

ALB Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

Departmental Response



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

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

Introduction

This paper provides DAERA's response to the findings and recommendations made in relation to the review of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA). The review took place during 2024, with the final report provided to the department in September 2025.

Background

In line with Department of Finance Guidance (The Public Bodies Guide: A Guide for Northern Ireland Departments), an independent review of NIFHA was commissioned by the Department and was undertaken by the Department of Finance's Innovation and Consultancy Services (ICS).

The review was carried out in line with Managing Public Money (NI) requirements, and 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 periodic review of arm's-length bodies (ALBs) is a core requirement of good public governance. In carrying out such reviews, departments here take account of Cabinet Office guidance, including the 'Public Bodies Review Programme' (2022) which advises that such reviews are intended to ensure that ALBs remain efficient, effective, and accountable, and that their functions continue to be necessary and aligned with government priorities.

The last review of NIFHA was undertaken in 2014-15, and the review now undertaken aligns with Cabinet Office's updated guidance.

Methodology and Reporting

Key stages of the approach of the review are outlined below:

1. **Desk – based research:** This involved a desktop review of key documents (governance records and Departmental strategies).
2. **Consultations:** ICS engaged with stakeholders including DAERA staff, NIFHA leadership, board members, Harbour Masters, and external stakeholders.

3. **Comparators:** ICS assessed two similar organisations, one in Scotland and one in England.
4. **Analysis:** ICS conducted analysis of consultations, survey and comparator data, assessment of continued need, appropriateness of the delivery model and opportunities for enhanced effectiveness and efficiency, assessment of the structure, staffing and funding requirement, development of conclusions and recommendations, and an update meeting.
5. **Reporting:** Preparation of the draft report, presentation of conclusions and recommendations, and finalisation of the report.

The full report is available through the following link [NIFHA Review Final Report](#) and should be read in conjunction with this Departmental Response.

Overall findings and recommendations

DAERA is pleased to note that, overall, the review found that NIFHA plays a vital role in supporting Northern Ireland's fishing industry and maintaining safe, sustainable harbours in alignment with the department's strategic objectives.

The review also concluded that the current operating model (i.e. as an executive NDPB) is necessary to maintain impartiality for the fishing industry. It did, however, highlight that the feasibility of NIFHA returning to a self-funding model remains a concern due to a declining industry and external challenges, meaning that there will be an ongoing reliance on funding from the department. The review specifically highlights that consideration of new income streams and improving financial planning is essential for NIFHA's long-term sustainability.

While the review found that NIFHA is fulfilling its core functions, it confirmed that targeted reforms in governance, communication, and organisational structure are essential to future-proof NIFHA and maximise its impact. The review team considered that implementing recommendations within the report will have a positive impact in assisting NIFHA to enhance the future delivery of its functions.

In considering responses to these recommendations, DAERA and NIFHA have worked collaboratively to develop a joint response and action plan (attached at Annex A) to address each recommendation and in order to provide the best framework for effective change.

The six recommendations made by the review team are set out below alongside the response to each of these. Additionally, responses to the nine observations made by ICS within the review report are provided at Annex B.

Recommendation One – Appropriateness of the delivery model

Recommendation:

The current status of NIFHA as an ALB (executive non-departmental public body) should be maintained for this review period (3-5years).

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

DAERA and the NIFHA board welcome this recommendation which confirms the current delivery model (an executive NDPB) is appropriate and provides stability for the organisation in the medium to longer term.

Recommendation Two – Self-Funding Model

Recommendation:

NIFHA to develop a controlled cost profile, which 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.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

DAERA and NIFHA note this recommendation and can confirm that the NIFHA three-year Corporate Plan 2025-28 (which has been agreed in the intervening period since the review) sets out the strategic direction for 2025-28 and is aligned with both DAERA's Corporate Plan 2025-27 and the Executive's Programme for Government 2024-27.

NIFHA's corporate plan sets out the following four strategic priorities:-

- Delivering safe, effectively managed harbours
- Providing excellent infrastructure
- Protecting and enhancing the natural environment
- Supporting thriving harbours through robust governance, people support and diversification.

