

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Fisheries and the marine environment, HC 680

Wednesday 28 January 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 January 2026.

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Members present: Mr Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Charlie Dewhurst; Sarah Dyke; Terry Jermy; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Tim Roca; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 44 - 182

Witnesses

I: Michelle Willis, Interim Chief Executive, Marine Management Organisation; Olivia Thomas, Head of Marine Planning and Technical, The Crown Estate; Colin Faulkner, Chief Executive, Seafish.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Seafish](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Michelle Willis, Olivia Thomas and Colin Faulkner.

Q44 Chair: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. We return this morning to our inquiry on fisheries and the marine environment and, in part, an accountability session on the arm's length bodies of the Department.

We are pleased to be joined this morning by representatives from the Crown Estate, Seafish and the Marine Management Organisation. Ladies and gentleman, just for the benefit of those following our proceedings and for our own official record, can I invite you to introduce yourselves to the Committee?

Olivia Thomas: Good morning and thank you for having me here today. My name is Olivia Thomas. I am the head of planning and technical as part of marine's leadership at the Crown Estate.

Michelle Willis: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for having me here. My name is Michelle Willis. I am the interim chief executive at the Marine Management Organisation.

Colin Faulkner: Good morning. I am Colin Faulkner. I am chief exec of Seafish. I am relatively new in post, since 12 January, but previously I was head of international fisheries in DEFRA.

Q45 Chair: Good morning. We are grateful to you for your attendance and assistance in the work of the Committee. I will just start with a very broad question. From the benefit of your organisations' vantage points, can you give us a minute or two on the biggest challenges that the fishing and marine sectors are going to encounter in the next five years? Olivia, I will start with you again.

Olivia Thomas: If I start with the Crown Estate's responsibilities, we have a statutory duty to enhance the value of the estate on behalf of the nation for the long term. In the marine context, what that means and why I am here is those duties apply to almost the entire seabed around England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We look to manage these responsibly for the long term, and we have a demonstrable history of doing so through supporting the delivery of some of the key priorities on the marine environment. Whether that is the development of offshore wind or the growth of other sectors, we are, importantly, enabling nature to recover alongside it.

In terms of the challenges, the sea space demand has never been greater. I saw a wonderful fact: even out to 2050, we are looking at a 10-times growth in that demand. It has been exponential. Whether that is for natural resources, food security or energy security, it is clear that there is that squeeze and a real challenge and constraint in this space.



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We have engaged the fisheries sector over the last 15 years on some of those common challenges and how to work in the marine environment. We really want to invest and develop our understanding, our evidence base and our data to support a co-ordinated way forward in how we deliver and support shared outcomes rather than racing towards uncertainty with respect to how projects might work together.

In the immediate future, when I think about the challenges for the Crown Estate, we will need to take decisions in a co-ordinated way. We are seeking to develop our marine delivery routemap—an interactive digital platform that will help to explore and plan future needs, inform our decision making and hopefully support the decision making of others as well.

Chair: There was quite a lot to unpack there. We will come back to that.

Michelle Willis: The role of the MMO is that we are England's principal marine regulator and marine manager. We regulate and manage what happens in England's seas, everything from how people fish to what happens in marine protected areas. We support all coastal and marine development where we can, and we have a real job in terms of balancing sustainable development with community and supply chains. We try to build on the resilience of coastal communities in the marine environment.

To try to contextualise an organisation of 500 people, what we achieve, and what we contribute to in economic and protection terms, we support fish exports to the tune of £1.7 billion as part of the UK economy. We support 96 GW of offshore wind and are supporting the growth in offshore wind. We are also responsible for the six marine plan areas, which cover 230,000 square kilometres of space. It is quite a big space to manage. We have 52 marine protected areas. The stakes are high for balancing these needs.

Turning to the challenges, I do not want to repeat what Olivia set out. The competition for space in the marine environment is ever-increasing. We have competing regulations. We have new regulations that need to come forward. There is high ambition around the reform agenda. We have many stakeholders who all have very high interests in that environment.

Colin Faulkner: Seafish has a slightly different remit, perhaps, from Crown Estate and the MMO. First, we are a public body, but we operate across the UK rather than solely in England. Our role is to support seafood industries and to improve their efficiency where we can. I deliberately say "industries" because we work right across the supply chain.

On your point about challenges and opportunities in the catching sector, the spatial squeeze remains a perennial concern of the sector. The recruitment challenges are also significant. Getting labour, and well-trained labour and well-trained crew, is a significant challenge for the



sector. There are also some perennial issues around safety. Seafish is heavily involved in trying to improve safety. As you will know, fishing is an incredibly dangerous occupation. Seafish has for many years worked with the MCA on improving that safety regime.

Briefly, just on the processing sector as well, there are significant challenges and, as ever, opportunities there. Like any business, they are operating in an environment where they see their costs rising. Again, around the import-export regime for the processing sector, there are challenges and opportunities arising out of the upcoming SPS agreement. On the import side, there are challenges around declining quotas, particularly in the primary sources of whitefish stocks in the Arctic and so on, which are squeezing supply to the UK market. As ever, with challenges come opportunities. Seafish will play our part in rising to those opportunities.

Q46 Chair: Can I just drill down a bit into the top lines? We will go into the areas in some more detail as we move on. Olivia, first of all, you have three strategic pillars, do you not?

Olivia Thomas: We have four.

Chair: Remind me.

Olivia Thomas: We seek to generate value across four broad lenses: social, environmental, decarbonisation and our financial returns.

Q47 Chair: It is net zero in energy; security; nature and biodiversity; and thriving communities. I did not hear anything from you about your thriving communities when you were giving your introductory comments there. How do you feel you manage the balance between that and the other pillars?

Olivia Thomas: Thank you for that question. It is a critical part of how we work and how we consider our decision making. With the marine space, we certainly recognise that there is an onshore interaction and an interaction with coastal communities as well. It is an important part of how we engage in taking our decisions.

Q48 Chair: How do you know when a community is thriving?

Olivia Thomas: We work closely with local partners and other organisations to look at what priorities particular communities have. We have not got to a point where we have met that objective. It is a big ambition to support thriving communities. Part of that is the fisheries and the massive contribution that they make to coastal communities around the UK.

Q49 Chair: You own the seabed. You also do some of the holding of the ring. You have FLOWW in the wet renewables sector. Do you manage to balance the competing demands between what these sectors give you financially and the fishing industry, which does not really give you anything at all financially because they are in the sea, not the seabed?



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Olivia Thomas: We recognise that fisheries play a vital part in the marine environment. We cannot deliver in our role of generating value without considering all those sectors and the contributions that they make. When it comes to how we are building our marine delivery routemap, we are engaging extensively with fisheries to make sure that we can reflect their interests and priorities in our decision making. As we drive value, we are incorporating that understanding of where those priority areas are for fisheries.

Q50 **Chair:** Where is the community that you are most proud of the impact that you have made with your work?

Olivia Thomas: We have an extensive amount of work we are doing across various locations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Chair: Just give me the one you are most proud of.

Olivia Thomas: I can give you the example of the Celtic sea and the work that we have done on very innovative floating offshore wind technology. It is our most recent leasing round, as we describe it, for offshore wind.

Q51 **Chair:** For the fishing communities there, what does that mean?

Olivia Thomas: We recognised that the Celtic sea does not have floating wind development. It is an important region for Wales, England and the UK. We worked collaboratively with the fishing sector in designing what we would bring forward for offshore wind. We ran a virtual mapping project led by the fisheries sector to look at where the prime areas were for fisheries. We also built in obligations around social value and considerations of how future wind developers would work with communities around the Celtic sea to support and enhance that. We have invested in a supply chain accelerator as well in order to stimulate economic growth in coastal communities associated with the marine space.

Chair: I am not hearing the name of a town or a village.

Olivia Thomas: I can come back with some specific towns and villages that we have engaged with across the south-west. We have been quayside in the south-west, the north-east and, most recently, Pembrokeshire in north Wales as well.

Q52 **Chair:** On reflection, do you think you are as effective as you might be in the balance between your three pillars?

Olivia Thomas: It is a work in progress. It is absolutely fair to reflect that. We are looking broadly at how we can really build out an understanding of our priorities. We recognise that one size does not fit all for coastal communities. There is work in train at the moment to engage and make sure that we are reflecting the needs of particular communities in particular geographic locations.



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Q53 Chair: The catching sector and the fishing industry feel that they are the ones who are always getting squeezed out. You have an opportunity, because you own it and because you are partly involved in the management of it, to do something about that. Do you feel you do as much as you could?

Olivia Thomas: We are absolutely focused on engaging with the sectors across a wide range of fish producers' associations. We will continue to improve in that space.

Q54 Chair: At what point will we see the work in progress as a completed work that we can judge, then?

Olivia Thomas: In us sharing our digital tools—we are looking to share the platform publicly—we will be able to engage with everyone over the coming years on the progress we are making and how we are reflecting others' interests through route-mapping the decisions that we then subsequently take.

Q55 Chair: Michelle, the Fisheries Minister told us that it is for the MMO to have a presence—I quote her directly—"at every port for every landing of every catch." What role do you have in ports? Do you have the capacity to fulfil the role that the Fisheries Minister has described to us?

Michelle Willis: The MMO covers the whole of the English coast. That does not mean we are based in every single port; it just means that we have offices that are located within a distance so we can achieve that.

We do a lot of engagement around the coast. We have marine officers, who deal with the industry and coastal communities on a day-to-day basis. More recently, over the last few years, certainly since Brexit, we have run the regional fisheries groups, which has been a really insightful and energised way to engage with the community. That has supported us with consultations, such as stage 1 and stage 2 marine protected areas. We do drop-in sessions.

What is not in the MMO's remit is the role of the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, the IFCAs. You have two regulators in the same place. We have to work together in those communities to—

Q56 Chair: The IFCAs do up to the six-mile limit and then you are on your own from six to 12.

Michelle Willis: Yes, they are arbitrary boundary lines, but it reflects some of the differences in regulation.

