



RECRUITMENT INTO FISHING CAREERS

POLICY BRIEF NO. 1, JULY 2019

Photo: Seafish

OVERVIEW

- The fishing workforce is ageing and the industry relies on labour from abroad.
- There is limited understanding of the opportunities and realities of work in the catch sector among young people.
- Careers in fisheries are considered dirty, with limited prospects and low pay.
- High costs of entry and limited access to training present additional barriers. New funding schemes may overcome this.
- Engaging with schools will help challenge perceptions of fishing and promote it as a rewarding career to young people.
- The industry needs to adapt to accommodate a short-term dynamic workforce, in line with the current priorities for young job-seekers. Providing a professional environment and transferable skills may enable this.

BACKGROUND

Fish stock decline between the 1970s and 1990s corresponded to a decline in wages for those in the catch sector, and a subsequent decline in people working in the industry. A generation of new fishers was lost, with many moving to other industries. Despite many fish stocks showing signs of recovery, recruitment of young people remains low, leaving the catch sector with an ageing workforce and risks of further labour

shortages. Currently, there are almost 12,000 fishermen active in the UK (1,2). There is no academic research into the number of entrants needed to sustain the UK fishing industry currently available.

Ageing workforce

The fishing workforce is ageing, raising questions about industry sustainability. The average age of a deckhand is 35, and 48 for a skipper (3). Smaller

This briefing summarises the output from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fisheries open Parliamentary seminar held on 7 May 2019. The meeting brought together stakeholders from across the sector and across the UK. Skippers, vessel owners, charity and advisory body representatives, academics and industry experts met to discuss recruitment challenges and ways forward. This document is a synthesis of the discussions that took place both at the event and online (via #FishingRecruitment).

vessels typically have the highest proportion of older workers and the average vessel owner is now around 50 years old (3).

Labour shortage

For fishermen working in both the small- and large-scale fleet, there is concern that their children are not interested in the industry. Increased social and spatial mobility has contributed to the breakdown of this father-to-son pathway into fishing (4), reliance on which can lead to a net recruitment decrease (5). Rather than take on the family business, young people are choosing careers in other marine industries, including military work and offshore resource exploration. These industries provide security through immediate access to a salary, in comparison to fishing, which offers a share of catch value.

A large proportion of the workforce is made up of non-UK nationals (who resupplied the UK workforce following contraction of the industry). International crew are vital to the industry, should these workers leave the industry, further labour and skills shortages are likely to become an issue. Work in the catch sector requires training, but not higher education; the pool from which labour can be secured is shrinking as more people take this route.

CHALLENGES

Perception of the industry

There is little knowledge of the industry among young people, which can cause a disconnect between workforce expectations and reality, and limit understanding of the opportunities in the catch sector. Practical training programmes are still not yielding recruits that are keen to stay in the industry. As with military careers, physical and emotional challenges come with the role, and obeying orders is a matter of safety. However, this is not necessarily the work environment anticipated by new recruits.

Market research indicates that school leavers see work in the seafood and catch sectors as dirty, with limited prospects and low pay, despite the opportunities available (6). More education is needed for young people to allow them to learn more about the fishing industry and what is involved.

Costs of entry

Family connections have traditionally facilitated entry by providing financial and material support (5). Substantial costs are involved in buying boats and leasing quota, making it challenging for young people to start their own fishing business. Accommodation in coastal locations can be very expensive and the lack of affordable housing adds to the challenge of retaining people in the industry. Fishermen are trying to raise money for a mortgage deposit as well as a boat and there is insufficient support to meet both of these financial needs.

There is little to no support from banks for young fishermen seeking to purchase their own boat. Financial backing from family and friends can help overcome this initial outlay, but the cost of safety equipment can also be prohibitive. The need to transport fish also incurs additional costs. Crew-share schemes for payment (where the value of the catch is split between the crew) are common in the catch sector. The lack of financial stability (if the boat cannot be at sea, it will not be making money) presents an additional risk.

Training access and availability

There is a ten-fold difference in the number of people undertaking training at each of the levels provided by Seafish, with many opting to undertake short-duration basic training over longer, more advanced sector-specific programmes. While training is important (and Basic Safety Training essential), the cost of undertaking it (in lost time at sea) can be substantial. For example, a captain qualification takes five months in a classroom to achieve.

During this time, anyone receiving payment by crew-share will not have an income.

