

Agenda Item No. B4

By: Principal Compliance and Enforcement Officer & Chief IFCO
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 27 January 2026
Subject: **Fisheries Management Plan update**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper provides Members with an update of DEFRA's Fisheries Management Plan programme, specifically the report reviewing on Bass Authorisations and changes to the Lobster Minimum Conservation Reference Size.

Recommendations:

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report

Update on Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs)

The new FMP framework represents a strategic shift from the previous EU-style system, which was often reactive and stock-specific. FMPs adopt a long-term holistic approach, considering ecosystem effects and the social and economic needs of fishing communities. Decisions are grounded in scientific evidence, but a precautionary approach is applied if there are evidence gaps to safeguard sustainability. The process emphasises transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement, providing authorities and partners opportunities to comment on and contribute to management measures. Within this framework, KEIFCA play a key role in FMPs development, particularly for those FMPs which are concerned with local keystone species. Through participation on FMP working groups, KEIFCA officers have been able to contribute local knowledge, management experience, and operational expertise help inform discussions that shape management decisions.

New FMPs published

With the publication of the 'Cockle FMP', the 'Skates and Rays FMP' and the 'Southern North Sea non-quota demersal species FMP' on the 16 December

2025, the FMP framework is taking shape and now covers all the major fisheries in the KEIFCA district. Whilst it will take time to start to implement these new FMPs, we are now in a very different place to a few years ago as there is now a national plan, with objectives and actions, for each of the key commercial species caught by our local fishing fleet.

Officers will work closely with DEFRA and the Association of IFCAs to help shape the implementation of these FMPs especially the Cockle FMP. As with the FMPs that have already been published officers will endeavour to keep Members involved and up to date with the key actions that flow from this work.

Bass FMP – Authorisations review

The Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP), published in 2023, has progressed the short-term actions set out in the strategic plan. First on the list was the establishment of the Bass Management Group (BMG), a multi-stakeholder forum enabling ongoing participation in fisheries management decisions. The BMG then created a “Bass Authorisation Review” subgroup to explore alternative approaches to the current authorisations system that better align fishing opportunities with wider FMP objectives, such as reducing discards, minimising environmental impacts, and maximising benefits to local coastal communities.

Background: current bass authorisations system

Since 2015, UK and EU management measures have reduced commercial fishing pressure on bass stocks through effort controls, including a track record-based authorisation system. Commercial vessels that could demonstrate evidence of bass landings between 2015-2016 were granted authorisations for their vessels to continue catching bass, subject to restrictions. Conversely, vessels without authorisation were not permitted to retain any bass. Authorisations are issued according to permitted gear types, including:

- hook-and-line
- fixed gillnets (bycatch only), and
- demersal trawls and seines (specified percentage of bycatch only)

Since 2021, all commercial vessels have been permitted to land a limited percentage of bass bycatch from demersal trawls and seines without authorisation.

Bass Authorisations review process

Over a seven-month period, the Authorisations subgroup met fortnightly to carry out a detailed evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current bass authorisation system, and to explore options for a future framework. Representatives on the group included a broad range of stakeholders, encompassing commercial fishers, recreational anglers, regulators, and conservation NGOs. KEIFCA was represented by Principal Compliance and Enforcement Officer Hayden Hurst, providing operational enforcement expertise and practical knowledge of bass fishing in the East.

Discussions were often lively, but participants listened to one another and generally reached agreement in the end. This collaborative process demonstrated that stakeholders with differing priorities and perspectives can engage in constructive, informed debate, ultimately producing balanced recommendations to guide the future management of the bass fishery.

 **Bass Authorisation**
Review- an overview 

A new report has been published on an MMO led review of the system used to authorise UK commercial fishing vessels to land bass.

- Guided by goal 2 of the Bass Fisheries Management Plan (FMP).
- The review was supported by engagement with nearly 300 stakeholders across 20 events around the English coast.
- Discussion topics: track records, vessel transfers, gear and discards.

Recommendations

Here are a few examples from the 24 recommendations in the report:

 Opportunities Create opportunities for new entrants and young fishers to join the industry.	 Fishing methods Allow fishers to switch from fixed gill nets to hook and line fishing.	 Discards Improve the recording and administration process.
 Gear trials Carefully consider the implications of gear trials on the ecosystem.	 Vessel size Make changes to the vessel size and power restrictions for fishing.	

Important information and next steps

Recommendations in the report are proposals and will now enter a formal decision-making process. They do not represent the official position of Defra or MMO at this stage.

This process, led by Defra and the Bass Management Group, may include further consultation, evidence gathering, and assessment of wider impacts before any decisions are made.

For more information email regionalfisheriesgroups@marinemanagement.org.uk

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Bass Authorisation Review Report

The outcome of this work was the Bass Authorisation Review Report published in December 2025, which presented details of the review process, analysis, and 24 recommendations to support a new approach to the Authorisation system.