Q57 Chair: In that, you are responsible for the fisheries management plans.

Michelle Willis: We are. We deal with the fisheries management impacts, but we also get engaged because we have marine protected areas that interplay with the coast. We have marine planners. We offer a grant service, which I know you will be familiar with. Again, we provide more one-to-one support.



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Q58 **Chair:** Do you feel you have been undermined by the negotiations at the end of last year in relation to access and management from the European Union?

Michelle Willis: I do not want to have a personal opinion or an organisational position on that. Ministers and the policy teams are still working through the outcome of the negotiations, which finished through—

Q59 **Chair:** It was agreed that the UK would follow EU fisheries management regulations, was it not?

Michelle Willis: It was, but we are still working through what those conditions mean. We do have time. To be fair, those negotiations concluded. We have probably about six months until impact. We will be working very closely with the industry on that. As we all know, we can work through constraints and remedies to that. I could not comment until we work through the detail of it.

Q60 **Chair:** How long have you been with the MMO?

Michelle Willis: I have been with MMO for 15 years.

Q61 **Chair:** Have you ever seen another occasion where you saw changes of the rules in this way at a year-end with no warning coming from the EU?

Michelle Willis: I have not, no.

Q62 **Chair:** Why was it different this time?

Michelle Willis: I do not know why it was different this time.

Q63 **Chair:** Have you asked?

Michelle Willis: Not yet, no.

Q64 **Chair:** It is one of the most important functions that your organisation has. You have had the rug pulled out from under you by your political masters. Did you have any idle curiosity, at least—"What on earth are you doing here?"

Michelle Willis: If I can qualify my statement, I have not yet asked why the technical measures were introduced at a late stage because we have been supporting and working through the outcome with DEFRA policy colleagues. That has been the focus and intent of the organisation: to resolve the fisheries management issues that have come, which we need to implement quite quickly, and to work through what those measures mean in practice. It has not been because we do not care—I should qualify that for the record.

Chair: I am sure you do. It is your career, is it not?

Michelle Willis: It is, yes.

Chair: But it was not your decision either.



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Michelle Willis: No.

- Q65 **Chair:** One of the concerns is that the enforcement of the regulations to which we have agreed is not going to be the same in the EU as it is going to be in the UK. It is going to be stricter in the UK than in the EU, so it is not even a reciprocal arrangement. Does that seem sensible?

Michelle Willis: Until we work through the detail, I could not really comment. I understand the challenges and the complexity of competing regulatory regimes. The EU reserves the right to change the control regs.

- Q66 **Chair:** In practical terms, fishing boats going to sea are going to have to buy bigger nets, are they not? When does that come into force?

Michelle Willis: My understanding is that there is still a six-month window that we have to understand what the ramifications of that are. That is what we are focused on at the moment.

- Q67 **Chair:** Would you perhaps keep us informed of what you are able to do there?

Michelle Willis: I will keep that commitment.

- Q68 **Chair:** In general, one of the things that we need to do for the health of stocks, in short, is to keep bigger boats out, is it not?

Michelle Willis: It is.

- Q69 **Chair:** Extending the trade and co-operation agreement for 12 years means that we have 12 years where we cannot control what comes into our waters, does it not?

Michelle Willis: It gives us the opportunity, through the fisheries management plans that we are developing, to help better manage what activity happens in our waters. The 12 years will give certainty from an economic perspective. There is an opportunity to continue that engagement and develop. We share the waters around the UK, and we share waters with Europe. Having a better relationship with Europe is probably what is needed to do that effectively. We will work through that.

- Q70 **Chair:** I have some questions in relation to FMPs, but we are going to come back to that at a later stage. Colin, good morning and congratulations. You came into post on 1 January, effectively. Is that right?

Colin Faulkner: It was 12 January.

Chair: Is it congratulations?

Colin Faulkner: Yes.

- Q71 **Chair:** It is a difficult time for Seafish, is it not? You wanted an increase in your levy; you have not had one. You have had to make significant cuts to your management team.



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Colin Faulkner: The first thing to say is that Seafish has a really bright future in the same way that the UK fishing industry has a bright future. Those two things go together.

Chair: That is a delightfully ambiguous way of putting it.

Colin Faulkner: Those two things go hand in hand. Seafish has to cut its coat according to its cloth, fundamentally. It is funded by a levy on the first point of sale of seafood. The receipts on that levy have been declining. They have dropped from about £8.5 million in 2019-20 to £7.1 million in 2024-25. We have to cut our coat according to our cloth.

The board has given the organisation a very clear steer on the strategic priorities for the organisation, and we will be taking those priorities forward. It does mean that we have to step back from some very specific activities within the fisheries management space. We are going through the process at the moment of defining exactly what that looks like in terms of the consequences for the organisation. We are also taking the opportunity to slim back some of our support functions in the organisation to make sure that we can live within our means, frankly. That is what you would expect any organisation to do.

Q72 **Chair:** Could you have done more to bring the industry with you in meeting these challenges?

Colin Faulkner: I will probably caveat most of my answers here with, "I have been here for two weeks". I was not involved in that decision-making process last autumn.

Q73 **Chair:** You have the benefit of a fresh pair of eyes, then.

Colin Faulkner: Exactly, yes. Certainly, looking forward, I will be very keen to make sure that levy payers and others in the industry have their opportunity to feed into the process of redesigning Seafish's role in the fisheries management world.

It is important to say that we are still heavily involved in the management of fisheries in the UK. We may have stepped back from the specific work on fisheries management plans, not least because there are many organisations in that space, but we are still heavily involved in the management of fisheries in the UK. Whether that is on safety, training, improving the economic analysis of the fleet, geospatial analysis of the catching sector's work, or fishing gear technology, we are still heavily involved in the fisheries management space.

Q74 **Chair:** Have you seen the letter signed by the 32 different fishing and seafood organisations complaining about the way these things have been done?

Colin Faulkner: I have indeed. Our board has replied.

Q75 **Chair:** It is quite a remarkable achievement. I cannot think of many occasions where we have been able to bring together 32 organisations.



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You have united the industry there.

Colin Faulkner: I worked in DEFRA for a long time, so I have seen a number of similar letters.

Q76 **Chair:** The serious point here is that they see this as coming halfway through your 2023 to 2028 corporate plan. You have a reduced communications capacity and you are disbanding your fisheries management team. These are all big, chunky decisions to have made. They are saying that they were made without any consultation with them. After all, at the end of the day, they are the levy payers.

Colin Faulkner: I am told that there were informal discussions with industry as those decisions were being taken last autumn. I was not party to those informal discussions, but I am told by colleagues that there were some discussions. You are right that there was not a formal consultation process.

Q77 **Chair:** Just on that point, as it happens, I was at the NFFO AGM on the morning you made the announcement. They were completely blindsided. What does “informal consultation” mean in this context?

Colin Faulkner: I am not fully sighted on all those discussions. I was not party to them.

Q78 **Chair:** As a levy-funded organisation, your relationship with the industry is surely important to you. You are new in this particular role, but you have been around the fisheries management space for quite some time. Is this something that you are going to be getting a grip on?

Colin Faulkner: The roles of the catching sector, the processing sector and the aquaculture sector are vitally important for defining Seafish’s work in the future. I will certainly be making sure that their voices are heard as amply and regularly as possible in our work.

Q79 **Chair:** You mentioned your board there. Do you have any fishermen on your board?

Colin Faulkner: Yes, there are.

Q80 **Chair:** Who do you have on your board?

Colin Faulkner: From memory, there are individuals who have worked in the fishing industry. They may not be active. One of them is an active fisherman currently, but others have been in the fishing sector for many years.

Q81 **Chair:** Can you maybe give us some chapter and verse on that in correspondence later on?

Colin Faulkner: Yes, I am happy to do so.

Q82 **Jayne Kirkham:** I am a Cornish MP. The Crown Estate has already been and is going to be really important to my area over the next—hopefully—quite a number of years. I have already seen a lot of change since



becoming an MP with the way that the Crown Estate has been working with us and the local area—it is positive. When we were first elected, it did seem that most of those leasing rounds were about price. Definitely, with the supply chain accelerator and the social value that is going into the leases, there is change, and that is really positive.

There are a couple of things that I would ask out of that, relating to your thriving communities aim. First, there has been some progress made, but you could go a lot further on social value and dealing with those communities. The supply chain accelerator is great, but, of course, there is much more to the community than the supply chain for floating offshore wind. It is how you intend to progress that social value. The clauses about 10% of the workforce being NEETs and apprentices and that sort of thing are good, but it is a very small start to a very big job. Of course, there is a lot of money to be made out of those leases as well.

The other thing was about fishing particularly. In previous rounds in the Celtic sea, the map that was put out scared fishers half to death. It was just a huge bundle of dots. It was a potential, but it was never going to be the reality. That kind of miscommunication was really upsetting to a lot of fishers. I know that it now has been corrected up to a point. You talked about an interactive digital platform. From now on, how are you going to be interacting with the fishing communities in particular and using that platform? Will that be the tool that that will be done through? How will that interaction be done? How will fishing be taken fully into consideration?

Olivia Thomas: Thank you for that question. With respect to the social value commitments, they are a work in progress. We see the opportunity now, in particular as to how we have placed commitments on the developers that will take on those project locations. There are six different types of social value plan incorporated into those commitments. We are working to support them directly to realise the benefits for the communities. You talked to some of that. Apprenticeships are part of it. There is planning around people who are not in education, employment or training. There are skills development plans, community impact plans, community engagement plans and volunteering plans.

Q83 Jayne Kirkham: In other countries, developers are very used to being asked to do an awful lot in the communities that they are working with. They will go and embed themselves in the community. They will have headquarters and that kind of thing. Is that what you envisage the Crown Estate doing in the long term? Will you put those things in the lease, like they do in other places?

Olivia Thomas: We will work with our developers on the scale of their plans and, where there are opportunities to invest to support more strategically for an area, we absolutely will do that.

