



FISHING CREWS TODAY AND TOMORROW

POLICY BRIEF NO. 18 - DECEMBER 2022

OVERVIEW

- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining crew are being experienced throughout the fishing industry, as well as other parts of the wider seafood sector.
- Challenges surrounding perceptions of fishing careers, access into the sector, and stability of work are perpetuating these difficulties.
- In the longer term, improving perceptions and education surrounding careers in fishing, as well as removing barriers to recruitment and retention, could attract more entrants.

BACKGROUND

Across different fleets and parts of the UK, the fishing industry is reporting significant challenges with recruiting new fishers and retaining existing crew. At the same time, there is concern that in the future, an ageing workforce will affect the viability of the industry; currently, the average age of a crew member is 40, while for boat owners working on their vessels, it is 50 (1). The UK fishing

fleet overall has already shrunk by 10% in the last decade (2). Any further shrinkages of the industry as a result of labour shortages would likely have a negative impact on some coastal communities (3). With a combination of issues believed to be behind the workforce challenges that the fishing industry is now facing, a range of potential solutions exist which could be explored by the industry and by policymakers.

This briefing summarises the output from the APPG on Fisheries open Parliamentary hybrid event, on 26 October 2022. The meeting brought together a variety of stakeholders to discuss current and possible future workforce demographics in the fishing industry. This document is a synthesis of the discussions that took place at the event.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of contributors to the event.

DRIVERS OF CHALLENGES IN RECRUITMENT

There is widespread recognition that the traditional family pathway into fishing, where young people gain exposure to fishing livelihoods from an early age and benefit from the financial and social support of family members, is waning in the UK (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). At the same time, people from outside fishing families reportedly cannot or do not want to enter the industry, with several key reasons put forward for this.

Lack of a steady income and/or low income

Income on fishing boats is often earned on a catch share basis, meaning that it is reliant on the quantity and value of catches - which can vary due to factors such as environmental conditions and market forces, as well as declines in stocks which are affecting some UK fisheries (10). Reduced access to traditional fishing grounds is also becoming an increasing concern for UK fishers, with the growth of protected area designations and of other industries such as offshore wind and aquaculture (11). Finally, establishing a career in fishing can require significant financial investment, such as through purchasing a vessel or equipment (4, 5, 8, 9, 12).

Changing perceptions of fishing careers

There is a general notion that manual work is considered less desirable by newer generations, and fishing in particular is viewed as less prestigious than used to be the case (4, 13). Schools may also be contributing to these perceptions, with fishing rarely promoted during careers events or by careers advisors, or targeted only at pupils considered to be less academic (4, 5, 6, 14). This may be due to a focus on maximising the number of pupils going on to higher education (6, 14) which is often used by schools as a metric for success. However, rigid secondary school curriculums may also limit the ability of schools to facilitate activities relating to education about fishing (6). Fish and chips businesses, which are notable customers of the fishing industry, have also reported challenges in recruiting young people due to perceptions among this cohort (15).

Regulatory barriers to exposing young people to fishing

While historically, fishers took young family members to sea to gain experience and skills, legislation now prevents this for children under the age of 15 (7). This also acts as a barrier to schoolchildren opting for work experience on fishing vessels (6).



