

Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund: expert advisory group session 2

Summary of 2nd meeting: 10:30-12:00, 10 August 2026

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) chaired the second meeting of the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund (FCGF) Expert Advisory Group (EAG) virtually via Microsoft Teams on 10 August 2026.

The meeting provided an update on Year 1 delivery of the FCGF, including uptake of the Fisheries and Seafood Scheme (FaSS), delivered by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and sought stakeholders' views on emerging priorities and delivery proposals for Year 2 policy development. Discussion focused on lessons learned from delivery to date, workforce and skills challenges, innovation and science priorities, and potential future delivery models.

Year 1 FaSS Delivery Update

MMO provided an overview of FCGF delivery through FaSS since launch in April 2026. Key points included:

- strong levels of demand across the fund, with over 150 expressions of interest and 361 applications received to date
- funding awarded across a broad range of categories including health and safety, ports and harbours, processing and marketing, energy efficiency, training and diversification
- early claims have begun to be processed and payments made
- larger applications continue to be assessed through dedicated funding rounds

Feedback

Members broadly welcomed the pace of delivery and reported positive experiences of engagement with MMO grant teams, particularly during the expression of interest stage.

Members highlighted a number of issues and observations from across the sector:

- concerns that Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) review fees for some vessel-related applications may be acting as a barrier to participation, particularly for smaller projects
- feedback that some applicants feel they are experiencing longer-than-expected claim payment times
- ongoing challenges for businesses that are unable to meet upfront capital costs prior to reimbursement
- positive observations regarding strong appetite for investment within the seafood processing sector

Officials noted these issues and confirmed they would continue engaging with stakeholders and delivery partners to identify and address barriers where possible.

Year 2 policy development

The Defra policy team presented emerging proposals for Year 2 development, building upon feedback received at the first EAG meeting, Ministerial steers and engagement with experts across Defra and wider Governmental bodies.

Two priority workstreams have been identified for further exploration:

- Workstream 1: Skills and Career Pathways
- Workstream 2: Fisheries Innovation, Science and Data

Workstream 1: Skills and career pathways

Focuses on:

- recruitment and retention
- workforce development
- improving access to training
- building long-term career pathways into the fishing and seafood sector

Feedback from members largely supported this priority area. Members noted:

- workforce challenges remain one of the most significant constraints facing the sector
- the importance of considering both sea-going and land-based seafood careers
- the charter boat fleet face many of the same challenges as the inshore commercial fleet and should also be eligible for career entry and workforce development support
- concerns that mandatory training requirements can create barriers for new entrants where costs are not currently fundable
- the need to consider wider participation costs alongside training provision

Workstream 2: Fisheries innovation, science and data

Focuses on:

- supporting innovation and modernisation
- improving use of science and evidence
- strengthening data collection and utilisation

- supporting industry adaptation to future challenges

Members generally welcomed this workstream, but emphasised the importance of ensuring future interventions:

- address industry-defined priorities
- have clear targets and expected benefits defined from the outset
- deliver practical and measurable outcomes
- support innovation adoption rather than research for its own sake
- enable effective industry-science partnerships
- are inclusive and accessible for smaller organisations and individuals

Several members highlighted the value of previous collaborative science projects and the need to ensure future opportunities remain accessible. Some feedback received suggested that neutral or collaborative bodies could help level the playing field by convening projects and enabling wider participation across the sector.

Delivery model discussion

Officials outlined early thinking around a mixed delivery model combining existing grant funding with targeted pilot activities.

Stakeholders welcomed the flexibility that pilot approaches may offer but raised questions around:

- governance requirements
- administrative burden and accessibility for potential applicants/beneficiaries
- affordability and match funding
- how pilot activities would be commissioned and managed
- whether the effectiveness of the pilots could be bolstered with a multi-stakeholder approach (for example, using industry as key partners)

Officials emphasised that proposals remain at an early stage and no decisions have been made. Further stakeholder input will inform future development.

Cross-cutting discussion themes

Several recurring themes emerged throughout the discussion, including the following.

Importance of collaboration

Stakeholders emphasised the need for future interventions to encourage collaboration rather than create multiple disconnected projects addressing the same issues. Particular interest was expressed in regional workforce initiatives, shared training approaches, industry-led partnerships and mechanisms for sharing best practice across different parts of the sector.

Avoiding duplication

Members highlighted the importance of ensuring future funding complements existing activity and avoids duplication of effort. Examples included:

- workforce initiatives already being developed regionally
- existing training programmes
- innovation and gear-trial activity
- seafood processing workforce programmes

Inclusion of wider sector needs

Several members stressed the importance of ensuring wider sector needs remain visible across both workforce and innovation workstreams, including the processing, aquaculture, recreational fishing and charter boat sectors, recognising the interconnected nature of the wider seafood supply chain and inclusion of these parts of the wider sector under various pieces of legislation.

Feedback suggested that future funding workstreams should be defined in a way that reflects the wider fishing and coastal economy, where relevant, and does not inadvertently exclude smaller or non-traditional applicants whose activity positively contributes to coastal communities, skills development, evidence gathering or fisheries management objectives.

Seafood plans

Members shared early experiences of the seafood plan pilots. Feedback reflected:

- support for place-based approaches
- some uncertainty regarding governance, objectives and responsibilities
- a desire for greater clarity over how local initiatives align with wider regional or national priorities
- recognition that different regions may require different solutions while still benefitting from shared learning

Maintaining breadth of fund priorities

Members' feedback broadly supported prioritising the two proposed Year 2 workstreams but some feedback cautioned that this should not come at the expense of other themes identified earlier in the Fund's development. Stakeholders highlighted continued interest in:

- infrastructure and access
- promotion and marketing
- shellfish welfare
- activity that can deliver benefits for multiple parts of the seafood supply chain and coastal communities

Feedback also noted that shellfish welfare may become an increasingly important issue for the sector, with potential implications for supply chains, training, equipment and competitiveness against imported products.

Long-term programme design and accessible participation

Feedback emphasised that the Fund is likely to have greatest impact where it supports longer-term programmes rather than short-term, standalone activities. Stakeholders suggested that shorter-term work may be useful where it helps explore feasibility or define delivery challenges, but should be connected to sustained programmes with clear objectives, measurable benefits and long-term sector value.

Feedback also highlighted the need to make access routes manageable for overstretched organisations and to ensure small-scale fishing interests can participate effectively through appropriate representative or collaborative structures.

Officials welcomed this feedback and noted its relevance to ongoing policy development.

Next steps

Officials confirmed that:

- feedback from the discussion will inform further development of Year 2 policy proposals
- engagement with stakeholders will continue between meetings
- emerging workstream proposals remain under development and do not represent final policy decisions
- notes from the meeting will be circulated to attendees and members unable to attend

The Chair indicated that the next EAG meeting is likely to be scheduled for autumn 2026, with members to be consulted on preferred format and agenda items.