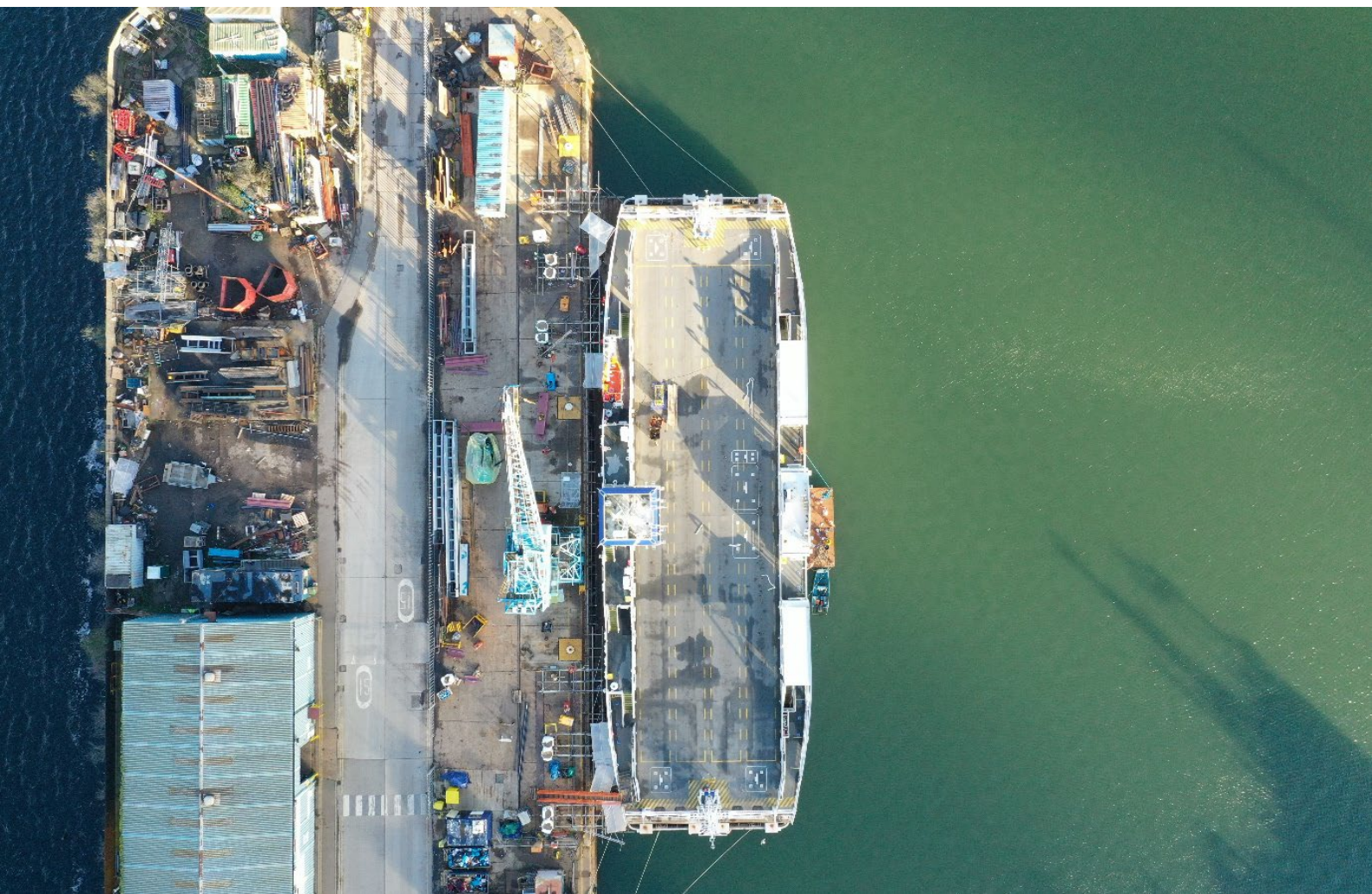


# Port of London Authority

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**LONDON**ASSEMBLY

**Research Unit**

## Overview

The Port of London refers to the system of docks, wharves, terminals, and associated infrastructure along the tidal portion of the River Thames in London, England.

The Port of London Authority (PLA) is a public trust established in 1909 to oversee the management and operation of the Port of London.

This paper provides key information on the governance, funding and strategy of the PLA, including areas of focus for London Assembly scrutiny.

## About the Research Unit

The London Assembly Research Unit provides an impartial research and information service. We undertake research and analysis on key issues in London to inform the Assembly's work.

All of our publications are available at:

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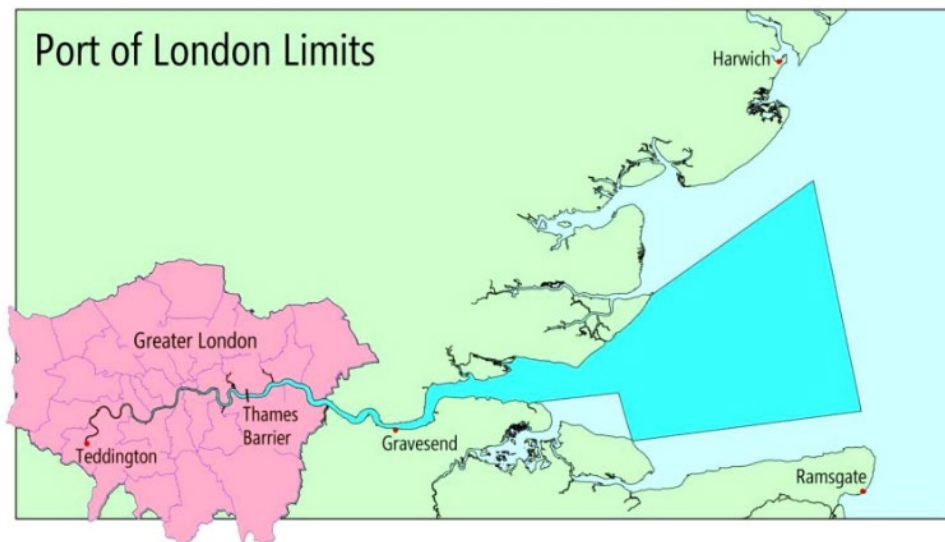
# 1 Introduction

The [Port of London Authority](#) (PLA) is a public trust established in 1909 to oversee the management and operation of the Port of London. The Port of London refers to the system of docks, wharves, terminals, and associated infrastructure along the tidal portion of the River Thames in London, North Kent and South Essex, England.

