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ALB Review for Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

Client: Department of Agriculture, Environmental and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
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Executive Summary

1. Introduction to the Review

ICS was commissioned by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch (CSB) in April 2024 to complete an Arm's Length Body (ALB) Review of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA). The Review was conducted in line with Cabinet Office guidance, namely Guidance on the undertaking of Reviews of Public Bodies (Cabinet Office, December 2022)¹

The Terms of Reference covered three areas:

- A light touch assessment of the continued need for NIFHA;
- A light touch analysis of the current delivery model; and
- Opportunities for enhanced effectiveness and efficiency of delivery.

The report draws together the findings of the Review and makes specific recommendations to support DAERA and NIFHA to continue to support the fishing sector of Northern Ireland (NI).

2. Approach

The review was conducted using an evidence-based methodology, focusing on key data collection methods:

1. Desk-based Research. ICS reviewed documents covering reports, governance records, and departmental strategies.
2. Consultations. ICS engaged with stakeholders including DAERA staff, NIFHA leadership, Board members, Harbour Masters, and external stakeholders.
3. Comparator Analysis. ICS assessed two similar organisations, one in Scotland and one in England.

This approach informed key findings and recommendations presented in later sections.

3. About NIFHA

The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA) is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) under DAERA, responsible for managing and maintaining the three fishery harbours at Ardglass, Kilkeel, and Portavogie. NIFHA generates revenue from levies, berthing fees, ice sales, leases, slipway and utilities revenue.

Further information on NIFHA is included in the main body of the report and, as such, offers further important strategic context to the Review.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-bodies-review-programme/guidance-on-the-undertaking-of-reviews-of-public-bodies>.

4. Comparator Insights

The Review included short comparison ‘insight’ studies with two similar organisations: A Harbour located in Scotland and a second one located in England. The report highlights several parallels and differences between NIFHA and these harbours and highlights some key insights. The most relevant to the report are:

- The comparators face similar challenges to NIFHA regarding crew constraints, EU fishing regulations, and increased demand for guard vessels.
- Both comparators provide essential services to vessel owners but focus more on leisure boats, whereas NIFHA primarily manages commercial harbours.
- The Scottish Harbour has invested in wind farms, allowing them to turn from a deficit position into a profit position.
- The English Harbour leases out its ice plant, chill rooms, and marinas, creating new revenue streams.

Information from this comparison insights exercise is drawn on in the findings and recommendations, where appropriate.

5. Continued Need

The Review provides a light touch assessment on continued need, considering the strengths, alignment to Departmental priorities and impact of NIFHA. From analysis of all the information gathered on continued need, it is the consensus of the Review Team that NIFHA remains necessary for governance, oversight, and service delivery at a competitive rate. Health and safety management is strong, and staff expertise is well-regarded.

The evidence for continued need is strong and supported by views across the Department and among wider stakeholders. The Review Team considers that continued need is supported by a consensus view across stakeholders that without NIFHA there would be a negative impact in the fishing sector in NI.

6. Self-funding model

This section provides an evaluation of the feasibility of NIFHA returning to a self-funding model. NIFHA’s finances remain a concern due to a declining industry and external challenges. NIFHA’s corporate plan does not forecast a return to self-funding, resulting in a heavy reliance on grants from DAERA. While grant funding remains necessary, exploring new income streams and improving financial planning are essential for long-term sustainability.

7. Appropriateness of the Delivery Model

NIFHA’s current delivery model was evaluated, and alternative options explored. The assessment considered whether NIFHA should continue as a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) based on the ‘three tests’ outlined in government guidance². More than one of the three tests were met, with the outcome being that NIFHA should continue as an NDPB for the next 3–5 years.

The Review Team assessed several delivery models but shortlisted only one, to bring NIFHA HQ functions in-house. DAERA and NIFHA both opposed this option, stating that NIFHA must remain

² [Requirements for Reviews of Public Bodies - GOV.UK](#)

independent from Ministers to ensure fair management of the three harbours. NIFHA HQ provides strategic oversight, coordinates activities, and ensures fair allocation of resources across harbours. As such, and considering the rationale provided during consultations, the Review Team concluded that HQ is necessary to maintain impartiality for the fishing industry.

8. Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency

This section of the review assessed the effectiveness and efficiency of NIFHA, focusing on its purpose, strategic alignment, governance, staffing, and areas for improvement.

1. **Strategic Direction and Purpose:** NIFHA aligns with DAERA strategic goals, particularly in delivering safe, sustainable harbours. While stakeholders understand its purpose, there are gaps in legal frameworks, such as the power to deal with abandoned vessels that may require changes to primary legislation.
2. **Areas for Change:** NIFHA seeks to extend its powers beyond the existing Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 to allow them to introduce a fining structure that includes abandoned and dismantling vessels. Stakeholder engagement is a recurring concern, with stakeholders expressing dissatisfaction with NIFHA's communication approach. The CEO has worked to build relationships with two key organisations, but broader, face-to-face engagement is deemed necessary.
3. **People and Structure:** NIFHA's structure is considered challenging due to their size with the CEO overseeing a disproportionate number of direct reports. Staff morale is low, although recent pay increases have improved this. There are concerns about succession planning, single points of failure, and outdated job descriptions.
4. **Headquarters (HQ):** The HQ plays a critical role in coordinating activities and providing oversight, although it is costly for such a small organisation.
5. **Impact:** NIFHA's absence would negatively impact stakeholders, particularly businesses dependent on the harbours. The review affirms NIFHA's essential role in supporting Northern Ireland's fishing industry.
6. **Governance and Accountability:** The NIFHA Board is relatively new and lacks a succession plan. Independent board effectiveness reviews have not been completed. At the time of completing the fieldwork, DAERA's oversight was through quarterly meetings, and it was felt at the time that this was appropriate. It should be noted that, from 2025, the frequency of these meetings was changed to biannual. NIFHA is keen for more engagement with Marine and Fisheries Division.
7. **Wider Shared Services:** NIFHA utilises some DAERA services but is frustrated by procurement timescales and the high costs of some digital services. Although not a recommendation, the Review Team identified an improvement for NIFHA to digitise its systems and include data loss risks in its risk register.

Overall, while NIFHA fulfils its core functions, the report highlights the need for better engagement, clearer governance, improved efficiency, and updated staffing structures to enhance its effectiveness.

9. Conclusion

The review notes that NIFHA plays a vital role in supporting Northern Ireland's fishing industry and maintaining safe, sustainable harbours in alignment with DAERA's strategic objectives.

However, to enhance its overall effectiveness and efficiency, several areas require attention. These include assessing the legal framework, particularly around vessel disposal and enforcement powers; strengthening stakeholder engagement; addressing structural and staffing challenges that impact morale and operational resilience.

Governance improvements, such as succession planning and independent board reviews, are also necessary to ensure accountability and strategic oversight.

Additionally, optimising shared services where possible given procurement timescale constraints, and embracing digital transformation could significantly improve the way in which the Authority works.

While NIFHA is fulfilling its core functions, targeted reforms in governance, communication, and organisational structure are essential to future-proof the Authority and maximise its impact.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Innovation and Consultancy Services (ICS) is the principal source of internal consultancy services across the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), its Executive Agencies and Arm's-Length Bodies (ALBs). ICS was commissioned by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch (CSB) in April 2024 to complete an Arm's Length Body (ALB) Review of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA).

1.2 Introduction to ALB Reviews³

Government departments should complete regular reviews of their ALBs to ensure they are aligned to strategic objectives, well governed and providing value for money.

Such reviews are conducted in line with guidance including:

- *Guidance on the undertaking of Reviews of Public Bodies* (Cabinet Office, December 2022)⁴ – this is designed to build on and deal better with perceived limitations of the tailored review process. The guidance is supported by a Self-Assessment Model (SAM).
- *Partnerships between departments and arm's length bodies: Code of Good Practice*⁵ (Cabinet Office).

1.3 Introduction to this review

The Executive agreed, at its 16 December 2021 meeting, that a review of ALBs should be conducted in accordance with the commitment made in the New Decade New Approach (NDNA)⁶. The process required individual Departments to progress reviews of their ALBs and ultimately bring any significant recommendations for reform to the wider Executive for agreement.

In keeping with the requirement of good governance, DAERA commissioned ICS to conduct an ALB review of NIFHA. This review follows guidance⁷ on reviewing ALBs and, as proposed in the guidance, the steps of the review process will be followed in a proportionate manner.

³ ALB is the umbrella term for non-departmental (NDPB) public bodies, the Northern Ireland Fisheries Harbour Authority (NIFHA) is classed as a NDPB.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-bodies-review-programme/guidance-on-the-undertaking-of-reviews-of-public-bodies>.

⁵ *Partnerships with arm's length bodies: code of good practice* - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

⁶ *New Decade, New Approach* (2020).

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-bodies-review-programme/requirements-for-reviews-of-public-bodies>

Based on guidance, the ICS approach has been to complete the reviews in two phases, firstly establishing continued need and considering alternative delivery models. The second phase, where continued need is established, is an evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency and performance of the ALB. At the heart of decision making on continued need and appropriateness of delivery model are the 'Three Tests'⁸ where one 'pass' is required for continuance as a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB):

- Is this a technical function that needs external expertise to deliver?
- Is this a function that needs to be, and be seen to be, delivered with absolute political impartiality?
- Is this a function that needs to be delivered independently of ministers to establish facts and / or figures with integrity?

1.4 Additional Work Requested by the Client

In addition to the defined ALB review, the client requested additional work to be completed as part of an overall review of NIFHA.

The client requested that ICS complete a high-level structural review, that comprised an assessment of whether NIFHA is structured correctly and has sufficient numbers of staff to complete the work required in the short and longer term, particularly when considering capabilities for delivery of future capital projects.

There is also concern whether the self-funding model for NIFHA will provide sufficient income to fully meet the needs of the harbours and central management of the Authority. The client requested that ICS complete a high-level analysis of the funding model to determine sustainability.

1.5 Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for ICS's involvement in this assignment were as follows:

1. To conduct an NDPB Review of NIFHA including an assessment of the fit and requirement for NIFHA functions and appropriateness of governance arrangements.
2. To conduct a high level structural and staffing review to assess NIFHA's capacity within Headquarters to meet the expectation of the delivery model.
3. To conduct a high-level funding analysis to assess sustainability of the self-funding approach.

Table 1 provides information on the activities undertaken to meet the ToR.

⁸ [Public Bodies Handbook – Part 2. The Approvals Process for the Creation of New Arm's-Length Bodies: Guidance for Departments \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)p6.](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/p6)

Table 1. Terms of Reference

Activities to meet the Terms of Reference	
Heading	Activities
Continued Need	A light touch assessment of continued need for NIFHA.
Appropriateness of the Delivery Models	Analysis of the current NIFHA delivery model. Assessment of the structural need and numbers and how this is currently met. Analysis of the current structure, roles and responsibilities, and staffing numbers.
Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency	Assessment of the strategic alignment between Departmental priorities, NIFHA objectives and delivery, structure and impact: - Exploring in more depth how NIFHA meets Departmental objectives and any relevant performance metrics. - Exploring how performance is measured and if there are any improvements to how that is assessed. Providing an understanding, with examples, of how NIFHA impacts key services.
	Exploring strategic alignment with, and contribution to, DAERA objectives as part of NIFHA's role.
	A light-touch view on governance and opportunities to improve approaches in financial, budgetary and governance arrangements. A light touch assessment of the NIFHA self-funding model and its sustainability.
	Consider use of any relevant wider shared services.
	Any wider areas for improvement or future consideration that emerge during the review.

