Marine Management Organisation

UK MAJOR PORTS GROUP

Report on Ports Sandbox Actions

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Executive Summary

The Ports Sandbox was established as a joint initiative between the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and the ports sector, working with UK Major Ports Group (UKMPG), to explore opportunities to streamline ways of working and improve the consistency, transparency, and certainty of marine licence applications. The Sandbox operates alongside, but independently of, the MMO's Marine Planning and Licensing Project (MPLP), providing a collaborative environment to test new approaches and identify solutions that can deliver meaningful improvements to both industry and regulator.

Aligned with the Corry Review emphasis on reducing regulatory complexity, and MPLP, improving decision-making transparency, and enhancing collaboration between government and industry, the Ports Sandbox is providing a practical mechanism to explore opportunities to apply these principles within the marine licensing context. The initiative supports the government's wider ambitions for growth, clean energy transition, and efficient infrastructure delivery across the ports sector.

Michelle Willis, MMO CEO said *"Through working with the ports sector we are collaboratively transforming how we work with industry, learning together and shaping a system that unlocks growth, reduces red tape while still protecting our natural environment."*

Geraint Evans, UKMPG CEO said *"The Sandbox is a fantastic example of genuine joint partnership working between the MMO and industry, who share a direct interest in environmental protection and the sustainable growth of the ports sector. Understanding builds trust and this model is the genesis of a long-term partnership model between the major ports of this country and the MMO."*

Purpose and Approach

The Sandbox was created to:

- Develop an open, collaborative relationship between the MMO and industry.
- Identify and test opportunities to simplify and streamline licensing processes.
- Explore where legislative or policy change could unlock efficiencies.
- Capture and share best practice from across the UK and international examples.
- Define a sustainable model for continuous improvement beyond the Sandbox's lifetime, for business as usual.

To date, the Sandbox has convened six workshops involving representatives from the ports sector, through the UKMPG, and the MMO. These sessions have identified pain points, shared evidence, and developed actionable recommendations across thematic areas of communication, transparency, process and tools, and external dependencies.

Corry Review Alignment

The Sandbox was instigated in February 2025 ahead of the outputs of the Corry review, which was published in April 2025. The Sandbox provides a practical mechanism to deliver on the Corry Review aims by identifying and addressing regulatory barriers, enhancing collaboration between industry and the MMO, and focusing on measurable outcomes. Both the MMO and the UKMPG (industry) are committed to working together to identify improvement opportunities, on both sides, to deliver shared objectives that create a more efficient, transparent, and outcome-focused licensing system.

In particular, the Sandbox supports Recommendation 5 of the Corry Review through the development of a collective development forecast to improve regulatory resource planning and early identification of complex cases suitable for the Licensing and Environmental Reform (LER) process. It reflects Recommendation 7 by exploring SLA-style agreements for major developments, building on successful approaches such as the Thames Tideway Tunnel. It is also aligned to Recommendation 10 looking at experimental and sandbox type environments, where new approaches can be tested in a safe space and, if successful, deployed for wider adoption into a business-as-usual context.

Aligned with the Corry Review's outcome-based ethos, the Sandbox will use pilot cases to measure improvements in timeliness, transparency, and certainty, including through new applicant-facing tools, improved information sharing, and the creation of a consolidated Top Tips Guidance resource to support more consistent and efficient licensing.

Initial Findings and Outputs

To date the Sandbox has produced 23 recommendations (appendix 2. (some of these are closely aligned to each other so have been joined together in the output table in Appendix 1). All recommendations have been assessed for:

- **Feasibility and difficulty** – including identification of "quick wins" and priority actions.
- **Resource implications** – considering both MMO and industry capacity.
- **Ownership and delivery responsibility** – whether led by ports, MMO, or jointly.

The recommendations focus on practical measures to:

- Review communication and pre-application engagement.
- Enhance transparency in timelines, decision-making, and fee structures.
- Refine tools and processes within the Marine Case Management System (MCMS)
- Review dependencies with statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency, Natural England, and Cefas.

