



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Fisheries Bill: Department of Agriculture,
Food and Rural Affairs

24 September 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin

Witnesses:

Mr Paddy Campbell	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr David Steele	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Claire Vincent	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I welcome, via StarLeaf, Claire Vincent, Paddy Campbell and David Steele. I invite Claire and her colleagues to begin their presentation.

Ms Claire Vincent (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Chair. Can you hear me?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Yes. Loud and clear.

Ms Vincent: That is great. The last time that we were with you to give oral evidence was on 5 March, just before lockdown. We had a full discussion then on the contents of the Fisheries Bill, and you heard from your research officer on the same date. As you have mentioned, the Committee has produced a report. We want to give you an update today on where we have got to, as well as a bit of context on the timing.

As you know, the Bill completed its Committee stage in the House of Commons on 15 September. We were told, around 9 September, that Report could commence as early as 5 October. It now seems more likely that that will be in the week beginning 12 October, but, as it stands, the date has still to be announced. Westminster is potentially pulling the timetable forward.

Report Stage is the final amending stage. We therefore need the Assembly's legislative consent before that. We then have to start working immediately towards an earlier date. Working back from the Westminster dates, I can say that the latest date that the Assembly debate can take place is 29 September, and that is the date for which it has now been scheduled. The Minister tabled a legislative

consent motion on 17 September and laid a supplementary memorandum on 18 September. Those are included in your packs. We understand that that has resulted in a really constrained time frame for you. That is not acceptable, but, unfortunately, from our point of view, it has been unavoidable. I just want to apologise for how that has happened. As Denis mentioned earlier, some of the legislative timetable things are outwith our control, owing to the busyness of Westminster at the moment.

I hope that that gives you a little bit of context as to why we are here today. If you are content with that, Deputy Chair, I will move on to summarising some of the changes that now stand part of the Bill and, after that, some further ones that we are anticipating being made in the coming weeks.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Yes. Go ahead. That is perfect.

Ms Vincent: The supplementary memorandum has been laid with a view to identifying the UK Government amendments that now stand part of the Bill following Committee Stage. Those all require the Assembly's legislative consent. I will look at them in turn.

Clause 2 has been amended to extend the time period by which the joint fisheries statement must be published from 18 months to 24 months. Schedule 6 has been amended to introduce a new requirement to publish specified information about assistance given under financial assistance schemes.

The third amendment concerns us. All of them concern us, but this one is specific to Northern Ireland. It amends the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 by removing the option of granting a licence to kill seals for the purpose of preventing serious damage to fisheries.

The next amendment is to clause 49. It includes a revised definition of "minimum conservation reference size" in order to give it greater legal clarity. The final amendment is to part 2 of schedule 4. It amends the Sea Fishing (Licences and Notices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 to introduce and expedite process for the communication of temporary fishing licences.

Those are the changes that have already been made. If you would like to discuss any of them now, we can do that. I can also throw in the changes that we anticipate happening in the next few weeks.

(The Chairperson [Mr McAleer] in the Chair)

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK. Thank you, Claire.

Ms Vincent: Do you want me to go ahead?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes. Go ahead.

Ms Vincent: The changes that I have just discussed are already in the Bill. These are now the further anticipated changes. We think that there will be an amendment to clause 46 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and to schedule 9 to the same Act to provide DAERA with the powers to regulate fishing for marine conservation purposes in Northern Ireland's offshore region.

A number of statutory rules will be amended to ensure that the restrictions and requirements provided by them apply equally to all fishing vessels licensed to fish in the Northern Ireland zone and to provide powers for DAERA and the other devolved Administrations to enter into joint working arrangements. We think that those will also be tabled on Report.

I have David Steele and Paddy Campbell with me to talk about the legislative process and the background to some of the proposed amendments to the Fisheries Bill. We are happy to take any of your questions. It will be tomorrow or Monday before DEFRA clears the latter amendments that we have been talking about, and it hopes to publish them on Monday or Tuesday of next week. So, as you can see, the timetables are squashed and are overlapping, but we are doing our best to work through and give you as much chance as possible to discuss the amendments.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you for that, Claire. When taking evidence on the Fisheries Bill previously, one of the decisions that we made was that the permanent secretary should write to the NIO regarding the territorial dispute over Lough Foyle. Has there been any response to that? What is the situation in regard to Lough Foyle?

Ms Vincent: I will have to check my records. We provided some briefing on that issue, and we requested that the Minister write to the NIO on that, but I will have to check up on that to see what has happened over the summer. We have briefed on the issue, but I am not sure and do not want to say that that has been actioned without checking first. Perhaps I can come back to you in writing on that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): That is perfect, Claire; thank you.