Table 2: Scope of the ALB Review

Review Requirement Quadrant	Review Actions
Efficacy: to provide assurance that NIFHA has a clear purpose and appropriate delivery model to deliver effective outcomes for citizens.	<u>Function:</u> Assessment of whether NIFHA has a clear remit, is up to date and remains relevant (government 3 tests).
	<u>Form:</u> Assessment of whether NIFHA's delivery model is correct to deliver effective outcomes for citizens.
	<u>Outcomes for Citizens:</u> Assessment of whether NIFHA has the correct systems and knowledge in place to deliver effective outcomes for citizens.
	<u>Performance:</u> Assessment of whether NIFHA has clear KPIs aligned to DAERA's strategic priorities through its delivery plan and government objectives.
Governance: to provide assurance that NIFHA's Board has a clear purpose, strategy and values, and operates in line with guidance requirements.	<u>Delivering wider government objectives:</u> Assessment of NIFHA's Board to drive efficiency and effectiveness and support the delivery of DAERA's wider objectives.
	<u>Purpose, leadership and effectiveness:</u> Assessment of whether NIFHA's Board has a clear

Review Requirement Quadrant	Review Actions
	purpose with appropriate membership in terms of skills, balance, diversity and size.
	<u>Appointments, skills and training</u> : Assessment of adherence to the appointments process for NIFHA's Board and opportunities provided to Board members for training and development.
	<u>Conduct and behaviour</u> : Assessment of the processes in place for NIFHA's Board to ensure appropriate conduct and behaviour in line with standards.
	<u>Effective financial and risk management and internal control</u> : Assessment of the processes in place for governance, risk management and internal control.
	<u>Transparency</u> : Assessment of NIFHA's Board in adhering to requirements of transparency.
Accountability : to provide assurance that clear accountability arrangements are in place for NIFHA.	<u>Effective sponsorship</u> : Assessment of whether the Sponsor team demonstrates appropriate links to NIFHA that can facilitate the delivery of government objectives.
	<u>Accountability of NIFHA to DAERA</u> : Assessment of whether there is an effective and appropriate relationship between DAERA and NIFHA.
	<u>Accountability of NIFHA to NI Assembly</u> : Assessment of accountability procedures in place for NI Assembly to be assured of the effectiveness and efficiency of NIFHA.
	<u>Accountability of NIFHA to other governmental functions</u> : Assessment of engagement with relevant government functions.
Efficiency : to provide assurance that NIFHA maximises value for money (VfM), whilst maintaining a focus on delivering a high-quality user experience.	<u>Financial management</u> : Assessment of processes in place for NIFHA's financial management.
	<u>Benchmarking Costs</u> : Assessment of whether NIFHA uses benchmarking in line with guidance on efficiency savings.
	<u>Digitisation</u> : Assessment on NIFHA's considerations in moving to digital channels.
	<u>Workforce</u> : Assessment of NIFHA's consideration of workforce and people strategies.

1.5.1 Outside the Scope of the Review

As a predominately 'light touch' review, the scope does not permit in-depth exploration of areas such as, but not restricted to, governance. This is consistent with the recommended approach to such a review, whereby some findings may indicate areas requiring deeper or wider attention. The need to address any such areas, where relevant, are included as recommendations of this review. However as additional works were requested on the self-funding model and structure these have been explored more fully.

It is also recognised that recommendations suggesting significant change could require an Equality Impact Assessment or other appropriate assessments. This would be the responsibility of the Department.

1.6 Acknowledgements

The ICS Review Team wishes to express sincere thanks to all the staff of NIFHA and DAERA who contributed to the review process. The information they provided, and their co-operation greatly helped the completion of this report. In addition, the ICS Review Team appreciates the time and information provided by the broader stakeholder groups, individuals and comparators consulted throughout the process.

2. Approach

2.1 Introduction

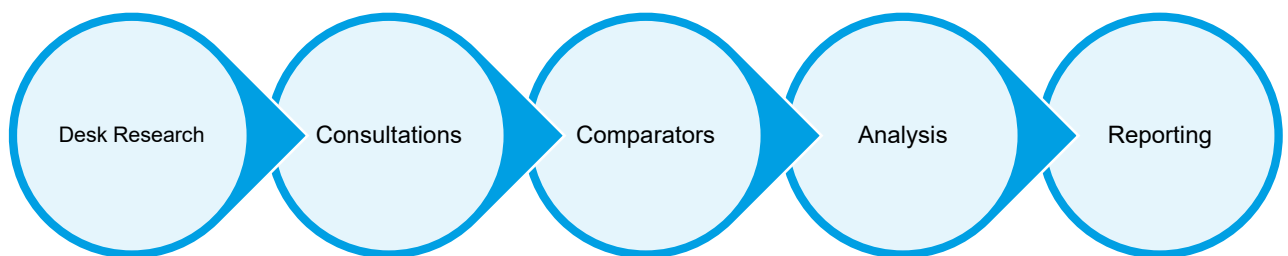
This section outlines the approach to the review and key methods utilised. Rather than providing a complete breakdown of the expansive range of activities conducted as part of the review, the focus is on reflecting the core elements of the methodology including desk-based research, stakeholder consultation, survey and comparator insights.

2.2 Approach to the Review

An evidence-based approach has been used within the review, with extensive information gathering and analysis to inform the key findings and recommendations.

Key stages of the approach are outlined below:

Figure 1: Approach



2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Desk-based Research

A wide range of documents were reviewed in preparation for consultations, including Annual Reports, Corporate Plans, Business Plans, individual strategies, board documentation, governance reports, job descriptions and business cases. Departmental documentation was also reviewed including Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) reports and DAERA Strategies.

2.3.2 Consultations

The ICS Review Team carried out wide ranging engagement with stakeholders. A full list of consultees is included at Appendix II. Key discussions were conducted with:

- DAERA staff, including the Deputy Secretary of Strategic Planning and Corporate Services Group, Head of the Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD), the Senior Sponsor, the ALB CSB and relevant strategic and policy leads;
- NIFHA Chief Executive and Senior Management Team (SMT);
- NIFHA Board Chair and 2 Board Members;
- NIFHA staff including the 3 Harbour Masters; and
- External stakeholders including vessel owners at each of the harbours, producers' organisations and sellers.

2.3.3 Comparators

The ICS Review Team carried out meetings with two comparator organisations one in Scotland and one in England that have similarities to NIFHA, outputs from these meetings are provided in Section 5 of the report.

2.4 Section Summary

This section outlines the structured, evidence-based approach taken to conduct the review. The methodology focused on four core elements: desk-based research, stakeholder consultations, survey analysis, and comparator insights. Rather than detailing every activity, the section highlights the key stages and tools used to gather and analyse information.

Extensive desk research was undertaken, reviewing a wide range of internal and departmental documents to inform consultations. Engagement was broad, involving DAERA officials, NIFHA leadership and staff, Board members, and external stakeholders such as harbour users and industry representatives. The review also drew on insights from two comparator organisations in Scotland and England to provide external context and benchmarking.

Together, these methods provided a robust foundation for the review's key findings and recommendations, detailed in the later sections. This is further developed in Section 3, which provides an overview of NIFHA.

3. Overview of NIFHA

3.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of key information about NIFHA.

3.2 Overview of NIFHA

NIFHA is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) sponsored by DAERA. It was formed in 1973 under the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973⁹.

NIFHA has a statutory responsibility for improving, managing and maintaining the three fishery harbours and harbour estates of Ardglass, Kilkeel, and Portavogie and for operating and maintaining the facilities that are provided at these harbours.

The main sources of income for NIFHA are:

- Levies on the gross value of fish landings;
- Berthing charges;
- Revenues generated from ice sales;
- Slipway services; and
- Rentals from land leases.

The negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in migratory workers, EU Exit changes and inflationary factors on NIFHA's operational costs has resulted in Grant in Aid funding from DAERA to cover the operational deficit. The expectation was that NIFHA would return to being operationally self-funded in 2025/26, however, it was reported to the Review Team that external factors impacting on the viability of business for small vessel owners, have created uncertainty for NIFHA's ongoing income. The Department provided £281k¹⁰ Grant in Aid funding for 2023/24, with the expectation that NIFHA would identify the means to reduce costs and / or identify other revenue streams to return to self-funding.

As an NDPB, NIFHA is governed by a Board where the Chair and other non-executive members are appointed by the Minister. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NIFHA is appointed by and is responsible to this Board.

The relationship between NIFHA and DAERA is managed by the ALB CSB, within DAERA's Strategic Planning and Corporate Services Group.

The last full ALB review for NIFHA was completed by Business Consultancy Services (BCS) in 2015. In 2020, following the New Decade, New Approach agreement, DAERA completed a desk-based exercise to review areas within NIFHA including budget,

⁹ The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973

¹⁰ Data provided by the ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch

staffing, function and governance. The outputs from both reviews have informed this ALB review.

NIFHA Vision

“Delivering safe, sustainable harbours, supporting healthy seas and thriving seafood communities”.

NIFHA's Mission

“To fulfil its statutory duties by safely, efficiently and sustainably providing a range of facilities and services which meet the needs of its customers and stakeholders”.

NIFHA Primary Functions

- Improve, manage and maintain the three fishery harbours and harbour estates of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie;
- Operate such facilities as may be provided at the harbours;
- Dredge and maintain the harbour berths, channels and entrances;
- Lease, dispose of or develop land vested in the Authority; and
- Construct, alter or extend any tidal work.

Other Key Functions

- Provision of safe navigation channels and berths;
- Maintenance of a safe operating environment within the harbours;
- Provision of services to the vessels including ice, water and electricity;
- Provision of services to repurpose, recycle and dispose of various waste streams;
- Provision and management of fish market facilities;
- Provision of slipway facilities for vessel maintenance and repair; and
- Estate management and development.

Leadership and Staffing

NIFHA is operationally led by a Chief Executive who has overall responsibility for the Authority's performance.

At the time fieldwork was undertaken NIFHA had a total of 22 employees that included 4 part-time staff and equated to 18 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff members. The staff are located across the organisation's headquarters in Downpatrick and the harbours located in Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie. Staffing and structure will be covered in more detail in Section 6 of this report.

Financials

In 2023/24, NIFHA was allocated total funds of £1,863,060 from DAERA (see Table 3 below).

This included capital grants from the Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD) via the Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund (MEFF) for capital works as well as a MEFF revenue grant which is funding for a salary within NIFHA.

The budget is discussed in more detail in Section 8 of this report.

Table 3: Funding Breakdown

Government Grants	2024
DAERA Capital Grant	£128,668
DEFRA via DAERA Capital Grant	£520,063
DAERA Grant in Aid	£391,000
MEFF Capital Grant	£776,222
MEFF Revenue Grant	£47,107
Total grants to NIFHA	£1,863,060

Performance

NIFHA has 82 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are used for reporting to the Board on a quarterly basis. These KPIs are organised into specific categories to reflect key performance areas. A breakdown of these is in Table 4.

Table 4: Breakdown of KPIs

Category of KPI	Total number of KPIs
Ardglass Harbour	11
Kilkeel Harbour	12
Portavogie Harbour	12
Finance and Administration	12
Project Management	11
Human Resources	10
Governance and Operational	4
Environmental	10
Total	82

Board

The Partnership Agreement between NIFHA and DAERA states that the

“Composition of the NIFHA Board is provided for in Article 5 of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973. This provides that the NIFHA Board consists of a Chairperson and not less than four and not more than eight other members who shall be appointed by the Minister”.

At the time of this report the Board of NIFHA consisted of a Chair and 6 Members, appointed by the DAERA Minister. There are 2 committees in place:

- Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC); and
- Finance and Personnel Committee.

Both meet at least three times per year.

A new Chair was recruited in December 2023 and their term will last for 4 years. From February 2024 the Chair has subsumed the Finance and Personnel committee into the wider board meetings due to the ongoing budget deficit position.

3.3 Section Summary

This section has provided a high-level overview of NIFHA, outlining its purpose, core functions, funding structure, and governance arrangements. This context sets the foundation for the more detailed analysis presented in the subsequent sections of the report.

4. Strategic Context

4.1 Introduction

It is important to acknowledge the strategic context within which this review is being completed and within which NIFHA operates. DAERA and NIFHA work in a complex environment, and this section provides a selection of key contextual points that offer the most relevant context to this Review.

