

**Agenda Item: C2**

**Shore Report: Essex**

**Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority**

**Quarterly Report for the Period: July 2025 to November 2025**

**Overview:**

Fishing activity in North Essex between July and November 2025 reflected a mix of stable trends and notable species shifts across both commercial and recreational sectors. Commercial operations benefited from a modest but encouraging increase in Dover sole catches during the summer months. As a high value species for trawlers, the improvement in sole landings provided a vital source of income for many local fishers. In contrast, Thornback ray numbers appeared to be lower than in previous years, continuing a downward trend that has been observed over recent seasons. Despite this decline, the overall composition of catches remained varied, with trawlers also reporting higher encounters with dogfish and other predatory species during the warmer months. Recent catches indicate a clear predatory trend in North Essex waters, with a higher proportion of mid to upper-trophic species recorded across both commercial and recreational fisheries.

The summer season reflects this shift, with catches dominated by dogfish, smoothhound, sea bass, and various rays (*Raja clavata* and *Dasyatis pastinaca*). Smaller quantities of conger eel and gurnard were also reported, alongside frequent seal activity, further highlighting a predator-heavy ecosystem. As the year progresses into autumn and winter, catch composition changes, with whiting, herring and sprats becoming more prevalent and mackerel appearing toward the late summer months. Notably, cod have all but disappeared from the Essex coastline. Most reported catches now come from further north into Suffolk waters or, on the odd occasion, in local trawls on offshore grounds, suggesting a continuing shift in distribution likely influenced by changing environmental and ecological conditions.

Overall, the July–November 2025 period in North Essex was characterised by stable bass stocks, improving Dover sole yields, and growing evidence of a shift in species distribution due to warmer sea conditions. Although the decline in Thornback ray abundance remains a concern for both commercial and recreational sectors, the emergence of southern species such as breams and megrim highlights the ongoing ecological changes shaping local fisheries.

### **Harwich & Walton**

Activity at these two ports has remained consistent and productive throughout this period, with many vessels now looking to undergo maintenance, some of which are already on hard standing. Those who have ventured out have reported low catch rates, particularly for lobster and edible crab, with widespread complaints from fishers about pots silting up with mud and organic matter. This issue has been especially pronounced around Harwich, where the accumulation of fine sediment has reduced pot efficiency and increased gear maintenance requirements. This appears to be a localised issue, not influencing gear further offshore or further south.

Despite these challenges, several trawlers and netting vessels have remained active, focusing primarily on Dover sole and sea bass to maintain financial viability. Fishing activity progressively increased as the season advanced, peaking toward late summer, while many commercial crews used this period to prepare vessels and equipment in anticipation of a more productive spring season in 2026. Recreational catches reflected the same trend as commercial, with anglers landing mainly seabass, dabs, thornback ray and Dover sole at these ports. Whiting has started to appear in all catches, a sign that Autumn is well underway and winter is approaching.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 20

### **Brightlingsea, Wivenhoe & Clacton**

Commercial fishing activity has gradually slowed as Autumn has approached, and many vessels have taken the opportunity to undergo maintenance in preparation for the spring season. The vessels that have remained active have primarily focused on sea bass and Dover sole using nets and trawls to achieve their allocated quota. As this period has progressed and weather conditions worsened, only a small number of trawlers and netting vessels continued to venture out, targeting whatever catch they could before commercial activity became unviable.

The charter vessel fleet experienced high demand during the summer months, with reasonable productivity, particularly for sea bass, which were caught consistently in the Blackwater and surrounding inshore waters. During the

quieter autumn and winter period, demand has dropped, and operators have used the time to repair and refit vessels in preparation for next year.

Number of active commercial vessels: 12

Number of active charter vessels: 5

### **West Mersea & Tollesbury**

West Mersea has remained one of the more consistently active ports in the district throughout this period, particularly when compared to other local ports, largely due to the number of commercial vessels based there. Fishers operating from the port have primarily focused on higher-value species, with trawlers targeting Dover sole and netters concentrating on sea bass, which have provided a stable and important source of income for the local fishing community. Indeed, some of the largest quantities of sea bass landed during this period were recorded at West Mersea, reflecting both the port's capacity and the demand for this sought-after species. Oysters remain a consistent commercial income for this port, as always, with many vessels working private grounds. Whelks have also been landed in large quantities when compared to other ports, a testament to the diversity of activity in West Mersea.

Toward the end of the reporting period, Manila clams began to appear in landings at West Mersea as part of the KEIFCA trial fishery, representing a new and emerging focus for local fishers on a species that had previously received little attention in the area. This development highlights the adaptability of the regional fleet, as fishers explore alternative opportunities to supplement income while maintaining sustainable fishing practices. Overall, West Mersea's continued activity demonstrates its importance as a key hub for commercial fishing in the district, supporting both traditional target species and innovative ventures.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 23

Number of active charter vessels: 2

### **Maldon & Bradwell**

Maldon and Bradwell have experienced low levels of commercial activity throughout this period, with only a small number of vessels remaining active compared to larger ports in the district. Those vessels that have been operating have primarily focused on higher-value species, mirroring trends observed at other nearby ports. Dover sole and sea bass continue to be the main targets, as they represent both the most financially viable and readily available species during this period. Despite the reduced activity, these landings provide an important source of income for the limited number of fishers operating from

these ports, while other vessels remain out of the water for maintenance, inspections, or seasonal downtime in preparation for the 2026 spring and summer fishing season. Recreational angling activity remains consistent on the south side of the Blackwater estuary, with anglers utilising lure fishing as a successful capture method for sea bass. Reports of large numbers of sizable individuals caught for sport and released continued into November.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 6

### **North Fambridge, Burnham-on-Crouch, Wallasea Island, Barling, Paglesham & Rochford**

Charter vessels have been the main active vessels throughout this period, focusing mainly on sport fishing for sea bass, smoothhound and thornback ray. Charter vessel activity peaked in the summer months and has tailed off as weather conditions and demand worsen. Several private recreational angling vessels also used these ports as their base and mirrored the same pattern of activity as the charter boats with high levels of activity throughout the summer that dropped off as the winter months started drawing in.

Only a few commercial vessels operate from these ports, some of which have started taking part in the KEIFCA Manila clam trial fishery.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 6

Number of active charter vessels: 6

### **Southend-on-Sea & Leigh-on-Sea**

As is always the case with Leigh-on-Sea, the cockle fishery remained active during this period, with fishers landing catch consistently throughout. At the time of writing this report, the fishery is now closed and fishers are undertaking necessary maintenance in preparation for the 2026 season. Several of which will now be lifted out for work on hard standing. Some vessels will be switching to pelagic trawls to focus on the herring and sprat run, as is the case for this time of year, and others will be searching for new ventures during quieter months. Southend Pier was the most active of all the piers in Essex, with officers undertaking regular patrols and landing inspections of recreational sea anglers. Sea bass, flounder, mackerel and whiting have been the main species caught from the pier, toward the end of this period.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 14

Number of active charter vessels: 1

### **Holehaven & Thurrock**

Activity for these ports remains quiet, as is always the case. Vessels remain present but are idle and at moorings. One commercial vessel continues to pursue fishing efforts, but at a relatively low level compared to other ports. Catch includes whatever decides to venture further into the Thames, mainly mullet, Dover sole and seabass are caught during the summer months; however, whiting have started to appear in both recreational and commercial catches in late autumn, as we approach the winter season.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 1

Number of active charter vessels: 1

**Max Nolic,**

**Senior Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Officer**