

Chief Executive's Office

Civic Offices
Guildhall Square
Portsmouth
PO1 2AL

Ref: NBP/kab

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury

The Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

By post and email

11 September 2026

Dear Prime Minister, Secretary of State and Home Secretary

Re: Portsmouth International Port and small boat arrivals

We write formally, and in the strongest possible terms, to set out Portsmouth City Council's position that Portsmouth International Port is wholly unsuitable for use as a disembarkation point for individuals arriving in the United Kingdom following migrant small boat crossings.

Portsmouth International Port is not an idle, flexible or readily adaptable facility. It is a busy, commercially operating international port, supporting multiple daily ferry services to France, Spain and the Channel Islands. Its primary function is to facilitate scheduled passenger travel, freight movement, trade and supply-chain resilience. The Port constitutes designated critical national infrastructure and also serves as a contingency port for food imports in the event that the port of Dover is unavailable.

The Port also performs a critical lifeline role for the Channel Islands, supporting the movement of goods and essential supplies. Any disruption to operations at Portsmouth would therefore have consequences well beyond the city, affecting island communities and businesses that rely on dependable and timely ferry and freight services.

Portsmouth is also a significant cargo port. Substantial volumes of fresh produce and other time-sensitive goods pass through the Port each day, dependent upon efficient handling, onward distribution and secure border processes. The imposition of small boat disembarkation activity would create unacceptable risks to the continuity, reliability and security of those commercial operations. Any such direction would be likely to cause severe disruption for several hours before and after each incident. It is imperative that all relevant parts of Government fully understand these implications before any such decision is contemplated.

The Port is also an important and growing cruise embarkation and destination, receiving on average two cruise visits each week. Cruise calls bring significant passenger numbers, transport movements and security requirements into an already constrained operational environment. The combination of those activities with emergency or enforced disembarkation arrangements would be operationally unsafe, reputationally damaging and highly disruptive. Portsmouth has worked over many years to develop its visitor economy, attract cruise calls and promote the city as a destination. Any direction requiring the Port to be used for this purpose would materially damage that reputation due to the disruption caused and risk loss of business, for which Portsmouth City Council would expect full recompense from Government.

There are, in addition, serious practical, safeguarding and public safety concerns. The Port's layout, access routes, commercial traffic flows and passenger-handling arrangements are designed for scheduled maritime operations, not for the reception, screening, safeguarding and onward transfer of vulnerable individuals arriving through irregular and unpredictable routes. The Port is configured for large commercial vessels, not lifeboats or small coastguard craft. Passenger access from smaller vessels would be inherently unsuitable and, in some circumstances, could necessitate unsafe arrangements due to the height of quays and berths. Welfare provision, medical access and the safe movement of unwell or vulnerable passengers would be significantly compromised. These issues must be fully understood before any proposal to direct the Port's use for small boat arrivals could even be considered viable.

Portsmouth's role as a commercial gateway must be protected. It should not be compromised by the imposition of a function that is incompatible with its daily operations, its supply-chain responsibilities and its role in supporting international passenger and freight services. Indeed, these are exactly the same operational reasons why landings in Kent do not happen at the commercial port.

Portsmouth International Port is also distinct in that it is wholly owned and operated by Portsmouth City Council. Income generated by the Port is reinvested directly into essential council services, including adult social care, children's services, homelessness support and housing. Disruption to the Port's income, operations or reputation would therefore place the delivery of essential local services at material risk. If Government were to direct the use of the Port for migrant crossing disembarkation activity, Portsmouth City Council would expect full reimbursement for all associated costs, including lost income, clean-up costs, staffing costs, security costs and any wider financial consequences arising from that decision.

For completeness, other harbour and coastal infrastructure in Portsmouth is also unsuitable. Much of this infrastructure is located in highly sensitive and inappropriate settings, including residential, commercial, historic, leisure and visitor areas, close to piers, national monuments, shopping centres, marinas and other public spaces. We do not consider that there is any infrastructure along the Portsmouth coast that could be safely or appropriately used without creating the same operational, welfare, security and public safety concerns experienced at Eastney on Sunday 6 September. There is no suitable location with the necessary welfare provision, secure access, passenger-handling arrangements or operational resilience. These constraints are exacerbated by all potential landing points being on Portsea Island, with limited road access. Portsea Island only has three roads onto it which any obstruction or blockage, including access to the acute A&E hospital, would cause significant risk to not only Portsmouth, but Isle of Wight residents too. The M275, the main route serving the city, passes directly in front of the Port, with previous protests demonstrating how susceptible it is to disruption, following previous activity linked to Border Force presence at the site.

We therefore request that Government provides a clear and unequivocal assurance that Portsmouth International Port, and any other infrastructure owned or operated by Portsmouth City Council or the Port, will not be used as a disembarkation point for migrant small boat crossings. Any future operational planning must fully recognise the Port's commercial, logistical, strategic and civic importance. Should Government nevertheless seek to impose any form of direction or instruction on the Port or Portsmouth City Council, we would make it clear that such action had been taken without local consent and that Government would remain accountable to Portsmouth residents for the consequences. We would also expect all related enquiries, Freedom of Information requests, complaints and correspondence to be directed to the relevant Government departments for response.

We would be grateful for urgent written confirmation of the Government's position. For the reasons set out above, we ask that Government is fully cognisant of the significant operational, commercial, financial, safeguarding and public safety implications of any such decision. In the event that Portsmouth International Port or Portsmouth City Council were instructed to make facilities available for these purposes (which we request is undertaken solely in writing to us), we would regard that decision as being imposed against the clear and stated position of the Council/Port, given the fundamental unsuitability of the Port and the wider Portsmouth coastline for such operations. We would reserve the right to communicate that position publicly and to make clear the basis on which any such decision had been taken.

We wish to highlight that Portsmouth City Council has never abrogated its responsibility to accommodate those seeking asylum within our city; in fact the Home Office has placed more individuals here than anywhere else across the entire South East, whilst some councils continue to play no part whatsoever in assisting this national challenge.

It is therefore inappropriate for the Government to impose further pressure on Portsmouth, our infrastructure and local services, particularly given the Council's clear position that the Port and wider Portsmouth coastline are unsuitable for such purposes.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Steve Pitt
Leader of the Council
Portsmouth City Council



Natalie Brahma-Pearl
Chief Executive
Portsmouth City Council



Mike Sellers
Port Director
Portsmouth International Port

cc: Amanda Martin MP, Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North
Stephen Morgan MP, Member of Parliament for Portsmouth South