



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Fisheries Management Plan for Cockles in English Waters

Engagement Report

October 2024



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Summary

This report presents a summary of stakeholder feedback gathered by the Association of Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities (AIFCA). The summary is based on informal stakeholder engagement activities delivered in 2023 and 2024 in England, to develop the draft cockle FMP for English waters. Information gathered through these stakeholder engagement events was subsequently used to refine the content of the proposed FMP, including fisheries management aims, goals and activities.

The cockle FMP has been prioritised for delivery in 2024 due to the stock's vulnerability to over-exploitation, the economic value of the fishery currently estimated at an annual value of £10.3million, and the environmental benefits cockle stocks bring to habitat health and wider biodiversity.

During November and December 2023 and January 2024, the AIFCA hosted a series of online and in-person events – see section 2.1 for details - as part of informal engagement to:

- Raise awareness about the development of the cockle FMP for English waters amongst stakeholders.
- Present draft FMP objectives to stakeholders in order to gather feedback to determine whether they were fit for purpose and set the right direction of travel for the management of English cockle fisheries.

Feedback received has been used to refine the draft cockle FMP content. Furthermore, views gathered will be used to inform implementation priorities and further develop future iterations of the cockle FMP.

Overview

This section sets out the governance provisions that shaped stakeholder engagement during the drafting process of the cockle FMP. This section outlines:

- Details of the AIFCA and its role within the IFCA framework
- Key driver behind the AIFCA leading the stakeholder engagement and drafting the Cockle FMP
- Membership of AIFCA
- IFCA Evidence Working Group and its membership
- Feedback from members key priorities identified

The Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) have the power, in English waters, to deliver fisheries management within the inshore 0–6nm zone. The IFCAs are committees or joint committees of local government with membership comprised of Local Authority representatives, statutory representatives from Natural England (NE), the Environment Agency (EA) and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO).

Additionally, further appointee membership is overseen by the MMO with applicants sought from individuals and stakeholders with specific knowledge, expertise and experience relevant to their local districts. These include, but are not limited to, active and retired fishermen, processors and buyers, academics and those with specific environmental or marine policy expertise.

The AIFCA aims to represent and support the ten regional IFCA's. Given the regionalised and inshore nature of existing commercial cockle fisheries, the opportunity to establish a national framework to raise awareness and promote these valuable fisheries and to strengthen links between national policy objectives and regional management was recognised.

While the AIFCA holds no statutory functions relevant to fisheries management, given the dispersed nature of these fisheries the AIFCA agreed to lead on the development of the cockle FMP in collaboration with the IFCA's and wider stakeholders.

Development support was sought from those IFCA's with significant fisheries, namely:

- Kent and Essex IFCA
- Eastern IFCA
- North Western IFCA
- Southern IFCA

The Cockle FMP Evidence Group (CFMP EG) was formed, consisting of senior scientists and fishery managers from these four IFCA's to provide the evidence and fishery specific knowledge to scope the FMP, and to assist in developing the draft objectives. Terms of Reference (ToR) which were developed and signed off by the CFMP EG, Defra and the AIFCA (available on request).

During November and December 2023, the cockle FMP draft objectives were presented to the AIFCA board and individually to the committees of the four IFCA's with commercial fisheries. Each of the IFCA committees presented to, included fishing industry members. Throughout the development period of the draft FMP, the AIFCA also engaged with existing industry representation bodies and fora, government and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and wider stakeholders. Industry engagement and feedback on draft objectives was particularly sought through:

- The Shellfish Association of Great Britain (SAGB) – both Processors and Mollusc Committee meetings
- Further meetings with regional cockle fishery representatives
- Industry groups with an interest in the fishery
- Seafish facilitated Shellfish Industry Advisory Group (SIAG) meetings
- MMO facilitated Regional Fisheries Group meetings
- Natural England, Historic England, Blue Marine Foundation and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
- Welsh government and Natural Resources Wales

Four regional in-person events were held in January 2024 in each of the four IFCA districts with commercial fisheries – see section 2.1

As all of the fisheries are inshore in nature and permitted by the local IFCAs, invitations to the events were sent directly to all permit holders to capture relevant fishermen.

In general, initial views concerning the concept of a national FMP for cockles prior to presentation of the aims and objectives, questioned the need for a national approach, given the regional and inshore nature of these fisheries and current, local management arrangements. There was also concern communicated that a national FMP would add further layers of bureaucracy and limit the development of new fisheries.

After presentation of the draft FMP objectives, rationales and discussion of issues facing the cockle industry, most stakeholders saw benefits associated with a national FMP. They accepted that a national approach would raise awareness of cross policy issues associated with water quality and shellfish certification and improve the evidence base for the stock and help to address wider environmental interactions and socioeconomic considerations.