This report focuses on recommendations to deliver outputs in two phases.

Phase One will deliver three key outputs which will help improve transparency of MMO and ports process; provide expectation management of case timescales; and provide guidance of new processes including how they are to be tested. These outputs will then be taken forward into Phase Two.

Phase Two will focus on the test and learn phase, taking pilot cases through the new ways of working approaches, measuring success, challenges and capturing best practice. Phase Two will also be an opportunity to bring statutory consultees and relevant third parties into the process to help shape, deliver and feedback on the agreed outputs.

Phase One will deliver:

- A Top Tips Guidance - for MMO/external use. This will be structured around the timeline of the licensing process and will include and gather information and guidance that may be hard to find, hard to understand, or not available to external parties, to help them on their licensing journey. This is a temporary fix while the MPLP teamwork through the updated guidance. The Top Tips Guidance will be published on Gov.uk and can be updated regularly as required. This will be jointly developed between MMO and industry and will be promoted and publicised within the ports sector as a useful resource.

- A Programme in Principle and guidance, for MMO use with relevant cases. It will deliver a jointly agreed clear process for setting realistic KPIs/milestones at

pre-application and application start, with a framework for complex projects that require longer timelines. This document will be key to managing expectations and keeping track of the progress of more complex projects against some agreed parameters.

Sandbox partners will also jointly agree and deliver a process and associated guidance for cases that will most likely exceed KPIs. The purpose of this is to maintain prioritisation, work to an agreed extension with applicants, and have a plan for communication via updates and documented revised dates. Short-term changes will be delivered via guidance and case officer processes, with medium-term integration into future systems for automated alerts and applicant-facing transparency.

- A new Ports Case Process Document, for MMO use. This will be a single document containing all process changes to be trialled on port cases as a result of the sandbox, picking up the themes of communication, transparency, process and tools, and external dependencies. This is a guidance document for use by the MMO case teams in their approach to port case work. It will also benefit ports through the refined processes and engagement on relevant projects. Flexible design will enable it to be adapted to also act as a tool to collect learning and feedback.

In addition to delivering the above outputs, briefing sessions will be delivered to the marine licensing team at all-team meetings and training sessions. The MMO Senior Executive Officer (SEO) for the Ports and Marinas Sector will support the Licensing team in the implementation of testing and will monitor the progress and outcomes of the updated processes. Process changes identified within the case process document will either be tested sector wide, or on an initial select few cases, depending on the level of change from standard process. Close alignment will be maintained with UKMPG through fortnightly check-ins and additional communication as required. A mechanism will be established to capture feedback from industry on the impact and effectiveness of these changes to inform continuous improvement and joint action.

Phase Two

This is the test and learn phase where agreed cases will be piloted through the new processes. It will also be the stage where relevant statutory consultees and other third parties will be invited to feed into the process for delivering the agreed improvements.

As the testing and learning and associated process changes embed into ways of working, Phase Two will become business as usual. Regular MMO and ports engagement will continue to review progress of Sandbox outputs and share new challenges and ideas.

Timelines

Phase one will focus on the development and delivery of the agreed “paper” outputs and will run until **31 March 2026**.

An interim review of progress was undertaken in **February 2026** and has been reported to Board meetings with positive endorsement. Regular engagement will continue between MMO and UKMPG to ensure alignment, with all draft outputs shared for review and agreement prior to finalisation.

During March and April 2026, the focus will shift to presenting these outputs to the team, starting pilot cases where appropriate, and gathering feedback from both the MMO case team, and the applicants involved.

As Phase One draws to a close, the focus will shift from immediate delivery to embedding improvements, refining processes, and planning for sustainable implementation across the wider licensing system.

Progress will be reviewed again at by **30 June 2026**, considering the standard 13-week timeframe for a marine licence application. These reviews will assess case progress; staff feedback on the updated processes; and industry and applicant feedback working with UKMPG and industry representatives, ensuring that learning is captured and informs the next phase of implementation.

