



### **Agenda item B3**

By: Principal Scientific and Conservation Officer

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 19 May 2026

Subject: TECFO stock surveys

Classification **Unrestricted**

#### **Summary:**

This report provides a summary of the spring 2026 cockle stock assessment surveys

#### **Recommendations –**

For **NOTING** and **COMMENT** only

## **1. Introduction**

Following the review of cockle management within the District, 2026 will be the second year of management under TECFO 2024 and the first year where the normal timing of events is planned to take place.

## **2. Spring 2025 Cockle Stock Surveys**

Stock surveys on the main harvesting areas of the Maplin and Foulness sands commenced on 3 April 2026 over the low ebb spring tides which gave best access to the drying sands that extend out to three miles offshore in some sections (a chart showing the cockle management areas is attached at Appendix A). These surveys took four days to complete, covering a total area of 69.8 km<sup>2</sup> (22.3 miles<sup>2</sup>) and a total of 501 quadrat samples were taken.

The sandflats were accessed from land using two Honda All-Terrain Vehicles for transportation and cockles were dug out from a 0.1 m<sup>2</sup> quadrat at each sample point, counted, weighed and the age determined (the method is described in more detail in the annual cockle report). The surveys were undertaken by the Authority's officers in teams of four. It is necessary to complete surveys during periods of spring tides when the ebb tide leaves the sands dry and these tide times result in the surveys being carried out around sunrise.

The boat-based surveys were undertaken from FPV Tamesis during high tides to reach subtidal samples, and samples were processed in a similar fashion to complete the surveys.

Analysis of the survey results show that there remains a stable number of cockles on the Maplin and Foulness Sands (Figure 1). The total number of cockles has notably increased compared to last year and is at its highest since 2019, however, the majority of this increase is made up of 2025-spat and the 1-year age class cohorts as shown by Figure 3. This pattern was replicated around all other surveyed beds in the TECFO (and permit fishery management areas) this spring. Overall, the majority of the total stock was made up of last year's surviving spat.

A second spatfall event and the exceptionally high over-winter survival rates of the 2025-spat class combined to result in record breaking spring spat-levels on the Maplin Sands (see Figure 2, note the increase in spat between autumn '25 and spring '26).

The adult stock (1 – 3 year classes) in 2026 is slightly lower than in 2025, and similar to that recorded in 2024. However, it is generally comprised of a younger age class by comparison. The adult stock fished in recent years, has significantly reduced (Figure 3) and very few adult cockles 3 years or older were recorded and there remains only a small 2 – 3 year class cohort from this previously fished adult stock. Therefore, the adult population that will be supporting the 2026 TECFO fishery will largely be based on the maturing 1 – 2 year classes (Figure 4). Consequently, we may expect younger, smaller cockles from the fishery in 2026 than recent previous years given the reliance on the young adult cohort. This pattern in the adult cockle demographics was persistent throughout all cockle beds surveyed in the TECFO areas, and indeed also in the permit fishery areas.

Winter survival was very good this year, possibly as a result of milder winter temperatures and fewer storms impacting the east coast. This can be seen especially in Figure 2 in relation to spat, where the drop in spat numbers between the 2024 autumn survey and the 2025 spring survey is smaller than the drops evident over the past ten years.

The graphs below show the latest stock situation on the main Maplin Sands beds in areas 4,5 and 6.

Fig. 1: Abundance of cockles from 2004 to 2026 in the main cockle harvesting areas of the Maplin and Foulness sands.