Mr Blair: Thank you Claire and others; it is good to see you all.

I have a couple of quick questions; one on the amendments and one on the extension to the time frame for the joint fisheries statement. Was full consideration given to the impact that the extension to the time frame might have on the sea fisheries sector? Have conversations taken place with the sector on any potential impact?

My second question is on the amendments. Whatever the outworkings of the amendments, I will hone in on sustainability. Is the Department involved in conversations with environmental organisations in relation to the sustainability argument? If so, will those conversations continue whatever the outcome of the process?

Ms Vincent: Thank you, John. On the joint fisheries statement, the purpose of the amendment is to change the time frame from 18 months post Royal Assent to 24 months, subject to agreement between the Administrations. We are working closely with the industry in all of this. A wee bit like the evidence that you heard earlier, for the first three or four months of the COVID pandemic, we were meeting weekly with industry to talk about COVID issues and then transition issues. It is probably fair to say that we are talking with them weekly at the moment, so there is good, close working. We have also been talking to the environmental NGOs on a regular basis and running webinars and Webex-type meetings as well.

On the sustainability issue, I am not sure. I might hand over to Paddy, who can say whether we spoke specifically to them about that. I assume that you are referring to the House of Lords wanting the sustainability objective elevated.

Mr Blair: Yes.

Ms Vincent: That has been overturned by the Government because they want a level playing field for all of the objectives. We support that because, obviously, sustainability is already about that balancing act between the environmental, social and economic elements. There could have been unintended consequences from elevating that, because sustainability is also about economic and social factors. I will hand over to Paddy to see whether he can say any more on that.

Mr Paddy Campbell (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Claire. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes, Paddy.

Mr Campbell: Good. OK. Sustainability issues were carried through the Lords. There was no specific consultation with environmental NGOs during that period because it was being taken through already by Parliament. However, sustainability goes right through the rest of the objectives. There is the sustainability objective, the precautionary objective and the ecosystem objective. There are plenty of environmental protections there. When those objectives were being developed, a lot of them — the first four, certainly — were replicated from the common fisheries policy itself. An additional one, the climate-change objective, has been put in by the Government. That is new and very important.

As regards engagement with stakeholders, as Claire mentioned, we have been meeting regularly with the fishing industry. In taking forward the joint fisheries statement, a community of interest group has been set up in each part of the UK. Therefore, we have a stakeholder group in Northern Ireland that includes the fishing industry, processors and the marine task force. We will engage with that group on drafts of the joint fisheries statement. That drafting has started. It is still at a very early stage. As the draft becomes more developed, we will share that with the group and take its views on how the joint fisheries statement is achieving the objectives as we go forward.

On the point about the extension, the main reason for the extension from 18 to 24 months is to take account of elections. There will be Assembly elections and legislative elections throughout the UK. The reason for that extension is purely technical. It is because we have to allow for elections and various purdah periods throughout the UK.

Mr McGuigan: Following on from John's question about the environment, does the Bill allow for developing environmental standards, in both the North and South, for the Irish Sea? It would be ludicrous if we did not have the freedom to develop all-Ireland standards for our waters. That is my first question.

My second question follows on from the Chair's question about Lough Foyle. It does not mention Carlingford lough at all. Is there a similar dispute about the ownership of Carlingford lough? If we do not have clarification on that, what will be the impact and implications of the Bill for Lough Foyle or Carlingford lough?

My other issue is that, while I understand that it is not your responsibility, Claire outlined the shortened time frame compared with what we would normally expect to have. From our point of view, with regard to what we will potentially consent to, there is so much that is unknown. We are even talking about amendments that we do not know about. For example, how will annex 2 of the protocol affect fishermen, tariffs, issues around immigrant workers, abandoned vessels and boats from one jurisdiction that are docked in another? We are being asked to agree to lots of unknowns when we do not actually have answers to many important questions.

Ms Vincent: OK. We will try to work our way through those issues. Your first question was about an all-Ireland approach to environmental standards and the impacts of that. The Bill is about the UK coming out of the common fisheries policy. However, we are still signed up to the European marine strategy framework directive. The obligations under that directive have been written into local legislation. One of the key underpinning elements of that is the ecosystem approach. That is one aspect. When it comes to environmental management, we will use the same approach as we are already using. The Fisheries Bill is still underpinned by the ecosystem approach. Some would say that the Fisheries Bill takes us further. As Paddy said, there is now a climate change objective in it, and there is still a strong environmental underpinning to the Bill. There is still a need to work on a regional basis. The UK is a coastal state under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (UNCLOS) definitions. We would still be participating in regional fisheries management forums as well. All of that is underpinned by the ecosystem approach. We will still be participating in plans for the wider Irish Sea and those sorts of waters. Paddy, would you like to add anything before we move on to cross-border regions?

Mr Campbell: In coastal state negotiations there is an opportunity for the parties to agree commonality of some measures. Where there is a particular environmental problem to do with fisheries, they can, and have agreed in the past, joint approaches to a market. That has happened for cod in the North Sea, for example, where they have agreed measures to conserve cod [*Inaudible.*]

Ms Vincent: Moving onto the disputed territory part in the border regions. Philip, you asked whether there were the same issues in Carlingford. My understanding is that there is the same issue with disputed territory but that it is not as complex in Carlingford, in that the UK and the Republic of Ireland are happy to have a gentleman's agreement that runs down the middle of the shipping channel between the northern side and the Republic of Ireland's side. That works because the shipping line broadly runs down the middle of Carlingford Lough. That is why there is a difference there in terms of, say, shellfish aquaculture licensing, where Northern Ireland will license aquaculture activities anywhere to the north of that shipping channel, and the Republic, likewise, will issue aquaculture licences on the southern side of that line. There is good communication and agreement between us on the managing of aquaculture. It could be better, but we are working away on that.

The difference with Lough Foyle is that there is no easy line because of the shape of the coastline. You could not run an agreement down the shipping channel in that instance because it runs along the Donegal coast. That is why it is managed for wild fishery, and that is for the Loughs Agency. It is worth saying that the main fisheries in Foyle and Carlingford are on the aquaculture side rather than the catch sector activities. That is why it comes into a different discussion about how you manage aquaculture in those circumstances. Lough Foyle is managed as a wild fishery and the Loughs Agency has a role in that; it works with us and with its sponsor Department in the Republic of Ireland.

It is not ideal, but some of this needs a political will on a higher level and that, as the Chair said earlier, was something that we undertook to take an action on and write to the Northern Ireland Office. I think that it was to ask for an update, because it is something for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London to sort out. There was definitely an action that our Minister was going to write to the Northern Ireland Office to ask what progress was being made. I cannot update you on where we are on that without checking my notes.

Philip, you asked about the shortened time frame and were concerned that you were not being fully sighted on all the issues. You also referred to annex 2 of the protocol. We are scheduled to come to talk to you next week on the specifics. Paddy or David, do you want to say anything more about that? Those are specific to the protocol rather than to the Fisheries Bill.

Mr David Steele (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Fisheries Bill, like many Bills, is framework legislation. As the Committee will be aware, there are a number of associated UK-wide statutory instruments. We are working through them and, as Claire said, we will be bringing them to the Committee's attention. One of them is CFP 20, which will come about with the implementation of the protocol. It is one of the SIs that we and our legal team are working through.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Leaving the common fisheries policy will mean leaving funding from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). Has there been clarity from the British Government on the replacement of the loss of EMFF funding?

Mr Campbell: The position is as we told the Committee earlier in the year. The indications from the Treasury were that funding would be no greater than it would have been under the EMFF, but the intention, at that stage, was that there would still be funding for fishery support. That, of course, would be subject to a spending review. The spending review has not yet happened, so none of us in the devolved Administrations, including DEFRA, has confirmation of the money that will be available. In the meantime, we are developing business cases. DEFRA has developed a UK-wide business case, which is going to Treasury to justify support. We have to do the same here to satisfy the Department of Finance that what we propose to spend money on in fisheries in the future will give us value for money and will meet the new objectives in the Fisheries Bill, and so on. That is a work in progress. No, we have not had confirmation that there is a pot of money being given to fishery support to follow the EMFF.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Am I correct in saying that we got in the region of £15 million in the most recent round?

Mr Campbell: Our share was about 10% of the UK pot, and we expect to get about 10% of whatever is devoted to fisheries.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): What is the implication of the Fisheries Bill for the voisinage agreement?

Mr Campbell: There is nothing in the Fisheries Bill that prevents us from carrying on the voisinage agreement, regardless of whether there is a wider fisheries agreement with the EU. If there is no agreement, a member state can still fish in a third country's waters with that third country's permission. Provided that the Republic of Ireland and ourselves still wish voisinage to happen, that is still allowable. The Bill allows us to license boats from the Republic of Ireland to fish in our waters if we want it to happen. It would have to be reciprocal, so if we are getting the same access for our inshore vessels, there is no reason why that cannot continue.

Mr Harvey: What can you tell me about the Hague preference, Claire?

Ms Vincent: The Hague preference has been very unpopular with our fishers. Paddy could give you chapter and verse on the Hague preference, but my simple understanding of it is that when we are assigning the quotas, coastal states that are reliant on fisheries can invoke preference. The UK can invoke Hague preference, but so can the Republic of Ireland because fisheries is an important part of our economy. That means that our quotas are lessened because both countries are invoking a Hague preference.

I am not sure if I explained that very well. It is unpopular with our fishers because they feel that their quotas are reduced when the Hague preference is invoked. They are looking forward to a time when

we assert ourselves as a coastal state because we will not get those reductions in quota that happen under the Hague preference.

Paddy, did I get that right?

Mr Campbell: Yes, you got it right. I will just elaborate a little.

There is a fiendishly complicated formula behind the Hague preference. It was developed when we entered the common fisheries policy. It dates from the first common fisheries policy that was developed.

As Claire said, it reallocates some quotas to the UK and Ireland, which were deemed at that time to be more dependent on fisheries than other countries. The Republic of Ireland gets a greater share of Irish Sea stocks, and the UK benefits mainly in the North Sea. When the Hague preference is invoked by both parties, it tends to be stakeholders in Scotland who benefit from North Sea stock increases, and we lose out in Northern Ireland because the Irish Sea quota shares are increased for the Republic of Ireland.

It is an artefact of the common fisheries policy. When we leave Europe finally, we will leave with what are called our full relative stability share. We will be leaving, so Europe cannot apply the Hague preference to us. That is our position. We would expect to benefit from leaving because the Hague preference will not be invoked on our share, so we will not lose that share.

Mr Harvey: Obviously, that will please our fishermen and our stocks.

Having been round all our harbours on the County Down coast — Kilkeel, Portavogie, Ardglass — I think that, infrastructure-wise, they all look as if they could do with improvements. Kilkeel would benefit from a new outer wall. The guys at Portavogie want to work; they could do with a bit more infrastructure and help to get new boats. Ardglass could also do with a few benefits. What can you tell me about infrastructure?

Ms Vincent: The industry is lobbying for new infrastructure in the ports. We thought that it was important, before taking any decisions, to do a strategic piece of work to look at the needs in all our ports and any future fishing opportunities that might arise from the UK leaving the EU. We commissioned a fish and seafood development programme to look at all that. I think that the Minister will shortly launch the phase 1 outcome of that, and a report, which will outline the issues and the next steps, is nearly finalised. Some of this work was supposed to be coming to a close, but we think that it is really important that it should not be closed out until we know the outcome of the new Northern Ireland protocol, because it will show us the shape of fishing opportunities and the industry in the future.

We realise that there is an impatience to get on with some capital investment, but there are a lot of steps to go through first. Notwithstanding the discussions and negotiations that have to go on in the next few months, that will be a really important backdrop to this piece of work. We are on it. We are doing that strategic piece. As I said, the phase 1 report should come out relatively shortly.

Paddy, I do not know whether you want to add to that.

Mr Campbell: Just that the phase 1 part dealt with the catching sector. A lot of it is to do with the opportunities available to the catching sectors. It cannot be closed off until we know the outcome of the negotiations on future fishing agreements and the implications of the Northern Ireland protocol, because that will affect, to the good or to the not so good — hopefully, to the good — the fishing opportunities available and, therefore, the case for major investment in infrastructure.

Mr Harvey: Thank you very much. Claire, you mentioned two words: needs and opportunities. There is, indeed, much need, and it is great that there are also opportunities. I welcome the fish and seafood development programme and look forward to seeing that report. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We export 80% to 90% of the fish caught here to the EU. There is the potential loss of the EMFF funding and the implications of that for here. There are concerns about access to the migrant labour that is so vital to the industry. Claire or Paddy, has the Department considered the implications of a no-deal Brexit, given that the EU market is vital for our exports of fish, for migrant labour and, indeed, the fact that we [*Inaudible*] our own fish here as well?

