



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Fisheries Management Plan for Southern North Sea and English Channel Skates and Rays

Engagement Report

October 2024

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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Summary

The following report presents an overview of stakeholder engagement carried out by the Marine Management Organisation's (MMO) Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) team and of the stakeholder feedback received that supported the development of the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP.

The Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP forms part of the next round of FMPs being developed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for English waters.

Throughout 2023, the MMO's FMP team used a series of engagement methods as part of both formal and informal engagement to:

- Raise awareness about development of the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP for English waters amongst stakeholders.
- Present draft FMP content such as evidence requirements and proposed management interventions to stakeholders to gather feedback, alternatives, and additional evidence that should be considered.

Stakeholder identification

One of the first steps before formal stakeholder engagement could begin was to identify relevant stakeholders to be involved in the development of the FMP. To do this, stakeholder analysis was carried out which involved first creating a list of all possible stakeholders relevant to the FMP and then assigning a category to each stakeholder (Collaborate, Consult, or Inform) based on various factors (See Annex 1). Those who were deemed to fall under the category of "collaborate" were approached to be part of the Working Group (WG) (See Annex 2). Detailed information on the criteria for stakeholder analysis can be found in Annex 1. The stakeholder list and associated assigned level of engagement was fluid and therefore changed as the FMP developed.

Working Group

To assist in the development of the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP, the FMP team set up a WG. The purpose of the WG was to advise the FMP alongside the MMO as the lead delivery partner. In addition, the WG had the

function of a forum for engagement on the FMP, and members were encouraged to seek opportunities to engage the wider fishing industry (commercial and recreational) and other key stakeholders where appropriate to feed their views into the FMP's development.

The WG membership comprised of individuals who represented different sectors of the fishing industry such as inshore, offshore, recreational and other government department representatives from Defra and Cefas (See Annex 2). These individuals were encouraged to take part in working group meetings that were agreed to be held online due to the large geographic spread of members. Members who could not attend online meetings were encouraged to provide feedback to us via email and one-to-one telephone conversations. Although efforts were made to ensure that there was appropriate attendance at every working group meeting, external factors such as weather, work commitments and technology meant that some working group members were unable to attend meetings.

Throughout the preparation phase of the development of the FMP, MMO sought feedback and input from the group on species prioritisation, drafted elements of the FMP and potential management measures to be proposed in the first iteration. Detailed information on the number of attendees and links to published meeting notes can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1: Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP Working Group meeting dates, attendance and links to meeting notes. OGDs stands for Other Governmental Departments. Other includes those attendees from non-governmental organisations, academia or independent facilitators.

Date	Purpose of Meeting	MMO	Inshore	Attendees				Total	
				Offshore	Recreational	OGDs	Other*		
10/10/2023	First WG meeting	3	3	1	0	3	5	15	WG1
02/11/2023	WG meeting to discuss proposed management measures	2	3	4	2	4	7	22	WG2
15/12/2023	WG meeting to provide feedback from engagement events	3	4	2	2	2	4	17	WG3
25/01/2024	WG meeting to provide a walk-through of key sections of the draft FMP, followed by a Q&A session.	4	3	5	1	2	5	20	WG4

At the fourth WG meeting the MMO FMP team provided the WG with an on-screen walk through of the key sections of the draft FMP. This included: the FMP Structure; Stock status; Fishery overview including key landing data by species and gear type; Draft management measures including their associated rationale, evidence dependencies and stakeholder views. A Q&A session followed the walk through.

Southern North Sea coastal engagement

A series of in-person engagement events were used throughout the development of the FMP to gather views from stakeholders across the Southern North Sea and English Channel areas.

4.1 November – December 2023 engagement

As a critical first step in developing the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP, MMO’s FMP team hosted several in-person events with stakeholders along the southern North Sea and English Channel coastal areas. Drop-in sessions at venues and quayside visits were used to optimise levels of engagement with a variety of stakeholders. Stakeholders from the commercial, recreational and wider stakeholders with an interest in the FMP were invited to attend engagement events through direct contact, industry groups, social media posts and website blogs. The information gathered during this engagement gave MMO an initial steer on what stakeholders wanted to see prioritised within the FMP, including species and management measures.