With respect to our routemap, the evidence base underneath it is critical. Some of the evidence that we have commissioned is through our offshore wind evidence and change programme, our £50 million commitment.



That is working directly with fisheries, including the Cornish Fish Producers' Association, to look at fisheries sensitivity and displacement mapping. Lots of these things have long technical acronyms, apologies, but we are looking at the specifics for a region or a location and what those impacts might look like for the community themselves.

To answer your question around the routemap, yes, we want to use that platform to showcase and realise where future opportunities might be, and use it to guide our decision making, but the evidence underneath it is absolutely critical. That has to be a shared evidence base. That is where we want to work collaboratively with the fisheries and my colleagues on the panel to make sure that we have that agreed and aligned evidence base.

Jayne Kirkham: I would echo the Chair's point that, at the end of these processes, it would be good if you could point to certain communities and say, "This is where the Crown Estate has made a difference", not just to the supply chain but to fishing communities as well.

Q84 Henry Tufnell: I just want to start, Michelle, on the report that we had last summer from the Office for Environmental Protection and the concerns that they raised about the lack of transparency. There are no minimum requirements for the frequency of inspections, no requirement to publish information about your inspection activities and no express statutory duty requiring you to conduct inspections. Can you provide a commitment to the organisation moving forward that you will publish data on this work?

Michelle Willis: Yes, I can. If I can just elaborate, though, the approach that we take for control enforcement, whether it is for marine licensing or fisheries management, is around education and facilitation. We try to get the right behaviours. People want to do the right things.

Q85 Henry Tufnell: People are not going to do the right things if you are only inspecting 10% of marine licences.

Michelle Willis: If I could just elaborate, some applicants will send in their own data for us to do that assessment on. Transparency of publication is something that we can definitely do better on and will take away. What I would also say is that we do take a risk-based approach. That is just the way in which we have to manage our capacity in order to ensure that we inspect those activities that are higher risk to either damage or non-compliance.

We do that. We take intelligence from the data that we get, from local data in the community and from the trends and behaviours in the data that we collect from applicants and the other activities that we are there to regulate. We can go further. We will take that away and come back to the Committee with a proposal on what that could look like.

Q86 Henry Tufnell: On the point about capacity, you told the Environmental Audit Committee recently about your concerns over churn of staff. Does



that go to the point that you are making around capacity in respect of the lack of personnel to carry out this important work?

Michelle Willis: It is not a recruitment and retention issue—we can recruit well—it is about skills and capability. From an MMO perspective, our attrition rate is currently stable. We are attriting at roughly around 11%. That is quite normal in organisations. Where we struggle—it still remains an issue that is unresolved—is that, particularly for our skilled staff in marine licensing, staff will move to the private sector, to the energy companies or the port sector, because they offer better wages than we can provide.

However, you will remember that the Department and the previous Secretary of State had commissioned the Corry review. We are working through the recommendations that were in the Corry review to look at other ways in which we can incentivise people to stay with the organisation. We are working with the sectors to try to work through better ways of interchange and secondment that balance the needs of both, so that we can at least retain the skills and have that better sharing of knowledge. It is largely in the marine licensing sector that we suffer that level of attrition.

Q87 **Henry Tufnell:** You have spent more. Net expenditure for 2023-24 was £48.8 million, which is a 14% increase. There is more money being spent. Is that not filtering through to the capacity?

Michelle Willis: The capacity gets deployed across the broad remit of the organisation. The organisation delivers some new policy priorities that are in the throes of being implemented. Some of the additional funding we have that comes through the MMO is for development and implementing new policy priorities, such as—

Q88 **Henry Tufnell:** So marine licences are not a priority.

Michelle Willis: They are a priority, but marine licensing is paid substantively through fees and charges. That is an obligation that we have to do under “Managing Public Money”. Those fees are under revision, and we are waiting to implement the new revision to fees and charges. The consultation for the fee revision completed in the last year. We are just waiting for those consultation responses to be addressed. That will allow us to at least better get cost recovery that is more reflective of the time we spend. Again, we have to marry up our resources and capacity to the fees and charges that we are able to charge and the distribution of all of the broad duties that we have to do in the MMO.

Q89 **Henry Tufnell:** Can I move on to Olivia in respect of your work with the Crown Estate? You have been at the Crown Estate for 18 years; is that right?

Olivia Thomas: Yes.



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Q90 Henry Tufnell: You have seen a huge change over that period of time. I was just wondering what your reflections were about recent changes that have happened. You have had a lot of things going on in the organisation recently with floating wind. I was wondering what your reflections are from seeing it from the inside, being on the inside.

Olivia Thomas: As I joined, we saw the formation of the Marine Management Organisation and the guiding development of the statutory marine plans. That has been really beneficial in helping to support priorities across the UK marine space. As you have said, the needs and demands over the sea space are multiple, whether that is food security or, increasingly, energy security. We see nature at a tipping point, so we are needing to look to enhance nature recovery as well.

Q91 Henry Tufnell: Internally, the Crown Estate has doubled its headcount in terms of the number of people that the organisation employs. Is that right?

Olivia Thomas: That has changed over the course of time that I have been there.

Q92 Henry Tufnell: In terms of where you began to where you are now, internally you are seeing loads more people working in the organisation and a changing culture. What can you reflect on?

Olivia Thomas: With respect to our strategy and how that guides us, the ability to look at value broadly has really come into focus over the last five to 10 years. We have had the opportunity to invest in things such as our digital platforms and our capabilities, recognising that we need to understand the sea space to take our decisions. That is absolutely where I have seen most of the evolution of the Crown Estate and how we work. It has been the breadth of how we consider value and how we can invest to make sure we have the right capabilities in place to take decisions for the long term.

Q93 Henry Tufnell: In the context of what we have been talking about, has the Crown Estate been forced into a lot of these positions in respect of social value and focusing on communities? You did not mention communities at the beginning of your opening statement. Is this something of an imposition on your organisation?

Olivia Thomas: It is the core of our strategy. It is recognising that, if we are to demonstrably show sustainable action in the land and marine assets that we manage, we have to consider people and places as part of that. That interconnection between the offshore and the onshore is very much part of what we are trying to do by using the routemap and building an evidence base so we can start to see where those interactions are.

Q94 Henry Tufnell: You have alluded to leasing in respect of energy and floating wind. As you set out earlier, you have a different range of priorities, such as thriving communities, decarbonisation and growth.



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When you get down into it, is it not the case that it is really about extracting fees? Greenpeace has threatened to take you to court in respect of the money that you are extracting from those leases. You are not focusing on climate change initiatives; you are not focusing on those local communities. It is really about maximising your own revenue, is it not?

Olivia Thomas: The value creation framework that we use to guide our decision making absolutely considers beyond the financial. We think about nature and decarbonisation as part of that, alongside thriving communities. We take decisions that go beyond the financial consideration.

Ultimately, our net revenue profits are for the benefit of the public, and we are accountable to Parliament in that way. We are absolutely guided by our value creation in the way that we can and are enabled to consider value more broadly than just a financial return. How we invest and reinvest in systems thinking and the development of the routemap is testament to how we want to be thinking about value more broadly and making sure that our impact goes beyond just the financial return that we make to Treasury.

Q95 **Henry Tufnell:** Can you remind the Committee how much money sits with Treasury and how much ends up with the Crown?

Olivia Thomas: I cannot right now. I am happy to follow up in writing on that.

Q96 **Chair:** On this business of maximising revenue, you take a lot of money from people laying cables in the seabed. How do you work out what an appropriate rent is for that?

Olivia Thomas: We work closely with the market and engage the market on demand.

Q97 **Chair:** Who else leases seabed to cable layers? You are the market, are you not?

Olivia Thomas: It is solely us around England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We work closely with Government and those who wish to use the seabed. Our responsibilities only extend to 12 nautical miles. It is important that we have strong engagement on understanding the remainder of that.

Q98 **Chair:** Do you still charge rent to aquaculture interests on the basis of turnover? You certainly used to.

Olivia Thomas: I would need to confirm the charging mechanisms for aquaculture.

Q99 **Chair:** Michelle, I want to come briefly to you before we move on. Your annual report used to publish the number of inspections and outcomes. You do not do that anymore. Is that correct?



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Michelle Willis: The performance report reflects key performance indicators for the organisation on the general number of inspections that we do and the outcomes that we are trying to achieve.

Q100 **Chair:** You are telling me that your report still publishes KPPs and KPIs. It certainly used to.

Michelle Willis: It used to. We moved away from what we call operational KPIs, which are some of the inspections.

Q101 **Chair:** This comes to the question of transparency, does it not?

Michelle Willis: What we moved to was trying to be much more outcome-focused because we wanted to try to demonstrate the impact that the regulation had.

Q102 **Chair:** If you are not publishing the KPPs and KPIs, the outcomes are what you say they are, rather than what people can see for themselves and assess objectively, are they not?

Michelle Willis: It is more the fact that we are trying to focus on the outcomes we are achieving for the money that we spend on behalf of the taxpayer. I take the point that it would be better to see some more clarity around some of the inspections to support that.

Q103 **Chair:** Presumably, though, you hold that data.

Michelle Willis: We do, yes.

Q104 **Chair:** You choose not to publish it. Why is that?

Michelle Willis: It is more in keeping with demonstrating the impact and the outcomes that we are trying to achieve. We are trying to say, "This is the impact that we are having."

Q105 **Chair:** Is there a better way of demonstrating it than publishing it? Why did you stop?

Michelle Willis: Our way of performance reporting in the MMO was to drive forward the demonstration that we were not just activity-focused. I understand from your colleague why you would like to see further activity detail. That is the operational data that we use to manage the business. We track inspections and operational activity. Through our publishing and reporting, we were trying to meet a different standard by describing what we were trying to achieve in terms of outcomes and impacts.

Q106 **Chair:** It sounds a bit like you are marking your own homework here.

Michelle Willis: I do not necessarily agree with that, but I can understand why you could come to that conclusion. The reason I do not agree with that is—

Q107 **Chair:** Tell me why I am wrong, then. I am genuinely wanting to get to the bottom of this.