The NIFHA board recognises that the pace of change will require regular review and refinement of the corporate plan as it is implemented. The need for diversification is acknowledged within the plan and remains a key focus for the board as it seeks to identify and pursue opportunities that support the long-term sustainability of NIFHA which are within its powers and statutory responsibility.

In addition, NIFHA will continue to work collaboratively with the department to develop an overall approach to diversification. This work is intended to provide a clearer, more structured framework for identifying, assessing, and prioritising potential diversification opportunities.

Controlled cost budgeting is already seen as a core activity for NIFHA's management team and is overseen by the board. NIFHA will continue to work closely with DAERA to ensure statutory requirements are met within available budgets and to support the development of a clear funding model for the future.

Recommendation Three – Self-Funding Model

Recommendation:

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.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

DAERA is satisfied that the NIFHA corporate plan, approved in September 2025, and annual approved business plans demonstrate how the organisation's priorities align with both the Programme for Government (PfG) and the department's priorities.

The department will keep NIFHA updated through existing sponsorship arrangements to support it in identifying and evaluating the feasibility of alternative income streams.

Recommendation Four – Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency

Recommendation:

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.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

The importance of NIFHA maintaining accurate and up to date job descriptions and a clear organisational structure to support effective governance and accountability is acknowledged by NIFHA. It is also accepted by NIFHA that a more systematic approach is required to ensure all roles accurately reflect current responsibilities.

NIFHA is undertaking a broader review of roles, responsibilities, and grading structures to address risks identified in the review, such as single points of failure and capacity constraints at senior levels.

We recognise that succession planning is a critical element of organisational resilience. This aligns with NIFHA having a succession plan in place for its senior management team, which is currently being reviewed, and the broader review of roles, responsibilities and grading structures which is underway.

The NIFHA board will continue to monitor this to ensure that succession risks are identified and appropriately managed.

Recommendation Five - Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency

Recommendation:

- 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.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

DAERA notes this recommendation and recognises its importance in supporting NIFHA's financial sustainability and resilience.

NIFHA currently undertakes price benchmarking as part of its annual budgetary process and is committed to strengthening these processes to ensure they are robust and well documented. This will help improve transparency and provide a stronger basis for informed decision making.

The department also notes the progress made in diversifying income streams, as reflected in the approved NIFHA Corporate Plan 2025-28, specifically the authority's efforts to explore new opportunities, including the successful commercialisation of its dredger. While these steps represent positive progress, both NIFHA and the department acknowledge that further diversification may require targeted assistance to identify viable opportunities and align these with available resources.

Recommendation Six - Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency

Recommendation:

- 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.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation.

The importance of appropriate stakeholder engagement is fully recognised. NIFHA already has a stakeholder engagement plan in place and is committed to reviewing and enhancing this approach where possible. Harbour Masters are available daily for engagement with stakeholders, and the chief executive officer's contact details are readily accessible should direct engagement be required.

The department also notes the existing publication scheme on NIFHA's website, which follows the model approved by the Information Commissioner. NIFHA will consider improvements to ensure the timely publication of corporate documents and to strengthen stakeholder confidence in the organisation's operations.

ACTION PLAN**Annex A****Actions arising from the Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)**

Recommendation(s) detail	Action/Update	Owner	Implementation Date
Recommendation - One – Appropriateness of the delivery model The current status of NIFHA as an ALB (i.e. NDPB) should be maintained for this review period (3-5years).	Review of the status of NIFHA to be undertaken as part of the next ALB Review within the next five years.	DAERA to commission review at appropriate time.	By 2030
Recommendation Two – Self-Funding Model NIFHA to develop a controlled cost profile, which 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.	The NIFHA Corporate Plan 2025-28 (approved September 2025) includes the need for diversification and the strategic direction for the organisation over a three-year period.	NIFHA	Completed

Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

2) The Department and NIFHA to work together to ensure that statutory requirements are being met within the budget available.	Prioritisation of work to ensure that statutory requirements are met within the available budget is considered annually. This is done alongside regular monitoring and profiling of expenditure and consideration of funding bids throughout the year.	DAERA and NIFHA	Annually
Recommendation Three– Self-Funding Model 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.	The NIFHA Corporate Plan 2025-28 approved in September 2025, demonstrates how NIFHA's priorities align with both the Programme for Government 2024-27 and DAERA's priorities.	NIFHA	Completed
Recommendation Four – Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency 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.	NIFHA to undertake a review of outstanding senior management team job descriptions.	NIFHA	31/03/27
b) An independent review should be completed, proportionate to the size of the organisation, to agree	NIFHA board to undertake a comprehensive review in this area. The board has already commenced work in this area.	NIFHA	31/03/27

Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

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.	To finalise and make available to the department the review that was undertaken by ARAC on succession planning. The relevant Sponsor Team will monitor progress of work undertaken on succession planning through regular accountability meetings. NIFHA to update risk register to reflect the risk of losing experienced staff.	DAERA and NIFHA	31/03/27 Complete
Recommendation Five – Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency. a) NIFHA should consider expanding the current price benchmarking activities to include wider lessons from comparable external organisations that are encountering similar challenges.	While benchmarking is already carried out, the NIFHA board will consider options for expanding this to ensure a focus on learning lessons from other comparable bodies. An updated benchmarking programme will be developed.	NIFHA	31/03/27 and ongoing
b) NIFHA should consider further diversification opportunities to remain sustainable within the sector.	NIFHA will continue to explore new diversification opportunities and will present these to the NIFHA board, engaging with the department where required.	NIFHA	31/03/27 and ongoing

Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

Recommendation Six - Opportunities for Enhanced Effectiveness and Efficiency a) NIFHA senior management should work with the stakeholders in each harbour to agree stakeholder engagement plans that include frequency and methods of communication.	NIFHA will review and update stakeholder engagement plans to include frequency and method of communications.	NIFHA	31/03/27
b) NIFHA should update its website to include a corporate publications section that will allow stakeholders to view their documentation.	All corporate publications will be added to the NIFHA website on a timely basis.	NIFHA	Annually

Annex B

Observations arising from the Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

No	Observation	Departmental Response	Action	Implementation Date
1	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.	The department notes this observation and understands that the sequencing of business planning is often outside NIFHA's control. However, with NIFHA's Corporate Plan 2025-28 now published, future alignment can be demonstrated more clearly.	N/A	Complete
2	The Review Team considers that the CEO span of control is too wide and not proportionate to the size of the organisation.	NIFHA is currently undertaking a wider organisational review which includes consideration of management capacity and reporting lines.	Complete organisational review.	31/03/28
3	The Review Team was advised by Harbour and HQ staff that morale is low with little enthusiasm to take on new/additional duties.	The department notes NIFHA's view that staff morale is linked, in part, to perceived and actual pay levels. This issue will be considered as part of the wider examination of pay, grading and workforce	Complete pay and grading review.	31/03/28

Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

		needs to be undertaken by NIFHA.		
4	The Review Team was informed that recruitment is challenging with the low levels of pay available.	The department notes the recruitment challenges outlined. This issue will be considered as part of the wider examination of pay, grading and workforce needs to be undertaken by NIFHA.	Complete pay and grading review.	31/03/28
5	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.	NIFHA has established processes for engagement with internal and external stakeholders.	Establish more Harbour Master meetings.	31/03/27
6	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.	NIFHA is bound by an existing long-term lease and that relocation at this stage would not be financially viable.	Review HQ office need towards end of current lease.	2033
7	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.	NIFHA has already streamlined its KPI set (7) and now reports against a more proportionate number of measures.	Complete.	N/A
8	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.	Conflicts of interest are routinely recorded at board and ARAC meetings in line	No change required.	N/A

Review of Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

		with good governance practice.		
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.	NIFHA has confirmed that tape backup is only one element of a broader backup process and that its IT systems were reviewed by external specialists in recent years. A further IT review will be undertaken in 2027/28.	IT review to be included in 27/28 business plan.	31/03/27



Department of

**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE®
We invest in people Standard