



**THE CROWN  
ESTATE**

# Northern Ireland Review 2023/24

# Introduction



This review is being published at a hopeful time, with increasing optimism around the prospects of new investment in Northern Ireland. The Crown Estate team look forward to working with the new Executive, stakeholders and communities to create opportunities as we continue to focus on national needs for net zero and energy security, nature recovery and biodiversity, inclusive communities and economic growth while generating financial value for the public purse.

As custodians of the seabed, we have a role to play in supporting Northern Ireland's energy strategy, which includes the goal of delivering 1GW of electricity from offshore wind from 2030, enough to power about a million homes. As outlined in the Energy Strategy Action Plan and the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP), this offers an opportunity for both decarbonisation and economic benefits for communities and businesses in Northern Ireland.

**“We are working with a wide range of organisations to help attract investment and drive progress for the long-term benefit of Northern Ireland”**

Will Apps on a visit to Sea Source at Kilkeel Port



With decades of experience in offshore wind that have culminated in a capacity of 11.8GW across our holdings, we are excited to support these ambitions, working with government, regulators and industry to move things forward. Through our Whole of Seabed programme, for example, we are supporting the OREAP Strategic Environmental Assessment – a critical element of the Action Plan that will set the context for future offshore wind leasing activity.

### **Opportunities in offshore wind**

A core priority for us is to make sure that offshore wind projects bring onshore benefits. Northern Ireland, particularly the port of Belfast is well placed to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the sector, with a great strategic location and a strong record in supporting the wind farms built in the Irish Sea to date.

Our Supply Chain Accelerator (see page 8) was launched this year to help businesses across the UK capitalise on these kinds of opportunities. It will match-fund early-stage projects that link to the requirements of Offshore Wind Leasing Round 5, which launched this year and is set to put floating offshore wind farms in the Celtic Sea.

### **Nurturing nature**

Nature recovery is another urgent priority, with one in nine species in Northern Ireland now threatened with extinction. Again, this is an area in which we can play a role through the assets we hold and by drawing on our broader experience and partnerships. One example of how we are doing this is by supporting oyster restoration work (see page 7), which is beneficial not just for the oysters themselves but for improving water quality and creating habitats for other species.

Looking forward, we are investigating the possibility of natural capital markets to deliver much-needed funding for nature. One highlight of the year was a natural capital markets workshop held with multiple environmental stakeholders in Northern Ireland and co-hosted with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). This workshop helped to inform the evolving Blue Carbon Action Plan and revised Marine Protected Area Strategy for Northern Ireland.

### **Delivering for communities**

During the year it was a pleasure to bring our chief executive, Dan Labbad, for a visit to meet with key contacts across sectors and learn more about local needs and priorities. We are keen to support projects such as the regeneration plans for Bangor Marina, which have the potential to help the community and businesses to thrive. During a visit to Kilkeel Port, I was impressed by the innovative thinking of Sea Source, a co-operative with a 40-year history in supporting the fishing community that is now operating offshore energy services.

We are constantly mindful that the challenges our strategy seeks to address are complex. No single organisation has the answer to the crises facing nature and our climate, or indeed the difficulties endured by families who are struggling with the cost of living. What we can offer, through the unique assets we hold and our unusual position between the private and public sectors, is to work with the wide range of people and organisations that are trying to move things forward, helping to attract investment and drive progress for the long-term benefit of Northern Ireland and the wider UK.

Will Apps  
**Head of Marine Development**

## Who we are

The Crown Estate owns and manages land on behalf of the nation, with the core purpose of creating lasting and shared prosperity.

We are responsible for managing Northern Ireland's seabed out to 12 nautical miles. We manage the rights to the resources on the continental shelf, such as natural resources and offshore energy (but excluding fossil fuels) and to deposits of gold and silver, known as Mines Royal. Other marine interests include pipelines, telecommunications and power cables.

We are also stewards of around 65% of the foreshore and riverbed, supporting the aquaculture industry - such as oyster, mussel, seaweed and kelp farming - alongside other coastal interests including commercial ports, recreational harbours and marinas.

Sitting between the public and private sectors, our strategy is to responsibly generate financial returns for the public purse, while helping to address national needs for net zero and energy security, nature recovery and biodiversity, inclusive communities and economic growth. We act independently and commercially, working with a wide range of partners and stakeholders to deliver financial, social and environmental value - both now and for the long term.



# Our strategy

Through our strategy we seek to make a difference in addressing national needs, where we believe we can have an impact.