Table 5: Key Strategic Documentation in Northern Ireland

Document	Description	Relevance to NIFHA
New Decade, New Approach ¹¹	The 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) of January 2020 restored the NI Executive after a three-year suspension. The NI Executive agreed in December 2021 that "...the Executive will as a matter of priority take forward reviews of civil service reform, including procurement and appointment processes, public appointments and arm's length bodies".	This review of NIFHA, aligns to the ALB review requirements of the NDNA.
Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 ¹²	There are 3 missions to include – 1. People 2. Planet 3. Prosperity There are then 9 immediate priorities that support the delivery of these 3 missions.	Of the 9 immediate priorities NIFHA aligns to 2. One of the priorities is " <i>Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment</i> ". NIFHA has a dedicated Environmental Officer based at the head office. Across the 3 Harbours NIFHA is developing capital projects that will support the Government's goal in reaching net zero. For example, NIFHA has an ongoing project across the 3 harbours for the installation of solar panels. The second priority to which NIFHA aligns is " <i>Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy</i> ". NIFHA aims to be competitive within the fishing sector for fees and charges and also to

¹¹ [New Decade A New Approach \(2020\)](#)

¹² [Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most \(northernireland.gov.uk\)](#)

Document	Description	Relevance to NIFHA
		encourage the fishing sector to remain sustainable for vessel owners.
DAERA's Vision	<i>'Delivering a net zero nature positive future, supporting sustainable agriculture and thriving rural communities.'</i>	The NIFHA vision is <i>"Delivering safe, sustainable harbours, supporting healthy seas and thriving seafood communities".</i> This aligns with DAERA's vision
Draft Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework for Northern Ireland¹³	A key consideration of the draft Green Growth strategy is the importance that a healthy and sustainable environment plays in food security and the long-term productive capacity of the food, farming, fishing and forestry sectors and their resilience. NB: At the time of reporting, the finalised Strategy was not published as it was pending approval by the NI Executive.	NIFHA aligns to DAERA's draft Green Growth Strategy as it is working with DAERA to ensure that fishing remains sustainable in NI through keeping landing fees competitive and sustainable for fishers.
DAERA Business plan 2024-2025¹⁴	One of the key priorities that has been identified by DAERA includes supporting sustainable, resilient and productive fishing sectors. DAERA aims to achieve this through using the Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund (MEFF)	NIFHA works closely with the Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD) to ensure that applications to MEFF support DAERA's key priorities.

4.2 Wider Context

There are also wider contexts that impact on how NIFHA operates. Below are four key areas.

Growth in the offshore vessel industry (guard vessels¹⁵) has become a useful additional income to the NI fishing fleet. This has become a sector in its own right, providing services and expertise well beyond the Irish Sea. Invest NI has identified that with future offshore renewable developments and its established track record, the NI offshore vessel services sector value could double over the coming years to more than

¹³ [Green Growth Strategy | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://daera-ni.gov.uk/green-growth-strategy)

¹⁴ [DAERA Business Plan 2024-25 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://daera-ni.gov.uk/daera-business-plan-2024-25)

¹⁵ A guard vessel is guardian of the submarine cable industry and other offshore operations. Each guard vessel maintains a round-the-clock watch over its assigned project.

£20m per annum¹⁶. NIFHA has been witness to this growth particularly within Kilkeel Harbour, where a number of the fishing vessels are being used as guard vessels.

Climate change is having a significant impact on the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. Here are some key points that show this impact:

1. **Shifts in Fish Distribution:** Many fish species are moving northwards or into deeper waters as sea temperatures rise. This shift affects the availability of traditional fish stocks for the Northern Irish fishing industry¹⁷,
2. **Changes in Species Composition:** Warmer waters are leading to an increase in species like squid and Atlantic bluefin tuna, while cold-water species such as Atlantic wolffish are declining¹⁸.
3. **Ocean Acidification:** Increased CO₂ levels are causing ocean acidification that negatively impacts shellfish populations. This could lead to a reduction in shellfish production, potentially decreasing the fishery's net present value by 14% to 28% by 2100¹⁹.

Economic and Social Challenges: The fishing industry faces economic challenges due to fluctuating fish stocks and changing regulations. These changes can affect the livelihoods of those dependent on fishing²⁰,

Policy and Management: The EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has been a significant factor in managing fish stocks and ensuring sustainable fishing practices. However, adapting to climate change requires continuous updates to these policies²¹. The EU's Common Fisheries Policy is the main policy mechanism impacting upon the sea fishing industry within Northern Ireland, past, present and future²².

4.3 Section Summary

This section has provided a key context for this review and the operations of NIFHA. Areas outlined will be drawn upon in subsequent sections as part of the analysis and assessment of continued need, delivery models and wider opportunities for enhanced effectiveness and efficiency within NIFHA. The next section builds on the strategic context to further explore 2 comparators from other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom.

¹⁶ [Microsoft Word - FSDP final report April 2021.docx](#)

¹⁷ [Impacts on Commercial and Recreational Fisheries Relevant to the UK and Ireland.pdf](#)

¹⁸ [Impacts on Commercial and Recreational Fisheries Relevant to the UK and Ireland.pdf](#)

¹⁹ [Impacts on Commercial and Recreational Fisheries Relevant to the UK and Ireland.pdf](#)

²⁰ [The Sea Fishing industry in Northern Ireland-issues, challenges and opportunities](#)

²¹ [The Sea Fishing industry in Northern Ireland-issues, challenges and opportunities](#)

²² [Northern Ireland's fisheries sectors – background and possible 'Brexit' considerations](#)

5. Comparator Insights

5.1 Introduction

This section gives an overview of how other jurisdictions seek to manage harbours and provides an analysis of commonality and key differences.

The Review Team met with the two comparator organisations:

- Comparator 1 Scottish Harbour
- Comparator 2 English Harbour

Although direct comparisons are not possible as these organisations have different status and staffing, they are organisations operating in a similar sphere to NIFHA and with aspects which are useful for overall comparison. The overview of findings from the comparator interviews is in Appendix III of this report, with a summary of the key findings detailed in the next section.

5.2 Key Findings from Comparator Organisations

There is commonality in the key functions of both organisations when compared to NIFHA. All provide essential services to vessel owners with the comparators servicing more leisure boats compared to NIFHA which operates primarily commercial harbours.

The Scottish Harbour has responsibility for 6 harbours with the largest harbour being the main commercial port. The majority of staff (9 of the 13) are based at the largest harbour but are flexible to move to other harbour locations as needed. It is important to note that the 6 locations are in close proximity to each other.

The English Harbour Authority has responsibility for 3 harbours and a total of 30 staff that work across the 3 locations. Some staff are seasonal and only work between May and September as the harbours are used for leisure fishing.

Staffing of both comparator organisations contrast with NIFHA, where the 18 FTE staff work in fixed locations within the 3 Harbours and 1 Headquarters. Section 9 explores the staff and structure of NIFHA in more detail.

5.2.1 Structure and KPIs

Both comparator organisations are owned by councils and have quarterly governance reporting requirements. They engage with stakeholders on a quarterly basis to ensure that they can feed back stakeholder updates as needed to the respective councils.

They have a similar governance approach to NIFHA, with business plans being required and works subject to an annual budget.

The Scottish Harbour reports to the council on 9 KPIs and the English Harbour report against 15 KPIs. This contrasts with NIFHA's 82 KPIs that are summarised and reported to the Board of Directors on a quarterly basis.

5.2.2 Budget and Planning

The Scottish Harbour has combated the constraints of an annual budget by producing a 10-year strategic plan that outlines the improvements required over the period on an annual basis. This is reviewed each year with the council and means if things change, for example in the case of storm damage to the harbours, the council committee are well informed and, in that case, can schedule improvements to be carried out sooner than forecasted in the 10-year plan. The council is able to make more efficient decisions as they know the short, medium and long-term improvements required.

The English Harbours' Masterplan was developed in 2012 in response to a recommendation by the Department for Transport. This document is a framework to set the scene for the future of the port and to ensure sustainable development. It outlines the strategic planning for the medium to long term for the harbour and enables local government to plan their own developments around the Masterplan.

5.2.3 Income Streams

The two comparator organisations encounter the same challenges as NIFHA in relation to fishing in EU waters and the increasing demand for Guard vessel works.

Both comparators have developed new income streams to address the challenges. The Scottish Harbour has removed a pier to facilitate the installation of wind farms at their harbour, which has changed their financial position from deficit to now self-funding and profits of £119,000 in the last financial year. They both have landing fee²³ structures in place. The Scottish Harbour has an additional 1.5% landing fee for a gross catch where the value is over £7,500 and the English Harbour has landing fee of 1.5% if the catch is brought in by land (transported by vehicles to land).

The English Harbour has leased out their ice plant and chill rooms to auctioneers and lease their marinas to a management company. This generates additional income for the Harbour and allows the Authority to remain self-funding.

5.3 Analysis

The Scottish Harbour's 10-year plan and the English Harbour Masterplan have similarities to the Northern Ireland Fishing and Seafood Development Programme²⁴ (FSDP). This was published in 2021 by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and

²³ A landing fee is the fee collected on the value or weight of the fish caught.

²⁴ [Final report from the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme \(FSDP\) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

outlines the improvements needed for NIFHA harbours. At the time of reporting, this programme has not been implemented.

Lessons can be learned from the comparator organisations, in relation to their diversification of income streams, KPIs and landing fees. The previous ALB Triennial Review of NIFHA, completed in February 2015²⁵, recommended that NIFHA complete a benchmarking exercise against an organisation that is recognised for customer service. Outputs from the benchmarking was to be used by NIFHA to feed into the development of KPIs. Although NIFHA regularly completes benchmarking for landing fees, there are additional lessons that could be learned from comparators in relation to levels of reporting, diversification into wind farms and the option to lease some services to improve income streams. These will be reviewed further in section 9 of the report.

5.4 Section Summary

This section has provided a short overview of harbour management practices in two other UK jurisdictions. While direct comparisons with NIFHA are limited due to differences in organisational status and staffing, valuable insights were gained.

Key Findings

- **Operational Scope:** Both comparators manage multiple harbours, with staffing models that allow flexibility across locations. In contrast, NIFHA staff are fixed to specific sites.
- **Governance and KPIs:** The comparators report to local councils and operate under business plans and annual budgets. However, NIFHA reports against a significantly higher number of KPIs (82) compared to Scottish (9) and English (15) Harbours.
- **Strategic Planning:** The Scottish Harbour employs a rolling 10-year strategic plan, while the English Harbour uses a Masterplan developed in response to national guidance. These approaches support proactive infrastructure planning and stakeholder engagement.
- **Income Diversification:** Both comparators have adapted to industry challenges by developing new income streams. Scottish Harbour's wind farm integration and English Harbour's leasing of facilities have enabled them to become self-funding.

The strategic planning and income diversification approaches of the comparator organisations align with elements of the Northern Ireland Fishing and Seafood Development Programme (FSDP), which remains unimplemented. Lessons from these organisations, particularly around KPI rationalisation, stakeholder engagement, and commercial innovation, offer valuable opportunities for NIFHA and will be explored further in Section 9.

²⁵ BCS 2015 NIFHA Final Report – F11/24/403024

6. Continued Need for NIFHA

6.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of key findings and provides a ‘light touch’ analysis and assessment on the continued need of NIFHA as an ALB.

6.2 Findings on Continued Need: Departmental Perspective

The Review Team consulted the ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch, Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD), Sea Fisheries Policy and the Deputy Secretary of Strategic Planning and Corporate Services. The consensus of DAERA personnel is that there is a strong continued need for NIFHA for the foreseeable future. An overview of key consultation findings is provided in Table 6.

Table 6. Departmental Perspective on Continued Need

Area	Findings
Strengths of NIFHA	• DAERA views NIFHA as being well organised with robust accounts and strong governance. • NIFHA provides a valuable service despite financial and staffing constraints on consistency and continuity of services. • A common theme was that NIFHA provides a good service that delivers, and it would be quickly noticed if these essential services were not provided. • Audit reports provide assurances to DAERA on governance and performance. • Access to wider UK grants is positive. • There is strong commitment from the NIFHA Senior Management Team (SMT). • Health and Safety at the harbours is well managed, with staff having good knowledge of requirements. • There is a good relationship with NIFHA.
Alignment to Departmental priorities and objectives	• Agreement that the work of NIFHA aligns well to Departmental priorities. • ALBs are invited to a DAERA Ministerial briefing annually, in which the Minister states their priorities. • Awareness that NIFHA understands the policies and requirements, despite difficulties due to constraints and timing of grants available. • Although NIFHA aligns well, there is a need for this to be demonstrated clearly in the annual business plan, to specify links to the strategies and to clarify the alignment with departmental priorities.

Area	Findings
	The NIFHA business plan needs to be provided earlier in the year to allow the Department to assess the requirements for opening allocations.
Impact if the current functions did not continue	- Without NIFHA to complete the functions there would be a detrimental impact on the fishing industry. The Harbour Masters and other NIFHA staff are active in resolving issues and concerns including for example, health and safety and dredging. - The fishing industry has been impacted by EU Exit, so for NIFHA not to be in place would cause a further negative impact to the NI fishing sector. - Without NIFHA HQ, although the harbours would continue with daily activities, there would be an impact on operational oversight, lack of prioritisation of spend and strategic oversight. This would require DAERA to take on management of the harbours.

The overall consensus from the Department is there is a continued need for NIFHA and for the essential services provided to the fishing sector. Consultees highlighted the various adverse impacts on the Department and the fishing industry if NIFHA was no longer in place.

