

Major disruption forecast at UK ports as a “real prospect” in a no-deal BREXIT

House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is concerned by slow progress and poor communication around Project Brock.*

Ability of businesses to plan is hampered by secrecy and lack of detailed information

Department of Transport is urged to write to the PAC before Christmas with updates on progress

Report Summary

There is a real risk that the UK Department for Transport will not be ready in the event of the UK departing the EU without a negotiated deal, and this risk is increasing as time runs out to deliver what is needed.

This latest PAC report is in a series looking at Government’s preparations for Brexit. As in previous PAC reports on border preparations, customs, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Committee is concerned about how well Government is prepared.

There is a real prospect of major disruption at UK ports. The slow progress and poor communication around work to avoid this through schemes such as Project Brock concerns the Committee.

The lack of detailed information provided to businesses to help them prepare and the secrecy surrounding discussions through the use of non-disclosure agreements is hampering businesses’ ability to plan.

Added to this is the Department’s uphill task to pass the necessary legislation in time, the majority of which the Department sees as essential, whilst allowing time for proper scrutiny.

With only months to go, it is extremely worrying that the PAC is seeing these same concerns again and again with little progress being made. Even if a deal is agreed, the Department faces a challenging workload during the proposed transition period.

The PAC acknowledges the difficult situation for the Department in having to prepare for all Brexit scenarios. But it must be open about the challenges it faces

* Project Brock, a project to improve congestion in Dover and Kent.

and work with businesses and stakeholders to help them get ready for whatever the future brings.

Comment from the PAC Chair Meg Hillier MP

‘The future of road, rail, maritime and air access to Europe after Brexit remains unclear and the Department for Transport has a critical role in ensuring the UK is prepared.

‘With so little time remaining, there is still much to do. The risks associated with no-deal are severe, yet plans for avoiding disruption around major ports in particular are worryingly under-developed.

‘The Department plans to spend £30-35 million this year on Project Brock, intended to manage traffic and lorry-queuing at Dover. But it is still to carry out proposed desk-based testing of the system and engagement with businesses has been poor.

‘The secrecy around the Department’s preparations, and the shortcomings in assurance on its progress, are a potentially toxic combination.

‘We accept the continued uncertainty over the final shape of Brexit adds to the complexity of the challenge. But the Department’s Brexit work is simply too important to get wrong.

‘It must be more open about what needs to be achieved, and work with business and others to deliver it. We urge it to respond meaningfully to our concerns in the weeks ahead.’

Comment from PAC Deputy Chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP

‘Our report makes it clear that the Department for Transport has a great deal to do before we leave the EU on 29 March 2019, especially if no deal is reached.

‘It needs to make whatever contingencies necessary to ensure that disruption to passengers, goods and services arriving or leaving by road, air or sea is kept to the bare minimum.

‘I am concerned, in particular, that the movement of goods continues which will mean the port of Dover will need to operate at an optimal level and that more goods will need to travel through other ports.

‘To minimise the disruption at Dover and the potential knock-on effect to hauliers travelling through the port, the Department needs to ensure that Project Brock is ready to operate as early as possible.’

Committee membership

Meg Hillier MP – Chair (Labour (Co-op), Hackney South and Shoreditch),
Douglas Chapman MP (Scottish National Party, Dunfermline and West Fife),
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP (Conservative, The Cotswolds),
Chris Davies MP (Conservative, Brecon and Radnorshire),
Chris Evans MP (Labour (Co-op), Islwyn),
Caroline Flint MP (Labour, Don Valley),
Robert Jenric MP (Conservative, Newark),
Gillian Keegan MP (Conservative, Chichester),
Shabana Mahmood MP (Labour, Birmingham Ladywood),
Nigel Mills MP (Conservative, Amber Valley),
Layla Moran MP (Liberal Democrat, Oxford West and Abingdon),
Stephen Morgan MP (Labour, Portsmouth South),
Anne Marie Morris MP (Conservative, Newton Abbot),
Bridget Phillipson MP (Labour, Houghton and Sunderland South),
Lee Rowle MP (Conservative, North East Derbyshire),
Gareth Snell MP (Labour (Co-op), Stoke-on-Trent Central)

Link to the report

The Report can be accessed in PDF format via the following link:
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublic/1657/1657.pdf>