Attendance and representation

The in-person events were attended by active fishermen, processor and buyer business representatives and wider stakeholders. Events were planned for late afternoon/evening time to facilitate increased attendance. AIFCA is not aware of any conflicts with event timings restricting capacity for industry members to fish. The events were further facilitated by representatives from regional IFCAs who are responsible for day-to-day management of the fisheries. A total of 26 stakeholders attended these events - details are at the annex below.

Event format and promotion

During the events, the AIFCA presented an overview of the FMP development process, what an FMP is and how the draft cockle FMP has been developed. The presentation also covered issues facing the cockle fishery and an overview of the timeline to get the draft FMP finalised and ready for public consultation.

Promotion of stakeholder engagement events was achieved through direct communication with stakeholders, including:

- Email correspondence
- Social media content shared through AIFCA channels
- Email correspondence via the Defra FMP Communications & Engagement Group
- Email correspondence via IFCAs, Regional Fisheries Groups

- Regional Fisheries Group (RFG) meetings, IFCA Technical Advisory Group (TAG) meetings and various Shellfish Industry Groups

Overview of FMP aims and objectives presented

Clarification

Stakeholder views gathered in this report were based on discussions of an initial draft of the cockle FMP which contained management objectives for the cockle fishery. Following a Defra-led quality assurance review, the objectives of the cockle FMP were subsequently further developed and renamed 'goals and actions' to avoid confusion with the objectives of The Fisheries Act 2020. For the purposes of this report and to maintain the authenticity and relevance of the views we have received from stakeholders, we retained the term 'objectives' in this document.

The draft objectives consulted on for the in-person events were as follows:

Objective 1: The FMP establishes a framework to achieve sustainable cockle fisheries in English waters through actions that ensure harvested stocks are environmentally sustainable in the long term and are not overexploited.

Objective 2: Fisheries authorities will monitor national reporting mechanisms to detect emerging fisheries outside current publicly managed and commercially viable cockle beds.

Objective 3: The FMP will ensure that the management of cockle fisheries is consistent with the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Objective 4: The FMP will support the cockle industry, recognising their contribution to coastal communities and the skilled employment they provide.

Objective 5: A national cockle FMP forum will be established to share best practice and to identify common issues that have an impact on and can advance all English cockle fisheries.

The rationale for each objective was discussed, prompting further discussion on the scope and potential ambitions of a national cockle FMP.

Feedback on draft FMP objectives

The draft FMP objectives were widely agreed to be sensible and appropriate within the English cockle fishery context. Feedback from attendees at events was largely positive, with minor points of clarification or amendment required.

Discussions highlighted the diverse nature of harvesting methods, fleet dynamics and business models between the different fishery areas. While there were both positive and negative opinions of regional IFCA's expressed, the consensus was that 'a one size fits all' approach was not appropriate, and that local or regional management was needed. The need for management to be adaptive, flexible, and responsive to local stocks and environmental conditions was made strongly. The need for communication with fishermen was also stressed. Criticism that while bottom-up management was in place regionally, this was not the case for central government policies in the past was also communicated.

Common concerns were raised that a national cockle FMP would add additional levels of bureaucracy or limit the development of new fisheries. Stakeholders asked for further clarification on how the FMP would potentially impact the current day-to-day running of the cockle fisheries. Stakeholders generally saw benefits in additional evidence being sought and the collation and communication of, particularly socio-economic evidence, at a national level, recognising the potential security this could afford the industry through increased awareness of this sector.

Some of the detailed feedback received is included below.

Overview of key points raised on specific draft objectives

There was broad support for the cockle FMP objectives. Fishermen had the opportunity to engage with a central government initiative and express their views and concerns. The delivery partner provided sufficient information which allowed stakeholders to get a better understanding of the rationale behind a national cockle FMP. By the end of these engagements, stakeholders saw the benefit of the framework approach proposed in the draft cockle FMP. See summaries under each objective below that give an insight into various cross policy issues that were discussed after the presentation of each objective.

Objective 1: As this was the first objective discussed with stakeholders, there was initial apprehension, and a lot of questions were asked around the need for a national FMP. Fishermen wanted to understand how the FMP would work with day-to-day management on a local level. As the discussion progressed, the AIFCA was able to provide reassurance that individual fishermen's current management arrangements were not going to be affected by the objectives proposed in the draft cockle FMP. The need for additional evidence was also discussed as fishermen recognised the importance of relevant and accurate data. Feedback was given on the use of various terms in the FMP such as

'environmentally sustainable', 'not overexploited' and 'harvested' to ensure that the fishery is described in a balanced way that does not limit the scope for new fishing opportunities through the introduction of additional hurdles or bureaucracy.

