



WORKING LIVES AT SEA

Impact & Priorities Report 2025/26



WE CANNOT DIRECT THE WIND





BUT WE CAN ADJUST THE SAILS

THE HIDDEN SEAFARERS OF THE UK CHARTER BOAT FLEET

A report from the Angling Trust Charter Boat Officer Programme on the working lives, welfare and safety of UK charter skippers - and the case for sustained investment in a workforce that has, until now, sat outside the visibility of national seafarer support.

Prepared for:

The Seafarers' Charity

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A FOUNDATION LAID
A WORKFORCE WAITING

Foreword

A WORKFORCE, FINALLY VISIBLE

For more than a century, The Seafarers' Charity has stood with the people who work at sea - those whose livelihoods, safety and wellbeing are shaped by the unique pressures of maritime work. The Thrive 2.0 strategy sharpens that focus: tackling the root causes of hardship across financial resilience, health and wellbeing, safety, working lives and social justice.

The Angling Trust is the national governing body for recreational fishing in England, representing anglers and the businesses that serve them. Within that community, charter boats occupy a distinctive place: they are commercial seafaring businesses whose skippers carry paying passengers to sea, sustain ports and harbour economies, and form part of the lifeblood of coastal communities the length of the UK coastline.

That role is now being recognised in law. The Fisheries Act (2020) brought recreational sea fishing within the scope of UK fisheries policy for the first time, and the Joint Fisheries Statement defines the fishing industry as “the economic

activity concerned with catching fish for food or sport.” Recreational fishing is now a recognised stakeholder in UK fisheries management, with a seat at the table on every Fisheries Management Plan. The jobs, livelihoods and seafaring businesses behind that recognition are, finally, being seen by government - and the case for seeing them through a welfare lens is now stronger than it has ever been.

This report is about the seafarers behind that recognition - a workforce that, until this year, sat almost entirely outside the visibility of national seafarer welfare: the UK's charter boat skippers.

They are MCA-coded commercial operators. They put to sea in all conditions, in vessels they own, maintain and command. They carry paying passengers, are responsible for their safety, and - like fishers and merchant seafarers - they work largely alone, with thin margins, fragmented support and no national welfare infrastructure built around them.

With the Charity's foundational support this year, the Charter Boat Officer (CBO) programme has, for the first time, mapped this fleet, listened to its

skippers at scale, and translated what we heard into a clear picture of their working lives. What that picture reveals sits squarely within Thrive 2.0 - but reaches a population the sector has not previously been resourced to reach.

This report sets out three things: the working lives our year's work has surfaced; how those findings map directly to the Charity's five strategic outcomes; and why we believe this foundational year is the beginning, not the end, of the case for investment.

Jamie Cook

CEO Angling Trust & Fish Legal





**“BEHIND EVERY
STATISTIC IS
A SKIPPER,
A VESSEL, AND
A LIVELIHOOD.
OUR FIRST
RESPONSIBILITY
WAS TO ENSURE
THEY WERE
NO LONGER
INVISIBLE.”**

Jemma Jewkes
Charter Boat Officer
Angling Trust

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THE CHARTER FLEET IS A SEAFARING WORKFORCE

Charter skippers carry the same regulatory burdens, the same physical demands and the same psychological pressures as their commercial and merchant counterparts. They share more in common with the rest of the UK seafaring workforce than they do with any other sector - but they have, until now, been almost entirely invisible to it.

The CBO programme's first task was to make this workforce visible. Working from harbour records, licensing data, in-person engagement and a national survey, we now have the most accurate picture of the UK charter fleet ever assembled.

530+

VESSELS IDENTIFIED
ACROSS UK & IRELAND

230+

ACTIVE CHARTER BOATS
IN CORE FLEET

53

DETAILED SURVEY
RESPONSES

86%

WITH 20+ YEARS' SEA
EXPERIENCE

60%

OF SKIPPERS
AGED 46-65

~98%

SOLE-OPERATOR
MICROBUSINESSES

WHO THEY ARE

This is an ageing, deeply experienced, overwhelmingly sole-operator workforce. Most skippers are between 46 and 65; a further 12% are over 65. They are, almost without exception, running microbusinesses — one person, one vessel, one livelihood - with decades of accumulated knowledge of UK waters and the demands of safe passenger operation at sea.



