

National symposium seeks to turn the tide for declining inshore and small scale fisheries.

Our island nation, which boasts some of the richest coastal waters in the world, has always been a nation of fishers. As a society, we continue to benefit from many sustainable and well managed fisheries that operate in our coastal waters, providing a source of livelihood, local economy, vibrant cultural heritage and national food security. Fish is a protein rich food source and, while commercial fisheries are of course vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and warming seas, they are resilient in ways that agriculture is not. It can rain all year long, or not rain at all, and our ability to keep producing food from the sea is not threatened in the same ways as food production on land and so offers opportunities for building resilience.

Recent research by the Inshore and Small Scale Fisheries (ISSF) consortium has evidenced that the public benefits that flow from sustainable fisheries are clearly felt and valued by people who live, work and visit coastal towns^[1].



People gather regularly to watch inshore fishermen land the famous Cromer crab in Norfolk. Photos credit: [Ian Georgeson Photography | Edinburgh PR, Marketing & Event Photographer](#)



However, research has also highlighted the precariousness of our inshore fishing sector^[2]. These small boats, which currently make up 79% of our whole fleet, are heavily dependent on healthy inshore waters, landing their catch locally in the many towns and villages dotted around our coastline. They ensure that the benefits from sustainable fisheries are delivered across our whole coastline, including smaller harbours and beach landing sites, often located in rural areas, which are unsuitable for larger-scale fishing operations.

Small boats underpin delivery of a 'national benefit' from fisheries (as enshrined in the Fisheries Act) that is truly national in scope – not just through GDP benefits concentrated in a small number of large ports, but as a broader social, economic and cultural good across the nation.

Whilst there has been decline across the whole of the UK's fishing fleet, in England, within only a 14 year period (2008-2022), we lost one fifth of our under 10-meter vessels, a rate of decline twice that seen in the over 10m sector. In other indicators too, small boats fare poorly: the number of days spent at sea and fulltime fishermen employed in the sector almost halved in the same period. This decline is further characterised by stark regional inequality with parts of the country, including northern and south-east England, showing 'hot spots' of deep decline.

In many coastal areas, the inshore fleet is in real danger of collapse, accentuated by an ageing fishing population close to retirement and an uncertain future for new generations.



Fishing Vessel Numbers UK

Data from Seafish, using two static points of 2008 and 2024 at NUTS2 level.

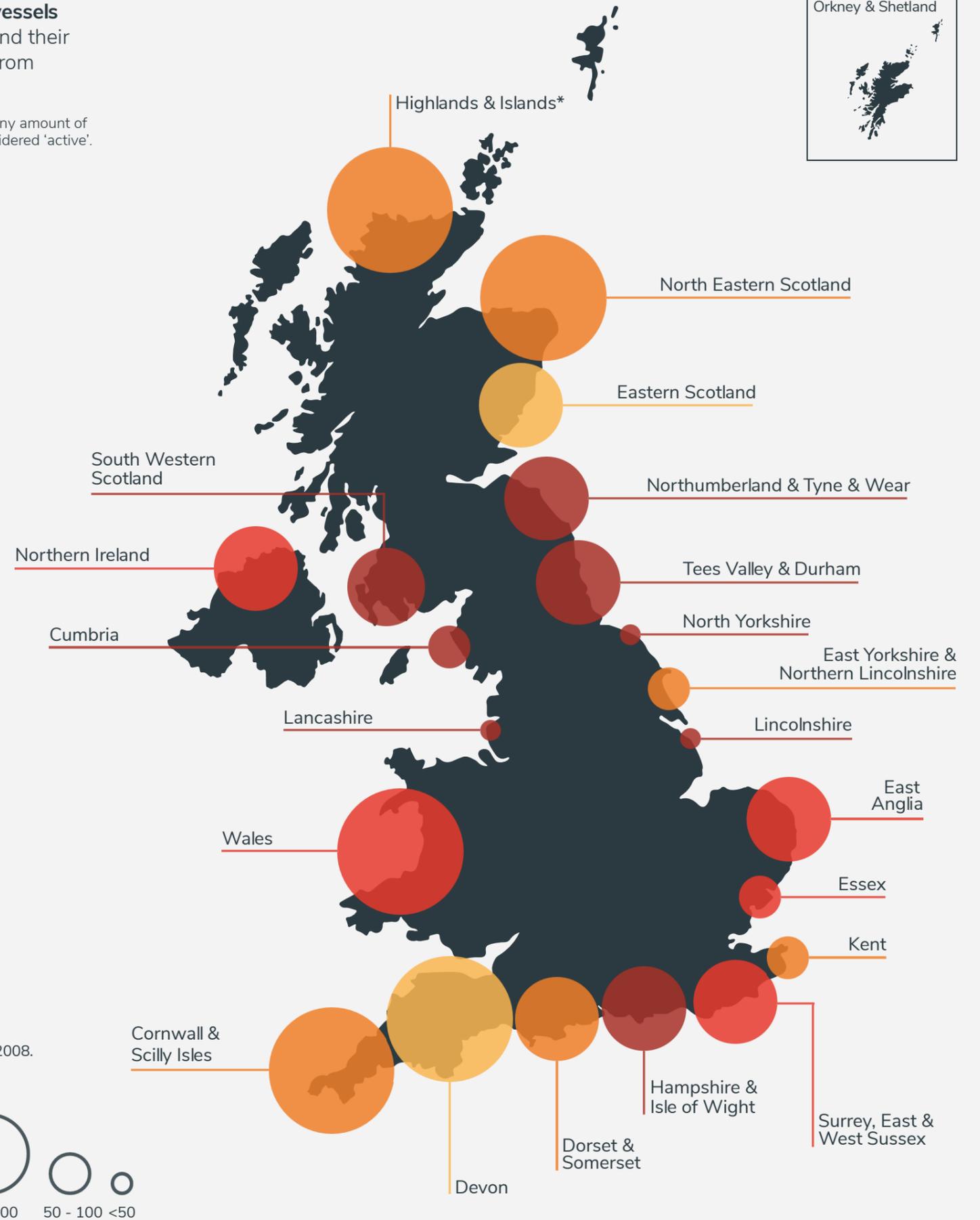
This is a visualisation of the UK's **active fishing vessels** in different regions and their change in numbers from 2008 to 2024.

