



Item No.B7

By: Deputy Chief IFCO

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

Subject: **PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary: To report on the surveys for the 2026 Permit Byelaw Cockle Fishery and set out management for the 2026 fishery

Recommendations: The Authority is asked to **APPROVE** the following recommendations

In respect of the Permitted Cockle Fishery

- (a) The Management Plan requirement that any open areas shall contain a minimum of 350 tonnes of cockles shall be waived for the 2026 season, subject to continual review throughout the fishery.
- (b) The Total Allowable Catch (TAC) should be set initially at 816 tonnes and that information related to the stocks will be continually reviewed throughout the season to ensure sustainability.
- (c) Reallocation of TAC, and therefore extension of the fishing season, may be made in the event of any remaining TAC and taking onboard feedback from industry and officers
- (d) 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 (b) and (c). These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.
- (e) That the described zonal management of Area 20 be undertaken in order to provide for a manila clam fishery trial.
- (f) That all areas subject to the permit byelaw shall be opened to fishing subject to the spatial restrictions in area 20 for manila clam trials, and that information related to fishing activity, catch rates and vessel density will be continually reviewed throughout the season to ensure sustainability.

- (g) That the fishery will commence at 1800 hrs on Sunday 6 September 2026.
- (h) Provisional fishing allocations will be as follows, this will also be subject to further amendment;
- (i) The fishing season will be divided into weekly specified fishing periods which will run from 1800 hrs on Sunday to 1200 hrs on Friday and during these periods permit holders will be permitted to make the following specified numbers of landings.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
6 September – 2 October	4	2 landings of 3.4m ³ or no more than 6.8 m ³ per week (6 bags)

- (j) Permit holders operating small boats may apply for an exemption to explore lighter and smaller gear types and riddles subject to the fitting of a REM system and additional documentation requirements.
- (k) The maximum quantity of cockles that may be landed or carried on board will be 3.39m³/125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes) unless a vessel is operating under an exemption related to quantity.

1. Revised fishery boundaries

Following the introduction of the Thames Estuary Cackle Fishery Order 2024 the boundaries for the permit fishery have changed when compared to those in years prior to 2025. This means that areas which were previously contained within TECFO are now part of the permit fishery. Notable beds to which this applies include Scrapsgate, the Spile and crucially Margate Sands.

The result of this is that management for the permit fishery needs to consider a far greater range of areas which are distributed across the Thames estuary than it did previously. To this end officers have carried out surveys across the district as usual and the results are presented below. A chart showing the revised areas is attached at Appendix A.

2. Start date of the fishery

In 2025, due to the delayed opening of the TECFO fishery, it was decided to move the permit fishery to earlier in the year to allow cockle fishing within the Thames to start supplying to market. Rather than the usual September/October fishery, the start date was brought forward to Sunday 13th July 2025.

For 2026, it is recommended that the fishery return to its traditional time period. This will give all of the beds the maximum amount of time to grow, and hopefully increase the financial return from the fishery for industry. The suggested time period is detailed below.

3. Limiting the number of trips per week and spreading out the effort

As for the 2023, 2024 and 2025 fisheries, the overarching idea is to encourage the fleet to spread out its effort, to locate new stocks of cockles which they have not had the opportunity to do with a time-compressed fishery in recent years and to allow fishers to take advantage of the fishing opportunity available to them.

If vessels spend extensive period of time in one area in an attempt to take their catch then the area could be closed. The minimum catch rate which is economically viable for a cockle suction dredging vessel is approximately 1 tonne per hour therefore officers would be reviewing any trips where total fishing time within an area was in excess of three hours per vessel.

In addition, officers would again also recommend the removal of the 350 tonne per area requirement criteria for the 2026 fishery as was done for the past three years to allow the smaller scale fishery to take advantage of smaller beds of cockles and spread out the effort of the fleet.

