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Ports and harbours

Introduction

Ports and harbours in the UK are generally owned and operated by three types of authority: private ports, local authority ports, and trust ports[1]. This short briefing provides an overview of ports legislation, policy, funding, and issues raised in written evidence submitted by CalMac Ferries Ltd, Mallaig Harbour Authority (a trust port), and the Scottish Collaboration of Transport Specialists (SCOTS), representing local authority port operators.

Ports Legislation

Ports and harbours operate under a complex statutory framework, much of which is reserved to the UK Parliament, although devolved legislation does apply to matters such as environmental and wildlife protection. The principal pieces of harbour legislation include.

- Harbours Act 1964
- Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
- Pilotage Act 1987
- Ports Act 1991
- Marine (Scotland) Act 2010
- Merchant Shipping Acts
- Port Marine Safety Code and associated guidance.

Many harbour authorities also operate under private acts and orders, many of which can trace their history back hundreds of years. These typically define the powers of a harbour or port authority, setting out:

- Limits of jurisdiction.
- Ability to charge for services.
- Harbour master functions.
- Maintenance duties.

[1] Trust ports are set up by an Act of Parliament and controlled and administered by a self-governing independent statutory body, often known as a Harbour Board or in older cases Harbour Commissioners. The governing body manages the assets of the port for the benefit of its stakeholders, which include port users, employees, local communities, and public authorities. A trust port has no shareholders or owners, and any surplus is ploughed back into the port for the benefit of its stakeholders.

- Navigation and safety responsibilities.

Ports policy

Transport Scotland sets out is plans for the development of ports and harbours used to provide Clyde and Hebrides ferry services, operated by CalMac Ferries, and Northern Isles services, operated by Northlink in the Vessels and Ports Plan for the Clyde and Hebrides and Northern Isles networks (2025 – 2045), which is part of the larger Islands Connectivity Plan. The plan focuses on improving the reliability and resilience of both ports and vessels, with port investment targeted at:

- renewing and upgrading ports in response to asset age and condition.
- improving weather resilience and technical reliability when investing in port upgrades.
- improving accessibility at ports.
- improving resilience through an expansion in the major vessel fleet and through increased inter-operability and standardisation of vessels and ports.

Details of investment plans are set out in the Scottish Government's Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline 2026, published on 13 January 2026. This lists infrastructure projects costing over £5 million and programmes over £20 million which are currently being delivered, approved, assessed, or considered for progress by the Scottish Government.

The Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline is a live document, and new projects and programmes will be added as investment plans are agreed. The Scottish Government intends to publish progress reports on the listed projects every six months.

The Pipeline lists the following port and harbour projects as having agreed outline business cases (or equivalent) and agreed funding.

- Lochboisdale/Gasay Island port improvements.
- Small Vessel Replacement Programme Phase 1 including port upgrades.
- Port Ellen Harbour upgrade.

It also lists projects in a "development pipeline", with an outline business case under development. While the Scottish Government has committed to these developments, the document states "To ensure protection of the public purse, where business cases and value for money considerations do not stack up projects may be stood down from the development or future pipelines." Port and harbour projects listed under this heading are:

- Ardrossan redevelopment.
- Gourock Port Improvement Works.
- Small Vessels Replacement Programme Phase 2 including port upgrades and shore power connections.
- Oban Berth Modifications.
- Mallaig Port Improvements

Funding

Most ports and harbours are self-funding, raising funds through charging fees for harbour services, berthing, and commercial operations, such as warehousing.

Transport Scotland also operates a pier and harbours grant scheme. This provides grants to port operators (including CMAL, but not local authority ports) for improvement to piers and harbours, with a focus on ports and harbours serving island ferry services. A total of £82 million was allocated in the Scottish Budget 2026-27 for such grants.

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (CMAL) ports and harbours

CMAL, which is owned by Scottish Ministers, is harbour authority for 17 ports and harbours. These are:

Ardrossan
(Arran) Brodick
(Arran) Lochranza
(Barra) Castlebay
(Bute) Rhubodach
Claonaig
Colintravie
(Coll) Arinagour
(Colonsay) Scalasaig
(Cumbrae) Tattie Pier
Gallanach
Gourock
(Harris) Tarbert
(Islay) Port Ellen
Kennacraig
Kerrera
Kilchoan
Largs
Lochaline
(Mull) Fishnish
(Mull) Tobermory
Oban
Portavadie
(Skye) Armadale
(South Uist) Lochboisdale
(Tiree) Gott Bay
Wemyss Bay

CMAL also owns and leases properties and port infrastructure at 11 other harbours across the west coast of Scotland. All these ports and harbours are served by CalMac Ferries services.

