

Agenda Item B5

By: Chief Inshore Fisheries Officer/Lead Scientific and Conservation Officer

To: Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
– 27 January 2026

Subject: **Whelk Permit Byelaw Update**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper will provide Members with an overview of whelk fisheries markets, analysis of KEIFCA whelk landings data over the year 2025 and an update of national whelk management and what it means for KEIFCA whelk fishery management.

Recommendations:

1. Members are asked to **AGREE** that the pot limit, the riddle size and the number & size of escape holes remain set at:

Pots – 300 for category 1 permits and 10 for category 2 permits
Riddle – 25mm spacing between bars.
Escape holes – 10 @ 25mm per pot

KEIFCA's Annual Whelk Fishery Review

The Market

As in previous years, most whelks landed in KEIFCA waters during 2025 were sold to Lynn Shellfish Ltd, with Chapmans of Rye buying most of the rest. Lynn Shellfish advised that whelk prices were around £1,600 per tonne during the year, an increase of £100-£200 on 2024 prices. According to the Kings Lynn based shellfish processor, the main market is still South Korea but there are also good EU sales as well as the home market.

MMO Landings Data

The long-term picture of annual MMO landings data (recorded landings in KEIFCA district ports, from vessels fishing inside and outside our district) showed relatively consistent high levels of landings in recent years compared to landings prior to

2010, as can be seen in Figure 1. This year's landings, while lower than those from 2012 – 2022, show a reverse of the downward trend in 2023 and 2024 when landings were approximately 50% lower than the previous year. MMO data on whelk fishing effort (pots hauled and days fished) was not available at the time of writing this report.

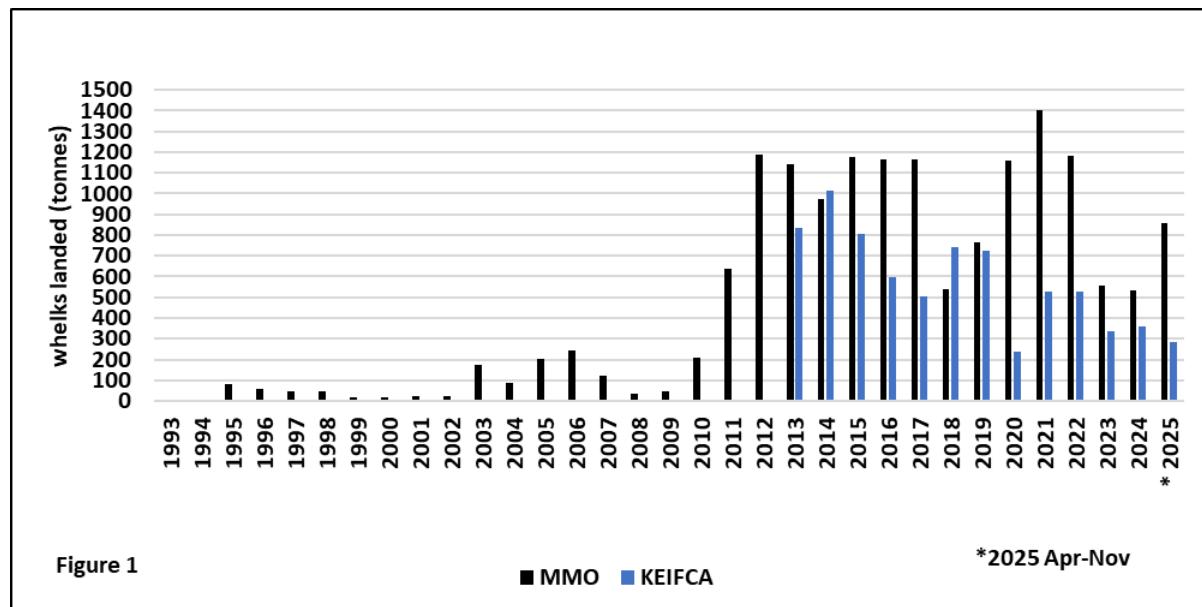


Figure 1. MMO whelk landings inside the KEIFCA district and out to 12NM offshore 1993-2025 alongside KEIFCA's landings data shown for 2013-2025 inside 6NM. NB data for 2025 data is April-November inclusive for both MMO and KEIFCA, all other years have 12 months of data.

KEIFCA district landings

The KEIFCA landings report is limited to months between April to November for all years presented below. This is because catch return data for the current permit year (which is the same as the financial year) has not been received for December 2025 to March 2026.

Fishing permits

For reporting and monitoring purposes, the KEIFCA district is divided into 4 fishing areas; Area 1: Essex, Area 2: north Kent coast, Area 3: Ramsgate-Deal and Area 4: south Kent coast (see Figure 4 further down).

In 2025, as in previous years, over 90% of whelks caught are from Areas 2 & 4 (See **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.** 3 and 4).

Nine commercial whelk permits are in place this year in Area 2, where 49% of total landings occur. Five fishers regularly operate out of Whitstable, and their fishing activity is generally comparable with each other.