4. Appropriate Assessment

The Authority is required under Regulation 48(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Authority to give notice to Natural England of intention to issue permits to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit an "Appropriate Assessment". This assessment includes survey data, fishery monitoring and details of mitigation implemented to ensure that there is no adverse impact upon these sites as a result of the Authority's action. The Appropriate Assessment has been discussed informally with Natural England and a formal submission will be sent taking into account the Authority's decisions regarding this paper.

5. Spatial Management of Area 20 to allow for manila clam trial fishery

Area 20 contains three main beds. The Buxey Sand, Ray Sand and Dengie Sand. Whilst the Buxey and Ray Sands combined contain approximately 2500 tonnes of adult stock, only around 300 tonnes of it is above the 16mm minimum size specified in the byelaw. The Dengie continues to have a minimal amount of adult stock of any size. In addition, area 20 contains stocks of manila clams which are being explored by the manila clam trial fishery.

Therefore, it is proposed that zonal management of Area 20 will again be undertaken as it was last year. The Dengie Sand will be closed to cockle dredging for 2026 and a specified area of the Buxey Sand will be closed to cockle dredging but will be used as part of the manila clam trials discussed elsewhere in these papers. This zonal approach is shown below in Figure 1.

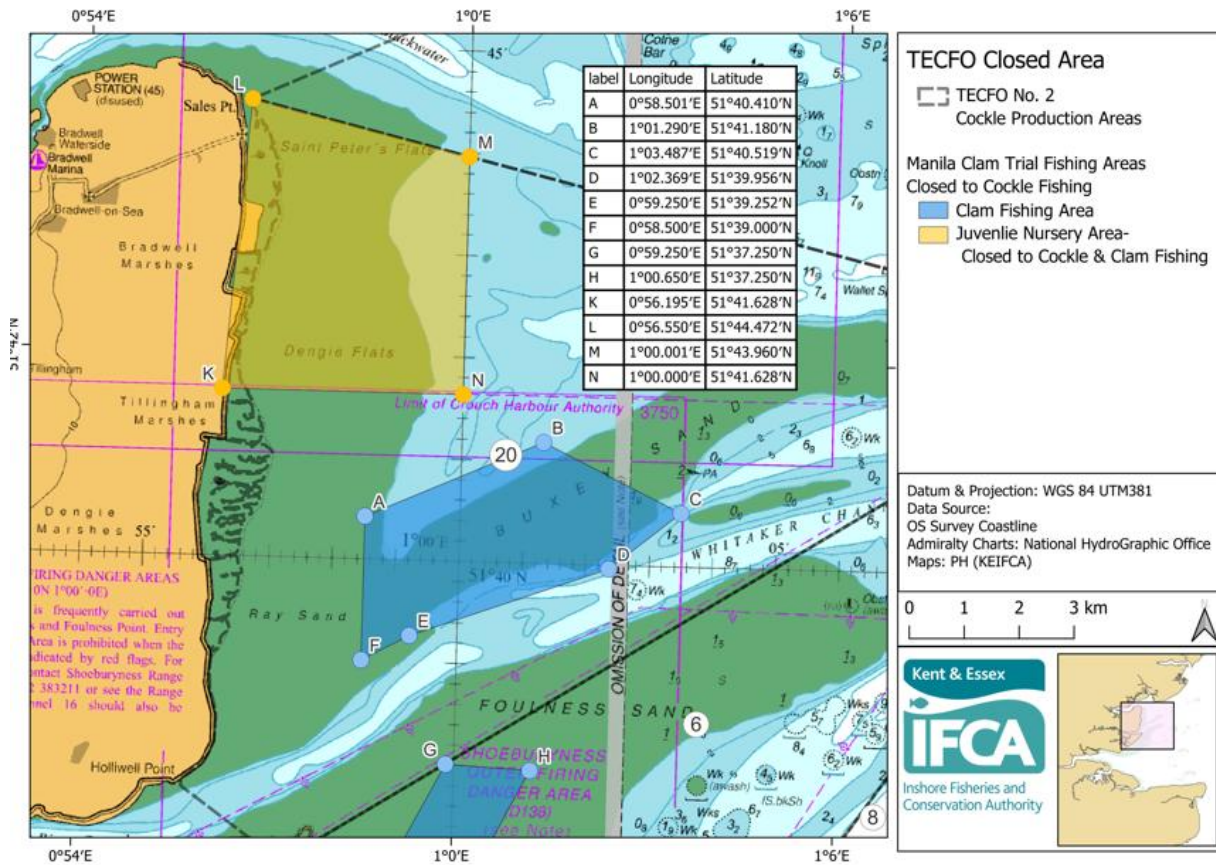


Figure 1. Zonal management of Area 20, orange area closed, blue area closed for manila clam trial

6. Spring 2026 Cockle Stock Surveys

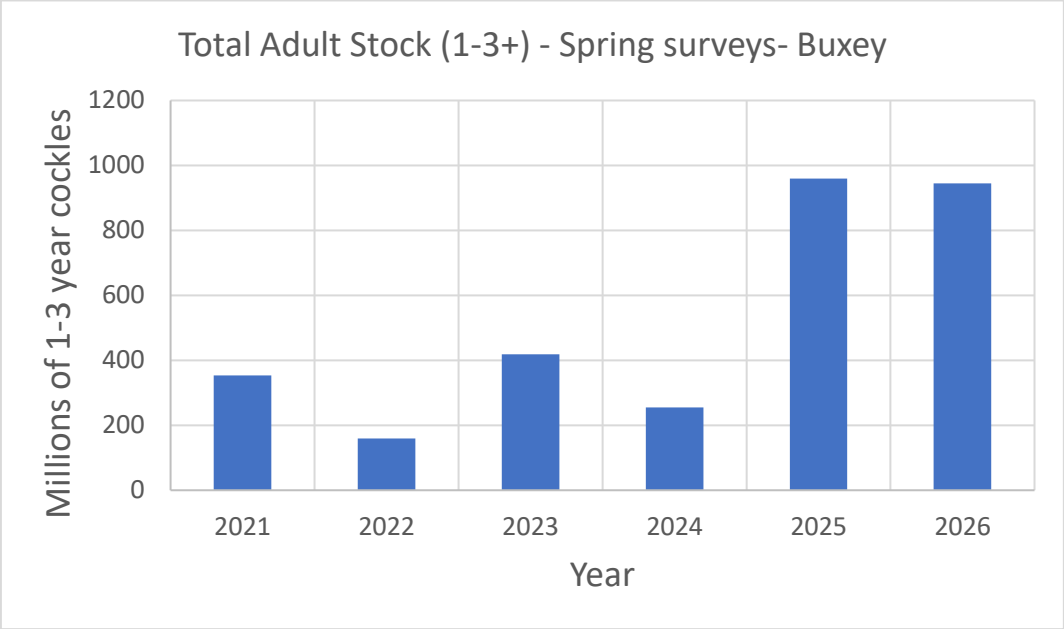
Stock surveys commenced at the beginning of April 2024 and concluded on 14 May 2024. At this time of year the cockles are coming into condition for their spring spawning following the winter dormant period. These surveys use Day grabs, deployed from both FPV Tamesis and FPV Nerissa, and cover a total area of 37.6 km² (14.5 miles²).

The areas surveyed cover the Buxey, Dengie and Ray Sands, Minnis Bay, Margate Sands, Spile and Scrapsgate. These areas include all of the current main production areas outside of the TECFO.