6.3 Findings on Continued Need: NIFHA Perspective

The NIFHA Board, SMT and staff were clear that there was a continued need for the Authority. An overview of findings is provided in Table 7.

Table 7. NIFHA Perspective on Continued Need

Area	Finding
Strengths of NIFHA	- For a small organisation, the work required is always done and delivery is agile, although it was stated that finances are an issue for the response and to be able to deliver at pace. - The approach taken to the fleets is consistent across the 3 harbours and for the local fishing community. - NIFHA ensures that there are safe and effective working harbours. - NIFHA keeps stability in the harbours and keeps political pressures out of the harbours. - The new Board members and a newly appointed Chair provide a new focus with clear objectives.
Alignment to Departmental priorities and objectives	- Promotion of sustainable fishing is in alignment with DAERA priorities. - NIFHA consultees stated that it was hard to specify how NIFHA aligns to the priorities and objectives because, at the time of consultation, NIFHA was not aware of DAERA

Area	Finding
	priorities due to a delay in publishing the DAERA business plan.
Impact if the current functions did not continue	- The 3 harbours are required, and staff would need to remain in place, to maintain and manage the harbours. However, it was considered that the HQ location could cease to exist (this will be explored further in section 9.4). - Loss of all aspects of NIFHA would mean that there would be no organised approach to the harbours as NIFHA arranges the licenses of the buyers, and plans and schedules the fish markets, slipways and pontoons.

The above highlights the view of continued need for the organisation and its functions. Themes emerged across the Departmental and NIFHA perspectives on the alignment of the Authority in promoting sustainable fishing by keeping the harbours safe and maintaining and improving the harbours. During consultations DAERA saw the alignment very clearly, compared to NIFHA who found it hard to see the alignment.

6.4 Wider stakeholder perspective

The Review approach involved extensive qualitative discussions to obtain a wide range of stakeholder views across users of the three harbours and other external stakeholders.

Table 8. Wider Stakeholder Perspective on Continued Need

Area	Finding
Strengths of NIFHA	- Stakeholders value the support of the Harbour Masters at the harbours. - Some of the businesses surrounding the harbours valued the flexibility of the Harbour Masters when using the slipways. With staff at the harbours being sighted as “approachable and reasonable”. - The dredger work is appreciated, and the stakeholders can see the difference that this makes to the harbours as it is working well. - Smooth running of the harbour and slipway are valued. - Pontoons are clear and clean. NIFHA maintains the pontoons and treats them with salt. - NIFHA has a good understanding of what is needed in the harbour.

Area	Finding
Impact if the current functions did not continue	• There is always the need for an authority to be in place to deliver these services. • While all stakeholders value the slipway services and the smooth operating of this facility, one stakeholder stated that they would lose 50% of their business if there was no slipway at Kilkeel. The slipway is viewed as an asset to the businesses in Kilkeel. • NIFHA allows for a joined up approach. Although, this could still be possible if overseen by DAERA, it would not be possible if the harbours were managed by e.g. local councils.

The prevailing view from discussions was that NIFHA plays a key role in maintaining the 3 harbours and that stakeholders value the support that Harbour Masters provide. The booking and scheduling of the slipways are appreciated by stakeholders, with the businesses located around Kilkeel harbour viewing the slipway as an asset to their businesses in Kilkeel.

6.5 Analysis

The Review Team has identified from consultations with DAERA, NIFHA and stakeholders that there is current and future need for NIFHA; the work that is completed in the 3 harbours; the HQ oversight; governance, coordination and flexibility; and the commitment from the HQ SMT and Board. It is considered by consultees that provision of essential services by NIFHA is done consistently and at a competitive rate. The health and safety role of NIFHA was highlighted by consultees and the knowledge of NIFHA staff was noted.

Support for continued need has been seen across the Department. The Review Team sees clear alignment between the role of NIFHA and the DAERA strategic objectives. The consultees in each of the groups highlighted that if NIFHA was to no longer exist, other organisations, including DAERA, would not have the capacity, and in some instances the capability, to manage demand for the continuation of necessary services being offered by NIFHA. This would have adverse impacts with costs to the public purse, businesses and the wider economy.

The Review Team was advised that, although NIFHA is promoting sustainable fishing, which aligns to departmental priorities, there is further work required to demonstrate this alignment to departmental priorities.

6.6 Section Summary

The Review Team concludes that there is a clear and ongoing need for NIFHA, a view consistently supported by DAERA, NIFHA staff, and external stakeholders. The Authority plays a critical role in delivering essential services, maintaining harbour infrastructure, and supporting the fishing industry across Northern Ireland.

Key Points

- NIFHA's governance, operational consistency, and strategic oversight are valued across all stakeholder groups.
- The Authority delivers services efficiently and safely, with strong commitment from its Senior Management Team and Board.
- Stakeholders highlighted that no other organisation, including DAERA, currently has the capacity or capability to take on NIFHA's full range of responsibilities without significant disruption or cost.
- While NIFHA aligns with DAERA's strategic objectives, further work is needed to demonstrate alignment with departmental priorities.

The continued need for NIFHA should be reassessed at the next review point (in 3–5 years), or earlier if there are significant changes in circumstances.

7. Appropriateness of the delivery model

7.1 Introduction

This section builds on the assessment of continued need for NIFHA by providing a light touch analysis of the current delivery model, alongside a brief review of alternative models. This includes assessment against the ‘three tests’ for continuation as a NDPB in line with guidance.

7.2 Alternative Delivery Models

In line with guidance, the Review Team considered each of the following delivery models that are recommended for consideration when conducting this form of review. One model was shortlisted for further analysis, as noted below.

Table 9. Shortlisting of Alternative Delivery Models

Delivery Model	Shortlist for analysis?	Rationale
1. Bring HQ activity in-house	Yes	This model will be assessed further to consider the rationale for independence compared to HQ role delivery in-house.
2. Merge with another body	No	Mergers can be a viable option where there are other organisations with significant service overlap or other synergies. There can be benefits in merging different organisations, with potential savings in supporting costs, accommodation and senior management. However, within the existing DAERA ALBs, there are no sufficiently similar organisations to enable a merger.
3. Less formal structure	No	Given the statutory requirement for NIFHA services and the technical expertise required to deliver statutory functions, a less formal structure is not regarded an appropriate option.
4. Move out of central government	No	The work of NIFHA supports Departmental objectives as well as wider government objectives. Movement to local government, voluntary or other sectors is not viewed as a viable option as no existing similar provision was identified in these sectors. There is also no appetite from the Department to explore this further as the Harbour Authority used to sit within local government before moving to the Department. Due to the current funding model of NIFHA this would not be appropriate or affordable for local government.

Delivery Model	Shortlist for analysis?	Rationale
5. Commercial model	No	A commercial model was not viewed as appropriate in line with the regulatory services that are delivered by NIFHA. There was no appetite from either the Department or NIFHA to move to a commercial model as this could impact the sustainability of the 3 harbours. If NIFHA became a commercial model the landing fees and the cost of their services would be likely to increase because they would need to at least financially break even. This would impact on sustainability for fishers in the area. In addition, the current arrangements means that NIFHA receives 100% of grants from DAERA. If NIFHA ran under a commercial model, they would have to match fund at least 25% of any grant received from DAERA.
6. Abolish	No	Given the analysis for continued need, the Review Team has provided a view supporting the continued need of NIFHA and its functions. As discussed previously, consultees provided a strong consensus that, should NIFHA's regulatory services not exist, there would be potential negative consequences for vessel owners, fishers and businesses within the 3 harbours and a wider impact on the fishing sector of Northern Ireland.

7.2.1 Bring HQ activity in-house

This option involves bringing the functions of NIFHA HQ in-house to be delivered by DAERA personnel. During consultation with DAERA and NIFHA this was presented as an option and the Review Team sought the opinion of the Department and NIFHA on this option. It is the view of the Department that this would not be appropriate, as any harbour authority should be distanced from the Department and direct Ministerial influence. The Department noted that the HQ is required for strategic oversight of NIFHA, coordination of the work undertaken and prioritisation of expenditure.

NIFHA stated that there is a need from the fishing sector for the harbour authority to act independently of Ministers and to deliver services with impartiality. NIFHA provides consistency of approach across the 3 locations of the harbours for all ongoing activities, maintenance and improvements to ensure that no single harbour is favoured.

The rationale for the need for NIFHA HQ will be discussed in Section 9.4 of the report.

The Review Team's conclusion is that the HQ is required because of their role in providing equity across the 3 harbours in relation to maintenance and access to funding. This ensures that no favouritism or preferential treatment takes place.

7.3 The Three Tests and Continuation as an NDPB

In line with guidance, at least one of the three tests must be met to recommend continuation of a NDPB. The assessment below is based on consultation and survey findings alongside the Review Team's independent assessment.

Table 10. Three Tests Assessment

Test	Assessment
1. Is this a technical function for which external expertise is needed?	Partially Met There is a clear requirement for expertise and knowledge of working harbours to effectively deliver NIFHA's regulatory functions of maintaining and improving the harbours. This test can only be partially met as some of the skills can be taught and developed in-house. However, the Department values the technical functions delivered by NIFHA, on which they also draw to provide input to policy teams on the development of legislation. It is therefore the view of the Review Team that NIFHA partially meets this test.
2. Is this a function which needs to be, and be seen to be, delivered with absolute political impartiality?	Met The fishing sector dictates that NIFHA's work requires political impartiality to provide credibility in delivery of their statutory functions. It is important that NIFHA is viewed as being independent from Ministers. NIFHA's role is to manage the 3 harbours and to ensure that there is a fairness and equality across the 3 locations. It is the view of the Review Team that this test is fully met.
3. Is this a function which needs to be delivered independently of Ministers to establish facts and/or figures with integrity?	Not Met Whilst NIFHA establishes facts and figures through their functions, it is not essential that this element is delivered independently of Ministers.

7.4 Summary

The Review Team assessed six alternative delivery models in line with review guidance. Of these, only one, bringing NIFHA HQ activity in-house to DAERA, was shortlisted for further analysis. However, both DAERA and NIFHA expressed concerns about this model, citing the need for political impartiality, strategic oversight, and equitable service delivery across the three harbours. The Review Team concluded that maintaining an independent HQ is essential to ensure fairness and consistency.

Other models, including merging with another body, adopting a less formal structure, moving out of central government, transitioning to a commercial model, or abolishing NIFHA, were all deemed unsuitable due to statutory requirements, lack of viable alternatives, funding constraints, and the risk of negative impacts on the fishing sector.

The Review Team applied the standard three tests for determining the appropriateness of continuing NIFHA as an NDPB. The organisation meets the critical test of political impartiality and partially meets the need for technical expertise, therefore supporting the continuation of NIFHA as an NDPB for this review period (3-5 years). Alternative delivery models were found to be either unviable or inappropriate, reinforcing the case for maintaining NIFHA's current structure.

Recommendation 1

The current status of NIFHA as an ALB (i.e. NDPB) should be maintained for this review period (3-5years).

8. Self-Funding Model

8.1 Introduction

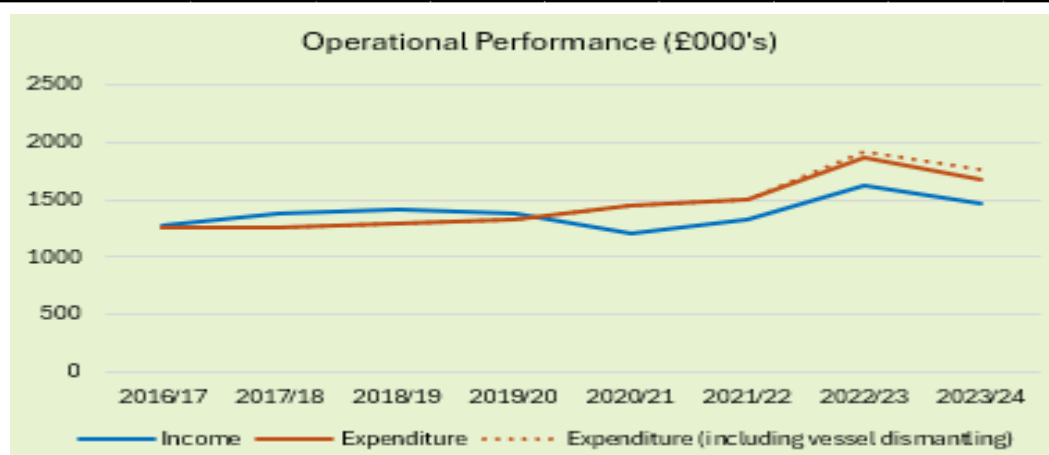
NIFHA's ambition is to return to a self-funding model, and this is also the hope of the Department. This section will reflect the findings from the review and whether this is achievable and realistic for NIFHA.

