



Scotland's Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups Network Operational Plan 2025

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Executive Summary

Scotland's Regional Inshore Fisheries Network comprises six Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups (RIFGs) covering the 0-12 nautical mile zone of Scottish waters. Each RIFG aims to improve the management of inshore fisheries to deliver an environmentally and economically sustainable fishing industry. They also provide a strong voice for inshore fishers in wider marine planning matters. Although funded via the Scottish Government, the RIFG network remains independent and provides a bridge between the industry, government policymakers and legislators.

The network is both a communication channel for the industry, and is working to deliver a positive and sustainable future.

The work, much of which is project based, is clustered around four main subject areas:

- The Scottish Government's Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement (IFMI) Programme:
The Scottish Government's Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement Programme is building towards developing a new framework within which to manage inshore fisheries, one that will facilitate new management measures and technical improvements designed to deliver sustainable fisheries.
It ultimately seeks to transition inshore fisheries management to a more agile model with co-management at its heart.
- National Projects:
Each Chair directs a project that will lead to an improvement in the sustainability of the industry. Projects vary widely from technical measures such as developing creel limits that are environmentally sustainable without being commercially unworkable to evolutionary improvements such as improving the interface that the industry has with the Marine Protected Areas.
- Local Projects:
Each Regional Inshore Fisheries Group Chair is engaged in leading or facilitating a range of local projects designed to support the industry in its area. These are diverse and include:
 - education projects – working with the University of the Highlands and Islands and delivering outreach through local schools and colleges:
 - technical trials- assessing the impacts of new equipment or technology on the marine environment:

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- improving data collection leading to a greater understanding of the marine environment.
- Communications:
The disparate nature of the fishing industry remains a challenging place for communications to flow freely in either direction. The RIFG network provides an accessible communication channel for fishers at all levels.
- Input to Offshore Wind Developments.
Ensuring that a strong voice is given to fishing interests in new and proposed offshore wind generation projects. This is achieved through working collaboratively with other fishing associations and federations.
- Project UK Fishery Improvement Projects:
Providing a conduit for information between fishing interests and Project UK, facilitated by the Marine Stewardship Council, on Fishery Improvement Projects which may impact the inshore area.

Vision and Values

The Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups Network is an independent and politically impartial Network which aims to improve the management of inshore fisheries in the 0-12 nautical mile zone of Scottish waters in line with the strategic direction described by the Scottish Government. They aim to give commercial inshore fishermen a strong voice in wider marine management developments.

Our vision is of a Network which:

- Earns respect and trust:
- Promotes the regional interests of commercial inshore fishermen:
- Is open and in touch:
- Works together:
- Works with and learns from others:
- Makes best use of resources:
- Values people.

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Our values are:

- Integrity:
- Objectivity:
- Political impartiality:
- Fairness:
- Diversity.

Introduction

The Regional Inshore Fisheries Network is a non-statutory advisory group which operates through six regional Groups, each with its own Chair. The initial aim of the network was to provide a safe space for fishers to meet and discuss matters of mutual concern. The Network, however, has evolved in response to the changing backdrop of legislative, economic and environmental requirements facing the industry. As well as providing a safe space for fishers to voice their concerns, it now provides an important, two-way, communication bridge between the Marine Directorate and the disparate fleets who operate in Scotland's inshore waters.

It works closely with the Marine Directorate of the Scottish Government to deliver projects that bring the industry closer to the goal of sustainable fishing.

For fishers, it provides readily accessible understanding and interpretation of the impact of policy and legislative changes, usually delivered at the most local level.

2024 saw the first complete year of operation for a reconfigured network. It also saw the output of a review of the Network by the Scottish Government's internal auditors. This plan builds on these experiences and sets out more robust targets for the coming year.

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Development of the Network

The Scottish Government's Marine Directorate has promoted and governed a Regional Inshore Fisheries Network since 2013.

In late 2022 the structure of the network was significantly re-focused to provide a more localised service that reflects the difference in character between the fleets in each area.

With 5 new Regional chairs appointed in the first quarter of 2023, the network only became fully operational again in May 2023.

In 2024 a formal review of the Network took place, carried out by the Scottish Government's Marine Analytical Unit. In 2025 the Network will again evolve in line with the recommendations from that review.

Policy and Legislative Backdrop for 2025

2025 promises to be a year of further development for the inshore industry. The inshore sector now comes under increasing scrutiny as it moves to a more regulated industry in line with the government's environmental, social and economic commitments.

Direct changes that are likely to affect the inshore industry in 2025 are:

- Preparatory work on the consultation on the Marine Directorate's Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement programme :
- The increased use of inshore vessel tracking systems within the under 12m fleet:
- Continuation of the temporary interim measures that were applied to the static gear fleet in 2024:
- Consideration of the evidence provided by the industry that it favours a move from national to more focused, regional approach to fisheries management.

