

NWIFCA Quarterly Meeting: 20th March 2025

REPORT NO.
4

CEO QUARTERLY REPORT

21ST NOVEMBER 2024 – 7TH MARCH 2025

Purpose: For members' information.

Recommendations: The report is received.

1. Authority Committees

A meeting of the Finance and Personnel Sub-Committee (F&P) was held on 26th November to discuss the proposed budget and associated council levies for 2025/26. Whilst agreement was not reached, further discussion was had at the last Full Authority Meeting on 5th December, and a 6% levy increase was agreed there.

A meeting of the Technical, Science and Byelaw Sub-Committee (TSB) was held on 11th February. The main items of discussion were Natural England's Oral Histories Project, plus our work on determining an appropriate whelk minimum size for the district¹ and assessing the current state of the district's brown shrimp fisheries. There was also an item discussed under AOB which led to a resolution being passed to change the flexible permit conditions for the Pilling cockle fishery from five tides per week, Saturday to Wednesday, to open on all tides until the end of the season (subject to an approved Habitats Regulations Assessment). I have raised concerns to our senior members (Authority Chair and Vice Chair, and TSB Chair and Vice Chair) about this discussion and subsequent resolution not complying with our Constitution across a few different areas, namely regarding the resolution not relating to an agenda item, the rescission of a resolution made within six months, and how the contributions of members of the public in attendance are managed. It is recognised that the Constitution does need to be updated to afford more flexibility in the Authority's decision making, but in the meantime, members need to be mindful of it and ensure it is adhered to.

2. Finances

The Authority's Financial Report for Q3 of 2024/25 is provided in a separate report to this meeting.

As mentioned above, a 6% budget increase was agreed at December's Full Authority Meeting. This resulted in a total levy of £1,855,358 from our nine funding councils. Levy letters were sent out on 25th February with a request for payment by 1st April; no payments have been received so far.

Following receipt of our outstanding CDEL² payment of £325,000 from Defra to contribute towards the remanufacturing of NWP's engines, which I reported on at the last meeting, all IFCAs have since received notification from Defra that no future CDEL funding will be available to them. This has implications for our future plans regarding capital asset replacement, namely any replacement of our

¹ It was agreed to keep the whelk minimum conservation reference size at 65mm for the district, with a review in three years' time.

² CDEL is a capital-based funding stream from Defra to support capital asset uplift for IFCAs with the advent of further responsibilities handed down from central government.

seagoing assets (see Agenda Item 12, Report 7). There has been no word on RDEL³ funding, but the Association of IFCA (AIFCA) have advised that this is more likely to persist in some form or another.

Alison, Joe and I met with our insurance brokers in February to discuss our policy renewals for 2025/26. We are happy with the cover we now have in place following our substantial review and overhaul last year, and are not expecting any significant increases in our premiums.

3. Estates

I continue to explore potential new premises for our Carnforth and Whitehaven offices. One very suitable property has been found in Lancaster, but it would result in a significant increase in our rent from the current £17,000 per year; the owners are seeking £32,000 per year. I am awaiting further information from them on what scope there is for lowering the proposed rent.

An issue with radon gas found in our Carnforth office is covered in more detail in my Health, Safety and Wellbeing Report under Agenda Item 10 (Report 5).

Regarding Whitehaven, as per discussions at the last Authority meeting, we have sent a letter to Cumberland Council via our solicitors setting out the Authority's position on ownership of our Duncan Square property. Member Cllr. Markley kindly provided me with contact details for some of the relevant senior executives at the Council and I have reached out to them. This seems to have got things moving, and a Council lawyer is now in contact with our solicitor, so we will hopefully start to see things move toward a resolution in the coming months.

Regarding the new prospective property at Marlborough Street, I had a recent meeting with the architect who has submitted the planning applications, and they are still awaiting formal approval from Cumberland Council for the proposed changes. As per the situation with Duncan Square, I have also reached out to senior executives about this issue to see if progress can be expedited.

