



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Consultation on the proposed North Sea and Channel Sprat Fisheries Management Plan

October 2024

Version: public consultation



© Crown copyright 2024

This information is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/publications

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	4
The North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP	4
Using and sharing your information	5
Background: Fisheries Management Plans	5
Why are we publishing FMPs?	5
What are FMPs?	6
How FMPs work	6
Approach to the development of the FMPs	7
Summary of North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP	7
Evidence	8
Goals for the management of North Sea and Channel sprat fisheries	9
Implementation	12
Conclusion	12
Strategic Environmental Assessment	13
What is the Environmental Report and how was it developed?	13
Summary of North Sea and Channel sprat Environmental Report	13
Regulatory Impact Assessments	14
Scotland	15
England	15
How to respond to this consultation	15
Duration of the consultation	16
Responses	16
Enquiries	16

Introduction

The United Kingdom has some of the best wild seafood resources in the world. Our fish stocks are a public asset which generate food and create jobs, and recreational opportunities in a sector with a strong sense of identity and pride for their communities. These fish stocks also form a vital part of our marine ecosystems.

Many of our fish stocks are under a range of pressures such as fishing and climate change. Fishing can also have impacts on our marine environment, for example through accidental bycatch or the effect of fishing gears on the seabed. It is therefore important to consider both the positive and negative effects of fishing as part of overall management of our fisheries and the marine environment.

Defra's [Environmental Improvement Plan \(EIP\) 2023](#) sets out how we will improve our environment here in the UK and around the world and sets a plan for a decade of delivery with target-led actions towards leaving our environment in a better state than when we inherited it.

The [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\)](#), as required by the Fisheries Act 2020, sets out how the UK fisheries authorities (Defra, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland) will prepare and publish 43 Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) by 2028. The plans will bring together the evidence on the state of the stocks and identify measures and actions necessary to improve the evidence base and manage our fisheries in a sustainable way. Policies in an FMP will set out both the short-term actions and longer-term vision for the management of the fishery. The plans must also consider relevant wider legal obligations including, in England, the environmental principles under the [Environment Act 2021](#) and the need for strategic environmental assessment under the [Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004](#).

There are opportunities for growth through a profitable and more sustainable fishing and seafood industry. We are keen to continue to work closely with commercial and recreational fishing interests and other stakeholders as we develop our plans for managing fisheries in the UK.

The complete list of FMPs that are being prepared by each of the fisheries authorities is set out in the JFS.

The North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP

The proposed North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP is a jointly managed plan between Defra and Scottish Government. It covers English and Scottish waters.

This consultation is seeking your views on:

- The draft North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP; and

- The draft North Sea and Channel Sprat Environmental Report which describes the likely environmental impacts of the FMP, as required under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004.

A de minimis regulatory impact assessment has also been developed, which describes the anticipated economic impact of the plan on the fishing sector and associated businesses. We would welcome additional economic evidence to update our assessment.

This consultation is particularly relevant to:

- Individuals, groups, or businesses who are engaged in the fishing, seafood, or aquaculture sectors, including individuals, groups or businesses from the UK or from outside the UK who fish in UK waters;
- Other individuals, groups or businesses who are sea users, for example, marine industries such as offshore renewables and sailing bodies; and
- National and local interest groups such as environmental and recreational non-governmental organisations, and industry federations.

Using and sharing your information

How we use your personal data is set out in the Sprat FMP consultation privacy notice which can be found in the related documents section on the consultation page.

This consultation is being conducted in line with the Cabinet Office 'Consultation Principles' and can be found at: [Consultation principles: guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultation-principles)

If you have any comments or complaints about the consultation process, please send them to consultation.coordinator@defra.gov.uk

Background: Fisheries Management Plans

Why are we publishing FMPs?

The Fisheries Act 2020 (the Act) sets out the legal framework to manage fisheries in the UK, including the provision to prepare and publish FMPs. FMPs will protect and recover stocks, support a sustainable fishing industry and safeguard the environment. The JFS lists 43 proposed FMPs tailored to specific stocks and locations, aiming to reform and redefine domestic fisheries management.

What are FMPs?

FMPs are evidence-based action plans designed to achieve sustainable fisheries. Each FMP outlines short-term actions and long-term visions, aiming to restore or maintain fish stocks at sustainable levels. These plans apply to both commercial and recreational fishing, addressing broader environmental, economic and social concerns. Where appropriate, FMPs may identify actions to address wider issues identified during their development such as environmental or social and economic considerations.

How FMPs work

The management of fisheries is a devolved competency, currently managed through regulation, byelaws, licence conditions and voluntary measures. FMPs may lead to changes to these legal instruments and voluntary agreements.