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Michelle Willis: The National Audit Office reviews the performance of the organisation. I am held to account by the Minister and the Department for the activities that the MMO does. We do have activity analysis. In our publishing of the annual report and accounts, we focus on the outcomes that we are seeking to achieve in congruence with the environmental improvement plan. That does not mean that data is not available.

Q108 **Chair:** As a Government body, you account to your Government Department.

Michelle Willis: I do.

Q109 **Chair:** You tell them what you have done. You do that to the National Audit Office because everybody has to do that.

Michelle Willis: We do that.

Q110 **Chair:** How does a fisherman or somebody with an interest in the industry know if you do not publish it?

Michelle Willis: We publish other datasets for the industry. We publish a lot of fisheries datasets that come through the fisheries statistics analysis about the activity that the fishing industry does. We publish other information more broadly around what the organisation is doing in activity. There was no deliberate or conscious reason not to publish the number of inspections. We talk to it in the narrative of our annual report and any reporting that we do to Ministers.

Q111 **Chair:** Again, it is your conclusions on your data, but nobody else gets to see the data. Would you provide that information for the Committee?

Michelle Willis: I can provide that. I will come back to you with the data on fisheries. Is it the fisheries inspections particularly or all inspections?

Chair: It is inspections and outcomes. The information that you used to publish in your annual report would be of interest, I suspect.

Q112 **Tim Roca:** Just before going to spatial squeeze, I have a question, since we have touched on it, for the Crown Estate on new leases, if that is okay. Just practically, what are the steps when you are providing, developing or granting a lease for the seabed?

Olivia Thomas: I am happy to answer. It is fair to say our process has evolved over time. Part of that is in recognising, learning and understanding the challenges that the marine environment is facing. Hopefully, it provides for a nice segue on to coastal squeeze.

I should also clarify that, with respect to the offshore wind sector, in order to run a fair and competitive process, we run structured tenders to lease the seabed. For other sectors and other interests, there are different mechanisms. There are licensing arrangements for the aggregate sector. They have exploration agreements where they better survey and understand the resource that they wish to extract. They then



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have production agreements with us. All those different sectors have different lifetimes of agreements and rights.

With respect to offshore wind, we have evolved over time. The work that we are doing through the routemap in the designing of the platform is to understand best where we might see future opportunity and where the optimal locations are, guided by policy and evidence on the balance of all the different competing needs and demands. When it comes to leasing for future, we will draw on the work from the routemap and the contributions that other sectors have made in order to design what we ultimately put out to market.

Tim Roca: That is the future.

Olivia Thomas: That is the future.

Q113 **Tim Roca:** Practically, today, when you are deciding to go into a lease or not, how do you take into account marine protection or the concerns of fishers, for example, in an area?

Olivia Thomas: Nature is actually a wonderful example because just today we have published our guiding nature principles. Again, that will be something that we use through the routemap to guide us with respect to where we believe the best locations are for nature in order for nature to recover. That is very much work that we wish to do collaboratively with others. The evidence base that underpins the routemap has existed for the long term.

Q114 **Tim Roca:** Practically, how does it feed into the process? If there is a new wind farm being proposed in Henry's constituency, what is the practical step for engaging with local fishers, the local wildlife trust or what have you about the impact?

Olivia Thomas: That is where historically the process has evolved over time. We have had multiple rounds of leasing. We will have engaged nationally. Historically, we will have engaged with national bodies, national ENGOs and others on the locations that were being leased. The reason that I look forward is because, in recognising the constraint over the sea space, we very much want to focus on what this specifically means for our region, our locations onshore and how something very far offshore might have an impact.

That is why I looked and talked to the routemap, because we are using that vital engagement mechanism with fisheries and others to make sure we are considering the onshore. That is not to mention other Government-led initiatives. We are working with NESO, the electricity system operator, to co-ordinate the grid network. All these things and the work being done through policy will form inputs to then decide how we would lease a future wind farm in a particular location.

Q115 **Tim Roca:** Is it fair to say that not many practical steps were being taken in the past to consider marine protection and local fishers' interests



when you were granting seabed licences?

Olivia Thomas: There were many steps. There absolutely were. We are always guided by—

Q116 **Tim Roca:** What practical steps are you taking? I am just trying to—

Olivia Thomas: There is an engagement process. We would talk to our intention at the outset—“These are the objectives that we are trying to achieve by leasing seabed”. We would engage multiple different sectors on what that meant for them and how their perspectives could be incorporated. We would use spatial analysis tools; we would incorporate data and evidence. We would be guided by policy targets and ambitions as well. There are multiple practical steps, as well as the regulations around our role as a competent authority under the habitats regulations and assessing the impacts that we would have by running a plan on marine protected areas.

There have always been a number of practical steps taken in the process of designing what goes out into a lease. We are now trying to take a system approach, which is why routemap is trying to address the spatial squeeze—

Q117 **Tim Roca:** It is fair to say that, if those steps existed, they received a lot of criticism from fishers and marine protection organisations. Presumably, that is why you have introduced the marine routemap: so you can approach this issue in a more balanced way.

Olivia Thomas: The routemap is trying to address the fact that we cannot take decisions in isolation. That goes for any one organisation with decision-making rights. If we are wishing to do something in the future, we have to recognise that there will be multiple demands over the space. That is really why we are using and developing the routemap.

In the past, the engagement had been multilateral, which drives a more complex process of engagement. Those steps did exist. It is just that we are trying to drive a more open and collaborative approach to how we work going forward.

Q118 **Tim Roca:** Can I check something so that I do not get it wrong? Is the marine routemap the same thing as the marine delivery programme?

Olivia Thomas: Yes, it is the marine delivery routemap; it is just called a programme because it is in development. We are evolving.

Q119 **Tim Roca:** How will that factor in existing fishing activity on the seabed and balance it with net zero and nature recovery objectives?

Olivia Thomas: That is where the engagement and collaboration with fisheries is so important. Whether that is the national bodies, the fish producer associations or the regional or local bodies, they are contributing to the evidence that the routemap will use. It is an engagement-based approach to making sure that we have evidence that



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truly reflects where fishing is happening and where future opportunity for fisheries might be.

Q120 Tim Roca: I represent an inland constituency so this is not an area I know well, but I was looking up the response to the marine delivery routemap from fishing organisations. I suppose FLOWW is your main group for liaison with these organisations. There was a lot of criticism that the routemap, when it was originally launched, did not take account of fishers properly.

Olivia Thomas: This was the point that was made earlier. If we put maps into the public domain without extensive engagement, they can cause concern and alarm. We are learning all the time about our approach and engagement.

FLOWW is a very effective forum. That has been in existence for 15 years. It is the Fishing Liaison with Offshore Wind and Wet Renewables group. That is fisheries-chaired and led, and it gives the opportunity for developers and fisheries to work through where we want to see best practice, and it addresses some of the concerns around cabling with best practice guidance and that kind of thing.

Q121 Tim Roca: They issued new best practice guidance in November. I was looking at some of our Scottish parliamentary colleagues' concerns about how the Crown Estate has dealt with this in the past. They said that in the past there had been excessive disruption to fishing; a poor relationship and communication between commercial fishers and offshore wind development; and no proper assessment of the cumulative impact on marine protection. It sounds like you are catching up. It was poor practice in the past, and now the routemap and so on are trying to fix what was a bad situation.

Olivia Thomas: We will always continue to listen and improve where we can.

Q122 Tim Roca: I have a question for all of you, rather than focusing just on the Crown Estate. I did not make the trip to Brixham that my colleagues did, but they heard a lot about spatial squeeze and the concerns that people have. It is fair to say that this has been on the radar for well over a decade in any case. Perhaps starting with you, Colin, what efforts are your organisations making to think about this issue and maximise co-location between different sectors?

Colin Faulkner: We do not have a statutory role within that type of process, but I would say two things. First, Seafish traditionally has had a convening role, let us call it, between industry and Government or industry and other statutory bodies. We can help on that front at a very basic level with that convening role.

The other point that I would make is that Seafish has been involved for a very long time in geospatial services. For the last 25 years or so, we have been involved in helping the catching sector with mapping out what is on



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the seabed. That arose primarily out of work with the oil and gas sector originally, but we have been doing that since about 2000. The data that we hold can help widen the understanding of what is on the seabed. We have worked very closely with the fishing industry for many years to help them avoid hazards on the seabed and so on.

While we are not the major player on helping resolve the spatial squeeze, we do have data and expertise to bring to the table to help organisations such as the Crown Estate, the MMO and representatives of the fishing industry. We work very closely with the NFFO and the SFF, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, on what we call Kingfisher work. I am very happy to meet the Committee or give a written briefing to the Committee on that particular project. As I say, it is more that we hold a lot of data from our historic involvement in mapping the seabed and in helping the industry avoid the various hazards on the seabed.

Michelle Willis: Co-location and co-existence are a key topic for the marine planning team. We have the 26 marine plans, and we have built co-location into the marine plan policies. Our marine plans map not only existing activities around fishing, navigation and marine protected areas, but the future needs of offshore wind.

We try to bring that data together to help people get on the front foot of where opportunities can exist together. A lot of our expertise more recently has been supporting the Crown Estate in the delivery of the routemap. DEFRA's marine spatial prioritisation project was key to that. We used our expertise and those relationships that we have with coastal communities, the fishing industry and others to inform the delivery.

It is trying to get that balance of certainty and flexibility into the plans. We have fully engaged with that and worked through the workshops to bring the communities and fishers into that. Fishers do engage through those workshops, and we help get their inputs in that way. That was the evolution of the marine plans and the marine spatial prioritisation.

The earlier plans, such as the east marine plans currently under review, were less specific. We are trying to bring greater specificity into those marine plans to help people understand the policies and choices that they can make and where they can do things differently.

I will just finish by saying that there is still an opportunity to go further. We can do more place-based work. Again, we are trying to evolve that. We are thinking around pilots that might be able to bring that together better. It is a continuing evolution and there are challenges to spatial prioritisation.