Vessels that have recorded any amount of landings in the year are considered 'active'.

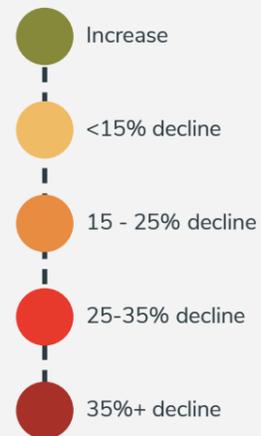
*Inc. West Scotland, Orkney & Shetland



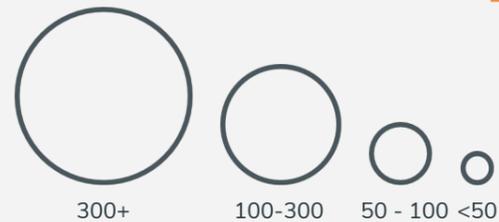
The above heatmap (Couthard et al 2025) shows regional inequality with some regions facing steep losses in their fishing fleet between 2008 and 2022. Updated to now incorporate the 2024 fleet survey from Seafish, we can see this decline deepen with parts of the south and north showing over 35% decline in their fleets.



Circle colour represents the % change of vessel counts from 2008 to 2024.



Circle size represents vessel numbers in the region as of 2008.



ENSURING
the VOICES of INSHORE
FISHERMEN are HEARD
to build the CAPACITY to
COLLECTIVELY ACT



EFFECTIVE
REGULATION
of ALL
SEA USERS

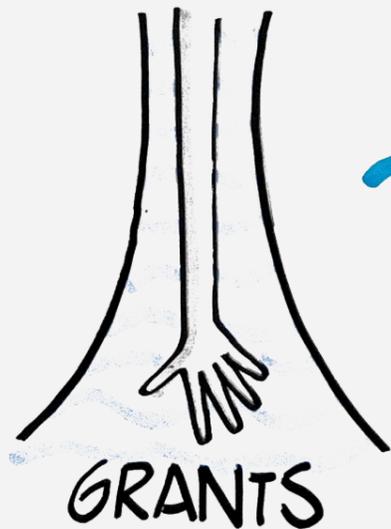
HEALTH and SAFETY
REGULATIONS
that MATCH
FISHING REALITIES
(inc vessel type
and size)