The first series of events were held at key locations in the English Channel starting with Newlyn, within ICES area 7e on 13 November. Following on from the Newlyn event, engagement in ICES area 7e continued between 14 and 15 November in Brixham, Plymouth and Lyme Regis. Engagement in ICES area 7d was undertaken during 15 and 16 November at Shoreham, Rye and Dungeness.

Engagement took place within ICES area 4c in Whitstable, on 17 November. Following on from the Whitstable event, engagement in ICES area 4c continued between 5 and 7 December in Harwich, West Mersea, Lowestoft, Wells and King’s Lynn. Engagement in ICES area 4b ran on 7 and 8 December and sessions were held in Bridlington, Hartlepool and North Shields. The FMP team spoke to individuals such as vessel owners and industry group representatives.

In addition to the above events, the FMP team held a meeting at Poole on 18 December, focussing on engagement with recreational anglers.

Across all the in-person events held in November and December 2023, 102 stakeholders, from both inshore and offshore commercial sectors, as well as the recreational sector, were engaged with and their views obtained regarding this FMP.

Location	Number of Attendees
Newlyn	9
Brixham	5
Plymouth	13

Lyme Regis	8
Shoreham	10
Rye	4
Dungeness	5
Folkstone	5
Poole	11
Whitstable	10
Harwich	4
West Mersea	11
Lowestoft	2
Wells	1
King's Lynn	0
Bridlington	0
Hartlepool	3
North Shields	1

Stakeholders were introduced to the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP and asked questions on the species that were most important to them and what potential management measures they would like to see within the FMP. Detailed feedback from this engagement can be found in the [2023 Stakeholder](#)

[Feedback Summary Document](#). How this feedback fed into the development of the FMP is highlighted below.

Online engagement

5.1 Stakeholder webinars

Alongside the in-person engagement in 2023, the FMP team hosted an online session open to all stakeholders with an interest in the FMP who could not attend the coastal sessions. A total of 11 stakeholders attended the online webinar, with attendees from both commercial and recreational fisheries.

5.2 Angling Trust forum

On 14 December 2023 the Angling Trust held an online forum to engage specifically with recreational anglers. The focus of the forum was to discuss the proposed management measures, and for recreational anglers to provide their views on the FMP. A total of 12 anglers attended this online session. A high-level summary of the feedback from recreational sea anglers can be found in Section 6 and detailed feedback can be found in the [2023 Stakeholder Feedback Summary Document](#).

5.3 Online survey

In an effort to obtain the views of as many interested stakeholders as possible, we launched an online survey to glean opinions on the proposed management measures as well as the perceived importance of the various species that are within the scope of this FMP. The online survey was open from 22 December 2023 until 9 January 2024, during which time 45 responses were received from both commercial and recreational fishers, as well as representatives from Fish Producer Organisations, eNGOs, and members of the public. The results of the online survey have been included in the feedback summary in section 6, below.

Feedback on proposed management measures

Feedback on proposed management measures from all stakeholder engagement carried out for the development of the FMP is summarised below.

6.1 Harmonised Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS).

- The majority of stakeholders felt that this would be an effective measure.
- Some stakeholders raised concerns regarding how appropriate the introduction of a universal MCRS is, given the anatomy variations between the species within the FMP.
- Some suggested that any increase in MCRS should be gradual over time.
- Some stakeholders in the South West indicated preference for a regional approach rather than a national MCRS.
- It was highlighted that any measures should be supported by scientific evidence.
- Some stakeholders highlighted that fishers do return juveniles when practical and that they appear to survive.
- Some stakeholders felt that a MCRS would be beneficial but could be seasonal to reflect the differing species targeted.
- It was suggested that there should be a ban on landing skinned or winged rays, to prevent manipulation of reference sizes. This would also aid species identification.
- Some stakeholders highlighted the North Devon voluntary code of practice, where commercial fishers signed up to a voluntary minimum landing size, to assist species growth and spawning.

