

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD AT EAST BEDLINGTON COMMUNITY CENTRE
ON MONDAY 25TH APRIL 2022

PRESENT: NIFCA Members:

Mr L Weller (Chair), Mr G Renner-Thompson (GRT), Mr F Armstrong (FA), Mr B Flux (BF), Mr C Hardy (CH), Mr S Lowe (SL), Professor P Moore (PM), Mr S Moss (SM), Mr J Stephenson (JiS), Mr J Wood (JW), and Mr I Thomas (IT).

Also in attendance from NIFCA was the Chief Executive Officer Mr M H Hardy (CEO) and the Chief IFCO Mr M Southerton (MS). Minutes were taken by the NIFCA Administrative Officer, Emma Stiles (ES).

3.1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE; DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST; ELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR FOR THE TERM OF OFFICE TO 24TH APRIL 2022/3; AND TO REVIEW APPOINTMENT OF MEMBERS TO THE AUTHORITY SUBCOMMITTEES

The CEO opened the meeting.

Apologies:

Mr P Gray (PG), Dr M Kitching (MK), Mr C Hardy (CH), Mrs C Seymour (CSe), Mrs L Dunn (LD) and Mr B Burdis (BB).

Election of Chair and Vice Chair:

Nomination for Chair: Prior to the meeting, Les Weller (LW) was nominated as Chair of the Authority for year 2022-23. During the meeting SL proposed accepting LW as Chair, which was seconded by IT. All members voted in favour of LW continuing as Chair.

Nomination for Vice Chair: Prior to the meeting, Guy Renner-Thompson (GRT) was nominated as Vice Chair of the Authority for year 2022-23. During the meeting FA proposed accepting GRT as Vice Chair, which was seconded by SL. All members voted in favour of GRT continuing as Vice Chair.

Welcome:

LW took the Chair and confirmed that the Authority now has two new members. Commercial fisher Steven Moss joined the meeting (as did prospective new member and angler Amelia Henderson). New member Paul Dent (commercial fisher) was unable to attend the meeting following confirmation of his appointment that morning.

Declarations of Interest:

The Chair asked for declarations of interest. None were given.

The Chair confirmed that Declarations of Interests can be given at the start of the meeting or as and when one emerges. Particularly for the benefit of new members, he explained that Members are not here to represent a particular community or sector but to contribute their knowledge and experience to the business of the Authority in the interests of all stakeholders.

3.2 DRAFT MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS QUARTERLY MEETING HELD ON 24 JANUARY 2022 AND MATTERS ARISING THEREFROM

The CEO confirmed the following amendments to be made to the minutes to read: -

- In 3.4: - “There is a view that RFGs not working effectively yet although they will be significant... etc.”
- In 3.5: - “New burdens funding. For Northumberland, the fund is not critical. However, throughout etc...”.

SL confirmed that the minutes should read “Northumbria Rivers Trust” not “National Rivers Trust”.

IT proposed acceptance of the minutes with the above changes, which was seconded by SL and agreed by all Members present.

3.3 MEETINGS ATTENDED THROUGHOUT THE QUARTER

The CEO confirmed that he had attended the Ward Hadaway webinar, ‘Living with COVID’ which reaffirmed the approach which NIFCA has taken (precautionary but attempting to continue with business as usual). He noted that NIFCA continues to operate with a limited number of people in the office, use of lateral flow tests if showing any level of symptoms and staying home if testing positive. The CEO commented that everyone will have read his report which explains a far higher than usual sickness absence in the last quarter due to COVID; thankfully for everyone at NIFCA who tested positive, symptoms have not been too bad or long-term. Ward Hadaway have explained that employers are not entitled legally to require employees to take a test before coming to work and there are potential issues with GDPR if someone had to declare the results of their test. There has been a culture created at NIFCA however where people are in agreement and happy to test, work from home and wear masks, where appropriate.

