

What changes has the Act made to the law?

This policy delivers on the government's commitment to create a mandatory version of the Seafarers' Charter, setting employment standards for operators of services calling frequently at UK ports. It is intended to protect seafarers from a race to the bottom on employment standards and level the playing field for operators.

The Employment Rights Act gives the government powers to implement a Mandatory Seafarers Charter. The Charter is part of the wider effort to strengthen protections for seafarers after incidents such as P&O Ferries' mass dismissal.

The Act therefore:

- Creates a statutory framework for a Mandatory Seafarers Charter, ensuring that minimum employment standards – such as fair pay, working conditions, and employment rights – apply to seafarers working on vessels regularly operating in UK waters.
- Builds on the earlier Seafarers' Wages Act 2023, extending protections beyond pay to include other employment rights.

In short, it gives the government the legal authority to enforce fair working conditions and pay for seafarers, closing loopholes that previously allowed poor treatment on ships operating from UK ports.

How is this different from the previous legislation?

In 2023, the Government launched a voluntary Seafarers' Charter, which commits signatories to meeting standards on a variety of employment standards. It was part of the response to P&O Ferries sacking almost 800 seafarers in March 2022 and replacing them with agency workers on worse terms and conditions.¹

The Seafarers' Wages Act 2023 makes payment of an equivalent to the UK National Minimum Wage for work in UK waters a condition of access to ports for services calling at a UK port at least 120 times a year.

The clauses amend the existing Seafarers' Wages Act 2023, which will become the Seafarers' (Wages and Working Conditions) Act 2023.

The Act provides powers to make regulations setting standards relating to safety (including roster patterns, fatigue management and safety related training) and remuneration (including pay outside of UK waters). Operators of services in scope will be requested by the harbour authority to provide a declaration that they are meeting the requirements of the regulations in order to continue accessing the port. If they do not provide a declaration, the harbour authority must apply a surcharge in respect of each occasion upon which a vessel providing the service enters the port. If the surcharge is not paid, the harbour authority must deny access to the port.

¹ [Oral statement to Parliament P&O Ferries: staff redundancies and suspension of services](#)

The regulations will specify the services to which the requirements apply, in relation to routes and/or frequency of port calls (but no less frequently than 120 port calls a year).

When will these changes come into force?

Commencement of the Mandatory Seafarers Charter is expected to be in December 2026.

That means the Charter will be legally binding from December 2026, following consultation and the passing of secondary regulations.

What further detail will be consulted on and when?

Any use of these powers will be subject to consultation with businesses and seafarer representatives. Consultation is expected to take place in early 2025.

Key Stats

Seafarers are crucial for the UK economy, keeping UK supply chains and maritime tourism traffic moving. The maritime sector directly contributed around £18.7 billion to UK gross value added (GVA) and directly supported around 227,000 jobs in 2019.² An estimated 24,100 UK seafarers were active at sea in 2023.³

Common questions

Will you be consulting on the use of these powers?

- Any use of these powers will be subject to consultation with businesses and seafarer representatives.

Are other countries applying similar measures?

- A recently introduced French law has also applied a similar requirement limiting tours of duty for seafarers on cross-Channel routes.
- We agree that it is appropriate for us to provide some sensible protections to those working on routes between our two countries.

Why should ports have to play a role in enforcement?

- It is important to note that ports will not play a criminal enforcement role. The harbour authorities will not be responsible for checking the validity of declarations.
- If a declaration is provided by an operator, then no further action is required on the part of the harbour authority.
- The role of ports is important in establishing the requirements as conditions of port access.

²[State of the Maritime Nation | Maritime UK](#)

³[Seafarers in the UK Shipping Industry, Department for Transport. 2023](#)

- The entire compliance mechanism has been designed as a proportionate and appropriate balance of roles between the ports, who will fulfil the administrative role of ensuring access to ports is conditional on provision of the applicable declarations and/or surcharges, and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which will be the body responsible for enforcement and prosecutions.