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Strategic Objectives of the Regional Inshore Fisheries Group Network 2025

The strategic objectives for the Network are:

- Progressing towards and ultimately achieving, with others, sustainable management of inshore fisheries:
- Scrutinising and, where appropriate, challenging planning proposals as they affect the industry:
- Delivering, on behalf of the Scottish Government, six projects of national significance:
- Understanding and representing the views of the industry in meetings with Government officials, Ministers, the Fisheries Management and Conservation (FMAC)- Inshore Fisheries sub-group, and relevant Scottish Marine Planning Partnerships:
- Engaging regularly with commercial inshore fishers within the area.

Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups Network- National Outputs 2025

1. Hold eighteen formal Regional Inshore Fisheries Group meetings:
2. Record 300 direct engagements with fishers and 100 engagements with other organisations representing fishers:
3. On twelve occasions during the year meet, with either Marine Directorate officials or Ministers and effectively communicate the views of fishers and their representatives:
4. Respond to all appropriate government consultations on behalf of fishers:
5. Respond to 100% of relevant notified marine licence planning applications on behalf of fishers:
6. Competently direct, on behalf of the Scottish Government, six projects of national significance.

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Limitations of the Network

While the network has a strategic vision there is an acceptance that it cannot be solely responsible for delivering it. It therefore works in close partnership with fishers, their representatives and associations.

As a non-statutory advisory group the Network has no statutory basis, operational authority and holds no direct budget.

The Chairs have adapted their operation in line with the recommendations of the review of the network that was conducted in 2024.

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Input Resources

The resources available to the network are virtually all deployed to provide regional, part-time Chairs, who are each charged with:

- engaging directly with fishers, and
- delivering their share of the National Targets
- directing projects of national significance

A small amount of budget is reserved for both travel and subsistence costs and support services, such as IT equipment and website management.

The resources invested in the network remains the equivalent of three full time staff.

Ongoing Operations

Much of the work of the Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups is based around, and seeks solutions to, real-world issues facing the inshore fishing fleet. Many of these projects incubate as local pilot schemes, the lessons from which, facilitate a smoother national rollout.

Examples of work that is currently underway to resolve them is:

Management Measures

The network continues to:

- Meet with creel boat skippers, and others, to understand the collective view in order to be able to help assess the socioeconomic impact of the Interim Measures imposed on the Crab and Lobster industry. It will continue to discuss options for reducing effort and the economic impacts of imposing restrictions. In the Outer

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Hebrides the Regional Inshore Fisheries Group has been instrumental in trialling the economic and social impact of creel limits:

- Using project funding, the network is participating in the Shetland Inshore Fish Survey which focuses on populations of juvenile fish in coastal waters, see-
https://rifg.scot/storage/article/211/Thomason_and_Fraser_2025._Fish_nursery_areas_around_Shetland-final.pdf
- Influence the industry to observe a range of voluntary closures aimed at protecting specific habitats. An example is the Loch Sunart to Sound of Jura 6-week closure which is aimed at protecting an area used as a common skate hatchery:
- Form close partnerships with Marine Directorate scientific staff and pursue the need for increased scientific activity in inshore waters. They have also sought early access to scientific data in order to facilitate timely decisions.

Piloting New Technologies

There has been a number of projects undertaken to research the impact on the industry of adopting new technologies. Examples are:

- a pilot trial of the use Bluetooth identifiers on the riser ropes from creel fleets. While final results are awaited, adoption of such a system will improve both the knowledge base on creeling operations and will improve compliance with fisheries legislation:
- a move to using weighted line in creel fleets to minimise cetacean entanglement. Following a series of workshops held around the coast the network, alongside Marine Directorate staff is both promoting a trial of the equipment and seeking routes to make a transition economically affordable.

Approachability and Communications

The Network conducts the majority of its business by engaging directly with fishers in a variety of settings as follows:

- Each Regional Inshore Fisheries Group is committed to hosting a minimum of three formal meetings per year:
- Drop-in sessions have been held in ports to allow a more informal setting to discuss concerns:
- Pierhead discussions allow ad-hoc discussions particularly with skippers and crew who do not wish to formally attend meetings.

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Crewing and Personnel Development:

Following the twin impacts of Brexit and the Covid pandemic there is a shortage of crew available to the industry. This issue has highlighted the lack of young people entering the industry.