National Fisheries Authorities (in this case Defra, Scottish Government and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO)) are legally required to act in accordance with the policies set out in the plan and will work with the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), Natural England, NatureScot and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) on implementation.

FMPs identify a range of short and longer-term actions. Plans will be adaptive and develop over time as further evidence is gathered and measures are implemented. Whilst each FMP will focus on specific stock(s), it will also be important to ensure they work together and recognise the needs of fishermen, and stakeholders who are affected by more than one FMP.

Each FMP must be reviewed within six years of its publication or sooner, if required. An FMP can also be replaced or amended at any time following a consultation allowing the plan to be kept up to date.

FMP actions will need to be implemented iteratively over their lifetime to have an impact on how fisheries are managed. It may therefore take some time to show benefits in terms of improving the sustainability of stocks and fisheries.

FMPs and other Coastal States

The UK, whilst having regulatory autonomy over its fisheries, is committed to working with other Coastal States to ensure sustainable management of shared fisheries resources – and to continuing to build our strong and positive working relationships. Through annual consultations with the EU and other Coastal States, as well as negotiations in multilateral and bilateral forums, the UK aims to achieve, or contribute to the achievement of the objectives in the Act.

FMPs provide a long-term framework for managing fishing activity, ensuring stock sustainability and a healthy marine environment. These plans will help inform the UK's approach to multi-year strategies for conservation and management of stocks proposed by the UK and EU under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

Regulatory measures to implement FMPs will apply to all vessels fishing in UK waters. The UK will notify the EU of any changes affecting EU vessels.

Approach to the development of the FMPs

Developed in a collaborative and transparent way, our aim is to ensure that FMPs are relevant to the fishery or fisheries and support a more practical and flexible approach to fisheries management tailored to species, locations, and fishing activities.

The FMPs are being developed in different ways, allowing us to try new approaches and test how best to develop the plans and engage with stakeholders. Delivery partners worked closely with industry groups and other stakeholders, and we will continue to build on this participatory approach and apply it to FMP development and through to implementation stages.

We have learned valuable lessons from the consultation process on the first set of FMPs in 2023. In response to stakeholder feedback, we have adopted a slightly different approach for the next set of plans, aiming to strike a better balance between the volume of consultation documentation (while also recognising the guidelines for public consultations and our statutory requirements) and ensuring stakeholders have sufficient information to engage meaningfully with the consultation process.

We have reduced the overall volume of material and incorporated evidence directly supporting the proposed goals or measures into each plan. Based on feedback, we have also reduced the number of consultation questions. Further background will be published alongside the final FMPs as supporting documentation.

Summary of North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP

The sprat FMP is a jointly managed plan between Defra and the Scottish Government which has been developed by Cefas with input from Defra, Scottish Government, Natural England, JNCC, IFCAs, the MMO and fishing industry and eNGO stakeholders. It outlines proposals to maintain the sustainable management of sprat fisheries in the North Sea and English Channel waters for the long-term. The FMP also identifies evidence gaps and considers research for North Sea and English Channel sprat to enhance current management and ensure that sustainability is maintained.

The FMP describes an overview of the current fisheries for sprat in the North Sea and Channel as well as providing information on available stock assessments, maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and stock biology.

Sprat fisheries within UK waters are currently being fished sustainably within MSY limits. Therefore, the vision for the FMP is that sprat fisheries in the UK waters of the North Sea and Channel will continue to be managed sustainably, ensuring that stocks are maintained above levels capable of producing MSY.

The goals set out in the FMP suggest how this can be achieved. This includes ongoing, adaptive management, in conjunction with delivery partners and wider stakeholders, which:

- **Takes account of sprat fisheries in the wider ecosystem.** The Act objectives, alongside the JFS, detail the UK's obligations in a domestic and international context for the conservation and sustainable use of the marine environment, including the need to apply an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. Sprat is an important prey species within the ecosystem and therefore needs to be considered within this important biological context. The FMP therefore considers actions to better understand the role of sprat within the marine ecosystem and develop appropriate management approaches as a result.
- **Seeks to improve the science underpinning management.** Whilst both sprat stocks are supported by evidence that enables assessment consistent with an MSY approach, the Channel stock is assessed by ICES as data limited. Additionally, evidence gaps have been identified through stakeholder engagement regarding the effectiveness of existing technical measures. The FMP considers actions to improve the evidence base to ensure that stocks continue to be maintained above biomass levels consistent with an MSY approach.
- **Supports sustainable fishing.** UK vessel activity in fisheries for sprat in UK waters has significantly declined in recent years in both the North Sea and Channel. This is understood to be due to a combination of factors including technical measure restrictions, market availability and processing capacity. Most vessels now catching sprat in UK waters are from the EU. During early engagement for the FMP, industry stakeholders raised their concerns about the decline of the UK fishery for sprat, which has historically been important to coastal communities, and remains an important fishery enabling diversification for inshore vessels. The FMP therefore considers actions to better understand the socioeconomic context of the fishery in the UK.