The PLA covers a significant stretch (95 miles) of the Thames, specifically the tidal Thames, which extends from the North Sea to Teddington Lock (where the [non-tidal Thames](#), managed by the Environment Agency, starts).<sup>1</sup>

As of today, the Port of London is the UK's largest port, handling over 50 million tonnes of cargo.<sup>2</sup> The tidal Thames is also the UK's busiest inland waterway, with over 3 million tonnes of intra-port freight and nine million passengers in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Visual depiction of Port of London Limits**



Source: Port of London Authority, [Port Information Guide](#). [Accessed on 15 April 2024]

In the UK, there are three primary categories of Statutory Harbour Authorities: private ports, municipal ports, and trust ports. A Statutory Harbour Authority is an entity responsible for managing and overseeing a harbour.<sup>4</sup> The PLA is a [trust port](#), which are independent statutory bodies, each governed by their own, unique, statutes and controlled by a local independent board.<sup>5</sup>

The PLA plays a vital role in the management and regulation of the River Thames, ensuring its safe and efficient use for commercial and recreational purposes. Established under the

<sup>1</sup> Port of London Authority, [About us | Port of London Authority](#) [Accessed on 24 September 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Port of London Authority, [Our history](#)

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by the Port of London Authority – October 2024

<sup>4</sup> British Ports Association, [What are Trust Ports? A BPA Briefing Paper \(britishports.org.uk\)](#), August 2023

<sup>5</sup> UK Government, [About us - Trust ports](#)



[Port of London Act 1908](#), the PLA is responsible for overseeing the navigational and environmental aspects of the river, with a particular focus on safety.<sup>6</sup>

PLA works closely with a range of stakeholders to help achieve collective visions for the river and wider Thames Estuary region. These stakeholders include:

- Customers: river users
- Employees
- Local communities and NGOs
- Government, elected representatives, regulators and local authorities<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Key responsibilities

Spanning a 95-mile stretch from Teddington in the west to the coastline, the PLA maintains responsibility for navigation safety, conserving the Thames, safeguarding the environment, and promoting the river for both business and recreational purposes.<sup>8</sup>

The PLA's role is enshrined in law through several pieces of legislation,<sup>9</sup> the most significant of which is the [Port of London Act 1968](#). Whilst the 1908 Act created the PLA primarily to oversee commercial port operations, the 1968 Act modernised the authority's powers, reflecting the broader role of the river in environmental, leisure, and urban contexts. The 1968 Act sets out the PLA's powers and duties, particularly in the regulation of navigation, dredging, environmental management, and development activities within its jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, subsequent amendments and bylaws have refined its regulatory powers.<sup>11 12</sup>

### 2.1 Environment and sustainability

The PLA plays an important role in the sustainable development and management of the tidal Thames. Maintaining environmental stewardship of the tidal Thames, the PLA aligns its activities with Government's [Marine Policy Statement](#) and environmental duties under the Harbours Act 1964.<sup>13</sup>

As part of their net zero commitment, in 2024 PLA published their [three-year action plan \(2024-2027\)](#). The PLA have committed to pushing for faster decarbonisation of river-based emission sources – primarily from vessel movements. Measures to achieve this goal from the action plan include repurposing landside storage tanks for low carbon fuels and onsite renewable energy regeneration with wind and solar, and investigating hydrogen production.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Port of London Authority, [About us | Port of London Authority](#) [Accessed on 24 September 2024]

<sup>7</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report 2022](#)

<sup>8</sup> Thames Estuary Partnership, [Port of London Authority](#), October 2021

<sup>9</sup> Additional pieces of legislation that collectively shape the legal framework of PLA's operations include, Pilotage Act 1987, Environment Protection Act 1990 and Water Resources Act 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Transport Committee, [Scrutiny of the Port of London](#), 22 April 2004

<sup>11</sup> Port of London Authority, [Port of London Act](#)

<sup>12</sup> UK Government, [The Port of London Authority \(Constitution\) Harbour Revision Order 2015](#)

<sup>13</sup> Port of London Authority, [Environment & sustainability policy](#)

<sup>14</sup> Port of London Authority, [Net Zero River Plan](#)

PLA are also exploring lower carbon fuels (the PLA uses sustainable hydrogenated vegetable oil [HVO] in its own vessel fleet), advocating for electric vessels including investment in onshore power, and the decarbonisation of logistics through greater use of the river for light freight.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2011, PLA have conducted climate adaptation risk assessments for their operations.<sup>16</sup> Impacts of climate change on the tidal Thames include increased peak river flows, increases in wave height and increased frequency of flooding. The effect of this has a direct impact on the Port of London, as it can lead to changes in river flow and sediment movement which impacts water quality and can accelerate deterioration of structures, buildings and river walls.<sup>17</sup> To mitigate the effects of climate change, PLA have implemented a number of initiatives:

- Switching to low emissions fuel;
- Designated test site for tidal energy technology trial;
- Solar energy generation for buildings, lighthouses and buoys;
- Rainwater harvesting installed to supply toilets;
- Restoring valuable marshes at West Thurrock through natural flood defences.<sup>18</sup>

In April 2024, PLA launched its [Clean Thames Plan](#) as part of their Thames 2050 Vision “of a clean river, free of sewage, waste and other pollution, supporting greater biodiversity and recreational use” (see more in [Section 3.1.3](#)).