In fishing Area 4 a very similar weight of whelks is landed to in Area 2, and landings make up 46% of the district's total. However, of the seven commercial whelk fishers along this south Kent coast, just three of them catch 87% of all whelks landed here.

With only one commercial whelk permit holder in Area 1 who works fewer pots than Kent-based fishers, landings here are less than 1% of the district's total.

Area 3 accounts for 6% of the districts landings this year, a 5.5% increase on the same period last year. This is due to two of the commercial fishers from Ramsgate moving to fishing grounds within fishing Area 3 this year; they both fished in area 2 last year.

The table below shows the number of permits issued, the total weight of whelks landed, the number of pots used, and number of days fished in each of the four fishing areas:

2025	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4
Permits issued	1	9	2	7
Tonnes landed	0.7	136	15	129
Pots used	465	64785	6775	75885
Days fished	31	246	40	329

Table 1. Summary of whelk permit fishery statistics for each whelk fishing area, namely number of permits issued, weight (tonnes) landed, number of fishing pots used and number of days fished, Apr – Nov 2025.

Annual Landings

All aspects of whelk fishing effort and landings in 2025 have been in line with last two years. Figure 2 shows that the total number of days fished (orange line), pots set (grey line) and permits issued (numbers in black bars) are very similar to 2023, with a slight increase in landings (height of black bars) and pots set during the intervening year of 2024.

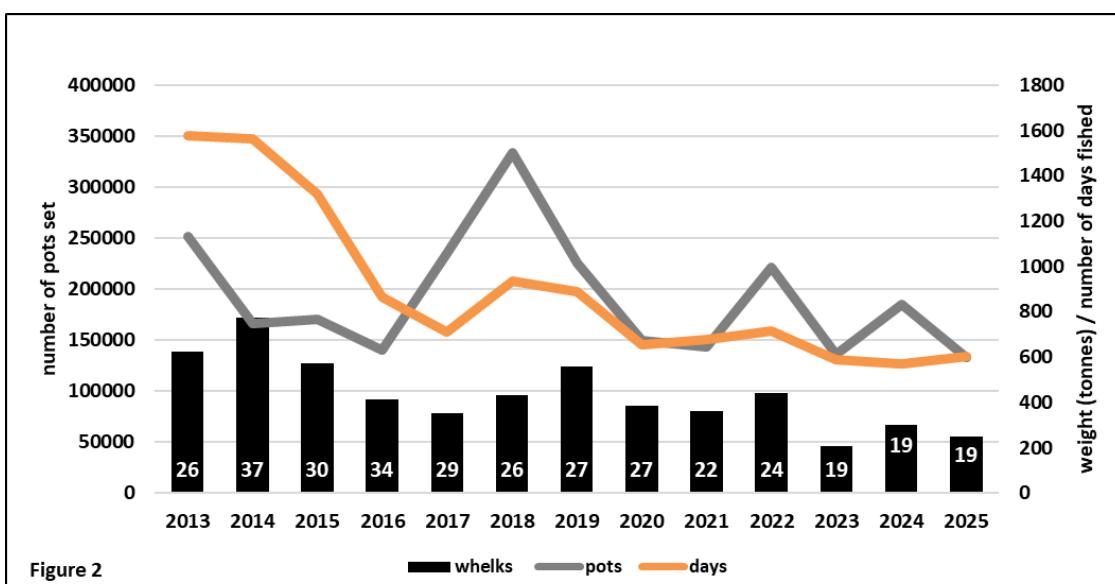


Figure 2. Total weight (tonnes) of whelks landed (black bars in relation to right hand y-axis values). The white number inside each black bar is the number of commercial (Category One) permits issued for that year. The line graphs show total number of pots set (grey line) and the total number of days fished (orange line) during the period April–November in each year from 2013–2024.

Geographical distribution of catches

The map (below) shows the total weight (tonnes) of whelks landed during 2025 (Apr-Nov) from each of the Whelk Fishing Areas (WFAs) (Figure 3). The majority of whelks landed (by weight) came from WFA-2 in 2025, closely followed by WFA-4.

