

**Environment, Marine & Fisheries
Group**
Marine & Fisheries Division



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

Our reference: DAERA/26-194

[REDACTED]
Cullybackey
Co Antrim
Northern Ireland

Marine and Fisheries Division
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Belfast
BT3 9ED

Email: marinefisheriesdivision@daera-ni.gov.uk

25th March 2026

Dear [REDACTED]

Environmental Information Regulations 2004

I refer to your request for information received by the Department on 16th March 2026 that sought the following information:

A copy or provided a link to minutes recorded in Content Manager AE1/21/875400 on 30th June 2021.

I can advise that the Department has completed its search and can confirm that it holds the information you requested.

The Department has decided to withdraw the information under Environmental Information Regulation 12(4)(d) which states:

a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that —

(d) the request relates to material which is still in the course of completion, to unfinished documents or to incomplete data

If you are deaf or have a hearing difficulty you can contact the Department via the Next Generation Text Relay Service by dialling 18001 + telephone number.

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This exception is engaged because the workshop minutes capture preliminary, evolving thinking rather than finalised positions.

The Department has decided to withdraw the information under Environmental Information Regulation 12(4)(e) which states:

a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that —

(e) the request involves the disclosure of internal communications.

This exception is engaged as the workshop formed part of internal policy development and inter-authority collaboration.

The Department has conducted a Public Interest Test which explains this further and is attached at **Annex 1**.

If you require any clarification, believe that any part of your request has been overlooked, misunderstood or misinterpreted, please contact me in the first instance to see if it is a matter that can be resolved.

If you are unhappy with the manner in which your request for information has been handled or the decision to release/withhold information, you have the right to request a formal review by the Department. If you wish to do so, please contact The Review Section either by e-mailing daera.informationmanager@daera-ni.gov.uk or by post at The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Data Protection & Information Management Branch, Floor 2, Jubilee House, 111 Ballykelly Road, Ballykelly, Limavady BT49 9HP, within two months from the date of this letter.

If after such an internal review you are still unhappy with the response, you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, CHESHIRE SK9 5AF, who will undertake an independent review of the Department's decision.

Yours sincerely,



Water Policy Branch

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Public Interest Test –EIR

Reference Number – DAERA/26-194

Requested Information

The requester has sought a copy or provided a Link to the Minutes recorded in Content Manager AE1/21/875400 on 30th June 2021.

Exemption / Exception under consideration

Regulation 12(4)(d) which states:

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Reasons why the public interest would favour disclosure:

- Transparency and accountability in how environmental policy, particularly water regulation and fisheries protection, is developed.
- Public understanding of environmental decision-making, classification methodologies and how abstraction, morphology and fisheries issues are managed.
- Environmental protection benefits from wider scrutiny of scientific and regulatory decision processes.
- Stakeholder confidence in the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), including the rationale for Programme of Measures and priority-setting.
- Improving public participation, which is an explicit aim of the Water Framework Directive (WFD)

Reasons why the public interest would favour withholding:

- Protecting the integrity of ongoing policy development: Workshop minutes contain unvalidated, partially formed or exploratory positions that represent early-stage thinking rather than settled departmental views. Releasing them prematurely would risk undermining the structured RBMP consultation process.
- Preserving a safe space for officials and technical experts to freely discuss risks, uncertainties and regulatory options, including contentious matters such as abstraction licensing, fish passage, groundwater saline intrusion and coastal morphology.
- Avoiding public misunderstanding: Some material includes incomplete data, untested projections, preliminary scientific analysis and early policy options that may be misleading without necessary context or subsequent validation.
- Avoiding distortions to future evidence gathering: Officials and partners must be able to share frank assessments of NI Water abstraction impacts, ecological flow regimes, fisheries mortality, hydromorphological risks, and cross-border issues.
- Supporting orderly policy development under statutory frameworks: The RBMP process includes formal public consultation at defined stages. Releasing internal deliberation ahead of finalised proposals risks confusing the public record and weakening the effectiveness of the official consultation.
- Risk to collaborative working: The workshop included multiple public authorities. Premature publication of internal, candid exchanges could inhibit full and frank participation in future technical workshops.

Conclusion:

Following consideration of the Public Interest Test, the Department has decided that disclosure at this point would prejudice the ongoing formulation of environmental policy, reduce the candour of future expert contributions, risk public confusion, and undermine the structured, statutory RBMP consultation process.

Accordingly, the Department concludes that the public interest in maintaining the exceptions under Reg 12(4)(d) and Reg 12(4)(e) outweighs the public interest in disclosure at this time.

Name Brendan O’Kane
Water Policy Branch