## 2.2 Navigational safety

As required by the [Port Marine Safety Code](#) (PMSC), the PLA publishes its Marine Safety Plan for the conduct of marine operations in the Port of London every three years.<sup>19</sup> The PMSC sets out a national standard for port marine safety and applies to all harbour authorities and other marine facilities, berths and terminals in the UK.<sup>20</sup> It is endorsed by the UK Government, the devolved administrations and representatives from across the maritime sector and, while the Code is not mandatory, these bodies have a strong expectation that all harbour authorities will comply.<sup>21</sup> The Chief Harbour Master's department is responsible for overseeing navigational safety on the tidal Thames, and are the Harbour Masters responsible for ensuring compliance with the Port Marine Safety Code.<sup>22</sup>

Through the Port of London Act 1968, the PLA has the primary responsibility of maintaining safe access and managing and supporting the safety of navigation for all river users on the Tidal Thames.<sup>23</sup> In their latest (August 2024) Marine Safety Plan, PLA detail the plans for a new Marine Centre Transformation Programme. The programme is a £10 million investment

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<sup>15</sup> Information provided by the Port of London Authority – October 2024

<sup>16</sup> Port of London Authority, [Climate change](#)

<sup>17</sup> Port of London Authority, [Climate change on the tidal Thames](#), 2021

<sup>18</sup> Port of London Authority, [Climate change on the tidal Thames](#), 2021

<sup>19</sup> Port of London Authority, [Marine Safety Plan 2024-2026](#), August 2024

<sup>20</sup> UK Government, [Port marine safety code - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 24 September 2024]

<sup>21</sup> Department for Transport, [Port Marine Safety Code](#), November 2016

<sup>22</sup> Port of London Authority, [Harbour Masters](#)

<sup>23</sup> Port of London Authority, [Navigational safety policy](#), January 2024

in preparing the port for growth, improving operational resilience and investing in new technologies and facilities.<sup>24</sup>

The PLA has a [Navigational Safety Policy](#) which outlines its compliance with the standards laid down in the PMSC. The policy ensures that ships, boats, and other vessels can travel along the river safely and efficiently. Key activities of the PLA's Navigational Safety Policy include:

- Vessel Traffic Service (VTS): helps manage the safe and smooth movement of vessels, ensuring they follow the correct routes and avoid accidents. It operates according to international and national safety standards.
- Hydrography: The PLA regularly checks the depth and shape of the riverbed by conducting hydrographic surveys. This helps them make sure that river users have accurate and up-to-date information to help them navigate the river safely.
- Vessel Licensing: The PLA inspects and approves commercial vessels operating on the river to make sure they are safe and fit for use. They also check that crews have the right skills to operate these vessels safely.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.3 Port security

In line with the requirements of the [International Ship and Port Facility Security \(ISPS\) Code](#), PLA is designated as a “strategic authority” by the UK Government.<sup>26</sup> The ISPS Code is a comprehensive set of measures designed to strengthen the security of ships and port facilities. It was historically implemented in the UK through the EU regulation on enhancing ship and port facility security.<sup>27</sup> This role includes responsibilities in respect of security matters in the wider port environment and impacts directly on the PLA’s internal security culture and arrangements.<sup>28</sup>

The PLA’s [Port Security Policy](#) focuses on keeping the River Thames and its ports safe from security threats. This includes protecting ships, cargo, and people from dangers like terrorism, smuggling, or illegal activities. Additionally, PLA must develop and maintain an appropriate PLA Port Security Plan, which meets the requirements of the ISPS Code.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Port of London Authority, [Marine Safety Plan](#)

<sup>25</sup> Port of London Authority, [Navigational safety policy](#), January 2024

<sup>26</sup> The ISPS Code provides a framework through which ships and port facilities can co-operate to detect and deter acts which pose a threat to maritime security.

<sup>27</sup> UK Government, [Ship security](#), [Accessed 24 September 2024]

<sup>28</sup> Port of London Authority, [Port security policy](#), January 2024

<sup>29</sup> Port of London Authority, [Port security policy](#), January 2024



## 3 Strategy

### 3.1 Thames Vision 2050

The [Thames Vision 2050](#) was launched by PLA in 2022, and is a strategic plan aimed at transforming the River Thames into the UK's leading port.<sup>30</sup> The plan is a new iteration of its original [Thames Vision 2035](#). Thames Vision 2050 is built around three interconnected themes, centred around the role the river plays for people and the environment. The themes of Trading Thames, Destination Thames and Natural Thames are each explored further below. To achieve Thames Vision 2050, PLA has categorised plans into short, medium and long term actions; this includes the [2030 Action Plan](#).<sup>31</sup>

#### Trading Thames

With the Thames Vision 2050, PLA wants to make the River Thames the 'No.1 Net Zero UK trading hub'. The Thames is currently the UK's largest port by volume of cargo handled. It sustains more than 48,000 full time equivalent jobs and an annual gross economic value added of more than £4 billion.<sup>32</sup>

In 2021, PLA released a [report](#) produced by Oxford Economics on the port and river's long-term prospects. From this report, it was forecasted that the total volume of cargo moving through the Port of London is projected to increase to 77 million tonnes by 2050, representing an increase of 18 million tonnes on 2019 levels.<sup>33</sup>

The vision for **Trading Thames** also draws on a number of key factors:

- Growth in cargo volumes handled by the terminal operators along the tidal Thames which include London Gateway (one of the UK's largest container terminals and one of the fastest growing ports) and Port of Tilbury which opened "Tilbury 2" in 2022 (a £250m investment in a new ferry and container facility on the site of an old power station).<sup>34</sup>
- Liquid bulk tonnages, particularly petroleum products, are projected to decline through the 2030s, with alternative fuels and feedstocks coming in over time, in smaller volumes.
- Serving the largest concentration of population in the UK, the port is well placed to play an essential role in the handling and supply of these new fuels, including hydrogen.
- Increased interest in using the river to carry light freight could, as [projected by WSP](#) (an engineering consultancy firm) help in delivering jobs, reducing congestion and pushing London forward on the path to improved air quality<sup>35</sup> and reduced carbon emissions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Port of London Authority, [Thames Vision 2050](#)

