

Northern Ireland Review 2024/25



Introduction



“This report reflects a year of progress in Northern Ireland as we support the Executive’s ambitions and engage with our customers and stakeholders.”

Rebecca Williams
Director of Devolved Nations

As Director of Devolved Nations, I am delighted to be sharing our Northern Ireland Review with you for the first time. The Crown Estate was set up to serve the country and we continue to progress our ambitious strategy to support decarbonisation and energy security, nature recovery and biodiversity, and inclusive communities and economic growth, while generating financial returns for public spending. Ultimately, our goal is to build a legacy of lasting and shared prosperity.

This has been a year of progress for us in Northern Ireland. Our chief executive Dan Labbad visited Belfast in October 2024 and had several productive meetings with the Department for the Economy (DfE) and other key stakeholders.

The Industrial Growth Plan that we published with partners in the spring of 2025 illustrates the value of offshore wind to the economy, and we are working to grow our portfolio’s current capacity of 12GW – supporting decarbonisation and energy security, while generating the new opportunities communities and local economies need to thrive.

Northern Ireland has its own Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan, which aims to deliver 1GW of capacity from 2030 – enough to cover the electricity needs for a million homes at current levels. The publication of the SEA (Strategic Environmental

Assessment) in February was a positive step forward and the document is now in consultation. We are supporting the DfE on next steps, guided by our world-leading geospatial planning tools, such as our Marine Delivery Routemap (see page 5) to ensure projects are put in the right place at the right time.

At the same time, we are actively engaging to ensure we understand the local context, and how we can create value in Northern Ireland. During the year, our team have been delighted to attend conferences and events, and to work alongside stakeholders such as the Northern Ireland Maritime and Offshore Network (NIMO), the Northern Ireland Maritime Organisation, and Invest NI, the economic development agency.

We are also learning more about our customers, seeking to understand how we can better support their activities and new ideas. I have found it fascinating to learn about the practices of the traditional mussel farmers based at Belfast Lough, who are trialling new methods to replenish mussel beds (see page 6); or at the Glenarm organic salmon farm off the coast of Antrim, where fish are hand-fed to avoid nutrient build-up on the seabed.

It has also been inspiring to speak to the team at Plaswire, an innovative business in County Armagh who recycle wind turbine blades into construction materials. They intend to grow their business, with ambitions to build a global leadership position with support from our Supply Chain Accelerator (see page 7). And we are pleased to have played a small role in facilitating the highly anticipated Queen’s Parade development, now under construction in Bangor, which is expected to bring much-needed regeneration to the area.

This year saw a significant moment in our history, with the passing of the Crown Estate Act 2025, which secures our ability to deliver on our ambitions over the long term. The new legislation builds on the 1961 Act that created us as an independent and commercial organisation, giving us the ability to borrow and to invest in a broader range of assets. It also increases our maximum number of Commissioners from 8 to 12. Three of the new Commissioners will have an additional responsibility to provide advice on conditions in Northern Ireland, Wales or England, and all are required to consider how our activities contribute to sustainable development in the UK. We very much look forward to progressing the recruitment process in the coming year, and finding an impartial candidate who shares our ambitions for Northern Ireland.

Rebecca Williams

Who we are

The Crown Estate is an independent business that owns and manages land and the seabed on behalf of the nation, working to create financial, social and environmental benefits over time.

We are responsible for managing Northern Ireland's seabed out to 12 nautical miles, with interests including pipelines, telecommunications and power cables. We also manage the rights to the resources on the continental shelf, including offshore renewable energy projects, and to deposits of gold and silver, known as Mines Royal.

We are 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.

Established by an Act of Parliament, we operate independently and commercially to grow the value of our portfolio for future generations. The Crown Estate Act 2025 adds to our founding legislation, giving us new borrowing and investment powers.

The 2025 Act makes provision for the appointment of a new Board Commissioner with responsibility to provide advice on conditions in Northern Ireland, with all Commissioners required to focus on how our activities contribute to sustainable development.



How we create value

Our activities are guided by our purpose: **to create lasting and shared prosperity for the nation**

We operate across three business areas



Marine

We manage the seabed and coastline around England, Wales and Northern Ireland to support the transition to a resilient, sustainable future.



Urban

Our real estate assets range from prominent retail and leisure destinations to significant mixed-use development opportunities.



Windsor & Rural

We are stewards of more than 200,000 acres of rural land, including the Windsor Estate and Great Park, tenanted farms and Welsh uplands and common land.