HOW THEY FIT WITHIN THRIVE 2.0

Every characteristic of this workforce - sole operation, advancing age, full personal liability for vessel safety, exposure to weather and isolation, microbusiness fragility - is a profile the Charity already recognises. What is new is that, until this year, there was no structured way to reach them, document their needs, or bring them into the conversations the Charity already convenes for fishers and merchant seafarers.

“AN ENTIRE SEAFARING WORKFORCE SPENT DECADES IN PLAIN SIGHT. ONE SKIPPER, ONE VESSEL, ONE LIVELIHOOD, CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF THE SEA ALONE.”

Jemma Jewkes
Charter Boat Officer
Angling Trust





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WORKING LIVES AT SEA: WHAT WE FOUND

Through 12 monthly online forums (30+ returning participants), in-person engagement at Weymouth, Brighton, Brixham, Brightlingsea and Whitby (with Falmouth to follow), one-to-one phone support, and a national survey, the CBO programme heard the same themes again and again. We have mapped them here against the five Thrive 2.0 outcomes.

FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

Charter skippers are running microbusinesses on margins that no longer hold. Operational costs - fuel, insurance, mooring, maintenance, MCA-coded equipment - have risen sharply. Severe weather has cut viable trip numbers in half for many. And while commercial fishing vessels can access grants for engines, safety equipment and business development, charter skippers are excluded from almost every comparable scheme.

Several skippers told us they now need a second income simply to keep the business running. For an ageing, sole-operator workforce, this is not a question of pricing - it is a question of survival.

**“IT TAKES 25-30
CHARTERS BEFORE
I EARN A WAGE.
COMMERCIAL
BOATS GET GRANTS.
WE DON’T.”**

Skipper
South-West England

**“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE
NOW - I NEED
ANOTHER INCOME
TO SURVIVE.”**

Skipper
Monthly forum

HEALTH & WELLBEING

The mental health picture from our engagement is stark. Skippers describe sustained isolation, mounting financial pressure, regulatory anxiety and a sense of being unseen by the systems they operate within. The monthly drop-in forums repeatedly surfaced burnout, sleep loss and fear about the future of the business and, with it, the household.

Crucially, there is no welfare pathway built around this group. Skippers do not know who to call or what help they are entitled to. And because they operate alone, there is no crewmate, colleague or shift partner to notice when things have become too much.

SAFETY STANDARDS

Charter skippers are personally responsible - legally, operationally and morally - for the safety of every passenger on board. Yet they describe a regulatory environment they find genuinely difficult to navigate: MCA coding requirements, harbour rules and enforcement guidance that they say change frequently, vary by port, and are not communicated clearly.

New entrants reported feeling lost before their first season. Long-experienced skippers reported delaying or skipping safety upgrades because grant pathways open to other seafarers are closed to them. The result is not a workforce resistant to regulation - it is a workforce asking, repeatedly, for clarity and parity of access to safety investment.

**“I DON’T EVEN
KNOW WHAT
RULES APPLY;
NOBODY CAN
EXPLAIN THEM.”**

Skipper
First-year skipper

**“BEING KEPT IN THE
LOOP IS THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING -
RIGHT NOW WE GET
NOTHING.”**

Skipper
North-East England

BETTER WORKING LIVES

Before this year, charter skippers had no national structure through which their working lives could be heard. There was no monthly forum. No survey. No officer to call. No route into the consultations, committees and roundtables that shape the conditions of their work.

This was not a niche complaint - it was the single most consistent theme across every port we visited. Skippers want what every other seafaring workforce takes for granted: a recognised voice, a known route for raising concerns, and confidence that someone is paying attention.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Legally compliant charter skippers describe being undercut, port after port, by unlicensed and illegal operators - boats running without coding, insurance or oversight. Reports to enforcement bodies, skippers told us, frequently go unanswered. The result is a workforce that plays by the rules being placed at structural disadvantage to one that does not.

Layered on top of this is the inequality of access we have already described: grants, training pathways and welfare provision available to other parts of the seafaring community are not available here. For a workforce that is almost entirely sole-operator and economically marginal, that inequality is felt deeply.

