

Ship to Ship Transfer Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Ship-to-Ship Transfer?

A Ship-to-Ship (STS) transfer is the process of transferring cargo—typically liquid bulk cargo like oil, petroleum products, liquefied natural gas (LNG), or other liquid products—from one vessel to another while both are safely at anchor or alongside a berth, rather than using a port terminal storage facility.

Typically for an STS cargo transfer, a larger delivery “mother” vessel would arrive at a Port or anchorage where it would be met by one or several ‘daughter’ vessels which would moor alongside and load cargo from the larger delivery vessel via hoses. The ‘daughter’ vessels then take the cargo onwards to different Ports or terminals.

The process is the same or very similar to when a delivery vessel discharges a cargo via a shore terminal into tanks for storage, processing or onward shipment. Instead of the cargo going ashore into tanks it is discharged directly into a smaller tanker which takes it onwards to its destination.

Often the delivery vessel may be a large ocean-going tanker “mother ship”, with ‘daughter’ vessels that may be smaller coastal tankers which can then berth at smaller coastal ports or terminals.

What is Bunkering?

Bunkering refers to the process of supplying fuel to a ship, typically marine fuel or bunker fuel. Bunkering involves the transfer of the fuel that will be used to power the receiving vessel, the fuel is transferred directly into the receiving vessels fuel tanks solely for use aboard that vessel.

Bunkering via supply ship is a type of STS transfer which can take place at berth or at anchor. It is a routine practice that takes place globally and is essential for the vessel's propulsion and operation.

Specialized bunkering vessels are designed for this purpose, equipped with the necessary equipment to transfer fuel safely between ships. STS bunkering is efficient for vessels that need to refuel part way through a voyage or when traditional port facilities are not accessible. Strict safety and environmental protocols are followed during these operations.

Ships that provide bunkering services within Falmouth Harbour must undergo an approval process in addition to their normal operating procedures. Including; checks on oil spill response equipment, the requirement to carry a specific offshore type oil spill boom and evidencing recent drills with the equipment.

How does a Ship-to-Ship transfer differ from Bunkering?

STS cargo transfers are defined differently from STS bunkering as they involve the transfer of cargo between two ship's cargo tanks, where the cargo being transferred is intended for onward delivery or sale. This means they generally involve much larger quantities of product and longer duration transfers are involved.

Do Ship-to-Ship transfers take place in Falmouth Bay?

Typically, only STS bunkering takes place in Falmouth Bay, and this has been routinely carried out for decades safely. Other STS cargo transfers have infrequently taken place at anchor over the past 20-30 years.

STS transfers in UK waters are governed by The Ship-to-Ship Transfer Regulations 2020, which state that bunkering can take place within Harbour Authority waters but any STS transfer involving a cargo consisting wholly or partly of oil is only permitted in certain circumstances.

The STS operations that have taken place in Falmouth Bay historically include: lightering operations for vessels arriving at the Eastern Jetty with cargo intended to be sold as bunker fuel within the Harbour Area, an emergency STS for a ship that needed cargo discharged in order to safely berth for repairs in 2019 and we believe that a Molasses STS previously took place in Falmouth Bay in 2003.

Why do ships conduct Ship-to-Ship cargo transfers?

STS transfers are common practice and are often the most economical way to transfer cargo from a large ship to a smaller ship for delivery to its destination. There are several reasons why vessel operators are looking at different approaches for cargo transfer:

- Reducing the need for a larger delivery ship to go to berth and off load cargo to shore based storage where the cargo is then reloaded to another delivery vessel.
- Constrained ports can often mean delays and increased costs.
- Reduced steaming times improving the efficiency and reducing the environmental impact of shipping the goods.
- Reduced shipping costs for the operator, in turn reduces cost of vital commodities for supply chain and industry and therefore the consumer.

As markets and cargo types continue to evolve, particularly with non-oil-based products and future fuels, it is possible that the demand for STS transfers at anchor may increase.

Why is STS now happening in Falmouth Bay?

Falmouth Harbour has historically been important for STS bunkering, due to its strategic location. Falmouth Bay offers a large, deepwater, sheltered anchorage and with its long history of safe bunkering provides an excellent opportunity for STS transfers such as this to take place.

STS operations usually take place in many other European ports but operators have identified Falmouth as a beneficial location due in part to lower port fees and costs as well as reduced onward transit time/distance for the 'daughter' vessel(s) for onward delivery further reducing both the costs and the environmental impact of shipping the goods.

Commercial shipping plays a significant role in the local and regional economy and operations such as this will bring an important boost to local operators and businesses in the direct industry and wider supply chain.

As a Statutory Harbour Authority, FH has an 'open port duty' requirement to keep the Harbour open for the shipping and unshipping of goods and welcome responsible operators. FH plays a crucial role in facilitating the refuelling needs of vessels, contributing to efficient maritime operations and global shipping logistics.

What is being done to make sure operations goes safely?

Commercial ships must operate in line with strict international standards and guidelines which include STS operations as part of normal ship operations.

Additional measures are put in place as part of routine practice, to ensure that STS operations are conducted safely, this will usually include appointing a specialist STS contractor who will oversee the operation and work with the vessel's masters, agents, pilots and Harbour Master.

Local Pilots will be in attendance when the vessels are manoeuvring alongside each other and specialist fendering will be in place. Detailed risk assessments have been compiled, and extensive safety checklists will be completed before, during and on completion of operations.