Q123 **Tim Roca:** Did you feed into the November 2025 North sea plan that the Government published?

Michelle Willis: We have been working closely with some of the various consultations and North sea plans. Through the FMP work that we have



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been doing, we have been working with a North Sea basin group and others. We are trying to bring the competing natures together. We cannot work in silos of marine planning, marine licensing and development; we have to find a way to bring those things together.

To be fair, at this point in time, it is safe to say that we do not have a single clear grade system or framework that steers decision making, but we are working very collaboratively towards that. We do have good tools there that will help on that journey.

Q124 **Tim Roca:** The North sea plan did not include any reference to fisheries or the marine environment. Is that not quite odd?

Michelle Willis: It does not mean that we did not feed into it.

Q125 **Tim Roca:** I am not saying you did not, but are you not concerned that the North sea plan did not mention fishing or marine protection?

Michelle Willis: It is something that is interesting.

Q126 **Tim Roca:** You mentioned the marine spatial prioritisation programme. Again, in an area that I do not know much about, I was interested to discover it was first mentioned by Government in January 2022. You have mentioned it now. It has been mentioned in numerous Government announcements, evidence and so on. There does not seem to be a single publicly accessible document that tells us the scope of it, what its objectives are or what its outputs have been so far. Have you seen anything?

Michelle Willis: We have seen a lot of the detail that has gone into the documents that have informed decision making, because the MMO supported a lot of the modelling that will help inform decision making for things such as offshore wind and where those activities could be better placed.

We have fed into those documents, but, as I say, it was a DEFRA-led MSPri programme. They would have to advise whether or not there is a report that could be shared.

Q127 **Tim Roca:** We are talking about spatial squeeze. There was a Lords amendment in January last year asking for them to publish a plan because, of course, this interacts with the Environment Act and lots of other things. Do you not think it would be timely for them to finally publish a single document?

Michelle Willis: It is difficult to say, because everything is still continuing to evolve. The marine delivery routemap is probably one of the key documents to try to bring these things together.

Q128 **Tim Roca:** In the Crown Estate, how do you take spatial squeeze into account?

Olivia Thomas: We have spoken about FLOWW in terms of the group, where are trying to ensure that we are taking into account the fact that



one size does not fit all. There are other convening groups that we have brought together, with support from the fishing sector and the offshore wind sector, as well as working with the aggregate sector.

In particular, in the south-east, we have recognised some of the earlier constraints we saw on sea space beyond the growth everywhere, so that has been just a flavour over time. Things such as best practice guidance are really helpful in supporting co-location and co-existence. This is very much led and contributed to by the sectors themselves, in terms of fisheries and how they might continue to operate while an energy developer is looking to survey the same space.

Safety is obviously critical and we support in notifications, notice to mariners, et cetera, as well. There are some practical ways that we are supporting the sectors to understand how they can work and co-exist. Then, from the perspective of co-location and planning for the future, it is about the guiding principles and getting agreement around those and what best practice looks that.

We are seeing a recognition that certain sectors are under stress, like the fisheries sector, and we need to ensure up front, and not just at project level, that their data, evidence and perspectives are being considered, so that we can design collaboratively, rather than something being done to them. There are a number of different ways that we are wishing to bring that to life, through our investment in evidence, the extensive engagement and then publicly sharing the information that we have available, so that we can work openly on the decisions we take from that.

Q129 Tim Roca: This is a question to all of you: would you support a sea use framework, in the same way that we are working towards a land use framework?

Olivia Thomas: I do not have a particular comment with respect to whether I would support one. We absolutely recognise that we have to work in a co-ordinated way in terms of sea use and, ultimately, we are guided by policy. The delivery and how we co-ordinate the delivery is absolutely what we are trying to achieve through the routemap. We would be very supportive of anything Government brought forward to encourage more co-ordination around sea use.

Q130 Tim Roca: Is the Crown Estate in favour of a sea use framework? It has been an idea that has been knocking around for quite a while.

Olivia Thomas: I do not have a particular comment on the sea use framework.

Tim Roca: So you do not know if the Crown Estate has an official position.

Olivia Thomas: No. I can follow up.



Michelle Willis: From my perspective, the marine plans play an instrumental part in facilitating a sea use framework. We bring the policies together and, with the work that we are doing with the Crown Estate, as Olivia alluded to, doing much more up-front activity, these will continue to evolve. With so many competing Government strategies for use of the marine environment, it is about finding an opportunity and the right time to do something like that.

We should really look at the tools that we already have and see if we can use them to better effect. As I say, the plans provide a really firm and sound basis through which you can make choices and decisions about the use of sea. As Olivia said, we cannot do it in isolation. We have to work together with it, and that is not just within Government; it is within the place-based communities.

As I alluded to, we are thinking about a potential pilot in a place-based community, which might give us better evidence of utility. Frameworks in themselves are good only if everybody will use them in the right way.

Q131 **Tim Roca:** You do not have a view. Your view is still being formed.

Michelle Willis: It is still being formed, because we are so involved with the work that we are doing to bring greater specificity into the marine plans. We are reviewing the east marine plans, which were some of the early ones. There is also some of the other work that we have been involved in with MSPri.

It is about trying to work out the best way to bring these things together. There is still some further work to do in this space and, over the next 12 months, we should, through other pilots, be in a place where we can come up with another evolution of the solution with the marine plans.

Colin Faulkner: Seafish does not have an official position on whether that is something that Government should do or not. If Government decide to take that forward, we will play our full part in making it a successful document.

Q132 **Tim Roca:** Do you have a personal view? You had a long-standing senior role in DEFRA.

Colin Faulkner: I do not have a personal view on it, no.

Tim Roca: I did not expect that set of answers to that set of questions.

Q133 **Chair:** I am not getting any great sense of urgency in relation to the development of policy on this, Michelle.

Michelle Willis: There is an urgency in that we need to support better decision making, but because there are many Government bodies and many users and decision-makers, there is not a single—

Chair: That is why a framework would be good, but never mind; let us move on.



Q134 **Henry Tufnell:** I just had a quick question to Olivia on what has just been outlined by Michelle, in terms of the amount of different competing interests on the coastline. The Crown Estate is a strange body, is it not? It sits between the public and the private. Essentially, you are an independent commercial business, realistically. Do you think it is right that that kind of organisation, which lacks that strategic oversight, should have such a level of power or autonomy over something that is effectively acting within the national interest?

Olivia Thomas: We are absolutely accountable to Parliament and we are guided very much by policy. In publishing and sharing openly the evidence and the considerations of other sectors that we do not have responsibility over, we are trying to take a sustainable approach, where we do have responsibilities. The role we are trying to play is recognising—

Q135 **Henry Tufnell:** That lack of responsibility is the key point, is it not? You lack responsibility over other aspects, and those other aspects might be critical to the national interest. There is a lack of alignment between your own interests, as an independent, commercial organisation, and the national interest. Do you see a tension there?

Olivia Thomas: With respect to how we are guided and our value creation framework, we recognise that we cannot do our job without considering the responsibilities, needs and demands of other sectors. We would not be doing our job well if we were to ignore the needs of fisheries, food security, defence and other security needs. We cannot do our role, with respect to how extensive it is over the seabed, without considering others.

The tension may come from the fact that there are multiple competing needs over the sea space, but not with respect to how we take our decisions and how we engage. That is vital to us demonstrably showing that we are taking sustainable decisions on the things that we ultimately then do end up leasing and licensing.

Q136 **Chair:** Olivia, you mentioned a few minutes ago the aggregates industry. I think the aggregates industry take something in the region of 20 million tonnes a year out of the seabed. Is that about right?

Olivia Thomas: I am happy to follow up in writing on the specifics.

Q137 **Chair:** It is something of that nature. You are stopping bottom-trawling and stage 3 MPAs because of impact on the seabed. What constraint is being put on the aggregates industry to do their share, if the seabed is so important?

Olivia Thomas: The aggregates industry has an absolutely critical part, in terms of the contribution it makes to the construction—

Q138 **Chair:** What are you doing to reduce their impact on the seabed?



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Olivia Thomas: We are working collaboratively with the sector to understand what their future needs would be. There are a number of existing production licences. The publication of the guiding nature principles that I mentioned earlier will help support our work and engagement with the aggregates sector, understanding what locations may be better for production in future.

Q139 **Chair:** They will still be allowed to take the same amount from the seabed as they do currently. Can you understand why I take this line of questioning? The aggregates industry is paying you for that extraction, is it not?

Olivia Thomas: It does, yes.

Q140 **Chair:** The fishermen are not paying you, because they are principally about the biological resource in the sea, rather than the seabed. Does it seem fair, if we are genuinely concerned about the seabed, that the aggregates industry carries on in this way, but the fishing industry is the one that gets impacted?

Olivia Thomas: The aggregates industry is a regulated industry, so we work with—

Q141 **Chair:** I would think fishermen are probably fairly well regulated as well.

Olivia Thomas: Yes. I can only talk to how we can support the aggregates industry in looking at future opportunity.

Q142 **Chair:** Does this not highlight the root of the problem here? You do your bit; you do your bit; you do the Seafish thing, but actually there is no co-ordination at all, is there?

Olivia Thomas: That is absolutely why we recognise the need to work in a co-ordinated way.

Q143 **Chair:** This has been going on for years. It is back to the point about the lack of urgency. Meanwhile, the fishing industry is the one that, piece by piece, gets squeezed out of the sea, is it not?

Olivia Thomas: I can absolutely recognise the pressure and the demands on the fishing sector.

Chair: Anyway, I have started intruding on your space, Mr Jermy, which is the co-ordination of marine planning.

Q144 **Terry Jermy:** That is fine. Tim pinched some of my points as well, but that is quite all right; we can share.

Olivia, I just wanted to go back to the conversation about FLOWW, just to understand this properly. It is the Fishing Liaison with Offshore Wind and Wet Renewables group. That seems, to me, absolutely crucial.

