

VOTE 30 MARINE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

28. Fishery Harbour Centres - Collection of Debts

The Department of the Marine and Natural Resources is responsible for the control and management of Fishery Harbour Centres. The day-to-day management of each Centre is carried out by a Harbour Master. The Centres are located at Killybegs, Castletownbere, Rossaveel, Howth and Dunmore East. A Fishery Harbour Centres Fund is maintained to record all moneys received and expenditure incurred in respect of these harbours.

Revenue to manage the five harbours is raised locally through the charging of harbour dues for the use of facilities, through rentals received for leased properties and by way of an annual grant paid by the Department.

During the audit of the Fishery Harbour Centres Accounts for the year ended 31 December 1998, it was noted that total debtors had increased from £414,601 at December 1996 to £693,450 at December 1998. The average time period for which debts were outstanding had increased from 149 days to 289 days.

It was also noted that outstanding harbour dues constituted 75% of the total debtors and that there was a poor and varying performance between the different Centres in relation to the collection of these dues. At 31 December 1998 the average period for which harbour dues were outstanding varied from 130 days in Howth and Rossaveel to 573 days in Dunmore East.

Financial details on the overall level of debtors and income for the years 1996, 1997 and 1998 plus the level of harbour dues outstanding and income for each Centre for 1998 are as follows:

Table 17 - Level of Debtors relative to Income 1996 to 1998

Year	Debtors at 31 December £	Income for Year £	Average Collection Period
1996	414,601	1,012,680	149 Days
1997	466,799	903,829	188 Days
1998	693,450	876,814	289 Days

Table 18 - Harbour Dues for 1998 by Centre

Centre	Harbour Dues Uncollected at 31 December 1998	Harbour Dues Income for Year	Average Collection Period
	£	£	Days
Castletownbere	82,750	91,848	329
Killybegs	340,264	285,326	435
Dunmore East	58,669	37,371	573
Howth	24,996	70,157	130
Rossaveel	12,305	34,596	130
Total	518,984	519,298	365

In response to my inquires concerning the high level of debts outstanding the Accounting Officer stated that the extent of harbour dues outstanding between 1996 and 1998 was attributable largely to a campaign of withholding dues organised by the Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation at Killybegs Harbour Centre. Payment of the withheld dues was pursued by the Department and £291,215 was paid over by the organisation in August 1999. The effect of this payment was to reduce from £518,984 at the end of 1998 to £388,568 at the end of 1999 the amount outstanding in respect of harbour dues as outlined in the following table:

Table 19 - Harbour Dues Outstanding at 31 December 1999

Centre	Harbour Dues Uncollected at 31 December 1999	Average Collection Period
	£	Days
Castletownbere	104,421	438
Killybegs	161,263	224
Dunmore East	71,943	853
Howth	34,134	148
Rossaveel	16,807	169
Total	388,568	283

There was scope for improvement in the overall position in relation to collection of harbour dues and the position at certain harbours required particular attention. The current standard procedures for dues collection were being reviewed with a view to effecting improvements in efficiency. In addition, clerical support has been or is being provided for the Harbour Masters at Killybegs and Castletownbere. Consideration was being given to the provision of similar support for the Harbour Masters at the three other Fishery Harbour Centres. Arrangements were in train also for the recruitment of a temporary Assistant Harbour Master for Dunmore East.

Harbour dues constituted the bulk of the Fishery Harbour Centres' income. Their income was, therefore, substantially determined by the levels of harbour usage and the dues accruing in respect of such usage and the efficiency of dues collection. Steps to improve the collection of dues would

ensure that available income was maximised and would be accompanied by continued rigorous control of expenditure to ensure the viability of the Fishery Harbour Centres going forward.

The position in relation to debt collection generally in this area was under review and any further action identified as necessary to effect the necessary improvements in the position would be taken.