Drawing upon our key strengths



Broad ownership, with a **diverse portfolio of national assets**



Independence and opportunity to take a long-term view



Ability to **bring stakeholders together** to tackle challenges

To deliver our strategy

- Net zero and energy security
- Nature recovery and biodiversity
- Inclusive communities and economic growth
- Generating financial returns

For our nation's future

Net zero and energy security

The world as we know it is changing, and the need for energy security and decarbonisation has never been more urgent.

Through our portfolio, we can make a significant contribution by driving up capacity in renewable energy – particularly through offshore wind, which offers a major opportunity to build energy security and reduce reliance on imported fossil fuels.

It is now over a quarter of a century since the UK's first offshore wind turbine was installed, and over two decades since the first major wind farm became operational in the Irish Sea. Our investment in the sector has facilitated 12GW of annual clean power capacity to date – about 14% of the UK's energy requirements, displacing an estimated 15 million tonnes of CO₂ in the past year alone. We are now working with partners to unlock additional capacity, creating further jobs and supply-chain opportunities for businesses and communities in areas such as Belfast, which has an excellent strategic location and a strong delivery record for the offshore wind sector.

In May 2025, we announced our Capacity Increase Programme, which could generate an additional 4.7GW of capacity by amending existing seabed rights for seven existing offshore wind farms. We are continuing to progress Offshore Wind Leasing Round 4, which could deliver another 8GW of capacity and has generated significant financial value for the nation this year. And we took another step closer to putting innovative floating wind farms in the Celtic Sea, progressing Round 5 to auction stage.

The Northern Ireland Executive has a goal to build 1GW of offshore wind capacity from 2030, which we are supporting as part of the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP) steering group – working alongside government, regulators and industry. The completion of the Strategic Environmental Assessment was another positive step forward during 2024/25.

Cutting-edge technology

Carbon removals will also be vital to decarbonisation, and we are investigating the potential of cutting-edge solutions such as biochar and rock weathering, while developing our approach to the 'blue carbon' that is captured and stored on the seabed.

The UK has some of the world's best natural resources for storing carbon, giving us an opportunity to lead in carbon capture and storage (CCS) – a new technology that captures CO₂ from hard-to-abate industrial sources, transports and stores it underground – and we are driving progress by granting leases for offshore pipeline transportation and storage of CO₂ in the seabed. This year, we enabled the UK's first test injection and leased space for an innovative project that will reuse depleted natural gas reservoirs to store CO₂ under the Irish Sea.

A plan for the seabed

As custodians of the seabed, it is our task to navigate the interlinked priorities of nature restoration, carbon sequestration, economic growth and renewable energy generation.

As the demands on marine spaces increase, we're developing a Marine Delivery Routemap as a tool to inform our decision-making and ensure we deliver positive outcomes for people and nature.

This strategic plan outlines potential future uses of the seabed, featuring maps and dashboards to visualise projects from offshore wind farms to conservation activities. Created in partnership with key stakeholders, and drawing on a wide range of datasets, it will help to ensure projects are put in the right place, at the right time.



Nature recovery and biodiversity

In stewarding rural, coastal and marine environments, we have a responsibility to support biodiversity, restore ecosystems and enhance the natural world for future generations.

In October 2024, we shared more detail on how we will do this in our Ambition for Nature Recovery, which was developed in consultation with a wide range of expert stakeholders including Ulster Wildlife and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Their expertise in maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience informed our three core goals:

- Deliver increased biodiversity
- Protect and restore freshwater, marine and coastal systems
- Increase social and wellbeing benefits from nature

At the heart of our ambition is a commitment to measurable impact. It is not enough to take well-meaning actions; we need to understand the impact of our business on nature and take decisions that create positive outcomes. To help us do this, we have compiled a biodiversity baseline for our portfolio, and we aim to keep enhancing and developing this data.

As we seek to support the natural habitats and species that thrive in Northern Ireland, we are working in partnership with government, businesses, conservation organisations and local communities. For example, we continue to engage with the

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the RSPB on the development of our Marine Delivery Routemap (see page 5), which will draw on data, evidence and insights to identify the best locations for nature restoration projects and developments. We are also managing our assets responsibly – collaborating with DAERA to remove dumped oyster trestles from Lough Foyle, where they presented an environmental hazard and a safety risk – and working with partners to restore and protect species such as oysters, saltmarsh and seagrass that support healthy ecosystems.