The CEO explained that at the AIFCA meeting Chief Officer Rob Clark outlined the areas of work Defra would like IFCA's to carry out. It was decided by the AIFCA meeting to view these as opportunities and IFCA's will get involved to support the Association. One aspect of supporting the Association is regarding the training of Officers. The Association has a Lead Training Officer, Stevie Travis (ST) who provides the majority of IFCA training (including Court training and Health and safety amongst others). ST must be hosted by an IFCA to carry out functions such as payroll, and NIFCA has initially volunteered to take this on. ST lives in North Yorkshire so would continue to work from home, but NIFCA would host his salary and pension, the cost of which would be paid by all of the IFCA's. This hosting would involve some additional work in finance and potentially in admin, which has until now been undertaken by Kent and Essex IFCA; the handover from KE IFCA would take up to a year. The Chair explained that so much of what the IFCA's do is southern centric, so moving training up here would be beneficial to the northern IFCA's, with the potential to host training events closer to home.

3.4 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT ON FOURTH QUARTER OF NIFCA 2021-22 (MEMBERS ONLY)

The CEO explained that NIFCA has continued to deliver on our remit during the challenging times of COVID. We have overhauled the website which continues to be a work in progress. The Annual Plan has been produced and the team have worked well together to overcome the challenges of the last few months.

Regarding staffing, the CEO noted that NIFCA will be starting interviews for the IFCO/Engineer and Enforcement IFCO soon. He explained that if the need arises, PR

has agreed to continue to work beyond the end of his contract on a part-time basis. NIFCA continues to await confirmation of the dredge byelaw; there has been some concern amongst the members about the time taken by the MMO to review the byelaw, leaving the possibility of damage in the district from dredge activity and consideration is being given to whether NIFCA could expedite the process from the MMO to Defra.

SM explained that there is concern that the new dredge byelaw will affect about five fishers who will lose the opportunity to dredge in the area. Other approaches which place more restrictions on the fishery, such as the Isle of Man approach, use of VMS or fixed seasons could have improved the situation without taking away the option to dredge. SM feels that a blanket ban, which puts pressure onto other fisheries, does not seem to be the best option. The Chair noted that all of SM's points are relevant; they have all been raised previously by members of the Authority and considered during the two-year discussion which took place while reviewing this byelaw. The proposed ban was raised in two public consultations with 92% of commercial fishers who responded being in favour of implementing a dredge prohibition.

Regarding the office, the CEO noted that NIFCA currently has very good premises for the Authority and a decision needs to be made on whether to continue the lease. The Chair commented that the office is of course a considerable expense, and the Authority should continue to keep it under review; he noted that the landlord did give NIFCA a discount of circa £2k+ and noted that finding new premises would be a huge undertaking. EC commented that the office in Blyth is a really good one, offering plenty of parking and a meeting room. GRT noted that there is the potential to find space for NIFCA at County Hall, if this would be beneficial and the CEO said he would check that.

The CEO commented that the work of the Association of IFCA's is excellent; Rob Clark does a great job as Chief Officer, who is supported well by TT (Chair) and LW (Vice). Rob Clark responded to the Joint Fisheries Statement very well; Fisheries Management Plans are also being developed nationally, which IFCA's are engaging with through the AIFCA, MAFCO and COG. Regarding the Regional Fisheries Groups, Defra are attempting to reach out to everyone who works within the marine fisheries environment, including groups like the NFFO to increase outreach.

SL explained that he has been concerned to see some negative responses to some of our recent social media posts and asked if they are they moderated? MS noted that NIFCA has a small group of anti-IFCA's following us on Facebook; there are sometimes comments made by this group of people which are inappropriate and can be removed. The CEO explained that in general, it is felt that we get the balance of this right and undertake social media carefully but in a fast-moving environment, it is difficult to please everyone all the time. There are risks to engaging in social media, but it is felt that overall, it is beneficial to the organisation.

3.5 INSHORE FISHERIES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The CEO explained that it was felt that the Authority should look at its carbon footprint and the potential impact of and for the fishing industry on climate change. We have begun work in this area and feel very positive about the benefits of doing it. The Chair noted that he is very proud that NIFCA has now implemented a policy on climate change and carbon reduction and is pleased that it has been written into our Annual Plan. The Authority should also look at future technology and how it can be introduced to reduce our footprint.

