



Ship agents adapting with change

By JONATHAN WILLIAMS,
Secretary, Federation of National Associations of Ship Brokers and Agents

So, another year has passed, and it is again time to reflect on recent developments, take stock of where FONASBA is now, and look at the issues that we are addressing.

Obviously, COVID continues to dominate our actions and we remain closely engaged with colleague associations and organisations in working to convince national governments that seafarers are essential workers and to grant them leave to travel and access to vaccinations. Even after nearly two years, this message is not being heard in some countries and the difficulties remain. One positive development from our side is the active engagement of FONASBA member associations in local vaccination programmes, working with local ship agents and healthcare providers to allow seafarers to be inoculated. We applaud their actions in providing this vital service.

Clearly, ship agents have been forced to adapt to the new realities of operating onboard vessels during a global pandemic and this includes maximising the use of remote access technologies to reduce physical contact. Despite this, however, the role of the ship agent as a provider of human contact and pastoral care to seafarers is as vital for the success of the port call as the organisation of port services, and it must not be overlooked in the drive towards remote operation and automation.

Whilst hoping they will not be needed for many years to come, FONASBA is nonetheless in the process of developing a set of protocols to assist ship agents in continuing to provide services during any future

health emergency. Currently titled the FONASBA Infectious Diseases Protocols, they are based on the Hierarchy of Controls set out in the International Chamber of Shipping's "Guidance for Ensuring a Safe Shipboard Interface Between Ship and Shore-Based Personnel", which we endorsed on their publication in early 2020. We hope the FONASBA Protocols will provide useful and relevant guidance to ship agents should a similar health emergency arise again.

As this article is being written, COVID is also looming over our 2021 Annual Meeting, scheduled for Antwerp at the start of December. Having held the 2020 Meeting virtually, and despite the increased formalities now plaguing international travel, there is a desperate need to get back together again in person and do what ship agents and ship brokers do best; talk, exchange views and experiences, and enjoy the company of friends. By the time this article is published, we will know if we have succeeded.

Whilst less able to make significant reductions in emissions and support sustainable development as other parties in the maritime transport chain, ship agents and ship brokers still have a role to play in ushering in a cleaner, greener, future for shipping. To this end, FONASBA issued its Sustainable Development Declaration in late October 2021 to coincide with the COP26 conference in Glasgow. It calls on ship brokers, ship agents and their associations to use their position as the instigators of the voyage and coordinators of the port call to actively support the use of cleaner fuels, emissions mitigating technologies

and practices, and other facilitations to achieve the necessary outcomes. The Declaration was also issued to all member associations and a copy of it can be found on the FONASBA website, www.fonasba.com.

Four years after the project launched, and following drafting work by the Ship Agent Committee and then a lengthy review and public comment process within UN/CEFACT, we expect that the Minimum Standards for Ship Agents and Ship Brokers, formerly the UNCTAD Minimum Standards, will finally be published by the end of 2021. It will be good to have the finished document in the public domain, especially as it references FONASBA and the Quality Standard in a number of sections.

As well as moving forward on these and other projects, FONASBA itself is moving. Having been housed at the Baltic Exchange since 2010, a major refurbishment project is planned for the building and so we will be moving out by the end of this year. 2022 will therefore see us based at the International Chamber of Shipping at its new offices a few minutes' walk from our current location. We have collaborated on issues of common interest for some years and the relationship became even closer through the joint action by international maritime sector organisations to mitigate the impact of COVID on shipping and seafarers. No doubt other opportunities for close cooperation will arise and we very much look forward to the experience.

We now look forward to the challenges that 2022 will bring. ▲