I am from Norfolk. Offshore wind is absolutely key where we are, as I am sure it is elsewhere. Could you confirm for me the role of that group and what impact it has? It has been going for a long while.



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Olivia Thomas: It has.

Terry Jermy: How does that work?

Olivia Thomas: It is a group of organisations that come together from the fishing sector and from the offshore wind development community. We invest in it. We fund the chairing and invest in some of the research that comes out of it. That grouping meets on a quarterly basis, I believe, and they agree on the priority topics and where they see a need to interact. Spatial squeeze is a critical part of that. How do we co-exist? How do we co-locate?

Historically, we have seen concerns from the fishing sector over surveying of seabed and how vessels might interact. Some of the best practice guidance that we have seen published is to help support and then seek alignment from the wider community around it.

Q145 **Terry Jermy:** Can you give some examples of where that group has had an impact? Are there any practical examples of what it has altered or changed, or where it has added value?

Olivia Thomas: The best practice guidance around cabling has been beneficial to both sectors, in terms of being held to account for the things that are more or less impactful to the fishing sector in the approach that the cable industry might take in laying cables. That is one example. That piece of guidance is used by the sectors, and we ask that it is used by the cable industry to minimise impact for fisheries. I am very happy to follow up in writing to the Committee with a number of other specific examples.

Q146 **Terry Jermy:** That would be really useful, because it is quite key and increasingly so, I am sure, in the years ahead.

I wanted to look at the marine planning aspect because, as I mentioned, I am from Norfolk and we have offshore wind. Just down the coast, we have Sizewell C in Suffolk. We have heard today about the competing priorities around coastal erosion. We have an awful lot of solar farms on the coast in the eastern region as well.

I am really keen to understand how your different organisations work together to address spatial squeeze. You have competing priorities and the same short geographic space, with a limited amount of coast. How do you work together? I will start with Michelle and give you a break, Olivia.

Michelle Willis: I will just go back to what I set out earlier. You will be familiar with this. We have had the east marine plans. Those were the first plans, which were published in 2014, and were not very specific. As we have gone through the next generation of marine plans, to help bring together the knowledge, changes in Government policy and different competing interests from other Departments, we have worked a lot more closely with the Crown Estate to try, as a system, to better work through these things.



If you are going to plan for the seabed and who uses the seabed, we have to regulate that. We then need to be more forward-leaning and forward-looking in so much as understanding what the competing interests will be. Gathering the data to inform that is really quite key. Some sectors, as you would appreciate, have greater levels of data that has been able to play into some of the marine spatial prioritisation; others have less. Fisheries is one of those areas where the data is not as good as it could be. That is something we are working on with the fishing industry.

Working together, we are trying to better organise this because you are right: previously, we were siloed as organisations. As the marine plans evolved—and bearing in mind the last round of plans were only published in 2020-21—the world kept moving on. The trick that we are trying to deal with now is how we keep pace together with that. It is about shared data, shared information and shared stakeholder engagement. Trying to put a framework in place that better deals with that decision making will be helpful to that.

Our collaboration is not just about how we work together. As Government organisations, we work with groups like seabed user groups. We pick up the needs of those. We work closely with NFFO, the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation and other producers organisations in order to gather up as many of the interests as we can. When we run the workshops, particularly in the marine plans areas—there are six of them—we do work really hard to get as many local interests and local authority interests into those plans as possible. Sea and land meet in that coastal estuary, which is another area of challenge.

What I would say to you is that the work we have certainly done over the last 24 months has changed the way in which certainly the marine delivery routemap has gone forward. That is quite important. In many regions, we are getting quite a lot of engagement, because people genuinely care about what happens in their space. That requires consistency of engagement. Coming back to the earlier point in the session, that is why it is important for the MMO to have multi-disciplinary skills in those place-based field offices that we have, to make sure that we can meet all of the different needs in those areas, like the east.

Q147 Terry Jermy: Colin, you are probably in a unique position, given your background and experience. How do you feel the organisations work together?

Colin Faulkner: I can only comment with respect to Seafish. We are a smaller player when it comes to spatial squeeze issues and resolving those issues. We do not have statutory functions in the way that the Crown Estate, MMO or other bodies do. What we can do is make available to colleagues the data that we hold, which, as I say, comes about from a different source. It is really about our historical engagement with the oil and gas sector and with representative bodies in the fishing sector. We



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can make that data available, so that colleagues are able to make choices that are as informed as possible.

Q148 **Terry Jermy:** Is there anything you want to add, Olivia?

Olivia Thomas: Just that, with respect to co-ordination and our roles, we are very much guided by the statutory plans. That framework of statutory plans and the policies that underpin them are critical to then determining how we deliver into the seabed management space. That is core to how we align and then we work practically and consistently, whether that is into stakeholder groups or on a shared evidence base, to support our distinct but respective roles.

Q149 **Terry Jermy:** Michelle, I just want to go back to co-ordination internally with Government. DEFRA clearly has a key role, but so does DESNZ, for example—increasingly so—with renewable technology. Are there any gaps or weaknesses in terms of Government Departments, in your view? What are your frustrations with the Departments you are having to consult and engage with?

Michelle Willis: We do not have frustrations with them, because we already have programme boards where we bring together cross-Government bodies such as DESNZ, the Department for Transport and the Department for Business and Trade. We bring all of those bodies together because we have to work together. They all have competing interests. We have different legislation running through currently. There is the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

We have to work together in those ways and, internally as Government, we try to recognise those cross-Government interests. The MMO is in a unique place, where it can bring together those organisations to have these discussions. The Crown Estate is part of those discussions, too. That is where, to be fair, we have developed all of the marine plans. We have worked in that cross-Government way and have tried to, as far as possible, ensure that those interests are at least being pulled together in the same way.

There is not that kind of frustration, because we are invested in that way of working internally. We recognise the imperative for change that is going on when Governments, Secretaries of State or policies change. We have to be switched into that space to understand what is going on.

Q150 **Terry Jermy:** You are happy with the level of respect that other Government Departments are giving to the MMO.

Michelle Willis: Yes, I am.

Q151 **Terry Jermy:** That is good. The only other point I wanted to make was around what happens when people and organisations fall out. There are so many different, competing priorities. I focused a lot on energy, but the environment and fishing are equally as important. Olivia, how do you prioritise those competing interests and what happens when different



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priorities fall out? What is the arbitration process?

Olivia Thomas: It is important to reference that that is why the marine spatial prioritisation programme was established by DEFRA. We do actually sit on the programme board. It is not meeting as frequently as it did previously, but there is that mechanism and opportunity to bring together those Departments. If there are any particular competing policy priorities, it is then for the relevant Government Ministers across those Departments to determine which should take precedence in any one location.

That has been our method of escalating any concerns that we might have in early design and development of the routemap and the evidence base that underpins it. That has been our mechanism for that. It is also why we are seeking to invest so much into the routemap, to tease those issues out as early as we can in an interest's life cycle, so we do not end up with a specific fishery that is impacted and a particular project in development that causes concern.

That system-level approach is how we are trying to address those early opportunities to de-risk and de-conflict, as opposed to getting to the point where we need to very specifically work out what to do in any one location.

Q152 **Terry Jermy:** Do you suspect there is going to be an increased or decreased amount of conflict, given the competing priorities?

Olivia Thomas: We have the two things in hand. We have a continuously constrained space and probably more demand than we will ever see out to 2050, but we have a fantastic opportunity to work in a framed way, in a system-shaping way, where we can plan ahead, plan for the long term and have a shared evidence base to support that. Certainly, that is the ambition, and the objective through the routemap is that we do deliver in a co-ordinated way and invest in understanding where there are evidence gaps or the extensive engagement needed, where there are competing priorities.

Q153 **Terry Jermy:** Going back to one of the earlier questions, Michelle, around capacity and skills, you mentioned in your previous answer just then that having the right skills is important. Does the MMO have the capacity and the skills to cope with these competing priorities moving forward?

Michelle Willis: In terms of the expertise in the organisation, we have really good experts, and we do have good capacity there. As we move forward, we may need different skills. As Olivia is implying, there is a greater need to use data better and in a different way. That is one area we in the MMO are thinking about. How do we improve data and data systems? How do we then get that data out and use it in a better way?

It is not just so that MMO can use it, but also for it to be shared. The way we see things going forward in the future, we will be working much more



in partnership with sectors such as fishing industry bodies, where we have trusted partnerships with organisations such as NFFO and CFPO. We will work better with them to get the data improved so that, not just for fisheries but across the piece, there is a better way we pull data in and use it in a more intelligent way.

Coming back to the urgency and pace, that will help with pace and urgency. Those skills are the skills we are continuing to evolve and develop as we go forward as an organisation. It is not just about the people; it is those other parts.

Terry Jermy: It is about doing things better. Thank you very much.

Q154 **Chair:** Just on that point about the NFFO, you conceded in correspondence with the NFFO, did you not, that, in relation to the stage 3 MPAs, the economic data on which you had based your decision was not reliable?

Michelle Willis: Yes, we did.

Q155 **Chair:** What are you doing about that?

Michelle Willis: We are currently working through all of our datasets, and we are working with industry on those datasets.

Q156 **Chair:** When will we get an outcome on that?

Michelle Willis: We are still working through the 23,000 consultation responses on stage 3 MPAs, so I am not at the point to conclude, but I can provide an update.

Q157 **Chair:** On this point about collaboration, Olivia, you consent to something that has environmentally damaging consequences. Michelle, you then designate another area of sea as a compensatory MPA. Is that right?

Olivia Thomas: If I may, we award production agreements only after they have all the statutory permissions they need. They are very much guided by regulation.

Q158 **Chair:** What about compensatory MPAs?

Michelle Willis: The marine protected areas and designations that we have are part of the MPA network. Can I just clarify whether you are talking about the marine recovery fund?

Chair: I am talking about compensatory MPAs.

Michelle Willis: We do look at that and look at the way in which any permission that we give for any activity in the seabed, where it could have damage—

Q159 **Chair:** You understand why fishermen feel that is a double-whammy. They are excluded from the area where you have consented and then they are excluded from the area that you have designated as



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compensation.

