

Minutes General Committee Meeting - April 2026 -

Date	Monday 27 th April 2026	Time	12:00
Venue	East Bedlington Community Centre, 16-17 Station Rd, Bedlington, NE22 7JN		
NIFCA Members	CHAIR: Amelia Henderson (AH), Frank Armstrong (FA), Les Bowman (LB), Liz Dunn (LD), Stephen Flower (SF), Pat Gray (PG), Karl Green (KG), Stu Harding (SH), Martin Kitching (MK), Steve Lowe (SL), Pip Moore (PM), Steph Ingram (SI), Catherine Scott (CS), Martin Swinbank (MSw).		
Officers	Mark Southerton (MS), Alex Aitken (AA), Nick Weir (NW) Emma Cosimini (EC). All IFCOs were also in attendance as observers, to celebrate the 15 year Anniversary.		

3.1	Meeting Matters	Decision
Apologies	Geoff Cowan (GC), Guy Renner-Thompson (GRT), Brian Douglas (BD), James Wood (JW), Brian Burdis (BB), Michael Nugent (MN).	
Declarations of Interest	None at this point.	
Guests	- Robert Arckless, Les Weller, Al Browne, Nick Brodin (MNP). - Online: Phil Bennet – Chair Orkney Regional Inshore Fisheries Group	
Chair welcome	At 15 years, so good to get everyone together to look at how far we've come and what's been achieved. Great to mark this moment.	
Election of Chair and Vice	MS takes over for the election of Chair and Vice Chair. - MS wrote to members on 27th March asking for nominations. None received. - Confirmed AH and GRT willingness to stand for a further term. - Members are asked to vote for AH to continue as Chair and for GRT to continue as Vice Chair.	
Members were asked to vote regarding AH to continue as Chair for IFCA year 2026/27		All members voted in favour - Accepted
Members were asked to vote regarding GRT to continue as Vice Chair for IFCA year 2026/27		All members voted in favour - Accepted
Review of subcomm.	MS wrote to members in March. We have 2 standing subcommittees (Finance and Watch) with space for up to 12 members which has 2 vacancies – if any members would like to join, please contact the office.	

3.2	Draft minutes: General Committee Meeting: 26 Jan 2026	Approval
MS	- Actions: 3.3 - Oil Spill/ Standing Environmental Group – there are 6 in England. Local one is Berwick to Spurn point. We have asked to be included in contact list for future training events. - Office space and Peter Dade: Peter expressed gratitude for our offer to use NIFCA office space as Fish Mission is no longer functioning in NS.	
Proposed acceptance	LD	Seconded SL Approved by all

3.3	Meetings attended throughout the quarter	Information
MS	- Another busy quarter with over 65 external meetings attended. - Inshore Small scale Fisheries Symposium was well attended. - Hosted coastal health workshop at NIFCA office	

	- AA/MS visited Scotland for an inshore fisheries knowledge exchange event. - Hosted Ed Mosely from Defra FMP policy team at the office and visited local port to discuss with local fishers and their difficulties faced. - MCRS working group – fed back to Defra what’s happening in the local area.
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3.4	Monthly member round up	Information
AH	This is sent out by email to all members monthly.	
MS	Fishermen cancer awareness project was a great opportunity for fishers to get access to health care screening.	
AH	NIFCA was nominated for an award for our work on the MCZ trawling management.	

3.5	Member Matters	Information
MS	- Confirmed with Leanne Tann that Member Appraisals were offered in March. - Reappointment confirmed from AH and PD. - FA confirmed to 2028.	
SF	Would like an opportunity to go out on the vessel.	
MS	- We will be doing grab sampling in Coquet to St Marys. For members interested in joining, please reach out to the office. - Members were sent a number of last-minute papers at the end of the week – your time and contribution to prepare for this meeting is appreciated.	