**“WE ARE THE
GOOD GUYS -
BUT WE’RE BEING
PRICED OUT OF
OUR OWN FISHERY.”**

Skipper
Brighton





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YEAR 1: MONITORING & EVALUATION

The Seafarers' Charity's foundational investment came with clear expectations for Year 1: identify a previously invisible workforce, build a national engagement structure, capture a welfare-relevant evidence base, establish representation, and begin case-by-case welfare support. Each criterion was framed around the Charity's wider ambition: reaching a seafaring workforce that has, until now, sat outside its strategic visibility.

Each criterion below is shown against demonstrable progress this year and linked to the Thrive 2.0 outcomes it supports. The work is foundational by design. It creates the infrastructure on which deeper welfare investment can now be built.

A PREVIOUSLY INVISIBLE WORKFORCE IDENTIFIED

Target: Build the first national map of the UK charter fleet and characterise the workforce behind it.

Demonstrable progress: 530+ vessels identified across the UK and Ireland; a core fleet of 230+ active charter boats now known, characterised and contactable. Demographic and business-structure data captured for the first time, showing an ageing (60% aged 46–65; 12% over 65), deeply experienced (86% with 20+ years at sea), almost entirely sole-operator (~98%) workforce.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: All five outcomes - visibility is the precondition for every welfare intervention.



A NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT STRUCTURE ESTABLISHED

Target: Create regular, accessible channels through which charter skippers can raise concerns, seek support and stay informed.

Demonstrable progress: 12 monthly online drop-in forums delivered with 30+ unique returning participants; a dedicated Facebook group active throughout the year; direct phone and digital support pathways live and in use; rapid-response updates issued across the year on regulatory and welfare-relevant developments.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: Better Working Lives; Health & Wellbeing.



A WELFARE-RELEVANT EVIDENCE BASE CAPTURED

Target: Build the first national evidence base on charter skipper working conditions, pressures and welfare needs.

Demonstrable progress: 53 detailed survey responses analysed; structured data captured on financial fragility, mental health pressures, regulatory burden, isolation, training gaps and welfare needs. A baseline now exists where none previously did - and against which future change can be measured.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: All five outcomes - every priority for the year ahead rests on this evidence.



IN-PERSON PRESENCE ACROSS THE FLEET

Target: Engage skippers directly at port and quayside to ensure the programme is grounded in lived experience, not desk research.

Demonstrable progress: In-person engagement delivered at Weymouth, Brighton, Brixham, Brightlingsea and Whitby, with Falmouth to follow. One-to-one conversations on quaysides, in tackle shops and in marina cafés surfaced some of the most challenging welfare realities of the trade — and the most powerful skipper testimony.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: Better Working Lives; Health & Wellbeing.



REPRESENTATION IN NATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Target: Bring the charter sector voice into the rooms where decisions about its working lives, livelihoods and safety are made.

Demonstrable progress: Charter skipper evidence carried into DEFRA consultations, the APPG on Angling, EFRA Committee engagement, FITF, FREP and national fisheries roundtables; direct correspondence with MPs, Ministers and regulators on welfare-relevant concerns including enforcement, regulatory clarity, illegal operators and access to support.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: Better Working Lives; Social Justice.



DIRECT WELFARE AND SUPPORT RESPONSE

Target: Begin a case-by-case welfare and support response from day one - without waiting for permanent infrastructure to be built around it.

Demonstrable progress: Direct welfare signposting delivered; individual skippers at risk identified and supported; guidance provided on MCA and harbour rules; help with training pathways and grant/funding applications. Each case small in isolation - together, the beginnings of a welfare infrastructure that did not exist twelve months ago.

Thrive 2.0 alignment: Health & Wellbeing; Financial Resilience; Safety Standards.





**IN YEAR 1, THE WORK WAS
NOT TO SOLVE THE SYSTEM,
BUT TO MAKE IT VISIBLE: TO
FIND THE PEOPLE INSIDE IT, HEAR
WHAT THEY CARRY, AND BEGIN
BUILDING THE STRUCTURE THEY
WERE NEVER INCLUDED IN.**



Hannah Rudd
Head of Marine
Angling Trust

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PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

The foundational year has made the work that comes next possible. Each of the priorities below maps directly to one or more of The Seafarers' Charity's Thrive 2.0 outcomes, and each builds on infrastructure the Charity has already invested in.

