

NWWAC Minutes

WORKING GROUP 1 (Irish Sea)

Virtual meeting – Wednesday, 29 October 2025

1. Welcome and introductions

John Lynch, WG1 Chair, welcomed the participants and explained that the WG1 meeting had been delayed due to an important national meeting in Ireland on 14 October, which required the attendance of the Irish members. No apologies were received, and the agenda was adopted as presented.

Action points from the last meeting (02 July 2025)

1	Members to send written queries for Joanne Morgan following her presentation to the Secretariat
	Email request sent to members 04 July
2	Members to send feedback on the fishing opportunities advice as well as the climate change impacts to the Secretariat.
	Email request sent to members 04 July
3	Working Group to follow up on BIM trials at October meeting.
	Updates will be available at the beginning of 2026, invite BIM for March meeting. Email from BIM: <i>We do not have any trial updates for the Irish sea this time. We are planning an Irish sea whitefish trial that will be completed before the end of this year, most likely in November. The trial will focus on selectivity and reduction of unwanted catches and will compare the current legislated gear (120 mm diamond mesh codend with a 100 mm diamond mesh extension) against a 100 mm square mesh codend and extension. We hope to have a completed report on this early in 2026 and could present something at the next meeting in 2026.</i>

On the last point, Emiel Brouckaert asked if the trials are carried out with commercial vessels or research vessels, and how many. The Chair replied that they are carried out with one commercial vessel. Currently, there is only one vessel involved, though they may be accepting additional participants. There is also a tender for a similar trial in the Celtic Sea, which may be used for comparison. As far as I understand, the two different gears will be tested on the single vessel.

2. Review and discussion of the ICES advice for 2026 TACs in the Irish Sea, with consideration of implications for each stock – FG Chair ([SLIDES](#))

The Chair presented then Agenda item 2, which focused on reviewing and discussing the ICES advice for the 2026 TACs in the Irish Sea, with consideration of the implications for each stock.

The discussion highlighted a concerning trend of declining advice in the Irish Sea across most stocks, despite the Sole having received a positive review two years ago. This ongoing decline was noted as an issue worth examining.

Five stocks specific to the Irish Sea have been discussed. Whiting, in particular, showed a small but positive change, moving from a zero TAC advice to 200 tonnes. Although this is still below the previous bycatch quota, it represents a positive adjustment.

Patrick Murphy raised concerns about potential overfishing, noting that if catches exceeded 200 tonnes in previous years under a bycatch provision, vessels could now be accused of overfishing. He emphasised that this practical problem should not be ignored. He further stressed the need for a full assessment of why stocks are declining, questioning whether the downward trend in fishing mortality (F) ranges, despite maintained MSY values, is effectively supporting stock rebuilding. He warned that if this trend continues, it could lead to the disappearance of fisheries. P. Murphy also highlighted environmental considerations, such as the movement of fish species like boarfish into the area and the potential impact on recruitment through predation on larvae, suggesting that these factors should be considered in future advice.

The Chair acknowledged P. Murphy points and noted that there is no recorded evidence of boarfish being caught in the Irish Sea, though it remains a question worth asking. He remarked that the main issue is the decline in stocks, particularly among Gadidae species where recruitment is low. The Chair mentioned that the cross-area stock advice for Nephrops is expected soon, which could raise additional concerns. Regarding whiting, he noted that Ireland had a quota of approximately 230 tonnes this year, with only 29 tonnes landed so far, and considered this manageable for Ireland and Belgium, with the UK's situation less clear.

P. Murphy asked whether discards would affect this assessment, and the Chair clarified that the total recorded landings, including discards, amount to 29 tonnes, indicating no immediate concern. The Chair also expressed concern about the declining advice for sole, observing that graphs and data do not clearly justify a reduction of 10–15 percent.

E. Brouckaert then provided input from the Belgian perspective. He explained that Belgium's base quota for whiting in area 7a is minimal, around one tonne, and bycatch is very limited. He welcomed the 200-tonne TAC, noting it should provide sufficient whiting for bycatch purposes. Regarding sole, E. Brouckaert stressed the importance of adopting a realistic approach in line with the Commission's mandate. He suggested including the revision of 2024 advice, when initial zero-catch advice was adjusted in-year following a benchmark assessment.

E. Brouckaert also addressed plaice, noting that while nothing is official, similar measures to those in the Celtic Sea might be proposed under the technical quota regulation, particularly for flatfish in areas 7D and 7A with associated choke risks under Article 4.6 of the multiannual plan. He recommended that the Commission consult stakeholders on any proposed technical measures or management actions, rather than negotiating unilaterally with the UK.

The Chair acknowledged Emiel's points and agreed on the need for stakeholder engagement, concluding the discussion on initial comments regarding whiting, sole, and plaice. The Chair observed that whiting was the most concerning in terms of potential bycatch issues, but current indications suggest this is not a problem. He highlighted the significant cuts advised for plaice, noting that the primary issue appears to be low recruitment among gadid stocks, rather than management measures themselves.

