North Western

Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

Annual Plan 2026/27

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Front page image: A view across Liverpool Bay © Tessa Bunney

Officers on survey in Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney

Foreword

"We are pleased to present the North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority (NWIFCA) Annual Plan for 2026/27, which sets out our priorities, commitments, and operational focus for the year ahead. This plan reflects our ongoing responsibility to manage the rich and diverse inshore marine environment of the North West. Our goal is always to balance sustainable commercial and recreational fisheries with the protection and enhancement of the marine ecosystems under our care.

NWIFCA continues to work in partnership with fishers, coastal communities, scientific bodies, environmental organisations, and government agencies to deliver evidence-based, proportionate, and effective management.

In the coming year, we will continue to invest in robust scientific monitoring, responsive enforcement whilst embracing new technology and collaborative policy development. We remain committed to supporting innovation and adapting our practices to meet emerging challenges—from habitat pressures to changing patterns of fishing activity.

This plan outlines the steps we will take to meet our statutory duties, drive continuous improvement, and safeguard the future of our coastal waters.

I would like to thank our members, staff, partners, and stakeholders for their ongoing dedication and cooperation. Together, we will continue to champion sustainable fisheries and healthy seas for the North West."

Alison Nicholson, NWIFCA Head of Administration

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Our Vision

NWIFCA's vision is a collective one adopted by all IFCAs:

"To lead, champion and manage a sustainable marine environment and inshore fisheries, by successfully securing the right balance between social, environmental and economic benefits to ensure healthy seas, sustainable fisheries and a viable industry."

Picking brown shrimp © Tessa Bunney

Introduction

NWIFCA is the lead statutory regulator under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MaCAA) responsible for the sustainable use of sea fisheries resources within our district and the protection of the marine environment from any potentially harmful fisheries activities. The Authority's statutory duties are defined in MaCAA, which include the requirement for us to prepare an annual plan setting out our main objectives and priorities for the year ahead; this is that plan for 2026/27. It sets out NWIFCA's main performance targets and priorities to deliver in the forthcoming fiscal year and demonstrates how we will continue to implement and improve our inshore fisheries management whilst also contributing towards the operational implementation of the UK Government's marine and fisheries policies.

Our Functions

NWIFCA is responsible for managing the exploitation of sea fisheries resources within our district, which includes all animals and plants which habitually live in the sea. In delivering this function, the Authority is required to ensure that all fisheries exploitation and development taking place within the district is sustainable, and that stakeholders' socio-economic needs are balanced with the requirement for strong marine environmental protection.

The Authority's principal regulatory functions relate to the enforcement of minimum conservation reference sizes (MCRSs) for certain species, fishing gear restrictions, restricted fishing areas, opening and closing of certain shellfisheries, and the management of fisheries for the protection of marine protected areas (MPAs)[1]. Alongside our enforcement responsibilities, our scientific work continually furthers our collective understanding of the district's main fisheries and how our inshore marine environment is responding to any fishing activity pressures. This enables us to implement sound adaptative fisheries management processes and flex our approach depending on the environmental circumstances at play.

To support the delivery of our fisheries management functions, the Authority can make byelaws to address local and regional fisheries and associated marine environmental management issues. This also extends to the ability to make emergency byelaws to address the most urgent fisheries matters.

[1] MPAs include the international designations of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), protecting habitats, and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), protecting birds, known collectively as European Marine Sites (EMSs), along with national designations known as Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs).

Sunderland Point, Lancashire © Tessa Bunney

The District

NWIFCA's district encompasses the entire coastline (approximately 500 miles) of North West England, from the Scottish border at the northern extent to the Welsh border in the south, as well as our coastal councils' landwards areas, and inshore coastal waters out to six nautical miles. NWIFCA is unique in that we are the only IFCA which does not share a jurisdictional border with any other IFCA.

Our district is one of diversity and contrast, with highly dynamic and ecologically productive marine environments existing alongside varying coastal communities, from the relatively low-density coastal populations of Cumbria in the north, to the more populated areas of Lancashire, Merseyside, and Cheshire. Within the district are many significant inshore marine environments, demonstrable by the fact that almost the entire North West's coastal waters are designated as an MPA of one form or another. Our estuarine and intertidal environments within the Solway Firth, Morecambe Bay, and the Duddon, Wyre, Ribble, Mersey, and Dee Estuaries are some of the most biologically diverse in the country and yield some significant commercial and recreational fisheries. Individually and collectively, these marine environments and fisheries are managed by the Authority to ensure they are maintained, and where necessary improved, for the benefit of all our current and future stakeholders.

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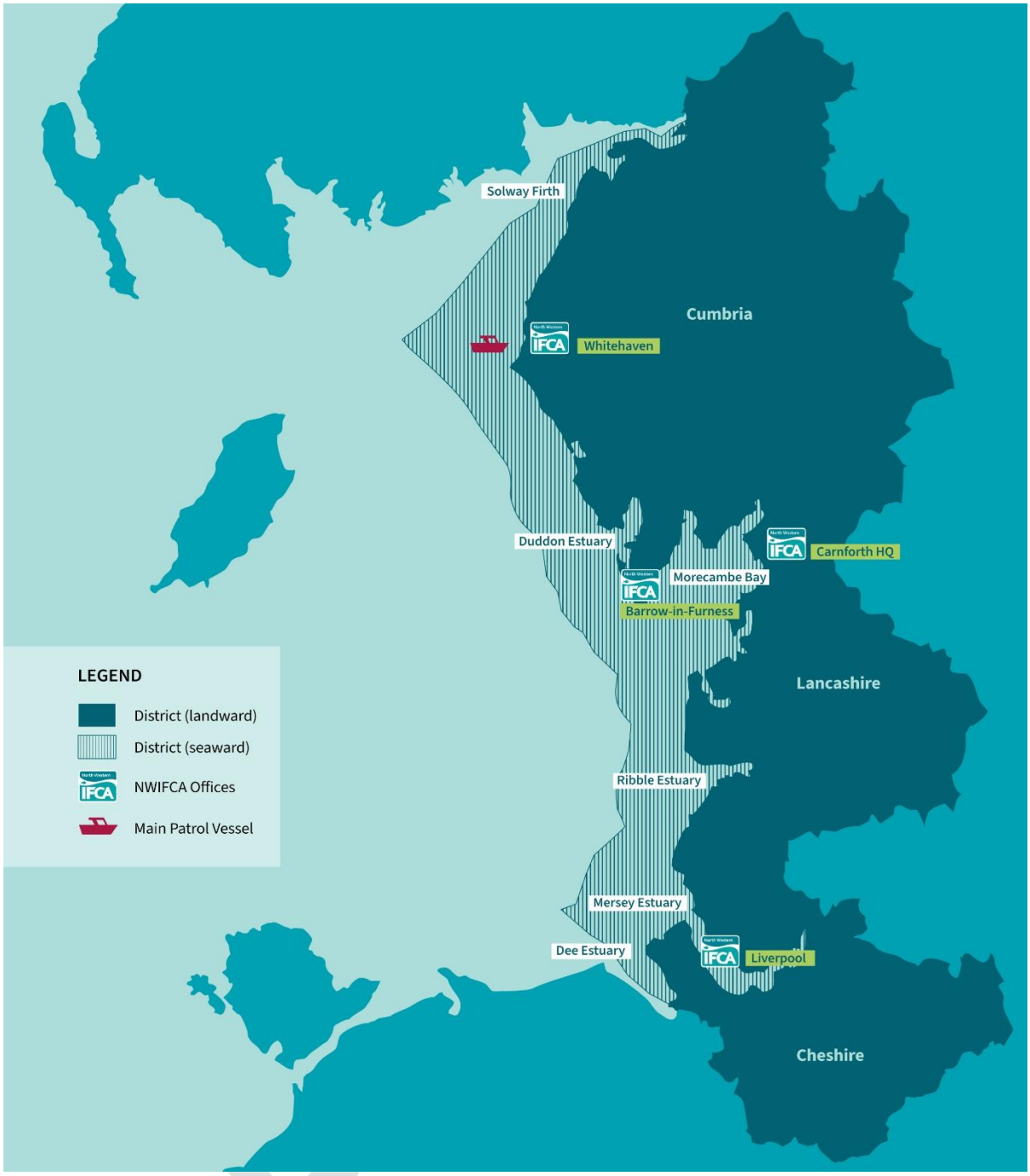

NWIFCA District Map © NWIFCA

Our Structure

Staff

NWIFCA has 22 members of staff working across three distinct teams: Enforcement, Science and Administration. Overseen by our Chief Executive Officer (CEO), each team has a senior manager responsible for the delivery of their teams' day-to-day duties. Our organogram is shown below.

Our Enforcement Team, led by Joseph Moulton, handles the operational delivery of our fisheries regulation. This centres on helping our regulated stakeholders remain compliant with the raft of legislation that we are statutorily responsible for. The team of 12 Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Officers (IFCOs) provides guidance and education to our fishing industry stakeholders and other relevant groups to enable their compliance and, where necessary, takes enforcement action against any non-compliance that has the potential to be of significant detriment to the North West's inshore fisheries or wider marine environment.

Annabel Plumeridge leads our Science Team, who deliver all our fisheries scientific research and monitoring work across the district. This team of five technical specialists regularly devises and applies a variety of bespoke survey methodologies to assess the state of our various fisheries and associated marine environments, working closely with key partner organisations to maximise the scope of our scientific understanding. With ever-changing marine ecosystems and habitats, their work is never dull, and they are constantly innovating and adapting their approaches to deliver the best evidence base upon which the Authority can make informed, sound decisions.

The Authority's Administration Team provides all the necessary administrative support to our two operational teams and our CEO. Managed by Alison Nicholson, they deliver our finance and HR functions, organise our various committee meetings, manage and maintain all our assets, including estates, vessels and vehicles, run our fisheries permit schemes, and process all our enforcement and fisheries data.

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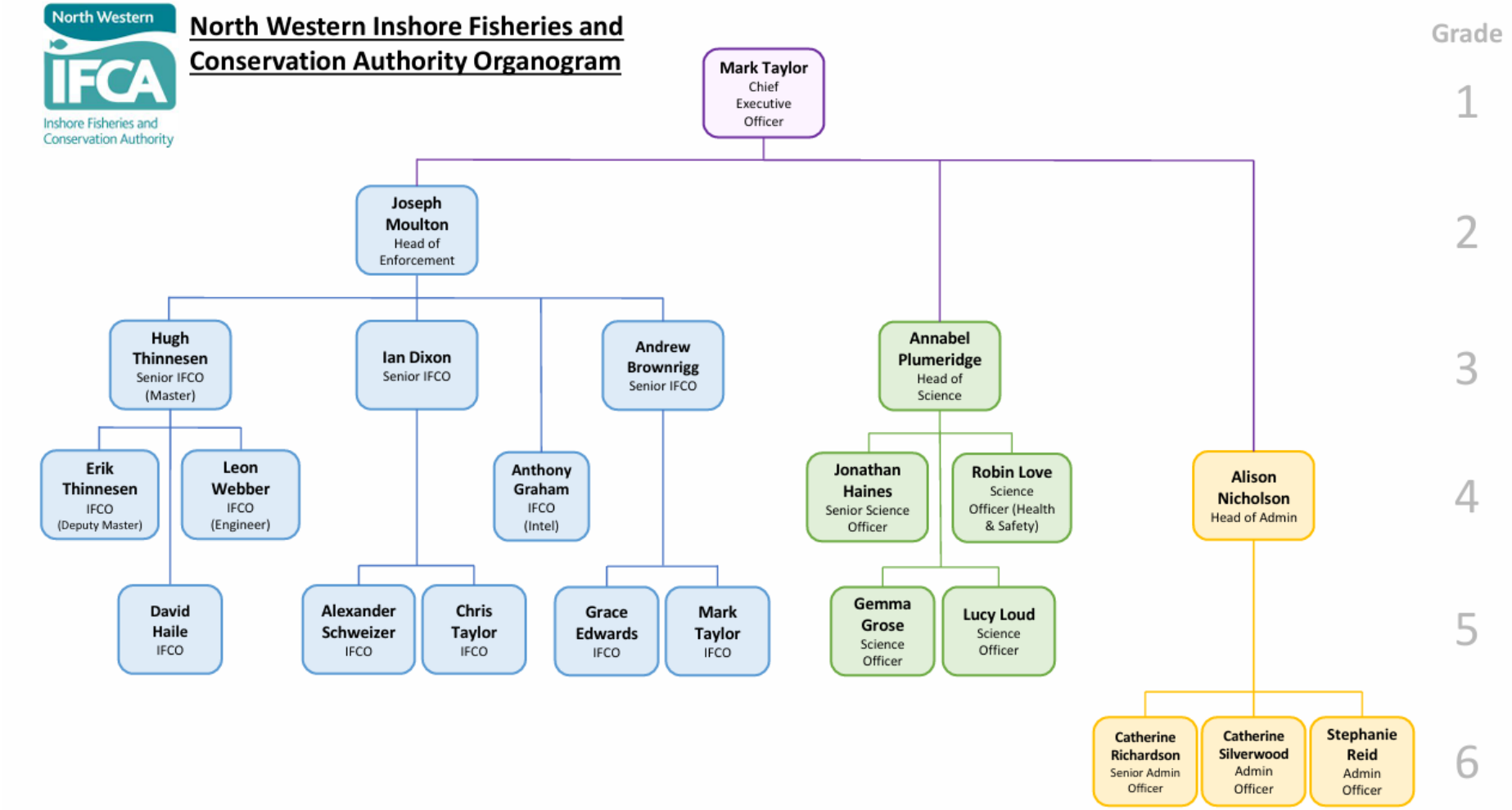

NWIFCA Organogram © NWIFCA

Assets

NWIFCA deploys several specialist operational assets to fulfil all our responsibilities. Our main patrol and survey vessel, North Western Protector, is based in the north of the district in Whitehaven. A former windfarm vessel, commissioned by the Authority in 2018, she is a 20.5m aluminium catamaran with a specification that enables us to deliver our enforcement and scientific work across the district. She has twin Man 1,100hp 12-cylinder 1,200rpm engines that power her Ultra-Dynamics UJ575 waterjets, giving her a cruising speed of 23 knots. She employs a 'mother-daughter' system with a small, stern-launched rigid inflatable boat (RIB) used to transport officers across to nearby fishing vessels for inspection. She can lift fixed fishing nets and pots for inspection, as well as deploying specialist scientific equipment for underwater surveys. As a twin-hulled catamaran, she can also 'dry out' on intertidal areas on low tides to enable officers to conduct scientific or enforcement work on foot.

North Western Protector at Whitehaven, Cumbria © NWIFCA

As well as North Western Protector, we also have two drones and a fleet of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs, or 'quad bikes'), pick-up trucks and vans to enable officers to travel throughout the district and deploy their specialist equipment wherever needed.

Members

The Authority's overall governance and strategic direction come from our committee of members. Our full committee has 30 members as defined in The North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Order 2010 ('the Order'), made up of 10 councillors appointed by our nine constituent councils, 17 voluntary members appointed by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and three statutory appointees representing the MMO, Natural England (NE) and the Environment Agency (EA).

Council Members

Cllr. S. Brookes	Blackpool Borough Council
Cllr. H. Deynem	Cheshire West and Chester Council
Cllr. A. Markley	Cumberland Council
Cllr. B. Woolfall	Halton Borough Council
Cllr. A. Jones	Lancashire County Council
Cllr. D. Shaw	Lancashire County Council
Cllr. P. Norris	Liverpool City Council
Cllr. C. Richards	Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Cllr. T. Bloomer	Westmorland and Furness Council
Awaiting appointment	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

MMO Appointees

Mr. P. Capper (Chair)	Marine Environment
Mr. B. Leigh (Vice Chair)	Recreational Fisheries
Mr. N. Baxter	Marine Environment
Mr. R. Benson	Commercial Fisheries
Mr. S. Brown	Recreational Fisheries
Mr. M. Burdekin	Marine Environment
Ms. G. de Jong Cleyndert	Marine Environment
Mr. W. Friend	Recreational Fisheries
Mr. T. Jones	Commercial Fisheries
Mr. R. Lomax	Recreational Fisheries
Mr. G. Pidduck	Commercial Fisheries

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Mr. L. Stainton	Recreational Fisheries
Mr. K. Thompson	Commercial Fisheries
Dr. M. Tupper	Marine Environment
Mr. D. Williams	Recreational Fisheries

Statutory Appointees

Mr. L. Browning	NE
Mr. S. Johnston	MMO
Mr. J. Turner	EA

Cockle gatherer with jumbo in Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney

Finances

IFCAs' operating budgets are derived from levies paid to them by each of their constituent councils. For NWIFCA, the percentages of the total levy which each council pays are defined within the Order and are as follows:

- Blackpool Borough Council 1.65%
- Cheshire West and Chester Council 7.30%
- Cumberland Council 20.47%
- Halton Borough Council 2.22%
- Lancashire County Council 33.14%
- Liverpool City Council 4.26%
- Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council 5.09%
- Westmorland and Furness Council 20.47%
- Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council 5.40%

At a meeting of the Authority's full committee in December 2025, our total levy for 2026/27 was agreed and set at £1,937,601. This was split between the nine constituent councils as follows:

- Blackpool Borough Council £31,970
- Cheshire West and Chester Council £141,445
- Cumberland Council £396,627
- Halton Borough Council £43,015
- Lancashire County Council £642,121
- Liverpool City Council £82,542
- Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council £98,624
- Westmorland and Furness Council £396,627
- Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council £104,630

This year's operating budget represented an increase of 4.4% (£82,243) on 2025/26. This increase was sought on top of last year's 6% levy increase and an unprecedented 21% increase in 2024/25.

The breakdown of this year's operating budget into our various budgetary headings and sub-headings is shown in the table below.

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EXPENDITURE		
Budget Heading	**Budget Sub-Heading**	**Amount**
Employees	*Gross Pay*	£952,615
	Unsocial Hours	£30,000
	Employer's NI	£121,142
	Employer's Pension	£186,696
	Expenses	£18,000
	Training	£33,000
	Equipment and Uniform	£22,000
Estates	*Estates Maintenance and Repairs*	£27,000
	Utilities	£18,000
	Rents	£117,648
	Rates	£27,000
	Sundries	£8,000
Transport	*Fuel*	£65,000
	Transport Maintenance and Repairs	£60,000
	Road Tax	£4,500
Capital Asset Replacement Fund		£150,000
Corporate	*Pension Fund (Ex-Staff)*	£9,000
	Professional Services	£67,000
	Insurance	£95,000
	General Admin	£16,000
	IT	£60,000

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	Members' Expenses	£3,000
	Events	£10,000
	Hotels	£7,000
TOTAL GROSS EXPENDITURE		£2,107,691
INCOME		
Permit Fees		£85,000
Shellfish Sampling		£10,000
Interest		£75,000
TOTAL INCOME		£170,000
TOTAL NET EXPENDITURE		**£1,937,691**

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Main Objectives and Priorities

This section of the Annual Plan defines our main objectives and priorities for the year ahead. It comes before a section on the IFCAs' Success Criteria and how NWIFCA aims to work towards or meet these this year. However, the objectives laid out in that section do not entirely encompass what we wish to achieve over the next 12 months and so this section describes our primary objectives and priorities for 2026/27.

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Operations

Vessel Replacement Strategy

In 2025/26, the Authority agreed a broad strategy for the replacement and upgrading of our patrol and survey vessels. This led to the sale of our two RIBs with the intention of replacing these with two new, purpose-built craft. The specifications for the first of these two vessels have already been agreed, and it will be procured in 2026/27 and brought into service in the latter part of the year (subject to build times and other factors). We will also finalise the plans for the second new vessel and work towards commencement of the procurement process for this vessel. The Authority also needs to update North Western Protector to extend its service lifespan and increase its capacity for delivering our at-sea patrol and survey objectives. As such, our Head of Enforcement will lead on the delivery of these upgrades, working closely with colleagues to ensure improvement works are delivered in a timely, cost-effective manner with minimal disruption to our operational maritime activities.

Lead Officer: CEO

Compliance and Enforcement Strategy Review

Our Compliance and Enforcement Strategy was created in 2012, and, whilst it has been intermittently updated, needs a wholesale review. This will be conducted in 2026/27, led by our Head of Enforcement with the support of our Senior IFCOs and CEO. It will be done in alignment with the ongoing IFCA-wide national workpiece reviewing the overall IFCA Compliance and Enforcement Policy. Our IFCO Code of Conduct will also be reviewed, with any appropriate training given to officers. The Authority's internal enforcement risk register will be reviewed and developed into a front-facing document which fully explains to stakeholders the risk-based approach taken to enforcement across the district.

Lead Officer: Head of Enforcement

Drones

Following on from the previous year, officers will continue to utilise the Authority's two unmanned aerial vehicles ('drones') for survey and enforcement work.

Enforcement

With all the necessary policies and procedures now in place, and two IFCOs holding a high degree of operational capability and confidence in flying drones at a variety of sites across the district, we will look to be reactive to intelligence and risk as required. Where required, drone flights will be tasked from our bi-weekly Tactical Coordination Group (TCG).

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The two IFCO drone pilots will continue to retain logs of their hours to maintain the competency of two hours' flying time in every three-month period, as well as maintenance and flight logs for the purpose of servicing at the required times. Demonstrating full operational utility of the Enforcement Team's drone is a key priority for this year. The Enforcement Team's specific objectives are:

- Complete 25 flights across the district
- Produce pre-defined operational plans for relevant sites across the district
- Explore beyond visual line of sight certification to give the ability to use more of the operational capability of the drone.

Science

The district has several large blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) beds which are important for the local fishing industry and to protected bird species. It is therefore important that accurate assessments are undertaken to monitor these beds and ensure any permitted fishing activity does not undermine their protection as an important bird food resource. Currently, all mussel beds are surveyed on foot with associated challenges regarding access, safety and resourcing. This year's main aim for the Science Team's drone is to build on the work carried out in 2025/26 to improve our capacity and accuracy in mussel bed surveying, with a view to operational implementation of this capability to deliver meaningful improvements and efficiency savings to our mussel survey work. Therefore, the objective for 2026/27 is to continue to build upon last year's progress, and move towards upskilling Science Officers to undertake the appropriate analysis as follows:

- Explore using the drone's multispectral camera in determining mussel from surrounding substrates by ground-truthing results
- Develop the use of processing software to assess percentage cover of mussel and how this could be used with physical sampling to assess biomass of mussel beds
- Compare the accuracy of drone-based mussel surveys to current on-foot surveys
- Undertake two visible light image surveys and one multispectral image survey of mussel beds; further develop the associated drone survey and analysis standard operating procedure
- Develop the experience of the second, more recently trained Science Team pilot
- Explore beyond visual line of sight certification to give the ability to use more of the operational capability of the drone.

Lead Officers: Heads of Enforcement and Science

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Senior Science Officer flying drone © Tessa Bunney

Science Surveys

Each year, the Science Team undertakes significant survey work that contributes to our longstanding datasets on the district's cockle and mussel stocks and informs NWIFCA's essential fisheries management decisions.

This year, as part of their ongoing survey work, the Science Team will deliver:

- A minimum of six Dutch Wand surveys of Morecambe Bay mussel beds
- A full survey of all district cockle beds (inclusive of Morecambe Bay, Ribble Estuary and Leasowe) in summer of 2026
- A minimum of seven mussel inspections for beds located in Fleetwood, Thurstaston, West Kirby and Morecambe Bay (inclusive of South America, Heysham and the Falklands)
- An annual side-scan survey of historic mussel beds in the Solway Firth
- A spring survey of large intertidal bivalves on the Wirral to help inform the Byelaw 2 review.

Officers will also engage with Natural Resource Wales (NRW) in sharing cockle survey methodologies to develop a baseline understanding of the methodology used in the Dee

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cockle fishery and how this translates to fisheries management decisions prior to NWIFCA's proposed future involvement in managing this fishery.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

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Science

Research Plan

We have several research priorities for 2026/27 to support our fisheries and marine environmental management work. However, as it is a requirement under IFCA Success Criterion 5, a separate Research Plan will be developed and published which will lay out our objectives and priorities in this area. In the meantime, our individual research priorities for 2026/27 are set out below.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Wirral Netting

In previous years we have had concerns raised, with associated media attention, relating to the wash up of smooth-hound (*Mustelus spp.)* and cetaceans on beaches along the Wirral coast. Individuals have claimed this to be caused by gill netting in the area, however, there is still little evidence to support this, or to suggest any alternative causes. Following initial reviews of the status of gill netting on the Wirral last year, a research strategy was devised. The aim for 2026/27 is undertake in-field surveys, in collaboration with local fishers where possible, to identify catch composition and determine the interaction of this fishery with smooth-hound, cetaceans and other non-target species. This may then inform appropriate future management, namely via our forthcoming Byelaw 7 (Netting Permit Byelaw).

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Brown Shrimp

In 2025, officers conducted a study looking into the current, and historic, status of the North West's brown shrimp (*Crangon crangon*) fishery. The study was initiated after industry members raised concerns about the decline in both the size and number of shrimps over the past decade. It identified several potential research avenues and knowledge gaps that require addressing to help understand the cause of these declines. Key areas identified were around a lack of fishers' landings data, limited recent data on population, size, sex and age, and limited research into the cause of observed declines.

In 2025/26 officer initiated a research project addressing some of the outstanding knowledge gaps, which involved developing a joint industry project collecting samples across the district to understand baseline sex ratio, age and size of shrimps. Sampling will continue into 2026/27.

To support our work around brown shrimp, our Science Team, in partnership with Salford University, Cefas and Mersey Gateway Environmental Trust, have secured funding through the Coast-R Network's small grants fund. The aim of this project is to assess if

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there are contaminant levels (heavy metals, PFAS) in shrimps, sediments and water which may be affect the population and to examine climate stressors (sea water temperature, salinity *etc*.) The project will run until Quarter 3 of this year, with monthly samples of shrimp, sediment and water collected by NWIFCA from three locations in Morecambe Bay. Officers will be trained in the analysis process by Salford University, and a workshop will be developed for industry to disseminate the results of the project later in the year, or in early 2027/28.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Whitebait Filter Nets

To further our understanding of the potential impacts of small-scale whitebait filter netting which has historically occurred within parts of the district, we will aim to develop a research strategy this year which will focus on establishing species composition in this fishery and associated implications for fishers' compliance with NWIFCA and national MCRSs and other relevant legislation. We will then look to engage with fishers who have historically prosecuted this fishery with a view to establishing an appropriate methodology for surveying. Findings from these surveys will be used to inform future management under our forthcoming Byelaw 7 (Netting Permit Byelaw).

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Whitebait from Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney

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Academic Partnerships

Despite having a Science Team of five, and whilst we continue to deliver our statutory requirements in this area, it is apparent that we do not have the resources to do everything we would *like* to do across our fisheries and marine environmental scientific work. Therefore, in 2026/27, we will look to explore the potential for furthering developing our relationships with academic institutions in the North West, to see if there are opportunities to support one another in specific scientific projects and provide the Authority with an even greater evidence base upon which to make our decisions. This will include exploring opportunities for further collaboration with the various universities we have already established good links with, including the North West institutions of Lancaster University, University of Liverpool and University of Salford, as well as Bangor University in North Wales.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Bangor Cockle PhD

In September 2025, the Authority embarked on a partnership with Bangor University in Wales for a postgraduate student to undertake a four-year PhD project to assess cockle larval distribution within the district. In 2026/27, this PhD project will progress into its second year, and the NWIFCA Science Team will continue to provide support to the student to develop the research methodology. This project has the potential to be significantly informative in terms of the future management of our cockle fisheries in the North West.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

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Enforcement

Coastal Patrols

To maintain a continued presence throughout the coastal areas of the district, IFCOs will conduct over 750 coastal patrols over the course of the year. These will be a combination of intelligence-led and routine patrols to areas of high coastal fisheries activity, and will include those on foot, in vehicles or on ATVs.

IFCOs on ATV patrol, Wirral © Tessa Bunney

Where there is intelligence raised through bi-weekly TCG meetings highlighting risk to compliance, officers will be tasked in these areas and outputs fed back to the TCG to record developments. Incidents will be recorded on our intelligence database for escalations to senior managers for decisions on the appropriate level of sanction based on any relevant evidence.

Joint working is a continued focus for the coming year with working alongside the MMO across the North West, operational patrols with the EA in estuarine areas and multi-agency led intertidal shellfisheries with partners such as the Police, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and local environmental health departments.

Lead Officer: Head of Enforcement

North Western Protector

This year will see North Western Protector continue to operate at full capacity. We will deliver at least 40 fisheries protection patrols over the year and aim to conduct upwards of 30 fishing vessel boardings and 50 closings. We will also conduct at least 30 patrols of the Allonby Bay HPMA in advance of new MMO byelaws coming into force which will prohibit fishing and anchoring there.

Furthermore, North Western Protector will continue to deliver our at-sea scientific work across the district and will conduct at least five research trips over the course of the year.

With a new set of standard operating procedures developed and the implementation of a new vessel safety management system, our Senior IFCO (Master), Hugh Thinnesen, IFCO (Deputy Master), Erik Thinnesen, and IFCO (Engineer) Leon Webber, will work with crew and our senior managers to embed these procedures into normal operational practice. This will include the continued use of pre-patrol plans and post-patrol reports, giving the Authority a greater ability to evidence and report on the fisheries enforcement and survey value North Western Protector brings.

Lead Officer: Head of Enforcement

Cockle gatherer using a jumbo, Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney

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Fisheries

Cockle FMP

Toward the end of last year, we completed a consultation on a draft of our first district-specific fisheries management plan (FMP), which will focus on one of our largest and most economically significant fisheries, common cockle (*Cerastoderma edule*). This year, we will look to adopt the FMP and move towards implementation for the beginning of the 2026/27 cockle season. We will also consider how the new national Cockle FMP needs to be factored into our own district version, and how ours can inform the national plan, which we will continue to contribute technical expertise towards.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Cockles © Tessa Bunney

Cockle Season

In 2025/26, the Authority trialled an early opening of the cockle fishery season for beds in Morecambe Bay, with a view to fisheries commencing in July rather than September and closing in February rather than April. Towards the end of the season, stakeholders were consulted as to whether they supported a permanent change to a July to February season, or whether they wished to revert to September to April.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Byelaw 3 (Cockles and Mussels Permit Byelaw)

In 2024/25, members agreed a broad basis for the implementation of a minimum use scheme for Byelaw 3 permit holders. This was on the principle that permitted fishers who do not routinely fish for cockles and / or mussels will not necessarily be eligible to renew their permit during the renewal period. Vacated permits will be offered to those at the top

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of the waiting list, ensuring that the maximum socio-economic benefit is being realised from the Byelaw 3 permit regime. This policy was adopted in late 2025/26 and will therefore be implemented this year.

In addition to this, members approved a handover scheme for fishers giving up their permits, whereby they could nominate an individual to take up their permit instead. This would be based on being able to demonstrate a direct familial relationship between the permit holder and nominee and may include requirements for the nominee to be below a certain age, to maximise opportunities for local young people. Further work needs to be undertaken in early 2026/27 to develop the details of this policy to then take to stakeholders for consultation and members for final approval, with a view to implementation in time for the 2027/28 season.

Lead Officer: CEO

Mussels © Tessa Bunney

Byelaw 4 (Potting Permit Byelaw)

Following on from the research to inform the 65mm MCRS for whelk (*Buccinum undatum*) prescribed in Byelaw 4, a review was completed of the whelk flexible permit conditions under Byelaw 4 (Potting Permit Byelaw), which assessed fishing effort, landings data, landings per unit effort, stakeholder feedback and the policy direction set by the national Whelk FMP. The review concluded that while the fishery remains productive, effort controls are still necessary to safeguard stock sustainability. Therefore, members agreed to reopen applications on a limited and controlled basis.

In 2026/27, NWIFCA will be allocating up to 2,500 whelk pots to owners of relevant fishing vessels that do not currently have a Category 1 whelk permit under Byelaw 4. Officers will continue to monitor landings, particularly Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE), as new permits are issued, to ensure management is sufficient for the fishery.

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Lead Officer: Head of Science

Byelaw 7 (Netting Permit Byelaw)

Back in September 2024, the Authority made our new Byelaw 7 and submitted it to the MMO for quality assurance. This byelaw will implement a flexible permit scheme for commercial and recreational fixed net fishers, whether operating from a vessel or shore based. It will legitimise this important fishery and provide consistent regulation across the entire district, whilst enabling the Authority to react quickly to changing circumstances to better manage netting for the benefit of affected species, local communities and fishers themselves.

After the MMO's quality assurance process, the byelaw was submitted to Defra for confirmation. We would hope to have it confirmed and implemented within the early stages of this reporting period, but to some extent, this is dependent on external factors within MMO and Defra, and so this cannot be guaranteed.

In anticipation of its confirmation, the Authority has already opened applications to prospective permit holders (*i.e.* anyone who wishes to use static nets within the district, whether from a vessel or the shore, whether commercially or recreationally). We have also been inviting applications for bass entitlements which will be issued to up to 26 shore-based commercial netters under this byelaw. Depending on when the byelaw is confirmed by Defra, we will complete the decision-making process for which fishers will receive a bass entitlement as well as the ordering of the associated waiting list.

Lead Officer: CEO

Byelaw 10 (Mobile Netting Permit Byelaw)

NWIFCA began the process of developing our new towed net (mobile netting) byelaw late last year, with an initial informal consultation of stakeholders. In early 2026/27, we shall use the findings from this initial consultation to begin drafting the byelaw, with a view to then taking a draft text to members for their consideration. Thereafter, the byelaw will go out for another round of consultation based on a member-agreed draft, and the results of this will inform any subsequent changes. It is unlikely the internal byelaw making process will be completed by the end of the year, and so the byelaw is likely to be made in 2027/28.

Lead Officer: CEO

Dee Cockle Fishery Regulating Order

NWIFCA is working with NRW to plan for the eventual replacement of the current Dee Estuary Cockle Fishery Regulating Order, which expires in 2028. Currently, the Authority

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has no direct involvement in the management of this fishery; it is managed solely by NRW. However, in 2024, our members voted to pursue a new joint Regulating Order with NRW, with a view to retaining consistency in the fishery's management and ensuring continuity across both sides of the English-Welsh border which runs through the middle of the Estuary. A joint NWIFCA-NRW application was submitted to Defra and the Welsh Government at the end of last year. This year, senior managers will continue to work closely with NRW to navigate the application process for a new Regulating Order, along with all other necessary documentation, such as an Impact Assessment and proposed FMP.

Lead Officer: CEO

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Marine Environment

MPA Assessments

There are 21 MPAs across NWIFCA's district, with six SACs, seven SPAs, seven MCZs and one HPMA. These have come into being over many years of designation under different legislation, and over the intervening years, we have prioritised assessment of fishing activities in specific MPAs to ensure they are compliant and minimise impacts on protected features, whether those are marine habitats or species. This process, known as an environmental impact assessment (EIA), is a statutory requirement for us to undertake. It involves significant data gathering, collation and analysis, which is then used to inform our technical assessments of the potential impacts fisheries activities might have on an MPA's protected features.

We have now conducted these assessments for most of our fisheries occurring within MPAs, but we still have some outstanding ones to assess in Allonby Bay MCZ (the area not covered by the HPMA), and the part Liverpool SPA which falls within the NWIFCA district. These outstanding assessments will be completed in 2026/27.

Lead Officer: Head of Science

Operational Stats

When out on patrol, officers collect a significant amount of data every year regarding fisheries activity sightings and inspections. IFCAs are the only organisations that collect this form of data with regards to non-vessel-based activities, intertidal fishing and recreational fishers, which are often data-poor sectors. This information is particularly valuable to both the Authority and other organisations, for building a picture of the activities across the district, identifying changes, undertaking fisheries assessments (*e.g.* MCZ assessments or Habitats Regulations Assessments [HRAs]) and informing our decision making.

Historically, much of this data has been collected by officers and logged into spreadsheets post-patrol. However, there is now the technology available to streamline this process, making both the collection, storing, and analysis of data more efficient. In 2025/26, a new application was trialled that allows the Enforcement Team use of live maps and recording of sightings in real-time on a phone or tablet. The data can then be directly transferred to a database, where the Science Team can access this for analysis or transfer onto other mapping software. This process bypasses the need for staff to manually enter data into databases each month, and removes human error associated with this. Following this trial, this new system will be implemented fully across the organisation in 2026/27.

Lead Officers: Heads of Enforcement and Science

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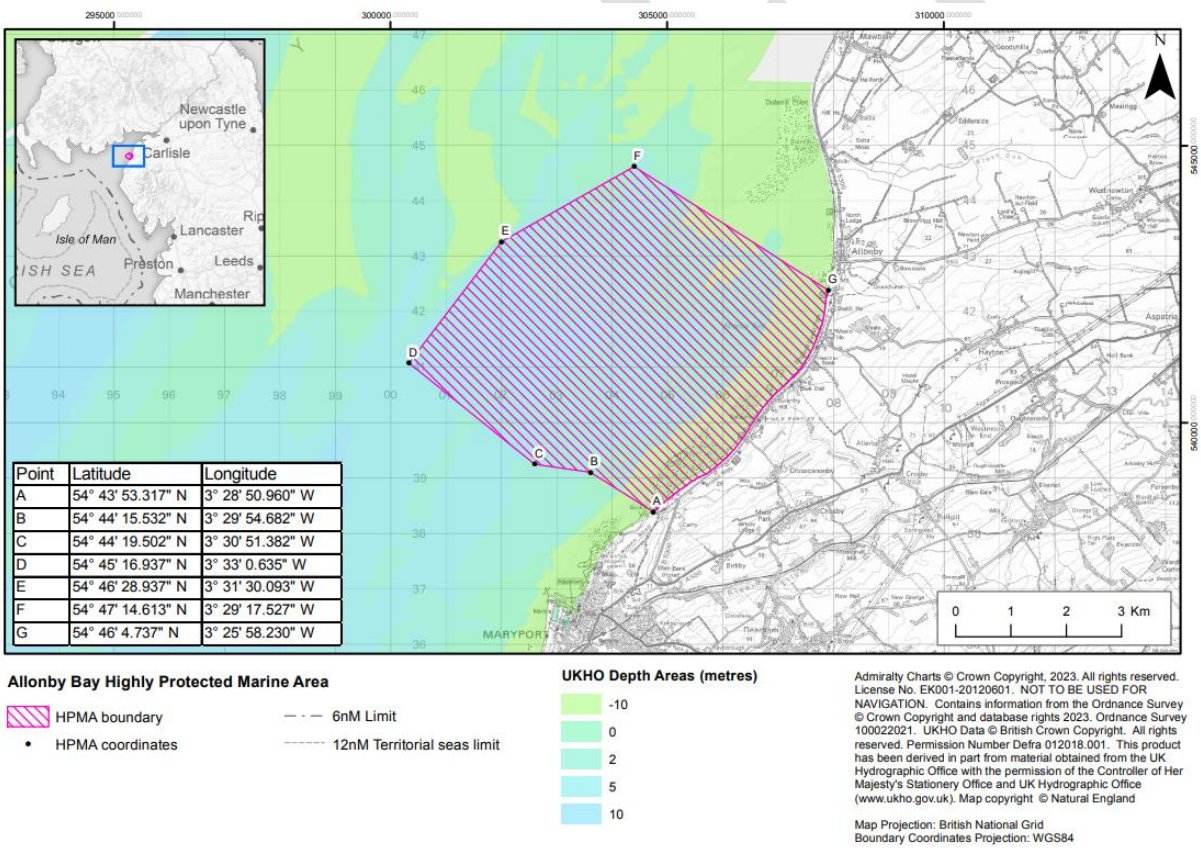
Allonby Bay HPMA

Since Allonby Bay HPMA was designated in 2023, we have been working closely with our strategic partners at the MMO and NE to develop an effective byelaw and monitoring regime respectively.

We anticipate that the two MMO byelaws for the HPMA, prohibiting fishing and anchoring, will be made within this reporting period, and thereafter, we will commence our compliance assurance and enforcement responsibilities towards it. In the meantime, we will continue our work publicising the HPMA, both through our communications work and via officers on the ground so that, when the byelaws are implemented, we have maximised awareness of the HPMA and the associated restrictions on activities therein. To support this, we will conduct at least six at-sea patrols within the HPMA and at least 50 shore-based patrols along its landward boundary.

Lead Officer: Head of Enforcement



Allonby Bay HPMA chart © Crown Copyright

Communications

Stakeholder Engagement Events

Over the course of these 12 months, NWIFCA will be looking to proactively engage with our primary stakeholders by holding a series of events. Last year, face-to-face events aimed at our Byelaw 3 (cockle and mussel) stakeholders were held at two locations in the district, as well as one in north Wales, with good engagement from these focussed events. This year, we will look to focus our engagement on specific stakeholder groups again, namely fishers affected by our Byelaw 3, Byelaw 4 (commercial potting vessel operators) and the new netting byelaw (any relevant commercial and recreational netters). We will communicate directly with these core groups, consult on the most appropriate means of future engagement and look to establish a recurrent regime of events whereby stakeholders' key issues can be discussed, concerns raised, and ideas shared.

We will hold at least three stakeholder engagement events over the course of 2026/27.

Lead Officer: CEO

Comms Officer

Due to a minor restructuring of the Enforcement Team, we have reassigned our Comms Officer role to the Administration Team.

Lead Officer: CEO

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Governance

Constitution Review

It is now over four years since NWIFCA's Constitution was reviewed and updated. Last year, staff began the process of a formal, comprehensive review with an internal assessment of its appropriateness and operability. This year we will look to establish a working group of members to develop a new Constitution to ensure it is reflective of a modern, responsive environmental regulator, whilst retaining the necessary governance structure which provides assurance to Defra, our local councils, stakeholders and the wider public that we are exercising our duties appropriately.

Lead Officer: CEO

Member Inductions

In 2026/27, the Authority will implement a new member induction process, with provision of more relevant, up-to-date and engaging information. This will be coordinated in conjunction with the Association of IFCAs' work at a national level on improving the induction process for new IFCA members.

Lead Officer: Head of Administration

Cockle sacks © Tessa Bunney

Staff

Performance and Development

Last year, an internal training calendar was introduced, setting out a schedule of training and development work that will be delivered over the course of the year by experienced officers, to help everyone develop and keep their skills and experience up to date. This year's operating budget includes £33,000 for training and a clear set of development objectives focussed on the needs of individuals, teams, and the Authority overall will help ensure this budget is spent and used appropriately. There will be specific training for all staff, or select groups, on the following:

- Risks Assessments and Manual Handling
- Intertidal Operational Safety
- Operation of new patrol vessel
- Workboat Code 3 training for seagoing officers
- Drone operating and associated data analysis
- Development of Science Team officers to further vessel helming capabilities

Lead Officer: CEO

Staff Induction

We will be developing a clear induction policy and procedures for new starters joining the Authority. As 2026/27 begins, we do not hold any vacancies and so do not anticipate any immediate recruitment, which will mean that we can use this period to develop a more structured induction process for new starters joining the Authority in the future, making this bespoke for whether they are joining the Enforcement, Science or Administration Team.

Lead Officer: Head of Administration

NWIFCA Values

For 2026/27, NWIFCA will adopt our first set of organisational values for staff, which will reflect our progress and maturation in recent years. These values will establish a key set of principles upon which Authority staff can expect to be treated by their colleagues, managers and members, as well as the values that they themselves will be expected to demonstrate and promote. These values will ultimately form the basis upon which individual staff's performance objectives will be set and appraised.

Lead Officer: CEO

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IFCAs' Success Criteria

This section sets out the five national IFCA success criteria and how NWIFCA intends to deliver against these in 2026/27. In the tables below, we outline specific actions we will take this year to help us work towards or meet each success criterion.

To support the delivery of the national IFCA vision, IFCAs work to a set of success criteria matched with corresponding high-level objectives. The vision, success criteria and high-level objectives are designed to assist in the creation of a shared understanding of the collective aims and objectives of all 10 IFCAs and focus service delivery on achievement of the national vision. These national IFCA performance criteria also link directly to the UK Marine Policy Statement.

Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney

The following five success criteria have been agreed and adopted nationally by all IFCAs:

Success Criterion 1: IFCAs are recognised and heard, balancing the economic needs of their fisheries whilst working in partnership and engaging with stakeholders.

IFCAs will be visible, respected, and trusted regulators within coastal communities and will maintain and deliver strategies to communicate their vision and duties effectively. IFCAs will engage with policy makers, industry, non-governmental organisations, recreational and commercial users and other regulators. They will work jointly and collaboratively with partner organisations across boundaries, participate in and contribute to the development and implementation of regional and national marine policy, including the marine planning regime, and take long-term strategic decisions and manage risks effectively. IFCAs may maintain a national body to coordinate the activities of authorities that are party to arrangements.

Success Criterion 2: IFCAs implement a fair, effective and proportionate enforcement regime.

The IFCA enforcement regime is risk-based, makes appropriate use of intelligence, meets legislative standards and complies with the Regulators Code. It should make effective use of the resources available to regulators, complement and align, if possible, with the regimes in adjacent IFCA districts and management by other organisations including the MMO and EA. Consistency and fairness are important, regulatory compliance is promoted, and enforcement action is carried out by trained, professional officers working to clear standards of conduct.

Success Criterion 3: IFCAs use evidence based and appropriate measures to manage the sustainable exploitation of sea fisheries resources and deliver marine environmental protection within their districts.

The IFCAs were created as statutory inshore regulators by MaCAA. They are relevant authorities for implementing international environmental commitments including the Birds, Habitats, Water and Marine Strategy Framework Directives and make an important contribution to securing a network of well-managed MPAs. FMPs identify local management measures which should be based on evidence, timely, subject to appropriate consultation and in step with national initiatives and priorities. IFCAs should balance the socio-economic benefits of exploiting sea fisheries resources with the need to protect the environment. They should make a contribution to sustainable development.

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Success Criterion 4: IFCAs have appropriate governance in place and staff are trained and professional.

IFCAs are statutory authorities and sit within the local government family. Authority members may be either general members or local councillors. They comply with Codes of Conduct and the Standing Orders that apply to meetings of local government committees. General members are appointed on merit, through open competition and for a fixed term. They are subject to annual performance appraisals. IFCAs are funded by levy, charged to their member councils. Funding originates in local taxation. IFCAs are accountable for their use of public resources and should ensure that a proper auditing regime provides confidence in their commitments and spend of public money. They should make effective use of their resources, including staff and assets. IFCAs have a statutory obligation to prepare and publish Annual Plans and Annual Reports.

Success Criterion 5: IFCAs make the best use of evidence to deliver their objectives.

IFCAs are statutory regulators for their districts. Decision-making should be based on evidence. All IFCAs are supported by officers who pool their expertise and share best practice through a Technical Advisory Group (TAG). Programmes of research activity and monitoring are planned, developed, and updated in consultation with partners. These programmes inform management decisions and support justification for additional research and evidence gathering.

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Success Criterion 1

IFCAs are recognised and heard, balancing the economic needs of the fishery whilst working in partnership and engaging with stakeholders.

Indicator	Workstream Objective	Lead Officer(s)	Intended Outcome
SC1A: Maintain a database of stakeholder contacts that has been reviewed and updated.	Our stakeholder database will be reviewed and updated accordingly and will be integrated into the permit and stakeholder database.	CEO Head of Enforcement	Met
SC1B: Complete a review of our communication strategy and implementation plan.	Our new communications strategy will continue to be implemented, focusing on how we will leverage different communication methods and approaches for different purposes and towards different stakeholder groups. Our social media platforms will be reviewed and updated to ensure we are maximising our reach and impact across our stakeholders and the wider public.	CEO	Met
SC1C: Review our website monthly.	Regular website reviews will continue, to ensure it is up-to-date and reflects our current regulatory position. This will include the use of new, higher quality and more representative images and more interactive features, along with case studies of officers' work to highlight significant achievements.	CEO	Met
SC1D: Review our website and ensure it meets the objectives of our communications strategy.			Met
SC1E: Review all our Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and have a clear plan	All extant MoUs will be reviewed to ensure they are concurrent and fit-for-purpose. New MoUs will be drafted collaboratively as necessary and will ensure that NWIFCA can leverage partner organisations' expertise and assets, provide our expertise and	CEO Head of Enforcement	Met

in place to update them where necessary.	assets appropriately whilst not impinging on our ability to deliver our statutory objectives.	Head of Science	
SC1F: Participate appropriately, proportionately and at the right level of delegation in regional and national fisheries and conservation activity.	Participation in regional and national forums will be reviewed and new opportunities for further participation identified. We will continue to participate in, and contribute towards, the MMO's Regional Fisheries Group for the North West. We will continue to contribute to the development of wider IFCA policies and procedures via the IFCAs' Chief Officer Group, National Inshore Marine Enforcement Group (NIMEG) and TAG. We will continue to contribute to the development of national marine and fisheries policy via Defra's Marine and Fisheries Chief Officer Group.	CEO Head of Enforcement Head of Science	Met

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Success Criterion 2

IFCAs implement a fair, effective and proportionate enforcement regime.