These recommendations are detailed below and provide KEIFCA authority the opportunity to comment.

TRACK RECORDS

Since 2015, bass authorisations have been issued through a track record system. Only vessels that could demonstrate historic bass landings between 1 July 2015 and 30 September 2016 were granted authorisations, and no alternative mechanism has existed for accessing the bass fishery.

Recommendation 1: The track record system for issuing bass authorisations should be amended to provide fishing opportunity: The track record system for bass authorisations should be revised to maintain current authorisations while allowing controlled access for new entrants within sustainable, historically informed limits. The existing system is limited by declining authorisations, restricted fleet replacement, and little flexibility for newcomers. A cap based on the historic maximum of 1,186 authorisations is recommended, with current numbers (993) well below this. As stocks recover, management should focus on expanding access through additional authorisations rather than increasing individual catch limits. While authorisations would initially be nationally consistent, regional approaches could be explored through targeted trials and monitoring projects.

Recommendation 2: Analysis of data to identify fishing opportunities: data analysis of ICES stock assessments and regional stock information, alongside advice from the Bass Management Group must inform whether the opening the fishery for new Authorisations (per Recommendation 1) would be appropriate.

Recommendation 3: Create a pool of authorisations for use in a young person/new fishers scheme: provides the ability to manage and prevent continued decline in the bass fishing fleet whilst creating additional benefits to coastal communities particularly young persons through organised schemes.

Recommendation 4: Create a pool of authorisations for use in alternative gear trials: current authorised gear types are relatively inflexible. The exploration of alternative gears through trials should be provided for at a regional level by setting aside authorisations for this purpose would generate better data on stocks, discards and bycatch to inform future management. Trials could lead to innovation and flexibility in fishing methods, allowing fishers to better adapt to local issues (e.g. seal predation in nets).

INSHORE DRIFT NETTING SCIENTIFIC TRIAL

Currently, fishers are prohibited from catching bass with drift nets, with only fixed nets, hook-and-line, or trawls being authorised. Stakeholders in the East and South East expressed strong support for a scientific trial of inshore drift netting to explore its potential benefits, and as such this topic is arguably the most significant output for inshore fishers in the KEIFCA district.

During the review the recreational sector and RSPB raised concerns about bycatch of sensitive species and the illegal targeting using nets, whereas commercial fishers and regulators supported a carefully managed trial. They argued that inshore drift netting needed further research, and has the potential to provide selective, low-impact access for the local fleet, reduce bycatch and seal predation, and counter misconceptions associated with offshore drift netting practices.

Recommendation 5: Implementation of a limited regional inshore drift netting scientific trial: Recommendations stipulate that a trial should be highly monitored and collaborative, involving regulators, commercial and recreational fishers, and NGOs. Oversight could include Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) or onboard observers, and impact could be mitigated by including robust technical conservation measures. Any trial should have clearly defined objectives, and a strong focus on eliminating bycatch of sensitive species. The trial should be conducted in regions (namely in the East) where fishers lack viable gear alternatives other than nets to catch bass, and should be compared against other gear types to practically assess whether it could be introduced as a sustainable gear commercially.

GEAR

Recommendation 6: Allow the switch from fixed gillnet authorisation to hook and line: hook and line is regarded as being a gear type that has lower mortality and less risk of sensitive species bycatch compared to netting. This would allow fishers currently authorised to land bass fixed gillnets to transition to hook and line only, thereby encouraging use of more selective and low impact methods.

Recommendation 7: Trial bycatch allowance for all non-authorised fixed gillnet fishers: Currently, vessels using nets without authorisation must discard all bass bycatch, which can result waste as mortality is high. Introducing a very small bycatch allowance could reduce discards without encouraging targeting, provide some economic support to fishers, and generate valuable scientific data on regional stock movements. A trial of a two-fish daily bycatch limit be for non-authorised fixed gillnet fishers is therefore recommended, with the goal of encouraging discard reporting and improving data collection.

Recommendation 8: Demersal trawls and seines should remain excluded from the requirement to have a bass authorisation AND

Recommendation 9: Establish a demersal trawls and seines working group:

Subgroup members noted that issues relating to trawling regulations, discards, and catch composition are complex and extended beyond the remit and timeframe of the bass authorisation review. It was therefore recommended

that a dedicated task-and-finish group be established to specifically review the use of demersal trawls and seines in the bass fishery.

TRANSFER OF AUTHORISATIONS

Since 2015, gear specific bass authorisations have linked to the vessel hull, designed to control fishing capacity. Authorisations can be transferred between vessels owned by the same operator, provided the replacement vessel does not exceed the original in engine power or tonnage, and fleet numbers remain unchanged. Single-hulled vessels under 8 metres are exempt from these restrictions, allowing upgrades to more modern vessels without risking large increases in fishing pressure. Transfers must be approved by the MMO, and authorisations do not automatically transfer with a vessel sale. New owners can acquire the authorisation with the vessel, including associated catch limits. Aggregation of multiple authorisations from smaller vessels to create a single authorisation for a larger vessel is not permitted.

