



BRITISH PORTS
ASSOCIATION

What are Municipal Ports?

An overview of the local authority owned ports sector in the UK



2026

A British Ports Association Briefing Paper

Introduction

This document has been prepared to explain the role that some Local Authorities have in owning and managing port or marine facilities across the UK. It is not legal guidance and should not be used to replace any existing documentation that Councils may have already prepared about their own port assets. It has been designed as a supplementary background document to help local government officers, post holders, BPA members, or external stakeholders better understand the municipal ports sector.

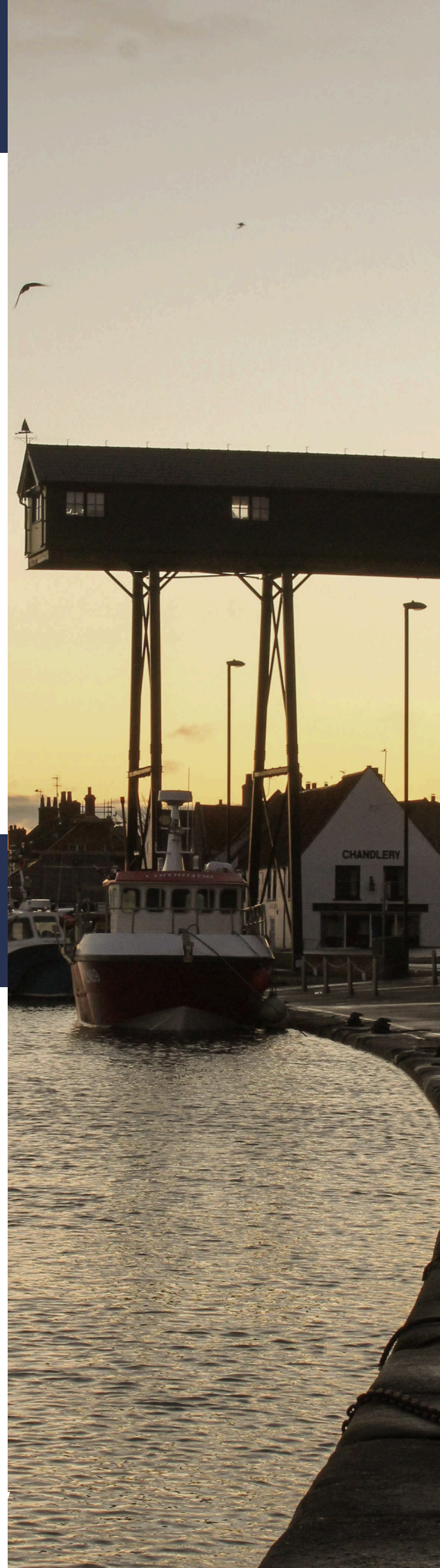
Whilst there are more than 300 local authority owned ports and marine facilities across the UK, port ownership remains an unusual activity for Councils. Therefore, those new to the sector can misunderstand port authority functions and duties, and we hope this document assists and improves understanding.

British Ports Association (BPA)

The British Ports Association (BPA) is the industry body for UK ports, with a membership of over 400 ports, harbours, marine facilities, and most municipal ports across the UK. Membership helps ports stay up to date with the latest legislative and policy developments, as well as learn from others in the sector about best practice and improved performance. BPA membership can indicate responsible port ownership and management.



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What are Municipal Ports and Port Authorities?

The UK's mix of ports provide important national, regional, and local hubs for trade, tourism, and recreational activities. The three main types of ports in the UK are Trust, Municipal, and those privately owned.

Ports can be statutory or non-statutory harbour authorities, or marine facilities. A Statutory Harbour Authority (SHA) is an authority that has been created with its own legislation – typically dating some time ago. SHAs can be Trust, Private, or Municipal ports.

Local Authorities that own and manage ports and harbours are typically Unitary Authorities, County Councils, District Councils, City Councils or Town Councils. These authorities may have differing constitutional models, such as a directly elected Mayor with a Cabinet, or a Leader and Cabinet, which would have a Portfolio Holder responsible for the harbour. Alternatively, some Local Authorities have retained, or returned to, the Committee structure.

Whilst the structures of local government and harbour legislation differ across the UK, broadly, all Municipal Ports must follow their own rules.

How Local Authority Managed Ports Function

Local authorities are governed by councillors, who are elected normally every four years and serve on committees or hold cabinet responsibilities for managing the various services operated by the Council. Local authorities are responsible for a range of services that they are required, or choose, to deliver, which may or may not be complementary to the management of a port or harbour. Depending on the size of the local authority, the operation of a port or harbour may represent only a small proportion of overall budget expenditure.

There are 339 local authorities in England and Wales, with a further 32 in Scotland and 11 in Northern Ireland. The number of coastal local authorities that host a port or harbour is considerably smaller, meaning that most local authorities do not manage ports and harbours.