**Driven by a purpose:**  
to create lasting and share prosperity for the nation

**Drawing on our unique strengths and values**



**Addressing national needs**

Climate change and energy needs

Nature loss

Growing pressure on urban centres

Economic challenges

**Our strategic objectives**

**Net zero and energy security**

**Nature recovery and biodiversity**

**Inclusive communities and economic growth**

**Generating financial returns**



Be a leader in supporting the UK towards a net zero carbon and energy-secure future



Take a leading role in stewarding the UK's natural environment and biodiversity



Help create inclusive communities and support equality, economic growth and productivity



Responsibly generate value and financial returns for the country

**Creating value for the nation**

Our strategy will help deliver an ambitious set of long-term national outcomes, which can support the national policy agenda, drive economic growth, and support improved productivity through all our activities to maximise returns to the Treasury.

**Financial**

We aim to balance short-term and long-term financial value, achieving returns today and for future generations

**Environmental**

Helping to tackle the global climate and biodiversity crises by creating greener, healthier places and accelerating renewable technologies

**Social**

We play a positive role by tackling inequalities, prioritising health and safety, and creating inclusive opportunities

**Enabled**

The indirect value we enable through our activity, for example jobs created through the offshore wind industry

# Net zero and energy security

We're working hard to support the transition to net zero carbon - and secure an energy supply for future generations.

As custodians of the seabed and much of the foreshore, we have a unique opportunity to contribute to the Northern Ireland Executive's renewable energy and carbon-cutting ambitions, particularly by helping to deliver offshore wind projects.

The draft Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP) includes the goal of building 1GW of offshore wind capacity from 2030, supporting Northern Ireland's journey to decarbonisation and greater energy security. The Northern Ireland Executive's ambitions reflect the urgency of the climate crisis and together with government, regulators and industry representatives, we are an active member of the OREAP Steering Group that is seeking to drive them forward. A positive step this year was the start of the Strategic Environmental Assessment, which we are supporting through our Whole of Seabed programme (see box).

In doing so we are able to share our learnings from 20 years in the wider UK offshore wind market. Our experience and partnerships help us to advise on the practicalities of delivering offshore wind projects in Northern Ireland waters, as well as the related considerations around protecting nature and maximising the benefits for communities.

The terms of Offshore Wind Leasing Round 5, which we launched in February 2024 with the intention of putting floating offshore wind farms in the Celtic Sea, show how we have evolved our own approach by placing requirements on developers to deliver positive environmental value and demonstrate plans for the surrounding communities through jobs, skills, engagement and volunteering. In the spirit of our wider strategy, these stipulations are designed to connect the wind farms with the local area in a way that creates a positive impact.

The Department for Economy (DfE) and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) both sit on the steering group for our Offshore Wind Evidence and Change (OWEC) programme. OWEC is a £50 million funding commitment by The Crown Estate to plug gaps in the available evidence and data, and work with 27 core stakeholders to accelerate and expand offshore wind capacity while supporting biodiversity.

This year we were able to share relevant OWEC data to inform Northern Ireland's Blue Carbon Action Plan as well as the UK's Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership. Blue carbon refers to the atmospheric carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, that is captured and stored by coastal and marine ecosystems, offering important environmental benefits.

## The Whole of Seabed programme

Our role managing the seabed means we are responsible for developing this vital national asset for the benefit of future generations. We established a Whole of Seabed Programme to support the growing demands on the seabed in line with our strategic commitments.

Through this pioneering project we are building on the data and evidence we have built up over the past 20 years by engaging with government, environmental NGOs, industry and marine experts to co-ordinate future activities up to 2050.

This information is being used to inform future leasing decisions as well as the ongoing environmental assessment in the waters around Northern Ireland.



# Nature recovery and biodiversity

Our natural assets are in a depleted state and need to be restored and enhanced. This work is important not just for nature itself but for the communities that rely on it.

The Crown Estate is committed to playing a part through the assets we hold, as well as our knowledge, experience and partnerships.

After consulting widely with experts on nature and conservation, as well as representatives from a range of sectors including fishing, farming and the built environment, we have developed a strategy to help us maximise our impact. It commits us to:

- Understand nature
- Partner for nature
- Design for nature
- Fund nature

This approach guides our work in Northern Ireland, where the State of Nature Report 2023 indicates one in nine species is threatened with extinction, with the main pressures on sealife seen as climate change, marine development and unsustainable fishing.

