National Policy Statement for Ports

Summary

- Planning must recognise ports as fundamental nodes with strengthened multimodal connectivity guidance and protected access for road, rail and waterway links.
- The NPS should provide clearer guidance on ports' strategic importance and protect existing water freight infrastructure from residential development encroachment.
- The government must set specific growth targets for water freight with renewed, simplified grant schemes beyond current programme expiry dates.
- It is essential to deliver clear direction on future fuel technologies and equipment standards while ensuring environmental requirements don't block essential infrastructure investment.

About Logistics UK

Logistics UK is one of the country's largest business groups, and the only trade association which represents all of logistics. Our mission is to support, shape and stand up for a safe, sustainable and efficient logistics sector. Our membership of more than 20,000 includes global, national and regional businesses and SMEs spanning road, rail, inland waterways, sea and air as well as the customers of freight services, such as retailers and manufacturers. We deliver services, representation and thought leadership, helping members and policymakers to seize new opportunities for the sector and the economy as a whole, right across the country.

The logistics sector

Logistics underpins our economy and is fundamental to our way of life. It supplies our hospitals, schools, factories, construction sites, shops and homes with everything they need, everywhere, every day – nothing moves without it.

The efficiency of logistics and the productivity of the economy are completely intertwined. Due to this relationship, Oxford Economics found in 2023 that getting the policy and infrastructure environment right for logistics would unlock up to £8 billion a year in productivity-led growth.

However, we are not currently going in the right direction. The UK fell from 4th to 19th place in the World Bank Logistics Performance index over the past decade, largely as a result of border friction and underinvestment in transport corridors.

Logistics is a major sector in its own right. It contributes more than £170 billion to the economy each year (12% of UK non-financial GVA), is one of the UK's largest employers, providing good jobs with strong career progression – 2.7 million people (8% of the UK workforce) are employed in logistics roles, and its key hubs provide a catalyst for further growth and investment, helping places to thrive.

Logistics has transformed the UK and is now delivering for the future. It helped deliver the country's canals, roads, railways, airports and ports, has driven revolutions in global trade and e-commerce and is now innovating to deliver decarbonisation and even greater efficiency.

Consultation response

Integrated freight network

As an economy where 90% of goods arrive by sea, ports are fundamental nodes in our logistics system. The revised NPS must recognise ports as part of the National Freight Network committed to in the previous Future of Freight plan, ensuring seamless multimodal connectivity. We strongly support the market-driven approach to port development, as commercial operators best understand demand patterns and operational requirements.

However, ports do not operate in isolation. The NPS must strengthen guidance on connections between ports and inland transport networks encompassing road, rail and inland waterways. We particularly welcome recognition of modal shift

opportunities, which align with the need to reduce the sector's carbon emissions and the impact of congestion on the efficiency of supply chains.

Planning system integration and understanding

Our members consistently report that planning authorities lack sufficient understanding of logistics operations and their strategic importance. Planning officers and elected councillors are typically not logistics experts, creating perceived challenges for granting planning permission. The draft NPS must provide clearer guidance to decision-makers on ports' role within the broader freight ecosystem.

This includes protecting existing water freight infrastructure from encroachment by residential development and ensuring new developments consider impacts on established logistics operations. Access to waterways and wharves can be compromised as land is lost to housing, with the further impact of potentially exposing subsequent logistics activities to local opposition. The NPS should mandate recognition of existing use rights when neighbouring land is developed for residential purposes.

We support the presumption in favour of sustainable port development, but this must be matched by practical deliverability. Environmental requirements, while important, should not create insurmountable barriers to essential infrastructure investment. The fact that only 13% of domestic freight is currently moved by water demonstrates significant potential for modal shift, but this requires supportive planning frameworks that understand operational realities.

Multimodal connectivity and infrastructure protection

The NPS should ensure port developments are integrated with inland transport networks. This includes adequate provision for HGV parking and driver facilities, rail freight connections and protection of wharf access for inland waterway transport. Planning guidance must recognise that restricting access to existing water freight infrastructure undermines modal shift objectives and contradicts sustainability goals.

Water freight growth and government support

Government must demonstrate the same commitment to water freight growth as shown for rail freight through Great British Railways. We call for specific growth targets for water freight, supported by renewed grant schemes beyond the current Mode Shift Revenue Support Scheme and Waterborne Freight Grant expiry dates. The application processes for these schemes require simplification to improve accessibility for operators.

Futureproofing and decarbonisation

While supporting net zero ambitions, the maritime sector requires certainty over future fuel technologies and standardisation of equipment. Maritime decarbonisation currently poses more questions than answers, with unclear phase-out dates and undefined future fuel strategies. The NPS should encourage flexibility in port design to accommodate evolving propulsion technologies and alternative fuels, supported by appropriate infrastructure investment.

Government must provide additional support for research and development to decarbonise port, maritime and inland waterway operations. Modal shift supports emission reduction but cannot achieve net zero logistics until the maritime sector itself reaches net zero.

Conclusion

This NPS represents a crucial opportunity to establish ports as recognised components of critical national infrastructure within an integrated multimodal freight network. We urge government to ensure delivery of the Future of Freight commitments, maintain momentum on multimodal freight network development, and provide the certainty and support mechanisms necessary for sustainable growth in water freight capacity.

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