There are approximately 60 SHAs in England and Wales that are owned and operated by local authorities, together with a number of non-statutory ports and harbours. Scotland has 128 local authority ports that are considered statutory municipal ports and harbours, along with a small number in Northern Ireland.

Local authority-run ports and harbours vary widely in type and scale, including those supporting commercial operations, fishing, passenger ferries and leisure activities. Some councils are responsible for a single port, such as East Suffolk Council's Southwold Harbour, while others manage extensive portfolios of ports and harbour facilities, with Highland Council responsible for around 90 locations.

In terms of scale, Orkney Islands Council's Scapa Flow has the largest geographical harbour area, Shetland Islands Council's Sullom Voe handles the highest freight tonnages, and Portsmouth City Council's Portsmouth International Port generates the greatest revenue.

One of the advantages of local authority ports is that, as part of a larger organisation, they can benefit from access to in-house services such as finance, legal, property services, human resources and IT. Harbour management may also sit within a wider council department, such as Environmental Services, Tourism and Leisure, Operational Services, or a similar function.

Some local authority-owned ports and harbours may have been 'inherited' from the trust and private ports sector following past failures, with the local authority acting as the 'funder of last resort'.

As mentioned earlier, ports and harbours may be statutory or non-statutory. Where a port or harbour is non-statutory, it is likely to be retained within the Council's general fund, and its resourcing will therefore compete with other services provided by the Council.

Regardless of whether a port is statutory or non-statutory, councils must be aware of their responsibilities under the Port & Marine Facilities Safety Code.



Harbour Management Committees (HMC) & Appointments

Previously, a harbour may have been managed by a committee that also covered other council services. However, in terms of current governance practice, the establishment of a dedicated Harbour Management Committee (HMC) is now regarded as one way in which a local authority can embed good governance principles. The BPA has produced guidance for local authorities that have, or are planning to establish, a Harbour Management Committee. This guidance has been included in the local authority ports section of the Department for Transport (DfT)'s Ports Good Governance Guidance.

These bodies may also be referred to as Harbour Boards, Harbour Committees, or similar, and, where adopted, are recognised committees of the Council. They should comprise a mix of councillors and non-elected members, generally on a 50:50 basis, appointed by the Council following a skills audit to ensure the HMC has the necessary expertise. This may include skills drawn from the environment, commercial shipping, fishing and leisure sectors. Appointments to these roles should be made through an open process, including advertisement, shortlisting, interview, and selection. This approach can bring greater openness and accountability to the decision-making process, while ensuring that the HMC benefits from relevant expertise and experience.

In general, the Chair of the HMC should be an elected member in order to report back to the full Council. Unlike trust ports, the Harbour Master or Harbour Manager cannot serve on the Committee or hold voting rights, as their status as a Council officer precludes this. They will, however, attend HMC meetings and will normally prepare the agenda and supporting papers



As council committees, HMCs are open to the public, which is considered to improve openness and accountability. Where necessary, confidential or commercially sensitive items may be considered in private, with the public excluded.

A Memorandum of Understanding should be in place between the Council and the HMC to ensure effective operation and to clearly set out respective responsibilities. Where powers are delegated by the Council, the HMC may act as a decision-making body and, provided decisions are taken within agreed council policy and budget, will not need to be referred elsewhere.

Following the initial UK-wide Trust Port Review in 2000, it was recognised that issues relating to accountability, governance and finance were also relevant to the municipal ports sector. This led to the Review of Municipal Ports in England and Wales (May 2006), which sought to ensure that municipal ports were playing a full and accountable role in the local and regional economy.

These reviews have since been superseded by the Ports Good Governance Guidance (March 2018). Guidance for local authority-owned ports is set out in Part C of this document, while Part A provides guidance applicable to all statutory harbour authorities.

Some trust ports, which are independent bodies that own themselves, may have provisions in their founding legislation requiring certain board members to be appointed by the local council. In a small number of cases, this may also include a legally enforceable precept, meaning that if the trust port requires financial support it can access funding from its local authority.