The outputs summarised in the table below have been drawn from the full list of recommendations and condensed for clarity.

The completion of the outputs and pilot activities will provide valuable insights into the practical application of the Sandbox recommendations. These learnings, along with live feedback from teams, applicants, and consultees, will form the evidence base for shaping Phase Two work.

Phase One - Quick Wins

Focus:

Deliver actions that are low-resource, high-impact, and build early momentum. These include guidance updates, process tweaks, and external-facing documents.

Key Deliverables by 31 March 2026:

- Publish **Top Tips Guidance** (Actions 5, 8, 9)
- Produce **Ports Process Document** (Actions 1, 3, 8)
- Draft and share **KPI Guidance Note** (Action 4)
- Agree a case pipeline template to be tested in Phase Two (Action 7)
- Provide an update on the MMO Chief Scientific Advisor role (Action 6)

Industry Role:

- Co-ordinate with MMO to jointly produce and input into guidance drafts
- Produce case pipeline template and commit to early engagement pledges
- Promote guidance externally and confirm the how and when.

Table 1: Phase One Outputs Summary

#	Theme	Summary Title	Lead	Key Outputs	Timeline	Resource
1	Best Practice	Capture Lessons Learned & Share Good Practice	MMO	Post-app debriefs, case studies, Top Tips Guidance	By Mar 2026	Low
2	Communication	Agree Programme in Principle for Complex Cases	MMO	KPI guidance note, early milestone mapping	By Mar 2026	Medium
3	External Dependency	Share Consultee Responses Earlier	MMO	Updated ports process document, interim process	By Mar 2026	Low

4	Process & Tools	Manage Over-KPI Cases & Forecasting	MMO	KPI guidance note, training sessions, pilot testing	By Mar 2026	Medium
5	Communication	Escalation Routes & Validation Guidance	MMO	Top Tips Guidance with escalation, validation steps	By Mar 2026	Low
6	Process & Tools	Role of Chief Scientific Advisor	MMO	Appointment of CSA to support decision-making	In progress	N/A
7	Transparency	Port Project Pipeline	Industry	Collective development forecast template	By Mar 2026	Medium
8	External Dependency	Consultee Comms & Post-Consultation Meetings	MMO	Updated ports process document, Top Tips Guidance	By Mar 2026	Low
9	External Dependency	Environmental Advisory Group (EAG) Info	Industry	EAG details added to Top Tips Guidance	By Mar 2026	Low

Together, MMO and industry should begin preparing for Phase Two during Phase One by:

- Identifying candidate cases for pilot projects.
- Agreeing resource commitments for trials.
- Developing early engagement pledges and data-sharing agreements where feasible.

Phase Two

Continuing Implementation and Building on Momentum

Phase Two will focus on the remaining recommendations and outputs identified through the Sandbox process, building upon the progress and learning achieved during Phase One. While Phase One has concentrated on delivering “quick win” actions to generate early momentum and demonstrate tangible benefits, Phase Two will use this foundation to establish a structured programme of work and a clear delivery timeline for medium and longer-term actions. Phase Two will introduce practical trials, pilot projects, and wider awareness activities to embed improvements in how the ports sector and MMO interact through the marine licensing system.

Phase Two will act as both a continuation and evolution of the Sandbox approach, embedding successful practices from Phase One while advancing longer-term improvements that strengthen transparency, consistency, and certainty. This phase will also embed new ways of working including regular feedback and reviews with industry.

As the regulatory and policy landscape continues to evolve, particularly through the Corry Review and MPLP, Phase Two will remain adaptive to these developments. This will ensure that the Sandbox continues to align with wider reform ambitions while maintaining focus on practical, collaborative improvements to licensing processes.

Phase Two Key Principles:

- Adaptive to Policy Change: Remain aligned with developments from the Corry Review and MPLP.
- Collaborative Delivery: Maintain close engagement between MMO, UKMPG, and consultees.
- Evidence-Based: Use lessons learned from Phase One and pilot feedback to inform programme planning.

