its operations, while protecting its staff and passengers from contracting Covid-19. "When the pandemic started, we immediately put together a cross-functional team, comprising of different managers from within the port," says John Feltham, CQP FCQI, Systems and Standards Manager at Portsmouth International Port. "That team started off as an 'emergency-response business continuity' unit, focusing on how the port would operate each day, the feedback we were getting from the Local Resilience Forum and the UK Government, and interpreting the Government's guidelines for Covid-19."

At the time, the team consisted of senior managers under the leadership of Portsmouth International Port's Port Director Mike Sellers, CQP MCQI. This group included the port's heads of engineering, operations, finance and IT, as well as the harbour master, business development manager, representation from the port's communications team, and a specialists duty manager, who all worked with Portsmouth City Council's Civil Contingency Team and the Local Resilience Forum.

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The business of the port changed rapidly with freight-only movements of essential supplies, medical equipment, the halting of cruise operations (apart from the repatriation of crews), and only key workers attending the site. All other personnel who didn't fall under this remit were told to work from home until further notice.

Infection and control measures

As the pandemic progressed, the group's model changed from a business continuity team (containment) to a business recovery team. One of the new objectives for the group was to develop a number of infection and control measures that would allow the port to continue operating and prepare for the future. Some of these health/safety protocols have included a £20,000 investment in thermal imaging cameras – used to conduct temperatures checks on passengers and staff entering through the terminal building each day. This technology was one of many initiatives that the business has taken on-board, according to Sellers. "Even before the government started introducing air bridges, travel corridors and other measures for passenger travel, we were already making our own preparations to ensure that we had the correct safety measures in place for when passengers return to the port."

He continues: "Along with our thermal imaging cameras, we have put social distancing signage and queuing lanes in place and taken out some of our seating areas in the terminal to reduce passenger capacity and maintain social distancing." As well as these protocols, Sellers explains that face masks are now mandatory and cleaning regimes have been increased, particularly for high touch areas (eg, tables, handrails and door handles). All touch points continue to be sanitised on a regular basis, using virucidal cleaners. Concurrently, an electrostatic fogging process has been used for sanitising baggage before it is loaded onto ships, as part of a recent investment. More hand sanitiser stations have also been added to the terminal, in addition to protective shields (sneeze guards), which have been installed at passenger check-in desks and security control points around the port to mitigate the risk of infection.

Portsmouth International Port has been recognised for its new health, safety and infection control protocols by global certification body, DNV GL. In August, DNV GL carried out a My Care assessment at the port over a four-day period. The My Care framework has been developed to help organisations demonstrate that they have implemented effective prevention control measures within their organisations, as they continue their operations after the national lockdown. The port was successful in achieving My Care verification certification, due to the strides it had

taken to keep both staff and customers safe during these unprecedented times.

This recent achievement complements the port's 'Organisation of the Year' award that it acquired at the CQI's 2019 International Quality Awards. Securing these awards has helped Portsmouth International Port gain recognition from stakeholders, existing customers and potential clients as a "port of substance and integrity", says Sellers. It has also been approached by more cruise lines, following its conscientious efforts for maintaining quality and safety in all aspects of the business.

Quality structure

One of the main quality objectives for Portsmouth International Port is to deliver a service that is safe, secure and provides customer satisfaction for its shipping companies, security maintenance personnel, caterers, as well as statutory bodies (the border force and police).

Being part of the local authority, the port does not have shareholders or a

board of directors. It is accountable to what is known as the Port Advisory Board. This board is made up of locally elected counsellors based on the balance of power that exists within the local council. Unlike other boards, this may change as a result of local elections.

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Most of the governance structure, Feltham notes, is based on the CQI's Competency Framework, incorporating quality, governance, improvement and leadership. "Being a Fellow of the CQI, I have been following the institute's guidelines for many years," Feltham says. "Everything we do at the port is pretty much based around that." The port has many measurements that have

been embedded into the organisation, including KPIs covering all the statutory and service-level requirements, along with five international approvals that Portsmouth International Port must comply with. These five ISO standards include: ISO 9001 (quality), ISO 45001 (health and safety), ISO 14001 (environmental management), ISO 22301 (business continuity and emergency planning) and ISO 27001 (information security).

