

Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

MINUTES of a meeting of the Authority held in the Council Chamber, Gravesham Council offices, Gravesend on Thursday 27 March 2025.

Present: Mr J Lamb (MMO), Mr J Nichols (MMO), Mr E Hannam (MMO), Mr P Wexham (MMO), Ms T Ferry (MMO), Cllr D Crow-Brown (KCC), Cllr T Hills (KCC), Mr W East (MMO), Cllr G Coxshall (Thurrock Council), Cllr A Goggin (ECC), Mr R Turner (MMO)

Apologies: Mr J Rowley (MMO), Mr A Baker (NE), Mr C Collins (MMO), Mrs E Gilson (MMO), Ms L Faulkner (EA), Cllr J Fleming (ECC), Cllr M Skeels (ECC)

In Attendance: Mr J Cook (Clerk, KCC), Dr W Wright (Chief Fishery Officer), Mr D Bailey (Assistant Chief IFC Officer), Dr P Haupt (Lead Science IFC Officer), Mrs K Woods (Admin Assistant), Mrs D O'Shea (Office Manager)

By invitation: Mr A Oliver (Andrew Jackson Solicitors)

The Chairman welcomed Mr Oliver to the meeting and reminded Members that he had acted as the IFCA's legal advisor throughout the entire TECFO 24 consultation process. He was in attendance to provide advice to Members as required.

Members were provided with copies of the letters submitted to the IFCA regarding the ranking outcome.

The Chairman reminded Members that any exempt papers they had received were confidential and the information provided in them and discussed in the exempt section of the meeting should not be shared with anyone.

The Clerk to the IFCA clarified the definition of an exempt session of the meeting.

47. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS (A1)

The Chairman requested Members to declare any interests and advised that those with disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Other Significant Interests may not vote on that Agenda item. The Chairman reminded Members that they could declare an interest either at this time or prior to the agenda item being discussed.

48. MINUTES

Members agreed that the minutes of the meetings held on 28 January 2025 were correctly recorded, and that they be signed by the Chairman. No matters were arising.

10:10 MOTION TO EXCLUDE PRESS AND PUBLIC EXEMPT ITEMS

That under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 that the public be excluded for the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 and 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act

- Members received a briefing from the CFO relating to correspondence received from Industry in respect of the ranked order of the issue of licenses to fish in the TECFO 24 cockle fishery and of the wording of the Regulating Order.

11:30 exempt meeting ended.

Break

11:40 Public meeting restarted

49. PAUSING OF TECFO 2024 LICENCE ALLOCATION PROCESS (B1A)

The CFO advised Members that following the publication of the recommended rank list from the Application Panel the IFCA had received letters from ranked applicants as well as local Fishermen's' Association which expressed disappointment and concern with the process and outcomes.

Members were advised that it was only right that this overwhelmingly negative feedback from all sectors, including those who had been recommended to receive a license, be considered, and that the licensing process be paused to give officers and IFCA Members the opportunity to review the comments received to see if the issues raised could be addressed before confirming and issuing licences. It was hoped that this could be achieved in time for the May IFCA meeting although this would have an impact on fishing operations for 2025. However, it was felt that it was preferable to delay the fishery rather than taking a premature decision and getting it wrong.

Members made the following comments:

- Would it be possible for the next meeting to be provided with a summary of the submissions to see if there was a trend or any major issues contained in them.
- Agree with the proposal to postpone the issue of licences in order to properly evaluate the letters.
- Thanked the people who had responded in this manner and bringing their concerns to the attention of the IFCA.
- If it were necessary to obtain more information or clarification, could this be done – in response the CFO advised that if more clarity was required then the officers would ring or write to the individual concerned. If the issue was perfectly clear then there would be no need.

- Would you consider meeting with stakeholders in Kent and Essex – in response the CFO stated that there was already a significant amount of detail in their letters and it would appear that stakeholders had clearly expressed their views.

The Chairman stated that it was important to be open and transparent on its actions. Kent & Essex IFCA had involved the Industry in the process of creating the new Regulating Order over a period of 3½ years. Their comments then and now would be listened to. The IFCA did not want to delay the opening of the fishery any longer that necessary, but the process needed to be carried out.

Members **AGREED** unanimously

- i. that, in response to the raising of issues relating to the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order, the pausing of the TECFO 2024 Licence Allocation Process be authorised to allow all comments to be reviewed and solutions explored, with the result that at this time the recommended ranked list is not confirmed and no licences are offered or issued; and
- ii. noted that the deferral will delay the opening of the Cockle Fishery.

50. FUTURE MANILA CLAM TRIAL PROPOSAL AND CONSULTATION (B2)

Members were reminded that they had agreed to a manila clam trial in 2025. The CFO advised that it was the intention of the IFCA that this ultimately became a commercial fishery and that they continued to work with NE to provide the evidence base to allow this to happen.

Members were advised that there were a number of ways to move forward with the fishery which the IFCA wished to do in consultation with the community. It was proposed to consult with all stakeholders who had expressed an interest in the fishery and would seek feedback in the following areas:

- proposed vision statement for the fishery
- an outline of the proposed trial
- an outline of the proposed application process

The CFO informed Members that it was proposed that the trial would take place over two years to help to provide information on biological and economic questions as well as allowing those taking part to invest and commit to the trial with more confidence. The fishery would take place over six to eight weeks and the consultation would also look to consider the number of boats that took part. Members were advised that feedback

received from the community was that they wanted the process to be as straightforward as possible. The application would look to establish that:

- the applicant had the required boat, gear and ability to land and sell on their catch
- their experience of fishing in the Thames and landing shellfish
- they had considered a development plan for the clam fishery

Members made the following comments:

- supportive of a two-year program to allow the IFCA to measure recovery
- a two-year trial was sensible. If at the end of the trial the fishery appeared to be successful, what would happen next – in response the CFO stated the first trial gave the IFCA an idea of what was effective, less damaging gear which had provided a method of fishing. This trial would look at a fishery level to see whether it could operate as a commercial fishery and would look to begin to outline how a management system would work in the future. The aim would be to do this concurrently; however, it would take approximately 18 months to develop a byelaw from this.
- there was a need for the trial to be carried out correctly to ensure the stock was available and to provide fishers with further opportunities
- would the trial take place at the same time as the cockle fishery – in response the CFO advised that once the IFCA knew who would be taking part then they would be in a position to decide when it would take place. The intention would be to consult and summarise the responses for the May IFCA meeting

Members **APPROVED** that:

- i. the IFCA undertake a consultation on the future Manila clam trial; and
- ii. the consultation document was agreed

51. MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING OF BCRC MCZ NATIVE OYSTER FISHERY (B3)

The LSCO reminded Members that in 2024 they had been notified of a significant decline in the native oyster population in the Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ (BCRC MCZ). The harvestable population in 2025 was not expected to return to the threshold levels defined in the management plan due to their slow growth rates. Sampling had been carried out in 2023 which had confirmed the decline and in some cases absence of oysters in the sampling areas.

Members were advised that the IFCA intended to carry out surveys in the BCRC MCZ in 2026 to assess any change in the population. They were reminded that for the fishery to be opened there should be a sustained recovery trend in stock levels and that the biomass should exceed 800 tonnes.

Members **APPROVED** that:

- i. the BCRC MCZ Native Oyster fishery remain closed in 2025 and 2026 because of a continued decline in the population and has not had sufficient time to recover to the required criteria set in the management plans; and
- ii. the Authority review this recommendation regarding the closure of the Native Oyster fishery within the BCRC MCZ following the planned 2026 survey

12:25 meeting finished