

AIFCA Chief Officer's Report

Ring-fenced support for the small-scale coastal fleet

The inclusion of ring-fenced support for the small-scale coastal fleet within the relaunched Fisheries and Seafood Scheme is a welcome recognition of the specific needs of inshore fisheries. It should help target investment towards fleet resilience, safety, infrastructure and coastal communities, while supporting more locally responsive and sustainable fisheries management. This announcement follows meetings with Defra and the Minister where we have called for this policy to be included in the scheme.

The Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund (FCGF) Expert Advisory Group

The Chief Officer has been asked to sit on the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund (FCGF) Expert Advisory Group, an informal advisory body established to help ensure the Fund reflects the needs and priorities of the fishing industry and wider stakeholders. The group's role is to provide Defra officials with advice and expertise on the short- and long-term issues facing the fishing and seafood sector, and to inform the development and implementation of the Fund in England. This includes advising on scheme design, best practice for delivery, funding priorities across different parts of the sector, and options for support under those priorities. Members are also expected to represent their organisations or networks and, where appropriate, consult with members between meetings. While the group will play an important role in shaping the Fund at an early stage, it is advisory only and does not hold decision-making powers, with final policy decisions remaining with Ministers.

Artificial Intelligence Use policy

The Chief Officer has developed an Artificial Intelligence Use Policy for AIFCA, which may also be of use to individual IFCAAs as they consider their own approach to the use of AI tools. The policy has been presented to the Chief Officers Group and will be forwarded to the Technical Advisory Group for comment. The policy forms part of the previously agreed workstream on Remote Electronic Monitoring and Artificial Intelligence, recognising the increasing relevance of AI to fisheries management, evidence gathering, administration and governance. It is intended to provide a practical framework for the responsible, transparent and proportionate use of AI, including appropriate safeguards around data protection, accuracy, human oversight and accountability. Further updates will be provided following TAG consideration, and the policy may be shared with IFCAAs as a resource to support local policy development.

The South Coast Marine Recovery Project Steering Group

The Chief Officer has accepted an invitation to join the Steering Group for the South Coast Marine Recovery Project, a partnership initiative led by the Wildlife Trusts to develop a major community-led programme for nature recovery across Britain's south coast, from Cornwall to Sussex. The Steering Group provides strategic oversight and governance for the project's development phase, helping to guide progress, review risks and milestones, and ensure that emerging delivery plans are evidence-based, collaborative, policy-relevant and capable of attracting broad partner support and future funding. Through this role, the Chief Officer will contribute to shaping an ambitious and achievable framework for marine recovery, while also helping to align the project with relevant policy, statutory duties and the interests of key delivery partners and decision-makers.

Support for ESRC Funding Bids

AIFCA has indicated support in principle for the development of proposed ESRC REACT and ESRC Connect bids concerning the future of small-scale and inshore fisheries. This includes willingness, subject to final scope and approvals, to participate as a project partner and provide support in kind through engagement with project development, sharing relevant IFCA network knowledge and practice, and contributing to dissemination and stakeholder discussions.

Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries Symposium / Defra Meeting 9 April 2026

The Chief Officer attended discussions between the ISSF Consortium and Defra on the outcomes of the February 2026 Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries Symposium and the development of practical actions to support the inshore fishing sector. The meeting considered a range of issues affecting small-scale fisheries, including management within the 0–12 nautical mile zone, licensing, quota flexibility, recreational fishing, and improving collaborative management and communication with fishermen. Defra was receptive to further work on a number of areas, including evidence gaps, communication, recreational fishing controls, and the role of lobbying in support of management change, while noting that some proposals would be constrained by wider legal, political or international considerations. The discussion also identified a number of follow-up actions for the ISSF Consortium, Defra and MMO, and confirmed that a draft report would be prepared to support ongoing dialogue on viable measures to help secure inshore fishing livelihoods.

National Day of Recognition and Celebration of Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries

The Chief Officer, supported by the team, has been working with partners to help organise the forthcoming National Day of Recognition and Celebration of Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries, to be held at Alnwick Castle on 1 July 2026. The event, hosted by His Grace the Duke of Northumberland, Newcastle University, the Association of IFCAs and the Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries Consortium, will bring together those working in and around the sector to recognise the importance of inshore and small-scale fisheries, reflect on current challenges, and highlight innovation and progress across the industry. The day will also mark the 15-year anniversary of the IFCA network, providing an opportunity to celebrate the contribution IFCAs have made to the sustainable management of England's inshore waters and to raise awareness of their continuing role in supporting both fishing communities and the marine environment.

The ISSF nominated for a fishing news award

The Chief Officer wishes to note the nomination of the Inshore and Small-Scale Fisheries Consortium (ISSF) for a Fishing News award recognising work to improve sustainability and environmental outcomes within the UK and Irish fishing industry. This nomination reflects the significance of the Consortium's work in responding innovatively to sustainability challenges facing the sector and recognises efforts that go beyond standard practice. The award criteria require clear evidence of both originality and impact, and the nomination therefore represents important external recognition of the value of the ISSF's work in supporting a more sustainable and resilient future for inshore and small-scale fisheries.