Priority remedial works of priority issues across our estate of six premises have now been completed via our facilities management company, ARC Masterworks. We are also assessing the potential for a long overdue refit of our Liverpool office. We have received a quote from ARC Masterworks, but it is over £10,000, so we will need to go out to tender or revise the spec. Separate works to upgrade the kitchen and toilet facilities there are going ahead.

We have renewed the lease on our Barrow office, with a modest increase in the rent

4. Vessels and Vehicles

North Western Protector (NWP) is now operational after the issues with the jet drives; Joe will provide a more detailed update in his Enforcement Team Report. Since the beginning of this financial year, we have spent over £80,000 on repairs to NWP and this level of expenditure is not sustainable. A proposal for replacing NWP and our other vessels is part of a separate agenda item for this meeting.

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 quadbikes) by 2027. We are well ahead of schedule with this and our main priority now is ensuring that procurement is spread out somewhat so that we are not having to replace a multitude of vehicles at the same time three or five years from now⁴.

Future annual operational budgets derived from council levies will need to take into account of the replacement of our capital assets. Currently, replacement is being funded through the Capital Asset Replacement Fund (CARF) ringfenced in our reserves, but this is not sustainable in the long-term,

³ RDEL is a revenue-based funding stream from Defra to support resource based uplift for IFCA's with the advent of further responsibilities handed down from central government.

⁴ Our vehicle replacement policy is every three years for quadbikes and every five years for pick-ups and vans.

particularly considering the potential to use a significant proportion of the CARF to fund vessel replacements in the near future.

5. Communications and Engagement

We have held two face-to-face stakeholder engagement events this reporting period, focussing on our Byelaw 3 cockle and mussel permit holders. One event was held in Grange-over-Sands on 28th January, with the other in Wallasey on 18th February. Both events were well attended and useful discussions were had between officers and industry members, as well as a handful of other stakeholders who also came along. My thanks go to the officers involved in arranging and holding both events, and to member Steve Brown for attending the Grange event and contributing to discussions there.

Communications in this reporting period have been focussed on keeping stakeholders abreast of developments with our cockle fisheries, and with changes to Byelaw 4 – Potting. In early January, we kept our cockle fishers abreast of our monitoring of the freezing temperatures, which eventually led to a five-day closure of the Flookburgh bed.

At the end of November, we were focussing on comms to address local residents' concerns regarding the Leasowe cockle fishery. This culminated in my attending the fishery on 28th November to speak with a BBC journalist to clarify the nature of the fishery and dispel some of the inaccuracies and criticisms of the industry that had been percolating, particularly over social media. A report, featuring my comments on behalf of the Authority, was covered on the BBC North West's news bulletins throughout that day.

6. IT

Officers from all three teams continue to support the implementation of our new permit database. Our Admin Team have been providing support to Byelaw 3 fishers who have experienced issues with using the database, both at the aforementioned stakeholder events and at the fisheries themselves. I have received positive feedback from individuals on the support provided to them by officers.

Having asked for a detailed overview from officers of how we collect, collate and use our Enforcement Team's fieldwork stats, in February, I authorised the commencement of a project to digitise this data recording to create a more streamlined approach with a more integrated database that could provide better analysis and interrogation. This project will be ran collaboratively between the Enforcement and Science Teams, working with a company called Mergin Maps to create a trial product that can then be refined with a view to rolling out to all IFCOs later in the year.

7. HR

Our staff Christmas celebration was held on 18th December in Carnforth, with brunch at the Brief Encounter experience at the railway station, followed by a staff meeting and then an evening spent in Lancaster.

We will be conducting staff performance reviews for the year in April and also implementing our new Performance Objective and Appraisal process for 2025/26, which will be more comprehensive and standardised and a further iterative improvement on this year's improved process.

Joe and Anna have been working with the Admin Team to develop a new internal training calendar to plan out bespoke in-house training sessions over the course of the year, in order to support staff's continued professional development and mitigate against skills fade.