6.2 Maximum Conservation Reference Size (MaxCRS)

- Feedback on the MaxCRS recommendation was polarised, not being supported by commercial sector due to the higher prices obtained for larger species, but popular with recreational anglers, who felt the measure will protect females.
- There was agreement that a MaxCRS may not be practical, and that an increase in MCRS may be more appropriate and pragmatic for management.
- Some stakeholders felt that an upper size limit would impact on survivability as fish would unlikely be returned swiftly by netters due to the time and effort involved in sorting gear for a fish that would be worthless.
- Some stakeholders felt that the MaxCRS could be the species size after one completed spawning cycle.
- Some stakeholders felt that introducing a MaxCRS would have the effect of reducing the market price, as the larger rays fetch higher prices.
- Some stakeholders were keen for species-specific measures, which allows for breeding-specific sizing to be taken into account.

6.3 Updated handling/ID/regulation guidelines

- Most stakeholders expressed support for this measure, and that it would be helpful to have clear guidance on the various size and measurement restrictions for different areas.
- Stakeholders agreed that this measure would help to support any species-specific measures.
- Some stakeholders highlighted that the guidance should be distributed to EU vessels, ensuring that EU vessels are abiding by UK rules.
- Some stakeholders highlighted that the existing Shark Trust species and handling guidance is already well-developed.

6.4 A lift in the ICES area 7.e small-eyed ray prohibition

- There was generally positive but cautious feedback on this measure.
- Some stakeholders raised concerns that the re-opening of the fishery would lead to over-fishing of the species. Some stakeholders raised that Defra need to negotiate the removal of the footnote for small-eyed ray prohibition on the western skates and rays group TAC.
- Some stakeholders raised that Defra also need to negotiate more quota in the short term for areas 7f and 7g, and that more allowance for undulate ray is required. Some stakeholders raised the possibility that it will lead to small monthly allowances, since the small TAC will be spread thinly over 7e, 7f, and 7g, and therefore lead to continued discards of small-eyed ray in 7e.

6.5 Species-specific minimum and maximum CRS

- There was mixed feedback from stakeholders on this measure.
- Whilst stakeholders generally welcomed the measure, some felt that complicated MCRS and MaxCRS may lead to fisherman discarding catches owing to the additional burden of checks.

6.6 Species-specific TACs

- There was generally positive feedback for this measure, for both species specific and ICES area specific TACs.
- Some stakeholders said that they get a better price for blonde rays rather than thornback.
- Some stakeholders said that all species should be subject to a specific TAC.
- Some stakeholders felt that changes need to be made incrementally.

6.7 Spatiotemporal management

- There was generally cautious feedback for this measure.
- Common concerns raised were the ability for the market to recover following any site closures, and questions around their environmental effectiveness.
- Some stakeholders said that rules need to be dynamic rather than fixed for long periods.
- Some suggested that industry-led and science-backed real time closures and closed boxes need to be employed.
- Some stakeholders said that any closures need to take into account closures introduced for other species.
- Some stakeholders agreed that closed boxes in North Devon have broadly been successful but are concerned about the ongoing squeeze due to offshore windfarms, aggregate extraction and marine conservation areas.
- Some stakeholders asked whether existing closed areas which protect skates and rays nursery grounds are actually working.
- Some stakeholders said that decisions on site closures need to be scrutinised.
- Some stakeholders stated they were not against spawning closures, but very concerned that Lyme Bay is used as a trial area on a frequent basis.
- Some stakeholders said they would want further information and evidence before considering.
- Some felt that seasonal closures are not workable in mixed fisheries.
- Some stakeholders felt that the seasonal aspect appeared to have disappeared.
- Some stakeholders have noticed a change in spatial distribution of the species, such as a noticeable drop in population within the inshore area. Stakeholders also noted similar population scarcity within the Thames estuary. They therefore felt this was a more fundamental issue that needs investigating.