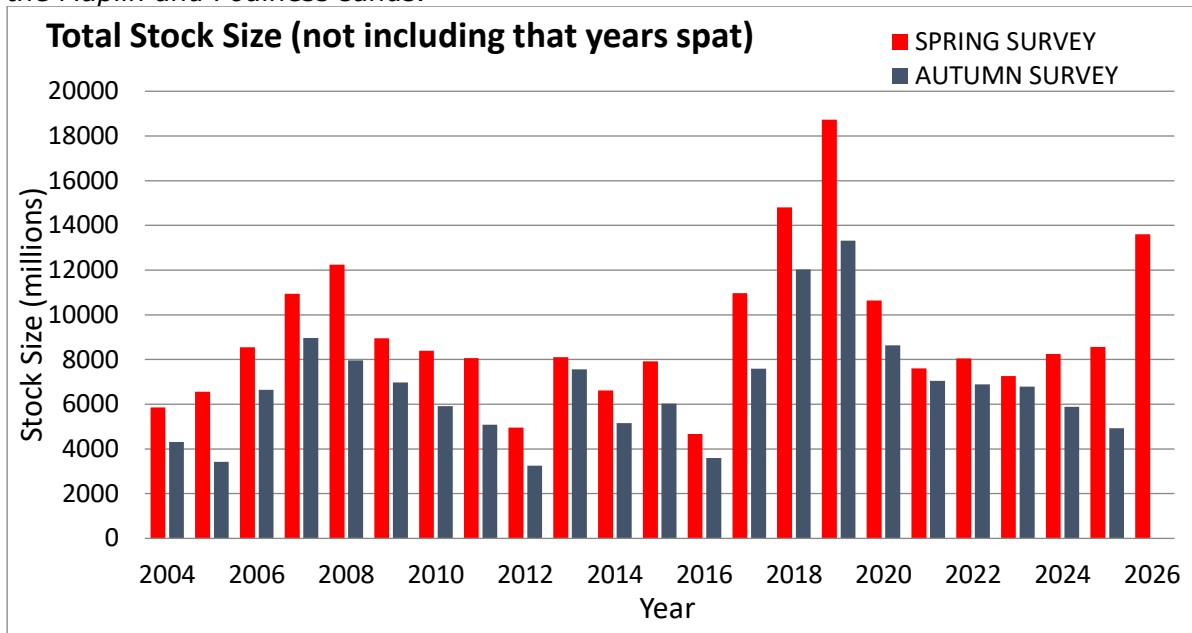


Fig. 2: Abundance of spat before and after the first winter for 2004 to 2026 year classes in the main cockle harvesting areas of the Maplin and Foulness sands

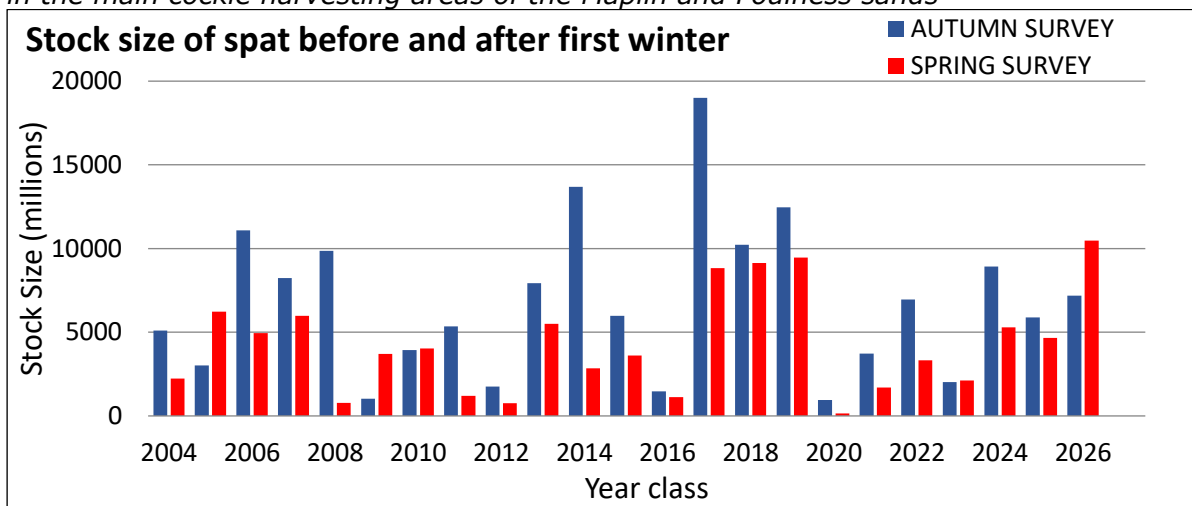
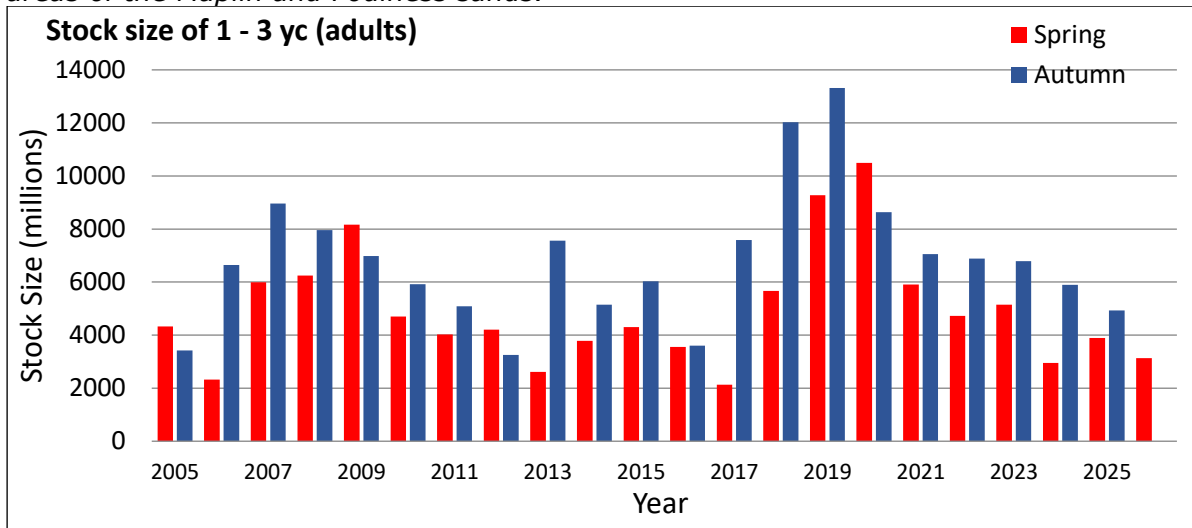