During Phase Two, the Sandbox will:

- Test Phase One outputs and approaches with selected pilot cases, review and adopt recommendations as appropriate.
- Review and prioritise the remaining recommendations to ensure alignment with ongoing policy and operational changes.
- Streamline and consolidate actions where possible to reduce duplication and increase efficiency.
- Develop a programme plan and timeline, informed by lessons learned from Phase One and pilot case feedback.
- Continue close collaboration with the MMO, UKMPG, and key consultees to maintain momentum and ensure outputs are practical, relevant, and deliverable.

What Phase Two Will Deliver:

- Practical trials with industry for complex cases (e.g., KPI management, pipeline forecasting).
- Pilot projects running in the Sandbox to test and validate new approaches.
- Refined guidance and process documents based on Phase One learnings and Phase Two testing.
- Sector-wide awareness sessions to embed best practice.

Phase Two will therefore act as both a continuation and evolution of the Sandbox approach, embedding successful practices from Phase One while advancing longer-term improvements that strengthen transparency, consistency, and certainty across the marine licensing system. A report on progress will be prepared and delivered at the end of Phase Two.

Measuring outcomes and success

Aligning with the Corry Review, the focus of the Sandbox is on outcomes so Phase One output documents will include the design of monitoring and measuring tools as well as training which will be rolled out to ensure understanding across MMO and industry. Development forecasting from the ports sector will enable the working group to identify a suite of cases that can be used as pilots for measuring end to end success of the recommendations of the Sandbox.

Success of these case studies will be evidenced throughout the process and reviewed by the working group at key stages and captured through reporting. The measures for success were set out in the Sandbox Terms of Reference. Measures of success will include:

- **Timescales**. Pilots will include complex cases that may not be achievable within the existing 13-week Licensing Blueprint KPI. In these cases, success will be case and applicant teams working towards a programme in principle which has been agreed early on. Clear communication and expectation management will be the focus here, with a 'no-surprises' principle when it comes to timescales. The Ports Case Process document, which will be delivered as part of phase One, will be used by case teams and will be designed to capture learning and best practice.
- **Transparency**. The Ports Sandbox Working Group will produce, implement and measure the impacts of the Top Tips Guidance which will be a resource of shareable information that, in most cases, already exists in various locations and guises. This information shall be collated into one, easy to use document which will contain internal (MMO and ports industry) process documents, desk notes (where appropriate) and project forecasts. Other examples for improving transparency include the earlier publishing of consultee responses on the public portal, enabling applicants to review and address at the earliest opportunity. These actions will improve the shared understanding of processes, working relationships and co-operation to achieving outcomes.
- **Addressing uncertainty**. It is recognised that uncertainty is unhelpful to applicants and many of the identified areas of work will look to reduce uncertainty, through improved communication and updates between the MMO and applicants. In the longer term, there is an ambition to develop an applicant-facing progress timeline on MCMS enabling the applicant to see the current live stage of their case with progress identified in red, amber or green. In the short-term this will be managed through new process documents and guidance notes. Earlier visibility of consultee comments on the portal will also enable applicant / agent to review and action responses earlier in the process. The Top Tips Guidance will provide more clarity on processes and contacts to enable clearer communication channels and mutual understanding of processes and priorities.

Communications

A communications plan has been produced to provide clarity, consistency and alignment of messages within the Sandbox space and to manage external communications for the purposes of transparency of the process.