Ms Vincent: Yes, we are very conscious of that. You will hear more evidence next week on this aspect and on the implications of the Northern Ireland protocol and how that works out. We will have with us at that meeting Ciaran Cunningham, who has been leading on all of that work. However, as you heard from Robert Huey and Norman Fulton in the previous session, there is still an awful lot of uncertainty around that. We are working through contingencies for those scenarios as well. As Robert Huey said, we are still working on plan A, which is that we get what we think is a common-sense, workable outcome for the Northern Ireland protocol. There is no certainty around that at the minute. However, we are working on to try to ensure that the industry is ready and that everything is in place to satisfy EU and enable trade to continue, realising what an important market that is. We are still working away on plan A, even though there is not much certainty about that. In the background, we are working on a contingency and trying to ensure that the industry is as ready as possible. Relations are good. The industry is working really well with us and is very much aware of the risks. There is no doubt that the UK is in a strong position, with quota shares and things like that moving forward, but so much trade is done with the EU that we need to keep that very much in our sights as well.

Mr M Bradley: I have a wee query. John mentioned it, as did Philip, to some extent. It is on conservation and the sustainability of the catch. I would like sustainability to be set so that species can grow, as opposed to the level playing field that we have currently. That was only a comment.

The other thing that concerns me is the rise in the number of super trawlers. I saw on the news this week that some of them use a very fine mesh, trawl from the bottom and pick everything up: mature fish, young fish and everything else ends up in the nets. That is a very dangerous thing for conservation in any waters. Is there anything in the Bill that would ban such trawlers from entering the waters of the UK or Ireland?

Ms Vincent: In the management of fish stocks, all the decisions on quotas and quota share are made with sustainability and maximum sustainable yield in mind, Maurice. The UK is still committed to that through the Fisheries Bill and its ecosystem approach. It is still very much at the heart of everything that we do. That is all managed through the science and the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES). An extensive programme of fish survey work is carried out for us in the Irish Sea by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), and that information is then fed into ICES. The UK will still very much use ICES's help to advise on safe levels of fishing stocks, and, in the future, we will be in coastal state negotiations with Norway, the Faroe Isles and the EU on how the quotas are split up. That is why the decisions are made every year. They are based on the science that is provided, and that changes year-on-year depending on how the fish stocks are doing.

Your question on super trawlers touches on the very important point about licensing vessels that come into our waters and ensuring their observance of the strict conservation measures that we put on our own vessels. I will hand over to Paddy. He may want to say more about that.

Mr Campbell: The maximum sustainable yield objective is in the Bill. It states that we are committed to maintaining populations of harvested species above the biomass levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield. That is firmly there, front and centre, in the Bill. That is where fisheries management has been going over the last five to 10 years, and stocks are growing. It is important that that is there, and we will continue to do that.

As far as the super trawlers are concerned, we have one vessel in our fleet that is over 70 metres long, and some might class that a super trawler. It usually operates not in the Irish Sea but off the west coast of Scotland and up into Norwegian waters. That is what is called a pelagic trawler. It goes for herring and mackerel, and its nets are mid-water and do not hit the bottom of the seabed. I know that the subject is very emotive and that people get very excited when they spot these big trawlers cruising around our shores, but they are all subject to strict quota control and are well managed. Also, there are not that many, so it is easy to keep track of them. As long as they stick to the quotas, that will ensure that the stocks that they take out of the sea are sustainable.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much, Paddy and Claire. I appreciate that.

Mr Irwin: There are not many fishermen in my constituency, but there seems to be optimism among fishermen. They felt very badly done with by being in the EU for a number of years. Their industry was decimated. The opportunities are an appeal.

At this stage, is there no clear guidance as to whether and to what extent they have a greater pool of water to fish in? Is that not totally decided? I think that it is important that the fishermen benefit from Brexit. I saw a programme on TV from the Irish Republic one night, and there were fishermen from Donegal who were saying that they should be leaving the EU along with them because they felt that they were getting a bad deal too. So, there are fishermen in Northern Ireland who feel that there are opportunities there, and it is important that they benefit from those.

Ms Vincent: Yes, I think that it is fair to say that there is optimism. As we mentioned, they are very keen on the ditching of the Hague Preference, but, as you have probably got a flavour for this morning, it is extremely complex, and there are issues. Our fleet does quite a lot of fishing in the Republic of Ireland, which are EU waters, as well, so it is a delicate balance. Then, of course, there is the issue, which Declan raised, that a lot of our trade is actually with Europe, so it is extremely complex. We are optimistic that there will be opportunities in the future, and we are working as hard as we can to get the best possible deal for the Northern Ireland industry. That is not only on all of the coastal state negotiations and all of those sorts of negotiations; it is also on the outworkings of what the protocol looks like — again, there is not much clarity on that yet — and how we get the best possible deal for our industry there. So, yes, it is complex, William. We will hear some more about the complexities of that next week, as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): In previous evidence that we have gathered, we noted that we do not have full devolved competency for marine conservation. Minister Poots wrote to DEFRA to request that consideration be given to marine conservation being fully devolved through the Fisheries Bill. Has there been any update on that or what is the latest?