<sup>31</sup> Port of London Authority, [2030 Action Plan](#)

<sup>32</sup> Port of London Authority, [Trading Thames](#) [Accessed on 20 September 2024]

<sup>33</sup> Oxford Economics, [Future trade through the Port of London](#), May 2021

<sup>34</sup> Information provided by the Port of London Authority, October 2024

<sup>35</sup> Port of London Authority, [Air Quality Strategy 2024](#), October 2024

<sup>36</sup> Port of London Authority, [Trading Thames](#)

## Destination Thames

**Destination Thames** is centred on enhancing the river's appeal as a destination for leisure and tourism, promoting activities and attractions that draw visitors and residents alike. With just 4.5 million trips in 2021 the immediate priority was the recovery of river travel to pre-pandemic levels of around ten million trips annually.<sup>37</sup> This figure of ten million trips annually is a reduction from the original proposal to double the number of annual river trips to 20 million by 2035 – as set out in the 2019 Passenger Pier Strategy (see more in [Section 6](#)).

The post pandemic recovery of passenger operations on the Thames continues, with the number of passenger trips (leisure, commuter and tourist) increasing to 9 million (estimated) in 2023.<sup>38</sup>

The outlook for **Destination Thames** draws from multiple pieces of research. In 2019, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and PLA jointly commissioned the report, *The Case for a River Thames Cultural Vision*, which sets out how best to integrate the river into the city's cultural landscape.<sup>39</sup> The study identifies ten opportunities that could be achieved through a River Thames Cultural Vision. These include:

- promoting night-time activity on the Thames
- celebrating and revealing the history of the Thames through commissioning new cultural projects to tell stories of the Thames and of London
- improving infrastructure and heritage on the Eastern parts of the Thames and encouraging engagement with residential communities.

Through a public engagement survey conducted by Opinium, the PLA explored the public's perception, awareness and experiences with the Tidal River Thames. Through this survey, PLA discovered gaps in how different groups interacted with the Thames.<sup>40</sup> The survey showed awareness and activity on the river varied between age groups, with young people more likely to be engaging. In addition, while there is interest among some younger potential workers in jobs on the Thames (45 per cent), awareness among this same group of port trade is low (13 per cent).<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, the PLA worked with London Sport on a survey to better understand the barriers to engaging in watersports across London, Kent and Essex.<sup>42</sup> The survey found there is considerable potential for participation in river watersports to become more inclusive and reflective of the wider communities. The [Active Thames](#) programme, developed by the PLA, started to address this issue in its first round of participation grants, which targeted

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<sup>37</sup> Port of London Authority, [Destination Thames](#) [Accessed on 20 September 2024]

<sup>38</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report and Accounts 2023](#)

<sup>39</sup> Mayor of London, [The Case for a River Thames Cultural Vision](#), September 2019

<sup>40</sup> Opinium, [Public Engagement](#), September 2021

<sup>41</sup> Opinium, [Public Engagement](#), September 2021

<sup>42</sup> London Sport Consultancy, [Active Thames Participation and Workforce Study](#), August 2021

diversity, inclusion and workforce development.<sup>43</sup> The PLA has awarded £430,000 to 56 clubs since 2021, with new funding rounds opening each autumn.<sup>44</sup>

## Natural Thames

**Natural Thames** focuses on preserving and enhancing the natural environment of the River Thames.<sup>45</sup> A key focus of the Thames Vision 2050 is responding to concerns about climate change and improving the overall health of the Thames. In April 2024, PLA launched its [Clean Thames Plan](#) as part of their Thames 2050 Vision. Since being declared biologically dead in 1957, water quality in the tidal Thames has improved.<sup>46</sup> It is now home to many protected sites that provide a range of habitats for numerous species of birds, seals and other animals, including over 125 species of fish, and a range of plant-life.<sup>47 48</sup>

The **Clean Thames Plan** sets out ten key priority areas for action, focusing on improving public access, nature restoration, tackling pollution and litter in the river and supporting technological development.<sup>49</sup> Its Clean Thames Manifesto, published in 2023, secured commitments from the three local water companies to bring forward efforts to reduce sewage discharge into the river, and from Thames Water to work collaboratively to resolve the accumulation of wet wipes on the Thames foreshore.

The PLA played a role in consenting river works associated with the Tideway Tunnel, due to come online in 2025. This is expected to reduce the number of occasions when sewage is discharged into the Thames by up to 95%.

In 2021, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) conducted a complete health check of the River Thames which showed expectations for the Thames River to become warmer, waves to become bigger, flooding to increase, and sea levels to rise.<sup>50 51</sup> Drawing on additional research undertaken by stakeholders such as Natural History Museum and ZSL, studies have also shown that microplastics are present in high quantities throughout the tidal Thames and are being ingested by wildlife.<sup>52</sup> As part of the **Clean Thames Plan**, PLA are collaborating with ZSL and 16 other organisations on developing a coastal habitat restoration plan – [Transforming the Thames](#) (due to be completed by March 2025). The aim of this project is to form a coordinated approach to improving the entire Greater Thames Estuary<sup>53</sup> system in order to strategically identify priority areas for conservation.<sup>54</sup>

Working with the Thames Estuary Partnership and the Environment Agency, the PLA has also developed [Estuary Edges](#) to promote river habitats for wildlife and encouraging natural

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<sup>43</sup> Port of London Authority, [Destination Thames](#) [Accessed on 22 October 2024]