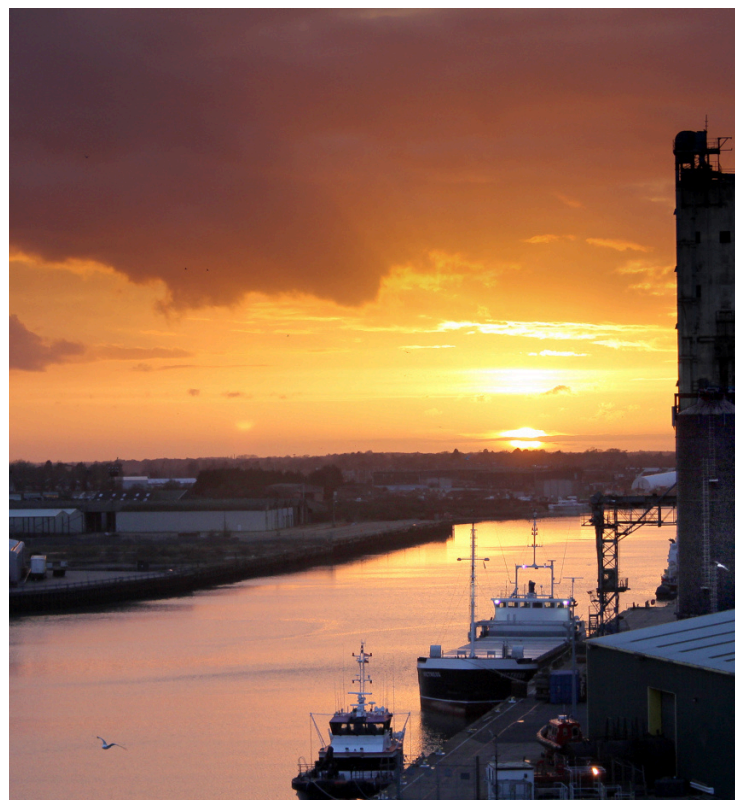
Separately, local authority representatives are sometimes invited to sit on stakeholder groups or interview panels for private or trust ports, as well as to review strategies, attend events and support development proposals.

Strategy and Business Planning

There are clear benefits for local authorities in developing robust business plans and strategies that set out what they wish to achieve through the operation of a port or harbour, taking into account both commercial viability and the provision of leisure and recreational facilities.

Such plans should assess the port's potential and how it will meet the needs of its stakeholders, who should be actively involved in their development. Larger ports are likely to benefit from a Port Master Plan, which sets out the port's strategic direction over the medium to long term, identifies how the business will grow and develop over that period, and provides a useful reference for local and regional planning authorities, transport infrastructure providers, and economic development bodies.

Local authority ports and harbours should engage fully and effectively with a wide range of relevant stakeholders in order to hear and take account of their views and concerns when considering future plans.



Finance

Ports are typically expected to operate on a commercial basis and to generate income from users and stakeholders across their estate, both marine and landside. This may include harbour and conservancy charges, cargo handling or fish landing dues, land and property rents, and car parking income. Where commercial activities have ceased, the parent local authority will be expected to support the safe operation and maintenance of the port in order to ensure that it continues to meet its legal obligations.

Depending on the provisions set out in the Harbour Orders, some local authority-owned ports may have bespoke, or ring-fenced, funding arrangements. This enables ports to access funding for upkeep and maintenance without having to compete with other council services. In addition, income generated by the ports and harbours can be used to plan for long-term development, rather than being transferred to other parts of the Council. This approach is identified as best practice in the Ports Good Governance Guidance and brings further benefits, including reduced financial dependence on the Council and the removal of the need to compete with other council services for funding.

Councils will need to take a realistic view of what they wish to achieve from their ports and harbours and to consider the interests of local stakeholders. As a result, some local authorities have sold their harbours or leased them to third parties. Other options may include conversion to a local authority-owned company, the establishment of a trust port, a Community Interest Company, or another appropriate operating model.



Where local authorities subsidise their SHA, they should consider a strategy to place port operations on a more commercial footing where possible. This may include increasing harbour dues for port or harbour use in order to meet statutory responsibilities for the safe operation of the harbour, as set out in the Port & Marine Facilities Safety Code.

The ability for ports and harbours to build up reserves from operating surpluses offers significant benefits, as it enables them to respond effectively to unexpected events where funding may be required at short notice.

Local Authorities Members of the British Ports Association

Membership of the British Ports Association (BPA) is widely regarded as an indicator of best practice and is generally associated with responsible port management. The BPA provides member ports with regular, free Port and Marine Facilities Safety Code (PMSC) duty holder training, enabling them to demonstrate compliance with the Code.

In addition, the BPA operates a number of working groups focused on key areas including marine safety, environment, engineering, finance, and employment. The BPA also convenes a Local Authority Ports Group, which meets provides a forum for council-owned port managers and harbour staff to discuss shared issues and challenges.

A list of local authorities that are members of the BPA is set out below:

[Aberdeenshire Council](#)

[Angus Council](#)

[Argyll and Bute Council](#)

[Bristol City Council](#)

[Canterbury City Council](#)

[Cumberland Council](#)

[Dumbartonshire Council](#)

[Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar](#)

[Conwy County Borough Council](#)

[Cornwall Council](#)

[Dorset Council](#)

[Dumfries & Galloway Council](#)

[East Suffolk Council](#)

[Exeter City Council](#)

[Fenland District Council](#)

[Hampshire County Council](#)

[Highland Council](#)

[Isle of Anglesey County Council](#)

[Moray Council](#)

[North Ayrshire Council](#)

[North Yorkshire Council](#)

[Orkney Islands Council](#)

[Portsmouth City Council](#)

[Renfrewshire Council](#)

[Shetland Islands Council](#)

[Somerset Council](#)

[South Hams District Council](#)

[Sunderland City Council](#)

[Thanet District Council](#)

[Torbay Council](#)

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