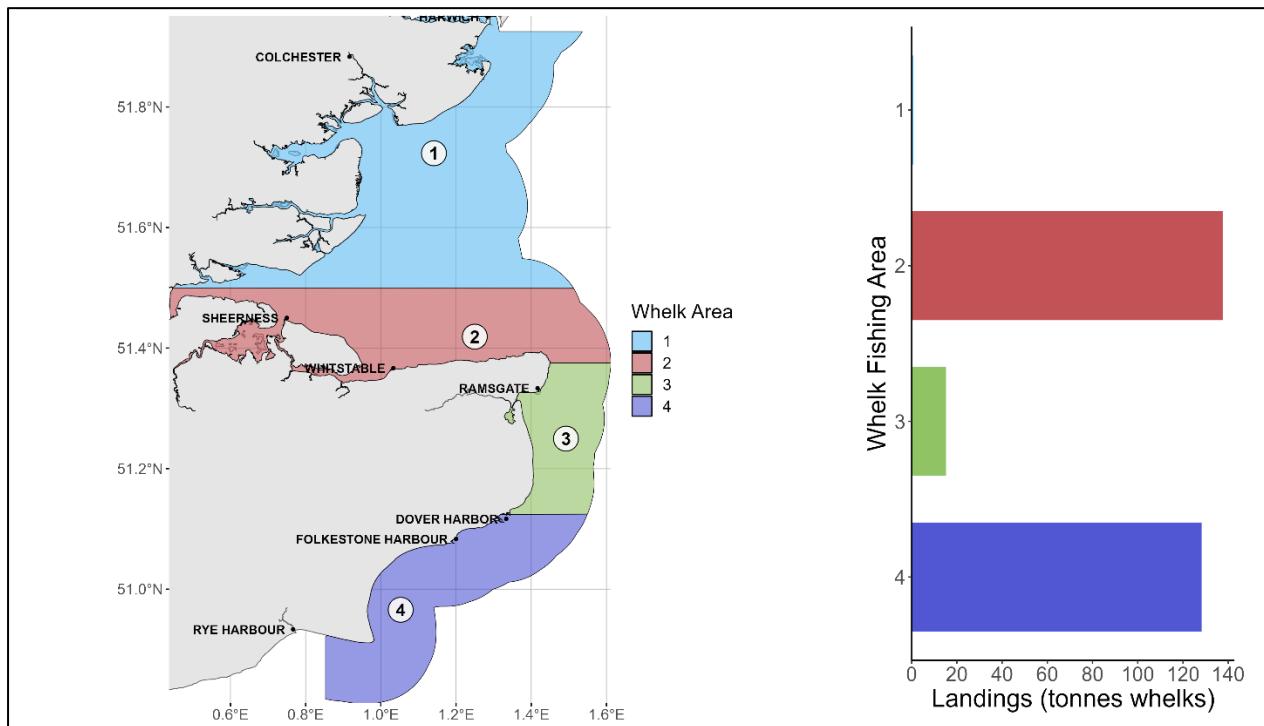


Figure 3. The four Whelk Fishing Areas (WFAs) in the KEIFCA district, showing the total annual landings for each area on the right-middle panel from April to November 2025.

The long-term spatial variation of whelk landings is shown in Figure 44 below as the proportional contribution of each of the four WFAs to the total whelk landings per year. The total weight of whelk landings was greater in 2025 than during 2023, driven by greater landings from WFA-2 in the last two years. Catches in WFA-4 remained stable, while catches in Area 3 increased largely as a result of a shift in fishing effort into the area. Almost no catches were reported from WFA-1 with the boats from Whitstable focussing their fishing effort on WFA-2 (in 2023 and 2024 there was a shift out of WFA-2 into WFA-1). Fisher behaviour in WFA-2 has therefore returned to more similar patterns observed before 2022, suggesting that the fishery has made a recovery following the mass mortality event. (Members will recall that at the end of August 2022 a significant mass mortality event was reported, coinciding with a severe marine heatwave in the Thames Estuary.) This is consistent with fisher reports, which has since reported whelks returning to The Cant and nearer the Isle of Sheppey.

