

Agenda Item No. B4

By: Cockle Officer

To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 14 September 2026

Subject: 2026 TECFO Cockle Fishery Management

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the 2026 TECFO cockle fishery.

Recommendations:

1. Members **RATIFY** the decision of the Chief Fishery Officer to decrease the TAC from 4,950 tonnes to 4,620 tonnes; and
2. Members **NOTE** the report

LOW DENSITY AREA MANAGEMENT TRIPS

General overview

The low-density area management fishing trips commenced at 1800hrs on Sunday the 21st of June and ran for two weeks (21 June – 3 July). The overall aim was to provide good coverage across the site spanning across Area 5 and 6 (Fig 1). To achieve this the site was split into 15 with licence holders working a specific box in the first week, with some vessels moving across the area as a whole in the second week. During these trips all vessels were permitted to turn the ground over for a total of four hours (two hours either side of high tide). All standard TECFO conditions were followed during these trips and any sizeable cockles caught were permitted to be landed. These trips were not classified as part of the main fishery and all other TECFO areas outside of the designated box were closed.

All TECFO licenced vessels took part in these trips. Landings consisted of between one and four tonnes per trip, including dead shell and other shellfish as part of clearing the ground.

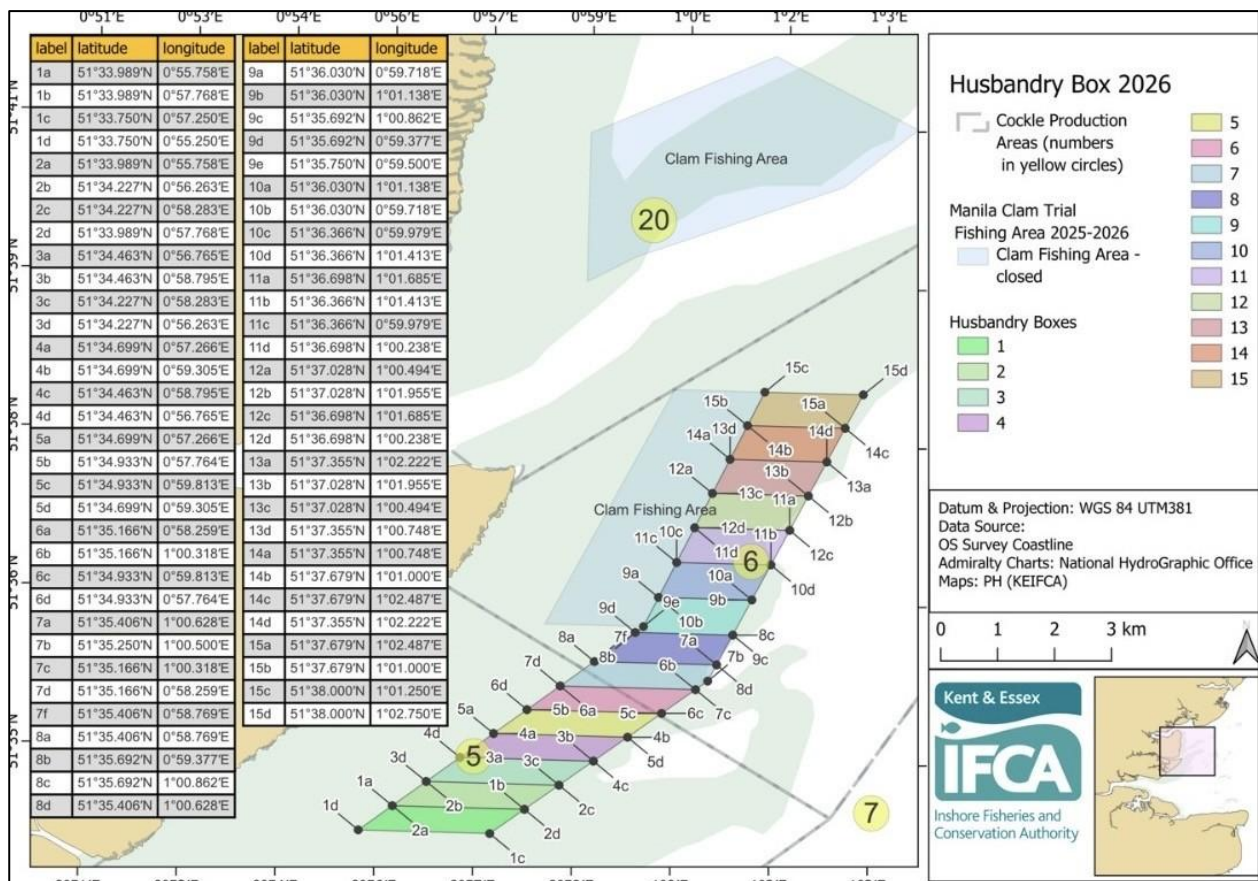


Figure 1. Chart of low density area management site divided into fifteen.