Funding nature

Enabling nature recovery will require significant funding over the long term. For this reason, we are investing in nature at scale and investigating the potential of natural capital markets as a sustainable funding source.

DAERA and the Department for the Economy (DfE) both sit on the steering group for our Offshore Wind Evidence and Change (OWEC) programme – which is drawing on £50 million funding from The Crown Estate and £12 million in partner contributions to support research to enable the UK's energy transition, while ensuring marine and coastal ecosystems thrive.

While our progress against our new goals is at a relatively early stage, and we expect to iterate our approach, we believe that our framework to understand, design for, partner for and fund nature will yield results over time – supporting both ecological and economic prosperity in Northern Ireland.

A new way to build mussels

Belfast Lough is home to a significant population of mussels. As well as supporting livelihoods through fishing and aquaculture, they contribute to the ecosystem by filtering water. However, the mussel population is under threat due to sewage spills and, this year, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) found no suitable wild seed beds that could be dredged and used to replenish licensed beds.

As a solution, we are supporting an application by our customers to trial a new method of seed collection covering an area of 24 hectares in the lough. The potential benefits are substantial: reducing emissions and fuel costs, reducing the impact on benthic habitats and supporting biodiversity, while providing a stable seed supply for the fishing community.



Inclusive communities and economic growth

As an independent company aiming to create lasting and shared prosperity, we seek to ensure that our investments and partnerships in key sectors such as renewable energy and science, technology and innovation deliver real benefits for people and places.

The Industrial Growth Plan that we developed in partnership with RenewableUK, the Offshore Wind Energy Council and Crown Estate Scotland estimated that the number of jobs in offshore wind alone will rise from 32,000 to 100,000 by 2030, and through its location and existing supply chain, Northern Ireland is well placed to benefit from these opportunities.

To build the skills base the sector needs and help communities to thrive long term, we are seeking to engage younger people with sustainability topics and careers through our Minecraft Education worlds, which invite students aged 7-14 to see if they can power a coastal village by designing and building an offshore wind farm. We are creating opportunities directly through our apprenticeship and internship programmes – as well as our Supply Chain Accelerator (see right).

We are also engaging with the fishing community, working with our customers from mussel producers to a sustainable salmon farm in the Irish Sea. During the year, we held an event bringing together industry representatives, scientists and regulators to discuss fisheries data and evidence. We have since begun the rollout of a fisheries engagement hub, through which the industry can view and comment on the data we use to inform our decision-making, ensuring it aligns with their local knowledge.

The Bangor Marina redevelopment offers exciting opportunities for regeneration, providing new homes, a hotel, offices, a market plaza, retail, cafés and restaurants. We have supported the project by providing access through our land, extending the local authority's lease to 125 years. With construction now underway, we look forward to seeing the scheme take shape and deliver benefits for the people of Bangor.

In the coming year, we will continue to scale our activities, focusing on how we can deliver social impact at a local, regional and national level.

A boost for high-tech businesses

We created our £50 million Supply Chain Accelerator in 2023/24 as a way to build capacity among UK businesses: supporting future growth in the sector and helping to spread the benefits. In December 2024, we completed our first funding round, awarding a total of £5 million match-funding to 13 organisations with early-stage projects that could help to build the domestic supply chain for offshore wind.

Projects were evaluated on a number of criteria, one of which was their ability to deliver on the requirements set out in the Celtic Sea Blueprint, from infrastructure and logistics to key skills. The blueprint predicts that if these opportunities are captured, the deployment of floating offshore wind through Offshore Wind Leasing Round 5 could deliver a significant economic boost and up to 5,300 jobs.

Successful applicants included Plaswire, an innovative recycling specialist that transforms wind turbine blades and other industrial waste into construction materials. The investment by The Crown Estate will help Plaswire to open a new recycling facility in the East of England that will more than double its blade recycling capacity, and build a quayside facility, making the huge blades easier to transport. Over time, the firm hopes to build a global franchise from its base in County Armagh.

"We are only a small team and to get that investment has really uplifted me," says Andrew Billingsley, CEO of Plaswire. "We only have a team of 11 and we can't grow fast enough by ourselves to serve the industry. Now we plan to grow our team to about 50 people by the end of this year."

The Accelerator's second funding round closed at the end of June 2025.



2024/25 reports

Annual Report and Accounts
Adolygiad Cymru
Wales Review
Northern Ireland Review
Sustainability Data Supplement
Environmental Reporting Criteria

Our Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25
and supplementary reports can be downloaded at:
thecrownestate.co.uk/annual-report

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