Fig. 3: Abundance of adult cockles from 2005 to 2026 in the main cockle harvesting areas of the Maplin and Foulness sands.



### Size ranges of the cockles

All 2025 spat is currently below 14mm. The vast majority of 1- 2 year class adult cockles are still below 14mm at this stage, but it is hoped that some of this stock would grow into the 16mm class before the fishery opens. The majorities of the 2 – 3 and 3+ year class cohorts are above 16mm, however, there is an insufficient biomass in the older groups to base fishery decisions on these year groups alone.

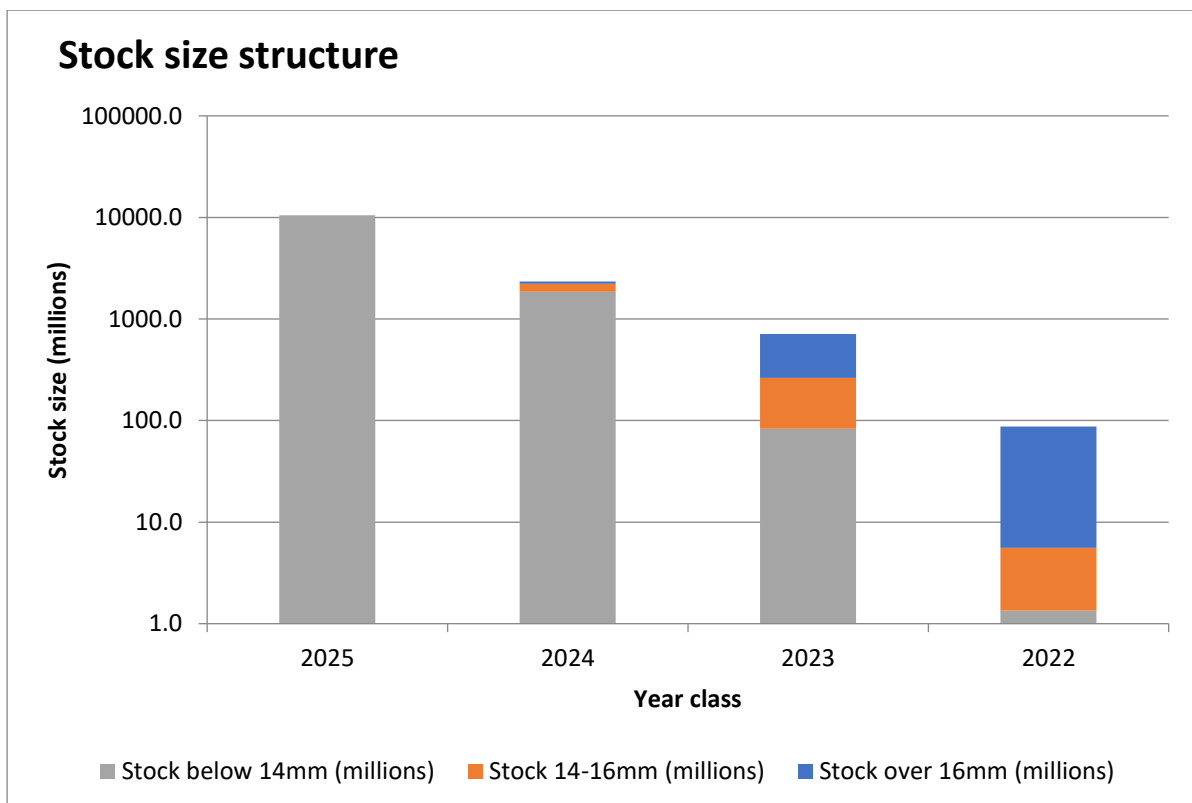


Figure 1. Size structure of stocks in main TECFO cockle beds 2026 (Area 4, 5, and 6). The numbers reflect the stock size in millions.