1. **Do you have any comments on the engagement process for developing this draft FMP? See FMP engagement report for details.**

Evidence

The FMP covers two separate sprat stocks in:

- The North Sea, Skagerrak and Kattegat (spr.27.3a4)
- The English Channel (spr.27.7de)

Whilst the Channel stock is categorised by ICES as 'category 3', data limited, the available scientific evidence for both sprat stocks covered by this FMP is considered sufficient to enable assessment of the stocks and provide advice in relation to an MSY approach.

The stocks are managed by Total Allowable Catches (TACs) which determine fishing opportunities. North Sea and English Channel sprat are shared with other coastal states and the TACs are negotiated in international forums with the relevant coastal states (UK-EU-Norway for North Sea sprat, UK-EU for English Channel sprat). Through international fisheries negotiations the UK seeks to agree outcomes which reflect the objectives of the Act relating to sustainable TAC setting and the principles of the JFS.

Sprat are a small pelagic species which is prey for many larger predators including demersal fish, seabirds and marine mammals. They have a relatively short life of less than five years, and spawning occurs over an annual period offshore in open waters.

Sprat is mostly fished using pelagic gear, but also may be caught using fixed and drift nets. The landing obligation applies to sprat fisheries, and there are existing technical measures for managing sprat. In a national context these are retained from EU law, and local measures are managed by the IFCAs. There is currently no sprat-specific monitoring.

Three areas have been identified for environmental consideration in relation to sprat fisheries in evidence provided by Natural England, JNCC and Nature Scot. Namely, risks to the designated features of marine protected areas (MPAs), UK marine strategy descriptors, and Scottish Priority Marine Features (PMFs) in Scottish waters. These have been assessed as part of the development of the FMP and underpin the suggested goals. Climate change also has the potential to affect sprat fisheries. Appropriate considerations are given to this in the FMP, and actions are proposed accordingly.

2. Do you have any comments on the evidence used in the draft FMP?

Goals for the management of North Sea and Channel sprat fisheries

To ensure effective management of sprat fisheries in the North Sea and Channel within English and Scottish waters, the FMP identifies five goals focused on domestic management priorities. These goals are subject to the consideration of the consultation and will be prioritised appropriately to ensure realistic and measurable outputs.

For each goal the plan sets out:

- a rationale;
- short-term actions (one to two years);

- medium-long term actions (two years and onwards)

The five goals of the FMP are to:

1. Harvest sprat stocks sustainably, with biomasses maintained above the level capable of producing MSY.
 - a. Actions on how to maintain this:**
 - i. Continue to determine fishing opportunities informed by the best available scientific advice.
 - ii. Continue to work with Coastal State partners with the aim of maintaining the sustainable harvesting of the stock through international negotiations.
 - iii. Should MSY based advice not be available, determine fishing opportunities in accordance with a precautionary approach guided by the best available scientific advice.
2. Identify and address evidence gaps required for improved stock assessments.
 - a. Short term actions for how this could be achieved:**
 - i. Consider establishing which factors within current sprat stock assessments have the greatest influence on assessment outcomes and identify those factors with the greatest uncertainty.
 - b. Medium-long term actions for how this could be achieved:**
 - i. Consider development of a research plan to fill evidence/data gaps required for improved stock assessments, including improved understanding of stock structure and boundaries of sprat populations in English and Scottish waters, for example the potential linkages between stocks in and outside scope of this FMP.
 - ii. Consider exploration of options to move away from single-species models, including extending and where necessary developing multispecies/ecosystem models to incorporate sprat and sprat fisheries.
3. Identify ecosystem-based fisheries management approaches appropriate to sprat fisheries.
 - a. Short term actions for how this could be achieved:**
 - i. Consider bringing together existing information into a report on the ecosystem role of sprat.
 - ii. Support participation in fishery-science partnership schemes to address evidence and knowledge gaps utilising the experience held within the fisheries.
 - b. Medium-long term actions for how this could be achieved:**
 - i. Consider how to undertake additional targeted evidence collection (including self-reporting and the potential for remote electronic monitoring - REM programmes) to improve estimates of bycatch of marine mammals, seabirds and designated fish for gear types used to target sprat.