Defra consultation on refreshed HRA guidance. IFCA perspective

Defra's consultation seeks views on updated Habitats Regulations Assessment guidance, with the stated aim of making the process clearer, more usable and more efficient, particularly where applicants and decision-makers face uncertainty. Defra also states that the update responds to concerns about uncertainty, delays and overly precautionary decisions.

From an IFCA perspective, the principal change is one of clarification rather than a substantive change in legal duty. The existing guidance already applies to European sites in inshore waters within 12 nautical miles and defines a competent authority broadly as a public body that grants licences, permits, consents, adopts plans, or carries out works itself. It also already includes permits issued under byelaws and other legislation within the types of projects that may require HRA.

However, the draft guidance is helpful because it now explicitly names Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities as competent authorities, alongside local authorities, the Environment Agency, statutory nature conservation bodies and government departments. This makes clear, rather than implied, that IFCAs must consider the guidance when carrying out their HRA obligations, including where they authorise, regulate or undertake plans or projects themselves.

The draft also provides clearer wording on proportionality. It emphasises that competent authorities should consider real, not hypothetical risks, may use thresholds or criteria where justified, and do not need to consider every possible plan or project in an in-combination assessment. This is potentially helpful for IFCAs dealing with routine permitting, byelaw implementation, adaptive management and fisheries interactions where evidence can be complex, variable or incomplete.

There is also useful clarification on the appropriate assessment stage. The draft confirms that adverse effects must be ruled out beyond reasonable scientific doubt, but that this does not require absolute certainty. It recognises the role of objective evidence, expert judgement, conservative assumptions and proportionate information requirements. This is important for IFCAs, where decisions often depend on ecological advice, local fisheries evidence, officer judgement and precautionary but practical management.

The refreshed guidance also strengthens the message on working with other competent authorities. The existing guidance already encourages coordination and agreement of a lead authority where responsibilities overlap. The draft restates this in clearer terms and is relevant to marine cases where IFCA, MMO, Natural England, harbour authorities, local authorities or others may each have roles.

Overall, the draft guidance appears to make the process clearer for IFCAs without materially changing their duties. The explicit reference to IFCAs is welcome, and the clearer explanations of proportionality, real risk, in-combination assessment, evidence requirements and reasonable scientific doubt should support more confident, consistent and efficient HRA decision-making.

Fishmongers' Company Knowledge Exchange Grant Application

AIFCA has submitted an application to the Fishmongers' Company Fish & Fisheries Programme Knowledge Exchange Grants Scheme to support a three-day professional exchange visit to Arcachon, France. The proposed visit would enable IFCA representatives to meet with the Comité Régional des Pêches Maritimes and local partners to examine French approaches to coastal fisheries governance, stakeholder representation, fisheries management, compliance and coastal community resilience.

The project seeks to strengthen professional links between the English and French systems, identify shared challenges, and draw out practical lessons for English inshore fisheries management. The application requests £7,000 to support travel, accommodation, meeting costs, interpretation, hospitality, reporting and dissemination.

Planned outputs include a structured programme of meetings and site visits, a post-visit dissemination session for IFCAs, and a final report to the Fishmongers' Company setting out the main lessons and any recommendations arising from the exchange.

PhD by Published Work

I have submitted a prima facie application to the University of Hull to study for a PhD by Published Work in the School of Environmental and Life Sciences. The proposed submission brings together published work on inshore fisheries management, MPA governance, sustainability, compliance, evidence use and institutional delivery, presenting this as a coherent research programme developed over more than two decades. I am grateful for the support of the AIFCA to pursue this opportunity. The study will be undertaken outside of worktime.

The Council of the Estuarine and Coastal Sciences Association (ECSA).

I am pleased to report that I have been elected to the Council of the Estuarine and Coastal Sciences Association (ECSA). ECSA is an international learned society and registered charity dedicated to promoting excellence in estuarine and coastal marine science, technology and management. Its mission includes advancing multidisciplinary research, supporting early-career scientists, encouraging global outreach, and promoting the sustainable management of estuaries and coasts. ECSA has significant influence through its international conferences, professional networks and links to the journal *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, providing a forum for research and evidence on coastal processes, ecosystems, fisheries, sediments, climate impacts and environmental management. My election to Council provides a valuable opportunity to strengthen AIFCA's links with the wider coastal science community, raise the profile of inshore fisheries and conservation issues, and ensure that emerging science and evidence are better connected to practical coastal management and policy delivery. ECSA's Council oversees the association's affairs and finances, with elected members serving three-year terms.

APPG consultation on an Action Plan for a Thriving and Sustainable UK Fishing Industry

AIFCA has submitted a response to the APPG consultation on an Action Plan for a Thriving and Sustainable UK Fishing Industry. The response emphasises that England's inshore fleet is a foundational part of coastal economies, food supply, maritime heritage and local stewardship, but is under increasing pressure from rising costs, ageing infrastructure, labour shortages, spatial squeeze and fragmented management. It calls for the Action Plan to explicitly recognise the value of maintaining a geographically dispersed inshore fleet, with stronger local governance, fairer stock-scale management, improved evidence, workforce renewal, and investment in vessels, harbours and supply chains suited to smaller operators.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers

No papers