

# NWIFCA Quarterly Meeting: 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024

REPORT NO.  
4

## CEO QUARTERLY REPORT – 25<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2023 TO 6<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2024

**Purpose:** For members' information.

**Recommendations:** The report is received.

### 1. Authority Committees

The Authority's F&P Sub-Committee met over Teams on 1<sup>st</sup> December to decide 2024/25's budget, which was subsequently agreed at the previous full Authority meeting of 7<sup>th</sup> December. The TSB Sub-Committee met at Carnforth on 6<sup>th</sup> February and held an Extraordinary Meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> March to discuss proposed changes to our cockle opening season.

I am delighted to welcome Trevor Jones back to the Authority who has filled one of our vacant MMO appointee positions. Trevor was previously a member for ten years and has substantial fisheries experience, particularly within the mussel industry.

I was sad to hear of the resignation of Dr. Cristina Mihailovici from the Authority, who has been a valuable member for the past three years. I wish her all the best in her future endeavours. David Harpley (Cumbria Wildlife Trust) has also left the committee after his ten-year tenure came to an end this month and I thank him for his contributions over this time. The Chair and I have been in close contact with MMO regarding recruitment of new members to fill outstanding vacancies that we have and that are coming up later in the year.

### 2. Health, Safety and Wellbeing

The Authority's internal Health, Safety & Wellbeing Working Group met on 29<sup>th</sup> November and 5<sup>th</sup> February. Premises audits have been carried out to revisit outstanding actions that had not been previously addressed. We have rectified non-compliance with roller shutter doors in all four premises which have them and are also in the process of reviewing all our uniform and PPE provision to officers to ensure we are providing suitable clothing and equipment in a consistent manner.

### 3. Pay Review and New Structure

Since my last quarterly report, we have now implemented our new staff structure, with associated grading, pay and line management chains. I am pleased to report that all members of staff signed up to our new contracts, terms and conditions and Employee Handbook without the need for any formal appeal hearings regarding the results of the independent job evaluation and pay review exercise.

The beginning of 2024 has focussed on implementing the new structure, which has affected the Administration Team and Enforcement Team in particular. I am confident that this new structure will enable the Executive to more effectively and efficiently deliver its functions across the district.

#### **4. Finances**

At the last meeting of the full Authority, members agreed an unprecedented 21% increase in our councils' levies, in order to address historic undervaluing of the budget through repeated low-level (c.3%) increases. We have now sent formal notification to all nine councils of their 2024/25 levy and expect to receive these funds in the coming days.

The Authority's Financial Report for the year to-date is provided in a separate report to this meeting. In our monthly finance meeting with our accountants Rushtons on 14<sup>th</sup> February, Alison Nicholson and I discussed our current expenditure for 2023/24. We carried out a detailed analysis of current expenditure across all budgetary headings, as well as anticipated expenditure for the remaining few weeks of the year. Due to increases in our staff salaries (along with associated NI and employer pension contributions), our expenditure under our Employees budget heading has been higher than expected for the year. This had meant that we were at risk of a slight budget deficit for 2024/25 year-end of c.£30,000, which would have meant using reserves to supplement this. However, having reviewed our anticipated expenditure for the last few weeks of the year, I have instructed staff to cancel or defer any non-essential expenditure to 2024/25 and as such, now anticipate that we will end up with a small surplus. Our end-of-year finances for 2023/24 will be presented to members at the full Authority AGM in June.

#### **5. Estates**

I continue to explore potential new premises for our Carnforth and Whitehaven offices. Currently, nothing suitable has been found in the local area to replace our Head Office in Carnforth, but I continue to look. For Whitehaven, I have continued to explore the option of taking up a lease on a new property on Marlborough Street in Whitehaven, adjacent to our current office. This would act as a dual-purpose space, with a lock-up / workshop on the ground floor and an office on the first floor. I have met several times with the new owner of the building and we have informally discussed an agreement in principle of how we might proceed, which has included discussion around potential rental fees. He is now seeking legal advice on producing an Agreement for Lease (as advised by our solicitors Ratcliffe and Bibby). At the appropriate point, I will bring a firm proposal to our F&P Sub-Committee for discussion, with a view to gaining the necessary approval to proceed from the Authority at our AGM in June. I anticipate the proposal will be for the Authority to take up a ten-year lease on the property for c.£30,000 per year, subject to certain conditions on the landlord regarding internal and external improvements to the building. These additional operating costs were budgeted for in the 2024/25 levy proposals that were agreed at the last Authority meeting.

We continue to seek to clarify the ambiguous issue of ownership relating to the current Whitehaven office. Cath Dobson has collated all existing information we have on the building and its ownership which has been provided to Ratcliffe and Bibby for their consideration. I will inform members of the outcome of this exercise with a view to agreeing how we dispose of the asset if indeed it can be proved we own it.

#### **6. Vessels and Vehicles**

I am delighted that North Western Protector is finally back online following the remanufacturing of her engines; Joe will provide a more detailed update in his Head of Enforcement Report. As per the Annual Plan that all members have had sight of, my aspiration for the coming financial year is to demonstrate the necessity for keeping North Western Protector fully operational, and Joe and our Senior IFCO (Master) Hugh will be working closely to develop operational plans for the vessel for the coming months in order to demonstrate to me, members, our funding councils and wider stakeholders that the vessel presents value-for-money and has long-term viability.

Our oldest RIB, Protector Bravo, remains up for sale, although little interest has been generated thus far. Having previously reduced the asking price from £18,000 to £12,500, I have now decided to further reduce it to £10,000 to try and generate a sale.