The processes within the port have largely remained the same, in spite of the current challenges it is facing with the coronavirus and Brexit. Feltham highlights that this is because "quality is embedded into our processes, the culture and the training that we give to our staff. We don't have a quality manager or quality departments – it's all about having good processes for commercial and operational activities and the ways in which our staff interact with those processes as well. Everybody in the business accepts ownership for what they do," he says, adding that the port's practices have not changed much prior to the pandemic, apart from The My Care Certification for infection control, which has been introduced to complement the organisation's existing framework.

Mental health

A high priority for the Portsmouth International Port's senior management team was, and continues to be, the mental health and wellbeing of staff. As part of the port's quality, health and safety programmes, the team set up a forum called the Mental Health Wellbeing Group, which has allowed staff to stay connected with their work colleagues through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. In addition to this, staff are able to discuss issues in confidence with managers or peer groups who have attended a recognised training course by Mental Health Britain. As a mandatory rule, members of the senior management team check-in with their staff on a regular basis, ensuring their mental health/wellbeing is strong at all times. Zoom and Microsoft Teams calls are also conducted regularly, where employees are encouraged to dial-in. "These virtual sessions usually involve the Port Director (Sellers) providing staff with a company update about where the business is and how we are progressing through the pandemic," notes Feltham.

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Sellers highlights that some of the port's departments have recently been given the option to return to the workplace. A roster system has been set up that only allows a certain amount of employees to return to work at one time to maintain social distancing guidelines, while helping to increase productivity and reduce stress/anxiety for those who are keen to get back to the office. Sellers elaborates: "Not everyone enjoys or feels productive when they're working from home, so we are giving our staff the balance of being able to carry on working remotely and from the workplace." He adds: "Some of our colleagues from the administration and finance teams have confirmed that they will be returning, but this is being closely monitored based on updated government advice."

Some of the employees that work directly on the port are classed as 'key workers', says Feltham, and have continued working on-site since the lockdown started in March. During this period, the port lobbied for coronavirus testing for its key workers to avoid staff from having to spend two weeks self-isolating. At its highest peak in March, the business recorded 15 per cent of absences from personnel who were displaying symptoms of Covid-19. In spite of this small percentage, the port was able to remain open after bringing in some temporary agency staff and increasing the working hours (overtime) for existing staff. This, in turn, enabled the transportation of medical supplies, fresh produce and other goods to continue flowing through the port with minimal disruptions.

Preparing for Brexit

Another challenge Portsmouth International Port is currently dealing with is Brexit – an area that Sellers is well versed in. "It's one of my favourite subjects," he quips. "We're the second largest cross-channel port...and we've been identified by the government as a potential high-impact port as a result of Brexit." He adds: "Because of this, we've been engaging with the Border Protocol Delivery Group (BPDG) in terms of the new Border Operating Model, and what that means for Portsmouth International Port in the future." ▶



On 1 January 2021, the transition period with the European Union will end. From this date, the Border and Protocol Delivery Group have said that the UK will “operate a full, external border as a sovereign nation”. This means that new border control measures will be placed on the movement of goods between Great Britain and EU countries. To make sure the maritime and shipping industry is prepared for the changes, the UK Government published a three-phase plan for the Border Operating Model, where businesses now have until 1 July 2021 to get their infrastructures ready for the border control measures coming into effect next year.

With the deadline set, Sellers and the port’s Brexit Working Group have been working closely with local MPs and Portsmouth City Council on getting the correct infrastructure/changes ready before the July deadline. Sellers expands: “There’s a number of us looking at everything from software integration, freight-operating systems and the port’s infrastructure, to health checks for plant and animal goods. We’re the quietest we’ve ever been in terms of shipping, but we’re the busiest we’ve ever been in terms of dealing with the whole pandemic and Brexit,” Sellers

laughs. In addition to this, the port is liaising with the Local Resilience Forum to ensure that the business has the right transport plans to deal with border and freight checks effectively, especially for the motorway network into the city of Portsmouth.

