

Northern Ireland retailers able to cope with P&O Irish Sea halt, for now

Northern Ireland's biggest retailers are coping with the sudden halt to P&O's Irish Sea services but have called for the ferry company to resume sailing as soon as possible to prevent supply issues.

The Northern Ireland Retail Consortium (NIRC) – which represents major grocery retailers such as Tesco, Sainsburys and Asda, as well as non-food retailers – said the sector is able to weather a short-term disruption to the Larne to Cairnryan route but would be impacted if the cancellation is prolonged.

Northern Ireland's supermarkets rely on the Irish Sea route daily for the importation of a large volume of fresh and non-perishable goods, while producers use it for export to Great Britain.

“P&O sailings are a key part of our retail logistics infrastructure and the ongoing situation will put pressure on supply chains,” Aodhán Connolly, Director of the NIRC, said. “While this is currently manageable, the longer the disruption continues, the higher the likelihood is that we could start to see some issues.

“Retailers are working with government to mitigate against this disruption, and we hope an effective resolution can be found quickly.”

Mr Connolly was speaking following news that P&O had suspended sailings on its UK and Ireland routes, including on the Larne/Cairnryan and Dublin/Liverpool sailings, both of which are used by retailers to import goods to Northern Ireland.

It sacked its 800 seafaring staff on the routes and is in the process of replacing them with agency workers, telling passengers the sailings will be suspended for 'the next few days'.

Companies which rely on cross channel services have the option of StenaLine's Belfast to Cairnryan and Liverpool, Dublin to Holyhead and Rosslaire to Fishguard sailings instead, provided there is capacity on those routes.

At the time of writing, there was availability on the Cairnryan to Belfast service this weekend – 19th and 20th March on Stenaline for an artic lorry up to 16 metres.

P&O sailings were unavailable up until Wednesday 23rd March, when all sailings on the crossing had availability.

Unions and politicians have railed against P&O for the manner in which it dismissed its staff on Thursday.

"I was shocked to hear the news from P&O Ferries this morning and my thoughts are with those staff working for P&O who have lost their jobs and also with those whose travel has been disrupted," Northern Ireland Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon MLA said. "This is a developing situation and officials are working on a cross-departmental basis to assess any local impacts, especially for supply chains, and are keeping in close contact with their counterparts in the Department of Transport in London.

"With the Economy Minister I am calling on the Secretary of State for Transport to take every possible step to save jobs and to maintain connectivity for passengers and freight on Irish Sea routes."

East Antrim MP Sammy Wilson said he had spoken to the Chief Executive of P&O Peter Hebblethwaite and been told that no P&O ships will operate from Larne for one week until new staff are

inducted.

“Ships and passengers will be redirected to Belfast Port,” he said in a tweet. “They will not have the capacity to sufficiently ramp up operations to cope with demand.

“With over 50% of NI freight coming through Larne Port, this will also have a knock on effect for local businesses.”

He also expressed concern about the use of agency staff.

“Despite operating purely between UK Ports, P&O will now pay staff third world wages. This raises serious concerns about the company’s morality.”

P&O, which is owned by Dubai-based DP World, said it had made the move to maintain the viability of the business.

“In its current state, P&O Ferries is not a viable business,” a spokesperson said. “We have made a £100m loss year on year, which has been covered by our parent DP World. This is not sustainable. Our survival is dependent on making swift and significant changes now. Without these changes there is no future for P&O Ferries.

“These circumstances have resulted in a very difficult but necessary decision, which was only taken after seriously considering all the available options. As part of the process we are starting today, we are providing 800 seafarers with immediate severance notices and will be compensating them for this lack of advance notice with enhanced compensation packages.”