3. Update on the development of ORE in the Irish sea and discussion on the request to have the NWWAC join the Seafood/ ORE WG as an observer member – FG Chair

The Chair provided an update on offshore renewable energy (ORE) projects, noting that developers have received questions regarding fisheries, fisheries management, and mitigation strategies, with responses due by January. He indicated that planning permission is unlikely to be granted before late next year, and some projects may face judicial review on environmental or fisheries grounds. While current projects are inside 12 miles, Ireland's ambition to reach 37 gigawatts may see new projects extending beyond 12 miles in the future. The Chair emphasised that this is an issue to monitor and noted the long-standing request for the Northwestern Waters Advisory Council to have observer status on the Irish Sea working group in Ireland. If approved in the final draft terms of reference, this would allow the Advisory Council to be represented, providing detailed feedback to members and ensuring that Irish ambitions, which could affect all Member States' fisheries, are monitored.

4. Discussion on growing concerns regarding cable installations across the Irish Sea and the need for further analysis of their interactions with the fishing industry – FG Chair

The Chair then highlighted a related but potentially more serious issue: the continual installation of communication cables in the Irish Sea, which has caused significant problems for some vessels, particularly the beam trawl and scallop fleets. He noted that, unlike pipelines and interconnectors, there are currently no guidelines in Ireland for the installation or maintenance of these cables. Developers bury them where feasible but are not obliged to report exposed cables. He asked if any EU-level guidelines exist and whether such guidelines should be requested or developed.

P. Murphy described the cables as a navigation hazard and suggested that, at a minimum, exposed cables should be monitored and vessels notified, shifting responsibility to those who install them. The Chair agreed, noting the challenge of identifying the appropriate authority to contact, including the possibility of approaching the European Commission. P. Murphy added that other organisations, such as the Irish Maritime Area Regulatory Authority – MARA or relevant UK authorities like Defra, could also be approached.

The Chair suggested exploring options with available expertise to monitor and address the cable issue, noting the increasing hazard.

E. Brouckaert added that Belgian legislation provides some monitoring and guidance for cables, pipelines, and interconnectors, but he was unaware of any EU-wide regulations. The Chair clarified that while pipelines and interconnectors in Ireland are monitored every two years, communication cables are not, and the lighter modern cables are more prone to becoming exposed.

Dominic Rihan commented that no European guidelines are known, and the Commission would likely defer responsibility to Member States. He suggested following up with the relevant national authorities, likely the Department of Transport, to begin addressing the issue.

Mo Mathies proposed starting informally by emailing the Commission to request information, noting that previous contacts with MARA had been unresponsive. She suggested also raising the issue at the next Northwestern Waters Member States Group meeting to identify the appropriate national contacts. Once the relevant contacts are known, a formal letter requesting information could be developed. The Chair agreed.

5. AOB

The Irish Ocean Knowledge Strategy 2030 – Proposal for a presentation by the Marine Institute at the next WG1 meeting

Finally, the Chair moved to other business, proposing that the Marine Institute be invited to present the draft Irish Ocean Knowledge Strategy 2025–2030 at the next meeting.

The Marine Institute has prepared a draft of Ireland's new Strategy for Marine Research, Knowledge & Innovation for 2025-2030, known as Ocean Knowledge 2030. Coordinated by the Marine Institute, the strategy has been developed in partnership with multiple government departments, state agencies, and stakeholders involved in marine policy, research, and innovation. Ocean Knowledge 2030 will guide national coordination of marine research and innovation investments, programming, and policy, supporting sustainable use of ocean space and the development of a climate-neutral blue economy. It aligns with national and EU sectoral and research strategies and contributes to the Impact 2030 action to position Ireland as a leader in marine research and technology. The strategy is currently in advanced draft form.

Aodh O'Donnell indicated he had no additional knowledge of the strategy beyond what had been presented. The Chair concluded that the group would wait for the presentation to determine relevance and next steps.



6. Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	Working Group to follow up on BIM trials. Updates will be available at the beginning of 2026, and the Secretariat will invite BIM for March meeting.
2	Draft a letter to the European Commission highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement when proposing technical measures. The letter should also reflect the fishing sector's view that some existing data do not accurately represent conditions on the ground.
3	In response to growing concerns regarding cable installations across the Irish Sea and the need for further analysis of their interactions with the fishing industry, the Secretariat will: - Contact the European Commission to enquire whether any EU-level guidelines, monitoring documents, or studies exist on the impacts of cable installations on the fishing sector. - Raise the issue at the next Member States Technical Group meeting. Follow up with MARA (Irish Maritime Area Regulatory Authority) to confirm their availability to present on the matter at the March meeting.
4	Secretariat to follow up with the Marine Institute to arrange a presentation at the March meeting on Ireland's new Strategy for Marine Research, Knowledge & Innovation 2025–2030.

The Chair ended the meeting, thanking the WG1 members for their participation and the Secretariat.

Participants

NWWAC members		
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
John	Lynch	Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation Ltd
Patrick	Murphy	Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation
Aodh	O'Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO)
Dominic	Rihan	KFO
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria	Bellomo	Fisheries Strategy & Administration Officer
Mo	Mathies	Executive Secretary