Sustainable future

Sellers believes that although the port has had some setbacks in terms of passenger movements and cruises, they will “bounce back”, as the business starts planning for a more sustainable future. “Covid-19 and Brexit has highlighted the importance of Maritime UK, but it also has made shippers reassess their logistics,” Sellers explains. “Portsmouth will be one of the ports that will gain as a result of the change in logistics, and we want to make sure that we’ve got the infrastructure and the ability to expand in order to deal with that.” To achieve this, the senior management team have appointed Royal HaskoningDHV – an international engineering and project management consulting firm – to deliver Portsmouth International Port’s Master Plan, which will help to identify the expansion opportunities for the port over the next 20 years. This will cover

the whole port authority harbour area, including Portico and the Camber.

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The Master Plan will not only look into Portsmouth International Port’s infrastructure/operations, but also its staff and development, succession planning, and how management can get their next ‘senior team of the future’ developed within their existing port teams. The Master Plan is expected to be completed by the end of this year and will contribute towards Portsmouth City Council’s Local Plan – a statutory planning document – which will help to ensure land is available when it’s needed to facilitate for port expansion.

Environmental sustainability is a key strategic objective with the aim to become the UK’s first zero emissions port by 2050, as part of the Department for Transport’s Clean Maritime Plan. Portsmouth

International Port has already taken its first steps towards this goal by adding solar panels to its warehouse roofs and terminal building roof in order to produce renewable energy and to be net-zero carbon by 2030.

In August, the business took delivery of a GS Yuasa dual-chemical energy storage system (battery) – capable of charging up to four electric cars simultaneously. The system takes the form of a weatherproof shelter that will be able to supply 100kW of power on-site as and when it’s required. The battery forms part of the Port Energy Systems Optimisation (PESO) project – a scheme that will demonstrate how a port can operate as a smart energy network – led by Marine South East (Commercial). “It is an intelligent system that can monitor the port’s usage, and will charge and discharge based on demand to improve the port’s green credentials,” says Feltham.

Kick-starting the economy

Portsmouth International Port has been in discussions with the Maritime Minister, Department for Transport (DfT) and the Treasury about how important ports will be in helping the economy to recover. “As much as there is going to be a need

TOP TIPS TO STAY AFLOAT

Mike Sellers, CQP MCQI, Port Director (top right), and John Feltham, CQP FCQI, Systems and Standards Manager at Portsmouth International Port (bottom right), provide their top tips to help businesses stay afloat in the new Covid-19 world



1. It is natural that any business impacted by the coronavirus pandemic would focus on cost reductions and liquidity. In this instance, try not to have a knee jerk on the challenges because it’s important to have resilience and resources to be ready for recovery, as we come out of the pandemic. At Portsmouth International Port, we have very much had an eye on the future and expect a rapid bounce back when the safety measures start to be relaxed.
2. Make sure your quality system and other associated approval standards are constantly reviewed and up-to-date. The plan, do, check, act (PDCA) cycle applies to all aspects of business management, even in a crisis.
3. Don’t wait until a crisis occurs. Be prepared for one even if it never happens.
4. Communication is key to dealing with any business change or crisis. Our port has an extremely effective Communications Department that send out messages both internally and externally, including staff updates and press releases. We advise other businesses to do the same to keep employees in the loop with that’s going on in their organisations.



to support the airline sector, it’s going to be just the same for ports,” Sellers asserts. “For us to continue with our green ambitions and developments, which will help kick-start the economy, there has to be some support from the government to help with those infrastructure projects.” Alongside this, Portsmouth City Council is seeking financial assistance from the government to help with projects that will benefit the port and city respectively. Around £8m of the port’s profits go towards council services for the town each year. However, this figure could be impacted due to the reduced revenue from passenger travel.

Despite the number of challenges afoot, the senior management team are feeling confident about the future, due to the quality culture/measures they’ve implemented into the organisation. And, together with their port staff, the team are certain they will be able to weather the storm and come out the other side as a stronger and more sustainable business than before. ■