<sup>44</sup> Information provided by the Port of London Authority, October 2024

<sup>45</sup> Port of London Authority, [Natural Thames](#)

<sup>46</sup> ZSL, [The State of the Thames Report](#), November 2021

<sup>47</sup> Port of London Authority, [Clean Thames Plan](#)

<sup>48</sup> Port of London Authority, [Nature & biodiversity](#)

<sup>49</sup> Port of London Authority, [Clean Thames Plan](#)

<sup>50</sup> Port of London Authority, [Natural Thames](#) [Accessed on 20 September 2024]

<sup>51</sup> Zoological Society of London, [State of the Thames Report](#), November 2021

<sup>52</sup> Environmental Pollution, [High prevalence of plastic ingestion by Eriocheir sinensis and Carcinus maenas \(Crustacea: Decapoda: Brachyura\) in the Thames Estuary](#), October 2020

<sup>53</sup> To note, the GLA are not one of the partners on this project and the Greater Thames Estuary also extends beyond the Greater London region.

<sup>54</sup> ZSL, [Tidal Thames Project](#)

diversity. The purpose will be to act as a guide on ecological design to encourage wildlife and biodiversity on the banks of the Thames.<sup>55</sup>

## 4 Governance

The PLA Board of Directors is the port's Duty Holder in accordance with the [Port Marine Safety Code](#) (PMSC). The Board's role is to set the strategy for the PLA, ensure its long-term success and create stakeholder value.<sup>56</sup> The Board is made up of a chair together with six non-executive and three executive members.<sup>57</sup> Jonson Cox CBE joined the board as chair on 4 April 2022, succeeding Christopher Rodrigues CBE.<sup>58</sup> The Secretary of State for Transport is required under the PLA's enabling legislation to appoint the Chair of the PLA and one to three Non-Executive Directors. The appointees' duty is to pursue the interests of the port. The Department for Transport (DfT) has no powers to direct the Board members.<sup>59</sup>

Being independent statutory bodies, each trust port is governed by its own local legislation.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, the British Ports Association explain that the government's control over trust ports and similar entities is restricted, primarily handling complaints rather than regulating.<sup>61</sup> Although the DfT has created governance guidelines, these lack legal enforceability. Published in 2018, the DfT's ["Ports Good Governance Guidance"](#), applies to all Statutory Harbour Authorities in England, offering detailed advice for trust ports.

PLA is the only trust port that is obliged under their statutory legislation to submit their annual report and accounts on a yearly basis to Parliament.<sup>62</sup> The PLA publishes an annual report that provides detailed information on its performance, financial statements, and governance practices. This report is accessible to the public and can be found on the PLA's official website.<sup>63</sup>

In 2023, the PLA Board met nine times. Minutes of these meetings are not publicly available.<sup>64 65</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Estuary Edges, [About Estuary Edges](#)

<sup>56</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual report and accounts 2023](#)

<sup>57</sup> Information on the PLA's board appointments is not publicly available, but it is assumed that, aside from positions appointed by the Secretary of State for Transport, the remaining members are directly appointed by the PLA.

<sup>58</sup> Port of London Authority, [Jonson Cox appointed PLA Chairman](#), March 2022

<sup>59</sup> TheyWorkForYou, [Port of London Authority: 26 Oct 2023: Hansard Written Answers](#), October 2023

<sup>60</sup> Department for Transport, [Trust Port Study Key Findings and Recommendations](#), May 2016

<sup>61</sup> British Ports Association, [What are Trust Ports?](#), August 2023

<sup>62</sup> TheyWorkForYou, [Port of London Authority: 26 Oct 2023: Hansard Written Answers](#), October 2023

<sup>63</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report and Accounts 2023](#)

<sup>64</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report and Accounts 2023](#)

<sup>65</sup> In line with practice in other commercial Trust Ports, the minutes of Board meetings are not published; however, the published Annual Report and Accounts include a summary of Board activity and areas of focus. Board Members also attend the PLA's regular public meetings in different locations up and down the river in order to answer questions from local residents and other river stakeholders

## 5 Funding

Trust ports are self-financing entities, maintaining both strategic and financial autonomy from the Government, and predominantly functioning within the private sector.<sup>66</sup> Self-defined as a ‘profit for purpose organisation’<sup>67</sup>, the PLA has no shareholders, but re-invests its operational surpluses for the benefit of river stakeholders. This includes funding ongoing capital investment in essential assets such as operational vessels and navigational safety infrastructure.<sup>68</sup>

Trust ports have powers to raise revenues by levying dues and charging for the use of port facilities.<sup>69</sup> Revenues are raised from various sources, including:

- **Conservancy charges on vessels and cargo** – these are fees collected from vessels that use the tidal Thames.
- **Pilotage charges** – ships that require pilotage services to navigate the Thames safely are charged for these services. This is crucial for larger vessels or those unfamiliar with the river.
- **Annual port dues** – charges port operators and shipping companies that use the Port of London facilities
- **River works licence fees** – charges fees for river works (such as construction on or near the river), event licensing, and other commercial activities, including leisure use of the river like boating or ferries.<sup>70</sup>

In 2022, the PLA recorded its highest revenue in the observed period, amounting to almost £78.2 million, which was a 10 per cent increase on the previous year (2021: £71.4 million).<sup>71</sup>

The annual report summary for year ended [2023](#) is detailed below in Table 1:

**Table 1: Consolidated Income Statement for the year ended 31 December 2023**

	<b>2023</b>	2022
	<b>£000</b>	£000
Revenue	90,775	78,241
Operating expenditure	(73,858)	(66,040)
<b>Operating profit</b>	<b>16,917</b>	<b>12,201</b>
Gain from investment property revaluation	9,502	126
Finance income	2,276	576

<sup>66</sup> British Ports Association, [What are Trust Ports?](#), August 2023

<sup>67</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual report and accounts 2021](#)