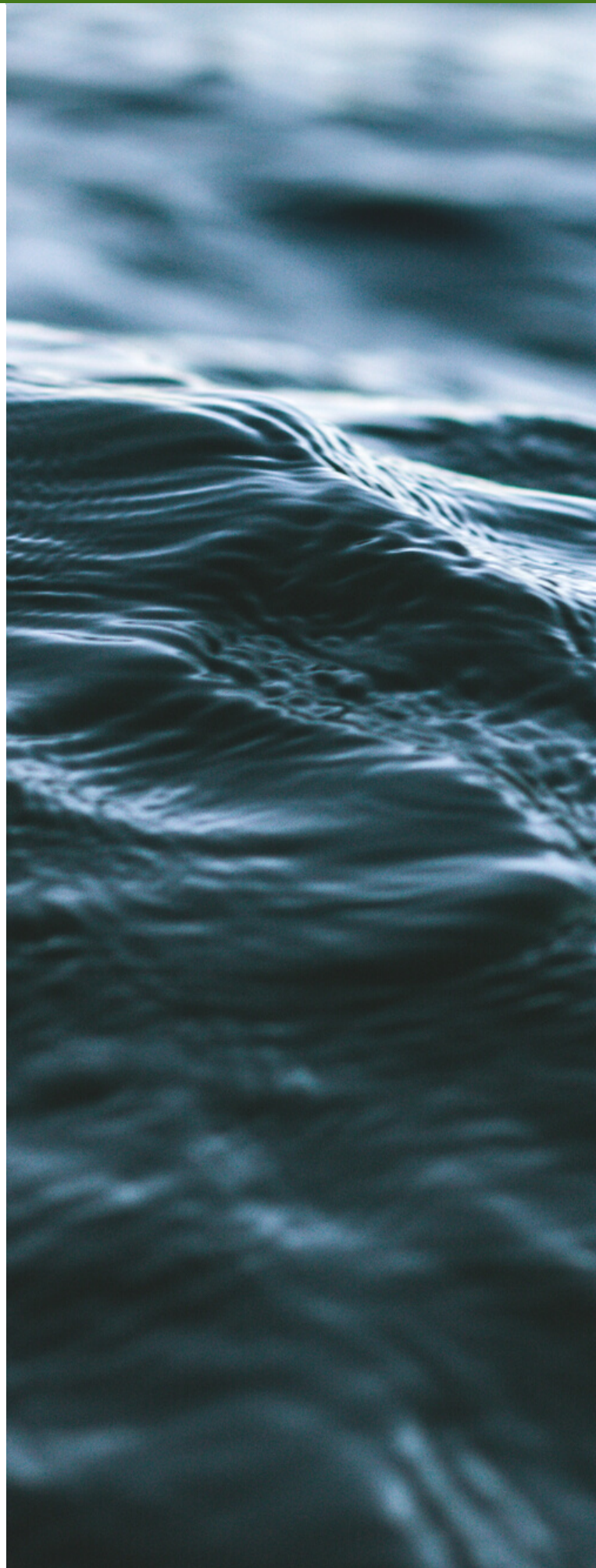
Cost of training

Commercial fishers are legally required to hold a number of qualifications, with the first course, Basic Sea Survival, being a prerequisite to stepping onboard a vessel and gaining fishing work experience (16). However, this initial course alone costs around £200 (6, 7, 14). This represents a financial risk for the entrant or the skipper, depending on who is paying for the course, should the entrant later decide not to pursue a career in fishing. Infrequency of the courses or lack of rural public transport to attend the courses can also present barriers (14).

CASE STUDY:

Get a Life at Sea

Fishers Karl and Jenny Price set up the [“Get a Life at Sea” social media campaign](#) with the support of the Holderness Fishing Industry Group (HFIG) in response to the challenges they were experiencing in recruiting crew, and to challenge public perceptions of fishing careers – particularly perceptions around lack of safety which may come from viewing media such as “Deadliest Catch”. Their first video for social media accumulated tens of thousands of views in its first day (14). Within three weeks, they had recruited three new fishermen, with another three trainees signing up for basic training (17). The Prices offer fishing vessel tours to provide people with a taste of what it is like to work on a fishing vessel, and hope to secure funding to create more regular social media content. However, they continue to struggle to engage with schools, which they believe is due to schools prioritising higher education and other types of careers for pupils.



DRIVERS OF CHALLENGES IN RETENTION

Among both fishers from fishing families and entrants without family ties to fishing, there is a high rate of employees dropping out of the fishing workforce, often in the early stages of their career (4, 5, 6, 8). In addition to the financial uncertainties that can come with a career in fishing, several key difficulties in retention have been identified.

Lack of a support network

It can be harder for new entrants to establish themselves if they do not come from fishing families, as it is harder for them to draw on the support of the surrounding fishing community (6, 9). This support may be financial in nature, but also takes the form of sharing advice and knowledge, as well as social and peer support (6, 9).

More seasonal nature of some fleets

Due to the ecology of some commercial species, some fishing fleets operate on a more seasonal basis. As such, they cannot offer a steady income throughout the year, requiring workers to be able to find other work out-of-season (6).

Administrative and regulatory requirements

Many members of the fishing industry note increasing demands on skippers' and boat owners' time and capacity to complete paperwork and ensure they remain compliant with regulations (4, 6, 18). Crew members can also find themselves facing complex tax processes due to the often intermittent and uncertain nature of their income (12). Such administrative obligations can reduce onshore downtime and increase stress (4, 6, 12).