3.6	FMP Update	Information
AA	- We have updated the NIFCA FMP page to signpost stakeholders. - Crab and lobster FMP: We’re recording any impacts of the increase through permit returns, surveys and feeding back to Defra FMP shellfish team. - Nephrops: draft FMP is now open until 17th June. Plan to put in a response and welcome any input from members. We’ll aim to get a draft to members in advance for feedback. Scottish Marine Directorate are leading on the FMP and have two plans for the west coast and North Sea which apply in England too. - There are 11 demersal species in Scottish Directorate (apply in English waters) and we responded to all relevant plans.	

3.7	MCRS	Approval
AH	This is for member approval.	
MS	- Defra timeline to increase lobster MCRS in England starts March 2026. The next rise takes place in January 2027 and increases 1mm per year until it reaches 90mm using licence conditions. - There is a cross-border fishery issue in our district and a different size limit for recreationally targeting lobster, which will remain at 87mm until national legislation is introduced. - NIFCA agreed to update the commercial permit condition to include (carry and retain) to help support the licence condition and went to consultation. - Only received one response – fisher thought it was an opportunity to object, so we discussed with them and the response was discounted. - MMO requested an extension – they were considering submitting a response and was granted an extension, but we did not receive an MMO response. - There are therefore no responses for members to consider. Members are now asked to vote on approving this permit change: proposed MK, seconded PM, all members voted in favour to proceed with permit condition change.	
Members asked to vote whether to proceed with permit condition change as outlined above		All members agreed - approved

3.8	Netting Byelaw Update (oral)	Information
MS	• Been through 2 rounds of review with the MMO and it is now with Defra. Will create a permitted netting byelaw including seasonal water depth restrictions. • Had expected it to be signed off by now, but new Minister wants to personally sign off on all IFCA byelaws now. • We will do increased communication on the requirement for permit to net in the district and SM when it comes into force as well as Fisher Focus newsletter and series of Fisher Forums. • The anticipated uptake is relatively low. We will charge £50pa for permit and there are around 3-4 people who have taken an interest in recent years, and we think it is unlikely people will take out a permit to have track record.	

3.9	Byelaw Review	Decision
AA	• Following acceptance of our byelaw review process, byelaws have been discussed and prioritised for review by Officers, and recommended next steps were provided to the Tech and Sci subcommittee in March. • The recommended next steps are as follows: ○ <u>Crustacea Conservation</u>: no further review required. It remains necessary and functional - minor wording changes are needed but are not significant enough to warrant a full byelaw change. ○ <u>Crustacea and mollusc Permit and Pot Limitation</u>: Tech and Sci subcommittee recommend a full byelaw change to create flexible byelaw conditions, allowing us to amend flexible permit conditions quickly, in line with national changes. ○ <u>Scallop Dredging</u>: currently prohibited in the district but some fishers have asked us to consider reopening it. The Tech and Sci subcommittee recommend seeking more information from the industry whilst very carefully managing expectations.	
SL	• For completeness, the minutes of the meeting haven't been agreed – therefore can't formally move forward until agreed.	
Proposed to accept recommended next steps as outlined above		LD Seconded SL All Members voted to accept (subject to formal acceptance of T&S mins).

3.10	Newcastle Uni	Information
PM	Discussion regarding current Newcastle University student projects: • One project is looking at impacts of the berried hen ban and fishers' views on that. • One MSc project last year looked at reasons why people enter and exit fishing life. Talked with people at the beginning of their career who had no background in fishing. • Another MSc looked at data gathered by NIFCA and showed that the stock assessment wasn't as positive as using Cefas data: this comes with a warning re. interpreting data. • Other projects include public perceptions of fisheries, assessing changes in UK waters, campaigns on bottom trawl gear and assessing public perceptions of first HMPA. • These studies can be shared once complete, but it is worth keeping in mind that they come with the caveat of being the individual's first stage of research which may well come with mistakes. Outcomes from these projects should not be taken as absolute.	

3.11	Summary Reports	Information
	• Finance: members approved finance mins and received 25/6 budget report, noting a £16k deficit budget due to significant costs of engines and legal costs.	

