

Departmental Response to Stage 1 of the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme Report

The Fishing and Seafood Development Programme is a strategic programme of work commissioned by my Department in 2019. It aims to explore the challenges and opportunities facing the NI fishing and seafood sectors, including its infrastructure needs, so that these sectors may realise their full potential.

The Programme was split into two stages. Stage 1 which is being published now, focuses on the fishing fleet and the fishing opportunities upon which it depends. Stage 2 which will be completed later this year will focus on the fish processing and other fishing related shore based sectors.

I am keen to build the foundations for a strong and prosperous fishing and seafood sector and appropriate investment in harbour infrastructure is integral to this. As we leave the EU and the Common Fisheries Policy there is potential to improve fisheries management and grow fishing opportunities in a sustainable way. The Stage 1 report highlights restrictions that might constrain the future development, profitability and safety of the fishing fleet and which may lead to a difficulty in taking full advantage of improved fishing opportunities.

In recent years many Irish Sea fish stocks have improved and most, including Nephrops and herring are now fished at Maximum Sustainable Yield levels. This stands us in good stead and I hope that further improvements in fisheries management will grow fish stocks further and result in a vibrant and prosperous fishing industry.

Stage 1 of the Report notes that our fishery harbours, which have served us well in times past, may now be limiting fleet development as average vessel size in UK is increasing. Over time this could lead to the fishing fleet becoming less competitive if vessel owners feel they can't invest in larger and generally more profitable vessels.

We do not yet know the outcome the Future Fisheries Agreement with the EU and the full implications on fishery products entering and leaving Northern Ireland after the Transition Period. Whilst I am optimistic and doing everything I can to ensure the best possible outcome, some uncertainty remains. Added to this, seafood sector has been hit hard by the measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID 19 and we have yet to see full recovery.

It is likely to be towards the end of 2020 before we know the outcome of discussions on future fisheries arrangements with EU and a wider trade deal, and have assessed what this means for future fisheries development in NI. Therefore the conclusions from Stage 1 of the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme are preliminary. My Department intends to issue an addendum to the final FSDP report in early in 2021 that will take account of the final arrangements negotiated with EU.

The Stage 1 Report makes several recommendations for work that should be undertaken to take us to a position where we can decide to move forward to the next stage in potential harbour development. We have reviewed the next steps and the immediate stages over the next seven months are listed below. However, it should be noted that harbour developments are complex and expensive and there is a lengthy process involving consultations and consents that must be gone through before we come to a point where decisions are taken on construction. This is likely to take several years. Proceeding to the next stage in the process is not a guarantee that construction will eventually take place as key approvals will be required at each stage.

Next Steps	Completion date
FSDP Stage 2 and final report	End December 2020
Assessment of impacts of EU/UK Fisheries Agreement and NI Protocol on NI fishing and seafood sector.	December 2020 to January 2021
Strategic Outline Case for fishery harbour investment	November 2020 to March 2021
Publish response to final FSDP report addressing strategic investment in fisheries.	April 2021

In conclusion, I am committed to the future success of the fishing and seafood sector and want to ensure that it is well placed to take advantage of the new opportunities that leaving the EU will bring.