CASE STUDY:

The Shauls

Carole White, Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia, joined forces with Jaime Taylor, director of Postcode Films, to make a film focusing on a fishing family in Cromer, Norfolk. "The Shauls" follows a skipper as he tries to train and encourage his grandsons to continue his trade in crab and lobster fishing. The film highlights the challenges that new entrants to the industry face, even if they have emotional, mentoring, and financial support from family (5, 8)



Still from "The Shauls": Jaime Taylor, Postcode Films

PROMOTING AND FACILITATING CAREERS IN FISHING

Promoting fishing careers

Proactive engagement with schools to promote fishing careers to both primary and secondary school children is already being undertaken in parts of the fishing industry (6). For example, the Marine Conservation Society has had success in Norfolk with funding local fishermen, and a local teacher in a coordinating role, to go into primary schools to speak to children aged 9–11 years as part of its Agents of Change project (6, 19).

Engaging with secondary schools has proved more challenging. In response, it has been suggested that promotion of jobs in fishing via schools and career advisors should emphasise success stories, the entrepreneurial element of being a fisher, the professional skillset that fishers build, and the prestige of contributing to national food security (4, 6, 14). Communication and engagement could also be targeted at parents, who could then act as a source of encouragement to young people seeking to enter the fishing industry (6).



Facilitating fishing careers

Given identified barriers to recruitment, there is a clear need for more formalised approaches to mentoring and/or apprenticeships, which government funding could facilitate in collaboration with the fishing industry. Formal apprenticeships or mentoring would provide key social and professional support to new entrants. An existing UK example is the system developed by the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO), whereby trainees have their courses and first few weeks at sea paid for, thus mitigating the risk to the boat owner and trainee themselves if they choose to drop out (6). Similarly, the Marine Fund Scotland (MFS) provides support for fishers under 40 years old to help them purchase second-hand fishing vessels (20). An example of a scheme implemented abroad is the 'master and apprentice' project in Finnish Lapland which does not provide entrants with an income but gives them the flexibility to work or study at the same time (21). The Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation is developing an 18-month apprenticeship scheme which will involve support from skippers (8), with the long duration of the apprenticeships considered crucial for success. However, they require significant investment of time and money from both the skippers themselves and the new entrants (6).

It has been suggested that government funding would mitigate the financial risks of these initiatives (5). A feasibility study for the Welsh fleet estimated that £4,500 would be required over three years to train a new entrant (7). The UK government's £10 million Skills and Training Scheme represents one potential source of funding (22).

Onshore employment opportunities

In addition to careers in fishing itself, the industry offers a range of onshore professional roles. These “downward-managing roles”, which are anecdotally reported to be increasingly important in supporting fishers to meet growing administrative and regulatory obligations (18), are filled by women to a much greater degree than onboard roles in the industry (1). Such career opportunities may partly redress the loss of seafood processing jobs – which historically were often filled by women (18) – as the UK seafood processing industry shrinks, due to factors such as falls in landings to UK ports and competition with processors abroad (23, 24, 25). While in some cases it is fishermen’s partners or other family members filling these roles, “corporate models” are already in use in parts of the fishing industry; for example, in Northern Ireland, one fishing port has taken advantage of economies of scale to jointly finance a business manager, thus reducing time and capacity demands on skippers (6).

Migrant labour

There have been calls from members of the fishing industry for shortfalls in available labour to be filled by migrant workers, at least in the short term (4, 13, 26), provided that the current visa system used for migrant fishers is reformed to make it easier for owners and skippers to employ them (27) and to reduce the risk of exploitation (28). In the longer term, the industry is keen to ensure that sufficient numbers of UK nationals are encouraged and supported to enter the fishing workforce. While industry voices emphasise that the industry itself should lead this drive, government funding would help to facilitate this.

CONCLUSIONS

In the UK, changing social, economic, and environmental conditions are leading to growing challenges in recruiting and retaining fishers. If current trends continue, numbers of new entrants will not be able to replace fishers who are retiring or leaving the industry early – with knock-on implications for coastal communities (3) and potentially national food security (29).

Numerous solutions have been suggested for combatting this trend. Key among these are measures that increase the attractiveness and perception of fishing careers through education for potential new entrants, make access into the sector easier, and make fishing careers more stable and tenable in the long term. With these measures in place, there is hope that the fishing industry can remain a robust part of the UK’s economy and social identity far into the future.



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