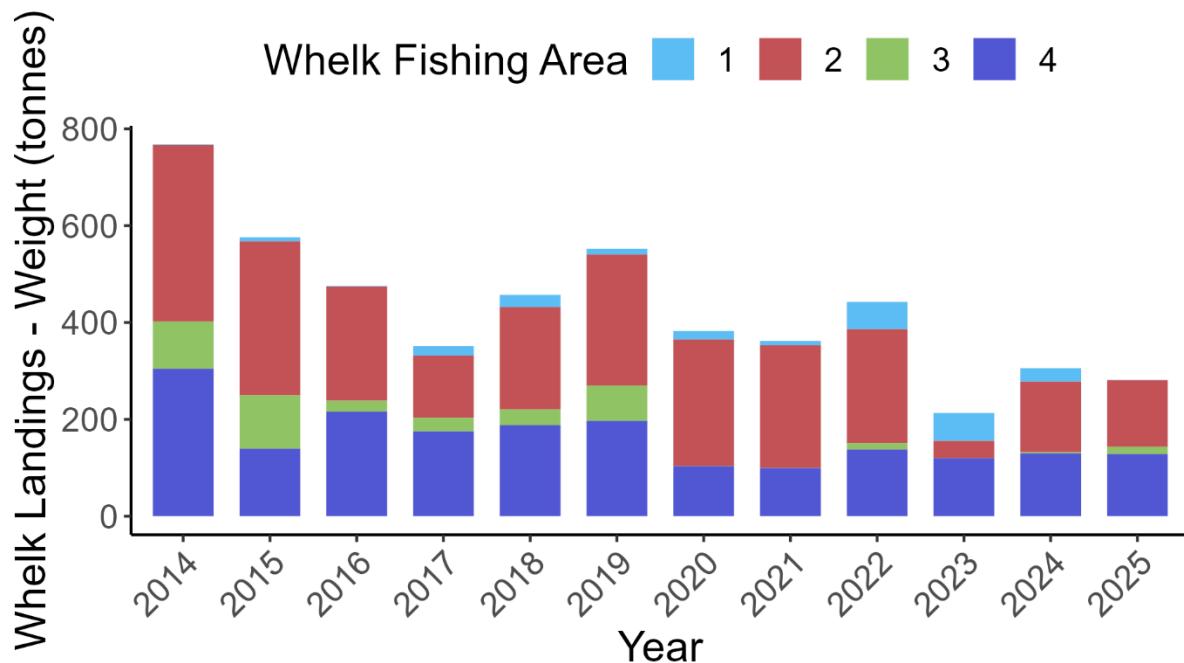


Figure 4. Total weight (tonnes) of whelks landed each year 2014 – 2025 in each of the 4 Whelk Fishing Areas in the KEIFCA district. (Note all landings are compiled from period April – November only to allow comparison between years).

Long-Term Monthly Landings

Figure 5 below shows the comparison of monthly whelk landings between April–November in recent years with the mean monthly weights of historic landings from 2014-201 inclusive. The long term monthly mean values represent “Before” mass mortality event (shown in dark blue), “During” the year of the mass mortality (the orange/yellow bar) and “After” data is for 2023 (grey), 2024 (light blue) and 2025 (purple) to give a detailed breakdown of the recovery since.

From August 2023 onwards, the first signs of landings returning to former levels can be seen. While whelk landings in 2025 were lower than the long-term average for all months included in the report, they were higher than 2023 (year following mortality event) and similar to 2024. This is in line with fisher reports of a recovery of whelk population in Whelk Fishing Area 2 with whelks returning to locations where they were formerly common but absent immediately after the mortality event.

The graph below shows the strong seasonal signal with highest landings consistently reported between April and June and lowest during the late summer early autumn (Aug and Sept) during 2025, as in the other years included in the graph. This seasonal pattern in landings accords with the high fishing effort levels in WFA-2 during the late spring and early summer months.

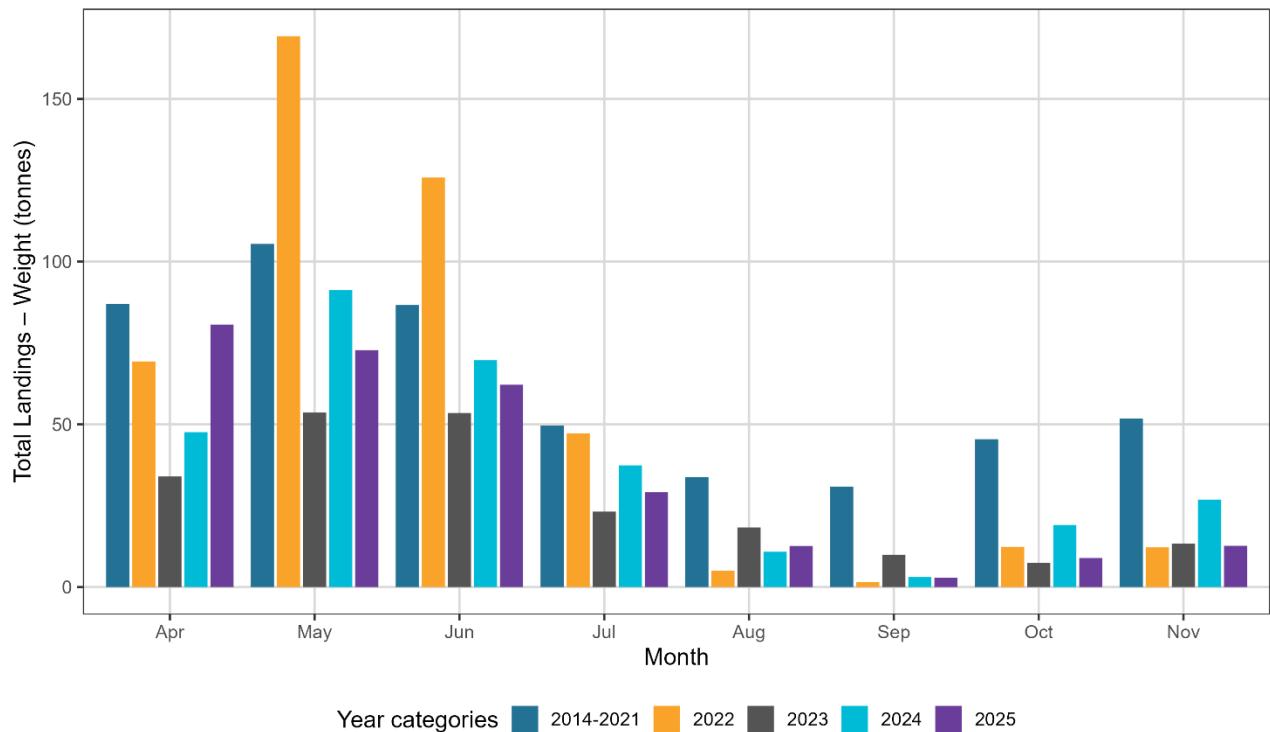


Figure 5. Long-term mean monthly total weights (tonnes) of whelks landed Apr–Nov 2014–2021 (black) compared to the total monthly weights (tonnes) landed Apr–Nov 2022 (orange), 2023 (grey), light blue (2024), purple (2025).