<sup>68</sup> Information provided by the Port of London Authority, October 2024

<sup>69</sup> British Ports Association, [What are Trust Ports?](#), August 2023

<sup>70</sup> Port of London Authority, [Port of London Authority Charges 2024](#)

<sup>71</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report 2022](#)

Finance expense	(291)	(2,250)
Interest on defined benefits pension scheme	(923)	(86)
<b>Profit before taxation</b>	<b>27,481</b>	<b>10,567</b>
Income tax expense	(7,066)	(2,702)
<b>Profit for the financial year</b>	<b>20,415</b>	<b>7,865</b>

## 6 The PLA and the GLA Group

Operations on the river in London – including boats, piers, licensing and land use – are owned and managed by various stakeholders. In addition to the PLA, key stakeholders with statutory responsibilities which relate to the use of the river for passenger services and for freight include, Transport for London (TfL), local authorities, and the GLA.<sup>72</sup>

TfL has a direct role in relation to passenger services on the river. It manages eight piers along the Thames: Greenwich, Tower, Bankside, Blackfriars, Festival, Embankment, Westminster and Millbank. It also owns Temple pier, which is privately operated. TfL also operates the Woolwich Ferry, a free ferry service that links Woolwich and North Woolwich. It can carry pedestrians, cyclists, cars, vans and lorries.<sup>73</sup>

The Mayor does not have regulatory powers in relation to the Thames or other London rivers, or any power over the PLA.<sup>74</sup> However, the [Greater London Authority Act 1999](#) places a specific obligation on the Mayor to ensure that each of their [statutory strategies](#) has regard to “the desirability of promoting and encouraging the use of the River Thames safely, in particular for the provision of passenger transport services and for the transportation of freight.”<sup>75</sup>

The Mayor has no direct powers over other public sector bodies operating around environmental policy, such as the Environment Agency, Natural England, or the Forestry Commission, although the Mayor is responsible for publishing the London Environment Strategy. The Mayor has called for more devolved powers in this area, as a response to extreme weather in London causing a series of flash floods, although this has not included any specific calls for powers over the PLA.<sup>76</sup>

The GLA and TfL work with the PLA through the Thames and London Waterways Forum (TLWF), as discussed in section 6.2 below. The TLWF was set up by the Mayor in 2017, with the objective to ‘advise on and address strategic river and waterway issues in London’.<sup>77</sup> Its steering group is led by the Deputy Mayor for Transport and brings together river

<sup>72</sup> Mayor of London, [London’s Passenger Pier Strategy](#), October 2019

<sup>73</sup> London Assembly Research Unit, [Transport for London](#), May 2024

<sup>74</sup> London Assembly Research Unit, [Greater London Authority: powers and functions](#), May 2024

<sup>75</sup> GLA Act 1999, [section 41](#)

<sup>76</sup> GLA, [Mayor convenes roundtable of key players in response to flooding | London City Hall](#), July 2021

<sup>77</sup> Thames and London Waterways Forum Steering Group, [Terms of Reference](#)



stakeholders including TfL, PLA, London Councils, Business LDN, Environment Agency and Canal and River Trust.<sup>78</sup>

In response to a Mayor's Question in 2023, the Mayor stated that the GLA and TfL also have a shared commitment to the PLA's Thames Vision 2050.<sup>79</sup>

The Mayor's policies on passenger services and on river freight are set out in a variety of policies and plans, including the Mayor's [Transport Strategy \(2018\)](#), [Environment Strategy \(2018\)](#), [Passenger Pier Strategy \(2019\)](#), [TfL's Freight and servicing action plan \(2019\)](#), [The Case for a River Thames Cultural Vision \(2019\)](#), and the [London Plan \(2021\)](#).

## 6.1 Mayoral strategies

### The London Plan (2021)

[The London Plan](#) (2021) sets out a vision for the strategic importance of London's network of linked waterways, including the River Thames.<sup>80</sup> The term 'waterways' encompasses more than just the River Thames, its tributaries, and canals; it also includes other water areas such as docks, lakes, and reservoirs. This interconnected network of waterways, known as the Blue Ribbon Network, holds strategic significance for London. Each borough in London features some waterways, with 17 bordering the Thames and 15 containing canals.<sup>81</sup>

The London Plan also outlines several key expectations for development projects in London that involve or impact passenger transport piers on the Thames. This includes enhancing existing piers as well as supporting new piers, in line with strategic plans of the PLA and TfL.<sup>82</sup>

The London Plan seeks to protect a network of wharves for freight use through planning policies. The London Plan also sets out that 'development proposals close to navigable waterways should maximise water transport for bulk materials during demolition and construction phases'.<sup>83</sup>

### Passenger Pier Strategy (2019)

TfL's [Passenger Pier Strategy](#) (2019) aims to enhance the use of the River Thames as a sustainable transport route in London. It seeks to improve the capacity, accessibility, and connectivity of London's piers to encourage more people to use river services.<sup>84</sup>

The strategy sets out in more detail how TfL plans to work with other stakeholders, including the PLA, to support passenger services and to encourage private sector investment in pier infrastructure. The strategy aims to improve connectivity and accessibility for commuters and tourists, reduce congestion on roads and public transport, and promote the use of the river

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<sup>78</sup> Thames and London Waterways Forum Steering Group, [Terms of Reference](#)

<sup>79</sup> GLA, [Thames Vision steering group | London City Hall](#), January 2023

<sup>80</sup> Mayor of London, [The London Plan](#), March 2021

<sup>81</sup> Mayor of London, [The London Plan](#), March 2021

<sup>82</sup> Mayor of London, [The London Plan](#), March 2021

<sup>83</sup> Mayor of London, [The London Plan](#), March 2021

<sup>84</sup> Mayor of London, [London's Passenger Pier Strategy](#), October 2019

as a viable mode of transportation. The Strategy sets out the following actions under this objective:

