

Agenda Item: C2

Shore Report: Essex

Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

Quarterly Report for the Period: May 2026 to September 2026

Overview:

The end of May saw settled weather conditions, with increasing air and sea temperatures allowing commercial vessels, anglers, and charter operators greater access to fishing grounds across the district. However, whilst these conditions were favourable from an operational and recreational perspective, the prolonged period of warm weather and below-average rainfall is likely to have had a negative impact on fish and shellfish stocks within the Thames Estuary. Elevated water temperatures can place additional stress on marine species, alter distribution patterns, reduce dissolved oxygen levels, and affect feeding and recruitment success. Commercial catches across northern Essex included thornback ray, Dover sole, brown crab, lobster, and limited quantities of sea bass. Recreational catches comprised species such as sea bass, smooth-hound, conger eel, plaice, flounder, turbot, and dab, with larger specimens generally being reported from offshore charter vessels. Notably, black bream were reported near Walton Pier, a species rarely encountered locally and potentially indicative of changing species distributions associated with warming coastal waters.

Throughout June and August, vessels were able to operate consistently due to the favourable weather; however, this did not translate into improved commercial catch rates. Fishermen across the district continued to report relatively low catches compared with previous years, with concerns over the reduced availability of larger, marketable fish. Rising fuel costs, combined with lower catch volumes, also affected the economic viability of offshore fishing operations, resulting in some vessels focusing effort closer inshore. The effects of elevated sea temperatures were particularly evident within some shellfish fisheries. Whelk catches declined as water temperatures increased, and concerns were also raised regarding the condition and resilience of Thames Estuary cockle stocks. Prolonged periods of warm water have the potential to affect shellfish growth, survival, and recruitment, which may have implications for the long-term sustainability and productivity of the fishery. Overall, while the summer weather provided favourable conditions for vessel operations and recreational access, observations from commercial fishermen, charter operators, and IFCOs suggest that the prolonged period of elevated temperatures may have adversely

affected the abundance, distribution, and availability of several key fish and shellfish species throughout the Thames Estuary, contributing to generally lower catch rates than would ordinarily be expected during the summer period.

Harwich & Walton

Fishing activity within the district remained relatively limited during the quarter, with Harwich continuing to support many commercial operations. Only a small number of vessels were regularly active from Walton, where fishing efforts primarily targeted sea bass, thornback ray, and shellfish species such as lobster, brown crab and whelks. In Harwich, Dover sole remained the principal commercial target species. However, fishermen reported that landings were generally disappointing and fell short of those recorded during comparable periods in previous years. Shellfish operators also experienced challenging conditions, with many reporting reduced catches. Several fishermen attributed this decline to increased levels of mud and silt on the seabed, which were said to be covering pots and degrading bait quality. Recreational angling activity remained consistent throughout the reporting period, particularly from Walton Pier, which continued to attract regular anglers, club members, and organised competitions. A variety of species were caught from the pier, including stingray, sea bass, plaice, and Dover sole, reflecting the continued popularity of the location among local anglers.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 15

Brightlingsea, Wivenhoe & Clacton

Fishing activity in Brightlingsea increased during this quarter as more favourable weather conditions allowed vessels to operate more consistently. Charter vessels were active throughout the period, with recreational anglers targeting sea bass, large smooth-hound, and the occasional stingray. Commercial fishing vessels operating from Brightlingsea, Wivenhoe, and Clacton primarily engaged in netting, trawling, and potting activities. Reported catches included relatively low quantities of lobster, sea bass, mullet, Dover sole, and thornback ray. Smaller netting vessels concentrated their efforts close inshore and within local estuaries, targeting a variety of finfish species. Meanwhile, some larger vessels changed ownership during the quarter and subsequently focused on a mixed fishing strategy involving trawling, together with static and drift netting operations.