Landings Per Unit Effort

Landings per unit of effort i.e. the total weight of whelks caught per pot per fishing trip, is a key metric in addition to the total weight of landings. This is particularly important when a fishery has experienced a reduction in landings because reduced LPUE could indicate that the stocks have been fished at an unsustainable level.

Figure 6 below shows the LPUE for each WFA per year since 2014. The two main WFAs, namely, WFA-2 and WFA-4, have remained relatively stable since 2017, but with the marked drop between 2022 and 2023 in WFA-2 following the marine heat wave (and mass mortality event). Since then, there has been a slight recovery of LPUE levels in WFA-2. We also note a decrease in LPUE in WFA-4, however, at this point not sufficient to warrant concern. Despite this, LPUE has been relatively stable and variation are comparable to long term levels of variation (and this is consistent with levels reported by neighbouring IFCAs). It is this sustained level of LPUE that suggests that stock levels are relatively stable and therefore suggests that the current management is supporting a sustainable whelk fishery.

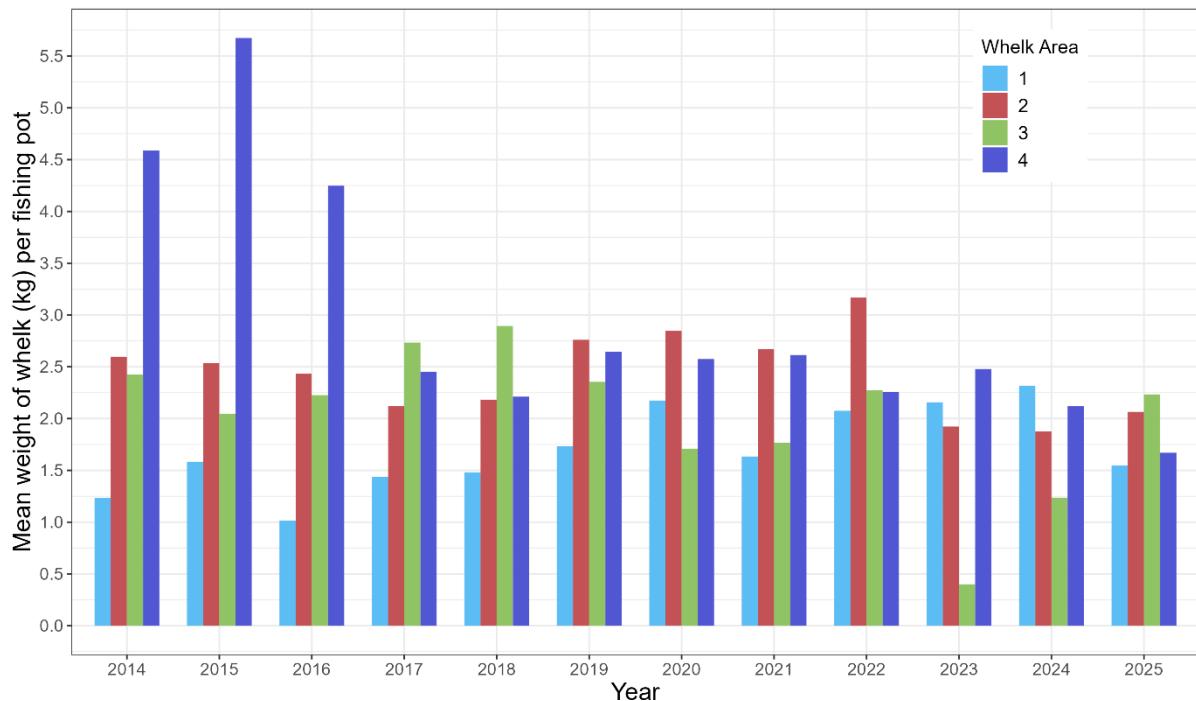


Figure 6. Mean annual LPUE levels for the 4 whelk fishing areas in the KEIFCA district 2014-2025

Whelk compliance

Consistent enforcement of the whelk permit byelaw is a seasonal priority on the KEIFCA Compliance Risk Register, with most effort between autumn to spring each year. Patrol teams monitor activity and gather intelligence, concentrating on any report or instance of non-compliance with the permit byelaw. The current intelligence picture informs bi-weekly Tactical Coordination Group (TCG) meetings where whelk enforcement taskings are assigned.