As we seek to make a difference we are partnering with relevant organisations at a local and national level, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Ulster Wildlife Trust. Our activities include investigating the potential for high-quality natural capital markets, a topic on which we co-hosted a workshop with DAERA joined by environmental stakeholders including RSPB NI, National Trust NI, and Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust. This helped inform the evolving NI Blue Carbon Action Plan and revised Marine Protected Area Strategy for Northern Ireland. Representatives from DAERA joined and spoke at The Crown Estate's Saltmarsh Symposium in June 2023, focusing on how to support and restore this important wildlife habitat, which is also an effective carbon store.

We also provide leases for aquaculture activity such as Islander Kelp's sustainable kelp farming on Rathlin Island. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and The Crown Estate have co-commissioned a piece of research on the Future Value of Seaweed Farming in the UK. This report is looking into the potential for seaweed-based products to replace agro-chemicals and plastic packaging, bringing opportunities for local economies and communities.

## Restoring nature's water filters

Oysters clean water by removing pollution, nitrates and particulates, and their reefs make homes for other marine life.

The loss of native oyster populations – which have declined by 95% since the 1800s – has therefore contributed to an overall decline in natural habitats. Meanwhile, the oyster fishing industry and the way of life it supported in our coastal communities has largely been lost.

To play our part in reversing this trend, the Crown Estate is supporting research and restoration work around the UK.

One example of how we are doing this is by supporting oyster restoration work in Belfast Lough by helping Ulster Wildlife Trust establish clarity around seabed ownership and thereby swiftly secure their necessary permissions to take forward their trials.

Recovery of native oyster reefs will not only help to boost local biodiversity in Northern Ireland but also help improve water quality and create habitats for other species.



# Inclusive communities and economic growth

The Crown Estate's position between the public and private sectors allows us to focus on delivering social, economic and environmental value as well as delivering financial returns.

At a time of economic and cost-of-living challenges, we are keen to ensure that our activities in sectors such as renewable energy and conservation will also benefit local communities and economies.

As we grow this part of our strategy, we are guided by a set of social impact principles that include addressing national needs, focusing on place, listening to and involving communities, and collaborating for collective action.

Offshore wind has the potential to deliver a significant boost for onshore communities and businesses, given that ports and manufacturing will be essential to developing wind farms.

We commissioned research to look at the supply chain requirements for Offshore Wind Leasing Round 5, which was published as the Celtic Sea Blueprint. It reported that manufacturing, transporting and assembling the windfarms could potentially create 5,300 jobs and create a £1.4 billion boost for the UK economy.

We are now working with key parties to create an action plan to develop the supply chain and infrastructure capabilities that will be needed for these innovative projects. Our £50 million Supply Chain Accelerator (see case study) will support early-stage projects looking to capture some of the opportunities.

Where our assets are needed for other kinds of development, we are also keen to help drive things forward, sharing our expertise where helpful. One project currently being discussed is a mixed-use regeneration scheme for Bangor Marina; although the details are still being considered, our team is advising on the potential for a saltmarsh restoration as part of the scheme.

## Boosting supply-chain opportunities

To de-risk deployment and secure the benefits of putting floating offshore wind in the Celtic Sea are shared with communities, we need to build the domestic supply-chain capability. While the UK has the world's second largest offshore wind market, our offshore wind supply chain lags that of other European countries. Through a stakeholder engagement exercise, we learnt that one barrier UK companies faced was an absence of early risk capital.

To help address this issue, The Crown Estate has created a £50 million Supply Chain Accelerator to match-fund early-stage projects that could provide the capability required to deliver Round 5. For the initial £10 million pilot funding round, which launched in June 2024, we are looking for projects that link to the requirements identified in the Celtic Sea Blueprint, published in February. These could include factories, manufacturing plants, test facilities, or storage and distribution centres.

The Accelerator will provide match-funding from £250,000 up to £1 million during the development phase, to cover activities like market research, business planning, surveys, feasibility studies and planning applications. For more information, see our website.



**5,300**

jobs in the Round 5 supply chain



**£1.4 billion**

boost for the UK economy



**£50 million**

total value of our Supply Chain Accelerator



## 2023/24 Supplementary reports

**Annual Report and Accounts**  
**Northern Ireland review**  
**Wales review (in Welsh)**  
**Environmental and Social data supplement**



Our Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24 and supplementary reports can be downloaded at:  
**[thecrownestate.co.uk/annual-report](https://thecrownestate.co.uk/annual-report)**

## Photography credits

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Photographer of the Year 2024

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