## **Other management areas**

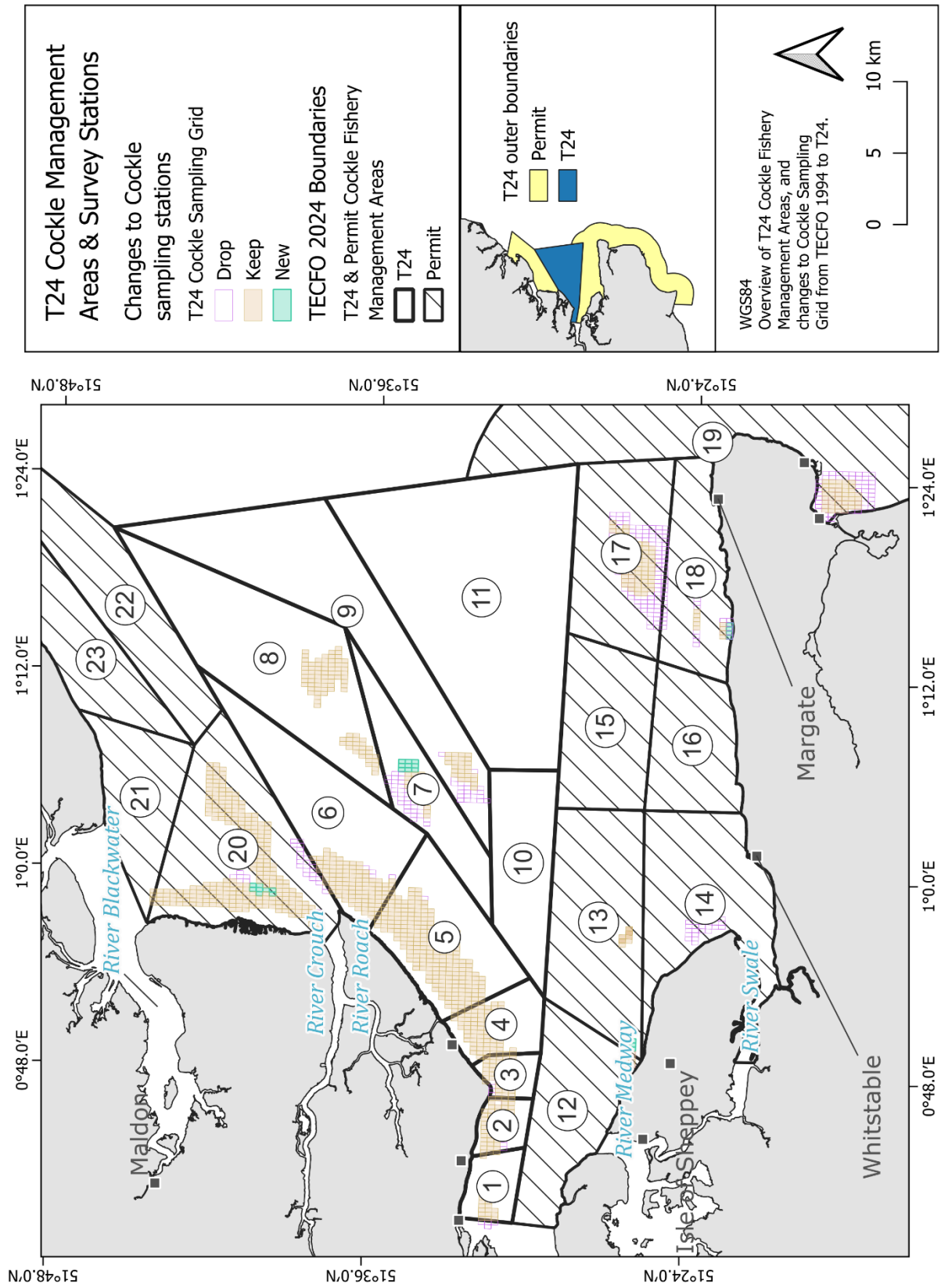
Surveys of additional cockle grounds beyond the major harvesting areas have also been completed. Areas 7, 8 and 9 have proven to be very productive in recent years, however, only the East Barrows out of the four key beds in these three areas had sufficient adult stock to be incorporated in setting this year's Total Allowable Catch (TAC).

The TAC discussed in Agenda item B4 is based upon the stock of adult cockles as well as the expected growth based upon the long-term average.

### **Recommendations –**

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# Appendix A



Map showing the cockle production areas within the Kent and Essex IFCA District