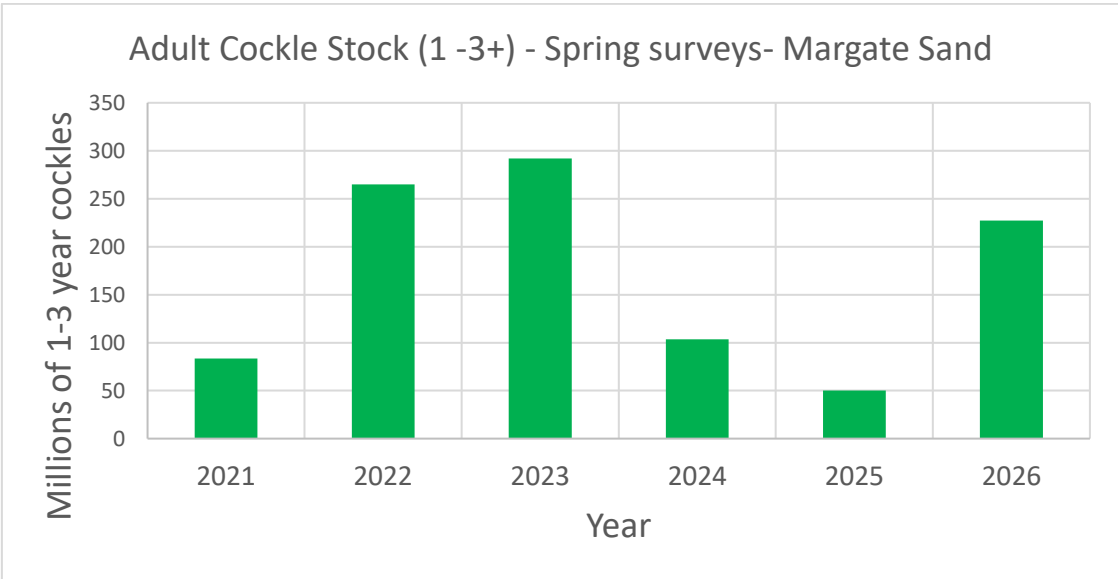
Analysis of the survey data collected has been completed. The survey shows that Area 13 (Spile) and Area 18 (Margate Sands) both contain good stocks of sizeable cockles, and Area 20 (Buxey) contains good numbers of one year old adults that are currently below minimum size. There are also smaller stocks available on the Margate Hook, Ray and Scrapsgate.

Area	Bed	adult biomass (tonnes)	>16mm biomass (tonnes)
13	The Spile	544	137
17	Margate Sands	1475	1154
20	Buxey and Ray	2765	282
TOTAL		4784	1573

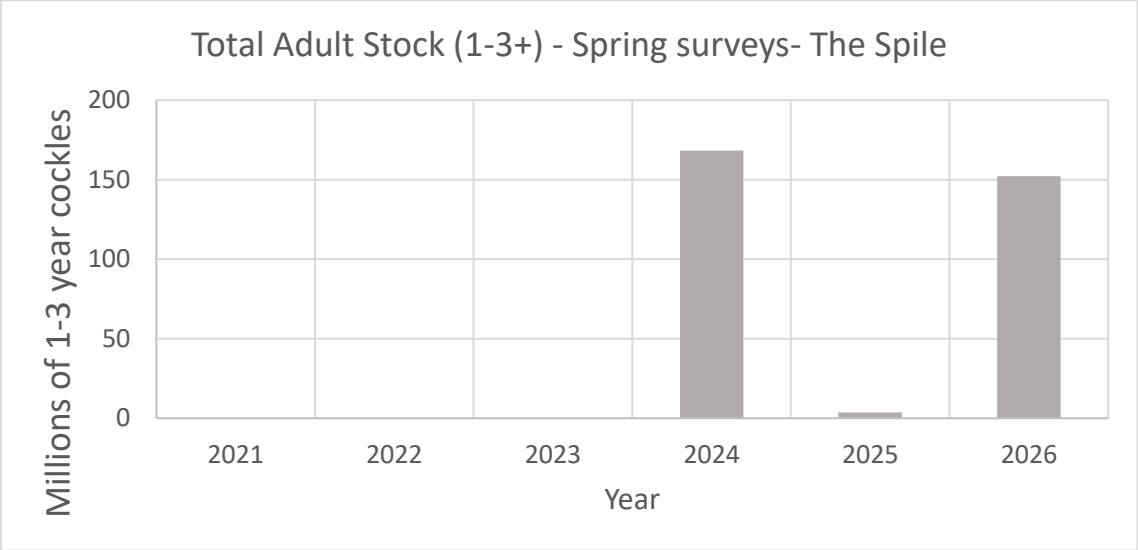
The cockles within Area 20 are present in very good numbers having increased from last year, concentrated on the Buxey. However, most of these are in the 1 year old category and therefore a significant amount of these cockles are below 14mm and wouldn't be expected to reach minimum size this year. That said there is still a quantity of cockles over 16mm and the area would likely benefit from being turned over by the fleet.



The survey conducted on the Margate Sands and Margate Hook identified an increase in the number of cockles on the ground as the same point last year. In addition, the beds contain a significant quantity of spat, some of which have already reached the minimum size. The adult biomass and >16mm biomass figures shown below use the year classes of 1- 3 year old cockles, which the same as used in all others cockle areas within the Thames. However, this bed is seeing additional stock in the form of 2025 spat growing extremely quickly and contributing to the overall stock available – therefore an additional survey is planned for June.



The survey conducted on the Spile has shown a large increase in the amount of adult stock available compared to last year. This bed however does not appear to have the same amounts of 2025 spatfall on it that have been present in the Margate Sands survey. The Spile has only started to produce fishable numbers of cockles in recent years, therefore we need to keep a close eye on this bed to see how it develops.



7. Number of Permit Applications

The process for the management of this fishery is that anyone wishing to apply for a permit is required to apply before 31 March in that year and all stock assessment surveys are completed before the May Authority meeting. This ensures that the Authority can be presented with a complete picture of the fishery, including the amount of stock available and the number of vessels wishing to work it.

In recent years, the Authority has only issued Category 2 permits in its efforts to continue progressing towards a small scale fishery. In 2023, the number of permits was 30. In 2024, the number of permits was 31. This year, is the same as 2025, 34 applications have been received for Category 2 permits.

8. Setting a Total Allowable Catch for the fishery

Given the revised fishery boundaries introduced by TECFO 2024, it is suggested to split the permit fishery trips into two zones – beds north of TECFO and beds south of TECFO, as shown on the chart below. Taking into account the levels of stock in the beds surveyed, including the adult stock, levels of spat as well as the exceptional growth seen in Margate Sands, there is a total initial TAC of 816 tonnes available, comprised of seven landings south of TECFO (areas 12-18) and one landings north of TECFO (Area 20).

The Margate Sands within Area 18 is a bed which has completely different stock dynamic to any other area within the Thames – not least because of the speed of growth on this bed. From a management perspective it is also in a period of flux, previously the area was fished by a fleet of 14 vessels, up until last year and this

where there will be up to 34 vessels fishing there. This means that KEIFCA needs to be conservative in its initial approach to the management of this bed.

Officers are intending to conduct further surveys on both the Margate Sands and the Spile in the summer in order to ensure the available data for the fishery is as current as possible. In addition, in a situation where all of the TAC is not taken by the third week of the fishery, remaining TAC can be split between the fleet to allow a more efficient uptake of the available stock – essentially this means that if there is stock remaining at the end of the third week, the remaining TAC can be split amongst the permit holders fishery to allow all of the available TAC to be taken. Furthermore, officers will take on board feedback from the fleet regarding the fishing opportunity available as well as feedback from officer observations on the ground including damage rates and catch rates to determine whether additional trips can be allocated on this area.

Dates	Number of weeks	Landing quantity per week
6 September – 2 October	4	2 landings of 3.4m ³ or no more than 6.8 m ³ per week (6 bags)

9. Allocating of TAC and quantities

In a similar manner to the past three years, and following the direction of the Authority, only category 2 permits have been issued for this year. Category 2 permits are limited to a maximum of 3.4m³ (3 tonnes) per trip.

We need to be mindful of how we operate the fishery, balancing the needs of the various industry voices, but an irregular, unsustainable fishery is in nobody’s interests and a fishery which operates, albeit at a low volume, low level, is far more beneficial than a fishery which does not open at all. If a small fishing opportunity is made available then individual fishers can make an informed decision about whether to take part or not.

As agreed in the review of KEIFCA cockle management that took place in 2022-24 and resulted in the introduction of a new regulating order, the area outside TECFO 2024 is for small-scale cockle fishing rather than the large-scale, large-volume fishery (13.6m³, 11 tonnes a trip).

As identified in the replies to the consultation, small-scale means different things to different stakeholders, however one of the key aims of increasing the area of the permit fishery was to try and create more opportunity for fishers in our district.

Compared to previous years, last year saw an increase in permit holders using smaller vessels, many of which had not fished for cockles before and used a range of alternative dredge gear set-ups rather than the standard suction dredge gear.

Although suction dredge gear is very efficient, allowing large volumes of cockles to be caught quickly on a single fishing trip, it is heavy, bulky, expensive to buy

and maintain, and generally requires larger specialised vessels to be deployed from and safely store the large volume of cockles caught. For smaller more multipurpose fishing vessels that fish for a range of different species over the year and make up most of our inshore fleet, using suction dredge fishing gear is not really a viable option.

TAC and gear variation industry requests

Although last year some set-ups were more successful in harvesting cockles than others, a lot of last year's non-suction dredge smaller vessel permit holders applied again this year and want to build on last year's work. In preparation for this year's permit fishery officers have received a written request asking for some of the rules to be changed to allow smaller vessels without a 'suction dredge set-up' more opportunity and flexibility in how they fish.

Fishing gear variation request for small vessels

Whilst the byelaw does not prescribe what type of gear is used to harvest cockles it does have a series of technical measures that all permit holders are required to meet. The byelaw requires that dredges are made with a bar spacing of no less than 16mm and that a riddle has to be at least 1.75m long. The request asked to use a dredge that uses netting rather than the traditional metal bar construction behind the mouth of the dredge, as this would save weight and make the dredge a lot lighter and easier to use on smaller boats. In addition, the applicant would like to use a much smaller riddle as their boat is smaller and it struggles to allocate the deck space for a 1.75m long riddle.

Whilst the Authority has made it clear that it wants to try and open up the cockle fishery to provide more opportunity to fishers, the technical gear management measures in the byelaw have proved critical in creating a sustainable cockle fishery across the Thames. In an effort to try and strike the right balance, officers have worked with our legal team to explore options and are suggesting that an exemption to the byelaw could be made for this year as long as several requirements are met:

- If vessels wanted to take up an exemption for gear type then they would need to be using a vessel of 10m or less and be using a gear type other than suction dredge.
- All gear types would need to be tested and pass both the minimum size and damage rate requirements prior to the fishery opening. In the 2-week run up to the fishery officers will run two trial periods each lasting 2 days and officers will coordinate with each permit holder to test their gear. The permit holders will only be able to work in the fishery once they have met the required standards.
- The vessel in use would need to be operating a Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) system which tracks the location of the vessel and the footprint of the gear. These systems have proved to be very effective in the TECFO fishery and Manila Clam trial and would allow the impact of the vessels working under the exemption to be quantified. The tracking would also help mitigate any enforcement risks. As with the Manila clam trial KEIFCA would assist with the purchase the monitoring system for the trial,

on a first come-first served basis depending upon how many wish to take this up.

- Any permit holder operating under these exemptions would be required to fill in a daily landings sheet and send it to the cockle officer as soon after landing as possible and no later than 24 hours after landing (send photo of landings sheet to the cockle officer on WhatsApp).
- At the end of the fishery each permit holder would be asked to fill in a short questionnaire answering questions about their experience of the fishery and the marketing and sales of their catch.

As long as the permit holder met these requirements then they would be eligible for an exemption from the byelaw. It is proposed that the exemption would lift the requirement for both bar spacing and a riddle length.

Trip allocation request for small vessels

In addition to gear variation the applicant also requested that KEIFCA allow smaller boats different and more flexible arrangements to the current quota and trip management where there are a set number of trips per week and a fixed maximum volume that each permit holder can take on each trip (last year this was 2 x 3.4m³ trips per week for 3 weeks for each permit holder).

Specifically, the request asks to be allowed to undertake more trips but with smaller quota per trip, with a preferred approach of potentially a flexible weekly quota with no set number of trips or fixed maximum amount per trip.

Taking account of fuel prices

Last year, several vessels requested that they be permitted to combine trips if they had the capability to do so, the rationale being that the fuel costs for undertaking two trips for 3 tonnes per trip would be less if they could do one trip of 6 tonnes as an alternative. The global prices of fuel have intensified these requests for this year and officers have been approached by the Thames Estuary Fishermens Association this year to ask if vessels could combine trips.

Officers have considered this alongside the small vessel request, and are developing an exemption whereby all vessels could be exempted from the requirements to land a maximum volume per trip with a specified number of trips. Instead, TAC could be allocated on a 'tonnage per week' basis. All permit holders would be allocated 6.8 tonnes per week, each permit holder could then decide how to fish that, e.g. two trips of 3.4 tonnes, one trip of 6.8 tonnes or four trips of 1.7 tonnes.

Again, whilst the Authority has made it clear that it wants to try and open up the cockle fishery to provide more opportunity to fishers, the management measures in the byelaw have proved critical in creating a sustainable cockle fishery across the Thames over many year. In an effort to try and strike the right balance, officers have worked with our legal team to explore options and are suggesting that an exemption to the byelaw could be made for this year as long as several requirements are met:

- If a permit holder wanted to take up an exemption for a 'tonnage per week' fishery rather than a maximum number of trips of a specified tonnage then they would need to be operating a Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) system which tracks the location of the vessel and the footprint of the gear. These systems have proved to be very effective in the TECFO fishery and Manila Clam trial and would allow the impact of the vessels working under the exemption to be quantified. The tracking would also help mitigate any enforcement risks. As with the Manila clam trial KEIFCA would assist with the purchase the monitoring system for the trial, on a first come-first served basis depending upon how many wish to take this up.

Under the exemption the quota allocation would not be divided into allocated volumes per trip, instead the permit holder would have a weekly maximum volume of 6.8m³. There would be no restrictions on the number of trips, however the same weekly start and finish times would apply as would all the other permit requirements. As per previous permit fisheries officers will review any unused quota before the end of the fishery and re-allocate any quota if possible.

Whilst the Authority and officers want to work closely and support fishers capitalising on new opportunities, officers would like to avoid a repeat of last year where some of the permit holders kept on arranging meetings and inspections of gear and then cancelled at the last minute or did not have the gear ready for officers to inspect, which wasted a significant number of officer days. Hopefully setting clear deadlines and outcomes for permit holders if they are not ready will help the fishery run smoothly and efficiently.

Officers will continue to develop these opportunities, any permit holder that wishes to take up either of the exemptions set out above will need to write to the Authority asking for an exemption by Wednesday 20 June 2026. The cockle officer will be the lead officer and point of contact for any permit holders with an exemption and will liaise with each permit holder with an exemption to coordinate activities like testing gear.

10. Vessel Monitoring Systems

Taking into consideration the opening period being recommended for the fishery and the much wider spatial area recommended to be opened; officers are setting out an expectation that all vessels should, in addition to the REM system set out above for vessels operating outside of the usual management structures, at least operate a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS). All >12m vessels are already required to be fitted with a VMS+ system which its for example utilised in the management of the TECFO fishery. The majority of <12m vessels will now have been fitted with an IVMS (Inshore VMS) system as a MMO licensing condition.

11. 2026 Fishery Management

Following consideration of the previously discussed items I **RECOMMEND** the following management measures.

Recommendations:

The Authority is asked to **APPROVE** the following recommendations.

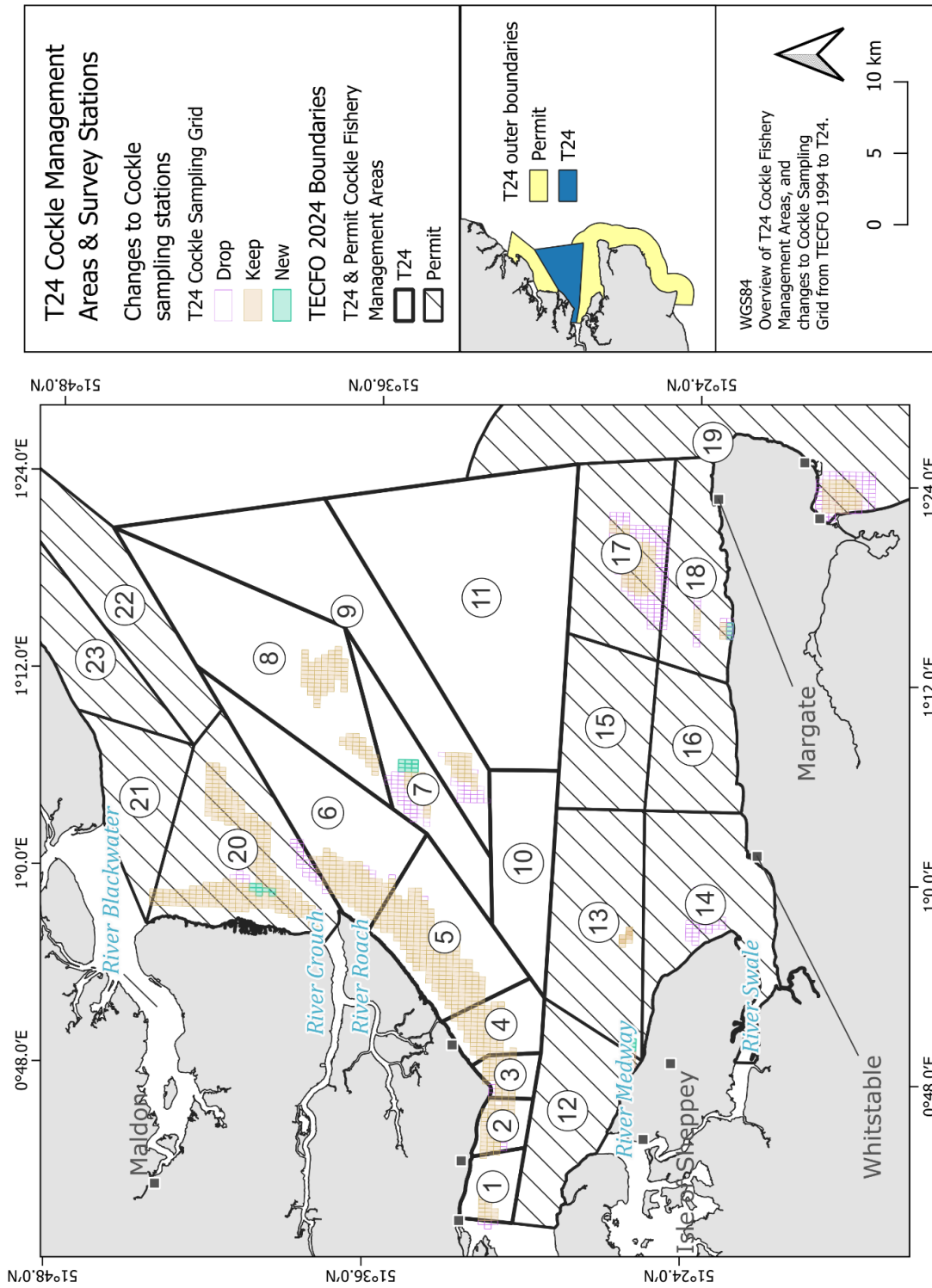
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- (v) The maximum quantity of cockles that may be landed or carried on board will be 3.39m³/125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes) unless a vessel is operating under an exemption related to quantity.

Appendix A



A chart showing the cockle production areas within the Kent and Essex IFCA District