1. A SECTOR-SPECIFIC WELFARE AND WELLBEING PATHWAY

Thrive outcome:
Health & Wellbeing.

Charter skippers do not currently know where to turn. A dedicated, sector-aware welfare and wellbeing pathway - building on existing maritime welfare infrastructure rather than duplicating it - would close one of the clearest support gaps surfaced this year.



2. EQUITY OF ACCESS TO SAFETY AND VESSEL- UPGRADE SUPPORT

Thrive outcome:
*Safety Standards, Financial
Resilience, Social Justice.*

Charter vessels carry paying passengers in commercial conditions but cannot access the safety and vessel-upgrade grant routes available to comparable seafarers. Addressing this inequity is, at its core, a passenger safety question - and a Thrive 2.0 question.



3. CLARITY AND CONSISTENCY IN THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Thrive outcome:
Better Working Lives, Safety Standards.

Skippers are not asking for less regulation. They are asking to understand the regulation they already work under. A coordinated effort with the MCA, harbour authorities and IFCA's to produce clear, consistent and accessible guidance would materially reduce the anxiety and mental load this workforce currently carries.



4. ENFORCEMENT THAT PROTECTS LEGAL OPERATORS

Thrive outcome:
Social Justice, Financial Resilience.

Consistent enforcement against unlicensed and illegal operators is one of the most effective ways to protect the working lives of compliant skippers. The CBO programme is now building the evidence base needed to argue for this, and support it.



5. A CONTINUING NATIONAL VOICE FOR CHARTER SKIPPERS

Thrive outcome:
Better Working Lives.

The monthly forums, in-port engagement, survey infrastructure and policy presence built this year only exist because the role exists. Sustaining and growing that role is the single highest-leverage step toward keeping this workforce visible to the systems that shape their working lives.



6. A CAREER PATHWAY INTO THE SECTOR - AND THROUGH IT

Thrive outcome:
*Better Working Lives,
Financial Resilience.*

The charter fleet is ageing, and there is no clear route in for the next generation of skippers. Mapping existing training and accreditation routes, engaging the RYA on aligned qualifications, delivering consultation workshops with operators, and producing an accessible career pathway resource would begin to address the barriers to entry, progression and long-term workforce resilience that this year's evidence has surfaced.





**THE WORKFORCE IS VISIBLE.
THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR.
THE RESPONSIBILITY NOW IS
TO RESPOND.**

Jamie Cook
CEO Angling Trust & Fish Legal



A FOUNDATION LAID. A WORKFORCE WAITING.

Twelve months ago, the UK charter fleet was a workforce known largely to itself. There was no national contact point, no welfare structure, no evidence base, and no voice in the rooms shaping its working life.

That has begun to change. The Seafarers' Charity's investment in the Charter Boat Officer role has revealed a population of seafarers whose working lives align closely with the Charity's strategic outcomes and who, for the first time, have the beginnings of an infrastructure built around them.

This is what foundational funding does at its best. It makes a workforce visible, gives it a structure through which to be heard, and creates the conditions for support to reach those who need it. The work this year has not been about fish. It has been about the people who put to sea to carry passengers, who carry the safety of others on their shoulders, who run fragile microbusinesses, and who, until now, had no one in the system asking how they were doing.

The case we are making is straightforward. The foundation is in place. The workforce is visible. Their working lives are documented. The alignment with Thrive 2.0 is clear. What is needed now is the next stage of investment to turn a foundational year into a lasting presence, and to ensure the seafarers we have spent a year listening to are not asked to wait once again.

“CHARTER SKIPPERS ARE SEAFARERS. THEY ARE WORKING ALONE, UNDER PRESSURE, IN CONDITIONS THE CHARITY ALREADY RECOGNISES. THE WORK THIS YEAR HAS BEEN ABOUT MAKING SURE THEY ARE RECOGNISED TOO.”

Hannah Rudd
Head of Marine
Angling Trust



A COURSE HAS BEEN SET





THE WORK NOW IS TO HOLD IT

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