In 2025 officers were tasked with boarding and gear hauling inspections at sea, and landing inspections on shore. Following best available intelligence to target non-compliance, KEIFCA enforcement teams conducted 28 inspections of whelk fishing vessels in 2025. A total of 9 offences were detected during these inspections, resulting in an overall compliance rate of 68%.

Of the nine offences detected, four were minor infringements involving the retention of small quantities of undersize whelks and were addressed through verbal warnings. The remaining offences included the use of unmarked gear, for which offence notices were issued, and a more serious breach involving the landing of a larger quantity of undersize whelks, resulting in the issue of a Financial Administrative Penalty to the vessel master. A further offence arose during a gear hauling inspection, where 20 whelk pots were seized for being set without current permit tags. This matter was subsequently resolved without enforcement action when it was confirmed that the gear had been reported as lost by the master.

Neighbouring IFCA district comparisons

Sussex IFCA has a substantially larger whelk fishery than KEIFCA with 66 fishers (49 commercial and 17 recreational), compared to our 19, and landing as much as 1000 tonnes in 2025. Sussex IFCA also report lower landings in 2022 and 2023 than long term average, but a steady uplift in effort (number of pots deployed) and landings since then. On average they report a slight decreasing trends in recent years in LPUE to approx 1.79 kg/pot.

Eastern IFCA also has a larger whelk fishery than KEIFCA, report landings over 450 tonnes for 2025, which was a significant increase in recent years, and the second highest since 2015. Eastern IFCA also report an above average level of effort (number of pots) in 2025 and a slight increase in LPUE as a result of high LPUE rates in September and October 2025.

Whelk catches from both Sussex and Eastern IFCA appear to be relatively stable. See Annex 1 for respective reports from Sussex and Eastern IFCAs.

Whelk study partnership with Essex University

A PhD student has successfully been recruited and is due to start 12 January 2026 at the University of Essex, with a project title: **Future Shellfish Fisheries in the Thames Estuary: Responses to Climate-Change Scenarios**. This work builds on the previous work assessing the thermo-tolerance of whelks under marine heat waves. The PhD will provide critical information necessary for better understanding the future of the whelk fishery in the Thames Estuary.

KEIFCA Management recommendations

After considering the most recent landings and catch data, the current assessment of market demand, and the benefit to the industry of continuity, it is recommended that the current measures are maintained for the 2026-2027 permit.

Current technical management measures:

- Pots – 300 for category 1 permits and 10 for category 2 permits
- Riddle – 25mm spacing between bars
- Escape holes – 10 @ 25mm per pot

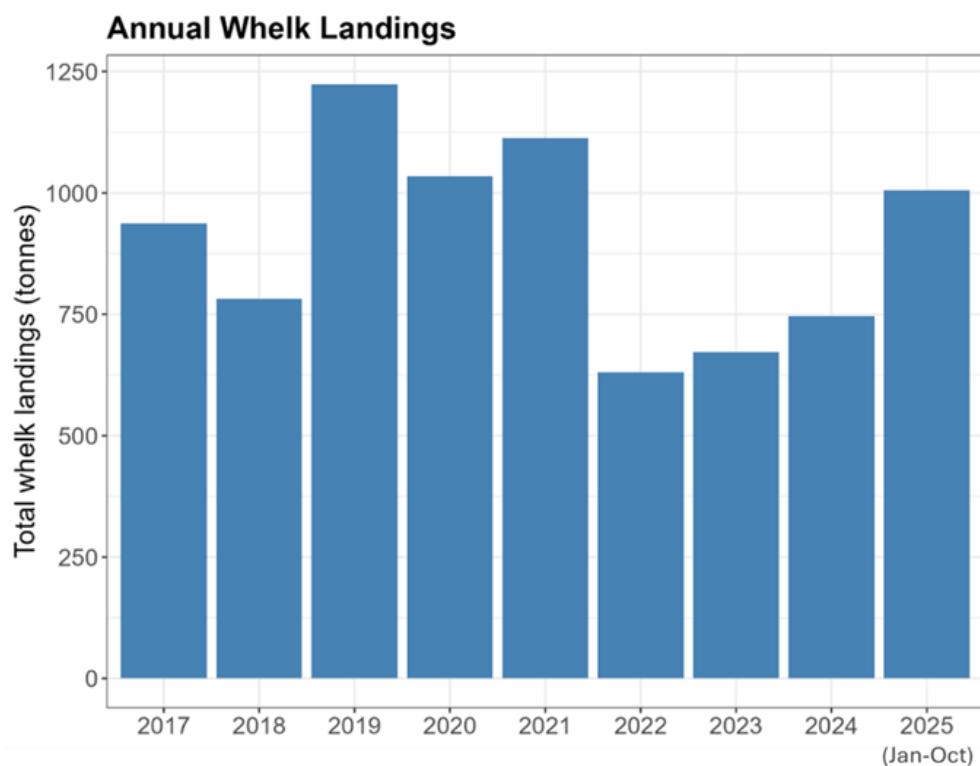
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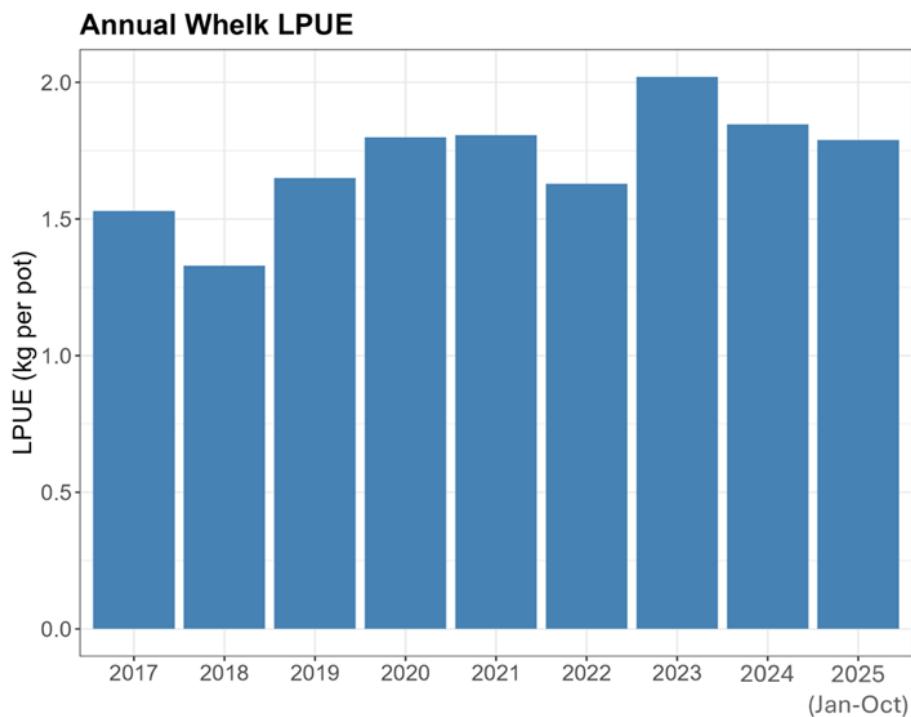
Pots – 300 for category 1 permits and 10 for category 2 permits
Riddle – 25mm spacing between bars.
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Annexe 1: Neighbouring IFCA district reports on landings