Appendix 1 - Sandbox Outputs

Table 2: Sandbox outputs (resource requirements are redacted from public facing document)

No.	Theme	Summary Title	Conclusion / actions	What good looks like / what are the steps?	Lead	Key Outputs	Resource Requirements
1	Best Practice	Capture lessons learned and shared best practice collaboratively between MMO and industry.	Joint actions to capture this might include post application debrief of lessons learnt and how these can be captured, used and shared going forward. Collate basket of case studies showcasing good practice and lessons learned, including MMO internal examples and joint MMO-industry examples. Create and update joint **Top Tips Guidance** to capture learning and consolidate guidance for applicants.	A transparent, collaborative process where both MMO and industry contribute to identifying improvements and sharing best practice, leading to more efficient and predictable licensing outcomes.	MMO & Industry (Joint)	New Ports process document for case teams to review when they get a case in the ports sector. Joint Top Tips Guidance published externally	Low **MMO:** Requires G7 approval, SEO drafting, technical SEO review and joint sessions with industry for feedback and case selection. **Industry:** Provide input during drafting (validation pain points, escalation clarity), review for usability, and actively promote guidance across member networks and communications channels.
2	Communication	Agree programme in principle for complex / non-standard cases	Joint mapping of the case programme and key milestones at pre-application stage, to agree a “programme in principle.” Industry/applicants to provide complete and accurate information	Clarity over project milestones and critical dates, realistic KPIs agreed early, and transparent	MMO with applicant collaboration.	New KPI Guidance note in two parts - How to approach applicants transparently about cases becoming over KPI; and a new	Medium **MMO:** Requires G7 approval, SEO drafting, technical

			early, including pre-application due diligence, to enable realistic timelines and reduce delays. Develop KPI guidance in two parts: • How to approach applicants transparently when cases risk going over KPI. • A process for early assessment and agreement of individual programme and associated KPIs for complex cases. Regular updates to the guidance during testing to reflect lessons learned.	communication throughout the process.		process to assess cases early on and agree individual KPIs for cases.	SEO review, and training sessions. **Industry:** Provide best available information and complete applications during pre-app stage to support programme development.
3	External Dependency	Sharing of consultee responses earlier to improve transparency and speed up decision-making.	Update the process so that consultee responses are added to the public register as soon as they are received, rather than collated and sent in one batch. Include this change in the new Ports Process Document for case teams. Industry/applicants to review responses promptly and provide clarifications or additional information where needed to avoid delays. Longer-term: MCMS system update will automate this process,	Earlier visibility of consultee responses for applicants, enabling faster resolution of issues and reducing overall determination times.	MMO with applicant collaboration.	New Ports process document for case teams to review when they get a case in the ports sector.	Low. **MMO:** Requires G7 approval, Ports SEO to write, Technical SEO to review guidance, Session with Seniors and select HEOs to critique and review. Briefing session with MMO team. **Industry:** Timely engagement with consultee feedback to support decision-making.

			but interim changes will apply to ports cases immediately.				MCMS update will do this for the team, but in the short term this can be a change in process to ports cases where consultation responses are issued to the public register immediately.
4	Process and Tools	Management of case forecast: Specifically, over KPI cases	Develop new KPI guidance and process for early, case specific, KPI setting and transparent communication. To include training and testing phase to ensure smooth adoption.	Improved customer experience and transparency/expectation management. Reduce potential conflicts around timescales and project programme. Clear process for agreeing KPIs early, transparent communication when cases risk going over KPI, and guidance embedded in team practice.	MMO	New KPI Guidance note in two parts - How to approach applicants transparently about cases becoming over KPI; and a new process to assess cases early on and agree individual KPIs for cases.	Low initial resource required for this as it's a change of process rather than a large piece of work. Could be covered in a training session and potentially an update to guidance (the on-hold guidance?) / new guidance note being written for Over KPI cases / predicting over KPI cases. Could be covered in a Sandbox session at an all-team meeting going through the outcomes of the project and what the process changes will be following / as part of Phase One. One G7 for approval and support, Ports SEO write, Tech