- ii. Consider research into how an ecosystem-based approach could be incorporated into future iterations of the North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP and where these might align with comparable approaches for other species.
 - iii. Consider development of policy aiming to minimise or eliminate any impact of the fishery in relation to the designated features of MPAs and wider seas to progress contribution towards achieving GES in the North Sea and English Channel, compatible with targets set by the UKMS.
- 4. Deliver a framework to support the role of the FMP in realising sustainable marine economies.

a. Short term actions for how this could be achieved:

- i. Consider if an economic assessment of the fisheries may help to identify any barriers to the realisation of economic viability to the coastal communities within the FMP area.
- ii. Consider a review of current technical measures affecting sprat fisheries, to include a consideration of the impact of potential modifications to these measures both for sprat and other species.

b. Medium-long term actions for how this could be achieved:

- i. Consider how to adapt the FMP to reflect relevant findings from an economic assessment and when new or improved measures are developed as appropriate.

- 5. Develop strategies to adapt to the impact of climate change on sprat fisheries.

a. Short term actions for how this could be achieved:

- i. Ensure that sprat is considered within wider research to identify the likely impacts of climate change on fisheries, their links within the wider ecosystem.
- ii. Consider how best to maintain collaboration and involvement across government, industry, and academic sectors in initiatives to reduce environmental impacts of sprat fisheries (including CO2 emissions).

b. Medium-long term actions for how this could be achieved:

- i. Consider identifying the impacts that sprat fisheries have on the marine environment (including CO2 emissions) through collaborative studies.
- ii. Consider how ecosystem-based fisheries management approaches can be used for managing sprat fishing that are robust to the effects of climate variability.

3. Do you have any comments on the goals in the draft FMP?

4. Do you have any comments on the possible actions in the draft FMP?

Implementation

Once formally published, the plan will need to be implemented. This will be an iterative process and Defra and Scottish Government will be working closely with the commercial and recreational fishing sector and wider stakeholders to develop implementation plans. Publishing the FMP is the start of a multi-year cycle, and we will ensure that the plans strike the balance between building momentum for short-term actions and setting direction for the longer term. This can be further iterated as the evidence base is improved. The plans must be reviewed at least every six years.

Cross regulator, government and industry groups have been central to the development of the draft FMPs. Stakeholder involvement and ongoing collaboration underpins successful delivery of the FMPs and will continue beyond their publication.

Conclusion

In summary, the North Sea and Channel sprat FMP describes existing management measures and the available science and evidence to assess the status of sprat stocks covered by this FMP in English and Scottish waters. This FMP will ensure that the stocks continue to be sustainably managed above biomass levels consistent with an MSY approach.

5. Do you have any additional comments on the draft FMP?

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Defra and Scottish Government are legally required to consider the environmental impact of policies, plans and programmes. The Environment Act 2021 sets out environmental principles to guide policy making. The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA Regulations 2004) require any qualifying public plans, programmes, and strategies to undergo Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) during their preparation and prior to publication if they are likely to have a significant effect on a European marine site (either positively or negatively). FMPs are plans or programmes for the purposes of the SEA Regulations 2004. Defra and Scottish Government have determined that the draft sprat FMP may have a likely significant effect (either positive or negative) on a European site or a European offshore marine site and, therefore, have completed a SEA.

What is the Environmental Report and how was it developed?

The SEA considers the likely significant environmental effects of implementing the policies and actions set out in the draft North Sea and Channel sprat FMP. The ER sets out the findings of this process. The report describes the current state of the environment (the baseline) and the likely significant effects of proposals in the draft FMP to the baseline. The assessment identifies where the draft FMP could make a positive impact on the baseline and hence our marine environment. Where the FMP may have negative effects on the baseline, the report suggests actions to mitigate and/or monitor these effects. Defra and Scottish Government developed the ER for the draft FMP. The scope and level of detail was informed through an early consultation with our statutory Consultation Bodies: Natural England, NatureScot, Environment Agency, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland, together with further advice from the JNCC, as an advisor to the UK Government and devolved administrations on UK-wide nature conservation. We drew on published information on the state of the environment and the potential impact of fishing on environmental features.

Summary of North Sea and Channel sprat Environmental Report

The North Sea and Channel sprat ER has been produced in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. The following issues (from Schedule 2 paragraph 6 of the SEA Regulations 2004) were scoped into the assessment: biodiversity, fauna, flora, geology, and sediments (soil), water, climatic factors, cultural heritage, landscape, and seascape. This report assesses the likely significant effects of the draft FMP on these issues.

