



The Northern Ireland Marine Taskforce (NIMTF) is a coalition of non-government environmental organisations – it includes RSPB, Ulster Wildlife, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, Marine Conservation Society, Live Here, Love Here, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Surfers Against Sewage, Shark Trust, Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust and Northern Ireland Environment Link. The NIMTF has the support of approximately 100,000 local people. We are working towards healthy, productive and resilient seas for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Marine Task Force response to: [Consultation on the Proposed Introduction of Fixed Fees for Providing Screening and Scoping Opinions Under the Marine Works \(Environmental Impact Assessment \(EIA\)\) Regulations 2007 \(as amended\)](#)

Submitted: 31st July 2026

NIMTF recognise DAERA's wish to recuperate costs associated with the administrative handling of marine licensing, however, as we have raised during our engagement with the AERA Committee around the Administrative and Financial Penalties Bill in October 2025¹, we still have concerns with additional costs which run the risk of pricing out organisations who are delivering on the ground work which is of benefit to Government Objectives and the Natural Environment. **However, as the money is not ringfenced it would not return to the Marine licensing Department within DAERA and instead into central Government procurement it would not necessarily fund a better/optimum service provision from the Marine licensing Team.**

ACTION: Therefore if the money is funding better marine licensing support there should be some sort of ring fencing possible so it is spent on improving that service.

The majority of these works that are delivered via our member organisations is for environmental and public interest - e.g. restoration of habitats and species, or providing access to society within our natural environment. It is important to remember throughout the process of marine licensing that there is the statutory requirement to achieve Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy. Currently we are failing 13 out of 15 indicators², whereas in the previous reporting cycle we were failing 11 out of 15 indicators³ - with the majority of these being marine ecosystems.

NIMTF has attached our response to the Committee meeting which has follow-up information. The information contained within the rest of this document is an updated element of that follow-up information, given recent amendments or latest information:

Please note that:

Planning in Ireland S.I. No. 402/2023 - Maritime Area Usage (Licence Fees) Regulations 2023⁴.

(2) The MARA may waive a fee under these Regulations where the applicant is a non-profit entity being a legal person organised for a collective, public or social benefit and does not operate as a business whose aim is to generate a profit for its owners.

Planning in Northern Ireland: No fees are needed where a development is an exemption under The Planning (Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015⁵.

6.—(1) Regulation 3(1) shall not apply where the council or, as the case may be, the Department is satisfied that an application for planning permission is made by or on behalf of a club, society or other organisation (including any persons administering a trust) which is not established or conducted for profit, and the conditions specified in paragraph (2) are satisfied.

(2) the conditions referred to in paragraph (1) are that:-

(a) the application relates to the provision of community facilities (including sports grounds) and playing fields; and

(b) the council or, as the case may be, the Department, is satisfied that the development is to be carried out on land which is, or is intended to be, occupied by the club, society or other organisation and to be used wholly or mainly for the carrying out of its objects.

under category paragraph 6(1) and (2) of the Planning (Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015⁵.

NIMTF notes that NIEA within DAERA provides the ASSI consent process for free for any works within ASSI areas. Therefore there is a conflict in responsibility for Consents/Licences costs within the same department. Additionally, ASSI consents need to be responded to within 3 months while marine licences are currently without an enforceable time limit beyond email responses.

Action: There should be an exemption on marine licensing fees similar to existing NI Law for Planning and ASSI Consent for works which align with supporting DAERA Objectives AND are not for commercial gain.

Action: There should be a set time limit for the department in relation to stages of the Marine Licences and in particular for simpler applications - equivalent to the one shop versions in England.

1. Do you agree with the proposed screening fee rate?

Yes.

NIMTF agrees that a screening opinion fee of £600 should be charged, given that these should in theory require less time than a full scoping opinion. NIMTF would like to have greater clarity on what project pay band this will apply to so that developers can have a full understanding of what fees will apply to them and the total cost applicable, as outlined within the Marine Licensing Application Fees 2026-2027⁶. As we currently understand it, this screening fee would apply to all licensable marine activities documented within Parts 1 and 2.