Michelle Willis: We may permit them to do activity in that area, but it might be with specific—

Q160 **Chair:** Stage 3 MPAs are a complete ban on bottom-trawling. Is that correct?

Michelle Willis: It is one of the proposals of those measures, yes. The confirmation of stage 3 has yet to be completed, because the consultation is still open.

Q161 **Chair:** If that proposal goes ahead, that is a double exclusion.

Michelle Willis: It could be, depending on the outcome of the other evidence in the consultations.

Q162 **Chair:** You can co-ordinate in that way, because there is a financial take for the Crown Estate, but the people who losing out are the catching sector again.

Michelle Willis: As I say, I would need to take that away and look at what stage 3 would permit or not.

Q163 **Jayne Kirkham:** I have a quick question for the Crown Estate, before I move on. I want to talk particularly about the new coastal growth fund, which is very exciting. What we are trying to grapple with a little bit is people finding it difficult to understand the whole entity of the Crown Estate and what it does. Essentially, it is kind of a public but private company. It makes over £1 billion in profit per year.

On top of that, it takes 27% to reinvest. It owns a lot more than the seabed, including a lot of parts of London and all sorts of land, and it also now has the right to borrow, or will do when the Crown Estate Act comes in. We have talked about public accountability. Who decides what investments will be made where by the Crown Estate? For example, the Crown Estate has decided to invest in the floating offshore wind supply chain, but why not ports? Ports would benefit the country's infrastructure and also the fishing community as well. Who makes those decisions and how are those decisions accountable? You said they were accountable to Parliament. Apart from talking to us here, how else is the Crown Estate accountable?

Olivia Thomas: I can follow up with the details in terms of the mechanisms on our accountability to Parliament, because I do not have all the detail in front of me. We publish on an annual basis the activities that we have been doing, the investments and then specific case studies around how we are investing and the activity that we are delivering. We use that annual reporting mechanism to showcase publicly what we are doing, and we land our accounts in Parliament as well on an annual basis, in alignment with that reporting.

The abilities that the Act has brought in are fantastic, as you say, in terms of us being able to take a more system approach as to where there



might be benefits in us investing in and enabling, for example, the supply chain for floating wind.

Q164 **Jayne Kirkham:** Would those be financial benefits? Do you have to make a return? There is nothing in the Crown Estate Act to tell you what you have to invest in.

Olivia Thomas: We are guided by our strategy and we publish our strategy as well. The priorities that we have, again, are guided by both the policy requirements and the needs over the marine space, as well as the markets, demands and uses of the sea space. In terms of specific investments in ports, we actively engage with ports around the UK, and I would not be able to give you any details on the specifics as to whether we would invest in a port and on what basis, but I am very happy to follow up in writing on that.

Q165 **Jayne Kirkham:** You can see the public good. You can see all that money there, which we think goes to the Treasury. It is a question we have asked about how the split goes, but it could be used to improve infrastructure for everybody in the country in a different way. My question was about that, really, and accountability.

Olivia Thomas: Part of developing the routemap is trying to drive some of that investor certainty. We are trying to attract investment by understanding where future opportunity might be for various sectors.

Jayne Kirkham: Fishing as well as floating offshore wind.

Olivia Thomas: In being able to demonstrate where opportunities are and where particularly important areas are, we hope to stimulate that cross-sector interest. We are focusing on place as well, to understand how we can make targeted and supportive investments in particular places.

Q166 **Jayne Kirkham:** That is encouraging. I wanted to talk a bit about the fishing and coastal growth fund, which is really positive. That is £360 million over 12 years. Previous funds may not have always been so well spent. They may not have made their way down to the smaller fishers, the smaller boats. What reassurances can you give—I am asking particularly the MMO—that this will be administered in a better way this time? Do you know yet who will be doing the administering?

Michelle Willis: If I can just come back on the performance of the previous grant schemes, I would like to draw out that there was quite a lot that has gone to small-scale fisheries across the piece. Certainly, over the 15 years I have been with MMO and been responsible for these projects, we have seen something to the tune in England of £140 million being distributed. That is not a small undertaking. Even since 2021, we have had 1,100 projects in small-scale fisheries, representing about £17 million. We have tried really hard as an organisation.

Jayne Kirkham: We went to Brixham and I am from Cornwall, so that is



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really from talking to the people in the industry.

Michelle Willis: We can provide more specific data of projects and stuff like that in the historical schemes. The schemes have gone really well previously. There has been a huge focus on health and safety, which is really important, as well as the labour force and growth in the industry. We have tried, through the various schemes that we have had, to achieve really good outcomes and improve the way systems work.

In fact, we do provide great services to those who struggle with systems, because not all fishers prefer to use systems. We do provide that one-to-one support. The details are still being worked through on the new fisheries growth fund. We do think that MMO will be taking forward and administering the scheme, and we will start to deliver money from 2026-27 onwards. We will be using the mechanics of the current FaSS scheme.

We do think at this point in time—it is still to be confirmed—that there will be a continued focus on labour and workforce, enhancements to health and safety, partnerships and strengthening trade and market access. Those still need to be worked through.

Q167 **Jayne Kirkham:** How are you setting those priorities? Is that through engagement?

Michelle Willis: We will be setting those priorities. We will be providing data to DEFRA, as will other devolved Administrations.

Q168 **Jayne Kirkham:** DEFRA will set the priorities.

Michelle Willis: DEFRA will set those priorities, but it will be based on engagement, not just with the MMO but with other industry stakeholders as they develop the fund. It is still being finalised.

Q169 **Jayne Kirkham:** I will do a quick plug, because I am from Cornwall as well. The Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation has an idea of what they would like to do with it. They have looked at science and research. We will talk about data collection later. The other area is careers. The Young Fishermen's Network has a great apprenticeship scheme that it would like to see get off the ground.

In terms of infrastructure—I am going back again to ports and harbours—there is a desperate need, as well as for local seafood promotion and that kind of thing. They have an idea of a pilot that they could run in Cornwall. Will those kind of ideas be part of the mix? Will they be considered? How involved are you in the design, or are you simply passing the engagement up?

Michelle Willis: We will be supporting DEFRA in the design, certainly for England.

Jayne Kirkham: I am glad I have told you about the Cornish plan.



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Michelle Willis: My leads work really closely with Chris Ranford and colleagues down in Cornwall, along with other organisations across England. We will be drawing in as much insight as we can, to make sure that those needs are reflected. Up until that point, given that it is a 12-year programme—

Q170 **Jayne Kirkham:** Will it be front-loaded? Will it be spread out along the 12 years?

Michelle Willis: It is still to be confirmed.

Q171 **Jayne Kirkham:** Can I ask how involved Seafish are, as well?

Colin Faulkner: We have a slightly different function from the MMO on this front. There are two ways in which we are keen to be involved. I should say also that I agree that the CFPO does really excellent work in this space. There are two ways in which we will be working with DEFRA to understand how we can be involved.

We are still working through exactly how we can be involved. There will be some projects and activities that Seafish will be happy to deliver on behalf of the fund. For example, under the previous fund, we were involved in trade promotion work. There was a strand of the previous fund dedicated to significantly increasing the UK's footprint at trade shows around the world. I understand, certainly from the publicly available information, that that is a strand of activity in the new fund that will continue to be taken forward. Again, we will be very happy to assist DEFRA in taking forward its ambitions on that front.

Similarly—again, from the publicly available information—we know, and Michelle has mentioned, there is safety and skills training and so on. That is bread-and-butter work for Seafish. Again, we are very happy to assist DEFRA or any of the devolved Administrations as they take forward projects in that space, whether that be helping them design projects or deliver them.

The second point I was going to make is that there is a role for Seafish, specifically on your point, in making sure that a wide variety of businesses, whether they be small or large, can access those opportunities under the fund. That might mean convening partnership approaches. I am just thinking of skills and training. We already do a lot of work with the University of Lincoln with respect to the processing sector in Humberside.

There is an opportunity for organisations such as Seafish to help bring together consortiums, bring together organisations, large or small, to bid for projects that will genuinely have the type of impact that the fund is seeking to achieve.

Q172 **Jayne Kirkham:** To push it a bit further, the fund is to support coastal communities as well. We know in Cornwall that one fishing job supports 15 in the local community. Does the MMO have the resources to develop



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the fund further? Do you have the resources to run the fund as a whole fishing and coastal communities fund?

Michelle Willis: We will need to impact that when they decide what the design of the fund is going to look like. They will be looking to focus on what they want to achieve in year one and then develop from there. At the moment, we have good resources and systems that will support the fund launch and, after that, depending on how broad they want to go with it, we will have to look at that and impact it. We will be keen to make sure that we do it in the most effective way, but also in the way that has the greatest impact.

Q173 **Jayne Kirkham:** As a final question, the important thing for the fishing industry is to grow, but also to be resilient. It is a bit like other sectors, such as farming. They have very little control over so much. How do you think the fund can best be used to increase resilience and maybe even encourage growth? Some of the ideas from the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation are there, of course, but you must have ideas yourself as well.

Michelle Willis: I know the organisation has been engaged historically with Chris and the Cornish Fish Producers' Organisation and others. Resilience is not just about the infrastructure. First, do not forget the day-to-day stuff that is needed. Health and safety is one of the key areas. It is one of the most dangerous professions. Therefore, that continued investment in keeping people safe and keeping fishers safe is really good.

The supply chain matters and providing skills and training throughout the supply chain is quite important. We recognise that it is an ageing profession. Colin will probably speak a little bit more to that and I know Chris has his ideas around that.

Resilience is going to come from improving data systems and the way in which we engage. The industry understanding the power of its data is quite important. Capturing what it is catching through to where it catches it is going to be quite key. Building and working in partnership and in a more co-ordinated way will help not just Cornwall but fishers more generally across England. There are things that we can take away and develop.

My key change on this would be that it has to be done in partnership. Partnership is going to be quite key for the industry, communities, organisations and Government. Those partnerships are going to be key to get better outcomes and solutions.

