



SCHOOL OF
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RESEARCH BRIEFING - Issues in recruiting new generations of fishers: A Future for Fishing?

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This research briefing outlines key findings on the issues facing fishers in recruiting crew and new entrants into the UK fishing industry. It is based on a decade of research in fishing communities in the East of England (2012-2022) and makes recommendations relevant for the wider UK fishing industry, particularly inshore fisheries.

The 'crisis' facing UK fishing communities is captured in a short ethnographic film, titled [The Shauls](#), produced by Postcode Films and the University of East Anglia, which follows Cromer skipper Keith Shaul and his grandsons Jimmy and Josh, as they fish for Cromer crab and lobsters off the Norfolk coast. While they have adapted to change and shown their resilience, like many North Norfolk fishermen, their future, remains uncertain.

As current skippers reach retirement age, a future generation of fishers to replace them is largely missing. The average age of deckhands is now 35ⁱ, and there is evidence of a low retention rate for mandatory training schemes (between 2015-2020 only half of those starting mandatory training to fish commercially in East England complete the requirements within the allotted two yearsⁱⁱ). The traditional father to son recruitment pathway for fishers is no longer reliable. Across the UK, hardship driven by increasingly restrictive policies around catching and marketing fish, has led to fishing families actively dissuading their children from fishing careers.ⁱⁱⁱ

In response to rising costs and crew shortages, inshore boats, such as the smaller beach launched Cromer crab boats, are increasingly operated by sole skippers to save costs associated with crew wages. This has resulted in fewer crewing opportunities for young aspiring fishers. Young people are also prevented from entering fishing by the rising expense and administratively complexity of fishing boat ownership. As Keith and his grandson explains in the film, a small boat can coast around £50,000 to set up with, with £10,000 for a fishing license not being uncommon. Nevertheless, as the film demonstrates, some young people are still keen to forge a path into fishing despite its challenges.

The film also highlights social and cultural barriers to recruitment. As Jimmy makes his start as an independent fisherman, the knowledge and experience of his grandfather is essential for helping him understand the business, working at sea and develop industry connections. New entrants without fishing family backgrounds, are likely to struggle accessing this type of support needed to make it in the industry.

To address local recruitment problems, short-term initiatives such as fishing apprenticeship programmes have been run across the country (e.g. in North Norfolk and Cornwall). However, the impact of such schemes on fisher recruitment is often negligible in the long term. Lessons learnt suggest they were often too short, without sufficient time at sea, did not engage with local fishermen sufficiently and did not successfully identify apprentices with the high motivation and commitment needed for a career in fishing.

Currently, there are moves to regenerate coastal communities and create job opportunities for young people – these include funding programmes launched between 2020 and 2022 including the UK Skills and Training Scheme (£10 million), the Fisheries and Seafood Scheme in England, and the Marine Fund Scotland. Other initiatives are also underway including an 18-month apprenticeship for commercial fishing which is due to start in 2023 in South-west England^{iv}. Other regions across the country are also exploring how to set up similar apprenticeships. However, pathways for recruitment also need to address ongoing issues and adapt in order to ensure a long-term future for UK fisheries.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- ❖ **Traditional recruitment pathways are broken** – The ‘father to son’ recruitment pathway can no longer be assumed. Specific support is needed for recruitment, especially for those without fishing family backgrounds.
- ❖ **Severe financial constraints limit new entrants.** Sufficient support and investment is needed, including adding value to catch to improve viability and provide the financial stability to support crew.
- ❖ **Insufficient social/demographic data on fishing communities.** Data improvements are urgently needed to better understand current issues. This will improve ability to prioritize particular needs.
- ❖ **Holistic policy for rural economy** - Fisheries employment and wider coastal economy are interdependent. Strategic policies for development are needed at regional and local levels.
- ❖ **Any new apprenticeships** being developed must:
 - allow extensive practical experience across seasons as well as mandatory formal training;
 - include wider learning necessary for success e.g. marketing/processing catch, sustainability, fisheries policy;
 - mitigate financial risks to skippers or offer incentives and ensure apprentices have secure income;
 - engage and seek commitment from skippers to take on and train an apprentice and ensure apprentices have sufficient level of motivation and commitment, e.g. ‘taster session’;
 - have ongoing support from a coordinating institution e.g. managing emerging issues, matching role for apprentices with skippers.

NOTES

The ethnographic film, titled [The Shauls](#), was made with Postcode Films between 2018-2021 and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the [FisherCoast project](#), a multi partner international research programme exploring the impact of environmental, economic and social change on the wellbeing of coastal communities. It was launched during an event in Parliament, organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Fisheries on the 26th October 2022.

ⁱ Seafish. 2019. *The World Is Your Oyster*. doi: 10.4324/9780429488306-10.

ⁱⁱ Eastern SeaFish Training Association, 2022 *pers comm*

ⁱⁱⁱ Gustavsson, Madeleine. 2021. “Women Belongings in UK Fisheries.” *Gender, Place and Culture*.

Gustavsson, Madeleine, and Mark Riley. 2018. “The Fishing Lifecourse: Exploring the Importance of Social Contexts, Capitals and (More Than) Fishing Identities: Fishing Lifecourse.” *Sociologia Ruralis* 58(3):562–82. doi: 10.1111/soru.12181.

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^{iv} Cornish Fish Producers’ Organisation, 2022 *pers comm*