Action: There should be an exemption on marine licensing fees similar to existing NI Law for Planning and ASSI Consent for works which align with supporting DAERA Objectives AND are not

for commercial gain.

2. Do you agree with the proposed scoping fee for a renewable project?

Yes.

NIMTF is in support of the increased scoping fee for all renewable energy projects. It is hoped that with the current update to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) through the Department for Economy, that should place a greater onus on the specifics within the SEA as opposed to highlighting specific changes through individual EIAs. By establishing greater depth for the SEA and HRA as opposed to the EIA, this would alleviate some of the cost associated with the scrutiny and administrative handling of scoping opinions. This is one of many recommendations highlighted in a Report from NIMTF on Proposed Management and Mitigation of Co-Location of Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) within MPAs in Northern Ireland (2026)⁷.

That being said, NIMTF is in support of DAERA recuperating costs associated with renewable energy projects, given that there will be an exacerbated need for renewable energy development projects to meet the objective of to meet 1GW of energy, of which 80% should be derived from offshore renewable energy developments under both the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022⁸ and the developing Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP)⁹. Given that the screening costs allow the following components to bring forward the early part of the EIAs forward and assess the following:

- The impacts of the project, in particular focusing on the most important impacts;
- Any other matters to be included

NIMTF would like to reiterate to DAERA, as we did with the AERA Committee that it is anticipated that with the growth of ORE Developments that there will be an established Marine Recovery Fund specifically for Offshore Wind. NIMTF are part of those discussions that will see developers paying into a compensation fund which can dispense their responsibilities to the natural environment for restoration in the instance of highlighted negative environmental impact. NIMTF will continue to work with DAERA and the Department for Economy to support the development of a Marine Recovery Fund Scheme for Northern Ireland that supports nature conservation commitments. See our response to the Marine Recovery Fund Consultation by DEFRA¹⁰.

1 <https://niassembly.tv/committee-for-agriculture-environment-and-rural-affairs-meeting-thursday-09-october-2025/>

2 <https://moat.cefas.co.uk/summary-of-progress-towards-good-environmental-status/>

3

<https://moat.cefas.co.uk/previous-assessments/2018-assessment/summary-of-progress-towards-good-environmental-status/>

4

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/publications/maritime-area-usage-licence-fees-regulations-2023-si-no-402-of-2023/>

3. Do you agree with the scoping fee for a non-renewable project?

No.

In NIMTF's follow-up from the AERA Committee meeting on the 9th October 2025 (see attached in email), NIMTF recognises that DAERA wish to recuperate costs to support the administrative nature associated with the role of marine licensing. However, there are still elements of concern when it comes to the cumulative total of marine licensing, especially for projects which are for public interest. Currently the licensing process for nature restoration activities follows the same marine licensing process and is subject to the same costs for permits and advice as developments - e.g. Ulster Wildlife's work on native oyster nurseries fall under an aquaculture licence, but the native oysters are not for commercial use. Nature restoration projects are subject to minimal, time-limited funding such as the Marine Environment & Fisheries Fund (MEFF) (in-year funding)¹¹, alongside delays in marine licensing decisions which take a minimum of 6 months any many over a year to process. Any works including restoration, removal of waste or public good do not have exemptions and are issued with Marine Construction Licences - where the price is only assessed on the cost of the works - which does not take into account public good and achieving the Department's own objectives for nature as part of the process with no commercial gain only cost. Below are examples of case studies where costs have been elevated:

Northey Island, Essex - National Trust Saltmarsh Restoration

In England, based on the increase to hourly fees for marine licensing support, a National Trust saltmarsh restoration project on Northey Island in Essex¹² has highlighted that their costs **prior** to the hourly increase were **£55k**. As this currently stands, this would far exceed the cost to carry out a marine licence screening and scoping opinion for a proposed renewable energy project in Northern Ireland in this current consultation.