8. Fisheries

Since my quarterly report for the last Authority meeting, we have submitted our Netting Byelaw to the MMO for quality assurance (QA) and have received it back with comments and requests for clarification. Joe is currently working through these comments to make the necessary amendments to the Byelaw text, all of which are essentially formatting changes that the MMO has requested, with nothing changing the regulatory effects of the Byelaw in any meaningful way. I will then be providing a response to the MMO with the Byelaw text changes and the clarifications they have requested. Thus far, the QA process has not been onerous and I am hopeful we will be able to progress through this stage of the byelaw making process and have the Netting Byelaw sent to Defra for confirmation in the coming months. In addition to this work, I have also developed a draft policy for how the Authority might assess and decide on the 26 entitlements that will be issued under the Byelaw for 26 fishers to retain bass as a bycatch in shore-set, intertidal fixed nets being fished commercially. I have provided this draft text to our Byelaw Working Group (BWG) members for feedback. In the coming weeks, our Science Team are due to launch an informal short survey of fishers to try and get an idea of how many people will be wanting permits under the Netting Byelaw and, with regards to Category 2 permits, how many of these would like a bass entitlement; we expect there to be a lot more than 26.

We continue to meet with colleagues at Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to progress the new Dee Estuary Cackle Fishery Regulating Order (DECFRO). Defra have provided guidance to us on their new RO application process and we will be the first applicants to follow this, so they are keen to liaise closely with us throughout. We will be meeting with NRW in the coming weeks to discuss next steps, namely NWIFCA leading on the application whilst NRW draft the associated Impact Assessment, along with commencing an informal consultation to get the initial views of affected stakeholders.

As per our recently adopted new Byelaw Strategy, officers have begun work on developing our new Mobile Net Byelaw. This will commence with the Science Team running an initial informal consultation with fishers along with an assessment of the associated evidence. We will then move to drafting the Byelaw, working with BWG.

Since the TSB meeting of 5th November, where agreement was reached on adopting a 'use it or lose' policy along with a handover scheme for Byelaw 3 permits, we have not been able to progress the development of these policies in any meaningful way. I will be looking to bring some draft policy wording to TSB members for the next meeting on 29th May, liaising with BWG members before then as appropriate.

We have carried out an internal review of our monitoring processes for the Authority's cold weather protocol for the district's cockle beds. This has resulted in my developing a standard spreadsheet to capture local weather station hourly temperatures, which can then be published on our website if and when a cold weather closure is triggered. Please note, this has not resulted in any changes to the protocol itself, or how closures are triggered. Rather, it is simply around ensuring consistency and transparency of approach to provide assurance to our stakeholders, including fishers who are directly impacted by the closures.

I also instigated a review of our prospecting policy for the district's cockle beds. We have firmed up the policy for when industry wishes to go onto a closed bed to assess the state of the cockles there and potentially gather a sample. In essence, this has resulted in two key changes to the policy:

1. Now only Byelaw 3 permit holders can go onto the beds to prospect / gather samples
2. Any prospecting / sample gathering must only be done with pre-authorisation given by officers

On this second key change, this is a slight tightening up of the policy, which was somewhat unclear beforehand but suggested individuals only needed to *notify* us if they were going prospecting, and only needed explicit authorisation if they were intending to gather a sample; now explicit authorisation is needed regardless of what fishers' intentions are.

Our annual voluntary closure of netting around St Bees Head in Cumbria will be initiated on 15th March, running through to 25th July. Appropriate comms will be issued in the run-up to the closure and during the closed period as required.

9. Science

Anna and I sat down at the end of December to plan the long-term strategy for our science work and the development of the Science Team. We have decided that, rather than produce an annual Research Plan for the Authority⁵, which does not provide the Authority with the scope to look longer-term, we will instead develop a five-year Science Strategy in 2025/26, which will focus on the scientific, research and survey work we will aim to deliver (beyond just our BAU work), as well as how we will develop and upskill the Science Team to ensure it has the requisite skills, knowledge and resilience to deliver our long-term fisheries science objectives.

