

# Council sets up new learning route to go to sea

*By Katie Macleod*

**One only needs to look at the fishing, aquaculture, or ferry sectors in the Outer Hebrides to see that the maritime industry plays an important role in the local economy.**

It's fitting, then, that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is in the process of creating a new national qualification tailored to meet the needs of the maritime industry – and the career aspirations of young people in the islands.

In conjunction with representatives from the fishing, aquaculture, ferry, and port authority sectors across Scotland, as well as schools and colleges in the Highlands and Islands, the Comhairle is working towards the launch of a National Progression Award at SCQF Level 5 in Maritime Skills, with the aim of it being up and running for senior pupils in the 2018-2019 school year.

On June 26th a meeting of the Qualification Development Group for the course was held in E-Sgoil on Francis Street, and a proposal for the new course has now been accepted by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Chaired by Iain Mackinnon, Secretary of the Maritime Skills Alliance, the meeting was also attended by representatives of Lews Castle

College, Orkney College, West Highland College, and Shetland North Atlantic Fisheries College.

"I'm full of praise for the initiative taken by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar," says Iain Mackinnon, who is based in London but has family ties to the islands. "They've recognised that many young people in the islands want a career in some part of the maritime sector and they've established an excellent partnership of employers and schools and colleges to create the best opportunity for those young people".

"For our part in the Maritime Skills Alliance, we're really keen to see young people across Scotland introduced to the terrific range of opportunities in the maritime sector. People in the islands know about CalMac of course, and aquaculture, and fishing, and all three sectors are very much involved in the work."

"The leisure sector – marinas – are very interested too, and I'm sure that CnES will find lots of interest across Scotland once we have the new qualification created. I might add that I've told others about this work, and they're very keen that we get something like it for other parts of the UK. The Western Isles are leading the way!"

"It's a partnership effort," agrees Iain Stewart, who works in the Comhairle's Education and

Children's Services and is a member of the Qualification Development Group. "The Comhairle here is taking the lead, but also assuming the responsibility. This is a national development, but locally led."

The new qualification will follow on from the current Skills for Work Maritime Skills qualification, offering in-depth training for senior pupils who know for certain that they want to enter the industry on leaving school. It does this by providing students with the skills, experience, and formal accreditation necessary for work at sea, covering the overlap in skills required by the ferry, fishing, aquaculture, and port sectors.

"The skills are transferable between the sectors so that when the economy shifts, there's a flexible, movable workforce, making it more economically efficient for the public and private sector," explains Iain Stewart.

He notes that one of the other driving forces behind the new course, aside from workforce planning, is the introduction of "personalisation and choice" into the curriculum, where young people are not simply presented with set subject choices, but asked what topics they would like to study more generally.

"We asked them what they would like to see on

the list, and the maritime sector has come out high, year after year, hence the existing maritime skills qualification being popular," says Iain Stewart. "But this one will actually provide them with the knowledge, skills, experience, and tickets, which will make them much, much more employable."

As the award is being designed with input and support from industry leaders themselves, it will not only cover their needs but also help move the responsibility and cost of training away from businesses and into the classroom. Some of the topics covered in the course include Vessel Rope Work Anchoring and Mooring Operations; Basic Seamanship; and Fire Prevention and Fire Fighting.

The recent developments of the working group build on the success of the official launch of the project in April 2016, when representatives from Caledonian MacBrayne, the Merchant Navy Training Board, and the Scottish Salmon Company, among others, met to discuss the possibility – and need – for such a qualification.

"The degree of interest in it is very high," says Iain Stewart. "Young people are asking for it, the sectors require and are asking for it, and the idea is that we will meet their workforce planning requirements with a skilled young maritime workforce."