Number of active commercial vessels: 6

Number of active charter vessels: 5

West Mersea & Tollesbury

Fishing activity remained consistent for vessels operating from West Mersea throughout this quarter. The oyster fishery continued to focus on private grounds and remained active throughout the reporting period. Many commercial vessels utilised trawls and fixed nets to maintain catch levels, with Dover sole and sea bass featuring prominently in landings. Reasonable quantities of sea bass were landed during the first half of the quarter, although catches declined

towards the end of the reporting period. Significant quantities of whelks were landed into the port during the first half of the quarter. However, as sea temperatures increased, whelk catches steadily declined, prompting some vessels to redirect their efforts towards finfish species. The principal fishing methods employed from this port included trawling, static and drift netting, and potting. Large quantities of mullet were landed throughout the quarter, while sea bass remained a key target species during the early part of the period. Some vessels also focused on higher-value finfish species, such as Dover sole, using drift nets to maximise catch returns.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 19

Number of active charter vessels: 3

Maldon & Bradwell

Fishing activity in Maldon remained relatively low during this quarter, reflecting the limited number of commercial vessels operating from locations further upstream within the Blackwater Estuary. Some vessels changed ownership during the reporting period, while several new vessels also appeared within the local fleet. In contrast, vessels operating from Bradwell employed a mixed fishing strategy, utilising both trawling and netting methods to maintain catch returns. There is also a well-established recreational angling community based in Bradwell, with private vessels regularly venturing offshore when conditions allow. Recreational catches during this period primarily consisted of smooth-hound and sea bass.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 5

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

Fishing activity in this area is primarily undertaken by charter vessels operating from Wallasea Island. Wallasea Island continues to be one of the most significant ports for paid recreational charter fishing within the northern part of the KEIFCA district, supporting levels of activity comparable to, and in some periods exceeding, those observed in Brightlingsea. Catch composition was broadly like that reported by charter vessels elsewhere in the district. Large smooth-hound remained the principal target species, with anglers also catching sea bass and the occasional thornback ray. Commercial fishing activity within the area remained limited. Several vessels continued to operate on private oyster grounds within the River Crouch and its associated tributaries, while other commercial fishing activity was generally low. Small netting vessels worked some of the creeks on a localised basis, although overall effort remained relatively limited. Recreational fishing activity also remained evident throughout the area. Private anglers continued to fish from both the shoreline and private vessels, primarily targeting sea bass within the estuarine creeks and channels.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 1

Number of active charter vessels: 3

Southend-on-Sea & Leigh-on-Sea

Throughout May and early June, commercial fishing activity in Leigh-on-Sea was primarily focused on preparing cockle vessels ahead of the commencement of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) fishery, which opened in mid-June. During the final week of August, further inspections and preparations were undertaken on additional cockle vessels in advance of the KEIFCA permitted cockle fishery, scheduled to commence at the beginning of September. All cockles harvested during these fisheries have continued to be landed into Leigh-on-Sea, reinforcing the port's importance as a regional shellfish landing centre.

Aside from the commercial fleet, there is only one known active charter vessel operating within the area. However, no catch information has been made available for this reporting period. Southend remains one of the principal locations within the district for hand-gathering activity, attracting both licensed commercial gatherers and recreational harvesters. IFCOs have dedicated significant resources to monitoring and inspecting recreational gathering activity along the foreshore throughout the quarter, undertaking numerous successful patrols and maintaining a visible enforcement presence. Recreational angling activity remains popular across Southend, both from the shoreline and from Southend Pier. IFCOs conducted inspections of anglers during routine patrols along the foreshore and addressed instances of non-compliance in a professional and proportionate manner, helping to promote awareness of fisheries regulations and encourage responsible fishing practices.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 15

Number of active charter vessels: 1

Holehaven & Thurrock

Only one commercial vessel and one charter vessel were active in the area between May and July. Details of commercial catches were not disclosed during the reporting period. However, the charter vessel reported catches comprising a variety of species, including smooth-hound and sizeable sea bass. During the quarter, a new commercial vessel entered the area. IFCOs engaged proactively with the skipper prior to the commencement of fishing activities, providing advice and guidance to promote compliance with relevant fisheries legislation and local management measures. Fishing activity subsequently focused on potting and netting operations, with vessels employing a combination of fixed and drift nets depending on spatial constraints and fishing opportunities both to the west and east of the crow stone. Overall fishing effort within the area remained relatively limited, although activity increased following the introduction of the additional commercial vessel.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 2

Number of active charter vessels: 1

Max Nolic,

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