Q174 **Jayne Kirkham:** That is maybe where Seafish can help.

Colin Faulkner: We are agreed. Resilience will be strengthened via all sorts of different routes but, just to highlight two, on the skills front, we will have a more resilient sector if we are able to retain people within the sector as much as possible, as well as attract new people into it. Skills



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and development have a massive number of different facets. The fund, from the publicly available information, appears to want to focus on that type of issue.

The other area I would highlight is that you have to sell what you catch as well. Market access, opening up new markets and commanding better prices for your product will help the economic resilience of any port and any community, whether it is in Cornwall or anywhere else. Again, the fund appears to be wanting to focus on that area. Seafish has been heavily involved in that type of work in the past, and we look forward to assisting Government on that in the future, if that is the direction of travel that DEFRA ultimately take.

Q175 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Colin, I will come to you on this specific point. The Government are talking up a potential SPS deal in terms of trade for the seafood sector. What is your assessment of that potential deal?

Colin Faulkner: A variety of sectors of the seafood industry tell us that they are keen to see that deal taking place. We know from a number of sectors that the cost of export health certificates has been a burden. Just generally, in terms of the red tape that has tied up some of the system, many sectors in the industry are looking forward to seeing that being disentangled.

The role of Seafish within it is to support the industry and understand the outcome of the deal. We have a regulatory affairs team that works very closely with DEFRA and all sorts of parts of Government, so that that team can then help demystify some of these things to industry as and when the deal is implemented.

I should also say that, further upstream, we do work with Government to make sure that they have the best possible understanding of the industry and the complexity of the industry as they are negotiating and taking forward that SPS deal. I am clearly not sighted on the mechanics of the deal and the negotiations themselves, but our role is to make sure that they understand the variety and complexity of the sector as best we can.

Q176 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Just very briefly, are you actively supporting the industry on the new EU import requirements that came in on 10 January?

Colin Faulkner: If you mean the new import requirements from the EU that came in on 10 January, yes, and we are working very closely with MMO colleagues. Our role really is to amplify the communications that have come from the MMO and from DEFRA on that front. Again, our regulatory affairs team have been very heavily involved in fielding questions and trying to answer those questions, but doing it in a properly co-ordinated way with MMO colleagues and with DEFRA colleagues.

Q177 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Moving on to that, Michelle, how has the sandeel dispute that you have had with the EU affected working relationships with Brussels, from your perspective?



Michelle Willis: We do not do that direct engagement with the EU and Brussels; we do it through DEFRA. We will support DEFRA in any of those activities—we just do not have that direct relationship. We will interact with Europe on an operational, practical level around control enforcement, where we have shared sea space, but, on that level, we just do not do that interaction. We will work with and feed information to DEFRA to support their discussions and deliberations on that. It would be DEFRA that would lead on all of those discussions and outcomes.

Q178 **Josh Newbury:** My questions are more for you, Michelle and Colin. As you have heard, the Committee in December had the chance to visit Devon and Cornwall and to speak to people in the sector, which was incredibly useful for us. They told us about a long-term trend of rising regulatory demands, fragmented policymaking and limited engagement, I am afraid, from DEFRA.

Fishers in particular described the administrative burden on small vessels becoming unmanageable, and some are even, with a heavy heart, considering decommissioning. We heard loud and clear from fishers in particular that they want more meaningful input in policy decisions, so that regulations can work in real-world practice. How can you make sure that things are done with people rather than to them?

Michelle Willis: The fisheries management plans are somewhere where we have made real progress. For the fisheries management plans, we are working in a much more joined-up way, not only with industry but with DEFRA, to try to come up with plans that are meaningful for the sector and deal with those specific species that can be managed far better and in a sustainable way.

Through working groups and the regional fisheries management groups, we will bring those insights in, so you are not just looking at the data; you are actually looking at trends and fishing practices. We are seeing different take-ups on key stocks and changes in fisheries, which I am sure you are going to come to. Because we do not have the policy role, it allows us to do much more of that engagement with the fishing industry, to get their input into those plans.

Getting fisheries management right is quite important, because it leads on to how you then regulate. We are aware of the challenges. Fisheries regulation is a challenging regime. It has evolved over 40 years or more, and we are trying to be more conscious and considerate of when new policies are coming forward.

We have to work through the process of dealing with the technical measures coming out of the recent negotiations. We are working much more closely with policy to be more thoughtful to what this means and how it lands in the existing fisheries regulatory regime. We are trying to support fishers with how they can comply with that.

Q179 **Josh Newbury:** Just to pick up that point around direct engagement, as



you said, a lot of this is very technical, and it is, in many ways, quite a fast-moving picture. Fishers do not have the time or often the inclination to be sitting behind a desk, as many of us do. I know that you are physically located in many ports, but how are you making sure that you are engaging directly and reaching the right people, rather than just those who are already well engaged?

Michelle Willis: We are close to many of the ports and we do move around. We do, as it happens, have an MMO office in Brixham, but that office does provide marine officers who can move around that stretch of coastline. The regional fisheries groups and the way in which we engage on a monthly basis are aimed at bringing all of those parties together.

Equally, with the jurisdictions of the IFCAs, we do have an MMO representative on the IFCA committees, and I get regular insight reports coming through from the industry, which get shared with DEFRA. We use that insight to bring that together. So far, from an MMO perspective, we have been working really closely with industry, not just with individual fishers but through industry groups. We have been working closely with Mike at the NFFO, Chloe from UKAFPO and Chris from the south-west.

The reason for doing that is to ensure that we can get into a more forward-looking programme of work for the forthcoming year, so we can improve engagement on a wide range of matters. We met before Christmas, and there were DEFRA colleagues with us. From an MMO perspective, we have heard that there is a challenge on fielding the multiple consultations and how we can better engage them to make best use of their time. We have taken that away. There is a recognition that things need to be done slightly differently.

We have things in place to deal with the here and now, but I just wanted to give the Committee reassurance that we are working with those representative bodies to find different ways in which we can improve that and keep the engagement going. The key is going to be data, though. Coming back to that, we need to improve the quality of the data that flows from the fisher through the systems that we use to make regulatory decisions.

Q180 **Josh Newbury:** That sounds promising. Colin, what about from the perspective of Seafish?

Colin Faulkner: We recognise and hear many similar things very often, particularly from the catching sector, but probably also from some of the processing and aquaculture sectors, too. We completely recognise that. Our role is to try to help build those partnerships across organisations, whether that be organisations such as ourselves, but also try to get beyond the representative bodies as well.

Those representative bodies are hugely important—of course they are—but you are right to point to the challenge of getting beyond those organisations to talk to people on the ground. Certainly, we do that direct



engagement within Seafish. We have people on the ground in different parts of the country, but certainly, in terms of my role in the future, I am very keen to look at what more we need to be doing in Seafish to have meaningful direct engagement with people on the ground, rather than tick-box engagement. That certainly is going to be a priority for me. You are right that we need to do more on this front.

Q181 Josh Newbury: Michelle, can I just turn to data again? We know that things such as total allowable catch have a huge impact on fishers. Data provided by fisheries scientists can often be months or even years out of date by the time it is actually fed into fisheries management decisions.

The fishers we spoke to expressed frustration that what they are catching in their nets often does not bear resemblance to the data that is feeding into those TACs. What can you do to make better use of real-time evidence that is being gathered by fishers?

Michelle Willis: I am not sure if the Committee is aware, but the way in which fisheries data comes in is threefold. We get data through e-logs for the over 12-metre fleet. We have the catch app. I will come back to the catch app in a moment. That picks up average data from the fleet in real time. For the 10-to-12-metre fleet, it comes in as paper records. There is a time lag in the data and there are, on occasions, more often than not, anomalies. I think, over the last year, the MMO corrected something in the order of over 10,000 records.

If the industry really want to embrace more timely data, we would like to work with them on that. The quicker we get the data, the more accurate the data is. Receiving that electronically would help everybody, not just the MMO, to have a better, more real-time view of the world. Fishers should see what their data is. At MMO, we are working within the Department to make bids for investment in that space and put business cases forward.

It is not just for us; it is for the benefit of the industry, to try to get those data and system improvements in place. We are working quite closely with colleagues in DEFRA to try to improve that. The catch app was innovative at the time. It was a bit of a struggle, but now the industry really likes it. We were aware that, in the last 12 months, there have been glitches with it. It has been capturing some records and not others.

Our digital colleagues in DDTS and the Department are working with us on a discovery, to see whether or not we can fix that app and make it better or whether we need to replace it. Hopefully, I will be able to share some news on that over the coming months, as that gets assessed. For something that was difficult to accept, it has actually been a win, and that will help.

I just cannot emphasise enough the importance of getting good-quality data and data that is accessible to all. That will be instrumental for all the



systems that we run, whether that relates to trade and access or regulatory decision making and sustainable stocks.

Q182 Sarah Dyke: I just have one question. As mentioned before, the OEP has consistently raised concerns about the slow pace of action in the marine environment. Your own MPA programme is currently off track. I also understand you work with a lot of different agencies and it is all about corralling, but what are you going to do to get back on track and keep this in progress?

Michelle Willis: We are delivering the MPA programme on behalf of DEFRA. We have put in place stages 1 and 2—they are implemented. As I said earlier, the stage 3 consultation closed, and we had an unprecedented number of comments back on that—23,000. We are still working through a lot of those comments, so we can put a recommendation to DEFRA on the proposals for stage 3.

We are currently working through stage 4. There had been a change in Government. We have worked really hard to bring it back on track. As I say, stage 3 is the one where there has been a significant and unprecedented amount of interest. We have to respond to those comments in a proper and appropriate way before we can make a recommendation to the Department on what those measures should be.

Chair: Unless anybody has anything else, we are very grateful to you for your attendance. This is part of an ongoing inquiry, and we shall be returning to it again in the not-too-distant future, but your evidence has been enormously helpful to us in the course of that. We are very grateful to you and thank you for your attendance here today. That concludes our proceedings today.