6.8 Other management to support enhanced commercial markets

- There was generally positive feedback for this measure, acknowledging the need for infrastructure to support the fishing industry.
- The Brixham market was mentioned by stakeholders as a good example.
- Some stakeholders felt that a daily quota should be considered to help moderate market fluctuations.
- Some said that the price for skates and ray catches are the same, whether winged or whole.

- Some stakeholders highlighted that skate wings are sent abroad, but not the remaining backs (the remaining central part of the fish once it has been winged).
- Some stakeholders said that summer heat is an issue and highlighted the need to get catches to the market as soon as possible.
- Some stakeholders pointed out the old Billingsgate market in London is now more of a fish shop, open to the public and selling fish from all over the world. It was felt that this has impacted on the domestic wholesale fish market.
- Some stakeholders said that for the South East, an auction house/market would be better located at Hastings or Weymouth.

6.9 Measures to balance commercial and recreational needs

- There was general support for this proposal.
- Some stakeholders felt that recreational angling has suffered due to a drop in skate and ray population. An example given was that Poole previously had 30 charter boats in use, this has now reduced to six.
- Some stakeholders suggested that the species value to the recreational sector may be greater than the commercial value, and that this should be researched.
- Some stakeholders suggested that species awareness and handling guidance among the general public could be addressed by targeting associated businesses, such as tackle shops, with guidance publications.
- Some stakeholders suggested a boat size restriction to ensure more localised commercial activity.
- Some stakeholders pointed out that recreational anglers are allowed to keep their catch; due to the high number of recreational anglers in the region, this equates to a substantial tonnage. Conversely, commercial fishermen are only allowed a 5% bycatch allowance.

Wider stakeholder engagement

7.1 FMP team presentations to wider stakeholders

Regional Fisheries Groups (RFGs)

The FMP team utilised the existing RFG meetings to update stakeholders on the progress of the FMP's development. The team attended a meeting with fishermen in area 4c on 12 October 2023, during which a presentation was given regarding this FMP. The FMP team also delivered a presentation to the South RFG meeting on 18 January 2024, which was followed up with a Q&A session.

Meeting minutes are available here: [RFG Meeting Notes South East 4c 12.10.2023.](#)

To mitigate stakeholder fatigue and avoid the need for separate events, in addition to the RFG meeting referred to above, the FMP team also attended several existing RFG drop-in sessions in order to discuss the FMP:

- 19/09/23 – North Shields RFG drop-in engagement
- 20/09/23 – Hartlepool RFG drop-in engagement
- 23/10/23 – Lowestoft Emerging Fisheries Workshop
- 24/10/23 - Scarborough RFG drop-in engagement
- 24/10/23 - Whitby RFG drop-in engagement

The FMP team also attended RFG drop-ins in the English Channel.

Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities (IFCA)

The FMP team involved the relevant IFCA's in the development of the FMP through meetings to discuss proposed management and also monthly updates for IFCA officers working at:

- 4b/4c - Northumberland, North Eastern and Eastern IFCAs.
- 7d/7e - Kent and Essex, Sussex, Southern, Cornwall, Devon and Severn IFCAs.

Finfish Industry Advisory Group

The FMP team attended regular Finfish Industry Advisory Group (FIAG) meetings to update members on the progress of the FMP. FIAG provides a forum to discuss sustainability and management of UK finfish non-quota species fisheries. The FMP team attended a FIAG meeting on 16 December 2023 and delivered a presentation on FMP progress but received no feedback on the day.

UK Association of Fish Producer Organisation (UKAFPO) meetings

The FMP team attended regular UKAFPO meetings to update the association of fish PO's. The following meetings have been attended by the Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP team:

19/10/2023

18/01/2024

Meeting minutes are shared with attendees after but not formally published so no direct links are available.

