



*Minutes of a General Meeting
held on Tuesday 27th June 2023*

Present

Phil Bennett, Chair, Orkney Regional Inshore Fisheries Group (PB), Stuart Bell, Senior Policy Manager, Marine Scotland (SB), Fred Brown (FB), Hannah Fennell, Orkney Fisheries Association (HF), Martin Foulis (MF), Arthur Geddes (AG), Tom Harcus (TH), Mason Harcus (MH), Ivan James (IJ), Andrew Livingston, Kirkwall Fishery Office Marine Scotland (AL), Neil Matheson (NM), Robert Smith (RS), Ian Spence (IS), Tommy Thomson (TT), Ronnie Norquoy (RN). Andy Braunston (Minutes)

1: Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

PB welcomed everyone present, introduced himself and invited attendees to introduce themselves.

Apologies: Duncan Geddes (by text)

2: Members

PB explained membership of this group is open to any professional fishermen in Orkney. The group is to represent the fishing community here. PB asked people to let him have any ideas about who else should be invited and involved in the group.

3: Purpose and Scope of the Regional Inshore Fisheries Group

A skipper pointed out that in the past a group like this was suggested but rejected by the fishermen. AL pointed out that the group had been in place since 2016. He asked then how it had been in place when the majority of active fishermen were not in favour of such a group.

PB pointed out that he is now an independent chair to the group and is not in a statutory role. His role is to get views and see if there is a consensus on various topics. He felt it was to improve the voice of the fishermen in Orkney.

SB pointed out that the constitution behind RIFGs is that they are non-statutory and their role is to provide representation from fishermen to government. He hoped the government would review the RIFG function and structure by the middle of 2024.

One of the skippers felt that fishers have no influence over government policy. SB hoped that new faces present this evening and PB's role would mean that some of the skipper's concerns could be addressed. SB pointed out the Group will help understand government documents and feed into government consultations and so influence overarching governmental policy. The Skipper felt that fishermen in Scotland had limited input into government policy - more influence came from NGOs like the RSPB or SEPA. SB felt this group would be a safe space for the fishing industry. The Skipper felt that the group would then be pointless but SB suggested that the group need to give it a go and see how things could improve. Ian Spence felt The Skipper had summed things up well. One of the skippers felt the strength of the NGOs was too strong and overpowered the voice of fishermen. PB felt the group could be an opportunity to give a strong voice to the fishing industry in Orkney but he didn't want to impose anything on the Group. The skipper worried that even taking part in the Group which was centrally planned gave legitimacy to policies that were ruining the economy. The skipper did think there needs to be something to represent the views of the fishers which was independent of the Scottish Government. PB pointed out that whilst he is paid by the Scottish Government, he is independent.

A skipper asked the definition of "inshore" and it was clarified this was 12 miles not 6.

4: Structure & Frequency of Meetings

PB felt the Group was there to give voice to fishermen; agenda items need to come from the fishermen and his role is to follow those agenda items up. PB asked how frequently the meetings should be held. The meeting thought that quarterly would be good. HF Fennell suggested extra meetings were there were consultations to respond to. SB asked if there were other ways in which fishermen might like to engage. One of the skippers felt that ideas could be emailed to PB. PB indicated he wanted to come and speak to fishermen and to continue to give email updates.

HPMAs were mentioned. PB noted that over 4,000 responses have been given to the Scottish Government so far. The responses he had seen were lengthy and detailed which he felt showed the level of engagement.

PB asked where the best venue might be to meet; the group were happy with the Nav School.

5: Marine Scotland Update

SB gave an update from Marine Scotland who are seeking to update the RIFG network. Part of the intention to refresh this network is to get some more valid outcomes in line with Scottish Government strategies rather than just talking shop. One of the first hopes that SB has are that chairs like PB will engage with stakeholders. The purpose of the group is to represent fishermen who might not be represented by other organisations. The RIFG network has been criticised for flimsy fisheries management plans. Scottish government approach to FMPs have been set out in the Joint Fisheries Statement. But the 21 stocks SB would like to get RIFGs to feed into the future development of fishery management plans for inshore fisheries, through the network itself and through the Chair's position in the FMAC group. The RIFG has a small budget from the Scottish Government which can be accessed for science and technology projects that are in the fisheries management policies promulgated by the Government. The network has supported two inshore projects in this financial year. SB outlined the current focus on vessel tracking for inshore fishing vessels and the likely road ahead. A skipper felt that the tracking equipment has only been used to enforce fishing bans not to help fishermen. SB noted that we have around 1800 vessels in the Scottish inshore fishing fleet but our scientific evidence on some stocks is limited. One of the skippers felt the stock assessment figures had built in errors in the model. Another skipper felt that we don't have a stock problem but a lack of fishers.

Concern was expressed about the upcoming medical tests that fishermen need to take in November along with a concern about a shift from supporting fishermen to encouraging those moving into renewables.

SB noted the Fisheries Management Strategy includes support for new entrants to the fishing industry. A skipper noted the increasing level of bureaucracy in the industry will put off people to join it. PB noted that there is huge concern about succession planning in the industry and how Orkney has lost a lot of its identity as a fishing community. PB wants to explore how we get interest in fishing into the schools and how we support apprenticeships and funding for boats.

One of the skippers noted that low wages are a difficulty and there is competition from fish farm boats. This should have been, he felt, in the Scottish Government policies. He felt that the rules aren't being adhered to when people land fish which means that fishers aren't making the good living they need.

A skipper felt there was a hard time going on Shetland with cod and mackerel being booked against other vessels. AL described a trial in Shetland to see how better compliance could happen. A skipper had heard tales of French and Spanish vessels in the waters west of Foula not being boarded and inspected. AL assured the group that those boats are inspected too.

AL felt there was a need to get younger people into fishing and this needs to be an attractive industry to enter. A lot of the knowledge that is passed from parents and

grandparents and if that knowledge is lost the industry will die. One of the skippers noted that the government don't trust fishermen to take their kids out on the boats due to Health and Safety issues. AL felt this was something that could be addressed by RIFG with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. One of the skippers present noted the issue is that there are not enough opportunities for work, especially in targeting specific species which would give more opportunities. SB acknowledged that there was desire for diversification opportunities in inshore fishing and that such opportunities were possible. While there are no guarantees, such proposals would typically require a case to be made outlining target species, method of fishing, markets and logistics.

A skipper noted there's a problem getting a good price for a box of fish. Orkney has a mackerel quota and hardly any of it is caught as there are fewer fishermen. PB felt there were possibilities to increase the quota for mackerel if a demand was evidenced. Another skipper felt the access to the market in Shetland costs a lot. More facilities such as ice plants are needed here to make an increase in mackerel quota worthwhile.

A Skipper noted that unless you have a specific licence you are stuck just fishing for certain species despite there being a huge market for various forms of shellfish.

He also noted that Orkney is the best fishing ground in Europe, but we've few fishermen and fewer boats but, at the same time opportunities have lessened whilst regulations have increased. He thought that the industry will collapse in 10 years. Another skipper added that fish farms and renewables are providing better paid opportunities. Another skipper agreed that over regulation is killing the trade and wondered how the regulations could be relaxed. A skipper felt the Scottish Government could streamline a lot of regulation and processes to make things easier, for example, around certification and inspection of lorries. PB wanted more details of where the hold ups were in order to address them. Another skipper felt that there's a bad negotiating position to start with as the fishing grounds are being taken away for wind farms. He also noted that the marine plan doesn't include fishing. SB felt Skipper's concerns could be addressed by better tracking to support arguments for greater and improved grounds. This led to lively debate! PB had spoken to OIC who have the power to stop development in certain grounds but they don't have the information as to where the fishermen actually fish. Two of the skippers in attendance felt that OIC do have this information and one also felt that Scottish Government isn't interested in continuing a fishing industry.

Attendees expressed concern over the Salmon industry and asked if ever a fish farm application was ever refused. HF wasn't aware of any in her time in role. There was a sense that fish farms are often part of multi-million-pound companies that are hard to resist.

A skipper expressed concern about new restrictions about what can be towed in Scapa Flow and wondered if the reasoning is mistaken. PB offered to go and talk to skipper to further understand the issue. SB undertook to seek further clarification on this.

6: RIFG Chair Update

PB noted he wanted to explore

- how succession planning for the industry can be developed.
- the issue of flexible quota adjustments can be applied for.
- improving the science on the inshore stock assessments

PB noted that there are a lot of surveys of the waters around Orkney from various renewable companies and is seeking information from them about the amount of lost gear in the waters. A lively discussion ensued about the effects, or not, of creels and lobster pots on the sea bed. A skipper again noted that the Scottish Government had asked for input from fishermen in the past but had ignored the responses. He felt it was ironic they are again wanting consultation.

7: Any Other Business

A fisherman raised again how youngsters could get into fishing.

A skipper noted that if the Scottish Government ran a decommissioning scheme to get people out of fishing it would be oversubscribed.

A skipper mentioned uncertainty in the industry meaning that banks won't lend to buy a boat.

A skipper noted that Shetland are the healthiest fishing community in the UK but are now being hammered for landing too much fish. AL countered that the fishers are playing the system and there is a suspicion that the law may be being broken. The group noted that Shetland did have ice plants and markets and more knowledge about navigating the regulatory environment.

HF mentioned the Marine and Coastal Agency are allowing people with health issues which come to light in the medical checks to continue to fish if they can prove that they have fished for some time with no medical issues. However, the licence might be for a shorter period than otherwise. If anyone has issues, they should contact HF.

A skipper wondered if the West of Orkney Windfarm could fund some projects from RIFG.

There was concern over Scallop fishing discrepancies in what can be landed in Orkney and in Shetland. This led to a discussion about the Issue of dredgers and an idea there should be a 3-mile limit on dredgers around Orkney in order to protect the Scallop beds here.

8 Points to Take Forward

PB noted, in particular:

- the need to attract more people into the industry,
- greater markets and ice plants needed,
- to explore the paperwork requirements and how they may be streamlined, and the hold ups in the shipping of fish south.

There was also a desire to take forward the idea of increasing the minimum size for scallops to be landed in Orkney 120mm. HF pointed out there are Orkney based dredgers.

9: Future Communication

PB noted that everyone had been asked to indicate what they wished to hear from him when they signed in.

10: Date of Next Meeting

PB will send out the date of the next meeting which would be in around three months' time.

The meeting closed at 9.12pm

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