The Regional Inshore Fisheries Group network is:

- a. actively meeting with education providers and those responsible for Developing the Young Workforce initiative, reviewing the opportunities and pathways that bring fishing and marine related opportunities to young people:
- b. working with University of the Highlands and Islands (Science, Technology, Environment and Mathematics) the network has developed a virtual reality based programme to provide fishing themed projects in schools and community settings:
- c. researching obstacles to young fishers obtaining financial assistance and approvals when acquiring their first commercial fishing boat.

National Projects

At the request of the Scottish Government, each RIFG Chair has engaged in one or more projects that will make a significant change to the sustainability of the industry.

Some of the projects underway this year are:

- Creel Limit Scoping Exercise
This project looks to coordinate research and engagement on existing, and potential creel limits for crab, lobster and nephrops. It will examine differences within regions and consider vessel size, creel type and target species.
- RIFG Network Communications and Engagement
The lead of this project will head up website improvements and maintenance, whilst maintaining oversight of website content and holding RIFG Chairs accountable for updating their content. The project will also look to establish wider network correspondence channels with the various stakeholders.
- Fisheries Diversification Check List
This will look to create a checklist to facilitate engagement, to ensure that diversification requests are realistic, and to help to identify barriers which need to be considered further.

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- Update to the RIFG Network Operational Plan
The lead of this project will be responsible for updating this plan ensuring it is up-to-date and highlights all the work and achievements of the RIFG regions. This plan will be made available to stakeholders via the RIFG website.
- Marine Protected Area-Fisheries Interactions
This work will undertake to gain a reading of fishers' impacts and sentiment regarding the development and proposed management of inshore Marine Protected Areas. It will clearly document the issues, frustrations and challenges ahead of consultation on further measures.
- Nephrops FIP Routine Update
The lead of this project will aim to provide a better understanding of the work being undertaken, its progress, and wider implications of the Nephrops Fisheries Improvement Plan.
- Renewables/ Fisheries Interactions
This project will look the work being undertaken around the growing marine renewable energy sector within Scottish waters. It will aim to provide a better understand of the work, it's progress and wider implications.

Local Projects:

Each of the six RIFGs is involved in projects that have arisen from a need within their own area. These tend to be diverse projects arising from a local need. Examples of these include:

- In Shetland, the RIFG is supporting 'The identification of Inshore Nursery Areas for Commercially Important Fish Species In Shetland'.
- In the Outer Hebrides, the local RIFG are working with NatureScot, monitoring the movement of Risso's Dolphins within the North East Lewis Marine Protected Area. In April 2025, six mooring devices were placed in key locations to monitor movement of Risso's Dolphins for a six month period. The Outer Hebrides RIFG is facilitating discussions between local fishers and NatureScot on the project.
- With support and guidance from Marine Directorate scientific team, the Regional Inshore Fisheries Group network are exploring ways of improving opportunities for data collection and analysis.
- In Orkney, Regional Inshore Fisheries Group funding has been used to enable digitisation of paper-based data captured between 2014 –

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2022. This will be used to understand seasonal variations and spatial distribution of crab stock, as well as to understand the dynamics of the fishery and the reasons for the observed population decline. The outcome of the study may be used to support local management strategies to improve sustainable fishing practices . The data will also be used to augment data gathered and held by the Marine Directorate science function.

- Orkney RIFG is also working with Heriot Watt University to formulate a project to size, sex and tag crab to understand how their migration pattern may be changed by electro-magnetic radiation from subsea cables.
- In the Solway, the South West Regional Inshore Fisheries Group, along with skippers and Marine Directorate scientists are involved in a 12-month intensive data collection project that involves cataloguing the size, sex and location of the lobster population with the aim of both providing the stock with better protection and at the same time maximising the economic potential of this productive fishery.
- On the East Coast, gear conflict continues to be an issue in some areas. There are also very good examples of local systems which work well in communicating between mobile and static gear operators. Best practice is being documented and proposals developed for future discussion with the industry.

Measuring Outcomes

This national plan accepts that both the direction and speed of progress towards achieving strategic objectives are beyond the direct control of this network. Due to this limitation the outputs that can be measured are largely operational activity measures.

Notwithstanding that, the Network is committed to working, progressing and reporting it's achievements in a planned manner.

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Summary

As the inshore fishing industry moves to a more sustainable, but regulated environment, the Regional Inshore Fisheries Group Network provides a key, independent, communication channel between Marine Directorate and Scotland's Inshore fishing industry.

It is a progressive forum that influences the development of new fisheries policy and legislation ensuring that government clearly hears and accounts for the views of fishers and others who work within the industry.

As demands are made of the marine resource the Network ensures that the economic importance of inshore fishing sector is given consideration within wider marine planning activities.

It is managing a range of projects designed to play a role in the successful adoption of more sustainable practices and technologies.

It provides an important point of contact for skippers and crew and eases the implementation of operational, policy and legislative change.