In your opinion, what will be the biggest challenges for the ports sector in 2019 and beyond?

Border control changes once Brexit implications are resolved will be a major challenge for the ports sector, with the scale of the impact dependent on resultant negotiations.

Brexit challenges at ferry ports in particular will be high. For example, more land will be needed near ports as the time taken to process both passenger and freight vehicles increase. Managing relationships with local authorities and other stakeholders will be key to meeting these challenges.

Whether the best case, frictionless trade is achieved is unknown at this stage, but ports are planning for alternative outcomes which may see hard border controls, with the associated requirement to recreate physical infrastructure to accommodate these controls are well underway. The timescale required to implement physical upgrades versus the status of the negotiations remains a key risk to the sector.

Brexit will also continue to challenge the freight haulage sector – a potential lack of truck drivers at major container ports will continue to create opportunities for rail and feeder services and infrastructure, supporting regional ports around the UK.

What do you see as the main opportunities for growth for UK ports in the coming years?

Despite the challenges of Brexit, it is also likely to lead to new opportunities within the sector. Ports already delivering port-centric solutions will be well positioned to move into free zone opportunities, avoiding unnecessary duties on adding value to goods or products for export. The growth into this market will see the need for temporary storage and value-added services pending onward movement of goods into Europe, which could potentially drive demand for port land. It is important for ports to be engaged in the logistics and distribution chain, meeting the needs of customers and seek opportunities for added value services where appropriate.

Offshore wind and other offshore opportunities include decommissioning, subsea cables and other green technology could provide an opportunity for UK port growth.
How can port connectivity be improved? What further improvements are needed?

UK ports need greater connectivity with road and rail links, given that over 90% of goods are transported through them. With the development of new port hubs and logistics facilities altering trade flows, there is likely to be the need for supporting infrastructure which should come through as part of regional development plans. Brexit requirements, as outlined above, may introduce additional infrastructure needs to support border controls.

How can new technologies and innovations be used in UK ports?

UK ports will continue to use digitalisation and automation to advance – this extends from major port machinery, across to on-dock warehousing and cargo management / administration. Continued automation will improve efficiency and speed of cargo transfer, enabling optimisation of trade flows across the supply chain. Digitalisation is resulting in better exchange of information across the whole shipping supply chain, improving visibility of trade flows while also increasing customer service expectations. New technologies allow greater flexibility in port operations and significant improvements in safety with less manual handling.

Note that this provides increased visibility of status of goods within the supply chain, raising customer expectations, with little tolerance for under-performance – even due to factors outside of the port’s control such as weather.

What are the impacts of recent shipping trends on UK ports?

Container and cruise vessel sizes continue to increase, also ferries, leading to terminal adjustments (at berth, onshore and hinterland links) and increased dredging requirements for marine access.

The increased size of ship on the mainline container trade, and the realignment of the main alliances, has resulted in the deep-sea container ports receiving fewer calls than before, though now from larger vessels. There have also been sailings eliminated across the off-peak period. The combined effect of this places incredible pressure on container yard and gate operations as they have to work harder during the new peaks. Advances in planning systems have enabled terminal operators to respond, but the challenges flow through the port and freight transport sector with the changing pattern of demand making it harder for the road and rail freight operators, the empty yards and the end recipients.

The lower sulphur limits in marine fuels will push shipping lines to alternative fuel options, such as low sulphur fuel oil, LNG and cold ironing/shore power. In the longer term, ship automation influences will continue to develop.

Hear from Martin Mannion and many more experts...

...including Nusrat Ghani MP, Port of London Authority, The Bristol Port Company, UKMPG, British Ports Association, PD Ports, Antwerp Port Authority, Transport for the North and many more at the UK Ports Conference taking place in London at the Holiday Inn Bloomsbury on Tuesday 14th and Wednesday 15th May.

Tickets start from just £349 + VAT. (group booking discounts available) for full details of the programme and how to secure your place visit http://bit.ly/2XjZ23S.