Key issues raised in written evidence

CalMac Ferries

CalMac Ferries Ltd summaries the views expressed in their written submission as follows:

- “Scotland’s ferry services, vessels, ports, landside connections and supporting infrastructure should be planned as a single integrated transport system.

- Most ports continue to support safe operation, but infrastructure constraints limit flexibility and resilience in parts of the network.

- Before major renewal or replacement is approved, the suitability of the existing harbour location should be tested against credible long-term alternatives.

- Future investment should prioritise common vessel-port interfaces and greater interoperability between vessels and ports.

- Reliability and resilience should remain the primary objectives of long-term infrastructure planning.

- Harbour projects should be assessed based on their contribution to network-wide performance as well as local benefits.

- Planning should examine opportunities for a dedicated freight vessel where this could reduce pressure on rural roads.

- Decarbonisation, grid capacity, and climate adaptation requirements must be incorporated into future infrastructure plans.

- Continued collaboration between Transport Scotland, CMAL, CalMac and other harbour authorities is essential to achieving long-term improvements."

Mallaig Harbour Authority

Mallaig Harbour Authority, a trust port with an annual turnover of around £2 million, sets out its views on harbour development as follows:

- "Mallaig is the mainland gateway for Skye, South Uist, the Small Isles and the Knoydart Peninsula, and a hub for Scotland's aquaculture industry. It handles up to 25 ferry movements a day.

- Its ferry infrastructure is around 40 years old, relies on a single linkspan, and cannot fully accommodate the next generation of ferries without compromise.

- The long-term solution is understood. Transport Scotland officials and CMAL agree that a new breakwater is the best long-term outcome. The question is when and how it is delivered.

- At over £100m, the breakwater is far beyond the means of a trust port turning over around £2m a year. No single organisation can fund it alone.

- The timetables are out of step. The replacement Lord of the Isles is expected around 2030, but Mallaig's port works sit in Phase 3 (2031–36) of the draft Vessels and Ports Plan.

Two asks of the Scottish Government:

- Support to fund a business case for Mallaig, developed jointly by Mallaig Harbour Authority (MHA), Transport Scotland, and CMAL, including a partnership plan for how the breakwater is funded and owned.

- Move Mallaig's port works into Phase 2 of the Vessels and Ports Plan, so the harbour and the new vessels are planned and delivered together".

Scottish Collaboration of Transport Specialists (SCOTS)

SCOTS note that across the local authority harbour estate that:

"Across Scotland there are common challenges relating to:

Ageing quay walls;
Deteriorating breakwaters;
Increased maintenance liabilities;
Climate change impacts and coastal erosion;
Rising construction costs;
More demanding safety and security standards; and
Changes in vessel size and design.

Particular pressure exists within island and remote mainland communities where harbours serve as critical economic and social infrastructure."

And that the principal risks are:

1. Structural deterioration leading to increased maintenance expenditure;

2. Reduced resilience to severe weather events;

3. Capacity constraints limiting future economic development;

4. Inability to accommodate future ferry replacement programmes; and

5. Reduced operational resilience during breakdowns or vessel substitutions.

SCOTS estimates that "…the cumulative investment requirement across local authority harbour estates is likely to extend into several hundreds of millions of pounds over the coming decades." They note a particular issue with small harbours that were developed around a fishing industry that no longer exists, meaning commercial income cannot cover the costs of inspection, maintenance, and repair.

SCOTS make eight recommendations to secure the future of local authority ports, and the services they support, for the long-term. These are:

1: Develop a National Harbours Strategy.

2: Establish a Multi-Year Harbour Investment Programme.

3: Align Ferry Procurement and Harbour Investment.

4: Commission a National Condition Survey.

5: Create a Dedicated Ferry Port Readiness Fund.

6: Improve Climate and Resilience Planning.

7: Recognise Local Authority Harbours as Critical National Infrastructure.

8: Strengthen Collaboration Across the Sector.

Alan Rehfisch, Senior Researcher (Transport and Planning), SPICe
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The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot