

Agenda item B6

From: Chief IFCO/Inshore Fisheries and Conservation IFCO
To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority- January 2026
Subject: Manila clam trial overview
Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary: In November 2025, following a meeting with the trialists, a collective decision was made to pause the 2025 Manila Clam trial due to concerns over market conditions. A proposal has been made by Officers and supported by trialists to open the trial again in the spring 2026. This paper outlines the proposals for the spring Manila Clam trial.

Recommendations

- 1 a) The Authority is asked to **AGREE** the updated 2-year trial outline including the proposed trial fishery areas and catch and trip limits (also including the riddle experiment and further recommendation that field studies should be conducted as part of the 2026 trial).
- b) The Authority **AGREE** that the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls to ensure future sustainability including for the purposes of setting TAC. These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.

The 2025 clam trial outcomes

On 14 November 2025, KEIFCA set up a meeting with the Manila Clam trialists, following concerns about current market and stock availability. This meeting was held to discuss feedback from the first weeks of the fishery and viability of the trial moving forward. From this meeting, feedback was received on ground conditions, current market conditions, and options were discussed around potentially pausing the trial. A collective decision between officers and trialists was made to pause the 2025 trial and look into potential opportunities for a

spring trial in 2026, including the run up to the Easter market. A second meeting was held on the 20 November 2025, to discuss logistics and proposals for a spring Mania clam trial fishery. The below proposal is the outcome of these meetings and logistical planning.

The updated 2026 manila clam trial proposals

The trial will run over six weeks starting in mid-March 2026, after pre-fishery surveys (which are scheduled for 5 – 8 March), and ending in April 2026, with a plan to mirror the 2026 trial into 2027 the following year. As in the 2024 and 2025 trial, the trialists will be able to sell their catch. As before, the trialists will be required to contribute to the trial, attend in-person meetings in the district (up to four in the period), supply all relevant trial data and sign-up to a Code of Conduct. All trialists will be required to use a specified vessel tracking system, Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM), whilst taking part in the trial and will be withdrawn from the trial if found to be breaking any of the management conditions as outlined in the Code of Conduct.

Outline of the trial

Trial Areas

The proposed trial areas will remain the same as previously agreed and are highlighted in blue in Fig. 1.

A proposal of splitting the Manila clam trial areas into high, medium and no intensity fishing areas was introduced and discussed with the trialists at an online meeting in 2025. Officers intend to introduce these areas to help assess how clam stocks respond to commercial levels of fishing. To inform this assessment, officers plan to conduct a survey of the grounds in March, prior to the trial fishery, followed by a post-trial survey. This will allow for an evaluation of how varying levels of fishing intensity may impact both stock levels across different areas and ground impact. This proposal received support from the trialists, and officers intend to have further discussions on how splitting the areas into intensity zones will look and refine how this approach will be implemented in practice for the 2026 trial.

In addition to the proposed trial areas outlined in Figure 1, three additional trips will be allocated for prospecting, in which vessels will be able to explore new clam grounds within the Thames Estuary as long as the grounds have a valid and appropriate shellfish classification. Officers successfully obtained an agreement with the Food Standards Association (FSA), CEFAS and the local county council authorities (primarily London Port Health Authority) in 2025 to transfer the

shellfish classifications awarded to cockles over to Manila clams in the Buxey and the prospecting areas, namely, Southend Flats, Phoenix, Maplin West, Maplin Central West Cant and Scrapsgate and East Cant, Middle and Red Sand. This agreement meant that the trial could include three prospecting fishing trips, where fishers are able to land catch from outside the two manila clam fishing areas as long as they came from the classified shellfish beds (pink areas Figure 1). We hope to obtain the same agreements in the 2026 trial.

As before, catch from prospecting trips would be permitted for landing, and REM tracking and data forms would be required. Prospecting will not be permitted in any areas within which bottom towed fishing gear is prohibited. Further, an area of the seabed will be closed to any dredging, as a reserve for the stock and to ensure that the fishery does not hinder the conservation objectives of any MPAs within the area (Fig. 1).

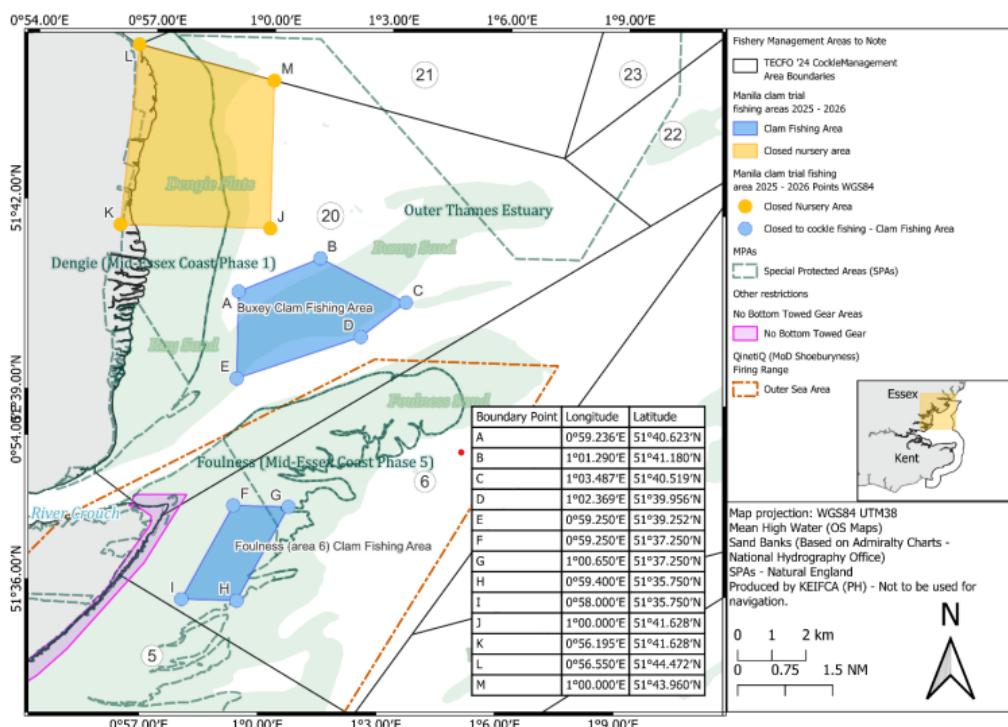


Fig.1 Plotted coordinates of proposed Manila clam trial areas

Catch and trip limits

Final catch and trip limits will be determined from the March surveys, to ensure that the latest data on the abundance of clams is used, however officers have included potential detail of the catch and trip limits that will be discussed with trialists. Officers propose that management measures will be structured as fortnightly limits.

The 2026 trial fishery is scheduled to operate over a **six-week period**. The first five weeks will be designated for regular fishing activity, while the sixth week will be reserved as a contingency to accommodate any missed trips due to

unforeseen adverse weather conditions. Officers propose setting a catch limit of **400 kg per trip for the first 3 weeks** of the trial and increase this to **500 kg per trip during the final three weeks** of the trial. However, this adjustment would be subject to review based on findings from the early weeks of the fishery. In response to feedback in a meeting with trialists on 23 of July, the number of prospecting trips and catch limits will be set as follows:

Prospecting trip 1: 300kg, Prospecting trip 2: 300kg, Prospecting trip 3: 400kg.

This will remain the same for the 2026 fishery.

In discussions with Natural England (NE) concerning the mandatory use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) on vessels participating in the fishery, there is increased flexibility in how these prospecting trips can be conducted. Provided that vessels give prior notice of their prospecting activities, officers propose that the three allocated prospecting trips may be carried out at any point after the first week of the trial.

	Start	Finish	No. trips	Landings permitted per trip
Week 1	16 Mar @ 08:00	20 Mar @ 18:00	2	400 kg
Week 2	23 Mar @ 08:00		4	400 kg
Week 3		3 Apr @ 12:00		
Week 4	6 Apr @ 08:00			
Week 5		17 Apr @ 12:00	4	500 kg
Week 6	20 Apr @ 08:00	24 Apr @ 12:00	Contingency week for missed trips due to weather disruptions	
Prospecting trips				
Weeks 2 - 6	23 Mar @ 08:00	24 Apr @ 12:00	1	300 kg
			1	300 kg
			1	400 kg

As there are still surveys to undertake in March, it proposed that we employ the same process that we use in TECFO fishery whereby small changes of TAC can be made following consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, as below:

That the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls to ensure future sustainability including for the purposes of setting TAC. These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.

Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM)

In 2025, all five trialists successfully installed their REM systems, and will be required to have these set up and running for the 2026 trial. The initial data received from these REM systems looks very promising in providing high quality data on fishing effort thanks to the gear-in-water technology.

Reviewing the trial after Year 1

As with the 2024 trial, officers will look to compile a report of the findings of the 2026 trial at the subsequent quarterly meeting. After considering the findings and recommendations of the report, Members will be asked whether they want to continue with the trial or not. Summary feedback will also be given on the engagement of trialists, and recommendations could be put forward regarding individuals' future involvement based on the Code of Conduct criteria. The current expectation would be that the second trial period would take place in spring 2027, however the timing of the trial would depend on the results f

Riddle experiment

Setting a standard bar spacing on fishing and sorting gear is a simple, but effective way to drastically reduce the risk of undersize fish being landed and sold. This improves the sustainability of the fishery by ensuring that individuals are able to reproduce at least once before becoming vulnerable to harvest.

As agreed by the Authority in the January 2025 meeting, KEIFCA has undertaken a study focussed on the effect of changing bar spacing on the size of retained/discard Manila clams, with the aim of setting a standardised bar spacing for any future trials or fishery. Based on this study, a preliminary recommendation of either 21 or 22mm bar spacing was put forward. It has been recommended that further field studies should be conducted as part of the 2026 trial, in order to complement the laboratory-based studies. This has been discussed with 2026 trialists, and no initial concerns have been raised.

Standardised Fishing Box Volume to Weight conversion

The landing data collected during the two-year Manila Clam trial will be used to gather comprehensive information on catch quantities and weights to support the standardised fishing box volume to weight conversion experiment. The aim is to collect sufficient data to develop a consistent and reliable method for landing catches in the future, and to evaluate whether future landings should be made just in bags or just in boxes. In the 2025 trial, trialists were landing their catch using a mixture of bags and fish boxes, highlighting the need for standardisation.

Recommendations

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b) The Authority **AGREE** that the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls to ensure future sustainability including for the purposes of setting TAC. These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.