Ms Vincent: David, would you like to take that one?

Mr Steele: Yes, certainly Claire. There have been updates on that. Let me just get that information for you — bear with me, sorry. Yes, there will be additional powers on the regulation of fishing in Northern Ireland's waters. However, the power for DAERA to designate offshore marine sites will not be included in the Bill. The reason behind that is that there will be certain functions there that do not relate to marine conservation or aquatic animals. It was decided that that fell outside the scope of the Fisheries Bill. We looked to see whether an alternative legislative vehicle was available. There is not one at present, but we are looking into that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): What sort of shape would an alternative legislative vehicle take?

Mr Steele: It is one that we can get these powers included in. It would be another piece of primary legislation that we would be looking for; one in which it would be found acceptable to include these powers.

Ms Vincent: Declan, when we heard that it was outside the scope of the UK Fisheries Bill, we looked at the UK Environment Bill, but, again, it is outside the scope of that Bill. The Minister raised this with the DEFRA Fisheries Minister, Minister Prentis, this week. I think that there is a willingness in Westminster to give that full devolution of the offshore zone to Northern Ireland. We will keep putting pressure on there.

We are looking at a legislative programme for next year. Once we get through this, we are looking to start next year on the 1966 Fisheries Act for Northern Ireland, so that is a potential legislative vehicle that, with the consent of the Secretary of State, we could use to take that through. I hope that I have got that right. David is nodding. He is much sharper on the legislation side than I am. We will not lose sight of that one, Declan. We will keep it on the agenda, and the Minister is very keen that we get the full devolution settlement for the Northern Ireland offshore area as soon as possible.

Mr Steele: I concur with what Claire said, Chair. Once we have the UK Government Fisheries Bill out of the way, we will turn our attention to scoping what requirements might be needed in domestic legislation in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Barton: I have one last question in relation to abandoned vessels and end-of-life vessels. Is there any progress on their removal or on trying to get them disposed of properly rather than them just being abandoned along the coastline?

Ms Vincent: I will hand over to Paddy, because he sent me something on that recently. I will ask him to pick that one up.

Mr Campbell: On a practical level, we have plans to establish a licensed facility in Portavogie. That is at the planning stage, and we are awaiting planning approval for that. Once that goes ahead, that will provide a practical and more cost-effective solution for fishermen to take ex-fishing vessels to. Currently, there is no practical or cost-effective solution in Northern Ireland. Separate to that, we will have to look at what can be done about regulating the disposal of vessels generally, because, although that problem is most frequent with fishing vessels, larger non-fishing vessels get abandoned from time to time.

The registration of vessels in the UK is a matter for the Department for Transport. It looks after registry of vessels, safety of vessels and things like that. We could raise the matter with that Department. We could also perhaps look at it internally. We are looking at possible greater regulation to try to ensure that vessels are disposed of safely and without harm to the environment. Progress is being made. The first thing that we want to do is to find a suitable facility here that these vessels can be taken to, and that would go a long way towards reducing the problem.

Mr McGuigan: I have a brief question. This will be debated in the Assembly on Tuesday. What happens if the Assembly does not allow legislative consent? What impact will that have legislatively and on the fishing industry?

Ms Vincent: That would leave us with a real problem because it would mean that we would have to make our own primary legislation, and you will all be aware of how long that takes. If Northern Ireland was written out of the UK Fisheries Bill, it would mean that we would be facing 1 January without the framework or anything to replace the common fisheries policy, which would leave us in a very poor state. I do not know whether Paddy or David want to say more about that.

Mr Steele: I could add a few words, Chair. Yes, if we were not part of this Fisheries Bill, clearly none of the provisions in it would extend to Northern Ireland. For example, we talk about the joint fisheries statements and being able to set out policies in it to achieve all the objectives — the eight high-level objectives — but we would not be able to take that forward.

Mr Campbell: We would not be able to license effectively either our vessels or other vessels that have access to UK waters. We would not have the powers to fund future fisheries support either. That is all in the Bill. There is a lot of stuff in the Bill that we need.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you very much. All members who wanted to ask questions have asked them. Thank you very much, David, Paddy and Claire, for your briefing and for answering all the questions.