Our Admin Team continue to implement our new Capital Asset Replacement Strategy which aims to replace all our ageing vehicles (pick-up trucks, vans and ATVs) over the next three years. In terms of our two active RIBs, Protector Gamma and Bay Protector, Joe and I have agreed to use 2024/25 as an opportunity to review their operational capability and our future requirements, with a view to then developing a strategy later in the year for their potential future replacement.

## **7. Staffing**

During this reporting period, we have had three new members of staff join us. Catherine Silverwood has joined us permanently as one of two new Administration Officers, along with Stephanie Reid, who is contracted on a two-year fixed-term appointment, using the Defra RDEL funding that we have received for increased responsibilities around our MPA, FMP and marine spatial prioritisation work. Lucy Loud has joined the Science Team as a Science Officer, also on a two-year fixed-term appointment under the RDEL funding. All three new colleagues are based in the Carnforth Office.

Next week is the last week for our Senior Operational Support Officer Cath Dobson, who retires at the end of March after over 34 years of dedicated service with the Authority and its predecessor organisation Cumbria Sea Fisheries Committee. Cath has been a wonderful servant to the Authority and has made an enormous impact on our work over all her years. We will all miss her experience, knowledge, and professionalism, and moreover, we will miss her as a colleague. I wish her all the best in the next chapter of her life and hope she has a well-deserved relaxing and fulfilling retirement. We will be celebrating Cath's longstanding service and saying our goodbyes at a retirement party for her at Whitehaven Golf Club on the afternoon of 28<sup>th</sup> March. Any members who wish to join us and have not already informed us, please speak to Alison.

Staff had our Christmas Party in Lancaster on 14<sup>th</sup> December, following a full team meeting in the Carnforth Office.

## **8. Communications**

Communications in this reporting period have been focussed on three key areas; the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Morecambe Bay cockling disaster, the consultation for our proposed earlier cockle opening season and the consultation for our draft netting byelaw.

With regards the Morecambe Bay disaster anniversary, there was some media interest picked up by journalists from the Guardian and BBC, who spoke to fishers from the local area and then approached the Authority. I gave interviews to both, focussing on how we manage and regulate the fishery now, whilst remembering the 23 Chinese nationals who lost their lives. We were featured in the Observer (print and online), on the BBC News website, on BBC Radio Lancashire and on BBC Radio 4's Farming Today programme. Fishers were also interviewed and featured in these articles / reports too. Joe and I also attended two memorial events in Morecambe on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> February as representatives of the Authority.

Anna and our Senior Science Officer Jonathan Haines have done a fantastic job engaging with relevant stakeholders for our consultation on bringing the cockle season forward two months. The results of this consultation were presented at an Extraordinary Meeting of our TSB Sub-Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> March and a recommendation from TSB will be brought to this meeting. I have received some positive feedback from stakeholders on this consultation process and my thanks go to Anna and Jon for all their hard work on this.

Following the cockle season consultation, Joe has led on the netting byelaw consultation, using the template Anna developed for the preceding cockle season consultation. At the time of writing, the consultation was just getting underway; results will be brought to the TSB at the next May meeting, with a view to finalising ('making') the byelaw at our AGM in June to then send off to MMO for quality assurance.

## **9. Byelaws**

Having reinvigorated the Byelaw Working Group with a small cadre of members, we had another meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> January, where we focussed on the proposed content for our new netting byelaw. This meeting was very useful from officers' perspective, and I also received positive feedback from members of this group. I look forward to continuing to work with the Byelaw Working Group in the future to progress our important work in this area.

## **10. External Engagement**

Over this reporting period I have attended three monthly IFCA Chief Officers' Group (COG) meetings, one AIFCA Directors' meeting, one meeting of the Marine and Fisheries Chief Officers (MAFCO) between the IFCAs and Defra and one meeting of the National Inshore Marine Enforcement Group (NIMEG) between the IFCAs and MMO.

In late November, I met with local fishing industry stakeholders in Lytham and Barrow.

The Chair and I attended the 'IFCA Story' Workshop in London on 5<sup>th</sup> December, where the findings of a detailed study of IFCAs and their stakeholders were presented by Dr. Sarah Coulthard from Newcastle University. The following day we both attended the AIFCA Members' Meeting, also in London.

I have also visited stakeholders from our mussel seed dredge fishery in Bangor on 13<sup>th</sup> February to find out more about their operations and how they are impacted by the Authority. I visited stakeholders Newbiggin Shellfish on 15<sup>th</sup> February to discuss their operations and concerns around the management of our cockle and mussel fisheries.

On 16<sup>th</sup> February I attended the opening of a new exhibition in Morecambe by photographer Tessa Bunney who has spent the last few years working closely with fishers from across Morecambe Bay, capturing magnificent images of their work and the wider Bay. Separately, I have agreed with Ms. Bunney to purchase the royalties for 15 of her images from this project at a cost of £750; these are now being used across the Authority's publicity and external comms work. I will be looking to employ Ms. Bunney for a few days this summer to work with our officers out on the coast and at sea to produce some images of *our* work for future Authority publicity and comms.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February I met with David Harpley and Georgia de Jong Cleyndert from Cumbria Wildlife Trust to discuss future partnership opportunities. We identified potential collaboration opportunities around lots of different areas, including the new Allonby Bay Highly Protected Marine Area (HPMA), their marine apprenticeship scheme and a new potential shrimp research proposal.

## **11. Dee Estuary Cockle Management**

There is a separate item on this important subject on today's meeting agenda.

*Mark Taylor, North Western IFCA CEO, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2024.*