8.2 Performance and Current State

Before assessing the ability to achieve self-funding, the Review Team reviewed the current financial position of NIFHA. The table below provides a breakdown of NIFHA's income and expenditure from financial year 2023/24 and provides data back to 2016/17.

Table 11. Operational Performance of NIFHA²⁶

Operational Performance (£000's)								
	2023/24 e	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17
	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000
Income	1,458	1,613	1,332	1,198	1,372	1,416	1,381	1,268
Expenditure	1,677	1,856	1,498	1,453	1,335	1,292	1,260	1,261
Surplus/Deficit	-219	-243	-166	-255	37	124	121	7
Vessel Dismantling	90	67	0	0	0	0	0	0
Net Surplus/Deficit	-309	-310	-166	-255	37	124	121	7
	-15%	-15%	-12%	-21%	3%	9%	9%	1%



²⁶ NIFHA Board Pack from 13 March 2024.

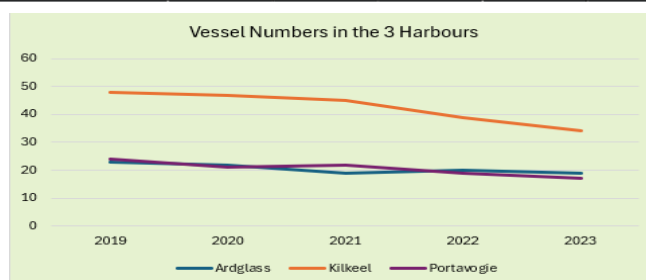
The above table and chart highlight a trend towards declining financial viability. Since 2019/20 expenditure has exceeded income. There have been various external factors that impacted the level of costs and the inability to increase income and include:

- EU Exit: changes to the areas where fishing was allowed within the Irish seas and other European waters.
- Migrant Workers and Crewing requirements: at the time of reporting, workers were only permitted to crew when the vessel was over 12 miles from shore. Over 12 miles was deemed to be outside UK waters, outside UK control and therefore vessel owners were not legally required to pay UK salary rates (circa £30k per year). If a local vessel owner was required to fish within the 12 miles of the shore it was not as sustainable to use migrant workers because of the salary cost. The Review Team has been informed that in November 2024, the Government committed to closing this loophole that exists in the Employment Rights Bill²⁷
- Recovery from the Covid Pandemic. This has a big impact on the fishing industry, with:
 - Some owners of smaller vessels having to cease their business.
 - Some owners changing use of their vessels as fishing vessels to usage as guard vessels to secure work throughout the year.
 - Some owners tying up their vessels outside the fishing season.

There has been a decrease in the number of vessels over 10m at each of the harbours, over the last 5 years (see Table 12). The number of vessels over 10m has decreased by 26%, with the largest harbour, Kilkeel, seeing the largest decrease.

Table 12. Vessels over 10m Numbers between 2019 – 2023 across the 3 Harbours²⁸

Vessel Numbers	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Ardglass	19	20	19	22	23
Kilkeel	34	39	45	47	48
Portavogie	17	19	22	21	24
	70	78	86	90	95



²⁷ [Thousands left without protection from slavery in Employment Rights Bill loophole | The Independent](#)

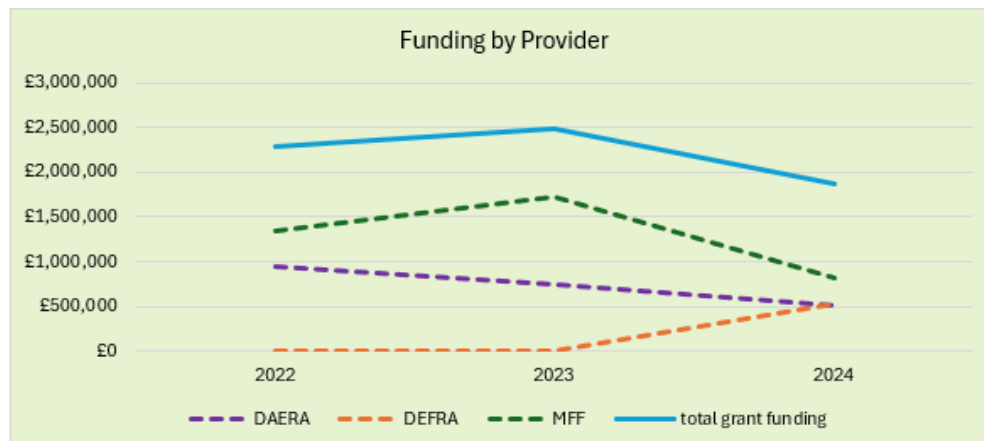
²⁸ Taken from NIFHA Accounts 2023

8.3 NIFHA funding Analysis

Since 2019/20, NIFHA has been operating in a deficit, with an impact on income from the numbers of vessels over 10m decreasing across the 3 harbours (Table 12). DAERA has been providing funding to NIFHA to allow HQ and harbour operations to be maintained. Resource funding covers the grant in aid for operational costs. NIFHA submits their business plan which is reviewed and challenged where necessary by the Department. NIFHA also applies for capital grants for the improvements to the harbours. Table 13 below provides detail of all funding received by NIFHA.

Table 13. NIFHA Grants and Funding income²⁹

Government Grants	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22
DAERA Capital Grant	£128,668	£477,622	£615,576
DEFRA Capital Grant	£520,063		
DAERA Grant in Aid	£391,000	£273,000	£335,000
MEFF Capital Grant	£776,222	£1,663,918	£1,265,790
MEFF Revenue Grant	£47,107	£67,405	£77,742
Total grants to NIFHA	£1,863,060	£2,481,945	£2,294,108



The 2 DAERA grants, as a percentage of total grants to NIFHA, account for 41% of grants in 2022, 30% in 2023, and 28% in 2024. In 2024, new, capital funding has been introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). 75% funding was received from DEFRA through the UK Seafood (UKSF) Infrastructure Scheme round 2.

This means that DAERA has funded the shortfall of 25% of the capital projects and NIFHA has been able to avail of 100% funded projects. The £520k in 2023/24 (Table 13) and the £2.2m (Table 14) account for the Portavogie Slipway project that is being delivered over a 2-year period.

²⁹ Taken from NIFHA's accounts data by Finance Officer on request. Figures for the financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23 are from the NIFHA Report and Accounts for year end 21 March 2023. The 2024 financial year figures were provided by NIFHA.

In addition to the grants above, NIFHA receives funding from the Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund (MEFF). The capital grant is for capital projects that are 100% funded through DAERA; the revenue grant is the contribution from DAERA for the NIFHA Project Manager post (50% funded) and Environmental Officer post (75% funded).

NIFHA has forecasted the income from grants in the table below for the current financial year.

Table 14. NIFHA Projected 2024/25 Income from Grants

Government Grants	Estimated 2024/25
DAERA Capital Grant	£245,000
DEFRA Capital Grant	£2,297,184
DAERA Grant in Aid	£786,000
MEFF Capital Grant	£765,728
MEFF Revenue Grant	£71,825
Total projected grants to NIFHA	£4,165,738

NIFHA forecasted that income will increase to £4.1m based on the Northern Ireland FSDP recommendations. The FSDP was published in 2021 by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to plan the future needs of the fishing industry after EU Exit to remain sustainable in Northern Ireland. It is important to note that at the time of writing the report, this programme had not been implemented.

8.4 Consultation findings

8.4.1 Self-Funding Model

The Review Team consulted with stakeholders in DAERA and NIFHA (see Appendix II) about the self-funding model to establish if it was feasible and realistic for NIFHA to return to self-funding. The Review Team was informed during consultations that NIFHA has a statutory obligation to ensure that their revenue covers their operational costs. The Review Team was also informed that this statutory obligation was included in the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973. The Review Team was unable to find this reference in this 1973 Order. However, it is noted in Managing Public Money Northern Ireland that charges should be set to recover full costs³⁰.

DAERA and NIFHA both agree that it is unlikely for NIFHA to return to self-funding in the near future. NIFHA reported that the finances were a concern and that, because the industry is not growing, this has an impact on future income. At the time of writing, NIFHA was completing a corporate plan that will not forecast a return to a self-funding model. NIFHA consultees advised the Review Team that the deliverables expected by

³⁰ [Managing Public Money Northern Ireland](#)

DAERA are not achievable, with challenges outside of NIFHA's control such as climate changes and the increase in storms impacting the coast, EU Exit and crewing.

8.4.2 Increasing Income

DAERA wants to encourage and promote sustainable fishing in Northern Ireland and, as such, is not keen for NIFHA to increase landing fees as currently, fees are in the top 90% when assessed against comparable organisations.

Some DAERA consultees felt that introducing new funding streams is the way for NIFHA to return to a self-funding model. NIFHA is keen to become financially sustainable and considers that diversification opportunities into energy and renewables may be a potential avenue to achieve this. NIFHA stated they were keen for support from DAERA to explore new and alternative income streams with them. NIFHA needs to look beyond DAERA support and consider other NICS Departments that may meet the future direction of travel especially in areas of energy and renewal opportunities. This is followed up in recommendation 2 (at the end of the section).

8.4.3 Reducing Costs

NIFHA stated that it is a lean organisation and there is little more they feel they can do to cut costs further. At the time of writing, NIFHA was installing solar panels across the 3 harbours with the aim of reducing energy costs. This has been completed in Ardglass, is in progress in Portavogie, with works starting in Kilkeel soon after.

8.4.4 Single Year Planning

NIFHA considers that single year planning does not allow for effective operational and development planning.

8.4.5 Capital Project Delivery

DAERA raised that NIFHA has an acceptable reputation for being able to deliver on their capital projects. NIFHA prioritises projects for maintenance and improvements across the 3 harbours, allowing them to be agile and respond at pace when and if capital funding can be made available by DAERA.

8.5 Analysis

The Review Team notes that the opinion of the NIFHA staff, NIFHA Board and the Department, is that it is not realistic for NIFHA to expect to return to a self-funding model in the near future, and the draft corporate plan is being updated to reflect this.

The NIFHA deficit, while fluctuating each year, remains high. Therefore, the funding required to cover the deficit figure is requested by NIFHA year on year. Since 2020/21, income from NIFHA activities has reduced, with expenditure rising. The Review Team considers that the funding model should be reviewed to enable the 3 harbours to have

sufficient funds to be sustainable and therefore to maintain services to their users, to consider diversification to increase income and to have sufficient income to allow for maintenance and repairs to the harbours' infrastructure. It may be the case that additional funding is required from DAERA to continue to maintain harbour services. However, diversification into new funding streams is being undertaken by the introduction of fees for guard vessels to berth at the Harbours with potential for other opportunities to be identified.

The Review Team considers that NIFHA should develop a structured profile of expenditure based on the previous years spend to forecast as accurately as possible the forthcoming financial support that NIFHA will require over the next 3-5 years. As part of this, DAERA should continue to consider how grant funding to NIFHA demonstrates VfM.

8.6 Section Summary

This section provided an overview of NIFHA funding, through direct income and grants, and its expenditure. It has highlighted that the return to a self-funding model is not realistic in the short term as operational costs are increasing and new income streams are required before a self-funding model would be attainable.

Recommendation 2

NIFHA to develop a controlled cost profile, that takes into consideration the limitations of returning to self-funding, and to develop a clear funding model.

The Review Team considers that this recommendation requires a 2-phase approach:

- 1) NIFHA to develop the corporate plan to include outline diversification plans and the future strategic direction. This should include the prioritisation of works to be completed.
- 2) The Department and NIFHA to work together to ensure that statutory requirements are being met within the budget available.

Recommendation 3

NIFHA to demonstrate clear strategic direction based on PfG and Departmental priorities. NIFHA should identify other NICS Departments that could support the future direction of travel and the evaluation of alternative income streams.

9. Opportunities for enhanced effectiveness and efficiency

9.1 Introduction

This section focuses on assessing the purpose and strategic direction of NIFHA performance and the impact the Authority has within NI. In line with guidance on the review of public bodies and as per the Terms of Reference: governance and accountability, staffing and structure and areas for improvement are explored in a light touch manner.

9.2 Strategic Direction and Alignment to Departmental Priorities

The Department acknowledges that NIFHA aligns well to the DAERA strategic direction. NIFHA's vision echoes this in relation to them "delivering safe, sustainable harbours, supporting healthy seas and thriving seafood communities".