The assessment was conducted against a baseline that primarily used existing evidence on the state of the marine environment set out in the updated [UK Marine Strategy Part 1](#) published in 2019. Additional sources of evidence were used to establish the current status of the environment in relation to issues, such as climatic factors, not covered by the UK Marine Strategy (UK MS). The historical impact of fishing activity on the marine environment has been considered part of the baseline. The assessment has been undertaken using the best available evidence to reach a suitable judgement on the environmental effects of the draft FMP.

Existing environmental effects of sprat fishing in the North Sea and Channel on those issues scoped into this assessment, in relation to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), the UK MS descriptors, Priority Marine Features (Scotland only) and the wider environment, have been acknowledged and considered in this report. The potential positive and negative environmental effects of the draft FMP's policies and proposed measures alone and in combination have also been assessed.

The SEA concluded that current evidence shows the North Sea and Channel sprat fisheries have an impact on the marine environment primarily through bycatch of unwanted/protected species and prey reduction. The contribution of fishing-related litter was also identified as a potential impact associated with sprat fishing. The contribution of sprat fishing to climate change related issues and cultural heritage was also identified as a potential impact.

The draft North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP has considered these impacts and sets out proposals to monitor and where required introduce mitigation to address these impacts.

The assessment of likely negative effects identified a low risk of significant adverse effects on the environment from implementing individual policies, measures and actions. The policies, measures and actions, will, where appropriate, be developed to avoid any potential negative effects of fishing activity identified by the assessment progress. The environmental effects of implementing the draft North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP policies and measures will also be monitored to identify unforeseen adverse effects at an early stage, so appropriate remedial action can be undertaken.

6. Do you have any comments on the assessment of the environmental effects of the draft FMP, as set out in the environmental report?

Regulatory Impact Assessments

The North Sea and Channel sprat FMP is a joint plan between Defra and the Scottish Government. The implementation of specific measures will be taken forward by respective national fisheries authorities as appropriate. Any assessment of impacts for specific measures will also be completed by the relevant national fisheries authority, in line with each authority's individual assessment processes.

Whilst the FMP identifies actions that could be introduced post-consultation, these proposals will be developed further and do not currently have sufficient detail for any economic analysis to be done. These could be regulatory or deregulatory, and positive or negative to business, hence it is not possible to estimate impacts.

Scotland

Scottish Government use Business and Regulatory Impact Assessments (BRIA) to assess the impact primary or secondary legislation and policy changes may have on the public, private or third sector.

A full BRIA is not required at this stage for the because the plan does not introduce new legislation, voluntary regulation, codes of practice, guidance or policy changes. If any of the above are implemented in the future as a result of the FMP, a full BRIA will be completed on specific interventions.

England

We recognise our commitment to balance the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable fisheries and have considered the Better Regulation Framework guidance and the better regulation principles of robust evidence, transparency and proportionality when preparing FMPs. Defra is completing regulatory impact assessments to assess the economic impacts of FMPs on businesses and the fishing sector.

For the purposes of the draft North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP consultation, we have drafted a de-minimis assessment (DMA) that outlines our rationale and approach to assessing the potential impact of the plan on businesses and the fishing sector. This DMA is a supporting document to the present consultation.

How to respond to this consultation

The consultation will run primarily via the Citizen Space online portal. However, we will accept email and hard copy responses for those unable to access the online survey.

The consultation questions are in bold throughout this document and in the online survey.

Large print and braille versions of this document are available on request.

The consultation survey has three parts:

1. Personal details and confidentiality (required)
2. Questions on the North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP, Environmental Report and stakeholder engagement report.

3. Consultee feedback on the online survey (required)

You only need to respond to the questions that you wish to. However, all respondents must complete the required 'Consultee feedback on the online survey' and 'personal details and confidentiality' sections before you are able submit your response to the online survey.

Duration of the consultation

This consultation will run for 14 weeks, closing at 23:59 on 19 January 2025. Responses must be received by 23:59 on 19 January 2025.

Responses

Responses can be:

- Submitted via the [Citizen Space online portal](#).
- Sent via email to: FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk. If responding via email, please structure your response around the questions in bold throughout this document.
- Sent via post to:

Consultation – North Sea and Channel Sprat FMP
FMP team – Marine and Fisheries
Seacole Building, 2 Marsham St
London
SW1P 4DF

At the end of the consultation period, we will summarise the responses and place the summary on the UK Government's website.

Enquiries

If you want to submit a consultation response, please contact:

FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk

If you have any general enquiries, please contact: FMPs@defra.gov.uk

The JFS can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-fisheries-statement-jfs>

The Act can be found here: [Fisheries Act 2020 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)