Recommendation 10: Authorisations to remain attached to the vessel hull:

hull: This supports management of the stock by continuing to restrict excessive increases in capacity and therefore fishing effort. It also keeps the authorisation transfer process simple, compared with attaching the authorisation to a licence or person.

Recommendation 11: Allow limited increase in engine power and vessel size:

size: allows fishers to keep up with technological improvements and safety, allowing diversification of fishing practice and modernisation of vessels. To an extent, engine size has limited relevance to fishing effort for fixed nets or hook and line gear types.

Recommendation 12: Retain the current under 8 metre exemption to monohull:

monohull: This recommendation is designed to prevent excessive capacity and effort increases in the under 8 metre fleet. Catamarans have greater stability and weather resilience, which could provide an advantage over monohulls. However, stakeholders questioned this exclusion, noting that catch limits are the main means of regulating effort.

Recommendation 13: Retain the restriction on aggregations: aggregation of authorised vessels would further limit the number of vessels with authorisations in the fleet impacting fishing opportunity, whilst changing the structure of the fleet to fewer, larger vessels. This measure therefore protects small scale fishers and new entrants.

Recommendation 14: New entrants to the fishery would not be allowed to transfer an authorisation when the vessel is sold: Bass authorisations have unintentionally become monetised, often increasing the value of vessels when sold, despite this not being an original objective of the system. While it is recognised that existing authorisation holders have a reasonable expectation that authorisations transfer with vessel sales, this would not apply to new entrants (subject to Recommendation 1). For new entrants, authorisations would not transfer on sale of the vessel and would instead return to a central pool for

re-issue, helping to widen access to the fishery and prevent further monetisation.

COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

Commercial bass fishing is regulated through a combination of gear-specific authorisations, landing limits, and licence conditions. A key compliance risk within this system is misreporting, particularly the misdeclaration of the gear used to catch bass. For example, some dual-authorised fishers may report landings as taken by hook and line (which carries higher catch limits) when bass are in fact caught using gillnets or trawls. Accurate gear reporting is essential for effective enforcement and reliable stock assessment. Licence conditions seek to reduce this risk by requiring vessels to carry only one authorised gear type when retaining bass; however, this control relies on inspection and enforcement presence, which cannot be applied continuously due to operational constraints. Regulatory complexity is further increased by the operation of non-powered vessels (NPVs), which can fish commercially but are exempt from licensing and bass regulations due to a legislative exemption.

Recommendation 15: Catch App be amended to direct fishers to declare gear type prior to departure: This would help deter misreporting, support existing gear-carriage licence conditions, and strengthen the ability of enforcement officers to prosecute offences. Requiring fishers to declare gear type before a fishing trip would also improve the accuracy of catch data by ensuring landings are correctly linked to the gear used, thereby strengthening the evidence base for fisheries management.

Recommendation 16: Review of the current closure period to establish if the protection it provides to the stock is appropriate: Emerging evidence suggests that bass aggregation and spawning patterns may vary regionally, meaning the existing February–March closure may not effectively protect spawning fish in all areas. It is therefore recommended that research is undertaken to assess whether a more regionally tailored approach to seasonal closures would better mitigate the targeting of bass aggregations and improve stock protection.

Recommendation 17: Direct that gear type and bass catches weight be declared before landing: To reduce misreporting, under-10-metre vessels using hook-and-line or fixed gillnet authorisations would be required to declare both gear type and catch weight via the Catch App before landing.

Recommendation 18: Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) of vessels: use of REM to support recommendations where possible as a tool to improve compliance and data collection. Early adoption should be encouraged among bass fishery vessels, with priority given to those identified as high risk.

Recommendation 19: Registration of non-powered vessels. NPVs under 10 metres can fish commercially without a licence, meaning bass authorisations do not currently apply. Requiring NPVs to be registered would create a formal

record of all vessels participating in the bass fishery, supporting management decisions, reducing the risk of transhipping and misreporting, and promoting fairness and accountability across sectors.

Recommendation 20: Develop a hook-to-plate accreditation for the bass fishery. Establish a dedicated accreditation scheme for commercial fishers authorised to use hook-and-line gear. The recommendation aims to create a transparent, traceable, and high-quality fishery, supporting sustainability and market integrity, while potentially adding value to bass catches.

DISCARDS AND ELECTRONIC CATCH RECORDING

Effective bass fishery management relies on accurate catch and discard data. Discarding is often high in authorised bass fisheries but is frequently under-reported. For under-10-metre vessels, the Catch App must be used to record all catches and discards, while over 10m vessels should record discard data in their fishing logbook. While discards over 50 kg must legally be reported, compliance is low and fishers are often reluctant to report discards.

