

UK Fisheries Minister on visit to local fishing industry

Robert Goodwill MP was appointed UK Fisheries Minister on 5th March this year, so his visit to South Down less than four months into his new role emphasised the importance of Northern Ireland's fishing industry.

Whilst recording his support for remain in the Brexit referendum, Mr. Goodwill told local fishing industry representatives that he was committed to delivering a Brexit deal for UK's fishermen that would take back control of UK waters and in doing so allow the fishing industry to benefit from the sea of opportunities that would follow,

Mr Goodwill's visit started with breakfast in Kilkeel, hosted by Sea Source. The fishing industry, which is acknowledged to be one of the few industries that will benefit from Brexit continues to harbour concerns it could still be sacrificed as part of any fresh negotiations between the UK and EU on a Brexit deal, but Mr. Goodwill was at pains to say that as Fisheries Minister he would not allow this to happen.

The Minister heard from local fishermen that their support for Brexit was driven by a policy that for decades had reduced fishing opportunities and driven many people out of the industry. Since 1990 the EU's Hague Preference system has annually removed fishing quotas from Northern Ireland fishermen and awarded these opportunities to fishermen from the Republic of Ireland.

Much of Northern Ireland's catch is exported to the EU and like other sectors those involved in the fishing industry wish to see trade with EU customers continue tariff free. However, the Minister was reminded that the EU fishing fleet's catches in UK waters, combined with their sales of seafood into the UK made the EU side much more dependent upon the UK than vice versa. Local fishermen were clear that for them Brexit is not about expelling EU fishermen from UK waters, but rather securing a fair share of fishing opportunities in waters such as the Irish Sea. Whilst 70% of the Irish Sea falls within UK jurisdiction, Northern Ireland fishermen are allocated around 40% of the catching opportunities.

Whilst Brexit issues dominate the headlines Mr. Goodwill heard about a range of other challenges facing the local industry. One of these is access to crew from overseas with the specialist skills needed to go to sea. As a former Immigration Minister Mr. Goodwill had previously met local fishing industry representatives in London to discuss the matter, but his visit to Kilkeel allowed him to visit Kilkeel Seafoods, the parent company of which (Whitby Seafoods) is based in Mr. Goodwill's Parliamentary Constituency. At Kilkeel Seafoods manager Garry Cassidy told the Minister that the shortage in supply of prawns was largely driven by a lack of fishing crew. Additional crew, would mean more fishing boats, landing more prawns that Mr Cassidy was clear could be sold within the UK market.

Alan McCulla from Sea Source told the Minister there was a clear ambition to create an industry that attracted domestic workers to pursue a career at sea, but until that goal was realised there was a need for a scheme that allowed skilled fishermen to come from other parts of the world.

Mr. Goodwill had wide ranging discussions with a number of fishermen and their representatives. He met those who had been affected by the decision by the Dublin Government to close Irish inshore waters to fishermen from Northern Ireland, a decision that has only recently been partially reversed. Mr. Goodwill confirmed he would be making further representations to the Irish Minister on the Voisinage issue.

Issues around the UK's Fisheries Bill currently making it's way through the Westminster Parliament were discussed, as was the designation and management of Marine Conservation Zones in the Irish Sea, implementation of the discard ban and fishing opportunities for 2020. Mr. Goodwill, also heard about local frustrations around delays in progressing plans to develop a new outer harbour at Kilkeel, despite industry offers of help to pay for the scheme.

During his visit to Sea Source the Minister was able to sample local seafood. Sea Source, which is owned by local fishermen described the initiatives they were involved in to promote the local fishing industry, increase the value of seafood for fishermen and create new opportunities based around local maritime expertise.

As he left Kilkeel Alan McCulla told Mr. Goodwill he hoped that whilst acknowledging the challenges faced by the fishing industry, the Minister would also recognise that local fishermen and others were making tremendous strides in creating a sustainable and economically viable fishing industry, which continued to make an important contribution to the economy of South Down. Brexit, accompanied by the provision of new infrastructure at Kilkeel would increase this contribution and the future for the fishing industry in Kilkeel and South Down was bright.