Objective 2: There was recognition that flexibility is needed in bivalve fishing management to allow fishermen to target invasive and non-native species where appropriate. Although stakeholders expressed concerns around the impacts of invasive and non-native species on local fisheries, they agreed that management decisions need to prioritise native species. This led to discussions surrounding the presence and persistence of beds in the offshore region (outside 6nm) and there was agreement that something needs to be in place if beds are found outside 6nm. The role of Natural England in the management of the cockle fishery was also discussed as was the impact of environmental conditions on the footprint of the cockle fishery and changing species distributions. There was agreement that management needs to be adaptive and responsive to such changing conditions. Other comments highlighted the importance of stakeholder communication and consideration to be given to fishermen's capacity to attend meetings.

Objective 3: This objective generated a lot of discussion around environmental regulations. Fishermen highlighted concerns that environmental restrictions are seen as limiting fishing opportunities. However, there was recognition that more needs to be done to allow fishermen to engage in management meetings to offer counter points or evidence in comparison to Natural England or environmental NGOs. The evidence base for bird food models was also discussed and fishermen expressed views on the impact bird predation has on the fishable stock which limits fishing opportunities. Further discussion ensued on the perceived prioritisation of bird species over fishery opportunities in marine policy and there was consensus that there needs to be flexibility on how the different beds are managed within fishery regions.

Objective 4: There was broad consensus that social and economic evidence, and consideration in management decision-making, could be improved at all levels. Shellfish certification requirements was the main concern for fishermen discussed under this objective. It was agreed that costs associated with export paperwork and associated veterinary duties were prohibitive to the sector's viability and that there are improvements to be made around movement certificates and shellfish certification requirements which are currently seen as not reliable, rely on trust and require a lot of time to complete. Water quality was also discussed, and fishermen expressed concern around the capacity of local authorities to undertake required processes to certify beds to facilitate fishing. However, fishermen agreed that the contribution of the local cockle industry is significant to local tourism and the land-based employment generated by the fishing industry, both in the UK and abroad.

Objective 5: The balanced composition of a national forum, encompassing both industry and other stakeholder interests was discussed. Stakeholders identified potential benefits in connecting cockle fishers from different parts of the country to share knowledge and experiences. However, some concerns were raised around the changing priorities associated with a new government.

Conclusion

There was broad support for the proposed objectives of the draft cockle FMP. Stakeholder engagement events gave fishermen the opportunity to have in-depth discussion with the AIFCA, to express their concerns and to get involved in government policy. This was the first detailed discussion fishermen had on the content of the cockle FMP and the AIFCA was required to provide context and rationale as well as the draft objectives. On the whole, fishermen engaged positively in discussions at these events and meetings, and their feedback and views have been captured and further shaped the draft cockle FMP. The AIFCA clarified the ambition of the draft FMP and fishermen are beginning to see their involvement as crucial in the further development and implementation of the cockle plan.

Overview of key wider policy issues raised

Outside of general fishery management principles and the draft objectives presented related to cockle fisheries, several recurring themes were raised by stakeholders as being of concern or impacting the future of the sector.

Water classification

It was evident at all events and through wider consultation that issues related to shellfish classification requirements and the impact these have on the capacity to harvest cockles are a major concern affecting the cockle industry. These issues are compounded by continued anthropogenic influences that have a negative impact on water quality. Additionally, costs and processes associated with exporting cockles are seen to be limiting the sector.

Interactions with other fisheries

Views recognised that in many cases cockle fisheries are managed through regulations which also include measures for other bivalve species, such as Manilla clams or mussels, or are focused on methods which are capable of focussed harvesting of a range of species, including cockles. The spatial overlap and management interactions between these closely related fisheries were evident from discussions with stakeholders and need to be considered when implementing the cockle FMP.

New entrants

As with other sectors of the fishing industry, there were concerns that younger people are not entering the industry and that there is limited capacity within existing fisheries for new entrants.

Spatial conflicts

There were concerns raised over increasing spatial pressure from other marine industries and these industries potential impacts on stocks and cockle habitats. Specific regional examples related to cabling and offshore wind farms were given.

Environmental priorities

Given the specific interactions between cockle fisheries and bird species, many consultees raised concerns about the perceived prioritisation of environmental factors in decision-making processes and the need to ensure balanced representation.

Annex: Table of in-person events

Number	Event location and date	Attendance
1.	Carnforth, Lancashire, 17 th January 2024	IFCA – 1 Industry – 6
2.	Sutton Bridge, Lincolnshire, 18 th January 2024	IFCA – 2 Industry – 6
3.	Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, 19 th January 2024	IFCA – 1 Industry – 10
4.	Poole, Dorset, 23 rd January 2024	IFCA – 1 Industry – 4