- TfL and the PLA, working with members of the Thames and London Waterways Forum, to review existing policies that may restrict innovation and investment.
- TfL and the PLA to undertake best practice/benchmarking studies to learn from other cities (such as New York, Paris, Sydney, and Amsterdam).
- TfL and relevant stakeholders will work together to assess pier capacity and viability for other uses, including looking at the flexible use of space in off-peak times and periods.
- TfL and relevant stakeholders to consider the feasibility of piloting the use of piers as delivery hubs.
- TfL and the PLA to partner with commercial organisations and cultural partners to identify opportunities that attract more people to piers and help them to become more commercially viable.<sup>85</sup>

The Passenger Pier Strategy also supported the PLA's target to double the number of passenger journeys on the Thames to 20 million by 2035. This target was set out in the PLA's 'Vision for the tidal Thames', a vision for the development of the river up to 2035, which was published in 2016.<sup>86</sup> However, a report published by the PLA in 2019 noted that 'despite having this growth target in place, numbers have remained broadly static since 2014/15'.<sup>87</sup> The PLA's 2035 vision has now been superseded with their 'Thames Vision 2050', published in summer 2022.<sup>88</sup>

The 'Thames Vision 2050' does not repeat the '20 million annual river users by 2035' goal, and does not set a target figure for annual river users.<sup>89</sup> The consultation document for the Thames Vision 2050 stated:

"With just 4.5 million trips in 2021, the immediate priority is recovery to pre-pandemic levels of around ten million trips annually. Looking longer term, the design firm, ARUP, found that growing river use towards the target was realistic, but substantial investment and innovation would be needed to achieve the targeted 20 million annual trips by 2035. It was noted that the upper limits of growth would potentially double the peak hour vessel movements and require interventions to increase river capacity, such as pier improvements."<sup>90</sup>

In response to a Mayor's Question in 2022, the Mayor stated:

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<sup>85</sup> Mayor of London, [London's Passenger Pier Strategy](#), October 2019

<sup>86</sup> Port of London Authority, [Thames 2035](#), July 2016

<sup>87</sup> PLA Thames Vision 2035, [Passenger Transport Growth Study, Tender Specification](#) [Accessed using internet archive as original document no longer on the PLA website]

<sup>88</sup> Port of London Authority, [Thames Vision 2050](#)

<sup>89</sup> Port of London Authority, [Thames Vision 2050](#)

<sup>90</sup> Port of London Authority, Thames Vision 2050, [Consultation – Spring 2022](#) [Accessed using internet archive as original document no longer on the PLA website]

“TfL has committed, in the London Passenger Piers Strategy 2019, to support a significant increase in the number of passenger journeys on the River Thames by 2035.”<sup>91</sup>

In its most recent Annual Report and Accounts, PLA estimated that 9 million passengers travelled on the river in 2023.<sup>92</sup>

Following the Assembly’s Transport Committee investigation on River Buses in 2018, a letter from the Chair to the Mayor recommended that: ‘TfL should set interim targets in the business plan to ensure that commuter passenger journeys increase in the coming years’. The letter also expressed that the Committee wished to see “more emphasis on increasing regular passenger journeys.”<sup>93</sup>

## Mayor’s Transport Strategy (2018)

The [Mayor's Transport Strategy](#) (2018) is a plan that outlines the vision for the future of transport in London up to 2041. The Mayor’s Transport Strategy (2018) is committed to TfL working with stakeholders to promote passenger river services.<sup>94</sup> This is in the context of the Mayor’s target for 80 per cent of all journeys to be made by walking, cycling, or public transport in 2041.

The Strategy committed to taking actions to support the PLA’s target figure of 20 million annual river users by 2035 (approximately a doubling of pre-pandemic figures) such as a new River Bus service to Barking Riverside. The strategy also set out how TfL planned to address other challenges it identified, including integration of river services with other parts of London’s transport network; security; and vessel emissions.<sup>95</sup>

The Mayor’s Transport Strategy also set out a policy to increase the proportion of freight moved on London’s waterways, citing benefits of river-based freight such as reducing congestion, reducing emissions and improving air quality.<sup>96</sup> This policy was detailed further in TfL’s Freight and servicing action plan (2019).<sup>97</sup>

In line with the strategy of creating a healthier, more sustainable and safer city, the Mayor set out the following proposals in collaboration with the PLA:

“Proposal 39: The Mayor, through TfL, will work with the Port of London Authority to publish an emissions strategy for the River Thames to reduce air pollutant and CO2 emissions from all river vessels and urges Government to introduce new legislation to ensure that emissions from vessels can be effectively reduced.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Mayor’s Question Time, [Thames Clipper service subsidy](#), November 2022

<sup>92</sup> Port of London Authority, [Annual Report and Accounts 2023](#)

<sup>93</sup> London Assembly Transport Committee, [A river tube line – the untapped potential of the Thames](#), August 2018

<sup>94</sup> Mayor of London, [Mayor's Transport Strategy](#), March 2018

<sup>95</sup> TfL, [London's Passenger Pier Strategy](#), October 2019

<sup>96</sup> Mayor of London, [Mayor's Transport Strategy](#), March 2018

<sup>97</sup> TfL, [Freight and servicing action plan](#), March 2019

<sup>98</sup> Mayor of London, [Mayor's Transport Strategy](#), March 2018

## 6.2 Thames and London Waterways Forum (TLWF)

The Thames and London Waterways Forum (TLWF) was set up by the Mayor in 2017, replacing two previous bodies (The London Waterways Commission and the Mayor's River Concordat), with the objective to “advise on and address strategic river and waterway issues in London.”<sup>99</sup> Its steering group is led by the Deputy Mayor for Transport and brings together river stakeholders including TfL, PLA, London Councils, Business LDN, Environment Agency and the Canal and River Trust.<sup>100</sup> The TLWF reports to the Deputy Mayor for Transport who has provided political representation at the annual conference.<sup>101</sup>