Funding training programmes is a challenge, as it falls outside many further education funding criteria. There is a constant need to re-adapt as changes in the funding climate mean new negotiations for training costs have to be made (EU funding, for example, will no longer be available in 2020, and training programmes will need a new source of funding).

WAYS FORWARD

The following approaches focus on how to promote fishing as a career choice, as disinterest in fishing careers is the first barrier to recruitment into the industry.

Provide transferable skills

Young people want choice and transferable skills. They are interested in doing something they can do well, learn from and then develop further in another role. Many people now have portfolio careers, picking up skills they can transfer between positions and staying in roles for 3-5 years. The demand for transferable skills has already been identified within lobster and shellfish fleets. Adapting to a short-term dynamic workforce is a challenge the catch sector needs to meet.

Professionalise the industry

As with any other industry, people cannot be pushed into fishing. Instead, they need to be attracted to the industry. The fishing industry needs to market itself well in order to get young people interested. This means demonstrating value, safety and stability.

Investing in the fishing industry helps others see its value. For fishing to be seen as a viable business, the monetary case should be demonstrated (showing that fishing can be

lucrative, products are saleable etc.). Crew welfare and wellbeing is a priority. By providing the best quality safety equipment, the industry can ensure it is a safe and welcoming place to work. Healthy, stable stocks are needed to enable continued employment. Demonstrating commitments to sustainability through responsible fishing (avoiding spawning areas, making gear more selective etc.) helps to professionalise the industry.

The only people in the fishing industry that work on a crew-share basis are in the catch sector. Removing this may be an option to explore as part of the next stage of professionalisation. In Norway, for example, fishers are paid a standard wage with bonus structures.

Engage with schools

Schools offer an opportunity to highlight what fishing careers actually entail and showcase the benefits of fisheries careers for school leavers. There is a need to rewrite the narrative on what jobs in the catch sector entail and challenge existing perceptions. Regional and national engagement offers routes to achieve this (e.g. Seafarers UK careers promotion forums and direct engagement with schools through careers fairs and suchlike). Approaches used by the Merchant Navy and Royal Navy to net new recruits could be readily applied to fishing, highlighting the challenge, excitement and opportunity that catch sector work brings.

Synergy with schools and education is required to highlight the training opportunities available for fisheries careers. Skippers and crew need to be highly skilled in order to operate state-of-the-art vessels that incorporate the latest in technology. Relevant training could be incorporated into qualifications undertaken at school (BTEC), or into Sea Cadet programmes.

Provide financial support

Some fishing organisations are already providing funding to attract new entrants, but opportunities may need to be communicated in a more targeted way to reach a young audience. Many organisations could, potentially, provide further funding support and a range of options could help alleviate financial difficulties for new entrants. In addition, the following options may provide additional support:

- Government grants in which the funds are affiliated to the boat, rather than the person. These have been available historically (e.g. The White Fish Industry grant).
- Setting aside quota for small vessels and new entrants. This makes it easier for small and new vessels to make a profit, and taking on new recruits becomes more desirable for established vessels. The approach is used effectively in Denmark (7).
- Progressive retailers and processors could help fund training programmes for recruits to the catch sector, supporting a workforce that their businesses ultimately rely on.
- Increased engagement with banks (who hold the gate for mortgages and vessel loans) could also improve lending capacity. Clarifying the current state of UK fishing, growth and opportunities could ameliorate the perceived risks of lending to those in the catch sector. Defra and Seafarers have begun work in this area and have produced a guide to inform strategic grant-making (2).

REFERENCES

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2. Seafarers UK, 2018. Fishing for a Future, UK Fishing Forum 2018. Published January 2018, accessed May 2019.
3. Seafish, 2019. 2018 Employment in the UK Fishing Fleet. Seafish Report No SR734. ISBN: 978-1-911073-40-6. Published February 2019, accessed May 2019.

SUMMARY

The primary issue is not the obstacles to getting into the industry, but the desire to get into fishing. Until this issue is addressed, solutions to other recruitment challenges will have limited efficacy. While there are rewards in the fishing industry, they are poorly communicated. This needs to be reshaped. Then financial measures can be put into place to support those starting fishing careers.

A joined-up, collective approach is needed to promote the industry to young people and challenge existing negative perceptions. This can be achieved by demonstrating professionalism and opportunities in the industry, as well as providing transferable skills for new recruits. Engagement with schools will facilitate this, while providing a new avenue for training.

Now is a good time to be promoting jobs in fishing as confidence and optimism in the industry is high.

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