3.6 BYELAW UPDATE

As noted at 3.4 above, the CEO noted that the dredge byelaw is currently with the MMO for consideration, following which it will be sent to Defra.

MS confirmed that the Officers are now looking at amendments to the Fixed Engines byelaw; this may include aligning it more closely with the EA byelaw, potentially changing it to a netting byelaw which incorporates fixed engines. The CEO confirmed that NIFCA byelaws are kept under constant review so amendments can be made if there is ever felt a need to do so. With this in mind, the Chair noted that no decision made by the Authority is permanent. As and when the fisheries change, or new technology is created, our byelaws have the ability to change too.

3.7 RISK ASSESSMENT

The CEO confirmed that the Risk Assessment Matrix is reviewed every 6-months with the latest review completed in March. One new risk has been added regarding climate change to ensure this remains at the forefront of our thoughts; the updated Matrix can be seen in the Annual Plan and the next review will take place in September.

3.8 CORRESPONDENCE

Received with thanks.

SL declared an interest in item 1: 'WADER' project. He explained that he fully welcomes this project and NIFCA's involvement in it and requested that reimbursement is sought for any input made by NIFCA officers. AA explained that so far NIFCA has only written a letter for the project but if any further work is done, it would be at a charge. CSc commented that this is an intertidal/support project and it is unlikely to require that level of interaction from NIFCA, although it could not be ruled out. SL said that if NIFCA undertake any work, they should be fairly acknowledged either with financial reimbursement or acknowledgement in paperwork. The Chair agreed whilst also noting that there are great benefits to NIFCA being involved in this project, including acknowledgement in a final report.

Regarding item 19, SL noted the Authority's response regarding Battleship Wharf; SL explained that from experience there has always been an impact from such works on the purple sandpiper, which could have been a point of objection by NIFCA. AA explained that this was simply a response to a variation on an existing application so there was a very small area of the works which Officers could comment on.

The Chair gave his sincere thanks to the team for their hard work in getting these papers out under difficult circumstances.

3.9 SUMMARY REPORTS OF WATCH & FINANCE COMMITTEES BY CEO (ORAL)

Finance:

The CEO confirmed that all minutes were approved, and the Finance Committee was updated about the Risk Assessment Matrix. One area of concern has been raised by the Committee regarding the PV fund and ensuring that there are sufficient finances to replace the vessel in the future. The Committee wishes to look at the type of vessel that could replace St Aidan and while overall finances are in a good place, a robust plan for the future would be beneficial. The meeting looked at the quarterly accounts produced by JuS, who provides a very good summary for the membership and

consideration was given to a paper regarding capital investment; the main question is whether reserves should be invested or continue slowly building interest in a low-income account. This will be considered at a future meeting.

The meeting received a summary of staff matters, noting that it has been a tough quarter for everyone, but the team have now come through the COVID situation experienced recently. The CEO confirmed that our long-term skipper DG is retiring on health grounds; it has been a long process and he retires at the end of this week. DG has been a fantastic Officer both on the PV, engaging and interacting in a really positive way with the public and he is an excellent colleague to work with, so will be a great miss. The Chair added that DG has been a fantastic Officer and a 'backbone' worker. We all wish him well for the future and hope we will be able to officially say goodbye to him sometime soon.

The CEO noted that initial approval of the Authority's pension policy was sought from the Finance Committee. The policy outlines situations in which NIFCA may enhance an individual's pension and it was felt by members that the Authority having that capability was important. This can then be reviewed again in a few years' time.

Finally, it was confirmed by the CEO that in March and April, appraisals were satisfactorily completed for all employees, so incremental rises and a 2% cost of living increase will be given this month.