7.2 Recreational fishers

In addition to the event hosted by the Angling Trust outlined above, the FMP team set up a meeting with the Angling Trust's Policy and Advocacy Manager to gather views on the FMP and issues faced by recreational anglers.

Key issues discussed involved the small-eyed ray prohibition lift in 7e, the increase in ICES recommended catches for skates and rays, market enhancements and the desire for a voluntary code of conduct.

7.3 Environmental non-governmental organisations (eNGOs) meeting

Meetings were held with eNGOs alongside Defra and other FMP delivery leads. A meeting took place on 19 January 2024 with the Marine Stewardship Council to discuss the FMP programme progress to date. Separate discussions also took place with representatives from other eNGOs.

7.4 Business-as-usual engagement

The FMP Team had many business-as-usual meetings with various stakeholders relevant to the development of the FMP such as National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, IFCA, NE, Fishing into the Future. Future of Inshore Fisheries. These discussions helped to strengthen stakeholder relationships and to provide the FMP team with other channels of communication to wider stakeholders.

7.5 FMP mailbox

During the development of the FMP, there was a dedicated mailbox set up for stakeholders to send in any queries around the FMP or give feedback on the content. This mailbox was monitored daily, and responses were aimed to be given within 10 working days. All comments regarding FMP content have been covered by other meetings and therefore no specific comments are highlighted here.

Communications overview

The MMO's FMP team and its supporting MMO communications officer developed and maintained core material relevant to this FMP. This material included lines to take and frequently asked questions to ensure consistent messaging went out to all stakeholders and evolved as the project progressed. Where appropriate, the MMO also utilised core material created and managed by the Defra FMP team for the wider FMP programme. These core documents supported the production of communications material used for the following:

- Fishing news
- Angling industry press.
- Monthly mail chimp sent out to interested stakeholders with updates on FMP progress and engagement events.
- Monthly IFCO/MO FMP update.
- Direct communications with groups such as Producer Organisations, Fisherman Associations, Blue Marine Foundation.
- Updates to pre-existing networks – Regional Fisheries Groups (RFGs), Finfish Industry Advisory Group (FIAG), Future of Inshore Fisheries (FOIF) etc.
- Newsletters (fishers bulletin (fortnightly), Defra stakeholders bulletin (monthly), Stakeholder bulletin (monthly)).

- Social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram to displaying key dates for consultation/engagement workshops etc.) And IFCA social media platforms can be used.
- Gov.uk Southern North Sea and English Channel Skates and Rays FMP landing site.

The MMO aimed to ensure that the information and updates were disseminated in a clear, accessible, and timely manner and that particular attention was paid to ensure that the language used was appropriate to the audience.

Annex 1: Stakeholder analysis scoring criteria

The scores will be given by the Fisheries Management Plan team during a workshop and checked by Principle Marine Officers for local expertise. Each stakeholder is given a score for the following:

Influence: (Stakeholders ability to influence the projects' ability to successfully deliver its objectives)

- 5) Ability to directly stop the FMP process e.g. FMP securing approval. Mostly this score used for government department stakeholders from whom we need sign off e.g. Defra, ALBs and DAs
- 4) Ability to significantly influence or steer the development of the FMP
- 3) Moderate ability to influence the FMP (positive or negative)
- 2) Minimal ability to influence the FMP
- 1) No influence

Impact: (Stakeholder may be impacted/ affected both negatively and positively by project outcomes)

- 5) Major impact as a consequence of FMP outcomes to stakeholder e.g. stopping incomes
- 4) Significantly impacted by the consequences of FMP outcomes
- 3) Moderately impacted by the consequences of FMP outcomes
- 2) Minimal impact from the consequences of FMP outcomes
- 1) No impact to stakeholder

Expertise: (May hold academic or practice-based expertise relevant to the project)

- 5) Up to date in depth knowledge relevant to the project
- 4) Good knowledge

- 3) Moderate knowledge
- 2) Minimal knowledge
- 1) No knowledge

Interest: (May have expressed an interest in the project/ potential outputs and whose interest we wish to encourage)