THAMES ESTUARY COCKLE FISHERY ORDER 2026

General overview

The TECFO hydraulic dredge cockle fishery was opened by the Authority at 1800hrs on 5 July 2026 following the two weeks of area management in June. All vessels have been fitted with REM gear sensors as well as cameras monitoring all fishing activity.

Catch rates during the season have varied between beds but overall have been good to very good with yields averaging between 13-22%. The Maplin Sands has reportedly produced a lower yield in comparison to other beds, but all TECFO Areas have improved in comparison to last year and 2024. Vessels have harvested the maximum of 13.6m³ or approximately 11 tonnes per trip fairly consistently, with some late August landings seeing vessels landing less than this. The catch rate on the main beds (Areas 1-6) has started decreasing as the fishery has progressed with vessels taking between one to two hours to fill one bag. Whilst some vessels are struggling to or choosing to no longer harvest cockles on the Maplin Sands, the majority of vessels are harvesting a minimum of three bags per trip. Catch rates are reportedly far better on the East Barrow, West Barrow and Knob with bags being filled within five to fifteen minutes.

The weather this year has added additional pressures to the fishery. There were reports of growth from industry across all beds at the start of the fishery, however, the high temperatures experienced resulted in elevated sea temperatures which have persisted. Reports of gaping cockles on the main beds were reported to Kent and

Essex IFCA in mid-July from both industry and partner agencies following the increase in sea temperature. These reports also highlighted concern for future years as stakeholders were no longer seeing signs of the significant number of spat seen in the Spring survey results. Additional surveys were completed in conjunction with CEFAS and Essex University following these reports. Management measures were discussed using this data in industry meetings and adjusted accordingly. Since the last licence holders meeting, reports of gaping cockles on the East Barrows have been received. The gradual reduction in sea temperatures have encouraged a spat fall with industry sharing this positive news with officers.

September surveys and outlook

The September cockle survey is scheduled to take place over the second weekend in September (11 – 13 September). Members will be given a verbal update at the meeting on the provisional findings.

Total allowable Catch for the 2026 TECFO

It was agreed at the May Authority meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 4,950 tonnes would be allocated and that any increases or changes would be subject to survey results and discussions with licence holders regarding available stock and growth during the season.

The original management sent out in the first Management Letter to licence holders allowed for flexibility with restrictions only in place for Area 8 (Table 1). It was relayed to officers, once the fishery opened, that stakeholders had decided to split their efforts across the main beds and other open areas.

Table 1. Specified landings per specified fishing period for the TECFO fishery as laid out in Management Letter 1 to all licence holders on 15 June 2026.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
21 June – 3 July	2 weeks	1 landing per week from Areas 5 and 6 in accordance with the low-density trips requirement below. All other areas will remain closed
5 July – 24 July	3 weeks	2 landings per week. Area 8 closed
26 July – 21 August	4 weeks	2 landings per week. No more than one trip from Area 8
23 August – 4 September	2 weeks	3 landings per week. No more than one trip from Area 8
6 September – 2 October	4 weeks	2 landings per week. Area 8 closed

As previously mentioned, the impact that increased temperatures (air and water) have had on the stock resulted in an alteration in management (Table 2). This has included a reduction in the total TAC from the fishery, which now sits at 4,620 tonnes.

There were also concerns over the fishing pressure on Area 7 from industry which officers reflected in the number of landings per week. Further management measures for the last half of September have remained flexible as we await the survey results to make a more informed decision.

Table 2. Updated specified landings per specified fishing period for the TECFO fishery as laid out in Management Letter 5 to all licence holders on 14 August 2026.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
16 Aug - 28 Aug	2 weeks	2 landings per week. No less than 3 bags to be taken from Areas 1-6 per trip, and no more than 9 bags to be taken from other beds per trip (Area 7 closed)
30 Aug - 11 Sept	2 weeks	2 landings per week. One trip to be no less than 3 bags from Areas 1-6 and no more than 9 bags from Area 8, and a second trip to be no less than 3 bags from Areas 1-6, and no more than 9 bags from Area 7. No more than 9 bags per week to be taken from either Area 7 or Area 8. (Further detail on closure below)
13 Sept – 2 Oct	3 weeks	2 landings per week

Effort across the season has been focussed on the East and West Barrows. On the primary Maplin Sands beds, effort has been concentrated onto Area 5, however, all areas between 1-6 have been harvested for cockles a few times. Area 8 has been harvested the most frequently, with vessels also harvesting stock on Area 7 and 9. Area 11 has been visited once, and Area 10 has not been fished as of yet.