Watch:

The CEO confirmed that all minutes were approved. The reports from MS regarding the PV and sea activity were received and discussion took place regarding some potential byelaw breaches. An update on vessels and vehicles was received as well as an update on health and safety, including COVID. It was confirmed that there is an election for North Tyneside Council so BB up for re-election and it is hoped he gets to continue as a member. The longer a Councillor remains on the Authority, the more information they receive and the more effective they become as a member. The CEO confirmed that inductions for the new members will take place in a few weeks, and we should hopefully be back to full capacity with 21 members for the first time in 3 years.

Finally, the CEO confirmed that discussion about becoming a host for the National Lead Training Officer took place in the Watch Committee.

3.10 IFCO REPORTS

3.10.1 Chief IFCO Report on activities for quarter ending 31 March 2022

MS summarised that it has been a challenging quarter with storms and subsequent recovery of gear. He noted that there is a voluntary group called Ghost Fishing UK who have been quite active in recovering lost gear from wrecks in the area. Other big impacts this quarter include the increased cost of fuel, heightened by the troubles in Ukraine.

Fishers have now changed their tags and MS noted there is strong demand for lobsters, selling as high as £30 per kg. There has been a roll out of the iVMS project with one of the devices available to fishers suspended for a number of weeks, but it has now been accepted as approved gear and it is encouraging to see that there are some vessels in the district transmitting information. It is hoped we will now see a better pattern of fishing activity, with vessels transmitting live at sea.

NIFCA's main PV has been out for its annual maintenance and the Cabin RIB has also been serviced. MS gave thanks to all staff, in particular Darren who has been an all-round guy for the last 14 years.

SM asked if it possible to get more clarification on how prosecutions are decided upon at NIFCA? He noted that the officers do educational work in the field but asked how it is determined to get a verbal/written warning, FAP or prosecution? MS confirmed that initially, it is down to Officer discretion; they might witness a small, first-time offence where they would choose to issue a verbal or written warning. If there were a number of technical infringements, the Officer submits a written report to the Chief, which then goes to the Prosecutions Sub-committee/Watch Committee. The Chief will give a report on the infringement(s), compliance, previous offences and the Sub-committee decides how to proceed. FAPs are on a set scale, based on offence from a £250 to £1,000 penalty and have to be paid in 28 days. If there is a repeat offence within 2 years, either a Court hearing or a double penalty is mandatory. If a repeat offence is committed outside of 2 years, a further FAP can be issued. If someone does not pay their FAP, it would go to court. The Chair confirmed that we seek legal advice from the Authority Solicitor and the Committee regularly goes with his recommendation but can sometimes disagree. All decisions made must be in the public interest. The CEO confirmed that NIFCA goes through the usual channel of interviews and statements. It is a strict, honest and transparent process.

MS confirmed that NIFCA has so far issued 75 recreational permits in 2022 which can now be purchased online. The district has seen no activity from divers and KS has been collecting RSA data, with students carrying out analysis. KS and NW attended the Amble Open which was a good event. MS reported that Intertidal hand gathering has so far been low but seems to be increasing.

Amelia Henderson (AH) explained that there is an angling event taking place on 19th June for the Queen's Jubilee which has been part funded by NCC. The event takes place between 12-4pm and money raised will support Forward Assist and the RNLI; all unwanted fish caught during the event can be donated to feed local families over the summer holidays. Details will be put on social media.

3.10.2 Environmental IFCOs Report for quarter ending 31 March 2022

AA confirmed that the team has published the Annual Research Plan last quarter and some of the Officers also did some outreach with a local primary school. She also noted that results from mussel and periwinkle monitoring appear similar to previous years. The Chair asked if Officers plan to go back to the subtidal mussel bed discovered last year to which MS confirmed that there are 3 days planned at this site.

AA confirmed that AB has been involved in the brown crab maturity project. NIFCA has also progressed the UAV project with Newcastle University.

3.10.3 Maintenance Report and Engineering Log for quarter ending 31 March 2022 and Cabin RIB Report

This report was received with thanks. SM noted the cost of fuel and explained that more vessels are now thinking about the cost to them before going to sea, which is having an impact on the fishery.

3.11 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- a) Date of next meeting 25 July 2022 at venue TBC

There being no further business, the meeting was closed at 15:05.