Sussex IFCA landings report



Landings per unit of effort (LPUE) decreased slightly from 1.85 kg/pot in 2024 to 1.79 kg/pot in 2025 (Jan-Oct). However, note that the 2025 dataset is incomplete as we are awaiting the submission of catch return data for November and December, and the seasonality of LPUE (generally lower in November and December due to increased effort) will likely bring this average down.



2. Fishing Behaviour

Once again 2025 saw many of the regular inshore whelk fleet who net during the summer months continue netting inshore well into the autumn and winter months, whereas others have decided to continue to pot outside the district. Anecdotally this is due to the decreased incidence of whelk on the inshore ground.

3. Compliance

In 2025, Sussex IFCA issued three warnings to fishers for missing catch returns and two warnings for fishing without a valid shellfish permit. There were no offences reported relating to Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) or gear offences (e.g. undersize riddle) at sea with seven boardings on whelk potting vessels conducted in the year. Landing inspections on potting vessels and market inspections also saw no issues with MCRS (45 mm).

Eastern IFCA Landings report

Activity levels are similar to the previous year. The normal seasonal peak between January-June was evident, with a similar number of trips and fishers. Activity for December is currently looking slightly lower than the previous year, but we are still waiting for some returns to be submitted so this could change. We are expecting activity to pick up in January.

The 2025 whelk landings were a little more interesting. March and October in particular recorded very high landings of whelk, notably higher than around the same time in the two previous years. Landings and activity for 2025 looked more similar to the 2022 peak. As a result, LPUE is also much higher, though not yet at the same level as 2022.

At the beginning of the year fishing activity was more concentrated in the Wash, with other activity spread fairly evenly across the Lincolnshire, North Norfolk and the Suffolk coast. In the latter half of 2025 activity along the Lincolnshire coast picked up slightly more than usual, with other areas also starting to increase in activity as the season progressed.