During the consultation period NIFHA (along with other ALBs and the wider Department) were awaiting the publication of the new PfG and DAERA business plan to fully understand the latest position on Executive / DAERA priorities.

At the time of fieldwork, the DAERA Corporate Plan for 2025 to 2027 was being developed. This Plan sets out the Department's strategic direction. In addition to published strategies, DAERA holds annual Ministerial briefings for their ALBs as a group to allow the Minister to share their priorities.

DAERA recognised that the business planning cycles for NIFHA and DAERA do not always run in the appropriate order. For example, in some planning cycle periods, because of a delay in DAERA issuing its business plan, NIFHA submitted its business plan without first being able to review that of DAERA and without being able to demonstrate alignment.

DAERA also acknowledged that there is often a number of iterations of the NIFHA business plan before it can be agreed and signed off by the Department. This tends to be because of the need to align to Departmental priorities.

Observation 1

The Review Team observed that in some financial years NIFHA submitted their business plan before DAERA's was available. This made it challenging for NIFHA to demonstrate alignment accurately to DAERA's priorities.

9.2.1 Purpose

NIFHA has a statutory responsibility under the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973, for improving, managing and maintaining the three fishing harbours and harbour estates of Ardglass, Kilkeel, and Portavogie and for operating and maintaining the facilities that are provided at these harbours.

From review of background information and from consultations and visits to the harbours, the Review Team determined that NIFHA's purpose is relevant and in line with the assessment of continued need outlined in Section 6.

In terms of stakeholder understanding of NIFHA's purpose, respondents reported that the functions and services are well understood. The Department accepted that there are lower-level legal gaps in the founding legislation, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973³¹ as NIFHA is unable to deal effectively with abandoned vessels. NIFHA has suggested that if the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 could be changed / amended this would allow the Authority to improve the harbours further. This is explored further below.

9.2.2 Areas for Change

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973

NIFHA is keen for a revision to the 1973 Harbour Order to extend their powers to allow them to introduce a fining structure that includes abandoned and dismantling vessels. As noted in Section 8.2, the cost of vessel dismantling in 2022/23 was £67k and in 2023/24 was £90k. NIFHA is keen for this revision to be made as they believe that this would improve the efficiency of the harbours. It is likely that this would require a change to primary legislation (as the powers that can be conferred on harbour authorities in NI are laid out in the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970³²).

Stakeholder Engagement

During the consultation period a common theme highlighted was NIFHA's stakeholder engagement. This was raised by both stakeholders and NIFHA staff. The Review Team also reviewed information from desktop research that focused on this theme, i.e. NIFHA board papers and Departmental minutes of the DAERA accountability meetings.

During consultations with NIFHA HQ staff, it was confirmed that NIFHA completes annual onsite stakeholder meetings at each of the 3 harbours. Whilst NIFHA regards the annual meeting as helpful in keeping the stakeholders informed, they acknowledged that the 3 meetings are poorly attended. Beyond the annual meetings, NIFHA keeps stakeholders informed via email and informal conversations and this is regarded as consultation. NIFHA developed a stakeholder engagement plan in November 2023, and this is reviewed on an annual basis.

³¹ The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 [nisro_19730035_en.pdf](#)

³² [Harbours Act \(Northern Ireland\) 1970](#)

The CEO has invested time to build relationships with the harbour users by developing relationships with the two producer organisations (Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO) and Anglo Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO)). The CEO now uses these 2 organisations to disseminate information to the stakeholders.

During stakeholder consultation, the Review Team was informed that stakeholders do not feel listened to or consulted in any of the developments taking place at the harbours, despite there being a NIFHA engagement plan in place. NIFHA Board and DAERA both felt that there is a lack of engagement.

Based on the feedback received during consultations, the Review Team considers that the current communication methods used are not achieving the result anticipated. In using the purchasing organisations (NIFPO and ANIFPO) to disseminate information, the CEO is not in control of messaging to the wider stakeholders.

The Review Team was informed before starting consultations that the stakeholders prefer to meet in person. This was taken on board and the Review Team found that in-person discussions were well received by the stakeholders. Based on this, the Review Team considers that non-personal engagement with the stakeholders will not elicit the same support and opportunity for engagement and discussion as can be achieved on a face-to-face basis. There is therefore a case for change in the manner that NIFHA carries out stakeholder engagement.

9.2.3 Awareness and Promotion

The theme of stakeholder engagement also links to a wider issue of communication with stakeholders. The recommendations made in the BCS 2015 review detail that the NIFHA website should have corporate documents available. To date this has not been completed. For example, at the time of reporting, the NIFHA website had overall NIFHA KPIs dated for March 2021. However, the Board details are updated to provide an accurate representation of the Board membership.

The Review Team regards the recommendation from the review in 2015 to still be valid and therefore the same recommendation is carried forward to this review.

Kilkeel Harbour won port of the year in 2024, and this was not communicated or promoted by NIFHA. The Review Team considers that good news stories should be promoted and celebrated both internally and externally to promote staff morale and encourage stakeholder engagement.

9.3 People and Structure

This section provides an overview of the staff and structure of NIFHA when considering the delivery model and ways to improve efficiency or effectiveness as part of this review.

At the time of writing, NIFHA had 22 employees, which included 4 part-time staff, equating to 18 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff. The staff are located across the organisation's headquarters in Downpatrick and their harbours located in Ardglass,

Kilkeel and Portavogie. A full staff organisational structure can be found in Appendix IV of this report.

9.3.1 Organisational Structure and Span of Control

The organisational structure (Appendix IV) provided to the Review Team by NIFHA in July 2024 does not fully reflect the actual structure in place:

- For dredging staff, they are shown on the organisational chart to report to the Kilkeel Harbour Master with contracts being prepared by HQ in Downpatrick. In consultations, it was reported to the Review Team that the dredging staff do not update the Harbour Master on activities that they undertake.
- The CEO has 7 staff reporting directly to him, but only 6 direct reports are shown on the organisation chart. It does not show that a part-time admin/HR staff member reports directly to him, bypassing the Finance Officer.

The span of control of the CEO is wide, i.e. a third (7 out of 22) of NIFHA staff report directly to the CEO. The Review Team considers this to be too wide and not proportionate for the size of the organisation, with an impact on the CEO time available to complete the activities appropriate to the role e.g. horizon scanning and strategic planning.

Observation 2

The Review Team considers that the CEO span of control is too wide and not proportionate to the size of the organisation.

9.3.2 Single Points of Failure and Succession Planning

It is the view of NIFHA and the Board of Directors that the role of CEO can be viewed as a single point of failure as the role covers a wide breath of responsibilities from health and safety to line management and reporting to the Board and Department. The Review Team agrees with this assessment.

The Review Team also considers that the roles of Project Manager and Finance Officer are also single points of failure. The roles are completed by one person, with no skills transfer in place.

There was no evidence of succession planning or identification of roles where specific skills are required. NIFHA is a small organisation with a risk that loss of staff, with associated loss of skills and corporate memory, will negatively impact the running of the organisation. Succession planning is further noted in Section 9.7.1 and a recommendation provided in Section 10. As NIFHA is a small organisation, the approach to succession planning should be proportionate.

9.3.3 Roles and Responsibilities

The Review Team identified some grade drift upwards for some of the activities being completed in the HQ. As part of the desk research completed, the Review Team reviewed the job descriptions, including roles and responsibilities for operational and administrative staff. There was no evidence that the job descriptions had been reviewed or updated since being developed for use in recruitment and had therefore been in place for some time. The Review Team considers that roles and responsibilities should be updated and clearly defined to ensure that it meets business needs.

9.3.4 Pay and Grading Review

The operational staff pay increase was agreed and confirmed by DAERA in August 2024 with arrears paid for the year 2022/23. This resulted in a significant uplift (13%) for Operational staff who are now aligned to the living wage.

The Operational staff pay uplift has created a new challenge for NIFHA in pay differential, as some supervisory staff are now on similar wages to operational staff. For NIFHA to develop the business case rationale for the pay increase is challenging to justify with being in a deficit position. NIFHA staff are not aligned to NICS grades and previous attempts by NIFHA to align grades have been unsuccessful.

In 2024, NIFHA staff joined the union Unite for representation on their pay and conditions.

Between July and September 2024, the Review Team consulted with NIFHA staff, including the CEO, Harbour Masters, HQ staff, Administrative and Operational staff. Staff raised that there was low morale across the group. The Operational staff cited the lowest levels of morale across NIFHA. However, there was improved morale following the pay increase implement from August 2024.

Observation 3

The Review Team was advised by Harbour and HQ staff that morale is low with little enthusiasm to take on new/additional duties.

During consultations with NIFHA, examples were provided of the challenges encountered when trying to recruit staff, with the Deputy Harbour Master at Kilkeel vacancy being used as an example. The rationale for this challenge was down to the low salary as it was difficult to attract the right person with the expertise to work at the harbours.

Observation 4

The Review Team was informed that recruitment is challenging, with small numbers of applicants, because of the low levels of pay available.

9.3.5 Engagement with Harbour Staff and Stakeholders

The Review Team findings from consultation show that there is a divide among the harbour staff and the HQ staff. The harbour staff commented that they would welcome more frequent engagement with HQ e.g. there have only been 3 official Harbour Master team meetings over the last 5 years. There is the potential for more engagement across the locations and for knowledge sharing to take place.

There was conflicting feedback from stakeholders in relation to the level of engagement received from the Harbour Masters compared to HQ. Some felt that there was sufficient engagement and others welcomed greater engagement.

Observation 5

The Review Team was advised that there is opportunity for greater engagement between NIFHA HQ and harbour staff.

There is also opportunity for HQ to assess the level of engagement that stakeholders would find useful and put this into practice.

9.3.6 Gaps in staffing requirements

NIFHA stated in their business plan 2024/2025 that they are under resourced. During consultations, the Review Team was advised that staff are having to regularly undertake overtime to meet deadlines.

There was no consistent message from consultation findings that work was not being completed, and that overtime had become 'normal practice' to ensure that all duties were completed. Therefore, a separate activity analysis would need to be completed to assess if the organisation is under resourced and in what areas of the organisation additional resources are required.

The CEO noted during consultation that due to the volume of work to be completed there is little time left for horizon scanning and strategic planning. This is an area that the CEO would like to have more time available on which to focus. This was echoed by the Board members, where they felt there is insufficient time for the CEO to focus on strategic approach.

9.3.7 Subsection Summary

There were no gaps in service identified during consultation, and from consultation with stakeholders, essential services are being delivered well and consistently to the fishing community across the 3 harbours. While some staff reported being overloaded the Review Team could not find evidence of this during desk research or at consultations.

The Review Team was informed that engagement between HQ, harbour staff and stakeholders is lacking in some areas. This is an area for review and agreement across all parties on expected approach.

The job descriptions that were shared by NIFHA were outdated and did not reflect potential for staff to move between harbours.

In order for the structure to be more efficient it is recommended that NIFHA evaluates the ongoing work activities undertaken at each grade and the grading structure for all staff. This will also identify any grade drift and support improving morale across the staff. The HQ and harbour staff need to engage more to ensure that they can continue to deliver the services.

Recommendation 4

- a) The Review Team observed that the job descriptions were not updated once a post had been filled. Given that the majority of staff have been in post for some time, the job descriptions may not fully reflect the work being undertaken and it is recommended that all job descriptions are reviewed.
- b) An independent review should be completed, proportionate to the size of the organisation, to agree the roles and responsibilities within headquarters and the harbours and to provide a reporting structure with clear lines of responsibility.

This may require a grading review to be completed across the organisation.

- c) Consideration should be given to succession planning in the organisation. The risk register should include the risk of losing experienced staff with no succession plan. This should be monitored by the Sponsor Team.

9.4 Headquarters (HQ)

The role of the HQ is diverse and, while not an exhaustive list, the Review Team has selected some of the key duties to highlight:

- Provides collated information across the 3 harbours to the Department and Board.
- Responsibility for paying the NIFHA staff salaries.
- Responsibility for issuing fines.
- Manages the dredger staff and the pontoons.
- Ensures that all health and safety is adhered to and signed off.

A financial breakdown in the accounts shows that staffing in HQ is 39% of the overall NIFHA staff costs.

9.4.1 Need

DAERA has stated that the HQ is required for oversight of NIFHA. Without the HQ activity being undertaken, although staff at the harbours would continue with their activities on a daily basis, there would be no coordinated prioritisation of spend and no strategic oversight. The impact would have a potential financial issue and a lack of joined up thinking that benefits the Department. Based on this, the Review Team considers that the functions completed by the HQ are required.