10. External Engagement / Other CEO Work

I attended AIFCA's Members' Forum in London on 3rd December along with our Chair, where we received updates on the Association's work, and discussed future IFCA initiatives. One thing AIFCA is looking at is a 'skills audit' of IFCA members, to understand where there might be members with certain expertise that could be used by other IFCAs, as well as how IFCAs could improve the induction process for new members. The next quarterly meeting was held online on 4th March, where discussions were held on the forthcoming parliamentary event, Newcastle University's IFCA Report and Defra's IFCA Conduct & Operations Report.

Along with member Steve Johnston from the MMO, I attended a meeting between fishers and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) on 6th January. This meeting was to discuss fishers' concerns about not being included in LCRCA's formal stakeholder consultation regarding the proposed River Mersey tidal barrage project. LCRCA gave attendees an overview of the project's plans and the timelines for its development and concerns regarding the potential impact to local fisheries and fishers' livelihoods were discussed. The meeting was held at the request of the Traditional & Sustainable Commercial Fishing Association (TSCFA), which is made up of a small group of inshore fishers based in the Liverpool area.

Following the abovementioned meeting on the Mersey tidal barrage, I attended a MMO Regional Fisheries Group (RFG) meeting in Liverpool with colleagues from the MMO, including Steve. A variety of inshore fishers from the southern part of the district were in attendance and there was some focus on the cockle fisheries in the Dee and at Leasowe. The following day, 7th January, two more of these meetings were held in Fleetwood and Barrow, with discussions on our Byelaw 4 whelk permits, future bass entitlements under the proposed Netting Byelaw, and our cockle and mussel fisheries. I was also able to drum up some interest from some attending fishers in becoming members of the Authority, and I am aware of at least one who has since applied and been interviewed by the MMO. A MMO meeting on 8th January in Whitehaven had no fishers in attendance.

I attended the IFCAs' monthly Chief Officer Group (COG) meetings on 15th January and 11th March (both online), missing the 12th February meeting due to a clash with an internal senior management meeting to review our draft 2025/26 Annual Plan.

I attended the annual Coastal Futures Conference in London 29th-30th January, which covered many different current initiatives focussed on coastal communities and environments in the UK, including ones focussed on inshore fisheries. Events such as these are incredibly useful for networking and building up contacts, and I took away several useful contacts for future NWIFCA work.

⁵ An annual Research Plan is required as part of Defra's IFCA Success Criterion 5. However, a longer-term Science Plan will meet, and exceed, this Criterion.

I attended the MMO RFG meeting online on 10th February and received updates from Defra and Cefas regarding Fisheries Management Plans, as well as updating the group on current NWIFCA initiatives and answering some specific questions from industry.

An oil spill pollution incident occurred in Half Moon Bay in Heysham on 22nd February, which led to the North West's Environment Group (EG) being stood up, which NWIFCA is part of. The beach was closed for three days whilst Lancaster City Council led on the clean-up operations, and the EG was stood down on 4th March once the EA (who chair the EG) were satisfied the suspected source of the oil spill was no longer active and contained. It is estimated that around 200l of neat oil was removed from the beach. Joe attended the EG meetings on behalf of the Authority and advised members on potentially affected fisheries in the area. Due to the isolated nature of the spill and relatively low quantities, it was deemed that there was no risk to any of the shellfish beds in the area.

I attended the North West Coastal Forum's (NWCF's) Conference in Carlisle on 6th March. The NWCF is headed up by former member Caroline Salthouse and the Conference covered various coastal and intertidal habitat restoration projects along the North West coast. My attendance at the Conference was useful to help understand where we can play a role in highlighting potential fisheries impacts of such projects (positive and negative) and building up contacts.

The Chair and I will be attending a Parliamentary event on 17th March covering inshore fisheries and the work of the IFCAs. As the event is after the date of this report, but *before* the Authority meeting, I will provide a verbal update at the meeting. In the run-up to the event, I emailed ten of our MPs from our key coastal fisheries areas to make them aware of the event and invite them along.

Mark Taylor, North Western IFCA CEO, 7th March 2025.