

Leadership Insight Eamonn O'Reilly

Eamonn O'Reilly, CEO, Dublin Port in conversation with Trish O'Neill, Director, Member Services, CPA Ireland



Eamonn O'Reilly, CEO,
Dublin Port

Your Career

You started your working life as an engineer, what brought you to the world of shipping?

I am originally an electrical engineer, I worked initially with Irish Cement and then I went overseas to a company called Shanahan Engineering. So I worked in Egypt for a couple of years, Saudi Arabia, and the Congo. I had 4 years good years away, came back then into SKC as it was then or KPMG as it now is, as a consultant.

Initially I worked on a job for the Department of Transport, and subsequently for the Port directly. That was a job on dock labour which was a real problem at the time – on the restructuring of dock labour. Following directly on from that I joined Imari and worked on the reopening of Dublin Port. It shut for the bulk of 9 months and opened up the new operation of marine terminals. I worked on my own for about 5 years, spent some time with Securicor and then worked for Doyle Shipping Group before taking on the job here as Chief Executive of the Port in 2010.

And what, to date, has been your Career highlight?

Career highlight – I think it was the time with Ted O'Neill at Imari, and the transition from consultancy to getting directly involved on the docks in Dublin. So I went from consultant to the Port, to working with Imari and the reopening of the Port, to negotiations with dock labour, very difficult restructuring and then to running a company in the new environment. All within about 18 months!

I would have never planned a career, and I am not sure you can. Maybe some people try to plan careers, but I certainly didn't. You just go with the flow, that was a particularly strong current to be flowing in at the time. You kind of grab opportunities if they arise

Business

Can you tell me something about the growth of Dublin Port?

Dublin Port has grown 25% in 4 years. It's extraordinary, the development of the docklands is incredible, as is the pace of development of the last few years. We've got 260 hectares but we think around 2040 the Port will max out.

When we first did our Masterplan which we published in 2012 we assumed 2.5% growth pa up to 2040. We now think we need to increase that planning assumption to 3.3% pa. But 3.3% is pretty much in line with what we've seen – every single year from '93 to 2007 was a record year.

It's part of the long history of the Port, so the only basis we can plan on is that it's going to happen, going to continue, because it has always happened.

The National Planning Framework is talking about an extra million people living in Ireland by 2040. Dublin Port is the gateway for everything that happens in the country so you know that that many extra people means a lot of extra stuff. The Port is import led so maybe 60% of the commodities are imported, 40% are exported. The headline figure last year was 35 million gross tonnes, 4m of that for example was petroleum products, – petrol and diesel, aviation fuel, etc – that's all straight import... as are a lot of consumer goods in the shops that all comes in containers and trailers. What we export from Ireland tends to be high value, low volume.

So in the economic accounts exports are much bigger than imports. Import volumes are much higher than exports which tend to be lower volume but higher value commodities.

What impact do you believe Brexit will have on the Port?

I need to differentiate between the effect of the economy on Dublin Port and looking at the Dublin Port company alone. There's two whole years of lead in that's going to happen so for Dublin Port that means direct and indirect impacts. The indirect impact is what effect would Brexit have on the general economy.

It will likely cause some economic contraction, therefore less imports. To the extent that it's a negative effect on the economy, it will impact on Port volumes.

I'm certain the effect won't be positive but I'm not sure that the negative economic impact of Brexit will be discernible from other effects such as interest rates and energy prices, so on the business of Dublin Port Company I don't think there's going to be a great impact.

The other direct effect then is on customs controls. The last time there were customs controls between Ireland and Britain, there were about 150,000 freight units a year. Now the equivalent number is 850,000 so something else is going to have to happen. Technology has changed so I think there will be solutions found so that Irish Customs can meet the requirements of the EU, of the Customs Union Code and I think

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they will find ways to do that efficiently. I'd be optimistic that over the two years Irish Customs are going to find ways of meeting Ireland's obligations on customs examinations which won't bring the Port to a standstill by any means.

Can you tell me about some of the projects that are included in the Masterplan for the development of Dublin Port?