A selection of vessels within the TECFO fleet organised a prospecting trip in the last week of July with the hope of finding additional cockle beds to relieve pressures on the main beds following the die off. No additional beds were found.

Officers will continue to work with the industry through the remainder of the season, with a view to balancing this year's fishery with the need to conserve stocks heading into the winter to try and ensure a sustainable fishery in the medium term. Increasing water and air temperatures are a major concern for both officers and the industry, and it is expected that some changes to how we manage the fishery will need to be made if very high summer temperatures become the norm. The PhD being undertaken in conjunction with Essex University started field work with officers this summer and will be a key component of understanding water temperature change impacts on shellfish fisheries, including the cockles, within the District.

Recommendations:

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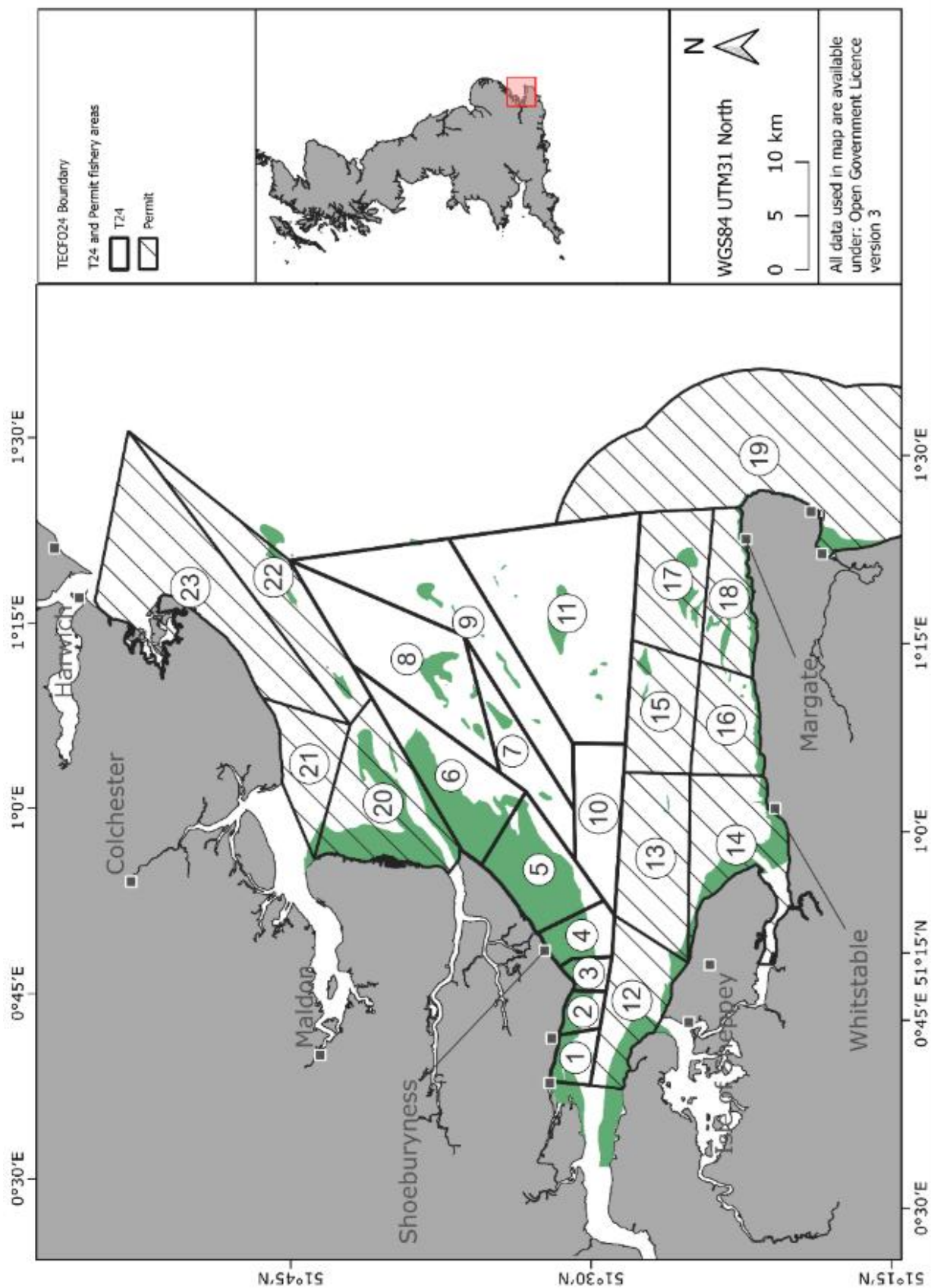


Figure 2. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery (No. 2) Order 2024 (TECFO) area boundaries (Areas 1 – 11) and the Permitted Cockle Permit Fishery boundaries (Areas 12 – 23) as of 2025.