	- Asset Replacement Fund is very comfortable and General Reserves remain at 20% of budget, in line with Financial Regs. - Discussed RDEL and reporting on FMP spending. - CDEL funding has been received by AIFCA from Defra: will be spent to support all IFCAs with CLUE, mobile working app and update of Kingfisher fishing restrictions. - Staff matters: we welcome the return of KS. Staff appraisals have been completed and incremental rises awarded to those who are eligible. - Members considered our annual contribution towards the MNP and agreed to support to 2029, recognising the benefit of partnership in reaching our MPA duties. Watch: - Minutes were approved and update on vessels was received. - Upgrades on Robert Arckless MBE will be carried out in 2027 to bring vessel in line with work code 3 requirements. - H&S: have increased training across the team. - Agreed for Chair and Chief to carry out a review of Standing order and Constitution and reflect of C&O report – recommendations will be reported to finance Committee. SC joined the meeting.
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3.12	IFCO Reports	Information
3.12.1 - Chief Officer's Report		
MS	- Economic challenges continue to affect the community. While the first quarter is always difficult, a prolonged period of easterly and south-easterly winds has kept many people from fishing. There was also an increase in lobster MCRS issues during March. - Overall activity levels have been low, and lobster prices have continued to be poor. - Fuel prices for both diesel and petrol were significantly higher at the start of the year, creating further challenges. RQ Marina also struggled to secure petrol supplies. - The sector remains under pressure, with confirmation of MMO Stage 3 bottom-towed gear restrictions still awaited. - Environmental discussions continue around offsetting licensed work within MPAs through the creation of new MPAs or the extension of existing boundaries. None are currently expected within or adjacent to our district.	
SC	- The Small Scale Fisheries Symposium held in February was very well attended by Defra and IFCAs, including attendance from Ann Freeman (Defra). - Fishers spoke openly about the difficulties they have been facing. - Since then, a smaller group has met with Ann Freeman to discuss the issues raised. It was agreed that they would be taken forward to explore how progress can be made. - Minister Angela Eagle raised concern about the decline in inshore fisheries. Discussions moving forward have been positive, with closer working between Defra and the sector to address the decline. - A talk was given at the University, attended by the Duke of Northumberland, who expressed interest in helping in some way. There was recognition of how small-scale fishing businesses intersect with life in rural communities. - The Duke offered to host an event at Alnwick Castle to mark a national day of recognition for local fisheries around the country. AA will give a presentation on Northumberland Fisheries. - The event will take place in July 2026 and will provide a great opportunity to celebrate what is working well while also recognising the decline in the sector. - Thanks to the IFCAs for their support – it is felt that the event could not have happened without their support. - A film about local Northumberland fisheries will also be launched at the event.	

MS	• Cross-border networking has continued, including invitations to regional fisheries groups, Blue Marine, and Scottish regional groups. • Our annual meeting was held with the Tweed Commission, and further discussions are planned with Jenny Moat Chair from the Scottish East Coast RFG. • Fishermen's Mission: we invited Peter Dade to make use of NIFCA's office facilities, the offer was gratefully received. • The Annual Plan has been circulated and would appreciate any feedback. • One of our recent prosecution press releases was shared as far as Scandinavia and Australia. • The NIFCA spring newsletter will be released shortly. • Our new website is currently in development, including a full overhaul of the members' section which will follow. • NIFCA will be attending the Newbiggin Maritime Festival this year. • In Alnwick, the team will also be attending the film festival, presenting the v-notching film alongside a talk, alongside the film "This'll Never Work".
LD	• Thanks to SC – very uplifting information. • Why did we see such a significant increase in applications to the summer placement?
AA	• We decided to advertise earlier this year and also attended a careers fair with a QR-code advertising the placement. Applications increased to 72. • It was asked whether the programme could be expanded from one placement to two.
SF	• Is there any opportunity to increase to two placements?
MS	• The placement currently supports the scientific team, but consideration is now being given to introducing an operational placement (vessel/at-sea work etc.) next year.
3.12.2 - Enforcement Report	
NW	<u>Denton prosecution:</u> • In September 2024, a joint operation with the MMO relating to undersized and berried lobster offences resulted in a prosecution. Thanks to the MMO for their work on the case, without them the prosecution would not have been possible. • Officers used surveillance to monitor the vessel landing, and with support from Northumbria Police, stopped the vehicle involved and found 248 undersized lobsters along with several berried lobsters. • The case concluded two weeks ago: offences included fishing without a permit, retaining 286 undersized lobsters, using untagged pots, and retaining 1 berried hen. • All offences were sentenced at the same hearing, and the defendants received a three-year disqualification from holding any IFCA permit anywhere in the country. • A £5,000 fine was issued, calculated as a percentage of weekly income due to the defendants having no declared income at the time. • This has been a hugely significant prosecution. • The Port of Blyth has been supportive and asked them to leave due to breach of their mooring conditions, and the vessel has moved to Eyemouth. • The two individuals involved have been significantly hindered by this.
PG	• On behalf of the Authority, thank you and well done to NIFCA and the MMO. The level of tenacity it takes to see that through, I'm not sure there's another IFCA or MMO department who would achieve this.
AH	• Would second this. The determination of the team, the patience and the work put in by NIFCA and the MMO is excellent. Thank you.
NW	<u>B&W Prosecution:</u> • NIFCA Officers used iVMS data to support evidence that Brigham and Ward were illegally using untagged/ unmarked pots. • They pleaded not guilty in the first case but were subsequently found guilty by the judge. In the second case, they entered a guilty plea. They are due to be sentenced for four offences relating to multiple fleets of gear. • MMO data was used to help evidence the case. Thanks to the MMO for their support and provision of data.