The Forum has three working groups – Passenger Transport, Freight and Development, and People and Places. Meeting details for the steering group and working groups up until 2018 are on the GLA's website.<sup>102</sup> The Forum held its annual event in December 2023 which focused on opportunities and challenges for organisations looking to use the river for freight and environmentally sustainable solutions to this,<sup>103</sup> including the Cross River Partnership's London Light River Freight Trial held between February and March 2023.<sup>104</sup>

The PLA acts as secretariat for the Steering Group.<sup>105</sup> The Terms of Reference of its Steering Group are as follows:

- Advises the Mayor on prioritised issues related to the River Thames and London's waterways
- Initiates and steers activities in relation to the implementation of policies relating to the London Plan, Transport Strategy, Environment Strategy, Culture Strategy and Thames Vision 2035
- Promotes and engages government, stakeholders and other relevant strategic bodies on waterways related issues
- Promotes river and waterways related strategic documents
- Promotes access alongside and to the waterways
- Advises on, and if appropriate, seeks funding for research and delivery projects
- Prioritises risks and helps mitigate risks, unblock barriers and issues with coordination as identified by the working groups
- Promotes the use of the river for health and wellbeing<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Thames and London Waterways Forum Steering Group, [Terms of Reference](#)

<sup>100</sup> Thames and London Waterways Forum Steering Group, [Terms of Reference](#)

<sup>101</sup> [Agenda Document for Environment Committee](#), December 2023

<sup>102</sup> GLA, [Thames and London Waterways Forum](#)

<sup>103</sup> Cross River Partnership, [Focussing on Freight at the Thames & London Waterways Forum](#), December 2023

<sup>104</sup> Cross River Partnership, [CALL Deep Dive: London Light Freight River Trial](#), May 2023

<sup>105</sup> [Agenda Document for Environment Committee](#), December 2023

<sup>106</sup> Thames and London Waterways Forum Steering Group, [Terms of Reference](#)

# 7 Assembly Scrutiny

The London Assembly does not hold formal scrutiny powers in relation to the PLA, for instance summoning information or people. However, in recent years the Assembly's Transport and Environment Committees have conducted a number of investigations focused on issues relating to the work of the PLA, in which the PLA has participated as a key stakeholder.

## 7.1 Investigations

### River services

In the 2023-24 assembly year, the Transport committee carried out an [investigation](#) into river services in London, particularly examining the following areas:

- The current status of passenger river services in London;
- Progress made since TfL's 2019 Passenger Pier Strategy, and TfL's commitment to further investment in and expansion of river journeys; and
- How TfL is working with PLA, Thames Clippers and other stakeholders to promote and address the barriers to the use of water freight for last-mile deliveries and construction.

The result of this investigation was a [letter](#) addressed to the Mayor of London, with the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Mayor should appoint a River Commissioner in 2024-25 to accelerate progress on better using the Thames for passenger and freight transport, including through working closely with the PLA, industry and local authorities.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Mayor should take steps to ensure that the Thames and London Waterways Forum provides strong co-ordination to drive forward the Mayor's priorities for the river, including increasing transparency and accountability around its activities. This should include publishing minutes of the steering group meetings on the GLA website, and annual reports to Assembly Members on progress.
- **Recommendation 3:** A key task of a new River Commissioner should be to work with primary stakeholders, including Councils and developers, to speed up the development and approval of new infrastructure to enable river services, such as wharves, slipways and piers.
- **Recommendation 4:** The Mayor should continue to support future light freight trials and work together with other stakeholders to find ways to scale the volumes of freight being transported and overcome current barriers.
- **Recommendation 5:** The Mayor should publish an update to his pier strategy in 2024-25, which should be expanded to cover both passengers and light freight.
- **Recommendation 6:** TfL should explore ways to feature river services more prominently on the TfL Go app, including ways to ensure that they appear as an option

for those who may be less time sensitive, and ways to provide real-time information on river boat departures.

## Water and London's Rivers

In the 2023-24 assembly year, the Environment Committee carried out an [investigation](#) into London's water and rivers to explore the impacts of:

1. climate change
2. flood risk
3. sewage pollution
4. the potential to reduce emissions
5. how to ensure sufficient water for London in the future.

The Committee published its report – '[Water and London's Rivers](#)' – which includes 21 recommendations to the Mayor, Thames Water and Government, covering four main areas, drinking water and water scarcity, wastewater and pollution, flooding, and maximising opportunities to create a sustainable water system.

Key recommendations from the report include:

- Thames Water should accelerate investment in its wider sewer infrastructure in areas of London not covered by the Thames Tideway tunnel, to ensure that it has the capacity to deal with intense rainfall events.
- The Mayor should work with Tideway to ensure that the Thames Tideway Tunnel is completed on schedule by 2025.
- The Mayor should double the target in his Transport Strategy to 100,000 square meters a year of roads draining into sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) per year. TfL should also double its targets for SuDS installation to deliver 10,000 square metres of roads draining into SuDS per year.
- The Port of London Authority (PLA) should publish the findings from its feasibility assessment for a River Ultra Low Emission Zone (RULEZ). In response to this, the Mayor should set out his position on such a scheme, and any plans for its implementation.

## 7.2 Questions to the Mayor

In addition to committee investigations, Assembly Members have asked questions about issues relating to the Thames and the work of the PLA as part of Mayor's Question Time. Recent questions have considered:

- [Excessive noise and its associated health effects](#)
- [Accessibility of the River Thames](#)
- [Air Quality on the Thames](#)



# Other formats and languages

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## Greek

*Εάν επιθυμείτε περίληψη αυτού του κειμένου στην γλώσσα σας, παρακαλώ καλέστε τον αριθμό ή επικοινωνήστε μαζί μας στην ανωτέρω ταχυδρομική ή την ηλεκτρονική διεύθυνση.*

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## Urdu

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## Arabic

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