9.4.2 Location

The location in Downpatrick is costing £20k per annum to operate, with HQ staff coming to the office one day a week. The Review Team considers that some cost savings could be made if HQ staff worked in the harbours (on rotation) for the 1 day a week.

During consultations the Review Team was informed that, other than an office for the HQ staff, the Downpatrick premises were no longer used for board meetings, with these taking place on rotation across the 3 harbours.

However, in reviewing the report, NIFHA has informed the Review Team that many board and committee meetings are held at HQ along with other external meetings including with DAERA.

Observation 6

The Review Team identified that cost savings could be made if the HQ offices in Downpatrick were closed with the option for staff to be located in existing harbour offices.

9.5 Impact

During consultations the Review Team asked who would be the most impacted if NIFHA did not exist. The stakeholders all felt that they would be negatively impacted if there was no harbour authority with one commenting that “*we could not function*”.

Many of the businesses and vessel owners value the complementary services available around Kilkeel Harbour with many of the businesses depending on the slipway to generate their sales.

It was noted in Section 6 of the report that the Department values the services that NIFHA delivers, and they view one of NIFHA’s strengths to be the consistency in how these essential services are delivered.

9.6 Measuring Performance

NIFHA’s year on year performance is measured by DAERA as part of the annual planning process. Assurances are reported on a quarterly basis, with only high level information required. The Review Team considers that this level of oversight is proportionate to the size of the organisation.

NIFHA has 82 KPIs that are reported, in summarised format, to the Board at the quarterly board meeting. Informal data is also collected by NIFHA in relation to the usage of the slipway. From consultation with NIFHA Board, the Review Team was advised that the summary data provided is sufficient for the Board to be aware of performance and to challenge where appropriate. It was clear to the Review Team that there is a lot of work undertaken by NIFHA HQ to develop the reports for the Board. Although the CEO and Chair of NIFHA are content with there being 82 KPIs when provided as a summary, the Review Team considers that 82 KPIs is too many to provide key information on performance. During consultations the Review Team raised this with the Board, who informed the Team that the Board is currently reviewing the KPIs.

Observation 7

Comparators (Section 5) have fewer KPIs than NIFHA (the Scottish Harbour has 9 and the English Harbour has 15).

The Review Team considers that the KPIs should be reviewed to highlight key performance and be proportionate to the size of the organisation.

9.7 Governance and Accountability

NIFHA has two levels of governance and accountability, NIFHA Board and DAERA ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch.

9.7.1 NIFHA Board

The Review Team consulted with the Chairperson and two members of the Board, all of whom were in post less than a year. Although the Board Chair and members have a breadth of experience from being part of Boards, because of the recency of their appointments, there were limitations in the Review Team gaining insight into the effectiveness of the Board and the level of support and challenge provided by the Board.

An issue raised during consultations was a conflict of interest on the Board. During consultation with the Chair, he advised the Review Team that he was reviewing the structure and numbers of the Board.

At the time of the fieldwork, CSB provided an update to the Review Team that the Board Members would be reappointed by another term of 2 years to maintain consistency. At the time of the report, 3 members had been reappointed. The Review Team advises that all conflicts of interest should continue to be recorded in the minutes of the board meeting and should be dealt with appropriately by the Chair.

Observation 8

Conflicts of interest identified at each Board meeting should continue to be recorded in the minutes of the board meeting and dealt with appropriately by the Chair.

There is currently no succession plan in place for the NIFHA CEO and SMT. This should be addressed by the NIFHA Board as a matter of urgency.

NIFHA currently carries out an internal board effectiveness review (BER) in the form of a survey. The Review Team reviewed the evidence from the previous BER and could not ascertain if the Board was effective. An independent BER would allow the Board and Department to establish if the Board is operating effectively for the ALB.

9.7.2 DAERA ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch

During fieldwork, the Review Team was informed that CSB carried out quarterly accountability meetings with NIFHA. Since 2025, the frequency of these meetings has changed to biannual. CSB is also responsible for completing the business planning process within DAERA, which was shared with the Review Team, which is considered an appropriate level of rigor, proportionate for the size of the ALB.

DAERA and NIFHA SMT agreed that there is a good working relationship and that, when needed, DAERA supports NIFHA. However, NIFHA has found it challenging to maintain this relationship as CSB has had a period of staff changes. Irrespective of the staff changes, NIFHA acknowledges that the CSB has made every effort to continue to invest in building relationships with NIFHA.

The Review Team was informed that a Partnership Agreement is now in place and includes engagement between the Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD). NIFHA reported during consultation that they would like more engagement with MFD.

9.8 Wider Shared Services

NIFHA, as an NDPB of DAERA can use Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) Directorate to procure services such as availing of utility services. Whilst NIFHA expressed frustrations in the timescales of CPD they feel services are protected because of the services available to them.

NIFHA SMT expressed an interest in using IT Assist to support the internal NIFHA system. However, the quoted cost for the service was too high and did not demonstrate VfM based on the size of NIFHA.

In the absence of digital backup, NIFHA's backup is to physical tapes. The potential loss of data is not currently recorded as a risk to the organisation, although it is the view of the Review Team that this should be included in the NIFHA risk register. The Review Team would encourage NIFHA to explore moving their system onto a digitised system and has recorded this as an observation below.

Observation 9

The Review Team was informed that NIFHA uses a manual process for system backup to tapes. The Review Team considers that this is a risk to data and security and would encourage NIFHA to explore alternative options for backups.

9.9 Section Summary

This section has explored the purpose and strategic direction of NIFHA, its performance and the impact the Authority has within NI. It is clear that the strategic intent of NIFHA aligns with the Departmental strategic direction.

NIFHA is performing its statutory duties as required, and it has been noted by harbour users that without the work of NIFHA they would not be able to function, evidencing the important role that NIFHA plays in the NI commercial fishing communities.

The Review Team was informed by stakeholders and harbour users that the communications and engagement with NIFHA HQ needs to be strengthened, and this is noted in recommendation 6.

The governance and accountability for NIFHA is twofold, from the NIFHA Board and from the Department. Generally, both are working well. However, the Review Team identified that there are some improvements to be made in how the Board works and its need for succession planning to be carried out for NIFHA's CEO and SMT to preserve corporate memory.

Recommendation 5

- a) NIFHA should consider expanding the current price benchmarking activities to include wider lessons from comparable external organisations that are encountering similar challenges.
- b) NIFHA should consider further diversification opportunities to remain sustainable within the sector.

Recommendation 6

- a) NIFHA Senior Management should work with the stakeholders in each harbour to agree stakeholder engagement plans that include frequency and methods of communication.
- b) NIFHA should update their website to include a corporate publications section that will allow stakeholders to view their documentation.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This section reviews the previous recommendations from the Business Consultancy Services (BCS) NIFHA review in 2015 with an update on the current status.

It also provides a summary of the recommendations from this ALB review.

Table 15. Implemented Recommendations from BCS Review in 2015

Recommendations from 2015 Review	Status – Implemented
The Board are also recommended to consider who can best champion the Health and Safety within the industry.	The Review Team consider this recommendation to be implemented as the Department, NIFHA Board and stakeholders all value the high standard of health and safety across the 3 harbours.
The review team recommend that NIFHA liaises with DARD to examine the feasibility of developing a new organisational website.	The Review Team has reviewed NIFHA's website and consider it to provide basic information. There is potential for NIFHA to develop the website and make it more user friendly for all (see recommendation 6 below).

Table 16. Recommendations from BCS Review in 2015, not implemented

Recommendations from 2015 Review	2024 Review Team consideration of the Recommendations
A NIFHA are recommended to consider the need for an external board effectiveness review, proportionate to the size of the Board.	The Review Team considers that this recommendation is still relevant, with an independent BER being completed at a maximum of 3 years from the current Chair's appointment.
B The review team recommend that both the corporate and annual business plans are easily accessible through the home page of the NIFHA website, under the heading of Corporate Publications.	The Review Team considers that this recommendation is still relevant, and that implementation would support transparency with stakeholders. It is recorded as recommendation 6b in Table 17.
C The development of the KPIs should be augmented by a benchmarking exercise against an organisation that is recognised for customer service and recommend accordingly.	The Review Team considers that this recommendation is still relevant. An additional, linked, recommendation has been added (recommendation 5a in Table 17) to focus on NIFHA carrying out benchmarking activities with comparator organisations to include income streams.

Table 17. ICS Recommendations from this ALB Review

No.	Recommendation	Report Section	Rationale
1	Recommendation – ALB status The current status of NIFHA as an ALB (i.e. NDPB), should be maintained for this review period (3-5years).	7	The Review Team used the three tests to assess if NIFHA met at least one of the tests. As NIFHA met one test fully and 1 test partially, it is clear that it should remain as an ALB (i.e.NDPB).
2	Recommendation – Departmental financial support NIFHA to develop a controlled cost profile, that takes into consideration the limitations of returning to self-funding, and to develop a clear funding model. The Review Team considers that this recommendation requires a 2-phase approach: 1) NIFHA to develop the corporate plan to include outline diversification plans and the future strategic direction. This should include the prioritisation of works to be completed. 2) The Department and NIFHA to work together to ensure that statutory requirements are being met within the budget available.	8	It is clear to NIFHA that they will not be in a position to return to full self-funding in the short term. Financial support will be required from the Department and the requirement should be calculated prior to the start of the financial year to ensure that there is sufficient budget available to enable NIFHA to meet its statutory requirements.
3	Recommendation – strategic alignment NIFHA to demonstrate clear strategic direction based on PfG and Departmental priorities. NIFHA should identify other NICS Departments that could support the future direction of travel and the evaluation of alternative income streams.	8	The Review Team considers that the draft business plan for 2024/25 did not define the plans and action to be taken by NIFHA within the business planning period. There were no SMART objectives.
4	Recommendation – structure and risk to the organisation a) The Review Team observed that the job descriptions were not updated once a post had been filled. Given that the majority of staff have been in post for some time, the job descriptions may not fully reflect the work being undertaken and it is	9	Recommendation a • This is linked to part b of the recommendation in relation to considering the span of control, and roles and responsibilities. Part a should be completed initially to support the implementation for successful succession planning.

No.	Recommendation	Report Section	Rationale
	recommended that all job descriptions are reviewed. b) An independent review should be completed, proportionate to the size of the organisation, to agree the roles and responsibilities within headquarters and the harbours and to provide a reporting structure with clear lines of responsibility. This may require a grading review to be completed across the organisation. c) Consideration should be given to succession planning in the organisation. The risk register should include the risk of losing experienced staff with no succession plan. This should be monitored by the Sponsor Team.		Recommendation b - Single points of failure for roles within the SMT, at CEO, Project Manager (PM) and Finance Officer. - Pay differential is a current concern. - CEO has too wide a span of control leaving little time for focus on a strategic approach. Recommendation c - High impact on a small organisation for staff to leave. At the time of reporting, the Board had a new Chair and two new members. There is no clear succession planning for the Board and the Review Team considers this necessary to maintain an active Board for the organisation.
5	Recommendation - sustainability of the organisation a) NIFHA should consider expanding the current price benchmarking activities to include wider lessons from comparable external organisations that are encountering similar challenges. b) NIFHA should consider further diversification opportunities to remain sustainable within the sector.	9	Recommendation a As noted in Table 16, this is an additional element to NIFHA benchmarking. - NIFHA is currently reviewing 82 KPIs to report to the Board and it would be timely to consider the comparator information. - CEO noted that there is no time to be strategic, including engaging with other similar organisations. Only price benchmarking activities are currently completed. - This is to be completed in conjunction with the support of DAERA CSB and MFD. Recommendation b - This is taken from comparator insights and work ongoing in the NIFHA harbours.

No.	Recommendation	Report Section	Rationale
6	Recommendation – communication and engagement a) NIFHA Senior Management should work with the stakeholders in each harbour to agree stakeholder engagement plans that include frequency and methods of communication. b) NIFHA should update their website to include a corporate publications section that will allow stakeholders to view their documentation	9	Recommendation a Review Team engagement with stakeholders identified that they do not feel that the communication and engagement with NIFHA is sufficient. Recommendation b As noted in Table 15, this is a previous recommendation from the BCS Review in 2015.

Table 18. Observations

The rationale for the observations is to highlight areas that the Review Team has assessed as noteworthy and may require further attention but there was insufficient evidence or urgency and therefore are not recorded as recommendations.

