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New UK maritime capital?

Merseyside's history is steeped in shipping like no other UK region, and the sector's chiefs are now working to make it the place to learn about all thing maritime, writes Felicity Landon

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NEARLY 600 companies employing some 6,000 people and with a combined turnover of £1.3bn (\$2bn) make up the maritime cluster of Merseyside, according to a study completed this year.

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The report was commissioned by Mersey Maritime, a private sector-led initiative set up last year to re-establish Merseyside as a recognised centre of maritime excellence. Its two priorities come as no surprise. The first is marketing, the second education, skills and training.

Ultimately the aim is to set up a Mersey Maritime Institute, which would involve all the education and skills providers, says the group's chairman, Ian Higby, managing director of ACL (UK).

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"Education, skills and training is the most important initiative that we could have here because business is so mobile now," he says.

"The reason why a lot of maritime companies are in Merseyside is because the people and skills are here. As soon as you realise that people are mobile there is a chance to have inward mobility rather than the dangerous flip side, outward mobility.

"We need to build up our expertise and skills base and the perception that Merseyside is a place to come and train and be educated in maritime business."

New container services launched by MSC and Maersk Sealand, the start of monthly car shipments into Liverpool for YA Logistics, cocoa shipments and the opening of the new Twelve Quays terminal have all been important boosts for Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, which will announced its half year results next month.

The positive mood is to be found throughout the sector, says Louise Hopkins, director of the umbrella campaign Mersey Waterfront.

"There is a definite feeling of confidence and a positive attitude to the future of the ports in the region," she says.

"The people of Merseyside do want to see ships in the river because it is an important part of what makes the river vibrant. There is a lot of support for freight movements on the ship canal, too."

Many in the ports, logistics and related sectors believe that factors such as increasing haulage costs, worsening road congestion and the impact of the Working Time Directive will encourage

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those shippers now trucking hundreds of miles to use England's southern ports and terminals to look more towards their 'natural' ports.

Mr Ian Higby says: "More and more geography is actually working for Liverpool, for inland United Kingdom distribution and the distribution of cargo coming out of Europe. Why put it on a truck and drive all the way through Spain, France and the congested southeast of England?

"In the end, much of the cargo comes up the M6 and is delivered into Manchester. Why not put it in a container or on an unaccompanied trailer and on a ship from Spain or Portugal or the south of France into Liverpool? It is only 40 miles on the M62 to Manchester and a lot more environmentally friendly and economic and efficient. What we will be looking for in business development is these opportunities.

"We have to be careful we are not doing the job of MDHC. We are here to help create the environment in which all parts of the cluster can prosper, including ABP at Garston, the Manchester Ship Canal and its corridor and the airport, where freight traffic is growing all the time."

Cocoa is a notable cargo that has returned to the port of Liverpool. Six barges carrying 3,000 tonnes of West African cocoa for Cadbury were discharged in June by the first Baco-Line mother vessel to call at the port.

Export cargo was loaded back into the barges, says Frank Robotham, MDHC's marketing director, "and we are very optimistic that this will grow in the future".

"What is coming out all the time is we are working with companies based in the northwest and north of England," he says. "We are demonstrating that we can provide a real benefit to the regional industry, allowing customers to avoid a longer journey."

Merseyside

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