IMPROVE
PUBLIC
AWARENESS
and PERCEPTION
of the FISHING
INDUSTRY

the Seven PRIORITIES

Better
ACCESS
to GRANTS
for SMALL
FISHING
BUSINESSES



SUPPORT
for and
FACILITATION
of
DIVERSIFICATION



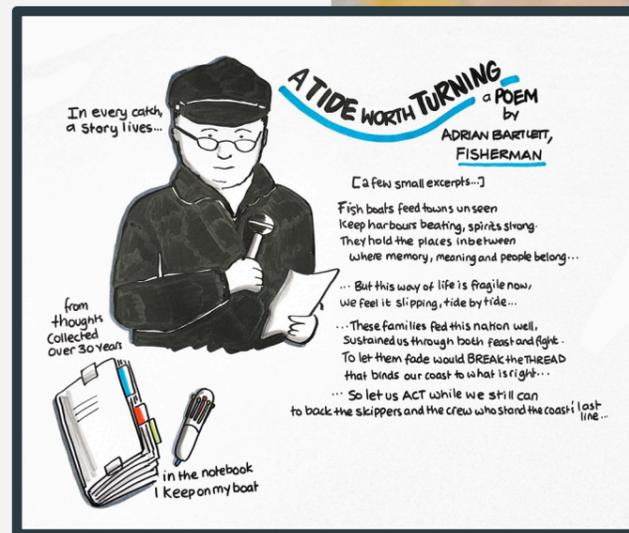
INVEST in
and FACILITATION
for TRAINING
and RECRUITMENT
into FISHING
CAREERS



Last week, a national symposium for Inshore and Small Scale Fisheries, coordinated by the ISSF consortium, took place in Newcastle upon Tyne. It was attended by 120 people including 50 fishermen and their representative organizations, scientists, regulators, policy makers, and NGO staff, who came together with one aim, to find viable solutions to secure inshore fishing livelihoods. The event was a platform for fishermen to explain the particular challenges faced by small-boat operators and, through dialogue with government, distil workable solutions. Many ideas were generated, framed around 7 priority themes which emerged in regional workshops (Lef by the ISSF) in Poole and Whitby in autumn 2024.

Some solutions are universally applicable across all fishing sectors, such as working across government to open up fishing as an accessible career to young people via attractive apprenticeships. Others speak specifically to the needs of small boat operators, such as simplifying paperwork to access local market opportunities and grant funding, recognising the impacts of boat inspection delays on small boats already facing reduced days at sea from stormy weather, addressing fishing pressure beyond 6 nautical miles, and building capacity within the hugely valued Fisherman's Mission to expand its reach to more rural and remote fishing communities. The full set of generated solutions to secure the inshore fleet will be taken forward in further dialogue between the consortium, DEFRA and other stakeholders to establish what is, and what is not, possible to realise, where funding might be sought, and how solutions proposed by inshore fishermen sit with other sectors of the fishing and broader marine sector.

A highlight of the event was the opening session which saw retired fisherman Adrian Bartlett of the Plymouth Fishing and Seafood Association read his poem, written especially for the symposium, 'A tide worth turning'. We were also blessed once again by the artwork of Caroline Chapple who captured conversations from the two days.



Reflections from fishermen

At this time the entire fishing community is facing unprecedented challenges from the closure of markets to the increased politicisation of fish stocks and all of this is contributing to the steady decline of the industry as a whole. The inshore fisheries face their own issues on top of these and is seeing a disproportionate decline. The symposium gave us the opportunity to discuss these issues in depth and engage with government bodies in a constructive atmosphere. Although we might not agree on everything, it's provided us a much needed forum to gain an understanding of the challenges facing both the fishing community and the enforcement agencies.

Whitby fisherman George Lamplough

Hastings fishermen travelled to Newcastle joining other inshore fishermen from around the coast to discuss face to face the problems facing the inshore fishery with important representatives from DEFRA, MMO, CEFAS, IFCA's and universities. It was a worthwhile trip discussing and debating a list of priorities that will go forward to help to secure a future for cultural and sustainable inshore fleets....

Having our voice heard by those people who are decision makers and hearing the problems they face to make those decisions was very relevant to our daily lives.

Hastings Fishermen's Protection Society





For thousands of years, a working harbour, community and knowledge of how and where to fish, has been the bedrock of our ability to produce food from the sea. As the last fishermen retire and the last boats are sold, this capability is lost, and once lost from a place, it is unlikely to return. Just as is done in farming and small-scale business, new efforts are urgently needed to address the specific needs and priorities of this important sector.

The ISSF consortium would like to thank everyone who made time to attend this event and the event funders Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Association of IFCAs and Fishmongers Company.



Images taken over the two days capture the value of making space for co-design processes like this, where new understanding, respect for different views, and even rebuilding trust become possible. Credit: Oli Loveday

[Electric Blue Productions | Filmmaking & Videography](#)

References

[1] Lewis, P., Hatt, A., and S. Coulthard (2025). Balanced Management and Social Wellbeing Outcomes: Exploring the Societal Contributions of Sustainable Crab and Lobster Fisheries. A report prepared by Newcastle University for Natural England.

[2] [Recognising and Protecting the National Benefit of Sustainable Fisheries in the UK - Coulthard - 2025 - Fish and Fisheries - Wiley Online Library](#)