Recommendation 21: Improved communication and provide incentives for discard recording. Fishers are often reluctant to record discards due to a lack of trust, concerns over stricter regulations, or fear of reputational damage. Better communications on benefits, and targeted incentives are recommended to encourage accurate discard reporting and build confidence in the process.

Recommendation 22: Consider amendments to the Catch App: During the bass authorisation review, several opportunities to improve the Catch App were identified. These include requiring pre-landing gear reporting to reduce misreporting, streamlining data entry to avoid duplication across the Catch App, IFCA returns, and Sales Notes, and adding a catch history feature to help fishers track previous landings and remaining quotas. Improved access to local regulation information within the app was also recommended. Finally, introducing discard categorisation (e.g. undersized, diseased, seal predated, over-limit, prohibited, or live versus dead fish) would enhance data quality and support evidence-based management measures. This type of discard recording could be tested during Recommendation 5 - Inshore Drift Netting Scientific Trial.

MMO ADMINISTRATION OF AUTHORISATIONS

Recommendation 23: Close the Track Record applications process. Due to the time elapsed and the resources required to process applications, it is recommended that the ability to obtain bass authorisations via the track record system be closed.

Recommendation 24: Move authorisations administration to an automated system. Bass authorisations should be transferred from the current manual database to the Sea Fisheries Management (SFM) system. This would improve data integrity and accuracy, reduce manual entry errors, lower administrative resource requirements through automation, and enable better

integration with other systems, supporting data queries and real-time analysis. Potential risks include costs and resources needed for system updates and data transfer.

Crab and Lobster FMP – Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) Changes

The Crab and Lobster FMP, published in December 2023, has introduced measures to support sustainable stocks in the KEIFCA district. The most significant change is the scheduled increase in European lobster MCRS from 87 mm to 90 mm, phased regionally over three years to balance conservation objectives with economic impacts. Changes to Edible Crab MCRS apply only in South West waters and do not affect the KEIFCA district.

In the East of England the schedule of MCRS changes for lobster is as follows:

- 88 mm – 01 March 2026
- 89 mm – January 2027 (TBC)
- 90 mm – January 2028 (TBC)

The higher MCRS will initially be implemented through a licence condition from 01 March 2026, followed by legislative changes subject to parliamentary approval.

The rationale for these changes is to reduce fishing mortality on spawning stocks, allowing crabs and lobsters to reproduce before harvest. Scientific evidence from Cefas shows a positive relationship between size and fecundity, and that English lobster stocks are overfished. Aligning MCRS across regions also simplifies regulation, improves compliance, and supports fair competition among fishers. Regional phasing reflects stakeholder consultation and advice from IFCAs and scientific advisory groups, balancing stock sustainability with local economic considerations.

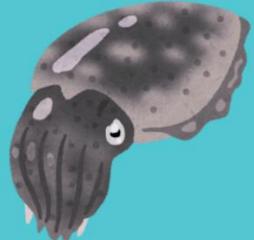
Southern North Sea demersal non-quota FMP

Updated in December 2025, this FMP covers a range of non-quota finfish, elasmobranchs, and cephalopods, including cuttlefish. One example of research initiated through this process is the cuttlefish egg recording survey, illustrated in the poster below.

Call for information

Benefits of underwater structures to cuttlefish egg survival

Are you a fisherman who uses fishing pots and nets and has seen cuttlefish eggs on your gear? Can you help provide us with information?



What is the project's purpose?
To gather local knowledge on:

- observations of cuttlefish egg-laying behaviour
- artificial substrate use
- timing and locations of spawning
- any perceived risks to egg survival

What will the information be used for?
Information will be used to fill key evidence gaps in The Channel demersal non-quota species and Southern North Sea demersal non-quota species Fisheries Management Plans. This work is funded by Defra and commissioned by Cefas.

MORE INFO

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please contact Dr Alice Hall alice.hall@plymouth.ac.uk or call us on 01752 584996. The interview can take place in person or over the phone. Deadline is 1st February 2026.



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Conclusion

These examples demonstrate how strategic, evidence-based planning under FMPs is translating into practical outcomes in the KEIFCA district. The Bass FMP has guided changes through the authorisation review, including recommendations to improve sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and targeted trials such as inshore drift netting. The Crab and Lobster FMP has introduced phased increases to lobster MCRS, balancing stock protection with economic impacts for fishers. The Southern North Sea Demersal FMP has supported enhanced data collection, including the cuttlefish egg recording survey, to improve understanding of stock dynamics. Together, these measures illustrate how FMPs provide a structured, transparent pathway for science and stakeholder led management, delivering tangible benefits for fisheries, communities, and the marine environment.

Recommendations:

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report