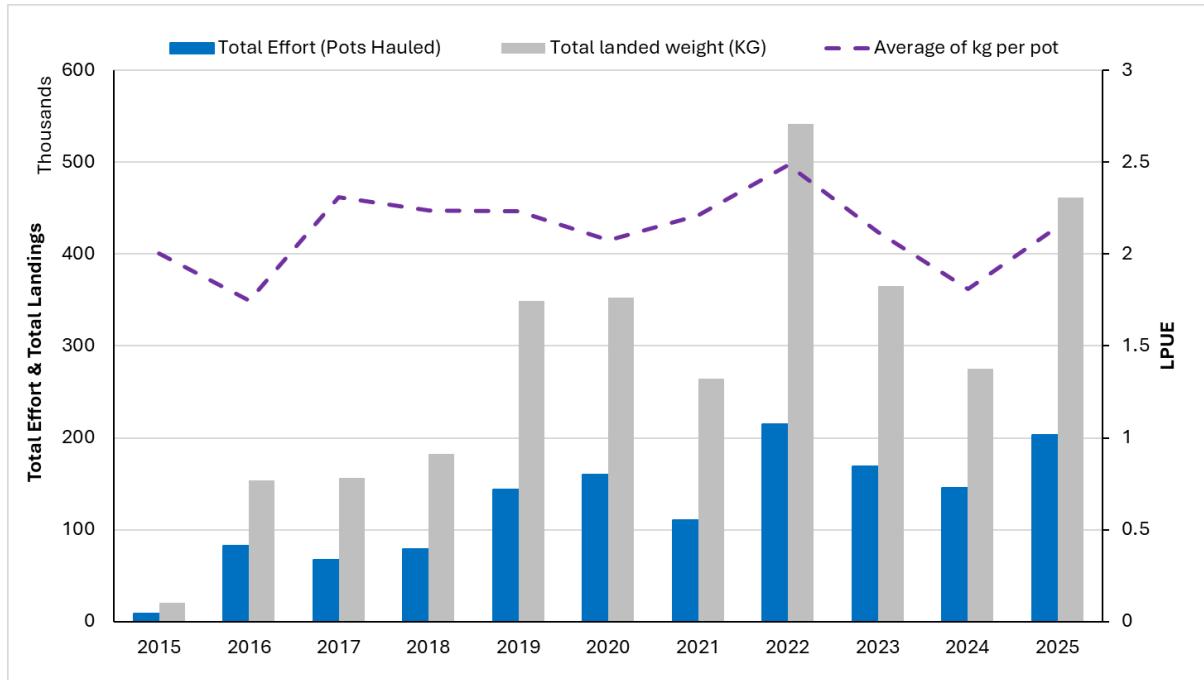


Figure 1. Total annual whelk landings (weight in kgs), total number of pots hauled and mean average weight (kgs) of whelks per pot (LPUE) for 2015 – 2025

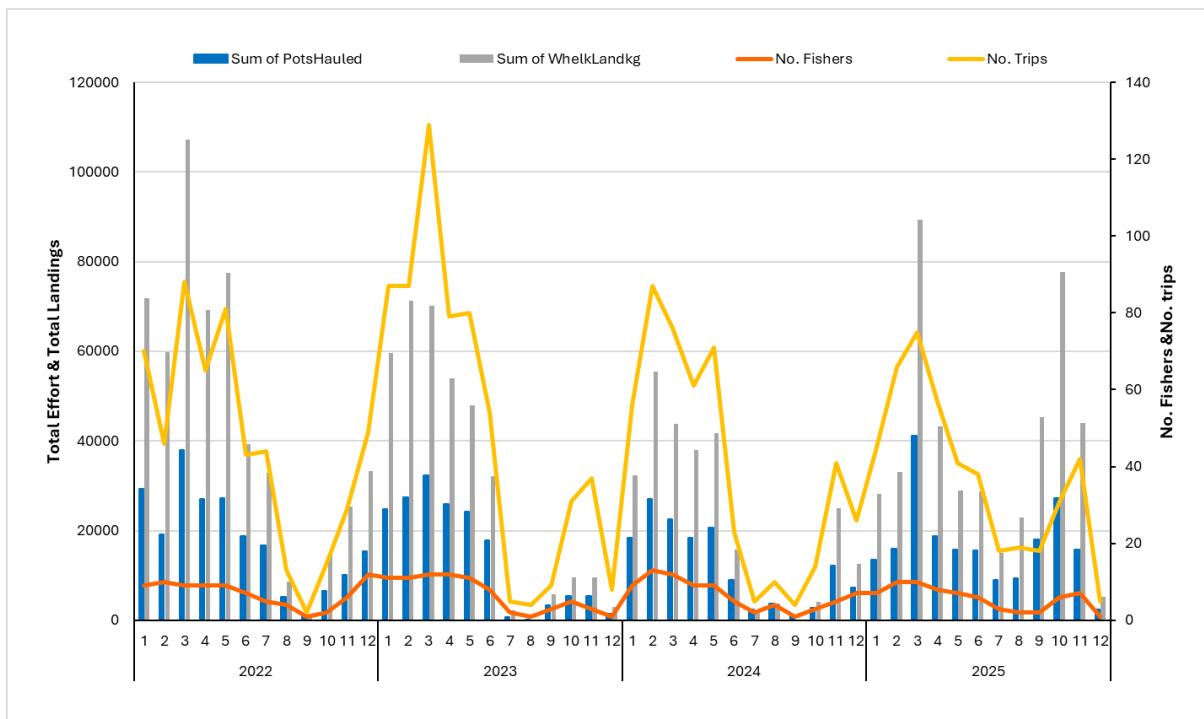


Figure 2. Comparison of total landings (kgs), pots hauled, effort (no. of trips) and number of fishers in the Eastern IFCA district for 2022 – 2025