							SEO to review and feed into guidance notes, Session with SEO and a couple HEOs to critique and ensure it makes sense. Once finalised, a select case team to test case - should not interfere with usual case process.
5	Communication	Escalation, Validation, and Fee Acceptance When and how to escalate an application Sharing of the MMO Validation checklist Acceptance of fee estimates in timely manner Tests for Conditions on an application	Create and promote an external-facing **Top Tips Guidance** covering: • When and how to escalate an application • MMO validation checklist and requirements • Timely acceptance of fee estimates (within 14 days per On-Hold Guidance) • Communication of the 5 tests for conditions with consultees and applicants This document will be jointly promoted by UKMPG and MMO as best practice guidance ahead of future MPLP updates.	Clear escalation routes, fewer validation rejections, timely fee acceptance, and better understanding of conditions tests by all parties. Minimising unnecessary case escalation and associated time impacts and damage to MMO/applicant relationship. Less cases rejected at validation / MMO having to go back for more information. Faster and more efficient process. Fee estimates accepted in timely manner (within 14 days in line with the	MMO with industry support and promotion	Shared Top Tips Guidance structured to mirror the application process for ease of use	Low **MMO:** Requires G7 approval, SEO drafting, technical SEO review and joint sessions with industry for feedback and case selection. **Industry:** Provide input during drafting (validation pain points, escalation clarity), review for usability, and actively promote guidance across member networks and communications channels.

				On-Hold Guidance) and delays minimised.			
6	Process and Tools	Role of the Chief Scientific Advisor	Appointment of a Chief Scientific Advisor within MMO to provide independent scientific challenge and ensure evidence used in decision-making is robust, relevant, and high quality.	A Chief Scientific Advisor in place, supporting MMO decisions and reducing reliance on external consultants for complex scientific reviews.	MMO	Appointment confirmed Role embedded in decision-making processes	**MMO:** Already in hand – internal appointment process and integration into governance.
7	Transparency	Port Project Pipeline	Ports to produce collective development forecasting to help MMO plan and resource for workflow. This could include sector wide programme meetings and data sharing agreements (being aware of commercial sensitivity). Industry can collate a wider picture from those individual submissions. Bristol to produce a template and test between industry and MMO. Need to agree and be clear on what information is needed. Ports to commit to using a common template and submit	MMO has clear visibility of upcoming projects through consistent pipeline submissions, enabling accurate resource planning and early engagement with major operators to anticipate workload.	Industry with MMO collaboration.	Industry to discuss across the board and agree what information can be shared between each other and MMO. Agreed template for pipeline submissions MMO guidance on useful data fields	Industry to Lead **MMO:** Low – Define data requirements, review submissions, and integrate into resource planning. **Industry:** Moderate – Agree template, submit pipeline data, pledge early engagement, and promote participation among members.

			pipeline information in a consistent format to MMO. Due to commercial sensitivities, this will not be combined into a single sector-wide forecast, but MMO will use individual submissions to improve resource planning and, where possible, create a sector overview. MMO to provide input on what information is most useful for forecasting. Larger operators with portfolios or ports with significant schemes in the pipeline to pledge early engagement and consider data-sharing agreements to support MMO planning.			Early engagement pledges from major operators Sector overview (where possible)	
8	External Dependency - Consultation	Consultee Communication and Post-Consultation Engagement	Ensure clear lines of communication to MMO where applicant and consultees are in direct discussion. Applicants and MMO to proactively engage in post-consultation interpretation meetings. to review response where necessary.	MMO is fully informed of all applicant-consultee discussions, ensuring decisions are based on complete information. Post-consultation interpretation meetings happen promptly, reducing delays and avoiding duplication.	MMO	Updated Ports Process Document Robust processes can help information flows and avoid repetition. Creation of Top Tips Guidance for external use	Low **MMO** will need to be introduced to the team in briefing session, update in seniors note, and creation of ports process document to collect process changes. G7 approval and oversight, Ports SEO to write, Technical SEO to review guidance, Session with Seniors and

							select HEOs to critique and review Summary including industry inputs **Industry:** Moderate – Applicants commit to sharing consultee discussions with MMO, participate in interpretation meetings, and promote Top Tips Guidance externally.