Indicator	Workstream Objective	Lead Officer(s)	Intended Outcome
SC2A: Ensure our enforcement risk register and strategy are published and available on our website.	Our Compliance and Enforcement Strategy was originally drafted in 2012 and, whilst it has been intermittently updated, needs a wholesale review. This review will be conducted this year, and any significant proposed changes will be brought to the committee and, where appropriate, consulted on with our stakeholders. We do not currently have an enforcement risk register or similar. This will be created this year. Our vessel and survey plans will be reviewed and updated accordingly.	Head of Enforcement	Working towards
SC2B: Work with other regulators to achieve consistent quality, application, and enforcement of management measures.	This year, NWIFCA will continue to foster our relationships with partner organisations, in particular MMO, NE and EA. Wherever possible, new opportunities for partnership working with other regulators and non-regulatory organisations will be sought to help support our work.	CEO Head of Enforcement Head of Science	Met
SC2C: Compile records of enforcement activity in a standard format, provide them to NIMEG and publish on our website.	We need to improve the timeliness within which we record our inspection and enforcement activity, to ensure records are available to our partner organisations (namely MMO) and publicly to our stakeholders. Inspection and enforcement records will be uploaded on the national system within one week of the activity / action taking place, and onto our website within one month.	Head of Enforcement Head of Administration	Working towards

	We will continue to supply enforcement statistics to NIMEG to support the IFCAs' national enforcement work.		
SC2D: Adopt the national code of conduct for IFCOs, review annually and publish on website.	We will review our current code of conduct for IFCOs to ensure it is up-to-date and relevant and, once this is complete, publish it on our website, as it currently is not on there.	Head of Enforcement	Met
SC2E: The code of conduct for IFCOs is reflected in work objectives and annual appraisals for all warranted officers.	Following the review of the code of conduct, IFCOs will be trained on this and reference to it will be made in all IFCOs' future work objectives and performance appraisals.	Head of Enforcement Head of Administration	Working towards
SC2F: Warranted officers attain accreditation and all officers undertake continued professional development (CPD).	Our continued participation in the MMO-led marine enforcement officer accreditation scheme was reviewed in 2024/25, and it was decided we will not continue to participate. This is due to other operational priorities and the improved development of our internal training plans and of IFCAs' more generally. A culture of CPD will be maintained to support all staff with developing and expanding their skillsets. A training budget of £33,000 has been allocated for 2026/27 and this will be utilised proportionally across the Authority to ensure all staff have access to appropriate CPD opportunities. We will continue to formalise our training routes towards becoming seagoing officers, helming vessels, operating drones *etc*. so that all staff, in particular new starters, understand the training expectations on them, and opportunities afforded to them. We will continue to contribute towards the national IFCA training programme, primarily through our Heads of Enforcement and Science. Mandatory training for all IFCOs will be	CEO Head of Enforcement Head of Science Head of Administration	Met

	delivered to nationally agreed standards. We will look to contribute towards the improvement of a formalised training programme for IFCA Science Officers.		

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Success Criterion 3

IFCAs use evidence based and appropriate measures to manage the sustainable exploitation of sea fisheries resources and deliver marine environmental protection within their districts.

Indicator	Workstream Objective	Lead Officer(s)	Intended Outcome
SC3A: Record site-specific management considerations for MPAs and report progress to the Authority's committee.	Our MPA Monitoring and Control Plan will be reviewed and updated as necessary. HRAs for new fisheries will be completed and submitted to NE for assessment within two weeks of a decision to open a fishery being made.	Head of Science	Met
SC3B: Data analysis and evidence supporting new management measures will be published on our website.	Data and evidence used in impact assessments, HRAs *etc*. will continue to be published on our website. Stakeholders will be consulted where appropriate on data and evidence collection methodologies and interpretation, and on any suggested management measures.	Head of Science	Met
SC3C: Management information (*e.g.* sampling and / or survey results) will be collected periodically after new management measures have been implemented, to demonstrate the effectiveness of the intervention.	Our Science Team will continue to monitor the impacts of new management measures and report these to our Technical, Scientific and Byelaws Sub-Committee (TSB) and full committee as appropriate. Post-implementation surveys will be scheduled and delivered, working with partner organisations where appropriate. Results will demonstrate degree of effectiveness of new measures and inform ongoing fisheries management. They will be reported to the committee and on our website. Inspection and enforcement data will be analysed to provide additional information towards assessment of the effectiveness of new management measures.	Head of Science Head of Enforcement	Working towards

SC3D: Develop a range of criteria-based management options that are explained to stakeholders through the website.	New management measures will be developed after assessment of options against criteria which define objectives.	Head of Science Head of Enforcement	Working towards
SC3E: New management measures selected for development and implementation will be delivered within agreed timescales.	We will seek to define timescales alongside the decision to affirm any new management measures and communicate these timescales to affected stakeholders and on our website, so that they can understand when such measures are likely to be implemented.	CEO Head of Science	Met
SC3F: Include shared agreed objectives and actions from FMPs in its own Annual Plan.	We will continue to report to Defra on our work around national FMPs as per the requirements for our resource funding.	CEO Head of Science	Met
SC3G: Progress made in relevant FMP areas, including Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) commitments, will be noted in the Annual Report.	We will implement our internal Cockle FMP this year and continue to work with NRW on the development of the Dee Cockle FMP for the new Regulating Order.	CEO Head of Science	Met

Success Criterion 4

IFCAs have appropriate governance in place and staff are trained and professional.

Indicator	Workstream Objective	Lead Officer(s)	Intended Outcome
SC4A: Publish an Annual Plan on our website setting out the main objectives and priorities for the next financial year; a copy will be sent to the Secretary of State (SoS).	This Annual Plan will be agreed by our committee, published on our website and sent to the SoS by the end of March 2026.	CEO	Met
SC4B: Publish an Annual Report on our website describing activities and performance, and a summary of audited financial information; a copy will be sent to the SoS.	Our Annual Report for 2025/26 will be drafted, agreed with our committee and published on our website and sent to the SoS by the end of November 2026.	CEO	Met
SC4C: All staff will have annual performance management plans in place and receive annual appraisals.	A standardised performance management process for all staff is in place. A new performance management plan form for each staff member is now the basis against which performance is appraised. A new appraisal form has been created. Staff will receive a six-month appraisal, no earlier than 1st October and no later than 15th November 2026 and will receive a final appraisal for the year no earlier than 1st April and no later than 15th May 2027. All staff will receive in-house training on the new performance management process, with line managers receiving additional training on the objective setting and appraisal processes.	CEO Head of Administration	Met

SC4D: An efficient secretariat of staff support Authority meetings which are held quarterly and are quorate. Meeting documentation will meeting standing orders.	Our Head of Administration will continue to act as clerk for our Finance and Personnel Sub-Committee (F&P), whilst all clerking duties for our full committee and TSB meetings are delegated to our Administration Officers. Papers for meetings will be sent to members at least one week prior to the meeting, and draft minutes will be sent out within six weeks. All relevant Authority meeting dates, papers and minutes will be published on our website.	Head of Administration	Met
SC4E: Through the Annual Report, demonstrate how marine, land and water management mechanisms in the district have worked responsively and effectively together.	The 2025/26 Annual Report will include an assessment of how our marine management measures have interacted with associated land and water management. We will work closely with relevant partner organisations (*e.g.* MMO, NE and EA) to help demonstrate this.	CEO Head of Science	Working towards

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Success Criterion 5

IFCAs make the best use of evidence to deliver their objectives.

Indicator	Workstream Objective	Lead Officer(s)	Intended Outcome
SC5A: Demonstrate progress towards identifying our evidence needs by publishing a research plan.	A separate long-term research plan for 2026/27 and beyond will be produced and published on our website.	Head of Science	Working towards
SC5B: Publish a research report that demonstrates how evidence has supported decision making.	A research report for 2025/26 will be published on our website by November 2026.	Head of Science	Working towards
SC5C: Contribution towards TAG and national evidence needs will be recorded in our Annual Report.	Our Science Team will continue to contribute towards TAG and relevant actions and outcomes will be recorded in the Annual Report for this year.	CEO Head of Science	Met

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Shrimping tractor in Morecambe Bay © Tessa Bunney