Cushendun - National Trust clearing the Boat Ramp - Dredging Licence

Before a licence can be acquired, National Trust would have to complete a sediment analysis through DAERA's list of accredited labs, resulting in a standard analysis costing **£4431 (including VAT)**. To deliver this project, it requires a dredging licence, which if expired would require a new licence which in 2025 would have cost **£791** to clear less than 200 tonnes - this particular licence cannot be applied for a smaller tonnage below 999 tonnes.

Action: DAERA to create a 500-tonnes tier within the marine dredging licensing.

5 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2015/73/contents/made>

6

https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/Marine%20Licensing%20%28Northern%20Ireland%29%20Applica%20Fees%20202627_0.pdf

7 https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/sl-nimtf-report-co-location-of-ore-in-the-ni-mpa-network_2026.pdf

Regards disposal, National trust have to date been re-using the sand (which is clean and coming from along the shore from the south and being trapped by the sea wall) to replenish the beach in front of the carpark (just past the sea wall) to provide access to the shore in a safe way. This is the most economical and beneficial way without having to go through disposal - however if in the future National Trust are required to dispose of the material offshore, this would require a maintenance disposal licence costing **£6,335**.

Combining all of the above cost - which it should be noted is prior to actual works being done that benefits the local community - this results in **£7104 + £4431 (including VAT)**. When this is combined with the proposed scoping costs associated within this consultation, the cost jumps to **£23,576 + £4431 (including VAT)**. This figure does not take into account the cost or time associated to submit a draft Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) alongside additional evidence. There is very real concern here that this completely prices some organisations from being able to conduct work which will benefit public interest.

Strangford Lough - National Trust, Removal of Wrecks and Marine Debris

Marine Construction Licence required (BAND E) **£4,671** on top of the **c.£100K** cost of actual removal of the waste. The works was to ensure the removal of abandoned boats and aquaculture waste which have been abandoned by other users but as land owner National Trust is trying to do the right thing. It should be noted that as part of the licence conditions for receiving an aquaculture licence, any abandoned gear or waste is the responsibility of the producer rather than the landowner. There is a cost for the Marine Construction Licence (as there are no categories for Restoration, Exemptions for removal of waste or works for public good) of National Trust also submit a Draft HRA as part of the application process to support the Department in writing their own and supporting evidence for developing Licence conditions. Total cost of this activity prior to these proposed charges is **c£104,671**. When this is combined with the proposed scoping costs associated within this consultation, the cost jumps to **c£121,143**.

Vertipools Marine Licence - Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

It should be noted that timings associated with this particular application for a marine licence was raised - with the entire process taking approximately 6 months with the waiting time from application (27th August 2025) to consultation going live (20th October 2025) to result (minimum three months later). Finalisation of the project was on the 13th March 2025¹³.

The original cost was **£3,750** for the Vertipools and the marine licence was **£204**, however when the cost for advertising within the newspapers for two consecutive weeks, the total came to **£4,658**. When factoring in the new cost associated with the marine licence for the same project - not including the inflationary cost associated with the Vertipools, the new cost would become **£21,130**. The purpose of the Vertipools was to ensure that 10 constructed habitats to support marine life could be placed within marinas. This provides an additional benefit to public interest in the form of educational resources which should be factored in, alongside the costs for ongoing maintenance.

There are significant additional costs already to doing the right thing. In terms of costs, developers should have slight discounts for taking additional actions which support recovery of our marine environment rather than potential removal of those actions if it pushes developers into another price band.

It should be noted that marine licence fees cannot be covered through the existing MEFF which sits at £3.5million for 2026/2027¹⁴ as these are a statutory requirement for work to progress. Therefore in order to carry out any work required under the MEFF scheme, the costs associated with marine licence fees will need to be found from other sources. Note there are significant delays currently in terms of responses in relation to Marine licensing, applications often have to resubmit the same documents multiple times, contact is often anonymous emails with no actual opportunity to discuss any applications or queries in person and no set timescales for processing responses which has led to missing windows of opportunity both in terms of windows where action can take place between breeding seal and wintering bird seasons and also funding windows with delays of over a year. Charging Fees without ringfencing the money to support the marine licensing process will not necessarily improve the current service.

