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Insights

THE NEW NATIONAL POLICY STATEMENT FOR PORTS

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Summary

On 6 July 2026 the Government published a revised National Policy Statement for Ports (NPSFP), replacing the one designated in 2012. It keeps the same basic architecture, a presumption in favour of consent and a market-led approach, but builds on it in ways that matter for anyone bringing forward port capacity. Offshore wind gets real policy weight for the first time, hydrogen and ammonia are named as commodities ports should plan for, and the need case now runs to 2050.

Why the new npsfp matters

National policy statements such as the NPSFP are key to the certainty of the fast-track development consent regime set up by the Planning Act 2008. Where a proposed port scheme meets the thresholds in that Act, for example a container terminal capacity increase above 500,000 twenty-foot equivalent units or a bulk traffic increase above five million tonnes a year, it needs a development consent order. The Secretary of State must decide that application in accordance with the NPSFP unless doing so would breach an international or statutory duty, be unlawful, or mean the adverse impacts of the scheme outweigh its benefits. The NPSFP also carries weight beyond DCOs. It is a relevant consideration for the Marine Management Organisation when it decides harbour orders and marine licences, and it may be material for local planning authorities dealing with port-related applications under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

What is the same

The 2026 NPSFP is not a complete rewrite. It explicitly says that it updates and enhances the 2012 NPSFP to reflect changed circumstances and policy, rather than replacing its underlying approach. The core architecture survives: judgments on when and where development occurs are still to be made on commercial factors in a free-market environment, there is still a compelling need for new capacity and there is still a presumption in favour of granting consent for compliant development.

What has changed

What has moved is the scale of what that need now covers and the sectors it is built to serve.

The 2026 NPSFP concludes a compelling need for substantial additional port capacity over the next 30 years, referring to updated Department for Transport demand forecasts running out to 2050 but setting out scope for these to be replaced by new forecasts. Containers, ro-ro and dry bulk are all expected to grow. Liquid bulk is the exception, forecast to fall as the energy mix moves away from oil and toward lower-carbon commodities.

The presumption in favour of consent is now stated in more explicit terms. Port development that falls within the established need and complies with the statement's policies benefits from that presumption. Alongside it sits a new instruction that decision-makers should give substantial weight to the positive impacts of economic development.

The bigger shift is in what the need case now covers:

- The 2012 NPSFP's energy section covered oil, liquefied natural gas and biomass. The 2026 NPSFP adds hydrogen and ammonia as commodities ports should be planning to handle, and treats ensuring security of energy supplies through ports as an essential consideration rather than simply an important one.
- Offshore wind has moved from a passing mention to a central theme, with a statement that ports should not be disadvantaged by avoidable delay in the planning system. Floating offshore wind in particular gets its own recognition for the first time too, with an acknowledgement that it needs deeper water, heavier lift capacity and more laydown space than conventional turbines, meaning new, bespoke port facilities.
- Cruise and passenger traffic also gets a stronger platform, with a dedicated tourism and leisure section and specific economic contribution figures included for the first time.

Biodiversity net gain is built into the NPSFP for the first time too, applicable to the onshore and intertidal parts of a scheme. A future Biodiversity Gain Statement is expected to set out how this will work for nationally significant projects once the relevant provisions of the Environment Act 2021 are commenced.

Key takeaways

The policy foundation for promoting NSIP port capacity has widened beyond freight and bulk. Port scheme DCO applications built around supporting energy transition infrastructure such as offshore wind, including floating offshore wind, or hydrogen, ammonia and other next generation energy commodities now have an express foothold in the NPSFP.

Cruise and passenger operations are in a stronger position too. International sea passenger numbers to and from UK ports were already back above 23 million a year by 2023, and the cruise sector alone is credited with contributing £9.4 billion to the UK economy and supporting 82,000 jobs, figures the NPSFP now sets out expressly to back a sector it says has kept growing since the pandemic.

The explicit presumption in favour of consent, backed by the new substantial weight to be given to economic benefits, will be key to the case for all applicable schemes.

Related Capabilities

- Planning & Zoning

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