- 5) Significant interest in the FMP
- 4) Good interest in the FMP
- 3) Moderate interest in the FMP
- 2) Minimal interest for the FMP
- 1) No interest for the FMP

Note: The MMO have assumed that a lack of overt interest does not necessarily equate disinterest within the commercial fishing sector as research states this is instead more likely to be linked to disempowerment, so interest has been assumed as universally high when it comes to the commercial sectors

Target aspirations for the stakeholder groups

Collaborate: Primary and key stakeholder who will be directly affected both positively and negatively by the FMP outputs. The MMO will work collaboratively with the group, engaging with them regularly to update them on relevant policy, and providing guidance and support through regular meetings and digital contact. Regular and direct engagement will help build a partnership based on trust and collaboration. These stakeholders will be kept fully informed on the FMP programme and project specific details.

High level of influence and impact

Target for expertise = 4 or over

Target for influence = 4 or over

Target for Impact = 4 or over

Target for interest = 4 over

Consult: Secondary and some key stakeholders. This includes people or groups that are indirectly affected, either positively or negatively, by the FMPs output. This includes people who have a strong interest in the effort for academic, philosophical, or political reasons, even though they and their families, friends, and associates are not directly affected by it. The MMO will pursue 'semi' pro-active arrangements with them. They will also reach out to seek informal input with them when appropriate. Concerns will be considered, and feedback obtained on issues that affect stakeholders, these concerns can be fed back to the WGs.

Medium to high level of influence and impact

Target for knowledge = 3 or below

Target for influence = 3 or below

Target for impact = 3 or below

Target for interest = 3

Inform: Secondary stakeholder. This group includes people or groups who have shown some interest but will only be indirectly affected and hold no influence or obvious expertise. These stakeholders are privy to the most passive level of engagement.

Low level of influence and impact

Target for expertise = 2

Target for influence = 2

Target for impact = 2

Target for interest = 2

Annex 2: Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP and WG member lists

Table 2: Southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP working group member list.

Organisation	Role on Group
Marine Management Organisation	Chair/Secretariat
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Policy support
Association of AIFCAs	Representation of all IFCAs
Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority	Representation of KEIFCA
Sussex IFCA	Representation of Sussex IFCA
Devon and Severn IFCA	Representation of D&S IFCA
Cornwall IFCA	Representation of Cornwall IFCA
Southern IFCA	Representation of Southern IFCA

Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science	Representation on behalf of Cefas
Natural England	Representation of Natural England
NFFO	Working group member
UKAFPO	Working group member
Angling Trust	Working group member
Professional Boatman's Association.	Working group member
Shark Trust	Working group member
Marine Stewardship Council	Working group member
Blue Marine Foundation	Working group member
Shark Hub	Working group member
Anglo Scottish Fish Producers' Organisation	Working group member
East of England Fish Producers' Organisation	Working group member
Humberside Fish Producers' Organisation	Working group member
North Sea Fishermen's Organisation	Working group member
Hastings Fishermen's Protection Society	Working group member
Hornsea Fishermen's Association	Working group member
Holderness Fishing Industry Group	Working group member
West Mersea Fisherman's Association	Working group member
Boston Fishermen's Association	Working group member
Thanet Fishermen's Association	Working group member
Norfolk Fishermen's Society	Working group member
Southeast Fishermen's Protection Society	Working group member
Worthing Fisherman's Association	Working group member
Bognor Fisherman's Association	Working group member
Eastbourne CIC	Working group member
Weymouth Fishermen's Association	Working group member
Plymouth CIC	Working group member

Lyme Bay CIC	Working group member
Mevagissey Fishermen's Association	Working group member
Brixham Trawler Agents	Working group member
South Coast Fisherman's Council	Working group member
Southwestern Fish Producer Organisation	Working group member
Interfish Producer Organisation	Working group member
Western Fish Producer Organisation	Working group member
Waterdance	Working group member
Weyfish	Working group member
Chapman's of Rye	Working group member