We have a 10 year capital programme starting in 2016. The price tag of that at the moment is €600 million over 10 years. This year we budgeted to spend about 90 million so there is a lot of work and it is expensive.

Included in the programme is the Alexandra Basin Redevelopment Project, we will build berths large enough to allow the biggest cruise ships in the world to come up as far as East Link bridge, two at a time. The cruise ships could be up to 350 metres long.

So, the ship is full, everyone gets off, goes up town, they do what they do as tourists, get back on the ship and sail away to the

next port. We think as we build these facilities you'll increasingly get turn-arounds. People will fly into Dublin Airport, spend a couple of nights in a hotel and board the cruise ship in Dublin.

The Port is too big to simply put the head down and say we're going to build more and we're going to intensify and not think about the consequences of that for the city - the city is right on our doorstep.

We also have the natural environment of Dublin Bay, a lot of protected areas which are protected by European law. So we can't ignore the impact we have on the city or the impact that we have on the environment and our nature so we are doing a lot of work to try to reintegrate the Port and the city. The Port used to be very integrated with the local communities because they provided huge workforces. But the increase in the power of machinery, the increased security of 4 meter high fences and all of that, means that the societal link with the docks has kind of broken down. So it is now an industrial area and now we're trying to open it up.

For example, around the Dublin Port office building there is a project to turn it into public area. There will be a marine park, there'll be a beautiful architecturally designed turnstile gates and a great big old crane beside the building. So that's one project we're doing to try to work in this physical integration. Those are industrial heritage projects, boundary softening projects.

Later this year we will start work to redevelop the road network in the Port and as part of that we're going to put in a 4km walkway and cycleway.

As CEO of Dublin Port what is your biggest leadership challenge?

I think the biggest single challenge is the time needed to do big projects. It's trying to get people to understand what the Port is about, what it needs to do. All of us travel through the airport, and we think we know the airline industry inside out as we go through airports so much. Most people never come near the Port and don't understand what the Port is.

So the big challenge, the single biggest leadership challenge is to get the message out, what is the Port about, what are the Port's requirements for development, what's it doing for development. And who are the people who need to understand that? Clearly the staff of the Port need to understand it. Then there are a lot of customers going to be affected by what we do, because we're going to have to move some customers out to Dublin Inland Port. We want to move activity out there which doesn't absolutely need to be in the Port, so they will be affected. Local authorities and planning authorities and local communities need to understand why are we doing these great big projects that will have environmental impacts.

So if everybody understands what we're trying to do and why we're trying to do it then the negative impacts can be addressed much more objectively. And maybe if we understand the local communities better and the environment better we'll produce projects that don't have negative impacts. So that's the big challenge.

The community obviously plays a big role in the Port so, given the large scale development work you have planned, how have you engaged with the community and Dublin as a whole?

There was a structured public consultation process and we generated a lot of publicity around this and we have also had a lot of engagement with the local communities through our CSR programme.

We support education initiatives in local communities, as well as supporting sporting activities and community activities. We also encourage and support all of the local users of the river – Poolbeg Yacht Club, St. Patrick's Rowing Club, Stella Maris Rowing Club, the private boat owners have moorings on the river so we encourage use of the river and more activity on the river including the annual Riverfest.

All of this is about trying to engage with people in an area that means something to them.

This year we're doing a festival called Port Perspectives which is aimed at

strengthening the bond between Dublin Port and the City and bringing Dublin Port to new audiences through the arts. In 2016 we commissioned a song cycle called Starboard Home which consisted of two concerts in the National Concert Hall and an album.

The Port is multi-faceted in the impacts that it has. So we could put the head down and focus on building quay walls. However, we, as an organisation, spent 31 years from 1979 to 2010 trying to get permission to win the 21 hectares from the north side of the Port – fighting local communities, fighting Dublin City Council, fighting Government...But guess what...we lost! So there is a better way, and the better way is recognising that the place has a big role, a big impact and trying to explain to people what the role and the impact are and what the position of the Port is in heritage and culture and other aspects.

Local communities get it, so the more we can open up the Port to people through whatever means – through visits, through songs, painting, industrial heritage, or whatever, the more we open up the Port to them, the more people get it.

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