No	Observation	Report Section
1	Observation – Departmental and NIFHA The Review Team observed that in some financial years NIFHA submitted its business plan before DAERA's was available. This made it challenging for NIFHA to demonstrate alignment accurately to DAERA's priorities.	9.2
2	Observation – Internal to NIFHA The Review Team considers that the CEO span of control is too wide and not proportionate to the size of the organisation.	9.3.1
3	Observation – Internal to NIFHA The Review Team was advised by Harbour and HQ staff that morale is low with little enthusiasm to take on new/additional duties.	9.3.4
4	Observation – Internal to NIFHA The Review Team was informed that recruitment is challenging with the low levels of pay available.	9.3.4
5	Observation – NIFHA HQ, NIFHA Staff and Stakeholders The Review Team was advised that there is opportunity for greater engagement between NIFHA HQ and harbour staff. There is also opportunity to assess the level of engagement that stakeholders would find useful and put this into practice.	9.3.5
6	Observation – Internal to NIFHA The Review Team concludes that cost savings could be made if the HQ offices in Downpatrick were closed with the option for staff to be located in existing harbour offices.	9.4.2

No	Observation	Report Section
7	Observation – Internal to NIFHA Comparators (Section 5) have fewer KPIs than NIFHA (Scottish Harbour has 9 and the English Harbour has 15). The Review Team considers that the KPIs should be reviewed to highlight key performance and be proportionate to the size of the organisation.	9.6
8	Observation – NIFHA and NIFHA Board Conflicts of interest identified at each Board meeting should be recorded in the minutes of the board meeting and dealt with appropriately by the Chair.	9.7.1
9	Observation – Internal to NIFHA The Review Team was informed that NIFHA uses a manual process for system backup to tapes. The Review Team considers that this is a risk to data and security and would encourage NIFHA to explore alternative options for backups.	9.8

Appendix I – List of abbreviations, tables and figures

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	In Full
ALB	Arm's Length Body
ANIFPO	Anglo Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation
ARAC	Audit and Risk Assurance Committee
BCS	Business Consultancy Services
BER	Board Effectiveness Review
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	Construction and Procurement Delivery
CSB	ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environmental and Rural Affairs
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DoF	Department of Finance
FSDP	Fishing and Seafood Development Programme
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
HQ	Headquarters
ICS	Innovation and Consultancy Services
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MEFF	Marine, Environment and Fisheries Fund
MFD	Marine and Fisheries Division
NDNA	New Decade New Approach
NDPB	Non-Departmental Public Body
NI	Northern Ireland
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NIFHA	Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority
NIFPO	Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation
PfG	Programme for Government
PM	Project Manager
QA	Quality and Audit
SAM	Self-Assessment Model
SMT	Senior Management Team
VfM	Value for Money

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Appendix II – Consultee List

Name	Organisation	Purpose of consultation
Department Consultees		
Fiona McCandless	DAERA, G3	Deputy Secretary, Strategic Planning and Corporate Services Group
Briege Lafferty	DAERA, G6	Head of In Year Financial Planning Branch
Angela Millar	DAERA, G7	Head of Financial Policy Branch
David Simpson	DAERA, G5	Director of Corporate Planning and Governance
Jennifer Weir	DAERA, G7	Acting Head of ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch
Tracey Convery	DAERA, DP	ALB Corporate Sponsor Branch
Owen Lyttle	DAERA, G5	Director of Marine and Fisheries
Kelly Mills	DAERA, G6	Deputy Director of Marine and Fisheries Operation
Ronnie McBride	DAERA, DP	Sea Fisheries Policy
Blinnia Cunningham	DAERA, SO	Sea Fisheries Policy
NIFHA		
Kevin Quigley	NIFHA	CEO
Belina McCaughey	NIFHA	Accounts Administrator
Stephen Welch	NIFHA	Chair
Siobhan McCauley	NIFHA	Board Member
Maynard Mawhinney	NIFHA	Board Member
Jenny Frazer	NIFHA	Environmental Officer
David Lindsay	NIFHA	Project Manager
Danielle Rooney	NIFHA	Harbour Master – Kilkeel
James Lenaghan	NIFHA	Harbour Master – Ardglass
Neil Warnock	NIFHA	Harbour Master – Portavogie
Stakeholders		
Harry Wick	Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation (NIFPO)	Stakeholder and tenant
Brian Chambers	Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO) and Sea Source	Stakeholder and tenant
Sam Mawhinney	Denholm Fishselling	Stakeholder and tenant
Comgall Milligan	C and O Milligan Fish Processor and Ardglass Development Agency	Stakeholder and tenant
Dick James	Ardglass Development Agency and NIFPO Board Member	Stakeholder and tenant
Russell Shepcar	DR Marine	Stakeholder and tenant
Leslie Girvan	Kilkeel Fuels and vessel owner	Stakeholder and tenant
Gerry Smith	Gerry Smith Boats	Stakeholder and tenant
Ian Newell	Ian Newell	Stakeholder and tenant
David Hill	Sea Source and ANIFPO	Stakeholder and tenant
Comparators		
Comparator 1	Scottish Harbour	Comparator organisation
Comparator 2	English Harbour	Comparator organisation

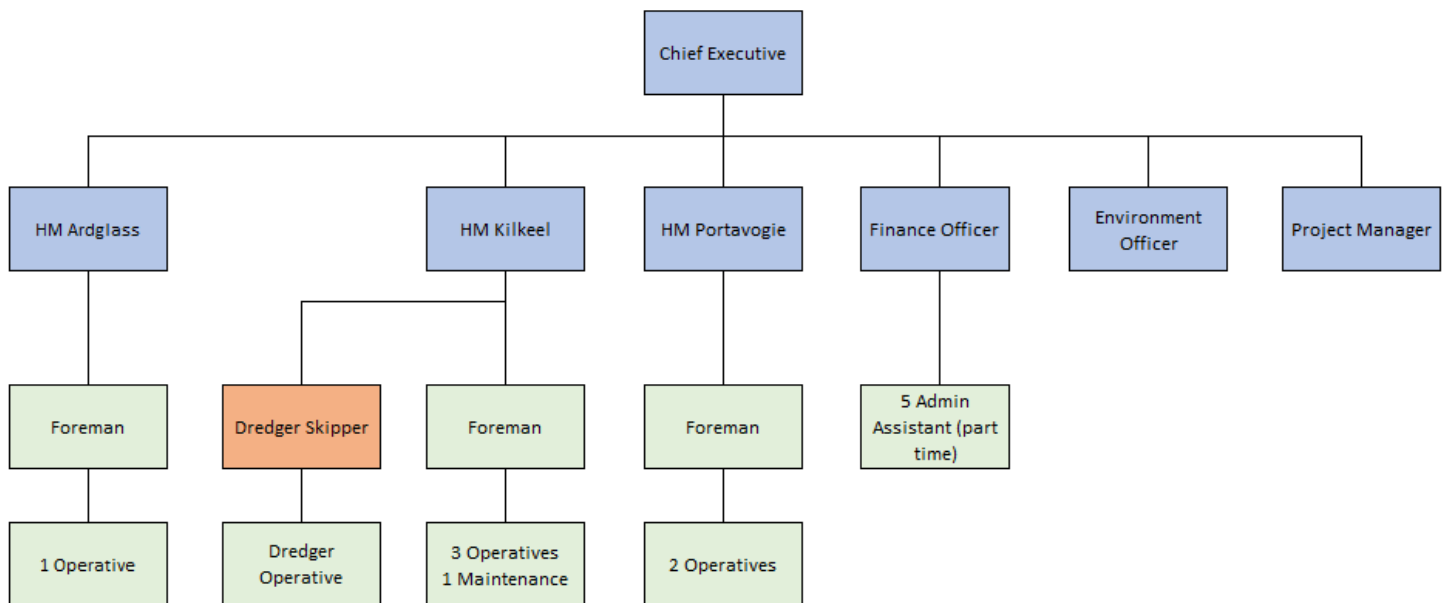
Appendix III – Comparator Table

	Comparator 1 Harbour in Scotland	Comparator 2 Harbour in England
Status	The port is owned and managed by a Scottish Council (Transportation Services) and has permitted development rights for harbour related activities. They are the statutory harbour authority for 6 harbours. They operate at arm's length from the Council.	This Harbour Authority is part of an English Council and is responsible for providing comprehensive and effective marine services within the statutory Harbour council area. They are a Harbour Authority that also have responsibilities for the beaches and coastlines. The Harbour Authority controls operations in the three enclosed harbours. At two of the harbours there are private marinas which are run by an external company that provides visitor moorings and are a tenant of the Harbour. The Authority is an individual section of the Council and there is a Harbour Committee responsible for managing the finances of the Harbour including the setting of harbour charges and ensuring that the reserve funds are kept at an appropriate level.
Purpose and Legislation	Port Marine Safety Code.	Port Marine Safety Code.
Functions	There is only one commercial harbour and provides a complete servicing package for the fishing fleet. It has manufacturing, boat repair, cargo handling and fishing businesses located at the harbour. Services include – • Ice plants (2x 5-ton ice plants) • Windfarms • Chillings for boats • Dredger is used across the 6 harbours • Berthing • Slipways • Electricity • Waste facility	Two of the harbours have capacity to cater for 440 berths in total for visiting vessels. To note that one of the Harbours is a drying harbour. Services at the harbours include – • Utilities (Water, Electric, WIFI and Waste disposal) • Slipways • Diesel • Boat brokerage • Boat sales • Jet Ski pods The Dry Harbour services include – • Utilities (Water, Electric and Waste disposal) • Visitor pontoon • Facilities in and around harbour including eateries • Standard launch and recovery only
Finance	Operating as a self-funding model. In 2016 the Harbours were operating at a deficit of £635k.	Operating as a self-funding model. Leases for ice plant and marinas improved profitability.

	Comparator 1 Harbour in Scotland	Comparator 2 Harbour in England
	It was then decided to install windfarms which resulted in the removal of one pier. They moved from a deficit to having a profit of £119k in 2023/24 Last year (2023/24) the income broke £1m for the first time in history.	Council owns the car parks and the harbours and this generates additional income. Income from the ice plants leases as the auctioneers own these and the chill rooms. The chilled produce is all sold there. There is a lease for the chill rooms too. This is currently being piloted and has not been fully tested yet.
People and governance	<u>People</u> 13 staff in total - • 12 operational • 1 admin 9 staff are located at the largest Harbour and the remaining staff are flexible across the other 5 locations. <u>Governance</u> A 10-year strategic plan which is updated each year. Quarterly reports to Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee within the Council. This is to provide a breakdown of the KPIs, incidents and updates on activities. Please note that in reality this is currently completed every 6 months due to staff shortages.	<u>People</u> 30 staff in total – • 50/50 split with 15 staff being operational and 15 staff in admin • 1 Duty Holder that works with the council <u>Governance</u> Harbour Committee Members approve and monitor the Harbour's business plan and address any issues relating to performance. It is made up of 9 voting members of the Council and 5 external non-voting advisors. Budget is set by the council and then this needs approval by the wider council and then cabinet as part of the budget monitoring report process. Quarterly reports produced for the quarterly council meetings.
Performance	Currently have 9 KPIs to report on. Top line figures only are reported on to the council. They also monitor the cost per ton and collect data internally on this. Financial target is to be on budget.	Currently has 15 KPIs to report on against 25 services that are delivered for the council. Top line figures only are reported on to the council.
Stakeholder Engagement	Once a quarter the Harbour arrange stakeholder engagement sessions to go through what has happened in the last period and what is coming up within the next period. They find these very beneficial and the Port Marine safety guide mandates stakeholder engagement. The Harbour ensures councillors' and internal office staff are available. These meetings are scheduled to align with the reporting provided on a quarterly basis to the Council.	Quarterly stakeholder meetings per group take place before quarterly council meetings, the stakeholder groups include – • Harbour groups • Marine Forum • Sea Safety Forum They are all engaged with quarterly before the council meetings. Stakeholders are grouped into primary, secondary and tertiary in relation to their needs and engagement requirements.
Landing Fees	• 2.5% landing fee up to £7,500 • 1.5% landing fee over £7,500	• 2.5% Landing fee by boat • 1.5% landing fee by land

Appendix IV – NIFHA Organisational Structure

This organisational structure provided by NIFHA in July 2024.



Key for the structure.

	Salaried	7 Salaried Employees
	Hourly Paid	16 Employees
	Outsourced	1 Position Outsourced



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