AH	- This is a testament to the team. NW came to the members a year ago and said it could occur significant costs to get the outcome we want, but members easily agreed, having confidence in the team. - Two very significant cases and a lot of work. Well done.
3.12.3 - Environmental Report	
AA	- It has been a busy quarter, much of which has already been discussed, including work relating to the Small-Scale Fisheries Symposium. - AA visited the flume tank facility in Denmark alongside a number of stakeholders, providing an opportunity to observe seabed interactions in detail. - VR attended the FREP event in Scotland. - The annual IFCA training course was held in Brixham. This was the second year of hosting the environmental course, which was supported and helped to run by AA. - Careers events were attended as part of outreach activity, resulting in 72 applications for placements. - Monitoring work continues, including MPA-related work. Thanks to CS at Natural England, who works closely with the team on this work. - ROV training relating to wild oysters was undertaken after a request for support was received. AB, SR and VR attended the training.
SL	Where mussels are in decline, LNRS could offer opportunities for recovery. Important we have that opportunity to access funding for training etc.
PM	Mussel decline is a global issue, it's not just happening locally – anecdotally to do with temperatures.
SL	Maybe also because we have an oyster farm next to it.
MSw	Are we noticing other things happening in these locations which is indicative of the decline as it could have wider impacts on what we're trying to conserve.
AA	- There are multiple factors which could be feeding into it. - What NIFCA is doing: we can add mussel decline to national discussion. CS is getting samples (SC also involved). - Mussels in pontoons and marinas doing well but intertidal is an issue. - NIFCA will continue to survey it.
AA	Coastal Health and Livelihood. Longterm monitoring of key species -looking at cockles and interested in looking at mussels. That's another avenue of looking at this.
3.12.4 - Maintenance Report	
MS	- Diagnostic health tests have been completed and the engines were removed and stripped down. Full diagnostics of element issues found carbon build up on crowns. - Engines back in vessel. Scheduled lift in on Wednesday with intention of trials.

3.13	Acronyms Table	Information
AH	Accepted.	

3.14	Any Other Business	Information
AH	Tech & Sci members: please reply by end of week to amend or accept minutes. Any feedback on Annual Plan by end of week.	

The meeting was closed by the Chair at 13:25pm

Actions for Next Meeting

Item	Action	Who
3.1	Any members wishing to join the Finance of Watch Subcommittee to please contact the office.	MS
3.6	Draft response to FMP consultation to be shared with members for their input	AA
3.14	Tech & Sci members: please reply by end of week to amend or accept minutes.	Members
3.14	Any feedback for the Annual plan to please be sent to NIFCA by the end of the week.	Members