NIMTF does not think it is appropriate to apply the same costs to an activity which applies extractive value to that which adds value through species, habitat restoration or even for public good. Therefore, NIMTF and our members who deliver practical work, reliant on a marine licence would ask that marine licensing fees should have an exemption process where there is a positive environmental impact. Additionally, the establishment of a nature restoration licence, or for the scenarios as described below for public benefit - a public benefit licence. All licences should follow the same process of a reliable evidence base and rationale, but would incur lower tier costs compared to those which are for extractive, commercial purposes.

Whilst NIMTF remains committed to the understanding that DAERA should be able to recuperate costs associated to the administrative costs aligned to the marine licence process, as can be seen from the previous examples that there is an increased likelihood of organisations being unable to deliver on projects and being priced out of delivering for public good due to the current proposals. There is an elevated need for the use of blue carbon and other nature based solutions for future marine and coastal management and it is vital that the financial cost of carrying out public good above the statutory minimum is not penalised through elevated costs through marine licensing fees.

Action: DAERA to provide an exemption process to marine licensing specifically for positive environmental/low negative impacts for marine licensing to encourage an open opportunity of providers from the eNGO sector - such as a nature restoration licence, or public good licence.

8 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/31/contents/enacted>

9

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Offshore%20Renewable%20Energy%20Action%20Plan%20for%20NI.pdf>

10 <https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/nimtf-response-to-defra-consultation-on-establishment-of-a-mrf-.pdf>

4. Do you agree with the Department's proposal that cost for specialist advice such as examinations or tests not available within the Department should be passed directly to the applicant for payment?

No.

NIMTF would like to see a transparent list of specialist advice, examinations and tests which are not currently available within the Department and connected to organisations which do provide them so that a quote can be sought in the first instance rather than organisations being supplied with an invoice that they are not able to assess. Where feasible, it would be beneficial for all organisations to provide an indicative quote for the aforementioned services for organisations which have to provide and/or assess multiple quote comparisons to funders to demonstrate fiscal decision-making - e.g. SEUPB Peace Plus projects, ACCLIMATISE, CMAP and MOSAIC¹⁵.

Action: DAERA to provide a list of specialist advice, examinations and tests not currently provided by DAERA, accompanied by recommended providers and example quotes.

5. The Section 75 Equality Screening concludes that the application of the proposed EIA fees is unlikely to have any impacts on people in terms of their equality of opportunity, their rights as people with a disability or their human rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. Do you support this conclusion? If you have any views on the content of this document or any information you wish to share with the Department, please include in your response.

No.

NIMTF recognises that additional EIA fees may impact on projects removing actions which would improve environmental conditions for society which could have impacts on health and human rights as **Marine Licences are currently only assessed on financial cost not social or environmental cost.**

6. The Rural Needs Impact Assessment concludes that the application of the proposed EIA fees is unlikely to impact on people in rural areas. Do you support this conclusion? If you have any views on the content of this document or any information you wish to share with the Department, please include in your response.

No.

NIMTF states that increasing costs may lead to it being financially unviable to support smaller projects for communities in rural areas which will have an impact on quality of life and opportunities in those areas.

NIMTF thanks DAERA for the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the proposed licensing fees for scoping and screening opinions and to provide evidence on behalf and alongside our members. We would like to reiterate the concerns of our member organisations who are delivering

practical work for public good which does not provide a return on investment in the form of physical cashflow back to those organisations.

For further information, please contact the NIMTF Officer, Robert Walsh on robert.walsh@nimtf.org

11 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-environment-and-fisheries-fund>

12

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/essex-bedfordshire-hertfordshire/northey-island/coastal-adaptation-project-at-northey-island>

13 <https://www.newrymournedown.org/artificial-rock-pools-will-provide-new-homes-for-marine-life>

14 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-muir-announces-ps305m-marine-and-fisheries-grants-support>

15 <https://www.seupb.eu/latest/news/almost-eu25m-peaceplus-funding-awarded-marine-and-coastal-management>